

THE
MASTER
AND THE
DISCIPLE



An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue

A New Arabic Edition and English Translation of
Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman's
Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām

Edited and Translated by
JAMES W. MORRIS

THE MASTER AND THE DISCIPLE

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by

James W. Morris

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*In gratitude to my parents
and to my children*

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Preface

Since one of the primary themes of this work is the sacred ‘trust’ (Qur’an, 33:72; 23:8, etc.) of the transmission of true knowledge and spiritual understanding, with all the duties that entails, it is only fitting that the list of those who helped bring this work to completion—some of them now departed—is quite long. To begin with, we must surely mention Wladimir Ivanow and Henry Corbin, both founding figures in the modern development of Ismaili studies, who first brought this text to the attention of the wider scholarly world, and who also originally provided, indirectly, the oldest manuscript used in preparing this edition.

The original impetus for this project came from the late Osman Yahya, who almost forced on me his two manuscripts, and whose enthusiastic descriptions of his work as a scholar and teacher with the Bohra Ismaili community of Surat (India) provided a unique and essential background on the ongoing history and religious uses of this text; and from my colleague at the Paris branch of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Mme Stella Corbin, who so generously offered Professor Corbin’s copy of the Ivanow manuscript. Mr. Adam Gacek and Ms. Fatemeh Keshavarz, then librarians at the Institute in London, kindly provided copies of two more manuscripts of this text with important historical connections, as well as many other manuscripts of works by Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūṛ, al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān and other early Ismaili authors.

The Paris branch of the Institute (and my colleagues Daryush Shayegan and Shahrokh Meskoub) provided an ideal working environment for the preparation of the critical edition, and special thanks are due above all to Professor Hermann Landolt, then director of the academic programmes at the Institute in London, for his constant help and support in the completion of that edition. At the same time, long conversations with such frequent visitors as Shlomo Pines, Abbas Hamdani, Muhsin Mahdi, Yves Marquet, Paul Fenton, Michel Chodkiewicz, Annemarie Schimmel, Heinz Halm and Wilferd Madelung gradually helped to fill out my understanding of the issues and complexities involving the early Ismaili movement and its wider Islamic context and posterity. Throughout that period, my enthusiastic students and colleagues at the Institute in London (whose names are too numerous to mention here) provided an ideally interested and qualified audience for earlier stages of this project.

Special thanks are due to the late Carol Cross, the able secretary of Harvard University's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilisations, who spent many long hours preparing what we then thought was a final copy for publication. And as years went on, the late Professor Jeanette Wakin of Columbia University (and other participants in the Columbia Faculty Seminar in Arabic Studies, including Professor Wadad al-Qadi) twice played a providential role in keeping alive a sense of the wider significance of this text, while several generations of my religious studies students at Oberlin and Princeton (with special thanks there to Sumaiya Hamdani) participated in the early stages of translation and commentary.

Finally, after my trans-Atlantic move to the University of Exeter's promising new Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, Dr Farhad Daftary (Head of the Department of Academic Research and Publications at The Institute of Ismaili Studies) has generously provided us with all the necessary encouragement to bring the entire project to fruition, with the help of his editorial staff and the indispensable collaboration of Mohamed Yousef, who has managed to 'computerise' an Arabic edition and indexes completed in the far off age of manual typewriters and card files. Last but not least, I am particularly indebted to Professor Wilferd Madelung for his painstaking

correction of the entire manuscript and of the Arabic edition at the final stage of this project.

Needless to say, none of this would have been possible without the constant support and inspiration, in every way, of my wife Corey and all our children.

James Winston Morris
University of Exeter
May 2001

Introduction

I. GENERAL PRESENTATION

Like all literary classics, the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* (*The Book of the Master and the Disciple*) is an old, yet timeless story: the initial story of one seeker’s quest for and gradual realisation of the ‘truth’—the spiritual knowledge and eternal life of the true ‘knowers,’ the ‘friends of God’—and the ongoing story of their necessary return to this world in order to fulfil their responsibility to transmit that divine ‘trust’ and discovery to their fellow human beings, to their family and the other members of their wider community, in the ways that are appropriate to each situation.¹ Like its models and constant source of inspiration in the Qur’an and hadith, this story is only a sort of map—a guide and reminder—that readers must follow and interpret in their own way, in the light of their own experience and insight. Since the universal meaning and interest of this tale, and its remarkable artistic qualities, are so readily apparent, we shall say only a few words in this opening section concerning its main themes and structure. For this work, despite its age and unfamiliar origins, should be immediately accessible to most readers without any further introduction.

However, it is also true that the original Arabic text of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*—which has unfortunately remained hidden from the wider Arabic and Islamic world for many centuries—is a

work of substantial *historical* importance with regard to (a) the development of Arabic literature (especially in its unique use of the dramatic dialogue form); (b) the still largely unexplored relations between Sufi themes and institutions and corresponding dimensions of earlier Shi‘i tradition; (c) our general understanding of the early stages of Ismaili Shi‘ism and the Fatimid *da‘wa*, which are still too often the subject of many highly inaccurate myths and stereotypes; and (d) the still relatively unstudied religious history of the Musta‘li branch of Ismailism from the fall of the Fatimid state down to the present day. These and other historical aspects of the work are discussed in greater detail in section II of this Introduction. In addition, since the author of this book, Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (late 3rd-early 4th century AH), is largely unknown to any but a handful of scholarly specialists, we have outlined in section III what little is known of his life and main surviving writings, virtually all of which are still unpublished. section IV examines the significance for the reader of the author’s complex usage of Qur’anic passages and allusions throughout this text. Finally, section V of the Introduction discusses the manuscripts of the Arabic text and the methods and format followed in this critical edition, including its notes and indexes.

The *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* is, to begin with, the dramatic presentation of a series of personal encounters between various seekers of the spiritual truth and other individuals who act in some way as their spiritual guide or ‘father.’ Thus we are presented not only with the relationship between the ‘Master’ or ‘Knower’ (*‘ālim*) and his disciple or ‘young man’ (*ghulām*) mentioned in the title, but also with those between the overall narrator and his disciples (in the opening and concluding paragraphs); between the Knower and his own spiritual master; between the young man Ṣāliḥ and the ‘highest master’ (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), at the centre and climax of the book; between Ṣāliḥ and his own physical father; between the religious dignitary Abū Mālik and the other notables of his city; and finally the long disputation between Ṣāliḥ and Abū Mālik at the end. Now each of these archetypal spiritual encounters—which together underline the full variety of human capacities and predispositions in this domain, and the correspondingly wide range of appropriate

methods of spiritual pedagogy and guidance—can be viewed from either side of those relationships. Or, as the narrator puts it at the very beginning of the work (paragraph [3]), this book is about *both* the proper behaviour of those who are seeking the truth (*ādāb al-ṭalībīn*) and the ‘ways of proceeding’—through appropriate action, teaching and belief—of ‘the righteous,’ of those who are spiritually receptive, prepared and suited for those ways (*madhāhib al-ṣāliḥīn*).

So if the dramatic focus and unity of the work flows initially from the reader’s natural interest in the fate of the sympathetic young hero (the aptly named ‘Ṣāliḥ’), the ongoing fascination and lasting interest of this book also derive from its deeper insight into the real possibilities and conditions of spiritual growth and guidance, which are tellingly revealed in the contrasting attitudes and approaches of the various spiritual teachers in different contexts of study and initiation. At this more profound level of intention, the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* continues to offer new insights at each reading, like a mirror reflecting each reader’s own experience and personal situation—just as is the case with those scriptures that are the author’s own constant reference and point of departure.

Of course, this analogy to the understanding of revelation is anything but accidental here, since the structure and composition of this text as a whole is governed at each stage by the fundamental distinction between the three dimensions of the ‘outward,’ ‘inner’ and ‘innermost spiritual’ aspects of reality (*zāhir*, *bāṭin* and *bāṭin al-bāṭin*: see especially paragraphs [144]–[169]). However, here those categories are not simply applied to the interpretation of the Qur’an and the *sharī‘a*, but in fact correspond more fundamentally both to the basic metaphysical structures of all reality (*dunyā*, *ākhirā*, etc.) and to the corresponding human spiritual types and forms of awareness—that is, to the essential spiritual stages of the ‘divine knower,’ the ‘seeker of (spiritual) knowledge,’ and the wayward masses mentioned in the famous saying of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib that is alluded to in several key passages.² And equally important, in still another perspective, are the similar correspondences of those three metaphysical categories with the earthly and spiritual hierarchies of Ismaili religious guidance, the *ḥudūd al-dīn*.³

Now it is the possibility of movement between these levels, the natural impetus to reach a higher degree of spiritual understanding, that forms the dynamic and dramatic aspect of this work, indeed its very *raison d'être*, while at the same time determining the extraordinary suitability of the dialogue form. For the essential characteristic of the spiritual reality (*al-ḥaqq*) or 'true religion' (*dīn Allāh, dīn al-ḥaqq*, etc.), the essential spiritual level of the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*, is that it cannot be fully expressed, or perceived, either as mere formal, subjective belief (the *zāhir*) or as the symbols that represent the esoteric hierarchy of the *bāṭin*. Therefore it cannot ultimately be 'taught' in any of the ways which might be appropriate to those two lower levels; it can only be lived. Hence the bridge to each higher level of spiritual insight can only be crossed by means of the appropriate action and experience, the difficult—and necessarily unique and individual—ongoing task of inner spiritual effort and realisation. The master can at best only guide and encourage that delicate and indispensable process of spiritual alchemy.

Thus this central theme of the essential interplay between spiritual knowing and right action (*'ilm* and *'amal*)—and of their ever-present common ground in divine grace (*al-minna*)—constantly underlies the dramatic development of this work. And if every reader must ultimately supply the actual correlates of those terms from their own experience, still the author has so artfully presented the more universal roots of that search in the recurrent painful doubt, constriction and neediness of the unenlightened soul—through the exemplary figures of both the young 'disciple' Ṣāliḥ and the learned theologian Abū Mālik—that almost anyone can identify with at least the initial stages of their quest.

This ultimate spiritual finality of the *bāṭin al-bāṭin* likewise openly determines the treatment of the historical and institutional means or 'vehicles' for its realisation in this story—most notably the organisation of the early (pre-Fatimid) Ismaili *da'wa* and its particular structures and teachings within the larger context of Islamic thought and history. Here (unlike many of the author's later, more specifically Ismaili writings) the decisive role of those particular historical institutions and intentions, although constantly assumed, is largely implicit at first, so that each reader—like Abū Mālik and his followers

at the end—is repeatedly challenged to put the central characters' far-reaching claims to the critical test of personal experience and commitment. But the ultimate practical criterion—in this book, at least—clearly remains the actual effectiveness of this or any other path in realising those universal spiritual aims that are so artfully evoked and presented here. In this respect, modern readers of the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* can hardly avoid noticing the recurrent homologies and similarities, whether at the experiential level of spiritual realisation or in the more formal domain of key religious ideas and structures, between this Ismaili text and certain more familiar features of later Sufism. Whatever the possible historical connections between these two vast Islamic movements (see section II.B below), such striking resemblances do lead the attentive reader back toward their common spiritual source and inspiration in the Qur'an and hadith.

II. THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KITĀB AL-ʿĀLIM WA'L-GHULĀM

As already mentioned, the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*, quite apart from its intrinsic literary and philosophic merits, should also be of considerable historical interest to scholars and students of (a) the development of Arabic prose literature; (b) the historical relations of Sufism and esoteric Shi'ism; and (c) early Shi'i movements and the spread of the Ismaili-Fatimid *da'wa*. The special historical importance of this work has not yet been adequately reflected in writing on those fields, due to its long period of virtual inaccessibility outside the Musta'li-Ṭayyibī tradition of Ismailism. The fact that modern researchers now do have access to this text and to many other related writings also serves to underline our relative lack of accessible in-depth studies of (d) the religious and philosophic history of the post-Fatimid Musta'li branch of Ismailism, both in Yemen and later in India.

A. The Literary Form of the Text⁴

To the best of our knowledge, the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* is by far the most accomplished example of the full-scale narrated⁵ dramatic dialogue form in Arabic literature—an example all the more remarkable in that it seems to have been developed in relative autonomy, on the basis of the Arabic sources discussed below, without any direct influence, for example, from the early dialogues of Plato (even if one finds remarkable literary and philosophic parallels, almost surely unknown to our author, in the similar narrative frameworks of the Platonic dialogues). Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman's re-creation of that literary form is especially noteworthy for his strikingly appropriate use of dramatic realism and irony (especially in his characters' widely contrasting development of Qur'anic and theological allusions)—characteristics which are likewise of central importance in the Socratic dialogues, but which were seldom effectively realised by Plato's later philosophic imitators. The author's realistic, moving portrayal of certain spiritual (and social) 'types'—most notably in the more fully developed characters such as the young disciple Ṣāliḥ and the learned theologian Abū Mālik—has already been noted. But even more important in conveying his essential message is the repeated ironic contrast (sometimes not without a touch of humour) between the different meanings of the same key religious terms (e.g., the Mu'tazilī slogan of divine 'unity and justice' (*ʿadl wa tawḥīd*) in the concluding theological discussion with Abū Mālik) as they are perceived by characters with radically differing degrees of spiritual understanding.

The same remarkably developed stylistic characteristics also serve to bring out—again as in real life (or as with Socrates)—the essentially dialectical or rhetorical nature of many of the discussions, in which the 'guiding' figure tentatively adopts his interlocutor's own (false or inadequate) premises and then exaggerates or twists them to make a philosophically significant (and personally appropriate) point.⁶ The artful marriage of all these distinctive features of the dramatic dialogue form provides repeatedly highlighted reminders that each seeker's understanding of spiritual meanings—the saving 'knowledge' in question throughout this work—is, above all, a

function of individual states of awareness and particular contexts and predispositions, of inner realities that can never be adequately conveyed on the uni-dimensional plane of abstract concepts, rote transmission and rhetorical disputation corresponding to the popularly accepted 'knowledge' of the formally 'learned' (the '*ulamā*') in this or any other tradition.

Now the immediate historical antecedents for Ja'far b. Manṣūr's extraordinary development of this particular literary form, so far as we can tell, are to be found primarily in three types of Arabic religious literature whose direct traces can be seen—artfully transformed—throughout the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*, as well as the author's other writings.⁷ The most obvious of these influences is of course the example of certain particularly relevant emblematic spiritual narratives within the Qur'an (e.g. Moses and the mysterious divine 'servant,' later known as al-Khādir, in the Sura of the Cave; or Joseph and his brothers), along with the amplification and development of many shorter Qur'anic stories or allusions in the later literatures of textual commentary (*tafsīr*) and the 'tales of the prophets' (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*)—a vast literature which, especially in its traditional Shi'i expressions, is a major subject of many of Ja'far b. Manṣūr's later theological works. The second area is the immense literature of hadith—in Ja'far's case, both from the Prophet and from the early Shi'i imams—which often does contain famous anecdotes perfectly illustrating the kind of dramatic spiritual encounters and conversations developed at length in the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*, although usually in the hadith on a much shorter and less elaborate scale.

The third obvious form of literary or rhetorical influence—openly mirrored here in the long concluding debate between Šāliḥ and the Mu'tazilī theologian Abū Mālik—is the widespread practice in the author's time of religious and theological disputations (*munāẓarāt*), such as the famous discussions with the physician Abū Bakr al-Rāzī described by Ja'far b. Manṣūr's near-contemporary, the Persian Ismaili thinker and missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, in his *Kitāb A'lām al-nubuwwa*.⁸ In particular, we only recently have had access, in a well-annotated English translation, to a long 'Book of Disputations' (*Kitāb al-Munāẓarāt*) in this genre, which is of extraordinary

historical interest since its author is a slightly older Tunisian Shi'ī scholar (Ibn al-Haytham) whose adult life was largely spent working for the early Fatimid court and whose writing brilliantly depicts the actual methods and approaches of learned Ismaili teachers and missionaries in the earlier period of 'concealment' (*satr*) of the imams immediately prior to, and at the very beginning of, the Fatimid caliphate in North Africa, perhaps only a few years after the composition of the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*.⁹ However, it is noteworthy that almost all our direct literary 'imitations' of such debates, including the elaborate Ismaili versions of al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Haytham—perhaps partly because they were normally written down by only one of the two debating parties—tend to be remarkably dry, stilted and artificial (as in most later Western philosophic imitations of Plato's dramatic dialogue form). In fact, it is probably the famous humorous parodies of such scholarly debates in books such as al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* that come closest to catching the dramatic vivacity, humour and vigour of Ja'far b. Manṣūr's own writing at its best.

Finally, a fourth possible, if more hypothetical, literary influence on Ja'far's writing would be the complex genre of edifying Arabic tales and fables (often adapted from earlier Hellenistic, Christian and Indian sources) that is exemplified by such diverse works as the famous stories of *Kalīla wa Dimna*, the fascinating *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Budhāsf*, or the famous political animal parables of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*.¹⁰

However, even the most cursory comparison of the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* with any of these earlier Arabic literary genres only serves to emphasise the extraordinary originality and literary power by which its author so creatively and subtly adapted those materials to the expression of his chosen subject.¹¹ Those distinctive literary characteristics are especially evident, to begin with, in his constant maintenance of the inner thematic coherence and philosophic unity of the work, despite its length, shifting settings and the considerable diversity of its cast of characters. Even more striking is his remarkable ability to marry dramatic realism with the intellectual demands of his subject, so as to depict in a credible manner the growth, ongoing change and sudden shifts of perspective and

awareness which actually are such essential features of inner spiritual life and development. Those traits are perhaps most beautifully illustrated in the way in which the author only gradually reveals the inner reality of spiritual ignorance underlying the extensive conceptual and traditional knowledge and formal beliefs of the young disciple at the beginning of the work, and of the learned Abū Mālik at the end. Most obviously, all of these outstanding literary characteristics are equally distant both from the episodic, often purely allegorical approaches of earlier (and later) fables and edifying tales, and from the one-dimensional, purely conceptual rhetorical positions of the disputation form in any of the literary examples that have come down to us. In comparison with those possible Arabic ‘sources,’ one can only marvel at the highly accomplished development of this distinctive literary genre of the dramatic dialogue in the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*.

B. Sufism and Esoteric Shi‘ism

The apparent resemblances between certain approaches in this work and many familiar aspects of later forms of Sufism, whether on the planes of religious ideas, individual spiritual realisation or socio-institutional arrangements, are so frequent that their full analysis would require a book in itself. However, where religious ideas and spiritual realities are concerned, it would be very difficult to demonstrate that those formal similarities reflect hypothetical historical ‘influences’ (in either direction), since such similarities obviously owe a great deal to the common sources and spiritual inspiration of both Sufism and esoteric Shi‘ism in the teachings of the Qur’an and hadith,¹² on the one hand, and in certain universal realities of human nature and experience (especially the essential connections between spiritual understanding (*‘ilm*) and practical experience on the other. In the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*, of course, this latter dimension of universality is dramatically underlined by the intentional, carefully constructed aura of uncertainty concerning the time and place of the story and the mundane details of its characters’ lives. And these same universal themes—especially the emphasis on the perennial role of the spiritual hierarchy (the *ashāb*),

and of the constant presence of the ‘friends of God’ (the Qur’anic *awliyā’ Allāh*) as humanity’s spiritual guides—are developed in profuse detail, with reference to all the central figures and symbols of earlier Islamic religious tradition, throughout the author’s other surviving writings.

Here, however, we can only mention two of the more historically significant points of convergence between the thought of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and later Sufi conceptions in Islam. The first of these is that the highest degree of true spiritual knowledge and insight characterising the ‘friends of God’ is always represented as something to which *each* properly qualified disciple can aspire and eventually attain, given the appropriate inner discipline, spiritual intention and the equally essential elements of divine grace and support (*tawfiq*, *minna*, etc.). Although this fundamental possibility clearly underlies the aims and structure of our text as a whole, as the ultimate goal of the spiritual path it is brought out most openly in paragraphs [159]–[169], where the Knower also pointedly, albeit discreetly, alludes to the possibility that the disciple’s own *inner* imam or guide (‘*your* imam,’ the *ḥabl Allāh*)—like the realities of the spiritual hierarchy and the spiritual world (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*) more generally—may be other than the visible imam and his representatives in this world.

The second striking point of ‘parallelism’ here is the spiritualisation and concrete ‘internalisation’ of earlier Islamic theological discussions (especially in Mu‘tazilī *kalām*) concerning the divine names and attributes: i.e., their transformation from the relatively abstract, conceptual context of scholastic theology into a comprehensive metaphysical expression of the divine presence as mirrored and manifested—and realised to greatly varying degrees—in the very human presence and indispensable guiding example of the ‘friends of God’ (the *awliyā’*). That essential metaphysical ‘personalisation’ of *kalām* conceptions is already quite evident here both in the initiatic ‘naming’ episode (paragraphs [268]–[288]) and especially throughout the longer discussions with the Mu‘tazilī Abū Mālik concerning the true—or at least, the humanly knowable—reality of God’s ‘unity and justice.’¹³ In these passages in particular, that traditional theological vocabulary, in this newly ‘Platonised’

perspective, already provides a coherent conceptual framework for expressing the inner relations of those fundamental metaphysical categories and dimensions of reality—the *zāhir*, *bāṭin* and *bāṭin al-bāṭin*—whose importance was already mentioned above.

Needless to say, the early Ismaili *da'wa* (and Shi'i thought more generally) also had its own historical specificities which are amply illustrated throughout this dialogue, features which have now been studied in detail by several generations of political and intellectual historians.¹⁴ No doubt the most obvious and most practically important of those distinctive features is Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's thoroughgoing insistence—particularly in the impassioned concluding paragraphs of Ṣāliḥ's discussion with Abū Mālik—on the wider, universal *political* role of the Ismaili imamate and the *da'wa* structure as guides, not just for a relatively small spiritual elite, but potentially for the Islamic community (and indeed even humankind) as a whole. And this broader politico-religious perspective and ambition, of course, reflects the author's (and his family's) own openly Ismaili historical commitments, an engagement that is expressed even more plainly in all that we know of his family background, his life and works, as explained in the biographical discussions below.

However, given the distinctively spiritual justification and metaphysical framework underlying that political commitment as it is explained in the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*, it is certainly easy to see how the activity and teachings of the type of *da'wa* (preaching and teaching) so vividly portrayed in this work—to the degree that Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's idealised image does reflect actual practices—could easily have been quite influential in helping to convey similar spiritual conceptions and related understandings of Islam into those many historical settings where the more purely political aspirations of the Fatimids eventually became ineffective, discredited in public opinion (by the ensuing centuries of 'cold war' and 'propaganda' under first the Abbasids and then their Seljuq successors), or were simply no longer a viable option.¹⁵ In other words, since we know that the Ismaili and subsequent Fatimid teachers like those dramatically depicted here were historically active throughout the Islamic world for several centuries, Ja'far's work suggests important ways in which their religious teachings could well have had more lasting and

far-reachingly creative influences in domains which extended far beyond the more visible, public historical signs of Shi'ī ideological adherence and overt political success.¹⁶

C. Early Ismailism and the Pre-Fatimid *Da'wa*

The past century has seen a remarkable profusion of scholarly studies of the formative phase of Ismaili Shi'ism in its wider historical contexts, both during the earliest period of 'concealment' (*saṭr*) and during the initial North African period of the Fatimid dynasty, thanks to pioneering research by Ivanow, Hamdani, Strothman, Corbin, Stern and others, and then to more recent detailed studies by Nagel, Halm, Madelung and other researchers cited in our Bibliography. The broad features of that vast and lastingly influential historical movement developed by those scholars have been carefully summarised in the recent, widely accessible surveys of Ismaili history by Farhad Daftary, and are therefore sufficiently familiar to interested students of Islamic history today so that there is no need to repeat them here.

However, those approaching the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* without any specialised background in early Ismailism and its wider context in Islamic history of the 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries may well be surprised to discover that they have acquired indirectly some very vivid and useful impressions of that long-ago historical context from a most unexpected source. If the 'general readers' of Islamic history in this period may at most be numbered in the thousands, millions of people world-wide have read some of the *Dune* novels of Frank Herbert (or seen the film based on the first volume of that series) without ever realising that they were actually encountering a powerful, imaginative recreation in a 'science-fiction' setting of this formative period of Ismaili and Islamic history. For the *Dune* stories were apparently based loosely on Ibn Khaldūn's famous *History*, a historical account which, interestingly enough, largely derives its presentation of this period ultimately from Ja'far b. Manṣūr's own dramatic history of his father's key role in the early Ismaili *da'wa* (the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* discussed in the biographical section below). That dramatic story, most likely written down during the same

early Yemeni period of Ja'far's life as the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*, was eventually adapted into al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's triumphalist account of the early Fatimids, *Iftitāh al-da'wa*, which went on to become the primary historical source, for the early Ismailis and Fatimid dynasty, used by Ibn Khaldūn and most other later Muslim historians of this troubled period.

The gradual collapse of the ruling authority of the vast Abbasid empire and the simultaneous resurgence, at all its fringes,¹⁷ of a multitude of more localised political and cultural traditions, often expressed in the form of a host of diverse and competing 'heterodox' and semi-'messianic' popular (and more elite) religious movements, are all brilliantly conveyed in those novels, along with the pervasive climate of repression, suspicion and intermittent persecution (often carried out by local commanders and semi-independent warlords) where the central power was still able to exert some control. All these essential historical elements of the context of the early Ismaili movement are memorably re-created in ways that remain broadly true to the highly unsettled religious and political currents of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's own time.

The term 'messianic' here, in the Islamic context, refers to the generalised public expectations—by no means restricted to Shi'ī settings—for a *mahdī* or 'rightly-guided one' from the family of the Prophet, the promised eschatological saviour-figure who would appear to re-establish justice and order, and who was expected to either purify or transcend the preceding religious revelation. Indeed the honorific title given by later Ismailis to Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's own father, 'Maṣṣūr al-Yaman' (the 'divinely-aided' conqueror of that region), itself reflects the vocabulary of Islamic eschatology referring to that redeeming figure. And as with messianic movements more generally, the actual balance of eschatology, religious fervour and more mundane local political, social and cultural discontentment varied greatly from one individual or situation to another, even within what were nominally the same 'sectarian' movements.

Still another broad historical parallel to the nascent Ismaili Shi'ism of Ja'far's and his father's day, from more familiar recent times, is the immense scope of 'socialist' movements and currents of ideas from the time of the French Revolution down to the present. While

much of the political, social and cultural history of the past two centuries—worldwide, and certainly from Europe to China—could be written in terms of that vague, but popularly compelling complex of ideas, ideals and related social and political movements, most people are well aware of the incredible diversity and constantly shifting spectrum of motivations, meanings, actual contexts and ‘movements’ which would have to be included under any such rubric—and of the extraordinary ways the enemies and opponents of this or that *particular* ‘socialist’ (or ‘communist’) idea, teaching or political movement constantly imagined and (mis-)represented, both unconsciously and quite intentionally, all sorts of what appear in retrospect as often fantastic images of the particular ideas and movements in questions. It is extremely helpful, if not indispensable, to keep that broad set of parallels in mind when approaching any of the literatures—whether the vast spectrum of medieval Islamic polemics, or the increasingly well-grounded researches and speculations of modern historians—relating to the complex of early Shi‘i movements and ideas of which Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr and his writings were one small, but influential part.

Readers of this book who are already familiar with some of that literature concerning the history of early Ismailism and the Fatimid *da‘wa* will almost certainly be struck by the distance between the widespread popular images of those movements and the distinctive conceptions and ideas portrayed in the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*. This is not the place to detail all the origins of those popular images and misconceptions about the Ismailis, whether in the long-ago Abbasid and Seljuq polemics against the Qarmaṭīs (Qarāmiṭa) and Fatimids (and later the Nizārīs of Alamūt), or in the often exclusive concentration of modern historians on those outwardly more ‘visible’ and highly dramatic political episodes. However, this work, along with the other writings of Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr discussed in the following section, does point to a much more nuanced and diverse picture of the origins and nature of early Ismailism,¹⁸ while raising many as yet unanswered questions of historical interpretation that deserve further detailed study by specialists in this field. One way of suggesting some of those alternative historical perspectives is to look at the problems posed by the contrast between the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-*

ghulām (with the ideas and conceptions it represents) and certain widespread myths or stereotyped conceptions concerning those influential historical movements, prejudices which in many cases extend to the treatment of Ismailism and Shi‘ism much more generally.

To begin with, readers of modern secondary accounts (not to mention their popular and journalistic summaries) are most often left with the impression that the ‘Ismaili movement,’ whether in its early or later stages of development, was somehow monolithic and uniform with regard both to its socio-political structures and aims and its intellectual expressions in religious or philosophic thought. But if such an assumption is obviously absurd when measured against the full range of historical forms and expressions associated with ‘Ismailism’ throughout longer periods of Islamic history, it is almost equally unfounded even with regard to what we know of single time periods—such as the era just prior to the political establishment of the Fatimids, which is the apparent context of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*.¹⁹ In order to forestall any possible misunderstanding, it is important to stress that our aim here is certainly not to replace one myth by another: it is far from clear, for example, to what extent the ideas and conceptions represented in this dialogue (or in many other roughly contemporary Ismaili-inspired texts, such as some of the influential *Rasā’il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’) actually corresponded to wider concrete historical realities, or to what extent they primarily express their authors’ own idealised personal conceptions and aspirations. In either case the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* does present a rather different and internally coherent paradigm for understanding our very fragmentary historical evidence about the aims and structure of the early Ismaili *da‘wa*, in at least the four following areas.

The first of these common stereotypes is the notion that the early Ismaili *da‘wa*, prior to the establishment of the first Fatimids, was an exclusively political—or even ‘revolutionary’—movement dedicated above all to the establishment of a particular form of Shi‘i government (as a replacement for the Abbasid caliphate), and from its beginning under some all-encompassing central control and guidance. (A basic corollary of this political conception, the reduction of Ismaili and Shi‘i thought of that period to some sort of political

ideology or even ‘propaganda,’ is dealt with in the following section.) Now, given the well-known examples of dozens of preceding political *da‘wa* movements and organisations and their rebellions (including a multitude of Shi‘i and Khārījī rebels and would-be Mahdīs) from early Umayyad times onward, combined with the eventual historical establishment of the centralised Fatimid dynasty, it is certainly easy to understand why most subsequent historians—whether in the medieval Muslim world or more recently in the West—have naturally tended to interpret the broader ‘Ismaili movement’ in this familiar political perspective. However, even a cursory reading of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*—which is supported in this respect by a considerable body of historical and literary evidence from roughly the same period—clearly suggests that the ‘actors’ in this particular movement at all levels were motivated by a far more diverse range of conceptions and aspirations,²⁰ most of which are in fact carefully illustrated within this book (and can also be found in comparable religio-political movements throughout human history).²¹

What is so noteworthy about the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* is that this wider range of motives and aspirations is here carefully placed within a framework that is indeed potentially ‘political,’ but in this case strictly governed by an essentially spiritual aim and intention. The *da‘wa*, in Ja‘far’s conception, is aimed above all at assuring both the wider awareness of human beings’ true spiritual end (the *‘ilm*, or spiritual knowledge, of its main protagonists) and the accessibility of the appropriate means (the corresponding *‘amal*) for realising those potentialities, in the ways that are possible for each individual. The claim to religiously legitimate political power and authority, from this perspective, is ultimately justified only as a means or instrument to that end of spiritual awakening and development—a goal itself necessarily limited, in its fullest expression, to a relatively small elite²²—and everything else is subordinate to the furthering of that spiritual search, which can (and will) clearly continue under almost any conceivable political circumstances, given its universal human roots. Whatever the ‘truth’ or wider appeal of Ja‘far b. Maṣūn’s portrayal and self-conception of the early Ismaili *da‘wa*, it is no doubt this essentially spiritual and religious intention

and understanding portrayed here, and not any more limited political or historical aims, that explain the continued use and ongoing interest of this Ismaili text (and others like it) for many centuries in other parts of the Muslim world (see section II.D immediately below).

Finally, whatever the wider usefulness of the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* as a historical portrait of early Ismailism, it does strongly point out the considerable limits of any central political (or ideological) 'control' at this period. Even more tellingly, the range of pedagogical procedures illustrated here—for example, the careful instructions given to Šāliḥ to speak appropriately and cautiously when he returns to his father and city (at [298]–[304] and [555]), or the ambivalent position of the *bāṭin* of ideology and temporal hierarchy in relation to spiritual truth and realities (the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*)—do actually correspond to the wide range of Ismaili thought and 'doctrines' to be found in different settings at this and later periods.²³

In fact, what this work does very clearly bring out is how the allegiance of different individuals to the Ismaili imam (or his *hujja*) and the religious hierarchy of the *daʿwa*, beyond the mere formal fact of their initial oath of fidelity (*bayʿa*), was characteristically motivated—and no doubt manifested—in a number of different ways: e.g., political support (again, for a wide variety of motives); economic assistance and co-operation (payment and use of the *khums* due to the imams); loyalty to certain more specifically social, spiritual or philosophic conceptions of the role of the imamate, and so on. Most of these possibilities of motivation are at least suggested in the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* (which stresses their hierarchical integration within a broader spiritual framework), and they can all be historically illustrated elsewhere already at the early stages of Ismailism, even before the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty. And finally, the complexity of this range of motivations and understandings helps explain how that allegiance, in each of these possible forms, could—and often actually did—fairly easily come to an end whenever a particular imam (or his representatives) failed to realise one or more of those very different sets of expectations.²⁴

Another frequent misconception concerning Ismaili Shiʿism, whether at this early stage or in most later periods, is that the many

forms of writing and thought produced by its followers were all centred around the claims for a single distinctive and authoritative 'teaching' or 'doctrine'—usually understood (implicitly or explicitly) as a sort of political ideology on the plane of formal belief.²⁵ Once again, there is no doubt that this was *one* of the potential functions of Ismaili thought and writing (as of Shi'ī thought more generally) in this and many other periods. But any exclusive focus on this aspect of 'political theology' and 'ideology'—an element which is inevitably present in Islamic writing of any period—inevitably tends to obscure the immensely wider set of common Qur'anic and Islamic conceptions and problems dealt with in virtually every known Ismaili writing,²⁶ while at the same time glossing over the often equally significant basic differences of outlook, assumptions and ultimate intentions separating the many types and representatives of 'Ismaili literature' even within this and other periods.²⁷

The *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*—again whether or not it is fully representative of the socio-historical realities of the Ismaili *da'wa* in the pre-Fatimid period—is especially revealing in this regard because of its clear and consistently repeated distinction between what it terms the *bāṭin* (corresponding, in the religious realm, to a relatively familiar body of Shi'ī 'ideological' interpretations of Qur'anic symbolism in terms of cosmology, the religious hierarchy, etc.)²⁸ and the underlying, universal spiritual reality it calls the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*, which can only be fully realised through the necessary rare combination of individual predisposition, ongoing spiritual discipline and divine grace, under the proper guidance of a true master. Needless to say, the *bāṭin* (in this specially limited sense) looks entirely different when it is viewed or unthinkingly accepted by itself and when it is perceived as fully illuminated by the deeper spiritual meanings and intentions revealed to the true 'knower' who has actually realised those common, deeper spiritual realities which it is meant to convey.

In fact, the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* as a whole is entirely devoted to bringing out the manifold corresponding functions of each of those levels of thought and reality: it is no accident if the spiritually apt 'young man' Ṣāliḥ quickly leaves behind the *bāṭin* in his first long discussion with his guide—while the theologian Abū Mālik and

his followers have not even arrived there at the end. For the metaphysical and epistemological schema outlined (and assumed) here can be readily applied as well to most of the distinctive themes to be found in any account of Ismaili 'doctrines.' To take a particularly well-known example, the diverse 'cycles' of prophets, messengers, imams etc., discussed in many slightly later Ismaili works can be understood (a) on the level of historical and traditional—or of cosmological—erudition (i.e., their '*ẓāhir*'); (b) as one element of an official 'political theology' or 'ideology,' either as justifying a particular dynastic claim or as pointing to a historical project and ideal yet to be realised (i.e., their *bāṭin*, as that term is used here); or (c) as purely symbolic allusions to constantly present grades or types of spiritual realisation and understanding (the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*). The 'real' meaning of such symbols, as Ja'far indicates, necessarily depends on the situation and intentions of each author and reader (or guide and disciple) alike,²⁹ but it certainly cannot be reduced to, nor exhausted by, a single 'exoteric' plane of socio-political interpretation.

A third, closely related common historical misconception concerning early (and even later) Ismailism is that it arose from the original and intentional propagation, in the Islamic context, of a particular philosophic or 'gnostic' point of view. Often this historical image—which has its scholarly basis in a justifiable interest in the important philosophic writings of such Ismaili thinkers as Muḥammad b. al-Nasafī, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Abū Yā'qūb al-Sijistānī, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shūrāzī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw,³⁰ not to mention the more complicated case of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'—is closely allied with the more widespread popular assumption, deeply rooted in centuries of hostile propaganda, that the Ismailis represented some sort of extraneous, even hostile 'innovation' (*bid'a*) with regard to the main currents of Islamic thought and history.

Without denying the importance of those (almost exclusively Persian) Ismaili thinkers in their own right and while fully acknowledging the distinctiveness of the intellectual tradition they represent, even a cursory comparison of their works with the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* or any of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's other works will immediately bring out the very different sources of his thought and writing

in a profound reflection on (and wide-ranging acquaintance with) the Qur'an and hadith, especially as conveyed by an elaborate and long-standing body of Shi'ī tradition.³¹ The profoundly Arab and thoroughly Islamic outlook and presuppositions reflected in his use of those materials, as well as in the cultural assumptions of the main characters in this work, are likewise exemplified throughout the writings of his famous younger contemporary, the Qāḍī al-Nu'mān. This should certainly not be taken to suggest that the works of these two Arab authors are either more 'authentically' Ismaili or Islamic than those of the famous Iranian philosophers just mentioned. What is more important, however, from a strictly historical point of view, is the way the undeniable contrast between the writings of these two groups of near-contemporary Ismaili authors—and the wider intellectual traditions and contrasting cultural milieus they clearly represent³²—itself helps point out the dangers and limits of those stereotypes discussed in the preceding sections.

A fourth common misconception about early Ismailism—a prejudice that encompasses all the three preceding points and is at once both the least founded in actual Ismaili literature and the most clearly rooted in hostile propaganda—is that it preached some sort of vague 'antinomianism' (*ibāḥa*) or at least an eventual transcending of the Islamic revelation (*shari'a*), whether generally and universally (e.g., in an eventual messianic or eschatological context) or for a special initiatic elite. But if there are several well-known cases, emphasised precisely by common Shi'ī traditions (shared with the Twelvers and others), of such messianic 'excesses' (*ghulāt*) even among the followers of some of the earliest imams, nothing of the sort is at all visible in the *Kitāb al-ʿAlīm wa'l-ghulām*, which clearly goes to the greatest possible lengths, throughout all the encounters between the Knower and his disciple, to emphasise the essential inner interdependence of all three levels of reality, but more especially of the *ẓāhir* and *bāḥin*.³³ In fact, a thorough critique of this common temptation of a sort of 'spiritual antinomianism'—i.e., of denigrating the routine practice of the commonly accepted religious obligations in favour of a more purely 'spiritual' conception of Islam or a chiliastic 'revolutionary' transformation of the human condition—is one of the central themes of this work as a whole, since the Knower

repeatedly stresses the key role of the prescribed practices of each divine revelation within the spiritual work that must be undertaken by each disciple.

With Ja‘far b. Manṣūr, the vehemence of this insistence on the fundamental role of the external aspect (*zāhir*) of the revelation clearly has its own more poignant personal roots in the dramatic apostasy (and violently ‘antinomian’ revolt) of his father’s Yemeni follower and erstwhile Ismaili companion, ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl. For that story and its vividly drawn moral is the primary theme of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*, discussed in the biographical section III below. This insistence, which is equally apparent in his other works, may also have a more ‘official’ background in the reaction of Ismaili leaders to the even more shocking and notorious actions of the various Qarmaṭī groups.³⁴ In any case, the Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s extremely influential writings, for example, are equally steadfast and unequivocal in their affirmation of (and studied attention to) the importance of the revelation—as understood in Shi‘i tradition, of course—and its practice and observance without exception.³⁵

D. Later Musta‘lī Ismailism

While the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* is undoubtedly of real historical importance with regard to our understanding of early Ismailism and the pre-Fatimid *da‘wa*, that particular historical aspect of its interest should not obscure the fact that—along with the rest of Ja‘far b. Manṣūr’s writings³⁶—it has continued to be carefully studied and copied down through the centuries as an important part of the curriculum of religious studies in the Musta‘lī Ismaili community (in both its Sulaymānī and Dā‘ūdī branches).³⁷ As indicated by the provenance of the manuscripts discussed in the following section, as well as numerous additional recent manuscripts cited in Poonawala’s *Bibliography*, the book appears to have been studied regularly for centuries by both major branches of the Musta‘lī Ismailis and in Yemen—where the works of Ja‘far b. Manṣūr (as a key historical ‘forefather’ of Yemeni Ismailism) seem to have enjoyed special favour—as well as among the larger educational centres of that Ismaili group in western India (Gujarat). The special role of the

Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām in the religious studies of the Musta‘li Ismailis is already mentioned, for the 12th/18th century, in the famous *Fihrist* of Ismaili Literature by Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Rasūl al-Majdū‘. And for the contemporary period, Prof. Osman Yahya has personally reported, on the basis of his teaching in Surat, that it was being used in the beginning stages of the three-stage religious studies curriculum (the *ma‘ārif*, *ḥaqā’iq* and *asrār*) of the Bohras, while another (confidential but well-placed) modern informant has indicated that its proper place is at the very culmination of that course of study (i.e., among the ‘secrets’ or *asrār*).³⁸

In any case, the existence of these numerous, carefully copied and corrected recent manuscripts, in an area where the natural life of such documents is normally quite short, points to the continuous intrinsic religious interest of this text in very different historical conditions from those surrounding its original composition. At the same time, the abundance of such texts in manuscript form also serves to highlight the relative lack of recent scholarly interest in the characteristic religious thought and structures of that community during those little-known centuries of Ismaili history, despite the vast range of Ismaili literature that has now become publicly available, both in manuscript and in printed form, during the past few decades.

III. JA‘FAR B. MANŠŪR AL-YAMAN AND HIS WRITINGS

The reliable external evidence concerning the life of Ja‘far b. Manšūr is so extremely limited that one can easily construct very different hypotheses concerning the date of composition of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and most of his other extant writings.³⁹ We know from the *Kitāb Kashf asrār al-Bāṭiniyya wa akhbār al-Qarāmiṭa*, an anti-Ismaili polemic (as its title indicates) by Ibn Mālik al-Yamanī, that Ja‘far’s father Ibn Ḥawshab, the leader and co-founder—hence his honorific, messianic title of ‘Manšūr al-Yaman,’ ‘the divinely aided (founder)’ of the Yemeni Ismaili community—died of natural causes, as a fairly old man, in the year 302/914–915.

We are also told by the same source that after a number of dramatic events involving the apostasy and eventual massacre of most

of Ja‘far’s family in the Yemen, he permanently emigrated to the court of the second Fatimid Caliph-imam al-Qā‘im (ruled 322–334/934–946) in Ifrīqiya, modern-day Tunisia. The first direct signs of his presence at the Fatimid court and of his continued passionate support for the Fatimid cause are several poems written in commemoration of victories during the famous revolt of Abū Yazīd, in the last two years of the reign of al-Qā‘im (333–334/945–946) and under the subsequent reign of al-Manṣūr (r. 334–341/946–953).⁴⁰ And the *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, while recounting an incident from the early years of the reign of the following Fatimid Caliph al-Mu‘izz (r. 341–365/953–975) involving Ja‘far’s house near the palace in the recently founded capital of Manṣūriyya, incidentally mentions Ja‘far’s high rank in the esteem of that Imam.⁴¹ Finally, as W. Madelung has shown in detail, at least two of Ja‘far’s later doctrinal works demonstrate the reworking of the Fatimid genealogy and corresponding theories of the succession of the Shi‘i imams (as well as the assimilation of a more sophisticated philosophic vocabulary) which took place under the patronage of the Imam al-Mu‘izz.⁴²

Probably the most important biographical indications about Ja‘far b. Manṣūr’s early life and family background, however, are those now contained in the opening chapters of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s *Iftitāh al-da‘wa*, the book which has served as the primary source for most later histories of the beginnings of the Fatimid dynasty, including Ibn Khaldūn’s famous and influential *History*. The early sections of that work, devoted to the story of Ja‘far’s father, his conversion to Ismailism and his successful mission to the Yemen, are largely taken literally (or paraphrased) from a longer biography of Manṣūr al-Yaman that is almost certainly by Ja‘far himself (i.e., the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* or ‘*Sīrat Abīhi*’), while most of the rest of that account cites eyewitness reports from ‘a close member’ of Manṣūr al-Yaman’s family who is likewise almost certainly Ja‘far himself.⁴³

Now one of the most moving of those eyewitness accounts in the *Iftitāh al-da‘wa*, ‘from someone who was present with [‘Abdullāh al-Shī‘ī, the eventual founder of Fatimid rule in Ifrīqiya] the day he said goodbye to’ the Yemen, in the year 280/893, gives a detailed description of the particular room in ‘Adan Lā‘a (Ja‘far’s home town), its view, and what was said by Manṣūr al-Yaman at that occasion.⁴⁴

Thus, assuming that Ja‘far would have to have been at least an older child in order to remember such details, this would put the latest possible date for his birth back towards the year 270—a timeframe that fits well with the date of Manšūr al-Yaman’s marriage within a local Shi‘i family, shortly after his arrival in Yemen in 268/882.⁴⁵

As for the date of Ja‘far b. Manšūr’s death, it seems quite likely (although this is only one possible hypothesis) that al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s massive, but unacknowledged ‘borrowing’ from Ja‘far’s *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* presupposes that he was already dead at the time of its writing (ca. 346/957), when he would have been more than seventy years old.⁴⁶

On the basis of this very limited data, therefore, one could suppose that the greater part of Ja‘far’s life—including the composition of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*, his history of his father’s successful Ismaili mission (the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab*), and several other works—probably took place in the Yemen, both before his father’s death (in 302/914) and the initial political successes of al-Mahdī in the Maghreb, as well as during the following tumultuous decades there prior to the reign of al-Qā‘im. This hypothesis seems to fit best with both the historical data and the internal evidence of the subjects and development of his writings. (But if one were to assume that Ja‘far was *not* the eyewitness to those later Yemeni events cited by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, then it could be maintained that he emigrated to Ifrīqiya as a relatively young adult and spent most of his life in the Fatimid court.)

In either case, though, the contents and subjects—and even the style—of his writing seem to reflect the division between those two periods of his life and of the Ismaili-Fatimid *da‘wa* more generally.⁴⁷ Thus the events of both the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and his *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab*, whatever the actual dates of composition of those two works, are clearly set in the ‘heroic period’ of the early *da‘wa* (of the imams of ‘concealment’ or *satr*), prior to its lasting political successes in the Maghreb, and are correspondingly oriented toward a relatively wider (and less exclusively Shi‘i) Muslim readership. In comparison, all the rest of his later writings are in the nature of theological teaching manuals clearly directed almost exclusively toward readers who are already thoroughly converted to a particular

Ismaili point of view; as such, they are almost certainly the product of his later employment as an official theologian and religious dignitary in the Fatimid court.

Undoubtedly the most important historical evidence for understanding the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and the origins of Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr’s own spiritual and religious conceptions is contained in the surviving fragments of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*, his biography of his father, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥasan b. Faraj b. Ḥawshab b. Zādān al-Kūfī.⁴⁸ That story, as we can reconstruct it from the sections cited by various later Yemeni authors (as well as those adapted in the *Iftitāh al-da‘wa*), remarkably parallels the outline of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* in many respects, and is even more openly conceived as a sort of indirect, archetypal spiritual autobiography.⁴⁹ Among the relevant points mentioned there are Ibn Ḥawshab’s Kufan background as a devout and learned Twelver Imami Shi‘i disturbed by the apparent (and at that date, quite recent) absence of a living imam.⁵⁰ This strong parental influence is reflected in the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and throughout Ja‘far’s other writings, both in his vast formal knowledge of many areas of earlier Shi‘i tradition,⁵¹ and in his constant stress on the absolute practical religious importance of the ongoing presence in this world of the imam and the mediating spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā’*, the ‘friends of God.’⁵² Ja‘far goes to great lengths, both in the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* and here in the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*, to emphasise that this is not simply an abstract theological or political thesis, a sort of ideological project, but rather a living reality that his father had verified in his personal contacts with the imams of his time, and which Ja‘far himself went on to exemplify in his own personal devotion to their successors in the Fatimid dynasty, despite the dramatic apostasy and violent opposition of his older brother and the rest of his family.⁵³

Finally, perhaps the most important religious and dramatic theme of the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* is the constant contrast between the true spiritual understanding of Ja‘far’s father and the narrowly political outlook of his Yemeni friend and disciple ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl, who eventually led a bloody revolt (in many ways closely resembling the other notorious Qarmaṭī uprisings during the last decade of the third

Islamic century) against both the Fatimids and other Muslim communities in the Yemen.⁵⁴ As already noted, Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr’s insistence on the absolute importance of the full observance of the prophetically revealed *shari‘a* and the ‘external’ dimension (the *ẓāhir*) of religion—no doubt partly in reaction against these and other familiar messianic movements and antinomian tendencies—is a constant theme throughout the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* and many of his other writings.⁵⁵

As we have already noted, the remaining writings of Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr have for the most part been preserved for centuries in many manuscript collections of the Musta‘li-Ṭayyibī Ismailis,⁵⁶ a fact that reflects both Ja‘far’s continuing special prestige as a teacher of Ismaili scriptural interpretation (*ta’wīl*), from early Fatimid times onward, and perhaps also a certain pride among later Yemeni Ismailis in their famous ‘native son.’ Among those other writings, the most accessible volumes are the *Kitāb al-Kashf* (first edited by R. Strothmann, London-Bombay, 1952; M. Ghālib, Beirut, 1404/1984), a lengthy and curious compilation of several earlier Shi‘i works of *ta’wīl*,⁵⁷ and his *Sarā‘ir al-nuṭaqā’* and *Asrār al-nuṭaqā’* (both edited by M. Ghālib, Beirut, 1404/1984), works devoted to the inner meanings of Qur’anic and other stories from the lives of earlier prophets and imams. Apart from the few poetic *qasidas* celebrating the Fatimid Caliph al-Manṣūr’s victory over the Khārījī rebel Abū Yazīd that were preserved in the *‘Uyūn al-akhbār* of Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn (see note 40 above), Ja‘far’s remaining unpublished works,⁵⁸ as indicated by their titles, are likewise virtually all devoted to similar questions of Ismaili *ta’wīl* and its traditional Shi‘i theological and doctrinal foundations: *K. al-Farā‘id wa ḥudūd al-dīn*;⁵⁹ *K. al-Ridā‘ fī al-bāṭin*; *K. Ta’wīl al-zakāt*;⁶⁰ *Risālat Ta’wīl Sūrat al-Nisā’*; and the *K. al-Shawāhid wa’l-bayān fī ithbāt amīr al-mu’minīn wa’l-‘imma*.

Now all of these works are strikingly distinguished from the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām* in that they are almost exclusively devoted to what is here called the *bāṭin* of religion—i.e., not so much the spiritual reality and truth itself (the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*), but rather the intermediate stage of Ismaili ‘doctrines’ and the organisation of the this-worldly religious hierarchy as they are symbolised in a certain

consistent (but, to the outsider, often apparently arbitrary) interpretation of Qur'anic symbols that is clearly derived from a wider body of earlier Shi'ī tradition.⁶¹ As we have already indicated, the predominance in these works of this sort of elaborate formal (and evidently largely traditional) Shi'ī *ta'wīl*, which is primarily aimed at reinforcing or deepening the faith of those who are already true believers, is probably connected with the later period of Ja'far's more official theological position at the Fatimid court. Yet, however radically these later works may differ from the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* (and the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*), both in style and content, they do demonstrate certain common themes and concerns. The most notable of these common elements are the author's extraordinary familiarity with the Qur'an and a vast range of earlier Shi'ī hadith and interpretive literature, and his persistent focus on the recurrence of certain spiritual types and situations as they are illustrated in their perennial, archetypal form in the Qur'an and earlier Islamic tradition.

