

The Qur'ānic Sufi Hermeneutics
of Shaykh Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī:
*A critical study of his Lubāb al-
'Ilm Fī Sūrah al-Najm*

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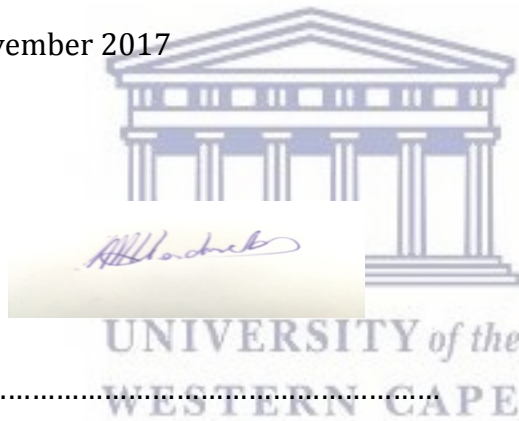
10 November 2018

DECLARATION

I declare that *The Qur'ānic Sufi Hermeneutics of Shaykh Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī: A critical study of his Lubāb al-'Ilmi Fī Sūrah al-Najm* is my own work, and that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Full name: Mogamat Mahgadien Hendricks

Date: 10 November 2017



Signed

DEDICATION

These pages are dedicated to those who thirst, and those who pour, and to the one who has said:

'I know God, with a knowledge part secret, part proclaimed

I drank the cup of love, and then possessed it,

And It hath become my possession for all time.

Thus came I to pour It, nay, it is I that press It.

Doth any other pour It in this age?'



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I would like to thank especially my wife Mardia for her tremendous patience, dedication, love and support all through my long journey.

ABSTRACT

The main focus of this dissertation is a critical study of the Arabic text, titled: *Lubāb al 'Ilm Fī Sūrah al-Najm* (The Kernel of Knowledge in the Chapter of the Star) by Shaykh Ahmad bin Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī.

Due to the lack of research on esoteric commentaries of the Qur'ān in the English language, there is a need to embark upon an in-depth study of such texts. An important work on Shaykh al-'Alāwī in English is Martin Lings' *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*. This book is an excellent introduction to the life, works and thought of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, but it does not deal with a specific text in any detail. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine closely the above-mentioned text of Shaykh al-'Alāwī as a sample of his esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. For the purpose of this thesis, I shall undertake a translation of his exegesis (*tafsīr*) on *Sūrah al-Najm* (the Chapter of the Star). I will include with it explanatory notes and identification of key quotations and sources. This sample from Shaykh al-'Alāwī's work will form the basis of my critical analyses. It will also provide a means for comparison with some of his other works, and with Qur'ānic commentaries of the same genre by other Sufi scholars, both classical and modern. In this dissertation, I also seek to offer some answers and proofs concerning the validity of the existence of esoteric *tafsīr* and why it is needed. I will do this by examining key verses in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* (traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad).

The distinction between esoteric and exoteric interpretations of the Qur'ān will also be dealt with in this dissertation. Although the emphasis will be on the esoteric dimension, neither the esoteric nor the exoteric dimension will be treated in a mutually exclusive way. Most Arabic commentaries on the Qur'ān tend towards the exoteric and literal meanings of the text, but the exoteric form also has an inner dimension which Shaykh al-'Alāwī demonstrates in his commentary on *Sūrah al-Najm*.

Another aspect of this thesis is to look at Shaykh al-'Alāwī's spiritual hermeneutical approach to esoteric [Qur'ānic] interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and how it differs from the western tradition of hermeneutics. I will also explore his influence on the development of Sufi interpretation.

The aim of this dissertation is to prove the essential need and validity for an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān, and to provide a sample of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary in English as an exemplification of such an esoteric interpretation. This study will make an original contribution to the existing literature on Sufi hermeneutics in general and to the deeper understanding of *Sūrah al-Najm* in particular.



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ARABIC TRANSLITERATION

The Arabic transliteration used in this thesis follows the system used by the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. The tables of transliteration are as follows:

CONSONANTS

ه	ن	ل	م	ك	ق	ف	غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض	ص
h	n	l	m	k	q	f	gh	'	ẓ	ṭ	ḍ	ṣ

ش	س	ز	ر	ذ	د	خ	ح	ج	ث	ت	ة
sh	s	z	r	dh	d	kh	ḥ	j	th	t	b

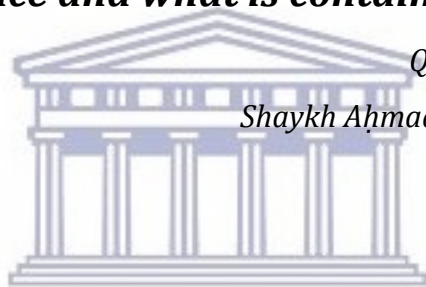
VOWELS

ء = '	ء = a	ا = ā	ى = ā	ي = ī	و = ū
<i>ta`wīl</i>	<i>asbāb</i>	<i>Rāzī</i>	<i>hudā</i>	<i>tafsīr</i>	<i>Abū</i>

- The position of the closed *tā'* or *tā' marbūṭah* written in the end of the word in this thesis is to be transliterated as follows: العلمية = *al-'Ilmiyyah*

CHAPTER ONE: *LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK*

***'We would never be satisfied to abandon the Qur'ān.
Because it is the religion together with Faith
And the value we hold for it has no equal.
In all of existence and what is contained therein.'***



Qasīda al-Luṭfiyya - Dīwān

Shaykh Aḥmad bin Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī

Introduction

This dissertation will critically evaluate an esoteric interpretation of *Sūrah al-Najm* by Shaykh Aḥmad Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī. Throughout his life, Shaykh al-'Alāwī was drawn to *tafsīr*, and his teachings on the subject have been preserved both in his treatises and writings.

In this dissertation, I will focus on the esoteric hermeneutic aspect of the sacred text and the special Sufi esoteric exegesis in general, with an illustration of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Sufi commentary in particular which I will also use as my case study.

This dissertation also aims to justify the need for and discuss the legitimacy of an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān which is built upon a firm hermeneutic foundation in the quest for meaning. I will argue, using selections from the esoteric *tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Najm* by Shaykh al-'Alāwī that an esoteric approach to interpretation enhances a deeper appreciation for the Qur'ān and allows for a more comprehensive understanding, both as a

literary work and as sacred text. This study will also illustrate how it is possible to deepen one's understanding of what constitutes esoteric interpretation, and the need to look beyond the letter to the spirit of the Qur'ānic word.¹ In this chapter I will also be covering the purpose of this study, the literature review, the early classical studies on esoteric exegesis and hermeneutics in the Qur'ān, life and works of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, his personality and the theoretical framework.

The objective of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's deep spiritual exegesis especially with Sūrah al-Najm is to stress the need and desire for excellence in one's religious faith, and there has to be a necessary apogee to any faith that aspires to be truly whole, which in the case of Islam is *al-Iḥsān* which captures the spirit of Sufi practice and its doctrine. Therefore the exegesis of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *lubāb al-'ilm* can be said to address exclusively the sincere aspirant (*murīd*) on the Path embarking on the mystical journey and to those who have already reached the supreme station of union.

The exegesis of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is certainly worth achieving more deserved prominence in the growing field of historical studies of *tafsīr* literature. Shaykh al-'Alāwī was a twentieth century scholar who however, had gone through a purely traditional system of education and was deeply rooted in the milieu of Algerian traditional Mālikī/Ash'arī/Sufi Islam. From the point of view of the history of the *tafsīr* genre, Shaykh al-'Alāwī's exegesis is a very interesting work that breaks the artificial distinction between "classical" or "traditional" *tafsīr*, and "modern" *tafsīr*. The doctrinal background of the Shaykh, in fact, was purely in classical/traditional Sufi literature. However from the point of view of his specific concerns and one of those concerns was also countering the superficiality of Salafi exegesis, which during the author's life was starting to penetrate the Algerian intellectual arena. The task of an exoteric *tafsīr* was also undertaken during the time of

¹ This does not mean rejecting the outward meanings, as in the case of the *Bāṭiniyya*. Those people who do not accept the form, or outer meaning of the Qur'ān and follow only its inner meaning are known as *al-Bāṭiniyya*. Shaykh al-'Alāwī, al-Ghāzalī and the Sufis are strong opponents of this creed.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī by the Salafist reformer Ibn Badis² who was from the eastern part of Algeria. For Ibn Badis *tafsīr* was an important vehicle for advancing his reformist ideas. Ibn Badis's aim was to convey to the Algerian people of his time the relevance of Qur'ānic revelation as a guide to social, economic and political issues. Ibn Badis adopted a methodology of exegesis that followed the classical school of interpretation by tradition as opposed to interpretation by opinion. It was fundamentally literalist in that it depended upon the semantic value of words. This school was also basically scripturalist in that it sought, as much as possible, to interpret the Qur'ān by way of the Qur'ān, which Ibn Badis perceived as the best way, according to the Prophet. This method was also based upon *ḥadīth* material transmitted through a chain of authorities from the earliest period of Islam, including Muḥammad himself and his companions, rather than through personal opinions.

Ibn Badis also invoked the Qur'ān against assimilationists, feminists and especially against Sufis. The development of anti-Sufi stereotypes was the growth in popularity of ideologies that marginalized Islam and, with it, Sufism. Due to deliberate negative interpretation of Sufism by the Salafis they also promoted a historical analysis that blamed Sufism for much of the backwardness of the Islamic world. So the great challenge for Shaykh al-

² *AL-Balāgh* (Arabic newspaper published in 1927 by Shaykh al-'Alāwī) was strenuously attacked by the modernists and also as was expected, by the Salafiyyah reformist group, and *Ash-Shihāb* (newspaper, estb 1921) kept up an almost undiminished hostility until 1931, when the editor, Ibn Bādīs, happened to come to Mostaghanem, and both he and the Shaykh were invited to a wedding feast. Although the Shaykh was in bad health at the time, it was barely three years before his death; he accepted the invitation since it is against the wont of the Prophet to refuse to go to a wedding, and having come face to face there with the editor in question, he invited him to the *zāwiyah*. In the next number of *Ash-Shihāb* there appeared the following items of news:

'A supper was given by Shaykh Sidi Aḥmad Bin-'Alīwah and it was attended by some of the leading men of Mostaghanem, together with about one hundred of the Shaykh's pupils. The Shaykh himself was exceedingly cordial and gracious to the point of serving some of the guests with his own hands. After supper verses from the Qur'ān were recited and then the Shaykh's pupils began to chant some of the odes of 'Umar ibn al-Fārid which they did so beautifully that their audience was greatly moved. The pleasure of the evening was further enhanced in between the singing by literary discussions about the meaning of some of the verses; and among the many examples of courtesy shown us by our host the Shaykh, I was particularly struck by the fact that he never once touched on any point of disagreement between us by so much as a single allusion that might have compelled me to express my opinion or to defend it. Our conversation all turned on those many questions which we are in perfect agreement, avoiding those few points about which our opinions differ.' (Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.115)

'Alāwī was the anti-Sufi stereotypes created during the reformation stage where Sufism was blamed as a prime cause of Islamic backwardness and passivity, and a major obstacle to rational reform.

The Shaykh al-'Alāwī in his *Lubāb* has aimed specifically at the higher spiritual values, merits and benefits of the Qur'ānic text of Sūrah al-Najm with a desire to take it to a specific spiritually enlightened audience. But those few scholars who have studied his *tafsīr* in depth regard it as a highly independent, original work, and not merely an imitation of the past centuries of hermeneutic heritage.

The Shaykh's hermeneutic saw the inherent need for a new horizon to discover and reveal the deeper inner meaning of the Qur'ān at its highest symbolic spiritual and esoteric significance breathing new life into the understanding of esoteric exegesis. The main thrust of his exegesis can be seen as bringing out the extra dimension of Islam in its depth and height which can only be revealed through the *maqām* of *al-iḥsān*.

In advocating the spiritual (esoteric) exegesis the Shaykh developed a highly sophisticated metaphysical vision of the Qur'ān characterized by *ta'wīl* and spiritual insight (*baṣīra*) together with the idea of Qur'ānic harmony and coherence (*nazm*), seeing the Qur'ān as a multilayered text. And it is also apparent that Shaykh al-'Alāwī was more concerned with the hermeneutical perspective of *tafsīr* and adding fresh meaning to the text than with defending a specific theological dogma. His methodology is innovative and has created intellectual currents relevant for modern exegetical thought. The hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is a good precursor needed in the abyss between 'secular humanism' and a 'pragmatic ethics of survival.' To quote Kenneth Honerkamp who writes:

"The appeal of Sufism to popular audiences of Islam has often been commented upon (frequently with the cliché that Rūmi is the best-selling poet in the United States). The 'spiritual' side of Islam is of particular modern interest as one that is amenable to personalized faith and minus the fears and fascination of both the legalistic and violent aspects of the media's Islamic world.' The focus on ethical conduct as the guiding principle behind Sufi

practice has continued to resonate throughout the Muslim world. As recently as the nineteenth century, the Moroccan Sufi and scholar Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1809 CE) defined Sufism as, “the science of learning the manner of journeying toward the presence of the King of Kings; or [one could say] inward purification from base tendencies and inward beautification with lofty character traits.”³

Shaykh al-‘Alāwī emphasizes contemplative crossing from *zāhir* to *bāṭin* meaning in the verses of the Qur’ān that is central in his exegesis.

However, the predominant aspect (feature) of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s hermeneutical approach to Qur’ānic exegesis is centered upon the three distinct levels of understanding the divine text; Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān*. For the Shaykh there are those who apprehend the meaning of the text at the level of Islam, and then there are those on the level of *Īmān* whose understanding is deeper, and the most comprehensive and the most transcendent level of all is *Iḥsān* which is the level of the Gnostics and, *Each of them have come to know their drinking place.*⁴ (Q. 2: 60)

He argues that the Qur’ān has degrees of understanding and should not just be apprehended on one level. The level of Islam corresponds with the generality (*‘awām*), or we could refer to them as the scholars of the exoteric sciences of religion. The level of *Īmān* corresponds with the elite (*khāṣṣ*) who are at the level of the scholars of the exoteric (*sharī’a*) and familiar with the esoteric sciences. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī also refers to this level as the maqām of love (*maḥabba*), because his definition of *Īmān* is *sharī’a* plus love. The level of *Iḥsān* corresponds with the elite of elite (*khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*) and this is the level of the Gnostics (*‘arifūn*) whose knowledge is obtained through direct contemplation (*‘ayān*), and this is the most distinct of all levels.

It is clear from the above explanation that without the esoteric dimension of *tafsīr* the holistic meaning of intellectual exegetical speculation is incomplete. One could almost say that the absence of Sufi exegesis is a virtual

³ Kenneth Lee Honerkamp, *Sufi Foundations of the Ethics of Social Life in Islam*, p. 182

betrayal of the spirit of the Qur'ān. And it is also apparent that Shaykh al-'Alāwī's purpose in his hermeneutical approach to the *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān was specifically with a desire to discover meanings relevant to the contemporary needs of his time.

The Qur'ān remains of abiding importance to Muslims until the Last Day.⁵ They believe that it is a divine message addressed as final revelation from God. This universal message is applicable to all people, for all time, anywhere in the world. Its immutability is divinely ordained, yet Muslims are encouraged to contemplate its divine secrets and hidden treasures of knowledge that go beyond its exterior.⁶ Since the end of the Prophetic mission of Muḥammad, Muslim scholars have applied themselves in earnest to understand the meaning and message of the divine text through various ways of interpretation, and to convey this meaning and message to the community of believers (*ummah*) and to humanity generally. The primary motivation for such interpretation is the desire to determine the relevance of the Qur'ān to the lives of Muslims. Throughout history, every generation has recognised the relevance of the Qur'ān within its unique context, and examined it for answers to the pressing concerns of the time.

The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind and soul and advocates the universal doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). It is considered the primary source of Islamic creed (*ʿaqīda*) and has had a profound impact on the history of Arabic literature. Its vigorous, allusive and concise style deeply influenced later compositions in Arabic. It also continues to influence the mode of expression of native speakers of Arabic in both writing and speaking.⁷

The most distinct and unique feature of Sufi exegesis is that it addresses the inner meaning of revelation (*bāṭin*), alluded to many times in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*. The Qur'ān refers to itself as a book of similar and dual

⁵ Khaled Troudi, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics with Reference to Narratives: a Study in Classical Exegetical Traditions," PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, 2011.

⁶ Q. 2:45.

⁷ Hamza Andreas Tzortzis "An Introduction to the Literary & Linguistic Excellence of the Qur'an," a linguistic excellence of the quran, originally published 17 September 2008.

meanings.⁸ The word ‘similar’ implies that there is some consistency between the fundamental literal meanings of the Qur’ān and its allegorical meanings. Hence its outer, or exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and inner, or esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions are expressed as ‘dual meanings’, which refer to its two levels of meaning that have been revealed. The exoteric meaning is more readily accessible to humankind than the esoteric meaning which is ultimately fully known to God only. The *ẓāhir*, or apparent meaning of the Qur’ān, deals with the exoteric path (*sharī’a*), while the *bāṭin*, or deeper meaning, deals with the spiritual features of the human self, and the divine truth (*ḥaqīqah*).

Despite the fact that there are many discourses and extensive *tafāsīr* on the Qur’ān, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī recognised the need for an established tradition of esoteric interpretation of the text. He viewed this tradition as one that serves the interests of a specific category of intellectuals (*khawāṣṣ*) who aspire to derive and appreciate the deepest inner meaning and message of the Qur’ān. In reality, both exoteric and esoteric approaches to the interpretation of Qur’ānic exegesis should be seen as equally valid and applicable. However, it is in the exploration of the latter approach to the Qur’ān that Muslims are able to gain access to what may be termed the Divine secrets.⁹ In *al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiya*,¹⁰ Shaykh al-‘Alāwī states that: “God has entrusted the *ẓāhir* of the Qur’ān with those who have mastered its outside, just as He also entrusted its *bāṭin* with those [Gnostics] endowed with spiritual knowledge to comprehend its inner meaning”, which Shaykh al-‘Alāwī describes as the contemplative vision of the heart (*baṣīrah*).¹¹ Their knowledge is the fruit of direct vision (*‘ayān*) and unveiling (*mukāshfa*), not proofs (*dalīl*) and arguments (*burhān*).

What also has to be borne in mind is that there have always been in this world, individuals for whom the ordinary interpretations of religion, in its dogmatic and obediential dress, are not sufficient to satisfy their intellectual

⁸ Q. 39:23.

⁹ This *ḥādīth* is narrated in the Musnad and in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Tirmidhī

¹⁰ *Al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiya* is a book in which Shaykh al-‘Alāwī presents a purely mystical interpretation of both the doctrine and the rites.

¹¹ *Baṣīrah* refers to the inner eye of the spiritual heart whereas *baṣar* refers to the external vision of the physical eye and both expressions are found in the Qur’ān.

and spiritual aspirations. They sense the compression of forms, religious or otherwise and seek that which is beyond form, not because they are arrogant or unsatisfied with posthumous salvation, but because the spirit moves them to search for liberation. It is to these people that the Shaykh al-'Alāwī addresses himself. And when they move in the direction of the Path (Sufism), such people find that religious forms themselves, far from being obstacles, help them towards their goal, the goal of the Path being the unveiling of the heart. The Law (*shari'a*) of Islam has in view the posthumous salvation of the individual, while the Path has in view the liberation through gnosis (*ma'rifa*) of the individual in this life. From the moment that the two facets of Islam, the exoteric and esoteric, separated in the early period of Islamic History, each had its own teachers, methods, terminology and perspectives. While there have been conflicts, inevitable because of the incomprehension of esoteric Islam, there have always been reconciliations, and there have even been many pious authorities of the Law (the *fuqahā*) who have recognised, and still do, the integrity and independence of the masters of the Path. Obviously, the law concerns the vast numbers of Muslims, the Path a limited group; but this does not mean that the Path as such excludes the law. On the contrary, without the Law of Islam there is no Path, as the greatest Sufis them-selves would say.¹²

From the Sufi point of view, providing literal accounts and lexical meanings and background of Qur'ānic texts might be fruitful to the public, but it would not satisfy the elite. Many people are attached to the mere form of things, and not what it holds on the inside. The great difference between the two dimensions (the Law and the Path) in Islam lies in the deeper comprehension of the spiritual contents of the Revelation that the Sufis have always shown.

Purpose of this Study

The key aims of this dissertation are as follows:

¹² Victor Danner and Wheeler McIntosh, *Ibn'Ata Illah-Kwaja Abdullah Ansari: The Book of Wisdom-Intimate Conversations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.X111.

1. To illustrate that there is an essential and inherent relationship between the exoteric and esoteric nature of the Qur'ān, which highlights the deeper, spiritual content of the divine text.

2. To provide an example of a Sufi approach to the interpretation of esoteric exegesis, exploring the inner meanings and levels of the Qur'ān, and to highlight the potential value of esoteric meanings within the Qur'ānic text. To this end, we have translated the commentary of Surah al-Najm by Shaykh al-'Alāwī.

3. To develop a Sufi hermeneutical framework for the understanding and analysis of esoteric exegesis.

Since my goal is to investigate the gap that exists between the form of the Qur'ānic text and its esoteric interpretation, this research will help shed light on the contemporary development of esoteric exegesis and its specific Sufi approach to the hermeneutics of Qur'ānic exegesis on the deeper levels of allegorical and spiritual meaning. Contemporary Muslim scholars can also use it to create and build a new understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis with the hope to benefit prospective readers, future Qur'ānic interpretations, academic circles and the seekers of spiritual meaning. The purpose is also making available the methodological choices to those who want to approach Qur'ānic exegesis and develop a greater reservoir of literature that can be used to understand Qur'ānic hermeneutics.

Sufi exegesis ought to reflect a particular spiritual ethos, as well as the mystical experience of the commentator which is profoundly and exceedingly present in the exegesis of Shaykh al-'Alāwī. The advantage of esoteric exegesis is that it postulates various nuances which teaches about multiple possibilities in language as will be shown in the case of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *tafsīr*, which operates on a very high level of interpretive capacity, explaining the text of the Qur'ān on four different levels in his main corpus of exegesis. Each level has a specific interpretation and is uniquely interconnected to the purpose of the text and each level discloses new vistas of meaning in a hierarchical form. These levels have been indicated in the text by the labels

(1) “exegetical” (*tafsīr*), (2) “juridical” (*aḥkām*), (3) “allegorical” (*ishārāt*) and (4) “spiritual” (*lisān al-rūḥ*).

