Epistle 42

On Opinions and Religions

The First Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O brother, that we have completed the Epistle on Definitions and Descriptions, which is the last of the Epistles on the Psychological and Intellectual Sciences, according to what we promised in the table of contents at the beginning of this book. We now wish, in this fourth division, to speak concerning the divine sciences, which are the highest purpose and ultimate goal. We shall begin with the first epistle of this division, concerning opinions and religions.

Know that human beings differ in their opinions and doctrines just as they differ in the forms of their bodies, the character of their souls, their actions, and their crafts. The causes of their differing characters are four. One arises from differences in the composition of their bodies and the mixture of their humours. Another arises from differences in their lands, climates, and the times in which they grow up. Another arises from their upbringing according to the customs of their parents, the practices of their religions, and the habits of those who educate and discipline them. The fourth, according to the cosmology of the authors, arises from the configurations of the celestial sphere and the positions of the stars at conception and birth.

We have already explained something of this in the Epistle on Character. Here we wish to discuss the various forms of disagreement among scholars who established opinions and doctrines and from whom different schools, sayings, and judgements branched forth. Before doing so, however, we must explain the kinds of things concerning which people disagree.

Things disputed about belong to three broad kinds. The first are sensible things, whose forms exist in matter and are apprehended directly by the senses. The second are intelligible things, whose forms are conveyed by the senses to the imaginative faculty and remain represented there after the sensible objects themselves are absent. The third are demonstrated divine and intellectual matters which neither the senses directly perceive nor imagination adequately represents, but which sound proof and necessary demonstration compel the intellect to acknowledge.

Demonstration is therefore the balance of the intellect, just as measures, weights, and scales are balances for sensible things. When people disagree about the quantity of something sensible, they return to measurement. Likewise, those who understand necessary demonstrations, when they disagree concerning something beyond sensation, return to proof and accept what follows from sound premises. They consider acknowledgement of truth better than persistence in falsehood.

Chapter 1 — Differences in the Degree of Apprehension

Know that the causes of people's differing apprehension of these three classes of things are themselves three. The first is the subtlety, refinement, and hiddenness of the meanings to be known. The second is the variety of roads leading toward them and the aids assisting their apprehension. The third is the variation in the powers of the souls that apprehend them, some being strong and others weak. This last is among the principal causes of disagreement in opinions and doctrines.

The human being is a composite of a corporeal body and a spiritual soul. Through the powers of the spiritual soul he apprehends intelligibles, just as through the bodily organs he performs crafts. The totality of sciences corresponds to the collective powers of human souls, just as the totality of crafts corresponds to the collective capacities of human bodies. No single individual can independently encompass all sciences or perform all crafts.

Among the powers by which knowledge is received are first the five senses, then the imaginative faculty associated by the authors with the front of the brain, the thinking faculty associated with its middle, and the retentive faculty associated with its rear. People differ greatly in the strength and weakness of these powers. One person sees very distant or tiny objects while another scarcely sees at all. One distinguishes subtle sounds and musical intervals while another cannot. The same applies to taste, touch, smell, imagination, discrimination, speed of conception, and memory. Since their apprehensions differ, their opinions and beliefs also differ.

Chapter 2 — Why the Knowing Powers Differ in Their Apprehensions

These differences do not necessarily mean that the knowing powers themselves are different in essence. Their acts vary because the bodily instruments through which they operate vary in condition.

The eyes are instruments of sight. When healthy, clear, and free from obstruction, visible forms appear within them correctly, as forms appear in a polished mirror. When the organs are damaged, sight is hindered. The same is true of hearing when the ears are blocked or diseased, of smell when the nasal passages are obstructed, of taste when the tongue's moisture is altered, and of touch when the nerves are injured.

So too with imagination, thought, and memory. When the bodily organs associated with them are balanced, their acts proceed properly. When illness or imbalance affects those organs, imagination may become disturbed, thought confused, or memory weakened. Much disagreement therefore arises because the same soul acts through instruments differing in quality and condition.

Chapter 3 — The Number of the Knowing Powers

Having explained why people's apprehensions vary, we now turn to the powers through which knowledge is acquired. These are the sensitive powers, the imaginative faculty, the thinking faculty, and the retentive faculty.

Each possesses conditions assisting its action and conditions obstructing it. Sight requires an appropriate distance, suitable light, correct orientation, and freedom from obstruction. Excessive brightness may prevent vision just as darkness does, and an object placed too near the eye may be as difficult to see as one too far away. Motion may also disturb perception. Similar conditions apply to the remaining senses.

The wise person must therefore understand not only the existence of a knowing power but also the conditions under which that power functions properly.

Chapter 4 — The Proper Sensible Objects of Each Sense

Every sense possesses things perceived by it essentially and other things perceived only through mediation. The proper objects of sight include light and darkness, while colour is apprehended through light. Shape, distance, position, motion, and similar qualities are often apprehended through colour and other intervening conditions.

For this reason sight, though noble and powerful, may err in things not proper to it in themselves. A large object may appear small at a distance; a straight stick partly submerged in water may seem bent; and the shore may appear to move to one travelling in a boat. Such errors do not invalidate sensation itself but reveal the need to distinguish direct from indirect perception.

Chapter 5 — The Senses Do Not Err concerning Their Proper Objects

Each sense is least liable to error concerning what belongs to it properly when its conditions are complete. Hearing is directed toward sounds, taste toward flavours, smell toward odours, sight toward visible qualities, and touch toward tactile qualities.

No sense performs the distinctive act of another. Sight does not hear and hearing does not see. Yet several senses may cooperate in recognising a single object, and the thinking faculty judges among their reports. Much confusion occurs when people demand from one faculty what belongs properly to another.

Chapter 6 — The Additional Powers of the Human Senses

God has granted human beings sensory capacities joined to intellect in a manner allowing forms of discrimination surpassing those found in many animals. The hand becomes an instrument for innumerable crafts, and the tongue becomes an instrument through which many languages and subtle meanings are expressed.

Animals may understand calls, commands, prohibitions, or signals, yet human beings communicate through propositions, arguments, questions, histories, and sciences. Writing extends this still further, allowing a person to receive knowledge from someone absent in place or long dead in time.

But reports may be true or false, and listeners may correctly accept or mistakenly reject them. Thus the very means by which human knowledge becomes vast also become causes of disagreement.

Chapter 7 — Knowledge Peculiar to the Human Being

Human beings know not only what is immediately present to the senses but also what has passed and what may occur in the future. Reports extend knowledge toward the absent and past; inference extends it toward what is hidden and anticipated.

Through language, writing, testimony, memory, reasoning, analogy, history, and calculation, human knowledge extends far beyond the narrow moment of sensation. Yet every one of these methods may be used correctly or incorrectly. Differences in their use therefore generate differences in doctrine.

Chapter 8 — The Imaginative Faculty

The imaginative faculty receives the forms delivered to it by the senses and retains them after the sensible objects themselves disappear. It can reproduce the image of a place once visited, a person once seen, a voice once heard, or an event long past.

It can also combine forms that were never joined in sensation. It may imagine a human being with wings or some other composite never actually encountered. Imagination therefore serves knowledge while also becoming a source of error whenever its combinations are mistaken for external realities.

Chapter 9 — The Wonders of the Imaginative Faculty and the Differences among People in It

People differ greatly in imaginative power. Some picture absent things vividly and rapidly, while others do so only weakly. Some dream intensely, compose poetry, create images, or perceive subtle analogies. Others confuse imagined forms with things actually present.

The imaginative faculty stands between sensation and pure intellect. Its power to detach forms from immediate sensible presence makes it one of the most remarkable faculties of the soul.

Chapter 10 — The Excellence of the Imaginative Faculty

Among the wonders of imagination is its apparent freedom from bodily distance. In an instant a person may imagine far countries, the heavens, the depths of the Earth, or things separated by enormous stretches of time and place.

The body does not move with it. Hence imagination provides an important indication that not every activity of the soul is identical with bodily locomotion or direct sensation.

Chapter 11 — The Acts of the Thinking Faculty

The thinking faculty possesses many actions. Some it performs by itself; others it performs together with another faculty. With the productive faculty it gives rise to crafts. With speech it gives rise to articulate expression. With imagination it retrieves images, and with memory it retrieves what has been preserved.

Its own acts include thought, deliberation, discrimination, conception, reflection, composition, analysis, collection, and inference. Through thought sciences are discovered; through deliberation affairs are governed; through analysis compounds are reduced toward their principles; through composition separated things are joined; and through inference what is hidden is sought through what is known.

The thinking faculty is therefore like a judge among the remaining powers. A judge should not decide before hearing evidence, and thought should not decide before the relevant faculties have presented what they know. Many errors in philosophy and religion arise because judgement precedes sufficient evidence.

Chapter 12 — How Superiority of Intellect Is Recognised

The superiority of one person's intellect over another becomes evident according to his station and conduct. Human beings occupy many social and religious ranks, but they may be gathered broadly into classes such as bearers of religion and law, scholars and sages, rulers and administrators, agricultural workers, craftsmen, merchants, labourers, and the poor or afflicted.

Within each class some lead and some follow. The intelligence of a ruler appears through sound government and just conduct toward those under him. The intelligence of one governed appears through appropriate obedience that does not violate religion or justice. The intelligence of a religious person appears through faithful performance without excess or fanaticism. The intelligence of a scholar appears through sound speech, good teaching, and refusal to claim knowledge he does not possess. The intelligence of a craftsman appears through mastery of his craft, and that of a merchant through honest dealing.

Even the intelligence of the poor and afflicted appears through patience, dignity, moderation in asking, and good treatment of others. Intellectual excellence is therefore not confined to one profession or social rank.

Chapter 13 — The Excellence of the Poor, the Needy, and Those Afflicted by Trial

The poor and afflicted are a mercy for the wealthy and an admonition to those living in comfort. When the healthy person sees the sick and the wealthy sees the poor, he may remember that the One who granted him ease could have withheld it. Gratitude is thereby awakened.

Questions concerning suffering have nevertheless generated many doctrines. Some attribute hardship entirely to personal fault; others to punishment, fate, celestial influence, or other causes. Some admit that its full wisdom is unknown.

The Brethren urge caution. One should not adopt contradictory doctrines merely to escape difficulty. It is better to admit that one does not know than to destroy coherence through desperation.

Chapter 14 — The Difference between the Principles and Branches of Sciences and Crafts

Every science and craft contains fundamental principles upon which its practitioners agree and branches concerning which disagreement may arise. Arithmeticians agree concerning number and its basic principles even if they dispute applications. Geometers agree concerning magnitude, line, surface, and body. Physicians share foundations concerning bodily health while differing over particular diagnoses and remedies.

The same applies to grammar, law, astronomy, music, and the other sciences. The intelligent disputant must therefore distinguish disagreement about foundational principles from disagreement about branches.

Chapter 15 — The Foundations of the Art of Disputation

The art of dialectic is founded upon claims, questions, answers, proofs, inferences, analogies, contradictions, and the movement from visible things toward hidden ones. It employs recognised principles and seeks to establish or refute positions through reasoning.

Yet this art is dangerous when practised by those ignorant of the sciences about which they dispute. Questioning is often easier than answering, and destroying an argument easier than building knowledge. Sectarian zeal also causes the disputant to prefer victory over truth.

Hence eloquence without knowledge can make falsehood resemble truth and truth resemble falsehood.

Chapter 16 — The Proper Manners of Disputation

Whenever two or more people dispute about some question, they should first be qualified in the science to which that question belongs. If neither is qualified, their dispute lacks a foundation. If only one understands the subject, the ignorant person acts unjustly in pretending equality with him.

If both are qualified but differ in rank, the lesser should recognise the superiority of the greater. If they are equal, they should return to the accepted principles and laws of their science. If the problem remains unresolved, they should consult one more learned than themselves. If no such judge is available, suspension of judgement is better than hostility.

Knowledge beyond immediate sensation generally comes through either report or inference. Reports may be true or false, and inference may be sound or unsound. Much disagreement arises here.

Chapter 17 — The Kinds of Measures and Analogies

The measures devised by the sages for discovering error are many. Bodily measures include scales, balances, lengths, astronomical instruments, geometrical tools, and the devices used by craftsmen. Verbal measures include grammar, poetic metre, rhetoric, and musical proportion. Intellectual measures include the forms of reasoning employed by jurists and philosophers.

All such measures serve one purpose: attaining truth, justice, proportion, and freedom from error. Yet people may still err through ignorance of the instrument, ignorance of its use, deliberate fraud, negligence, or the use of a defective measure.

These earthly measures are also treated as symbols of the final Balance mentioned in revelation. The wise person should therefore weigh his own actions before being weighed and examine himself before being called to account.

Chapter 18 — The Genera of Opinions and Doctrines

Having discussed the measures of the sciences, we now turn to the opinions and doctrines held by human beings, particularly those related to religion.

Some disagreements concern religion, revealed law, and matters attached to them. Others concern sciences and disciplines not directly religious, such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, grammar, and medicine.

Religious disagreement is especially important because the person guided correctly in these matters follows, in the authors' language, the path of the angels, whereas one who strays may follow the path of the devils.

Chapter 19 — The Best Opinions and Beliefs

Human beliefs are of several kinds. Some are suitable principally for the learned, some chiefly for ordinary people, and some benefit both.

Among the best beliefs for all people is that the world has one wise Creator who originated it, governs it, knows it, and guides each being according to its proper nature. Likewise beneficial are belief in moral responsibility, the prophets, the return, recompense for actions, justice, purification of the soul, and the need for virtuous conduct.

Opinions should therefore be judged not merely by complexity or subtlety but by whether they guide the soul toward truth, justice, harmony, and nearness to God.

Chapter 20 — Philosophical Opinions concerning the World

Philosophical opinions concerning the world's existence may broadly be gathered under two headings. Some hold the world to be eternal in one sense, while others hold it to be originated through a cause.

Many other schools branch from these general positions. The Brethren warn against assuming that all philosophers agree merely because they share the name “philosopher,” or against condemning them through isolated statements without understanding the meanings intended.

Chapter 21 — The Defects of Rational People and the Afflictions of Intellect

Intellect is among God's greatest gifts, yet those possessing intelligence suffer many afflictions. Among them are pride, self-admiration, haste, imitation, excessive attachment to inherited opinion, desire for victory, insufficient training, and corruption of temperament.

A person may be highly intelligent in commerce and ignorant of theology, or accomplished in grammar and incompetent in medicine. Excellence in one domain does not confer authority in all others.

One of the greatest errors of the learned is therefore to exceed the limits of what they truly know.

Chapter 22 — Seeking the Cause before Understanding the Effect

Another error occurs when a person seeks to know a hidden cause before properly understanding the effect through which it is known.

A hidden craftsman is recognised through his craft. To understand the craftsman correctly, one first examines the artefact, its matter, form, proportion, order, and purpose.

Likewise the person seeking knowledge of the Creator should contemplate created things. For this reason mathematics, natural philosophy, and knowledge of the soul serve as preparations for divine science.

Chapter 23 — Why Some Affirm that the World Was Originated by a Single Cause

Those who affirm that the world arose through one cause point to its unity, order, interconnectedness, and mutual correspondence.

The heavens, elements, bodies, souls, generated beings, and their operations form one coordinated whole. This suggests one governing principle rather than independent first causes.

Multiplicity among effects does not require multiplicity in the First Cause. A single root may possess many branches, one Sun illuminates many objects, and one soul governs many bodily organs.

Chapter 24 — Why Some Posited Two Principles

Others, observing oppositions such as good and evil, light and darkness, health and sickness, life and death, and justice and injustice, concluded that two first principles must exist.

The Brethren reject this inference. Opposition within created things does not require two independent creators. Contraries may coexist within a single ordered system and serve a larger purpose.

What harms one individual at one moment may contribute to a wider good unknown to him.

Chapter 25 — The Origination of Matter

Some ancient sages investigated whether matter itself is originated. They first trained in mathematics and natural philosophy, recognising that human craftsmen never produce without pre-existing material.

But divine origination cannot simply be measured by human craft. The human artisan imposes forms upon matter already present; the Creator is not limited by the conditions governing human production.

Matter itself therefore belongs within the hierarchy of caused things.

Chapter 26 — Body Does Not Move Itself

Body is a substance possessing length, breadth, and depth. Considered merely as body, it is not living, sensing, or voluntarily moving.

Yet bodies of living creatures do move, perceive, and act. There must therefore be another principle through which these activities occur.

The body is an instrument. The soul is the principle employing it. From the soul the inquiry rises toward higher spiritual causes and ultimately toward the Creator.

Chapter 27 — The Sayings of Scholars concerning Matter

Scholars differ greatly concerning the nature of matter. Some identify it with body, some describe it as a simple receptive substance, and others distinguish several levels of matter.

The Brethren themselves distinguish such levels as the materials used in crafts, natural matter, Universal Body, and Prime Matter. Confusion often arises when the same term is applied to several ranks without distinction.

Correct inquiry therefore requires determining in what sense the word “matter” is being used.

Chapter 28 — Evil Exists Accidentally, Not as the Primary Intention

Some sages maintain that evils within the world arise accidentally and not through primary intention.

Fire is established for heat and transformation yet may burn a human being. Rain gives life to the Earth yet may destroy a dwelling. A sharp instrument serves many useful purposes yet may wound.

The accidental harm does not abolish the greater good toward which the thing is principally ordered.

Chapter 29 — The Kinds of Good and Evil in the World

Good and evil are spoken of in several ways. There are goods and harms belonging to bodies, souls, intellect, social life, religion, individuals, and communities.

Some evils arise naturally, others through voluntary action. Some are temporary, others leave lasting effects.

A judgement concerning the whole cannot be made from the perspective of one individual, one moment, or one consequence. The chain of causes and purposes must be considered.

Chapter 30 — First Intention and Second Intention

The sages distinguish between what is intended **first** and what occurs through **second intention**.

A physician may primarily intend healing while employing a painful treatment. The pain is not desired for itself but tolerated because of the greater good.

Likewise many painful things within the world accompany a wider order whose primary intention is not that particular pain. This distinction helps explain how evil may occur without evil being the Creator's ultimate purpose.

Chapter 31 — Evils in the Natures of Animals Belong to Second Intention

The same reasoning applies to what appears harmful in animals: claws, fangs, venom, hunger, fear, predation, and competition.

Pain causes creatures to protect themselves. Fear produces flight from danger. Appetite preserves the individual. Sexual desire preserves the species. Predation participates in broader cycles of nourishment and generation.

Considered only from the viewpoint of the victim, such things appear entirely evil. Considered within the larger order, they may possess purposes beyond that immediate perspective.

Chapter 32 — Evils Attributed to Human Souls according to Divine Law

Moral evils differ from merely natural harms. Human beings possess deliberation, choice, and the capacity to respond to command and prohibition.

For this reason praise and blame attach to voluntary conduct. Ignorance, greed, anger, envy, lust, arrogance, and corrupt opinion may lead the soul away from justice.

Revealed law and moral education exist in order to restrain these tendencies and train the soul toward virtue.

Chapter 33 — Human Dispositions toward This World and the Hereafter

Human beings differ naturally in what they desire. Some are intensely attached to bodily life, possessions, family, honour, and worldly survival. Others incline toward worship, asceticism, remembrance of death, and longing for the hereafter.

The higher path, according to the Brethren, does not require hatred of bodily life itself. Rather, bodily life should be used as a means for perfecting the soul rather than treated as the final goal of existence.

Chapter 34 — Drawing Near to God through Prophets, Imams, Saints, and Angels

Some people seek nearness to God through prophets and messengers, others through imams and their successors, others through saints and righteous servants, and still others through angels, sacred places, rituals, prayers, or offerings.

The danger lies not necessarily in honouring an intermediary but in forgetting the One toward whom the intermediary points.

Prophets, saints, angels, and sacred symbols are meant to lead souls toward God, not replace Him as the ultimate object of devotion.

Chapter 35 — Why the Followers of Prophetic Religions Differ

The adherents of prophetic religions differ partly concerning principles and partly concerning legal practices. Much confusion arises because people fail to distinguish between **religion** and **revealed law**.

The underlying religion of the prophets is one: recognition of God, obedience, justice, virtue, purification, and preparation for the hereafter. Their revealed laws differ according to nations, times, conditions, and capacities.

Differences in prayer, fasting, legal regulations, ritual direction, sacrifice, or other outward practices therefore do not necessarily imply disagreement concerning the fundamental religion.

Those who deny that one revealed law may replace another often do so because they have not distinguished the permanent religion from its historically varying legal forms.

Chapter 36 — Particular Souls Cannot Reach the Hereafter without Passing through This World

The particular soul cannot attain the perfection proper to the hereafter without first passing through worldly life.

The authors compare the world to the womb. The body cannot enter worldly life until it has developed within the womb. Likewise the soul does not reach its mature spiritual condition without passing through embodied experience.

The womb perfects the bodily form. The world perfects the soul through sensation, experience, action, knowledge, moral discipline, and choice. Death is therefore analogous to birth: departure from a constricted environment toward another order of existence.

Chapter 37 — Disagreement concerning the Imamate

The question of the imamate is among the great roots of disagreement. Because of it blood has been shed, wealth seized, and communities divided, and the controversy remained unresolved in the authors' own time.

True spiritual leadership, however, should unite knowledge, justice, wisdom, virtue, preservation of religion, and concern for the community.

The farther actual rulers depart from these qualities, the greater the disorder surrounding claims to authority.

Chapter 38 — Kingship and Prophecy

Certain qualities commonly associated with worldly kingship oppose those of prophecy.

Kingship is primarily directed toward worldly rule, possession, defence, obedience, honour, and political continuity. Prophecy is directed toward purification of souls, justice, salvation, and the hereafter.

Yet political power can serve religion when it protects justice and restrains oppression. The greatest corruption occurs when political domination claims spiritual authority while lacking the virtues required for it.

Chapter 39 — The Question of Compulsion

The dispute over compulsion and human power is another major source of sectarian division.

One group emphasises divine decree so strongly that human beings appear to possess no meaningful agency. Another emphasises human power so strongly that divine governance appears diminished.

The Brethren reject both crude extremes. Human beings act through powers bestowed upon them and within conditions they did not create. Responsibility concerns intention, effort, and the use made of one's capacities.

The precise relation between divine knowledge, causality, and human action is subtler than the partisan slogans of disputants.

Chapter 40 — Disagreement concerning Astrological Judgements

Astrological judgements are likewise among the ancient causes of disagreement. Some deny celestial influence entirely, some attribute nearly everything to the stars, and others treat celestial configurations as signs or intermediate causes.

Within the Brethren's historical cosmology, celestial motions participate in the natural order but remain subordinate to higher spiritual principles and ultimately to God.

The stars therefore are neither independent gods nor absolute causes.

Chapter 41 — The Reward of Those Who Do Good

The recompense of the good differs in the hereafter according to their degrees of knowledge, purification, virtue, and effort.

For many believers the path consists in prayer, fasting, almsgiving, recitation, remembrance, and fulfilment of religious obligations. Others unite these actions with understanding, ethical refinement, and spiritual knowledge.

Higher still are those whose knowledge produces certainty, detachment, and continuous remembrance of God. Recompense therefore corresponds not merely to the outward number of actions but to the perfection produced within the soul.

Chapter 42 — The Three Classes of Difficult Questions

Difficult questions are too numerous to count, but they may broadly be gathered into three classes: sensible and corporeal questions, spiritual and intelligible questions, and mathematical questions standing between the two.

Within each class are matters that are comparatively easy, intermediate, and extremely subtle. Thus the authors speak of nine broad degrees of difficulty.

God has distributed different inclinations and capacities among human beings so that various sciences and crafts may be preserved. No single person is suited equally to every discipline.

The first knowledge a person should seek is therefore that which he cannot safely remain ignorant of.

Chapter 43 — The Outward, Inward, and Intermediate Levels of Religious Knowledge

Religious knowledge itself possesses degrees. Some of it is outward and manifest, some inward and hidden, and some stands between the two.

For ordinary believers, the most useful matters are prayer, fasting, almsgiving, recitation, worship, religious narratives, and transmitted reports. Those of intermediate learning study jurisprudence, interpretation, legal reasoning, the clear and ambiguous passages of revelation, and the distinction between sound proof and mere imitation.

The elite investigate the secrets and inward meanings of prophetic symbols: creation, Adam, the angels, Iblīs, the Tree, resurrection, Barzakh, the Balance, the Path, Paradise, Hell, and similar matters in the revealed books.

But higher teachings should be given according to capacity. Wisdom disclosed without preparation may confuse rather than guide.

Chapter 44 — The Noblest Knowledge Is Knowledge of God

The noblest of all sciences and the most exalted of all forms of knowledge is knowledge of God and of the attributes appropriate to Him.

Scholars have employed the familiar questions: Is it? What is it? How much? What kind? Which? Where? When? Why? From what or by whom? These are useful when investigating created things.

But the Creator of quiddities, quantities, qualities, places, times, and causes cannot Himself be confined by those categories. Of such questions, those most appropriately directed toward God are essentially: **Does He exist?** and **Who is He?**, the latter being answered through His acts rather than through a bodily definition.

Thus when Pharaoh asked Moses, “What is the Lord of the worlds?”, Moses answered through lordship and action: the Lord of the heavens and the Earth and what lies between them.

Human conceptions of God nevertheless differ according to capacity. Some ordinary believers imagine Him through bodily or spatial images. Others understand Him as incorporeal and spiritual. Others deny even form and localisation. Those more advanced understand Him as the utterly unique principle from whom existence proceeds without His becoming one thing among the things that exist.

The epistle also considers disputes concerning divine speech, knowledge, and will. Letters and sounds uttered by bodies are created, whereas the meanings known by God cannot simply be identified with those bodily sounds. Revelation descends through a hierarchy of communication: from God, through angelic mediation, to the prophet, and from the prophet to the community.

Many theological disputes arise because people fail to distinguish the eternal meaning, its reception, and its created verbal expression.

Chapter 45 — Nature Does Nothing in Vain and the Soul's Desire for Permanence

The sages say that **Nature does nothing in vain**. This means that the ordered tendencies placed within creatures are not wholly without purpose, whether or not that purpose is immediately understood.