IV. READING A QUR'ANIC DIALOGUE

The fact that this particular work of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr has been carefully studied by many generations of readers for over a millennium should suggest that there is perhaps some truth in his forceful insistence at the very end of this tale (boldly echoing the Qur'anic Sura of Joseph) that it is something more than just another 'made-up story.' However, given the understandable unfamiliarity of its literary form and original contexts for most readers today, it may be helpful to indicate some practically useful ways to begin to discover this work's hidden depths and riches. To begin with, the essence of the dramatic dialogue form is to entice and simultaneously *oblige* the properly prepared and motivated reader into an increasingly deeper inner, necessarily 'personalised' exploration of the particular issues (whether ethical, political, epistemological or metaphysical) dramatised through the conflicting viewpoints of the various 'actors' participating in each drama. Thus the lasting effectiveness of that literary form depends above all on the author's ability to capture and articulate genuinely archetypal perspectives and issues which

are rooted in recurrent human situations and possibilities, in what Ja'far here calls the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*, the 'innermost reality' of things. Rather than expressing 'doctrines' or 'ideas' which could otherwise be formulated in a simpler, more prosaic and accessible form, the spiritually operative dimension of this dramatic dialogue is rooted in the author's quintessentially Qur'anic awareness that each appropriately prepared reader already participates unavoidably in the same recurrent metaphysical dramas, and therefore must necessarily discover his or her own answers to these fundamental challenges and dilemmas.

Plato, like Ja'far here, typically engaged his contemporary readers in his dramatic dialogues by including both well-known historical actors and a host of literary and mythical figures and allusions whose archetypal roles and wider symbolic significance were readily apparent to his original educated audience. For Ja'far and his originally intended audiences, the familiar (to them!) figures and allusions of the Qur'an and hadith—which of course stretch back through a vast panorama of 'sacred history,' symbolism and forms of interpretation partially shared with cognate Judaeo-Christian religious traditions—provided a similar, but perhaps far more extensive, symbolic field of archetypal references. Given Ja'far's own remarkable mastery of those inner dimensions of the Qur'an and related Islamic traditions, any serious reading of this exemplary dialogue requires a close, careful attention to all the relevant dimensions of that vast web of Qur'anic allusions out of which he has woven this drama. Since those scriptural allusions are typically quite brief, and often employed in an ironic, ambiguous or pointedly critical manner which frequently forces the student to refer back to their broader, detailed original Qur'anic contexts, that participatory 'work' required to penetrate Ja'far's dialogue may be quite demanding for modern readers.

Yet those who take the time needed to study the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* as it was intended to be read will discover that the entire book is carefully designed as a three-part dialectical discussion between (a) the experiences and situations of the characters in the drama; (b) each reader's own experiential 'version' of these archetypal situations; and (c) the sometimes lengthy and elaborate (or

problematically symbolic) articulation of the themes underlying these situations, and the corresponding 'laws' and recurrent structures of spiritual life scattered throughout the Qur'an.⁶² As with most forms of 'esoteric' writing in traditional Islamic culture, this text therefore presupposes a much more active, demanding and ongoing 'participation' on the part of its intended 'readers' than we normally assume today.⁶³

To begin with, the original audiences for this text, like most readers of the Arabic down to the last century, could safely be assumed to have an intimate and detailed awareness of the Qur'an, such that the briefest allusion was sufficient to evoke the typically much longer and widely scattered Qur'anic passages suggested by what are, in many cases, only one or two Arabic words. Thus thoughtful readers who could approach this text with that essential preparation would eventually discover that its ultimate subject—especially throughout the first, less polemic, half of the work—might even be summarised as the accomplished spiritual intelligence of the underlying structures and principles of one's spiritual life through the illuminating perspectives of the Qur'an.⁶⁴ So it should not be hard to imagine what is lost if one reads through the English without stopping to reflect on the relation between the 'visible' drama and the implicit mediating presence of the Qur'an.

Therefore, serious students of this text, whether they are working individually or in a study group (and the latter approach, as with Plato's dialogues, is usually more fruitful and illuminating) will want to look up key Qur'anic allusions and reflect on their relations to the recurrent events and spiritual laws being dramatised in each passage. We have attempted to facilitate such careful study by identifying in italics and giving references to the first few Qur'anic occurrences of the terms in each passage or allusion,⁶⁵ although those more familiar with the Qur'an will immediately recognise that the entirety of the dialogue is in fact inseparably woven together from central Qur'anic themes.

V. MANUSCRIPTS AND EDITION

This edition of the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* is based on the following five manuscripts:

[1] This manuscript, completed on 21 Dhū al-Ḥijja, 1098 AH (= October 9, 1687), is now located in the collection of the library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, which kindly provided a photocopy and the opportunity to study the original. It is described in A. Gacek's *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies*, vol. 1, (pp. 3–4, item 6), and is the same copy listed in I.K. Poonawala's *Biobibliography of Ismāʿīlī Literature* (p. 74, item 14) as belonging to the Ismailia Association for Pakistan. The text comprises 182 pages (12.5 x 18 centimetres) of 13 lines (7.5 cm.) per page.

This is undoubtedly the most carefully copied and corrected manuscript among those available for this edition; it was also collated with more than one earlier manuscript during the copying process, as indicated by the occasional marginal indications (also included in our critical apparatus) of alternative readings from 'another manuscript' (نسخ). Other indications of the extreme care with which this manuscript was prepared include the provision throughout of red marks (like inverted commas, slightly above each line) to separate each phrase, and the inclusion of vocalisation at several points where confusion or ambiguity would otherwise be likely.

An important historical point—which also may explain the exemplary state of this manuscript—is that it bears the official seal, both at the beginning and at the end, of 'Sayyidnā Hibat Allāh b. Ibrāhīm' (d. 1160/1747 in Najrān, Yemen), who was the 32nd chief *dāʿī* in the Sulaymānī branch of the Mustaʿlī-Ṭayyibī Ismailis (see the chronological listing of the chief *dāʿīs* of this branch in Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 368). The fact that the manuscript once belonged to this chief *dāʿī* (and quite possibly to his predecessor, since it was copied during his term of office) may indicate that it was meant to be used as something of an official or 'master' copy in the curriculum of Ismaili religious studies of which it was an important part (see section II.D above).

[ح] This manuscript, completed on 27 Shawwal, 1267 AH (25 August, 1851), now belongs to the library of the Jāmi‘a Sayfiyya, the madrasah of the Bohra (Dā’ūdī-Musta‘lī) Ismaili community in Surat, India; an excellent photocopy was generously made available by Professor Osman Yahya. The text consists of 200 pages (13 x 19 cm.) of 11 lines (7.5 cm) per page. It is in an extremely clear and legible hand, and contains a number of more recent marginal explanations, added diacritical markings (some in pencil), and other signs of recent and continuing use.

The lengthy and informative colophon at the end of this manuscript (included in our edition) indicates that it was copied by a certain Ismā‘īl b. ‘Ajabshāh in the time of the 47th Dā’ūdī Ismaili chief *dā‘ī*, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir Najm al-Dīn b. Ṭayyib (see Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 368). The manuscript has on many pages the personal seals of both Ismā‘īl b. ‘Ajabshāh and Jābir b. Shaykh Ismā‘īl (presumably a son of the original scribe); the latter seal bears the name in Arabic, Gujarati and English (Latin script). This manuscript is apparently not included in the list given by Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 74.

[ي] This manuscript, also from the Bohra Ismaili community of Surat, was in the possession of Professor Osman Yahya, who again kindly encouraged us to examine and copy it. It lacks a colophon or seals which would permit exact dating, but in the opinion of Dr Yahya it would seem to date from the early 19th century in India—i.e. roughly contemporary with or even slightly earlier than the preceding copy. The only explicit indication of ownership or provenance is the more recent mention, in pencil on one of the (otherwise blank) opening pages, of one ‘‘Abd al-Qādir b. Yūsufbhai’ and ‘Wazīr al-Jāmi‘a al-Sayfiyya, Sūrat, al-Hind.’ This manuscript is likewise apparently not mentioned in Poonawala’s *Biobibliography*.

The text of this copy covers 160 pages (9.5 x 15.5 cm.), varying from 13 to 17 lines (of 6.5 cm.) per page, written in a compact but extremely legible and careful hand. There are a few blank spaces, noted in our critical apparatus, where the scribe clearly left the section markings (i.e., ‘the knower/young man said,’ etc.) to be completed later in red ink, but neglected to do so on certain pages. As with the preceding manuscript, there are also a few more recent

marginal annotations (addition of diacritical markings, glosses of difficult Arabic terms, etc.), frequently in pencil, again indicating that the copy has continued to be used up to the present day for study purposes.

[ف] This is the manuscript at the Bombay University library (M. Goriawala, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Fyzee Collection of Ismaili Manuscripts*, Bombay, 1965, no. 13; Poonawala, p. 74, item 14), a photocopy of which was kindly made available by the library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. The text comprises 118 pages of 18 lines (of 8 cm) to the page; it is dated 1314 AH/1897 AD (*both* dates being given in the colophon). The handwriting is relatively hurried and careless when compared with the other manuscripts above, although still legible and with some diacritical points, and the text contains a great number of unique variant readings which are apparently due to the scribe's heedlessness and, in certain cases, his evident desire to 'correct' or simplify unfamiliar or ungrammatical expressions.

The main interest of this particular manuscript is historical, in that it first served to bring the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-gḥulām* to the attention of the larger scholarly community, through the article by W. Ivanow, 'The Book of the Teacher and the Pupil,' in his *Studies in Early Persian Ismailism* (Cairo, 1948), pp. 85-113.

[ك] This is a recent transcription, kindly provided by Mme Stella Corbin, of a relatively early photocopied manuscript which had been sent to Professor Henry Corbin by W. Ivanow; the original manuscript was dated 10 Jumādā 1, 1012 AH (Nov. 15, 1603). That copy was described by Ivanow (in his article just mentioned, p. 88) as being of 163 pages of 13 lines (4 inches long) to the page. However, we were unable to locate either the original manuscript or photocopies of it so as to verify the readings in Corbin's transcription; for the same reason, it was impossible to determine whether or not Ivanow's copy was the same as one of the several other manuscripts in private Bohra collections (for which no colophon dates are given) cited in Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 74.

Orthographic and Grammatical Particularities

All the manuscripts used for this edition share certain orthographic features, differing from the conventions of modern Arabic printed texts, which are common to Arabic manuscripts from the Western Indian region (and often to earlier Arabic manuscripts more generally). In addition, all of the copies used for this edition did provide the full diacritical points, although their reading (again as with any Arabic manuscript) was occasionally problematic. Vocalisation, on the other hand, was very rare, with the exception of the specification of some unusual verbal forms which was already noted for manuscript 1.

In general, the orthography has been ‘modernised’ to accord with modern standard Arabic usage where that seemed desirable to avoid possible confusion or misunderstanding on the part of contemporary readers who would normally be unfamiliar with some of the spelling conventions followed in these manuscripts. In particular, orthography has been changed systematically for the following points:

- (a) *Alif maqṣūra* has been spelled as such (e.g., الـى), instead of the fully pointed *yāʿ* (الي) usually found in all the manuscripts, which could otherwise frequently be confusing.
- (b) *Alif mādda*, which is usually missing in the manuscripts, has been indicated as such (e.g., آداب, آمن).
- (c) The ‘seat’ of the *hamza* has been indicated according to the accepted common modern forms (except in Qur’anic quotations). In the original manuscripts, the *hamza* was almost always either missing entirely or else indicated only by a sometimes ambiguous *wāw* or *yāʿ* (e.g., بدو for بدأ or اومي for أوما).
- (d) Standard abbreviations have been spelled out in full: e.g., تعالى for تع

Readers may also notice occasional minor deviations, such as are common in most middle Arabic texts, from strict grammatical norms concerning such matters as Arabic numbers, the agreement of subject and verb, pronouns and their referents, and so forth. In such cases readings given by all the manuscripts have usually not been corrected where the meaning would still remain clear, although

sometimes a grammatically ‘correct’ variant reading has been chosen for the main text even where it was not supported by the older and more reliable manuscripts. This problem was frequently posed by the many passages where the author paraphrases or alludes to a Qur’anic verse in a context which requires some slight grammatical changes (for example, a different person, number or tense of the verb) from the original Qur’anic context. Often the variant readings at such points indicate that certain later scribes attempted to ‘correct’ the Arabic either toward the Qur’anic or the grammatically appropriate reading, so that the author’s original choice may now be difficult to determine.

Variant Readings and Manuscript Affiliations

The condition of these manuscripts and their relations reflect the unusual history of the text itself: as something of a ‘textbook’ in the elaborate curriculum of religious training in the Musta‘lī Ismaili tradition over many centuries, this work has been continually studied and copied out by generations of students (see section II.D above). This unbroken tradition of group study, requiring close attention to the actual text, may help account for the fact that all the manuscripts, despite their different ages, are in fact in remarkably close agreement.⁶⁶ Very few of the variant readings concern more than a single letter or word, and even fewer make any significant difference in the basic meaning of the text.

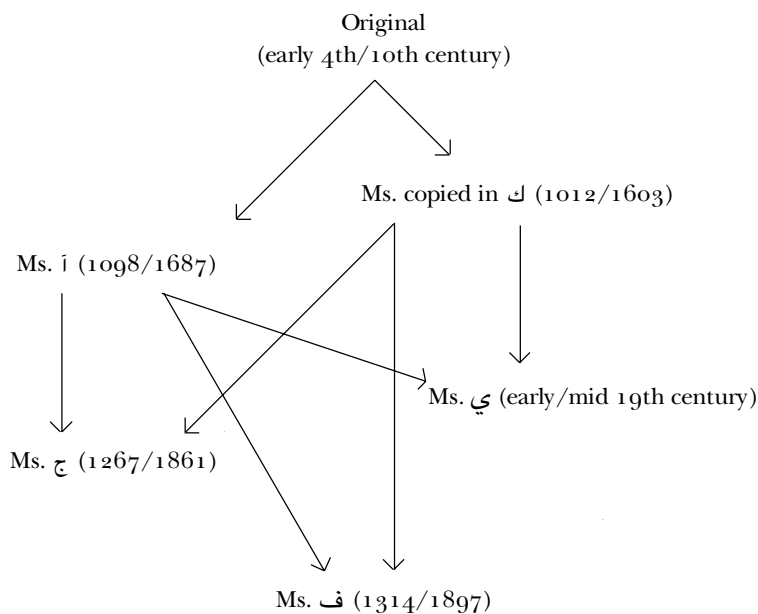
The following observations concerning the relative reliability and carefulness of the different manuscript copies and their possible historical affiliations help to explain the weight given to certain manuscripts (especially the oldest, *ī*) in the selection among variants for the main printed text. The following conclusions are based on a detailed statistical analysis of all the variant readings:

- (a) Confirming the impression that the transmission process has involved ongoing careful study of the copies, virtually all of the cases (some 97 per cent) involve a *single* variant reading, which may be shared by one or more manuscripts.

- (b) In the great majority of cases, the variant reading is clearly recognisable as a single copyist's error: some 70 per cent of the variants are found only in a single manuscript, and only very rarely (especially with the two oldest manuscripts) has that unique reading seemed more appropriate.
- (c) The ranking of manuscripts according to the number of unique variants found in each confirms the initial impression that the early Ismailia Association/IIS manuscript [i] is the most carefully copied and corrected (with only about 70 unique readings), while the very late Fyzee Collection copy [ف] is, relatively speaking, rather carelessly done (with almost 190 unique readings, many of them obvious copyist mistakes). The two manuscripts originating in Surat [ي and ج] both seem to have been carefully copied and corrected (roughly 90 unique readings in each), while with the recent transcription of Ivanow's (originally oldest) manuscript [ك] (with some 115 unique readings) it is difficult to say which variants were already in the original manuscript and which were introduced in the recent transcription process.
- (d) It is quite evident that no single manuscript used in preparing this edition was simply copied directly from one of the others. However, certain of the manuscripts are certainly more closely related than others, judging from those cases (27 per cent of the total variant readings) where a given reading is supported by three manuscripts against two others. The detailed analysis of those cases suggests the following conclusions:
- (i) The two oldest manuscripts [i and the original of ك] represent two clearly separate manuscript traditions, since their 'separative' readings are opposed some 70 per cent of the time.
 - (ii) None of the three more recent manuscripts [ف, ج and ي] seems to have been copied directly from any of the others, since there is a substantial number of separative readings in every case.
 - (iii) The manuscript ج is considerably closer to the Ismaili Association/IIS manuscript [i], and the manuscript ي is more closely related to the tradition of the original manuscript

underlying ك, while the more recent Fyzee collection manuscript [ف] appears to draw almost equally from the traditions represented by *ī* and by the original of ك.

For the sake of simplicity, the above conclusions about the relationships of these manuscripts over time and their relative affiliations—since the complexities of their actual historical relations are likely to remain unknown—can be represented graphically as follows:



Format of the Arabic Edition

The presentation of the Arabic text adopted here involves certain departures from the form of the original manuscripts (in addition to the spelling changes already mentioned) designed to make the edition more readable and the allusions in the text more accessible to those wishing to study it in depth. These changes in format are as follows:

- (a) Section and paragraph divisions: In the original manuscripts the different speakers in the dialogues (but not usually the unnamed background narrator) are clearly distinguished by having their names and the opening ‘he said’ (*qāla...*) written in red ink; the word *ثم* indicating important subdivisions, is also sometimes given in red ink. Following these indications, we have clearly separated each speaker’s contribution and have also given separate section divisions for each separate intervention of the narrator, who is not so clearly indicated in the original manuscripts. The consecutive numbering of these sections of the dialogue is also an editorial addition aimed at facilitating cross-references to the Arabic indexes and the English translation and notes.
- (b) Punctuation: *All* punctuation has been added by the editor, with the aim of bringing out the structure and procedure of the argument. Apart from the scribe’s rare ‘phrasing’ indications in manuscript *ī* alone, the manuscripts themselves contain only the minimum suggestions provided by the few Arabic particles and conjunctions, so that alternative punctuations (with corresponding changes in interpretation, etc.) would of course be possible for many passages, as in any dramatic text.
- (c) Citations of Qur’an and hadith: As explained above (section iv), this book is largely woven together from a multitude of allusions to hundreds of passages of the Qur’an and to various important hadith, usually from the Prophet, but also including allusions to important sayings of early Shi‘i imams widely respected by Sunni Muslims as well, especially ‘Alī (such as the famous conversation with Kumayl later included in *al-Nahj al-balāgha*), Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Šādiq. This web of allusions—reflecting the author’s remarkable culture and facility in the spiritual interpretation of the Qur’an and hadith—is generally so artfully and unobtrusively constructed that it often seems an almost invisible part of the natural flow of the discussion: such ‘hidden’ citations, as we have indicated in the English translation, are in fact far more numerous than the few explicit quotations from the Qur’an.

While longer Qur'anic allusions are usually identified in the English translation, only the relatively few explicit Qur'anic quotations have been set off by quotation marks and printed with the full vowelings in the Arabic text. The index of Qur'anic references does include allusions as well as quotations, keyed to the section numbers which are the same for both the Arabic and English. These indications have been given, in most cases, only for extended passages (of at least two or three words), and not for individual Qur'anic terms—although the most relevant of these can be found in the long index of technical terms. The numbering of Qur'anic verses used here follows the Cairo edition most commonly used today.

References to Prophetic hadith have been given in the notes to the Arabic edition from the canonical collections of Prophetic sayings (usually following Wensinck's *Concordance*).⁶⁷ Sayings of the early Shi'ī imams have been given from standard reference works (especially *Nahj al-balāgha*), both Ismaili and Twelver, and especially from accessible printed editions of near-contemporary Ismaili works (particularly by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī), as such references help to indicate the familiarity and currency of such sayings in wider Ismaili and Shi'ī circles at this early period. (However, obviously these references should not be taken to indicate the actual or probable literary sources of the hadith as they were used in this text.) In some cases the full text of the Prophetic saying itself (though not the *isnād*), or of several alternative versions, has been quoted at length where that information could be important for grasping the allusion in the text. (We have not attempted, however, to cite the vast hadith literature, whether from the Prophet or the imams, commenting on the many Qur'anic passages and terms alluded to in the text.) It is likely that we have overlooked certain hadith allusions, especially from the immense Shi'ī literature where convenient reference works are only slowly becoming more available; we would be most grateful to readers who would draw such cases to our attention, so that they could be indicated in any future edition of this book.

- (d) Citation of variant readings: Variant readings are indicated by footnotes immediately following the term (or passage) in question, with the alternative reading(s) appearing at the bottom of the page; the footnote numbering of variants begins anew on each page of text. We have indicated in the footnotes only the manuscript source(s) for the variants; the reading included in the main text is therefore that given by all the other manuscripts not cited in the footnote. (As indicated above, some 70 per cent of the variant readings exist only in a single manuscript.) An alternate reading involving the *addition* of a word (or words) is indicated by the sign '+', followed by the addition. A variant involving the *omission* of a word or phrase is indicated by the sign '-', followed by the word or words missing in that manuscript.

The abbreviation نسخة أخرى for نسخ (‘in another manuscript’) indicates an alternative reading given in the margin of manuscript 1, the only copy having this sort of explicit indication of collation with more than one other manuscript.⁶⁸ Most of the remaining indications (for example, بياض for a blank space, etc.) should be self-explanatory in the context.

- (e) Indexes and cross-references: Detailed Arabic indexes have been provided for: (i) key technical terms and concepts, with special attention to those that provide the framework for Islamic (and particularly Shi‘i) religious thought; (ii) proper names, places and titles of books; (iii) allusions to hadith, sayings of the imams and Arabic proverbs; (iv) Qur’anic verses and some Qur’anic allusions. The numbers given in each Index refer to the sections of the printed Arabic text also given in the English translation, numbered consecutively from beginning to end (and *not* to page numbers). This procedure was adopted to facilitate both the location of references (since the sections are usually considerably shorter than a page) and especially easy cross-reference between this Arabic text and indexes and the English translation and notes.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. The timeless, perennial nature of this situation is emphasised both by the repeated allusions to the similar roles of the pre-Islamic prophets and divine messengers mentioned in the Qur'an—especially the archetypal story of Moses and the initiatic figure, later identified as al-Khāḍir, in the Sura of the Cave (18:60–82), which is constantly in the background here—and by the complex frame story (in the opening paragraphs), which places the core narrative in the larger perspective of an ongoing transmission of spiritual knowledge spanning several more generations down to the time of the core drama.

2. The saying in question is the famous account of Imam 'Alī's dramatic 'confession' to his disciple, Kumayl b. Ziyād, which is more familiar today in the later version found in the *Nahj al-balāgha* (ed. M. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo, n.d.), although it is also found in earlier Shi'ī sources (such as the *Kitāb al-Irshād*). See the lengthy (unacknowledged) quotations of 'Alī's teachings from there at paragraphs [157], note 76, and [392], note 165 below.

3. In this respect, these early Shi'ī categories of *zāhir*, *bāṭin* and *bāṭin al-bāṭin* closely correspond with the popular—and equally problematic—later Sufī distinction between *sharī'a* (revealed tradition), *ṭarīqa* (the initiatic way) and *ḥaqīqa* (the underlying divine reality).

4. Many of the points developed in this section would be almost equally applicable to another closely related work (also largely in dialogue form) by the same author, his biographical account of the mission of his own father (the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*), if we can judge by the longer fragments of that book preserved in al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's *Kitāb Iftitāḥ al-da'wa* (ed. W. al-Qāḍī, Beirut, 1970) and in the *'Uyūn al-akhbār* (ed. M. Ghālib, Beirut, 1973–1984) of the later Yemeni Ismaili historian Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn (see the longer discussion of that work in section III of the Introduction).

5. As already noted, the wider narrative context and complex frame story developed in the opening paragraphs serve an essential purpose in bringing out the deeper time perspective—extending back into the past and down to the writer's own day—that dramatically illustrates the author's characteristic insistence on the ongoing transmission of the divine 'trust' of spiritual knowledge and the wider responsibilities that implies for each of his readers.

6. The other side of this is that such statements would often be meaningless or gravely distorted if they were to be taken out of their particular rhetorical and dramatic context. As noted in section II.C of the Introduction,

the neglect of such essential contextual considerations, whether intentional or unintentional, has frequently led to relatively caricatural portrayals of Ismaili religious thought and writing in a number of later historical (and often polemical) settings.

7. Not only are there no direct signs of any sort of borrowing of this literary genre from Plato (or from his less artistic imitators in Hellenistic culture), but the few writings of Plato that are known to have been translated into Arabic (or at least those that have survived in that language) were mainly in a summary, highly abridged form, coloured by intervening philosophic traditions that placed little or no positive value on their distinctive literary qualities and techniques, including the dramatic dialogue form.

8. Ed. Ş. al-Sāwī and G.R. al-A‘wānī (Tehran, 1397/1977).

9. The Arabic edition is included in the recently published bilingual volume, *The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shi‘i Witness*, edited and translated by W. Madelung and P. E. Walker (London, 2000). This important and only recently ‘rediscovered’ work is much more of a vivid, living (and credible) eyewitness account of the early Fatimid period than most of the well-known historical sources mentioned in the following discussion and the Bibliography, which were typically written down as ‘official’ histories or apologetic justifications, sometime well after the actual events they describe.

10. If these latter two Arabic works are mentioned in particular here, it is not because of their (still quite problematical) origins, but rather because of their subsequent historical association and preservation by the same Musta‘li-Ṭayyibī branches of Ismailism which preserved the manuscripts of the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*. For the *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Budhāsf*, itself quoted repeatedly in the later *Rasā’il* of the Ikhwān al-Şafā’, see the Arabic edition by Daniel Gimaret (Beirut, 1972). And note especially that editor’s longer discussion of the history of the manuscripts and their origins in the Introduction (pp. 9–61) to his French translation of the same text, *Le Livre de Bilawhar et Budhāsf selon la version arabe ismaélienne* (Geneva-Paris, 1971), concluding with the judgment that ‘For us, the *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Budhāsf* of the Ismailis represents what is probably one of the first monuments of Arabic prose. ...’ (The term ‘Ismaili’ here refers only to the location of the surviving Arabic manuscripts of this work, and not necessarily to the nature of their doctrinal contents or historical origins.)

11. The same remarkable literary gifts are equally apparent in the surviving fragments of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* (discussed in section III), another ‘cautionary tale’ which beautifully illustrates the same subtle artistic use of

the dramatic dialogue form, constant allusions to hadith and the Qur'an, and other distinctive literary features found in this text. Marshall Hodgson (*The Venture of Islam*, Chicago, 1974, vol. 2, p. 493) has also noted the wider cultural significance of this genre of Ismaili 'accounts of one's own spiritual search and discovery.'

12. See the detailed indexes of Qur'an and hadith allusions and related notes to the English translation.

13. The potential 'affinity' which Ja'far b. Manṣūr suggests in those concluding discussions between the fundamental theses of Ismaili (and most early Shi'ī theology)—its Neoplatonic stress on the ineffable unknowability (*tanzīh*) of the ultimate divine 'One,' and the corresponding absolute practical religious centrality of the divinely inspired attributes and guidance of the more humanly accessible imams and 'friends of God'—and these familiar tenets of Abū Mālik's Mu'tazilī theological creed highlights the growing role of Mu'tazilī thought visible in all the forms of Imami Shi'ism (Twelvers, Zaydi, Ismaili) at the time Ja'far was writing. However, it should be stressed—for the majority of readers unfamiliar with the evolution of early Islamic theology—that these distinctive emphases are already quite central in the earliest, common *shared* sources and expressions of Shi'ī thought. Perhaps the most dramatic and accessible illustration of that point is to be found in the dozens of famous 'sermons' attributed to the Imam 'Alī that are collected in the *Nahj al-balāgha*, where those basic themes (of God's *tanzīh* and our essential human need for the 'revelation' and ongoing guidance of the 'friends of God') pointedly structure each of those classical formulations of Shi'ī teaching.

14. Those distinctive Ismaili and broader Shi'ī institutions, with their intellectual and religious assumptions and terminologies, are briefly explained in short footnotes to the translation as they are gradually introduced in the course of the dialogue.

15. In any case, it is certainly these dominant, profoundly spiritual dimensions of the work (and not its initial ideological claims) that account for the survival and continued regular use of this text down through the centuries in the religious studies of the Bohra (Musta'li-Ṭayyibī) branch of the Ismailis (section II.D of the Introduction), long after the practical abandonment of any wider political hopes for the imamate.

16. One quite visible and relatively uncontroversial sign of such wide-ranging and relatively 'clandestine' influences was the well-studied key role of Ismaili conceptions in a number of medieval Jewish philosophers and religious thinkers primarily living in the Muslim 'West' (see the essay by S. Pines cited at note 18 below). The continuing sensitivity of Sunni-Shi'ī

issues has unfortunately too often continued to hinder, even in modern Western scholarship, a similarly open exploration of potential Ismaili (and wider Shi'i) influences on such developments as the metaphysics of Avicenna or the cosmologies of later key Muslim thinkers in Andalusia and the Maghreb.

17. Hence the early lasting political successes of the early Ismaili (pre-Fatimid) *da'wa*, as of other competing rebellions and religio-political claims at that time, were mainly in relatively remote areas where the authority of the Abbasids (and later the Seljuqs, etc.) was exercised, if at all, only indirectly through local chieftains and tributaries: Yemen, Sind, the Berber peoples of North Africa, and the mountains of Badakhshān, among others.

18. The full diversity and variety (geographical, doctrinal and political) of the 'Ismaili movements' in the period both prior to and even after the initial success of the Fatimids has become much clearer through the painstaking historical researches of W. Madelung (summarised in the articles in the *EI*2, vol. 4, on 'Ismā'īliyya' and 'Ḳarḡaḡī'), supplemented by several recent works by H. Halm and the more fragmentary studies of S.M. Stern (see detailed references in Bibliography). Together, these studies clearly bring out—primarily at the level of political history and its more narrowly 'ideological' reflections—the multiple differences between the Fatimids (or their predecessors) and the Qarḡaḡīs, and the considerable variety of different movements, ideologies and historical situations included under both epithets. (Generations of later Ismaili and anti-Ismaili writers alike both tended to overlook these distinctions and conflicts—albeit for very different reasons.)

However, the wider implications of these important new historical insights and distinctions have not yet been fully assimilated and reflected at the level of broader literary, philosophic and religious studies of these movements. Because the most original modern scholars, like their predecessors, have continued to focus primarily on political history and those (relatively narrow) aspects of Ismaili writings—e.g., the changing 'doctrine' of the imamate—directly related to political events and sectarian developments, relatively little attention has been paid to the wider religious and philosophic dimensions of Ismaili literature, and especially to the many areas where it overlaps with other Shi'i (or even more broadly Islamic) perspectives and ways of thinking. In English, S. Pines' modestly entitled article on 'Shi'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*' (see Bibliography) is probably the best readily accessible introduction to the wider philosophic and religious interest of this literature.

19. As noted in the biographical section III of the Introduction, Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's adult life apparently spanned the period just prior to the establishment of Fatimid rule in Ifrīqiya and the reigns of several of the first Fatimid caliph-imams, for whom he worked after his emigration (at an uncertain date) from the Yemen. Therefore, it is theoretically conceivable that the *Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām* could have been written after his move to North Africa and simply have been 'set' in an earlier period. However, on the basis of purely internal evidence (and the striking contrast with Ja'far's more numerous Ismaili doctrinal writings clearly produced under official Fatimid sponsorship) it is very difficult to imagine that in such a case this work would not have made at least some mention of the recent public establishment and widely propagated claims of the first Fatimid imams. Instead, readers can easily verify that this book consistently treats the Ismaili *da'wa* as being in concealment and a state of persecution *throughout* the Islamic world, as was the case prior to the establishment of the Fatimids; likewise, the rank and exact nature of the 'grand master' (*al-shaykh al-akbar*, etc.) is treated with the same intentional vagueness that evidently surrounded the public identity of the imams during the period of concealment (*satr*)—not least for very practical political reasons.

20. In the 'young man' Ṣāliḥ's latter discussions with Abū Mālīk in particular, Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr does clearly acknowledge the sort of widespread popular socio-economic grievances that historians usually point to in explaining the historical success of Fatimid (and other) 'propaganda' during this period. And in the repeated attacks in the first half of the work on those who would claim to do away with the *sharī'a* (or with its 'external' religious duties, the *zāhir* more generally), Ja'far likewise acknowledges the pitfalls of a sort of antinomian, messianic, 'revolutionary' appeal whose violent dangers and illusions he had himself apparently experienced in their most extreme form: see the discussion of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* in section III of the Introduction.

It is also worth noting that one finds an even wider range of religio-philosophic motivations and dimensions developed throughout the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'—a fact which no doubt accounts for the lasting and remarkably diverse appeal of that encyclopaedic work in very different situations (Sunni and Shi'i, mystical, philosophic, scientific, political, etc.) throughout later Islamic history.

21. The history of recent 'socialist' movements, in all parts of the world, tellingly provides a host of dramatic and recurrent illustrations of highly influential activists, theoreticians, artists, organisers and others who were diversely inspired by radically different ideals and aims than those which

were eventually put into practice by the politically 'successful' beneficiaries of those same movements.

22. In this work, note especially the long search of the Knower at the beginning, through many cities, for a *single* suitable pupil to transmit the 'life' of his spiritual understanding, and the way that the astute reader is eventually left with no real illusions about the relative spiritual capacities of Abū Mālik and his companions, for example.

23. One of the most thorough, specific studies of this complex process of the interaction between Ismaili thought and teachings and their religious and political repercussions is Azim Nanji's *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, N.Y., 1978), which explicitly mentions (pp. 102–6) the striking relevance of the *Kitāb al-'Ālim wa'l-ghulām* as a model for illustrating (and explaining) the later creative and lastingly effective activities of the Ismaili *ḫīr*s in a totally different cultural and historical milieu. The same point is illustrated in greater detail, for periods closer to the time of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr himself, in several of the pioneering articles of S.M. Stern (e.g., on the early spread of Ismailism in Sind—where the first *dā'īs* were sent from Yemen by Ja'far's own father—and in Khurasan) included in his *Studies in Early Ismā'īlism* (Jerusalem-Leiden, 1983).

24. The historical illustrations of these different sorts of 'secession' from any central control—whether in religiously sectarian, purely political or more individual form—throughout Ismaili history (before, during and after the period of the Fatimid dynasty) are far too numerous to list here; they are, of course, closely paralleled by numerous incidents in the earliest history of Shi'ism and in the histories of its other major branches as well. As discussed in section III of the Introduction, the famous exemplifications of this phenomenon that are probably most immediately reflected in Ja'far's writings (including the present work) are the notorious cases of 'Alī b. al-Faḍl (in the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*), of the Qarmāṭīs and of some of the Fatimids' earliest Berber allies in North Africa (including the *dā'ī* 'Abdullāh al-Shī'ī himself)—not to mention the lesser-known, but no doubt more poignant apostasy of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's own brother (and most of the rest of his extended family) after the death of his father.

25. To take only one of the most common examples, the long and ongoing controversy as to whether the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' are an Ismaili (or Shi'ī) work or not almost always turns on such assumptions concerning the nature and sources of the supposed central 'teachings' (and broader character and aims) of the early Ismaili *da'wa*. See, for example,

the lengthy discussions summarised in I.R. Netton's *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London, 1982).

26. What is especially striking in Ismaili writings of this fairly early period (e.g., those of Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr or of his near-contemporary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī) is that they are often not set in an implicitly sectarian and intra-Islamic apologetic framework, but instead self-confidently and straightforwardly take up the exposition and defence of Islam in general—often on points which would indeed be widely accepted by Muslims 'belonging' to other socio-religious groups. It is thus rather surprising, in contrast, that most modern secondary accounts still seem to follow the later hostile medieval polemicists and heresiographers in their basic assumption that the Ismaili point of view (like the perspectives of other Shi'ī groups, Sufis, philosophers, etc.) necessarily represents an outside, 'sectarian' or 'foreign' interpretation arbitrarily imposed on some other (purportedly non-interpretative) 'orthodox' understanding of Islam.

27. The frequent absurdity of trying to understand diverse 'Ismaili' authors mainly in terms of their (supposedly common) theologico-political sources and intentions, instead of their wider relations within the full range of relevant Islamic thought in each individual case, becomes quite apparent if one reverses that perspective and applies it, for instance, to such 'Sunni' thinkers as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn 'Arabī. It remains to be shown whether such categorisation (i.e., as 'Ismaili') is really a great deal more revealing, for example, with regard to such Ismaili near-contemporaries as our Yemeni *dā'ī* Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr, the North African jurist al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān and the Persian philosopher Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī.

28. This sort of sometimes rather contrived Qur'anic interpretation (*ta'wīl*)—largely derived from a common body of earlier Shi'ī tradition, including much of the cosmological and astronomical symbolism—is alluded to here primarily in the preliminary discussions of the Knower on the *zāhir* and *bāṭin* (of the Islamic revelation) in paragraphs [84]–[92]. This type of material is, of course, greatly amplified in Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr's other works of Qur'anic exegesis, which—unlike the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* itself—seem to have been written exclusively for an audience of committed Ismailis, most probably in the Fatimid court in Tunisia (see section III of the Introduction). This is the type of exegetical writing almost exclusively described in the available secondary accounts of Ismaili 'doctrine' during this period, usually without clarifying what may have been later, original additions of Ismaili imams (or their followers) and what belongs to the broader, pre-existing body of Shi'ī traditions largely shared with the Twelvers and other Shi'ī groups.

29. Another similar illustration of this outlook within the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*—which is likewise reflected in a wide range of later Ismaili literature—is the complex treatment of the Qur’anic expression *ḥudūd Allāh* (‘God’s limits’) and related terms. Again, these *ḥudūd* can be understood as the divine decrees (*aḥkām*) in general (at every level of conception from the most metaphysical to the most mundane legal sense); as a reference to the cosmic spiritual hierarchy, from God through the angels and other spiritual realities (the *asbāb Allāh*, in the language used here) down to their earthly manifestations; as a justification for or reference to a wide variety of strictly human hierarchies and their corresponding functions (political, religious, etc.); and as an allusion to the inner limits and structures of being (whether moral, metaphysical, etc.).

30. See the important study by S. Pines cited at note 18 above, and full bibliographical references in I.K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā‘īlī Literature* (Malibu, CA, 1977). The relative lack of serious studies of these thinkers until very recently, even in comparison with other areas of Islamic philosophy, is reflected in the fact that until recently only one major scholarly survey of that field, Henry Corbin’s *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris, 1986) has given them any sustained attention. The juxtaposition of these famous names perhaps suggests less about the specific origins and character of Ismaili thought in particular than it does about the cultural structures underlying the curious ongoing localisation, throughout Islamic history, of so many of the most accomplished representatives of the many currents of Islamic philosophical thought (including its related theological and mystical forms) within the area of the Iranian plateau.

31. The author’s own personal roots in that broad corpus of tradition shared with earlier Twelver Shi‘ism, illustrated in some of the notes to this edition, are clearly explained by the important biographical indications concerning his father’s intellectual background as a devoted Imami scholar, in his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* discussed in section III of the Introduction.

32. With these other Ismaili authors, as with Ja‘far (or al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān), it is easily possible to explain the particular form and orientations of their writings in terms of these authors’ own specific intellectual background, and the particular expectations and interests of their intended readership, without postulating any sort of larger, overall intellectual or doctrinal evolution from an ‘archaic’ or ‘mythic’ ‘Yamani school’ to a more ‘advanced’ or ‘philosophic’ ‘Persian school.’ This conception—first put forward in these terms by W. Ivanow, in his *Ibn al-Qaddāh* (Bombay, 1957), pp. 136 and following—apparently inspired the elaborate, but not entirely persuasive, recent development of this hypothesis in H. Halm’s *Kosmologie*

und Heilslehre der Frühen Ismāʿīliya (Wiesbaden, 1978). That interpretation arbitrarily assumes both a separation of early Ismaili (or 'proto-Ismaili') thought from the much wider body of pre-existing Shiʿi (and early Islamic) tradition, and a rejection or minimising of the wider, highly diverse range of complex cosmological and metaphysical frameworks actually contained in this tradition.

33. This should not be taken to indicate any simplistic resolution or denial of all the real practical and larger political problems associated with what may be understood by 'the *sharīʿa*' and its proper interpretation and application. But the type of questions Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr raises in that regard are no more radical than those to be found in many other realms and currents of Islamic thought.

34. The later spread of this particular myth concerning the Ismailis throughout the Islamic world does seem to have its roots mainly in Abbasid propaganda (sometimes perpetuated by earlier modern scholarship) attempting to associate the Fatimids in the popular imagination with some of the particularly infamous actions of the Qarmaṭīs, such as the stealing of the Black Stone from the Kaʿba.

35. See especially the two-volume edition by A.A.A. Fyzee of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* (Cairo, 1951–60) which subsequently served as the basic reference for Ismaili law throughout the Fatimid period and, for the Mustaʿli-Ṭayyibī branches, down to the present day, as well as Fyzee's English translation of the opening chapters on *walāya* in *The Book of Faith* (Bombay, 1974). Robert Brunschvig's article on 'Fiqh Fāṭimide et histoire de l'Ifriqiya' (see Bibliography) gives an excellent overview and important historical background concerning the relatively minor differences in Islamic ritual as outlined in the *Daʿāʾim* (vol. 1), in comparison with the major Sunni legal schools.

36. The important ongoing role of Jaʿfar's writings in the Ismaili *daʿwa* of the Fatimid era is indicated by Ḥamīd al-Kirmānī's particular mention of 'the books of Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman' as exemplars of those 'books of *taʿwīl* comprising the inner worship (*al-ʿibāda al-bāṭiniyya*) connected with (spiritual) knowledge' which should be studied—along with the more exotic works concerning religious practice (*ʿamal*), such as those of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān—before approaching his own comprehensive work of Ismaili philosophy, the *Rāḥat al-ʿaql* (ed. M. Ghālib, Beirut, 1967, p. 109). The special respect surrounding the works of Jaʿfar in this later Fatimid period is also suggested by the attribution to him of at least one surviving clearly apocryphal work, the *Kitāb al-Fatarāt waʾl-qirānāt*: cf. the detailed discussion by H. Halm in 'Zur Datierung des ismaʿilitischen Lehre' (see

Bibliography). The special case of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* is discussed in section III.

37. For the post-Fatimid period (in the Musta‘fi-Ṭayyibī tradition of Yemen), it is significant that Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr’s various writings are repeatedly quoted by many of the famous Yemeni *dā‘īs* (as with the representative case of his *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*); the citations from this Yemeni literature noted by Poonawala (*Biobibliography*, p. 71) are by no means exhaustive. For the modern and contemporary periods, Poonawala (pp. 70–5) lists numerous manuscripts of almost all of Ja‘far’s works (mostly from Bohra collections in India). Similarly, the manuscript collection of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, which is a fairly accurate reflection of the Ismaili literature preserved in India (cf. Gacek, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies*, London, 1984–85, vol. 1), contains more works by Ja‘far (and usually with multiple copies) than any other Ismaili author except al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān and the philosopher al-Kirmānī. This well-attested tradition of ongoing study (and careful copying) seems to account for the relative lack of major divergences among the manuscripts used in this edition (see section V of the Introduction). The continuing modern study of the work is also indicated by the freshly pencilled marginal annotations and explanations for students visible in several of the manuscripts used for our edition.

38. It seems quite possible that both informants may be correct, since the work—as discussed in section I—can be read on many different levels, and is explicitly devoted (cf. paragraph [3] and the concluding paragraph of the Arabic text) to illuminating *both* the proper approach of ‘beginners’ on the spiritual path (*ādāb al-ṭālibīn*) and to the complex problems and methods of spiritual pedagogy that are confronted by the ‘guides’ and spiritual teachers in many different contexts and situations (the *manāḥij al-ṣāliḥīn*).

39. In particular, most standard secondary accounts in major reference works (both in Arabic and in Western languages) contain a great deal of completely mistaken or purely hypothetical suppositions, while leaving out important information. Much of this confusion can be traced to a remark—added by a later reader—at the end of one manuscript of Ja‘far’s *Asrār al-nuṭaqā’* that implies a date of 380/990. The ensuing mis-dating forced first W. Ivanow (*Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*, Tehran, 1963, p. 21) and then Paul Kraus (‘La Bibliographie ismaélienne,’ p. 486) to make Ja‘far a ‘grandson or great-grandson’ of Maṣṣūr al-Yaman—despite the unanimous historical evidence to the contrary—and to suggest that early Yemeni Ismaili works such as the *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa’l-ghulām*

and the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* (and possibly the *Kitāb al-Kashf*) could not be his writing (again despite the unanimous textual and historical evidence to the contrary). Unfortunately, these misleading conclusions were then followed by both Brockelmann (*GAL*, Supplement, I, p. 324), who therefore leaves out almost all of Ja'far's works, and by Sezgin (*GAS*, I, pp. 578–9), and were also repeated in the many Arabic editions and Ismaili histories produced by Muṣṭafā Ghālib.

The reliable historical sources are listed by Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, pp. 70–1. However, Poonawala (possibly still influenced by the mistaken dating by Ivanow and Kraus) places Ja'far *after* al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974) and the early Fatimid poet Ibn Hānī' (362/973), although he was certainly older than both of them; in fact, it is probable that he was at least contemporary with—and quite possibly somewhat older than—the famous early Persian *da'is* Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 323/934) and al-Nasafī (d. 332/943). The article on 'Dja'far' by H. Halm in the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Supplement, fasc. 3–4, pp. 236–7) summarises the very limited known biographical evidence, without any description of Ja'far's writings or their possible chronology. Additional bibliographical information, derived from later Yemeni Ismaili authors, is also included in the 'étude bibliographique' in H. Feki's *Les Idées religieuses et philosophiques de l'ismaélisme faitimide* (Tunis, 1978), pp. 16–19, and in the fundamental historical study by W. Madelung ('Das Imamāt in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre,' see Bibliography) discussed in several of the following notes.

40. These panegyric poems, taken from volume 6 of the late Yemeni *dā'ī* Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn's (d. 872/1468) monumental history of the imamate, the *Uyūn al-akhbār*, are conveniently collected in a previously unpublished article ('Ja'far Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman's Poems on the Rebellion of Abū Yazīd') included in S. M. Stern's *Studies in Early Ismā'īlism*, pp. 146–52; they do not contain any new biographical information, apart from their evidence of Ja'far's religious devotion to the Fatimid cause. Stern's article also briefly summarises the troubled events in the Yemeni *da'wa* following Ibn Ḥawshab's death, as recounted in Ibn Mālik al-Ḥammādī's *Kashf asrār al-Bāṭiniyya* (ed. S. Zakkār, Damascus, 1482/1982). (Idrīs's own historical source is unidentified: it could be an earlier chronicle of Abū Yazīd's rebellion, but also possibly a larger collection of Ja'far's own poetry circulating in the Yemen, since the anti-Ismaili author Ibn Mālik, for example, cites one line from a longer poem Ja'far sent to his brother after the latter's apostasy.) See note 48 below.

41. The full incident is recounted in al-Jawdhārī's *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar* (ed. M.K. Ḥusayn and M.A.H. Sha'ira, Cairo, 1954, p. 126; French tr. M. Canard, Algiers, 1958, pp. 193–4). The account describes the Caliph al-Mu'izz paying off a mortgage which Ja'far had taken on his house near the palace, because of this Imam's great respect for Ja'far and the services of his father. The language of this account strongly suggests that Ja'far was probably quite an old man by the time of this incident. Another famous anecdote—recounted almost five centuries later by Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn (see H. Hamdani, 'Some Unknown Ismā'īlī Authors,' ref. in Bibliography), and summarised by Poonawala (*Biobibliography*, p. 70)—describing the way in which al-Mu'izz taught al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān about Ja'far's higher spiritual rank, is almost surely apocryphal, given the substantial literary evidence of personal acquaintance between these two leading Ismaili authors in the court of al-Mu'izz.

42. See Madelung's classic study, 'Das Imamāt,' especially pp. 94–100, focusing mainly on Ja'far's *Ta'wīl al-zakāt*; the *Kitāb al-Adilla wa'l-shawāhid*, cited in this connection, consists of only a few pages in the extant manuscripts. As discussed below, Madelung suggests there (pp. 51–8; p. 95, n. 275) that the majority of Ja'far's writings—and especially the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* and the *Kitāb al-Kashf*—considerably antedate the reign of al-Mu'izz, reflecting an earlier, specifically Yemeni Ismaili tradition. As discussed above (section II.D), we agree strongly with that Yemeni dating and provenance for the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*. However, Madelung's 'suspicion' (p. 96, n. 282) that the *Ta'wīl al-zakāt* must date from the end of al-Mu'izz's reign (i.e., ca. 364/976), because a discussion concerning the succession to the imamate could be an allusion to contemporary problems involving the sons of al-Mu'izz, does conflict with stronger suggestions (from within the *Ifitāḥ al-da'wa* and *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab*: see following note) that Ja'far would have been at least ninety years old by then—and therefore he probably died nearer the beginning of al-Mu'izz's reign. (For a vivid depiction of Fatimid court life and intrigue during the time of al-Mu'izz, see M. Yalaoui, *Un Poète chiite d'occident ... Ibn Hānī' al-Andalusī*, Tunis, 1976.)

43. These sections alternate between what are clearly fragments taken directly from an unidentified literary work—which we take to be the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* mentioned separately by later Ismaili sources (see note 49 below), since it is in precisely the remarkable dramatic dialogue form of the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*, written in the same striking Arabic style and distinctive language, and recounts a very similar story—and al-Qāḍī Nu'mān's own paraphrases and summaries of the same events (based on

these ‘eyewitness’ reports), in a way that shifts the guiding focus away from Maṣṣūr al-Yaman himself to the Qāḍī’s later personal interest in al-Mahdī and the Fatimid uprising in the Maghreb. It is our hypothesis that al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, by ‘re-writing’ and paraphrasing what was probably a single coherent written source, was trying to give the impression that this section was basically his own composition—especially since this sort of concealed use of earlier sources is certainly not that uncommon among other Arabic historians. The alternative hypothesis suggested by A. Hamdani (‘An Early Fatimid Source,’ pp. 66–7, see Bibliography), that ‘the *Sīra* would have been a proscribed book almost immediately after its composition,’ seems rather unlikely in view of the evidence we have just noted for Ja‘far’s high position under al-Mu‘izz, the continued study of all the rest of his religious works throughout the Fatimid period, and the lack of any other evidence for such a ‘ban.’

Note in particular the following internal descriptions of this key unnamed source (*Iftitāḥ al-da‘wa*, from the edition by W. al-Qāḍī): ‘what was reported to us by a person of knowledge and trustworthiness among the people of [Maṣṣūr al-Yaman]...’ (p. 33, at the very beginning of the *Iftitāḥ*); ‘trustworthy sources from the people of [Maṣṣūr al-Yaman] reported to us...’ (p. 47); ‘one of the people of [Maṣṣūr al-Yaman] reported to us...’ (pp. 48, 53). In each of these cases, these phrases seem designed simply to conceal the fact that al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān is actually quoting from (or paraphrasing) what is actually a single written source. Given the fact that (as reported by Ibn Mālik: see note 53 below) all the rest of Ja‘far’s family apparently stayed behind—and were eventually massacred—in Yemen, this source in Ifrīqiya could hardly be anyone else but Ja‘far himself (or his own written work).

44. *Iftitāḥ* (ed. W. al-Qāḍī), p. 62.

45. See the *Iftitāḥ* (ed. W. al-Qāḍī), p. 45, for the description of Maṣṣūr al-Yaman’s marriage to the daughter of a devoted Shi‘i recently martyred in the prisons of the Sunni ruler of Ṣan‘a; this is the only wife mentioned explicitly in any of the sources. The story also mentions that it was this woman’s first cousin (*ibn ‘ammihā*)—i.e., Ja‘far’s own uncle—who was sent as the first Ismailī *dā‘ī* to Sind, where al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān adds that the *da‘wa* was still flourishing in his time. (For details concerning the success of that *da‘wa* enterprise and its political establishment in Sind [Multan] during this later period, see S. M. Stern’s articles on ‘Ismā‘īlī Propaganda and Fatimid Rule in Sind’ and ‘Heterodox Ismā‘īlism at the Time of al-Mu‘izz,’ reprinted in *Studies in Early Ismā‘īlism*, pp. 177–88 and 257–88.)