I consider this research methodology to be appropriate because it attempts to respond to the needs of contemporary circumstances affirming the continuity of God’s guidance of humanity through revelation. And in this way it searches for the deeper meanings and studies the distance of the text from the reader and his perception of it from its social, linguistic, spiritual and historical context interacting with the text to create new readings and understandings that share its relevance. This research also offers new spiritual interpretations of the Qur’ān, transcending the madrasa style commentaries limited to the historical tradition of *tafsīr*.

Esoteric *tafsīr* has been marginalized to a great degree; therefore, the purpose of this research is to present contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim readers’ different ways of understanding the Qur’ān provided by the traditional esoteric *mufasssīrūn*. This research also offers insights to the esoteric characteristics of *tafsīr* and its place in Islamic intellectual history.

In esoteric exegesis there is also the need to understand the use of Sufi terminology and the use of specific patterns and techniques in order to understand the intricacies of its fundamental components, and so researchers must study how these exegetes understood the Qur’ān.

Commentary on the Qur’ān (*tafsīr*) is undoubtedly one of the richest genres of writing produced in Islamic civilisation. Voluminous commentaries have been written from the time of the prolific and influential scholar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) up to the present. Ṭabarī is widely credited for the creation of this genre in its classical exoteric form and his comprehensive commentary is a compendium gleaned from the work of earlier exegetes. Norman Calder in his ground-breaking study on *tafsīr* from Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī to Isma’īl b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), describes the formal characteristics of writing in the *tafsīr* genre as follows:

i) ‘The entire Qur’ān or at least a significant portion of it is interpreted in its canonical order with segments from the text being followed by commentary.

ii) The interpretations of a wide range of named authorities are cited, which results in a polyvalent reading of the text that acknowledges several possible meanings.

iii) The text of the Qur'ān is measured against external structures, both instrumental and ideological.¹³

However, with the approach and development of contemporary and modern *tafsīr* beyond Ṭabarī, we have to look at the ways in which the genre of *tafsīr* has changed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its influence on exegetes with respect to the aims, methods, style and structure of *tafsīr* works. In the introduction of '*Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*' Andreas Gorke writes; "The genre of *tafsīr* as a whole is still analytically under-studied and insufficiently investigated without much clarity about its characteristics, its place within Islamic intellectual history and its inner and outer boundaries."¹⁴

The emergence of *tafsīr* as a distinct genre required the definition of the boundaries of *tafsīr* itself in order for it to be understood in relation to other branches of religious activity and learning within Islam; and in relation to the scriptures and exegetical tradition of other religions.

Apart from seeing the Qur'ān through the eyes of Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān* the central theme of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *tafsīr* is strongly based on the *ḥadīth* "Verily the Qur'ān has an outward, an inward, a boundary and a horizon". (*'inna lil Qur'ān zāhiran wa bāṭinan wa ḥaddan wa maṭla'an'*) and this esoteric outlook of the Shaykh has clearly influenced his *tafsīr* and his contribution to the genre of *tafsīr* in a positive way.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *tafsīr* can also be studied in relation to other genres of scholarship due to his four-method approach and going beyond theological boundaries offering new interpretations to the Qur'ān. Even though his *tafsīr*

¹³ Norman Calder, "*Tafsīr* from al-Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'an* Ed. by Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993) Pp. 1 -140; P. 101 *zāhiran wa bāṭinan*

¹⁴ Andreas Gorke, "*Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*," p. 2, published 2014

is clearly traditional as “apposed” to the prototypical modernist Qur’ānic commentary, its approach, in a spiritual and metaphysical sense is representative of the ‘modern intellectual period’. And despite the Shaykh’s mystical inclinations, he also has the ability to interpret the Qur’ān in a completely non-mystical way as will be illustrated in chapter three. Such was the Shaykh’s hermeneutical approach that aimed at doing justice to the text, and very rarely did he borrow from other exegetes.

Literature Review

The literature review of this dissertation will focus on the previous studies on esoteric exegesis and hermeneutics, their definition, scope and limitations in the Holy Qur’ān.

The focus will also be on works dealing with the theoretical aspects related to the scope of this study, such as the relation between the *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* meanings of the text. In addition, the literature review will encompass the Sufi hermeneutical trend of context and interpretation. Finally, the review will also consider theories of *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*.

It is noteworthy that the literature on *ta’wīl* and Sufi hermeneutics of the Qur’ān are not as voluminous as those on exoteric *tafsīr* and linguistic theory of the text. There are relatively few specialists in the former field. The present study will confine itself to the relevant aspect of *ta’wīl*.¹⁵

No academic thesis occurs in a vacuum. A later study must necessarily draw on previous studies that are both directly and indirectly related to the relevant field. It is therefore imperative to survey some of the classical and contemporary studies on esoteric *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān. I will also briefly look at previous research based on a selection of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s esoteric *tafsīr*

¹⁵ *Ta’wīl* comes from the verb *awwala*. It is derived from *iyālah*, which means to shape or arrange a thing so as to place its various significations in their proper perspectives. *Ta’wīl*, thus, means the reducing one or two senses, or interpretation, which an expression bears, or admits, to which suits the apparent meaning. See Dhahabī (1976, I: 17-18), Ma’rifat (1997, I: 19) and Lane (2003, II: 2397). Also, *ta’wīl* means the final end of a matter, as when the Qur’ān says “on a day when its *ta’wīl* (fulfillment) shall come” (Q. 7:5)3; the final purpose, meaning, or end of a thing. Ma’rifat (1997, I: 20) and Cf. Stetkevych (1989: 83)

of the Qur'ān, namely *Sūrah al-Najm*. Following from this, I will make a comparison with other esoteric interpretations.

A literature review on some landmark studies in the field of Tafsīr and Ta'wīl

The purpose of this section is to provide some background to previous contributions to esoteric commentaries of the Qur'an. We shall examine the perspective of two Sufi scholars, namely Ibn 'Ajibah and Ibn Barrajan.

Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība

In his *tafsīr*, an interesting parallel is drawn between the incredulous attitude of the *kuffār* in the Qur'ān and that of exoterists towards some of the doctrinal tenets of Sufism.

Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība¹⁶ (1746-1809) is the author of *āḥr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*,¹⁷ an exegesis of the Qur'ān that combines commentary on the scripture's literal, exoteric meaning as well as on its symbolic, esoteric significance. Ibn 'Ajība is not very well-known in the Western world, still less has his *tafsīr* received the attention it deserves. Among his Sufi counterparts in the Maghrib, he is one of the few to have left behind a large body of writings. His numerous metaphysical treatises, commentaries and his exegesis are pivotal for gaining insight into North African Sufism in light of the concise nature of the literature in this area. His *tafsīr* in particular is regarded, by the few scholars who have studied it in depth, to be a highly independent, original work and not merely a collage of the past eleven centuries of hermeneutic heritage. Even if Ibn 'Ajība does draw upon numerous sources for both the exoteric and the esoteric side of his

¹⁶ His full name is Abā al-'Abbās Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn 'Ajība al-Ḥasanī.

¹⁷ *Al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, ed. Aḥmad 'Abd Allāh al-Qurashī Raslān, 6 vols., Cairo: Ḥasan 'Abbās Zakī, 1999

commentary, he does not hesitate to challenge even the most esteemed of figures of Qur'ānic exegesis.

"Ibn 'Ajība's exoteric treatment of *kufṛ*¹⁸ stays within the bounds of the "moderate" Ash'arite framework. In his exegesis he discusses the esoteric interpretation of the critical idea of *kufṛ* and its deeper esoteric meaning. When handling the latter concept, previous Sufi exegetes often moved to the level of the soul, stressing the correspondences between the unbelievers in the larger universe and the demons (hiding) lurking within the inner world of the human soul. However, Ibn 'Ajība often departs from this approach, taking the Qur'ānic context as an opportunity to exhort Sufi values to a larger mainstream audience, and anchors the moral weight of the idea to protest against the abominations of anti-Sufi jurists. In his *tafsīr*, an interesting parallel is drawn between the disbelieving attitude of the *kuffār* in the Qur'ān and that of exoterists towards some of the doctrinal tenets of Sufism. In his *tafsīr* he gives an example of the following verse,

Why [how could we be resurrected] after we have died and become mere dust? Such a return seems far-fetched indeed! (Q.50:3)

After putting these words in the mouths of *kuffār*, the Qur'ān replies:

How can you refuse to acknowledge God, seeing that you were lifeless and He gave you life, and that He will cause you to die and then will bring you again to life, whereupon unto Him you will be brought back? (Q.2:28).

In the spiritual allusion corresponding to these verses, Ibn 'Ajība simply paraphrases the words of the scripture, such that the disbelief of the *kuffār* of the cosmic resurrection is transposed onto the disbelief of exoteric-minded Muslims regarding the resurrection of the soul: According to Ibn 'Ajība from the esoteric perspective it means, How can you deny the manifestation of the light of the Truth in the cosmos, [and furthermore] distance yourselves from the Presence of direct vision and gnosis, [especially since] you were

¹⁸ Usually translated as 'disbelief' or 'unbelief', in the Qur'ān it refers to the people who reject the message of the Prophets, including Muhammad. At the most elemental level, the root KFR is tied to the idea of 'covering', 'covering up', or 'stifling'. On a popular level, a *kafir* (unbeliever) has come to stand for the religious "other".

(spiritually) dead– [in a state of] forgetfulness and bitterly veiled [from Him], whereby He revived you into [a state] of wakefulness and [the momentum] of return [to Him], then He causes you to die to yourselves [such that] you came to see nothing but Him, then He resurrects you to [a state whereby you] witness His [immanent signs].”¹⁹

So, according to Ibn ‘Ajība, to claim that mystical illusion is a myth is to deny the doctrine of God’s Immanence, His Self-proclaimed quality as the “Outward” (*az-Zāhir*). Elsewhere in his *tafsīr* Ibn ‘Ajība also leverages the connotation of the unbeliever’ (*kāfir*) as he who denies or disavows the signs of God. He also asserts that denying the wondrous station of gnosis can also stem from simple fear and ignorance. He also makes good use of the sense of *kufr* as ‘the act of covering up’ and in such contexts Ibn ‘Ajība also makes use of the notion of *kufr* in its aspect of ‘denial’, ‘refusing to acknowledge’ the truth of Sufi gnosis or simply the inability to see or know reality.’²⁰

In Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic of *kufr*, less emphasis is placed on articulating principles of Sufi psychology and more on advancing social, reformist objectives and consolidating Sufism’s socio-cultural stature in the Islamic community.

Looking at Ibn ‘Ajība’s *tafsīr* his approach appears to be more thematic, investigating the esoteric as well as exoteric hermeneutic of the word *kufr*²¹ and the primary status that *kufr* occupies in the realm of Islamic ethics. Many things prompted Ibn ‘Ajība to adopt this particular method of *tafsīr*, for example, the many psycho-spiritual ills that the Muslims of his time were perceived as having succumbed to. He felt that the answer to this was in the balance between the outward application of religious directives (*sharī‘ah*) and inward realization of the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*).

¹⁹ *Tafsīr*, pp. 70-71 vol. 1

²⁰ *Tafsīr*, p. 253, vol. 7

²¹ The distinct hermeneutic of *kufr* pertaining to these two groups is often merged as one, even if they have been isolated from each other for the sake of clarity in this paper. The two are nevertheless closely related since “passive” unbelief against, or ignorance of, Sufism by the masses can– and in Ibn ‘Ajība’s time often was–stirred up, by the *fuqahā’*, into more “active” aggression. Conversely, the *fuqaha*’s “active” persecution of Sufis can stem from arrogance or from a fear of losing their authority and influence, and thus, essentially, from a “passive” sort of *ghaflah* and preoccupation with worldly desires.

And according to Ibn 'Ajība, in his own words, "this medicine is only administered by the doctors of the inward, who are the spiritual heirs of the prophets and are licensed to impart spiritual education that's effective as if it were received directly from Muhammad."²²

In his methodology he also sets about effectively defending the doctrine of Sufism. The classic negative qualities of the *kāfir*—rebelliousness, insolence, conceitedness and contentiousness are easily, and without stretching the allegory too far, applied to those who reject and persecute Sufis.

The complementary role which the two interpretations (esoteric and exoteric) play in the service of Islam, reaching out to an audience that stands outside the fold of Sufism looking in. A hierarchical view of human beings' spiritual abilities can be reconciled with the famous Sufi ternary---- masses (*awām*), elect (*khawāṣṣ*), elect of elect (*khawāṣ al-khawāṣ*), and differences in spiritual aptitude among human beings are real. "Among the favors that God has bestowed upon us is that of having brought together in us exoteric and esoteric knowledge. For, praised may He be! I am someone who takes from both sides...like the horseman who has the choice of becoming a pedestrian."²³ The Prophet Muhammad once said: "Verily God will send to this community at the head of every hundred years a person who will renew for it its religion."²⁴

Ibn 'Ajība concludes his *ishāra* with a famous Sufi aphorism which asserts God's Absolute Transcendence and implies, ipso facto, His Immanence: "[In the beginning] there was God and there was naught besides Him, and He is now just as He was then." God's Absoluteness necessitates that the world itself be a manifestation of His Being. Although Ibn 'Ajība does not set out to explicitly promulgate Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine, the latter subtly undergirds the metaphysical discussions in the *tafsīr*.

²² See *Tafsīr*, p. 159 vol 1

²³ Ibn 'Ajībāh, Abī al-'Abbās Aḥmād, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qurān al-Majīd*

²⁴ Sunan Abī Dāwūd, hadith 4291, p. 106-107, Vol. 4. Dār al-Hadīth. Cairo, 1988.

In this spiritual allusion Ibn 'Ajība quite explicitly traces the shift from the literal notion of *kufr* to the esoteric one. And many of the elements that make up the semantic structure of *kufr* survive this transition without losing too much of their recognizable face value without stretching the allegory too far, applied to those who reject Sufism.²⁵

The *ishārah* (allegorical meaning) expresses in a decisive way the idea that there is a huge gap that separates the Sufi understanding and practice of Islam from that of the 'commoners' ('*awām*). We have a lot of literalists who are taking the texts just to mean one thing. The esoteric approach has been marginalized to a great degree. The nuances teach us about multiple possibilities in language.

This is achieved by transposing the Sufi worldview onto the fundamental dichotomy *mu'minīn/kāfirūn* (believers/disbelievers). In Sūrah al-Kāfirūn, this moral dichotomy (division) is at its most unequivocal: just as there could have been no question of the Prophet reverting to the polytheism of the Meccans, it is out of the question that the *murīd* should ever forsake his superior religious orientation for the "hallowed" practice of Islam of the *a'wām* that considers only the outward aspect of things. The passage reveals a deep concern about disciples who are young on the path, being intimidated, discouraged from, or talked out of their mystical quest for perfection. It is also part of Ibn 'Ajība's attempt at nurturing a renewed confidence-assurance in the Sufi community and consolidating the socio-cultural space that it occupies within the Islamic 'Ummah.²⁶

It is clear from the above example that the esoteric approach of Ibn 'Ajība's exegesis is similar to that of Shaykh al-'Alāwī and this is just another confirmation of the consistency in the principles of esoteric tafsīr. Ibn 'Ajība was known to Shaykh al-'Alāwī because of their spiritual link in the Shadhiliyya chain (*silsila*) of gnostics and Ibn 'Ajība's exegetical knowledge could possibly have made an impact on Shaykh al-'Alāwī since both were

²⁵ See *al-Bahr al-Madīd*, p.71 vol. 1.

²⁶ Ibn 'Ajība *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd*: (Louisville, KY, Fons Vitae, 2009), p. ix.)

from the Maghrib and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī was born sixty years after the death of Ibn ‘Ajība.

The Mystics of Andalusia: Ibn Barrajan and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century

Another landmark study worth mentioning in the field of esoteric *tafsīr* is the twelfth century exegete Ibn Barrajan whose *tafsīr* is among the very early Muslim mystical exegetes, by Yousef Casewit.

Yousef Casewit, assistant professor of Qur’ānic studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, tells the story of an overlooked mystical school of Andalusia, the *Mu‘tabirun* (lit. “The contemplators” or “the practitioners of *i‘tibār*”). The *Mu‘tabirun*, as Casewit demonstrates, formulated a mystical teaching centered on contemplating God’s signs in creation and the Book, and that self-consciously distinguished itself from the Sufis of the East. This book details the ways in which Ibn Barrajan (d. 536/1141), Ibn al-‘Arif (d. 536/1141), and Ibn Qasi (d. 546/1151), the school’s main authors, contributed to Andalusi mystical thought and provided a link between Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931) and Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 637/1240).²⁷

According to Casewit one of the most preeminent, influential and prolific mystics of the formative period was Ibn Barrajan of Seville.

“Ibn Barrajan²⁸ has an interpretive approach to the exegesis of the Qur’ān that is rather unique. His work²⁹ is described as an “*i‘tibārī*” (meditative) exegesis that represents a culminating achievement of the *Mu‘tabirūn* tradition in al-Andalus where he emphasizes contemplative crossing (*‘ibra*)

²⁷ The Mystics of Andalusia, Ibn Barrajan, Cambridge Press p.79

²⁸ His full name Abu-l-Ḥakam Abd al-Salām Abd al-Raḥmām ibn Moḥammad ibn Barrajan—born in Seville where he lived. He died in Marrakesh 536/1141. Was one of the greatest Sufi figures of al-Andalus

²⁹ The full name of his *tafsīr* *Tanbih alAfham Ila Tadabbur al-Kitab al-Ḥakim wa Ta’arruf al-Ayat wa-l-Naba al-‘Athim*,

into the unseen world. His hermeneutic in this exegesis is built around three parts, namely harmony, hierarchy and hegemony of the Qur'ān.

One of Ibn Barrajān's most important concerns in his *tafsīr* was to demonstrate the intrinsic correspondences between revelation and the natural signs of God, and to show how a total absorption in these two modes of divine self-disclosure can generate a concrete awareness and certainty of God's presence in this life. Ibn Barrajān advocated a hermeneutic of total absorption into the universe of the Qur'ān and natural signs and held that discovering the inner meanings of one went hand in hand with an apprehension of the other. As indicated in the full title of the *Tanbīh*, Ibn Barrajān considers the Qur'ānic revelation and the world of divine signs as complementary and ultimately identical facets of a single reality which flow from God and return to Him.³⁰ This mode of reflection necessitates an existential transformation in which human character traits are effaced in the divine, thus exposing the spiritual aspirant to the graces of awareness (*shu'ūr*) and inspiration (*ilhām*).

At the highest level, Ibn Barrajān holds that the Qur'ān discloses itself to the reader as a direct and personal revelation, just as creation discloses itself to the *Mu'tabir* (contemplator) as a revelatory book. The title of the book literally means 'Alerting Intellects to Meditation on the Wise Book and Recognition of the Signs and the Tremendous Tiding [of Judgment Day],' or simply "Meditations on the Qur'ān. Ibn Barrajān reasons that if one believes the Qur'ān to be God's literal, word-for-word revelation, then not a single letter, word, verse, or chapter of the Qur'ān can be accidental in its placement or pronouncement. Just as he insists that the Qur'ānic verses are thematically arranged, he also believes that each of the sūrahs stand as independent compositional units that revolve around an axial theme. The sūrahs are deliberately placed next to one another for a divine purpose."³¹

³⁰ Ibn Barrajān's exegetical writings stand in contrast to the classical "Sufi" commentaries on the Qur'ān. His hermeneutic differs from that of the early Sufi exegetes who typically penetrated the Holy Book in search of allusions (*ishāra*) and correspondences to their own spiritual states.

³¹ Introduction to *The Mystics of al-Andalus* by Yousef Casewit, p. 80

“There is a chapter built around three parts that define Ibn Barrajān’s hermeneutics, namely harmony, hierarchy, and hegemony of the Qur’ān. Section I examines Ibn Barrajān’s vision of the Qur’ān as a harmonious, coherent, and unambiguous text. Ibn Barrajān rejects any notion of Qur’ānic ambiguity (*ishtibāh*) and proclaims that ambiguity lies in the eye of the reader, not in revelation. Consequently, his approach to the Qur’ān is governed by the principle of *nazm*, that is, the compositional harmony and structural orderliness of the Qur’ān. His engagement with this theme also marks one of the earliest extensive engagements by a Qur’ānic exegete with this topic. Ibn Barrajān stressed the doctrine of *nazm* in his writings since he saw the Qur’ān and the universe as two copies of each other: two complementary beings. In his vision of things, the Two Beings derive their respective forms from the Universal Servant (*al-‘abd al-kullī*). Thus Ibn Barrajān believed that every Qur’ānic verse is divinely placed in the revealed book for a specific purpose, just as every particle of creation is placed with a purpose in creation and reflects God in a specific way. The doctrine of *nazm* has many consequences for Ibn Barrajān’s Qur’ānic hermeneutics. He held each of the Qur’ānic sūrahs to be structured around a specific theme. Ibn Barrajān was also a staunch opponent of the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*) of Qur’ānic verses by others. He reasoned that since every verse of the Qur’ān is located in a specific position by God, two verses can only abrogate one another if the abrogated (*mansūkh*) verse is followed by an adjacent abrogating (*nāsikh*) verse. Section II of the book analyses Ibn Barrajān’s conception of the Qur’ān as a multilayered revelation, which contains both verses that are “all-encompassing” (*mujmal*) and others that are “differentiated” (*mufaṣṣal*).