Human souls naturally desire permanence and recoil from annihilation. Yet no bodily individual remains forever. If there were no fulfilment corresponding in some way to this desire beyond bodily existence, the tendency toward permanence would appear entirely futile.

For this reason the Brethren regard the soul's desire for enduring life as one indication of its persistence after separation.

After knowledge of God, no knowledge is nobler or more beneficial to the soul than knowledge of the return and the next creation. The surest road toward it begins with self-knowledge.

Chapter 46 — Corrupt Beliefs That Inflict Pain upon Those Who Hold Them

Among false or harmful beliefs are those which continually fill their adherents with grief, hatred, bitterness, or frustrated expectation.

The authors give polemical examples drawn from rival religious communities. Their underlying argument is psychological: a doctrine which trains a soul to remain perpetually angry with creation or resentful of divine providence becomes itself a form of torment.

Trials experienced by prophets and righteous people may serve discipline, expiation, elevation, instruction, or the manifestation of patience.

The proper response to sacred suffering is therefore not inherited hatred without end but wisdom, patience, and reform of the soul.

Chapter 47 — Hope and Fear

God has placed within human nature the tendency to obey through either hope or fear.

A person may be moved by something immediately present or by something future reported by a trustworthy messenger. Prophets therefore bring both glad tidings and warning.

Hope encourages obedience through expectation of reward; fear restrains wrongdoing through expectation of consequence.

The proper religious state lies between despair and false security. But fear and hope themselves should ultimately be directed toward God, not merely toward created instruments.

Chapter 48 — The Peaceful Condition of the Friends of God

The authors contrast divisive and painful doctrines with the state of the friends of God.

Their hearts are purified from corrupt habits, evil actions, deceit, excessive bodily passions, envy, hatred, and inward opposition to divine governance.

They do not wish evil upon creation merely because others differ from them. They do not regard themselves as entitled to superiority over everyone else.

Their bodies remain in the world while their aspirations are directed toward the higher world. They worship God as though they see Him, and even though bodily sight does not encompass Him they remain certain that He sees them.

Chapter 49 — The Joy of Certainty and the Brotherhood of the Righteous

No pleasure of the soul is sweeter than the certainty entering the hearts of God's friends concerning His promise.

Hope in the hereafter, expectation of reward, and longing for nearness to God produce a spiritual joy even before bodily death. This itself is a portion of the reward granted to them in advance.

The Brethren return here to the necessity of cooperation and brotherhood. Human beings were commanded to help one another, love one another, reconcile, and seek mutual salvation. Yet many instead occupy themselves with exposing faults, slandering rivals, dividing into sects, and transmitting hatred from one generation to another.

In doing so they construct for themselves a portion of the punishment they imagine lies only in the future.

Good character may be natural in part and acquired in part. Bad character likewise may be rooted in temperament or formed through repeated habit. What is repeatedly practised eventually becomes like a second nature.

The rational person should therefore examine his own habits and opinions rather than excuse them by saying, “This is simply my nature.” The prophets and sages were sent precisely in order to reform corrupt habits and defective dispositions.

Chapter 50 — Against Corrupt Polemic and Empty Disputation

Know that corrupt opinions are many, and what we have related is sufficient for one who reflects. Among the most harmful people are those contentious disputants who speak about intelligible realities while ignorant of sensible ones, undertake demonstrations without mastering mathematics, discuss divine matters while ignorant of natural philosophy, and preside over assemblies arguing about questions that yield neither useful religious knowledge nor philosophical benefit.

When asked about sciences established among learned people, they may deny them merely because they do not understand them. Some say that medicine is useless, astronomy false, geometry without reality, and logic or natural philosophy unbelief. They attribute foolish positions to philosophers and sages which those people themselves may never have held.

Worse still, in attempting to refute false doctrines, these disputants express them eloquently, arrange arguments for them, write them beautifully, and attribute them to famous learned men. In this way they may establish those corrupt doctrines in the minds of inexperienced listeners more effectively than their original advocates ever could.

They claim that by doing this they defend religion. Yet outsiders who observe their quarrels, accusations, curses, and mutual declarations of unbelief may become more firmly attached to their own communities rather than attracted toward the truth.

Among all groups of people, says the epistle, few display as much hostility toward one another as those who make disputation their occupation. They accuse one another of unbelief and heresy, permit themselves to seize the honour or possessions of opponents, and make knowledge hateful in the eyes of ordinary people.

Their likeness is that of a dog lying in a manger: it does not eat the fodder itself and does not allow the horses to eat.

A saying is attributed to al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, peace be upon him: evil scholars sit at the gate of Paradise; they neither act so as to deserve entrance themselves nor allow others to pass beyond them and enter.

Beware, therefore, O brother, of people possessing eloquent tongues but blind hearts, who make themselves opponents of scholars and adversaries of sages while knowing neither wisdom nor the realities of revealed law.

If you wish to become rightly guided and capable of guiding others, act according to the rulings of divine law, the counsels of the prophets, and the indications of the sages. Abandon quarrels, bad character, evil deeds, ugly actions, and corrupt opinions.

Learn knowledge, whatever its proper discipline may be—philosophical or revealed, mathematical or natural, intellectual or divine—for all genuine sciences are nourishment for the soul and life for it in this world and the next. Do not follow the way of those who dispute concerning God without knowledge.

We have composed fifty-one epistles concerning these sciences and disciplines, each devoted to a particular branch of knowledge or form of learning. Seek them and read them, and you will find their roads made easy for you.

May God grant us, you, and all our brethren success upon the path of correctness. May He guide us, you, and all our brethren along the way of right guidance. Indeed, He is compassionate and merciful toward His servants.

Blessings and peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad and all his family.

Here ends the Epistle on Opinions and Religions.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Nature of the Path to God, Mighty and Exalted.

Epistle 43

On the Nature of the Path to God, Mighty and Exalted, and How One Reaches Him

The Second Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that God, blessed and exalted, created creation and fashioned it well, governed all affairs and set them in motion, then established Himself upon the Throne and exalted it. Out of the abundance of His mercy, the perfection of His generosity, and the completeness of His beneficence, He chose a group from among His servants, selected them, drew them near, conversed with them, and disclosed to them some of His hidden knowledge and the secrets of His unseen realm. He then sent them to His servants so that they might call them to Him and to His proximity, inform them of His hidden mysteries, awaken them from the sleep of ignorance and the slumber of heedlessness, give them the life of the learned and the existence of the blessed, and lead them to the perfection of being in the Abode of Eternity.

Thus He has spoken in His books and upon the tongues of His prophets—blessings be upon them—saying that He created the heavens and the Earth in six days and then established Himself upon the Throne; that God chose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of ʿImrān above the worlds; that God sent the prophets as bearers of glad tidings and warners and sent down the Book with them; and that God calls to the Abode of Peace and guides whom He wills to a straight path.

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that arrival there is possible only through two qualities. One is **purity of the soul**, and the other is **straightness of the path**.

Purity of the soul is necessary because the soul is the kernel of the human substance. The name “human being” applies to the soul together with the body. The body is this visible corporeal frame composed of flesh, blood, bones, veins, nerves, skin, and similar things. All these are earthly, dark, heavy, changing, and corruptible bodies. The soul, however, is a celestial and spiritual substance: living, luminous, light, mobile, incorruptible, knowing, and capable of apprehending the forms of things.

Its apprehension of the forms of sensible and intelligible existents resembles a mirror. When a mirror is straight in shape and its face is polished, the forms of corporeal things facing it appear within it according to their true forms. But when the mirror is warped, those forms appear other than they truly are; and when its surface is covered with rust, nothing appears within it at all.

Such is the state of the soul. When it is learned and layers of ignorance have not accumulated upon it, when its substance is pure and has not been stained by evil actions, when its essence is clear and has not been rusted by bad character, and when its aspiration is sound and has not been distorted by corrupt opinions, then the forms of the spiritual things belonging to its own world appear within it. The soul apprehends them according to their realities and beholds through intellect and purity of substance things hidden from its senses, just as it beholds corporeal things through its senses when those senses are sound and healthy.

But when the soul is ignorant and impure in substance, when it has been stained by evil deeds, rusted by bad character, or warped by false opinions and persists in such a condition, it remains veiled from apprehending the realities of spiritual things. It becomes incapable of reaching God Most High and is deprived of the bliss of the hereafter, as God says: **"No indeed! On that Day they shall be veiled from their Lord."**

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that the veil between the soul and its Lord is nothing other than its ignorance of its own substance, its own world, its origin, and its return. Its ignorance is the rust accumulated upon its essence through its evil actions and ugly deeds, as the Blessed and Exalted says: **"No indeed! Rather, what they used to earn has rusted upon their hearts."** Its crookedness comes from corrupt opinions and bad character, as God says: **"When they deviated, God caused their hearts to deviate."**

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you with a spirit from Him—that so long as the soul possesses these qualities it cannot truly behold itself, nor do those beautiful, noble, delicious, and desirable things belonging to its own world appear within it. God describes them when He says: **"Therein is whatever souls desire and eyes delight in, and therein you shall abide forever,"** and: **"No soul knows what delight of the eyes has been hidden for them as a reward for what they used to do."**

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you with a spirit from Him—that souls, so long as they have not witnessed such things, neither desire nor seek them nor long for them. They remain as though blind, as God says: **"It is not the eyes that become blind, but the hearts within the breasts that become blind."**

When the soul becomes blind to the affairs of its own world and imagines that it possesses no existence other than the condition in which it now finds itself in this worldly abode, it becomes eager to remain here, wishes for immortality within it, becomes content with it and tranquil in it, despairs of the hereafter, and forgets the matter of return. God says: **"They were content with the life of this world and became tranquil in it,"** and: **"They have despaired of the hereafter as the unbelievers have despaired of the inhabitants of the graves."**

Then, even when the soul is reminded by the divine counsel brought upon the tongues of His prophets—peace be upon them—it may fail to remember, as God says: **"When they are reminded, they do not remember."** It remains in its blindness, ignorance, and rebellion until death, persisting arrogantly as though it had heard nothing.

When the stupor of death comes—that is, when the soul separates from the body and ceases to employ the bodily frame—it departs from it reluctantly. Then, being empty of the body's service and cut off from the apprehension of sensible things, it returns upon itself and

attempts to rise. Yet it may be unable to rise because of the weight of its burdens, its evil deeds, and its bad habits, as God says: **“They carry their burdens upon their backs.”**

At that moment it becomes clear to the soul that the sensible pleasures it possessed through the mediation of the body have escaped it, while it has not acquired the intelligible pleasures belonging to its own world. Then it recognises that it has lost both this world and the hereafter.

That is the manifest loss.

Chapter 1 — The Purification of the Soul and the Correction of Character

As for the second quality, which is **straightness of the path**, every person who seeks some worldly object chooses, as far as possible, the shortest road leading toward what he seeks and the easiest road to travel. He knows that if the road is not short, his arrival at his goal will be delayed, and that if the road is difficult, obstacles may prevent him from reaching it or he may be exhausted by travelling upon it. The shortest road is that which follows a straight line, and the easiest is that in which there are no obstructions.

So too should those who seek God Most High, after purifying their souls, and those who desire the bliss of the hereafter in the Abode of Peace, who wish to ascend toward the Kingdom of Heaven and enter among the angels, seek in their journey the road nearest to Him. God says: **“Those are the ones who have sought right guidance,”** and He says: **“This is My path, straight, so follow it; and do not follow the other paths, lest they separate you from His path. This He has enjoined upon you.”** And He says: **“What if I bring you better guidance than that upon which you found your fathers?”**

We therefore wish to explain what this straight path is which God has enjoined upon us and commanded us to follow upon the tongues of His prophets—blessings be upon them—and how one should travel upon it until one reaches what our Lord has promised, as God says: **“We have found what our Lord promised us to be true; have you found what your Lord promised you to be true?” They shall say: “Yes.”**

Yet this cannot properly be explained through conjecture or arbitrary speech. It must be explained through measured discourse, sound analogy, and clear indications, in accordance with the manner in which God Most High has explained His signs and His prophets have described them—through the signs within the horizons and within ourselves, until it becomes evident that this is the truth. God says: **“On the Earth are signs for those possessing certainty, and within yourselves; will you not then see?”**

When this is done, the doors of stored knowledge and hidden mysteries are opened—those mysteries which none touch except the purified.

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that no one should speak concerning the essence of the Creator Most High or His attributes through guesswork and conjecture, nor should he dispute about Him before purifying his soul. Doing so leads to doubts, bewilderment, and error, as God says: **“Among people are those who dispute concerning God without knowledge, guidance, or an illuminating Book.”**

We therefore begin before everything else by explaining how the soul ought to be purified from the bad character traits to which it has become accustomed from childhood. In our mathematical epistles we have set forth many chapters concerning this and have given different kinds of examples so that the matter might be clearer in explanation, easier to understand, and more effective as admonition.

After that, in these epistles, we describe other matters by which it becomes evident what the straight path to God, Mighty and Exalted, truly is and how it should be followed. We explain this through measured speech and clear indications so that it may become a path for those who seek and a guide for those who desire.

After these two matters—the purification of the soul and the clarification of the straight path—we begin to unveil something of the living divine realities and hidden mysteries which we have come to know either through inspiration from God Most High, through what we have inferred from interpretations of the books of His saints and the revelations of His prophets—peace be upon them—or through what has passed upon the tongues of the sages in their indications and symbols.

Among these matters are the reason for the beginning of the world's existence after it had not been, the fall and deception of the soul, the creation of the first Adam and the reason for his disobedience, the account of the angels and their prostration before Adam, the story of Iblīs and the jinn and his refusal to prostrate, the Tree of Eternity and the kingdom that does not decay, the reason for the covenant taken from the descendants of Adam, the reports concerning the Resurrection, the blowing of the Trumpet, rising from the dead, gathering, reckoning, the final judgement, crossing the Path, deliverance from the Fire, entrance into Paradise, and the visitation of the Lord—blessed and exalted is He—as well as other reports of this kind mentioned in the books of the prophets, blessings be upon them, and the true realities of their meanings.

For among human beings are intelligent and discerning people inclined toward philosophy who, when they reflect upon such matters and measure them according to their intellects, cannot conceive their true meanings. Yet when they carry them merely according to what the outward wording of revelation seems to indicate, their intellects do not accept them. They consequently fall into doubt and bewilderment, and when that bewilderment persists they may deny these matters inwardly even though they do not openly express such denial with the tongue out of fear of the sword.

There are others below these in knowledge and discernment who believe and know that these things are true. Others receive them only through imitation and do not reflect upon them at all. There is also a group who, whenever they hear questions of this sort, recoil inwardly, dislike even mentioning them, and accuse the speaker or questioner of unbelief, heresy, or inappropriate speculation.

These are people whose souls have sunk deeply into the sleep of ignorance. Whoever reminds them should therefore be like a gentle physician, knowing how to treat them through the mildest form of admonition available. He should remind them through the signs contained in the divine books, through the reports of their own prophets, and through the limits, ordinances, and symbolic forms contained within the laws they themselves observe.

All these things are indications reminding the soul of what it has forgotten concerning its origin and return: the specified numbers of obligatory acts, religious ordinances established according to known conditions, their performance at appointed times, orientation toward particular directions, and the different forms of worship. If these people belong to the Torah, the Gospel, or the Qur'an, then their very attachment to the outward ordinances of their laws, their concern with reading the books of their prophets, and their acknowledgement that the judgements found there are sound for religion and worldly life provide the person reminding them with evidence concerning what they have forgotten about their own world, their return, and their beginning, and bear witness against their denial of the meanings of the questions just mentioned.

If those who reject the meanings of these questions are worshippers of idols, images, fire, the Sun, stars, or similar things, their own books of law, forms of temples, and ritual practices likewise contain symbols and indications of these realities, just as prophetic religions do. But whoever reminds such people must understand those symbols.

There is another group who, upon hearing such questions, find their aspirations stirred toward their answers and desire knowledge of their meanings. Yet when answers are given to them, they accept them without proof or demonstration and only through imitation. Their souls remain sound and have not yet become warped by false opinions or sunk deeply into the sleep of ignorance. Such people should be led gradually along the path of instruction, as we have described in the first two epistles which we composed for students and seekers.

When their souls have been disciplined, their minds purified, and their powers of thought strengthened, answers to such questions may be disclosed to them together with their demonstrations, as we have explained in the five epistles which we arranged according to the form of the human being and whose proofs we clarified through examples drawn from the human form.

There is also a group among the learned who have investigated some sciences, read certain books of the sages, or listened to debates between those inclined toward philosophy and those devoted to revealed law. They have heard these questions discussed and answered in many different ways, but have found no agreement upon a single answer or established opinion. Instead they encounter disputes and contradictions.

The reason is that these people possess no single sound principle and no single straight measure by means of which all these questions may be answered. Their principles are different and their measures unequal. Answers based on differing foundations and judgements based upon unequal measures necessarily conflict and fail to attain soundness.

Know, O brothers—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that we have answered these questions and many others resembling them according to **one principle and one measure**, namely the **form of the human being**.

For the human form is God's greatest proof against His creatures, because it is nearest to them, its indications clearest, and its demonstrations strongest. It is the book which He wrote with His hand, the temple which He constructed through His wisdom, the balance which He established among His creatures, the measure by which He measures out for them on the Day of Judgement the reward and recompense they deserve, the form in which the images of both worlds are gathered, the epitome of the sciences contained within the Preserved Tablet, the

witness against every denier, the road toward every good, and the Path stretched between Paradise and Hell.

Whoever claims mastery of the true sciences and claims to know how to answer the questions mentioned above should be asked to answer them according to one principle and one measure. He will not be able to do so unless he takes the human form as his principle among all the forms of existing things—celestial spheres, stars, elements, animals, plants, and all the rest.

If he takes something other than the human form as his principle, he will not be able to measure all other existents by it and answer these questions in the manner in which we have measured and answered them. When this principle is properly used, the scattered answers come together upon one opinion, one religion, and one doctrine; disagreement is removed, truth becomes clear to all, and this becomes a cause of salvation for everyone.

We do not permit anyone to investigate such matters or even question them until he has first disciplined his soul according to what we have described in these two books. In this we follow the divine precedent which God, blessed and exalted, relates when He says: **"We appointed for Moses thirty nights and completed them with ten."**

Moses—peace be upon him—stood throughout those nights and fasted during their days until his soul became purified. Only then did God converse with him and speak to him.

It is also related from the Prophet—may God's blessings be upon him and his family—that he said: **"Whoever sincerely devotes worship to God for forty days, God opens his heart, expands his breast, and releases his tongue with wisdom, even if he had been unable to speak with eloquence."**

For this reason, when the sages wish to open the gate of wisdom for students and uncover secrets for seekers, they must first train and discipline them so that their souls may become clear and their character purified.

Wisdom is like a bride who desires a private chamber. It is one of the treasures of the hereafter.

If a sage fails to fulfil what wisdom requires by training students before revealing its mysteries to them, he resembles the chamberlain of a king who permits foolish and undisciplined people to enter upon the king without preparation or order. Such a chamberlain deserves punishment for doing so.

But if the sage carries out the necessary discipline and education and the students themselves refuse to act upon it or accept it, then the sage is free from blame and the fault belongs to them. If you place food and drink before a hungry person, you have provided what would satisfy him. If he then refuses to eat until he dies of hunger, responsibility lies with him.

May God grant you, O good and compassionate brother, and us success upon the path of right guidance. May He make firm the steps of you, us, and all our brethren wherever they may be throughout the lands. Indeed, He is compassionate toward His servants.

Here ends the Epistle on the Nature of the Path to God, Mighty and Exalted, and How One Reaches Him.

It is followed by the Epistle explaining the Belief of the Brethren of Purity.

Epistle 44

On the Belief of the Brethren of Purity and the Doctrine of the Divine Sages

The Third Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that we have completed our explanation of the nature of the path to God Most High and the manner of attaining knowledge of Him, which is the ultimate goal. We now wish in this epistle to explain the belief of the Brethren of Purity and the doctrine of the Divine Sages, and to show that the soul remains after separation from the body, that separation which is called natural death. We shall set this forth by a persuasive path rather than by strict demonstration.

Know that it is related concerning former times that there was once a wise man skilled in medicine who entered a certain city and found that most of its inhabitants suffered from a hidden disease. They neither recognised their illness nor perceived the malady afflicting them. The sage considered how he might treat them, cure their disease, and free them from the illness that had persisted among them. He knew that if he simply told them what condition they were in, they would neither listen to him nor accept his counsel. They might instead oppose him, accuse his judgement of weakness, despise his learning, and belittle his art.

Out of his intense compassion for his fellow human beings, his mercy toward them, and his eagerness to cure them for the sake of God's good pleasure, he devised a stratagem. He sought out one of the more virtuous inhabitants who nevertheless suffered from the disease. He gave the man a medicinal drink which he had prepared for their treatment and administered another remedy through his nose. The man immediately sneezed and felt lightness in his body, ease in his senses, health in his frame, and strength in his soul. He thanked the physician, rewarded him with good words, and asked whether there was anything he could do in return for the kindness shown him.

The physician replied, “Yes. Help me treat one of your brothers.”

The man answered, “I hear and obey.”

The two agreed upon another man whom they considered near to goodness. They separated him from his companions and treated him with the same medicine. He too recovered immediately. When he awoke from his illness he blessed them and asked how he might repay their kindness. They said, “Help us treat another of your brothers.” He agreed, and they approached another man and treated him in the same manner.

They then spread throughout the city, curing one person after another in secret until many had recovered and their supporters, brethren, and acquaintances had multiplied. Only then did they appear openly among the people and announce their treatment. When necessary they compelled those who resisted to accept the medicine, one group holding the patient's hands, another his feet, and others administering the remedy until at last they had cured the inhabitants of the whole city.

Chapter 1 — The Prophets as Physicians of Souls

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that this is a likeness of the prophets—blessings be upon them—at the beginning of their missions. They reminded people of what they had forgotten concerning the hereafter and the return and awakened them from the sleep of ignorance and the slumber of heedlessness, which are diseases of the soul.

The Prophet—may God's blessings be upon him and his family—at the beginning of his mission first called his wife Khadīja, then his cousin ʿAlī, then Abū Bakr and others, until a small community gathered around him. When their number and strength increased, the call became public.

Likewise Moses—peace be upon him—when he first entered Egypt began with his brother Aaron and with certain learned men among the Children of Israel until a group had gathered around him secretly. Only afterward did they openly confront Pharaoh. Christ—peace be upon him—acted similarly at the beginning of his mission in Jerusalem.

Know, O brother, that knowledge is of two kinds: **knowledge of bodies** and **knowledge of religions**. Physicians treat bodies, while the prophets—peace be upon them—and their friends and successors are physicians of souls. This is the doctrine of our noble brethren and that to which we call the rest of our brothers. Therefore be, O good and compassionate brother, a helper to your brethren and support them, and you will prosper, God willing.

Know also that most people who acknowledge the return remain doubtful and bewildered concerning it. They neither understand its reality nor know its manner, but merely transmit by imitation what one person has heard from another and the follower from the one he follows. Their likeness is that of a group of blind men, each placing his hand upon the shoulder of the one before him so that they move like a caravan of camels. If they possess no sighted guide, all of them become lost.

May God preserve you, O brother, from being among them. Rather, be a sighted guide who leads the lost and a gentle physician who cures blindness and disease. Do not yourself remain sick and in need of another physician.

When physicians agree concerning the treatment of a sick person, when their judgement is united upon one medicine, when they understand the disease clearly and cooperate sincerely without rivalry, God may cure the patient at their hands in a short time and through an easy treatment. But when the physicians quarrel, contradict one another, and dispute, the sick person is abandoned between them and may perish, while they themselves gain no benefit from their knowledge.

Therefore assist your brethren, agree with them, and counsel them sincerely, so that God may benefit His servants through you and reform their condition.

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that we, the company of the Brethren of Purity, sincere friends and noble companions, were asleep for a period of time in the cave of our father Adam while the transformations of time and the calamities of events passed over us. Then the appointed time came after we had been scattered through the lands within the kingdom of the bearer of the Greater Law, and we beheld our **spiritual city raised in the air**, which we described in the second epistle.

This is the city from which our father Adam, his wife, and their descendants were expelled when their accursed enemy Iblīs deceived them and said: **"Shall I show you the Tree of Eternity and a kingdom that does not decay?"** They were deceived by his words, and greed and haste moved them to seek before its appointed time something they had not yet become worthy to receive. Their rank therefore fell, their degree declined, their nakedness was disclosed, and they and their descendants were sent down, each becoming an enemy to the other. They were told that upon the Earth they would have an abode and enjoyment for a time; there they would live, there they would die, and from there they would be brought forth on the day of resurrection, when they awaken from the sleep of ignorance and rise from the slumber of heedlessness.

Will you not, O brother, hasten to embark with us upon the **Ark of Salvation** built by our father Noah—peace be upon him—so that you may escape the flood of Nature before the heaven brings forth its manifest smoke, and so that you may be delivered from the waves of the sea of matter rather than becoming one of those who drown?

Will you not look with us until you behold the Kingdom of the Heavens which our father Abraham beheld when night covered him, so that you too may become one of those possessing certainty? Will you not come to the appointed meeting on the right side, where Moses was called, so that the matter may be completed for you and you may become one of the witnesses?

Will you not perform what those people performed so that the spirit may be breathed into you and blame removed from you, until you behold Jesus at the right side of the Throne of the Lord, his dwelling drawn near? Will you not leave the darkness of Ahriman until you behold the light of Yazdān? Will you not enter the temple of the sages until you behold the spiritual spheres described by Plato, rather than merely the corporeal spheres to which astronomers point?

For the knowledge of God Most High encompasses what the Intellect contains of intelligibles; the Intellect encompasses what the Soul contains of forms; the Soul encompasses what Nature contains of generated beings; and Nature encompasses what Matter contains of fashioned things. These are spiritual spheres, one encompassing another.

Will you not remain awake through the Night of Destiny until you behold the Ascension at the coming of dawn, where Aḥmad the Messenger stands in his Praiseworthy Station? May God grant you and all our brethren understanding of these indications and symbols, open your heart, expand your breast, purify your soul, and illuminate your intellect so that you may witness with the eye of insight the realities of these mysteries. Then you will not be terrified

by bodily death when the soul separates from the body, for within bodily death lies the life of the soul.