Ibn Mālik al-Yamanī's account of the dramatic events after Manšūr al-Yaman's death (below, note 53) suggests that Ja'far was Manšūr's second-oldest son, after the eldest (and future apostate), Abū al-Ḥasan Manšūr; Ibn Mālik also mentions a third son named Abū al-Faḍl and other, unnamed '*awlād*.'

46. Apart from this possible indication of a death date around 346/957, we would therefore agree with the estimate of A. Hamdani ('An Early Fatimid Source,' p. 65) who points out that Ja'far's name is not mentioned in a list of the notables who accompanied al-Mu'izz to Egypt in 362/973, and concludes that he must have 'lived somewhere between 270/883 and 360/970, reaching an advanced age of between 80 to 90 years.' The prolific editor M. Ghālib, in his edition of Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī's *Kanz al-walad* (ed. M. Ghālib, Wiesbaden, 1971, p. 43, n. 1) also gives the dates 240–347 AH for Ja'far's life (relatively close to our approximation here), although he does not cite any source or explanation for those dates in that work, and elsewhere usually gives quite different dates (apparently derived from Ivanow, Kraus and Brockelmann) in his other editions of Ja'far's works.

47. In particular, this biographical hypothesis closely coincides with what W. Madelung distinguishes (in 'Das Imamāt') as three approximate periods or strata of writings attributed to Ja'far: a 'Yemenite' period, which would include the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*, the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* and Ja'far's possible 'editorship' or compilation of the *Kitāb al-Kashf* (cf. pp. 51–8); such relatively earlier theological works as the *Shawāhid* and the *Kitāb al-Farā'id* (including the discussion of al-Mahdī's famous letter to the Yemen), written in Ifrīqiya prior to the doctrinal changes of al-Mu'izz (p. 95, n. 275); and the late *Ta'wīl al-zakāt*, reflecting the new interpretation of the imamate introduced by al-Mu'izz (pp. 95–101). Most importantly, these particular dates give no reason to deny either the unanimous attribution to Ja'far of such pre-Fatimid works as the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*, or the many internal stylistic and thematic links between those dramatic works and his later, more purely theological writings.

48. The historical data concerning the period of Ibn Ḥawshab's activity in Yemen, based on these fragments and on many other historical and geographical sources, is analysed in complete detail in H. Halm's long article on 'Die Sīrat Ibn Haušab' (see Bibliography). However, this study (despite its title) is *not* specifically concerned with the distinctive literary and religious dimensions of that composition in particular, and does not point out the many serious problems raised by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's obvious transformations and abridgements of that text. Nor does it point out the evident dependence of both Idrīs and Ibn Mālik on the very limited selections of

the Qāḍī, or the problematic character of Ibn Mālik's Ismaili sources for the events following Ibn Ḥawshab's death (see note 53 below).

In fact, the 'Sīrat abīhi' (i.e., of Ja'far's father) is mentioned by name only by several later Ismaili *dā'īs* of Yemen, some of whom apparently had access to a separate, complete copy, since they quote a longer passage (translated and edited by A. Hamdani, 'An Early Fatimid Source') which does not appear at all in al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān or the many later historians who adapted his text. These references to the *Sīrat abīhi* are as follows (cf. H. Feki, *Les Idées religieuses*, p. 16):

- (a) The *Ghāyat al-mawālīd* of al-Sultān al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 533/1138); this source does not mention Ja'far's own name, and is clearly referring to the fragments preserved by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān in the *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*. (See the Arabic text cited in Ivanow, *Ismaili Traditions Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids*, London, 1942, p. 36).
- (b) The *Kitāb Majmū' al-tarbiyya* by Muḥammad b. Tāhir al-Ḥārithī (d. 584/1188); this anthology reproduces a part of the text—completely independent of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's work—given at greater length in Ibn al-Walīd's *Risālat al-Waḥīda* (full reference below).
- (c) The *Lubb al-ma'ārif* by 'Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Walīd (d. 682/1284).
- (d) The *Risālat al-Waḥīda fī tathbīt arkān al-'aqīda* by his son Ḥusayn b. 'Alī Ibn al-Walīd (d. 612/1215), which contains the longer passages—completely independent of the *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*—edited and translated by A. Hamdani ('An Early Fatimid Source').

It does not appear that Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468) had access to this separate (and probably complete) copy of the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab*, since his excerpts (like those of Ibn Mālik and all the later Sunni historians, including Ibn Khaldūn) seem to be completely drawn from the *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*.

49. Although the *Sīra* is no doubt based on Ja'far's first-hand knowledge of his father's (and his own family's) experiences, everything about the work—judging by the contents, structure and distinctive Arabic style (remarkably identical with the language of the *Kitāb al-'Ālim wa'l-ghulām*)—indicates that it is definitely a later literary composition by Ja'far, clearly composed after his father's death and the subsequent rebellion by his father's Yemeni fellow-missionary 'Alī b. al-Faḍl. The ongoing contrast between these two figures, with their radically differing levels of spiritual maturity and insight, governs the dramatic and thematic structure of the whole work, just as in the more elaborate encounters of this type depicted in the *Kitāb al-'Ālim wa'l-ghulām*. Its form is also that of a dramatic

dialogue, in which each of the characters (not just Ibn Ḥawshab) speaks in the first person, and in which the sections of dialogue are tied together by a narrator's comments and explanations. The fragment preserved in the *Risālat al-Waḥīda* (see preceding note) is especially important in this regard, as it shows with certainty that the *Sīra* was *not* simply an autobiographical memoir, and since the key themes of that fragment—particularly the ongoing spiritual mediating presence of the imams and 'friends of God,' even in times of their politico-historical 'concealment' (*satr*)—are precisely those governing virtually all of Ja'far's own writings.

50. The *ghayba* ('occultation') of the twelfth imam is traditionally dated at 260/874, and the opening scene of the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* is clearly meant to occur shortly after that date; Ibn Ḥawshab himself is presented as already being an adult and an accomplished Imami Shi'i scholar by that time—which would imply that he was a fairly old man at the time of his (apparently non-violent) death in 302/914.

51. Professor W. Madelung, in an important article on 'The Sources of Ismā'īlī Law' (see Bibliography) has likewise pointed out in detail the absolute importance of Kufan Shi'i sources (including some Zaydī works) in the surviving fragments of one of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's largest compilations of Ismaili *fiqh*. However, the possible role of Ja'far (and his father) in transferring that wider underlying body of Shi'i tradition—much of which is now preserved mainly in Twelver Imami texts and hadith collections—into the Ismaili context in North Africa has not yet been explored. For example, no similar research has yet been undertaken concerning the broader sources of Ja'far's many compendia of Shi'i *ta'wīl* and prophetic tales, such as the *Kitāb al-Kashf*, the *Asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, etc., even though virtually all of those works are based on and presented through a vast body of hadith going back to the early Shi'i imams (especially Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and his father Muḥammad al-Bāqir), just as in the more 'exoteric' writings of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān.

52. It is arguable that this is, in fact, the central governing theme of each of the works attributed to Ja'far, clearly dominating the particular doctrinal 'variations'—reflecting the vicissitudes of the Fatimid dynasty—that are the more specific focus of Madelung's study of 'Das Imamāt.' As can clearly be seen in the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām*, this recurrent theme of the continuity and presence of a hierarchy of spiritual guidance—and the concomitant possibility of actually reaching the rank of the 'friends of God'—has wider Islamic (and human) religious dimensions that have not yet been adequately reflected in the more historically and politically focused studies of early Ismaili thought.

53. This dramatic factional episode, arising from the Imam al-Mahdī's eventual choice of Maṣṣūr al-Yaman's experienced Yemenī fellow-*dā'ī* 'Abdullāh b. al-'Abbās al-Shāwiri (instead of Ja'far's older brother Abū al-Ḥasan al-Manṣūr) to succeed Ibn Ḥawshab as head of the Ismaili community in Yemen, is recounted in Ibn Mālik al-Yamani's *Kashf asrār al-Bāṭiniyya* (= *Akhbār al-Qarāmiṭa*, pp. 343–6). There the account actually appears to be based on later Ismaili sources, probably including Ja'far himself, since the narrative—despite the flagrant anti-Ismaili intentions of Ibn Mālik's later work—is quite sympathetic to Ja'far's position and his forceful criticism of his older brother's policies. Ibn Mālik's account includes (p. 345) one line of a poem Ja'far later sent to his older brother from Ifrīqiya, after Abū al-Faḍl's murder of al-Shāwiri and his 'apostasy' (from Shi'ism) and public return to Sunni-Abbasid allegiance. And often this historical account is directly presented as a 'quotation,' for example, of dialogues between Ja'far and his older brother, or of Maṣṣūr al-Yaman's death-bed advice to his followers—a distinctive structural feature of all our fragments of the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* (and the *Kitāb al-'Ālim wa'l-ghulām*). However, the style and literary quality of this particular dialogue is clearly not that of the *Sīrat Ibn Hawshab* fragments preserved by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, so that Ibn Mālik himself must have either paraphrased a later section of that work, or some other Yemeni Ismaili chronicler continuing that story.

Ibn Mālik's account concludes (pp. 345–6) with the dramatic story of how—some time after the murder of al-Shāwiri and Ja'far's ensuing emigration to Ifrīqiya (i.e., some two or three decades after the death of his father in 302/914)—his older brother, despite his public return to Sunni-Abbasid allegiance, was finally betrayed by yet another of his own followers, so that 'the children of [Abū al-Ḥasan al-] Maṣṣūr and his *ḥarīm* were driven out of' their home and were eventually attacked by neighbouring tribesmen 'and slaughtered, all of them, adults and children alike, and the women enslaved,' so that 'Maṣṣūr had no known posterity at all.'

54. The story of Ibn al-Faḍl's military campaigns and notorious antinomian activities is recounted in more detail by a number of (equally hostile) early non-Ismaili sources, which are discussed by H. Halm, 'Die *Sīrat* b. Ḥauṣab,' who also points out the way the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* intentionally understates the evident political and military importance of al-Faḍl's activities in the early expansion of the Yemeni *da'wa*—no doubt just as later Ismaili accounts from North Africa tell us relatively little about the specific Berber leaders who actually accounted for 'Abdullāh al-Shi'ī's eventual political success.

55. It is very likely that the passion with which this theme is presented in both the *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-ghulām* and the *Sīrat Ibn Ḥawshab* (as well as in Ja'far's other works) has much more to do with the immediate events of his father's mission and the subsequent attacks by Ibn al-Faḍl than with what some historians have viewed as an 'evolution' in Fatimid doctrines—after the establishment of their dynasty—away from an originally more 'messianic,' 'Mahdist' and 'antinomian' outlook. In any case, Ja'far's almost certainly pre-Fatimid work translated here does not seem to represent a tendentious 'rewriting' of the history of the pre-Fatimid Ismaili *da'wa* so as to eliminate its supposedly messianic or antinomian teachings. Instead, it more likely points to the much wider diversity both of the formal teachings and 'doctrines' pragmatically adopted by the *dā'īs* in different settings, and of the possible public reactions and relevant social bases—which, as in many such popular religio-political movements at any period, seem to have had very little to do with theology or spirituality—that were apparently involved in many of these late third/ninth-century messianic movements in widely scattered regions of the Islamic world.

56. See full details in Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, pp. 70–5; Gacek, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, as well as the discussion of the manuscripts used in this edition in section v of the Introduction. While by no means a complete listing of the extant manuscripts of Ja'far's writings, Poonawala's work is considerably more exact and complete than the corresponding sections in earlier Ismaili bibliographies given by Brockelmann, Sezgin, Kraus and Ivanow (which have been the basis of most subsequent secondary accounts).

57. See especially the discussion of this work in Madelung, 'Das Imamāt,' pp. 52–8. There is no reason why Ja'far should not have been the 'editor' or compiler of this work (as indicated by all the manuscripts), especially since, as already noted, virtually all of his theological writings consist of a similar (if more polished and coherent) sort of reworking of traditional Shi'ī and Qur'anic materials. However, given the evident nature of the work as a compilation of diverse earlier Shi'ī writings and interpretations—many of which almost certainly pre-date the known beginnings of any distinctively Ismaili *da'wa*, there is certainly no reason to attribute all the ideas and doctrines in it to Ja'far himself (or even to earlier Ismailis): see the recent discussion by H. Halm in his 'The Cosmology of the pre-Fatimid Ismā'īliyya,' pp. 79–80, in F. Daftary, ed., *Mediaeval Ismā'īli History and Thought* (London, 1996).

58. H. Feki's mistaken identification of a supposedly 'lost' work by Ja'far ('*al-Tawārīkh wa'l-siyar*,' in his *Les Idées religieuses*, p. 16) is actually based simply on a quotation from Ja'far recorded in Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī's

Kanz al-walad (p. 218; later repeated in Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn’s *Zahr al-ma‘ānī*), in which Ja‘far simply refers to ‘what was mentioned in the histories and biographies ...’ As already mentioned above in regard to the unnamed source (including one of Ja‘far’s poems) for the later sections of Ibn Mālik’s history, there are almost certainly fragments of other writings by Ja‘far preserved in the works of later Yemeni authors. Often, for instance, in the *Kanz al-walad* just mentioned, these Yemeni authors quote hadith or passages from unnamed works by Ja‘far whose exact provenance has not yet been determined. Similarly, the *Kanz al-walad* twice quotes unspecified ‘works (*awḍā‘*) of Manṣūr al-Yaman’ which are not part of the extant fragments of his *Kitāb al-Ruḥd wa’l-hidāya*. (These other fragmentary works of Manṣūr al-Yaman, incidentally, are not mentioned by Poonawala.)

59. The famous letter of al-Mahdī to the Ismailis in the Yemen concerning the genealogy of the Fatimids, which Ja‘far describes in his *Kitāb al-Farā’iḍ wa ḥudūd al-dīn*, has been the subject of a long series of articles and disputes that have seldom touched on the contents and context of the rest of this work or of Ja‘far’s writings in themselves. See the most recent and complete discussion of this difficult problem (including reference to much of the earlier literature on the question) in A. Hamdani and F. de Blois, ‘A Re-Examination of al-Mahdī’s Letter’ (see Bibliography).

60. See Madelung’s detailed analysis of the revised theory of the Ismaili imamate in this late work in ‘Das Imamāt,’ pp. 95–101.

61. One has the impression—which remains to be demonstrated by more detailed historical investigations—that much of the content of these works of *ta’wīl*, as is obviously the case with the *Kitāb al-Kashf*, is a sort of compilation and adaptation of pre-existing Shi‘i themes and interpretations, often shared by common Twelver Imami traditions. The verification of this hypothesis, which does fit with what we know of Ja‘far’s father’s own religious background and training, would require a detailed study of these works by a scholar thoroughly acquainted not only with the writings of Ismaili contemporaries such as al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, but also more particularly with the vast early body of cognate Twelver Shi‘i hadith.

62. Of course the author also makes similar use of allusions to key elements of the hadith (reported sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad and early Shi‘i imams) and early Islamic sacred history, usually carefully drawing on materials shared by both Sunni and Shi‘i traditional sources. However, because of the unfamiliarity of many readers with these sources, we have explained most of those key allusions briefly in footnotes at the corresponding passages, giving references to their parallel usage, where possible,

in other Ismaili and Twelver Shi'ī authors and sources (such as al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān).

63. For further discussions and illustrations of these distinctive rhetorical features and assumptions shared by a wide range of pre-modern Islamic intellectual traditions, see our forthcoming study, *Between the Lines: An Introduction to Islamic 'Esoteric' Writing*.

64. The author's particular usage of Qur'anic passages and allusions to allude to *universal* spiritual themes and phenomena (what the Knower usually terms the 'innermost spiritual dimension,' *bāṭin al-bāṭin*) which we are describing here is in most cases clearly distinct from his more 'technical' interpretations of certain Qur'anic terms and passages as applying to specific figures of the then-contemporary Ismaili spiritual hierarchies and construction of sacred history (that dimension the Knower normally refers to as the *bāṭin*, or 'inner aspect' of religion). Those latter, specifically Shi'ī usages are usually clearly and straightforwardly explained in the course of the dialogue, although they may appear somewhat artificial to outside (non-Shi'ī) observers; again, we have usually explained that historical context of those technical usages in footnotes as they first appear. In any case, those particular technical meanings attributed to Qur'anic terms and symbols usually need to be formally 'taught' and explained, which is not the case with the deeper, experientially grounded phenomena and laws of the universal spiritual dimension, the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*.

65. Since the author often alludes to a dozen or more related Qur'anic verses (which would require an impractically lengthy listing of all related occurrences), dedicated readers without access to the original Arabic will need to refer to H. Kassis's *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley-London, 1983), which is an indispensable tool for this kind of study. In addition, we should point out that the most accurate and reliable English translation of the Qur'an (A.J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted*, London, 1953) unfortunately does not follow what has become the standard (Arabic and English) verse numbering of the Qur'an and only indirectly indicates by typographic format the beginning of each verse; however, the variations in Arberry's numbering are very small (usually no more than one or two verses' difference from the standard numeration we have adopted in this translation), and attentive readers normally can locate the verse(s) in question without too much difficulty.

66. An apparent exception to this are the two recent manuscripts (one from 1253 AH and the other undated) used in the version published posthumously under the name of Dr. Muṣṭafā Ghālib, *Arba' a kutub haqqāniyya* (Beirut, 1403/1983), pp. 15–74, which reached us only after our completion

of this critical edition in 1984. This printed version (apparently undertaken after Dr. Ghālib's death in 1981) contains hundreds of errors and omissions, but a great many of those cases seem to come from the text having been set in print or transcribed rather carelessly: often the Arabic phrase makes no sense as printed, but one can readily see what must have been the actual reading in the original manuscripts. As a result, it was practically impossible to know which variant readings were actually found in those two manuscripts and which discrepancies were generated separately during the stages of printing, transcription, etc. In general, the manuscripts used in this Beirut version seem closest to the late (and likewise relatively hastily copied) Fyzee manuscript [ف] used in this edition.

67. In most cases, of course, similar Prophetic hadith are also included in the extant Shi'i (primarily Twelver Imami) collections.

68. See the discussion of this practice and the related abbreviations by Gacek, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. xiv–xv.

The Book of the Master and the Disciple

Composed by our Master Ja'far b. Manṣūr al-Yaman

In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate

[1] Now it has come down to us that a number of the truly faithful and a group among those who call (people) to the (true) religion once said to a Knower among them:

‘You have liberated us by helping us to know an affair (*al-amr*)¹ (of such great importance) that we are obligated to show our gratitude to you for three reasons: our thanks to you for having called us to that (religion); our thanks for the knowledge to which you directed us; and our thanks for the (religious) practice you ordered us to perform. So explain to us what one ought to do who wishes to show his thankfulness for that. Then inform us about the rights and duties that are obligatory for us among the *ordinances of religion* (*ḥudūd al-dīn*);² and about what is obligatory for the seeker in his questioning, and for the person who is sought, in his responding to that. And let us know, *as much as you can easily express*³ (73:20), about the ways (*madhāhib*) of the righteous (*ṣāliḥūn*) and the proper behaviour (*adab*) of the seekers.’⁴

[2] The Knower⁵ answered them:

‘Now the affair to which I called you all is that (religion) God has bestowed as an honour for His servants, which *He has perfected for them* (5:3) and through which He honours whoever responds to Him. So for every beginning in it He has placed an end, and for each end in it a goal; and each goal has a limit whose full extent cannot be attained. These are the way-stations of *the people of true understanding* (2:269; 3:7, etc.): their keys are *remembrance* (of God), and their beginning is *trials*; their middle is *right guidance*; and their end is active *mindfulness* (of God: *taqwā*). So whoever has been seeking to know the foundation of all things and then discovers the ranks of the divinely-determined religion, that person has sought guidance from the right guideposts for the search and has set out upon it in the best possible way.

‘As for showing thankfulness to the Knower (who guided you), that is through obedience to him. As for thankfulness for the knowledge (he gave you), that is through putting it into action and calling (others) to it. And as for thankfulness for the (right religious) practice

(he taught you), that is through steadfastness in (continuing) it and in calling (people) to it.

[3] 'But as for (teaching you) the ways of the righteous and the proper behaviour of the seekers, (the following story) has come down to us concerning 'a man among the people of Persia'⁶ who was among those subject to the trial of (spiritual) ignorance: although he had a rich heart and a brilliant intellect, and had acquired an agreeable culture and education, nonetheless ignorance outweighed (true) knowledge in him, because of his earlier experiences and the milieu in which he had grown up. So he was casting all about in the burning heat of his thirst, *supposing that the glimmering of the mirage was the reflection of water, until, when he came to it, he found that it was nothing at all—but he found God there, and He paid him his account in full!* (24:39). Then (God) *honoured his abode* (12:21) and *removed from him his veil* (50:22). *He found him wandering astray, and He guided him; He found him in need, and He satisfied him* (93:7–8) with (true) knowledge. So through the bestowing of (God's) grace, he became one of the Knowers of *Sinai* (19:52; 52:1, etc.) and the (angelic) dwellers in *the well-populated temple* (52:4).'

[4] Then, when his guidance had been completed and he had reached the goal of his aspiration, he (the Knower) was duty-bound to show thanks to his Maker and *to exert himself for his Lord* (84:6). For he used to hear his own (spiritual) father (*wālid*)⁷ repeat a proverb which for him was like his soul in relation to his body: *'The most excellent of good deeds is giving life to the dead'* (5:30). So he thought to himself:

'I too used to be dead, and he gave me life; I was ignorant, and he gave me knowledge. I am not the first person to be ignorant, so that I attained knowledge before everyone else; nor am I the last one to be ignorant, so that the process of (spiritual) teaching will come to an end. Therefore it is only right for me, because of my gratitude for this blessing, to pass on this (divine) *trust* (4:58; 33:72, etc.) to those who come after me, just as those who preceded me have handed it down to me. For the beginning of this affair is from God, and it only reached me through its many intermediaries (*asbāb*),⁸ the first passing it on to the second, the second to the third, (and so on)

until it descended from *the heavenly host* (37:8; 38:69) to the creatures of this lowly world.

‘After that, did it tear asunder the veil (between God and humanity), and did the ‘gateways’ (*abwāb*)⁹ pass it onward until it reached me, (only) so that *I* could be its goal and ultimate end? Not at all! For those who have transmitted it and handed on the *trust* in this way (before me) are more deserving of precedence and (spiritual) gains: what they have earned does not belong to me, so that I could rely on it. No, I am part of what they have earned through their actions (of teaching me). Nor does their precedence relieve me from having to act: so now I need to seek knowledge through (continuing right) action, just as (at first) I needed to seek knowledge.’

Thus he thought to himself, and he knew that, because of this, his obligation (to pass on his spiritual understanding to others) was now like the duty (of his own master) toward him, and that his duty in the end was like it had been in the beginning.

[5] So he left behind his people and his possessions, (travelling) *toward his Lord*¹⁰ and *calling* (people) *to the good* (3:104), so that he might come to deserve gratitude like that which was incumbent upon him (toward his own master). And he started *to travel through the countries* (9:2), passing among the non-Arabic peoples and the Arab tribes, scrutinising their faces (for signs of the right spiritual aptitude) and presenting the (religious) questions. But he did not find anyone responding, nor did he meet any seeker, until he ended up in *the furthest part* of the Jazīra.¹¹ There *he entered a city* of that region *while its people were unaware* (28:15); and while he was *re-calling* (God’s) *blessings* (7:69) and searching their gatherings, he noticed a group of people from the town who were *disputing about religion without any guidance* (22:8; 31:20), recklessly following the inclinations of their passions. So he sat down in a nearby place, but out of sight of them, listening carefully to their discussion and scrutinising them closely (to see) which of them was closer to the (right) path.

[6] Then he said to himself: ‘These people are more deserving of the life (of spiritual knowledge) for three reasons: first, because the (divine) argument (*al-hujja*)¹² has reached them; secondly, because they belong to the people of (my own Islamic) religious community

(*al-milla*);¹³ and thirdly, because they are *nearer to the right path* (18:24), given their keen interest in religion and (the fact that) they are inquiring about it and discussing it together—for the person who is (already) seeking something is much closer to finding it.’

[7] [The narrator:] So when they had finished what they had been talking about, they turned to him and said: ‘Who are you, and where are you from, *O youth (fatā)*’¹⁴ (21:60, etc.)?’

[8] ‘I am ‘Abdullāh and I am among the residents of His sanctuary,’¹⁵ he replied.

[9] ‘Then what is your business (here) and what is your work?’ they asked.

[10] ‘My business is finished,’ he replied, ‘and as for my work, I am looking for it.’

[11] ‘Well then,’ they said, ‘did you find anything in our discussion particularly striking?’¹⁶

[12] ‘All of it is striking for the person who finds it so,’ he answered.

[13] ‘But the word “striking” has two meanings,’ they said, ‘a commendable one and a reprehensible one...’

[14] ‘Of course I knew that,’ he said, ‘and likewise (all) speech can be commendable or reprehensible.’

[15] ‘Then according to you,’ they asked, ‘just what is the commendable sort?’

[16] ‘Speech that is correct,’ he replied.

[17] ‘And what kind is that?’ they said.

[18] ‘That whose origin comes from God and through which (people) are called to God,’ he answered.

[19] ‘Then what,’ they asked, ‘is the reprehensible sort of speech?’

[20] ‘That which is based on passion,’ he replied, ‘and which is used to call (people) to something other than the right guidance.’

[21] ‘You have spoken truly,’ they said. ‘So won’t you let us hear something of your own words?’

[22] ‘I have no words of my own,’ he responded. ‘For I am following the words (of another)!’

[23] ‘Then let us hear you say something of your own that will tell us about your (particular religious) way,’ they said. ‘For you have made a good impression on us, and we were pleased by your

brotherly concern, so now we ask you to be a gateway through which God may open up His loving kindness toward us.’

[24] ‘All right,’ he replied. So he stood up to speak, with the people listening attentively, and looked out at them.

[25] Then he began:¹⁷

‘Verily *He Who created* with His power, *then arranged all well; Who determined (all things) through His generosity, then guided rightly: He it is Who brought forth the path-givers (shawāri‘)*¹⁸ of the *pastureland*, then *He made its outer aspect dried-up brush* and its inner aspect (the *bāṭin* of God’s religion) *all-encompassing* (87:2–5), whose ways are not obscure and whose traces will not be obliterated—for then (people’s) minds would fail to seek it, and their intellects would despair of reaching it. It does not exist outwardly so that those who are unworthy of it could possess it and alter (the proper way to) *seeking its path* (16:9); instead it is eminent and well-protected (from the unworthy)!

Its Knowledge is *well-concealed* (56:78) because of its special excellence, and its secrets are well-guarded for those worthy of them: the special dignity (of those secrets of spiritual knowledge) is *the splendid robe* of (divine) right guidance, and the most perfect of them is *the garment of mindfulness of God* (7:26), marked out by *the light of lights* (24:35), *entrusted safely* (6:98) in the breasts of *the best* (of men) and *the chosen ones* (38:47–48), *the truly pious* (3:193, etc.), *guardians* (6:61), *protectors* (21:42), *generous and recording* (82:10–11)! That (knowledge of the inner dimension of religion) is *a trust they safely pass on* (4:58, etc.), (divine) *ordinances which they do not transgress* (2:229). It is the law of the Supreme Judge (containing all) the benefits of the All-Merciful: He honoured it, so He made it inward (*bāṭin*), and He protected it, so He made it secret. He veiled it with His rights (our obligations to Him), and He crowned it with His *covenants*.

For He cannot be reached by the aspirations of those who rely on their thinking (alone), nor can He be attained by the thoughts of those who are scheming. His outer aspect is *the reminder* (6:68, etc.) and signposts for *whoever is rightly guided* (10:108, etc.). His inner aspect is *a sweet drink gushing forth* (67:30, etc.). His lofty heaven *comes down close* (53:8) to those who inquire after (Him); His *earth*

is arranged (43:10) for those who inquire (after Him)' and the right occasions for His *guiding stars* (27:7) are arranged for those who seek (Him). He has watering-places for those who move towards Him and (divine) *signs* whose wonders follow each other in succession, pointing to Him through *their symbols* (47:3). *His accustomed way is preferment* (*tafdīl*) (17:21, 55, 70, etc.)¹⁹ and His *way of approach* (5:48) is through distinguishing (their ranks and functions).

'His judgements are (religious) duties and *His accustomed way* (17:77) is (through) the (different divine) paths (*sharā'ī'*).²⁰ Pure intention ennobles the following of their ways, and justice makes good what is acquired through them. For He has made them a means of guidance and a way leading to every good, and He has made (the outer aspect of those ways) a protection for and a sign pointing toward their inner dimension (*bā'in*). Thus (people's) intellects are forced by their neediness and ignorance to seek (spiritual) knowing and *open abundance* (4:100).

'So *blessed be the One Who placed the night and the day in succession, for whoever might be reminded or would want to be thankful* (25:61–62)! May God's blessings be upon (the one) whom He has specially chosen from His servants and has made *to be a warner for all the worlds* (25:1)'

[26] Then he said: '*Be mindful of God* like someone who fears Him; and fear Him like someone who is hoping for (pleasing) Him! *Seek (divine) knowledge*²¹ and you will come to know; act according to it and you will receive (God's) loving mercy!'

[27] Then *his eyes overflowed with tears* (5:83), so he stopped his talk and said farewell to the group, weeping, while he got up to go to his travel baggage. They were all overcome with crying because of the intensity of his talk and the effectiveness of his sermon, so they wanted to accompany him. But he kept them from all leaving with him together, in accordance with proper behaviour. And since they didn't know what they should do for him in that situation, they all went off to their homes.

But a *young man* (*ghulām*)²² (3:40, etc.) from the group did accompany him, who was the youngest of them in years, but who had the best character of all. He had already completed the education of his intellect, and thinking had awakened his heart: for that (previous

thinking) coincided with and reinforced what he had heard in the Knower’s speech—both what he had presented and what he had only alluded to.

Now the young man *had as his father a great shaykh* (12:78), among the most distinguished of the Arabs by his lineage and one of the most devoted of them in his support of the people of religion. So that shaykh continued to accompany the Knower, with his permission, until he had reached his inn. Then he entered the inn, and he had the young man come in with him. Next he ordered some food, and when the two of them had finished with that and they were both comfortable enough to talk,²³

[28] The young man said: ‘O wise man (*ḥakīm*)!²⁴ You have spoken and you have made us hear; you have preached and you have been eloquent. You have adorned religion with the most beautiful of ornaments, and you have motivated (us to practice that) with the most beautiful of motivations and the most noble of preparations. You have called (us) to that through the most eminent of responsibilities, enticing our minds to enquire from you about all that has struck our hearts as a result of your speech. That excellence could only become manifest through someone whose knowledge had become perfected inwardly and whose good character had become fully developed outwardly, so that he became a source of wisdom, (like a good tree) *its roots firm* (14:24–25), its splendour towering over the worlds, with *fruits* branching from its limbs for those who seek. So I would like for you to be one of those blessed branches (for me), because of what I can see of your distinguished judgement, your native aptitude and your perfect intellect.

You had mentioned (in your speech) that our minds are forced by their ignorance to seek (spiritual) knowledge and abundance. Now my mind is the most needy and indigent of all—so is their any way to life for *me*?’

[29] The Knower replied: ‘Surely the One Who created the creatures through His power did not *create them for no purpose* (23:115), nor did He bring them into being full of knowledge (16:78). He did not *leave them* wandering in ignorance *for no end* (75:36), nor is He pleased for them to take foolishness as their proper behaviour, or to *take on the garments* of ignorance (7:26) as their clothing! So *He*

established for them a way out (65:2) of all that by means of that instrument (of the spiritual intelligence) around which He shaped their constitution and through which He perfected their creation. And *He made their hearing and eyes and hearts* (17:68) openings for the lights (of His knowledge) as His act of generosity toward them, through which He completed His argument²⁵ regarding them.

‘Next He placed the treasures of His wisdom and the specific characteristics of His wish (for them), regarding the ways of proceeding (*madhāhib*)²⁶ (toward Him) that please Him, in the pure chosen elite of His creation: He gave (His messengers and friends) the responsibility of worshipping according to those (religious) ways and calling (people) toward those ways, while He imposed (on all other people) the duty of responding (to the prophets’ call) through the use of that instrument (of the spiritual intelligence) we have mentioned, *so that He might distinguish the wicked ones from the good* (3:179). Hence the (spiritual) knower will reveal himself plainly through his seeking (of that knowledge), while the (spiritually) ignorant person will be distinguished by his falling behind. Therefore *there is no argument against God after* (His sending) *His messengers* (4:165), nor is there any excuse for going astray after (the right way) has been pointed out.’

[30] The young man replied: ‘The lack of any excuse has frightened me, and the existence of the signs pointing (to the right way) makes me desirous (of setting out on that search); so I’ve asked you to be a guide (for me), and I’ll be your humble servant!’

[31] The Knower answered: ‘Surely God did not create the (human) creatures as fully grown men and as (divine) knowers. He only *created* them as *infants* (40:67), small and ignorant, *not knowing anything* (16:78), so that they only become big after having been small, and only come to be knowing after they were ignorant. Thus their smallness is a precondition for their becoming big and their ignorance is a sign pointing toward knowledge. The same is true of (spiritual) knowledge: one can only attain its essence on the basis of preceding, lower forms of knowledge which hearts can more quickly assimilate and the understanding can more easily grasp, so that the first stage (of that process of spiritual growth) is established in (people’s) minds and they are humbled enough to carry out the duties

(required by that), and so that their hearts come to open up to the essence (of that knowledge) and their intellects are able to bear its goal. That is *God’s accustomed way regarding His servants* (40:85); so it is not necessary for us to depart from the opinions of (this) religious community (*al-milla*), nor do we need to follow other than (*His*) *accustomed way* in our process of being guided.’

[32] ‘But I am (still) a youngster with regard to what I want (on this path),’ the young man said, ‘so raise and educate me! I am ignorant with regard to what I have been seeking, so *teach me and help me to know* (18:66). I am forced to rely on your gracious favour, so *have mercy on me* (2:286; etc.). Surely you yourself were (once) in this state, and God brought His bounties to you through the hands of that person who was so important for you, to whom you owe such thanks? So you already know the state of someone who is like myself, caught in the vice of ignorance and so needy he will resort to any way out.’

[33] ‘I myself was once in the state you’ve described,’ the Knower said, ‘and I surely wish to spare you in that regard. But my compassion towards you is not the sort of thing that will bring you close to what you hope for without your *working* for it! For just as every word has a proper employment that can only be accepted if it is sincere and true, so likewise (religious) knowledge is of no benefit until it has been put into action, and (our) action is of no benefit until it is accepted (by God). Now the true and sincere form of speech is that which is just. And the signs pointing to (spiritual) knowledge are the revealed paths of right actions and faithfully conforming to the right models throughout all that is encompassed by *the furthestmost regions* (55:33) and *the variation of day and night* (2:164; 3:190, etc.).

‘So do not seek that (knowledge) impatiently, and do not dismiss it out of negligence! Nor should you accept it out of blind imitation, without any (convincing) argument (*hujja*)²⁷—for in that case it would slip from your heart at the first onset of doubt. But do not deny that argument once it has been firmly established, *lest you become the pleader* for all that is false (4:105). And do not stop inquiring into (that knowledge) and *reflecting upon it* (9:122), lest your judgement *become sterile* (42:50). Then you should think well

of me, without any prejudice, and make every effort (to understand) your argument without any confusion, seeking the (true) religion as one like you should be seeking, and asking God's help in your situation—for *God does not neglect a recompense* (for your striving) (3:171, etc.), and He will not forbid you your reward if He sees you seeking for the good!

[34] 'Surely you have spoken most justly, accomplishing great good, and you have pointed the way to the truth with the most beautiful of speeches,' said the young man. 'But now I *am* seeking God's help, and I am asking you about that affair²⁸ to which you are calling, to which you are specifically referring: What is it? From whom does it come, and to whom does it lead?'

[35] 'That is *God's religion which He has approved* (24:55),' replied the Knower. 'It is from Him, so *He will accept none other* (3:85)! Then it leads in particular to the pure elite among His messengers, and more generally to all of His creation. So the person who has been singled out for (*His*) *favour* (10:64, etc.) should be thankful for that and put it into practice and call (people) to it. But the person who has been excluded (from that knowledge) should keep seeking it until he comes to know, and should willingly obey whoever is guiding him.'

[36] 'Do you think,' asked the young man, 'that this favour by which God has singled out *His friends* (10:62, etc.) is at the same level insofar as it concerns them, so that they are all equal in regard to its excellence? Or do some of them have a rank of excellence (*fadl*)²⁹ over others?'

[37] 'Haven't we already mentioned,' said the Knower, 'that every knowledge has a preceding stage of knowledge below it, and that for every (divine) favour there are (specific human) "bearers"? So *they have ranks (of honour) with their Lord* (8:4, etc.), in order that He may entrust *each one of them with what he has earned* (24:11, etc.) through his knowledge. Thus *He gives of His bounty to every bounteous/meriting person* (11:3)—out of His justice towards His creatures and His loving mercy towards His servants!'

[38] 'Then what you are calling (us) to,' asked the young man, 'is it this (infinite divine) favour (toward all the creatures), or is it something else?'

[39] ‘It’s not exactly the same as *that* (boundless divine) favour,’ responded the Knower, ‘but neither is it something other than that. Rather this (favour) is related to that one as a handful of water is to the vast extent of the Euphrates! As for me, I am calling you to that (*religion*) which God approved of for His servants (24:55) and which He ennobled on the day He made it complete (5:3).³⁰ It is sublime, protected, *noble, hidden* (56:77–78): He has ennobled it with His rewards in honour of those who uphold it; and He has rebuked with His punishments, as a sign of dishonour, whoever neglects it. Its outward dimension is formal prescriptions (*rusūm*), and its inner aspect is (all the levels of) knowledge; its authority is illuminating and its justice most clear: *This* is what I am calling you to!’

[40] ‘But what,’ asked the young man, ‘singled *you* out for this affair instead of others, and made you more deserving of it than others, since you just claimed that it comes from God to (all) the creatures in general? Indeed everyone lays claim to it (for himself or his own group), as opposed to others. So what has made you all more deserving of the name “the truth” than those others, when this affair only came to you in the same way it came to them?’

[41] ‘There is no one who speaks a word of truth,’ the Knower replied, ‘who has not taken it from the same sources from which we have taken it. So they are in agreement with us about that (word of truth), since both we and they affirm it. But after that they became separated from us through their leaving behind those sources, while we persevered in (our allegiance to) them; through our obeying them, while they went against them; through our preserving that (*divine trust*) we agreed to bear (33:72), while they let go of it; and through our upholding what we accepted as our responsibility, while they abandoned that. Hence they agreed with us in what they affirmed, but they differed from us through their actions.

‘Thus what they affirm bears witness against them in our favour. And what they have abandoned indicates their need for us and their neediness for what we possess. They are like those brothers³¹ who inherited enormous wealth from their father and divided it equally among themselves. Then some of them lost theirs and fell into poverty, while the other brothers increased theirs, economised and traded with it, so that they multiplied the wealth they possessed many times

over. Then the impoverished brothers were forced to come to the others and serve them and ask for their help. Likewise those who have lost the path of their (prophetic) messengers have been forced by their ignorance to seek out (true spiritual) knowledge from the people of the noble sources. So the sign indicating that we are more deserving of the truth than them is their need for us and our self-sufficiency without them. That is how our knower has come to invite the ignorant among them, how our clothed one has come to cover up their naked ones, and how our wealthy one has come to assuage their hungry ones.

For the true right (*al-haqq*) goes to the one who has precedence/true merit (*fadl*): precedence/true merit belongs to the person who does the deeds of kindness, and gratitude is due to whoever does what is truly good (*iḥṣān*).

[42] 'As for your greater merit and precedence over them, that has become quite clear,' said the young man. 'And as for your argument for the truth, that has been verified with regard to everyone among the common people (*al-ʿāmma*)³² who has neglected (the truth). But what is your argument against *me*? For I am (already) affirming what you have mentioned, upholding what you have described, denying what you have denied, acknowledging the truth and its precedence, and loathing falsehood and its people!'

[43] 'My argument against you,' replied the Knower, 'is like my argument against them, since you disagreed with them regarding the description (of the truth) while you actually agreed with them regarding (its) inner meaning.'

[44] 'But how can that be,' asked the young man, 'since I am affirming the truth with regard to the one who possesses it (i.e., you), while those others are denying it?'

[45] 'Even if you disagreed with them in your affirming (the truth) when they denied it,' the Knower continued, 'still you were in agreement with their preventing (actual access to it) when they prohibited it.³³ For (the merely verbal) affirmation is of no benefit without any repentance and turning back (to the truth), and (purely verbal) denial does no harm when (the person denying) already has *the clear evidence* (6:57; 98:4, etc.).'

[46] ‘Then *I will turn to* (11:88) the people of the truth (seeking) their truth,’ exclaimed the young man, ‘if I have recognised them, or to a confirmed representative from them! So tell me which of those (options) is possible for me.’

[47] ‘Can’t you see,’ replied the Knower, ‘that you’ve been forced to affirm (the need for) recognising the possessor of the truth or his representative, just as the common people have been forced to affirm (their need for) the truth? So your actions may have been different from theirs, but you shared with them their ignorance.’

[48] ‘You’ve spoken rightly,’ said the young man, ‘so explain that to me.’

[49] ‘Didn’t you just now maintain,’ asked the Knower, ‘that you were confirming my argument against yourself and against the common people?’

[50] ‘Yes,’ he said.

[51] ‘Then how,’ the Knower asked, ‘can anyone confirm a “truth” as being their own, which actually belongs to someone else?’

[52] ‘Nobody is able to do that,’ he said.

[53] ‘So now that you have confirmed (my) argument against you and against the common people,’ demanded the Knower, ‘nothing else remains but to surrender (to God) and turn back to the one (whose help) you need and who is self-sufficient without you.’

[54] ‘As for my neediness,’ said the young man, ‘I do admit that. But as for the one who is self-sufficient without me, I am still seeking him, so have mercy on me!’

[55] ‘Have you noticed that when a poor person is forced to go to a generous person,’ asked the Knower, ‘does he receive any favour from that person except through either earning it or else through (that wealthy person’s) gracious generosity?’

[56] ‘Yes,’ replied the young man, ‘he only receives something either through earning it or through an act of generosity.’

[57] ‘And is the merit of those who only received (their favour) through an act of charity,’ asked the Knower, ‘anything like the merit of those who actually earned theirs?’

[58] ‘No,’ he admitted, ‘it couldn’t be.’

[59] ‘So seek this distinction through (your own) action,’ said the Knower, ‘and you will reach it because you have come to deserve it. But don’t seek it through flattery, for if you try to obtain it through (some undeserved) favour, you will be excluded.’

[60] The young man responded: ‘*You* are the key to the good and the one who is pointing to it; so show me the way to whichever of those two paths is superior by its essence and closer to guiding me rightly. For my great need for you has made me even more captive to you!’

[61] ‘O my dear son,’³⁴ said the Knower, ‘May God not estrange you (from the good), and *there is no blame for you* (12:92). What you’ve hoped for from me is coming to you. But it has limits you must not overstep and conditions you musn’t forget to follow.’

[62] ‘Set whatever limits you like and impose whatever conditions you think best,’ declared the young man, ‘for I hope that *you will find me patient* (18:69) and grateful for your kindness.’

[63] ‘The first of these limits,’ said the Knower, ‘is to fulfil *the outward aspect* (*zāhir*) of *the Book* (2:2, etc.)³⁵ and its revealed paths, acting upon that in accordance with what you know. For whoever acts for God’s sake according to what they know, will be guided by God to that which they don’t (yet) know.’

[64] ‘But the (revealed) books are many,’ the young man asked, ‘and all of them *are from what is with God* (2:189). Each book among them has a large group of people adhering to it, so all of those people are agreed about upholding the books and worshipping in accordance with them.’

[65] ‘But now we’ve returned to what we were saying before,’ the Knower remarked, ‘and we’re obliging ourselves to argue in confirmation of what we don’t (really) have to confirm!’

[66] ‘And how is that?’ asked the young man.

[67] ‘Because of what you were saying about there being many books, all of them coming from God, and that each of them has its large group (of followers),’ explained the Knower. ‘So then do you imagine that *God’s words* (6:34, 115; 66:12, etc.) and *His books* (2:285; 4:136) invalidate one another,³⁶ or that the first of them denies the last, or that the last one denies the first?’

[68] ‘No, I don’t imagine that!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘But then what is the (true) argument concerning this?’

[69] ‘If people acted according to what is in the first book,’ replied the Knower, ‘it would lead them toward the second. And if they acted in accordance with the second, that would lead them to the third, until in the end they came to act according to the latest of the books. For it is more deserving than what came before it—although all of them *are from what is with God* (2:189)—because the latest one is more recent in time and clearer in its way of proceeding, since it has *replaced* (2:106) what was before it, and nothing has come after it to replace it.’

[70] ‘You’ve spoken truly,’ said the young man, ‘and you’ve made clear how we should acknowledge the truth and the signs of truthfulness. Now I will uphold those limits you’ve ordered me to keep, but what are your conditions for me?’

[71] ‘My conditions for you are five,’ replied the Knower. ‘Don’t neglect anything I’ve *entrusted you with* (8:27; 2:283); don’t conceal anything from me *if I ask you about it* (18:62); don’t come looking for me to give you an answer (whenever you have a question); *don’t ask me about anything until I* (18:70) bring it up with you; and don’t speak about my concerns with your father.’

[72] ‘I shall do everything that you have mentioned,’ the young man declared. ‘Indeed it seems easy for me, given all that I am hoping for from you. But why the subterfuge with my father? Surely that is the greatest test and the most painful trial for me! How about allowing me to go away from him?’

[73] ‘Moving away from him,’ explained the Knower, ‘would be a sign for him pointing to someone else (i.e., the Knower and his mission). Instead you must stay with him, properly respect him, try to please him by being somewhat agreeable with him. And you must protect your innermost self and keep your (spiritual) concerns secret from him. For *surely God will make up for* (2:137) his hostility and that of other people.’

[74] [Then the narrator] said: So the Knower and the young man kept on occasionally meeting and then being apart for a period of time. And the young man was perplexed about his situation, not knowing anything other than what he had been assigned (to perform)

from the *sharīʿa*. He didn't know the Knower's (permanent) *place of residence* (2:36, etc.), nor was he able to seek him out, because of the condition he had established for him. Until at last one night, when the young man's period (of initial testing) had grown long and his merit and his perseverance in (fulfilling) what had been prescribed for him had become clear to the Knower, the Knower was (able to be) alone with him undisturbed by the people and *unheeded by* (28:15) any would-be spies. So when their meeting was arranged, the young man sensed within himself that the moment (for fulfilling) his need was near. And as their being alone gave him the opportunity in relation to his master, *he prostrated himself humbly* (12:100; 32:15, etc.) before the Knower. Then when he raised his head,

[75] The Knower said to him: 'I saw you bow down out of thankfulness. But being thankful *before* the good deed (that would deserve thanks) gives rise to suspicion (of insincerity), and it puts an end to being thankful after the good deeds (are finished).'

[76] 'All of your words are true,' replied the young man, 'and all of your actions are good deeds. My thanks are only for all your gracious favours before this! Yet, in thanking you, I did hope for even more (acts of kindness) from you.'

[77] 'Certainly it is right,' the Knower continued, 'that thankfulness should *merit an increase (in good deeds) for those who are thankful* (to God) (3:144-145, etc.), and what you deserve is an obligation (upon me). So turn your heart toward me, pay close attention and *listen carefully to what I will present to you* (20:13).'

[78] 'I have already prepared the instrument of my understanding and made myself ready for listening,' the young man exclaimed, 'so say what seems right to you.'

[79] 'There is a key to religion,' the Knower began, 'which renders it either sacred or profane, like the difference between marriage and fornication.'

[80] 'Surely that key you have mentioned must be extraordinary in God's sight,' remarked the young man, 'if it is what distinguishes between the sacred and the profane, between truth and falsehood! So what is it?'

[81] ‘That is *the pact of God* (13:20, 33:15, etc.) which confirms His rights, encompasses His obligations and safeguards *His friends* (10:62–64); *the rope of God* (3:1–3) upon His earth and His guarantee of security among His creatures,’ said the Knower. ‘I shall repeat (that oath) to you and impose its obligation on you.’

[82] ‘Yes,’ said the young man. ‘Ask (of me) whatever you would like. I am not hesitant about your opinion, nor will I violate your tradition.’

[83] The narrator continued: So the Knower began to recite the oath to the young man, and he slowly repeated it and bound himself by it. The young man couldn’t control himself because of his emotions, and his tears were streaming down because of the intensity of that moment, until (the Knower) brought him to the end of the oath. So he praised God and glorified Him and gave thanks for all that had reached him, knowing with certainty that he was henceforth part of *the party of God* (5:56; 58:22) and the party of *God’s friends* because he had accepted the obligations of their oath.³⁷ Then he finished his praises and became silent, and the Knower began his explanation and clarification.

[84] Now the first thing that the Knower said to him by way of setting forth the first principles of the manifest (causal) intermediaries (*al-asbāb al-zāhira*)³⁸ and the beginning of their creation was that:

‘God is *the Originator of things* (2:117 etc.) and the Giver of their existence. *He created them* (6:101) and then *He initiated them* (10:4, 34 etc.), without any preceding source of creation that He might have referred to (as a model) for what He created. On the contrary, *He is the First* (87:3, etc.) of every first and *the Inheritor* (15:23, etc.) of every existent. Therefore He initiated the creation of what He created from a Light,³⁹ with three words branching from that: the first of those words was (His) will; from the will derived (His) command; and from the command came *His saying to whatever He wishes “Be!,” so it comes to be* (36:82, etc.). So the beginning of creation was (God’s) willing of a command through (His) speaking.

[85] ‘Now from those first three words there came “Be!,” which is two letters and “so it comes to be” (36:82), which is five more letters.⁴⁰

Hence those seven letters were the root-principles from which were derived seven things:

‘From the (divine) Light was created the air (*al-hawāʾ*),⁴¹ which was the first of those (seven things), singular and without any pair, unique among those things in its mixing with them and encompassing them, but not being encompassed by any of those things. Thus it points (symbolically) to the One *who has no like unto Him* (42:11).

‘Next there were created from those three words *the water*⁴² (11:7, 21:30), *the darkness and the light* (6:1)—*the light of the heavens and the earth* (24:35).⁴³

‘Then He created from the water *smoke* (41:11–12); from the darkness He created the thickness of the *mud* (of Adam: 15:26, 28, 33); and from the light He created *fire* (6:12; 15:27, etc.).

‘Thus these three things were derived from the three preceding things, so that *they became pairs* (51:49, etc.) with them, because they had been created from them. But the air, the seventh (of these principles of creation), governs them altogether. This was the beginning of creation and the commencement of all things.

[86] ‘So once the creation was established on (these) seven principles, He proceeded with the process of shaping the outward forms and likenesses (of things). He created from the smoke *seven heavens and their signs* (41:11–12), and from the thickness of the mud *He created seven earths and their sustenance* (41:9–10; 65:12). Thus these seven branches (of the heavens and the earth) came from those seven root-principles.

[87] ‘Next we should examine the *signs of the heaven* (10:6, etc.) and the *sustenance of the earth* (10:31; 34:24, etc.): what are they, and what are their visible witnesses? Now if we return to what we were saying about the three words and their letters, from which the seven (root-principles) were created, those words are (God’s) “*willing a command through (His) speaking*”—which makes twelve letters.⁴⁴ Hence their signs in the heaven are the twelve *mansions* (of the Zodiac: 15:16; 25:61), and their witnesses are *seven rulers* (78:12).⁴⁵ And their signs on the earth are the twelve regions (*jazīra*),⁴⁶ while their witnesses are *the seven seas* (31:27). So those are the *signs (in) the heavens and the earth, which (most people) pass right by, turning away* (12:105).