Ibn Barrajān conceived of the Qur’ān as containing two layers. The first, which he called the Supreme Qur’ān (*al-qur’ān al-‘azīm*), comprises the holistic, or all-comprehensive (*mujmal*), verses that engulf the entire meaning of the revelation. From the Supreme Qur’ān emerge the

differentiated verses (*āyāt mufaṣṣala*), which Ibn Barrajān identified as the Exalted Qur’ān (*al-Qur’ān al-‘azīz*). Moreover, certain sūrahs, like 1 and 2, are also held by Ibn Barrajān to embrace the Qur’ān’s message as a whole. Ibn Barrajān defines the so-called *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* verses not as “clear” or “unambiguous” verses in contrast to the “ambiguous” verses. Rejecting any ambiguity, he identifies the former as “compact/fixed” (*muḥkam*) verses that are sunk in the Preserved Tablet, like roots sunk in the soil of non-manifestation. The *mutashābihāt* verses, for their part, are mutually resembling, or “consimilar” (rather than confused), verses and constitute the bulk of the revelation. Section III examines the primacy of the Qur’ān in Ibn Barrajān’s scholarly approach. Ibn Barrajān saw the Qur’ān as the yardstick against which all other bodies of knowledge, from weak *Ḥadīth* to Biblical material, are to be assessed. This hermeneutical principle is expansive, since it allows for the author to integrate any wisdom literature that he deems to complement the Qur’ān: it is never used to exclude texts from his interpretive framework. This section thus examines Ibn Barrajān’s use of the Qur’ān to explain itself, as well as his use of weak *Ḥadīth*³² to shed light on Qur’ānic teachings.”³³

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³² Modern Muslim scholars have reproached Ibn Barrajān for not specifying the sources and authenticity of his *ahādīth*, and for liberally incorporating not only sound (*sahīh*), but also weak (*da‘īf*) and fabricated (*mawḍū‘*) reports. He also maintained that it is permissible for qualified scholars to narrate prophetic sayings nonliterally, and insisted that many Companions and early authorities transmitted the meaning of the Prophet’s sayings without relating his exact words. Ibn Barrajān uses purportedly weak and fabricated *Hadīth*, and narrated prophetic sayings nonliterally. In line with earlier *Hadīth* scholars, Ibn Barrajān defends this practice, so long as his weak sayings are not marshaled for juridical purposes.¹²² When it comes to eschatology and metaphysics, it is truth, not historical accuracy of the chain (*isnād*) that counts for Ibn Barrajān – and truth is weighed against the Qur’ān not an *isnād*. At root, Ibn Barrajān maintained that it does not matter whether or not Muhammad actually said it or not. What matters is whether a statement attributed to him is vested with authority and accepted as going back to him by virtue of its Qur’ānic validation. As a case in point, Ibn Barrajān reflects on verse Q 54:1 on the splitting of the moon. The hadith about the Prophet splitting the moon in Mecca is transmitted by a single narrator (*hadīth āhād*) and is deemed by *Hadīth* authorities to be weak. Yet the event is confirmed by the Qur’ān in the verse, “The Hour has drawn nigh and the moon is split” (Q. 54:1). Ibn Barrajān thus argues that the value of a prophetic saying, regardless of its authenticity, should be assessed primarily in light of its Qur’ānic foundation (*asl*). When weak prophetic sayings agree in substance with the Qur’ānic message, their use is permissible:

³³ Hermeneutics of Certainty, Ibn Barrajān, p.241

The final chapter sheds light on the author's understanding of *i'tibār*, cycles of time, the divine command, and future predictions, which are a direct application of his cosmological and hermeneutical teachings. Another important exegetical source for Ibn Barrajān is the Qur'ān itself (the Qur'ān is its own interpreter). He often takes account of its competing meanings, accommodating them equally and without excluding one over the other. Sometimes he observes that the meaning of a verse alternates between two contradictory meanings. Given his fixation on *nazm*, most examined verses are juxtaposed with, or defined in relation to one or several others. Ibn Barrajān was surely a distinguished exegete in the field of esoteric *tafsīr* and certainly with a unique style of his own, even though he was known as the al-Ghazālī of the West perhaps because of the many similarities he shared in the style of al-Ghazālī, and there are some who say that Ibn Barrajān borrowed much from al-Ghazālī.



Early (Classical) Studies on Esoteric Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Qur'ān

Islamic hermeneutical literature is significantly influenced by Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, better known simply as al-Ghazālī, the great Sufi theologian (1057-1111). His *Jawāhir-ul Qur'ān* is a major contribution to the corpus of *ta'wīl*-based hermeneutics. He renounced the uncompromising literalism and the rigid commitment of the exoteric exegesis of his contemporaries, which generally excluded the esoteric dimension in *tafsīr*. His critical analysis marked a shift towards scepticism of approaches to *tafsīr* that fail to recognise the rightful role and significance of *ta'wīl*-based hermeneutics.

For the purpose of this study, al-Ghazālī's approach to interpretation of texts forms the primary source for *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics. He did not rely solely on the allegorical meaning of verses to the exclusion of the plain or literal sense of meaning. These types of rules are provided by al-

Ghazālī for revealing the true meaning of the text. These rules also provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding the approach of Shaykh al-'Alāwī.

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation of Sūrah al-Najm shows how he draws on faculties higher than the cognitive faculties of sensory perception, creativity and reason. His treatment of al-Najm relies solely on mystical intuition and cannot be understood by anyone who is not inclined toward such an interpretation. Therefore, a casual reader may not immediately comprehend this method of approach.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī typically resolves this dilemma by offering a balance between an interpretation of the esoteric and exoteric verses.

However, Sūrah al-Najm is one of the exceptions in this instance, as a mystical interpretation here was the predominant one.

An analysis of *The Jewels of the Qur'ān*, clearly indicates that al-Ghazālī interprets eight verses of *al-Najm* as jewels³⁴ (verses 42-49). He argues that by combining the meanings of these eight verses it is possible to make a string of jewels that collaborates in gathering the light of the knowledge of God, His attributes (*ṣifāt*) and His acts (*af'āl*). These eight verses are interpreted by connecting it with human cognition.

On the contrary, no verse of *Sūrah al Najm* is categorised as a pearl.³⁵ The purpose of pearls according to him is to lead to steadfastness on the straight path of action, which leads to practical actions.³⁶ Al-Ghazālī also argues that the revealed text is distinct from other kinds of written texts. The revealed

³⁴ Al-Ghazālī has divided the Qur'ān into jewels and pearls. The jewels are those verses which especially concern the essence of God, His attributes and His deeds. This is the cognitive part. The pearls are the verses which describe the straight path and the verses which urge man to follow it. This is the practical part. The jewels and pearls mentioned in the *Jawāhir* are used as "images" indicating directly to the truths of the Qur'ān where their real meaning becomes mere metaphoric nature.

³⁵ In order to help the reader understand how the religious sciences, together with their respective subjects, are ranked in relation to each other, al-Ghazālī ascribes symbolically to each one of them a precious object available in the world of sense perception. The jewels, pearls and other materials as such are valuable, yet their value differs from each other. They serve as symbols for forms of religious knowledge. An existing entity in itself, each one of these symbols has a certain value which makes it adequate to symbolise an abstract object of religious knowledge. See Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Nāṣṣ*, p.278.

³⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Qur'ān: Al-Ghazali's Theory*, trans. Muḥammad Abul Quasem (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1997) p. 145.

text, he points out, requires special understanding and a type of hermeneutics different from philosophical hermeneutics. Therefore, it is not possible to read and understand the Qur'ān in the same way one reads and understands a book by a human author.

In Shaykh al-'Alāwī's esoteric interpretation of Sūrah al-Najm, each verse is intrinsically connected with its preceding as well as succeeding verses, creating a relative linkage which provides a continuity of thought for his readers. The entire *Sūrah*, from the first to the final verse of prostration (*sajdah*), symbolises the extinction of the Sufi's ego (*fanā'*) in the Lord. All things disappear and only God remains. The narrative of the destruction of the towns and people by God in the *Sūrah* is a trope for the annihilation of the self. This is what He does with all creation in the eyes of the Gnostic when He shows His Magnificence to him, nothing remains but God.³⁷

Muhammad Kamal in his article "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology" examines al-Ghazālī's guidelines for understanding the Qur'ān and his call for an approach to the Qur'ān with devotion and an open mind free of preconceived notions acquired from traditional exegesis.³⁸ Kamal's key enquiry on Islamic hermeneutics explores the question of whether the meaning of the Qur'ānic text is inherently clear and explicit, or whether its meaning should be mediated by means of a tradition. In this respect he offers two points of view.

According to Kamal, the proponents of the first view believe in the sufficiency of the Qur'ān and the immediacy of the meaning of its text.³⁹ In *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics the mystical and spiritual experience of the reader aids in the revelation of secret layers and meanings of the Qur'ān.

Proponents of the second view of Islamic hermeneutics focus on the tradition of al-Ghazālī's predecessors' commentaries on the Qur'ān.⁴⁰

³⁷ This is how all created things are rendered non-existent for the one who is annihilated in God. "And they ask you about the mountains, so say: my Lord scatters them as dust, and leaves them a level plain, wherein you can see neither crookedness nor curve." (Q.20: 105-107).

³⁸ Kamal, "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology."pp.77-89.

³⁹ Ibid. p.77

⁴⁰ Troudi, "Quranic Hermeneutics with Reference to Narratives."

Advocates of this view rely substantially on earlier commentaries and classical exegesis for understanding the meaning of the Qur'ān. They argue that the Qur'ān cannot be correctly understood without the aid of the interpretations and commentaries of earlier exegetes. This is referred to as *tafsīr*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics.

This thesis will undertake an analysis of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's interpretation of the Qur'ān using both *tafsīr*- and *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics. The theoretical framework for this analysis incorporates both approaches to Qur'ānic hermeneutics, however; *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics forms the main focus of this study due to the esoteric nature of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutics. These two points of view represent distinct hermeneutic positions. The former framework (*tafsīr*-based hermeneutics) suggests that the Qur'ān is insufficient to convey its own meaning and that it requires *tafsīr* for this purpose. It also suggests that the Qur'ān lacks immediacy in access to its meaning; therefore *tafsīr* is required to mediate its meaning. The latter framework (*ta'wīl*-based hermeneutics), suggests that the Qur'ān could be understood directly without reliance on pre-given exegesis, or via the methodology of a tradition.

Kamal's paper also examines the first of these hermeneutic positions as developed by al-Ghazālī. It further explores the similarity between al-Ghazālī's hermeneutic position and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl⁴¹ with regard to understanding the meaning of a text.⁴²

Al-Ghazālī's argument is not against a reliance on the exoteric meanings of the Qur'ān per se, but rather against such reliance to the exclusion of the esoteric meanings of the Qur'ān. He insists on the recognition of the intrinsic connection between exoteric and esoteric meanings that is; between the pearl and the shell. He only disagrees with those exegetes who focus on the

⁴¹ Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl (1859-1938) was a German philosopher who established the school of phenomenology.

⁴² A brief explanation of the main features of Husserl's phenomenology may be useful here in illuminating al-Ghazālī's method. Husserl belonged to the Cartesian philosophical tradition, which is aimed at establishing a new foundation for knowledge. To accomplish this, Husserl began to understand human consciousness phenomenologically. He employed phenomenology as a method for reaching the "essences" of phenomena intended by consciousness intuitively and prior to any presuppositions and prejudgments.

shell without dealing with the internal meaning of revelation (the pearl). Additionally, in approaching the Qur'ān intuitively, he does not preach *bāṭiniyah*,⁴³ the tendency to search for the hidden meanings of the verses. He believes that understanding of the inner meaning of a verse is possible only through understanding of its outer meaning; only inside the shell can one find the pearl.

Kamal also mentions al-Ghazālī's taking a pragmatic approach of safeguarding interpretations from the risk of caprice. He (al-Ghazālī) believes that the possibility of interpretation is related to its decisiveness which is also determined by its practical application and usefulness in society. If an interpretation is seen to be harmful to religious beliefs and the *ummah*, the interpreter should be charged with infidelity.⁴⁴

Another dimension of al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics is that, for those who are not endowed with mystical intuition, the task of understanding the Qur'ānic text becomes problematic. As noted earlier, the aim of al-Ghazālī's methodology, as with Husserl's phenomenology, is to reach the essence of the text. For al-Ghazālī, however, the discovery of essence is achieved by mystical intuition rather than by categorical intuition, as it is with Husserl. At the same time, al-Ghazālī believes that only those individuals who seek the spiritual path are gifted with the faculty of mystical intuition.⁴⁵

Similarly, Amer Latif in his study stresses the hermeneutic nature of *ta'wīl*-based interpretations by presenting Rūmī's point of view in which he says, "Like al-Ghazālī, Rūmī (d. 672/1273) also believed that [the] Qur'ān is actually a practice of self-understanding."⁴⁶ Rūmī uses the binary analytic pair of form and meaning in developing his hermeneutics. He also offers two levels of reality for understanding the Qur'ān; the outer and inner levels. Rūmī emphasises the repeated exhortations made by the Qur'ān to its readers to use their intelligence (*'Aql*). The purpose of this exhortation is to

⁴³ *Al-Bāṭiniyya* is a sect amongst Muslims who only believe in the inner meanings of the Qur'ān whilst rejecting its outward and literal meaning.

⁴⁴ Kamal, "Al-Ghazālī's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology", p.86, 2004.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁴⁶ Amer Latif, "Quranic Narrative and Sufi Hermeneutics: Rumi's Interpretations of Pharaoh's Character," PhD Dissertation, Stony Brook University, 2009,

reflect, ponder and meditate on the immanence of God in the universe. He asks his readers to seek evidence before believing any narration of the Qur'ān. This distinction between form (*ṣūrah*) and meaning (*ma'nā*) is fundamental to Rūmī's teachings. He uses this pair as a tool to analyse every existing entity, including human beings and the Qur'ān. According to Rūmī, the form of something is its outward appearance while its meaning is its inward and unseen reality. Similarly, the form of a human being is the body and the meaning of a human being is the soul or spirit. In the domain of language, words are the form while their denotations are the meanings. Thus, Rūmī's approach also exemplifies *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics that may be compared with that of Shaykh al-'Alāwī. In this respect Rūmī's stance is evidently different from that of his contemporary exegetes.⁴⁷ Rūmī makes a sharp distinction between form and meaning and clearly prefers meaning over form, and yet does not see form as an obstacle. What he does say however, is that form is an obstacle only if one refuses to accept that there is something beyond form. By itself, form is the portal to meaning and seekers need to cling to it so that form might lead them to its inward reality. Rūmī says, "Seize upon the outward even if it flies crookedly! In the end the outward leads to the inward."⁴⁸

Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) is another figure whose work reflects esoteric hermeneutics. His mystical vision offers a useful comparison with the work of Shaykh al-'Alāwī. Ibn 'Arabī is well known for his association of philosophy with mysticism. His interpretations are based on his individual spiritual experience rather than the physical intermediary.⁴⁹ He uses his concept of a threefold universe in his interpretation of the Qur'ān, and relates it to the highest level, in the realm of Cherubic Intellects, which is uncontaminated intellectual insight.

⁴⁷ Latif, "Quranic Narrative and Sufi Hermeneutics," p. 12.

⁴⁸ The Mathnawī of Jalāluddīn Rumī, Ed. and trans. by R.A. Nicholson; 8 vols London: Luzac, 1925–1940.

Chittick, William C. Ed. The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi. Albany, New York: State

University of New York

⁴⁹ Chittick, William C. Ibn 'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Steigerwald⁵⁰ shows that another intermediary level revealed in the Qur'ānic hermeneutics of Ibn 'Arabī is related to the universe of Angel-Souls who shift the celestial spheres and govern the world of active imagination, or idea-images (*khayāl*). In other words, Ibn 'Arabī requires an active imagination for understanding the universe. Steigerwald further states that the third level of Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation is the connectivity of the physical universe perceptible to the senses.⁵¹

He used his concept of a threefold universe in interpreting the Qur'ān. According to Ibn 'Arabī, these folds include:

Firstly, at the highest level, there is the universe of Cherubic Intellects (*'ālam al-jabarūt*) which can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception. Secondly, at an intermediary level is the universe of Angelic-Souls (*'ālam al-malakūt*) who move the celestial spheres and govern the world of active imagination or idea-images (*khayāl*). [This is also] the place of theophanic visions which can be perceived by active imagination. Thirdly, at the lowest level is the physical universe (*'ālam al-mulk*) perceptible to the senses.⁵²

Access to these folds is evidently an esoteric experience, hence *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic Sufi hermeneutics in this thesis will focus primarily on Gnostic hermeneutics, in contradistinction to linguistic hermeneutics. Ghazālī⁵³ and Aḥmed⁵⁴ in their studies confirm that Gnostic translation is a kind that is based on spiritual knowledge and insight into texts.

In contrast, the classical scholars took account of the Prophet's life, including words and actions, and treated them as a living commentary of the Qur'ān. They also used such commentaries to provide a practicing framework for individuals. The commentators of both classical and modern *tafsīr* believe that it is very difficult to translate the Arabic language into English or any

⁵⁰ Steigerwald, D., 2014. *The Mystical Visions of Ibn Arabi*. California State University.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ghazali 2000

⁵⁴ Aḥmed 2011

other language. Tustari's *Tafsīr al-Azīm*⁵⁵ and *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* constitute an important part of the foundation of any enquiry into the classical *tafsīr*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics and *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics. Ibn Ajība⁵⁶ also features in classical religious literature although he is a relatively unknown figure in Western scholarship.

In his book, *What is Sufism?* Martin Lings speaks of the rich symbolism contained in the Qur'ān.⁵⁷ He distinguishes the affinity of the Sufis—as opposed to other Muslims—towards the Qur'ān, as well as the relationship between the Gnostic and the Qur'ānic text. He refers to the Qur'ānic Revelation as embracing every aspect of human life, “leaving absolutely nothing to Caesar”, and alluding to the Qur'ān as an embodiment of the outer and inner, of *shari'a* and *ḥaqīqa*. He also alludes to certain passages as reaching a level which infinitely transcends the duality of Creator and created, Lord and slave, and which is no less than the degree of the Divine Essence Itself. The Qur'ān, according to Lings, is the book of the entire community, yet at the same time, and above all, it is the book of a minority, the book of a spiritual elite.

‘The Qur'ān commands this dual status in different ways. Firstly, it is full of ‘open’ verses which every believer can and indeed must apply to him or herself, but which may nonetheless be said to apply pre-eminently to the Sufis. For example, the supplication contained in *al-Fātiḥah*, the opening chapter, is “*Guide us upon the straight path.*”⁵⁸ This occurs several times in Muslim daily ritual prayers and is consequently the most oft-repeated supplication in Islam. It ‘belongs’ especially to the Sufis because, being by far the most ‘path-minded’ members of the *ummah*, they can give themselves to this verse as no others can, entering into it as into their own element.

Moreover, Sufis alone do justice to the superlative implicit in the ascent towards *ma'rifa*. In general, the mystic could be defined as one who has asked

⁵⁵ Al-Tustarī, Sahl ibn Abd Allāh. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al- Arabiyyah al-Kubrā, 1911.

⁵⁶ Ibn 'Ajība (1747-1809) was an 18th century Moroccan saint of the Shādhili Darqāwi Sufi lineage (*silsila*), and is part of the spiritual lineage of Shaykh al-'Alāwī.

⁵⁷ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (University of California Press, 1975).

⁵⁸ Q. 1:6.

the question: "How can I transcend myself?" It is in answer to this question that Sufism exists, and for no other reason, for it is by definition the most direct approach to God, so much that the word *tariqah* (way) which is partly synonymous with *ṣīrāt* (path),⁵⁹ has by extension the meaning of Sufi order or brotherhood. Lings also makes reference to a comparable verse with an inner and outer meaning. He says the whole of Sufism is summed up in this verse of "seeking to return"⁶⁰ (*istirjā'*): "*Verily we are for God and verily unto Him we are returning.*"⁶¹ Although every believer is necessarily for God in some degree or other, the mystic may be said to be for God in a way which the rest of the community is not, for mysticism implies total dedication. Moreover, in the context of both verses, it must be remembered that Sufism is nothing if not a movement of return, an ebb. By Sufi standards, the rest of the *ummah*, although facing in the right direction, is comparably stationary. According to Lings, the Gnostics are referred to as the travellers (*sālikūn*). He asserts that for the Sufis, the outer meaning is included in the inner meaning and that in many verses the outer and inner meanings apply to quite different domains. He gives the example of the Prophetic saying when the Companions of Muḥammad had returned from a battle against the infidels, he reportedly announced, "We have come back from the lesser Holy War (*jihād*) to the greater Holy War." His Companions asked, "What is the greater Holy War?" He answered, "The war against the soul (*nafs*)."⁶² This can be interpreted as the key to the inner meaning of all those verses in the Qur'ān which refer to *jihād* and the infidels. Lings maintains that only the mystic is capable of this inner realisation; that the war against the inner infidels and the rebellious elements of the soul is the greater war.⁶³

In his article⁶⁴ on spiritual hermeneutics, Henry Corbin comments on the analogy of Qur'ān and *Furqān*⁶⁵ presented by Ibn 'Arabi. This analogy enables

⁶⁰ Lings, *What is Sufism?* P. 27-28

⁶¹ Q. 2:156.

⁶² Lings, *What is Sufism?*

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 28-29.

⁶⁴ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) p.211

an understanding of what may be referred to as the two natures of the Book. It is first a source of human disappearance in its “sea of wisdom”, or union with God (*fanā*), and second, as a means of true permanence (*baqā*). The Qur’ān as *Furqān* allows one to recover oneself in one’s relationship with God as He speaks to us.⁶⁶

Corbin often refers to the inner reality of the Qur’ān by quoting the *ḥadīth* “he who knows himself knows his Lord”, which he sometimes conversely paraphrases as “he who knows himself knows his Qur’ān.”⁶⁷ This paraphrasing foregrounds the coincidence of the created appearance of the Qur’ān in the consciousness of the faithful and its supreme identity with the Word of God. He says that such an understanding transcends the terms of the theological debate over the created versus the uncreated nature of the Book. It is the best antidote against an abstract, literalist and totalitarian perception of the Qur’ān as absolute otherness by a strong affirmation of its dimension of immanence, while at the same time undercutting the facile relativism of contemporary religious discourses that reduce the Book to matters of private opinions or feelings. In fact, there is no better way to articulate this paradox than by referring to Corbin’s commentary on Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement, “No one will ever understand what we have just said except for him who is himself, in his person (*fī nafsi hī*) a Qur’ān.”⁶⁸

In his approach to canonical scripture, Ibn ‘Arabī fulfills the role of mystical exegete. According to him, each word of the Qur’ān has unlimited meanings, but all meanings are intended by God. Correct recitation of the Qur’ān allows readers to access new meanings at every reading. He says, “When meaning repeats itself for someone reciting the Qur’ān, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance.” In fact, Ibn ‘Arabī typically regarded words as symbolic expressions subject to

⁶⁵ *Furqān* is one of the names of the Qur’ān forged on the Arabic root FRQ, which implies the idea of splitting, separating and dividing. In contrast, the root of Qur’ān, QRH, which means reading, indicates by the idea of gathering and re-uniting.

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, p. 211

⁶⁷ According to most scholars of *ḥadīth*, this is not established as a Prophetic *Ḥadīth*. This is also what Imam Nawawi said, affirming that, “It is not established.” See Sakhāwī al-Maqāsid al-Ḥasana 1.220.I.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

interpretive efforts, which he called *ta'bīr* (the act of “crossing over”). Thus, for him the truth of the interpretive effort presents itself in the act of crossing over from one state to another. Difference becomes the root of all things, since for something to be in a constant state of crossing it is constantly differentiated, not only from other things, but also from itself. Thus, with respect to scriptural hermeneutics, Ibn ‘Arabī was convinced of the infinite potential for inherent meaning in divine revelation, especially in sacred scripture. Such an understanding of the nature of scripture can be invaluable because it demands that believers not only take a stance of conviction within the teachings of their sacred texts, but also that they realise this conviction. The depth does not restrict or exhaust in any way the potential meaning of these texts.

