

The Islamic revolution of Iran, however, is still firmly rooted in Shī'ī piety, eschatology, and messianic hope. Hence, in a very real sense for Shī'ites, the final and real conclusion of Shī'ī *tafsīr*, as indeed, of Shī'ī history altogether, lies not in the writing of commentaries, but rather in the appearance of the hidden Imām, for whose return they pray daily.

IO

Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān

ISMAIL K. POONAWALA

ISMĀ'ILĪS make a fundamental distinction between aspects of religion, the *ẓāhir* (exterior) and the *bāṭin* (interior). The former aspect consists of exterior aspects, such as knowing the apparent meaning of the Qur'ān and performing the obligatory acts as laid down in the *sharī'a*, the religious law. The latter aspect is comprised of knowing the hidden, inner, true meaning of the Qur'ān and the *sharī'a*. They further maintain that it is the *nāṭiq* (lawgiver-prophet)¹ who receives revelation (*tanzīl*) and promulgates the *sharī'a*, while it is his associate and deputy, the *waṣī* (plenipotentiary),² who expounds the *bāṭin* through the science of *ta'wīl*.³ The *ẓāhir*, therefore, varies from prophet to prophet in accordance with each epoch, whereas the *bāṭin* remains unchanged and is universally valid. Despite this twofold division of religion into exoteric and esoteric aspects, Ismā'īlīs stress that both are not only complementary to each other, but that they are also intertwined with each other like body and soul. One without the other, therefore, cannot exist.⁴

¹ A term used for the lawgiver-prophet. According to the Ismā'īlī doctrine there are seven *nūṭaqā'*: Adam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, 'Isā, Muḥammad, and the Qā'im. See Zāhid 'Alī, *Hamāre Ismā'īlī madhhab kī ḥaqīqat aur uskā nizām* (Hyderabad, 1954), 129; Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār* (a critical edition has been prepared by Ismail K. Poonawala and will be published soon), ch. 6.

² The *waṣī* is also called *al-asās* (foundation). According to the Ismā'īlī doctrine, every *nāṭiq* appoints his *waṣī*, or *asās*, who succeeds him and is, in turn, succeeded by the *imām*. See Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 7; also al-Kulīnī, *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfi*, ed. A. al-Ghaffārī, (Tehran, 1388/1968), i. 224.

³ The literal meaning of *ta'wīl* is 'to cause something to return to its original state'. In the beginning it was synonymous with *tafsīr*, but in the course of time it became a technical term for the interpretation of the subject-matter, or for the exposition of the covert meaning. In this latter sense it formed a supplement to *tafsīr*, which meant expounding the narrative by making known the significations of the strange words or expressions and explaining the occasions on which the verses were revealed. Most of the sectarian groups, especially the Shī'īs and the Sūfīs use *ta'wīl* on which to hang their own doctrines. See Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *a-w-l*; EI¹, 'ta'wīl'.

⁴ In his *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān* (MS: see M. Goriawala, *A Descriptive Catalogue*

The Ismā'īlī classification of religious sciences into two categories, the *zāhirī* sciences and the *bāṭinī* sciences, also reflects the above distinction. Accordingly, all branches of knowledge from philological to physical sciences and historical to juridical fall in the first category, while the other is comprised only of the *ta'wīl* and *ḥaqā'iq*.⁵ Conspicuously absent from Ismā'īlī literature is the science of *tafsīr* (exegesis), classified as a branch of the *zāhirī* sciences.⁶ Its absence implies that any *tafsīr* could be used for the external philological exposition of the Qur'ān and to explain the occasions on which the verses were revealed, but its inner, true meaning could be obtained only through the *ta'wīl* derived from the legitimate Imām. For this reason, the Imām is often called *Qur'ān-i nāṭiq* (the speaking Qur'ān), while the Book, since it needs an interpreter, is called *Qur'ān-i ṣāmī* (the silent Qur'ān).⁷

of the Fysee Collection of Ismā'īlī Manuscripts (Bombay, 1965), 15, 209–10), Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman states:

The *bāṭin* does not stand up without the *zāhir*. The former is like the soul while the latter is like the body. Both taken together are the two roots, but one is not useful without the other. Each bears witness to the other. [The body] helps the soul in realizing its [potential] and thereby brings it back to life [i.e., the spiritual life with the acquisition of knowledge]. . . . The *zāhir* consists of performing the obligatory acts while the *bāṭin* is comprised of knowledge. Neither performing the obligatory acts without knowledge, nor the acquisition of knowledge without [performing] the obligatory acts, is useful. For example, body without soul is unfit for life, similarly [the existence of] soul cannot be proven without body.

See also al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, ed. A. Tamir (Beirut, 1960), 28; Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, MS Hamdani Collection, 63rd *iqṭid*; Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-aql*, ed. M. Kāmil Ḥusayn and M. Ḥilmī, (Cairo, 1952), 16, 22, 27, 30–2. See also n. 31, below.

⁵ The literal meaning of *ḥaqā'iq* is truth, reality. It represents the ultimate cosmological and eschatological system of the Ismā'īlī doctrine. 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd's book dealing with the Ismā'īlī doctrine is entitled *Kitāb al-dhakhira fi'l-ḥaqā'iq*, ed. M. al-A'zamī (Beirut, 1971). See also Zāhid 'Alī, *Ismā'īlī madhhab*, 395; and n. 6, below. In *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, al-Sijistānī refers to himself and his group as *ahl al-ḥaq*.

⁶ R. Strothmann's edition of *Mizāj al-tashnīm* by Diyāl-Dīn Ismā'īl ibn Hibat Allāh (d. 1184/1770) (Göttingen, 1944–55), under the title *Ismailitischer Koran-Kommentar*, is misleading. The word *tafsīr* is not mentioned by the author either in the title or in the introduction. The book deals with the *ta'wīl* of certain *sūras* and it is in the form of *majālis* (pl. of *majlis*, meaning 'gathering'—see M. Kāmil Ḥusayn, *Fī adab Miṣr al-Fatīmiyya* (Cairo, 1950), 33–41), selective audience, or students. Those tracts are collected and entitled by the prefix *ḥaqā'iq* added to the appellation of each *sūra*, such as *ḥaqā'iq sūrat al-naml*.

⁷ Al-Kulīnī, *al-Uṣūl*, i. 246, reports a similar tradition which states: *innu al-Qur'ān laysa bi-naṭīq" ya'muru wa yanḥā, wa lākin li'l-Qur'ān ahl" ya'muru wa yanḥawna*.

The following study deals with Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* and its place within their overall system of thought. It also attempts to delineate general hermeneutical principles whereby the Qur'ān is interpreted. The research is based primarily on published and unpublished works of three major authors: al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/947)⁸ and his two lesser-known contemporaries, Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman⁹ and Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī.¹⁰ Their works, which exemplify three different trends of thought within the Ismā'īlī system, represent the earliest extant sources on the subject.

I

In his *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, al-Sijistānī, elucidating the source of *ta'wīl* from the Qur'ān, states:

The relationship of the [human] soul to the world of knowledge is more intimate than its [relationship] to the world of sensory perception. Indeed, the *nāṭiq*'s soul attains a high status of knowledge which his peers and likes are incapable of [reaching]. Hence, [the fact that] the *nāṭiq*'s revelations are expressions of the incorporeal world and its spiritual, luminous forms, cannot be denied. [This being the case], how could it be correct to translate

⁸ For his life and works see Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā'īlī Literature* (Malibu, 1977), 48–68.