Know, O brother, that no one will be completely sincere in friendship toward you if he does not believe that after bodily separation he will receive recompense for his affection and love toward you. Do not be deceived by one whose only purpose in helping you is to bring benefit to his own body or repel harm from it.

Whenever two people cooperate in seeking some advantage where the safety of one body requires the destruction of the other, each ordinarily wishes for his own body to survive even if his companion's perishes. This is not the belief of our brethren in their cooperation for the welfare of religion and worldly life.

Their disposition is otherwise.

The text gives the example of a wise minister serving the king of the Hephthalites. When the Persian king advanced against them with a great army and resistance appeared impossible, the king consulted his ministers. Some advised battle, some flight, and one wise minister advised a stratagem. He offered to allow his own hands and feet to be cut off and his eyes put out, so that the enemy would believe he had been punished for betraying his king. The king could then retreat while leaving him behind. When the Persians arrived, the mutilated minister would appear to seek revenge and direct them by a false road into destruction.

The king marvelled that anyone could willingly surrender his own body in this way. The minister replied that others before him had done the same.

He then related the story of a group of pearl-divers who were captured by robbers while returning from an island. Each diver had swallowed the precious pearls he carried so that the robbers would not find them. Their travelling companion, who possessed none of the valuable pearls, realised that the robbers intended to cut open their bodies. If the first man killed were found to contain pearls, all the others would certainly be slaughtered.

He therefore offered himself first. When the robbers killed him and found nothing, they believed the others' denial and released them. Thus he sacrificed his own body to preserve the lives of his companions.

The Brethren offer such stories as examples of what complete loyalty can demand when the welfare of many souls is weighed against preservation of a single body.

Chapter 2 — Why Prophets and Sages Regard the Body Lightly

Know that the prophets, their followers and successors, and those philosophical sages who share their opinion regard the affair of bodies lightly once souls have awakened, because they understand bodies as prisons, veils, passages, or instruments of souls rather than as their final reality.

The body resembles the shell surrounding a chick or the placenta surrounding an embryo. While the creature within remains incomplete, Nature preserves its covering. But once the

chick has become complete, destruction of the shell no longer destroys the chick. Once the infant is fully formed, the placenta is no longer its life.

So too the soul preserves and tends the body while it still requires bodily instruments for its completion. But once it has awakened from ignorance, recognised the nobility of its own substance, understood that its true existence differs from bodily existence, and perceived that spiritual existence is better, more lasting, more delightful, and more beautiful, separation from the body becomes easier for it.

When the soul recognises that it is a stranger within this corporeal world, a prisoner of Nature and a wanderer upon the sea of matter; when it recognises its own spiritual world and beholds the forms free from matter, intellectual pleasures, lights, splendour, joy, spirit, and fragrance; then it may willingly surrender the body for the sake of God's good pleasure, the support of religion, and the welfare of the brethren.

The epistle invokes Moses and the Israelites who worshipped the calf and were commanded to repent, and the magicians of Pharaoh who, after recognising the truth of Moses' sign, accepted Pharaoh's threats rather than abandon their conviction. Their willingness to endure bodily destruction is interpreted as evidence that they believed the soul to possess a life beyond the body.

Chapter 3 — Christ and the Deliverance of Souls from Bodily Captivity

Another indication that the prophets believed in the persistence and welfare of the soul after bodily separation is, according to the epistle, the conduct of Christ—peace be upon him—and the counsel he gave his disciples.

Christ found many among the Children of Israel attached to the outward form of the religion of Moses and the Torah but ignorant of its inward purpose. They observed inherited practices while remaining absorbed in worldly concerns and without genuine longing for the hereafter.

The purpose of prophecy, the authors insist, is not merely the improvement of bodily and worldly affairs. Its higher purpose is to rescue souls drowning in the sea of matter, release them from the captivity of Nature, bring them from the darkness of bodies toward spiritual light, awaken them from ignorance, and cure them of greed, envy, hatred, fear, sorrow, rivalry, and excessive attachment to corporeal pleasures.

The epistle relates a parable in which Christ encountered people washing garments. He asked them whether, after cleansing those garments, they would place them upon bodies covered with blood, excrement, and filth. They answered that only a fool would do so. Christ replied that they had acted similarly by cleansing their outward bodies and garments while leaving their souls covered with ignorance, envy, hatred, greed, suspicion, deception, and uncontrolled appetite.

He called them instead toward the Kingdom of Heaven, described as an abode without death, old age, illness, hunger, thirst, poverty, fear, grief, envy, pride, or the exhaustion that attends bodily life. Those whose hearts were opened accepted his teaching and accompanied him.

The source then presents Christ's final instruction to his disciples according to the Christian narrative known to the authors. He commands them to spread the teaching without fearing rulers or bodily death and promises continuing spiritual support after his separation from bodily life. His disciples, after witnessing what the epistle describes as the crucifixion of his human nature and the disappearance of his body from the grave, disperse through the lands and preach despite persecution.

Their willingness to risk their bodies is taken as evidence that they expected the persistence of the soul beyond death.

Chapter 4 — Abraham and Joseph

Among the indications that Abraham, the Friend of the Merciful, held this belief is his saying: **“He who created me guides me; He feeds me and gives me drink; when I become ill, He heals me; He causes me to die and then gives me life; and I hope that He will forgive my fault on the Day of Judgement. My Lord, grant me wisdom and join me with the righteous.”**

Joseph likewise prayed: **“My Lord, You have given me sovereignty and taught me the interpretation of events. Originator of the heavens and the Earth, You are my protector in this world and the hereafter. Cause me to die in submission and join me with the righteous.”**

Did Abraham and Joseph, the authors ask, mean that their bodies were to be joined with the righteous? Their bodies returned to the earthly elements from which bodily things arise. The thing seeking reunion with the righteous was the noble, purified, luminous soul.

Chapter 5 — The Prophet's Household and Karbala

Among the indications that the Household of our Prophet—peace be upon them—held the same belief is their surrender of their bodies to death on the day of Karbala. They refused to submit themselves to the authority of Yazīd and Ibn Ziyād and endured thirst, wounds, and death rather than abandon what they regarded as truth.

The epistle interprets their conduct as evidence of certainty that souls remain after bodily separation. They believed that after leaving their bodies their souls would ascend toward the celestial kingdom and join the purified souls who had preceded them—Muhammad, ʿAlī, the Emigrants, the Helpers, and the righteous.

Had they believed bodily death to be complete annihilation, the authors argue, their willingness to surrender worldly life would be unintelligible. But they believed in the life of the hereafter and in deliverance from the deception of this world.

Therefore, O brother, free your soul from the captivity of Nature, escape from the sea of matter, rise from the darkness of bodies, and seek sincere companions who desire the salvation of both themselves and their brethren.

Chapter 6 — Socrates and the Philosophers' Belief in the Survival of the Soul

Among the indications that the divinely minded philosophical sages held this same opinion is Socrates' voluntary surrender of his body to destruction and his acceptance of the cup of poison.

Socrates was a sage among the philosophers of Greece. He displayed renunciation of worldly pleasure, longed for the joy and fragrance of the spiritual world, called people toward it, and discouraged excessive attachment to the world of generation and corruption. A group of the children of kings and noble families gathered around him to hear his wisdom and unusual sayings.

Some of his opponents became envious and accused him falsely. Eleven men testified against him and he was imprisoned while judgement concerning his death was considered. Many philosophers gathered around him in prison, some agreeing with him and others opposing him, and debated the soul and whether it survives bodily separation. Socrates argued for the soul's persistence and the improvement of its condition after death.

His companions asked whether, since he had been wronged, he wished to escape through payment or flight. Socrates replied that he feared the Law might ask him afterward, “Why did you flee from my judgement, O Socrates?”

They answered that he could say, “Because I was wronged.”

He replied, “And if the Law says to me: If the judges and the eleven witnesses wronged you, did that give you the right to wrong me by fleeing from my judgement—what shall I answer?”

According to the epistle, the law of his people required submission when authorised witnesses had established judgement, even when the individual believed himself wronged. Socrates therefore submitted and said that whoever makes light of the Law is destroyed by the Law.

When he drank the poison, the philosophers around him wept. He told them not to grieve, saying that although he was leaving noble and wise brethren among them, he was going toward other noble and wise brethren who had preceded him. They answered that they wept for themselves because they were losing a wise father such as him.

Chapter 7 — Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras

Another indication that Plato, the sage of the Greeks, believed in the survival and welfare of souls after separation from bodies is the saying attributed to him: **“If there were no return in which we hoped for good, this world would be the opportunity of the wicked.”**

The epistle also attributes to him the statement that we are strangers here, held captive by Nature and living among hostile powers, having been expelled from our proper world because of an ancient fault associated symbolically with our father Adam.

Aristotle too is presented as holding this belief through the discourse attributed to him in the work known as the **Epistle of the Apple**, particularly his sayings when death approached him and his argument concerning the excellence of philosophy and the recompense awaiting the philosopher after bodily separation.

Pythagoras, the master of number, is likewise cited through the **Golden Epistle** and the counsel attributed to him. At its conclusion he is represented as saying that when the purified person leaves the body he becomes free in the spiritual expanse, safe and tranquil, no longer returning to mortal human existence or becoming subject to death.

Chapter 8 — Why the Brethren Cite Both Prophets and Philosophers

We have cited in support of this doctrine the sayings and counsels of philosophers together with the actions of prophets and the practices of their revealed laws because among the people of religious law there are those who call themselves philosophers while knowing scarcely more than the name of philosophy, and there are people of religious learning who know little of the secrets of revealed law beyond its outward forms.

Such people assume positions of authority and speak about things they have not mastered. At one moment they oppose philosophy by means of revealed law, and at another they oppose revealed law by means of philosophy. They thereby fall into confusion and doubt, going astray and leading others astray.

Another indication of the soul's survival after bodily separation may be found in ordinary human grief at death. Reflect, O brother, upon people's weeping and sorrow when someone dies. If their grief were merely for the body, the body lies before them complete immediately after death. Nothing visible has yet been removed from it. If they wished, they could even preserve it for a considerable time through medicines and preparations. Yet they become alienated from the corpse and hasten to bury it.

Their grief is therefore not primarily for the body's matter but for what once appeared through that body: movement, speech, wisdom, virtues, crafts, affection, and action.

Why do they not grieve in the same manner when a person sleeps, even though most outward actions temporarily disappear? Because they know that the living principle remains and will resume its bodily operations.

Love, companionship, affection, sorrow, and longing are therefore directed principally toward the noble soul which formerly manifested its qualities through the body.

Likewise, people of religious communities visit the graves of righteous persons, saints, and virtuous people, pray there, seek forgiveness, ask for intercession before God, and hope for the fulfilment of needs. The Brethren ask whether all religious communities could have agreed upon such acts if there were absolutely no reality underlying them. They regard this as a subtle knowledge and a hidden mystery understood only by the learned.

Chapter 9 — The Parable of the Island, the Apes, and the Return Home

We should now explain how the Brethren of Purity ought to maintain their relationship with one another, how they should assist one another in seeking worldly livelihood, and what they should believe concerning a brother whose appointed death comes before that of his companions.

It is related that there was once a city situated upon the summit of a mountain on an island in the sea. It was fertile, prosperous, pleasant in climate, sweet in water, rich in trees, and abundant in delicious fruits and many kinds of animals. Its inhabitants were brothers and cousins descended from a single ancestor. They lived the happiest of lives because of the affection, love, mercy, compassion, and gentleness among them. Their life was untroubled by the envy, aggression, hostility, and other evils found among corrupt cities whose inhabitants possess conflicting temperaments, divided opinions, ugly actions, and bad character.

A group from this virtuous city once sailed upon the sea. Their ship broke apart, and the waves cast them upon another island. This island contained a rugged mountain covered with tall trees bearing little fruit, deep springs with muddy water, dark caves, and predatory beasts. Most of its inhabitants were apes.

On another island lived an enormous and powerful bird which swooped down each day and night and carried away several of those apes.

The shipwrecked travellers scattered through the valleys of the mountain seeking fruit to relieve their hunger. They drank from the springs, covered themselves with leaves, and sheltered in caves against heat and cold. The apes became accustomed to them, and they in turn became accustomed to the apes because apes were the animals most similar in outward form to human beings.

Some of the men became attached to the female apes. Children were born and generations multiplied. As time passed the travellers settled permanently upon the island. They built houses from its stones, competed over its fruits and possessions, stored provisions, competed for the females, and envied whoever possessed a greater share of those things.

They began to desire permanent residence there.

Eventually hatred and hostility arose among them and the fires of conflict were kindled.

Most importantly, they forgot their original city, its prosperity, their families, and the blessed life they had once possessed.

Then one man among them dreamed that he had returned to his homeland. When the inhabitants of the city heard of his return, his relatives came out joyfully to meet him. Travel and exile had changed his appearance, so before bringing him into the city they took him to a spring outside its gates, washed him, cut his hair and nails, dressed him in fresh garments, perfumed and adorned him, mounted him upon an animal, and brought him into the city.

The people rejoiced when they saw him and gathered around asking what had happened to his companions and what he had experienced in his journey. He was seated in the place of honour, surrounded by his people, astonished at the mercy by which God had rescued him from shipwreck, exile, companionship with the apes, and that miserable life.

He believed everything was truly happening while awake.

Then suddenly he awoke and found himself still among the apes.

He became deeply sorrowful and broken-hearted. The place he had formerly accepted now became hateful to him, and he longed intensely to return home.

He told the dream to one of his brothers. Hearing it caused that brother to remember what the passing years had made him forget: their homeland, families, relatives, and former blessings.

They consulted one another about how they might escape. Eventually they devised a plan: they would cooperate in gathering timber from the island, build a ship, and return to their original city.

They made a solemn covenant not to abandon one another or grow lazy but to labour as though they were one man.

Then they reflected that if a third man joined them the work would become easier, and that the larger their number became, the more likely they would be to reach their goal. They therefore reminded the others of their homeland, awakened longing for return, and made them dissatisfied with remaining among the apes.

Eventually a group joined together and began building the ship.

While they were working, cutting trees and preparing timber, the great bird which preyed upon the apes swooped down and seized one of the men. It carried him into the air intending to eat him. But after flying some distance it examined him and realised that he was not one of the apes it habitually devoured.

It continued flying until it passed over the man's original city and then dropped him upon the roof of his own house.

The man looked around and found himself in his homeland, in his own dwelling, among his family and relatives. He then began wishing that the bird would return each day, seize one of his companions from the island, and carry him home as it had carried him.

His companions remaining on the island, however, wept and grieved over him because they did not know what had happened after the bird seized him. Had they known his true condition and where he had arrived, they would have wished for themselves exactly what he wished for them.

Such should be the belief of the Brethren of Purity concerning a brother whose appointed death comes before that of his companions.

This world resembles that island. Its inhabitants resemble the apes. Death resembles the great bird. The friends of God resemble the shipwrecked travellers. The abode of the hereafter resembles the virtuous city from which they had departed.

The companions who remain behind grieve because they do not see where their brother has gone. But if they truly knew what had become of him, they would rejoice for him and long for the same return when their own appointed time arrived.

This is the belief of our noble brethren concerning their cooperation in worldly life and concerning one whose death precedes that of his brothers.

Awaken, therefore, O brother, from the sleep of heedlessness and the slumber of ignorance. This world is an abode of deception, trial, and affliction, and no rational soul should desire everlasting residence in an abode of sorrow and tribulation.

May God grant us, you, and all our brethren success upon the path of correctness. May He guide us and you toward the way of right guidance.

Here ends the Epistle explaining the Belief of the Brethren of Purity and the Doctrine of the Divine Sages.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Manner of Association among the Brethren of Purity and their Cooperation with One Another.

Epistle 45

On the Manner of Association among the Brethren of Purity, Their Cooperation with One Another, and Sincere Compassion and Affection in Religion and Worldly Life

The Fourth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that our brethren, wherever they may be throughout the lands, ought to have a private assembly in which they gather at appointed times, without outsiders entering among them. There they should discuss their sciences with one another and converse concerning their secrets.

Most of their discussion should concern knowledge of the soul, the senses and sensible things, Intellect and intelligibles, reflection upon the secrets of the divine books and prophetic revelations, and the meanings contained within the ordinances of revealed law. They should also discuss the four mathematical sciences—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—but their greatest concern and highest aim should be investigation of the divine sciences, for these are the ultimate goal.

In general, our brethren—may God strengthen them—should not oppose any science, abandon any book, or become fanatically attached to any single school. For our opinion and doctrine encompass all schools and gather together all sciences. Our way consists in contemplating all existing things, sensible and intelligible, from their beginning to their end, their outward and inward aspects, their manifest and hidden states, with the eye of truth, insofar as all proceed from one Principle, one Cause, one world, and one Soul encompassing their differing substances, genera, species, and particulars.

We have already stated that our sciences are drawn from four books. The first are books composed by sages and philosophers concerning mathematics and natural philosophy. The second are the revealed books brought by the prophets—blessings be upon them—such as the Torah, Gospel, Qur'an, and the other prophetic scriptures whose meanings were received through revelation from the angels and which contain hidden mysteries.

The third are the **natural books**, namely the forms of existing things as they are now: the structure of the celestial spheres, the divisions of the zodiac, the motions of the stars, the measures of their bodies, the transformations of time, the changes of the elements, the varieties of minerals, plants, animals, and the many artefacts produced through human hands. All these visible forms are symbols and indications of subtle meanings and delicate mysteries. People see their exteriors while remaining ignorant of the inward meanings that reveal the subtle workmanship of the Creator—exalted be His praise.

The fourth are the **divine books which none touch except the purified**, the noble angelic messengers. These are the substances of souls, their genera, species, and particulars; their governance of bodies; their movement and administration of them; the successive manifestation of their acts through bodies over the course of time and cycles; their descent at times into the depths of corporeal existence and their ascent at other times from bodily darkness; their awakening from the sleep of heedlessness and forgetfulness; their gathering toward reckoning and the Balance; their crossing of the Path; their arrival at the Gardens, their detention within the levels of the abyss and Fire, their remaining in Barzakh, or their standing upon the Heights.

Such is the condition of our excellent and noble brethren. Follow their example, O brothers, and you will become like them. We have explained throughout our epistles whatever our brethren require from these sciences.

Chapter 1 — Choosing a New Friend or Brother

Our brethren—may God strengthen them—wherever they may be throughout the lands, when one of them wishes to take a new friend or establish a new brotherhood, should first investigate that person's condition, learn his circumstances, test his character, and ask about his doctrine and belief so as to discover whether he is suited to friendship, pure affection, and true brotherhood.

For among human beings are people whose natural dispositions differ greatly and depart from moderation, whose habits are corrupt, and whose doctrines are unjust. Among them are the good and the wicked, the grateful and the ungrateful, the trustworthy and treacherous, the forbearing and foolish, the generous and miserly, the courageous and cowardly, the envious and loving, the immoral and chaste, the impatient and patient, the greedy and contented, the gentle and harsh, the coarse and refined, the intelligent and foolish, the learned and ignorant, the loving and hateful, the agreeable and contrary, the hypocritical and sincere, the sincere counsellor and deceiver, the proud and humble, the enemy and friend, the believer and heretic, the recogniser and denier, and others characterised by opposing virtues and vices.

Know that among all these groups the most dangerous is the one who does not believe in the Day of Reckoning. Among the roots of evil character are the pride of Iblīs, the greed of Adam, and the envy of Cain; these are among the mothers of disobedience.

Some people are naturally disposed toward one or several praiseworthy or blameworthy traits. Bad habits strengthen bad character, while beautiful habits strengthen praiseworthy character. The same applies to doctrines and beliefs. Some people believe that their religion permits them to shed the blood of anyone who differs from their doctrine, whereas others believe in mercy and compassion toward all people, pity sinners, seek forgiveness for them, show tenderness toward every living creature, and desire the welfare of all. This latter is the doctrine of the righteous, ascetics, and virtuous believers, and it is the way of our noble brethren.

Chapter 2 — Examine a Friend as Carefully as Precious Wealth

If you intend to take a friend or brother, examine him as carefully as people examine silver and gold coins, fertile land before planting, a prospective spouse, servants, or valuable goods before purchasing them.

Indeed, taking a true brother is more serious and more important than all these things. Sincere brethren are helpers in matters of both religion and worldly life, and they are rarer than the red sulphur of the alchemists. If you find one, hold firmly to him, for he is delight of the eye, comfort in this world, and happiness in the hereafter.

True brethren are support against enemies, adornment among companions, pillars upon whom one may rely in hardship and trial, a back upon which one may lean in adversity and prosperity, stored treasure for the day of need, a wing lowered in times of difficulty, a ladder by which one ascends toward noble things, an intermediary to hearts when seeking intercession, and a fortified refuge in times of terror.

If you are absent, they guard you. If you weaken, they strengthen you. If they see an enemy approaching you, they restrain him. One such brother resembles a blessed tree whose branches lower their fruit toward you, whose leaves shade you with their fragrance, and whose beautiful shelter covers you. When you remember, he assists you; when you forget, he reminds you. He commands you toward righteousness and races ahead toward it. He encourages you toward good, precedes you in it, directs you toward it, and gives his wealth and his soul for you.

If God blesses you with one possessing such qualities, then offer him your soul and wealth, protect his honour with your own honour, lower your wing for him, entrust him with your secret, consult him concerning your affairs, and refresh your eyes by seeing him. When he is absent, let your companionship with him be remembrance of him and reflection upon his condition.

If he commits a small fault, forgive him. If he slips, make the slip appear small in his own eyes rather than frightening him with your resentment. At the moment of his wrongdoing, remember his former kindness, so that he may remain at ease with you and secure from your hostility. This is safer for affection and more enduring for brotherhood.

Chapter 3 — Those Unsuitable for Friendship and Brotherhood

Know, O brother, that some people are entirely unsuitable for friendship, brotherhood, and close companionship. Consider carefully whom you accompany. Do not be deceived by outward appearances without learning what lies within, nor by immediate sweetness before considering the bitterness that may follow.

When you wish to take a brother or friend, investigate his condition, test his character, ask about his doctrine and belief, and observe his habits, natural disposition, traits, and movements. The person possessing insight can often discern inward qualities through outward signs.

Some people assume the appearance of friendship, imitate agreement, and display affection while concealing its opposite within themselves. Do not be deceived until you have attained certainty.

People's outward acts generally follow the character with which they are naturally endowed, the habits in which they were raised, or the opinions they have adopted. If you find a man conceited and arrogant, quarrelsome and obstinate, harsh and coarse, contentious, envious and resentful, hypocritical and ostentatious, miserly, cowardly, treacherous, domineering, greedy, excessively hungry for praise, contemptuous of his peers, habitually disparaging others, or relying arrogantly upon his own power, know that such traits make him unsuitable for pure friendship and true brotherhood.

These qualities corrupt his relationship with his brethren. Whoever constantly demands what is not due to him will rarely offer what is due from him. Envy, obstinacy, and anger prevent submission to truth. Pride and contentiousness prevent the ending of dispute. Harshness prevents gentleness, and anger leads toward stubborn opposition. All such qualities destroy affection, conflict with pure brotherhood, burden the soul, disturb familiarity and tranquillity, and make companionship bitter.

Complete friendship is also difficult between people whose fundamental characters are opposite. Consider the generous and the miser. When the generous man spends his wealth according to his generosity, the miser sees him as wasteful and foolish. When the miser withholds according to his disposition, the generous man sees him as ignoble and mean-spirited. Each therefore begins blaming the other. Repeated blame produces estrangement, estrangement produces conflict, conflict produces anger, anger produces hatred, and hatred is the opposite of friendship.

The same principle applies to other deeply opposed character traits.

Chapter 4 — Friendship Must Be Preserved after It Is Acquired

Taking friends and brethren resembles acquiring wealth and treasure. Some people spend their entire lives seeking a compatible friend and never find one, just as another spends his life seeking wealth and never acquires it. Others are granted many friends as others are granted abundant wealth. Some know how to acquire wealth but not how to preserve it, and likewise some know how to acquire brethren but not how to preserve their affection, so friendship changes into hostility and love into hatred.

Therefore, once you have found a friend, devote even greater effort to preserving him than you did to finding him. Observe his rights, care for his affairs, and guard the friendship from becoming hostility through boredom, irritation, suspicion, false accusation, doubt entering the affection, or slander carried between you by one seeking corruption.

Know, O brother, that the human being changes frequently and seldom remains in one condition. A person's circumstances may change from wealth to poverty or poverty to wealth, residence to travel, celibacy to marriage, humiliation to honour, idleness to occupation, hardship to prosperity, high rank to low, low rank to high, one craft to another, one group of

companions to another, one doctrine to another, youth to old age, or health to illness. Such changes often produce changes in character and in one's treatment of friends.

The friendship of the Brethren of Purity, however, should not rest upon temporary circumstances. Friendship founded merely upon some worldly benefit generally lasts only as long as the cause producing it. When the benefit disappears, the affection disappears with it.

But friendship established for the purification of the soul, the pursuit of wisdom, and mutual assistance toward salvation has a cause rooted more deeply than changing worldly circumstances. Such brethren should be like **one soul dwelling in many bodies**.

Chapter 5 — A True Brother May Be Dearer than Bodily Kin

When you find one of these true brethren, prefer him in spiritual companionship to many of your ordinary friends, relatives, clan, and neighbours among whom you were raised.

A true brother may be more beneficial to you than the son born from your own body, the brother born from your father, your wife, or other bodily relatives, for bodily kinship belongs principally to the body whereas true spiritual brotherhood belongs to the soul.

Bodily relatives may accompany you for the affairs of this world but be unable to assist your soul in knowledge, purification, or the hereafter. A sincere spiritual brother, however, reminds you when you forget, corrects you when you stray, teaches you when you are ignorant, supports you when you weaken, and cooperates with you in the pursuit of what survives bodily death.

Therefore bodily lineage alone should not be regarded as the highest bond. The nobler relation is the relation through virtue, knowledge, and agreement concerning truth.

Chapter 6 — The Kinds of Happiness

Know that the best thing a human being can be granted is happiness. Happiness is of two broad kinds: inward and outward. Inward happiness is itself divided between that of the body and that of the soul.