In her detailed analysis of the *Kashf al-Asrār*, Annabel Keeler explores the way in which hermeneutics and doctrine interact in a Sufi commentary on the Qur’ān.⁶⁹ Like earlier works in the field of Sufi exegesis, such as those by Louis Massignon⁷⁰, Henri Corbin, Paul Nwyia, Gerhard Bowering and Pierre Lory, her study pays close attention to the relationship between the Qur’ānic word, mystical experience, and the language of interpretation. It views language with regard not only to the evolving terminologies for the exposition of mystical experience, but also to the context of an emerging literary language which, in the early twelfth century, was becoming indispensable to the expression of the doctrines of mystical love. Thus, Keeler’s study considers the way in which Sufi exegesis may reflect a particular spiritual ethos as well as the mystical experience of the commentator. Throughout the book the subtleties and complexities of Sufi hermeneutics and doctrine are clearly explained with reference to other relevant Sufi literature.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur’an Commentary of Rashid al-Din Maybudi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷⁰ Louis Massignon, *Testimonies and Reflections*, selected and introduced by Herbert Mason, University of Notre Dame Press, 1989. Corbin, H. (1969). *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arab* (Trans. R. Manheim. Original French, 1958.) Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press. Nwyia Paul, al-Rasāil al-Sughrā, (ed) Beirut 1958, Bowering, Gerhard.

⁷¹ Ibid.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Sufis' belief in the Qur'ān is that it is the fundamental source of mystical thought, inspiration, and gnosis, and thus, they maintain that all of their concepts and terms originate in it, and in the words of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, *fal Qur'ān huwa 'ayn al-ḥaqīqa* (the Qur'ān is the essence and source of al reality). Sufi commentators, since the early days of classical esoteric *tafsīr* have approached the Qur'ānic narrative through allegorical and metaphorical interpretations because they believe that its text may be understood as including this multilayered depth of divine meaning hidden underneath the literal meaning.

Previous Research on Lubāb-al-'Ilm fī Sūrah al-Najm

In his book, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Martin Lings comments on Shaykh al-'Alāwī's interpretation of selected verses from *Sūrah al Najm* in *Lubāb al-'ilm*.⁷² Lings also covers the aspects of gnosis ('*irfān*) and Shaykh al-'Alāwī's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Lings concurs with Shaykh al-'Alāwī's argument that the doctrine should not be conflated with pantheism and monism.

Martin Lings has also produced a large collection of literary, Sufic and intellectual works. Some people consider Lings' books, *Muḥammad: His Life* based on the earliest sources and his book 'A Sufi Saint of the twelfth century: Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alawi, his spiritual heritage and legacy' and 'What is Sufism?' Which have a distinctive, poetic style, to be the best written in English about Islam and Islamic Sufism.

Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas⁷³ in his translation of, *The Mysticism of Ḥamza Faṣṣūri*, refers to al-'Alāwī's commentary on *Lubāb al-'ilm fī Sūrah al-Najm* on the topic of the Night Journey (*Isrā*). This, al-Attas says, serves as an apt summary of Ḥamza's third treatise (*muntahā*) since it deals similarly with an exposition on the nature of Gnosis and *waḥdat al wujūd*. Ḥamza's views on

⁷² Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth century*.

⁷³ Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamza Faṣṣūri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malay press, 1970).

the interpretation of the Qur'ān are similar to that of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, since they both espoused the doctrine of *waḥdat al wujūd*.

Khalid Williams⁷⁴ in his book, *The Qur'ān and the Prophet in the Writings of Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alāwī*, considers several important writings of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, revealing his method of commentary, his mastery as a commentator and a Sufi writer and his exposition of esoteric knowledge. His translation of the commentary on *Sūrah al-Najm* was one of his selected works from Shaykh al-'Alāwī. Williams has done an excellent job with his translation. However, my translation differs slightly in that I have given a full annotated translation with clear, descriptive footnotes. My approach to the translation of *Sūrah al-Najm* in some places appears more straightforward in terms of choosing words that are easily comprehensible, yet at the same time holding close to the spirit and intended message of the author's Arabic text. My footnotes provide clarity on key Sufi thoughts and terms expressed by the author. It also makes reference to parallel sources by the author, as confirmation of his esoteric explanation of other chapters of the Qur'an.

Omneya Nabil Moḥammad Ayad,⁷⁵ in her thesis examines the life and works of Shaykh al-'Alāwī. She has an entire chapter dedicated to his contribution in the field of Sufism and its spiritual stages in comparison to other major works on the topic. She mentions in her literature review that, "there were passing references of Shaykh al-'Alāwī found in the writings of Emile Dermenghem who mentions him as one of the most celebrated mystic Shaykhs of our time."⁷⁶ Concerning *Lubāb al-'ilm fī Sūrah al-Najm*, she says that Shaykh al-'Alāwī "eloquently deduced some Sufi hermeneutics," in his commentary.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafā Alāwī, Shaykh Ahmad Alāwī, *The Qur'ān and the Prophet in the Writings of Shaykh Aḥmad Al- Alāwī*, trans. by Khalid Williams (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2014).

⁷⁵ Omneya Nabil Muḥammad Ayad, "The Contemporary Sufi Heritage of Shaykh Aḥmad Ibn Muṣṭafā' al-'Alāwī: The Seven Spiritual Stages of the Sufi Path," MA Thesis, Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations, The American University in Cairo, 2013

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.3.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

In the preface to the book, *The Qur'ān and the Prophet in the writings of Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alāwī*, Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr writes:

'Shaykh al-'Alāwī was a supreme metaphysician and saint, but he was also a major Islamic scholar. His works on *tafsīr* reveal him to be a master Sufi commentator of Islam's Sacred Scripture in the tradition of the classical Sufi commentators such as Imam al-Qushayrī, Ibn 'Arabī, 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kashāni, Ibn Barrajan, Ibn 'Ajiba and the like but with many 'new' insights. His commentary on the *ḥadīth* also follows the long tradition of esoteric commentaries on the Prophetic traditions written by Sufis over the ages. While his main task was to train human souls and expound the deepest truths of *ma'rifa*, he was also engaged in those social and intellectual debates of the day that concerned the integrity of the Islamic tradition. To this end he struggled against modernism and the anti-Sufi trend in Algeria and beyond. Like his spiritual heritage, his intellectual *jihād* in this domain (of *tafsīr*) is still of the utmost significance today. Al-'Alāwī is all the more relevant at a time when the essential message of traditional Islam, which includes teachings about both the *shari'a* and the Way (*al-Ṭarīqa*) and at the heart of which stands (*ḥaqīqa*), is being threatened by both modernism and fundamentalism. These elements that are inimical to traditional Islam are grounded in a truncated and impoverished understanding of the Islamic message.⁷⁸

Information and awareness of Shaykh al-'Alāwī first began to spread in the English world through the great work of Martin Lings (Shaykh Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn) who himself also belonged to the Sufi order of Shaykh al-'Alāwī. The book he wrote, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, contained precise information about the legacy and spiritual heritage of Shaykh al-'Alāwī with ingenious translations of some of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Arabic poems into free flowing poetic English. Lings also gave a detailed biography with a thorough account of the Shaykh's life as told by the Shaykh himself. The book of *The Sufi Saint* has remained popular and became much sought after amongst

⁷⁸ Seyyed Hossein Naṣr, "Introduction," in *The Qur'an and the Prophet*, Berkley, 2012.

English speaking readers and has been read widely in the last fifty years, and has also been translated into other European languages. However, despite its large circulation Lings' book did not lead to extensive translations of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's works into English as opposed to French into which many of his works has been rendered during the past decades.

The work of Khalid Williams, who also belongs to the spiritual lineage of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, has filled an important gap after Lings by making some of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's valuable Arabic writings available in the English language. His effort for his brilliant and careful translation of the Arabic texts is certainly to be commended. His book in particular speaks about the two guiding principles of Islam: the Qur'ān and the Prophet, of which both has been preserved through al-'Alāwī's writings in the form treatises and in records of answers which he gave to his disciples in his regular gatherings. He has concentrated on the Shaykh's teachings, both written and oral and has added to the corpus of English translations of Qur'ānic exegesis especially those with a Sufi approach which is fairly rare. His seems to have the intention of bringing across a spiritual and intellectual message to both Muslims and non-Muslims in the West.

The M.A. thesis of Omneya Nabil Muhammad Ayad titled, *The Contemporary Sufi Heritage of Shaykh al-'Alawī - The Seven Spiritual Stages of the Sufi Path* examines another Sufi work of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, a commentary on 'al-Mawād al-Ghaythiyya'.

In this thesis she aims at demonstrating the spiritual stages in the divine path to God represented by Shaykh al-'Alāwī both at the theoretical level and its pragmatic application on ritual worship, and with the intention to introduce Shaykh al-'Alāwī to a broader English speaking audience who did not have the privilege of being exposed to the Shaykh's prominent intellectual scholarly output. Her thesis addresses a more practical aspect of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Sufi doctrine. She writes:

'The work of Shaykh al-'Alawī on the spiritual stages, among other works are good candidates for deep studies as they were not treated and rarely explored in Western scholarship. Also, in total these works offer us an

insightful guideline and sketches a clear map which draws the way of the wayfarer to reach his spiritual destination while striking a balance between the outer forms and inner meanings so they would end up being two faces of the same coin.'

Her research has also widened the gap to stimulate academic researchers to investigate and analyze the scholarly works of a great luminary and Sufi master of the twentieth century and to give his works the due attention it deserves.

Life and Works of the Shaykh al-'Alāwī: a brief Biography on Shaykh al- Alāwī

Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alāwī was born in 1869 in Mustaghānem, Algeria. He was one of the most famous Sufi saints of the 20th century, with many followers both in the Muslim world and in Europe. Martin Lings's biography of al-'Alāwī, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, brought him to the attention of readers of English. Shaykh al-'Alāwī was a prolific author and his works covered several traditional Islamic subjects. He was a Sufi, a *Mālikī* scholar, a jurist (*faqīh*), a Quranic exegete (*mufassir*) and a poet.

He was also the spiritual Shaykh and renewer of the Shādhilī-Darqāwī Sufi order, from which he founded the 'Alāwīyah order that bears his name. The French Orientalist Emile Dermenghem characterised al-'Alāwī as "one of the most celebrated mystic Shaykhs of our time."⁷⁹ He was born during a time of concerted French colonisation. It was also at a time that Sufism was under attack from the Salafiyyah Movement, which makes his spiritual renewal even more remarkable. His first encounter with Sufis was the Īsāwī Ṭarīqah, but he went on to become attached to the celebrated Shaykh Muḥammad al-Būzīdī (d. 1909).

⁷⁹ Emile Dermenghem, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Muslim World Vol. 2*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). P. 71

Within the lifetime of al-Būzīdī, Shaykh al-'Alāwī was appointed *muqaddam* (representative of the Shaykh) by the age of twenty-five, with authority to initiate others into the order. Shaykh al-'Alāwī was actively involved in the affairs of the day, reproofing those Algerians who had become naturalised French citizens, and expressing his strong disapproval of westernisation, secularisation and modernisation. He was also critical of the *Salafīyyah* movement and in his weekly newspaper *al-Balāgh*;⁸⁰ he defended Sufism against its critics.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī established the very first Arabic-language newspaper in Algeria titled, *Lisān ad-Dīn*, in 1923. The publication of an Arabic newspaper was needed at the time as a way of resisting the assault on the identity of Muslims and the Arabic language. In 1927 he published a second newspaper titled *al-Balāgh al-Jazā'irī*, in which a series of articles were written to raise the awareness of Algerians against the issue of adopting the French nationality and the impermissibility of doing so under the French occupation. Several pressing issues were addressed in the publication, such as the issue of prostitution which was widespread in all the Algerian cities and villages, condoned by the French colonial powers. The newspaper also addressed issues of both national and international interest. For example, it condemned the position of the Kemalists and their movement against the Ottoman caliphate. The late Algerian historian, Aḥmad Tawfīq al-Madanī, praised the newspaper's role in spreading moderate Islamic teachings and reinforcing the Algerian national identity.⁸¹ Following the death of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, Shaykh Sidi 'Adda ibn Tunis took over the command of the 'Alāwīyah order and revived their publications, then, after three years of suspension, Shaykh

⁸⁰ *Al-Balāgh* was also a means for the Shaykh to address the community at large and to preach a renovation of Islam in all its aspects, not puritanically, as one who seeks to strip his religion of everything that goes beyond his understanding, but on the contrary seeking to safeguard its dimension of breadth and above all to restore what it has lost of its dimension of depth.

⁸¹ Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madanī (1899-1983) was an Algerian nationalist leader during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1983) and a minister of the GPRA, a provisional exile government of the Front de liberation nationale (FLN). He belonged to the Association of the '*ulamā*', an Islamic organisation that formed a main pillar of the nationalist movement. After the war he became an acclaimed historian.

'Addah ibn Tunis issued a magazine titled *al-Murshid* in 1946, replacing *al-Balāgh*. This new publication was to act as the voice of the al-'Alāwīyah order. The unique addition to this new monthly periodical was that it was published in both Arabic and French to attract a wider readership. The magazine focused on a range of issues, such as Sufism and its true meaning, and the importance of adhering to the right religious teachings. The publication also addressed current affairs in the Muslim world and sought to inspire Muslims to remain committed to their faith.

Over a period of six years, over 230 articles were published in the magazine on different social, religious and political issues in the Islamic world. As such, the publication may be considered a relevant record of a critical period in the history of Algeria.

The order gained popularity beyond the borders of Algeria in Europe, North America, Asia and the rest of Africa. The activities of the order included teaching the Qur'ān and various Islamic sciences and the proselytisation of Islam to people of other faiths. The latter efforts were extraordinarily successful.

One of the ways in which the order spread the teachings of Islam was through its printing house in Mustaghānem. This facility published numerous treatises and books in both Arabic and French for readers of other faiths.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Personality

Shaykh al-'Alāwī was humble and self-effacing, and has had a profound effect on those closest to him. His successor, Shaykh Adda bin Tunis, described him as very wise, compassionate and dynamic. Family bonds were very important to al-'Alāwī. Caring for the poor and orphans played an important part in his personal life, with his *zāwiyah* in Mustaghānem always keeping its doors open to newcomers. When Shaykh al-'Alāwī became ill, he gave all his worldly possessions as a religious bequest (*waṣīyyah*) in the Way of God, to his family, to those who have devoted themselves to learning and to the poor and the needy. These bequests would suggest that he sought the eternal

reward for obedience to God alone and to express his gratitude to God. This is consistent with the Prophetic narration from Abu Huraira in *Saḥiḥ Muslim* and *al-Bukhāri* in which the Prophet said, "...when a person dies, all his deeds are severed except three; a perpetual charity, beneficial knowledge and a pious child praying for him."⁸²

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's works offer a glimpse of how he succeeded in enriching the Sufi heritage with his profound inspiration and knowledge of the divine. He maintained equilibrium between exploring the inner meanings of *sharī'a* and its spiritual manifestation on the one hand, and the outer practice of religious rituals, observation of the Prophetic examples, and application of the revealed law on the other. Revealed law is the shell that envelops the spiritual core of divine knowledge.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's impact globally occurred at a time when Sufism was threatened by the rapid spread of Wahhabi literalism. Unlike Sufism, Wahhabism advocates, inter alia, the rejection of the use of pious intermediaries to gain the pleasure of God. Consequently, some Orientalists like Arthur John Arberry were led to believe that Sufism was in a state of terminal decline. However, when Arberry learned of the influence of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, he was persuaded otherwise.

It is noteworthy that Shaykh al-'Alāwī's physical appearance made a deep impression on those around him. This is exemplified in the writings of the Frenchman Dr Marcel Carret, his medical doctor. According to Michel Valsan's article, "Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alāwī"; when Dr Carret first met Shaykh al-'Alāwī he was struck by his Christ-like face.⁸³

The teachings of Shaykh al-'Alāwī stressed the threefold nature of the religion (*dīn*) as mentioned in the famous *Ḥadīth Jibrīl*: Islam, represented by one's inner and outer submission to *sharī'a*, true faith (*īmān*), and the perfection of faith (*Iḥsān*) in the knowledge of God. ⁸⁴He authored works in

⁸² Sunan al-Tirmidhī 'Īsā Al-Tirmidhī Edited by Ibrāhīm 'Aṭwah 'Iwaḍ Mustafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī Second Edition 1975) Ḥadīth No. 1376 Vol. 3 Pg.651

⁸³ Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alāwī by Michel Valsan Source: Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 5, No. 3. (Summer,1971). © World Wisdom, Inc. www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

⁸⁴ " Narrated from Umar al-Khattāb in the Ṣaḥiḥ of Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 54

each of these mainstays of the religion. However, his most important legacy is the spiritual path he founded, which emphasised knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*) and the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Supreme Name of Allāh.

Among his teachings is the notion that the true measure of a spiritual path is neither in books, nor in the literalist strictures of right and wrong, but in open hearts receptive to knowledge of divine realities conveyed by Prophetic revelation. Shaykh al-'Alāwī has stressed the abiding truth that Sufism is based on certainties, not opinions. The al-'Alāwīyah order became widespread in the Muslim world, and the Shaykh is widely recognised as a true spiritual master. He died in Mustaghānem in 1934 (1353 AH).

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Sufi Impact on the West

Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alāwī established his own branch of the Shādhiliyya Darqāwiyya order which came to be known as the 'Alawiyya order that began spreading not only in the Maghrib, but also in Yemen, Syria and other lands east as far as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī, in the words of his successor Shaykh Sidi 'Adda bin Tunis,⁸⁵ was considered the spiritual pole (*Quṭb*) of his age and one of the greatest Sufis of the past few centuries and in fact of the whole history of Sufism. His fame spread not only through Algeria and the Maghrib in general but also beyond to other parts of the Islamic world in the West.

'Augustine Berque, who spent time with Shaykh al-'Alāwī from 1921 until the Shaykh's death in 1934 was fascinated by the character of the Shaykh and even wrote a long article about him. He praised the completeness of the Shaykh. He saw in him both a traditional saint and a modern visionary.

The special quality of the contemporary nature, openness, and vision of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, coupled with his preservation of his traditional roots, made some elite Western thinkers, such as Frithjof Schuon accept Sufism at his

⁸⁵ In his *qasīda* of praise to Shaykh al-'Alāwī (*bushrā 'an Aḥmada*), Shaykh 'Adda Bin Tunis says in the first line; 'My glad tidings I convey to you about our teacher Ahmad al-'Alāwī, the Quṭb and Imām. (see Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *Dīwān*, under *Dīwān* Shaykh 'Adda, p. 22, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2006)

hand, or send to him all those who desired to drink in this type of Eastern spirituality, as René Guénon did. Who were they? What was their connection to Islamic Sufism in general and the 'Alawi Darqawi in particular? What was their role in establishing the Western branch of the 'Alawi Darqawi Shadhili? Darqawi Sufism is the spring from which Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafa al-'Alāwī drank, and he achieved a great rank in it, making him the focus of a large number of murids, not just from the Arab or Islamic world, which would have been enough by itself, but also from Europe and the U.S.A. where his fame spread because of the great openness and flexibility of his teachings and his tolerant and charismatic personality.⁸⁶

The French scholar, Eric Geoffroy, says about him in his essay: "The influence of Shaykh al-'Alāwī was such that it affected many Europeans. Whether they were orientalist, converts to Islam or just visitors, all of them stress the spiritual magnetism that emanated from the Shaykh. Regarding the testimony of orientalist, I will confine myself to just two of them. Arberry, for example, recognized that the sanctity of Shaykh al-'Alāwī "recalled the golden age of medieval mystics." Despite that he wrote in the same book, entitled Sufism, that there had not been any real mystics since Junaid or Ibn 'Arabi. He first argued that mysticism had declined after the thirteenth century and then stated that there was a contemporary saint worthy of the great medieval masters."

Similarly, Martin Lings in his book, *What is Sufism?* Compared Shaykh al-'Alāwī to al-Junaid of Baghdad, who was named 'the master of the order of Sufis.' Martin also described Shaykh al-'Alāwī as "A Saint of the Twentieth Century" in a book which he wrote in English under the same name.

The French philosopher René Guénon ('Abd al-Wahid Yahya) who was a considerable scholar in Islamic philosophy and Sufism became Muslim at the hands of Shaykh Salama ar-Radi, the Shaykh of the Hamidiyya Shadhiliyya order who had a great influence on Guénon and other orientalist.

⁸⁶ Islamic Sufism in the West, Dr. Aziz Kobaiti Idrissi, Diwan Press, p. 38

'Martin Lings was born in Manchester in the north of England on 24th January 1909. He is considered a very important writer, and an important western academic who has presented to the West a profound recognition of its inheritance from Islam and its gnostic tradition. He is the author of the most famous contemporary biography of the Prophet, *Muḥammad: His life based on the Earliest Sources*, a book whose reading is considered indispensable for every Westerner when they want to learn something about Islam.

"The American proselytizer Mark Hanson, or Hamza Yusuf, describes him by saying: "Martin Lings was a spiritual giant in an age of dwarfed terrestrial aspirations and endeavors."⁸⁷

"Lings obtained his doctorate from the University of London in 1959. It was about Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafa al-'Alāwī and was published under the title *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alāwī*, his spiritual heritage and legacy. This book is considered as a synopsis of the life-path of Martin Lings, and the result of his journey in Sufism and spiritual reflection burst forth from it. A sincere search for the truth was in general one of the hallmarks of his life and led him to the discovery of the books of René Guénon, whose intellectual insights helped him to grasp the fallacies of the contemporary world in which religion has become sidelined. His awareness was awakened to the fact that inner truth is not confined to a single religious tradition but is common to all divine religions. He says about the books of Guénon, "I knew that I was face to face with the Truth. It was almost like being struck by lightning. I knew that something must be done about this." That is how it came about that Lings chose to convert to Islam, since the Islamic religion, being the last, is by that fact superior to other religious forms because of its nearness in time, something which is reflected in the freshness, vibrancy and dynamism of the teachings of the spiritual core, Sufism.⁸⁸ Lings had taken on the name 'Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Deen' and was

⁸⁷ Hamza Yusuf, "Q-NEWS", June (2005), n : 363, p. 53

⁸⁸ Michael Fitzgerald, "In Memoriam: Dr. Martin Lings" in *Vincit Omnia Veritas*, 11, 1, p. 90

initiated into the 'Alawiyya Darqawiyya Shadhiliyya order at the hand of Titus Burckhardt, a representative of Schuon in Basel. Lings became one of the most important figures in the West and later a muqaddam of the Maryamiyya 'Alawiyya tariqa. However, he continued on Islamic lines until his death on 12 May 2005. Throughout his life, Lings remained sincere to Islamic Sufi principles. Despite his belief in the universality of Sufism, he also believed in the necessity of practicing it within an Islamic structure. He says in the second section of his book, *What is Sufism?*: those who insist that Sufism is 'free of the shackles of religion' do so partly because they imagine that its universality is at stake. But however sympathetic we may feel towards their preoccupation with the undoubted aspect of Sufism, it must not be forgotten that particularity is perfectly compatible with universality, and in order to perceive this truth in an instant we have only to consider....Islamic art."⁸⁹

Another significant Western personality is the Swiss philosopher and writer Frithjof Schuon. In 1932 he was sent by Guénon to Shaykh Aḥmad Muṣṭafa al-'Alāwī, the Shaykh of the Alawiyya Darqawiyya Shadhiliyya tariqa in Algeria, where he embraced Islam, taking the name 'Isa Nur ad-Deen Aḥmad, and joined the Darqawiyya Shadhiliyya.⁹⁰

In 1934, after the death of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, Frithjof Schuon was appointed muqaddam of the Alawiyya Darqawiyya Shadhiliyya order in the West by the *khalifa* of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, 'Adda Ben Tounis, evidenced by a document written in his own hand. The supporters of Schuon consider this document to be an *ijaza* which both confirms Schuon's sincerity and also gives him the spiritual authority to found a branch of the 'Alawiyya Darqawiyya order in the West, which was to have unprecedented influence due to its complete independence from its base in Mostaghanem in Algeria. He later changed its name to the Maryamiyya order. Others consider the contents of that document to be weak; deeming it merely a customary document which did not in fact give Schuon any special authority to call people to himself or to

⁸⁹ Islamic Sufism in the West, Dr. Aziz El Kobaiti Idrisi, Diwan Press, 2012 CE, P. 55

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.39

anyone else, and that the call to Islam referred to in the document was general.