⁹ Ibid. 70–5. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān faithfully served the first four Fatimid caliphs for half a century, and his sons and grandsons held the office of chief judge in the Fatimid empire for almost another half century. In addition to his pioneering works on jurisprudence and history, al-Nu'mān wrote some seminal works on the *ta'wīl*. Yet he is regarded mainly as an exponent of the *zāhirī* sciences. Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, representing the Yemenite school, on the other hand, is considered one of the leading exponents of the *ta'wīl*.

An interesting story narrated by the Yamanī *dā'i*, Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn ('*Uyūn al-akḥbār*, MS Hamdani Collection, vi. 39–40), states that on a certain occasion, after al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān had recovered from illness, he waited upon the Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh. The caliph inquired about the various dignitaries who had visited him during the illness. Al-Nu'mān replied that everyone came except Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman. Al-Mu'izz, therefore, ordered certain books to be brought, gave them to al-Nu'mān for perusal, and asked for his opinion. After examining one of the books, al-Nu'mān replied: 'How can I comment on a work composed by you?' 'This is the work of your master Ja'far', replied al-Mu'izz. Al-Nu'mān, on hearing this, realized Ja'far's higher rank in the *da'wa* and went straight to him to pay his respects. Whether the story is authentic or not is another question, but it poignantly illustrates the lofty position of *bāṭinī* sciences over *zāhirī* sciences.

¹⁰ Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, 82–9. Al-Sijistānī, who represents the Iranian school, was an original thinker and a distinguished author. He formulated a new synthesis of reason and revelation by adapting Ismā'īlī doctrine to Neoplatonic cosmology.

everything he transmitted to his *umma* [community] into physical, corporeal objects? . . . We affirm that the *nāṭiq* comes from [the spiritual] world; he is connected to it and derives [his knowledge] therefrom.¹¹

The points made by al-Sijistānī are: (i) the prophet communicates with the higher, spiritual world, the fountain-head of his inspiration; (ii) the prophet's soul attains the highest attainable status of knowledge; (iii) revelations, being representations of the spiritual world in human language, cannot be taken literally.

In order to grasp the full purport of the author's statement, a brief outline of al-Sijistānī's theory of prophethood and the nature of revelation within the framework of his philosophical system is called for. According to al-Sijistānī, God is absolutely transcendent, beyond all thought and all being. His true being is neither conceivable nor knowable. All that is known about Him is His Command (*amr*) and His Munificence (*jūd*) as something united with the Intellect (*'aql*) originated (*abda'a*) by Him. The superstructure of the hierarchy of beings, thus, begins with the Intellect, the second hypostasis of the Neoplatonists. The descending order of al-Sijistānī's Neoplatonic cosmology consists of the Intellect, the Soul, Nature, the Spheres, the Elements (that is, fire, air, water, and earth), and the three Kingdoms of mineral, vegetable, and animal. Since all the species in the physical world are created in ascending order, man is the noblest of all creation. Man, by virtue of his position, is the central link in the long chain of being; below him is the animal kingdom and above him is the world of angels (or the spiritual world), and he is connected to both. Prophethood, therefore, is the highest spiritual rank a man can aspire to attain in this world.¹²

The basic notion in al-Sijistānī's theory of prophecy is that the prophet is the messenger of God to mankind, who brings with him revelation (or a scripture). He is called both a *nabī* (a prophet, that is, one who informs mankind or who is informed, respecting God and things unseen),¹³ and a *rasūl* (a messenger, an apostle of God, that is, the relater, by consecutive progressions, of the tidings from God).¹⁴ Both of the aforementioned terms not only stress his role as

God's messenger to mankind, but they also imply that he is the knower of the 'unseen' and 'hidden'.

The prophet is further characterized as 'a pure man who is inspired (*al-mu'ayyad*) by the spirit of holiness'.¹⁵ The key to the unravelling of the mystery of divine inspiration, or illumination, is the word *ta'yīd*. This term is derived from the Quranic usage of its verbal form *ayyada*.¹⁶ Al-Sijistānī defines *al-mu'ayyad* as the one who attains full quiescence and one who receives benefits from the Intellect in a perfect way without mutation and interruption.¹⁷ At another place he states that the prophet, by virtue of his pure soul, rises to the subtle, spiritual world and takes from it spiritual subtleties and luminous delights and conveys them to the world below.¹⁸ The prophet is, therefore, an intermediary between the higher and the lower worlds, and it is through him that God bestows His bounties on the latter. Hence, he is described as 'the deputy of the Intellect in the physical world'.¹⁹

The soul, according to al-Sijistānī, is ordinarily divided into three parts: vegetative, animal, and rational. But the prophet has the fourth category called 'the sacred (*al-qudsīya*)', and because of it he is inspired and rises above the ordinary man.²⁰ In his *Kitāb al-yanābī*, in the fortieth *yanbū* entitled 'The modality of receiving inspiration by the inspired ones in the physical world', al-Sijistānī explains the modality of inspiration as follows:

The promptings of inspiration are experienced when the inspired one is able to discover things without [passing through] sense perception, which is the normal way of inference from known to unknown things. Conversely, [the inspired one] finds himself abstemious to sensible things and desirous of abstract, intellectual things. The difference between the learned (*al-'ālim*) and the inspired (*al-mu'ayyad*) is that the former is obliged to remember his learning and pronouncements on things perceptible through the senses, while the latter is able to dispense with it. The *mu'ayyad* conceives in his mind what the 'ālim would have been unable even to deduce by way of perceptible arguments. Probably the one who is

¹⁵ Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 119.

¹⁶ The verb *ayyada* with *ruh al-quds* in regard to Jesus occurs three times in the Qur'ān; 2/87, 2/253, and 5/110. It means to strengthen, to aid, or to render victorious. Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *a-y-d*; al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 5.

¹⁷ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-yanābī*, 36. ¹⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 144.

¹⁹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-yanābī*, 72; id., *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 127; Paul Walker, 'Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and the Development of Ismā'īlī Neoplatonism', Ph.D. dissertation (Univ. of Chicago, 1974), 166-79.

²⁰ Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 13-48, 128, 152.

¹¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 12.

¹² See the following works of al-Sijistānī: *Kitāb al-iftikhār*; *Kitāb al-maqālīd*; *Kitāb al-yanābī*, ed. H. Corbin, in *Trilogie Ismaélienne* (Tehran, 1961); *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. A. Tāmir (Beirut, 1966).

¹³ Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *n-b-*.