[88] ‘Next *the (physical) heavens and the earth were all one piece* (21:30) of that darkness of “black mud,” which is the ruler of the earth. Then *He divided it* (21:30) with His lights, so that *the differing light and darkness* (45:5) became mixed. Therefore He separated the two of them (light and darkness) *through the night and the daytime as two signs* (17:12). Thus *He made the night* and its sign the emblem of the darkness and its portion, and *He made the daytime* (25:47, 62, etc.) and its sign the emblem of the light and its portion. So *He darkened the night* (17:12) with His darkness, while the moon and the planets are its signs; and *He caused the daytime to shine forth* (17:12) with His light, while the sight-giving (rays) of the sun are its sign. Then from the two of them resulted *the days revolving in turn*⁴⁷ (3:140) between the daytime and the night. Now there are seven days, and their signs are that the daytime of each day is twelve hours, and the nighttime of each day is twelve hours.

[89] ‘Now, when the creation of things from these (seven) root-principles was completed, *He made those things pairs* (36:36, 43:12), *male and female* (53:45)—and I don’t mean by that masculine and feminine (individuals of the species), but rather (paired) in terms of greater and lesser excellence and merit (*al-fāḍil wa’l-maḥḍūl*).⁴⁸ Thus (*God’s*) *accustomed way* (17:77; 33:38, etc.) proceeded with *the creation of the pairs* (36:36, etc.), and He created from their essential realities all the animals, including *the people and beasts* (35:28) and *the birds* (24:41, etc.) and the vermin. Then *His accustomed way* proceeded with regard to language, and it also became *pairs*: attributes and things qualified by them, names and the essential meanings (named). So *glory to the One Who created the pairs, all of them!* (36:36), Who then made them the outward aspects of His command/affair, symbols for His religion and signs pointing to His power. Thus He pointed through all things toward their Source, and He pointed through creation toward its *Creator* (59:24).

[90] ‘Thus (to recapitulate the whole process of creation from the initial unity of all things): *He separated them* (21:30) with His Light, He originated them through His command, He created them with His knowledge, and He sealed them, from His Names, with the letters “*In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate*” (1:1, etc.). Until finally, when *He had perfected* all of them

through His shaping (27:77) and had harmoniously ordered them (8:63) in pairs through His arranging (25:2, etc.), He selected and purified (2:132) for Himself, from the quintessence of His wish and the innermost depths of His mystery, abundant knowledge and an *illuminating light* (4:174). He made that the religion (2:132) through which God is worshipped and by which one draws near to Him. Then He ennobled it with the revealed paths (*sharā'ī'*)⁴⁹ and the (sacred) books, and He pointed to it through the symbols and recurring orders (*sunna*)⁵⁰ (of all creation).

Then He raised up for Himself, from among the very best of His creatures, certain distinguished personalities, guiding figures and wise judges. These He placed in the houses of His prophethood, the treasuries of His knowledge and His wisdom, and the (inspired) translators of His revelation (*wahy*); and He made them His viceroys on His earth (24:55), guideposts pointing to the pathway of salvation in both the outer and the inner, spiritual aspects. Among them are the *imams* (21:73; 28:5, etc.) and the *nāṭiqs* (messenger-prophets), the *ḥujjas* (proofs) and the *naqībs* (chiefs), and those who are summoning (people) to the good (3:104) (the *dā'īs*) and the *'ulamā'* (knowers).⁵¹ In their different ranks, they are like the stars of the heaven (6:97): the actions (of those they guide) rise up to them, and the symbols (of the religion) come to an end in them. Hence their imam is like the immensity of the sun in comparison with the (other heavenly) lights: it is impossible for it to be veiled from (people's) vision —indeed the sun is his symbol and outer aspect. And their *ḥujja*, the gateway (*bāb*) to their imam, is like an illuminating moon (25:61), for the moon is his outer aspect and his symbol. And their *dā'īs* are like the shining stars, for the stars are their symbols and their outer aspect.

[91] Now, all of the pairs I have described to you have an inner and outer aspect (57:3), a symbol (*mathal*)⁵² and what is symbolised. Thus the outer aspect (the visible planets, sun and moon) of the seven heavens (55:12, etc.) are symbols, while their inner aspect are the seven *nāṭiqs* (among the prophets), the possessors of determination among the (divine) messengers (46:35).⁵³ The outer aspect of the seven earths (55:12) is likewise a symbol, while its inner aspect is the imams of right guidance (21:73; 32:24). Thus each *nāṭiq*

among them has *twelve naqībs* (5:12), and their symbols in the seven heavens are *the twelve mansions* (of the Zodiac: 15:16; 25:61). Likewise each imam among the imams of right guidance has twelve *hujjas* through whom he brings His argument to his people; and their symbols on earth are the twelve (inhabited) regions (*jazīra*), which are also their dwelling-places, with one *hujja* to each region. Then each *hujja* has a greater or lesser number of *dā’īs*—for *God increases among His creatures whatever He wills* (35:11)—who communicate this argument, (which is) *God’s argument* (6:149), among His creatures, *so that the people will not have any argument against God after (the sending down) of His messengers* (4:165).

[92] ‘So it is through these intermediaries (*asbāb*)⁵⁴—that is, *God’s* intermediaries whom I’ve just described for you—that *God’s* argument has reached His creatures, and it is through them that His justice has become manifest, both outwardly and inwardly. For the inner aspect (*al-bāṭin*) is *the religion of God* (3:83; 110:2, etc.) through which *the friends of God* (10:62, etc.) rightly worship Him, while the outer aspect (*al-zāhir*) is the revealed paths of religion and its symbols. So religion is the soul and the (living) spirit of those revealed paths, and they are the body for religion and signs pointing to it. The body can only subsist through the spirit, because it is its life; and the spirit can only subsist through the body, because that is its covering.

‘It is the same way with the outer aspects of the religious paths and (all) other things: they only subsist through the inner, spiritual religion (*dīn al-bāṭin*), because it is their light and their essential meaning (*ma’nā*).⁵⁵ It is the spirit of life in them. Nor does the inner aspect subsist except through the outer aspect, because that is its covering and the sign pointing to it. Now the outer aspect is the distinctive mark of this lower world,⁵⁶ which can only be seen through that; and the inner aspect is distinctive mark of the other world, which can only be seen through that. Hence there is not a single letter among the “letters”⁵⁷ of the inner aspect, nor any friend (*walī*)⁵⁸ among *the friends (of God)*, who does not have many visible signs in the outer aspect (of this world), because of the multiplicity of the symbols and the great extent of the revealed paths.

[93] ‘Now our speaking about this could go on and be greatly expanded. But when one is speaking of wisdom, because of its preciousness and the purity of its substance, the longer one’s reply is, the more the point becomes hidden; the later part makes you forget the beginning. For part of the light of wisdom *can* obscure another part, just as the light of the sun veils and weakens the light of the moon and the stars. That is how words of wisdom should embellish the tongue of the wise man.’

[94] ‘But don’t you see,’ asked the young man, ‘that regarding this lower world—in which He created these creatures whose essence is so marvellous, so immense in their sheer numbers, from the first to the last—that people differ concerning it? For some people are very intent on this lower world, *plunging into* (23:75) the pursuit of it and considering the only excellence to consist in *seeking to accumulate more* (102:1) of it. While other people condemn it and carefully avoid it, even though they can’t do without it—and if a great deal of something is forbidden, then surely a little of it is also forbidden? Now I haven’t heard you mention this lower world or discuss it at all, so what do you have to say about it?’

[95] ‘As for this lower world,’ replied the Knower, ‘no one has ever condemned it at all, whether they be a knower or a (spiritually) ignorant person. Because the ignorant person does recognise the merits of this lower world since he is ignorant of anything else, while the knower recognises its value because of the merit of its essential meaning. So no one ever (really) condemns this lower world except for the (totally) ignorant person.

‘And as for what I myself have to say about this, it is clear to whoever can (really) see that this lower world was established on the basis of seven things, which are derived from the seven root-principles: those are the heaven, the earth, darkness, light, the “vehicles,” the (divine) favours and the adversities. That makes seven groups, and from each of those seven are derived seven further divisions:

- (i) Thus (from the heaven are derived) *the seven heavens* (2:29, etc.).
- (ii) And (from that earth are derived) *the seven earths* (65:12).

- (iii) The light (gives rise to) seven days alternating with seven nights. Thus the “Sabbath” is for resting and repose; “the first (day)”⁵⁹ is for (God’s) *limits* and *accustomed way*;⁶⁰ “the second (day)” is for (*the seven*) *doubled ones*⁶¹ (15:87; 39:23) in “the great meaning”; “the third (day)” is for the three levels (of reality)—the outer aspect, the inner aspect and the inner aspect of that (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*);⁶² “the fourth (day)” is for *the four sacred (months)* (9:36); “the fifth (day)” is for the fifth of God’s intermediaries; and “the (day of) gathering” is for God’s greatest law (*nāmūs*).
- (iv) The darkness (gives rise to) seven nights as a protection for the seven days, each day having a night.
- (v) The seven “*vehicles*” (43:12–14) are the camels, *horses, mules, donkeys* (16:8), elephants, *cattle and ships* (43:12). For with these seven vehicles they cross the great expanses of the earth: the camels for the sands; the horses for the plains; the mules for the mountains; the donkeys for the short distances; the elephants for the wastelands and wilderness; the cattle for the swamps and thickets; and the ships for the seas. So that makes seven ways of crossing for the seven (terrains).
- (vi) The “favours” of this lower world come to seven: air, water, light, darkness, food, clothing and marriage. Thus the air provides an opening between the heaven and the earth in which the winds arise and where the breaths can come and go. Water (enables) life for all living things. Light is the basis for sight and vision. Darkness (allows) the growth of plants. Foods (provide) sustenance for living bodies. Clothing is protection and *covers the private parts* (7:26). And marriage (provides for) the means of propagation (of the species) and raising offspring. So among them are the keys to what is good and the wellsprings of (God’s) blessings. Then, which of these is to be condemned when they are all among God’s kindnesses and His favours for which His servants should all be thankful?
- (vii) Their opposites among the “adversities” (of this lower world) are also seven: heat, cold, hunger, thirst, fear, sickness and death. That makes seven things about which we must exhibit faithful perseverance (*ṣabr*) after we have come to recognise their essential meanings.’

[96] ‘Those are undoubtedly the attributes of this lower world,’ the young man responded, ‘and nothing exists that is not part of the handiwork of the Creator and from His fashioning. So why is it some of the learned criticise this lower world, even though they cannot do without it? And why do the ignorant people praise it? For it seems to me that they are right about this matter, even though they are ignorant—and their being right necessarily means the learned must be mistaken, since they have opposed the ignorant with regard to this matter.’

[97] ‘The learned were not mistaken in their criticising this lower world,’ replied the Knower, ‘but people don’t realise what they actually intended in doing so. Nor did the ignorant people really grasp what is true when they were praising this lower world, since they failed to understand its essential meaning. And the person who is ignorant of something naturally opposes it.’

[98] ‘Then show me,’ asked the young man, ‘what is sound in the words of the learned (who criticise this world), so that I can recognise why they are right. And clarify for me what it is in the saying of the ignorant people that will reveal their falseness, since appearances would seem to indicate the opposite of that. For my heart has been constricted by my ignorance of that, and I only want the (genuine) relief that comes from knowing (the truth) of this matter.’

[99] ‘Now this lower world and everything I have described to you about it,’ the Knower continued, ‘is only the outer aspect of the inner dimension (*zāhir li-bāṭin*). So this lower world has nothing to sustain it but that inner dimension, because it stands in relation (to the material world) like the spirit in relation to the body. Therefore, whoever knows the spirit finds the body pleasing. But for that person who does not know the spirit and only recognises the body, the body itself is a dead thing, and *carrion is forbidden* (5:3, etc.). This is the reason why the knowers have forbidden this lower world, because it is carrion (taken in itself); so they forbade *that (same) carrion which God had forbidden* (2:173, etc.), until it is approached in the way God wishes.

‘Now it has become clear why the ignorant people were wrong in praising this lower world, since they didn’t recognise its inner dimension and what God intended by it. They imagined that God had

created it without any essential meaning—but *God did not create things pointlessly or in jest* (23:115). For if this lower world and all it contains had only been created for this lower world alone, bringing forth in it creatures returning to nothingness, there would have been *no ultimate outcome for it* (22:41; 31:22, etc.), and it would have had no essential meaning. For every action without any ultimate outcome is *only (vain) amusement* (6:32, etc.), and every speech without any essential meaning is falsehood—but God is exalted above that!

[100] ‘You have certainly established the truthfulness of the knowers,’ the young man admitted, ‘and you have shown their excellence and what distinguishes them from the ignorant people, as well as what their mistake was in the way (their) argument initially appeared. And now we need to know about the inner dimension of this lower world and what *it* contains. For it does seem to me that the constriction I was complaining to you about (because of my ignorance) has already gone away.’

[101] ‘Then what is the reward,’ asked the Knower, ‘for the person who removes you from the constriction of neediness to openness and abundance?’

[102] ‘Thankfulness and praise,’ he replied.

[103] ‘Then what is the reward,’ he continued, ‘for the person who has removed you from the constriction of ignorance to the open space of true knowing?’

[104] ‘Obedience and action (in accordance with that knowledge),’ he answered.

[105] ‘So this lower world and all of its symbols,’ continued the Knower, ‘are the outer aspect of the other world (*zāhir al-ākhirā*) and what it contains, while the other world is their spirit and their life. Therefore whoever strives in this lower world *for* this lower world, with no awareness of the other world—their striving is only aimless wandering, since their striving has no essential meaning and no ultimate result. *But whoever strives in this lower world for the other world [with the right striving], while having faith* (17:19) in the other world—their striving does have a meaning and an ultimate result, and *their striving finds (God’s) acceptance* (17:19; 76:22).’

[106] 'You have spoken truly,' said the young man. 'So explain to me the distinctive signs of this lower world and what they contain, and lay out for me the symbols (from this world) in connection with the inner meanings of what they symbolise.'

[107] The Knower began: 'God, may He be praised and exalted, did not create even a single thing among the things of this lower world—not an animal crawling upon the earth, nor a flying creature flying with its wings (6:38); not anything wet nor dry (6:59), whether inanimate things assembled like the mountains and stones, or the trees, or minerals like gold and silver and gems; nor all things, great and small—but that it is a symbol established (by God) (39:27, etc.). Don't you see that even the tiny *dust-mote* (4:22, etc.), despite its smallness and the slighthness of its essential meaning, has its limits—in front of it, behind it, to its right and left, and above and below it? Those are six limits, while the mote itself is the seventh. Now the same is true of everything that God has created at all—from the dust-motes or *the gnat to whatever is above them* (2:26), from the heaven and the earth and everything between them, from the biggest things to the smallest—in just that same way. Each thing among them has six limits, and the thing itself is the seventh. (All this is) a sign pointing to the six root-principles from which all things were created, while the "Air" which encompasses them is the seventh, ruler of all the others.⁶³

So now, if your heart has opened up to these questions, to examining the (outer, created) symbols and the correspondence of each of them with its counterpart among the "pairs" of the inner dimension, then ask about whatever you consider appropriate.'

[108] 'Then what is symbolised by *the heaven*,' asked the young man, 'with its towering above the things and the vast extent of *its regions* (55:33), such that it contains the totality of things?'

[109] 'Its symbol is the likeness of the *nāṭiq*,⁶⁴ replied the Knower, 'who is towering above all the creatures by virtue of his excellence and the lofty elevation of his ranks, and he contains all the (divine) wise precepts—the precepts of the revealed path—because of the vast extent of his knowledge.'

[110] 'Then what is symbolised by *the mansions* (of the Zodiac, at 15:16, etc.) and the rest of their stars?' the young man inquired.

[111] ‘They are the symbol of *the twelve naqībs* (5:12),’ the Knower explained, ‘the chiefs of the *nāṭiq*, and the stars are their *dā‘īs* who *are calling (people) to the good* (3:104), with the permission of their Lord.’

[112] ‘Then what is symbolised by the earth and its great extent,’ asked the young man, ‘since it *has been made a resting-place* (40:64) for these creatures *and a refuge* (78:6)?’

[113] ‘It is a symbol of the *bāb*⁶⁵ of the *nāṭiq* during his lifetime,’ the Knower responded, ‘and of his designated *waṣī* (trustee) after the *nāṭiq*’s death. For he *is a refuge for the people* (2:125) and *a resting-place* for whoever is seeking right guidance, since he knows the symbols and the *inspired interpretation (ta’wīl)*⁶⁶ (12:6, etc.) of the inner aspect (of those symbols).’

[114] ‘Then what is symbolised by the twelve regions (*jazīra*) on the earth?’ asked the young man.

[115] ‘They are the symbols of the twelve *hujjas*, the proofs (assisting) the *waṣis*,’ replied the Knower.

[116] ‘And what are symbolised by the earth’s *rivers* (13:3; 16:15, etc.) and its *springs* (36:34; etc.)?’ asked the young man.

[117] ‘They are the symbols of (the *dā‘īs*,) *those who are calling (people) to the good* (3:104),’ the Knower answered.

[118] ‘Then what is symbolised by the (spiritual entities who are) *the rulers of the seven heavens* (17:44, etc.) and of *their spheres* (21:33; 36:40)?’ asked the young man.⁶⁷

[119] ‘Those are the intermediaries between God and the *nāṭiqs*,’ explained the Knower. ‘They are [...⁶⁸]; so those are the seven (heavenly spheres), plus the two (outermost) spheres, which are God’s greatest intermediaries.’

[120] ‘Then what is symbolised by *the seven seas* (31:27)?’ asked the young man.

[121] ‘They are the (spiritual) intermediaries between God and the imams (following) the *nāṭiq*, which are beneath those intermediaries [mentioned in the preceding question],’ the Knower replied.

[122] ‘Then what is symbolised by *the salty water and the sweet, fresh water* (25:53; 35:12),’ asked the young man, ‘and by the difference between the two of them here on earth?’

[123] ‘The *salty water*,’ explained the Knower, ‘is the symbol of knowledge of the outward aspect (of things), which does not contain any (spiritual) calling and has no callers (to the good): that is just like the salty water which has no usefulness for growing things or anything else. But *the sweet, fresh water* (25:53) is the symbol of the inner, spiritual aspect: it is either *springs* (54:12) flowing in the earth, or (rain) water flowing down from above the earth. Thus (that true) knowledge, knowledge of the inner spiritual aspect, is either of its outward aspect that is conveyed by the *dā‘īs*, or else the inner spiritual knowing, which is hidden.’

[124] ‘How did water become a symbol for knowledge?’ asked the young man.

[125] ‘Because water is life for every living thing,’ the Knower responded, ‘just as knowledge is life for every knower.’

[126] ‘So what, then, is symbolised by the air *which encompasses all things* (4:126; 41:53 etc.)?’ asked the young man.

[127] ‘The Air is too exalted to be a symbol of anything else!’ replied the knower.

[128] ‘Is it greater or are the heavens and the earth,’ asked the young man, ‘since they are both symbols?’

[129] ‘May God be glorified (above any limitation)!’ exclaimed the Knower. ‘Indeed it is greater than either of them. For the extent of the earth in relation to the Air is like a seal-ring in relation to a great plain, and the extent of the (earth’s) atmosphere in relation to the heavens is like a seal-ring in relation to a vast desert. But the expanse of *the heaven and its regions* (33:14), in comparison to the full extent of the Air is still like an egg in relation to an immense plain. So what could this (Air) possibly comprehend and symbolise, so that it could be its symbol and point to it?’

[130] ‘Then what is its essential meaning?’ inquired the young man.

[131] The Knower replied: ‘It is a sign pointing toward the One Who *has no thing as His likeness* (42:11)—may He be glorified and exalted above whatever they would associate (with Him) (16:74)!’

[132] ‘Yet didn’t the Creator say: “*So do not make any likenesses for God*” (16:74)?’ the young man objected.

[133] ‘But didn’t He also say: “*And God’s is the loftiest symbol*” (16:60; 30:27)?’ asked the Knower.

[134] ‘Glory to the One Who spoke mysteriously in His Book, so that He might be approached through His (proper) gateway (*bāb*),’ replied the young man. ‘Now *you* are one of His gateways, so explain clearly to us how that is.’

[135] ‘Now every thing has its essential meaning,’ began the Knower, ‘and the meaning of the symbols is that in their outward aspect are signs pointing toward the inner, spiritual aspect. Therefore He—may He be glorified and exalted!—has forbidden that He should be compared to anything among His creatures, lest someone should say “This is the likeness of God” in the same way that they say “This is the symbol of the imam” or “This is the symbol of the *ḥujjā*” and “This is the symbol of the *dā‘ī*.” For their symbols have become signs pointing to them and to their respective dignities. However, in view of (God’s incomparable) majesty, the Creator must not be compared to any thing among His creatures, whether in word or action; so it cannot be said “This is the likeness of God.”

‘Nonetheless, the symbols are understood according to their essential meanings. And since they are signs (each of them) pointing to their own essential meanings, with the lesser ones pointing to the greater ones and the greater ones pointing to the highest and most sublime meanings, then the loftiest symbols point to *the Highest* (2:255, etc.), *the Most Exalted* (87:1, etc.).⁶⁹ So that is why He said: *And God’s is the loftiest symbol* (16:60)—that is to say, the supreme sign, because there is no sign pointing to anything higher than the sign which points to God. And that (unique symbol) is the Air, which is higher than the heavens and the earth, encompassing all things and not encompassed by any of those things. Therefore that is *the loftiest symbol*, and it is the sign pointing to the One Who *has no thing like His likeness* (42:11). For He did not say “No thing is like Him,” since He (obviously) has no “like.” Rather, He meant that the sign pointing to him is not like all the other signs—for *His is the loftiest symbol* (16:60)—and that none of the other signs pointing to the other creatures, such as we have described, are at all like His sign. So *blessed be God, Lord of the majestic throne* (40:64, 23:86)!’

[136] ‘(Your) meaning has certainly become immense and its scope has become vast!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘So was there anything before the Air, between it and God, given what you described of its limitlessness?’

[137] ‘Yes,’ said the Knower.

[138] ‘Then what is that?’ asked the young man.

[139] ‘Time (*al-āwān*),’⁷⁰ replied the Knower.

[140] ‘But what is (this) time?’ continued the young man.

[141] ‘It is the time of the (divine) will, through which *He created what He willed and commanded what He wished* (36:82, etc.).’

[142] ‘Now you’ve carried me into the depths of the seas of *the loftiest assembly* (37:8; 38:69)!’ the young man remarked. ‘But come back with me to the knowledge of this lower world and its symbols. Perhaps I’ll be able to find help in that knowledge for my own situation and will be able to use it to uphold what is expected of me. For (just now) I became afraid for my soul and worried that my mind might have led me away toward something whose essence I am unable (to grasp).’

[143] ‘You did climb high in your questioning,’ the Knower replied, ‘and my reply climbed with you to the very peak of the outward aspect of the spiritual meanings. Then your vision became lost and bewildered there and your mind was in perplexity about it. So how would it have been if I had begun to unveil for you their *inner* aspect? We would have been, you and I, like *Moses and the knower* (18:60–82)!’

[144] ‘Then there is also an inner aspect to *this* inner dimension, even more inward (spiritual) than it is?’ exclaimed the young man.

[145] ‘By my life!’ responded the Knower, ‘there is indeed an inner aspect of this inner one: it is the very highest of (spiritual) stations, more extensive than this inner aspect in its power and more perfect than it as a guide. For it is the *goal* of all the signs pointing to the way of salvation.’

[146] ‘Now I do see that there are three levels of knowledge here,’ the young man answered. ‘There is its outer aspect (*zāhir*), its inner aspect (*bāṭin*), and the inner (spiritual) dimension (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*) of that.’⁷¹ ‘So is there a sign pointing to this?’

[147] ‘Where is there any sign that doesn’t point to this, or to something like it?’ responded the Knower.

[148] ‘Then point out for me the symbol of these three stages,’ said the young man.

[149] ‘I shall point that out for you,’ replied the Knower, ‘from God’s Book, on the basis of intellectual argument and from the generality of all the symbols.’

[150] ‘But I didn’t suspect,’ said the young man, ‘that there was a way of proceeding (*madhhab*)⁷² (toward God) *beyond what* I had attained (2:91), nor that *God’s command/affair* (7:54, etc.) is far greater than what the imaginations of *the pretenders (al-mutakallifin)*⁷³ (38:86) could ever reach!’

[151] ‘As for the sign (of these three stages of knowing) from the Book of God,’ continued the Knower, ‘that is in His saying: “*O children of Adam, We have sent down for you clothing to cover your private parts, and splendid attire, and the garment of mindfulness (of God)—that is best!*” (7:26). So that makes three (levels of revealed knowledge): the outer aspect (*zāhir*), its inner dimension (*bāṭin*), and the inner aspect of that (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*).’

[152] ‘You have spoken truly,’ replied the young man.

[153] ‘Now, as for the intellectual proof of this,’ the Knower continued, ‘every thing can only be known by means of its name, its specific characteristic or its essential meaning. But the meaning is the real essence of the thing, while the name belongs to it and the characteristic only points to it. The same thing is true of *God’s religion* (3:83; 110:2): It has its outer aspect, the name, and its inner dimension, which points to (its essential reality, the innermost level); and it can only subsist through both of them.

‘Now we can only point to something through either a name or a specific characteristic (of that thing), as when someone says “The moon rose.” Now the essential meaning is the (actual) disk, “the moon” is its name, and “rising” is its specific characteristic. But if someone were to say “the disk” and then stop, that would have no real meaning; or if they were to say “the moon” and then stop, that would also have no meaning; and if they were to say “it rose,” that would likewise be without meaning. Because it is only when the name and the specific characteristic are combined, so that one says “The

moon rose,” that the real meaning appears and what was said about that is actually true.

‘Likewise, if you were to say “the outer aspect,” then someone would have to ask in response: “the outer aspect of what?” And if you were to say “the inner aspect,” again it would be necessary to ask in response: “the inner aspect of what?” But if you said “the outer aspect of religion and its inner aspect,” what you said would be understandable. There would be a religion with an outer and inner aspect, just like the thing with its name and its specific attribute, as when He said: “*And abandon both the outer aspect of the offence and its inner aspect!*” (6:120). For in that case the misdeed is the thing, and it has both an outer and an inner aspect.

‘Now God’s *greatest* religion is just like that: the revealed paths are its outer aspect, the inner (spiritual) dimension is its inner aspect, and it subsists by itself. Therefore in order to come to understand its essential meaning and reality, there are many symbols pointing to it, such as the *hidden egg* (37:49). It has its outer aspect (the shell) which hides it; its inner aspect, the white of the egg; and the inner dimension of that, its yellow yoke, which is its true substance and essential meaning.’

[154] ‘But aren’t this lower world and the other world a pair,’ asked the young man, ‘and the spirit and the body a pair, and our knowledge of the outer and inner aspects (of religion) a pair? And aren’t a great many *of all of the pairs* (36:36; 43:12) just like these pairs which you’ve described?’

[155] ‘You’re right,’ said the Knower, ‘but they are pairs symbolising what?’

[156] ‘The pairs are pointing to *God’s religion*,’ replied the young man.

[157] ‘Right you are,’ said the Knower. ‘So the pair of the outer aspect, which is the name, and the inner aspect, which is the distinctive characteristic, together point to *God’s knowledge* and to *God’s religion*—and *that* is the innermost dimension (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*).

‘Likewise the creatures were created according to three levels: the first level was the creation of the angels; the second the creation of true humanity (*ādamiyyūn*);⁷⁴ and the third the creation of the brute beasts. So knowledge of the outer aspect (of this lower world) is the

level of the brute beasts, and whoever knows it (alone), without its inner aspect, is at the level of those animals. And knowledge of the inner aspect is the knowledge of the (true) descendants of Adam and their distinctive level; whoever knows it has true faith and is at the level of humanity.

‘But knowledge of the inner dimension of that inner aspect is the knowledge of the angels. So whoever knows that is spiritual in his knowledge and material with regard to his body. Such a person is *a prophet sent* (to humankind) (2:213), *whom God places as His viceroy on His earth* (2:30; 38:26; 24:55) and whom *He makes His argument* in regard to His creatures (6:83; 4:164–5). For (such a spiritual knower) is the veil of the angels, the exemplar of divine revelation and its interpreter for the children of Adam. He has the keys of the gardens (of Paradise), so that only those who willingly follow him may enter the gardens; and he has authority over Hell, such that only those who disobey him will enter there.

‘So there are only two (types of) fully human beings among humanity: the “*sanctified knower*” (*rabbāniyyūn*) (5:44, 63),⁷⁵ who already knows the *goal* of the sciences, and whose spirit is in direct contact with the spirit of certainty. That person is a knower through his knowledge, but he is sanctified through his actions. And the other (type) is “those seeking knowledge along the path of salvation.”⁷⁶

‘For the rest of “humankind are riffraff and rabble” who don’t (really) know anything, “the followers of every screaming voice” (of someone) who has become deluded in his error and *has deluded them* (28:63, etc.) through his own ignorance. *Yet they suppose that they are doing good works* (18:104)! But no, *the exemplary (punishments) have already taken place before them* (13:6), and *God will never break His covenant* (22:47), and *surely the ungrateful ones will have their like* (as punishments) (47:10).’

[158] ‘Indeed true merit and excellence is like that,’ said the young man, ‘and that is (the description of true) knowledge and clear presentation! So bravo for *the friends of God* (10:62, etc.), and bravo for *those who follow (them) in doing what is good and beautiful* (9:100)! But can that lofty level be reached by following the trail of the levels that are below it?’

[159] ‘Be careful, my son!’ replied the Knower. ‘That level has been specially honoured by God above all the other (spiritual) levels and ranks; so it can only be attained through the most excellent and meritorious action. But if you should perform the actions appropriate to it and strive for it in the proper way, with the most sincere certainty and a pure, attentive heart, then you can hope to reach as much of it as was reached by *the friends of God, the chosen and purified ones, the very best* (38:47).’

[160] ‘And who,’ asked the young man, ‘would even aspire to attain such a spiritual level through which *God has raised up* (2:253, etc.) *His friends*?’

[161] ‘Surely their God is also your God?’ replied the Knower, ‘and there is no (undeserved) tie of closeness between God and anyone: the creatures only come close to God through their spiritual mindfulness and appropriate actions. As for that knowledge *through which God raised up* (12:76; 58:11) *His friends*, you are now at the beginning of that. So if you put that knowledge into action, you can reach its culmination. For it is only right for God to help you reach the attainments of *the pure and righteous (al-ṣāliḥūn)* (2:130; 21:105, etc.)⁷⁷ among them, and *He will not treat you unjustly* (9:70, etc.) in respect to anything which He bestowed on them.’

[162] ‘Then would you be able,’ asked the young man, ‘to help me (understand) the essential meaning of that, just as you have so generously done earlier?’

[163] ‘The only thing that is truly appropriate to *this* spiritual level,’ replied the Knower, ‘is to put into practice what is specifically fitting for it.’

[164] ‘But why is that,’ objected the young man, ‘when you were able (to teach me through discussion) earlier?’

[165] ‘Now the farmer can fertilise the ground, and seed and water it,’ the Knower responded, ‘but he cannot make the plants and their flowers come forth.⁷⁸ And a man can sow his seed whenever he wants, but he is not able to create from it whatever he wishes. So it is painful for me, my son, that you should ask my help in something while I am unable to help you with it—*May God open up your soul* (6:125; 39:22) and illumine your heart with right guidance! Now it is obligatory for you to be mindful of God and to do

what is good and beautiful, since *God surely does not neglect the recompense of whoever is good and beautiful in their actions* (9:120; 11:115, 12:90).

‘For you are on the path of salvation and the highway of right guidance and the course of the people of God-mindfulness. So travel your path which you have just begun and *hold tightly to your connection* (to God) (2:256; 31:22) to whom you have been called, until you are guided by a *connection from God [and from men]* (3:112) to *God’s connection* (3:103)—for *that* is the goal of all who are seeking.’

[166] ‘But isn’t *God’s connection* the imam to whom you’ve been calling me?’ asked the young man.

[167] ‘He is an outward aspect of that,’ replied the Knower, ‘and he is *your connection* and *the firmest support* (2:256; 31:22), your proof (*hujja*) and the gateway (*bāb*) to *your imam*.’

[168] ‘But then, what is *God’s connection* (3:103), and what is a *connection from God* (3:112)?’ the young man continued.

[169] ‘That (*God’s connection*) is the *goal* of your guidance and the concluding degree of the (true) knowers,’ the Knower answered.

[170] ‘So *there is no power and no strength except through God* (18:39)!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘Surely whoever is without a (true spiritual) guide would drown in the floods of ignorance, just as anyone without a *ship*⁷⁹ would drown (29:15) in the seas of this lower world.’

[171] ‘But what,’ asked the Knower, ‘are that *power* and that *strength* which you just mentioned *only exist through God*?’

[172] ‘We say,’⁸⁰ the young man replied, ‘that there is no way (*hīla*)⁸¹ for me to bring myself any benefit, and no *strength* for me to defend myself from the harm of whatever I dislike, except through God.’

[173] ‘Then what if you were to say “there is no ‘way’ except for God,” and you didn’t say “*there is no power*”?’ the Knower objected.

[174] ‘Indeed it has been transmitted to us in our sciences,’ the young man continued, ‘that the word *ḥawl* [usually understood as *power*] actually means “a year,” because God said (using the same word *ḥawl*) “*for two entire cycles*” (2:233), meaning two years. It has also been transmitted to us—and the common people⁸² likewise report—that the word *power* (in the same verse 18:39) actually refers

to mules, because of God's saying: "and We gave him [Qārūn] such treasures that its keys would weigh heavily upon a band (of men) possessors of great strength" (28:76). Then they said that (in that verse) "band" means forty men, while "strength" (*quwwa*) refers to mules, so that "the keys of his treasures" were equal to the burden of forty mules.'

[175] 'Then what you really meant when you said "there is no power and no strength except through God," responded the Knower, was that "there is no year and no mule except through God"! And that, according to you, is the deeper interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and essential meaning of your saying?'

[176] 'I don't have anything else to say,' replied the young man. 'Of course that is weak and really doesn't resemble words of wisdom at all, and I do suppose that its essential meaning is something else, which must be more rhetorically effective and of more substantial significance. So do those two expressions have another, deeper interpretation in their inner dimension?'

[177] 'People do not utter any word of truth without its having some source in that inner dimension (*al-bāṭin*),' the Knower began. 'Nor is there any word of falsehood but that it once had a real meaning—only those words were turned away⁸³ from that meaning and thus became absurd. For what is absurd and impossible has been "turned away" and shifted from its proper place, and when the truth is shifted (that way), it becomes falsehood. And after that (distortion) such (false) speech can only be perceived through analogy (*qiyās*)⁸⁴ and ambiguity, just as (the true speech) before it was perceived through its likenesses and symbols.'

[178] 'You've spoken truly,' said the young man. 'So what is the real meaning of those two words and what do they symbolise?'

[179] 'As for (the word) *ḥawl* (power),' replied the Knower, 'that refers to God's *nāṭiq*,⁸⁵ His faithful and true viceroy (*khalīfa*), the master of the twelve chiefs (*naqībs*) (5:12)—just as *ḥawl*, in its meaning as a year, is only completed by the twelve months. Now the imam is only called a *ḥawl* because he "transforms and conveys" (*ḥawwala*)⁸⁶ the Creator's speech, with all the subtlety of its essential meaning, into the speech of human beings, so that they can understand. Thus (God's speech) becomes an outward form of speech:

the words of wisdom are its body and form, while the Creator’s speech is its spirit of life and light of salvation. Hence the words of wisdom are ennobled above all the other forms of speech, because of the special nobility of the Creator’s speech, which is their inner dimension. Therefore, the imam is called a *ḥawl* because of his “transformation and conveying” of (God’s) speech, for He only does so with God’s permission!

‘And as for (the word) “strength” (*quwwa*), that refers to (the imam’s) *ḥujja* (proof) and His *bāb* (gateway) because God has “given him strength” (*qawwāhu*) to bear (His) *weighty words* (73:5). Therefore (the *ḥujja-bāb*) takes that (divine speech) from the imam, in its general, all-inclusive form, and disseminates it to the *dā’īs* (summoners), in more detailed and particular form, according to their different levels. So the *ḥujja* is called a “strength,” but he has no strength except through God. Thus “there is no *imam* and no *ḥujja* except through God,” and their light and their support comes (only) from God.

‘And as for the *band* (*of men*) *possessors of great strength* (28:76), they are the twelve *ḥujjas*. That is why Joseph said to his father (in describing his dream): *O my father, verily I have seen eleven stars and the sun and the moon—I saw them bowing down to me!* (12:4). By the “sun” he means the imam, by the “moon” his *ḥujja* and *bāb*, and the “stars” are all the twelve *naqībs*. Likewise Joseph’s brothers said: *Indeed Joseph and his brother are more beloved by his father than us, although we are a band!* (12:8)—by which they are referring to the twelve *naqībs*—so let him pick a man from among us (to rule) over us. So they were overcome by the failure of their personal opinion⁸⁷ regarding Joseph—peace be with him!—and they were overwhelmed by the dominance of their envy of Joseph, because of *the blessings God had bestowed on him* (19:58). Thus *God’s command/affair was fulfilled* (12:6) concerning Joseph, and *the ultimate outcome of their affair* (65:9, etc.) was remorse and returning to (God) in repentance.’

[180] ‘Praise be to God,’ exclaimed the young man, ‘Who *purified them from defilement* (33:33) and brought them back to the returning of repentance and the consequences of their turning (toward Him)! But then what is the essential meaning of *the king’s*

saying (to Joseph): *Verily, I see seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green ears (of wheat) and (seven) other dry ones*" (12:43)? What is that, and what is the vision seen in a dream?"

[181] 'As for the vision (in a dream),' began the Knower, 'that is the likeness of what remains in the outer dimension (*zāhir*) of the (religious) actions a person performs, for it *is like a mirage which, when (the thirsty person) reaches it, he finds to be nothing* (24:39). For in the same way, an outwardly (religious) action without any inner (spiritual) dimension will not be accepted at all, no matter how often it is repeated. Likewise a vision seen in a dream does not give any lasting result at all, even if there are many (such visions). Thus the king said, according to the transmission of the common people, "Verily, I see seven things revolving around seven others."

'But as for (the true meaning of) *the seven fat cows* (12:43), they are God's (heavenly) intermediaries who are between Him and His creatures. As for *the seven thin ones*, they are the seven *nātiqs* (messenger-prophets), who are compelled by their need for what comes from *what is with God* (62:11, etc.) by means of those seven intermediaries. And as for *the seven green ears (of wheat)*, they are the intermediaries between God and the *waṣīs* (the imams), while *the seven dry ones* are those *waṣīs*, who are compelled by their need for what comes from *what is with God* by means of those seven intermediaries. *So blessed be God, Lord of the worlds* (7:54; 44:64)!'

[182] 'Then what is their likeness with regard to *us*?' asked the young man.

[183] 'Those (symbols), with respect to the foundation (*asās*)⁸⁸ of Islam and his descendants,' explained the Knower, 'are like a seed which has grown into *seven ears* (of grain)—I mean, from whose seed there have come seven imams.'⁸⁹

[184] The young man continued: 'But then how is it that God has prohibited this lower world, since He said: "*Then do not let the life of this lower world deceive you!*" (31:33; 35:5)?'

[185] 'God did speak truly,' replied the Knower. 'He didn't say "Don't let this lower world deceive you." He only said: "*Don't let the life of this lower world deceive you.*" Because "life" has four meanings: the outward life in this lower world and its ultimate outcome, (which is) *passing away* (55:26); and the life of the other world and

its ultimate outcome, (which is eternally) lasting. Hence He said that you shouldn’t act for this passing, transient life, but you should act for the lasting (eternal) life. For that (is the point of) His saying: “*O would that I had prepared for my life!*” (89:24)—which is to say, “If only I had prepared during this passing life for the lasting life.” And the essential meaning of these two sorts of life is life through knowledge of its outward aspect, and life through knowledge of its inner (spiritual) aspect.

‘For knowledge of the outward aspect is *the life of this lower world* (31:3, etc.), which is knowledge of what is lowest. But knowledge of the inner aspect is the life of the other world. Because of this He said: *Don’t let yourselves be deceived by the life of this lower world!*’—that is, don’t be deluded by the outward aspect of knowledge and by action according to that alone. For (the outcome of your actions) will only be accepted from you (at the Judgement) through the inner aspect and through your upholding and accomplishing *that* along with the outward aspect, since the outward aspect is not accepted without the inner.’

[186] ‘What do you think,’ asked the young man, ‘about someone who knows the knowledge of the inner aspect, but who doesn’t know the knowledge of the outer aspect and doesn’t uphold that? What would their rank be, according to the people of religion?’

[187] ‘What a terrible position!’ the Knower replied. ‘For in that case the inner aspect (of religion) couldn’t subsist and be sound, since that person would have neglected something that has been commanded (by God) and has been established as a protection for the inner aspect, like the outer aspect of fruits: if their outer covering is peeled off before they’re ripe, then they become rotten and are useless after that. It is just like with the body: if its limbs are cut off, the spirit won’t remain in it for even a moment. That is a likeness of the outward aspect of religion: if its basic obligations aren’t carried out, then its inner aspect won’t be realised for that person. But in fact, (such a person’s) neglecting its outward aspect—without any permission from the one Who made it obligatory for them—can only be for one of two reasons. If they neglected it because of some incapacity, then they are even more incapable of (realising) the inner aspect. Or if they neglected the outward aspect

intentionally, while being able (to uphold it), then they are wilfully disobedient to the one Who commanded them to uphold it. Now the disobedient person is an evildoer, and the evildoer cannot be a companion of the Friends of God. Indeed, the evildoer *is the enemy of the friends of God* (18:50), and they are his enemies, *because of his cutting off what God has commanded should be joined* (2:27; 13:25).

[188] 'What about someone who knows the knowledge of the outward aspect and upholds it, but who doesn't know the inner aspect?' asked the young man. 'What is that person's rank, according to the people of religion?'

[189] 'The worst station of all,' the Knower responded, 'because they are like a body which has come into being without having the spirit (of life) breathed into it, so such a person is numbered among *the dead bodies* (2:28; 16:21). These corpses are the ranks of those who reject (God), and those who reject God's signs are the enemies of religion and of its people.'

[190] 'So I see,' said the young man, 'that the outward aspect can only be sound through its inner dimension, and that the inner aspect can only subsist through the outer. So this lower world can only be (religiously) licit for someone who truly knows the other world, which is its life and its inner aspect. Likewise religion is only complete for its people once they uphold both its outward and its inner aspects.'

[191] 'Yes,' the Knower answered, 'that is the true meaning (of religion), and that is the way (your own) actions should be, because upholding the totality of *what God has commanded* (2:27; etc.) leads you to deserve *His satisfaction* (3:162); but neglecting some of *what God has commanded* exposes you to *His wrath* (3:162).'

[192] 'Then isn't the person who knows the outer aspect through the inner dimension (of religion) and who upholds and accomplishes both of them the (genuine) person of faith (*mu'min*)?' asked the young man.

[193] 'Yes,' said the Knower, 'such a person is *in truth a person of faith* (8:4, 74)!'

[194] 'Then what about the person who has known (the true religion) and acted for the sake of the other world,' continued the young man: 'doesn't this lower world become good for such a person,

and aren't *its good things licit for them* (5:5; 7:157), along with enjoying its fruits?

[195] 'Yes,' replied the Knower, 'this lower world is only suitable for them; they have the best right to this lower world, and they are most deserving of it.'

[196] 'But then why is it,' the young man responded, 'that I see the people of this description, those who are the true knowers among the people of this (lofty) rank, rejecting this lower world and looking askance at it, as though their souls were weighed down by it? Indeed they have rejected this lower world and what it contains to such a degree that someone who didn't know them would think that they considered it forbidden. Moreover, I see that their skin has become pale (from nightly praying and vigil) without their being sick, and that their bodies are so weak (from fasting) and their skin sticks so tightly to their bones that it seems they are not eating any food at all, even when they are eating.'

[197] The narrator continued: Now when the Knower heard him mentioning their (spiritual) brothers and their description, he was overcome with emotion, and *his eyes overflowed with tears* (5:83), so that he wasn't able to talk for a while, because he was crying so much. And the young man started crying because of this, until the Knower became worried that some of their enemies might surprise them. So he controlled himself, until his heart had become calm. Then the Knower approached the young man,

[198] And the Knower said: '*O my dear son* (2:132, etc.), the people whom you have described as being like that have looked at themselves with the light of life, and they have devoted themselves to (perfecting) their affair with the certainty of salvation. Nor were they being harsh against themselves. O my dear son, truly *this lower world* is viewed in terms of (people's) *possessions and their children* (18:46, etc.). But the other world *is seen through (true) knowledge and certainty* (102:5-7)! O my dear son, those people (*al-qawm*)⁹⁰ are right in *having faith in the unseen* (2:3, etc.), for they have certainty about the (divine) *promise and the threat*. Their hearts were longing for what they have been promised, so they were seeking it. And *fear of (God's) threats* (14:14) filled them with awe, so they

struggled mightily. They were in dread of *the pangs of death* (50:19), so they hastened to perform the (good) actions.

‘Thus their bodies became weak from their persistence in fasting and their complexions became pale from their long night-vigils of praying. For they are not sleeping with the (heedless) sleepers because of their anxiety (about their soul’s fate), nor do they eat except with repugnance. They were distracted from the pleasures of life by the attractions of reflection, and they were too busy for the interval of sleep because of the sweetness of remembrance (*dhikr*) (of God).⁹¹ Their souls turned away from the (carnal) attractions, so that this lower world did not seem agreeable to them. Because they were multiplying their remembrance of death, this life did not seem pleasant to them; and because they contemplated the blessings of the other world with certainty, they could only look askance at this lower world. Hence they rejected this lower world because they were distracted from it (by their concern for the next world), not because they considered it forbidden.’

[199] ‘This is the genuine good!’ exclaimed the young man, ‘and this is the reason why the (true) knowers were rejecting this lower world! But *most of the people are heedless of them* (10:92), imagining that they have somehow forbidden for themselves what God had made licit for them. So describe for me *the illusions of the people of this lower world* (3:185; 7:20) concerning this world of theirs, and *their heedlessness of the other world* (30:7).’

[200] ‘If those who are attached to this lower world were to reflect,’ explained the Knower, ‘upon *their creation and the transformation* of their states—from *weakness to strength, then from strength back to weakness* (30:54), from enjoyment to loss, and from life to death; or if they were to *observe closely those who have gone before them from past centuries* (36:31, etc.), how the good and the evil among them passed away on the same level, without their seeing a reward for the good ones nor any retribution for the evil in this lower world: then they would know that they are not created for this lower world. But instead they are weighed down by what they are busy acquiring, so that they have not taken upon themselves the burden of seeking (understanding). Therefore *they grasped the goods of this lowest (life)* (7:169), and they were satisfied with the

enjoyments of this lower world instead of the other world. This is *their preoccupation* (3:11, etc.) and their essential reality, so *they have no argument against God* (4:165) nor against His friends regarding their shame, and *there have already come to them the notifications (from God) containing what should restrain (them)* (54:4).’

[201] ‘Praise be to God Who guided us to His religion!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘Nor *would we have been rightly guided* (7:43) except for His generosity. So inform me about the origination of these (human) creatures and their (outer and inner) make-up: was it as a single creation, all alike? Or was it different, because of the many differences I can see in their opinions and passions/factions (*ahwā*)?’⁹²

[202] ‘As for the creation of their bodies,’ the Knower began, ‘that is different, as you can see from *the difference of (their) tongues and colours* (30:22). That is a sign of (God’s) power to maintain the signs, so that the creatures can recognise one another. Through those signs the child among them recognises his or her parent and the parent knows their child; the husband knows his wife from other women and the wife recognises her spouse among the other men—all because of God’s justice toward His creatures.

‘But as for the creation of the instruments of the limbs and faculties, both outward and inner, they are created in a single way, and (the similarity of) their outer aspect should indicate to you (the similarity of) the inner faculties. For did you ever see a knower with three eyes, so that his extra knowledge was quite visible? Or did you ever see an ignorant person with only one eye, so that his deficiency in this regard was visible, so that people would say “the knower sees (more) because of his additional (instruments of knowing), but the ignorant person can’t see because of his deficiency (in those instruments)”?’ Did you ever really see any increase in the outer (bodily) instruments (of perception) of some of them in relation to others?

‘(No,) *you will not see in their creation* (67:3) but a single, equivalent creation with regard to the outer instruments (of perception), and the essential reality of their (external) make-up is one. Therefore we know that the inner instruments (of will and understanding) also follow this same pattern of (divine) justice. For God would not

treat (His creatures) justly in their outer aspect and act unjustly toward them regarding their inner dimension. He has not placed two hearts within the knower, nor has He forbidden any (means of understanding) to the ignorant person. For the instrument (of knowing) is one, and the (same inner) make-up extends to everyone. Now that is how *God has established His argument* (6:149) against them, through that instrument (of understanding) which He gave to them and which they failed to employ, so that He—May He be exalted!—said (of the jinn and humans in Gehenna): “*They have hearts with which they do not understand, eyes with which they do not see, and ears with which they do not hear*” (2:286, etc.). Or do you think that God, despite all His bounteousness and generosity, would *impose on them what they are unable to perform or to bear* (2:296, etc.)? But no, surely He is more just than that!

[203] ‘I don’t think that, and I don’t say that!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘But I am asking you about the difference of (people’s) passions/factions. Where did *that* difference come from, if the instrument (of understanding) is one and the root of their (moral and intellectual) make-up is one?’

[204] ‘Their root (make-up) is one,’ replied the Knower. ‘All of them come from Adam, and Adam *was from the dust* (2:59). His Lord *created him* and then *breathed into him from His spirit* (32:9, etc.). But then through marrying they left behind the (divine) way (*al-sunna*), and their progeny followed (ways) other than the (divine) creed (*al-milla*)⁹³ and were raised up without the right guidance—indeed I don’t doubt that among them were illegitimate children claiming as their fathers those who were not (their real parents). Now when the roots become corrupted, the branches are also ruined. So those people changed for the worse and were unable to return to the truth, because of their envy of the friends of God, and because their pride (kept them) from obedience (to God) and their slothfulness (kept them) from serving Him. Thus they did not restrict themselves to what was licit, avoiding what was forbidden.’

[205] ‘But if their origin was one and their instrument (of understanding) was one,’ continued the young man, ‘then where did the difference of their passions/factions come from? For the essential

reality of what they were seeking was one, since each one was seeking what was good for himself.’

[206] ‘By my life!’ responded the Knower. ‘The essential reality of what they were seeking was one. But they differed in their actually reaching it, just like people shooting at a target. For they were alike in their intention and their instruments for shooting at it, but all the same they differed in actually hitting it. This is just like the hearts in people’s breasts, which are in agreement with their minds, and their minds are likewise in agreement about preserving and respecting their bodies. Yet when the call of the truth appeared, they differed among themselves. Some of them considered that responding to the call of the (divine) messengers and surrendering to them was part of respecting their souls and preserving them from corruption. But others among them considered that denying the messengers and refusing to obey them was likewise part of respecting their souls and preserving them from the constraints of servitude. So the root (in both cases) was one, in their seeking ease for their bodies and proper respect for their souls.

‘Therefore one group among them chose what the messengers had promised them of God’s recompense, despite its being small and rare in this lower world, because of its being eternal; while the rest of them chose the enjoyment of this lower world, even though it is passing, because of its being already present, easy to seek and quick in its rewards. Hence the hearts with which that first group sought the blessings of the other world—it was with their like that the others sought the enjoyments of this lower world. Each of them were concerned with their own souls and considered that they were doing right by them, because they were alike in their seeking and only differed in what they actually obtained. All that is from God’s justice and generosity and *bestowing of His bounty* (17:20): each one who seeks from Him (receives) what he has sought. Thus *whoever wants the reward of this lower world, We shall give of it to them. And whoever wants the reward of the other world, We shall give of it to them* (3:145).’