Mark Sedgwick says in reference to it: "Indeed, all the things 'permitted' to Schuon in it are things for which no permission is needed, and which are actually incumbent upon any Muslim anyhow. The 'Diplome' thus has the form of an appointment without any substance. It is hard to think of any reason for Ibn Tunis to produce such an empty document save perhaps to respond tactfully to a request for an *ijāza* with which he was unwilling to comply."⁹¹

His Works

About thirty-four of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's works may be regarded as scholarly: encompassing different fields of Islamic studies. The most significant of his works are the ones on Sufism. The following is a list of his works followed by a brief account of each. This list offers a glimpse of his intellectual contributions to Sufism. The first is the book which relates most directly to this thesis.⁹²

1-Lubāb al-'Ilm fī Sūrat al-Najm (The Kernels of Knowledge in the Chapter of the Star):

In this book of exegesis, Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *tafsīr* focusses mainly on expounding the hidden secrets (*asrār*) and esoteric wealth of meaning of this chapter of the Qur'ān. He also explores the issue of prophethood and revelation, as well as the miraculous Prophetic journey of Ascension (*mi'rāj*) to the heavens. Al-'Alāwī examines, at some length, the possibility of seeing God, not only as it applied to the Prophet, but as it may apply to all Muslim gnostics. In respect of some verses, he supports his argument with passages

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 41

⁹² The list of books of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is published by the 'Alāwī publishing house in Mustaghānem under the title, *Manshūrāt al-Maktabah al-Dīniyyah le al-Tariqah al-Sufiyyah al-'Alawiyyah* (1987).

from the Gospel of John, finding in it a support for his own perspective, which is likely to be disagreeable to many Muslim scholars. He eloquently engages the Sufi hermeneutics of these Qur'ānic verses and offers his own unique perspective. His esoteric interpretation of *al-Najm* is systematic and each verse is elucidated with esoteric meaning. He connects all the verses with each other, bringing all the preceding and succeeding verses into a relative linkage in order to maintain a continuity of thought for his readers.

2-A Commentary on ***al-Mawād al-Ghaythiyya***: (The Productive Matters)

The text features detailed commentaries by Shaykh al-'Alāwī in two volumes. The book itself is a compilation of aphorisms written by Shaykh Abū Madyan Shu'ayb ibn al-Ḥusein al-Ansāri, (1116-1198 CE) one of the famous Sufi gnostics in Tunisia.

3-***Al-Abḥāth al-'Alawīyya fī-al-Falsafa al-Islāmiyya***: (The Studies of al-'Alāwī on 'Islamic Philosophy').

This is a philosophical treatise published by Aḥbāb al-Islam in Paris, printed in Arabic and French in 1984. It is a compilation of research papers from different periods and made available for the benefit of followers. The research reflects Shaykh al-'Alāwī's views on creation and the role of humankind in this world. It advocates for shari'a legislation in the public interest. Shaykh al-'Alāwī consistently argues that human laws are mutable and often subject to vested interests, whereas divine law is absolute, based on divine sovereignty and always in the interests of the public.

4-***Risālat al-Nāṣir al-Ma'rūf fī-l-Dhabb 'An Majd al-Taṣawwuf***: (A Treatise in defense of the honor of Taṣawwuf)

This treatise was divided into many parts and was first published in several editions of the journal *al-Balāgh al-Jazā'irī*, signed by *al-Nāṣir Ma'rūf* and written by al-'Alāwī. Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Hāshimī al-Tilmisānī later compiled all the parts of the treatise into a single volume and published it in defense of Sufism.

5-*Nūr al-Ithmid fī Sunnat Wad'al-Yad 'Ala-l-Yad fī-l-Ṣalah:* (The Light of applying the Sunnah by the placing of one hand above the other in prayer)
This small treatise was written in response to a question Shaykh al-'Alāwī received from Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Khalīfa ibn al-Hajj 'Umar al-Madīnī al-Qusaibī from Tunisia, regarding the issue of the clasping of one hand over the other during prayers which is not in accordance to the Māliki *fiqh*.

6-*Al-Risāla al-'Alawīyya fī-al-Aḥkām al-Shar'īyyah:* (The 'Alāwī Treatise on the Rules of Sharī'a)

This treatise is composed of approximately one thousand poetic verses. It also includes the most important religious rulings relating to the creed of monotheism (*shahāda*), as well as a range of other important rites and devotions. He concludes the book with an eloquent treatise on the essentials of Sufism in 132 verses of poetry.

7-*Manhal al-'Irfān fī Tafsīr al-Basmalah wa-Suwar min al-Qur'ān:* (The Fountain of Gnosis on the Exegesis of the Basmalah and other Chapters of the Qur'ān).

This is an exegesis of the Qur'ān consisting of three sections.

8-*Al-Unmudhaj al-Farīd al-Mushīr l-Khālis al-Tawḥīd:* (The Unique Archetype alluding to the Pure Tawḥīd)

In this book, the author expounds on the hidden gems and secrets in the dot of the Arabic letter *bā'*. Except for chapter nine of the Qur'ān, this is the letter with which every chapter of the divine revelation commences.

9-*Miftāḥ 'Ulūm al-Sir fī Tafsīr Sūrat wa-l-'Aṣr:* (The Key to the Secret Knowledge on the Chapter of 'Time')

This is an exegesis of *Sūrah al-'Aṣr*, which unveils its secrets and distinguishes between the different spiritual stations of humanity. In this

commentary, Shaykh al-'Alāwī' also focuses on the attributes of the perfect man, which generally occur in other parts of the Qur'ān.

10-Mi'rāj al-Sālikīn wa-Nihāyat al-Wāsilīn: (The Ascension of the Travellers and the final stage of those who have arrived).

This is a valuable work on Sufism, first published eighty years after it was written. It is one of the earliest writings by 'al-'Alāwī' on the subject of Sufism. The book is also a defence of the esoteric utterances of his mentor, Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb al-Buzīdī al-Mustaghānemi.

11-Al-Qawl al-Mu'tamad fī Mashrū'iyyat al-Dhikr bi-l-Ism al-Mufrad: The Reliable Statement regarding the Lawfulness of Invoking the Single Name 'Allah' (in Dhikr).

This treatise was published in the journal of *al-Balāgh al-Jaza'iri* in its 69, 70 and 71st editions. It was later compiled into a single volume by Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Hashimī al-Tilmisani and published for the benefit of a wider audience.

12-A'dhab al-Manāhil fī-al Ajwibah wa al-Rasā'il: (The most Sweetest Springs with regards to Answers and Treatise).

This book was compiled by Shaykh Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin al-Siddiq al-Ghumārī and focuses on ninety-three questions and answers by Shaykh al-'Alāwī along with thirty-seven letters and a long intimate conversation with God (*munājāh*). These questions and answers are pertinent to theological and juristic methodological issues along with some Sufi questions on morality and spiritual discipline.

13-Ḥikmatuhū: (His (al-'Alāwī's) Aphorisms).

These are aphorisms written by Shaykh al-'Alāwī and translated into French. These encompass all the mystic knowledge that he attained during his long and prolific saintly life.

14-*Al-Minaḥ al-quddūsiyya*: (The Divine Gifts)

This is a commentary on a book written by ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Ibn ‘Ashir al-Fāsī (1582-1631 CE) who was a famous Moroccan Sufi, jurist and logician. Al-Fāsī’s prose is titled, *Guide to the Essentials of Religious Knowledge*. Although al-‘Alāwī’s commentary is only one of many, it differs from the others in that it transposes the two lower realms of religion Islam and Iman into the third higher realm, namely *Iḥsan*. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī presents a purely mystical interpretation of both the doctrine and the rites.

15-*Mazḥar al-Bayyināt fi-l-Tamhīd bi-l-Muqaddimāt*: (The Manifestation of Proofs in Preparation for what lies ahead)

This book includes a rich introduction composed of twenty-five chapters on the importance of *shari’a* for regulating the affairs of human beings. The book also refutes the philosophers’ insistence on the use of the intellect in the metaphysical realm where it does not possess the capacity to grasp metaphysical reality.

16-*Al-Qawl al-Maqbūl fi ma Tawaṣṣal ilayhī al-‘Uqūl*: (The acceptable Word which the intellect has attained)

This is the twenty-fourth in a series of treatises published in the book *A’dhab al-Manāhil*. It consists of three sections on the essentials of monotheism and faith.

17-*Risālat al-Qawl al-Ma’rūf fi-l-Radd ‘Ala man Ankar al-Taṣawwuf*:⁹³ (A letter of a Kind Word in Response to those who reject Taṣawwuf).

This treatise is a reply to the critics of Sufism. It is an eloquent and

⁹³ My MA Thesis deals in detail with this book, and provides the first English translation of the book in its entirety. This book was written in defence of Sufis and Sufism. I have also reviewed the Shaykh’s methodology applied in his *ijtihād* to validate and defend the Sufis in their practices. [A Translation with Critical Introduction of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, *al-Risāla al-Qawl al-Ma’rūf Fi al-Radd ‘Ala Man Ankar al-Taṣawwuf* (A Kind Word in Response to those who reject Sufism) A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Magister Artium in the Department of Foreign Languages, University of the Western Cape Supervisor: Professor Yasien Mohamed].

elaborate treatment of Sufism, elucidating its significance as the essence of Islam.

18-*Miftāḥ al-Shuhūd fī Mazāhir al-Wujūd*: (The key to Witnessing the Manifestations of Existence).

Although this book addresses the subject of astrology and knowledge of the celestial sphere, it primarily focuses on the subject of monotheism and how one can find one's way to God in the universe.

19-*Mabādī' al-Ta'yīd fī Ba'd ma Yaḥtāj ilayhī al-Murīd*: (The Consenting Principles with regard to what the murīd requires).

This book is composed of two parts, but only the first part was published. It focuses on juristic issues related to Islamic rites. The book is characterised by its simple style and eloquent elucidation in matters of interest to Muslims.

20-*Al-Nūr al-Dāwī fī Hikam wa-Munājāt al-Shaykh Al-'Alāwī*: (The Healing Light on the Hikams (Aphorisms) and the intermit discourse (*munājah*) of Shaykh al-'Alāwī).

This is a small, yet valuable record of the author's intimate conversations with God. The value of its contents is such that it may be recommended for the devotee for the purpose of devotions and litanies.

21-*Majālis al-Tadhkīr*: (The Gatherings of Dhikr).

This is a compilation of a series of articles that were published in the *Murshid* journal on issues of invocation of God and following the Sufi path.

22-*Dawḥat al-Asrar fī-l-ṣalah 'Ala-l-Nabiyy al-Mukhtār*: (Unveiling of the Secrets in the salutations on the Chosen Prophet).

This book unveils the secrets of the invocation of peace and blessings on Prophet Muḥammad.

23-*Minhāj al-Taṣawwuf*: (The Method of Sufism).

The available edition of this book is composed of two poems, the first of which is about Sufism, its meaning and the etiquette for the devotee in dealing with his Sufi mentor. Al-'Alāwī' also discusses the necessary attributes that a Sufi Shaykh must possess to qualify as a mentor. The second part of the book is a poem written by Shaykh Abdul Wāhid Ibn 'Āshir, elucidating the principles of Sufism.

24-*Al-Dīwān*: (The Dīwān).

This is a collection of 135 poems in three sections. The first is composed by al-'Alāwī, the second by Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb al-Buzaidī al-Mustaghānami and the third by Shaykh al-Ḥājj 'Adda ibn Tunis al-Mustaghānami. This collection of poems is a guide to the Sufi path, describing the different spiritual stations that the devotee traverses in his quest for the Divine.

25-*Tanbīh al-Qurrā' ila-Kifāh Maqalat al-Murshid al-Gharrā'*:

(Cautioning the readers in their combat towards the Articles in "Al-Murshid" (Newspaper).

This book consists of two parts, published by Shaykh Sidi 'Adda ibn Tunis in the journal *al-Murshid* that was widely circulated in both Arabic and French. More than 230 articles were published on different important religious and political issues relevant to Muslims in the Arab and Islamic world.

26-*Fakk al-'Iqāl 'An Tasarruf al-Af'āl*: (Removing the Shackle of the intellect from the conjugation of the Verbs).

This book deals with the rules for Arabic grammar and syntax along with the division of verbs and their different functions.

27-*Al-Rawḍa al-Saniyya fi-l-Ma'āthir al-'Alawīyya*. (The Sublime Garden and the Glorious Deeds of the 'Alāwīyya (order).

This is an autobiography of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, which can also be considered a valuable contribution to Islamic scholarship.

28-*Al-Shakhs wa-l-Fatawa*: (The individual and the Rulings (Fatāwa).

This book consists of four sections, including letters from people around the world expressing their gratitude and admiration to the unique character and prestigious position that Shaykh al-'Alāwī enjoyed both in Islamic scholarship and social work.

29-*Al-Durra al-Bahiyya fī-Awrād wa-Sanad al-Ṭarīqa al-'Alawīyya*: (The Shining Pearl in the Litanies and the (spiritual) chain of the 'Alāwīyya Ṭarīqa).

This book contains the regiments and litanies of Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb al-Buzaidī al-Mustaghānemi written for the devotees on the Sufi path.

30-*Al-Bahr al-Masjūr fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bī-Maḥḍ al-Nūr*: (The Overflowing Sea in the Exegesis of the Qur'ān with the Pure Light).

This publication, divided into two volumes, contains the exegesis on several parts of the Qur'ān in the Sufi hermeneutical tradition. Unfortunately Shaykh al-'Alāwī died before completing his work on all the chapters of the Qur'ān.

31-*Al-Ḥulal al-Marḍiyya 'Alā-l-Risāla al-'Alawīyya* (The Satisfactory explanations on the 'Alāwī Treatise).

This is a voluminous work on theology, juristic rulings and Islamic law. The depth of the work is evident in the large number of *aḥadīth* and commentaries from traditionalists and *ḥadīth* scholars.

32-*Burhān al-Khuṣūṣiyya fī-l-Ma'āthir al-Buzaydiyya*: (The Proof of Distinction in the Glorious deeds of al-Buzaidi).

This is a unique work by Shaykh al-'Alāwī that remained undiscovered for more than seventy years. The only copy of the book was found by

Muḥammad Rashid al-Bady who is the manager of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī publishing house. It is a biographical work on the author’s mentor and predecessor, Shaykh al-Buzaidī. The book focuses on Shaykh al-Buzaidī’s unique traits and his lineage which extends to Muḥammad.

33-***Qawā’id al-Islam***: (The Rules of Islam).

This book was written in French and was addressed to Muslims unable to read Arabic. It is a manual on how to perform prayers with illustrations to help French Muslims learn how to pray correctly.

34-***Wiqāyat al-Dhākirīn min Ghiwāyat al-Ghāfilīn***: (The Protection of the Rememberers (dhākirūn) from the errors and sins of the heedless (ghāfilūn)).

This book was dedicated to discussing the issue of the invocation of God and the eminent status of the invokers and the rememberers of God. It is filled with Qur’ānic references and *ḥadīth* traditions in support of the prominent position of *dhikr* among other kinds of worship.⁹⁴

The legacy of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī is both spiritual and literary in nature. With regards to the first, his name occurs in the *silsila* of the Shādhiliyya order and this affirms his mastery of the Path. From the Sufi viewpoint, this spiritual legacy of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī was his supreme contribution, for he had realised within himself the truths taught to him by his own master. Then as a master himself, he taught them to others, some of whom would also become teachers in their own turn. With regards to his literary legacy, his importance as a writer is also evident in the continuous value his work has had for the Muslim world. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s teachings can be defined as both traditional and esoteric.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is a combination of hermeneutics in a subjective approach, and Sufi doctrine designed to extrapolate esoteric meaning from the exoteric text of the Qur'ān through the hermeneutic method of *ta'wīl* within the realm of Islamic tradition. This section will also discuss previous studies on esoteric exegesis and their methods of interpretation.

The theoretical framework will assist in revealing Shaykh al-'Alāwī's distinctive metaphysical conception of what he calls "pure unity" (*al-tawḥīd al-maḥḍ*)⁹⁵, or the affirmation of belonging to God alone and to no other. This affirmation appears to be similar to the doctrine of "oneness of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*); since most of *Sūrah al-Najm* is centred on this doctrine. In *Sūrah al-Najm* Shaykh al-'Alāwī concentrates mainly on the inner manifestations of the surah and its divine graces and spiritual secrets, and does not deal much with the exoteric and historical meanings.

It is also important to mention Shaykh al-'Alāwī's larger work of Qur'ānic exegesis wherein he has taken a more comprehensive approach following a pattern of four levels of interpretation. This will help in portraying his style and method of esoteric interpretation. As part of the theoretical framework I would also like to elaborate on the hermeneutical principles established by Shaykh al-'Alāwī which he mentions in the introduction of his major *tafsīr* work, *Al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*.⁹⁶

To guide the methodology of the research, a comprehensive theoretical framework is designed by making the links between the chosen *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic Sufi hermeneutics in order to use it as the criteria for interpreting Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutics of *Sūrah al-Najm*.

As noted, there are two main approaches when discussing the rules of interpreting the Qur'ān, namely exoteric and esoteric. The exoteric approach has been established by the classical interpreters of the Qur'ān. In the

⁹⁵ *Lubāb al-'ilm fī sūrah al-Najm*. Mustaghanem: al-Matba'a al-'Alāwiyya, n.d.

⁹⁶ Shaykh al-'Alāwī presents a purely mystical interpretation of both the doctrine and the rites.

classical period of Islam, Arabic was the primary language for interpretation. Commentaries have been written in almost all Islamic languages by cultures that have been predominantly Muslim from a variety of perspectives: grammatical, philological, rhetorical, legal, theological and philosophical. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive and, depending on the interests and abilities of the exegete, are commonly combined within a single commentary. In Western scholarship, Ignaz Goldziher's *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* was the first study that sought to present an overview of the ways in which Muslims have interpreted the Qur'ān.⁹⁷ He categorised Qur'ānic interpretation using the following scheme: the early stage of Qur'ānic interpretation, followed by liturgical, traditional, dogmatic, mystical and sectarian interpretations. Goldziher ended his study by reflecting on hermeneutical trends in modern interpretations of the Qur'ān. Since the appearance of Goldziher's work, the study of *tafsīr* has drawn considerable attention. Works by scholars such as Böwering,⁹⁸ Calder, Gilliot,⁹⁹ Lory, and Andrew Rippin, among others, have added much to our understanding of Qur'ānic interpretation.¹⁰⁰

A strong theoretical base for understanding the hermeneutical approach of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is to first know that, apart from being an exegete (*mufassir*), Shaykh al-'Alāwī is also a gnostic and a spiritual guide (*murshid*) for the traveler on the spiritual path. The goal of the spiritual path is to move beyond appearances and form and to arrive at the inner meaning of the truth (*ḥaqīqa*). However, the form should not appear as an obstacle, because it is the portal to meaning and the gnostic needs to cling to it so that form might lead him to its inward reality. Form is an obstacle only if one refuses to

⁹⁷ Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920). For a recent English translation, see Ignaz Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, trans. by Wolfgang H. Behn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006).

⁹⁸ Gerhard Böwering *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'ānic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl at-Tustarī* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

⁹⁹ Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 6 vols. ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006).

¹⁰⁰ Calder, "Tafsīr from al-Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr"; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," and Ismail K. Poonawala, "Ismā'īlī Ta'wīl of the Qur'ān" in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Pp. 46–62; pp. , 199–222.

accept that there is something beyond it, as in the case of the literalists (*zāhiriyya*), or on the other hand, refusing to acknowledge and recognize the importance of the outward meaning of the text, as in the case of the *Bāṭiniyya*.¹⁰¹

Another thing that helps in understanding the hermeneutic approach of Shaykh al-'Alāwī in his interpretation of the Qur'ān is his response to a question about a certain verse, *Do not hasten with the Qur'ān until its divine inspiration is decreed (decided) unto you*.¹⁰² His answer illustrates an intrinsic link to his esoteric interpretation. He answered saying, "According to the reference made here, the prohibition of haste refers to the interpretation of the meaning of the Qur'ān. It is as if God is saying, 'Do not be in a hurry (*O Muḥammad*) to explain all the meanings of the Qur'ān before its proper time has come.'" Similarly, in another verse, *There is not a single thing except that it's in Our treasury and We do not send it down except by a decree known*.¹⁰³ According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, even though the Qur'ān has been completely revealed from the aspect of its laws (*aḥkām*); it does not end with regards to what it contains of divine inspiration (*ilḥām*). So the only thing permissible is to make apparent what rightfully needs to be made apparent and clear. Whatever other extraordinary meanings it holds, leave it for the right time. God will manifest it upon the tongues of those sages (*'ulamā*) of the *ummah* endowed with knowledge. And one of them, Shaykh Abū Madyan alluded to this meaning in his aphorisms (*ḥikam*) when he said, "The Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) flows upon the tongues of those sages endowed with knowledge in every age in accordance to what is suitable and appropriate for its people."¹⁰⁴

What is meant by "those sages endowed with knowledge" here are those who possess the knowledge of God (i.e. gnostics). The following *ḥadīth* also refers to them: "The sages (*'ulamā*) are the heirs of the Prophets."¹⁰⁵ The fact

¹⁰¹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 526; translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 22.

¹⁰² Q.20:114.

¹⁰³ Q. 15:21.