¹⁴ Ibid., s.v. *r-s-l*.

inspired conceives spiritual things without constructing syllogisms and expresses them in a perceptible language so that the people can perceive them.²¹

In his *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, al-Sijistānī suggests two possible modes through which the prophet receives inspiration: auditory or mental perception.²² The former is ruled out because it involves intermediaries and is also corruptible. Mental perception, therefore, is the only mode of revelatory experience and is supported by the Qur'ān itself, wherein it is stated: 'The heart lied not [in seeing] what it saw' (Q. 53/11). Now, the question about the veracity of the prophet's mental perception as compared with that of others arises. The prophet's veracity, al-Sijistānī contends, is assured by the temperateness of his physical constitution and the purity of his soul. The Qur'ān states: 'It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak [that is, through an auditory mode] to him, except by revelation [that is, through mental/idea inspiration], or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger who reveals by God's permission whatever He wills' (Q. 42/51). In his *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, in a section entitled 'The modality of God's speech', al-Sijistānī, commenting on the three modes of revelation as stated in the above verse, states:

Wahy^{an} (by revelation) means *ta'yīd* from the Intellect; *min wara'i hijāb*ⁱⁿ [from behind a veil] means *ta'yīd* from the Intellect through the Soul, the latter being a veil between the Intellect and the Nature; and *aw yursila rasūl*^{an} [or that He should send a messenger] means that, when the *nātiq* attains his rank [i.e., receives the call], he is obliged to translate what has been brought down to his heart by the Trusted Spirit into his own tongue in order to convey it to his people.²³

Thus the individual's mental perception is closely connected with his own speech pattern, and each prophet expresses his revelation in his own language. This is attested to by the Qur'ān wherein it is stated: 'We have made it [the Qur'ān] easy in thy tongue that thou mayest bear good tidings thereby to the godfearing, and warn a contentious people' (Q. 19/97).

Further elaborating on the various types of speech, al-Sijistānī states:

As for the speech [word] of God, when it became united with the first being

²¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-yanābī*, 95.

²² pp. 147–9.

²³ Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 149.

[i.e., the Intellect] it did not have any sound (*ṣawt*) or print (*naqsh*), but this [knowledge] was shared by the Intellect and the Soul through the former's benefaction upon the latter. . . . As for the inspired speech (*al-kalām al-ta'yīdī*) emanating from the Intellect and connected with the *nātiq*, it is like spiritual dying of the *nātiq*'s soul. Each dye consists of an intellectual form which combines many psychic things and spiritual formations radiating into the receiver's soul with the knowledge of many things. . . . As for the compound speech (*al-kalām al-tarkībī*) emanating from the Soul and connected with the *nātiq*, it consists of psychic movements which manifest [in the movements of] the stars and the planets. . . . Only the *nātiq*, because he is inspired, is able to decipher this [compound speech] and how it is expressed in each epoch. . . . As for the *nātiq*'s own speech [sound-words], it possesses the forcefulness, elegance, and loftiness that those who speak the same language are unable to produce like unto it.²⁴

Three spiritual forces, namely, *al-jadd*, *al-faṭḥ*, and *al-khayāl*, emanating from the Intellect and the Soul are described as special prophetic gifts which form part of the prophet's *ta'yīd*.²⁵ Thus it is obvious that al-Sijistānī's theory of prophecy, like those of other Muslim thinkers such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, is based upon Greek and Neoplatonic theories of the soul and its power of cognition.²⁶ To sum up the foregoing discussion, the following salient features should be noted. The prophet, unlike ordinary man, is endowed with a pure soul and extraordinary intellectual gifts. He does not need an external instructor, but his intellect develops by itself with the help of divine power prior to its final prophetic illumination (revelation) and, thereby, attains contact with the Intellect. The intelligibles thus bestowed upon the prophet by the Intellect are translated and expressed by him in symbolical and metaphorical language, since the commonalty cannot grasp purely spiritual things.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid. 152–3.

²⁵ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 4; al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-yanābī*, 92.

²⁶ See Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam* (London, 1958). For the Shi'ī theory of prophecy, see Henry Corbin, 'De la philosophie prophétique en Islam Shi'ite', *Erano Jahrbuch*, 31 (1962), 49–116.

²⁷ According to the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Beirut, 1957), i. 76–8; ii. 210; iii. 344–5, the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān is indispensable. The Ikhwān's position is very similar to that of al-Sijistānī, see Ismail K. Poonawala, 'The Qur'ān in the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*', *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'ān* (Canberra, 1980), 51–67; also Yves Marquet, 'La Pensée d'Abū Ya'qūb as-Sijistānī', *SI* 54 (1981), 95–128—Marquet has also pointed out some similarities between al-Sijistānī and the *Rasā'il*.

II

In keeping with their basic distinction between the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*, Ismā'īlīs maintain the same distinction between the *tanzīl* (the divine message delivered by the Prophet in its literal form) and the *ta'wīl* (the hidden, spiritual meaning of the scripture explained by the Imām). In his *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, al-Sijistānī has devoted a separate *iqḥid* to elucidating the difference between the two. He states:

The *tanzīl* is similar to the raw materials, while the *ta'wīl* resembles the manufactured goods. For example, nature produces various types of woods, but unless a craftsman works on them and gives them a specific shape, such as a door, a chest or a chair, the wood is not worth more than fuel [to be consumed] by the fire. The wood's worth and benefit become manifest only after it receives the craftsman's craftsmanship. The craftsmanship [is an art which] puts everything in its proper place. Likewise is the case of other raw materials, such as iron, gold, copper, and silver. Unless a craftsman works on them, their worth and utility remain hidden. . . . Similarly, the *tanzīl* consists of putting things together in words. Beneath those words lie the treasured meanings. It is the practitioner of the *ta'wīl* who extracts the intended meaning from each word and puts everything in its proper place. This is, then, the difference between the *tanzīl* and the *ta'wīl*.²⁸

As the craftsman cannot practise his art without the raw materials, the function of *ta'wīl* comes after the *tanzīl*. Similarly, the rank of the practitioner of *ta'wīl* in the Ismā'īlī hierarchy assigned to the *waṣī*, the deputy and successor of the prophet, comes after that of the *nāṭiq*. It is the *nāṭiq* who receives the *tanzīl* and promulgates the *sharī'a*, while it is the *waṣī* who imparts the *ta'wīl*. It is worth noting that in the *da'wa* organization, which corresponds to the spiritual hierarchy of the higher world, the religious offices of the *nāṭiq* and *waṣī* correspond to the Two Roots: the Intellect and the Soul. This correspondence between the two highest ranks of both the hierarchies is very revealing for the understanding of what follows. After his prophetic revelation, the prophet makes the *waṣī* privy to his illumination of the spiritual world so that the divine inspiration continues after his death. The *waṣī*, thus, is inspired from the heaven (*mu'ayyad min al-samā'*),

²⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 52nd *iqḥid*.

and it is this role of imparting the *ta'wīl* which he passes on to his progeny, the Imāms.

It is repeatedly stressed that the *waṣī* is not only divinely inspired, but he is also divinely commissioned to impart the *ta'wīl*. In his *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, al-Sijistānī gives three reasons as to why it was incumbent on Muḥammad to appoint 'Alī as his *waṣī*.²⁹

(i) People who accepted Islam during the lifetime of Muḥammad consisted of two groups: those who embraced Islam willingly and those who submitted out of fear, or for furthering their worldly interests. The latter group was waiting for Muḥammad's death to revert back to their old practices and declare their hostility to Islam. What prevented them from doing so was that they were awe-stricken by the prophet, as he was divinely inspired. Muḥammad, therefore, was instructed to select the most virtuous, the most noble, and the most learned person of his community and to make him privy to his illumination of the spiritual world so that the *ta'yīd* would continue after his death through the *waṣī*. This, in turn, would keep the insincere group awe-stricken and the nascent religion would take roots.