[207] ‘Now *the people of this lower world are in different levels* (6:165; 43:32) in this world of theirs,’ replied the young man. ‘Some of them are so rich they don’t need to work; they are the kings,

because of the abundance of their possessions. While others of them are poor and in need of (those possessions), so they end up serving (the kings) in order to obtain (their sustenance) from them. Now since they are together on the same level in (their striving to) accumulate the pleasures of this lower world, then are their pains equally unpleasant during their ultimate outcome (in the Fire), or do some of them have a position lower than others?

[208] 'It is part of God's justice,' the Knower answered, 'to join them together with each other and not to keep them separate from their comrades and close companions. So they are alike in His punishing them, just as they were all in agreement in their disobeying Him!'

[209] 'Then what about this *religion which God honoured and made complete, the religion He accepted as pleasing* (5:3) and imposed as a duty on His servants?' the young man continued. 'Do you think that He will accept (less) from some of them than from others, so that they will have their (different) levels in it, just like the people of this lower world? Or will He only accept from among them the person who accomplishes it perfectly?'

[210] 'If *the people of this lower world have their levels* (6:165; 43:32) in this world of theirs,' the Knower replied, 'then *surely the people of religion have ranks* (17:21, etc.) in their religion. Certainly it is a necessary aspect of (God's) justice that (the creatures) should worship the Creator with the perfect devotion of their will. But His self-sufficiency is so great without them, and their need for Him is so great, that *He extended His loving mercy toward them* (7:156) and knew that among them were weak ones. So He has accepted from them whatever actions they are able to perform in good faith, along with their wholehearted devotion in obeying (Him), however great or small that may be. Therefore, *He imposed the duty* of knowledge and acting in accordance with it *on each person according to their capacity* (2:286), and *He gives of His bounty to everyone of merit* (*faql*)⁹⁴ (11:3), so that *they are many ranks with their Lord* (8:4). Then in His justice, He assigned to them as the ultimate outcome of their obedience that they should be joined with the people of the complete religion and the most noble actions among His servants. So He—may He be exalted!—said: *And whoever obeys God and*

the Messenger, they are with those whom God has given blessings among the prophets, the righteous, the martyrs and the upright ones. They are the best companions. That is the bounty from God (4:69–70), (as a reward) for their wholehearted obedience, not for their (superlative) actions, as with the upright ones, but as a (special) loving mercy from God for them, even though they and their actions were weak.’

[211] ‘Praise be to God Who has done that for them!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘And should anyone fear being punished for something other than his own disobedience, even if his (good) actions were few?’

[212] ‘God is more just than that,’ the Knower answered.

[213] ‘And can anyone like infants and the insane hope to enter the Garden without any (deserving) actions?’ asked the young man.

[214] ‘What is that,’ replied the Knower, ‘in comparison to (the vast extent of) God’s bounty and generosity and His all-encompassing loving mercy?’

[215] ‘And what is the limit of the effort (we must make) in striving to obey (God) and in wholeheartedly performing (right) actions,’ the young man continued, ‘so that God will have to accept our excuses for (not accomplishing) the rest?’

[216] ‘The full attainment of knowledge and the furthest extent of (your) power,’ replied the Knower.

[217] ‘Then describe to me the ultimate limits of the knowledge and action that are required of me,’ asked the young man, ‘so that I can test myself. Then if I am able to attain the full extent of what pleases God, (that’s fine). And if not, I will have stopped at the limit of my capacity—and it is certainly more fitting for God to forgive what I am unable to do. For I am sure of God’s justice and have faith He will do no wrong, fearing only the harmful influence of my own (carnal) self.’

[218] ‘Have no fear regarding that in which you have faith,’ replied the Knower, ‘but do not feel (too) confident regarding that which you should fear. And *strive vigorously for God in your actions with your self and your possessions (9:41)*. For God is not pleased with that which He abhors, nor does He abhor that which pleases Him. Certainly He abhors ingratitude in His creatures, and He is pleased by thankfulness in His creatures and justice in respect to

Him, so He will accept nothing but that. Sincerity (in action) and faithfulness are *His two Gardens* (55:46), so none will be saved with Him but the people of sincerity and faithfulness.’

[219] ‘Then show me,’ asked the young man, ‘the *goal* of my actions with respect to myself, and what God has made obligatory for me regarding that goal.’

[220] ‘Surely obedience to God ennobles all those who practice it,’ the Knower began, ‘even if their roots (in understanding that) are weak. But (*truly*) *appropriate action* (*al-‘amal al-ṣālih*)⁹⁵ is the crown of those who act (purely for God’s sake). So as for what is obligatory for you with respect to yourself, that is to carry out all of the religious duties and to abstain from all the prohibited deeds. For that is the very foundation of religion and the purifying offering (*zakāt al-abdān*)⁹⁶ of our bodies. And in general, what will ensure that you deserve *God’s satisfaction* (3:174, etc.) with you and His acceptance of what you offer, is that you do for others whatever you would love for them to do unto you, and that you refrain from doing (to them) whatever you would have them refrain from doing (to you).⁹⁷ Because justice lies in doing that, and *God’s satisfaction* is with what is just.’

[221] ‘Yes, that is indeed the right which is truly obligatory, and whoever fails to do that has nothing at all to do with God!’ the young man responded. ‘But in what you have mentioned, is there any allowance in the event someone is forced by necessity (to do something else)?’

[222] ‘Certainly God has already made allowance for that for His servants, *as a mercy and loving kindness from Him* (24:20, etc.),’ the Knower responded, ‘since He said: “*So whoever is forced by necessity, neither desiring (the forbidden) nor (wilfully) disobeying, there is no sin for that person*” (2:173).’

[223] ‘Praise be to God, Who *did not place any undue burden upon His servants in religion* (22:78)!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘Now I have already resolved to uphold all that I have been commanded (by God) to do, and I ask God’s help in (carrying out) all that He has commanded me (to do). So what is my obligation with regard to my possessions, since you mentioned them together with

my self when you told me just now to act *with my self and my possessions* (9:41)?’

[224] ‘As for your possessions,’ replied the Knower, ‘that is *what God has bestowed on you* (33:50) from all that you have earned. So only take from that what was lawfully acquired, and only spend it for what is rightfully deserved.’

[225] ‘But what is its licit portion that should be taken from it,’ asked the young man, ‘and what is the rightfully deserved (cause) for which it should be spent?’

[226] ‘As for its licit portion,’ began the Knower, ‘that is those (morally) good acquisitions in the course of which no one was wronged, and which are not tainted by any lying. And as for its rightfully deserved (cause), its purification⁹⁸ is that you should consider everything that you have acquired, however great or small; then you should take out as its *fifth* (8:41)⁹⁹ what seems best to you and what you love the most, and you should spend that on behalf of those who have a right and are deserving (to receive) from you. In so doing, you *will purify your possessions through charity* (9:103), just as you purified your body through right actions. For right action is a protection and *charity is a purification* (9:103)—and *whoever purifies himself has (already) prospered* (87:14).’

[227] ‘I will do that,’ responded the young man, ‘and I will turn to God (in repentance) for what has gone before. Then what should I do with the remainder of my possessions?’

[228] ‘Spend it on yourself and your family in the accustomed manner,’ replied the Knower. ‘And if its surplus (beyond what you need) continues to grow, then give it in charity to the needy among your brothers and spend what you think fitting for whoever is pleading for your help. Because whoever has no such surplus (beyond his needs) is forced to ask for help and generosity. So *race quickly for every good (deed), and be first in (reaching) what is excellent* (23:61)! For *that* is the goal of your actions, if you persevere in them.’

[229] ‘Yes, *I will persevere, then again I will persevere* (3:200),’ the young man answered, ‘because how can anyone not persevere who is so immensely in need of *the One Who is self-sufficient* (27:40, etc.) without his actions? For everyone who is needy is (necessarily) patient, and everyone who bestows favours is to be thanked.’

[230] [The narrator:] Now when the Knower was pleased with the words of the young man, he said: 'Praise be to God Who has brought you to speak so correctly! I implore Him to help you to complete your deeds, for that is the perfection of excellence and (true) merit.'

[231] 'I was always seeking generosity toward myself from the hand of someone else,' replied the young man, 'but whenever any generosity (*faḍl*)¹⁰⁰ came to me from myself, I would forbid that to myself, since I haven't found anyone more disloyal to me than my own (carnal) self.¹⁰¹ So now, here before you are all of my possessions, divided into five portions. One portion is its purifying *zakāt*;¹⁰² a portion is *the atonement* (5:95, etc.) for whatever I have ruined (by my misdeeds); a portion in thankfulness to God for what I have come to understand; a portion for the poor among my brothers; and a portion which you must kindly accept as your support for your travels.'

[232] The narrator continued: Then the Knower's heart was filled with sympathy for the young man, because of what he had seen in him of the purity of his essence, and because of what his testing (*miḥna*)¹⁰³ had revealed of the praiseworthy depth of his experience, his manifest generosity and the purity of his actions.

[233] Then with his eyes overflowing with tears, the Knower said: 'O my son, it is for the likes of you that the (true) knowers undertake their journeys. It is for the likes of you the earth carries (its burdens) and the sky gives its shade. It is through the likes of you that the intimate ties of (spiritual) kinship are made manifest. And it is upon the likes of you that *the showers (of divine loving mercy) descend through the clefts in the clouds* (24:43; 30:48). Congratulations, O my son, for all that God has bestowed upon you, and that *He has opened your heart to (true) Islām*¹⁰⁴ (6:125; 39:22)! Now I am bringing you the good news of a light from your Lord (39:22) and a (divine) opening that is near (61:13), and I am offering to you a gift from God and the benefits of His gracious blessings. So your (obligation in response) is to practice this most seriously and to be appropriately thankful.

But as for my portion of this wealth (of yours), I have no need of it—indeed, I have left behind possessions and I have fled from the

conflicts and temptations of wealth. So *it is certainly not respectful piety* (2:177), O my son, to force me to return to what I dislike! And as for the portion of your brothers, they are already here with you. So if they ask you for something, give it to them with your own hand, so that they will recognise your generosity and merit, and so that through that they will be thankful for your acts of kindness. As for the portion for atonement, keep it with you so that you will remember your sins. As for the portion of thankfulness and gratitude, that is entrusted to you by God, until you attain your full maturity and have reached the ultimate goal of what you have come to know. And as for the portion of purifying *zakāt*, that is also entrusted to you by its rightful master. So take all of it for yourself until you meet him. For he is the rightful judge for you and against you.’

[234] ‘Then what is the authority of that noble person over you,’ asked the young man, ‘so that you do not oppose his judgement or go against his command?’

[235] ‘That person,’ replied the Knower, ‘is the one whose right God has made an obligation (that must be acknowledged) by myself and by all the people of true faith;¹⁰⁵ the one in whose hands are the keys of the (heavenly) Gardens and the guiding signs of the angelic world; the one whose palms open up (to reveal) *the light of Sinai* (28:29), so that he becomes the occasion for (divine) signs; the one who, through his knowledge, ascends to the summits of the ultimate goals. So through him your light will be completed, by him God will perfect your affair, and at his hand blessings will pour down on you.’

[236] ‘That is true generosity!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘So what is he for you, and what are you (in relation) to him?’

[237] ‘I am his son,’¹⁰⁶ replied the Knower, ‘and one of his good works. I am seeking his satisfaction, and I am anxious lest I incur his wrath.’

[238] ‘I suspect that I am far removed from pleasing him and near to (incurring) his wrath,’ remarked the young man, ‘since I haven’t even known him! Do I have any excuse for that?’

[239] ‘The excuse is only there (for you) before you are offered the chance to know him,’ replied the Knower.

[240] ‘Then should I speak or stay silent?’ asked the young man.

[241] ‘Say whatever seems right to you,’ responded the Knower.

[242] ‘Now, at this time, isn’t my obligation to have you help me to reach *the gate of repentance* (2:58, 7:161), so that I can enter it, and to help me to reach *the house of light* (24:36), so that I may *be illuminated* (20:10, 27:7)?’ the young man enquired. ‘Surely that is part of perfecting *that trust* which you *must pass on* (4:58, 33:72)?’

[243] ‘Indeed that is my obligation,’ the Knower answered, ‘but subject to his permission and his good judgement.’

[244] [The narrator continued]: So then the Knower took leave of the young man and went away. The young man wanted him to take some (of his wealth) as provisions (for his journey), but he was unwilling to accept any of that.

(The Knower) travelled until he came to his own greater (spiritual) father (*wāliduhu al-akbar*).¹⁰⁷ There he set forth for him the story of this young man. (The superior) recognised (the young man’s) description and knew from his qualities that he was among the people of good and the wellsprings of excellence and bounty; so he was pleased by that, and

[245] He said: ‘Hurry back to me with this young man. For I would like for him to become a gateway of loving kindness that God has opened for the people of his time.’

[246] [The narrator continued:] Then the Knower spent some time not far away, until (one day) he approached the young man and found him in quite a different physical state from the one he had known (before).

[247] So the Knower said: ‘How is it that I see you in a different state than that in which I left you?’

[248] ‘What don’t you recognise about me? May my father and mother be your ransom!’ the young man exclaimed.

[249] ‘The weakness of your body and the paleness of your complexion,’ replied the Knower.

[250] ‘That is from the loneliness and upset that overcame me after you (left),’ said the young man.

[251] ‘But what is that loneliness,’ asked the Knower, ‘and what is the cause of this sickness?’

[252] ‘Being separated from you made me lonely,’ replied the young man, ‘and the fear of what might happen before I met you (once again) made me sick.’

[253] ‘God already knew what was in your heart,’ the Knower responded, ‘so He made your period of testing easier, and He placed a special loving mercy for you in the heart of His *walī*.¹⁰⁸ So start preparing for your journey. For I am about to help you reach (the object of) your hope, and I am taking you to the gateway *bāb* of your ultimate goal—and *there is no power but through God* (18:39)!’

[254] [The narrator] continued: Then the young man sighed so deeply from his joy and awe that his spirit almost separated from his body—until God brought him back, because of what He knew concerning him, and returned his spirit to him. Then when he had regained consciousness,

[255] He said: ‘Praise be to God Who is eternally compassionate and merciful with those who have (true) faith!’

[256] [The narrator went on:] So he continued to thank his (spiritual) father profusely, and he started to kiss his hands and (even) his feet. Then he got up hurriedly and began preparing for the journey.

The two of them left (his town and travelled on) until they reached the greater Knower. There they asked permission (to see him), and they were admitted and came in and greeted him, and sat down with his permission. So when the two of them sat down for the meeting,

[257] The young man said to his teacher: ‘Teach me how I should speak and how I should request what I need.’

[258] ‘I am not permitted to teach you anything while you are in this position,’ the teacher said to him, out of respect for his master. ‘So be quiet, because you are in the hands of someone who is aware of what you need, and who knows what it is you want.’

[259] [The narrator continued:] So the young man remained silent and the two of them stayed with the (greater) Knower for a while, until the young man’s affair was completed and his guidance was perfected and he had attained the goal of his hopes and had come to know his (spiritual) rights and his obligations. Then the two of them took their leave and left together, cautiously and in secret.¹⁰⁹ Neither of them had spoken a word during the meeting,

except for their greetings and expressions of friendship, but the young man had become pale from his powerful feeling of awe, so that he wasn't even able to speak.

Now the Shaykh¹¹⁰ had ordered the master of the inn to treat both of them with proper respect, to treat them with dignity and take care of all their needs. So (the innkeeper) accompanied them back to his inn, brought them inside, greeted them both properly and showed his great happiness at seeing them.

[260] Then he (the innkeeper) said to the Knower, who was his close friend, with whom he shared a longstanding sense of brotherhood and mutual understanding: 'O my brother, is this the young man we've all been hearing about?'

[261] 'Yes,' he replied, 'this is the one whose news has gladdened so many hearts, who is being mentioned by all the faithful.'

[262] 'So have the reports about me come to such a point that *the friends of God*¹¹¹ are talking about me in their gatherings?' asked the young man.

[263] 'Yes, my brother,' said the Knower. 'That's how (exceptional) you are.'

[264] '(God's) graces and blessings are flowing over me from all directions,' exclaimed the young man, 'and (His) favours are coming to me from every side! So I don't know whom to thank or to repay (for all those favours).'

[265] [The narrator continued:] Then they all sat together and talked among themselves late into the night. And when they got up in the morning, they asked permission to see the Shaykh. Now when they entered his room and had finished greeting him, the Shaykh asked them to sit down, and they did so. Then the Shaykh began his speech:¹¹²

[266] 'Praise be to God *Who split* (21:30) with *His light* the dark obscurity of (people's) hearts and Who opened with His justice the locked chambers of what (their hearts) have sought; Who *makes remembrance easy* (54:17, etc.) through *His fashioning (of everything)* (27:88), as a subtle grace for His servants and a loving mercy from Him for all those who are longing for Him. The creatures cannot bear the essence of what He deserves (for all His blessings), yet *He is not pleased for them to be ungrateful* (39:7) for His blessings, so

He, in His justice, *imposed upon them* (as their obligation only) *what they were not unable to bear* (2:286, etc.). Thus His command was harmoniously balanced between those two points,¹¹³ so that it was called “Justice.”

‘And out of His bounty, He has given abundantly of His favours, giving (all things) good and beauty, excellence and abundance. Thus no one who prays (to Him) is left disappointed, but neither is the silent person excluded (from His bounty). On the contrary, *His blessings are all-abounding* (31:20) and His favours are marvellous: they are not limited to those who are thankful for them—though (the grateful person’s) reward is overwhelming; nor are they removed from those who are ungrateful for them—although their eventual torment is immense! For He has ennobled His blessings above any sort of stinginess, and He has firmly established His arguments beyond any possibility of denial. He has extended *His all-inclusiveness* (4:126) beyond ever being found (in any delimited form), yet He has (so many) signs that He cannot possibly be denied. So He can be found (everywhere), but not delimited; and He can be recognised (in every form), but not described (fully by any of them).

‘Praise be to Him Who is so immense—but how subtle He is in His creation! Who is all-powerful—but how merciful and loving He is with His creatures! Who is solitary and supreme—but how just He is in His wise-judgement! Who is infinitely exalted—but *How close He is to humankind* (50:16)! Who is so near—but how infinitely removed He is from (people’s) imagining! So worship and serve Him, and be thankful to Him, for *to Him you are all returning* (29:17).’

[267] Then he said: ‘As for what comes next, among the marks of honour of (people’s) intellects is their use in the seeking (of God), and among the fruits of seeking is finding (Him), and among the distinctive signs of having found (Him) is the sweetness of what is found. For every *fresh, sweet water* (25:53; 35:12) has its outward aspect which can be drunk, and its inner dimension which is hidden.¹¹⁴ The one who is (truly) seeking it never tires of thinking, and the creatures cannot grasp its ultimate ends; its distinctive signs are true and the duties flowing from the truth are obligatory. That is why it is called “truth” (*ḥaqq*),¹¹⁵ because of the necessary verification and realisation of its obligatory nature. Therefore, whoever

prevents (people) from carrying out the obligations of the truth is unjust. For surely among the obligations (*haqq*) flowing from thinking is the preparatory purification of (our) hearts through the proper modes of behaviour (*ādāb*);¹¹⁶ and among the obligations of that proper behaviour is the seeking of (spiritual) knowledge (*ṭalab al-‘ilm*);¹¹⁷ and among the obligations of that knowledge is acting in accordance with it; and among the obligations of right action in accordance with that knowledge is its purifying it through willing obedience to the *masters of (true) authority* (*ūlū al-‘amr*)¹¹⁸ (4:59); and among the obligations of that willing obedience is its perfection *both in what is easy and in what is difficult* (94:5–6), (being *tested*) alike in *what is good and in trials and temptations* (21:35). *So it shall only be granted to those who persevere, and it shall only be granted to the person who has immense good fortune* (41:35).’

[268] [The narrator continued:] Then he turned his gaze toward the young man and said: ‘O *brave youth* (*fatā*),¹¹⁹ you have been honoured by a newly arriving intimate friend, and you have been greeted by a visitor seeking (a soul like yours), so what is your name?’

[269] ‘*Ubayd Allāh* (“the little servant of God”), son of the servant of God,¹²⁰ he answered.

[270] ‘That is your description,’ replied the Shaykh, ‘but we have already been informed about you.’

[271] ‘I am *Hurr* (“freed-man”),¹²¹ son of the servant of God,’ the young man replied.

[272] ‘Then who set you free from being owned, so that you became free?’ inquired the Shaykh.

[273] ‘This Knower set me free,’ said the young man, pointing with his hand toward the Knower who had called him (to the way).

[274] ‘But do you think,’ continued the Shaykh, ‘that if he is also owned and not your owner, does he have any right to set you free?’

[275] ‘No, he doesn’t,’ replied the young man.

[276] ‘Then what is your name?’ repeated the Shaykh.

[277] [The narrator] continued: Then the young man hung his head, bewildered and unable to respond.

[278] ‘O *brave youth*,’ pursued the Shaykh, ‘how can we recognise something that has no name, even if it has been born?’

[279] ‘I have been born to you,’¹²² replied the young man, ‘so you name me!’

[280] ‘That is only after the fulfilment of seven days (of waiting),’¹²³ the Shaykh responded.

[281] ‘But why must that be postponed until after seven more days?’ asked the young man.

[282] ‘In honour of the new-born infant,’ replied the Shaykh.

[283] ‘But what if the new-born should die before the seven days are finished?’ the young man continued.

[284] ‘Nothing will harm him,’ replied the Shaykh, ‘and after that he will be named.’

[285] ‘Then will this name by which you’ll have named me be my own?’ asked the young man.

[286] ‘In that case *you* would be what is worshipped,’¹²⁴ replied the Shaykh.

[287] ‘But then how should we speak of it?’ asked the young man.

[288] ‘The Name is your owner,’ the Shaykh answered, ‘and you are owned by it. For you cannot penetrate further than your own (spiritual) rank. Now depart until your period of waiting (is over).’

[289] [The narrator] continued: Then the young man got up quickly, eager to obey, nor did he say anything back, because of his grasp of proper behaviour. So he left, and his spiritual father left with him, until they both returned to their residence.

There the master of the inn greeted the two of them,

[290] and he said: ‘What is the state of this brother of ours in regard to his need?’

[291] ‘A promise has been made,’ the Knower answered, ‘and the one to whom it was given is thirsty, but the appointed time is near.’

[292] [The narrator] continued: So the two of them remained there until the seventh day. Then they asked for permission to see the Shaykh, and when he gave them permission he ordered the young man to perform a complete ablution and to dress in his *finest clothing* (74:4). So when the young man set about those preparations, his heart was joyful that his need would be fulfilled on that very day, and that this preparation which he had been ordered to undertake

was a sign pointing to the good that would come to him subsequently. Therefore when he had completed what he had been ordered to do and the two of them left together, the young man was saying to himself 'What a lucky day, and what an auspicious friend/master (*walī*)!'; and he kept on repeating that many times. Now the only thing that brought him to that state was the abundance of his joy and the intensity of his longing for that knowledge which would bring him closer to (attaining) God's satisfaction.

So when the two of them entered the Shaykh's (room), *they both found him* (18:65) already preparing for the ceremony. Then he greeted them both with blessings of peace, and they returned his greetings.

[293] Next (the Shaykh) ordered the young man to come close to him, *so he approached* and came nearer.¹²⁵ Then (the Shaykh) came even closer and began to speak of *what cannot be comprehended by* (18:68) imagination, what pens cannot express, and *'what has not occurred to the heart of any mere mortal* (basha).¹²⁶ This is among those things which must not be mentioned in the schools of sermons and should not be openly expressed in the contents of books, because of its tremendous worth—for it is only unveiled to those who are worthy of it.¹²⁷

Now, when (the Shaykh) had fulfilled his duty and had led (the young man) out of wandering in the wilderness to the end of his guidance, then his way (*madhhab*)¹²⁸ became pure, his drinking-place became *sweet*,¹²⁹ and *'he came to know his Lord*.¹³⁰ Then *his consecration was accomplished*, through *glorifying what God made sacred* (22:30). He *held firmly to the solid connection* [with God] (3:103), *circled around the age-old House* (22:29), *fulfilled his devotions through remembrance* (of God) (2:200), and *completed his pilgrimage* (2:196) with (*God's*) *greatest sign* (53:18; 79:20).¹³¹

[294] After that, the young man and his spiritual father¹³² continued to visit the Shaykh frequently in order to study what he had bestowed. He was always patient with their company, never becoming tired of their questioning, because of his nobility of character, nor ever becoming weary of replying, because of his agreeable nature. So the two of them continued in that state *for a certain period*

of time (76:1), until (the Shaykh) knew that (the young man’s) *roots* had been well watered and that *his branches had grown tall* (14:24).

[295] Then (the young man) said to the Shaykh, thanking God and him: ‘Praise be to God, Who made you worthy of this station, Who then brought religion to life and destroyed ignorance through you, Who *made you a refuge and a sanctuary for the people* (2:125)! For you are the gateway for the people of *heaven* (7:40, 15:14) and *the ascending pathway* for the people of the earth (32:5, etc.). From the light of your glory appear the lights (of right guidance), and from *the abundant rains* (78:14) of your palms flow *the rivers* (of God’s grace and blessings) (2:25, etc.). May you continue thus so that the One Who was pleased with you may gratify you!’

[296] ‘As for you,’ said the Shaykh, ‘may God bless you in all that He has bestowed upon you, and may He help grant you success in preserving what He has given you. And may He use you properly to (accomplish) His will and may He make the way easy for you through the light of His right guidance. May *He open up your heart* (39:22; 94:1) with the keys of wisdom, and may He ennoble your affair through the path of the (Ismaili) call (*al-da‘wa*),¹³³ and perfect your rank and worthiness by the sincere signs of (proper) responding (to that call). And may He help you to reach in your obedience to Him the most excellent and deserving degree of your *hopes for His satisfaction* (4:114, etc.).

‘Now I am bidding you farewell, O my son, and giving you leave to depart. Being separated from you is hard for me, but three things make that necessary for us. First, we are about to travel to another country. Secondly, the great length of this time you have been separated from your family, despite the hardship (for you) in having to leave without your (physical) father’s permission. For in that is a terrible pain and great sorrow (for him) that can only be removed by your coming back, although I do have hopes for your father (to enter this path) if you are clever and gentle with him. And the third thing is your obligation to pass on what is rightfully required by this (divine) favour which has reached you: for what is obligatory for you is to worship and serve in accordance with it and to call (others) to it.’

[297] ‘Leaving you is sad for me and not having you there is a great loss for me,’ replied the young man, ‘but seeking your advice is the better path, obeying you is more obligatory, and (asking) your judgement is more correct. So do give me some parting advice concerning what you judge to be right, and then send me away if you will. And please let my (spiritual) father travel with me to my country, so that I can rely upon him in my work and can look to him for support in all my affairs.’

[298] ‘I shall do that,’ said the Shaykh. ‘Now I advise you to be mindful of God *Who created you*, to *uphold your trust* (33:72) which you have taken upon yourself, and to safeguard and sustain your (spiritual) father, who *has raised you when you were small* (17:24) and who has worked so hard and long on your behalf, with yourself and with your possessions. So do not dress him up in the garments of pride and do not drag him into situations that would destroy him. Do not allude to him by name and don’t try to mention him in your conversation, nor should you visit him in your city, although at the beginning you may have some flexibility (in that regard).’

[299] The young man responded: ‘May God reward you with good from an abundant source of blessings, for every thankful person. And may *the Bountiful One* (40:3) compensate you on behalf of those whom you watch over, since their efforts and favours cannot possibly do so. Now I shall observe your parting advice, and please do not stop my share in the blessing of your prayers!’

[300] [The narrator continued:] Then the two of them got up and shook hands with (the Shaykh) and embraced him, while he said goodbye to each of them. Unable to keep himself from crying, he could only speak with gestures. After that the two of them departed, and they travelled until they came near to the young man’s city where his father lived.

[301] Then the Knower said to the young man: ‘O my son, you already know the Shaykh’s parting advice and you can only be rightly guided by his words. Here is your city whose outskirts we have reached, so sit down with us for a moment away from the road. For I want to mention to you some instructions and give you some final advice about how you should act.’

[302] So when they had sat down together, the Knower said: ‘O my son, you are well aware of your father’s condition and his enmity toward the people of this cause. That has only been compounded by your leaving with me and by your being absent from him without his permission and his blessing. Now I want to carry out my (spiritual) father’s advice by concealing myself somewhere in this surrounding country. And as for you, you should return to your father and try to calm him down and pacify his anger. For I do hope that, if you are properly clever and subtle with him, he will prove to be closer to what you desire than the others, especially since he has been disturbed by your absence and saddened by loneliness.

You should know, O my son, that God has opened up for you, with little effort on your part, something that I don’t think you will fully appreciate until after some time. Now *God has been very good with you, so do good* (28:77) to your soul, and honour that person through whom God has honoured you—for we have a very high opinion of you, and we have great hopes for you. So you must safeguard that trust which your (spiritual) father has entrusted to you and you must remain steadfast in what you have been commanded. Mindfulness of God (*taqwā*) and careful precaution (*taqiyya*)¹³⁴ are the foundation of your religion and your (religious) practice, and thankfulness and perseverance are what will increase your light. So I ask God to provide you with the means and to grant you the most beautiful success.’

[303] Then the Knower continued: ‘My parting advice to you is six things. That *you entrust yourself to God once you have resolved (upon something)* (3:158). That you speak with words of wisdom when you call (others to the good). That you not become angry when you are wronged. That you not become upset when you are called a liar. That you remain patient and persevering with each person who responds to your call to the good. And that you make sure that you yourself are the best example of that to which you are calling (others). (If you do that), then God will surely help you and will open up for you (His support).’

[304] ‘May God reward you rightly for three things,’ replied the young man: ‘for the imam whose (divine role as) argument you have upheld; the *hujja* (proof) whose trust you have earnestly fulfilled;

and the dead person to whom you have so graciously given life. Now my heart and my soul are filled with light and joy because of the immensity of what you have opened up for me. So I don't know which aspect of your words is finer: whether it is the outer aspect that you have so well arranged in its proper order, or whether it is the inner dimension that you have explained with all its essential meanings.'

[305] 'Praise be to God,' responded the Knower, 'Who has made His way easy for you and has brought you close (even) to what was remote in Him, and Who has helped you to bear *His burden* (53:5). Now I am going to say farewell and leave you. So do you have any (special) need?'

[306] 'My fundamental needs are three,' the young man replied: 'a need which you have already fulfilled; a need which I am now hoping (to fulfil myself); and a need for which I ask you to generously give your help.'

[307] 'I have already understood your three needs,' the Knower answered, 'and I will respond to what you have requested. As for that need of yours which has already been fulfilled, that is your (being given) life through (spiritual) knowledge after death. May God bless you with life in that regard, and may He help you to reach the very best of that to which you have aspired. As for that need regarding which you are still hoping, that is to put into practice what you have come to know, and that it may be acceptable (to God) once you have done so. And as for that need for which you have asked my help, it is as though you would love (for me) to add even more to what you have already heard.'

[308] 'Nothing you might add could be more (remarkable) than your knowing what was in my soul!' exclaimed the young man. 'But please do add whatever you think best.'

[309] 'As for my knowing what was in your soul,' the Knower began, '*no one but God knows the unseen* (3:179; 6:59, etc.); and yet "the person of true faith does see with the light of God."¹³⁵

As for (saying) even more, I am setting it out for you and instructing you about the basic principles which should guide your actions. You should consider the outward aspect of all these things which I have mentioned to you, and you should apply them as

likenesses (for what you encounter). Thus whatever is praiseworthy among them is a likeness for the (divine) truth and its people, the most noble of those (symbols) for the most noble of them, just as their visible signs are pointing to them. And whatever is reprehensible among those likenesses, you should apply that to the enemies of the truth and its people, the greater (symbols) to the major (enemies of the truth) and the lesser (symbols) to the lesser (enemies)—and their visible signs are also pointing to them. So these are the fundamental principles of that knowledge on which right actions are based: if you observe these principles, you won’t need anything else.

And my parting advice to you is to be mindful of the One Who *created you when you were nothing* (19:67), to *safeguard His covenant* (2:27, etc.), and to uphold His rights and truth, which He has made an obligation for you and for all His creatures.’

[310] Then when (the Knower) had finished speaking, had informed (the young man) about his refuge (where he could be found), and *had completed his (spiritual) weaning* (2:233), he said: ‘O my son, take care of your soul. For now I have business to do with others than you, so *this is your point of separation, between me and you* (18:78).’

[311] [The narrator] continued: So the young man gave a great sigh at the mention of their separation, as though his soul had taken flight and his spirit had separated from his body. Then he came up and kissed (the Knower’s) feet, rubbing their dust on his cheeks, and after that (the Knower) said farewell and went away.

The young man returned to his house, but he was unable to control his heart because of his sorrow and unable to hold back his tears because of his sadness at being separated from his greater father (the Shaykh) and his father (the Knower) who was the immediate cause of his blessings. (This went on) to such a point that his family and his neighbours became upset, because he was so depressed day and night from that sadness and sorrow. Then his own father¹³⁶ came in angrily,

[312] and he said: ‘O my son, is this how sons repay their fathers? Now I have never known you to be anything but the best of sons to his father. I never disapproved of your state and your ways never seemed objectionable to me, until after that man, the stranger

(*gharīb*),¹³⁷ came along. Then you chose him instead of me, and you went over to him and his cause instead of the path of your forefathers. So if what you recognised in him was the truth, then you have betrayed me with regard to myself, inasmuch as you have kept that truth hidden from me. But if it is a false and vain (cause), then you have betrayed me with regard to yourself and your self-destruction, because whatever happens to you as a result of that also happens to me.’

[313] ‘*O my dear father* (19:42–45),’ the young man replied, ‘I have never known you to be anything but compassionate and kind-hearted with me. You have raised me with loving kindness from you in my regard and you have nurtured me. Then you have preferred me above other people and wealth. How much, then, do I have need of that (same compassion) from you this very day, if you will please do one of two things for me!’

[314] ‘So explain to me what those two things are,’ said the shaykh.

[315] ‘Either that you should leave me to be agreeable and compliant with you,’ the young man began, ‘and in that case I am your son *whom you have raised when I was little* (17:24), and (the final judgement regarding) our affair is up to God. Or else that you should allow me to have a (serious religious) discussion (*munāzara*)¹³⁸ with you, (which requires) that you will use your intellect and that you assure me you won’t get angry.’

[316] ‘As for your being outwardly submissive and agreeable, as opposed to what is really in our hearts,’ replied the shaykh, ‘that would be iniquitous between me and you. How long could such an outward agreement possibly hold up in the face of such inner differences? I don’t like that at all. So as for discussing this with you and giving you my word (not to be angry with you), that is fine. So go ahead and say what seems right to you.’

[317] ‘When you consider my position in relation to you over the past forty years,’ the young man began, ‘can it have been anything other than one of these two possibilities? Either you were a knower (of the truth) and yet you stopped me from (sharing in) your knowledge—but if you have prevented me (from acquiring that knowledge), then don’t criticise me for seeking salvation for my soul from someone else—or else, if you were ignorant (of that truth), then you are

innocent in my regard, but you are even more in need of that stranger than I am. For if you had preceded me in (learning from) him, because of your greater age and your earlier birth, then you would have heard his words just as I have heard him, as you can see.’

[318] [The narrator] continued: The heart of the old man was touched by the words of his son, and he knew that there was no way out of both of those arguments, and *his eyes overflowed with tears (from what he recognised of the truth)* (5:83).

[319] And he said: ‘O my son, that argument which you have just made against me will also apply to you in the same way, if you continue to keep silent with me about your cause. So mention it to me. If it is correct, then I will accept it from you, out of respect for my own soul. And if it is false, then I will dissuade you from it, out of respect and consideration for *your* soul.’

[320] [The narrator continued:] So the two of them continued their discussion for a while and they went on to reveal things to one another for a long time. But (the ultimate conclusion) of their affair was to *right guidance and (divine) direction* (40:38), upholding and safeguarding *the religion of God* (3:83, etc.), worshipping according to it and calling (people) to it and *helping one another* (5:2) in it. So through the two of them God *gave life to a great number of people* (5:32). And the young man sent a message to the Knower telling him the good news about his father’s readiness and asking him to come to (visit) him. So he came to the two of them and was a support for both of them. And God brought down blessings upon the people of that country through the two of them and by their hands, and God’s command was fulfilled, while *those who made up lies (against God) failed completely* (20:61).

Now, the name of the young man was Šālīḥ,¹³⁹ and the name of his father was al-Bakḥṭarī. They enjoyed great respect among their people because of the favours and assistance they had bestowed, and they had a great reputation among them because of the excellence of the culture and learning which they had acquired. So the reports about the two of them and the religious position they had adopted spread throughout the region, until it reached a group among the followers of their former (theological) school (*maqāla*).¹⁴⁰ For al-Bakḥṭarī had been very generous with them, and they were afraid

that those favours would be taken away from them now that he had left their sect.

So they went out and gathered together (to go visit) with a scholar of theirs called 'Abd al-Jabbār Abū Mālik.¹⁴¹ Because of scrupulous piety, his great understanding and his passionate devotion to his religion, he was known among them as *Ka'ab al-aḥbār*.¹⁴² He was greatly renowned among them because of his learning, his understanding of theology and his discernment with regard to (dogmatic) opinions. Now when they had entered his presence,

[321] They said: 'O Abū Mālik, haven't you noticed what the young man has gone over to (*kharaja*)?'¹⁴³

[322] 'What young man?' he asked.

[323] 'Šāliḥ, the son of al-Bakḥṭarī,' they replied.

[324] 'But what is it he has gone over to?' he inquired.

[325] 'Yes indeed,' they began, 'we want to inform you that there has come to our country a man, a stranger, who has an impressive way of speaking. And he has a particular (religious) school to which they were calling, though we don't know what it is. So the young man became infatuated with him and left with him without even asking his father's permission. Then he stayed with (the stranger) for a while, and after that he came back to (his father), but he was speaking the same way as that man, the stranger, and calling (people) to what that man had been calling them to. And now it has reached us that his father has already rallied to (the young man's) opinion and is helping him with that.

Now we have become very uneasy about that, because of what they are doing while we have been avoiding them, for three reasons. First of all, because of the abundant favours his father has bestowed on us, given the special brotherhood in religion which you know has always existed among us. So now we are afraid of becoming separated (from him) after being close, and we would hate to become split apart after such brotherhood. Secondly, if those people are following something true, then we have been remiss in not following them and assisting them in that. And finally, if they have fallen into error and have gone astray in that, then we have been remiss in not preventing them from following that, and in not supporting the truth and its people. Now you are our head in our religion and our foremost

learned dignitary; so we have come to you to inform you and to consult with you, since we will not go against your opinion.’

[326] ‘Woe unto you!’ exclaimed Abū Mālik. ‘Indeed, I am deeply troubled by these words of yours. For you have always known that al-Bakhtārī and his son were among those of us whom we have considered to be people of sound intelligence (*ḥilm*)¹⁴⁴ and scrupulous piety. Moreover, we have incurred many obligations toward both of them, because of their many favours and generosity over the years. Yet you have mentioned concerning them what you have mentioned, even though in my opinion you are among those who wouldn’t desert their sincerity and faithfulness toward others—may God preserve you from that!

‘Now this report has come down to those people and its argument has convinced them, so that they have begun to follow it and be pleased with it. Therefore it is not possible for us to judge them and convict them of error (without first listening to them), since we would be doing them injustice. Nor can we judge that they are following right guidance, since in that case we would be doing injustice to our own souls by blindly imitating (*taqlīd*)¹⁴⁵ them. So we cannot say that they have been deceived, since we would be condemning them without any real knowledge about them—and we know that they are certainly more noble than that! Instead of that, therefore, we need to look more closely at this report, examining it with an eye of impartiality, in the light of justice, and with the firmness of our intellects.

‘Now it is said (proverbially) that “whoever is firmly grounded in his affairs, his authority will continue to be protected but whoever is hasty in his affair can’t be sure he won’t slip up.” Therefore in most matters a foolish error is something whose mistake can be excused and whose harm can be readily compensated, as with a foolish error regarding (some particular sort of) food. The harmfulness of such a thing is limited and it is easy to discover its remedy. On the other hand, a foolish error in regard to religion entails great damage and enormous loss, since such a fault can’t be excused and it can’t be easily exchanged (for the right thing). It is like a foolish error with regard to (prescribing) a medicine: the person who makes (such a mistake) cannot undo it and cannot exonerate himself.

‘Now it has been related to us¹⁴⁶ in that regard that “the most excellent of treasures are the treasures of (enlightened) hearts and the acquisition of the proper modes of behaviour (*ādāb*).” For surely the fruits that flow from them are praiseworthy and among their fruits is the pursuit of sound intelligence (*ḥilm*). Indeed that sound intelligence is the crown of the learned: all their noblest aspirations ascend to the heights of (its) crowning glories, and their pre-eminence becomes manifest in all locations through what they attain of those noble acquisitions through the familiarity of the subject they are seeking. Because of that, therefore, we have laid up treasures for ourselves of that sound intelligence which we have borrowed for ourselves, along with something of that proper behaviour which we have acquired for ourselves over long preceding times, despite our trying circumstances and the difficulty of the search. And we have been persevering in that because of its excellence, despite the vicissitudes of fate and the changing shapes of our fortune.¹⁴⁷ Thus we cannot throw all of that (acquired wisdom) away. Now is the auspicious moment when we really need it and must try to employ it with regard to what has happened to us in this affair which has overcome us on the part of our brothers!

‘So there is no sense in abandoning them and what they are following now without first interrogating them and disputing with them about it, relying on the sound intelligence of those who are self-controlled and the insight of those who are seeking—of course without doubting our position, but without supposing that those people have been deserting the truth heedlessly, since we know that they are more decent than that. Or else (we would have to suppose) that they have been leaving (the truth) for error, but error is far slighter than that (truth), and falsehood is not so eminent that they would abandon the plain truth to follow it!

‘Indeed, if you carefully think over with us the case of these people, (you’ll see that) it can only be due to three things. Either these people are (still) following the religion we already know, and this new thing with them is only an additional element drawn from the traditions of proper behaviour and stories and poetry¹⁴⁸—and in that case people do say all sorts of things. Or else that fellow has brought those people something else in addition to the religion they

have, and they have been very pleased by it—and in that case “knowledge is the lost camel of the person of true faith,”¹⁴⁹ because an increase in knowledge is certainly better than a lack of it! Or finally, perhaps there has come to those people some right guidance quite apart from what they had before, from the prophethood of a prophet who has come to them and has called them to that (prophetic mission). So (in that case) they may have followed him *with clear guidance (from your Lord)* (6:157, etc.). For that (possibility) cannot be denied of God’s command/affair, and *the creatures will never attain* (17:37) the ultimate (understanding) of God’s wise judgements regarding them and His will in their regard, no matter how hard they strive. For surely *God is every day involved in a (new) work* (55:29)!¹⁵⁰

[327] ‘O Abū Mālik,’ they answered, ‘we came to you with *our hearts full of wrath* (9:15) against these people, ready to claim them as enemies of faith and to condemn their opinions so that we might consider licit the shedding of their blood and the seizing of their property.¹⁵¹ But now we have found our *hearts inclining in humility* (57:16) to what you have said in arguing on their behalf and in defending them.’

[328] ‘This argument of mine is not for them,’ explained Abū Mālik, ‘but for the truth, so that I may not unknowingly betray the truth. That is why I upheld the argument for the truth in regard to them, since those who are arguing for it weren’t present. Nor was I trying to defend them, either. On the contrary, I was only defending myself and you against *saying what is false* (22:30) and *guessing about the unseen*¹⁵² (18:22) regarding *what our knowledge does not encompass* (2:255). For in that case we would be acting like *the false idols* (2:256–257) of earlier religious communities, who were pleased by their own ways of sound intelligence and *who rejoiced in whatever knowledge they possessed* (40:83), so that they imagined that they had fully encompassed everything *that God had commanded* (13:21, etc.), and (all) His knowledge and what He intended by that for His creatures. For they said *God will never send a messenger after His messengers* (40:34), and they did not imagine that there was (a further) way of proceeding *beyond the knowledge* they had already attained (2:91). Hence they judged against God that He had ceased

His argument against His creatures and (the maintenance of) *His viceroy (khalīfas) on His earth* (37:62, etc.).¹⁵³

‘Then (those people) went on to limit God’s knowledge regarding His servants and that for which He sent out His prophets and His messengers to the extent of their own understandings: whatever went beyond that they considered to be sheer error. Thus *they themselves were in error* in holding that opinion *and they led into error a great multitude* (5:77). For through their (false) judgements they considered as licit *what God had forbidden* (9:37), and through their opinions *they killed God’s prophets* (2:91). So I implore God’s help lest you *follow the (same) passions of a people who went astray before this* (5:77). For passion may incline people of (sound) intelligence in every direction, so that they are deceived in every regard. But it should not (be like that for) the way of religion: seeking it is most proper, and its excellence is not hidden (from anyone)!’

[329] ‘O Abū Mālik,’ they replied, ‘we don’t mean to disagree with your command and your good advice is not hidden from us. We haven’t been obeying you in our affairs for so long in order to start contradicting you at this point! Now you’ve just been alluding to “considered opinion” and dropping hints about the “search,” so what is *your* opinion about going along with us to these people so that we can interrogate them about this way of theirs and inquire about it? Then if it is (divinely) directed we shall follow it too, but if it’s *a delusion* (2:256) we’ll stay away from it.’

[330] ‘Now this is (a sign of) your doubting what you follow (in religion),’ Abū Mālik responded, ‘and the doubting person doesn’t really know the truth of his own view from the falsehood of someone else.’

[331] ‘But we strongly affirm what we hold as right and we hold everything else to be false, whatever it may be!’ they exclaimed.

[332] ‘The search for the essential meaning (of religion) isn’t like that at all,’ Abū Mālik replied, ‘and you won’t find (God’s) right guidance by holding (everything else) to be false.’

[333] ‘But then what is this “search” like,’ they asked, ‘if we don’t deny what is false and affirm the truth?’

[334] ‘If you really knew the truth and how to receive it,’ answered Abū Mālik, ‘and if you recognised what is false and how to

show its falsity, then you wouldn’t be numbered among the seekers. Rather you’d be numbered among the (true) knowers of prophecy and right guidance, among those who judge the people of this lower world through divine revelation (*wahy*).’

[335] ‘But we’re quite content with the truth we already have,’ they objected, ‘and we have no doubt about it. So we’d like to be excused from the trouble of seeking (the truth).’

[336] ‘Aren’t you satisfied with their being superior to you in (only) one respect,’ Abū Mālik responded, ‘but that you have to make them superior to you in many respects? And aren’t you satisfied with being among the ranks of the seekers, because of your neediness, but that, through your ignorance, you would also enter *the ranks of those staying behind* (4:95)?’

[337] ‘But how could we become like that,’ they asked, ‘and in what way are they superior to us?’

[338] ‘Their superiority to you is in their knowing what you know, but having more (knowledge) of what you don’t know,’ Abū Mālik replied. ‘Now this matter is something that has already happened to these people. And if you don’t seek them out, then they will seek (to call) you to it. And if you don’t pay any heed to it, they’ll strive with you (to convince you) of it. So in that case they’ll become superior to you with regard to their preceding you, their seeking and their striving (*jihād*).¹⁵⁴ But as for your “staying behind” and avoiding the search, that is total ignorance: it is negligence and a shortcoming in the knower until he shares his knowledge, and in the ignorant person until he seeks to learn.’

[339] ‘O Abū Mālik, your argument leaves us no way out, and everything you say is correct,’ they acknowledged. ‘So open a way for us with your opinion that we can follow in action.’

[340] ‘Pride in (one’s own) opinion is blindness and neglecting to seek (God) is a sin,’ Abū Mālik responded. ‘But there is no fault, for those who seek, in their searching. However the seeker does need to know *the proper ways* (2:189) to seek, in order to seek the truth with a real understanding of the search. For someone who seeks the truth without really knowing (the right way to seek it) will be all the quicker to deny it, since the distinctive signs of what is false (in religion) appear in *hypocritical appearances* (8:47) and in conformity

to accepted opinions. But the clear signs of the truth become manifest through tests and afflictions, and through opposition to the passions (*al-ahwāʾ*).¹⁵⁵ So only all those with a *sound heart* (26:89; 37:84) can renounce following their passions and can persevere despite the onset of tests and afflictions.’

[341] ‘Now you’ve already opened up a proper gateway for us here,’ they replied, ‘by alluding to real understanding of the search. So explain to us what that understanding is and what is a sound heart?’

[342] ‘As for real understanding of the search,’ Abū Mālik began, ‘that’s when you know that you are in need. For the person who is in need seeks what they lack *with the humility* (57:16) that comes from their neediness for what they’re seeking. And as for a *sound heart*, that is a heart that doesn’t insist on denying what occurs to it, whatever that may be, until it is the truth itself that reveals itself and manifests its superiority, and until what is false uncovers its own defectiveness. Then at that point the person is able to distinguish what is false with their intellect and to receive the truth in the way it should be received.’

[343] ‘But it has been reported to us (*ruwiya*),’¹⁵⁶ they objected, ‘that whoever is in this position—who doesn’t confirm *the truthfulness of the truth* and doesn’t show *the falsehood of what is false* (8:8)—is acting in ignorance, since they can’t recognise the truth in order to follow it, nor do they know what is false so that they can avoid it.’

[344] ‘Indeed, you spoke truly about what was reported to you concerning such a person,’ said Abū Mālik. ‘But according to you, hasn’t that person already moved out of the rank of *those who deny (the truth)* (3:137, etc.) and entered the rank of *those who are ignorant* (2:67, etc.)?’

[345] ‘Yes,’ they admitted, ‘such a person, in our opinion, is ignorant and not actually denying (the truth).’

[346] ‘But surely,’ Abū Mālik continued, ‘the ignorant person (who at least recognises that he doesn’t know the truth) is more actively hoping for the good and the search for it. So if he seeks that knowledge of his own accord, that’s fine; and if he doesn’t do so, then those who (truly) know will seek him out. For ignorance is the

original condition of (human) creatures, so there’s no fault in that for those who seek knowledge, being aware of their ignorance. But denial (of the truth) is “the worst trade of all”: the person who denies (it) doesn’t gain any right guidance through his denial, nor does he ever reach any assurance about that which he was denying.’

[347] ‘That is true,’ they concurred, ‘for you have made us realise that denying (the truth) was wrong. So we will never deny anything at all until we know it. Now you were helping us to know about the gateway of seeking with that humility which comes from one’s need for what is sought. Then does that humility and modesty with regard to what is sought come *after* its truthfulness has become clear or before that has been made clear?’

[348] ‘No,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘it only comes *before* that (truth) has become clear, so that you can actually perceive its being made manifest (to you) *because* of your humility.’

[349] ‘But what (would happen to us) if we were to humble ourselves for what is being sought, so that what is there can become manifest to us,’ they objected, ‘and then (instead) what was made clear to us was in error? What use would humility be then? Wouldn’t it have been wasted?’

[350] ‘No,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘on the contrary, that humility refers to *God*, and we must be submissive to *His* Command. The reward for it belongs to you if the one to whom humility was shown does not deserve it, because the seeker has been carrying out what is required by his seeking, even if (the one he is seeking) does not carry out his obligation. A likeness of his situation in that respect is the likeness of the beggar who comes to a certain king seeking his favours. The only thing that he can do by way of seeking (the king’s favour) is to be humble and to beseech and implore him and to complain (of his neediness). Now if (the king) gives him anything of what he was seeking, then the king has carried out what is required by his obligation to be bountiful, and he has the reward for what he has given. But if (the king) doesn’t give the beggar anything, at least the beggar has carried out the obligation of seeking by politely asking—and has brought out the avarice of the one who refused him. The seeker after (religious) knowledge is just like that: it is obligatory for him to be modest and humble, and to persevere in the face

of trials and adversity until he carries out what is required by that seeking. Then after that the full course of time (*al-dahr*) will bring to him whatever it brings.'

[351] 'That is the plain and *illuminating truth* (27:79)!' they exclaimed. 'So will you give us permission to go to those people in accordance with the duty you have pointed out to us? For we will not disobey whatever you command.'