¹⁰⁴ Abu Madyan Shu'ayb Al-Ghawth, *Al-Mawād al-Ghaythiyya*, vol.2. p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abu Dāwud, al-Nasa'ī, Ibn Māja, Aḥmad, Ibn Hibban, and others; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, Zayla'ī, Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, and others who deemed it sound (*ḥasan*) or rigorously authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).

that he said “the heirs of the Prophets”, instead of saying “the heirs of the Messengers (*rusul*)” informs us that they are instructed to keep within the limits of what the Qur’ān contains. This interpretation is derived from a question posed to Shaykh al-‘Alāwī in his book *A’dhab al-Manāhil*.¹⁰⁶ The meaning of this is that the inspiration (*ilhām*) which God has favoured them with and which is one of the forms of revelation (*wahyī*) came to them within the restricted limits and not from outside of it. They (gnostics) will continue to extract extraordinary meanings from the Qur’ān, all of which are effects of the original revelation and its rays, which shine upon their hearts from the Prophetic Presence (*al-ḥaḍrah al-nabawiyya*). They will continue to dispense the wonders of the Qur’ān which the Truthful (*al-ḥaqq*) has favoured them with until He inherits the earth and whatever is upon it, and the Qur’ān does not have an end to its meanings. What makes one realise this is the saying of the Prophet, “The wonders of the Qur’ān will never cease,” and, “God knows best.”¹⁰⁷

Al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī concur on many of the rules of hermeneutics. One of the main rules outlined in their hermeneutics is that the literal meaning of the text should not be held separate from the hidden meaning. Al-Ghazālī says in *Jewels of the Qur’ān*:

“Then, know that the realities we hinted at have secrets and jewels; [but also] they have seashells, and the shell is that which appears first. Some people who reach the seashells know [only] these, while others break the shells and carefully examine the pearls [inside them].¹⁰⁸

Elsewhere in *Jewels of the Qur’ān*, al-Ghazālī argues against those who rely only on the external meanings of the Qur’ānic verses:

“Near to the science of reading is the science of the outward exegesis of the Qur’ān. This is the inner surface of the shell of the Qur’ān, which is next to the pearl. This is the reason why its resemblance with the pearl has become strong so that some people

¹⁰⁶ *A’dhab al-Manāhil*, al-‘Alāwī, al-Matba’a al-‘Alawiyya, Mostaghanem, 1993, p. 30

¹⁰⁷ Ibid..

¹⁰⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Qur’ān*.

imagine that it is the pearl itself and that beyond it there is nothing more valuable than it. It is with it that most people are content; how great are their deception and deprivation--for they have imagined that there is no rank beyond theirs! However, in relation to those who possess the knowledge of [other] sciences of the shell, they are at a rank high and noble, since the science of exegesis is mighty when compared to other sciences of the shell, because it is not meant for them while they are meant for it."¹⁰⁹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī says, "and so they belie what goes beyond the exterior without realising that in knowing the outside of the Book only is as one who knows a fruit by nothing but its peel."¹¹⁰ This is in reference to those extreme literalists who cling to externals and see nothing in the Qur'ān but what their own intelligence can apprehend, while at the same time imagining that the whole religion is within their grasp and what lies outside the scope of their own meagre understanding is necessarily outside the pale of Islam itself.

For the Sufis, Islam is not based on any principle other than that of the Qur'ān and the wont of Muḥammad. However, in the Qur'ān there is doctrine which is beyond most people's attainment.¹¹¹ Umar ibn 'Ali ibn al-Fārid said, "And beyond the words of the text lies a knowledge too subtle to be grasped by the farthest reach of sound intelligences."¹¹²

Al-Ghazālī and his Qur'ānic Sufi Hermeneutical Approach

Islamic hermeneutical literature is significantly influenced by the stance of al-Ghazālī. His *Jawāhir-al Qur'ān* is a major contribution to the corpus of *ta'wīl*-based hermeneutics.

Al-Ghazālī in his work attempted to strike a balance between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the Qur'ān. In most metaphorical

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.89

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² The Egyptian Sufi `Umar ibn `Alī ibn al-Fārid (1181-1235).

interpretations, a term is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable. Al-Ghazālī believed that the use of some special metaphorical terms could help in understanding the will of God. However, such texts require reasons for interpretation.¹¹³ In other words, metaphorical interpretation defines esoteric meanings of the Qur'ān and therefore cannot be used at the exoteric level, which is purely based on the literal word, the law, and the material text. Al-Ghazālī did not negate the literal meaning, but his esoteric interpretation is for the selected few who are gifted with the faculty of mystical intuition.¹¹⁴ Such interpretations are mainly for the elite and deal primarily with spiritual matters. When al-Ghazālī talks about "feeling the text",¹¹⁵ his concern is with the emotional impact of the revealed text on the mind of the reader who should feel that he or she is standing before God and hearing the voice of God. In al-Ghazālī's view, the reader should apprehend the meaning of the Qur'ān directly. According to al-Ghazālī, it is not possible for every person to understand the meaning of the Qur'ān: "Just as every hand is not fit for touching the leather of the *mushaf* (Qur'ān); so also every tongue is not fit to recite its letters, nor every mind fit to understand its meanings."¹¹⁶

Ultimately, in spite of the limitations and problems in al-Ghazālī's methodology, the idea of a beginning free from presupposition in his hermeneutics had a significant impact on Sufi esotericism. While it is difficult to trace his influence on the adherents of traditional interpretation of the revealed text, his hermeneutic position was important to the development of Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān. His hermeneutics influenced in particular the approach taken by those who advocated the philosophy of illumination, such as Shahāb al-Dīn Yaḥya ibn Ḥabash Suhrawardi (1153-1171 CE) and his

¹¹³ (Alavi, 2012)

¹¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī seems to be aware of the fact that the hermeneutical approach he suggests in *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* is appropriate only for a small group of people who are intellectually, morally and spiritually on a level that would require from them not to be distracted from striving to pursue a Sufi way of life. He was accustomed to saying different things to different people according to their different skills.

¹¹⁵ It means the mind of the reader will be affected by different feelings according to the verses being recited and will experience feelings such as grief, fear and hope.

¹¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' Ulūm ad-Dīn*, 5 vol. Beirut, nd Book 8, p.60

followers, and even to some extent the opponents of illuminationism, such as Ṣadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, or Mulla Sadrā (1571-1640 CE). Al-Ghazālī's hermeneutical approach is significant in two key respects: its rejection of tradition, which made access to the essence of the Qur'ān to some extent more difficult and complex, and second; the encouragement it gave readers to apprehend the meaning of the Qur'ān on their own, unfettered by dogmatic adherence to a particular school, which allowed them to arrive at an independent understanding of Qur'ānic rulings.¹¹⁷

Here I must also make mention of al-Ghazālī's well-known criticism against the esoteric Ismailism often referred to as 'al-Bāṭiniyyah', a name given to the Ismā'īlīs in medieval times, referring to their stress on the *bāṭin*, the "inward" meaning behind the literal wording of sacred texts; and unlike the Sufis who have stressed the intrinsic importance of both the outward and inward meaning of the Qur'ān, the Bāṭiniyyah have been accused of rejecting the literal meaning of the divine texts in favour of the *bāṭin*. Al-Ghazālī has also critiqued their method of arriving to esoteric knowledge. When al-Ghazālī was asked to write a polemical work against the Bāṭiniyyah- the Isma'īlī rivals of the Sunni caliphate, he concentrated a large portion of the book on the question of *taqlīd*. The Isma'īlī doctrine consists, in al-Ghazālī's rendition, in "the invalidation of individual reasoning (*al-ra'y*) and the invalidation of the exercise of intellects and the call to men to instruction issuing from the infallible Imam and the affirmation that the only way to acquire knowledge is instruction," hence the need for an inspired teaching (*ta'līm*). In his *Munqidh* al-Ghazālī makes a distinction between three sources of knowledge: acceptance of a belief on authority (*taqlīd*), inference (rational justification), and tasting (*dhawq*). The last form is the "highest": certainty and guidance come only in the form of experiential states of the soul (*nafs*, or *qalb*). Al-Ghazālī proposes an alternative epistemology, which does not exclude learning and rational reflection but rather adds something to discursivity, a direct experience and personal insight. The "tasting" knowledge is not some

¹¹⁷ Kamal, "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology." Journal of the Institute for World Religions, June 2004, p.88

fleeting mystical vision, but an effect of a long-term strenuous cultivation of virtues of character and virtues of distinguishing perception by ascetic and devotional-meditational practices (in al-Ghazālī's words, purification of character and states of the heart). The Sufi way that al-Ghazālī puts above philosophy, theology and Bāṭinite esoterism, is a collection of practices and principles leading to knowledge of religious matters by the way of disclosure (*mukāshafa*) or Gnosis (*ma'rifa*).

The following is a summarized version of the Bāṭiniyyah taken from Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*.

The Bāṭiniyyah represent Isma'īlī piety, linked to Isma'il son of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. They were dominant in Egypt at one stage. They believe that the secret meaning of the Qur'ān was confided to 'Alī, and that the spiritually alert were those who recognize 'Alī's position and were vouchsafed such truths. Recognizing the force of Shari'a as connected to Muḥammad, some exalt 'Alī beyond Muḥammad, with secret knowledge. In the spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos, the Prophet is the head, and 'Alī has knowledge of the divine plan. The accessible Imam, hidden, is Muḥammad, son of Isma'il. The Imāms are infallible, and Muḥammad, the son of Imām Isma'il, is hidden. ¹¹⁸

Al-Ghazālī is a key figure in the historic realm of Islamic thought, whether his work is seen for some as having a negative impact or, as is far more commonly regarded, a positive one. He was famous in his time as a master of *fiqh* which dealt with correct practice, doctrine and orthodox belief. His own spiritual quest made him realize that salvation was not to be obtained by mere simple imitative adherence to a code of conduct or intellectual assent to a creed, but rather in the first-hand experience of the Divine, toward which the beliefs and practices of Islam were directed but often went unrealised. Al-Ghazālī's pursuit for a fully actualised spiritual life led him to the disciplines of meditation on the divine essence and reflection upon the inner meanings

¹¹⁸ Hodgson, G.S. Marshall, *The Venture of Islam*, p. 378 - 381

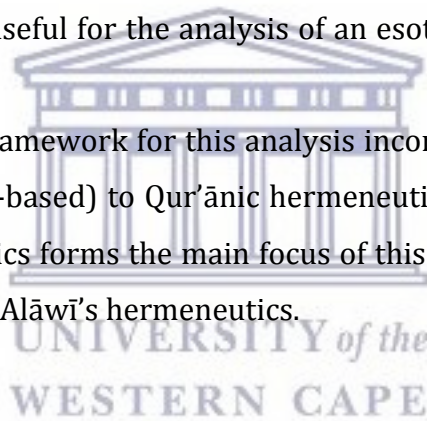
of the Qur'ānic revelation as preserved and held in both the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*.

Conclusion

According to what has been discussed above, Shaykh al-'Alāwī's focus was mainly on the esoteric hermeneutic aspect of the sacred text, and also proving the essential need and validity for an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. For both al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī, there is an essential and inherent relationship between the exoteric and esoteric nature of the Qur'ān.

In the current study of Sufi hermeneutics al-Ghazālī's approach to interpretation of text forms a primary source for *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics, which also prepares the foundations of a Sufi hermeneutical theory that will be useful for the analysis of an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān.

The theoretical framework for this analysis incorporates both approaches (i.e. *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*-based) to Qur'ānic hermeneutics, however; *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics forms the main focus of this study due to the esoteric nature of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutics.



CHAPTER TWO: *A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF QUR'ĀN*

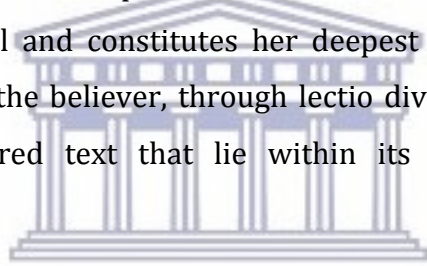
This chapter attempts to provide an overall study of the contextual meaning of hermeneutics in order to underline how Western and Islamic practices of understanding developed. It also attempts to do a critical study on hermeneutics and in particular its application to esoteric exegesis and method of interpretation. It will explain the concept of *ta'wīl* (interpretation) and how it differs from *tafsīr*, and provide an illustration of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's interpretation of Qur'ān.

I will also discuss al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics and show its similarity with that of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutics, and attempt to develop a framework for Sufi principles. I also discuss the different categories of *tafsīr* and some of the classical exegetes on *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. Also being discussed is the exoteric and esoteric exegesis and their intrinsic relation with one another, and even though esoteric interpretation is obtained through *ta'wīl*, the first requisite as a rule among Sufi exegetes is to first fully comprehend its general intended exoteric meaning. I also explain the distinction between *muḥkam* (clear) and *mutashābih* (unclear) verse of the Qur'ān.

Although it is essentially considered as a book of clear evidence and guidance, the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān still need to be explained, and this is the method called *ta'wīl*. Also, there is an approach in the interpretation of the Qur'ān that is intrinsically linked to *ta'wīl* which is the esoteric and gnostic approach forming the main part of the analytical framework of this dissertation. I also intend to highlight in this chapter Sufi exegesis as an important genre of *tafsīr* in Islamic thought and piety.

The spiritual hermeneutics of two great Sufi figures (one classical and the other contemporary) are discussed as a practical means of arriving to a proposed set of Sufi hermeneutic principles for a standard esoteric *tafsīr*. I look at common Sufi hermeneutic principles agreed upon by al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī and also where they differ in the structure of these principles.

'There is a profound correlation between the semantic latency of scriptural meaning and the spiritual virtuality of the soul for "the believer's whole inner ethos derives from his mode of understanding." Spiritual hermeneutics is a reciprocal and gradual actualization of the unfathomable depth of scriptural meaning and the spiritual consciousness of the reader. More specifically, a meditative contact with the Qur'ān discloses its own true nature to the soul, by actualizing her relationship with her Lord, that is, the aspect of the Divine that "faces" the soul and constitutes her deepest ontological and spiritual ground. In reverse, the believer, through *lectio divina*, actualizes layers and aspects of the sacred text that lie within its inexhaustible wealth of meaning.'¹¹⁹



Some of the main Sufi hermeneutic principles are discussed in detail. For example, the agreement of al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī that in the realm of Sufi hermeneutics the deeper spiritual meanings and secrets of the Qur'ān can only be perceived by those who have attained spiritual realization through gnosis (*ma'rifa*). The esoteric exegesis of Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī on *Sūrah Fātiḥa* is also discussed in detail.

An exclusive esoteric perspective by both al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī is given on the Qur'ānic narrative of Abraham contributing greatly to my thesis on Sufi hermeneutics as a whole.

¹¹⁹ Henry Corbin, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. London: Kegan Paul, 1993, p.52

General Introduction to Hermeneutics

The etymological root of the word “hermeneutics” derives from the Greek verb *hermeneunein*, generally translated as “to interpret,” “to explain,” “to translate”; and the noun *hermeneunia*, which exclusively means “interpretation.”¹²⁰ Over the course of non-Muslim history, scholars have produced works on philosophy, religion, linguistics, politics, historical studies, and social science in an attempt to explain hermeneutics. Most of these works, however, emphasise the idea that hermeneutics involves both the art and the order of the theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions.¹²¹

Many non-Muslim thinkers agree that there are two strands of hermeneutics: one solely concerned with the nature of the written text, and the other with reading and understanding of reality and everything expressed. Ricouer defines hermeneutics as the “discipline that has been primarily concerned with the elucidation of rules for the interpretation of text.”¹²² Others, such as Harvey, maintain that hermeneutics is the “intellectual discipline concerned with the nature and presupposition of the interpretation of expressions.”¹²³ He states that hermeneutics is the theory of understanding texts vis-a-vis their interpretations.¹²⁴ In addition, reading a text becomes a new challenge in the way of understanding. Non-Muslim thinkers claim that each reader develops his/her own interpretation of the

¹²⁰ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 12; and Rene S.J. Marle, *Introduction to Hermeneutics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

¹²¹ Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

¹²² Paul Ricouer, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, John B. Thompson (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 36.

¹²³ Harvey, Van A. “Hermeneutics,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, edited by Mircea Eliade, 279–87. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 36

text, and his/her own belief in its validity.¹²⁵ In this context, the main concern of hermeneutics becomes “what it means to understand a text, and how understanding and interpretation are determined by the presuppositions and assumptions (the horizon) of both the interpreter and the audience to which the text is being interpreted.”¹²⁶ Therefore, the majority of non-Muslim thinkers analyse the science of hermeneutics and its application according to this point of view. They claim that hermeneutics is applicable in any circumstance in which the meaning is ambiguous, and requires exegesis.¹²⁷

Despite the development of many schools of thought on this term, these works generally agree that the meaning of hermeneutics is far more concerned with the clarification of understanding as a conception itself.¹²⁸ In addition, Jasper, Bruns, and other modern non-Muslim thinkers who have studied the history of hermeneutics and its development assume that, “hermeneutics is about the most fundamental ways in which we perceive the world, think, and understand. It has a philosophical root in what we call epistemology—that is, the problem of how we come to know anything at all, and actually how we think and legitimate the claims we make to know the truth.”¹²⁹ In sum, the focal point of the science of hermeneutics, from the beginning was concerned with the actual process through which one arrives at the meaning of text with the goal to construct a bridge between faith and doubt, and one major concern which was the nature of interpretation.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.”

¹²⁶ Farid Esack, *The Quran: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002), p. 142.

¹²⁷ Gadamer. *Hans-George Truth and Method*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975.

¹²⁸ Bruns, Gerald L. *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 1992.

¹²⁹ David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 3.

¹³⁰ Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.” Modern hermeneutics was developed through new philosophical perspectives to demonstrate the great transformation of nineteenth century hermeneutics to the twentieth century. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was, according to Bruns, the “founder of modern hermeneutics as a science. His attempt was to take a broad view of the ancient saying of philology, namely, that understanding a text means understanding it first, as well as and then even better than the author does.” Therefore, for Schleiermacher, “a text is interpreted from two points of view: grammatical, in relation to the language in which it is written, and psychological, in relation to the mentality and the development of the author.” Under the impact of his hermeneutical theory, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) “extended hermeneutics to the understanding of the human behavior

Qur'ānic Sufi Hermeneutics

Every aspect of the highly-developed Qur'ānic sciences (*‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*) may be seen as constituting an Islamic hermeneutic. The way that commentators have gone about interpreting the verses of the Qur’ān can be called Qur’ānic hermeneutical approaches. Most writing on religious hermeneutics is about how to interpret religious texts or other phenomena. Religious hermeneutics is concerned with the subjective dimension of phenomena, of how they are taken to be related to one’s own life and existence.

Kinsella defines hermeneutics as the art of interpretation originally used for understanding of ancient and biblical texts.¹³¹ The art has been used in the field of social science. In the context of Islamic texts, hermeneutics refers

and products,” M. J. Inwood, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Edited by Ted Honderich. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Clearly, he was concerned with interpreting ancient texts in their cultural understanding for he locates “hermeneutics within the context of the social sciences. The secularisation of hermeneutics is complete.” Jasper, *a Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) stated that hermeneutics “is concerned with the interpretation of the being who interprets texts and other artifacts, who may become, but is not essentially, either a natural or cultural scientist: the human being or Dasein,” Inwood, *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. However, his 1927 hermeneutical work, *Being and Time*, had influenced Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who wrote *Truth and Method* in 1960. In his works, Gadamer affirmed the universality of hermeneutical problems by defining hermeneutics as the “dialogue between the claims of truth on the one hand and the process of method on the other, between an absolute (whether of God or Dasein) demand and the relentless, systematic application of methods and process.” Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, p.106. Gadamer indicated that hermeneutics “has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world.” Gadamer, H. (2003). *Truth and Method*. New York and London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd. Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) also was influenced by Heidegger’s, *Being and Time*. Ricoeur “emphasizes how the text itself may open up a space of existential and political possibilities. This dynamic, productive power of the text undermines the idea of reality as a fixed, unyielding network of authoritative patterns of interpretations.” See Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.” His hermeneutical theory is linked to studying the structural analysis of the text that, according to him, is “a work of discourse, and hence in the first instance a work.” Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” p. 13. His theory of hermeneutics is associated with the concept of the text. Therefore, Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory indicates that “explanation and understanding are no longer contradictory attitudes, as has often been assumed in the history of hermeneutics.” Ibid. p. 13. In this context, “it seems possible to situate explanation and interpretation along a unique hermeneutical arc and to integrate the opposed attitudes of explanation and understanding with an overall conception of reading as the recovery of meaning.” Ibid, p. 161.

¹³¹ Elizabeth Anne Kinsella, “Hermeneutics and Critical Hermeneutics: Exploring Possibilities Within the Art of Interpretation,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research Sozialforschung* 7,3 (2006).

to two different points of view in the past literature. According to Kamal, the first view of Islamic hermeneutics is based on the clarity in Qur'ānic texts. The proponents of this position believe in the sufficiency of the Qur'ān and the immediacy of its meaning and they presume that nothing is needed to judge the meaning given through this sacred text. As mentioned in the introduction, this type of hermeneutics is referred to as *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics, where the mystical and spiritual experiences of the reader can help reveal the secret layers and meanings in Qur'ānic verses.¹³² On the other hand, the second view of Islamic hermeneutics concentrates upon the support of presuppositions in the form of tradition from predecessors' commentaries of Qur'ān. According to the followers of the second view, they heavily rely on the earlier commentaries and classical exegesis for understanding the meaning of Qur'ān. This approach to hermeneutics is referred to as *tafsīr*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics.¹³³ The current research aims to compare Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutic approach with both esoteric and exoteric narratives and interpretations of the Qur'ān. As such, the theoretical framework incorporates and sheds light on both approaches. Nevertheless, *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics form the central aspect of the current study because of the predominantly esoteric nature of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutical approach.