(ii) Muḥammad was sent to the Arabs who were surrounded by the Persians and the Greeks (Byzantines). Both these peoples were known for their shrewdness, discernment, acumen, and their mastery of fine sciences (*al-'ulūm al-laṭīfa*). As long as Muḥammad lived, they were unable to deceive the Muslims. The prophet, therefore, was instructed to designate his *waṣī*, who was divinely inspired (*mu'ayyad min al-samā'*), and to entrust him with the teaching of fine sciences and noble secrets (*al-asrār al-laṭīfa*) which would inspire awe among the Persians and the Greeks.

(iii) Had Muḥammad died suddenly without appointing his *waṣī* and entrusting him with the secrets of prophecy and teaching him the subtleties of wisdom and the intricacies of hermeneutics, the people would have thought that the prophethood was a temporary phenomenon which would cease with his death.

Such, then, is the importance of hermeneutics, according to al-Sijistānī. In another work entitled *Sullam al-najāt*, after stressing the importance of the *ta'wīl*, he poses a hypothetical question and states:

If it is said: Why did the prophet then not take upon himself to impart the

²⁹ Ch. 7.

ta'wīl? It should be said to him: Had the prophet done it himself, it would have weakened his call to follow the Qur'ān and the *sharī'a*. Because, if he would have said that his [real] intention in performing the ritual purification by water was to purge the soul from doubt and perplexity and to purify it by knowledge, his community would have said: Since we have known the truth there was no need to perform the ritual purification. But the prophet's silence about the *ta'wīl* was to make the *sharī'a* incumbent on the faithful and that they should seek the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābihāt*.³⁰ Thus, the faithful would obtain goodness [success] both in this world and the hereafter.³¹

Both al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān and Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman establish the necessity of *ta'wīl* by deducing evidence from the Qur'ān, the *sunna* (prophetic sayings and deeds in general), and the sayings of the Imāms.³² Al-Nu'mān states that God, the Creator, alone is One and unique, while every created thing in this universe consists of pairs. The Qur'ān states: 'And of everything We have created pairs, that you may reflect' (Q. 51/49). Although the individual is seemingly one person, he is composed of body and soul. Body is the external aspect, while soul is the internal aspect. The former is apparent, whereas the latter is hidden.³³

Next, al-Nu'mān justifies the usage of the term *bāṭin* by stating that it is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān. For example, the Qur'ān states: 'He has bestowed his favours upon you, both outwardly (*ẓāhirat^{an}*) and inwardly (*bāṭinat^{an}*)' (Q. 31/20), and,

³⁰ See Q. 3/7. *Mutashābihāt* verses mean those that are equivocal, or ambiguous. These verses are susceptible to different interpretations, see Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *sh-b-h*.

³¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Sullam al-najāt*, MS (M. Goriawala, p. 11). This passage clearly indicates that the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* are two complementary aspects of religion. The former, which consists of following the injunctions of the *sharī'a*, is aptly called *al-'ibāda al-'amaliya* (worship by performing prescribed acts of devotion), while the latter, which consists of seeking the *ta'wīl*, is called *al-'ibāda al-'ilmīya* (worship through knowledge).

³² Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, 23–32. Except for a brief introduction, the rest of the book deals with the *ta'wīl* of the tales of the prophets. In this introduction, the author states that he has dealt with the principles of *ta'wīl* in greater detail in another work entitled *Hudūd al-ma'rifa*. A. Tāmir, the editor of *Asās al-ta'wīl*, states that several copies of the latter are to be found in Maṣyāf, Syria, but I have not come across a copy of it in the private collections of Ismā'īlī MSS accessible to me.

There is no systematic *exposé* of the necessity of *ta'wīl* by Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman in his extant works, but his *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān* is very useful in this respect. He has collected in it all the typical evidences from the Qur'ān and the *sunna* generally cited by the Shi'is to support their claim that 'Alī was nominated by the Prophet as his *waṣī* and that he was also commissioned to impart the *ta'wīl*.

³³ See also Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 13–14.

'Forsake the outward sin, and the inward' (Q. 6/120). Thus it is implied that the faithful have to know what are the inward bounties and sins.

Furthering his claims, al-Nu'mān adds that the Qur'ān states: 'It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are clearly formulated verses, those are the essence of the Book, and others ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*)' (Q. 3/7).³⁴ It is obvious, therefore, that those ambiguous verses stand in want of interpretation. The Qur'ān further states in the same passage: 'And none knows its interpretation (*ta'wīl*) save only God and those firmly rooted in knowledge.' 'Those firmly rooted in knowledge', al-Nu'mān asserts, are the legitimate Imāms.³⁵

The Qur'ān also contains parables. It states: 'And those parables (*amthāl*) We coin them for the people, but none understands them save those who have knowledge' (Q. 29/43), and, 'Indeed We have coined in the Qur'ān every kind of parable (*mathal*) for the people, so that they may reflect' (Q. 39/27). Those parables need interpretation.³⁶ Moreover, the stories (*aḥādīth*) narrated in the Qur'ān call for an explanation, as it is stated in the story of Joseph: 'So will your Lord choose you, and teach you the interpretation of tales' (Q. 12/6), and, 'So We established Joseph in the land, and that We might teach him the interpretation of tales' (Q. 12/21).

The fact that the *ta'wīl* is indispensable is also stressed by Muḥammad. He is reported to have said: 'Not a single verse of the Qur'ān was revealed to me without it having the *ẓahr* and the *baṭn* [outer and inner dimensions].'³⁷ Muḥammad is also reported to have said to 'Alī: 'O 'Alī, I am the possessor of revelation while you

³⁴ See n. 30, above.

³⁵ See also al-Kulīnī, *al-Uṣūl*, i. 213, 221, 263, who reports a tradition which states:

Gabriel brought two pomegranates to the Prophet. The Prophet ate one while the other he split into two halves; he ate half and gave 'Alī the other half. Then he said to 'Alī: 'Do you know what these two pomegranates mean?' 'No,' replied 'Alī. He said, 'As for the first, it is the prophethood in which you do not have any share, but the other is knowledge and you are my associate in it.'

³⁶ See also Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 17–18.

³⁷ *Ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* are found as variant readings in some MSS of *Asās al-ta'wīl*. *Ẓāhir*, the outer dimension of the Qur'ān is its apparent meaning, while *baṭn*, its inner dimension, is the meaning known to the elect few. The Qur'ān must be understood on both levels, exoteric and esoteric, and *ta'wīl* includes both. See also Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'i, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1973), i. 40; Muḥsin al-Amin, *A'yān al-Shī'a* (Beirut, 1960), iii. 22, 55, 65.

are the possessor of [its] hermeneutics. You will have to fight for the hermeneutics as I fought for the revelation.³⁸ Yet another tradition states: 'I am leaving among you the two important things. If you will hold fast to them you will never be led astray. They are: the book of God and my family, and they will never be separated from each other until they arrive at the pond [in the hereafter].'³⁹ Referring to the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an, Ja'far al-Šādiq is reported to have stated: 'We can speak about a word in seven [different] ways.'⁴⁰ It is also well known in Arabic that a word might have one meaning outwardly and quite another inwardly. As the Quranic style and diction are celebrated for their *i'jāz* (inimitability, uniqueness), it is not surprising that the Qur'an encompasses all those linguistic beauties. Its outward style and diction are Muḥammad's miracle, while the explication of its inner meaning is the Imām's miracle.