Bodily happiness includes health, balanced constitution, beauty of form, sound senses, and bodily strength. Psychic happiness includes intelligence, good understanding, sound judgement, knowledge, wisdom, good character, purity of heart, and right belief.

Outward forms of happiness include wealth, family, helpful companions, social position, and other conditions which assist a person from outside.

Of all these, the happiness of the soul is superior because the soul is nobler than the body and more enduring than external possessions. Bodily and external goods are beneficial when they serve the soul's perfection; when they become ends in themselves they may distract from it.

A good teacher is therefore among the greatest forms of happiness because the teacher becomes, as it were, a **father of the soul**, just as the bodily father is a cause of the body's formation.

Chapter 7 — Those Who Pretend to Knowledge

Know that among the followers of revealed religion are people who imitate the appearance of the learned and disguise themselves as religious authorities while possessing neither genuine philosophical understanding nor true comprehension of revealed law.

They nevertheless claim knowledge of the realities of things and venture into questions concerning the soul, Intellect, divine matters, resurrection, prophecy, and similar subjects without the necessary preparation.

Such people may corrupt both philosophy and religion because they understand neither adequately. They may attack philosophy in the name of religion and misrepresent religion in the language of philosophy.

A person seeking truth must therefore distinguish between a genuine sage and one who merely wears the clothing of wisdom, just as he distinguishes a skilled physician from one who merely possesses the instruments of medicine.

Chapter 8 — The Qualities of a Good Teacher

Know, O brother, that part of your happiness is that you should encounter a teacher who is intelligent, naturally gifted, of good character, clear-minded, loving knowledge, seeking truth, and free from fanatical attachment to one doctrine.

He should not be driven by desire for worldly wealth or reputation, nor be envious of students, impatient with questions, harsh in instruction, or eager to dominate. He should understand the capacities of learners and give each one what he can bear.

He should proceed gradually, beginning from what is easier toward what is more difficult, from sensible things toward intelligibles, from examples toward demonstrations, and from preliminary sciences toward the divine sciences.

The teacher should especially watch for intelligent and receptive young people whose souls remain free from hardened prejudice. Good instruction planted early resembles seed placed in fertile soil.

The teacher's relationship to such a student may become nobler than bodily fatherhood, because the bodily father is a cause of temporary corporeal existence whereas the true teacher may become a cause of the soul's intellectual and spiritual life.

A student may eventually rise so greatly in wisdom and virtue that, through the knowledge first received from his teacher, he becomes a cause of benefit even to that teacher. Thus the scripture says concerning fathers and sons: **“You do not know which of them is nearer to you in benefit.”**

Chapter 9 — Wealth, Knowledge, and Mutual Assistance

Know that the gifts of God are many beyond enumeration, but they may broadly be gathered into two kinds: **bodily possessions** and **possessions of the soul**.

Among bodily possessions are wealth, property, food, clothing, shelter, tools, servants, animals, and other things required for bodily life. Among psychic possessions are knowledge, wisdom, faith, good character, understanding, and the virtues by which the soul lives.

If one of our brethren has been granted wealth but not knowledge, he should seek a brother whom God has granted knowledge and draw him close. The wealthy brother should assist him from his wealth, while the learned brother assists him through knowledge, and together they should cooperate in improving the affairs of religion and worldly life.

The wealthy brother should not boast over the learned but poor brother because of the money he gives him, nor despise him because of poverty. Wealth is a bodily possession by which bodily life is maintained in this world. Knowledge is a possession of the soul by which the soul's life is maintained in the hereafter. The substance of the soul is nobler than the substance of the body, and its enduring life is nobler than the body's temporary life.

Likewise the learned brother should not envy the wealthy brother, despise him for ignorance, boast over him through knowledge, or demand payment for everything he teaches.

Their cooperation should resemble the cooperation of the hand and foot within one body. The hands do not demand reward from the feet when they place shoes upon them or remove a thorn from them, and the feet do not demand compensation from the hands when they carry them to the place they wish to reach or remove them from danger. They are instruments of one body whose welfare depends upon each other.

Likewise hearing does not boast over sight when it makes a call known, nor sight over hearing when it reveals the speaker, for both are powers of one soul assisting one another in the soul's apprehension of sensible things.

So should the Brethren of Purity cooperate in seeking the welfare of religion and worldly life.

Their condition resembles two men travelling together through a desert. One is sighted but physically weak and carries a heavy supply he cannot bear. The other is blind but strong and possesses no provisions. The sighted man takes the blind man by the hand and guides him, while the blind man carries the other's heavy burden. They share the provisions and cross the wilderness safely together.

Neither can boast over the other concerning the rescue, for each was saved through the assistance of his companion.

The ignorant brother resembles the blind man; the poor brother resembles the weak man; the wealthy brother resembles the strong man; and the learned brother resembles the sighted man. The road is the soul's companionship with the body, the wilderness is worldly life, and salvation is the life of the hereafter.

If one has been granted knowledge but no wealth and cannot find a brother to support him materially, he should be patient and await relief, trusting that God may bring assistance through some affair or brother, as He has promised: **“Whoever is mindful of God, He will make for him a way out and provide for him from where he does not expect,”** and: **“Whoever is mindful of God, He will make ease for him in his affair.”**

Let him also remember that being granted knowledge is better than being granted wealth alone, for knowledge sustains the soul in both this world and the hereafter, whereas wealth sustains bodily life only for a time.

As for the brother granted neither wealth nor much knowledge, if he possesses a pure soul, beautiful character, a heart safe from corrupt opinions, love of goodness and its people, patience, and contentment with what God has allotted him, then let him know that these qualities themselves are a great gift.

Indeed, we find people possessing learning and wealth while lacking good character, and others of little formal learning whose character is refined. Good character is therefore itself among God's gifts. God praised His Prophet by saying: **“Indeed, you are upon a magnificent character,”** and: **“Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you.”**

Good character belongs to the traits of angels and the inhabitants of Paradise, whereas bad character resembles the disposition of devils and the inhabitants of the Fire, who envy one another, hate one another, and curse one another.

Chapter 10 — The Four Ranks of the Brethren

Know that the powers of the souls of our brethren in the matter toward which we call and encourage them are arranged in **four ranks**.

The first is purity of the substance of their souls, excellence in receptivity, and quickness of conception. This is the rank of those capable of crafts and disciplined learning. It corresponds to the discerning rational power appearing after about fifteen years from the birth of the body. In our discourse and epistles we call those of this rank **our good and compassionate brethren**.

Above this stands the rank of those possessing leadership and governance. Its qualities are care for the brethren, generosity of soul, bestowal of benefit, compassion, mercy, and tenderness toward them. It corresponds to the wisdom-producing power that matures after about thirty years. These we call **our excellent and virtuous brethren**.

The third rank stands above this and is the rank of rulers possessing authority, command and prohibition, assistance, and the capacity to repel stubborn opposition when someone resists this matter. Yet their first instruments are gentleness, subtlety, accommodation, and reform rather than harshness. It corresponds symbolically to the nomic or law-giving power associated with the completion of forty years. These we call **our noble and excellent brethren**.

The fourth rank stands above all these and is the rank toward which we call all our brethren whatever their present degree. It consists in surrender, acceptance of divine support, and witnessing truth directly. It is the **angelic power**, associated symbolically with the completion of fifty years. It prepares the soul for the return and for separation from matter.

Through this rank comes the power of ascent. Through it the soul rises toward the Kingdom of Heaven and beholds the realities symbolised by resurrection, rising, gathering, reckoning, the Balance, crossing the Path, deliverance from the Fires, and proximity to the Merciful, Possessor of Majesty and Honour.

To this rank points the saying: **“O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, pleased and pleasing. Enter among My servants and enter My Garden.”** Abraham sought it when he prayed to be made among the inheritors of the Garden of Bliss, and Joseph when he prayed: **“Cause me to die in submission and join me with the righteous.”**

The source also cites Christ's promise to his disciples, sayings attributed to Socrates and Pythagoras at the approach of death, and the story of the sage who declared himself among those who know the Kingdom of Heaven. All are presented as indications of the same final spiritual rank.

Toward this we call all our brethren. **God calls to the Abode of Peace and guides whom He wills to a straight path.**

Those invited toward this matter must pass through four states. The first is **acknowledgement of its truth**. The second is **forming a conception of it through examples that make it clear**. The third is **inward assent and belief**. The fourth is **verification through striving in actions corresponding to it**.

One who acknowledges verbally without understanding is an imitator. One who understands conceptually but does not assent remains doubtful and bewildered. One who assents but does not verify his belief through appropriate action remains negligent and deficient. One who rejects it outwardly and denies it inwardly is a denier.

The person who acknowledges this matter with his tongue and understands it truly within his heart begins to find four qualities within himself which he did not previously recognise: strength of soul and readiness to rise from bodily domination; eagerness to seek liberation from matter, which is the Hell of souls; hope of success and salvation when the soul separates from the body; and trust in God together with certainty that the matter will reach its completion and perfection.

Chapter 11 — The Four Degrees of Belief in the Prophetic Books

Know that all who acknowledge this Qur'an and the books of the prophets—peace be upon them—and the reports they contain concerning unseen realities occupy four degrees.

One acknowledges with the tongue but does not believe with the heart. Another acknowledges with the tongue and believes inwardly but does not understand the meanings and explanations. Another acknowledges, believes, and understands, yet fails to perform what

the truth of that knowledge requires. The highest joins acknowledgement, belief, understanding, and corresponding action.

The one who acknowledges outwardly without inward belief has been granted little understanding and discrimination. When he reflects upon the apparent wording of prophetic books, his reason does not accept what he thinks those expressions mean because he cannot conceive their subtle meanings and hidden indications. He therefore doubts them inwardly.

The second acknowledges and believes because he understands that a matter affirmed by prophets, imams, rightly guided leaders, virtuous believers, wise people, and discerning men cannot reasonably be wholly without reality. Yet his intellect remains too weak to comprehend its inward meanings completely.

The third has been guided by God toward understanding some of the realities and secrets contained in prophetic books but falls short in fulfilling what they require, perhaps because he lacks helpers capable of assisting him. For not every great undertaking can be completed by one person alone, especially an affair concerning divine law and the reform of a community.

Thus the Brethren continually return to cooperation. Knowledge without action remains incomplete; action without understanding may remain blind; individual effort without fellowship may become powerless.

True completion comes when knowledge, faith, virtue, and mutual assistance are joined together.

Here ends the Epistle on the Manner of Association among the Brethren of Purity and Their Cooperation with One Another.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Nature of Faith and the Qualities of the Believers.

Epistle 46

On the Nature of Faith and the Qualities of the Believers

The Fifth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that God, exalted be His praise, has frequently mentioned the believers in the Qur'an, praised them beautifully, and promised them abundant reward in this world and the hereafter. Likewise He has frequently mentioned the unbelievers, censured them, warned them, and threatened them in both worlds.

We therefore wish to explain who is truly a believer and who is truly an unbeliever, for this matter has become confused even among many learned people, so that some declare others unbelievers and curse one another without knowledge or clear explanation.

One reason for this confusion is that many do not distinguish between **knowledge** and **faith**. Some theologians call faith a kind of knowledge acquired through hearing and call what is reached by analogy or reasoning knowledge acquired through intellect. We therefore begin by explaining what knowledge truly is.

The sages say that knowledge is **the representation of the form of the known thing within the soul of the knower**. If this is knowledge, then not everything reported to a person through hearing is represented in the soul according to its true reality. Such acceptance is therefore not yet knowledge but faith, acknowledgement, and assent.

For this reason the prophets first called their communities to acknowledgement, then demanded assent after explanation, and afterward encouraged them to seek true knowledge. God says, **“those who believe in the unseen,”** not “those who know the unseen.” He then encourages investigation by saying, **“Take heed, O possessors of understanding,”** and distinguishes the two ranks when He says that God raises those who believe and those who have been given knowledge by degrees, and when He speaks of **“those who were given knowledge and faith.”**

We wish therefore to explain the conditions of faith and the qualities of the believer, so that every person may know whether he is truly a believer or remains doubtful and uncertain. The believers are the heirs and pupils of the prophets. The prophets did not bequeath silver and gold; they bequeathed knowledge and worship. Whoever receives these has received a great share.

Chapter 1 — The Four Classes of People in Knowledge and Faith

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you—that God's gifts to creation are beyond number. Those particularly belonging to the human being may broadly be divided into outward and inward gifts. Outward gifts include wealth, companions, children, and the goods of worldly life. Inward gifts include bodily health, beauty, strength, and sound constitution, and gifts of the soul such as good character, intelligence, and purity of substance, which form the basis of knowledge.

With respect to knowledge and faith, human beings occupy four classes. Some are granted knowledge but not faith. Some are granted faith but little knowledge. Some receive an abundant share of both. Others are deprived of both.

Those granted faith without much knowledge are people who accept what the prophetic books report concerning the resurrection, beginning and return, angels, gathering, reckoning, the Balance, the Path, recompense, and the delights of Paradise. Their knowledge may be limited, yet their souls rest tranquilly in what the prophets have reported. They assent inwardly and outwardly, desire what has been promised, and act for its sake without investigating deeply into how, where, when, or why these things occur.

Those granted knowledge without faith are people who study the books of philosophers and sages and train themselves in geometry, astronomy, medicine, logic, dialectic, natural philosophy, and similar sciences but neglect the revealed books and the secrets of prophetic law. They become pleased with the knowledge they possess while remaining uncertain about prophetic mysteries.

Those deprived of both knowledge and faith are absorbed in worldly pleasure day and night. They seek food, drink, wealth, status, and bodily pleasure, turn away from learning, and neglect religion and the disciplines intended for the salvation of the soul.

Those granted both knowledge and faith in abundance are the excellent and noble brethren whom God raises in degrees. We have described their doctrine, character, opinions, and secrets throughout our fifty-one epistles.

Know also that the degrees of believers vary just as the degrees of scholars vary. Whenever a person reaches one level of knowledge, another level appears above it. He must therefore remain ready to acknowledge and trust the report of one who knows more than he does.

Knowledge is the form of the known in the knowing soul. Faith is assent to one more knowledgeable than yourself concerning something you do not yet know.

Chapter 2 — Faith Precedes Knowledge

Know, O brother, that faith gives rise to knowledge because faith precedes knowledge in existence.

For this reason the prophets first called nations to acknowledge what they reported concerning things absent from sensation and imagination. Once people acknowledged with their tongues, they were called believers. They were then required to assent inwardly, and when assent entered the heart they became truthful affirmers. Only after this were they led toward knowledge.

The prophets themselves begin with faith toward what the angels convey to them concerning realities beyond ordinary human capacity. The angels too differ in rank and knowledge, and even those who bear the Throne are described as believing in God.

You likewise require faith toward one who stands above you in knowledge. If you refuse to accept anything until you yourself already possess demonstration of it, you may deprive yourself of the noblest sciences. At the beginning, the path to trusting a teacher is good opinion concerning his truthfulness. With time, what he reports may become clear through your own understanding.

Do not remain content with imitation once you have advanced sufficiently in learning, but neither demand complete demonstration before you have acquired the preliminary knowledge needed to understand it. First form within your thought a conception of what you hear, then seek the road and proof leading to its verification.

Come, therefore, O brother, to the assembly of excellent brethren, learned friends, and sincere counsellors. Listen to their words, observe their character, learn their secrets, and strive to conceive through the purity of your soul what they have conceived through the purity of theirs.

Perhaps your soul will awaken from the sleep of heedlessness and ignorance, live through the spirit of knowledge, and ascend toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

Chapter 3 — The Nature of Faith

Know, O brother, that God has praised faith so greatly because faith gathers within itself the human virtues and prepares the soul for the virtues of angels. Likewise unbelief gathers the roots of human evil and demonic vice.

Faith is spoken of in two senses: **outward** and **inward**.

Outward faith consists first in verbal acknowledgement of five matters. The first is that the world has one Maker, living, powerful, wise, Creator and Governor of all beings, without partner. The second is acknowledgement that He has angels, the chosen among His creatures, appointed to worship and service and entrusted with different parts of the governance of the cosmos. The third is acknowledgement that God selected certain human beings and made the angels intermediaries between Himself and them, so that prophets receive revelation and knowledge from the angels and convey it to humanity. The fourth is acknowledgement that the meanings brought by the prophets in different languages derive through inspiration and revelation from the angelic world. The fifth is acknowledgement that the Resurrection must come, that there is another creation, that creatures will be raised, gathered, called to account, rewarded for good, and recompensed for evil.

Inward faith is not merely utterance. It consists in the heart's assent to these truths and in conduct corresponding to them.

Chapter 4 — Trust in God

Among the conditions of faith and the qualities of believers is **trust in God**. God says, **“Upon God place your trust, if you are believers,”** and commands His Prophet to trust in the Living One who does not die.

Trust does not mean abandoning effort or neglecting causes. It means that after using the causes available to you, your heart does not regard them as independent powers. The farmer tills and plants yet knows that he does not command the rain, growth, season, or final result. The sick person may seek medicine while recognising that healing does not belong independently to the physician or drug.

Whoever trusts only in bodily strength, wealth, rulers, friends, tools, or worldly preparation remains anxious because all such things are subject to change. Trust in God establishes tranquillity because the believer understands created causes as instruments within a greater order.

Chapter 5 — Sincerity

Among the conditions of faith is **sincerity** in action and supplication.

Sincerity means that one does not perform good works for reputation, praise, worldly gain, or the admiration of others. The sincere person seeks through his action what is good and pleasing to God.

If a person performs worship to be seen by people, he has divided his intention. If he gives charity only to acquire status, the body of the act remains but its inward purpose has been corrupted.

The purification of intention is difficult because the soul loves praise and recognition. The believer must therefore examine the inward motive of his actions just as carefully as he examines their outward correctness.

Chapter 6 — Patience

Among the conditions of faith and the qualities of believers is **patience**, and patience has been called the head of faith.

Patience is steadfastness in hardship without uncontrolled agitation because one hopes for a praiseworthy outcome. Many people endure hardship, but their endurance is not patience in God or for God, for they complain inwardly, suspect divine injustice, or imagine that their suffering occurs outside His knowledge or governance.

The prophets and true believers endure trials differently. They believe that the hardships befalling creatures may contain forms of benefit and wisdom hidden from ordinary understanding. Just as bodily pain warns an animal away from destruction, some forms of suffering may serve purposes beyond their immediately unpleasant appearance.

This conviction follows from a more fundamental principle: the world has one living, powerful, wise Maker who has ordered its affairs according to wisdom, so that no event,

small or great, is entirely devoid of order and purpose even when the creature does not comprehend them.

Chapter 7 — Decree, Destiny, and Contentment

Among the conditions of faith is contentment with decree and destiny: tranquillity of soul toward what occurs within the order allotted to it.

In the cosmology of the epistle, destiny is associated with the unfolding of determinate celestial and natural causes, while decree is God's prior knowledge of the events produced through that order.

Contentment with decree is among the loftiest conditions of faith. It does not mean loving pain for its own sake or refusing legitimate efforts to remove harm. Rather, after the event has occurred and after one's duty has been fulfilled, the soul does not rebel against the whole order of providence.

The epistle invokes Socrates' acceptance of the judgement of the law, Abel's refusal to retaliate against Cain with murder, the magicians' acceptance of Pharaoh's punishment after their conversion, the Prophet's patience at Uḥud, and al-Ḥusayn's refusal to surrender his conviction at Karbala.

The purpose of these examples is to show souls so persuaded of a higher good beyond bodily survival that they could accept bodily loss without abandoning what they held to be true.

Chapter 8 — Fear and Hope Belong Ultimately to God

Among the signs of realised believers is that their deepest fear and hope belong to God alone.

Children fear and hope in parents; pupils in teachers; soldiers in commanders; subjects in rulers. But the perfected believer sees all these as subordinate intermediaries.

The angels fear their Lord and carry out what they are commanded. The truly learned likewise possess reverential fear because their knowledge leads them beyond secondary causes toward the One from whom all causes derive.

The highest form of this is expressed in the prophetic saying concerning excellence in worship: to worship God as though you see Him, and if you do not see Him, to know that He sees you.

Chapter 9 — Following the Bearers of Divine Law

Know, O brother, that the first pillar of faith and one of its strongest foundations is following the bearers of divine laws in what they command concerning obedience and what they prohibit concerning wrongdoing.

The placing of divine law is, in the Brethren's hierarchy, among the highest human actions and closest to the rank of angels.

The relationship between lawgivers and their followers resembles rain descending from heaven upon the Earth. The sayings of prophets resemble rain; receptive hearts resemble valleys and soil; and the sciences, virtues, and actions produced from their encounter resemble vegetation, animals, and minerals brought forth by water.

Divine law requires commands and prohibitions; these require promise and warning; promise and warning operate through hope and fear; and hope and fear become effective only in a soul willing to obey and restrain itself.

The law therefore educates desire and aversion so that they may eventually be governed by understanding.

Chapter 10 — The Aim of Divine Law

The aim of everyone who rightly uses the ordinances of divine law is to reach truth, correct judgement, good action, and avoidance of falsehood.

Truth is an end beyond which there is no further end, but many ambiguous and difficult matters stand before it. Words may carry several meanings, and imagination may move toward different interpretations. Therefore, when you hear an expression capable of several meanings, do not hastily judge before considering what meanings it can bear.

The purposes of the lawgivers are often deep and are not understood at first hearing. Their sayings and actions must sometimes be considered carefully before their highest purpose becomes clear.

Thus outward expressions should not be severed from the wisdom toward which they point.

Chapter 11 — The Believer in Prosperity and Adversity

Know, O brother, that human life alternates between hardship and ease, and the believer should not turn away from obedience in either condition.

When healthy, strong, wealthy, honoured, and prosperous, he should give thanks rather than become arrogant. When poor, ill, humiliated, or afflicted, he should remain patient rather than despair.

Prosperity tests gratitude just as adversity tests patience. Wealth is no more proof of divine favour than poverty is proof of rejection, for both may become either means of purification or causes of corruption depending on how the soul uses them.

Chapter 12 — Renunciation of the World and Desire for the Hereafter

Among the conditions of faith is renunciation of excessive attachment to this world and desire for the hereafter.

Renunciation does not mean destroying the body, abandoning lawful necessities, or refusing useful worldly work. It means recognising that worldly goods are temporary and should serve the soul rather than enslave it.

The believer uses food, clothing, shelter, wealth, and social life according to need and justice while refusing to treat them as the final purpose of existence.

The world is a passage, not the homeland of the soul.

Chapter 13 — Self-Knowledge

Know, O brother, that all sciences possess nobility, but among the most exalted forms of knowledge is that the human being should know the reality of his own substance and understand the successive states through which he passes until reaching the furthest end toward which he is directed.

Whoever knows only the body knows only the vessel. Whoever knows the soul begins to understand the traveller within it.

Self-knowledge opens the path toward understanding life, death, resurrection, reward, punishment, angels, and the higher world because the human being contains signs corresponding to all these realities.

Chapter 14 — The Soul Is Other than the Body

Among the clearest indications that living creatures possess a substance other than the body are the sensation, motion, sound, choice, and activity manifested while they live and lost from the body when they die.

The bodily organs remain for a time after death: eyes, ears, hands, feet, flesh, bones, and nerves. Yet they no longer perceive, speak, move voluntarily, desire, remember, or act.

The difference between the living and dead body therefore lies in something other than the mere bodily matter.

That principle is the soul.

Chapter 15 — The Parable of the Captive Prince

It is related that a king's son fell into the hands of an enemy who enslaved him, subjected him to harsh service, gave him little food and drink, clothed him poorly, struck and insulted him, and reduced him to such misery that he forgot the dignity of his birth.

When someone later reminded him that he was a prince and that his father's kingdom still existed, he at first found the report difficult to believe because long servitude had become habitual.

Such is the soul immersed in bodily life. It is of a nobler origin than the conditions to which it has become accustomed, but prolonged attachment to appetite, anger, fear, and bodily service makes it forget its own rank.

Prophetic teaching is the message reminding the captive prince of his homeland.

Chapter 16 — Dreams Show the Soul Acting beyond Ordinary Sensation

The epistle next turns to dreams as evidence that psychic activity is not limited to the waking use of the external senses.

It relates stories in which sleepers hear speech, behold distant places, experience pleasure and fear, recognise people, and receive meaningful impressions while their bodily senses lie inactive.

Dream experience is therefore presented as an analogy showing that the soul can perceive forms without the ordinary waking operation of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

Not every dream is true, but the existence of dreaming itself is treated as evidence against reducing all perception to external bodily sensation.

Chapter 17 — The Dream of the Man Absorbed in Luxury

The epistle relates the case of a wealthy man who devoted most of his life to bodily comfort, pleasure, and ease.

A dream confronted him with another state so vivid that what he had regarded as secure worldly reality became unstable in his own understanding.

Such examples are used to show that the soul may experience joy, fear, pain, memory, recognition, and transformation while the external body remains motionless.

The wise person should therefore not dismiss every unseen or psychic reality simply because it is not perceived through waking bodily sensation.

Chapter 18 — Reflect upon the Wonders of Dreams

Reflect, O brother, upon these accounts and upon the transformations of dreams.

Their influence can become so powerful that people change habits, decisions, journeys, relationships, and entire courses of life because of what they have seen while asleep.

The dream may terrify the body though no external enemy stands before it, or delight the soul though no sensible object of pleasure is present.

This demonstrates at minimum that the forms producing psychic experience need not always be immediately present to the external senses.

Chapter 19 — Against Those Who Deny the Soul and True Dreams

No group, says the epistle, is more harmful to prophetic teaching and more burdensome to believers than those who reject all realities that do not fit their narrow account of sensation.

Such people may exist as open opponents of prophets during their missions or later as disputants within religious communities.

They deny the soul, true dreams, inspiration, and spiritual realities while imagining themselves to be defenders of reason.

The Brethren argue instead that reason should investigate experience rather than abolish what it has not yet explained.

Chapter 20 — Human Excellence and the Powers of the Soul

God created the human being in the finest proportion, placed him above many animals, subjected other creatures to his use, and made him capable of governance over minerals, plants, animals, and crafts.

Human superiority does not arise merely from bodily form. Many animals exceed humans in speed, strength, sight, hearing, smell, or other bodily powers.