The question then is whether it can be expected that Islamic hermeneutics will be governed by any distinctive principles? In Islam, the interpreter (*mufassir*) is tied to certain conditions. In the hermeneutics of the Qur'ān there are rules of interpretation, or rules of *tafsīr*. Thus, with regards to the Qur'ān there is a hermeneutical interpretation that Islamic scholars have agreed upon. Al-Suyūṭī gives three essential qualifications of the *mufassir* (exegete). First, the *mufassir* must have sound faith and must strictly observe the precepts of Islam. He must avoid erroneous views and spurious traditions and must take seriously his trust, in the Book of God. Second, he must have

¹³² Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis* (First published 2012 by Routledge

¹³³ *Ibid.*

good purpose, that is; his aim should be only to serve God and not to acquire wealth or prestige. A good *mufassir* must therefore be totally detached from the world. Third, a *mufassir* must be an authority in the Arabic sciences.¹³⁴

One of the key functions of the commentator is the exhortation of the commentary. This hermeneutical act is tied to the commentators' commitment to and understanding of the goal of the divine text they have set out to interpret. In the Qur'ānic outlook on reality, faith is always linked to performance of moral deeds; the implication is that knowledge needs to be translated into practice. Qur'ānic hermeneutics and interpretation, therefore, are not simply mental operations that are performed on an aesthetic object; rather, the insights gained through the process of interpretation make demands on the lives of the interpreters and the community. The above conditions make it clear that there is no free reign for Qur'ānic interpreters who bring in their subjectivity, rationale, or other personal interpretations. The subjectivity of the Sufis in their interpretation of the Qur'ān is not the same subjectivity envisaged by Gadamer, but it is spiritually transcendent and devoid of caprice (*hawā*). However, there are some points of agreement with western hermeneutics.¹³⁵

It is evident that most Islamic scholars, whether classical or modern, remain attached to the exoteric *tafsīr*-based interpretation of the Qur'ān and give little attention to its esoteric and allegorical meanings. Many consider the latter to be a highly controversial phenomenon and a deviation from the *Sunnah*. This could perhaps be one of the key factors as to why very little esoteric *tafsīr* is available. Close to esoteric *tafsīr* during the classical period of Islam was *tafsīr al-dirāya*, also known as *tafsīr bi al-ra'yī*, or *tafsīr* through application of reason and *ijtihād*. Even though classical and contemporary scholars made a clear distinction between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, and accepted their individual merit, some scholars went to the extreme to say that only

¹³⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, 1988). Volume 2, p. 175.

¹³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. (New York and London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2004).

God knows the *ta'wīl* and, therefore we cannot make *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān; these scholars are known as the literalists (*zāhiri*).

Regardless, matters concerning the Islamic way of life are connected to the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* in one way or another, since the right application of Islam is based on an appropriate understanding of guidance from God. Without commentary and interpretation (*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*), there would be no proper understanding of various passages of the Qur'ān and the *'ahādīth*. This is what has provided the foundation for different interpretations.

Most commentators of the Qur'ān have considered that *ta'wīl* was advocated in Sufi hermeneutics even during the classical period of Muslim history, not only because of the influences of numerous political and sectarian movements, but also because of the different understandings and views of Muslim scholars and practitioners of the text. Ma'rifat states:

In accordance with Sufi practical and theoretical classifications, Sufi *tafsīr* can conveniently be sorted into two categories: theoretical and mystical. Whereas practical Sufi exegesis is based on asceticism, renunciation, self-denial, and annihilation, theoretical Sufi *tafsīr* is predicated on research and study.¹³⁶

Therefore, Sufi exegesis is an important genre of *tafsīr* in Islamic thought and piety. Classical Sufi exegetes devoted themselves to interpreting the Qur'ān based on their mystical assumptions. The fundamental characteristics of Sufi *tafsīr* are evident in the importance placed on the nature of the sources of knowledge and the self-seeking of this knowledge. Sufi commentaries about terms and content are different from other types of Qur'ānic exegesis, because most of them reflect mystical ideas and concepts in the Qur'ān.

Since the early days of Islamic mysticism, Sufi commentators have approached the Qur'ān through allegorical and metaphorical explanations. They assert that the understanding of the hidden literal meaning of its text

¹³⁶Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat. *At-Tafsīr wa'-l-Mufasssīrūn fī Thawbah al-Qashīb*, 2 vols, (Mashad:al-jāmi'ah ar-raḍwiyyah lil'ulūm al-Islāmiyyah, 1997). Available online: <www.al-shia.org/html/ara/books>

cannot not be reached until its divine words have been understood. Accordingly, in their interpretative methodologies, Sufi exegetes focus on the Qur'anic text's philological meaning to discover its inner meanings. Therefore, the use of mystical language clearly indicates the development of a specific mystical terminology in Sufi *tafsīr*. Different studies, however, have shown that such language and discourse may appear to be metaphorical even though it actually describes one's experience in this intermediate reality. It may be truly metaphorical, since metaphor and allegorical language was better suited and more accessible than dense philosophy.¹³⁷ Given that the issue of mystical language is strongly connected with the nature and objective of Sufi *tafsīr*, Sufi commentators often use mystical language in symbolic, figurative, and anthropomorphic ways to elucidate the Qur'ān. In this context, Sands writes:

Sufis displayed literary characteristics that are not often found in works of *tafsīr*, creating their own metaphors, wordplay, narratives, and poetry as an integral part of the exegesis, and it is this use of language and style as much specific Sufi doctrines and beliefs that give Sufi commentary its distinctive character.¹³⁸

In addition to the use of the allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of language, the development of the mystical vision of the Qur'anic *tafsīr* is directly linked with the Sufi idea of inner knowledge (*'ilm al-bāṭin*). Therefore, *'ilm al-bāṭin*, as unlimited levels of meaning exist in the Qur'anic text itself, has its complement in the spiritual knowledge (*ma'rifa*), which Sufis acquire through introspection into the inner emotions stirring their

¹³⁷ In Arabic literature, metaphor means the "figurative language" (*majāz*) as opposed to literal or expression of truth (*ḥaqīqa*). Therefore, metaphor, like its close associate, simile (*tashbīh, tamthīl*), refers to joining or linking two or more concepts for purposes of comparison or semantic equation." See Peter Heath, "Metaphor," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, Jane Dammen (ed.), (McAuliffe: Brill, 2009). Brill Online, <www.brillonline.nl.lib.exeter.ac.uk. Also, allegory is the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalisations about human existence; also: an instance (as in a story or painting) of such expression.

¹³⁸ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qur'ān in Classical Islam* (Routledge: London and New York, 2006). p. 8.

souls. However, this notion of inner knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*) is considered, according to Böwering:

...A divine gift granted to individual Sufis after intense ascetic effort and psychic discipline [on their part]. Possessed by [the] elite of mystics who were granted the inner sight of and insight (*baṣīrah*) into the realities, hidden within their souls, *‘ilm al-bāṭin* was acquired into principal ways: intuition and extra-sensory perception.¹³⁹

In their mystical *tafsīr* works, Sufi exegetes have employed various methods of interpretation to attain *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* knowledge. The distinction between *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* has its basis in the Qur’ān¹⁴⁰ and in the *ḥadīth*. As for the Qur’ān, the Sufis generally agree that this is not a specific analysis of words and verses but a hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ān in general.¹⁴¹ As for the prophetic tradition, one *ḥadīth*, narrated by ibn Mas‘ūd and often cited in Sufi writings, mentions the following terms: *ẓahr*, *baṭn*, and *maṭla‘*.¹⁴² Most Sufi exegetes have disputed the meaning of *maṭla‘* in order to provide a mystical interpretation of it. Al-Tustarī, for instance, understands *maṭla‘* as “the heart’s key-hole,”¹⁴³ while Ruzbihān assumes that it indicates “people who have been attributed by the unveiling (*kashf*), eye witnessing (*‘iyān*), and explanation (*bayān*) to their hearts (*qulūb*), spirits (*arwāḥ*), intellects (*‘uqūl*) and innermost secrets (*asrār*).”¹⁴⁴ Nisābūrī explains that *maṭla‘* is “that destination where, when one arrives at it, one comes to

¹³⁹ According to Böwering, some scholars and exegetes have claimed that the notion of *bāṭin* “can be traced back to the refined study of the soul in the circle of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) through the teachings of his mystic disciple ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. 150/767).” See Gerhard Böwering, “The Scriptural Senses in Medieval Sufi Qur’ān Exegesis,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 347–365.

¹⁴⁰ Sufis have assumed that verses 6:120, 6:151, 7:33, 31:20, and 57:3 in the Qur’ān indicate the notion of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*.

¹⁴¹ Böwering, “The Scriptural Senses,” p. 374.

¹⁴² Sufi exegetes often mention the *ḥadīth* narrated by ibn Mas‘ūd: “The Messenger of God said: the Qur’ān was sent down in seven ḥarf. Each ḥarf has a back (*ẓahr*) and belly (*baṭn*). Each ḥarf has a border (*ḥadd*) and each border has a lookout point (*maṭla‘*).” See Ibn Ḥibbān (1984, I: 243) and al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fi ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, II p. 196.

¹⁴³ Sahl ibn Abd Allāh Al-Tustarī. *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Arabiyyah al-Kubrā, 1911).

¹⁴⁴ Abū Muḥammad ibn Abī Naṣr Shīrāzī al-Baqlī Ruzbihān. *‘Arā’is al-Bayān fi Ḥaqā’iq al-Qur’ān*. Edited by Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2008).

understand essences in their essence.”¹⁴⁵ In addition, al-Kāshānī in his *tafsīr*, interpreted that “*maṭlaʿ* is a place to which one rises up from the limit and beholds the witnessing of the all-knowing.”¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, all these interpretations come in the context of showing that *ẓāhir* is the external sense of the Qurʾān, *bāṭin* is the inner sense, and *maṭlaʿ* is the gnostic’s lookout point.

The Sufi’s concept of an esoteric understanding of the Qurʾān is also linked to its hidden meaning (*istinbāṭ*), a level of understanding that distinguishes Sufi exegetes from other Muslim scholars. Al-Sulamī wrote that the Sufi commentator has gained the ability to practice *istinbāṭ* in order to indicate the determination of his piety, inwardly and outwardly, and the perfection of his knowledge (*maʿrifah*), which represents the highest level of faith.¹⁴⁷ In addition to *istinbāṭ*, which became the focal point of Sufi hermeneutical methods, the presence of *ʿilm al-ishārah*, which indicates the hidden meaning in a given Qurʾānic passage by its subtle allusion (*ishārah*), led the Sufis to feel obligated to extract it by means of *istinbāṭ*.¹⁴⁸ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, who plumbed the depths of the method of understanding (*ṭarīq al-fahm*) and of allusion (*ṭarīq al-ishārah*), explains that most Sufi exegetes acted in this manner due to the knowledge that God has granted them. He concludes that Sufis are called the people of understanding (*ahl al-fahm*), and among them the actualised (*muḥaqqiqūn*) have conformed to the Qurʾān and the practice of the *Sunnah*, externally (*ẓāhir*) and internally (*bāṭin*). He writes:

The close link between one’s ability to practice *istinbāṭ* and one’s strict compliance with the precepts of the divine law are available only to those who act in accord with the book of God, outwardly and inwardly, and follow the messenger of God, outwardly and inwardly. Therefore, God makes them heirs to the knowledge of subtle allusion

¹⁴⁵ Niẓām al-Dīn al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad Nisābūrī. *Gharāʾib al-Qurʾān wa Raghāʾib al-Furqān*. Edited by al-Shaykh Zakariyā ʿUmayrān, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1996)

¹⁴⁶ Abd al-Razzāq, *al-Kashānī Taʾwīlāt* (Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān)

¹⁴⁷ Jawid Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqāt Genre from Al-Sulamī to Jāmī* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

(*‘ilm al-ishārah*) and unveils to the hearts of his elect servants carefully guarded meanings (*ma‘ānī madkhūrah*), spiritual subtleties (*laṭā’if*) and well-kept secrets.¹⁴⁹

On the level of personal experience, Sufi exegetes have used verse 62 from *Sūrah Yūnus* to identify themselves as God’s elect friends (*awliyā’*). In his *laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*, al-Qushayrī explains:

The *awliyā’* came to speak according to their levels of achievements and capabilities, and God inspired in them things by which He has honored them. So, they now speak on behalf of Him, inform about the subtle truths that He has instructed to them, and point to Him . . . this idea has been stated clearly to show that God has honored the elect (*aṣfiyā’*) among His servants by granting them the understanding of His subtle secrets (*laṭā’if asrārihi*) and His lights, so that they can see the elusive allusions and hidden meaning contained in the Qur’ān.¹⁵⁰

Böwering has provided a detailed explanation concerning the exegetical methodology of the most classical Sufi exegetes and their particularities. He discusses the different issues that predominate in the interpretation of the Qur’ānic content in Sufi *tafsīr*—such as allusion, figurative expressions or metaphors, symbols, and allegories that manifest a specific exegetical method to them. He writes:

“Each verse of the Qur’ānic phrase was understood as opening vistas to the infinite variety of divine meanings embedded in the unfathomable depth of the Qur’ān; it became a characteristic feature of the Sufi exegetical approach to concentrate upon keynotes within selected passages of the Qur’ān. These keynotes, frequently short phrases from a particular verse, are chosen as the focal point of the commentary. Whether taken up in isolation from their contextual environment or in connection with it, these keynotes

¹⁴⁹ ‘Ali al-Sarrāj al-Tūsī, *The Kitāb al-Lumā’ fi’l-Tasawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, "E. J. W. Gibb Memorial" Series, Vol. XXII, (London, 1963), pp. 31-2

¹⁵⁰ Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī. *al-Risāla al-qushayriyya fi ‘ilm al-tasawwuf*. Ed. by Hanī alHajj. (*al-Maktaba al-tawfiqiyya*: undated).; Martin Nguyen, “The Confluence and Construction of Traditions: Al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and the Interpretation of God’s Word”, PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2009. Ngyuen studied the connection between Qur’ānic *tafsīr*, theology, and mysticism in al-Qushayrī’s work as a great Sufi exegete of classical Islam.

awaken associations in the mind of the interpreter that spring from the mystical matrix of the Sufi world of ideas. The process of the spiritual encounter between the Qur'ānic keynotes and the mystical associations achieves a level of synthesis which makes it impossible to discern where exegesis ends and where it begins, and where the discovery of the interpreter's own existence disappears in the revelation of the divine word were required to reflect the various shades and facets of meaning that cannot be captured in one single definitive expression."¹⁵¹

These mystical visions became the focal point of exegeses. Their hermeneutical works, however, indicate that the exegetes' understanding and attitudes do not differ from their understanding of other sciences. The well-known Sufi exegetical works of the classical era were Sahl ibn Abd Allāh's al-Tustarī ¹⁵² (d. 283) *tafsīr al-Qurān al-aẓīm* and Abū Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn's al-Sulamī ¹⁵³ (d. 412/1021) *ḥaqāiq at-tafsīr*.¹⁵⁴

Difference between Tafsīr and Ta'wīl

Tafsīr literally means uncovering or unveiling, and can be characterised as the general elucidation of a verse with the objective of discovering its exoteric meaning and application. *Tafsīr* is specifically concerned with the understanding of a verse, interpreting its obscure words or phrases, and elucidating its general linguistic problems. This branch is known as the science of meanings (*ma'āni*) of the Qur'ān. Several commentators have devoted their efforts to this branch.

Ta'wīl literally means the final end (*'āqiba*) of a matter, and can be characterised as the science of elucidating particular meanings of the words

¹⁵¹ Böwering, "The Scriptural Senses," pp. 347-348.

¹⁵² Tustarī was among the most important and influential mystics of the early, formative period of Islamic mysticism, and many later famous Sufis and thinkers drew upon his ideas and cited his sayings, including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240).

¹⁵³ Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt* served as an essential resource for later Sufi hagiographies. The second category of Sulamī's writings is the genre of Sufi commentary on the Qur'ān, where he compiled the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* (The Realities of Qur'ānic Exegesis) and an appendix to this work titled *Ziyādat al-ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* (Appendix to the Realities of Qur'ānic Exegesis).

¹⁵⁴ *Dhahabī* (1976, II: 380 and 384) and *Ma'rifat* (1997, II:540 and 543).

of the Qur'ān. The difference between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, according to some commentators, is that the former is concerned primarily with the transmission (*riwāyah*) of tradition, whereas the latter is concerned with the deeper comprehension (*dirāyah*) of the inner meaning of the sacred text.¹⁵⁵

Early commentators such as Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, used the terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* interchangeably. In time however, the two terms came to designate two distinct branches of the general sciences of the Qur'ān (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*).

With the language terminology, it is quite clear that the similarity of the term hermeneutics to the Arabic terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* reflect the flexibility of the Qur'ānic exegetical process.¹⁵⁶

Lane indicates *ta'wīl* as an Arabic term for hermeneutics, which concerns itself primarily with “covert or virtual meaning or it reduces meaning to its ultimate intent,”¹⁵⁷ that makes the meaning return to the beginning. The conception of *ta'wīl*, however, is exactly indicated by the distance of clarity (*al-bayn*), and its method of evolving is that of return, a return to the start.¹⁵⁸ Clearly, the presupposition of the highest intent in *ta'wīl*, as it is in dialectical tension between first-as-last and last-as-first, can be made the foundation of

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¹⁵⁵ Abu 'Abd Allah Badr Al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allah b. Bahadur b. 745/1344i, II, p.150.

¹⁵⁶ *Tafsīr* is a noun that comes from the verb *fassara*, which means, interpretation, explanation, discover, decide, reveal, develop, or disclose a thing that was concealed or obscured; or a meaning perceived by an intellect. Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (AES/ Educa Books, 2003), vol. II, p. 239; al-Iṣfāhānī Abul Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad Al-Rāghib, *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qur'ān*, Nadīm Mar'ashlī (ed.), (Beirut: Dār ash-Shāmiyyah, 1992), p. 47; Ma'rifat, Muḥammad Hādī. *At-Tafsīr wa'-l-Mufasssīrūn fi Thawbihi al-Qashīb*, 2 vols, *Mashad:al-jāmi'ah ar-raḍwiyyah lil'ulūm al-Islāmiyyah*, 1997. Al Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Uthmān ibn Qayyim 'Abu 'Abd Allah Shams al-Din al-Dhahabī *Ta'wīl* comes from the verb *awwala*. It is derived from *iyālah*, which means to shape or arrange a thing so as to place its various significations in their proper perspectives. *Ta'wīl*, thus, means to reduce to one or two senses, or interpretations which an expression bears or admits, to which it suits the apparent meaning. See Dhahabī (1976, I: 17-18), Ma'rifat (1997, I: 19) Abu al-Qasim Qushayrī. *al-Ris'ala al-qushayriyya fi 'Ilm al-tasawwuf*. Ed. by Hamī al-Hajj (*al-Maktaba al-tawfiqiyya*: undated); and Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. II, p. 2397. *Ta'wīl* also means the final end of a matter, or the final purpose, as when the Qur'ān says “on a day when its *ta'wīl* (fulfillment) shall come” Q.7:53; and Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. I, pp.126–127.

¹⁵⁸ Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*.

the intellectual paradox.¹⁵⁹ Al-Suyūṭī also considered *ta'wīl* an act of referring a Qur'ānic verse back to whatever meanings it can bear.¹⁶⁰

Generally, in *'ulūm al-tafsīr* works, al-Zarkashī has defined *tafsīr* as:

The clarification of the Qur'ānic text has different meanings. It includes elucidation of the occasion or reason of revelation of a verse (*asbāb an-nuzūl*), its place in the chapter (*sūrah*) to which it belongs, and its story or historical reference. *Tafsīr* must also determine whether a verse or passage belongs to the Meccan or Medinan period of revelation, whether it is *muḥkam* (clear) or *mutashābih* (ambiguous), abrogating (*nāsikh*) or abrogated (*mansūkh*), and whether it has a general (*āmm*) or specific (*khāṣṣ*) reference or meaning.¹⁶¹

Between the second and fourth Islamic centuries, *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* were used interchangeably by commentators who wanted to particularise their applications of Qur'ānic exegesis. Historically, there was great debate among the scholars as to whether the proper approach to interpretation of the Qur'ān should be described as *ta'wīl* "focusing on hidden meanings", or *tafsīr*, "focusing on explanations of the text."¹⁶² For example, *tafsīr* was first used to represent the external philological exegesis (the exoteric) as a reference to the Qur'ān; *ta'wīl* was taken to refer to the exposition of the exegesis, dealing purely with the Qur'ānic text (the esoteric). However, these two terms soon came to designate different branches, both with a direct connection to the general science of Qur'ānic exegesis. Traditional *tafsīr* often have titles which include the term *ta'wīl*, such as, al-Ṭabarī's *jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*. This indicates that *ta'wīl* became almost synonymous with *tafsīr*, and yet commentaries were referred to as *tafsīr*, not *ta'wīl*.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ al-Ḥāfiẓ Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fi Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (ed.), 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Aṣriyyah, 1988).

¹⁶¹ Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Zarkashī Badr al-Dīn, *Al-Burhān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (ed.), (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1972). Vol. II, p. 148.

¹⁶² Andrew Rippin, "Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'ān", in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, G. R. Hawting and Abdul Qādir A. Sharīf (eds.), (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 249–57.

In the fourth century AH (11th c. CE), *tafsīr* was used to indicate a hermeneutical work on the Qur'ān. After a long period of identical usage, *tafsīr* replaced *ta'wīl* and, in its general sense, may be characterised as the first step used to explain Qur'ānic verses in order to discover exoteric meaning and application.¹⁶³ Due to its scriptural function, *tafsīr* comes the closest to being an equivalent of exegesis; the term is now interchangeable with the concept of Qur'ānic exegesis. In addition, through the development of exegetical works, the majority of Muslim exegetes who attempted to clarify the distinction between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* concluded that *tafsīr* is concerned primarily with the transmission of tradition, whereas *ta'wīl* is concerned with the deeper comprehension of the inner meaning of the Qur'ānic text.¹⁶⁴ Some of them emphasised that *ta'wīl* must not, however, go beyond the *Sunnah* when interpreting the literal sense or meaning of the Qur'ān, because the former is the primary interpreter for the latter.¹⁶⁵

For example, Poonawala concluded the historical development of the term *tafsīr*:

From what we know of the early history and development of *tafsīr*, it seems that in the beginning both words [*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*] were used synonymously. There is no hard evidence to suggest that *ma'ānī* (meanings) was the earliest term used for the titles of works on Qur'ānic interpretation and that *ta'wīl* was introduced late in the 3rd/early 10th century and was supplanted in the following century.¹⁶⁶

In the realm of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* it has been clarified that *tafsīr al-riwāya*, also known as *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, is more linguistic in orientation and method and focuses mainly on the narrations of the Prophet and his companions and the *Tabi'ūn*,¹⁶⁷ whereas *ta'wīl* is more orientated towards deeper meanings of

¹⁶³ Esack, *The Quran*, p. 129.

¹⁶⁴ Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān*, vol. II p. 150.

¹⁶⁵ Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, 'Adnān Zarzūr (ed.), (Kuwait: Dār al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, 1971). pp. 87-89.

¹⁶⁶ Ismail Poonawala, "Ta'wīl," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (eds.), 12 volumes (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996-2005).

¹⁶⁷ The followers of the Companions of the Prophet.

the Qurʾān as it corresponds with *tafsīr al-dirāya*, or the specialised sciences that emerged from the study of the Qurʾān during the classical period of Islam.

The Qurʾān describes itself as *Muḥkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt*

The *muḥkam* are the clear and unambiguous verses of the Qurʾān and its purpose is to provide clear guidance and is therefore generally understood to need no interpretation. The *mutashābi* are verses of ambiguity which are not precise in meaning and are liable to more than one interpretation.