[352] 'I wouldn't suggest to you something,' replied Abū Mālik, 'while I spared myself from doing it. Indeed, if it weren't that I am afraid of doing you wrong *by preventing you from the path of God* (2:217, etc.), I would have suggested that you should stay behind while I myself go ahead (to visit them alone), *taking precedence over you (in seeking) the good* (35:32), out of respect for my own soul and giving it preference over every other soul. But let us go together now and I shall assist you with myself, out of respect for you all and from gratitude for your having singled me out especially for this good.'

[353] 'It's as though you've been waiting for this matter even before today,' they remarked.

[354] 'Well not exactly for this,' he replied, 'but I have long been waiting for an *opening* (61:13) to come from God, (looking) in every direction, hoping for that good (to come) from every way, listening attentively with my (spiritual) hearing to every speaker, seeking an increase (in my knowledge of God) from his words, whether they are confirming the truth or revealing falsehood.'

[355] 'As for that increase (in knowledge) which comes from words that confirm the truth,' they answered, 'that is obvious. But why are you hoping for such an increase from words that reveal falsehood?'

[356] 'The addition of truth to truth is a light,' Abū Mālik began, 'but the awareness of falsehood that comes from (words) revealing falsehood is an increase in certainty. So the more our certainty increases, the greater becomes the light in our hearts. And none shall be saved with God but the people of certainty.'¹⁵⁷

'Now I am getting up to visit those people. So if you have all resolved to get up and go with me, then consider this. Whoever knows of any sin in himself, let him *turn to God in repentance* (44:8, etc.). And whoever has any debts, let him *repay them to the person to whom*

he owes them (2:283). And let them (all) make the major ablution of purification from all defilement (33:33), and let them adorn themselves for their seeking in the purest robes of determination and make ready for what they are seeking the inner intention of those who are (truly) in need. For I am doing that now, since surely *our going out is to God* (4:100). And if He knows that we are truly sincere (in our intention), He will help us to be successful in what that (intention) deserves. But if He knows of any *mockery and scorn* (4:147, etc.) (in your attitude) regarding this religious community, He will turn us away from His signs in basest humiliation, as a protection for His close friend (*wālī*) from *the mocking ones* (15:95, etc.).’

[357] ‘Yes,’ they replied, ‘we’ll do what you have ordered in three more days.’

[358] ‘No,’ he said.

[359] ‘In two more days?’ they asked.

[360] ‘No,’ he responded, ‘only today will do for us! So if you all are doing that (with me), then fine. But otherwise I am still going (alone).’

[361] ‘Then we are turning to God in repentance from every sin,’ they responded, ‘and we will pay off all of our debts and do what you have ordered us to do. And *there is no power except through God* (18:39).’

[362] [The narrator continued:] So they did all that on that very day, and they went out together until they reached al-Bakḥṭarī’s door. Then when they had greeted him and taken their places,

[363] Abū Mālīk said to al-Bakḥṭarī: ‘O father of Ṣāliḥ, how is your son Ṣāliḥ, and where is he?’

[364] ‘Today Ṣāliḥ is my father (*wālid*),’¹⁵⁸ al-Bakḥṭarī replied, ‘and I am Ṣāliḥ’s son—and Ṣāliḥ is with his Lord.’

[365] Abū Mālīk, supposing that Ṣāliḥ has just died, because of his father’s saying that he ‘is with his Lord,’ responded: ‘*Verily we are God’s and to Him we are all returning* (2:156). Has Ṣāliḥ died?’

[366] ‘No,’ replied al-Bakḥṭarī, ‘Ṣāliḥ hasn’t died, nor will he ever die; indeed he is abiding (with God) for all eternity!’¹⁵⁹

[367] ‘Here are three things whose meanings have been turned upside down!’ exclaimed Abū Mālīk. ‘For the son has become the

father; the Lord has come to exist on earth, and with the Lord is a servant who is receiving (grace) from Him; and one *who was created to pass away* (55:26; 28:88) has come to be abiding forever! Woe unto those *who seek (their own ends) through confusing speech* (2:42)—and indeed *behind this there is something most strange* (38:5)!

[368] ‘O Abū Mālik,’ responded al-Bakḥṭarī, ‘seek what it is you need and be determined in your questioning, for you are at the beginning of your testing.’

[369] ‘You are right,’ replied Abū Mālik, ‘for the first (stage) of the truth is testing. And what I need is to meet the righteous servant (*al-‘abd al-ṣāliḥ*).’¹⁶⁰

[370] ‘There is no way to do that,’ replied al-Bakḥṭarī. ‘But perhaps you mean my son Ṣāliḥ?’

[371] ‘Yes,’ he said.

[372] ‘That is (only) with his permission,’ he replied.

[373] [The narrator continued:] Then the shaykh got up and went quickly, until he entered where his son Ṣāliḥ was and informed him about the news of Abū Mālik and his companions. And he was very happy with that, because of what he knew of the excellence of their minds.

[374] Then he said: ‘O my God, open up for Your servants the ears of their hearts and guide them with Your loving kindness to the signs of what they are seeking. And *open their breasts* (20:25; 39:22) with the light of Your veiled light.’¹⁶¹

[375] [The narrator continued:] Then he passed his hand over his face and made the sitting-room ready for them and he ordered his father to present them (to him). Now when they had all come in with him and had greeted him and were seated, *he had* Abū Mālik *come close to him* (12:69, 99) and drew him near to him. And the first thing of which Ṣāliḥ spoke (to Abū Mālik) was that,

[376] He said: ‘O Abū Mālik, you have visited us most generously and out of your nobility *you have preceded us to the good* (35:32), for it is I who should have come to visit you, out of respect for your friendship and because of all the obligations to you which I have accumulated in the past.’

[377] ‘But when has (your) generosity ever stopped, O source of good?’ Abū Mālik replied. ‘You were lenient and understanding toward us even when you were little, and you have always been generous toward us once you grew up. And (now) you have begun *to call us toward the good* and have become a warner (*nadhīr*) (of God’s accustoming ways)¹⁶² (5:19, etc.). So may your root be nourished, may your branches grow high and may your actions be purified—and *congratulations to you (for what you are doing)* (52:19)!’

[378] ‘Now did you come to accuse me, O glory of the learned,’¹⁶³ Ṣāliḥ said to him, ‘or to follow me blindly? And what has become of your perfect intellect and that noble practical intelligence which we have been familiar with in you?’

[379] ‘Your capacity and rank are far above any accusation,’ Abū Mālik replied to him, ‘and religion is far above any blind obedience.’

[380] ‘Then how is it,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘that you’ve termed me a “warner,” when the warner is a prophet and the prophet is a proof (*ḥujja*) between God and His creatures, both for them and against them? And how can someone be a proof for you who has not (yet) established (the divine) argument against you?’

[381] ‘You are right,’ replied Abū Mālik. ‘That is what is necessary (for someone to be a divine proof). Now we are not acting in this situation on the basis of rash words. No, we have come to you *with that which is better* (16:125; 17:53). And I thought that direct sincerity was more appropriate with someone who has established himself as a guardian for religion and a firm proponent for the truth, who has opened his doors to those who are seeking (the truth). Now that we have recognised the excellence of the search (for truth), we have sought you out and we humbly ask you (to grant us) what we’re seeking. So do be attentive to our need!’

[382] ‘O Abū Mālik,’ Ṣāliḥ responded, ‘if you have recognised someone’s excellence, isn’t it also obligatory for you to acknowledge what is their due?’

[383] ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘that is obligatory.’

[384] ‘So when you recognised the excellence of the search (for truth),’ he continued, ‘then you also acknowledged what is its due?’

[385] ‘And what *is* its due?’ he asked.

[386] ‘To understand the ways to (carry out) the search,’ Ṣāliḥ explained to him, ‘so that you will aim for the way among them that is obligatory for you (in your seeking).’

[387] ‘Then what are the ways of seeking,’ asked Abū Mālik, ‘and how many ways are there?’

[388] ‘There are three ways of seeking,’ Ṣāliḥ explained to him. ‘There is the seeker who already knows; the seeker who is coming to know; and the seeker who desires (to begin) to know.¹⁶⁴ So which of those three are you?’

[389] ‘I am in need of coming to know all three of them,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘so how can I claim a rank that I don’t really know?’

[390] ‘But then how did you claim to be a seeker,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘when you didn’t even know the ways of seeking?’

[391] ‘I didn’t really know them,’ Abū Mālik admitted, ‘so make that clear to me.’

[392] ‘Possessions are the treasures of the people of this lower world,’ Ṣāliḥ began, ‘and (spiritual) knowledge is the treasure of the people of the other world.¹⁶⁵ Now the search for possessions takes place in three ways: there is the seeker who searches for (more of) what he already has; the seeker who searches *until a determined limit* (11:3); and the seeker who is searching to obtain charity.

‘So likewise there are three ways to seek for religion and the treasures of the other world. There is the seeker who (fully) understands: that is the sanctified knower (*al-‘ālim al-rabbānī*)¹⁶⁶ who seeks those who are dead in (their) ignorance in order *to bring them back to life* (2:28) through his knowledge. Then there is the seeker who is coming to understand: that is the person who is seeking to learn, who has already understood some of *the levels of knowledge* (12:76) and who is seeking the final and ultimate (stage) of those levels. And (finally), there is the seeker who is just starting to understand: that is the ignorant person who has at least recognised his own ignorance and that he really knows nothing more than his awareness that he is in need. So he has sought out the (real) knowers so that he can come to learn. Thus those are the three ways (to seek the truth) and the descriptions of those who are seeking.’

[393] ‘Yes,’ replied Abū Mālik, ‘those are the ways of seeking both religion and this lower world. Now I am the seeker who is just

starting to understand, the one who doesn’t understand anything. But I do know that I am in need (of knowledge), so teach me.’

[394] ‘Do you just “know” that,’ he asked, ‘or do you really *understand*?’¹⁶⁷

[395] ‘What’s the difference between the two?’ asked Abū Mālik.

[396] ‘Knowledge,’ explained Ṣāliḥ, ‘is a report,¹⁶⁸ while real understanding is *immediate vision* (102:5–7).’

[397] ‘Then this is also something that I am in need of knowing,’ Abū Mālik admitted.

[398] ‘As for the “report”,’ Ṣāliḥ continued, ‘that is (the case of) an ignorant person who doesn’t know that he is ignorant until he encounters a knowledgeable person. Then the knower informs him that he is ignorant, so that he knows that he is ignorant and in need of knowledge, according to what that knower told him. So his knowledge that he is ignorant is based on a report.

‘As for truly understanding one’s ignorance and need, that is when a man knows with his own intellect that he is inquiring after something, although he doesn’t know and is ignorant of the (correct) response. So that person’s heart becomes constricted because of his ignorance, and his only hope for being released (from that inner tension) is through coming to know whatever it is he is ignorant of. So that person’s ignorance is a kind of understanding through his intellect. For ignorance is a need, and that neediness is constricting, and that constriction (of the heart) is an intense need that forces people to seek release, and that release comes from the openness of (really) knowing, since knowledge is a wide-open expanse. So that is what makes you really *understand* that you are in need.’

[399] ‘I find all that you have described in my own soul,’ admitted Abū Mālik. ‘Indeed I have truly understood that I was in need, that my neediness was intense. So cure my neediness with your generosity!’

[400] ‘It seems to me,’ Ṣāliḥ replied, ‘that you are rushing ahead in your search, before you have found any solid grounding.’

[401] ‘My neediness forced me to hurry, because of its constriction, so I rushed ahead,’ admitted Abū Mālik. ‘I recognised the excellence of that open expanse, so I went seeking it.’

[402] ‘But if your neediness forced you to hurry and you recognised the excellence of that open expanse and sought it,’ Ṣāliḥ inquired, ‘then how did you come to understand what you were seeking?’

[403] ‘I became sure of your excellence, so I came straight to you!’ Abū Mālik exclaimed. ‘You hinted at the real meaning (of religion), so I sought you out.’

[404] ‘But just how did you become sure that *I*, rather than you, really understood that open expanse (of true knowing), so that you went seeking it?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him. ‘And how did you know that I was what you were searching for, so that you went seeking me? For no true knower of prophecy has guided you to me, so that you might come to (truly) know. Nor have you seen in me the confirming signs (of such divine inspiration) so that you might really understand. Don’t you see that in your seeking you are really aspiring for the effortlessness of blind imitation (*taqlīd*)? In doing so *you are doing injustice* to wisdom and *to yourself* (65:1, etc.), like the merchant who *measures* (11:84) from the bottom of the barrel: if he doesn’t fill up (his measure), he does injustice to his customer; and if he overfills it, he does injustice to himself. The same is true of someone who simply accepts (a piece of) knowledge on the basis of blind imitation: if he puts it into practice, (the person who gave him the knowledge) won’t receive any thanks; but if he abandons it, then he’s accused of irreligion. But in my opinion you are more intelligent than that.’

[405] ‘I myself am certainly aware that such a person is like that,’ admitted Abū Mālik, ‘but I wanted it to be the truth that would confirm itself, so that I could absolve you of having to confirm it. Because disputation gives rise to dissension and controversy, and that gives rise to malice and rancour, as each of the antagonists seeks to overcome his opponent. But once one has perceived the truth, who would persist in defending falsehood?’

[406] ‘How well you have spoken!’ Ṣāliḥ said to him, ‘since the truth does confirm itself because of its own excellence and nobility. Whereas disputes, once they have proliferated, will surely distract the hearts (of the disputants) from what is more important than them. Yet there’s no getting around what the (true) knowers have

set down as the usual rule, when they said that every seed for which the ground has not been properly prepared beforehand will not grow and flourish,¹⁶⁹ and every knowledge for which the hearts (of the learners) have not first been purified by (proper) argument will not flourish.’

[407] ‘Then mention all the arguments you wish,’ replied Abū Mālik. ‘For words of wisdom are like a jewel: if you turn it around and scrutinise it, its light sparkles and shimmers, but if you leave it alone, that won’t diminish its value at all.’

[408] ‘You’ve spoken truly,’ Šāliḥ answered him, ‘but that is only if there isn’t any confusion between the jewel and a forged piece of glass; in that case the jewel is quite obvious. But as for when *the false idols* (4:51, etc.) of this lower world multiply their pretensions and disputes about religion until they have deceived (people) by confounding it with other things and have counterfeited and distorted it for those who are seeking (the truth), then there is an obligation for the seeker faced with that situation to have the jewel tested, so that its true value will become clear and so that the counterfeit and its people will be unmasked.’

[409] ‘You have spoken with justice and have upheld what is required by the truth,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘and as for the deceptions (undertaken) by such people, we are well aware of them and their shortcomings. That is why we have rejected such deceptions and why we have clung firmly to this opinion (*ra’y*)¹⁷⁰ which you know we have maintained, and why we have said that *this* position is the genuine jewel. We have supported this opinion, and you and your father have agreed with us about it, and *all together we have held tightly to the cord* (3:103; 2:256) of this opinion. So if you have now found a meaning which is a more precious jewel than this opinion, then—by my life!—some jewels are more valuable than others, and in that case you must show the value of your jewel through a test by which its real value can be known. But as for our jewel, we have already recognised its value, as have you; so say what seems best to you regarding it.’

[410] ‘As for this “jewel” of you and your companions,’ Šāliḥ answered him, ‘we all used to hold it dear instead of the genuine jewel, until we presented it to the jewellers and experts in gems. But

they showed us that it was counterfeit and they wouldn't even accept it from us as a jewel. Instead they said "This is a forgery made of glass," and they showed us its flaws so that it could no longer be considered a jewel. For a jewel is only held in high esteem because of its rarity and preciousness, and because of the opinion that people *of discerning insight (baṣīra)*¹⁷¹ have concerning its value and *their competition* (83:26) regarding it, so that as a result its price can become so lofty. But when the jewellers have rejected it (as a forgery), then who else will acknowledge it (as a gem), or who will accept it after that—except for *the people of delusion* (57:20) who neither buy nor sell?

'So, likewise, (spiritual) knowledge can't be (accepted as genuine) until it has been offered to those who know with (inspired) knowledge from heaven. Then if they accept it, it is genuine knowledge. But if they don't accept it, then it is merely *empty talk* (28:55, etc.), and empty talk cannot be accepted as wisdom, nor will it be accepted by the wise.'

[411] 'And who,' asked Abū Mālik, 'are these persons who know with "knowledge from heaven," after the prophets and the (divine) messengers? For I myself don't know even one of them in this time of ours, nor do the ordinary people have any acquaintance with such persons, since *divine revelation of the Book* (18:27; 29:45) has ended, and (all) the religious communities are *only* worshipping according to transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*).¹⁷² So what do you have to say about that?'

[412] 'To begin with,' said Ṣāliḥ, 'every "religion" in which worship is based (only) on transmitted reports shouldn't be called religion, since *religion is one, purely upholding* (12:40, etc.) what is due to God, *without any difference in it* (4:82)—while as for the transmitted reports, you already know how much they all differ and deny one another. But *God's religion* (9:29, 33) is dearer and more unique than all that!'

[413] 'But even if all of them differ in their process of transmission,' Abū Mālik continued, 'still they all go back to the (divine) books. So they accept whatever agrees with those Books, and they deny whatever differs from them.'

[414] ‘Then as for what is only found in general terms in the books,’ Ṣāliḥ answered him, ‘who is going to explain its particular (applications) to them? And as for what is given there in detail, who is going to explain its actual connection to them? And who among them should they trust (to determine) what God has permitted and forbidden?’

‘For we have heard you on the day (set aside for legal) controversy, when a man came to you all upset and said to you: “O Abū Mālik, I have formally sworn to divorce my wife and then I have broken my oath about that!” And you answered him: “Some people say that she is strictly divorced from you and that you cannot remarry her until she has first married another man. Other people say that she is still your wife and not forbidden to you by a single oath of divorce (but only by three separate oaths).”¹⁷³ Then the fellow said to you: “But which of those two (opinions) should I follow?” And you said to him: “Act according to whichever of the two you like.” So he got up from there not knowing whether he would be doing something that was (religiously) permitted or forbidden.

‘Now is that how wise judgement should be in *God’s religion* (9:29, 33)? Or is that (really) what *God* has permitted and forbidden?’

[415] ‘By my life!’ replied Abū Mālik, ‘certainly the *sharī‘a*¹⁷⁴ has become corrupted and ineffectual, and we are only clinging to *the name* of religion (12:40)! So what is the state of religion in *your* opinion?’

[416] ‘But what *is* religion, O Abū Mālik?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him.

[417] ‘Commanding and prohibiting, and what is permitted and what is forbidden, and the (Prophetic) traditions and the religious obligations,’ he replied.

[418] ‘And what is the *sharī‘a* besides that, according to you?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him.

[419] ‘I don’t know of anything else other than what I just described for you,’ answered Abū Mālik.

[420] ‘So you’ve joined religion (*al-dīn*) and the *sharī‘a* on the same level?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him.

[421] ‘Yes,’ he replied.

[422] ‘Therefore religion has become corrupted and ineffectual through the corruption of the *sharī‘a*?’ Šāliḥ asked him. ‘Then what still remains with you?’

[423] [The narrator continued:] Then Abū Mālik stopped and looked down, unable to reply for a while, thinking about the state of his religion. After that he lifted up his head,

[424] and he said: ‘I don’t know that anything remains with me now. But what is religion for *you*?’

[425] ‘For me,’ Šāliḥ answered him, ‘religion is that whose (protective) veil He has strengthened against those who would corrupt it,¹⁷⁵ whose gateways have been opened up to those who are seeking (it). So the person who attains it is ennobled with *precedence* (23:61; 56:10), and the one who (truly) seeks it has been joined with the good. The (religiously right) actions are ennobled with its excellence, and the revealed paths are resplendent with its justice. For it is *a rope*¹⁷⁶ *extending from heaven to earth* (38:10), continuous and without any break,¹⁷⁷ *the firm handhold of those who cling (to God)* (2:256; 31:22) and *the rope of those who hold firmly (to Him)* (3:103), *the ark of the divine presence* (2:248; etc.) and *the ship of salvation*¹⁷⁸ (29:15) and the light of life. All that it *contains is noble* (56:77), its knowledges are well-protected, and its jewels have their distinctive signs, so that their excellence is not hidden from every-one who looks closely at them.’

[426] Abū Mālik replied: ‘If God does have *a religion by which He is to be worshipped* one day, *that pleases Him* (5:3)¹⁷⁹ for His rewarding and punishing (of good and evil), then this would be its essential meaning! Now the excellence of the *description* (you have given) of it has become clear, but what about (the reality of) what you’ve described?’

[427] ‘*What is good and healthy* (7:58; 3:179) only comes from what is good and healthy, O Abū Mālik,’ Šāliḥ answered him. ‘So put your *light* in *the niche* of your intellect (24:53) and understand what is required of you! For the rights of what has (already) been determined (by God) have been disputing with you, and the bulky robes of self-deception have fallen away from you, and you have taken upon yourself (this responsibility) which no one but you can uphold—in that you have shouldered the affairs of these

(companions) *who are following you in doing good* (9:100), since they listen to what you say and follow your guidance and agree with your opinions. Therefore, it is obligatory for you *to protect yourself and them from entering a fire* (66:6) from which *you all have no refuge* (4:121)! So seek the path of salvation from that. For you, among all of them, have had the greatest share of God’s blessings, and you should be the most thankful to Him. Indeed I have known well how much you know the good and hope for its reward.

‘And as for what you asked about confirming that which I was calling you to, I am obligated to confirm that for you in whatever ways you would like.’

[428] ‘Everything that *you have spoken* up to now is correct and *firmly established* (14:27),’ Abū Mālik began. ‘And as for the transmitted reports of the common people (*al-‘amma*),¹⁸⁰ religion cannot be right and proper through (relying on) them, and they are not appropriate to it. So the only thing remaining for us is to learn about what you are calling us to.’

[429] Ṣāliḥ answered him: ‘I am calling you to God’s justice and to the assertion of His unity.’¹⁸¹

[430] ‘Then what you were calling (us) to is just wonderful,’ replied Abū Mālik, ‘because we ourselves have been saying just that, and we know its superiority to all the other (competing theological) doctrines!’

[431] ‘But that is not the way you imagine it, O Abū Mālik!’ Ṣāliḥ answered him. ‘That (Mu‘tazilī) school which you intend described (God’s) “justice” with no real understanding of who is (actually) being described. And *they went astray regarding God’s Names* (7:180), without any real understanding of His unity. Now this (religion) to which I am calling you is the real understanding of God’s justice and the distinctive traits of His unity. If you like, shall I inform you about what I mean, by beginning with the speciousness of that doctrine (of yours)?’

[432] ‘If the doctrine of the people of (divine) justice is erroneous and their declaration of (God’s) unity has gone astray,’ declared Abū Mālik, ‘then there is no firm truth on earth—unless that be some other meaning different from all the (theological) doctrines.’

So show us just how (our assertion of God's) justice and unity was erroneous.'

[433] 'The (assertion of God's) justice and unity are among the most noble doctrines altogether,' Ṣāliḥ answered him. 'God's unity is far above being erroneous, since it has no contrary; and (God's) justice cannot be impaired, since it is a firm decree established between God and His creatures. But *all* the (*kalām*, theological) doctrines are erroneous because of the way they all undermine the assertion of (God's) justice and other points, since they are empty pretensions that cannot ground any doctrine. For (their proponents) *do not encompass any (real) knowledge* (10:39; 20:110) of what they assert, *so that they could return to God's command* (49:9). So defend whichever of those two points (i.e., of God's justice or unity) you wish and take it upon yourself, so that I can put an end to it for you using God's argument.'

[434] 'I shall never uphold against you a doctrine which I myself don't assert,' Abū Mālik began, 'nor has the proponent (of some other doctrine) asked me to do that and appointed me *as the defender* (25:43, etc.) of his doctrine. For *I am not the protector of* (6:104; 11:86) the supporter of (other) doctrines, and I will only defend my own doctrine against you. Now I do maintain that God is One, *there is nothing like Him* (42:11); and that He is just in His judgement, *not imposing on His servants what they cannot bear* (2:286, etc.). Thus He has commanded them (to do certain things) and He has forbidden them (to do others), but He does not command by force, nor does He forbid by compulsion. Rather, His command is by giving them the choice of the better, and His prohibition is by way of warning (of the consequences of disobedience). Therefore *He is not obeyed involuntarily* (2:256), nor is He disobeyed against the will (of the disobedient person). That is the gist of my meaning and what I maintain.'

[435] 'Didn't I just tell you that this doctrine was among the most noble of all doctrines?' Ṣāliḥ answered him. 'But those are only names and descriptions which are of no benefit except through the existence of their essential realities. (Your approach) is like saying "fire is hot." You've certainly spoken truly, but that sincerity is of no benefit to you because your saying "fire is hot" is only a noun

and an adjective: simply mentioning them is of no benefit to you, since you can’t cook food with them or light up the darkness without the essential reality of the *existence* of fire. For if the mere nouns and adjectives could take the place of the realities of things, then your tongue would start burning at the mention of fire and your hunger would be satiated at the mention of food!

[436] ‘As for what you’ve just said about these things,’ Abū Mālik replied, ‘you’ve spoken truly, since *their* names and attributes are only of any benefit through the actual existence of their essential realities. So show me how my assertion of (God’s) unity and justice is (only) names and attributes that would require one to come to know (the Reality) that is named and described.’

[437] Ṣāliḥ answered him: ‘You’ve said that God is one, and (the word for) “one” (*wāḥid*) is (written with) four letters: for we see that two of them are connected and two of them are separate. So which of those letters is “one”—or are all of them together “one”? And your saying “God” (*Allāh*) is also (written with) four letters: so which of those letters is “God,” or are they altogether “God,” or are they signs pointing to God—or do you say something else entirely?’

[438] [The narrator] said: Then Abū Mālik hung his head for a while,

[439] and then he said: ‘I don’t see any way out of that except to say that they are signs pointing to God.’

[440] ‘But then which of those letters points to God?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him. ‘Or with just what do you point to God: with them separately or by joining them together? Or by separating some of them and joining others, as when you say “*Allāh*”: for then (in writing that in Arabic) you’ve separated the initial ‘A’ by itself and joined the next three letters. So which of them all points to God: this one by itself, or these others that are joined together?’

[441] ‘I don’t know what to say to you about that,’ Abū Mālik replied. ‘Help us to find some other gateway (to approach this matter) than this.’

[442] ‘Whoever speaks (about this matter) in this way,’ Ṣāliḥ answered him, ‘has already locked the gateway to a real understanding of God’s unity, O Abū Mālik!’

[443] ‘Yes,’ he said.

[444] ‘Now I’m going to ask you about *your* understanding of God,’ Ṣāliḥ continued. ‘Where did that come from, and from whom did you take it: from an adjective that pointed you toward the (Reality so) described?’

[445] ‘No,’ he answered.

[446] ‘Then from a name that pointed you toward (the Reality so) named?’ he continued.

[447] ‘Yes,’ he replied.

[448] ‘And what is that name which pointed you (toward Him)?’ he asked.

[449] ‘God,’ he responded.

[450] ‘Is “God” a name or something named?’ Ṣāliḥ inquired.

[451] ‘Something named,’ he responded.

[452] ‘Then what is its name?’ he asked.

[453] ‘God,’ he answered.

[454] ‘“God” is a name for God?’ asked Ṣāliḥ.

[455] ‘Yes,’ he said.

[456] ‘Then what is the difference between the name and What is named?’ asked Ṣāliḥ. ‘And which of the two do you worship—or both of them?’

[457] [The narrator] said: Then Abū Mālik was completely bewildered for a while, reflecting how he should answer.

[458] Then he said: ‘I don’t find any other way concerning this than (to say) that when I looked at everything that was made, each thing had its maker. So I judged that this immense creation (also) *had a Creator* (6:102; etc.) *Who does not resemble anything among His creatures* (42:11), just as the makers (of other things) do not resemble what they produce.’

[459] ‘O Abū Mālik,’ Ṣāliḥ answered him, ‘now you’ve taken us away from the original meaning (of your assertion), and your difficulty concerning the real meaning of (God’s) unity has forced you to seek Him by analogical reasoning (*qiyās*),¹⁸² and so you’ve *forged likenesses for Him* (16:74, 17:48, 25:9). But God is too unique and exalted above that, because every thing is made from another thing—but God does not create the things from some thing that existed before them. As for these (worldly) makers, you only knew about them through your observing with your own eyes how they made

(things). Then you judged a creation whose Maker was absent (i.e., the whole universe) by what you yourself had seen of the activity of similar makers whom you had seen and known, by analogy with them.

‘But *God*, when He created that, *did not make you witness the creation* (18:51) of what He made. Nor does He have any ‘likeness’ that makes (things) like *His* making, so that you could have used your witnessing of that present likeness (as an analogy for conceiving) the absent (earlier) likeness. Indeed, I’ve never observed you, O Abū Mālik, being satisfied with analogical reasoning in your religion, so how would you be satisfied to seek the knowledge of your Lord through analogy?¹⁸³ And (as for) your saying “*There is nothing like His likeness*” (42:11), this seems, from your saying, to indicate that He does have a likeness, and nothing is like His likeness. For if your goal was to assert (God’s absolute) unity, you would have said “There’s nothing at all like Him,” and you wouldn’t have said “*There is nothing like His likeness.*” But far beyond that (implicit analogy) is the One Whom (people’s) intentions will never perceive by thinking, nor even their aspirations of “alluding” to perception.¹⁸⁴ On the contrary, *He is infinitely exalted beyond* (17:43) any description by those who are obligated (to worship Him).

‘O Abū Mālik, if this were the way you would try to seek a (*true*) *servant among His servants* (18:65) or *an angel among His angels* (6:9), then you would be completely unable to perceive what should be (rightly) said about him. So how much more so with their Creator? Now *the lights (of the eyes)*¹⁸⁵ of the people of the earth *are unable to perceive* (6:103) the light of the sun, although that is only one of the lights of this lower world. So how could they perceive of the Creator what they cannot even perceive of His servant? Now say what seems right to you.’

[460] [The narrator] said: Then Abū Mālik looked down and hung his head for a long while, completely bewildered and *not finding any way to speak* (17:48; 25:9).

[461] Ṣāliḥ said to him: ‘O Abū Mālik, lift up your head and say whatever comes to you.’

[462] ‘My words have gone and I have nothing to say,’ replied Abū Mālik. ‘(In this realm) intellects are bewildered and unable to

reply, and our imaginations are unable to carry on thinking. The instrument (of reflection) becomes so weak that it can perceive nothing other than (our inner) seeking and questioning.'

[463] 'O Abū Mālik,' (Ṣāliḥ) asked, 'can the One Who is of this (unimaginable) immensity *be perceived by (our) vision* (6:103)?'

[464] 'No, He is far above that,' he replied.

[465] 'And can we hear His speech?' (Ṣāliḥ) continued.

[466] 'No,' he replied, 'for speech can only come from a speaker, and the speaker is described by speech, but God is immensely beyond having (such) attributes.'¹⁸⁶

[467] 'So (do you think),' Ṣāliḥ said to him, 'that this *All-Embracing One* (2:115, etc.)—the *Majestic, the Exalted* (2:255, etc.), *the All-Powerful* (2:20, etc.)—that He is unjust to His creatures, *imposing upon them what they cannot bear* (2:286, etc.), commanding them to do what they cannot perceive,¹⁸⁷ and then punishing them if they don't do that?!

[468] 'Anyone who would impose as an obligation on the person subject to his command what that person cannot do,' responded Abū Mālik, 'would (in reality) be imposing on them (inevitable) disobedience. And to punish the person (in that impossible situation) would be an act of outright enmity—and God is far exalted above that!'

[469] 'O Abū Mālik,' he continued, 'then would the One Who is impossibly (removed) from injustice and immensely exalted above enmity, would He be satisfied and pleased with *ignorance* as an intimate companion for His servants?'

[470] '(Spiritual) ignorance,' replied Abū Mālik, 'cuts off thankfulness and leads to ingratitude and rejection (of God)—*and God does not love every ungrateful one* (22:38).'

[471] 'Then did He create them all as (perfect) knowers, knowing what was desired of them?' asked Ṣāliḥ.

[472] 'No, not at all,' he said. 'He created them *ignorant* (33:72), not knowing anything.'

[473] 'Then how did they (receive) the knowledge of that gratitude toward Him which is desired (of them),' inquired Ṣāliḥ, 'so that they may become entitled to His *good pleasure* (9:72, etc.), and so that He can reassure them against *His wrath* (3:162)?'

[474] ‘(Our) knowledge of that comes *from what is with God* (46:23, etc.),’ replied Abū Mālik.

[475] ‘But if He is *far exalted* above being seen, too *measureless to be perceived by* (our) *vision* (6:103), far too *immense* to be delimited by (an attribute of) speech,’ continued Ṣāliḥ, ‘then how can what He commands be known from what He prohibits, obedience to Him from disobeying Him, or thankfulness to Him from ingratitude? (How could that be) if the knowledge of all that couldn’t be perceived through intermediaries between Him and His creatures, as His act of justice toward them *through just witnesses* (7:181)¹⁸⁸ who bear witness for and against them, whom He chooses in His knowledge and whom *He selects and purifies* (22:75) above all the rest of His creatures? Then *He makes them messengers* to (His creatures) and *arguments* against them, so that they become, through God’s justice, *just witnesses* (7:181) between Him and His servants, carrying on His commandments and prohibitions, so that willingly obeying them is part of obeying God and (obtaining) His good pleasure, while disobeying them (entails) His wrath and His retribution. Otherwise, how does the divine command extend from God to His creatures?’

[476] ‘By my life,’ exclaimed Abū Mālik, ‘this is the very foundation of justice! For the first thing that the creatures need, in respect to God’s justice, is for Him to inform them about what He desires from them, by means of *the just witnesses* (7:181) among His creatures. Then He will thank and reward those of them who do good, and He will condemn and chastise those of them who do evil, if He wills.’

[477] ‘Then is anything else compatible,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘with justice in (His) wise judgement?’

[478] ‘Nothing else is admissible,’ he declared, ‘since God is *the Most Wise of those who judge wisely* (11:45; 95:8)!’

[479] ‘Then is it compatible with His wise judgement,’ asked Ṣāliḥ, ‘that He should impose a command upon some of His creatures and point it out to them through one of His *just witnesses*, and then impose precisely the same command upon others, but not point it out to them through one of His *just witnesses*, as He had done with the first group?’

[480] ‘(God’s) wise judgement can only be one (in all cases),’ said Abū Mālik, ‘because justice is one. So if the judgement (in question) had two different meanings, then one of them would have to be unjust.’

[481] ‘Haven’t you already confirmed this judgement in regard to God,’ Šāliḥ asked him, ‘that *He is One* (4:171, etc.) and does not vary, and that (*His*) *accustomed way* is one and *does not change* (25:43, 48:23) regarding His messengers? Were it not for the continuous succession of (His) messengers and (their) establishment of what (He) commands and forbids, would there be any development of the truth or any meaning (to the existence) of His creatures?’

[482] ‘Yes,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘that is the truth.’

[483] ‘So doesn’t the continuous succession of those (messengers) from God to His creatures necessarily impose on the creatures the obligation to willingly obey them, as their religious duty?’ asked Šāliḥ. ‘For He made (His messengers) *just witnesses* (7:181) between Him and His creatures, that they might bear witness on behalf of those who willingly obeyed them, so that He might accept (their acts of obedience); and that they might bear witness against those who disobeyed them, so that He might turn away from them.’

[484] ‘(God’s) wise judgement is nothing but that!’ exclaimed Abū Mālik. ‘For anything else would turn His messengers into liars and *would betray His promise* (2:80, 22:47, 30:6)—and *God is far more noble* (96:3) than that! Certainly (God) has made clear the affair of His messengers: that they are part of His justice, and that the creatures (should) worship Him through their willing obedience to those messengers. But do inform me now about the levels of those *just witnesses* with God: are they all alike, or do some of them have precedence over others?’

[485] ‘How can they all be on the same level,’ Šāliḥ answered him, ‘when some of them are subjected to others through their willing obedience to them? Because if they were all equal in their levels, then none of them would be obeying any others. But in His justice (God) *has preferred some of them over others* (2:253; 17:55), so that the subordinate is joined through obedience to the superior,¹⁸⁹ and the superior to one more superior to him, until through them their

obedience and service eventually reaches the final stage of what God has intended.’

[486] ‘Then is the person who obeys the superior among them, and the subordinate (among them),’ inquired Abū Mālik, ‘are all of them equal in their recompense?’

[487] ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘for because of God’s justice, it is necessary that each person who obeys (Him) receives *his just recompense* (48:16, etc.), and He does not ask about the level of the superior or the subordinate.’

[488] Abū Mālik asked: ‘Then can any *of their enemies* (6:113; 25:31) ever be confused with these excellent and worthy ones?’

[489] ‘That can’t be,’ he replied, ‘because they come from the Creator with knowledge of the unseen in the books which He has sent down upon them. So no one *is able to bring anything like those books, except from what is with God* (17:88; 28:49, etc.).’

[490] ‘But could someone be confused with the subordinate ones¹⁹⁰ among them,’ continued Abū Mālik, ‘since they do not bring a book in which God has revealed to them *the knowledge of the unseen* (3:44; 11:49; 13:102)?’

[491] ‘No one is able to pretend to claim that spiritual station,’ he replied.

[492] ‘But how can that be,’ inquired Abū Mālik, ‘when they are not clearly distinguished from other people by (their knowledge of) the unseen, as the superior (i.e., the messenger) has clearly distinguished himself (with his revealed book)?’

[493] ‘If the superior has clearly distinguished himself from others through his knowledge of the unseen in what was sent down (in his book),’ Ṣāliḥ answered him, ‘then the subordinate also clearly distinguishes himself from others through his knowledge of the unseen in his inspired interpretation (*ta’wīl*).¹⁹¹ For both the sending down and the inspired interpretation are *from what is with God*, and no one can attain what is with God *except through revealed inspiration (wahy)*¹⁹² (42:51; 53:4; etc.).’

[494] ‘Then the subordinate also receives revealed inspiration!’ exclaimed Abū Mālik.

[495] ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘which is why *obedience to him is obedience to God* (40:80).’

[496] ‘But then if he is like the superior with respect to revealed inspiration and (deserving) obedience,’ asked Abū Mālik, ‘then why is he called a “subordinate”?’

[497] ‘Because of his obedience to the superior and his need for him,’ replied Ṣāliḥ.

[498] ‘But why does he need another (human) creature,’ asked Abū Mālik, ‘when the revealed inspiration is (already) coming to him from the Creator?’

[499] ‘Although that revealed inspiration does come to him (from the Creator),’ Ṣāliḥ explained to him, ‘it only comes to him *through inspired interpretation of the hadith* (12:6, 21, 101) and of the (revealed) books and the rest of what has been left behind (as their spiritual heritage) by the “superiors.”¹⁹³ As (in the case of) His revealed inspiration to Lot by means of Abraham (11:69–81; 29:26–35), which clearly showed the superiority of Abraham, or as with *His revealed inspiration to Ismail and Isaac* (4:163),¹⁹⁴ while He assigned *the good things and the blessings and the excellence to Abraham* (11:73; 29:27; 37:113). Therefore God’s revealed inspiration is continuously connected to *His just witnesses* (7:181) on His earth, to the extent of their different (spiritual) levels. For in His justice, *He does not love* (2:190, etc.) for *His commands* and His prohibitions *to be cut off* (2:27, etc.) from His servants *after His blessing (of sending a messenger from themselves) to them* (3:164, etc.), since that would bring about the cessation of their worship and service and would legitimise (spiritual) ignorance.’

[500] ‘Now the (messenger) on whom (revelation) has been sent down has certainly shown his truthfulness through the knowledge of the unseen which is in his (revealed) book,’ Abū Mālik continued. ‘But what indicates that the person who has been given this inspired interpretation (*ta’wīl*) also has with him that knowledge of the unseen which would bear witness that he has also *been given a revealed inspiration* (from God), so that he ought to be obeyed instead of someone else—just as one is obliged (to obey) the person to whom (the book) has been sent down?’

[501] Ṣāliḥ answered him: ‘Through his inspired interpretation he brings knowledge from heaven and *a clear sign* (75:19, etc.) from

the heavenly host (37:8; 38:69), and the book bears witness to him (and his role) in that regard.’

[502] ‘Now I do bear witness to what the (divine) books have attested,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘that what has been sent down in them does bear witness that every (truly) inspired interpretation is a revealed inspiration from what is with God. If that were not so, one would have to deny all the revealed books and the messengers, since their intended meaning (in that regard) was a single meaning.’

[503] Then (Ṣāliḥ) said to him: ‘If some of them had denied the others, then we would have had to deny all of them. So if each of them attests to the truthfulness of the others, shouldn’t we affirm the truthfulness of all of them?’

[504] ‘That is certainly just,’ Abū Mālik answered him, ‘and through that we recognise the truthfulness and the excellence and superiority of those (divine guides) whose truthfulness is affirmed. For He obliged us to be obedient to *the possessors of resolution among the messengers* (4:59, 46:35) who are *His just witnesses among His creatures* (7:181), and He gave them the duty of communicating His message (16:35). Now if He has obliged us to be obedient to the *possessors of resolution* (who have received) prophecy and the sending down (of His books) and inspired interpretation, then what is the matter with these people (among the religious scholars) who sit together in their assemblies pretending to resemble (the prophets), while they are not at all among them? And on top of that, they have all come together and agreed among themselves¹⁹⁵ that there will be no prophet after their prophet, that *there is no (divine) warner in their time* (5:19), and that they are the ones who are *upholding* the command of God and *His religion* (42:13)—indeed that these words of theirs will lead to God’s reward or His recompense!

‘But now you are saying something other than that. So how is it that the learned scholars (‘*ulamā*’)¹⁹⁶ of this community came to abandon (genuine) inquiry and investigation at this time?’

[505] ‘They haven’t abandoned it,’ Ṣāliḥ remarked to him, ‘but they no longer inquire and investigate this in the way that they should. For no one has spoken to them about it so that they *would pay heed to him* (6:113) with their intellects, *because of what has been imbued in their hearts* (2:93) that they are *the (true) possessors of God’s*

command (4:59, 83) and His religion, and that there will be no prophet after their prophet, exactly as was said by those before them among *those who led astray* (26:94) the (religious) communities before them. For every community claims that there is no prophet after their own.'

[506] 'Where did that all begin,' asked Abū Mālik, 'and what did they want (to accomplish) by that?'

[507] 'In every age that has begun with three (types),' Ṣāliḥ explained to him. 'There is a *rebellious devil*¹⁹⁷ (22:3), a *wilful oppressor* (11:59), and a hypocritical religious scholar (*faqīh*).¹⁹⁸ Since by saying this [that there would be no more prophets] they wanted to cut off *the outward traces* (43:22–23) of the prophets from the real and distinctive qualities of (genuine) prophecy, and to use those outward traces *as a commodity among themselves* (59:7), they could only accomplish that once *they had imbued the hearts* (2:93) of their respective communities with the saying to each community that God hadn't sent anyone superior to their own prophet, and *there would not be any prophet after him* (40:34), nor any (divine) *warner*. So *they quietly insinuated* (7:20, etc.) that to them, *without their really being aware of that* (2:171; 8:21–22, etc.), and they did away with them (seeking the true religion) *without their even knowing that* (7:182, etc.). So each community became greatly attached to their own prophet, while denying whoever came after him, and they even imagined that in doing so they were drawing near to their own prophet. Thus every community claimed that *every prophet after their own prophet was a liar* (43:23–24).

'By means of such words, *all* of the (religious) communities became cut off from the very memory of prophecy and the legacies of the prophets, and because of that they did not even seek after what they were missing, nor did they accept it as true if they were seeking. In that way *the devils among those who lead astray* (15:39, 42; 38:82) became firmly established, so that *then they led their peoples astray* (28:63; 37:32). And the oppressors gained so much power they could kill the prophets, *so they killed them* (2:91, etc.). And *doubt was introduced* (42:14, etc.) by the legal scholars of evil who *made these things attractive to them* (41:25), so that they perished and caused others to perish. Now they did all that so that people's

hearts would not ardently love the prophets when they appeared, nor would they seek them when they were missing. And the hopelessness of those (peoples) regarding (the existence of) the prophets eventually came to such a point that when (the prophets) *called* them *openly* (71:8) to the truth, *they called them liars* (23:44, etc.) *the prophets were killed* (2:112, etc.) among them—and they didn’t even become angry!

‘Thus this community of *the Magians* (22:17) are (still) clinging to their excesses and *worshipping their idols* (29:17), devoting themselves to their fire-temples and declaring their claim that *God will never send a messenger after their messenger* (40:34). And this community of the Torah are clinging devotedly to their Psalms, *tending to their calf* (20:91; etc.), upholding the ordinances of their prophets and submitting to their judges, and declaring their claim that *God will never send a messenger after Moses*. And this community of the Gospels is declaring their anthropomorphism, claiming that their prophet is their God, worshipping with their crosses and venerating *their priests* (9:31), and declaring (likewise) that *God will never send a messenger after Jesus*.

‘And now this community of yours has already *followed them in the ways* (20:53) of those who were before them. For *they were led astray by those who tempted* (28:63; 37:32). Thus *they inherited the book from those who were not worthy of it* (35:32, 42:14), for their religion they abided by something that was not God’s creed, and *they followed the seductions* (7:146) of their leaders and *willingly obeyed their rulers* in error (33:67). Their legal scholars cravenly submitted to the oppressors, *upholding the religion for them* (instead of God), without regarding (the true) traditions, *establishing the prayers* at the wrong times and paying the alms-tax to those who did *not* deserve it. Thus they were all in agreement about patiently enduring those (oppressors), assiduously serving them because of their need for them and being certain that they needed no one else, and proclaiming that *God would never send a messenger after their messenger* (40:34), nor any warner.

‘That is how you and those like you followed the sayings of the “great majority” (*al-sawād al-a‘zam*),¹⁹⁹ terrified by the power of (scholarly) “consensus” and the tyranny of the rulers. So you accepted

that (misguided religion) from them and you adorned it (for them) with the beauties of your school-doctrines and you all gave your preference to it with your beautiful phrases, upholding for that (false path) the argument of the *just witness* (7:181) in whatever he did not argue against you. Thus you (scholars) all followed the tyrants and oppressors who are above you out of terror; and those who are beneath you followed you all because of their appetites, and *they imagined that* (this false way of yours) *was the truth* (3:154).

‘Now, if we must give our assent to this (Muslim) community for one point, on the basis of this one factor of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*),²⁰⁰ when it has judged that God has cut off His proofs from His creatures, then by the same token the earlier religious communities are even more deserving of our assent because of three other points by which they win the argument against you all and by which they compel our assent (to *their* claims) instead of yours.’

[508] ‘But what are those points according to which they ought to be given *precedence over us* (7:38–39),’ asked Abū Mālik, ‘such that we must agree with them if their words are true, or deny them if their words are a (false) *deviation* (3:7)?’

[509] ‘What they say is like what you say,’ Šālīḥ explained to him, ‘and what you all say is of the same sort as what they say. So your hearts are all alike, but they have precedence over you in their argument. As for their first point, they all say that they were earlier than you in (adhering to) *God’s religion*, so that they have the merit and precedence of *those who come first* (23:61, etc.). As for the second point (of their precedence), both they and all of you (scholars) are in agreement (*ijmāʿ*) in confirming what they have (from their prophets), but they have the merit and precedence of *those who confirm the truth* (15:64, etc.). And thirdly, you (scholars) all bear witness for them that their prophets *were confirming the truth* and that they were messengers of God. But not one of them bears witness to the prophecy of your prophet, nor to his truthfulness. So they have precedence over you all through your consensus together with them (that their prophets are true), while you stand alone apart from them (and that consensus, with regard to your own prophet)! Therefore they are all claiming that whatever knowledge you all have is taken over from their knowledge and their sciences, which are the

origin of your knowledge. That is their argument against all you (scholars): what they say is straightforward, and its justice is quite clear. So if we’re obliged to follow the judgement of the creatures (that divine guidance has stopped) against the Creator, then the judgement of these people is more compelling.

‘But if *the Creator* is the One Who judges wisely regarding His creatures, *abrogating what He wishes* (2:106, 13:39) and *confirming what He wills* (5:1)—and *nothing can postpone His judgement* (13:41)—then by my life, everything *all* of these (groups and scholars) have been saying collapses! For the Creator has far more right to create and to command, and certainly *every day He is engaged in a (new) work* (55:29). So His (unlimited) action cannot be denied, even if He sent a warner every day.’

[510] ‘Certainly this community has become entangled in *far-reaching error* (4:167, etc.)!’ declared Abū Mālik.

[511] ‘*And certainly most of the earlier ones before them went astray!*’ (37:71), Ṣāliḥ answered him. ‘*For they ousted the friends of God from what was rightly theirs* (22:40), and *they overcame their cause* (18:21) by using the *foolish people* (21:13). Then they tried to *make licit what God had forbidden* (9:37) quite intentionally, so they would not alert (the people) to prophecy, lest the common people would long deeply for the prophets and would not kill them because of that. Rather (those oppressors) *have distracted them* (102:1) with power and largesse, so that the common people follow them in agreement with their appetites. And (the oppressors) were ably assisted in that by those who were known for their truthfulness and scrupulous piety in their outward appearance, *fooling the common people with such hypocrisy* (4:142)—so that *those who were ordering the community to good* (3:110; etc.) were actually turning them away from it, and *those who were forbidding them from wrong* were actually pointing them in that direction!

‘So those who were faithful to *the friends of God* became few in number, and the truth and falsehood came to alternate like *the light and darkness and their alternation* (2:164, etc.). Thus were it not for *the remnants* (11:86, 116, etc.) of *the friends of God* and *His just witnesses* (7:181) upon the earth and that *revealed inspiration* which continues to come to them, that *small handful of truthfulness*

(16:14) would not have overcome the great multitude of falsehood. For otherwise, with whom would *God distinguish the wicked from the good* (8:37), were it not for *His just witnesses*? And how could *God's argument be communicated* (6:149; etc.) to all those creatures except through them?

[512] 'Given the multitude of the enemies (of the prophets),' Abū Mālik exclaimed, 'there can be no way out and no means for (realising) God's justice and His command except through God's *just witnesses*! It is through them that God fulfils His argument against His creatures.'

[513] 'Then if it has been established that the whole group of God's prophets are His *just witnesses*,' Ṣāliḥ asked him, 'wouldn't each one of them be called "a just witness"?'

[514] 'Yes,' he said, 'that is "a just witness," as when they say "So-and-so gave testimony, and he was a *just witness* ('*adl*) among the *just witnesses*" (65:2, etc.).'

[515] Then Ṣāliḥ said to him: 'So now it has been established for you that the *just witness* (or "justice") is the *friend of God*. And we have left behind your speaking about "justice" as a descriptive attribute,²⁰¹ and it has become the *reality* so described?'

[516] 'Yes,' he said, 'that is the right way to put it.'

[517] 'Then for the person who hasn't perceived the reality underlying that descriptive attribute (of justice),' Ṣāliḥ asked him, 'is there any benefit for him (20:109, etc.) in the description itself?'

[518] 'The descriptive attribute itself is of no benefit to him,' he admitted, 'unless he perceives the reality underlying that description.'

[519] 'Then as for the person who has not yet known God's *just witness* and *His friend*,' inquired Ṣāliḥ, 'can the words (and religious teaching) of such a person be just?'

[520] [The narrator] said: Abū Mālik smiled at that, and then he answered: 'By God, you have removed me far indeed from my (old) doctrine of (God's) "unity and justice," and *it is only the truth that has removed me from that* (8:5), with the clearest of arguments and the most subtle and penetrating explanations. So after this, what is the doctrine you are establishing?'

[521] 'O Abū Mālik,' Ṣāliḥ answered him, 'from now on that piece of counterfeit glass has lost its place among the different colours

of jewels, so no one will recognise its value. And when it is presented to the jewellers its forgery will be exposed, as will the delusions of *its people who have only deceived themselves* (2:9; 4:142).’

[522] ‘You have spoken truthfully, and the deviations of the (theological) doctrines and the misguided ways of the (religious) communities have become clear,’ said Abū Mālik. ‘So how can we find any salvation from them, and how can we come to know God’s intermediaries, or even one of them, since we can’t go back to their time, while in this time of ours there are no longer any prophets or messengers, as there once were among the communities before us?’