The distinctive human excellence lies in rational and spiritual capacities: speech, reflection, deliberation, memory, craft, moral choice, science, and knowledge of universals.

These indicate a psychic principle whose possibilities extend beyond merely animal sensation.

Chapter 21 — Objections to Dreams Answered

Some opponents ask: if a person dreams that his head is separated from his body, with what eye does he see the head?

The Brethren respond that this objection assumes the very point under dispute—that all seeing must occur through bodily eyes. In dreams, forms may be represented directly to the soul's inner faculties.

The dreamer may behold himself from outside, travel without bodily motion, hear without external sound, and experience events impossible in waking bodily life.

The dream does not prove that the bodily event literally occurred; it proves that the soul can receive and compose forms in another mode.

Chapter 22 — The Human Being Is Not Merely the Visible Body

To whoever claims that the human being is nothing beyond the visible bodily aggregate and its accidents—life, sensation, and motion—the epistle asks why personal identity remains intelligible through continuous bodily change.

The body's matter is continually replaced through nutrition, growth, and decay. Childhood, youth, maturity, sickness, and old age greatly alter bodily substance, yet the person continues to say “I.”

This continuity points toward a governing principle not identical with any temporary portion of bodily matter.

The body is therefore the instrument and dwelling of the human being, not the whole reality of the human being.

Chapter 23 — The Kinds of Dreams

Having established the soul and the general reality of dreams, the epistle divides dreams into several kinds.

Some arise from bodily temperament, recent experiences, anxieties, appetite, or habitual thought. Some are confused combinations produced by imagination. Some carry symbolic meaning. Some are truthful indications concerning matters beyond ordinary sensation.

Therefore dreams should neither all be believed nor all rejected.

Their causes and moral effects must be distinguished.

Chapter 24 — Three Modes of Dream Interpretation

Although dream interpretation possesses many branches, the epistle gathers its forms into three broad modes.

Some dreams correspond directly to what later occurs: the image and its fulfilment are alike.

Others signify by analogy, resemblance, opposition, number, quality, or symbolic correspondence, so that interpretation is required.

Still others concern inner psychic states rather than external events.

The interpreter therefore needs knowledge of the dreamer, circumstances, symbols, language, habits, and the relationships between visible images and hidden meanings.

Chapter 25 — Angelic Inspiration and Demonic Suggestion in Dreams

Dreams arising from angelic inspiration and those arising from demonic suggestion belong to one general domain but proceed in opposite directions.

To understand them, one must understand what the epistle means by angels and devils, inspiration and whispering.

A dream containing admonition, encouragement toward piety, renunciation of vice, remembrance of the return, desire for the hereafter, or exhortation toward good is treated as resembling angelic inspiration.

A dream which intensifies greed, envy, hatred, uncontrolled lust, rivalry, or attachment to worldly appetite resembles demonic suggestion.

The moral direction of the dream is therefore one clue to its source.

Chapter 26 — Angels and the Souls of the Righteous

The Brethren associate angels with purified spiritual beings and also describe righteous souls which have departed from bodies as approaching angelic rank.

Such souls, having freed themselves from gross bodily occupation and cultivated knowledge, virtue, and worship, long toward those still embodied who resemble them in goodness.

They may appear symbolically in dreams, admonish descendants or pupils, remind them of the return, encourage them toward virtue, or represent the state into which they themselves have passed.

The epistle connects this doctrine with religious practices surrounding the graves of prophets, imams, martyrs, and righteous servants.

Chapter 27 — Devils and the Souls of the Wicked

As purified souls approach angelic states, corrupt souls may approach demonic ones.

If a person reaches maturity, understands command and prohibition, hears promise and warning, yet devotes himself entirely to appetite, wealth, domination, bodily pleasure, and vice while neglecting the soul, then these habits become deeply rooted.

When such a soul separates from the body, the bodily instruments through which it previously pursued pleasures are removed while the appetites formed through long habit remain.

The result is torment: intense desire without the means of satisfaction.

Such disembodied corrupt souls are described as devils in actuality, just as vicious embodied people may be devils in potentiality.

Chapter 28 — How Wicked Souls Influence the Living

Souls departing the body in a corrupt state continue, according to the epistle, to incline toward embodied souls resembling their former dispositions.

Just as people seek those whose habits resemble their own, disembodied wicked souls gravitate toward human beings immersed in the same appetites and encourage them through suggestion.

In this sense the source interprets “devils of humankind and jinn” as including embodied wicked souls and hidden disembodied wicked souls.

Conversely, purified souls incline toward righteous people and wish for them the happiness they themselves have found.

Chapter 29 — Recognising the Source of a Dream by Its Moral Effect

Having described angels and devils, the epistle returns to the discernment of dreams.

Every dream whose meaning leads toward admonition, piety, goodness, detachment from excessive worldly attachment, remembrance of the hereafter, repentance, and moral reform bears the character of angelic inspiration.

Dreams that strengthen greed, envy, hatred, lust, rivalry, or obsessive pursuit of pleasure bear the character of demonic suggestion.

The value of a dream is therefore judged not merely by its vividness but by the direction in which it moves the soul.

Chapter 30 — The Example of the Slave of Appetite

The epistle relates a disturbing example of a man utterly absorbed in food, drink, and sexual appetite.

Through excess he weakened his own bodily powers while his desires remained strong. Instead of disciplining appetite when the body could no longer sustain it, he sought ever more degrading forms of stimulation. Habit became character, and character hardened into a second nature.

The story is deliberately extreme. Its purpose is to show how a soul can gradually shape itself into a demonic disposition through repeated voluntary acts.

The source contrasts this with the concise Qur'anic principle that whoever restrains the soul from passion finds Paradise as the abode.

Chapter 31 — Revelation and Angelic Inspiration in Wakefulness

Having explained dreams, inspiration, whispering, angels, and devils, the epistle turns to revelation in waking life.

The human rank stands between the animal and angelic ranks. Some animals approach humanity in bodily form, intelligence, imitation, responsiveness to commands, or learning. Likewise some human souls approach the angelic rank through purity, intelligence, knowledge, discipline, and virtue.

The more purified the soul, the easier its reception of angelic inspiration becomes. The prophets possess this receptivity in the highest degree, then the truthful, then excellent believers, each according to rank.

The epistle compares spiritual preparation with the order of the sciences. Mathematics prepares for natural philosophy, and natural philosophy prepares for divine science. Likewise moral discipline prepares the soul for right action, sensory knowledge for intellectual knowledge, and intellectual purification for higher inspiration.

The prophets and sages therefore insist upon long training, worship, self-discipline, and purification before the reception of wisdom. Moses' disciplines, prophetic worship, and the traditional forty-day period of sincere devotion are invoked as examples.

Chapter 32 — The Purpose of Prophecy and the Possibility of Becoming Angelic or Demonic

Know, O brother, that if you examine the lives and counsels of the prophets, the practices of the bearers of divine law, and the purposes of what they established, you will find that their common aim is the **discipline of human souls and their transfer from the human rank toward the angelic rank**, freeing them from the world of generation and corruption and preparing them for the world of permanence.

You were created, the source says, not for annihilation but for continuing passage from one abode to another: from loins to wombs, from wombs to this world, from this world to Barzakh, and from Barzakh toward either felicity or misery.

Therefore reflect, O brother, upon this grave matter. Awaken from heedlessness, gather provisions, and know that the best provision is reverence for God.

Just as the souls of the good become increasingly receptive to angelic inspiration, the souls of the wicked become increasingly receptive to demonic suggestion. A person whose conduct resembles the beasts through ugly actions, bad character, accumulated ignorance, and enslavement to appetite becomes easier prey to passion and whispering.

Conversely, the person who reforms his character, follows a just way of life, trains in the sciences, understands sensible and intelligible realities, and purges corrupt beliefs becomes progressively more receptive to angelic inspiration and progressively more obedient to Intellect.

The Brethren describe a hierarchy of existence in which bodies without souls occupy one rank, spiritual beings without bodies another, and animals—including human beings—

combine body and soul. Animals themselves differ in sensation, and human beings differ in intellect and knowledge. The scholar whose knowledge is primarily spiritual is proportionally nearer to the angels.

For this reason the prophets stand as intermediaries between humanity and the angels. They resemble human beings through their bodies and angels through the purity of their souls.

The speech of angels is described as signs and indications, whereas human speech employs words and expressions. The meanings themselves may be shared. Prophets receive meanings from the angelic realm and express them for each nation in the language known to that people.

Because their listeners differ in intellect, prophetic language often carries multiple levels of meaning. Ordinary people understand one level, while the more discerning understand subtler and more refined meanings. In this lies benefit for all, for wisdom should be spoken according to the capacities of those who receive it.

Strive therefore, O brother, in knowledge and walk the path of the Divine Sages and the righteous. Perhaps your soul will awaken from heedlessness, become purified from the impurities of Nature, and have the eye of insight opened so that it understands the secrets of prophetic books and the symbols of divine laws.

Know that **your soul is an angel in potentiality and can become an angel in actuality** if you follow the path of the prophets and the bearers of divine laws and practise their counsels.

Know also that **your soul is a devil in potentiality and can become a devil in actuality** if you follow the path of evil and unbelief.

Consider, therefore, O brother, what you choose for it.

The epistle describes the angels as inhabitants of the celestial Gardens and the expanses of the heavens, and the devils as inhabitants of the descending ranks of the Fires. Human existence stands between these two directions: the last limit of the lower order and the first threshold of ascent.

If you hasten to leave the domination of the world of generation and corruption through purification before opportunity is lost, you may hope to rise toward the celestial world, enter among the angelic ranks, and attain the life of the blessed. But if you remain heedless and cling entirely to worldly existence, the soul descends according to what it has fashioned within itself.

May God grant you, O brother, correctness, guide you toward right conduct, and guide all our brethren wherever they may be throughout the lands, through His favour and generosity.

Here ends the Epistle on the Nature of Faith and the Qualities of the Believers.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Nature of the Divine Law.

Epistle 47

On the Nature of the Divine Law, the Conditions of Prophethood, the Number of Their Qualities, and the Doctrine of the Divine Sages

The Sixth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that animals are the adornment of the Earth just as the stars are the adornment of heaven. The most complete of animals in constitution, the most perfect in form, and the noblest in composition is the human being. The best human beings are the rational, the best of the rational are the learned, and the highest and most exalted of the learned are the prophets—peace be upon them. After them in rank come the philosophical sages.

These two groups, the prophets and the sages, agree that all things are effects, and that the Creator—mighty, exalted, and holy—is their Cause, Originator, Perfecter, and Completer, just as the unit is the principle, beginning, and cause of number. They likewise agree in censuring excessive attachment to this world, affirming the return, and affirming recompense for actions: good for good and evil for evil.

Both groups therefore bear witness to what we say and believe concerning the affairs of religion and worldly life.

Know, O brother, that **prophethood is the highest degree and loftiest rank which a human being can attain before the rank of the angels**. Its perfection consists, according to the authors, in forty-six qualities belonging to human excellence. The first of these is the truthful dream, which the prophetic tradition calls one of the forty-six parts of prophecy. The remaining qualities are treated through the discussion that follows.

Chapter 1 — When the Prophetic Qualities Are United in One Person

Know, O brother, that when these qualities are gathered in one human being during one of the cycles and conjunctions of time, that person is the one sent forth, the master of the age, and the imam of the people for as long as he lives.

When he has delivered the message, fulfilled the trust, counselled the community, recited the revelation, disclosed something of its interpretation, established the revealed law, clarified the path, instituted the tradition, and united the community, and then dies and passes on, those qualities remain as an inheritance within his community.

If all or most of them are then gathered in a single person, he is suited to become the prophet's successor among his people. If they are not gathered in one person but are distributed among a group whose judgement is united, whose hearts are joined in mutual affection, and who support one another in protecting religion, preserving the revealed law, maintaining the tradition, and keeping the community upon the religious path, then their worldly order endures and their good end in the hereafter is strengthened.

But if the community disperses after the death of its prophet, differs concerning the path of religion, and allows its unity to be shattered, its worldly authority declines and its affair in the hereafter is corrupted.

If, therefore, you are resolved to seek the reform of religion and worldly life, come: let us gather with excellent brethren and imitate the prophetic law through truthful dealing, sincere counsel, and pure brotherhood.

Chapter 2 — The Cooperation of the Brethren of Purity

Know that among groups who cooperate in matters of religion and worldly life, none ought to be more sincere toward one another or more beautiful in mutual conduct than the Brethren of Purity.

Each of them believes that what he seeks in strengthening religion cannot be completed without the assistance of his brother. Each desires for his brother what he desires for himself and dislikes for his brother what he dislikes for himself.

We have already explained the conditions of pure brotherhood in the preceding epistle. Reflect upon them, O brother, and present them to those among your friends from whom you hope for goodness, sincerity, and affection.

Chapter 3 — This Doctrine Is Ancient, Not Newly Invented

Know that the matter toward which we have called our brethren and encouraged our friends is not a newly invented opinion or a recently created doctrine.

It is an ancient way followed by sages, philosophers, and virtuous people. It is the road travelled by the prophets—peace be upon them—and the doctrine followed by their successors and the rightly guided imams.

Its foundation is unity of purpose, abandonment of destructive disagreement, harmony among souls, reconciliation of hearts, truthfulness in speech, inward sincerity, mutual trust rather than suspicion, love rather than envy, agreement rather than quarrelling, mutual support rather than abandonment, and cooperation in the welfare of religion.

Those who truly follow it should become like **one man and one soul**, just as the prophetic teaching compares the believers to a single body and commands cooperation in righteousness and reverence while prohibiting dispute that destroys strength.

Chapter 4 — Every Ordered Community Requires Leadership

Know that no group gathers around an affair of religion or worldly life, wishing its affairs to proceed correctly and its conduct to remain rightly guided, without requiring some principle of leadership to unite it, preserve its order, watch over changing circumstances, repair what begins to break apart, and protect what is sound from corruption.

But leadership itself must rest upon a principle by which judgements are made.

We have accepted **Intellect** as the leader of the community of our brethren and as the judge between us, for God has appointed Intellect as ruler over the excellent among His creatures who are subject to command and prohibition.

We accept the conclusions of sound reason under the conditions we have explained in our epistles.

Whoever refuses those conditions after understanding them, or accepts them and then knowingly departs from them, separates himself from the brotherhood. We do not entrust him with our secrets, sciences, or common affairs until the basis of trust is restored.

Chapter 5 — Bodily and Spiritual Leadership

Know, O brother, that leadership is of two kinds: **bodily** and **spiritual**.

Bodily leadership is such as the dominion of kings and tyrants whose power extends principally over bodies through force, conquest, coercion, injustice, or fear. They compel people to serve worldly administration, wealth, appetite, and the pleasures and ambitions of bodily life.

Spiritual leadership is such as the leadership of the bearers of revealed laws. They govern souls through justice and beneficence. They direct them toward preserving the law, maintaining traditions, practising sincere worship, softening the heart, attaining certainty, hoping for reward, and seeking salvation and happiness in the return.

The first governs bodies for the sake of worldly order. The second seeks to govern bodies so that souls may be corrected.

Chapter 6 — The Divine Law Is the Noblest Form of Human Governance

Know, O brother, that among the sciences, actions, crafts, forms of administration, and kinds of governance practised by human beings, none is higher in rank, nobler in degree, greater in reward in the hereafter, more closely resembling angelic action, nearer to God, or more effective in seeking His pleasure than the establishment of a divine law.

The divine law is described by the authors as a **spiritual disposition appearing from a particular soul in a human body through an intellectual power flowing upon it from the Universal Soul by God's permission** during one of the cycles of time.

Its purpose is to attract particular souls, release them from dispersion in bodily existence, distinguish the pure from the impure, and prepare them for judgement and return.

The law therefore does not exist merely to regulate markets, marriages, punishments, or political order. These are outward instruments. Its ultimate object is the ordering and liberation of souls.

Chapter 7 — The Twelve Qualities of the Lawgiver

Know, O brother, that the perfection of the one who establishes a revealed law requires twelve qualities rooted in his constitution.

First, he should possess complete and sound bodily organs, with powers capable of easily performing the actions required of him. Second, he should possess excellent understanding and rapid conception, comprehending what is said according to the speaker's intention. Third, he should possess powerful memory for what he understands, hears, and apprehends, rarely forgetting it. Fourth, he should be intelligent and perceptive, able to grasp the significance of even a slight indication.

Fifth, he should possess eloquence, so that his tongue can express what lies within his heart and thought in clear and concise language. Sixth, he should love knowledge and instruction, willingly accepting the labour required in learning. Seventh, he should love truth and truthful dealing and draw truthful people near to himself.

Eighth, he should not be greedy in food, drink, and sexual pleasure but should restrain excessive bodily appetite. Ninth, he should be great-souled and lofty in aspiration, naturally disdaining shameful and base matters and seeking what is noblest.

Tenth, money, gold, and the transient goods of the world should be of little importance to him. Eleventh, he should love justice and those who practise it, hate oppression and those who commit it, give each person his due, feel compassion for those suffering injustice, readily respond to what is good and fair, and refuse to be drawn toward ugly oppression.

Twelfth, he should possess strong resolution concerning what he judges ought to be done, courageous and bold without cowardice or weakness of soul.

Chapter 8 — The Fundamental Beliefs upon Which Divine Law Is Built

The first foundation established by the lawgiver, upon which the commands, prohibitions, ordinances, interpretations, institutions, and governance of the community are built, is certain knowledge that the world has an eternal, living, knowing, wise, powerful, sovereign, willing Creator who is the cause, owner, and governor of all existents according to what is appropriate for each.

The second is recognition of intelligible beings free from matter, each standing according to its assigned rank. These are the angels, God's chosen servants, through whom communication, revelation, prophetic information, and divine assistance occur.

The third is recognition of psychic beings or souls, sometimes separate from bodies, sometimes using bodies, and sometimes attached to them according to the capacities and needs appropriate to each.

The fourth is recognition that when souls separate from bodies their substances are not thereby annihilated and that leaving bodily sensation does not remove them from the power of the Creator.

The fifth is recognition that the good or corruption of each soul depends upon what becomes attached to it through its actions, opinions, character, and knowledge or ignorance.

The sixth is recognition that when God commands human beings, He grants them the capacities relevant to what is commanded, so that some obey and others disobey within the sphere of responsibility.

The seventh is recognition that acts of obedience and disobedience possess corresponding recompense, so that command and prohibition are not without consequence and so that the path is made clear enough for responsibility to have meaning.

Upon such principles the remaining structure of the divine law is built.

Chapter 9 — The Lawgiver Must Know the Condition of His Community

Among the qualities of the lawgiver and his care for those whom he calls is that he should learn the condition of each member of his community: young and old, male and female, free and enslaved, noble and lowly, learned and ignorant, wealthy and poor.

He must know their character, capacities, occupations, circumstances, habits, strengths, weaknesses, and degrees of understanding.

For one treatment does not suit every patient, nor one lesson every student, nor one command every circumstance.

The lawgiver therefore addresses people according to capacity while directing all toward a common good.

Chapter 10 — The First Social Practice Is Mutual Loyalty and Affection

The first practice instituted among followers of the law should be mutual loyalty because of the sanctity of the law itself.

Its purpose is to strengthen affection among them, reconcile their hearts, unite their scattered condition, make their purposes agree, and transform them from isolated individuals into a community capable of mutual assistance.

A law whose followers hate, betray, envy, deceive, and abandon one another has failed to produce one of its most important social fruits.

Religious fellowship should therefore establish bonds strong enough that the believer experiences the good of another as his own good and the injury of another as an injury to the whole.

Chapter 11 — The Brethren Should Imitate the Prophetic Model of Cooperation

Come then, O brother, if you are resolved to seek the welfare of religion and worldly life. Let us imitate the practice of divine law, gather with virtuous brethren and noble friends, and cooperate with complete inward sincerity.

Let each assist the others through whatever God has granted him: knowledge, wealth, strength, counsel, influence, courage, patience, or skill.

No one alone possesses all the qualities required for every task.

When hearts become united, virtues dispersed among individuals may function together as though gathered within one person.

Chapter 12 — Sacrifice of Wealth, Self, and Family for the Sake of the Law

Among the convictions held with certainty by the true bearer of divine law is that one of the greatest means of drawing near to God and seeking His pleasure is willingness to expend wealth, self, and family when necessary for establishing justice, preserving the law, protecting the community, and defending truth.

The prophets and their sincere followers repeatedly surrendered possessions, comfort, homeland, reputation, and even bodily safety for this purpose.

The point is not destruction for its own sake. Sacrifice is noble only when directed toward a good greater than the thing surrendered.

Whoever loves bodily survival more than truth in every circumstance cannot imitate those whose certainty concerning the soul and the hereafter made them willing to endure bodily loss.

Chapter 13 — The Lawgiver Does Not Attribute the Divine Law to His Own Opinion

Among the qualities of the true bearer of divine law is that he does not attribute what he says, does, commands, and prohibits in establishing the law merely to his personal opinion, individual reasoning, or bodily power.

Rather, he attributes it to the higher intermediary through whom he received it and ultimately to God.

For if people regarded the revealed law as simply the private preference of one human being, its binding spiritual character would disappear and its followers would compare one private opinion with another.

The lawgiver therefore speaks as a messenger rather than as the independent owner of the message.

Chapter 14 — Four Things Complete Religion and Worldly Order

Know that the completion of religion and worldly order for the followers of divine law depends upon four things.

The first is that each person possess **Intellect**, through which he recognises what is ugly and restrains himself from it, recognises what is beautiful and commands himself toward it.

The second is the **lawgiver**, who sets before the community the revealed principles and disciplines through which individual intellects are educated and brought into agreement.

The third is **practical power and governance**, through which good principles can be realised in social life rather than remaining merely words.

The fourth is **cooperation among the followers**, without which neither intellectual guidance, law, nor governance can achieve its full effect.

The sound community therefore requires inner reason, revealed guidance, practical capacity, and mutual assistance.

Chapter 15 — The Rational and Virtuous Require Less External Coercion

Know that excellent rational people, when the guidance and strength supplied by the lawgiver have been added to their own intellects, require less continual external coercion by rulers ordering, forbidding, threatening, and judging them.

Intellect itself becomes an inward ruler.

The person who understands why justice is good does not need to be watched at every moment in order to act justly. The person who has disciplined appetite does not require a guard at every door.

External law is most necessary while inward law remains weak.

The highest goal is not to abolish law but to have its wisdom become an inward character of the soul.

Chapter 16 — Philosophers Should Not Neglect the Outward Law

Know that some who have trained in philosophical sciences and mathematical disciplines, while remaining ignorant of the outward ordinances and inward secrets of revealed law, become negligent in practising its rituals.

They imagine that intellectual investigation makes outward discipline unnecessary.

The Brethren reject this.

Philosophical knowledge without purification of conduct may increase pride rather than wisdom. A person may speak accurately concerning number, geometry, nature, or logic while remaining ruled by appetite, anger, envy, greed, or arrogance.

The outward disciplines of law train habit and character, bind the individual to a community, and prepare the soul for meanings that intellectual speculation alone may fail to realise.

Therefore the philosopher who seeks divine knowledge should neither despise revealed practice nor imagine himself beyond moral discipline.

Chapter 17 — Outward Revelation and Inward Interpretation

Know that the divine books possess **outward revelations**, namely the articulated and heard words, and **hidden inward interpretations**, namely the intelligible meanings understood through them.

Likewise, the bearers of divine laws established outward ordinances with manifest judgements and inward secrets.

The practice of the outward ordinances benefits people in worldly life by regulating conduct, restraining injustice, disciplining appetite, and organising the community. Knowledge of their inward secrets benefits the soul in its return and the hereafter.

The person who is granted understanding of the meanings of divine books, knowledge of the hidden purposes of revealed ordinances, and perseverance in righteous conduct is prepared, according to the Brethren, for ascent toward the angelic rank.

But one who does not understand these inward meanings yet faithfully practises the just outward path is not thereby lost. His soul remains preserved in the **human form**, which the Brethren call the straight path, until further passage and perfection become possible.

By contrast, one who neither understands the meanings nor strives to practise the just path of the law descends through the domination of appetite toward the animal rank.

This, the authors say, is among the highest purposes for which divine law is established.

Chapter 18 — The Symbols and Mysteries of Prophetic Revelation

The revealed books and sacred narratives contain symbols whose outward wording is known to many people while their inward meanings remain obscure.

The Brethren therefore conclude this epistle with a long poem consisting largely of questions and allusions to such mysteries.

It begins with the approach of the Hour and the splitting of the Moon and asks what lies beneath these signs when they are understood beyond their bare outward form. It speaks of those who see a sign and turn away, calling it persistent magic, and of those who reject admonition despite the coming of wisdom and warning.

It asks about resurrection after death and the meaning of the soul's request to return; about those who fled their dwellings for fear of death and were told to die and were then restored; and about the traveller who passed by a ruined town and wondered how God would revive it after its death.

It asks about the transformation of those who violated the Sabbath into apes and swine; about those unable to prostrate when called to prostration; about chains, bonds, thirst, Fire, punishment, and the symbolic language by which states of the soul are described.

It asks why Hell is said to possess seven gates, why the Garden is described through its several degrees, why the bearers of the Throne are numbered, why certain punishments are associated with particular numbers, and why a chain is described as seventy cubits in length.

It asks about the nineteen guardians, the three-branched shadow, the ninety-nine beautiful names, the divisions of the religious community, and the traditional number of the parts of prophecy, including why the truthful dream is counted as one of them.

It asks about the isolated letters appearing at the beginnings of Qur'anic chapters—such as Ṭā Hā, Ḥā Mīm, and Ṭā Sīn—and what secrets the sages perceive in such expressions.

It asks about the jinn; about Iblīs and the serpent and peacock in the story of Adam; about the forbidden tree or grain; why Adam's nakedness became manifest; and why the raven taught Cain how to bury his brother.

It asks about Abraham's fire and how it became coolness and peace; about the birds restored to life; Noah's Flood and the ship of planks and nails; Joseph's shirt, the wolf, the blood, the well, his sale for a small price, his imprisonment, the proof he saw, the witness concerning the torn shirt, and the later shirt through which his father's sight was restored.