III

Since revelation is a symbolic expression in human language of the spiritual realities, it contains profounder spiritual meaning than that which lies on the surface. It is the *ta'wīl* which extracts this spiritual meaning. According to al-Sijistānī, two categories of verses stand in obvious need of the *ta'wīl*: (i) verses with physical objects, such as heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, animals, trees, and fruits; (ii) the *mutashābihāt* verses. The first category should be treated figuratively, especially when the literal meaning appears dubious. The second category, as mentioned in the Qur'an itself, is defined by al-Sijistānī as follows:

When the listener hears the *mutashābihāt* verses, his intelligence disapproves of [their obvious meaning], and he becomes confused, because [their meaning] departs from [the accepted] norms and customs, such as the ant's speech to Solomon, the hoopoe's bringing the news about the personal religious beliefs of the Queen of Sheba, the cooling off of fire for Abraham,

³⁸ Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 74. See also al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'a*, iii. 102; this tradition is transmitted both by al-Nisā'ī and al-Ḥākim in their *al-Khaṣā'is* and *al-Mustadrak* respectively.

³⁹ Ibid. 91. For a slightly different version see al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ*, ed. M. al-Albānī (Damascus, 1961), iii. 255, English trans., James Robson, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* (Lahore, 1975), ii. 1350. It is also reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim.

⁴⁰ On this see further n. 69, below.

the gushing forth of twelve fountains when Moses struck his staff on a rock etc., in the stories of the apostles (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*). . . . When an intelligent person is presented with those *mutashābihāt* verses, his faith is not reassured, because he finds [those stories] surrounded by an element of impossibility.⁴¹

After a lengthy discussion of the problems involved in those *mutashābihāt* verses, al-Sijistānī raises some philosophical questions: why should one seek the *ta'wīl* of uncommon phenomena mentioned in those verses? Does not the seeking of the *ta'wīl* imply the denial of those occurrences and consequently infringe upon the Almighty God's omnipotence? Al-Sijistānī defends the use of the *ta'wīl* by stating that the literal interpretation of those unusual phenomena violates the law of nature. It further implies that God, who has willed the universe to function according to the laws of nature, could annul His own wisdom. Once this wisdom is nullified, then the whole creation is invalidated, which leads to *ta'ṭīl al-khālīq* (denuding God of all content). Miracles that break the law of nature are therefore possible, but occur rarely.

The second argument advanced by al-Sijistānī in defence of the *ta'wīl* is based on 'the principle of disparity (*tafāwut*)', which is also his principal argument in defence of prophecy.⁴² The basic postulate in this theory is that except for God and the Intellect, disparity prevails over everything in the universe. It is because of this disparity that the affairs of the two realms, the intelligible and the sensible, sustain their order. Creation (that is, emanation), according to al-Sijistānī, is in itself the principle and the order of Being. Accordingly, the higher is simpler, more subtle, and nobler than the lower. It is always the lower which receives the influence of the higher. The key to universal order, therefore, is the knowledge of each particular thing's proper place in the hierarchy to which it belongs. This is precisely what the *ta'wīl* accomplishes.

Next, al-Sijistānī outlines some general principles of hermeneutics, whereby the above-mentioned two categories of verses are to be interpreted:⁴³

(i) Words could be interchanged when they resemble each other in

⁴¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 54th *iqḥid*. Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-kashf*, ed. R. Strothmann (Bombay, 1952), 131-5; he gives the *ta'wīl* of the Q. 3/7 wherein *mutashābihāt* means antagonists of the Imāms.

⁴² Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, 13-48.

⁴³ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 12.

meaning, for example, earth (*ard*) could be interchanged for knowledge (*ilm*), as explained below.

(ii) Some words are used figuratively in order to achieve special meaning and effect, for example, Muḥammad's saying to Anjasha, the camel-driver: 'Gently, do not break the *qawārīr*.'⁴⁴ *Qawārīr* means glass vessels, or bottles. Muḥammad used this word figuratively to indicate the delicate nature of women. Anjasha had a sweet singing voice. His singing, therefore, would make the camels go quickly. As the women were riding the camels, Muḥammad told Anjasha not to make those beasts run so quickly. Certain verses of the Qur'ān, therefore, should be treated figuratively.

(iii) The stories of the apostles are to be interpreted allegorically, because the recitation of past stories does not benefit the reader if there is no moral to be learned and applied to a similar situation (either in the present or the future).

Whether interpreting an allegorical story, or words used metaphorically, Ismā'īlīs use special terms for the expounding of *ta'wīl*: *mathal* (likeness, example, model) and *mamthūl* (one who is exemplified).⁴⁵ In fact, hermeneutic principles are tied to this theory of *al-mathal wa'l-mamthūl*, which is based on establishing parallelism between the spiritual, physical, and religious hierarchies. For example, the noon prayer is *al-mathal* for Muḥammad, or, in other words, Muḥammad is the *mamthūl* of the noon prayer. Similarly, 'the blessed olive tree' stands for the Imām 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, or, in other words, the Imām is exemplified by that tree.⁴⁶

IV

Let us now turn to some examples. First, we will deal with the verses wherein a certain physical object is mentioned. All of the following examples, unless stated otherwise, are taken from al-Sijistānī's *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, chapter 12.

⁴⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Sahīḥ* (Beirut, 1978), iv. 82-3; Muslim, *al-Sahīḥ* (Cairo, 1334/1916), vii. 79; al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ*, ii. 576, English trans., James Robson, *Mishkāt al-Masabih*, ii. 1004.

⁴⁵ These terms are borrowed from the Qur'ān (see Q. 29/43, 39/27).

⁴⁶ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 52nd *iqḥid*; Ja'far ibn Mansūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 17-18; Zāhid 'Alī, *Ismā'īlī madhhab*, 398-9; Kāmil Ḥusayn, *Fi adab Miṣr al-Fāṭimīya*, 9-10; id., ed., *Diwān al-Mu'ayyad* (Cairo, 1949), 106-8.

i. Earth

The Qur'ān states: 'When the word falls on them, We shall bring forth for them out of the earth a beast that shall speak to them' (Q. 27/82). A beast coming out of the earth, al-Sijistānī notes, has generated a lot of discussion among the commentators, but without any satisfactory explanation. The obvious meaning of 'earth' is that it is a coarse, motionless body, whereupon vegetation grows and the animals live. It is an abode of all 'generated beings' (*al-mawālīd al-tabīrīya*), and they cannot exist without it. Likewise, the soul's subsistence and that of all 'the spiritually-generated beings' (*al-mawālīd al-rūḥānīya*) depend on true, spiritual knowledge. 'Earth', therefore, in *ta'wīl* means knowledge. The true meaning of the above verse, thus, reads as follows. 'When the word falls on them' means 'When the community is confronted with the proof', they will know that what they believed was falsehood. 'We shall bring forth for them out of the earth a beast' means 'God shall bring forth for them a leader who is well-versed in knowledge.' '[A beast] that shall speak to them' means 'who will deliver them from falsehood to guidance and from [the state of] doubt to that of certainty'. This, then, is the primary meaning of 'earth' in *ta'wīl*. In its secondary meaning, the earth is applied to the *waṣī*, the *asās*, since he is the source of the *ta'wīl* and the true sciences (*al-'ulūm al-ḥaqīqīya*).⁴⁷

Similarly, 'journey in the land', in Q. 29/20 and 22/46, means 'journey seeking knowledge from its rightful possessors'. Those who succeed in obtaining that knowledge would know how creation was originated. It is this knowledge which 'brings forth the second growth' of the soul and obtains success in the hereafter.