[523] ‘May God be far exalted (above what you are saying), O Abū Mālik!’ Šāliḥ answered him. ‘You haven’t stopped talking about God’s justice for a single moment of your life. Yet when we have just finished debating with you about that in order to establish for you the way you ought to approach that, you immediately come back to speaking unjustly of God and attributing injustice to God!’

[524] ‘God forbid that I should ever say that!’ exclaimed Abū Mālik. ‘For whoever says that *has transgressed* (God’s limits) and *has made up lies about God* (6:21, etc.). So what could possibly lead you to implicate me in such a thing?’

[525] ‘Your saying that the time of the prophets has already passed you by,’ Šāliḥ replied, ‘and that there is no longer any prophet nor messenger in this time of yours. For was His sending those messengers to the earlier peoples justice on His part toward His servants, or *was it a pointless waste* (23:115)?’

[526] ‘God forbid!’ he declared. ‘It could only be justice from Him.’

[527] ‘Then what has caused us to be excluded from that justice?’ asked Šāliḥ. ‘Aren’t we also His servants as they were, and aren’t we created as they were? Aren’t we obliged to worship and serve Him as they did? So has He acted unjustly toward us after having been just toward them, so that we are exempted (from His justice) after them? Or else has *His generous giving* (17:20) been exhausted in this time of ours, so that we should hold on to the remainder of His (past) generosity to them, while He is satisfied with that from us? Or else *has God’s accustomed way changed* (17:77; 35:43, etc.) in regard to us, after having remained firmly the same

with regard to those who came before us, so that we can justly accuse God of changeability?

‘Surely His justice is also obligatory in regard to us and His wise judgement still in effect against us, as *was His accustomed way among those who passed before us* (33:38). For *there is no changing the words of God* (6:34, 115; 10:64, etc.) and *no postponing of His wise judgement* (13:41). Now who is more deserving of the name “just” than *the friends of God*? And who is *the just (person) among those God has created* (7:181), if not the one whom God has specially chosen so that he has become the *just witness* by His command? For that is why wise judgement is called “justice,” because of the just and harmonious actions of whoever judges according to it, just as the truth is called truthfulness (*ṣidq*) because of the truthfulness and sincerity of whoever speaks it.’

[528] ‘This matter cannot be anything other than that,’ responded Abū Mālik, ‘and it is not permissible for us to apply anything but the truth to God. But all the same, we have brought the discussion down to our opinion and our judgement that *the just and righteous ones (al-ṣāliḥūn)* (2:130, etc.)²⁰² are absent from us. That is simply part of God’s wise judgement and *His accustomed way* with regard to us, just as *He acted with regard to those who came before us* (33:38) in the time of *the intervals* (5:19) between one (divine) messenger and the next, such as the interval which existed between *the (religious) community of Abraham* (2:130, 135) up until the period of Moses and the Torah, and the interval which separated the Torah from the time of Jesus and the Gospels.²⁰³ So that’s where we stopped in the discussion, and (that’s why) we (scholars) are acting according to (the conditions of) this interval, relying upon the surviving traces and custom (from the time of Muhammad).’

[529] ‘Surely the religion of God is far dearer to God than that!’ Ṣāliḥ answered him. ‘For what “interval” was there after *the community of Abraham* when *God had sent after him [as messengers to his people]* (10:74, etc.) *Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Jonah and Jethro*,²⁰⁴ leading up to Moses? And (at that time) *He revealed to them the performing of the good actions* (21:73) and *calling to [the right religion] the community of Abraham* (6:161), and *the upholding of the prayer* according to its proper way, and *the giving of charity* (21:73)

according to its prescribed forms, until *He sent down the wise judgement of the Torah* (5:43) upon Moses. Then what “interval” was there after the community of Moses, between that and the Gospel, since *God had sent* after Moses *Joshua son of Nūn, Elias, Saul, David and Solomon, Zechariah and John*,²⁰⁵ leading up to Jesus? Therefore they upheld the judgement of the Torah by worshipping in accordance with it, calling to it, and by reciting its psalms, until He sent down the judgement of the Gospel upon Jesus.

‘Likewise (God sent such successions of prophets) *with those who came before them* (14:9) and those who were after them, and for many centuries between that (25:38) *there came to them messengers with clear signs* (5:32; 10:74; 14:9, etc.), who *only God knows* (4:164; 40:178). For each one, God struck for him *the likenesses* (25:39), and each was calling (his people) to the truth. So where was the “interval” between those (prophets), and when was that “interval”? For God only said: “[*Our messenger came to you...*] *upon an interval among the messengers*” (5:19), mentioning specifically the *messengers*,²⁰⁶ since the “interval” here refers to the *public* manifestation of the (divine) “call” after the (period of) fear, when they were calling (people to God) in secret and clandestinely (*kitmān*).²⁰⁷ Because the earth is never without a just witness from God for a single blink of the eye, either publicly and openly, or *in fear* (78:18, 21) and concealment.’

[530] ‘Those are words *that can’t be refuted* (30:43),’ declared Abū Mālik, ‘and *a firm saying* (14:27) that can’t be doubted! And as for the continuity of God’s argument through (His) *just witness* and through following the messengers, that has been firmly established and clearly shown. So now indicate to me the real meaning of their absence (*ghayba*)²⁰⁸ in this time of ours: what is the reason behind that?’

[531] ‘What was the reason for Moses’ being hidden,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘when *he went out of the city* (28:21) of Pharaoh and crossed from it, *in fear and clandestinity* (28:22), to the land of Midian and (the prophet) Jethro?’

[532] ‘He fled from the people of Pharaoh,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘concealed from them because he feared for his life from them, since they had agreed to kill him!’

[533] Ṣāliḥ said to him: ‘Then have you heard in this revealed path of yours of any one of the *just witnesses*, the witnesses of God and the descendants of His prophets,²⁰⁹ who were murdered while persevering in (their role as) the intermediaries of religion?’

[534] ‘Yes,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘a great many people *among them have been murdered* (4:155).’

[535] ‘Then, which one of God’s *just witnesses* do you want to reveal himself (publicly) to you and to the people of your time?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him. ‘Is it a martyr that God should resurrect for you all after his death? Or one fleeing from you all, while you seek his return to the death he is fleeing from? Therefore (His *just witness*) has followed *God’s accustomed way regarding His prophets and His messengers* (17:77) in persevering patiently under persecution and in remaining hidden until God judges between him and us—for *He is the best of those who wisely judge* (7:87; 10:109).’

[536] ‘There is no fault in whoever has followed the accustomed ways of the righteous ones in fearing for himself and fleeing from his people,’ Abū Mālik responded. ‘No indeed, the fault surely lies with the communities of evil and the helpers of injustice in their killing God’s prophets and His *just witnesses*, and in their all agreeing together (*ijmā’*)²¹⁰ about that.’

[537] ‘Then what do you say,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘about those who murder God’s just witnesses and His guide; what is *their ultimate fate* (14:30) or that of those who help them?’

[538] ‘*In the Fire* (14:30),’ responded Abū Mālik, ‘along with whoever has blackened a flag²¹¹ or filled an inkwell for them!’

[539] ‘But what do all your legal scholars (*fuqahā*) say about that?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him.

[540] ‘They all pray for God’s mercy for the murdered one,’ said Abū Mālik, ‘but they don’t see the sin of the murderer!’

[541] ‘Now, as for the person who willingly obeys the murderer,’ Ṣāliḥ asked him, ‘isn’t he his accomplice in the blood of the murdered victim?’

[542] ‘By God, of course he is!’ exclaimed Abū Mālik. ‘For he is the murderer’s associate and even worse than him.’

[543] ‘His association with the murderer is obvious, because of his helping him. But how does he become even worse than him?’ Ṣāliḥ asked him.

[544] ‘Were it not for the opinions passed down and circulated by the legal scholars,’ Abū Mālik responded, ‘the oppressors could not maintain their domination over the foolish ones.’

[545] ‘You’ve spoken truly, O Abū Mālik,’ Ṣāliḥ said to him. ‘Indeed would you *yourself*¹² be satisfied to have their kingdom as your home, their land as your sanctuary, their armies as your neighbours, and *their guardians* (of Hell) (96:18) as your best friends? Yet you are a witness for them, judging in their favour with this “knowledge” of yours and affirming that they fulfil your needs. For you have prayed for them in asking them (for money), and you have thanked them for (their help with) your needs. And *you have dressed up* (2:42; 3:71) their wrongdoing with the crown of your “justice,” so they became filled with pride. And you adorned their proud boasting with the outer garments of (your) “revealed path,” so they went to even greater extremes. You have illumined their falsehood with indifference to your truth. And *the despised ones* (4:75; 34:31–33)¹³ were deceived by your actions and those who resemble you among the so-called “knowers.” For they said: “*We have a model (to imitate) in them* (60:4, 6), since they are the legal scholars of the community.” So they have gone astray due to all you (scholars), just as you all went astray due to the oppressors.

‘Thus *you all imagined that* (41:22, 48:12) the responsible person was someone other than yourselves, since you forgot God’s saying—may He be praised: “*And do not be dependent upon those who do injustice, lest the fire touch you [and you have no protecting friends but God]!*” (11:113). So you all *have cut off what God ordered to be connected* (2:27; 13:25), *while you were all looking on* (27:54)! And you have proclaimed the outer appearances of “justice” while you were far astray from its path. You turned away from His saying, “*Obey God, and obey the Messenger and the possessors of authority among you*” (4:59), while you claimed that these wrongdoers were the “*possessors of authority over you,*” even though they openly rejected God. In doing so you forgot God’s saying—may He be exalted: “*Fight those who reject (God) who are close to you*” (9:123).

Thus you all wilfully disobeyed the person you had been commanded to obey, and you willingly obeyed those whom you had been ordered to struggle against. And all the while, *you kept on supposing that you were those who are working good deeds* (18:104)!

'So *the self-delusion of error* (7:146) carried you all so far in the end, and your own opinions overpowered you to such an extent that you all said that *God will never send a messenger* (40:34) or a warner in your time! Is it that as a result of the (imagined) "goodness" of your actions, *you felt you had no need* (80:5; 92:8) for the *friends of God* to carry out (God's) argument? Or else was the ugliness and evil of your actions such that you gave up all hope for (forgiveness) from God through repentance? Or is it part of "justice" that *you should pass judgement* against God without *any justice* (4:58), and that you should be satisfied and pleased with the sort of (systematic persecution and rejection) of your Messenger that you would never be satisfied with for yourselves? For would any one of you be satisfied to see his own child killed or expelled from their home and possessions without any right?'

[546] 'None of us would be satisfied with that!' Abū Mālik exclaimed. 'If any one of us had his child killed or was expelled from his property, he would become outraged, and his people would be outraged for him, so they would not be satisfied until he was satisfied.'

[547] '*Surely God and His Messenger are more deserving* (9:62) that you all should be outraged and angry for him,' Ṣāliḥ answered him, 'when *His viceroy (khalīfa)*²¹⁴ was killed and His friend (*walī*) was removed from the earth?'

[548] 'Indeed, it is hard for us that they should kill *God's friend* among us or *remove him from his earth* (14:13),' said Abū Mālik. 'But (His friends) have decided to absent themselves from us, while the oppressors are unjustly dominating us.'

[549] 'If you were all to help the *friends of God*, then they would win out,' Ṣāliḥ answered him. 'And if you were to abandon *His enemies* (6:112; 60:1, etc.), then they would not be victorious. But (in reality), as far as your relation to the *friends of God*, you can all be judged to belong to one of these three levels. There is the relentless murderer, who never tires of hunting them down and whose blood-thirstiness is not assuaged even when he wins out. And there is their

inveterate enemy, who *bites his nails* (25:27) in rage, who will go to any length to incite enmity against them, and who never forgets (his hatred of) them, even if they overlook (him). Finally, there are those who do dislike (those enemies’ actions), who are sympathetic to the *friends of God* but are really abandoning them, who *have no spiritual insight* (12:108, etc.) in regard to faith, and who cannot be relied upon to protect the secret (*kitmān*)²¹⁵ (of the imams).

‘So it is because of that that the *friends of God* have concealed themselves from you, out of precaution against you and this immense number of people *who have taken their passions as their gods* (25:43, 45:23), who fight like dogs over *the stuff of this lower world* (3:14, 185, etc.), and who conspire together about *killing the prophets*. Since such people are unaware of the wrongfulness of their actions, they do not trouble their souls with the wrongfulness of their evil-doing and *they do not humble themselves in repentance* (4:17, etc.) for what they have done. Indeed they go so far as to attribute the wrongfulness of their actions to God and to ascribe them to Him!²¹⁶ So they say that *God will never send a prophet after their prophet* (40:34), nor any warner. Thus²¹⁷ they sought to legitimise *the slaughtering of the friends of God without any right* (3:21). And in so doing they did wrong with their actions, they turned away from (the truth) in their speech, and they transgressed by calling (them) liars.’

[550] ‘Yes,’ said Abū Mālik. ‘That is the description of this community of ours, and that *is* what they say. So how can we be saved from that, and *where is the refuge* (75:10) from God’s punishment?’

[551] ‘*With God* (75:12)!’ Ṣāliḥ answered him. ‘Seek protection with Him and *He will give you refuge* (46:31). Turn to Him in repentance and *He will accept that repentance from you* (42:25). And ask Him for *the path of His friends* (5:48) and *He will rescue you* (6:64) through your own right action from the deeds of *those who do injustice* (23:28, etc.). The same is true for all these other people: if they were to *turn to God, He would accept their repentance* (2:160, etc.). And God would not punish them, for *God does not do a dust-speck’s weight of wrong* (4:40), even if they themselves have done wrong and denied (God’s friends). For *He does not hasten to*

punish them (18:58), even when they have hastened to disobey (Him).’

[552] ‘Then I am seeking protection from God’s punishment,’ Abū Mālik replied, ‘through repentance and turning to Him. And I am *searching for the connection* (5:35) to what pleases Him. So be generous to the one who comes to you seeking (help), and *help to guide rightly* (18:66) the one who is seeking your guidance—may God reward you for that!’

[553] ‘If you do that,’ Ṣāliḥ answered him, ‘you will find that God, in His forgiveness, *is closer to you* (50:16) than your repentance and returning to Him, for *surely He loves those who turn (to Him) in repentance* (2:222). And you will find me *full of concern for you* (9:128) in regard to guiding you.’

[554] [The narrator continued:] Then Ṣāliḥ’s *eyes filled with tears* (5:83) at the mention of repentance, so he drew his speaking to an end. Since he was in his own rooms, he asked them to go away to his father’s house. Then he went in to see his (spiritual) father, the Knower who had called him (to this way), and he consulted with him about the matter of Abū Mālik and his companions.

[555] Then the Knower said: ‘You know your companions better (than I do), so if you recognise some good in them, then guide them rightly as you were guided. But if you are apprehensive about them, then don’t let your desire for them lead you to approach them while putting yourself at risk. And test them by ignoring them, but not harshly. Order your father to treat them kindly and to be respectful toward them for a while. For the person who is truly seeking the good will not remain hidden. Surely God will not leave you behind and He will open up for you, from the light of His providential arrangement (of things), that through which *He manages the affair* (13:2; 32:5, etc.) of His creatures. And He will open up for you from the gateways of right guidance what will show you the (appropriate) actions of those who are rightly guided.’

[556] [The narrator] continued: So Abū Mālik and his companions continued to go through their different kinds of testing, until their affair was complete and they recognised their right guidance. And it was God’s friend among them who took care of their guidance, and they thanked God for that. Then *they returned to their*

people warning them (46:29), so that through them God guided a great many of His servants to His religion.

[557] *Nor was this a made-up story, but rather the confirmation (12:111) of what God has commanded (2:27, etc.). For in it is the confirmation of the (divine) messengers, the signs of their trustees (the imams), and the proper behaviour of those who are seeking.*

[558] *So praise be to God, in the beginning and at the end! May God’s blessings be upon His Messenger, our master Muḥammad, who was sent by Him to His creatures as a bearer of good news and as a warner (2:119). And (may His blessings be) upon his trustee, the imam of those who are mindful (of God), ‘the best of the best,’²¹⁸ the beloved of the Lord of the worlds; and upon the imams from the people of His house (11:73; 33:33) upon whom God has bestowed His favours (19:58)—may He take away from them (all) impurity and purify them totally (33:33). And God is sufficient for us, the best of trustees (3:173), the best of protectors and the best of supporters (8:40, 22:78). And there is no strength and no power except through God (18:39), the Exalted, the Tremendous (2:255, 42:4).*

NOTES TO THE TRANSLATION

1. The central, multifaceted Qur’anic expression *al-amr* can also refer to God’s ‘command’ or ‘workings’ in the broadest possible sense, including the process of creation and all the relations of the Creator and creation. Ja’far b. Maṣṣūr uses it in the following paragraph as a virtual synonym for that *dīn* (‘religion,’ in the all-encompassing Qur’anic meaning of that expression), which is the central subject of this book. In those contexts where the Arabic root sense of ‘commanding’ or ‘ordering’ is predominant, the same term has sometimes been translated as ‘command’; where the two senses strongly overlap, we have occasionally given both English equivalents together (‘command/affair’).

2. *Ḥudūd al-dīn* (literally, the ‘limits’ or ‘bounds’ of religion, echoing the fourteen Qur’anic references to ‘God’s *ḥudūd*’) is understood here—as throughout the writings of Ja’far b. Maṣṣūr and other Ismaili authors—in a very broad sense that includes both the divine prescriptions of right religious action and belief, and (this being the specifically Ismaili usage) the spiritual hierarchies (*asbāb*)—both terrestrial and heavenly—through which that revealed religious guidance is conveyed, preserved and carried out in

action. When used in that specifically Ismaili sense (as in the following paragraph and frequently below), *ḥudūd* is translated here as ‘ranks’ (i.e., of the spiritual hierarchies).

3. Both the key ideas and the specific symbolic language of this text are carefully woven together from an enormous range of verses in the Qur’an and hadith (including hadith often found in the classical Sunni collections), along with key teachings of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib generally acknowledged by Sunni as well as Shi‘i Muslims. To facilitate readers’ further study of those allusions, we have highlighted Qur’anic phrases and longer allusions (but *not* the host of key individual Qur’anic terms) in italics, followed by a brief indication of their initial appearances in the Qur’an (plus ‘etc.’ where there are too many Qur’anic passages to list in full); most of these allusions—as opposed to the less frequent explicit quotations—do involve minor alterations of the original Qur’anic expressions in question. Since the author could assume a detailed acquaintance with the Qur’an on the part of most of his original audience, it is often necessary for modern readers to return to the larger contexts of these particular passages in order to grasp the point of his allusions. In order to simplify and shorten the footnote apparatus, only the most essential and recurrent Qur’an and hadith allusions have been discussed in individual notes.

4. *Ṣāliḥūn* (a recurrent, central Qur’anic expression) is also the plural of what is eventually revealed (at paragraph [320] below) to be the proper name of the young protagonist, Ṣāliḥ. As well as the broad Qur’anic reference to the ‘righteous’ and those of great spiritual attainments (prophets, saints, etc.), the Arabic root also refers to someone who is sound, fitting and (spiritually) suitable. The word *madhāhib* can also refer more specifically to specific religious or legal ‘schools’ or ‘sects’. Finally, *adab* is another of the key themes of the dialogue: its outward aspect is the complex of social norms and rules of ‘good’ behaviour, while its deeper dimension—well illustrated by the depiction of the words and actions of the prophets in the Qur’an—depends on developing the subtle, inspired spiritual awareness of what is truly appropriate and fitting (*ṣāliḥ*) in each new situation.

5. This particular figure, who actually relates the rest of the book (and is *not* the same as Ṣāliḥ’s teacher) is identified in square brackets as the ‘narrator’ whenever he is speaking directly, rather than through one of the characters in his story.

6. The allusion is not to his region of birth, but rather to those with the extraordinary spiritual aptitude indicated in the famous hadith—also found in several of the primary Sunni hadith collections—in which the Prophet says of his close disciple Salmān the Persian, ‘*Even if true faith*

(*īmān*) were in the Pleiades, people like this [or in another version: ‘people from among the Persians’] would reach it!’

7. It later becomes clear that the author always uses the expression *wālid* (literally, ‘the one who gives birth’ and hence life) specifically to refer to those spiritual ‘knowers’ who transmit the ‘life’ of spiritual knowledge to their disciples, as is still familiar today in Christian monastic or ecclesiastical usage (i.e., ‘Father’ so-and-so).

8. *Asbāb*: literally, the celestial spiritual hierarchy of ‘ladders’ or (intermediate) ‘causes’ linking the ultimate Godhead and humanity, usually associated with the highest archangels or—as in the (Sunni) hadith of the *Mi‘rāj*—with the spiritual ‘realities’/archetypes of the prophets inhabiting each of the seven (or more) spiritual heavens. By extension, it refers to the corresponding earthly, historical religious hierarchy (here associated with the Ismaili *da‘wa*) responsible for transmitting that spiritual influence throughout humanity. In that sense it is broadly synonymous with such expressions as the divine ‘ranks’ or ‘levels.’ (See notes 2, 38 and 54).

9. The *abwāb* (s. *bāb*) is another common Shi‘i expression—alluding to the celebrated hadith in which the Prophet calls ‘Alī the ‘gateway’ to the City of prophetic knowledge—for one of the higher ranks of the spiritual hierarchy. In the Ismaili terminology gradually explained below (see translation at notes 51 and 65), the term *bāb* is applied specifically to the rank of the ‘imam-in-waiting,’ the heir or successor to the current imam.

10. The language here clearly recalls the Qur’anic description of Abraham’s archetypal departure from his family and people, seeking the One God, and explicitly echoes the familiar words of the commemoration of Abraham’s faith which is one of the key rituals of the Hajj.

11. The geographic reference is probably to the region of the same name, between the Tigris and Euphrates in the north of present-day Iraq, which was populated by the descendants of Arab tribes (like Šāliḥ and his people described in this story) at the time this text was composed. However, the term *jazīra* might also refer specifically to one of the ‘twelve regions’ into which the Ismaili *da‘wa* was divided, with a different *ḥujja* (see following note) in charge of each region, as the Knower goes on to explain below (at [87], [91] and [114]). On another level, the specific language here (echoing the Qur’anic expression *aqṣā al-madīna*) recalls a mysterious section in the central Sura *Yā Sīn* (36:20) which powerfully resonates with all the overall themes of the entire following story.

12. The important Qur’anic expression used here (*al-ḥujja*: 2:150; 4:165; 6:83, 149, etc.) refers to the broad notion that God only holds responsible those people who have received a direct divine notification or

‘argument’—through the prophetic messengers, imams and their designated successors and helpers—of the realities and responsibilities of their soul’s relation to God (*al-dīn*). The same term *ḥujja* has been translated as ‘proof’ or kept in transliterated form where it is clearly used as a title referring to a specific rank in the Ismaili conception of the spiritual hierarchy (see note 51 below).

13. *Al-milla*: this Qur’anic expression is often used in the text to refer broadly to what we would call the multiple *historical* ‘religions’ or historical followers of individual prophets (as opposed to the universal spiritual reality of *dīn*); here the Knower’s reference is clearly to a group of other Muslims.

14. The term *fatā* used here has powerful Qur’anic resonances, since it is applied in the Qur’an to Abraham (as he boldly teaches the idolaters among his native people), Joseph (12:30) and Moses’ unnamed companion (in the Sura of the Cave). In addition to youth, it thus has connotations of special bravery, intelligence, generosity, divine charisma, etc., and was especially associated with the qualities of ‘Alī in both Shi‘i and Sunni spiritual traditions. It is thus somewhat close in meaning to the distinctive Qur’anic term *ghulām* employed below to describe the ‘young man’ (Ṣāliḥ) in the title of this work (see note 22 below).

15. There is a double pun in the Knower’s response: his readers understand him to be saying he is a man named ‘Abdullāh from Mecca; but he actually means that he is ‘a (*true*) servant of God’ (‘*abd Allāh*’) and, as an initiated follower of the Ismaili Imam, *spiritually* dwelling already in the divine presence. A similar, but more obvious pun is included in his follow-up answer about his own ‘business’ (or ‘need’: *ḥājja*) and his ‘work.’

16. We have tried to capture in a single English term here the intentionally ambiguous double meaning of the underlying Arabic root (‘-j-b), which can mean either ‘pleasing’ (which is clearly the sense the townspeople intend at first) or its contrary: bizarre, strange, incongruous, etc.

17. The following speech conforms to the rhetorical models of a proper Arabic sermon (*khutba*), with its alliterative rhymed prose (*saḥf*), dense interweaving of Qur’anic allusions, and progression from the praises and description of God to praises of the Prophet (and other divine intermediaries), and finally to the implications for the listeners. (See the translations of ‘Alī’s *Nahj al-balāgha* for many classical examples of this type of speech known to the author; unfortunately the rhetorical and literary effects of such Arabic writing is almost impossible to translate in English.)

Although most of the Knower’s listeners here are moved by the polished language and religious learning of his speech, they are clearly unaware—except for the unnamed ‘youth’—that he carefully summarises all the

essential elements of the general Shi'ī conception of religion and revelation, while also subtly criticising the opposing points of view. Properly understanding what the Knower intends here requires careful, informed attention to the broad Qur'anic contexts (and often to later theological schemas for interpreting those contexts) of each verse or phrase identified here.

18. *Shawāriʿ* (pl. of *shāriʿ*): here the Knower introduces the subject of the divine 'revealed path' (*sharīʿa*) which is central to much of the rest of the book. *Shāriʿ* here can mean either a road (originally, a path leading to water), or the technical term (in later Islamic thought) for those legislating prophets and divine messengers who bring, communicate and institute the different 'revealed paths.' One of the Knower's chief concerns in subsequent discussions—given an already long history of Sunni polemics and misrepresentations—is a proper understanding of the relations between the inner (spiritual) and outer (ritual) aspects (the Qur'anic expressions *bāṭin* and *zāhir*) of those divine paths.

19. *Tafdīl*, as indicated in these and related Qur'anic passages, refers to the Qur'an's insistence on God's systematically 'preferring' or 'finding more excellent/meriting (than others)' certain prophets, messengers and saints, and creatures, etc.; this notion of a divinely-instituted hierarchy (the notion of 'ranks' and 'intermediaries' discussed in the opening paragraphs) is central to the Knower's worldview in both its earthly and its more spiritual dimensions.

20. *Sharāʿiʿ* (plural of *sharīʿa*): literally, the divine 'paths' or everything 'set down' in the prophetic messages, including outwardly both the scriptures themselves (e.g., Qur'an, Torah, Gospel) and in the case of Islam the wider body of Prophetic traditions preserved in (at least some of) the hadith literature, as well as the inner dimensions of reality approached through those paths. By the time of this work at the end of the 3rd century AH, the term was often understood more broadly in reference to the various complex learned traditions of ritual and legal interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith that had become established by then (see note 18 above).

21. The opening words of one of the best-known Prophetic hadith: 'Seek knowledge, even so far as China.'

22. In the Qur'an, the expression by which this youth is characterised throughout most of this dialogue, *ghulām*, is used eleven times, referring specifically in all but one case to young *prophets* or their (likewise prophetic) offspring, such as John the Baptist, Joseph, Isaac and Jesus.

23. The language here (especially the unusual dual expressions) is clearly meant to echo the familiar story of Moses and his *fatā* (Joshua) in the Sura of the Cave (18: 60–82).

24. The expression *al-hakīm* could also refer to a doctor or even a philosopher, but there is no indication of such a prosaic and limited meaning here. More importantly, the youth's language here (and for some time to come) is an ornate, rhyming Arabic prose clearly intended to show off his own learning and accomplishments—a defence that gradually disappears as he comes to be more comfortable with the Knower and begins to speak more openly and directly.

25. See note 12 above on the notion of the divine *hujja*, and the many further discussions of this term below.

26. *Madhāhib* (sing. *madhhab*) used here can also be taken in the more limited sense of the different religious groups or 'ways' corresponding to the different messengers and revealed paths (see note 20 above). As the Knower goes on to explain, his reference to the divine 'wish' here (*mashī'a*, based on the repeated Qur'anic contrast between God's 'wishing' and His absolute, immediately compelling 'willing' [*irāda* in creation) underlines his strong insistence on the essential reality of our human responsibility for choosing and willing, which are only possible through the specifically human 'instrument' (*alā*) of the intelligence (*'aql*).

27. The term *hujja* here (see note 10 above) is clearly being used to refer not just (or even primarily) to intellectual argument, but rather to the *person* of the Knower who embodies and can communicate the genuine divine knowledge in question; the same term gradually takes on a more technical sense (referring to key figures in the Ismaili hierarchy) in the Knower's subsequent explanations.

28. Or divine 'command' (*al-amr*): see the explanations at note 1 above.

29. Or 'precedence': the term *faql* refers (as indicated at note 19 above) to the repeated Qur'anic insistence on the mystery of God's 'preferring' some messengers over others. The same Arabic word also has meanings of 'bounty,' 'merit,' etc., in other contexts here, which makes it difficult to translate consistently by a single English term.

30. To begin with, this famous verse is usually understood (by all Muslims) as the final revelation of the Qur'an, delivered on the occasion of the Prophet's last pilgrimage and thereby sealing the revelation of Qur'an and formally bestowing on this revelation the name *al-Islām*. For Shi'i Muslims, however, the same verse is also seen as inseparable from the accompanying events of 'Ghadīr Khumm,' during which the Prophet was understood to have designated 'Alī as his rightful successor. (See the representative Shi'i

discussion of that occasion by the Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir in al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s *K. Da‘ā’im al-Islām*, vol. 1, pp. 14–15.) Many of the Prophet’s words on that same occasion are reported in very similar forms—but ultimately interpreted quite differently—in the standard Sunni hadith collections: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 7, pp. 239–334 (hadith from Tirmidhī, Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Māja). The following short selections, from Ibn Māja (chapter on *Faḍā’il al-aṣḥāb*), are representative:

‘Then he took ‘Alī’s hand and said: “*Am I not closer (awlā) to the faithful than their own souls?*” “Yes!,” they declared. He said “*Am I not worthier (awlā) of each one of them than his own soul?*” “Yes!” they responded. He said: “*Then this is the friend/protector (walī) of each person for whom I am their walī. O my God, protect whomever he protects! O my God, be the enemy of whoever is an enemy to him.*”’

Other versions of the same events given by Ibn Māja also include the well-known sayings: ‘*Whoever has been protected by/close to me, ‘Alī is his protector/master (mawlā),*’ and (addressing ‘Alī), ‘*You are in relation to me as Aaron was with Moses.*’

31. This story seems to reflect a version of the parable of the ‘talents’ in the Gospels.

32. The young man uses the term *al-‘amma* in its more common meaning, to refer to the uneducated, lower classes, but the Knower turns the conversation to developing the standard Shi‘i understanding of that phrase (expanded in [87] and later discussions below), as referring to all those Muslims—of whatever class or educational achievement—who have not yet recognised the rightful role of the imams and the rest of the spiritual hierarchy.

33. This is the most open allusion yet to the dangerous, highly persecuted situation of the Shi‘i emissaries (and often their followers) throughout most parts of the Abbasid empire at the time this treatise was composed. Within that same context of widespread persecution of the Ismailis (and many other ‘rebel’ movements of the time), the Knower’s following reference to ‘purely verbal denial (by someone already knowing the truth) doing no harm...’ clearly foreshadows later more open allusions to the important Shi‘i theme of ‘prudential concealment’ of the true faith, *taqiyya* and *kitmān* (see notes 134 and 207 below).

34. The special intimate, diminutive form here foreshadows the central theme of each knower’s role as the spiritual ‘father’ (*wālid*) of each person they spiritually awaken.

35. The outward ‘book’ in question at this point is of course the Qur’an itself. But as the Knower’s argument unfolds and eventually focuses on the

‘inner aspect (*bāṭin*) of the book,’ it is important to keep in mind that the Qur’anic meaning of this central expression (*al-kitāb* is used some 230 times) frequently refers not simply to particular revealed ‘scriptures,’ but to an archetypal spiritual reality which is often explicitly said to be expressed through the persons and broader teachings of the prophets and messengers. The same point even more obviously applies to the repeated Qur’anic references to God’s ‘words’ and ‘letters’ (at [67] and following below).

36. The Knower’s argument here presupposes the young man’s awareness of these and many other Qur’anic verses (and similar injunctions in even more hadith) which explicitly forbid the people of faith (*al-mu’minūn*) to attempt to ‘separate’ or ‘distinguish’ between God’s books and messengers, and insist on the necessity of having faith in *all* the divine books and messengers.

37. See H. Halm’s discussion of this passage and much later evidence concerning this process of pledging allegiance, in ‘The Isma’ili Oath of Allegiance (‘*ahd*) and the “Sessions of Wisdom” (*majālis al-ḥikma*) in Fatimid Times,’ in F. Daftary, ed., *Mediaeval Isma’ili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 91–115.

38. The *al-asbāb al-zāhira* are the outward or visible intermediaries, i.e., the heavens and the cosmological principles of the external, physical world, as contrasted with the inner, spiritual intermediaries who are the main focus of the following exposition and of this entire work (see notes 2, 8 and 54).

39. In addition to the many Qur’anic verses alluded to here, the beginning of this account clearly alludes to the famous hadith: ‘*The first thing God created was my light*’—or in other versions: ‘*the intellect,*’ ‘*the spirit,*’ ‘*the throne,*’ or ‘*the pen.*’ See Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 2, p. 71. Similar hadith are included in the major Shi’i collections, including Majlisī’s *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 6, chapter on ‘The Beginning of Creation and What Occurred in It’: ‘*The first thing God created was my light; He originated it from His Light and derived it from the glory of His majesty.*’

40. This famous Qur’anic expression (*kun fayakūn*) is written with seven Arabic letters.

41. The distinctive role of this symbol (*al-hawā’*) here and in several following discussions apparently refers *not* to the material ‘element’ of air, but to its clearly symbolic role in a famous hadith included in several major Sunni collections, including Tirmidhī and Ibn Ḥanbal (see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 7, p. 116). In Ibn Māja, that hadith is cited as follows: ‘... I said: “O Messenger of God, where was our Lord before He created creation?”’

He said: “*He was in a cloud, below which was air and above which was air...*.” For modern readers, the term ‘space,’ with its open limitlessness and omnipresence, may well come closer to conveying the intended scope of this key symbol as it is developed throughout the following discussion (especially at [126–131]).

42. The central cosmological role of this symbol is mentioned not only in the Qur’an, but also in several of the major hadith collections in their sections on ‘the beginning of creation’: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 6, p. 324. In the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (chapter on *bad’ al-khalq*), the hadith is given as follows: ‘*God was, and there was no thing other than Him, and His throne was upon the water...*’. The ‘hadith of the cloud’ cited in the preceding note (and recorded in a number of Sunni collections) also continues: ‘*He was in a cloud, below which was air and above which was air and water; then He created His throne upon the water.*’

43. That is, that relative divine light which becomes manifest in creation, and not the primordial ‘Light’ of the divine Essence from which the entire process of creation originates, according to the Knower’s preceding account.

44. The written Arabic letters of the three ‘words’ in question—*irādāt ‘amr bi-qawl*—are twelve in all.

45. That is, the five visible planetary bodies, the sun and the moon.

46. The term *jazīra* normally refers to traditional geographical divisions of the inhabited areas of the earth, although the Knower soon goes on to explain (at [91] and [114]) that in the symbolic language of the *bāṭin*, it refers to the twelve different regions for which the twelve *ḥujjas* (‘proofs’), the high members of the Ismaili *da’wa* immediately below the imam, are responsible (see note 11 above).

47. The Qur’anic verses alluded to here, revealed in connection with the battle of Badr, clearly allude to the deeper divine purpose behind the outward vicissitudes and political fortunes of good and evil in the world.

48. The Qur’anic concept of *faḍl* here and in a number of following sections (as indicated already at notes 19 and 29 above) combines the concept of a special, divinely granted ‘excellence’ or ‘benefit’ with the notions of the special ‘rank’ and ‘merit’—and concomitant system of relative rights and obligations—that flows from such particular spiritual gifts and divine ‘preferment.’ As becomes clearer in what follows, this wider conception of a cosmic, divinely established hierarchy, with its more particular social, political and religious reflections, is one of the central features of Ja‘far b. Manṣūr’s teaching.

49. On *sharā’i‘* (plural of *sharī‘a*), see notes 18 and 20 above.

50. Here, as throughout this work, Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr uses the Qur’anic expression ‘*sunna* (of God)’—usually translated here as God’s ‘way’ or ‘ac-customed way’—to refer to the recurring orders and regularities underlying all the divine manifestations in creation. In this particular context, where the emphasis is on the human possibility of understanding and responding to those spiritual laws, the same term is translated as ‘recurring orders.’

51. Here the Knower introduces for the first time in an explicit way the technical meanings of these basic ranks of the (pre-Fatimid) Ismaili *da‘wa*. The *imams* (‘leaders’) *guiding by Our command* are mentioned several times in the Qur’an, and in this tradition they are understood to be divided into those divine messengers who ‘speak out’ publicly by bringing a new divine book (the *nāṭiqs*, literally ‘speakers’, translated here as ‘messenger-prophet’), while the remaining imams are in that specific sense ‘silent’ (*sāmiṭ*) and act as the *waṣīs* (‘trustees’) of the messengers in this function of divine guidance. The Arabic term refers to someone who actively carries out and fulfils a responsibility or duty specifically entrusted to them. Finally, each designated *waṣī* is also termed a *bāb* (‘gateway’) until he actually succeeds the preceding imam.

Beneath the individual imams hierarchically are the twelve *ḥujjas* (‘proofs’) (a Qur’anic expression otherwise translated here as the divine ‘argument’ when not used in this technical sense: see note 12 above) and *naqībs* (‘chiefs’), whose special functions are explained by the Knower below, followed by the even more numerous ranks of the *dā‘īs* (‘summoners’) and the ‘*ulamā*’ (in the specifically Ismaili sense of true spiritual ‘knowers’), who are exemplified in this book by the Knower, the narrator and eventually by the young man Ṣāliḥ himself.

52. *Mathal*: a central Qur’anic expression (appearing almost ninety times) meaning literally a *divinely* sanctioned or created ‘likeness,’ similitude or image—therefore, a ‘true’ or ‘natural’ symbol, since this term is often contrasted in the Qur’an with the human tendency to coin false and misguided, illusory images of reality.

53. By Ja‘far’s time, this Qur’anic verse was commonly taken by many Muslim interpreters to refer to those particular messengers who were seen as having brought a newly revealed divine path (*sharī‘a*) or ‘book’, which was the distinctive function of the *nāṭiqs*, the messenger-prophets, in Ismaili terms (see note 51 above).

54. *Asbāb*: see notes 2, 8 and 38 above, and the Knower’s (and narrator’s) many earlier allusions to these celestial and earthly hierarchies. It should be kept in mind here that the Qur’anic usage of this term (at 38:10 and 40:37), as in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, also retains the root sense of a

'ladder' or 'rope' extending between and connecting God and earth, as in the Biblical image of Jacob's angelic 'ladder.' That symbolic image is often important to the Knower's usage of this term, particularly when the perennial spiritual functions of these figures are his focus.

55. The key term *ma'nā* is usually translated here as 'essential (or 'real' meaning,' but it is important to keep in mind that the original Arabic expression also has the concomitant senses of 'true reality' or 'spiritual essence' of a thing, which cannot easily be expressed in a single English equivalent expression.

56. It is important to note that the expression 'this lower world' will be used (along with 'the other world' below) to convey one of the most essential concepts of the Qur'an: the recurrent contrast between 'the life of this lower (realm)' (*hayāt al-dunyā*) and 'the life (or abode, *dār*) of the final/ultimate (realm)' (*al-ākhirā*). As so often with the Qur'an, any of the usual English equivalents tend to suggest a misleading focus on separate, distinct 'places' or successive 'times' which are both quite foreign to the essential *continuity* (and common connection with 'life') and fundamental symbolic indeterminacy of the actual Qur'anic expressions.

57. Like the intermediaries (*asbāb*) discussed above, these 'letters' are another common Shi'i technical term referring to the pleroma of divine messengers and vehicles of divine grace (prophets, imams, guides, etc.); this technical usage is apparently derived from the frequent Qur'anic description of the prophets themselves (or their messages) as divine 'words.'

58. *Walī*: the Arabic root of this key technical expression—which became the most common term for all the 'saints' in later Sufism, as for the imams in Shi'i Islam—combines the meanings of being very 'close' (spiritually, in this context) and of having a certain 'protection' and 'authority' or spiritual influence which flows from that closeness to God. Throughout the Qur'an (where it also appears as an essential divine Name or attribute, *al-Walī*, at 42:9) and the hadith, this term normally refers to those most accomplished souls who are completely 'drawn near' to God, so that, in the words of the Qur'an, *'they experience neither fear nor sadness'* (10:62, etc.).

59. The names of Sunday through Thursday in Arabic are derived forms of the first five numbers, and the 'derivations' which the Knower recounts here are based on verbal associations between these names of the days and the corresponding numbers or words formed from the same Arabic root.

60. For the recurrent Qur'anic theme of 'God's accustomed way' or 'order' (*sunnat Allāh*), see note 50 above. The frequent Qur'anic references to 'God's limits' (*ḥudūd Allāh*), often taken to refer to specific revealed

punishments, can also be interpreted in a broad metaphysical or cosmological sense, as explained in note 2.

61. This mysterious phrase has often been understood as a reference to the seven verses of the opening Sura of the Qur'an (*al-fātiḥa*). Thus 'the great meaning' (*al-ma'nā al-kabīr*) here may refer to the Qur'an understood as the divine archetype of all creation and revelation (*umm al-kitāb*) or as the primordial divine manifestation of the 'First Intelligence.'

62. The Knower goes on to develop this fundamental perspective on religious reality in a number of key passages below. His enumeration here may well reflect a famous saying of the Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, recorded in the famous Shi'i hadith collection *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* by Ṣaffār al-Qummī: '...Abū 'Abdullāh (Ja'far) said to me: "Our cause (*amr*) is the truly real and the true reality of the truly real (*ḥaqq al-ḥaqq*); it is the outer dimension, the inner aspect of the outer, and the inner aspect of that inner dimension (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*); and it is a mystery (*sirr*), the mystery of a mystery, a mystery kept secret, and a mystery sealed with a mystery".' The same saying of Imam Ja'far is also quoted in Ḥaydar Āmulī's *Jāmi' al-asrār wa manba' al-anwār* (Tehran, 1347/1969), p. 33.

63. See the Knower's longer explanation of these seven principal divine 'letters' and their symbols and branches at [84]–[86] above.

64. On the *nāṭiq*, *naqīb*, *bāb*, *waṣī* and other ranks of the Ismaili *da'wa* mentioned in this and following sections, see [90–91] and notes 51 and 53 above.

65. The technical use of the expression *bāb* here clearly reflects its original reference to Imam 'Alī in the famous hadith in which the Prophet states: 'I am the city of (divine) knowledge and 'Alī is its gateway, so enter the city through its gate.' (See notes 9 and 51 above.)

66. *Ta'wīl* is the inspired ability—illustrated in the Qur'an above all by the key figures of Joseph and the divine 'servant' (al-Khaḍir) who instructs Moses in the Sura of the Cave—to recognise the deeper spiritual meaning of all the 'happenings' of this lower world. In subsequent Shi'i thought, it became the standard term for the processes of spiritual hermeneutics illustrated in detail throughout the opening half of this work and almost all of the works of Ja'far b. Manṣūr.

67. The young man's question here—and the Knower's subsequent response—alludes both to indications in the Qur'an (as well as hadith) and to the generally accepted scientific cosmology and astronomy of their time, in which the earth was at the centre (and bottom) of a cosmic system of nine vast concentric, living crystalline spheres—the first seven each containing one of the visible planets, sun or moon, the next-to-last the fixed

stars, and the outermost one being itself without luminaries—all moved by angelic spiritual entities (*rūḥānīyāt*), which are identified with the spiritual realities of several of the major prophets in the many detailed hadith recounting the Prophet's ascension (*mi'rāj* and *isrā*).

68. The Arabic texts here give a series, highlighted in red ink, of several (possibly nine?) separate mysterious letters which are apparently abbreviations or encrypted symbols of the celestial spheres or their angelic movers or prophetic entities, although they (or their numerical equivalents) do not match up directly with the usual names and order of the planets or prophets in question.

69. The two divine names mentioned here (the Highest, the Most Exalted), both of them intensive, superlative forms derived from the same Arabic root signifying loftiness, elevation and inaccessibility, are *al-'Alī* and *al-'Alā*. It is probably significant, given the Shi'ī context of this composition, that the word *al-'Alī*, used as a divine name nine times in the Qur'an, is of course also the definite form of the name of Imam 'Alī.

70. There are many Arabic expressions for different aspects of time, and the particular rare term *al-āwān* employed here suggests the most abstract, all-encompassing dimension of time, rather than any sense of a moment or duration of time; one might even say it is the 'container' of all times.

71. The key spiritual terms introduced here and discussed in the following section (*zāhir*, *bāṭin* and *bāṭin al-bāṭin*) are precisely those employed by the Imam Ja'far al-Šādiq in the famous saying quoted in full at note 62 above.

72. *Madhhab* can also mean simply a different historical 'school' of theological, juridical or religious belief and teaching, as it often does with Abū Mālik and the (not very bright) scholars in the second half of this dialogue. (See also notes 4 and 26.)

73. The unusual Qur'anic expression employed here differs by only one consonant from the common expression (*mutakallimīn*) for the disputational theologians who are the major protagonists in the second half of this dialogue, and whose opinions, we discover, were apparently the same as those of the young man and his father. The critical echo of that key term in the young man's comment here seems to be an ironic allusion (by the author) to the fundamental contrast between their limited methods and assumptions, and the much broader perspectives outlined by the Knower at this point.

74. Adam and his spiritual descendants, the Qur'anic *insān* (i.e., theomorphic, spiritual humanity, in contrast to the mortal animal *bashar*).

75. The meaning of the key Qur'anic term *rabbāniyyūn*, translated vaguely here as 'sanctified,' apparently is related both to the Arabic root referring to God as 'Lord' (*rabb*, hence 'divine' or 'god-like'), and to the aspect of the Arabic root referring to teaching and education in the broadest sense (*r-b-y*). The latter meaning is emphasised at Qur'an 3:79, which probably underlies the special usage here: '...*Be rabbāniyyūn through your teaching the Book and through your studying (it).*'

A similar meaning is given in a famous saying of Ja'far al-Šadiq, where he is commenting on this same Qur'anic expression (as it appears at 5:44): 'The *rabbāniyyūn* are the Imams, after the prophets, who teach and educate the people with their knowledge. ...' See al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *K. Da'ā'im al-Islām*, vol. 1, p. 37, and al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfi* (Tehran, 1334 H.S.), vol. 1, pp. 33-4.

76. Each of the key phrases given in quotation marks here and throughout the remainder of this section indicate portions taken directly from the famous story of Imam 'Alī's secret encounter with his close confidante Kumayl b. Ziyād, as recorded in the *Nahj al-balāgha* and other, earlier works of Shi'ī tradition (including the *K. al-Irshād*). However the author does not explicitly point out his borrowing here, nor does he allude to his actual source.

77. The powerful Qur'anic expression *al-šāliḥūn* is used almost thirty times to refer to what are clearly one of the highest spiritual ranks of the 'friends of God' in both this world and especially in the next. Its usage here alludes already to the special gifts and promise of this young man whose given name eventually turns out to be 'Šāliḥ.' (See also note 4).

78. The allusion here (echoing Matthew 13:3-9, Mark 4:2-9 and Luke 8:4-8) is clearly to the Qur'anic reference at 48:29 to *the parable of the sower in the Torah and the Gospel*, a symbolic family of images which is further applied in numerous Qur'anic verses and themes (and hadith) involving water, vegetation, gardens and so on. Ismaili (and other Shi'ī) writings generally take such Qur'anic passages to symbolise the activities and missions of the prophets, imams, and other divinely ordained religious and spiritual teachers.

79. This section clearly alludes not only to the Qur'anic story of Noah, but more particularly to the famous hadith on the 'ship of salvation' (usually called *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn*), which is transmitted by various narrators in many standard Sunni and Shi'ī collections: '*I am leaving behind with you all two weighty things: the Book of God and my family, the people of (my) house Certainly their likeness among you is like the ship of Noah: whoever boards it will be saved, and whoever neglects it will drown.*' See Wensinck,

Concordance, vol. 1, p. 293 (versions in Muslim, Abū Dā'ūd and Ibn Ḥanbal), and al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *K. Da'ā'im al-Islām*, vol. 1, pp. 28 and 80.

80. The interlude beginning here is a humorous, but very serious parody of the typical historicist suppositions and philological methods which were the basis of many of the 'traditional sciences' (*'ulūm naqliyya*) of Islamic religious learning which had developed by the third century AH, complete with its self-conscious apparatus of oral transmission (*riwāya*) and group-solidarity (*ijmā'*) of the emerging clerical specialists, emphasised here by the young man's sudden appeal to the 'we' and 'our sciences' of his learned teachers and colleagues, epitomised by the major character of Abū Mālik later in the dialogue.

81. The young man here uses *hīla* ('way out' or 'trick,' a term particularly favoured by learned jurists hired to find ostensible religious justifications for the needs and desires of their wealthy or powerful patrons) as the effective synonym of the Qur'anic *ḥawl* ('power' or 'force') in this verse (18:39), which is commonly used by itself as a popular expression of awe or powerlessness. This widespread philological and lexical approach to deciphering the meanings of the Qur'an is satirised more openly in the following exchange, which plays with another meaning of the same word (*ḥawl*) as a 'cycle,' and by extension a full year.

82. The expression *al-'amma*, as it is used here and throughout the following discussions, is that commonly used by Shi'ī writers to refer to the wider, general body of Muslims (the *muslimūn*), as contrasted with the *mu'minūn*, the 'truly faithful' who are the followers of the Imams. This is not the only point in the dialogue where the author—perhaps as a way of foreshadowing later developments—has specifically Shi'ī Ismaili conceptions expressed by characters who, from a more dramatically realistic point of view, would not likely have used such technical terminology. (See also notes 32 and 180.)

83. The Knower plays here with different forms of the same Arabic root as *ḥawl* (and *hīla*), which refer to the 'distortion' or 'shifting away' (*tahwīl*) of words from their proper meaning and intention, and the absurdity or impossibility (of intelligible meaning) which results from that process. The wider framework for his biting irony here is the Qur'an's repeated insistence on the historically fatal process of gradual distortion (*tahriḥ*, at 4:46, etc.) and cumulative misunderstanding of the original words and intentions of the prophets—an inevitable human tendency which is dramatically contrasted with the forceful denials of any such 'shifting' (*tahwīl*, at 17:77; 35:43) or 'substitution' (*tabdīl*, at 35:43, 48:23) in *God's order* or *accustomed way* of proceeding. The Knower here intentionally

highlights the institutional rationales, procedures and pressures that—when unchallenged—necessarily further that process of cumulative distortion and decay.

84. The process of analogical ‘supposition’ (*ra’y*) concerning the intentions underlying the words of revelation, and the practically essential extension of those supposed intentions to very different situations, was the basic foundation of the Islamic legal ‘religious sciences’ developed in the centuries preceding this dialogue. Virtually all Shi‘i authors of this early period, as long as their group acknowledged a living imam, were vociferous in their denunciation of *qiyās* (and the unacknowledged ‘personal opinion,’ *ra’y*), which they saw as its basis), which they contrasted with the ongoing divinely inspired insight (*‘ilm*, or divine ‘knowing’ in its Qur’anic sense) of the imams and ‘friends of God.’ The acceptance and spread of *qiyās*, in this view, was one of the essential elements of the wider historical processes of ‘distortion’ and ‘substitution’ of revelation discussed in the preceding note. (The word translated as ‘perceived’ in this sentence extends to both true and mistaken, *false* perception, although the young man evidently fails to grasp that irony.)