It asks about the lowing calf, the yellow cow, the dead man restored through it, the wandering of a nation in the wilderness, and the mountain raised above them.

It asks about Solomon's ring and staff, his understanding of birds, the subjection of the wind, the body cast upon his throne, and the throne brought before him in the blink of an eye.

It asks about Jonah and the great fish; Christ, the Spirit, speaking from the cradle; Hārūt and Mārūt and the teaching associated with magic; the sleepers of the Cave and their dog; Gog and Magog and the barrier constructed against them; and the loosening of that barrier near the fulfilment of the promise.

It asks about the Sun rising from the west, its later folding up, the falling of the stars, the figure of the Dajjāl, his one-eyed description, his army, and the symbolic Paradise and Fire associated with him.

These questions are not separately resolved in this epistle.

Rather, the poem is deliberately presented as a collection of **riddles and signs** pointing toward the inward sciences of prophecy.

The authors conclude that these verses and the questions contained within them are guidance for those who have disciplined themselves through the correction of character and an awakening for those trained in knowledge of the soul, directing them toward the secrets of prophecy and the symbols contained within the ordinances of divine law.

No brother should answer questions concerning these mysteries indiscriminately.

Such meanings should be disclosed only to one who has disciplined his soul and corrected his character, because the rust upon the soul and corruption of character prevent understanding of such subtle meanings.

The manner in which people should be called, instructed, and gradually prepared for these truths will be explained in the epistle that follows.

May God grant understanding, if He wills.

Here ends the Epistle on the Nature of the Divine Law and the Conditions of Prophethood.

It is followed by the Epistle on How to Call People to God.

Epistle 48

On How to Call People to God

The Seventh Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that our followers and brethren scattered throughout the lands, and all those associated with this way, occupy three broad ranks. One group consists of the elite: rational, religious, virtuous, and excellent people. Another consists of foolish, wicked, and corrupt people. Between them stands a third, intermediate group.

Each group possesses opinions and doctrines in which they differ, sayings to which they are attached, characters and dispositions by which they vary, and actions and habits to which they have become accustomed.

We therefore wish to describe each group and indicate the signs by which they may be recognised. Then, whenever you enter a city or country and meet one of them, you may recognise him by his marks, greet him appropriately, approach each class with the greatest gentleness and tact you possess, discuss with them from our knowledge according to what their hearts can accept, and disclose from our secrets only what their intellects can bear, their souls can encompass, their aspirations can reach, and their understanding can conceive.

In all this, be like the gentle and wise physician whose story we related earlier: he treats each patient according to his condition rather than giving the same medicine indiscriminately to all.

Chapter 1 — Recognising the Excellent Brethren

Among the distinguishing qualities of our excellent brethren is that they possess knowledge of religions, understand something of the secrets of prophecy, and have been disciplined by the philosophical mathematical sciences.

If you meet one of them and perceive right guidance in him, bring him glad tidings concerning what will delight him, remind him of renewal, awakening, and the removal of affliction from the servants of God, and disclose to him from our teaching according to the measure of his understanding.

Among our followers are also people who doubt our existence and remain uncertain concerning our continuation, while others are convinced of our continuance but are heedless of our affair and ignorant of our mysteries. When you meet such people, reassure them concerning what they hope for, remind them that what they imagine to be distant may be near, and convey to those whom you trust something of the knowledge entrusted to you.

Give them from our epistles whatever their souls desire and find agreeable, but do so in order and gradual sequence. Perhaps, when they hear them read and understand their meanings, their souls will awaken from heedlessness and ignorance and come to life through the spirit of knowledge.

Among the people of our religious community are also some who acknowledge our excellence and the excellence of the Household of our Prophet while remaining ignorant of our sciences and mysteries. Some of these deny our existence and rebuke those who believe in our continuance.

One cause of this is that corrupt people sometimes use affiliation to noble causes as a covering for their wrongdoing. They commit forbidden acts, neglect obligations, and when corrected they hide behind claims of allegiance and lineage.

Know that bodily descent alone does not make a person spiritually related to the righteous. Some call themselves ʿAlids while possessing only bodily affiliation, knowing neither the realities of the Qur'an nor the substance of religion, practising neither knowledge nor proper worship, and using their ancestry as a cause for pride.

The Prophet is represented as warning his own clan not to come on the Day of Resurrection carrying only genealogies while others come carrying their deeds.

Likewise, some make attachment to the Household into a livelihood, reducing it to lamentation, curses, stories, mourning, and visiting tombs while abandoning the pursuit of knowledge, understanding of scripture, jurisprudence, prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage, and moral discipline.

Do not, O good and compassionate brother, become one of these. Be instead one who guides and is guided, a gentle physician to your brethren, friends, and neighbours: guide the lost, heal blindness and disease, and revive the dead by God's permission.

Chapter 2 — The Indian King, His Son, and the Sage

It is related that one of the kings of India was mighty in authority, vast in dominion, just toward his subjects, and devoted to fairness, yet he worshipped idols and knew nothing of the prophetic teachings concerning the celestial kingdom, revelation, scripture, the beginning and return, resurrection, gathering, reckoning, the Balance, the Path, deliverance from the Fire, entrance into the Gardens, or proximity to the Merciful.

In his old age a fortunate son was born to him. Astrologers judged from the boy's birth that he would attain a kingdom unlike earthly kingship—not corporeal dominion, but spiritual and celestial sovereignty.

The king therefore raised the boy in seclusion, built him a palace, surrounded him with servants and guardians, and prevented ordinary people from reaching him.

As the boy grew, he received unusual intelligence and clarity of mind. He learned reading, writing, poetry, eloquence, grammar, language, arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and the disciplines suitable for princes. Yet his soul remained intensely contemplative concerning the

Kingdom of Heaven, the Maker, the origin of things, the return, and the fate of past generations. Reflection became so strong that it distracted him from food, sleep, and bodily pleasure.

He longed for someone capable of answering what occupied his heart.

News of him spread until it reached a sage from the land of Sarandīb. The sage hoped the youth might be capable of right guidance and wisdom, so he travelled toward him carrying a book of wisdom and prophetic mysteries concealed in a sealed container.

Access to the prince was difficult. Eventually the sage selected one of the prince's trusted servants and privately told him that he possessed precious jewels suited only to kings and princes.

The servant asked to see them.

The sage replied that their brilliance was so powerful that he feared the servant's sight could not bear it, whereas the young prince possessed sharp and youthful vision.

The servant eventually reported the matter to the prince. When the prince heard, he understood that this was perhaps what he had been awaiting and ordered that the stranger be brought secretly by night.

When the sage entered, he recognised nobility and receptivity in the youth. The prince dismissed the servant and began questioning him.

Such, says the epistle, should be the method of our excellent brethren when choosing those to whom wisdom is entrusted. They should especially seek intelligent, disciplined, noble young people whose souls remain receptive and whose minds have not hardened through corrupt habits and prejudices.

Chapter 3 — Why the Sages Renounce Excessive Attachment to the World

Among the questions the prince asked the sage was: Why do the sages condemn worldly affairs and renounce its pleasures when this is the world in which they were raised and the dwelling of their fathers?

The sage replied that worldly life appears small to them once they perceive something of the Kingdom of Heaven. Its pleasures become insignificant compared with the pleasures they understand to belong to the spiritual world.

The human condition resembles that of a person accustomed to poverty who imagines his little possession to be great because he has never seen royal abundance. Once he enters a palace and sees what kings possess, his former treasure becomes insignificant.

So too the person acquainted only with bodily pleasure imagines food, drink, sexual desire, ornament, wealth, buildings, status, and rule to be the greatest goods. But once the soul

knows intellectual and spiritual delights, bodily pleasure appears limited, passing, and mixed with pain.

The sages therefore do not condemn creation itself. They condemn taking what is temporary for what is permanent and mistaking a passage for one's homeland.

The body is a vehicle; the world is a road; the soul is the traveller; and the true destination lies beyond the road.

Chapter 4 — The Minister Who Concealed His Wisdom

The narrative continues with a king who questioned his minister after learning that the minister had long held these views concerning the soul and the hereafter.

The king asked, “Since when have you known this doctrine?”

The minister answered, “For a long time.”

The king said, “Then what prevented you from discussing it with me?”

The minister replied that wisdom cannot be given merely because a speaker possesses it. The listener must also be prepared.

The physician does not administer strong medicine to one whose body cannot bear it. The farmer does not sow every seed in every soil. Precious jewels are not entrusted to children who cannot distinguish them from stones.

The sages therefore observe the condition of the person whom they address. Some are guided by a simple religious teaching; others require examples; others demonstrations; others must first have their character disciplined before subtle matters can safely be disclosed.

To reveal difficult truths at the wrong time may cause the listener to reject them and become more distant from knowledge than before.

The caller to God must therefore understand not only truth but also **the art of conveying truth**.

Chapter 5 — The State of Souls after Separation from Bodies

The prince also asked the sage what the wise believe concerning souls after separation from bodies.

The sage answered that souls differ after separation just as they differed while embodied.

A purified soul which has acquired knowledge, virtue, moderation, justice, and detachment from bodily appetite rises toward a state corresponding to its purity. It joins beings

resembling it, encounters intellectual and spiritual pleasures, and is released from many of the burdens associated with bodily existence.

A soul that has devoted itself wholly to bodily pleasure, vice, ignorance, greed, envy, hostility, and false opinion departs carrying those habits with it. The body is removed, but the dispositions formed through long practice remain.

The pain of such a soul comes from desiring what it can no longer obtain through bodily instruments while lacking the intellectual goods that could replace those desires.

Death therefore does not make all souls equal. It unveils what each soul has made of itself.

The hereafter is not wholly foreign to this life; its beginnings are fashioned here through knowledge, character, and action.

Chapter 6 — The Brethren Are Scattered through Every Class of Society

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that we have brethren and friends among noble and excellent people scattered throughout the lands.

Some are sons of kings, princes, ministers, officials, and secretaries. Some belong to merchants and tradesmen. Some are craftsmen. Some are scholars, jurists, physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, theologians, and philosophers. Some serve in government; others live privately. Some are wealthy and others poor.

What unites them is not profession, lineage, city, or outward rank but aspiration toward knowledge, purification, brotherhood, and the salvation of the soul.

Do not therefore imagine that wisdom belongs exclusively to one profession or class.

Search for worthy brethren in every group of people, for the same noble disposition may appear under many outward forms.

Chapter 7 — The Brethren Do Not Oppose Any Genuine Science

Know, O brother, that we do not oppose any science, become fanatically attached to one school, or abandon any book composed by sages and philosophers in the various branches of knowledge and derived through sound intellect.

Our doctrine seeks to gather the truths dispersed among different sciences.

We investigate mathematics, natural philosophy, psychology, intellect, religion, prophecy, divine law, and metaphysics because each is a road toward understanding one aspect of existence.

Our purpose is not to defend the name of one group against another but to examine things according to their realities.

A truth does not become false because it was spoken by someone outside one's own community, nor does an error become true because it was spoken by one's own group.

The wise person takes wisdom wherever it is found.

Chapter 8 — Self-Knowledge Must Precede Claims to Universal Knowledge

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that it does not become us to claim knowledge of the realities of things while remaining ignorant of ourselves.

The person who claims to know the heavens, stars, elements, animals, plants, divine attributes, resurrection, and metaphysical realities while not knowing what the human being is resembles one who claims detailed knowledge of a distant city while being ignorant of his own house.

The human being is nearer to himself than any other object of inquiry.

Know first what your body is, what your soul is, how they are joined, which powers belong to each, how sensation occurs, how thought operates, what sleep and death are, what remains constant amid bodily change, and toward what end the soul strives.

From the human microcosm you may then ascend toward knowledge of the greater world.

Whoever neglects self-knowledge while claiming mastery of divine things builds upon an unstable foundation.

Chapter 9 — The Spiritual City and Its Four Walls

Know with certainty, O brother, that the city we describe has already been built according to its proper form, but no one can enter it unless his knowledge is proportionate to what is required for entrance.

Around it stand four walls.

These correspond to successive disciplines and purifications through which the seeker passes.

One wall concerns the correction of conduct and character. Another concerns training in the mathematical sciences, by which the mind learns order, proportion, demonstration, and abstraction. Another concerns the natural sciences and knowledge of bodies, generation, corruption, and the powers of Nature. The innermost concerns knowledge of the soul, Intellect, prophecy, divine law, and divine realities.

The seeker cannot safely leap over these stages through mere enthusiasm.

Each wall protects what lies within it.

One who has not disciplined desire may misuse knowledge. One who has not trained the intellect may mistake imagination for demonstration. One who has not studied Nature may speak confusedly of metaphysics.

The road into the spiritual city is therefore gradual.

Chapter 10 — The Four States Required of Those Who Are Called

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that four states are required of those invited to this matter.

The first is **acknowledgement with the tongue**.

The second is **forming a true conception of the teaching in the mind**.

The third is **inward assent and conviction**.

The fourth is **verification through action corresponding to what has been acknowledged, conceived, and believed**.

One who acknowledges without understanding is an imitator.

One who understands but does not assent remains doubtful.

One who assents but does not act is deficient and negligent.

One who understands, believes, and acts begins to verify the matter through his own state.

Instruction should therefore move a person gradually through these four ranks.

Chapter 11 — Four Degrees of Belief in Revelation

Those who acknowledge the Qur'an and the books of the prophets and their reports concerning the unseen occupy four degrees.

One acknowledges only with the tongue while inwardly rejecting.

Another acknowledges with the tongue and believes in the heart but does not understand the meanings.

Another acknowledges, believes, and understands but does not fulfil what the understanding requires.

The fourth joins acknowledgement, belief, understanding, and action.

The first is outwardly affiliated but inwardly uncertain. The second possesses genuine faith but limited knowledge. The third possesses knowledge but lacks completion through action. The fourth is the realised believer.

Do not therefore judge people solely by words. The true state of faith appears through the relation between speech, understanding, inward conviction, and conduct.

Chapter 12 — Address to Philosophers Who Doubt Revealed Law

As for those trained in philosophy who doubt revealed law and remain heedless of the mysteries of prophetic books, we say: do not suppose that because an expression appears strange to your present imagination it therefore contains no truth.

You accept subtle conclusions in geometry, astronomy, medicine, music, and natural philosophy only after long preparation. Why then demand that the symbols of prophecy disclose their deepest meanings immediately to an untrained mind?

Prophetic language addresses many classes simultaneously: ordinary people, the learned, children, rulers, ascetics, jurists, and sages.

The same expression may therefore possess an outward use for social guidance and an inward meaning for those capable of understanding it.

Do not reject what you have not yet investigated.

Examine the discipline, purpose, symbolism, numerical structures, rites, laws, narratives, and psychological effects of prophecy before declaring them irrational.

Chapter 13 — The Realities Signified by Eschatological Language

Every religious community possesses doctrines and teachings particular to it, and scholars who study them. The Brethren hold that the realities described in prophetic accounts of resurrection, Paradise, Hell, angels, demons, reckoning, the Balance, and the Path are not empty inventions.

These realities exist, but their mode of existence is not always identical with the gross bodily image first formed by ordinary imagination.

Some scriptural descriptions instruct the masses through sensible images. Some point symbolically toward psychic and intellectual states. Some possess both an outward and an inward truth.

The error lies either in denying everything because the outward image seems impossible, or in refusing every deeper meaning because one fears departing from the surface of the words.

The prophetic books employ symbols because spiritual realities must often be represented to embodied souls through forms drawn from bodily experience.

Chapter 14 — Address to Those Doubting the Soul

As for those confused by disagreements among scholars concerning the soul—its substance, mode of existence, relation to the body, origin, and destination—we ask first: do you acknowledge that there is something in the human being beyond this visible body?

If not, consider whether flesh, bone, blood, nerves, and humours by themselves explain speech, memory, reasoning, geometry, music, prophecy, history, prediction, craft, and moral choice.

If you do acknowledge the soul, then inquire seriously into its reality rather than using disagreement among scholars as an excuse for neglect.

The epistle raises several fundamental questions: What is the soul? Is it body or not body? How is it joined to the body? Where was it before bodily life? Where does it go after separation? Why does it sleep? How does it dream? What accounts for personal identity despite continual bodily change?

These questions should not be dismissed merely because they are difficult.

One who knows nothing of his own soul should be cautious in claiming complete knowledge of the Creator, the cosmos, or the hereafter.

Chapter 15 — The Soul's Servitude and Its Love of the Body

Know, O brother, that the condition of the particular soul, despite the nobility of its substance and its exile in this corporeal world, resembles that of a wise and noble man captured by a crude master.

At first the captive recognises his degradation and longs for freedom. But if captivity continues for many years, he may become accustomed to the master's house, language, food, habits, and commands until he forgets his former dignity.

So too the soul enters bodily life and becomes absorbed in bodily service: feeding, clothing, protecting, adorning, healing, housing, and pleasing the body.

Through long habit it may begin to love its prison.

It then fears death not merely because death is unknown but because it has forgotten any form of life apart from bodily existence.

The purpose of wisdom is to remind the soul of its own substance and teach it to employ the body without becoming enslaved to it.

Chapter 16 — The Descent of Souls from the Spiritual World

Know, O brother, that the epistle describes the particular soul as having descended from its spiritual world and fallen from its former rank because of a primordial fault or inclination.

Its association with body is therefore presented as both punishment and education.

Within corporeal life it experiences limitation, labour, hunger, thirst, fear, sickness, desire, and death, but it also acquires knowledge, character, discipline, and the possibility of return.

The body is thus both prison and school.

If the soul becomes purified through this experience, it rises. If it becomes more deeply attached to the body and bodily passions, it sinks further into material domination.

The story of Adam's descent is read symbolically as an image of this psychic descent and possible return.

Chapter 17 — The Fifty-One Epistles as Preparations

Know, O brother, that we have composed fifty-one epistles concerning the various disciplines, strange sciences, and forms of wisdom.

Each of them is like an entrance, preliminary exercise, or model intended to prepare our brethren for matters beyond it.

They are not ends in themselves.

Arithmetic disciplines the mind through number. Geometry through magnitude. Music through proportion. Astronomy through ordered motion. Natural philosophy through generated beings. Psychology through the human microcosm. Intellectual science through abstraction. Religious and divine sciences through prophecy, law, the soul, and the return.

When these disciplines are assembled and understood in proper sequence, they prepare the seeker to perceive the unity underlying their diversity.

Do not therefore read the epistles merely to collect information. Their purpose is to transform the soul's manner of seeing.

Chapter 18 — Address to Officials and Secretaries

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that we have brethren and friends among officials, secretaries, administrators, and those who serve kings and governments.

When addressing them, remind them that worldly administration is temporary and that authority is a trust.

Writing, calculation, taxation, correspondence, command, and public office may become either instruments of justice or tools of oppression.

The official who possesses intelligence should use his position to reduce injustice, protect the weak, reconcile people, assist knowledge, and restrain corruption wherever possible.

If he spends his entire life preserving another man's kingdom while neglecting the kingdom of his own soul, he has gained little.

The intelligent administrator should therefore join political skill with moral and spiritual governance.

Chapter 19 — Address to Kings and Rulers

O brother, we have chosen you for a matter through which there may be nearness to God, support for religion, and sincere counsel for the brethren. Proceed with confidence, relying upon God for assistance and support.

When speaking to kings and rulers, remind them that dominion changes from people to people and that no earthly dynasty is permanent.

Political power reaches its greatest dignity when joined to justice, knowledge, restraint, and service of the common good.

The epistle speaks in the historical and cosmological language of its own age concerning signs of political change, celestial cycles, dreams, omens, experience, and the rise and fall of dynasties. Its practical point is that wise people should observe the conditions of their age and recognise when a political order is approaching transformation.

Counsel offered to a ruler should seek the reform of religion and worldly life rather than private advantage.

If the ruler receives the counsel well and aspires toward what is indicated, the purpose has been achieved. If he asks for proof, send him a trusted person capable of examining the matter through knowledge and reason rather than flattery.

Chapter 20 — Address to Learned People Who Neglect Knowledge of the Soul

Tell us, O brother: do you know with certainty that alongside this body of length, breadth, and depth—composed of flesh, bones, nerves, veins, blood, phlegm, and the other bodily constituents—there exists another substance nobler than it, namely the soul, a simple, living, spiritual, celestial, and subtle substance which moves, governs, and manifests through the body its actions, speech, sciences, and virtues?

Or do you maintain that there is nothing except this visible and perishable body?

Consider the body by itself. Heat dissolves it, cold stiffens it, sleep suspends its outward senses, hunger weakens it, thirst dries it, food fills it with fluids and waste, death makes it decay, and without burial it becomes offensive.

Can this body alone be the true author of refined crafts, many languages, histories of vanished peoples, sciences concerning distant places, predictions, melodies, anatomy, astronomy, mathematics, the natures of elements, minerals, plants, and animals?

If these things are attributed merely to bodily mixture, remember that mixture itself is an accident and cannot adequately account for the enduring unity of knowledge and personal identity.

The person who remains ignorant of his own soul yet claims mastery of all sciences, divine attributes, and unseen things should examine the foundation of his claims.

If you acknowledge, O good and compassionate brother, that another noble substance exists with the body and that actions, sciences, and virtues properly belong to it, then you have spoken correctly.

Now ask: What is this substance? Why is it joined to this body? Was the union voluntary or compelled? Where was the soul before? Where does it go afterward?

Will you be content to say, “I do not know,” while claiming knowledge of matters farther from you than your own self?

It is reported: **“Whoever knows himself knows his Lord.”**

The soul is nearer to you than every other thing. Ignorance of it arises because most people neglect the science of the soul, immerse themselves in bodily desire, and devote their aspirations wholly to wealth, food, drink, clothing, houses, vehicles, sexuality, and social position.

They make their souls servants of their bodies instead of making the body an instrument of the soul.

Will you not, O brother, care for your soul, seek its salvation, loosen its chains, and lighten the burdens that prevent its ascent? Seek the companionship of sincere friends and excellent brethren who desire your salvation along with their own.

Learn their sciences, understand their symbols, cultivate their character, and travel with them toward the spiritual city.

Then you may live through your noble and enduring soul rather than treating this heavy, dark, changing, and corruptible body as your final reality.

Chapter 21 — Address to Those Devoted to the Household of the Prophet

God has joined us with you, O good and compassionate brother, through several causes which strengthen affection among brethren and gather friends together for the welfare of religion and worldly life.

Among these is the religion of Islam, which we regard as among the strongest bonds; the religion of our Prophet Muhammad—may God's blessings be upon him and his family—the Book he brought, and the just revealed law transmitted through him.

Among the bonds joining us is also love of the Prophet and his purified Household and devotion to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.

Another is shared reverence for knowledge and separation from the ignorance of the masses. Another is what we hope to find in you of beautiful character, noble conduct, freedom of soul, and purity of substance.

For this reason we write to you and send one of our trusted brethren whose understanding and religious conduct we have examined.

Receive him privately when your heart is free of distraction. Listen carefully to what he conveys from our teaching and secrets. Examine our doctrine and belief concerning religion and worldly life with your own intellect and reflection.

Then answer truthfully concerning what you think, without embarrassment, fear, flattery, or concealment of what sound judgement and truth require.

Chapter 22 — Why Many Philosophers Miss the Secrets of Prophetic Books

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you—that the secrets of the prophetic books escape many people trained in philosophy and those who investigate the realities of things because they neglect to investigate those books and turn away from contemplating them.

Their understanding therefore remains too weak to conceive meanings derived from the angelic world, the Highest Assembly, the inhabitants of the heavens, and the spiritual order.

Do not become among those who know only the outward aspect of worldly life while remaining heedless of the hereafter.

When scripture criticises people as deaf, dumb, blind, and without understanding, it does not mean that they literally cannot hear sounds, see colours, or manage ordinary worldly affairs. It means that they fail to apprehend the deeper meanings toward which the prophetic books point.

These are the meanings to which we continually direct our brethren throughout our epistles.

They are the religion of the prophets and the path of the Divine Sages and learned guardians of revelation, who were entrusted with something of the hidden wisdom of the Book.

But such mysteries are not grasped merely through outward affiliation. They require purification, knowledge, disciplined thought, sound character, and a heart prepared to receive them.

May God grant you, O brother, correctness in judgement, true belief, righteous action, and divine knowledge, and likewise all our brethren wherever they may be throughout the lands. Indeed, He is generous, bountiful, and gentle toward His servants.

Here ends the Epistle on the Call to God Most High.

It is followed by the Epistle on the States of the Spiritual Beings.

Epistle 49

On the States of the Spiritual Beings

The Eighth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that no one belonging to the corporeal world can adequately understand the acts of the spiritual beings until he first knows the substance of his own soul and the manner in which it acts through his body.

Once he understands this, it becomes possible for him to understand something of the states and activities of the spiritual beings throughout the whole world, both the higher world and what it contains and the lower world and what it encompasses.

This knowledge then leads him toward knowledge of his Creator, toward declaring his Originator free of improper attributes, toward understanding the act which He performs by Himself and the beings He brings forth, and toward recognising the order through which divine action reaches the created world.

In this lies one aspect of human perfection. Through it the human being becomes capable of conceiving the angelic and spiritual form, so that his own actions increasingly resemble the actions of angels and he becomes capable of recognising what proceeds from them within the corporeal world and among humankind.

He may also understand, according to the cosmology of this epistle, something of the acts attributed to jinn and devils, the spiritual forces assigned to restrain them, and the heavenly signs through which their influence is represented.

Chapter 1 — The Circle of Intellect

Know, O brother—may God strengthen you—that the circle of Intellect belongs to a rank of the divine command which no psychic imagination can encompass.

The luminous realities arranged in the horizon of the Universal Intellect cannot be grasped by sense or touched by bodily contact.

This is the first created circle, beyond the reach of the imaginations of creatures belonging either to the spiritual or corporeal worlds. It is characterised by the action proper to it: Intellect apprehends what lies beneath it, while created imagination turns back before comprehending the full extent of its encompassing rank.

Its highest activity is acknowledgement of its Creator, glorification of its Originator, humility before Him, longing toward Him, dependence upon Him, and return toward Him.

The circle of Intellect is luminous through the extreme purity of its substance. Within it appear the traces of the divine lights proceeding from pure Unity, which neither multiplies nor increases through composition.