Commenting on Q. 50/7, 'And the earth We have stretched it forth, and have flung firm mountains therein, and have caused of every lovely pair to grow thereon', al-Sijistānī states:

When a person reflects on the earth's stretching whose parts are piled up one upon the other, he will not be able to understand its meaning since the [act of] stretching comes after that of contraction. It is also not possible to think of [the earth's] contraction without its stretching. Casting of unshakable mountains therein is also not necessary, because one casts a thing into a thing [which is made] of a different thing. Mountains have sprung from the earth itself. . . . Its *ta'wīl* is realized when the word 'earth' is exchanged for 'knowledge,' or 'the one who is the source of knowledge.'

⁴⁷ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 12; see also Ja'far ibn Mansūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 39-40, 113.

Thus, the setting up of the *asās* and [his] promulgation of the *ta'wīl* is analogous with the earth's stretching, while the casting of firm mountains is similar to appointing religious dignitaries to disseminate knowledge among the deserving. 'Causing of every lovely pair to grow thereon,' means the growth of twofold knowledge, exoteric and esoteric.⁴⁸

The following verses are interpreted likewise. 'Know that God revives the earth after its death' (Q. 57/17) means that God will revive knowledge after it has become extinct and that the *asās* will revive his authority by returning the power to his son. 'The she-camel of God', in the story of the prophet Šāliḥ (Q. 11/64) stands for the *asās*; obedience to him is obligatory on the faithful. 'Leave her that she may eat in God's earth' means that he should be left alone so that he will derive benefit from the divine knowledge and will confer it upon them. 'Touch her not with evil' means that they should neither deceive him nor conspire against him. 'Lest you be seized by a nigh chastisement', means that they would miss their good fortune, whereby their souls will perish. Also of interest is Q. 21/105: 'And verily We have written in the Psalms, after the reminder: My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.' The literal meaning of earth in this verse does not make any sense, because it is always inherited by the oppressors and seized by the tyrants. The true meaning reads: 'My righteous servants shall inherit the knowledge.'

ii. The Heavens

The word *samā'* (sky) is applied to a fine, rotating body studded with the stars. It is analogous with the *nāṭiq*, who forms 'the sky of religion'.⁴⁹ For example, the verse, 'He sends down water from the sky, so that valleys flow each in its measure' (Q. 13/17) means that God revealed the Qur'ān to Muḥammad's heart (literally, brought it out from the prophet's heart) so that the people would carry it, each according to his capacity and the purity of his soul. 'And the flood carries a swelling foam' means the differences and disputes that surfaced among the Muslim community with regard to the Quranic exegesis and hermeneutics. In the same verse, 'Then, as for the foam, it vanishes as jetsam, while, as for that which profits mankind, it remains in the earth' means that the differences and

⁴⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 12.

⁴⁹ See also Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 39–40, 60, 82.

disputes vanish, but that which is useful to mankind remains with the *asās*.

In its secondary meaning, the sky is applied to the *sharī'a*, promulgated by the *nāṭiq*. The verse, 'On the day when We shall roll up heaven as a scroll rolled up with the writings' (Q. 21/105), means the cancellation of the *sharī'a* and its abrogation.

Commenting on Q. 41/11–12, 'Then He lifted Himself to heaven when it was smoke, and said to it and to the earth: Come willingly, or unwillingly. They said: We come willingly. So, He ordained them as seven heavens in two days, and revealed its mandate in every heaven', al-Sijistānī states that God's address to the dead body (that is, the heaven and earth) can be understood either in the sense of an inspiration, or in the sense of (the) Creation. He then adds, how could a dead body, which does not have intelligence, be inspired? The second option, that is, discourse in the sense of their creation, is also impossible. The real meaning of the above verse is that the Soul looked at the administration of *dawr al-satr* (the epoch of concealment)⁵⁰ and the state of the leaders in that epoch. At first, it looked as if it were smoke. The furnishing of inspiration did not kindle any (human) soul who would rectify the situation. The Soul, therefore, realized that the remedy, that is, the administration of laws, could be provided by depositing the hidden, inner meaning underneath the outward meaning. 'And said to the heaven and to the earth: Come willingly, or unwillingly' means that the soul enjoined on the *nāṭiq* and the *asās* the necessity of setting up two *da'was*, voluntary and obligatory, where the former is for the *bāṭin* and the latter for the *zāhir*. 'They said: We come willingly' means that both the *nāṭiq* and the *asās* willingly accepted the call. 'He ordained them as seven heavens in two days' means that the Soul ordained seven leaders from the epoch of concealment in two distinct hierarchies: exterior and interior. 'Revealed its mandate in every heaven' means that each leader's share of God's Word was inspired to him individually. The words 'sky' and 'earth' in Q. 11/44 and 54/11–14 are to be interpreted similarly.

iii. Mountains

Firmly established mountains in the land serve as signposts whereby the travellers are guided and wherefrom streams gush

⁵⁰ Ismā'īlī's view history as a progressive cycle which develops through various epochs; see Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, 21–2.

forth. In *ta'wīl* they stand for the *hujaj*,⁵¹ who are established in every region of the earth to guide the faithful with their knowledge. Streams gushing forth from the mountains are analogous with the fountains of wisdom and knowledge radiating from the *hujaj*. An example of this is David's subjection of the mountains and their singing God's glory with him in the following verse, 'And with David We subjected the mountains to give glory' (Q. 21/79). Taken literally, this verse does not make any sense. David was an *imām*, obedience to whom was obligatory. The mountains in the above verse, therefore, mean the *hujaj* and various *da'wa* dignitaries.⁵² The passage Q. 34/10 is to be interpreted similarly.

The Qur'ān also states: 'And when Moses came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke with him, he said: My Lord, show me, that I may behold Thee! He said: Thou shalt not see Me, but behold the mountain, if it stays fast in its place, then thou shalt see Me' (Q. 7/143). Commenting on the above verse, al-Sijistānī states that it is in obvious need of interpretation. How could God manifest Himself through an inanimate object, such as the mountain? How could a major lawgiver—prophet like Moses ask such an impossible question? The real meaning is that Moses thought that his intellect would be able to perceive the Creator's quiddity (*innīya*) and that he would be able to dispense, via negation, with affirming the *tawḥīd* (unity of God). When he realized that it was not possible, he repented and glorified his Lord by asserting *tanzīh* (dislodging all association from God). The mountain in the above verse means the Soul.⁵³

Similarly, the mountain is mentioned in Q. 59/21, 'If We had sent down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, thou wouldst have seen it humbled, split asunder out of the fear of God.' The mountain here represents a learned, pious, and godfearing *mu'min* (faithful). Al-Sijistānī cites the following two verses to support this interpretation: 'Is it not time that the hearts of those who believe should

⁵¹ The *hujja* (pl. *hujaj*) is a particular figure in the *da'wa* hierarchy who serves at a given time as an evidence, or a proof, among mankind, of God's will; it also means a rank following that of the Imām. Ismā'īlī doctrine divides the inhabited earth into twelve regions; each region's *da'wa* hierarchy is headed by a *hujja*. Zāhid 'Alī, *Ismā'īlī madhhab*, 305. See also al-Kulīnī, *Kitāb al-hujja*, in his *al-Uṣūl*, i. 168–74.

⁵² See also al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, 253.