85. The terms employed here (already introduced at [90] and notes 51 and following above), all refer to the Ismaili understanding of the divine messengers (*rusul*) among the much larger group of ‘prophets’ (*anbiyā’*, s. *nabī*), who are distinguished by their bringing a new divine book and inaugurating a new cycle of imams. That initial founding figure is referred to as a *nāṭiq*, i.e., a publicly legislating prophet, who is also termed God’s ‘viceroys’ or vicegerent (*khalīfa*), a term that the Qur’an applies in particular to Adam, as the first such messenger-prophet. The Qur’anic expression *naqīb* (‘chief’), used there to refer specifically to Jacob’s sons as the founders of the twelve tribes of the Children of Israel, is understood in Shi‘i tradition to apply to a similar number of divinely designated disciples and helpers who are understood to accompany each of the prophets (such as Jesus’ twelve disciples, certain companions of Muḥammad, etc.), and eventually each of the successive imams.

86. *Ḥawwala* (written in Arabic with the same letters as *ḥawl*); this word also includes the meaning of ‘transmitting’ or ‘passing on’, here from God to the human auditors.

87. The author is clearly alluding here to what Shi‘i Muslims have traditionally considered the profound injustices surrounding the processes of selection of the initial historical successors to the Prophet, which are summarised in the substitution of ‘personal opinion’ or judgement (*ra’y*) for divine designation (*naṣṣ*).

88. *Asās* is a distinctively Ismaili technical term for the unique role of ‘Alī, understood as the *waṣī* (trustee) of Muḥammad (the *nāṭiq* or messenger-prophet of the Islamic revelation) and as the progenitor of a new series of seven imams. (See the earlier discussions of this technical terminology at notes 51, 53 and 85 above.)

89. The focus of the early Ismailis on seven imams (and the wider symbolism of ‘sevens’ already evident in the preceding discussions) gave rise to their being popularly designated—in distinction from other competing Shi‘ī groups—as the ‘Seveners’ (*saba‘iyya*). This emphasis may be regarded as one of the indications of the pre-Fatimid composition of this text.

90. It is noteworthy that the Knower’s familiar expression here for all his ‘brothers’ in true faith, *al-qawm* (literally, ‘the tribe’), is probably the most common expression for such spiritual personalities throughout early Islamic spiritual writings and later in association with Sufism.

91. *Dhikr* refers to the practice of silent and spoken prayers, invocations of litanies of the divine Names and other formulae of prayer.

92. The Arabic expression *ahwā’* (s. *hawā*) refers originally to the multitude of human passions and desires, but eventually took on the sense of (erring religious) ‘sects,’ which seems to be the main subject of the young man’s concern here. ‘Opinions’ (*āra’*) is the plural of the key technical term for ‘(arbitrary) individual judgement’ (*ra’*) which the Knower has already strongly criticised on several earlier occasions.

93. The expression *al-milla* (see note 13) usually refers to the more historical, social aspect of different religious communities; in the singular, however, it is often used to refer to the primordial religious way of Abraham and his true successors. The expression *al-sunna*, translated as ‘divine way,’ is used here in its Qur’anic sense.

94. Or ‘bounteous person’: the same multi-faceted Arabic term (*faḍl*) at the centre of the following discussion here refers at once to the many forms of excellence, merit and superiority (and the ranks flowing from them); to notions of abundance, surplus and excess; and to the gifts, benefits or favours flowing from that abundance.

95. The phrase *al-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*, one of the most common in the Qur’an, is almost always combined with and preceded by the condition of having true faith (*īmān*, a synonym of the spiritual knowledge, *‘ilm*, at the centre of this dialogue), and the Knower’s remark here highlights that essential condition. The second half of this phrase also alludes to the revealing of this young man’s particularly appropriate name (Ṣāliḥ) later in the dialogue.

96. *Zakāt* is usually understood in the sense of the religiously obligatory annual offering from one’s wealth; here the Knower extends it in a

way that recalls the original Qur'anic emphasis on the wider Arabic root-meaning of 'purification' and 'charity.'

97. This is one of the most common formulations of the 'golden rule' (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) in Islamic tradition.

98. Or 'its religiously obligatory charitable portion' (*zakāt*) (see note 96 above).

99. This Qur'anic verse, originally referring to the 'booty' taken by the Medinan Muslims after the battle of Badr, has traditionally been understood by most Shi'i Muslim groups to refer to an ongoing obligation toward the imams or their representatives. The specification of the rightful *beneficiaries* of this charity given there—with the imams being understood as the successors of the Prophet—is particularly important at this point in the dialogue: *And know that whatever you all have gained, God's is a fifth of that, and for the Messenger, and those who are close (in kinship), and the orphans and the poor and the traveller, if you have faith in God and what We have sent down to Our servant. ...* This is roughly the same order followed in the young man's apportionment of his wealth at [231] below.

100. Or 'any excellence or merit': the word *faḍl* here has both meanings, which makes the translation somewhat difficult.

101. The young man's remarks here play with the two meanings of the Arabic *nafs*, as the reflexive pronoun and as the shorthand expression for the deceptive animal 'self.'

102. That is, the 'fifth' part that should be given in purifying acts of charity, as discussed above (note 99).

103. The same technical term (*mihna*), used here to describe the probational period of the young man's initiation, is frequently used in later Sufi literature to describe the master's 'testing' of the would-be disciple's spiritual desire and purity of intention.

104. That is, to the inner reality of true surrender to the divine will and the peace that flows from it; the Qur'anic reference at this point (originally describing the Prophet) is clearly not to particular historical or social allegiances.

105. Here, as throughout this dialogue (and most Shi'i writings), the term *mu'minūn* ('people of true faith') is used in its restrictive sense, to refer to the true followers of the rightful imam, as contrasted with the larger mass of the 'common people' (*al-'amma*), which includes all those who are outwardly 'Muslims' (*muslimūn*) (see notes 32 and 82 above).

106. This and a number of subsequent passages on the theme of spiritual 'paternity' recall the famous hadith: *'I am only like a father (wālid) to his son: I am teaching you all...,'* which is found in the collections of Ibn

Māja, Nisā'ī, Abū Dā'ūd and Ibn Ḥanbal. See Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 2, p. 131.

107. The expression *wāliduhu al-akbar* literally means 'his father superior'. This figure is apparently the same as the highly respected 'master' (*shaykh*) and initiator in the following sections. Although his rank in the Ismaili *da'wa* is never explicitly identified, he is undoubtedly a higher member of the spiritual hierarchy whose functions included the instruction of particularly promising novices.

108. It is unclear whether the technical term *walī* refers here to the Knower's 'greater (spiritual) father' mentioned in [244] or to the Ismaili imam. Its literal meaning is the person 'close' to and 'protected' by God, with the spiritual authority and power (*walāya*) flowing from that unique relationship. Although the repeated Qur'anic plural of this expression (*awliyā' Allāh*) has usually been translated here as 'God's friends,' this striking *singular* form, in any Ismaili text, would normally be reserved for the imam (see note 58 above).

109. These words reflect the usual 'clandestine' character of the Ismaili *da'wa* during this period of general persecution and suspicion by the Abbasid authorities, a highly charged political situation—continuing for several centuries—that is discussed more openly later in the dialogue. Specifically, those suspected of being Shi'i agents or emissaries of the Ismaili imams (and other descendants of the Prophet) were closely watched and surrounded by a network of governmental informants and spies, which often resulted in their arrest and execution.

110. 'Shaykh' is the title of respect by which the 'greater Knower' is usually referred to in the following sections.

111. Note the familiar colloquial use of the Qur'anic expression 'friends of God', as well as 'the faithful' (*al-mu'minūn*) in the preceding sentence, to refer broadly to the small local gatherings (*majālis*) of the Ismaili Muslims.

112. The subject and distinctive language of the following section is that usually associated with learned Friday sermons or other formal group religious occasions, like the Knower's own opening remarks to the young man and his companions at the beginning of this story.

113. The Arabic here echoes a famous phrase of the Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq referring to the proper understanding of the subtle balance between divine determination and human freedom and responsibility: '*It is a point between those two points, neither (total divine) determination nor (total) delegation (of freedom to human beings).*' See Abū Ḥatim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb A'lām al-nubuwwa*, ed. Ṣ. al-Ṣāwī and G.R. A'wānī (Tehran, 1397/1977), pp. 41–2.

114. The discussion here presupposes the Qur'anic symbolism of the *two seas* already introduced by the Knower at [122]–[123] above.

115. The very simple Arabic formulae in this passage are based on the multiple meanings of the single Arabic root *ḥaqq*. By itself, that term means both what is true and real, *and* the complex of obligatory (*wājib*) rights and duties flowing from that true reality; *taḥqīq* is therefore both the initial seeking and 'verification' of that reality and the subsequent 'realisation' of the duties it entails. The discussion also presupposes throughout the Qur'anic understanding of the definite form (*al-Ḥaqq*) as one of the central divine names.

116. *Adab* refers here at first to the socially maintained standards and forms of right behaviour, prior to the deeper realisation of their true spiritual roots and goals as a result of spiritual awareness or 'knowledge' (*ʿilm*) and the corresponding 'right action' (*ʿamal*) which presupposes that heightened, ongoing spiritual insight. (See note 4 above on the role of *adab*, in its social and spiritual senses, as one of the central themes of this dialogue.)

117. The hadith concerning the obligation of seeking spiritual knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*) are particularly abundant: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 4, pp. 10–11 and 330–5. Among the most famous sayings cited there (from all the standard hadith collections) are 'The seeking of knowledge is a religious duty for every Muslim'; 'I do not know of any action more virtuous than the seeking of knowledge'; and 'Seek knowledge, even so far as China.'

118. The famous Qur'anic formula in this verse (*ūlū al-ʿamr*) designating the (otherwise unspecified) holders of true religious authority, also alludes to the classical Shi'ī understanding of the imam's role as God's *walī* (special friend, intimate, etc.), who is directly inspired with the divine 'command' and 'affair.' (See also notes 1 and 62 above.)

119. For the special Qur'anic ethical and spiritual resonances of the technical term *fatā*, which was initially applied to the Knower by the young man's companions, see note 14 above.

120. Here the young man begins by punning on the name of his teacher, the Knower of the first half of the dialogue, who had introduced himself initially (see [8] above) as 'Abdullāh. 'Ubayd Allāh is the diminutive form of the same name.

121. Continuing the preceding pun, the common name *Hurr* also refers to the legal status of a legally emancipated slave (*ʿabd*). The same play on terms normally referring to the legal status of ownership and slavery continues in the following discussion.

122. See the hadith on this subject of spiritual 'paternity' cited at note 106 above.

123. Here the Shaykh refers explicitly to the parallel of this initiatic ritual with the usual Islamic social custom of waiting seven days before the name-giving celebration for a new-born infant; the language used below also echoes the Qur'anic references to the 'seven days' of creation.

124. The discussion here refers both to the common Muslim custom of giving boys names referring to 'the servant ('*abd*) of' this or that particular divine Name (as with the Knower's name, '*Abdullāh*, 'servant of God') and also to the deeper spiritual and metaphysical dimension of that custom—particularly familiar in many later Sufi authors—based on the understanding that each human soul has specific tasks (with corresponding virtues and capacities) which are symbolised by its relation as 'servant' and 'worshipper' (the two inseparable dimensions of the '*-b-d*' root) of a particular aspect of the total divine reality, symbolised by one or another of the 'most beautiful Names' of God. That unique spiritual individuality of each person is what the Shaykh goes on (at [288]) to call the young man's 'rank' or 'limit' (*ḥadd*) which also means 'definition'; see notes 2 and 127). The same symbolic, metaphysical relationship between the divine Names and the individuals who realise them is elaborated in the following passage [288], where the young man's new initiatic name is said to be his 'ruler' or 'owner' (*mālik*).

125. The language employed here clearly alludes to a central initiatic episode in the life of the Prophet, echoing the Qur'anic account given in highly symbolic terms in Sura 53: 1–18.

126. *Bashar*, in Qur'anic language, is the mortal human-animal considered without regard to the perfection of the angelic soul or divine spirit (*rūḥ*) which constitutes the theomorphic, fully human being, *insān*. The phrase in quotation marks is part of a celebrated 'divine saying' (*ḥadīth qudsī*) found in many of the standard hadith collections: '*I have prepared for My virtuous servants what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and what has not occurred to the heart of any bashar.*' See Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 2, p. 48: this hadith is recorded by Muslim, al-Bukhārī, Ibn Māja, Tirmidhī, Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Dārimī.

127. Alluding to the hadith recorded by Tirmidhī: '*No one may enter God's ranks (ḥudūd, the term normally used to refer to the levels of the Ismaili spiritual hierarchy; see note 2 above) until the veil is unveiled.*' See Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 1, p. 432, and vol. 6, p. 22. The phrase 'schools of sermons'—assuming our manuscripts preserve an accurate text—is not entirely clear in the Arabic. It appears to refer to teachings for the 'general public,' such as those openly taught in the religious schools (*madrasas*) and

mosques. The Arabic words translated here as ‘contents of books’ can also be read as ‘mosques of books.’

128. *Madhhab*: ‘way of going,’ is a term often applied to a particular religious group or to a ‘school’ of religious law (see notes 26 and 72).

129. In earlier sections (at [124] and [267]), the *sweet water* of a famous Qur’anic image (25:53) was shown to be a symbol of knowledge of the inner, spiritual dimension (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*), in contrast to the *salty water* of exoteric learning. The Knower stresses there the *two* essential facets of this spiritual knowledge: both its outward aspect ‘carried by the *dā‘īs*,’ and its inner, ‘sealed’ spiritual aspect ‘flowing down from heaven.’ The term *mashrab* (source of water or drinking-place), like *madhhab*, often refers specifically to a particular religious school or approach.

130. An allusion to the celebrated (if non-canonical) hadith: ‘*Whoever comes to know his self/soul, knows his Lord.*’

131. Most of these Qur’anic verses are ordinarily taken to apply to the rites of the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca and the Ka‘ba, the ‘House (*bayt*) of God.’ The comparison of the recognition and visitation of the Imam to the culmination of the obligatory pilgrimage is a standard image in Shi‘i writings.

132. That is, the Knower of the first half of the dialogue. As already noted several times, the author always uses this specific Arabic term (*wālid*, ‘progenitor’) to refer to each character’s *spiritual* parent, as distinguished from his biological father (*abūhu*; see note 136 below).

133. The related term *al-da‘wa* is clearly used here in a technical sense to refer to the outward forms of the Ismaili movement.

134. *Taqwā* is of course one of the most central spiritual virtues in the Qur’an, but the spiritual (as well as practical) centrality of *taqīyya*—the careful prudential concealment of one’s spiritual outlook and allegiance from those who would not support it (and might even be harmful)—is one of the distinctive features of Shi‘ism. Cf. the well-known saying of the Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir, recounted by his son Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, ‘*Taqīyya is my religion and the religion of my fathers. So whoever does not practice taqīyya has no religion,*’ recorded by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān in *K. Da‘ā’im al-Islām* (Cairo, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 59–60; and by the Twelver Shi‘i author Ḥaydar Āmulī in his *Jāmi‘ al-asrār wa manba‘ al-anwār*, (Tehran, 1347/1969), pp. 34–5 and 227. For a basic discussion of this concept, see our article ‘*Taqīyah*’ in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York, 1987), vol. 14, pp. 336–7.

135. This is a pointed allusion to the famous hadith: ‘*Be mindful of the clairvoyance (firāsa) of the person of true faith, for that person sees with*

the light of God.’ (From Tirmidhī, *tafsīr* of Sura 15:75 [*al-Hijr*]: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 7, p. 298.) Shi‘i sources attribute a similar saying to the Imam Ja‘far al-Šādiq, replying to a question concerning the ‘knowers of signs’ (*al-mutawassimin*) mentioned in the same Qur’anic verse: ‘They are the imams, who see with the light of God; so be mindful of their clairvoyance regarding you all.’ See al-Qāḍi al-Nu‘mān, *K. Da‘ā’im al-Islām*, vol. 1, p. 25.

136. From this point on the Arabic returns to the most common expression for one’s *physical* father (*abūhu*). The narrator soon identifies the young man’s father simply as ‘the shaykh’ (an honorific term clearly reflecting his wealth and leadership role in his community, as well as his fairly advanced age, more than sixty years, as we learn at [317] below), and we are soon informed by the narrator (at [320]) that his family name is al-Bakhtārī.

137. A clear reminder of the famous hadith: ‘Islam began as a stranger, and it will return to being a stranger, just as it began. So blessed are the strangers.’ Quoted here from the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, *kitāb al-īmān*. The same hadith is also mentioned in the collections of Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, al-Dārimī and Ibn Ḥanbal: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 4, p. 473.

138. The term *munāzara* was normally used to describe the formal theological disputations of the various theological and religious ‘schools’ (*madhāhib*) of that time, which are well illustrated in the debates involving Abū Mālīk and his learned friends in the remainder of the dialogue.

139. Besides recalling the name of one of the central Arab (non-Biblical) prophets in the Qur’an, the word *ṣāliḥ* itself immediately suggests both a special ‘aptitude’ or appropriate (spiritual) preparedness, and also the repeated Qur’anic stress on the especially high spiritual rank of the *ṣāliḥūn* (7:168; 21:105, etc.), the ‘just’ or ‘righteous’ souls both in this world and the next (see note 4 above).

140. The term *maqāla* was commonly used at that time—as in the title of al-Ash‘arī’s famous survey of theological opinions—to refer to the opinions and schools of the scholastic theologians (*mutakallimūn*), although most often those dogmatic intellectual differences also reflected wider, socially embedded religious movements or sects (*milla*, as Abū Mālīk’s group is also described in the next sentence). The subsequent discussion makes it clear that Abū Mālīk follows the Mu‘tazilī school of scholastic theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), which was particularly widespread and influential in many regions of the Muslim world at the time this dialogue was written, and which continued to have especially lasting influences in Shi‘i traditions

(especially Imāmī and Zaydī) after the later ascendancy of Ash‘ari theology in many Sunni settings.

141. The names given to this theologian (which do, incidentally, echo the actual names of various religious scholars) are particularly and no doubt intentionally ironic here, given the central *political* role which such scholastic theologians had taken on by this time (and continued to play for many centuries) in articulating and defending the ‘official’ ideologies and religious policies of the Abbasids and other rulers. Thus the words ‘*abd al-jabbār*’ would ordinarily refer to a ‘servant of the All-Powerful (God),’ but could also be understood as ‘servant of the oppressor,’ while the words of the otherwise common given name *abū mālik* also literally means ‘father of the king.’ This telling name and multiple honorific titles of Abū Mālik are once again in pointedly ironic contrast with the humble, consistently nameless and anonymous ‘stranger’ who represents the true spiritual Knower in this story. (See notes 137 and 142 above)

142. ‘Glory of the learned’ or ‘glory of the rabbis,’ alluding to the famous learned Yemeni Jewish convert at the beginning of Islam (d. 32/652; see the article ‘Ka‘b al-Aḥbār’ in *EI2*, vol. 4, p. 344), who became a close associate of both the Caliphs ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān, and eventually a famous transmitter of hadith and other legendary materials. In giving Abū Mālik this title here, the author is no doubt ironically pointing to his eventual equally dramatic ‘conversion’ to the true religion—in this case, to the Ismaili understanding of Islam conveyed by Šāliḥ in the following sections.

143. Abū Mālik’s questioners use this pejorative phrase (*kharaja*) which immediately recalls the dangerous schismatic movement of the Khārijīs in the civil wars at the beginning of the Islamic era.

144. Much of the following discussion depends on this untranslatable key term (*ḥilm*) in the social-ethical terminology of the pre-Islamic Arabs, which refers both to an outward air of dignity, thoughtful modesty and forbearance, and to the inner practical intelligence and depth of experience and understanding expressed in that visible bearing. At a deeper level, throughout this section the author is ironically pointing to the persistence of such unreflectively ‘pagan’ social and ethical ideals in ostensibly ‘Islamic’ settings. In this section Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr uses a number of procedures and key terms from the mores and poetry of the pre-Islamic period of ‘ignorance’ (*jāhiliyya*) to highlight the shaky social and historical underpinnings of the collective beliefs of this typical group of outwardly learned ‘knowers’ (*‘ulamā’*), beginning with Abū Mālik’s grandiloquent rhetoric (more obvious in the original Arabic) and his obvious reliance on using popular Arabic proverbs (rather than the Qur’an or other sound religious sources) to gain

the attention and allegiance of his followers. In the background is the implicit contrast with the established Ismaili willingness at that time to preach to *all* Muslims, whatever their linguistic or ethnic background. The initial political successes of their earlier *da'wa* were often among such non-Arab groups (Berbers in North Africa, and other ethnically mixed groups in Central Asia, Sind and present-day Iran), as continued to be the case later in India.

145. This is Abū Mālik's first mention of the key religious term *taqlīd* ('blind imitation' of the example and teachings of others) which will become a central theme in the remainder of the dialogue.

146. Like the young man at the beginning of his earlier encounter with the Knower, Abū Mālik starts out here by openly evoking the standard procedures of (oral) transmission of learning (*riwāya*) which had become integrally associated by his time with the central institutional forms of Islamic scholarship.

147. Abū Mālik's florid rhetoric here is an ironic pastiche rigorously evocative, at the same time, of the pre-Islamic poets' emphasis on a firm stoic attitude (close to the popular understanding of *hilm*; see note 144 above) toward the unknowability of fate and of the fickle arbitrariness of the cycles of 'endless time' (*dahr*). The implicit contrast is of course with the constant Qur'anic assertion of the ultimate meaningfulness, justice and beneficent, far-reaching intentionality underlying each individual human destiny, at every instant.

148. In fact the particular rhetoric Abū Mālik uses to address his fellows throughout this section ironically suggests the considerable extent to which those three important traditional elements of Arabic culture (*ādāb*, *ahādīth* and *ash'ār*) do help constitute the real social foundations of the religion they actually follow.

149. This famous Arabic proverb is sometimes attributed to the Imam 'Alī himself.

150. The third possibility which Abū Mālik raises here—a highly radical one, in this particular religious context, and one which is strikingly out of character with his usual cautious and traditional approach—might be interpreted as a sign of an already conscious inner sympathy with the Ismaili position (which he must prudently conceal from his followers at this point), or perhaps simply as the author's way of foreshadowing the distinctively Ismaili interpretations of the imamate to be developed in the ensuing discussions with Šāliḥ. In any case, it should be stressed that the Qur'anic terms translated as 'prophethood' and 'prophet' here (*nubuwwa*, *nabī*) clearly extend, in a non-controversial way, to many divinely inspired figures (often

common to Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions) who did *not* bring a new book of external revelation—the latter special prophetic role being normally referred to by the more specific Qur’anic expression ‘messenger’ (*rasūl*). Thus in the Ismaili understanding earlier explained openly by the Knower and now gradually developed by Ṣāliḥ in his concluding disputation with Abū Mālik, the imams are the divinely inspired rightful interpreters of the message brought by the Messenger (Muḥammad) and therefore fulfil the same role as many of the earlier non-legislating ‘prophets’ (*anbiyāʾ*) mentioned throughout the Qur’an and Islamic tradition. In order to avoid those dangerous sorts of recurrent misunderstandings and accusations well characterised by Abū Mālik’s companions here, later Sunni Sufis tended to refer to the inspired *interpreters* of the Islamic revelation by using the central Qur’anic term *walī/a waliyāʾ*—terms which most Shi‘is usually restricted to their imams and sometimes other higher members of their spiritual hierarchy—rather than the more problematic expression ‘*nabī*.’

151. The practice of considering all those with whom one had any differences of religious opinion (including their extended families and children of all ages) as dangerous ‘enemies of the true faith’ who should rightfully be murdered and pillaged became widespread during the endemic civil wars (*fitan*) of the first century AH, and was something that the author of this dialogue had witnessed directly in the eventual bloody fate of his family and nascent Ismaili community in the Yemen. (See the discussion of Ja‘far b. Maṣnūn’s biography in section III of the Introduction above.) Such efforts at the total elimination of local Shi‘i communities (Ismaili and other) became even more widespread in subsequent centuries, in many different regions of the Muslim world, especially as a result of the ongoing political struggles between the Fatimids and various groups proclaiming Abbasid-Sunni legitimacy.

152. The literal words of the Arabic idiom employed here, literally ‘*stoning the unseen*,’ allude rather ironically to the fate that Ṣāliḥ and his father have narrowly escaped at this point.

153. The key Qur’anic concept of God’s *khalīfa* (literally, His ‘steward’ or ‘vicegerent’) on earth was extended in Shi‘i thought from Adam and the other prophets to whom it is applied in the Qur’an to the imams and the ongoing role of their spiritual hierarchy. (See also the further discussion of subsequent disputes over the historical and political meanings of this key term at note 216 below.)

154. Here, as often in the Qur’an itself, the term *jihād* is used in the root sense of ‘*striving (in the way of God)*.’ The Qur’anic allusions to ‘staying

behind' likewise refer to those 'hypocrites' among the people of Medina who refused to follow the Prophet in defending the early Muslim community.

155. The same Qur'anic term *al-ahwā'* (5:77, etc.) is also frequently applied to the various 'sects' or 'heresies' (conceived as the outgrowths of those same passions), and it is likely that Abū Mālik's listeners would take his expression in that more social sense.

156. Here Abū Mālik's followers use the technical term *ruwiya* from the religious science of hadith referring to the processes of verbal, historical transmission of traditional reports which constituted the particular exoteric knowledge (*'ilm*) of this influential class of religious scholars (*'ulamā'*). The contrast here of their typical attitude and assumptions of *taqlīd* ('blind obedience' to received tradition) with the very different approach of the true Knower (Ṣāliḥ's teacher) portrayed earlier encapsulates the whole point of the dialogue.

157. See the following famous hadith from the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (*Kitāb al-īmān*): '*Certainty is the entirety of faith.*' (See also Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 7, p. 376.)

158. Al-Bakḥṭarī uses this same Arabic term *wālid* which Ja'far consistently employs throughout the dialogue to refer to the '*spiritual father*' or 'master,' although at first Abū Mālik and his friends are obviously unaware of that technical usage here. Likewise the phrase 'with his Lord' refers to Ṣāliḥ's new-found contemplative awareness of God, though the visitors equally fail to grasp that allusion.

159. His response here explicitly echoes the famous words of the Imam 'Alī to Kumayl b. Ziyād (from *Nahj al-balāgha*) already mentioned at [157] above: '*...the knowers (of God) are abiding (with Him) for all eternity.*'

160. Abū Mālik's words here are an intentionally punning allusion both to Ṣāliḥ's given name and to the figure of Moses' mysterious divinely guided teacher in the Sura of the Cave (18:65) who is simply called '*one of Our servants,*' later identified in Islamic tradition as 'al-Khaḍīr'. Al-Bakḥṭarī plays along with Abū Mālik's humour.

161. Ṣāliḥ's mention of 'veiled light' here is a clear allusion to the celebrated hadith: '*God has seventy [in some other versions 700 or 70,000] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendours of His face would burn up whoever [or 'whatever creature'] was reached by His gaze.*' See Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 1, p. 464 (mentioning versions in Muslim, Ibn Māja and Ibn Ḥanbal). This celebrated hadith is usually cited according to the version recorded in Ibn Māja (I, 44).

162. Along with the complementary task of 'bearing the good news' (of God's loving mercy), the epithet *nadhīr* is one of the most common Qur'anic

descriptions of the role of the prophets and messengers; as such, it is not a term that one would ordinarily apply loosely to someone, as Šāliḥ immediately points out.

163. The honorary epithet by which Abū Mālik was commonly known (see [320] and note 142 above).

164. Šāliḥ's words here almost literally quote key lines from the Imam 'Alī's famous encounter with Kumayl b. Ziyād, which the Knower had earlier alluded to at [157] above.

165. Here Šāliḥ continues to paraphrase another celebrated passage from the encounter between 'Alī and Kumayl mentioned above (paragraphs 157 and 388):

'O Kumayl, knowledge is better than possessions: knowledge protects you, but you must guard possessions; possessions are exhausted as they're spent, but knowledge multiplies as it is shared; whoever holds on to possessions disappears as they do.... O Kumayl, those who treasure their possessions perish while they are still living; but the knowers are abiding (with God) for all eternity...'

166. See the explanation of 'Alī's outline of each of these three stages of the spiritual quest (in the encounter with Kumayl recorded in *Nahj al-balāgha*) and its Qur'anic background at [157] and note 76 above.

167. Here Šāliḥ begins to develop a key distinction between two Arabic roots for 'knowing,' 'l-m and 'r-f (translated here as 'real understanding'), which eventually becomes classical in later Islamic thought. Although the two terms in everyday usage were often used synonymously (as Abū Mālik clearly does here), the fact that the unique Qur'anic term for the specifically inspired, divine 'knowing' ('ilm) of the prophets and other spiritually accomplished individuals—which is of course the central focus of this entire dialogue—gradually began to be limited to the familiar sort of transmitted, institutionalised formal domains of scholarly learning (typified here by Abū Mālik and his companions), eventually forced Muslims to substitute the 'r-f root for the original semantic field of 'ilm, in ways which are beautifully dramatised in the ensuing discussion here.

168. Or 'piece of (transmitted) information' (*khābar*): that Arabic term is perhaps the most commonly used technical expression for the contents of the actual *ḥadīth*, the transmitted reports about the sayings or actions of the Prophet which provided the foundation of the predominant later forms of Islamic religious learning, already by the third century AH.

169. An allusion to the famous Qur'anic passage: *...That is their likeness [of the truly faithful] in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel: like a*

seed which sends up its shoot; then He strengthens it and it becomes stronger and rises up on its stalk, pleasing the sowers.... (84:29). (See note 78.)

170. The purely consensual, socially based foundations of the term Abū Mālik employs here (*ra'y*), 'opinion' or 'personal judgement' are further highlighted by his repeated literal emphasis ('we...') on the 'collective' aspect of this opinion, which had already been stressed in many earlier passages (see notes 83, 86 and 92 above). We soon learn (at [430] below) that the particular doctrine in question is that of the Mu'tazilī theological school, but Ṣāliḥ's counter-arguments are about much more fundamental religious and spiritual issues, not particular disputed points of theological doctrine.

171. Ṣāliḥ's pun here alludes to the Qur'anic meaning of the same term *baṣīra*, where it is applied to the inspired 'spiritual vision' and discernment of the Prophet (12:148), or to other rare signs and forms of guidance having a specifically divine source.

172. Here Abū Mālik extends the term *riwāyāt*, ordinarily used to describe the chains of oral transmission (*isnād*) of the emerging Sunni religious sciences (especially of hadith), to highlight his explicitly historicist understanding of the institutions of *all* the formerly 'revealed' religions, including his own. The word translated as 'worshipping' here refers broadly to all aspects of human relations with the Divine, whatever their real foundations, and is from the same root as 'religion' (*al-dīn*) in the immediately following discussion.

173. The issue in question is not invented here; this particular subject is a familiar topic of dispute in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and well illustrates the uncertainties involved in its interpretive assumptions.

174. *Sharī'a* is the key term usually translated above as '(divinely) revealed path,' which figures prominently throughout the Knower's explanations in the first half of the dialogue (see notes 20 and 48 above), usually in the plural. In Abū Mālik's case, we have kept the actual Arabic expression, since the phenomena he is actually referring to in employing that specific term here—i.e., the diverse historically created, institutional forms of (specifically Islamic) religious learning and practice gradually elaborated and supported by scholars like himself—are in fact particular interpretations and applications far removed (as he begins to acknowledge at this point) from the actual divine revelations (and ongoing inspired transmission and interpretation) to which the Knower was pointing in his earlier instruction of Ṣāliḥ. Abū Mālik's understanding of *sharī'a* here is also still very close to what that same term usually conveys in unreflective popular usage today.

175. See note 134 above (and the related passage) on the corresponding centrality of the ‘veil’ of *taqiyya* (‘protective dissimulation’ of otherwise endangered religious principles and practices) in the Shi‘i tradition.

176. Or ‘ladder’ (*sabab*): this Qur’anic expression is the same as the key term frequently discussed above describing the ‘intermediaries’ of the celestial and earthly spiritual hierarchy (see notes 8, 37 and 53 above)

177. An allusion to the Shi‘i insistence on the continuous, unbroken chain of divine representatives and teachers (the prophets, imams, etc.) present and active on earth at all times, without any ‘gaps’ (*fatarāt*). This theme is developed in greater detail in Ṣāliḥ’s debate with Abū Mālik at [528]–[530] below.

178. The allusion here is primarily to the famous hadith (*ḥadīth al-thaqalayn*) already discussed (with reference to standard Sunni versions) at note 77 above. For a representative Shi‘i version, transmitted by Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, see al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *K. Da‘ā’im al-Islām*, vol. 1, p. 80: ‘*The place of the people of my house among you all is like the ship of Noah: whoever boards it will be saved, and whoever avoids it will be drowned.*’

179. Abū Mālik’s ironic use of this celebrated Qur’anic verse is meant to have an especially dramatic effect on Shi‘i readers, who would immediately connect it with their understanding of the public investiture of ‘Alī (as Imam) at Ghadīr Khumm (see the references at note 30 above).

180. Abū Mālik’s formula here reflects (probably somewhat unrealistically, in dramatic terms) the long-standing terminology shared by most Shi‘i schools in which the non-Shi‘i Muslims are referred to as the ‘common people’ (*al-‘amma*) as contrasted with the Shi‘i *al-mu‘minūn*, ‘the truly faithful,’ among the wider, inclusive community of *muslimūn* (see notes 32 and 87 above).

181. This formula of ‘*adl wa tawḥīd*’ was the traditional slogan of the Mu‘tazilī school of dialectical theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) to which Abū Mālik and his companions clearly adhere.

182. On *qiyās*, see note 84 above; the application of such reasoning is one illustration of the general reliance in the religious sciences of jurisprudence and theology on *ra’y* (personal opinion), already discussed at notes 84, 87, 92 and 170 above.

183. Ṣāliḥ’s questioning here seems to allude by contrast to the celebrated hadith ‘*Whoever knows their soul/self, knows their Lord,*’ which already played a central role in the description of the culminating point of his own spiritual initiation at [293] above. In the following sentence, we have translated literally—as Ṣāliḥ clearly intends at this point—the famous Qur’anic formula (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay’*, 42:11) which Abū Mālik had initially quoted

(in [434] above) as scriptural support for his Mu‘tazilī doctrine of God’s absolute unity (*tawḥīd*). Usually that formula is taken—as it was by Abū Mālīk at that earlier point—simply as an intensified assertion of God’s radical incomparability (*tanzīh*) with any creature.

184. Šāliḥ’s words here closely echo the apophatic emphasis on the inability of reasoning and imagination to grasp the paradoxical transcendent *presence* of the divine Reality in the illumined heart, which is found throughout numerous sermons of Imam ‘Alī and later emphasised in more philosophic and theological terms in the classical works of many of the Ismailī philosopher-theologians. One particularly famous example Šāliḥ directly alludes to in this specific passage is ‘Alī’s response to the persistent questioning of his companion Kumayl b. Ziyād as to ‘What is the (divine) Reality?’:

(‘Alī) said: *‘The Reality is the unveiling of the splendours of the (divine) majesty without any (intermediate) allusion.’* (Kumayl) said: ‘Make that even clearer for me.’ (‘Alī) said: *‘The rending of the veil because it is overwhelmed by the innermost mystery’ [al-sirr, the “innermost secret” of the divine Spirit at the core of true human being].* (Kumayl) said: ‘Make that even clearer for me.’ (‘Alī) said: *‘A light that shines forth from the dawn of eternity, whose traces then glimmer over the “temples” (ḥayākil) of divine Unicity.’* (Kumayl) said: ‘Make that even clearer for me.’ (‘Alī) said: *‘Extinguish the lamp, for the Sun has risen!’*

Translated here from the version given by Ḥaydar Āmulī, in his *K. Jāmi‘ al-asrār wa manba‘ al-anwār*, p. 170.

185. Šāliḥ is paraphrasing here the Qur’anic verse (6:103): *The visions (of people) do not perceive Him, but He perceives (or encompasses) the visions*, in which the key term *baṣar* refers to the pre-modern assumption that vision involves the active emission of a ‘visual ray’ of light by the seeing eye.

186. A key aspect of the Mu‘tazilī doctrine of ‘divine unity’ defended by Abū Mālīk here was its opposition to alternative theological and religious doctrines which they felt assumed or implied a kind of naive anthropomorphic ‘likening’ (*tashbīh*) of God to created realities (such as ‘speaking’, in this instance) and a corresponding multiplicity of different opposing, self-substantial divine qualities incompatible with their central assertion of divine unity. Taking advantage of Abū Mālīk’s strong Mu‘tazilī beliefs here, Šāliḥ uses those assertions to push him even further in the direction of that intensely apophatic theology of *tanzīh* (see note 184) which was stressed by Ismailī thinkers and by many of the earliest, shared sources of Shi‘ī teaching—and eventually (beginning in [475] below) to

the concomitant Shi'ī conclusion of our absolutely fundamental need for the *living* 'revelations' constituted by the ongoing presence of the imams and the rest of the spiritual hierarchy.

187. That is, to *know* God, which would seem to be impossible (for human beings, at least) from Abū Mālik's own theological perspective.

188. The remainder of this discussion, almost to the end of the dialogue, actually depends on an association which Ṣāliḥ gradually begins to establish here, using the Arabic root for 'justice' ('*adl*, which can also mean simply 'a witness'), between his own distinctive Shi'ī understanding of the multiple religious roles of the imams (and the spiritual hierarchy more generally) and that divine 'justice' which Abū Mālik of course vociferously defends as a central tenet of his Mu'tazilī theological doctrine. The Qur'anic verse Ṣāliḥ alludes to repeatedly in these passages (7:181) reads in full: *'And among those We have created is a community (umma) who rightly guide with the truth (al-ḥaqq) and through it establish justice.'*

Of course Muslims have understood this and related verses in many very different ways, and Ṣāliḥ's sudden identification of the subjects of this verse (and the 'justice' of Mu'tazilī doctrine) with his specific understanding of the religio-political role of the Shi'ī imams, so readily accepted by Abū Mālik in what follows, is by no means self-evident. In fact, for readers even remotely familiar with Mu'tazilī theology and alternative understandings of the topics discussed up to this point, the transition that Ṣāliḥ suddenly undertakes at this point of the dialogue may appear quite radical and jarring. For such an informed audience, the tensions resulting from his sudden shift at this point to a far more overtly Ismaili—and, at the time, openly (and potentially dangerously) 'political'—understanding remain palpable for some time. Ṣāliḥ's sudden ability to 'steer' the discussion in this openly Shi'ī direction from now on clearly presupposes a large degree of helpful complicity from Abū Mālik throughout the remaining passages.

189. Here the hierarchical terms 'superior' and 'subordinate'—which are eventually used as equivalents of the complementary spiritual ranks and functions of the prophet-messengers (*nāṭiqs*) bringing divine 'books' and of their successors (the non-legislating prophets, imams and other ranks of the spiritual hierarchy)—are only rough equivalents of the Arabic *fāḍil* and *mafdūl*, since the Arabic root of both terms also conveys the important related meanings of their distinctive spiritual 'value' or 'excellence' (in *both* cases), and of a kind of 'overflowing abundance' which is passed down from the 'higher' to the 'lower.'

190. By now it is clear that Abū Mālik is using this term to refer to the imams (and their subordinates in the earthly spiritual hierarchy).

191. *Ta'wīl* literally means to 'take something back to its source' or 'beginning' (*al-'Awwal* is one of the Qur'anic Names of God). The Arabic more immediately reflects Ṣāliḥ's intended sense of a 'reversion' of the process of scriptural 'revelation' (literally 'sending down,' *tanzīl*). The exemplars of this spiritual ability in the Qur'an are the mysterious divine 'servant' of the Sura of the Cave (later identified as 'al-Khaḍir' or Khezr, 18: 78, 82) and Joseph (12:6, 21, 44-45, 100-101). However the Qur'an strongly emphasises that this gift refers to the inspired ability to see through to the divinely intended 'inner meaning of whatever happens' (*ta'wīl al-aḥādīth*) in life, not just dreams and visions (or scriptures, which are not even mentioned in either place). The rarity and importance of this spiritual gift are also highlighted in the famous passage where it is connected with 'the Book' (3:7), which insists that 'none knows its *ta'wīl* but God'—and, in some readings, 'those who are deeply rooted in (divine) knowledge,' the true 'possessors of hearts.'

192. In most later schools of Islamic thought, this special Qur'anic term *wahy* is reserved for the inspiration or 'sending down' of the divine books to the messengers (*rusul*), as opposed to the many other forms and expressions of spiritual inspiration (often indicated by the Arabic term *ilhām*, which Ṣāliḥ carefully avoids here).

193. That is to say, the heritage of guidance left by the divine messengers or legislating, 'messenger-prophets,' as Ṣāliḥ goes on to illustrate from the Qur'an. We have therefore translated the three Qur'anic verses Ṣāliḥ alludes to here (which actually refer specifically to Joseph's ability to interpret the inner meaning of *aḥādīth* in the sense of 'events' or 'happenings') in the anachronistic, 'literal' sense (*aḥādīth* in their later technical sense as the transmitted teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad) which he clearly intends to be understood in this particular dialectical context.

194. Here Ṣāliḥ clearly assumes a knowledge of the remainder of this Qur'anic verse, where in addition to the three names he mentions here, God's 'revealed inspiration' (*wahy*) is explicitly extended to 'Noah and the prophets after him, to ... Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon...' (4:163).

195. The Arabic expressions employed here clearly invoke the famous legal doctrine of scholarly 'consensus' (*ijmā'*) which was reaching its full development as a justification for the normative claims of the various disciplines of 'religious learning' (*ilm*) that were approaching their mature development at the time of this dialogue (third/fourth century AH). The

language Abū Mālik employs here also clearly refers to the institutional and educational forms (*majlis*, ‘*ulamā*’, etc.) that were gradually gaining wider acceptance in the Muslim world at this time.

196. The term ‘*ulamā*’ is the plural form of the word translated as ‘knower’ throughout the first half of the dialogue; a different translation is necessary here to convey the radical shift in the type (and source) of ‘knowing’ in question in either instance. The same powerful irony is expressed in Abū Mālik’s referring to these scholars’ abandonment of the repeated Qur’anic injunction to ‘*examine and investigate*’ God’s signs and manifestations (throughout the world, history and our souls), since these scholars normally applied precisely the *same* Arabic term (*naẓar*) to describe their own more limited dialectical, legal and philological pursuits.

197. The larger context of each Qur’anic verse is necessary here to understand Ṣāliḥ’s shorthand allusions in the first two cases: *And among the people are those who dispute about God without any knowledge, and who follow every rebellious devil* (22:3); and ... *They denied the Signs of their Lord and disobeyed His messengers, and they followed the command of every wilful oppressor* (11:59).

198. Or ‘lawyer’: the term *faqīh* here and below (‘the scholars of evil’) originally meant someone who ‘tried to understand’ religious or legal matters, but by the time of this work had become largely restricted to learned specialists in *legal* interpretations of religious sources, frequently at the behest of the local ruling powers; whereas the term ‘*ālim*’ (note 196 above), with its Qur’anic resonances, continued to be applied more broadly to a wider range of scholars in various religious and related disciplines.

199. In addition to the general meaning of this phrase, the author may well be alluding to a strikingly illustrative and influential hadith transmitted by Mu’āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (the founder of the Umayyad dynasty and arch-enemy of ‘Alī and his claims to the imamate), which is recorded in the collection of Abū Dā’ūd (*ḥīṭan*, 2). What is so poignantly significant about this particular hadith (and its transmitter) is that the standard Sunni hadith collections include dozens of slightly varying transmissions and versions of the Prophet’s saying about the recurrent history of the ‘seventy-two sects,’ but *only* Mu’āwiya’s report *adds* the final words concerning the ‘saved’ branch: ‘and it is the great majority.’

‘Mu’āwiyya b. Abī Sufyān stood up among us and said: ‘Beware! The Messenger of God stood among us and said: “*Beware! The People of the Book before were split up into seventy-two sects, and this community will be split up into seventy-three: seventy-two of them will go to the Fire and only one will go to the Garden—and it is the great majority*”.’

200. Šālīḥ concludes his argument here against the truth-value of any scholarly or communal consensus by a particularly ironic and revealing argument, given Abū Mālik's particular motives and prejudices. The Arabic of this entire section, with its repeated insistence on a choice of logical 'divisions,' 'forcing consent' (*taṣḍīq*), etc.—and its allusions to a bloody historical backdrop familiar enough to both interlocutors (and any readers of their time)—is a powerful ongoing parody of the technical language and procedures of argument of *'ilm al-kalām*, as well as the institutions of 'scholarly debate' and 'disputation' (especially the *munāẓara*, often held in court settings for centuries to come) in which such religious disciplines had developed.

201. That is, Abū Mālik's original Mu'tazilī theological doctrine concerning God's 'descriptive attribute' (*sifa*) of 'justice,' with which he began this long discussion.

202. This key Qur'anic expression *al-ṣāliḥūn*—which is of course also a poignant play on words, given the name of Abū Mālik's interlocutor—appears dozens of times, usually referring to the highest ranks among the spiritual elite, in this world and in the next. (See note 77 above.)

203. The fact that Abū Mālik, a highly knowledgeable religious scholar, completely leaves out here the multitude of prophets and divine guides mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an during the 'interval' periods in question ironically highlights the fateful 'intentional ignorance' of the clerical elites and their 'religious sciences' whose dramatic consequences Šālīḥ had so eloquently described a few moments earlier.

204. While the names of all these prophets are mentioned in different contexts in the Qur'an, the particular arrangement and ordering of them here reflects the distinctively Ismaili conception of sacred history as turning on repeated cycles (and eventually, 'sub-cycles') of seven key spiritual figures, in which the 'speaking' messenger-prophets who bring a new 'book' of revelation and found a new religious community (notes 51, 53, 64, 84 and 88 above) are each followed by a series of 'silent' imams. The application of such interpretative schemes to the Qur'an and to contemporary Islamic religious politics is more rigorously and complexly developed in the other writings attributed to Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr, as well as in the writings of his contemporary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and many later Ismaili authors.

205. Again (as in the preceding note), all seven of these names of prophets and their 'sending' by God are mentioned in various verses of the Qur'an, but their selection and particular arrangement in this cycle is part of the author's own systematic conception of this process, as is the complex Ismaili theory of 'manifestation' (*ẓuhūr*) and 'concealment' (*ṣatr*) or 'secrecy'

(*sirr*) of their respective missions that is alluded to only briefly at the end of this section (notes 210–211). The omission of Aaron's name here would be particularly striking to Muslim readers, given his frequent mention with Moses in the Qur'an, and the well-known hadith comparing his relation to Moses with that of 'Alī to the Prophet (see note 30 above).

206. That is, to the *rusul*, or public bearers of a new divine book and revealed path, as contrasted with the larger group of prophets (*anbiyā'*) and imams.

207. *Kitmān* is often used synonymously with the broader Shi'ī principle of *taqiyya* (see references at note 134 above). Complex theories of 'public' and 'hidden' manifestations of prophecy and imamate were developed over time in most traditions of Shi'ī thought, in ways reflecting the historical fates of their different chains of imams, under the pressures of constant persecution and surveillance by the ruling powers.

208. In this Ismaili context, the term *ghayba*, used here to describe the current situation of the imams, simply indicates their public 'absence,' in the sense of their clandestine work and existence under persecution.

209. Here Ṣāliḥ explicitly shifts to the contemporary, Islamic prophetic cycle for the first time. His allusion is most clearly to the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn and many members of his family (and other supporters) at Kerbala, as well as to the slaying of 'Alī and so many others among his descendants.

210. Here Abū Mālik for the first time himself uses the key term *ijmā'* (public 'consensus' about religious matters) in the more far-sighted sense of the collective *responsibility* of the learned religious scholars that Ṣāliḥ had been trying to help him see in the immediately preceding discussion.

211. Apparently an allusion to the black battle-standards of the Abbasid caliphs and their supporters, along with their continued reliance on subsidising (and closely controlling) the religious scholars and intellectual elites of their major cities.

212. Prior to this point, Ṣāliḥ had generally used the plural form of 'you' (corresponding to Abū Mālik's constant exculpating use of 'we' to describe his colleagues and the learned more generally) to address Abū Mālik, but in this opening paragraph he very pointedly begins by employing the singular 'you' in a way which highlights Abū Mālik's *personal* moral responsibility for this situation. The impression made by this shift is very powerful and unavoidable in the original Arabic, as it is throughout the Qur'an, where it is used repeatedly in a very similar way. When Ṣāliḥ returns to the plural form of 'you'—now employing it to refer to the class of religious 'learned

scholars' more generally—we have periodically added 'all' to indicate that the singular 'you' is no longer being employed.

213. This short passage is a particularly dramatic illustration of the way an intimate familiarity with the Qur'an is assumed, throughout the dialogue, in order to grasp the full pathos and intensity of Ṣāliḥ's (and the author's) questioning and probing of Abū Mālik's (and each reader's) conscience. Here, for example, the first verse (4:75) in which this key term (*al-mustaḍ'afūn*: referring literally and tellingly to 'those who are considered weak and powerless') appears is as follows:

And what is wrong with you all, that you do not fight in the path of God, while those who are considered weak and powerless among the men and women and children are saying: 'O our Lord [our intimate Protector and Sustainer], take us out of this town whose people are oppressing (us)! And appoint for us a protecting friend [walī] from Your presence, and appoint for us from Your presence some successful support!'

The verses at 34:31–33 give an even more dramatic 'courtroom scene' of mutual recrimination between these 'despised ones' and their earthly masters at the Last Judgement.

214. The key word *khalīfa* (literally, 'stand-in' or 'vice-regent': someone who is made responsible in the absence of their master) is used in the Qur'an (38:27; 38:26) to indicate the metaphysical status and responsibility of Adam (and perhaps, by extension, all human beings). However, after the death of the Prophet it was used by the Umayyads and their successors (in the grandiloquent phrase, *khalīfat Allāh*) to express their far-reaching claims to the ancient Near Eastern tradition of 'divine kingship.' Ṣāliḥ's question here alludes to both senses of that term, given that the first such event he is referring to is probably the martyrdom of Imam 'Alī, and perhaps also of his son al-Ḥusayn at Karbalā'. (See note 153 above.)

215. For *kitmān*, as a synonym of *taqiyya*, see notes 134 and 207 above; the *taqiyya* ('precaution') of the imams and their followers is mentioned explicitly in the following sentence.

216. This is an allusion broadly to the general tendency of the dominant Muslim rulers, from the time of the Umayyads, to support religio-political doctrines of divine 'determinism' (*jabr*) which attributed to God the ultimate responsibility for all human actions, good and evil alike. More specifically, it is possible that the author is alluding to various more elaborate theological doctrines, such as the later *kalām* doctrines associated with al-Ash'arī (and eventually officially supported by the opponents of the Fatimids) which were opposed to the Mu'tazilī insistence on human freedom (and responsibility) and divine justice championed by Abū Mālik here, and

which tended to emphasise God's responsibility for all human actions. The learned representatives of Shi'ī traditions (Twelver, Zaydi and Ismaili) continued in general to oppose such broadly 'Ash'arite' theological positions, for reasons neatly summarised in Šāliḥ's remarks here, sometimes using Mu'tazilī theology and sometimes turning to the theories of the Islamic philosophers.

217. That is to say, by denying the rights and the very existence of the 'friends of God' in their own time, they necessarily portrayed them and their supporters as rebels and troublemakers to be suppressed and destroyed.

218. The particular Arabic idiom here (literally, 'the most brilliant of the shining ones') is mentioned repeatedly, in different contexts, in a number of longer hadith recorded in several of the major Sunni hadith collections (by Muslim, al-Nisā'ī, Mālik and Ibn Ḥanbal): see Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 1, p. 428, as well as the extensive note to our Arabic edition at this point. There this phrase usually refers to the special spiritual status of Muḥammad's (true) community, or to particularly advanced spiritual personalities among them, who are marked off at the Last Day by a heightened radiance symbolising the 'effects of their ablutions' and their special spiritual purity.

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Note: Only a selection of the most important ideas, technical terms and proper names found in the translation have been cited here. The fully detailed Arabic indexes of technical terminology, proper names and titles, and allusions to the Qur'an and hadith are all referenced to the section numbering which is the same in the English translation. Interested scholars can, by using the Arabic indexes, quickly locate each occurrence of Ja'far's elaborate technical vocabulary and his references to the Qur'an and hadith.

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