Created things multiply because something is joined to something else. The First Unity is not multiplied in this way. It is the principle from which multiplicity proceeds without itself becoming multiple.

From this first circle comes the order of the lower circles. The Soul follows Intellect as the second rank; after it comes Matter, then Nature, and thereafter the many circles extending downward toward the Earth.

Each spiritual rank possesses an action proper to it and does not exceed the boundary established for it by the Creator.

The authors describe the first two principles after the Creator as two encompassing circles, the first surrounding the second. The higher is characterised by perfection, abundance, overflow, mercy, and beneficence toward what lies beneath it. It receives from above without exhausting what it receives, for the source of its support is continuous.

It is called Intellect because it contains the forms of existents and orders them according to their appropriate ranks.

The Soul does not encompass everything in Intellect all at once. It receives gradually from Intellect, just as what lies below the Soul receives gradually from it.

Nature in turn displays, moment after moment, forms, colours, species, and changes according to what reaches it through the Soul and through the celestial powers.

Thus the order descends from the divine command to Intellect, from Intellect to Soul, from Soul to Nature, and from Nature into matter and generated things.

The epistle compares this continuous causal order to a waterwheel. The visible containers rise and fall, become filled and emptied, but their motion depends upon a connected chain leading back to an original mover.

So too Nature does not act independently. Its movement is linked to celestial motion, celestial motion to Soul, Soul to Intellect, and Intellect to the divine command.

The divine command is expressed through the scriptural formula: **“When He wills a thing, His command is only to say to it: Be—and it is.”**

The intelligible forms are therefore compared to writing in a divine book: the Intellect is associated with the Pen, and the ordered realities within it with the Preserved Tablet. They are arranged like letters within lines, each in its appointed place.

Chapter 2 — The Emanation of the Intellect and Soul

Know that Intellect continuously receives the generosity of its Creator and transmits according to its capacity to what lies beneath it.

The Soul receives from Intellect, and through Soul the forms descend into Nature.

If the Soul possessed everything contained in Intellect without mediation or gradation, no difference would remain between their ranks. Likewise, if Nature possessed the full perfection of Soul, there would be no distinction between Nature and Soul.

Perfection therefore descends by ordered degrees.

Each rank receives according to its capacity and transmits according to the role established for it.

The spiritual beings assigned to the lower world are described as carrying forms into the elemental and generated realms, causing the various manifestations of minerals, plants, animals, and human bodies to appear in time.

Thus no rank is without function and no level is without its appointed station.

Chapter 3 — The Act Which God Performs by Himself and the Attributes Appropriate to Him

Know, O brother, that Intellect is nearer to its Originator than everything beneath it.

Because of this nearness, the First Intellect is described as the first originated act and the most perfect of created realities.

The divine act proper to God is not like the bodily acts of creatures.

Creatures act through organs, instruments, motion, time, place, and material. The Creator does not require any of these.

His bringing-forth of Intellect is therefore described as origination without pre-existing matter and without an instrument.

The First Intellect is luminous, complete, receptive to divine generosity, and oriented wholly toward its Cause.

From it the order of subsequent existents begins.

Chapter 4 — Divine Attributes and the Attributes of Creatures

Know, O brother, that the attributes belonging uniquely to God must not be understood in the same way as similar words applied to creatures.

God is called Originator, Creator, Maker, Powerful, Knowing, Living, Existing, Acting, and Eternal, but His possession of these descriptions is not derived from another.

Created beings may also be called knowing, living, powerful, or acting, but only by participation, reception, or dependence.

The knowledge of the creature is acquired; divine knowledge is not acquired.

The life of the creature may begin or cease; divine life is not subject to such conditions.

The power of the creature is restricted; divine power is not.

Thus the similarity of language does not imply identity of reality.

God is also beyond the oppositions that characterise created things. He is not one member of a pair of contraries such as hot and cold, light and dark, motion and rest, large and small.

Such predicates belong to beings bounded by genus, quantity, relation, place, and condition.

The Creator transcends these limits.

Chapter 5 — The Negligent Human Being Is Lower than the Beasts

Know, O brother, that the human being who remains heedless of worship and immersed in wrongdoing may become lower than animals, plants, and even minerals.

Mineral substances act according to their nature without voluntarily departing from their order.

Plants fulfil their functions of nourishment, growth, and reproduction.

Animals follow the faculties assigned to them and generally do not deliberately oppose their nature.

The human being, however, possesses rational capacity and may nevertheless abandon it, choosing ignorance and vice despite being capable of knowledge and virtue.

For this reason the descent of the human soul through corruption is more blameworthy than the limitations of beings that never possessed rational choice.

Chapter 6 — The Acts of the Active Intellect

Know, O brother, that the **Active Intellect** is the first origination and the most complete created reality. It is the divine act brought forth directly through the command of God.

The action proper to Intellect does not separate from it.

Because Intellect continually receives the generosity of its Creator, from it proceeds the second emanation, namely the Universal Soul.

The relation of Soul to Intellect resembles the relation of an image to the light by which it becomes manifest.

The Soul receives the intelligible forms according to its capacity and then pours their traces into Nature and matter.

Thus the entire descending order remains connected.

Chapter 7 — The Spiritual Powers of the Sun

Know, O brother, that from the circle of the Sun descend spiritual powers extending throughout the world below.

The sages described these as solar spiritualities.

Through them, in the authors' cosmology, life, illumination, warmth, visibility, balance, and the regulation of many earthly processes are sustained.

The Sun occupies among the celestial bodies a position analogous to the heart within the human body.

Just as the heart distributes vital power throughout the bodily members, the Sun distributes its light and influence throughout the lower world.

It governs the alternation of day and night, seasons, growth, ripening, and many of the activities upon which living creatures depend.

For this reason the epistle repeatedly uses the Sun as a sensible image of a higher spiritual principle: one source may give to many recipients without being diminished by the multiplicity of what receives from it.

Chapter 8 — The Spiritual Powers of Saturn

From the circle of Saturn descend spiritual powers which, according to the ancient cosmology adopted here, produce qualities of heaviness, stability, slowness, endurance, persistence, restraint, and consolidation.

These powers extend throughout the heavens, elements, and generated beings.

They are associated with the holding of forms within matter and with those qualities by which things resist sudden alteration.

When harmoniously ordered, such powers produce perseverance and firmness. When excessive or corrupted, they are associated with heaviness, melancholy, obstruction, or rigidity.

The same force may therefore be beneficial or harmful according to measure and context.

Chapter 9 — The Spiritual Powers of Jupiter

From the circle of Jupiter descend spiritual forces associated with balance, moderation, harmony, beneficence, justice, reconciliation, and the preservation of order.

Through these powers, according to the epistle, conflicting qualities may be brought into proportion and natural oppositions moderated.

In human life they correspond symbolically to wisdom in governance, justice between opposing claims, generosity, and peaceful order.

The authors therefore describe Jupiter's spiritual influence as among the beneficent powers maintaining harmony within the world.

Chapter 10 — The Spiritual Powers of Mars

From the circle of Mars proceed spiritual forces associated with impulse, motion, courage, force, swiftness, struggle, competition, and the drive toward difficult ends.

When rightly governed, these powers support bravery, energetic work, protection, and the overcoming of obstacles.

When excessive or disordered, the same powers produce anger, violence, warfare, destruction, recklessness, and domination.

The epistle thereby treats cosmic forces not as simply good or evil but as powers whose moral significance depends upon proportion and use.

Chapter 11 — The Spiritual Powers of Venus

From the circle of Venus descend spiritual forces associated with beauty, harmony, ornament, affection, attraction, pleasure, music, symmetry, and the adornment of generated things.

Through these powers, the epistle says, the world receives much of its visible beauty: the colours of flowers, the attraction between creatures, the delights of melody, and the forms through which beings become agreeable to one another.

At the level of human character, such powers correspond to love, tenderness, sociability, and aesthetic delight.

When governed by intellect they contribute to harmony; when left to appetite alone they may become excessive attachment to pleasure.

Chapter 12 — The Spiritual Powers of Mercury

From the circle of Mercury proceed spiritual forces associated with knowledge, thought, discernment, writing, language, memory, calculation, interpretation, inspiration, dreams, revelation, and prophecy.

The authors compare Mercury's role in the cosmos to the brain's role in the human body.

Through the brain arise thought, imagination, memory, and speech; through Mercury, in the symbolic cosmology of the epistle, intellectual and communicative powers are distributed through the world.

Because of this association, Mercury is linked not only to ordinary learning and writing but also to subtle forms of communication such as dream imagery, intuition, and prophetic reception.

Chapter 13 — The Spiritual Powers of the Moon

From the circle of the Moon proceed spiritual forces which descend throughout the lower world.

The Moon forms the threshold between the celestial spheres and the world of generation and corruption.

Its waxing and waning make it a symbol of increase and decrease, generation and decay, appearance and disappearance.

The authors connect lunar influence with moisture, growth, reproduction, bodily cycles, the changes of plants and animals, and many processes occurring in the sublunary world.

The Moon therefore stands at the boundary where higher celestial influences are received into the changing material realm.

Chapter 14 — The Spiritual Powers of the Fixed Stars

Likewise every fixed star possesses, according to the cosmology of this work, a spiritual power extending from the eighth sphere down toward the centre of the Earth.

These innumerable influences interweave with those of the planets and with the dispositions of matter.

The different qualities observed among earthly regions, minerals, plants, animals, and human temperaments are explained partly through this complex celestial order.

Yet all these influences remain subordinate causes. None is independent of the higher chain of Intellect, Soul, Nature, and ultimately the divine command.

Chapter 15 — The Circle of Ether and Fire

Having described the celestial circles and their spiritualities, the epistle turns toward the lower elemental circles.

Immediately below the lunar sphere lies the region associated with ether and fire.

Its qualities are heat, lightness, upward motion, and subtlety.

The authors regard it as the highest of the elemental regions and therefore as closest among the elements to the celestial order.

Fire transforms what it reaches, separates subtle from dense, illuminates, heats, and rises.

These physical properties are again used as symbols of psychic and spiritual processes.

Chapter 16 — The Region of Intense Cold

Beneath the fiery or ethereal region lies the circle of intense cold.

The authors describe it as a spherical region produced through vapours rising from the Earth and prevented from ascending farther when they meet the higher fiery sphere.

Here condensation and cooling occur.

The cosmology is pre-modern, but within the internal structure of the epistle this region explains phenomena associated with cold, clouds, freezing, and atmospheric transformation.

Chapter 17 — The Circle of Air

Below this lies the circle of air, spherical and mixed in constitution.

Its apparent colour is compared with the blue of the heavens, though it becomes bright when illuminated by the Sun and dark when deprived of that illumination.

Air receives vapours, clouds, winds, sounds, scents, and the movements of living beings.

It mediates between higher and lower elemental regions and is essential to respiration and animal life.

Chapter 18 — The Circle of Water

Below the air is the circle of water surrounding much of the Earth.

The air draws water upward in vapour; vapours rise and condense; rain returns them to rivers, springs, and seas.

Thus the water cycle becomes another example of the circular order found throughout Nature.

Water nourishes plants, animals, and human beings, carries dissolved substances, and participates in continual generation.

The authors regard its movements as governed by the same descending chain of causes already described.

Chapter 19 — The Circle of Earth

Below the water is the Earth, dense, heavy, dark, and stable.

Upon its surface corporeal beings dwell, and from its substance arise minerals, plants, animals, and the bodies of human beings.

The Earth occupies the lowest central position within the cosmology of the epistle.

Yet from this lowest region beings rise through successive degrees of complexity and perfection.

Thus descent of spiritual influence from above is answered by ascent of generated forms from below.

Chapter 20 — Minerals and Plants

Know, O brother, that the first generated forms beginning within the depths of the Earth are minerals.

Their powers are hidden, dense, and heavy. Some are hard, others soft; some possess colour, lustre, malleability, brittleness, or particular chemical and medicinal properties.

Above the mineral degree comes the plant degree.

Plants possess powers beyond those of minerals: nourishment, growth, development, reproduction, and response to environmental conditions.

Each higher rank gathers the powers of what lies below and adds something new.

Thus the hierarchy ascends from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, and from animal toward humanity.

Chapter 21 — The Circle of Animals

Above the plant circle stands the circle of animals.

Animal beings encompass and dominate the plant rank in the sense that they consume plants, move voluntarily, perceive through sensation, pursue what benefits them, and flee what harms them.

Different animals possess different degrees of sensation, movement, memory, and instinct.

No sharp break separates every rank from the next. The highest members of one degree resemble the lowest members of the degree above.

Through this gradual continuity, the world forms a connected chain.

Chapter 22 — The Circle of Divine Law

Above the merely animal degree within the human world stands the **circle of divine law** and those persons who uphold revealed laws and what descends to them from their Lord.

This circle resembles, within human society, the encompassing celestial sphere.

Through it descend forms of religious felicity and social order.

Prophets and true lawgivers bring commandments, prohibitions, rites, institutions, moral disciplines, and teachings designed to govern both bodies and souls.

The divine law therefore creates within human society an order analogous to the cosmic order above.

Chapter 23 — The Circle of Philosophical Wisdom

Adjacent to the circle of divine law stands the circle of those who possess rational and philosophical wisdom.

From them proceed the perfected crafts, sciences, forms of reasoning, political arts, and disciplines required by rulers, scholars, artisans, and the educated.

The authors do not regard prophetic and philosophical wisdom as enemies when both are rightly understood.

One addresses humanity through revealed law and symbolic teaching; the other investigates through rational demonstration and disciplined inquiry.

Both may contribute to the perfection of the soul.

Chapter 24 — The Human Body as an Image of the Cosmic Circles

Know, O brother, that God composed the human body from multiple substances and arranged within it circles nested one within another so that the human constitution would resemble the structure of the greater world.

This is one reason the human being is called a **small world**.

Bones provide support, nerves bind the joints, flesh fills and protects the body's spaces, veins carry blood, and the blood nourishes the members.

Each component possesses an assigned function, just as each cosmic circle possesses an assigned action.

The ordered cooperation of the body's parts becomes a visible image through which the mind may understand the cooperation of cosmic powers.

Chapter 25 — The Twelve Openings of the Body and the Zodiac

Just as the celestial sphere is divided into twelve zodiacal signs, the authors identify twelve principal openings in the human body as an analogy to them.

The comparison is not presented as anatomical identity but as part of the symbolic correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm.

As particular powers are assigned to regions of the heavens, particular faculties are assigned to bodily organs and openings.

The purpose of these correspondences is to show that the human being gathers within himself images of the greater world.

Chapter 26 — The Human Being as a Complete Microcosm

The powers of the human body and soul are arranged so that the person becomes a miniature likeness of the universal order.

Within him are higher faculties resembling the celestial powers and lower faculties resembling the elemental and animal ranks.

When his psychic powers are balanced and turn away from domination by bodily Nature toward Intellect, his actions become increasingly angelic.

When they descend toward uncontrolled appetite, anger, ignorance, and bodily excess, they resemble demonic actions.

Thus heaven and hell begin symbolically within the structure of the human soul.

Chapter 27 — Correspondence between the Human Body and the Sublunar Circles

The head resembles the fiery or ethereal region through the rays of sight, rapid motion of the senses, and warmth associated with breath and life.

The mouth and throat correspond to the region of cold and condensation through moisture and transformations connected with air and food.

The chest corresponds to air through respiration.

The abdomen resembles the watery region through its fluids and digestive processes.

The lower and heavier parts correspond to Earth through density and support.

All that exists beneath the lunar sphere therefore finds, in the authors' symbolic anthropology, some analogue within the human body.

Chapter 28 — The Human Soul between Angelic and Demonic Directions

When the faculties of the human soul are moderated, purified, and turned toward Intellect, the soul becomes angelic in character and its actions resemble those of angels.

When it abandons Intellect and follows Nature without discipline, its actions become beastlike or demonic.

The human soul therefore occupies a middle rank.

It can ascend or descend.

At death it is drawn toward beings resembling the character it acquired during bodily life.

Knowledge, justice, worship, and purification incline it upward. Ignorance, tyranny, uncontrolled appetite, and hatred incline it downward.

Chapter 29 — Degrees among Animals, Plants, and Minerals

Having found these correspondences within the human being, the epistle returns to the lower ranks.

Animals themselves occupy many degrees. Some approach humanity through intelligence, memory, social organisation, imitation, trainability, or bodily form.

Plants likewise differ in complexity, longevity, sensitivity, usefulness, and form.

Minerals differ in purity, hardness, lustre, rarity, and receptivity to transformation.

The upper edge of every rank approaches the lower edge of the rank above.

Thus existence is not a collection of disconnected fragments but a hierarchy whose neighbouring degrees touch one another.

Chapter 30 — Actions Reveal Spiritual Affiliation

Know, O good brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that when you reflect upon the celestial signs, the activities attributed to spiritual beings, and the creation of the heavens and Earth, you will discover that actions reveal the rank toward which a soul belongs.

The person whose actions are just, merciful, truthful, orderly, wise, and beneficial resembles the higher spiritual powers.

The person whose conduct is destructive, deceptive, envious, cruel, and enslaved to appetite resembles the lower demonic powers.

One therefore need not speculate abstractly about spiritual affiliation while ignoring conduct.

Character and action are among its clearest earthly signs.

Chapter 31 — Why the Heavens Are Spherical

Know, O brother, that the Creator made the heavens spherical because, in the geometry accepted by the authors, the sphere is the most complete of bodily figures.

It contains the greatest volume with the least boundary, possesses no corners, and permits uniform circular motion.

Triangles, squares, cones, and other forms have distinct properties, but the sphere is treated as the most fitting form for the encompassing celestial bodies.

The epistle uses this geometric perfection as another sign of the ordered wisdom of the cosmos.

Chapter 32 — Higher Powers Act More Strongly upon Lower Things

Know, O brother, that the action of a larger and more encompassing circle appears more strongly in what lies beneath it than the action of a smaller thing upon what surrounds it.

Sweet water poured into a vast salty sea may not noticeably change the whole sea, whereas the sea readily alters the smaller amount of sweet water.

Likewise a small flame is overwhelmed by a great mass, whereas a great fire transforms what is placed within it.

The authors use such examples to explain why higher and more universal causes possess wider effects upon the lower world than lower causes possess upon higher ranks.

The more universal cause encompasses rather than being encompassed.

Chapter 33 — The Encompassing Sphere

The outermost celestial sphere is the widest of the heavenly circles. The spheres beneath it are arranged one within another, and the encompassing sphere was understood in the astronomy of the authors to complete a revolution around the Earth every twenty-four hours.

All lower motions occur within this greater motion.

The image illustrates the metaphysical principle that a universal order contains more particular movements without being reduced to them.

The universe therefore resembles a single ordered body whose parts possess distinct motions while remaining joined within one encompassing structure.

Chapter 34 — Epicycles, Eccentrics, and the Ordered Whole

Know that each of the seven wandering stars was understood by the astronomers of the authors' age to move upon a smaller circle called an epicycle, while these circles moved within larger eccentric spheres arranged in relation to the zodiacal sphere.

These astronomical mechanisms were employed to account for the observed irregularities of planetary motion.

For the Brethren, their importance is not merely technical.

The complexity of celestial motion demonstrates that many apparently contrary motions can coexist within one ordered system.

What appears irregular when one motion is considered in isolation may become intelligible when placed within the larger whole.

The same principle applies to Nature, history, the body, and the soul.

Chapter 35 — The Survival of the Soul and the Scriptural Testimony concerning Spiritual Beings

Know, O brother, that when a human being reflects carefully upon the body he finds it to be a composite thing: flesh, blood, veins, nerves, bones, and other members described by anatomy. Its beginning is from reproductive matter, then nourishment sustains and enlarges it, and when the soul departs at death the body decays according to the order established for it.

The soul, however, is described as a celestial, luminous, living, knowing, active, sensing, and apprehending substance.

It does not perish with the body but remains, either in pleasure or in pain.

The souls of believers, the friends of God, and righteous servants ascend after bodily death toward the celestial expanse in rest and spiritual ease until the Resurrection. The souls of

unbelievers, the wicked, and the corrupt remain in the darkness of their ignorance, suffering from what they have fashioned within themselves, until the Day of Resurrection and judgement.

The epistle cites many Qur'anic passages as evidence that the soul persists after death in either felicity or suffering.

For one who accepts admonition, the authors say, what has already been stated is sufficient. Whoever cares for what comes after death should prepare for the journey before life passes away.

The epistle then turns from human souls to spiritual beings more broadly.

Some earlier thinkers, it reports, divided souls into several classes. Some spiritual beings do not inhabit corporeal bodies at all. Among these are the beings called angels, characterised as good by nature, and those called devils, characterised as evil within the symbolic scheme used here.

Other souls are linked with celestial bodies and exercise influences through both their bodies and their psychic powers.

Still others are associated with animal or human bodies and separate from them when bodily constitution fails.

The authors then insist that the existence of angels, jinn, devils, and other spiritual beings is abundantly affirmed in revelation.

Christian scriptures are mentioned as containing frequent references to demons and their encounters with Christ. The Qur'an likewise contains numerous references.

The epistle therefore gathers a long sequence of Qur'anic testimonies.

It recalls the command to the angels to prostrate before Adam and Iblīs' refusal through pride. It cites the account in which Satan caused Adam and his companion to slip from their former state, and the passages concerning the devils associated with magic in the kingdom of Solomon.

It cites the warning not to follow the footsteps of Satan, the statement that Satan threatens poverty and commands indecency, and the description of one who takes Satan as a protector and thereby suffers manifest loss.

It recalls the “devils of humankind and jinn” who inspire decorated speech to one another, the jinn and human beings addressed together, and Iblīs' refusal to prostrate in the story of Adam.

It cites the warning that Satan and his tribe see human beings from where human beings do not see them, the whispering of Satan to Adam and his wife, and the statement that those conscious of God remember when touched by a passing suggestion from Satan.

It recalls the episode in which Satan adorned the deeds of combatants and later withdrew when the two forces confronted one another, and Joseph's description of Satan having stirred discord between him and his brothers.

It quotes the speech attributed to Satan after judgement: God promised the truth, Satan promised falsely, and he possessed no coercive authority except to call and be answered.

It cites the creation of the jinn from scorching fire, the command to seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan before reciting the Qur'an, and Iblīs' declaration that he would seek to lead Adam's descendants astray.

It recalls the statement that if humankind and jinn gathered together they could not produce the like of the Qur'an, and the description of Iblīs as one of the jinn who departed from his Lord's command.

It cites the passage concerning Satan's interference with prophetic desire, followed by God's confirmation of His signs; the statement that Satan abandons the human being; the powerful jinn in the story of Solomon; and the attribution of certain violent actions to the work of Satan.

It recalls the jinn labouring before Solomon, the statement that when Solomon died they discovered that they did not possess knowledge of the unseen, and the description of devils as builders, divers, and others bound in chains.

It cites the guarding of the lower heaven with stars and the fiery missiles directed against rebellious devils attempting to overhear the Highest Assembly.

It recalls passages concerning jinn who listened to the Qur'an and returned as warners to their people, the creation of jinn and humans for worship, the creation of the jinn from smokeless flame, and the challenge addressed to both humankind and jinn to pass beyond the regions of the heavens and Earth if they possess authority.

The authors ask: can all these statements, appearing in so many contexts and with so many different meanings, truly refer to nothing at all?

They answer that enough has been cited for one who is willing to reflect and abandon obstinate denial.

The point of the epistle has therefore been completed: to establish, within its own philosophical and scriptural framework, that the corporeal world is interwoven with psychic and spiritual orders, that the human soul belongs to this wider hierarchy, and that knowledge of spiritual beings begins with knowledge of oneself.

Praise be abundantly to God.

We ask Him to grant us and you correctness and to guide us and all our noble brethren, wherever they may be throughout the lands, upon the path of right guidance through His favour and generosity.

He is sufficient for us, and praise belongs to Him always and forever, as He deserves.

Here ends the Epistle on the States of the Spiritual Beings.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Kinds of Governance and Their Number.

Epistle 50

On the Kinds of Governance and Their Number

The Ninth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that in every one of our epistles we have placed a chapter containing something of its kernel and purest substance. Whoever is granted understanding of it and acts according to it may attain happiness in this world and the hereafter.

We have also summarised what we set forth throughout our fifty-one epistles in a separate work which we have called the **Comprehensive Epistle**. It stands outside the number of the fifty-one and contains, in the most concise form we were able to devise, explanations of matters treated more extensively elsewhere.

Because it seldom happens that all our epistles are gathered together in the possession of one person, we composed that Comprehensive Epistle so that it might stand in place of its sisters for one who cannot obtain them all. Yet in our judgement it is more proper and beneficial that the Comprehensive Epistle be read only after the fifty-one epistles, for when it is read after them its usefulness increases and many things that were obscure in the earlier epistles become opened to the reader. If someone obtains it while lacking some or all of the preceding epistles, however, it will still not be devoid of benefit.

As for this epistle, we have called it the Epistle of **Governance and Leadership**, so that you may discipline yourself according to what it requires and read it to those among our noble brethren whom you especially trust. Discuss it with them at times when both you and they are energetic and attentive, for you will not fail to obtain benefit from it.

Know that the benefit proper to the human being belongs to two domains and no third: the worldly and the otherworldly, or, expressed in another way, the bodily and the psychic. When these two forms of governance are perfected in a human being, he fully deserves the name “human” and his soul becomes prepared to receive the angelic form and to pass into the celestial rank when it separates from the body in the condition called death.

We therefore describe for you both forms of governance so that through them you may attain perfection in both abodes and rise toward the rank of the blessed in the two worlds.

This wisdom should be guarded and entrusted only to one suited to receive it. If you find someone whose disposition resembles yours and whose path resembles your path, do not withhold it from him, for wisdom must not be denied to those worthy of it.

Know, O brother, that we have observed in you readiness to receive intellectual benefits and practical disciplines, a rational soul capacious enough for intellectual treasures and divine sciences, detachment from excessive worldly attachment, contentment with little, concern for the purification of your soul, a love of knowledge, patience, good worship, beautiful character, noble aspiration, clarity of mind, humility of heart, and longing for truth.