⁵³ See also Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Farā'id wa ḥudūd al-dīn*, MS (Goriawala, p. 14), 229–30; his *ta'wīl* is different.

be humbled to the remembrance of God?' (Q. 57/16), and, 'Only those of His servants fear God who have knowledge' (Q. 35/28).

iv. Trees

Goodly trees mentioned in the Qur'ān are the righteous, godfearing, and virtuous people, while the corrupt trees, or those uprooted from the earth, are the debauched ones. 'The blessed olive tree' in Q. 24/35, therefore, stands for the Imām 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn ibn al-Ḥusayn,⁵⁴ while 'the accursed tree' in Q. 17/60 stands for the second Umayyad caliph, Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya, who was responsible for Imām al-Ḥusayn's massacre at Karbalā'.⁵⁵

These were, then, some examples of Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* of certain physical objects mentioned in the Qur'ān. Interpretation of the tales of the prophets is one of the major themes in Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* literature, especially with Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman. The main purpose of those stories, as stated earlier, is to drive home a moral lesson; hence, they are interpreted allegorically. Even a cursory survey of all those stories is beyond the scope of the present study. As an illustration, I will confine myself to the story of Jonah, which is also selected by al-Sijistānī, because, according to him, it is in greater need of *ta'wīl* than any other story. Jonah was an *imām* and was entrusted with the task of upholding the *sharī'a* of his epoch's *nāṭiq*. He lived under difficult circumstances and did not measure up to his task. Consequently, he was demoted, his knowledge faded away, and he was overwhelmed by a younger rival who was accomplished in exoteric knowledge. Jonah being swallowed by the whale (Q. 37/142) represents his falling into the abyss of ignorance and doubt. Then, his being thrown on a desert shore while he was sick (Q. 37/145) means that, when he confessed his wrongdoing, God flung him from the depth of ignorance to the spaciousness of knowledge. God's causing a tree of gourds to grow over him (Q. 37/146) signifies that God appointed a trustworthy, knowledgeable, and gentle person to treat the affliction into which Jonah had fallen so that he might be completely cured.⁵⁶ Most of the stories of

⁵⁴ See n. 46, above.

⁵⁵ Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 310; he states that the accursed tree stands for the Umayyads, in general, as well as the adherents of Mazdāism.

⁵⁶ See also al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, 286–90; Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-Shawāhid wa'l-bayān*, 569–74. There are some differences in their *ta'wīl*.

the prophets narrated in the Qur'ān are similarly interpreted.⁵⁷

All of the aforementioned three authors, especially al-Sijistānī, use *ta'wīl* on which to hang the Neoplatonic cosmology and eschatology.⁵⁸ God's Command, described in the Qur'ān,⁵⁹ fits well into the Ismā'īlī scheme of creation, especially al-Sijistānī's doctrine of the Command (*amr*), or the Word (*al-kalima*),⁶⁰ namely, that there is one intermediary between the Originator/Innovator (*mubdi'*, that is, God) and the First Originated/Innovated (*al-mubda' al-awwal*, that is, the Intellect), and that is the Command, or the Word of the Originator.⁶¹ The Quranic pairs of words, such as *al-kursī wa'l-'arsh* (royal seat and throne) (Q. 2/255, 39/75), *al-qalam wa'l-lawḥ* (pen and tablet) (Q. 96/4, 85/22), *al-shams wa'l-qamar* (sun and moon) (Q. *passim*), *al-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar* (fate and divine decree),⁶² are equated with the Two Roots (*aṣṣalān*), that is, the Intellect and the Soul, in turn, corresponding to the *naṭīq* and the *asās*. Al-Sijistānī even takes great pains to interpret Q. 13/4, 13/28, 5/116, 39/21, 67/10, and 89/5 to establish that both the Intellect (*al-'aql*) and the Soul (*al-nafs*) are mentioned in the Qur'ān.⁶³

The concept of the Last Judgement held by the commonalty, that it will be accompanied with complete upset of the cosmos, dislocation of the earth and the heaven, such as the splitting of the heaven, scattering of the stars, swarming over of the seas, etc., is ridiculed by al-Sijistānī. How could God, he argues, gather mankind and call them to account when the cosmos, which sustains

⁵⁷ For the tales of the prophets see al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*; Ja'far ibn Mansūr al-Yaman, *Asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, MS Hamdani Collection; id., *Sarā'ir al-nuṭaqā'*, MS in the possession of the late A. A. A. Fyze; id., *al-Farā'id wa ḥudūd al-dīn*.

⁵⁸ The terminology used by al-Sijistānī to describe creation is of Quranic origin, e.g., God is described as *al-khāliq*, *al-bārī*, *al-muṣawwir*, *badī' al-samāwāt wa'l-'ard*. Thus, those terms imply both temporal creation (in the religious sense) and real creation (in the philosophical sense of emanation). Q. 59/24; 2/117; Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 14th *iqḥid*; P. Walker, pp. 133 ff.

⁵⁹ 'His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it "Be," and it is', Q. 36/82.

⁶⁰ The Command is also called Will (*irāda*).

⁶¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 2; id., *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 19th *iqḥid*.

⁶² In theology, these words were taken to mean predestination and freewill. See Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 601–24. The Qur'ān uses the word *qadar* in the sense of both power and measuring, see Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago, 1980), 12, 65–8.

⁶³ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 3.

human existence, is dislocated? Reward and punishment are similarly interpreted spiritually.⁶⁴

Interpretation of the *sharī'a* is another celebrated theme in Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl*. Al-Sijistānī has devoted the last five chapters of his *Kitāb al-iftikhār* to expound the *ta'wīl* of the five pillars of Islam. A brief summary is in order. Ablution (*wuḍū'*), the minor ritual purification performed before prayer, implies disavowal of the imamate from those who claimed it unjustly. Water used for purification represents knowledge which purifies the soul from doubt and uncertainty. Prayers signify *walāya* (devotion) of the *awliyā'* (plural of *walī*, meaning saint, man close to God, that is, the Imāms). The five obligatory prayers correspond to the five *ḥudūd*: the Intellect, the Soul, the *naṭīq*, the *asās*, and the Imām. The poor tax (*zakāt*) in *ta'wīl* means that those individuals who are rooted in knowledge should set up trustworthy mentors to guide the people. By so doing, that is, by setting up a hierarchy, the lower rank would become *zakāt* for the higher. Fasting (*ṣawm*) means observing silence and not revealing the secret to the uninitiated. Pilgrimage to Mecca, that is the house of God, symbolizes having an audience with the Imām, because he is the house wherein knowledge of God resides.⁶⁵

Another interesting aspect of *ta'wīl* found in the works of al-Sijistānī is the technique of transposing the letters of certain verses to vindicate a particular Shī'ī tenet. *Sūra* 108, accordingly, is employed to demonstrate 'Alī's *waṣāya* (the rank of plenipotentiary). First, al-Sijistānī explains the occasion of its revelation and states that when Muḥammad was informed about the future events which would take place in his community, especially that his grandsons would be persecuted by the Umayyads, he was overcome by grief. Subsequently, the *sūra* entitled 'Abundance' (that is, Q. 108) was revealed, giving him the good tidings concerning his offspring through his daughter Fāṭima and 'Alī:

إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ إِنَّ مَالِيكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ

'Surely we have given thee abundance; so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice. Surely he that hates thee, he is the one cut off.' This

⁶⁴ Ibid., chs. 9–11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., chs. 13–17. See also al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Ta'wīl al-da'ā'im*, ed. M. al-A'zamī (Cairo, n.d.); al-Nu'mān's details differ from those of al-Sijistānī.

interpretation, al-Sijistānī contends, can be demonstrated by transposing the letters of the *sūra* to read:

أَلَا أَنَّ الْكَوْثَرَ الطَّاهِرَ وَصِيَّكَ عَلِيٌّ إِنْ تَنْحَرُ فَإِنَّ شَانِكَ أَبُو بَكْرٍ

The absence of letters *qāf* (indicating 'atīq, that is, Abū Bakr⁶⁶) and *mīm* (indicating 'Umar and 'Uthmān) from the *sūra* further indicates that the caliphate will not continue in the progeny of those three caliphs.⁶⁷ Similarly, Q. 17/60 is employed to demonstrate the imamate of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the infidelity of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazīd.⁶⁸

The fact that Ismā'īlīs take great pride in their *ta'wīl* is obvious from the very title of al-Sijistānī's polemical work, *Kitāb al-iftikhār* ('The book of pride'). In this book, after refuting his opponents' arguments, al-Sijistānī expounds his own doctrine and then concludes by stating: 'What pride is greater than comprehension of the *ḥaqā'iq* and pursuing the [right] path?' This phrase, like a refrain, is repeated after each argument throughout the book.

Despite the Ismā'īlī claim that their *ta'wīl* is derived from the Imāms, numerous differences in interpretation are found in the works of the aforesaid three authors.⁶⁹ One example will suffice. The verse relating to light (Q. 24/35), interpreted by al-Sijistānī (= *Sij*) and Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (= *Jaf*), is selected; what follows is a brief summary.⁷⁰ The verse in question reads: 'God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil would almost glow forth, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will.'

Light *Sij*: Light of knowledge radiating from the Command of God, and from the Intellect and the Soul
Jaf: *imām*

⁶⁶ 'Atīq was Abū Bakr's nickname; see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* (Cairo, 1962), iii. 424–5.

⁶⁷ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, ch. 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., ch. 8.

⁶⁹ Zāhid 'Alī, 399 ff.; he has dealt with this question at great length.

⁷⁰ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maqālīd*, 52nd *iqḥid*; Ja'far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-kashf*, 7, 16–18 (his interpretation resembles that of al-Kulīnī, *al-Uṣūl*, i. 195). See also Henry Corbin, 'Epiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose Ismaélienne', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 23 (1954), 141–249.

Niche	<i>Sij</i> : <i>nāṭiq</i> <i>Jaf</i> : Fāṭima (the Prophet's daughter)
Lamp	<i>Sij</i> : <i>asās</i> <i>Jaf</i> : Imām al-Ḥusayn
Glass	<i>Sij</i> : The first <i>mutimm</i> , i.e., the first Imām, al-Ḥasan <i>Jaf</i> : When al-Ḥusayn was in his mother's womb
A glittering star	<i>Sij</i> : Imām al-Ḥusayn <i>Jaf</i> : Fāṭima
The Blessed Olive Tree	<i>Sij</i> : Imām 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn <i>Jaf</i> : Abraham
Neither of the East nor of the West	<i>Sij</i> : It qualifies the tree, i.e., 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn <i>Jaf</i> : Abraham's religion, which was neither Judaism nor Christianity
Oil would almost glow forth	<i>Sij</i> : Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir <i>Jaf</i> : Al-Ḥusayn might have spoken about his imamate while he was still in his mother's womb
Even if no fire touched it	<i>Sij</i> : Fire stands for Imām Ja'far al-Šādiq <i>Jaf</i> : Even though the (previous) Imām had not yet appointed al-Ḥusayn as his successor
Light upon light	<i>Sij</i> : Al-Qā'im <i>Jaf</i> : (Text is not clear)

It is obvious, thus, that differences in interpretation of the same verse between the two authors are quite striking. In his *Asās al-ta'wīl*, al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān quotes a tradition from Imām Ja'far al-Šādiq. It states that one day the Imām, while he was explaining the *ta'wīl* of a certain verse, was confronted with a question from a listener saying that his *ta'wīl* on that particular day was different from the one given by him on a previous occasion. The Imām, thereupon, replied: 'We can speak about a word in seven different ways.' When the astounded questioner said, 'Seven!', the Imām retorted: 'Yes, even seventy. If you ask us more we can increase it even more.' Aspects of *ta'wīl*, that is, explanation and interpretation, therefore, al-Nu'mān notes, depend on the rank (*ḥadd*) of its practitioner, the higher the rank, the higher the number of interpretations.⁷¹ It is clear from the above tradition that differences in interpretation by various authors are glossed over.

⁷¹ Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, 27.

Finally, exegesis, or interpretation of the Bible, has been used by both Jews and Christians throughout their histories for various purposes. The exigencies of particular historical situations, as well as polemical or apologetical conditions, very often dictate and anticipate the truth to be discovered from the sacred scripture. Quranic exegesis has also been exploited for different ends by different groups, Ismā'īlīs consider *ta'wīl* as a science *par excellence* and cultivate it studiously. Al-Sijistānī divides knowledge, derived either through 'revelation' or '[Greek] wisdom',⁷² into three categories: lower, middle, and higher. He then states that the knowledge of revelation consists of jurisprudence, '*ilm al-kalām* (scholastic theology), and *ta'wīl*, and they are graded on an upward scale.⁷³ Al-Sijistānī further points out that both types of knowledge (that is, revelation and wisdom) do not conflict with each other. The growth and development of Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* can thus be seen as a reflection of the general concern of Muslims and of Islamic theology, which was being developed in the fourth/tenth century. In his numerous studies, Henry Corbin has rightly pointed out that it was the tension between the *sharī'a* and the *ḥaqīqa* that led to esotericism, which, in turn, led to what he calls 'herméneutique spirituelle du Qorān'.⁷⁴ *Ta'wīl* plays an important role in the Ismā'īlī formulation of a new synthesis of reason and revelation based on Neoplatonism and Shī'ī doctrine.

⁷² *Hikma* (wisdom) is used loosely by Ismā'īlī authors to signify philosophy. See *Rasā'il Ikhwan al-Safā'*, iii, 345–7; both the *ḥukamā'* and the '*ulamā'*' are described as heirs to the prophets.

⁷³ Al-Sijistānī, *Ithbat al-mubā'āt*, 122. *Rasā'il Ikhwan al-Safā'* (i, 321–3) classifies people into the following eight categories in ascending order: (i) the Qur'ān reciters and the scribes; (ii) the transmitters of the Prophet's biography as well as his traditions; (iii) the *fuqahā'* (jurists) and the '*ulamā'*' (scholars); (iv) *al-muḥassinīn* (the Qur'ān commentators); (v) the warriors who defend Islam; (vi) the caliphs who uphold the *sharī'a*; (vii) the *zuhhād wa'l-'ubadā fi'l-masājid* (the ascetics and the devout worshippers); (viii) the possessors of *ta'wīl* (the Imāms).

⁷⁴ Henry Corbin, 'Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité Shī'ite', *Eranoš Jahrbuch*, 29 (1960), 57–71; id., 'Le Combat Spirituel du Shī'isme', *Eranoš Jahrbuch*, 30 (1961), 69–125.