We have therefore selected you, after testing and examining you, to become a caller toward us and a guide to our brethren, giving glad tidings concerning the manifestation of our affair to those unable themselves to reach what you have reached because of the difficulties of their circumstances and the corruption of their age.

Chapter 1 — The House of Contentment

When you have understood what we entrust to you in this chapter, rely upon it and find tranquillity within it.

When you return to the place from which you came, build for yourself a **house of contentment**. Strengthen its foundations, raise its walls, make renunciation its door, and let poverty in the sense of freedom from unnecessary possession stand as its threshold. Let your bedding and covering be the abandonment of possessions except what is sufficient to satisfy hunger and cover nakedness.

If you dwell in such a house, you will be safer from highwaymen, thieves, confiscation by rulers, envy among companions, and the many concerns that follow abundant possessions. Your neighbours will be few and visits to you infrequent.

Yet after building such a dwelling, do not imagine that you may become negligent. Remain watchful lest you abandon the governance of your soul or neglect the works required by divine law.

Contentment is not indifference. Renunciation is not laziness. Freedom from possessions is valuable only when it releases the soul for what is higher.

Chapter 2 — Bodily Governance

As for the governance of your body, if you desire health and wish to avoid harm arising from food, let your diet be simple and composed of whatever wholesome things are easily available to you, together with water, whether it descends from the sky or springs from the Earth.

Remain moderate in eating, avoid habitual satiety, and accept hunger at appropriate times. If you maintain moderation in food, drink, sexual activity, and bodily movement, you give the bodily temperament its best opportunity for balance.

If an illness then comes from causes other than negligence in diet or bodily care, treat what can be treated according to sound bodily governance. If, however, illness proceeds from causes the authors attribute to the broader celestial and natural order, let the soul remain tranquil rather than endlessly accusing itself.

The body is not the enduring essence of the human being. It is a perishable composite and therefore is subject to alteration, sickness, dissolution, and death.

Many people, whenever illness comes, continually blame themselves for what they ate or drank and thereby increase their grief. They become enemies to themselves through excessive regret.

If you have observed moderation and fulfilled your reasonable duty toward the body, then when illness comes do not add psychic torment to bodily pain.

Know that your body is **carried rather than the carrier**.

Some ignorant people imagine that the body carries the soul and that the soul is merely the finest product of bodily temperament, becoming strong when nourishment is abundant and weak when nourishment declines.

The Brethren hold the opposite: the soul carries and governs the body. Through the soul the body moves toward one direction or another, descends, ascends within the limits of its bodily possibilities, and performs its voluntary actions.

The soul cannot take this heavy earthy body into the celestial world. But once separated from it, the authors hold that it can rise according to its own spiritual condition.

The relationship resembles a ship and the wind. A well-built ship may possess sound equipment, yet it does not travel without the wind that drives it. When the wind ceases, the ship stops, although no plank or rope has necessarily disappeared.

Likewise, when the soul departs, the human body loses voluntary movement even though its visible organs remain for a time.

The wind is not made from the substance of the ship, nor can the sailors compel the same wind to return once it has passed. Likewise the soul is not, according to this teaching, merely a bodily organ, nor can physicians restore it through bodily craftsmanship after it has separated.

A ship may perish in two ways. One is corruption of its own structure: its boards break, water enters, and it sinks. This resembles bodily death through breakdown of bodily constitution. The other is destruction by a storm stronger than the vessel can withstand. In either case, the wind itself does not perish because the ship has broken.

So also, says the epistle, the soul remains although its bodily vessel dissolves.

Once you understand this and govern the body accordingly, your soul will be relieved of much fear and anxiety arising from excessive concern for bodily preservation.

Chapter 3 — Governance of the Soul

As for the governance of the soul, let your character be pleasing, your habits beautiful, and your actions upright.

Return every trust to its owner, whether friend or enemy. Discipline yourself to preserve what has been entrusted to you. Honour the rights of those whose interests have been placed in your care. Be a good neighbour, preserve the affection of your friends, and be sincere in your love toward those who love you.

Reduce greed and needless fear concerning passing worldly things. Desire for others what you desire for yourself.

The epistle corrects a narrower formulation of this maxim: it is not enough that the believer desire for **his brother** what he desires for himself. The nobler saying is that he should desire for **another person** what he desires for himself.

Train your soul to perform good because it is good.

Do not act merely for compensation, for if payment is the only reason you act, the act has not reached the highest form of goodness. Nor should you act for reputation and fame, for then ostentation enters the intention.

True virtue should become loved for itself.

The epistle next turns to the governance of one's household—relatives, spouse, children, servants, and others bound to a person through bodily and domestic relationships. It advises consistency of conduct so that one's dependants know the order by which the household is governed and do not become confused through constant changes in treatment.

The source here also reflects historically conditioned assumptions about women characteristic of its social setting, describing them as especially changeable and recommending close supervision. These claims belong to the manuscript's own social outlook and are preserved here as part of the historical text rather than adopted as a general judgement.

The broader principle is that a person should govern those for whom he is responsible consistently and should first examine whether disorder in them has arisen through inconsistency in his own behaviour.

The authors say that solitary life is personally preferable to them, but they do not prescribe it to all the brethren, since universal withdrawal would bring lineage and social continuity to an end.

Regarding children, servants, and dependants, maintain dignity and fulfil your obligations toward them. Do not unnecessarily expose every personal weakness or need in ways that destroy the order of the household. Explain limitations wisely rather than reducing yourself to humiliation before those whose affairs you are responsible for governing.

Chapter 4 — Governance of Companions

Know, O brother, that companions cannot be governed properly until you know them.

Learn their conditions so thoroughly that neither small nor great matters important to your dealings with them remain hidden from you. Only then can you treat each according to what suits him in religion and worldly life.

If you do not know their character, you cannot guide your relationship with them or preserve their friendship.

Not everyone who accompanies you deserves complete confidence. Even prophets were accompanied by hypocrites whose purpose was to discover secrets and disclose them to enemies.

Accordingly, distinguish people by their dispositions and give each what he can bear.

Toward one person gentleness is appropriate, toward another firmness. One is moved by encouragement, another by warning. One requires generosity, another restraint. One benefits from intimate instruction, another should receive only general teaching.

Do not reveal every secret merely because someone displays outward affection.

Yet this caution must not become general suspicion or cruelty. Its purpose is to place trust where trust is deserved.

The brethren should likewise recognise that bodily kinship does not guarantee spiritual kinship. One may possess relatives through blood who share nothing of one's purpose, while a distant stranger may become a true brother through knowledge, virtue, and sincere agreement.

Chapter 5 — Offerings and Sacrifices

We now speak of offerings.

Offerings are of two principal kinds: those belonging to revealed law and those belonging to philosophical or divine discipline. There are accepted offerings and accepted prayers, and there are offerings rejected because the intention or act is corrupted, as illustrated by the scriptural account of the two sons of Adam.

The offering prescribed by revealed law consists in approaching God through acts established by the prophets: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage, lawful sacrifice, supplication, and the other acts commanded within the religious law.

Philosophical worship belongs to another level of discipline in which the soul seeks nearness through knowledge, contemplation, moral purification, and imitation of the celestial order.

Do not attempt to practise the higher philosophical forms while neglecting the obligations of revealed law.

Whoever claims inward wisdom while abandoning outward justice and discipline resembles one who tries to climb to a roof after removing the ladder beneath him.

The stages support one another.

Chapter 6 — Sacred Times and Philosophical Worship

Know, O brother, that among the most excellent times of supplication in the Islamic revealed tradition are the Night of Destiny, the Festival of Breaking the Fast, the Festival of Sacrifice, the time of sacrifice during pilgrimage, prayer at the Sacred House and between the Corner and the Station, the sighting of the new Moon marking the end of the fast, and the giving and receiving of alms.

The epistle then describes what it calls **philosophical divine worship**, which the ancient philosophers are said to have taught their children and pupils after they had first been instructed in bodily governance, governance of the soul, and the obligations of revealed religion.

According to this discipline, three days in each month were set apart: one near its beginning, one near the middle, and one near its end.

On the first, the practitioner purifies himself thoroughly, uses pleasant incense where appropriate, performs the obligations of his religious law, and after the final evening prayer remains in remembrance, glorification, praise, and magnification of God through the first third of the night.

He then renews purification and goes into the open beneath the sky. There he contemplates the heavens, the guiding stars, and what the source calls the manifest book of the cosmos, reflecting upon its signs while continually remembering God.

The first third of the night is thus devoted to revealed worship and the second to contemplation of the celestial kingdom.

When the middle portion has passed, he prostrates himself in humility before his Creator, remains so as long as he is able, and then raises his head with repentance, tears, self-examination, and supplication. The source refers here to prayers attributed to Plato, Idrīs, and Aristotle in the philosophical literature known to its authors.

He remains in such discipline until dawn, then performs the morning prayer and sits until sunrise.

After sunrise, food may be prepared and family and brethren invited. They eat together, thank God for His gifts, and afterward discuss wisdom and knowledge according to what time, place, and the capacity of those present allow.

A similar observance is described around the full Moon and again toward the end of the month.

These practices are presented as philosophical disciplines supplementing, rather than replacing, the obligations of revealed religion.

Chapter 7 — The First Philosophical Festival: Spring

The first annual festival occurs when the Sun enters the beginning of Aries, marking the spring equinox in the astronomical system of the authors.

At this time night and day become equal, the climate grows mild, gentle winds blow, snow melts, valleys flow, rivers increase, springs become abundant, moisture rises into the branches of trees, vegetation emerges, crops grow, flowers appear, trees become clothed with leaves, animals reproduce, milk becomes plentiful, and the face of the Earth turns green and adorned like a young person entering the fullness of life.

For this reason the sages treated it as a day of joy.

They are described as gathering with their children and young pupils in their temples wearing clean and beautiful garments, preparing wholesome food and sacrifices, setting out vegetables, milk, grains, and the produce of the Earth.

After eating and rejoicing, they employed music whose rhythms stirred the souls toward noble things, joined with the recitation of wisdom and the spreading of knowledge.

Thus bodily joy and intellectual cultivation were joined.

Chapter 8 — The Second Philosophical Festival: Summer

When the Sun enters Cancer, the second festival begins, corresponding to the coming of summer.

The day has reached its greatest length and the night its shortest. Spring ends, summer arrives, heat intensifies, hot winds blow, waters begin to diminish, grasses dry, grain reaches maturity, and harvest and fruits become ready.

The sages therefore treated this as the arrival of another phase in the yearly cycle.

They gathered in temples set aside for this occasion, wore garments corresponding symbolically to the season, and used foods and fruits appropriate to the time.

After fulfilling the observances associated with that day, they departed until the third festival.

Chapter 9 — The Third Philosophical Festival: Autumn

When the Sun enters the first degree of Libra, night and day become equal once again and autumn begins.

The air changes, northerly winds arise, waters diminish, rivers and springs decline, and vegetation begins to dry.

This too becomes a festival, though its joy is less than that of spring.

The sages enter the temple appropriate to the season, employ foods corresponding to the character of the time, and share whatever knowledge is suitable for the occasion.

The yearly order itself becomes a lesson: emergence, flourishing, maturity, decline, and return.

Chapter 10 — The Fourth Festival: Winter, the Religious Festivals, and the Greatest Sacrifice

The fourth seasonal observance occurs when the Sun reaches Capricorn.

At this point the night has reached its greatest length and begins to decrease while the day begins to increase. Autumn passes into winter, cold intensifies, leaves fall, much vegetation dies back, animals retreat into the depths of the Earth and caves of the mountains, clouds gather, the atmosphere darkens, bodies weaken, and many creatures experience hardship.

For this reason the sages are said to have treated the day not as a festival of ordinary rejoicing but as a day of sorrow, reflection, repentance, forgiveness, and fasting.

The epistle then compares these philosophical seasonal observances with the festivals and commemorations of Islamic revealed law.

The Festival of Breaking the Fast is compared with spring because people pass from the difficulty of fasting into joy, just as the Earth passes from winter into fertility.

The Festival of Sacrifice is compared with the second season because pilgrimage involves labour, heat, fatigue, sacrifice, and joy mixed with exertion.

The third religious commemoration identified in the text is **Ghadīr Khumm**, associated with the Prophet's testament after the Farewell Pilgrimage. Its joy is described as mixed because, in the sectarian historical interpretation of the authors, what followed was accompanied by breach of covenant and political conflict, just as autumn carries both completion and the beginning of decline.

The fourth is the day of the Prophet's death. For the Prophet himself, his departure to the divine presence is interpreted as a festival because **“the hereafter is better for you than the first life.”** For his community, however, it is a day of grief because revelation ceased and his bodily presence was lost.

The Brethren then claim for themselves a further symbolic cycle.

Their own “festivals” are not merely days of the calendar but living manifestations represented by persons and historical moments. They speak symbolically of the appearance of successive leaders or “risers,” each corresponding to one stage of the seasonal cycle: emergence like spring, the ending of an oppressive order like summer's culmination, the confrontation of truth and falsehood like the autumnal balance, and finally a return to concealment and precaution resembling winter.

The source interprets the periods of manifestation and concealment of the Brethren through this cyclical symbolism. Times of clarity are known through periods of obscurity, justice through oppression, health through sickness, and purity through trial.

The Brethren of Purity receive their name, the authors say, because they preserve purity through patience in prosperity and adversity, submitting peacefully to their Lord.

The discussion then returns to **sacrifice**.

Sacrifice in revealed law is the lawful offering commanded during pilgrimage: an appropriate animal, sound in condition and properly offered, whose meat benefits those entitled to receive it. When such an offering is made freely and with truthful intention, it becomes an accepted sacrifice and an act of expiation.

The philosophical sacrifice resembles this outward form but reaches its extreme in surrendering attachment to bodily life itself when fidelity to truth requires it. Socrates drinking the poison and Aristotle facing death with tranquillity are invoked as philosophical examples.

Yet the authors say that the **greatest sacrifice** is the sacrifice made within the soul: abandoning excessive love of the world, renouncing domination by its pleasures, reducing fear of death, and freeing oneself from the belief that bodily survival is the highest good.

The sacrifice of the Brethren is said to gather the revealed and philosophical senses together.

The epistle closes by describing this final teaching as a **comprehensive chapter of beneficial things**, standing to the remainder of the epistle as the heart stands to the body and the head to the bodily frame.

Sound intellects, the authors say, bear witness to the truth of these principles; purified souls longing for their Lord find tranquillity in them; the signs written in the horizons and within souls support them; prophetic books and heavenly revelations indicate them; and the actions of prophets and ancient sages provide examples of them.

One who doubts what has been said is not to be condemned merely for doubting, for doubt may arise from ignorance and lack of experience.

But if a person genuinely wishes to test the truth of this path, let him undertake the discipline undertaken by its practitioners and make the same effort they made. Only then can he judge from experience rather than from distance.

If he finds in it what strengthens the Muhammadan revealed law, supports the Hāshimite religion, and removes the doubts of those who deny prophecy, then he is welcome among the brethren, sharing what they share and bearing what they bear.

If, after genuine examination, he finds what contradicts divine law, he is not required to remain upon it.

May God bring you, O good and compassionate brother, to the dwellings of the righteous and save you and us from the punishment of the Fire, together with all our brethren wherever they may be throughout the lands and deserts.

Indeed, He is generous and forgiving.

Here ends the Ninth Epistle of this division, On the Kinds of Governance and Their Number.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Arrangement of the Entire World.

Epistle 51

On the Arrangement of the Entire World

The Tenth Epistle of the Divine, Revealed, and Legal Sciences

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Is God better, or that which they associate with Him?

Know, O good and compassionate brother—may God strengthen you and us with a spirit from Him—that the entire greater world is like a single sphere divided into eleven layers. Nine of these are hollow, transparent, spherical heavens, and their stars likewise are luminous and spherical, while all their motions are circular.

The encompassing sphere, together with all the spheres and stars contained within it, revolves around the Earth once in every twenty-four hours according to the astronomy accepted by the authors. Each star likewise moves within its own sphere or circular path over a known period, and whenever one revolution is completed another begins, as we have explained in the Epistle on the Introduction to Astronomy, the Epistle on the Heavens and the World, and the Epistle on Cycles and Revolutions.

Below the sphere of the Moon lie two further great spherical regions. One comprises fire and air, and the other water and Earth. Each has a spherical form, and the end of one region is connected with the beginning of another.

The upper limit of fire adjoins the lunar sphere, while its lower limit approaches the region of intense cold. The region of cold is in turn connected with the lower atmospheric and watery regions. Water surrounds much of the Earth, while the Earth together with its seas and mountains forms a single globe.

If you contemplate the shapes of mountains, rivers, and seas upon the surface of the Earth, you will find that each resembles a segment taken from the circumference or surface of a sphere.

Chapter 1 — Circularity in the Forms and Processes of Nature

So too, when the forms of generated things are examined carefully, many are found to be spherical or circular. Many fruits, seeds, leaves, and flowers possess rounded forms.

The same is true of many things fashioned by human beings, as we have explained in the Epistle on Geometry.

Their **states and transformations** are also circular, in that their endings return toward their beginnings.

Consider the turning of the seasons: winter passes into spring, spring into summer, summer into autumn, and autumn again into winter.

Likewise night and day continually revolve around the globe of the Earth.

The circulation of river water, sea water, clouds, and rain resembles a revolving wheel. Vapour rises from seas and rivers, winds carry the clouds toward deserts and mountains, rain descends there, torrents gather into valleys and rivers, the waters return toward the seas, and from them vapours rise once more. Such is the determination of the Mighty, the Knowing.

Plants likewise arise from earth, water, air, and heat and eventually return to those elements.

A plant begins, grows, reaches maturity and perfection, and then through decay returns toward the things from which it was composed. Its roots draw subtle materials from the elements and transform them into leaves, seeds, and fruits. Animals consume those plants, and within their bodies the plant matter becomes flesh and blood. Some is expelled as waste and manure and returns again to the soil, becoming nourishment for plants and once more seed and fruit.

If you reflect upon this process, it resembles a wheel continually revolving.

The bodies of animals also return to the Earth. They decay and become soil; from that soil plants arise, and from plants animals are nourished. This too resembles a revolving wheel.

Human bodily life likewise follows a circular pattern. The human being begins from a sperm-drop, grows, develops, reaches maturity, and thereafter produces sperm from himself, through which another human generation begins.

Likewise he begins weak in bodily power, gradually grows stronger until reaching his full strength, and thereafter begins to decline until he returns in old age to weakness resembling the condition from which he began.

Thus scripture describes the stages from earth to sperm-drop, clot, embryo, bones and flesh, birth, maturity, decline, and death.

The affairs of bodily life therefore display repeated patterns of beginning, growth, completion, decline, and return.

Chapter 2 — The Hierarchy of Beings beneath the Sphere of the Moon

Know, O brother, that the beings beneath the sphere of the Moon likewise possess order and arrangement in existence and persistence.

They are ranked one beneath another, with the end of one rank connected to the beginning of the next, just as number is arranged in successive degrees and the celestial spheres are ordered one within another.

The parts of the world form eleven great spherical regions: nine celestial spheres beginning from the encompassing sphere and extending down to the lunar sphere, followed beneath the Moon by the elemental regions of fire and air, and of water and Earth.

Within the sublunary world the four elemental qualities are arranged in successive regions. First comes the etherial fire beneath the lunar sphere; beneath it the region of intense cold; beneath that the moist region of water; and beneath that the dry and dense Earth.

Their wholes remain arranged in their proper places, while their particular portions undergo transformations into one another, as we explained in the Epistle on Generation and Corruption.

From these elements arise the generated beings: **minerals, plants, and animals**.

These too form a continuous hierarchy. The beginning of the mineral rank touches the elemental world, while its highest forms approach the vegetal rank. The highest plants approach animals. The highest animals approach humanity. The highest human beings approach the angels.

The angels themselves possess ranks and stations whose ends are likewise connected with higher beginnings, as we explained in the Epistle on the Spiritual Beings.

Among minerals, gypsum stands near the earthy limit and salt near the watery limit. Gypsum arises when sandy earth becomes moistened and then solidifies; salt arises through the interaction of water with saline soil.

At the higher end of the mineral rank, approaching vegetation, the authors place such things as truffles and similar growths that form within the soil like minerals yet emerge in moist places during spring in a way resembling plants.

The mineral kingdom therefore extends between lower forms resembling the elements and higher forms approaching vegetation.

The same continuity appears within plants.

The lowest plant forms are said to be the simple green growths appearing upon moist earth, rocks, and stones after rain or heavy dew. They may emerge quickly and dry again beneath the heat of the Sun.

The highest plant rank, approaching animal life, is represented especially by the date palm.

Chapter 3 — The Date Palm as the Highest Plant Rank

The date palm is placed at the end of the vegetal rank nearest to the animal kingdom because some of its conditions and activities differ from those of ordinary plants even though its body remains vegetal.

In the palm, the active reproductive power is visibly separated from the receptive power through distinct male and female individuals. The male trees provide pollen required by the females, in a manner the authors compare to reproduction among animals.

Other plants were thought to contain active and receptive reproductive powers within the same individual in a less visibly separated manner.

The palm also dies if its crown is cut off, just as an animal dies when its head is severed. From this point of view the authors describe it symbolically as a plant in body but animal-like in certain functions.

They also mention another plant, dodder, which does not root firmly in the ground like ordinary plants but winds itself around trees, crops, herbs, and other plants, drawing nourishment from them. In this behaviour it resembles a worm feeding upon vegetation.

Such examples illustrate the continuity between vegetal and animal ranks.

The remaining varieties of plants occupy intermediate degrees between the lowest forms adjoining minerals and the highest forms adjoining animals.

Chapter 4 — The Animal Rank and Its Approach to Humanity

Know, O brother, that the beginning of the animal rank is likewise connected with the end of the vegetal rank, just as the beginning of vegetation is connected with minerals and the beginning of minerals with earth and water.

The lowest animals, according to the authors, are those possessing only a single sense.

They give the example of a small creature dwelling within a tube or shell upon rocks along certain seashores and riverbanks. It extends part of its body outward in search of nourishment. When it encounters softness and moisture it stretches toward them, and when it encounters hardness or danger it contracts into its shelter.

Such creatures are described as lacking sight, hearing, smell, and taste, possessing only touch.

Many worms living in mud at the bottoms of seas and rivers are likewise described as having only the sensory capacities necessary for their survival.

Divine wisdom, the authors argue, does not grant an organ to an animal which it does not need for acquiring benefit or avoiding harm, for unnecessary organs would themselves become burdens requiring preservation.

The lowest animal forms therefore stand close to plants. They may remain fixed in one place like plants yet display voluntary contraction and movement, thereby entering the animal rank.

The authors even attribute to plants a rudimentary form analogous to touch, citing the way roots grow toward moisture and away from hard rock or dry ground, and the way plants bend around obstacles toward open space and light.

Animals differ from plants more clearly through the capacity for voluntary movement and the perception of pain, because animals possess means of escaping or resisting what harms them.

At the opposite end of the animal hierarchy stand those species approaching humanity.

No single animal encompasses every human excellence, because the human rank gathers many virtues. Different animals approach humanity in different respects.

The ape approaches through bodily form and imitation. A noble horse approaches through character, courage, discipline, and responsiveness to human guidance. The domesticated pigeon approaches through familiarity and social behaviour. The elephant is praised for intelligence and understanding of commands. Songbirds and parrots approach through varied sounds and imitation of speech, while bees display subtle organisation and remarkable craft.

Every animal domesticated by or closely associated with human beings, the authors say, possesses some quality bringing it nearer to the human rank.

The ape imitates human actions because of the similarity of its body.

The noble horse may be so disciplined that it restrains itself in the presence of its rider, endures wounds in battle, and displays courage comparable to that of a brave man.

The elephant is said to understand speech and obey command and prohibition in a manner resembling rational obedience.

Such animals therefore stand at the highest edge of the animal rank nearest to humanity.

The remaining species occupy intermediate degrees.

The lowest degree of humanity, however, remains close to animal life.

It consists of those who know only sensible things, recognise no good except bodily goods, seek only the welfare of the body, desire only worldly ornament and continued bodily existence, and long chiefly for food, drink, sexual pleasure, accumulation, and rivalry.

Their bodies are human, but the activities of their souls resemble animal or even vegetal activities.

Chapter 5 — The Human Rank Nearest to the Angels

As for the human rank nearest to the angels, it consists of those whose souls have awakened from the sleep of heedlessness and the slumber of ignorance and have been revived through the life of knowledge and understanding.

The eye of insight has opened within them.

Through the light of their hearts they perceive realities absent from the bodily senses: spiritual matters, intelligible existents, and the higher order of souls.

Through the purity of their substances they contemplate the world of spirits and perceive, with the eye of certainty, the classes of beings described as forms free from corporeal matter—the angelic ranks, the spiritual hosts, the cherubim, the bearers of the Throne, and the other beings of the higher world.

They recognise something of their conditions, their joy, their pleasures, and their felicity. Because of this, they begin to long for that world.

They lose excessive desire for the pleasures of worldly people and for prolonged residence in bodily existence. They abandon domination by bodily appetite and turn their thought toward spiritual realities even while their bodies remain in this world.

Such a person spends his night in reflection and may pass his day restraining bodily appetite in pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

He becomes content with enough worldly provision to sustain the body's life and enough clothing to cover himself until the appointed time.

He lives bodily among human beings while, in the character of his soul, approaching the angelic kinds.

Strive therefore, O brother, to seek what they sought. Desire their companionship, imitate their practice, and walk according to their way, so that perhaps you may be gathered among their company in Paradise, the Abode of Permanence.

God says that those who were conscious of their Lord shall be driven toward Paradise in groups.

And the Prophet—may God's blessings be upon him and his family—is reported to have said: **“A person will be gathered on the Day of Resurrection with those whom he loves.”**

And God says: **“If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.”**

We have explained the path of the prophets—blessings be upon them—and the qualities of realised believers throughout the fifty-one epistles we composed concerning the rare sciences, refined disciplines, purification of the soul, and correction of character.

May God grant you success in reading them, understanding their meanings, and acting according to what they contain, if God Most High wills.

Here ends the Tenth Epistle of this division, On the Arrangement of the Entire World.

It is followed by the Epistle on the Nature of Magic, Incantations, and the Evil Eye.