The Qurʾān is essentially considered a revelation of clear *muḥkamāt* verses, and this view is supported by a verse in the Qurʾān, “A Book whereof the verses are explained in detail.”¹⁶⁸ However, most scholars agree that some passages of the Qurʾān leave certain ideas implied rather than stated and that, from the outset, the Qurʾān cautions that some verses are literal in meaning, while others, named *mutashābihāt* are metaphorical in meaning.¹⁶⁹

A *muḥkam* verse is very clear and unambiguous specifically applied in the field of *aḥkām* (laws); an example would be “*wa aqīmū as-salah*” (And establish the prayer). A *mutashābi* is a verse that can have more than one meaning, an example, “*yadullahi fawqa aydihim*” (And the Hand of God is above their hands).

According to esoteric and some exoteric scholars, like the Muʿtazilite school of rationalism for example, the Qurʾān has the awareness that certain things cannot be stated directly and are beyond direct human apprehension. Such things can only be experienced through metaphor.¹⁷⁰ This allows the

¹⁶⁸ Q. 41:1-2.

¹⁶⁹ “It is God Who has sent down to you the Book; in it are clear verses (*muḥkamāt*), they are the foundation of the Book, others are metaphorical” (*mutashābihāt*), Q. 3:7.

¹⁷⁰ Even in the most ordinary circumstances we, as human creatures, find it difficult enough to express our deepest feelings in speech with any degree of accuracy or to convey to other people the precise outlines of ideas which are quite clear in our own minds, even though this speech is a tool fitted to our needs. How much more difficult then for God to express the wealth of meaning He wishes to convey in the language of man. It is shredded, it bends and cracks under this burden, and we find again and again in the Quran, unfinished sentences or

mind to roam, to explore, and allows room to leap between what is known and what cannot be known. All the great religious texts used metaphors – this is why they resonate in the mind. If we insist on the most literal reading we destroy the capacity to grasp metaphorical readings, and for the imagination (intellect) to go beyond the shell of the imagination to the soul. The Qur’ān says, *Will they not reflect on this Qur’ān?*¹⁷¹

“Were it not for the marvels of the Qur’ān, we would not have been commanded to meditate on it through the ages. The Prophet said, “Analyse the language of the Qur’ān, and seek out its marvels.” In response to this, someone might say, “God has relieved us of the burden of extracting its pearls by having those who came before us do it.” Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s reply was: “this would mean that we would lose out on our share of meditation on it-- God forbid! Which no intelligent person would suggest, nor anyone graced with faith.”¹⁷²



the omission of words required to complete the sense of a passage (words usually supplied in brackets by the translators) gaps over which our understanding must make a leap in the dark. (Islam and the destiny of man – Gai Eaton, p. 76)

¹⁷¹ Q. 17:82.

¹⁷² Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafā ibn ‘Alīwa, *Al’Baḥr al-Masjūr fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-maḥḍ al-nūr*, (Mostaghanem: al-Matba’a al-‘Alawiyya, 1995), p.18.

Exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and Esoteric (*bāṭin*) Interpretation of Qur'ān

Esoteric exegesis, which forms an integral part of the analytical framework for this dissertation, attempts to unveil the inner meaning of the Qur'ān by moving beyond the apparent point of the (Qur'ānic) verses and relating them to the inner and metaphysical dimensions of consciousness. The *ẓāhir* aspect is the literal word, the law and the material text of the Qur'ān, while the esoteric *bāṭin* aspect is the hidden meaning:

Esoteric interpretations do not usually contradict the conventional (in this context, exoteric) interpretations; instead, they discuss the inner levels of meaning of the Qur'ān. A prophetic *Ḥadīth* which states that the Qur'ān has an outer (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) meaning, and that this inner meaning conceals a yet deeper inner meaning, and so on (up to seven levels of meaning), has sometimes been used in support of this view. It is by virtue of this correspondence between the two that *ta'wīl* may occur: *ta'wīl* consist in re-conducting what has been received i.e. the sacred, to the very source from which its descent, *tanzīl*, originated.¹⁷³

The exoteric approach explains the signs of the scripture by considering the objectivity of them and their external references. Furthermore, the esoteric approach is formed based on the mindset of the interpreter, which is the fruit of divine inspirations. The two methods of study and the subject-matter complement each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of Islam and of the Holy Qur'ān, in both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions.

¹⁷³ Patrick Lauda, "The Qur'ān, Scriptures and Hermeneutics, p. 52.

Those who limit Islam to a two-dimensional understanding and practice of its forms do not err in affirming the *zāhir* but are misled in denying the *bāṭin*.

Doing so they deprive religion of what constitutes its *raison d'être*, the divine dimension of height and depth, of transcendence and immanence: transcendence because the meaning of religion lies above the letter of human understanding, and immanence because the substance of Islam, like that of the Qur'ān, is an inexhaustible wealth of reality.

Another aspect to the exoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān is its linguistic and grammatical analysis of Qur'ānic exegesis.

The Sufis generally do not have a strong attachment to syntax and the rules of grammar; they are, to an extent, critical of those who exert themselves in spending years perfecting its rules and articulation. Very few amongst the Sufis have mastered its skills because of their attachment to the spirit of the word and not the letter, since grammar is essentially a science that deals with the external laws and is considered a *fard kifāya*¹⁷⁴ and not a *wājib* which is their main preoccupation. However, Shaykh al-'Alāwī believes that having a standard knowledge of the Arabic grammar is undoubtedly a prerequisite for all Qur'ānic exegetes. The Shaykh has also shown in some verses of the Qur'ān how grammar can become a tool for discovering esoteric knowledge. I would like to give an example of three verses which Shaykh al-'Alāwī approaches from a grammatical perspective arriving to an esoteric interpretation.

It is interesting to know how Shaykh al-'Alāwī interprets a much debated verse on Qadar and divine action from a purely linguistic perspective arriving at four different grammatical approaches, affirming on one hand, the Ash'arite view that God creates our actions, and on the other hand, justifying the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (Oneness of Being) which says "*Lā fā 'ila illa 'Llāh*" (there is no doer [in reality] but God). The verse says:

¹⁷⁴ *Fard kifāya* is not binding on the entire community, even though it is considered a compulsory obligation in the acts of religion, if it is done by only a few then the responsibility and burden falls away from the rest of the Muslim community. *Wājib* is an obligation upon each and every Muslim male and female.

و الله خلقكم و ما تعملون (Q. 37: 96) "God created you and your deeds"

1 -The particle ما in the above verse could be translated as موصولة (a relative pronoun) 'God created you and that which you do.'

2 -ما can also be considered an استفهام (interrogative) meaning, 'God created you, and what do you do?'

3 -ما can have the meaning of نفي (negative particle) 'God created you and you do nothing!'

4- ما could also be a مصدرية (objective noun of source) 'God created you and your deeds'.

The syntax of one grammatical particle has provided four possible interpretations. However, all four approaches point to one esoteric reality and that is 'There is no doer but God'.

Another example of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's unveiling spiritual secrets within the linguistic form can be seen in the following text:

'O, dear contented nafs, return to your Lord well-pleased and pleasing Him.'

يا ايها النفس المطمئنة ارجعي الى ربك راضية مرضية (Q. 89:27-28)

It would have been sufficient for God to say, "O nafs", with one vocative حرف النداء; but instead, the verse contains two vocatives 'yā and 'ayyatuhā ('O' and 'Dear') implying the great veneration God gives to the nafs at this point because of its total submission and annihilation in Him, and it is at this point that the nafs is transformed into pure soul (rūḥ). For the Gnostic experiences this transformation of the nafs into rūḥ (soul) in this life (dying a spiritual death) which occurs at the point of Gnosis (ma'rifa).¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ The Shaykh al-'Alāwī says: "The Gnostics have a death before the physical death. The Prophet said: "Die before you die" and this is the real death, for the other death is but a change of abode. The true meaning of death in the doctrine of the Sufis is the extinction of the slave that is his utter effacement and annihilation. The Gnostic may be dead unto himself and unto the world, and resurrected in his Lord, so that if you should ask him of his existence he would not answer you in as much as he has lost sight of his individuality. Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī was asked about himself and he said, "Abū Yazīd is dead, may God not have mercy on him!" This is the real death; but if on the Day of Resurrection you should ask one who has died only the general death, "who are you?" he would answer; I am so-and-so", for his life never ceased and he has never sensed the perfume of death, but has simply passed on from world to world, and none perceives the meaning of the real death save him who has died it. Thus have the Sufis a reckoning before the Day of Reckoning, even as the Prophet said, "Call yourselves to account before you will be called to account." They labored in calling

In the following verse the Shaykh stresses the power and force of the *nafs* that dictates evil, through its grammatical construction:

“Verily the *nafs* commands only evil.” (Q.12:53) ان النفس لامارة بالسوء الا ما رحم ربي

To show the severity of the *nafsul ammārah* God employs four particles of

emphasis (*tawkīd*) in the very first four words

emphasis ان (verily) (2) the definite article ال (the) attached to the word *nafs*

(3) the *lām* of emphasis لام التوكيد attached to *ammārah* (4) the exaggerated

form of the verbal noun *āmirā'* (commandi

vigorously) which in Arabic is known as صيغة المبالغة

And this is why the Sufis give great reverence to the Prophet’s words: “The

greatest battle (*jihād*) is the battle against the *nafs*.” And in another Prophetic

saying; “The *nafs* is filthier (*akhbathu*) and more dangerous than seventy

devils.” It is also stated in a *ḥadīth* that “The believer (*mu’min*) is weak by

himself (*nafs*) but strong in his brother.’ And the Sufis say that the only veil

between us and God is this *nafs* and if we were to remove it or push it aside

we would find Him closer to us than ourselves.

An overview of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s hermeneutical steps to an esoteric Tafsīr

The hermeneutics I have chosen to draw from in comparing Shaykh al-‘Alāwī

with the hermeneutics of al-Ghazālī in this chapter has been extrapolated

from the six steps in the introduction of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s *al-Baḥr al-masjūr*

fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi maḥḍ al-nūr, in which each verse of the Qur’ān is viewed

on four different levels of Interpretation based on the six hermeneutic steps.

Step one makes clear the need for a dynamic and fresh perception to the

interpretation of the Qur’ān in every age, and that which asserts the way for

this reality in Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s view is to have a good opinion of the pious

scholars of every age destined and qualified to extrapolate their allotted

themselves into account until they were free to contemplate their Lord, and theirs is a resurrection before the Resurrection.” (Al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiyya, p. 74) this translation was taken from The Sufi Saint, Lings, p.160

share of understanding the divine text. The Shaykh also asserts this truth with the support of authentic prophetic traditions.

The Shaykh also alludes to the archetype scholar in the form of the *mujaddid* (renewer of faith) and his independent opinion when he says that the *mujaddid* is not necessarily someone who follows the opinion of others, but rather takes directly from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Reading of the Qur'ānic text should not be a forced limitation restricted to one particular generation, a concept held by many exoteric scholars of our time. The Shaykh is also very critical about those scholars who assert that no exegesis of the Qur'ān is legitimate and complete if it does not comply with the special understanding of the *saḥāba* and the *tāb'īn* (*as-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥīn*)¹⁷⁶, as if no other generation is worthy of their own interpretation. We have to see the message of the Qur'ān within our own world view and this is clearly manifested in the *ḥadīth* of the '*mujaddid*', the one sent to revitalize the spirit of the religious sciences and the *ḥadīth* that 'every generation of my community will have its foremost (*al-muqarrabūn*). The Shaykh confirms the sense of hope and high aspirations in the latter part of the Moḥammadan community when relating the words of the Prophet, 'My community is a blessed community. No one knows if the first part or last part is better', without the intention to imply any comparison or superiority over the Prophet's Companions.

In his concluding remarks of the first step he says, 'this book of mine (if not understood now) might be of use to those who will come later, even if it does not please my contemporaries', a statement alluding to someone almost appearing ahead of his time.

Step Two expresses an inherent truth that the Qur'ān is the eternal book of God and cannot be limited to the mind of any human being. Its wisdom cannot be confined to one generation in exclusion of another because its wondrous meanings are infinite, "Its marvels will never cease."

And in the words of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, 'if the book of God did not contain many spiritual marvels and secrets, He would not have commanded us to

¹⁷⁶ Our pious ancestors of the first two generations of Islam

contemplate it through the passing of time' and so al-'Alāwī therefore maintains that the Qur'ān will remain fresh and new in every age and will continue to be a ripe garden opening windows unto a vast landscape of meanings. The uniqueness of the Qur'ān is that every letter of the Qur'ān has meaning and the proof is derived from the prophetic saying, 'Whoever reads a letter from the Book of God will receive one good deed and one good deed is rewarded ten-fold'. And so why would there be such a great reward for the reading of one letter if not for the purpose of divine secrets and spiritual meanings contained in them? So there is no way that those who came before us could have extracted all the jewels from the Qur'ān since every generation must have a portion of contemplation in it according to the Qur'ānic injunction, *Will they not contemplate this Qur'ān?* (4:82).

The Shaykh also makes it clear that the disciplines and facets of the Qur'ān can only be uncovered by one who has attained to spiritual realization. According to 'Ali bin Abī Ṭālib there are three kinds of people in the spiritual hierarchy of the Islamic community, (i) those who have attained to the ultimate knowledge of *ma'rifa* (gnosis) and this is an expression of *al-iḥsān*, (ii) those who are seekers upon the path of gnosis and this is an expression of *al-īmān* and (iii) those who are like straw (they follow whichever direction the wind takes them) and they are the 'exoteric' majority in Islam. Yes, it is true that by virtue of its unity Islam is profoundly egalitarian, advocating equality to all; but in its diversity it asserts distinctions in rank, and no hierarchy can be fully grasped except by those at its top. *All are watered with the same water, yet some have We given preference above others in the tasting thereof.* (Q.13:4). *All do We aid, these as well as those from the bounty of your Lord* (Q.17:20).

Step three discusses the meanings contained within the Qur'ān that are beyond the intellect of most people. This step appears to be an illustration of the three-fold hierarchy of knowledge which forms an integral part of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutics of the Qur'ān. For al-'Alāwī the Qur'ān is meant to be understood on three levels; first there is the general address to all Muslims

(*‘āwām*)¹⁷⁷, then there is the address to the elite (*khāṣṣ*) who learn reasons for their beliefs¹⁷⁸ and finally the elite of the elite (*khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*), those who directly experience religious truths and they are the Gnostics. Or we could also refer to the three fold hierarchy as the knowledge of certainty (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*), the vision of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*) and the ultimate truth of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*).

Shaykh al-‘Alāwī argues unequivocally for the legitimacy of an inner spiritual perspective to revelation and asserts the intellectual superiority of the mystical knowledge of the Sufis. However, there is no problem for those who cleave to the outer meanings of the Qur’ān, but what grieves al-‘Alāwī is their rejection of what lies beyond the form of the divine text. Apart from textual evidence in the Qur’ān and Sunnah regarding the permissibility of an esoteric interpretation to the divine text, the Shaykh is prompted to quote what some of the Companions understood from the Book of God and their careful dissemination of their hidden knowledge which they have received from the Prophet himself. Among the various quotations is the popular one of Abū Huraira who speaks of two distinct treasures of knowledge which he had received from the Prophet and his caution for disclosing the one (hidden) knowledge to everyone for fear of the possibility that misunderstanding of a figurative statement could lead to misinterpretation. And so it is clear that even among the Companions of the Prophet there were those who held on only to the letter of the word and lacked the capacity to comprehend what lies beyond the literal meaning. Most people are attached to the mere form of things and not what it holds on the inside. All of this is taken from the *ḥadīth*, “Speak to people according to the level of their intellectual capacity” lest it be the cause of *fitna* (dispute) and misinterpretation.

Nevertheless, it should be reiterated that by approaching the Qur’ān intuitively and seeking out its esoteric meaning, the Sufis do not in anyway preach “*Batiniyya*”, the tendency to search for the hidden meaning of the

¹⁷⁷ The *‘awām* (s. *‘āmm*) are those who believe in the truths of religion without questioning

¹⁷⁸ Implying here the religious scholars and especially speculative theologians

Qur'ān without giving value to its exoteric meaning. The religious textuality that is literally spelled out in the Qur'ān is in actual fact the symbol of its hidden reality and the literal meaning of the text is like a body to a soul. According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, even though the Qur'ān has been completely revealed from the aspect of its laws (*aḥkām*) it does not end with regards to what it contains of divine inspiration (*ilhām*).

Step four emphasizes the reality of the Qur'ān being vivified with freshness in every age and in all aspects of its revelation, and not merely in its laws. Instead, we should see it as a book sent especially to us because we have to realize that the Qur'ān is alive because it's the word of God and through it He speaks to us directly, not in the past tense but now. According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, everyone believes that the Qur'ān is the speech of God but what they lack is hearing it from God Himself; and they will not hear it from God unless God is their hearing, as He says about His true servant, "And when I love him I become his hearing with which he hears" until the end of the *ḥadīth qudsi*, and according to al-'Alāwī the reference in this *ḥadīth* is to the gnostic who has attained to the station of direct vision (*mushāhada*). And in the words of Henry Corbin, "A meditative contact with the Qur'ān discloses its own nature to the soul by actualizing its relationship with its Lord" and this is where the Divine comes face to face with the soul. Therefore, while being exoterically a guarded book (*kitābun makhnūn*), the Qur'ān is esoterically an open book in the sense that each of its verses corresponds to a state of being or a state of consciousness. The scripture of the Qur'ān is absolute with regards to the essence of its message, but relative in its form. A real contact with the Qur'ān through intellectual contemplation and meditation of its verses amounts first of all, to an awakening of the intellect which at the very source of our intelligence binds us to the truth (*al-ḥaqq*).

Shaykh al-'Alāwī also stresses the need for excellence and sincerity in one's religious faith (*al-iḥsān*) which captures the spirit of Sufi practice as the necessary apogee to any faith that aspires to be truly whole.

What can be gathered from all this is that Shaykh al-'Alāwī's meditation on the hermeneutics of the Qur'ān is undoubtedly encapsulated in two remarkable prophetic sayings, "Verily the Qur'ān has an outer, an inner, a boundary and a limitless horizon", and "The wonders of the Qur'ān will never cease" and such is the reality of a spiritually living Qur'ān!

Step five is a discussion on the universality of the Qur'ān and how each and every word in it is meant to be for every one in every age. If we reflect on how the Qur'ān is a book from God addressed directly to us, we cannot consider any of God's injunctions, warnings, promises and commandments therein to refer to other people.

Another aspect of its universality is that the Qur'ān has been made to be appropriate and suitable for all times because it is the final revelation. God has not revealed a book in a time except that it contains in it all that is good and all that which suffices for that time. The Torāh was appropriate for the needs of the time of Moses, and the Injīl was appropriate for the time period of Jesus and the Qur'ān is appropriate from the time of its revelation till the end of time. The Qur'ān contains knowledge and divine secrets for this time, and it is perhaps for this reason that the '*ulamā'* (sages) are considered to be the heirs of the prophets (*ambiyā*), and the speech of the sages is expected to be in accordance to what is needed for each specific time and age. And for Shaykh al-'Alāwī the true sage (*'ālim*) is the one who has taken from the outer and inner part of the Qur'ān and that is the Gnostic; because there are '*ulamā'* who have taken only from the outer part of the Qur'ān and they have established the pillars of the *sharī'ah* but lost out on the *ḥaqīqa*. The complete sage is the one described in the poem of Shaykh al-Buzaidi, the *ustādh* (teacher) of Shaykh al-'Alāwī who said, "O murīd observe the principles of the *sharī'ah*, and if you hold fast to it you will have a strong *ḥaqīqa*".¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ (*Murīdī kun ḥafīdh ḥudūd as-sharī'ah, tamassak bihā tufīd kamāl al-ḥaqīqa*). *Dīwān*, (Beirut:Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), p.114

God has honored the Gnostics who have taken from both the exterior and interior of the Qur'ān and have extracted from it what is appropriate for us in every age, and like the Prophet said, "God will grant at the beginning of every century one who will renew His religion (*dīn*)," and each one brings out what is required for that time, meaning, what may not have been clear in the time before us is made clear now since every wisdom and every knowledge has its appropriate time. Nothing will be manifested before its time as God says in the Qur'ān, *And do not be in a hurry with the Qur'ān (O Muḥammad) before the revelation has come to you and say: O my Lord increase me in knowledge.* (Q.20:114).

In the Qur'ān there are treasures, but these treasures are locked, and only when their time comes are they opened, like the verse says, *And do not be in a hurry with the Qur'ān until its revelation descends unto you*, And for the Gnostic, when inspiration comes to him the verse opens up, the *ḥaqīqa* comes to him and opens up the verse for him. And the Gnostics will come and extract the treasure of secrets in the Qur'ān for us at the right time. And every community will have its share of understanding from the Gnostics. The Shaykh al-'Alāwī says, 'and God gives that there will come a community after us (meaning after his time) who will receive secrets that has never occurred to us now', and the ḥadīth says, 'And truly the wonders and secrets of the Qur'ān will never cease.' He also says, 'we have found that in the books of the latter scholars great miracles that never occurred to the former people, because those people did not need it at the time. God made to come on their tongues what was appropriate and suitable for the people of that time, because the doctor medicates in accordance to the times and accordance to the illness, and the medication differs in accordance to the illness. This is when we talk about the physical illness, what still about the diseases and illnesses of the spiritual heart?

Step six alludes to the spiritual state of the Gnostic, who, when reading the Qur'ān seeks to be annihilated in the word of God. For the Gnostic the Qur'ān is *'ayn al ḥaqīqa* (the ultimate essence of all truth), and it has mixed with his

blood, his flesh and his sweat and with all of his being, and the symbolism of all this is the drowning of the created in the uncreated; and the orthodox view in Islam is that the Qur'ān is uncreated.

What al-'Alāwī considers most important about the Book of God is that we should see it as fresh, coming to us now from the Divine Presence. The Qur'ān has a specific message and education for every age and which can be comprehended by those scholars who have approached the Qur'ān with deep spiritual contemplative understanding. And so, if the Qur'ān is God's universal address to all humanity as it claims to be and which is the belief of all Muslims, it should transcend time and space and should make sense to everyone at all times. It should speak to its addressee here and now.

One should not confine the Qur'ān only to the causes of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) or the person about whom the verses were revealed. The lesson to be taken from the Qur'ān is the generality of the phrase, not the specificity of the cause, we should reflect on the broader meaning of God's words.

'In the Muslim's view, revelation (*wahī*) bypasses human intelligence and the limitations of that intelligence, whereas inspiration (*ilhām*) enlightens intelligence but does not abolish its limitations.¹⁸⁰ If the revelation of the Qur'ān has been made indispensable for us from the aspect of its Laws (*aḥkām*); however, it does not end with regards to what it contains of divine inspiration (*ilhām*).

¹⁸⁰ The distinction between revelation (*wahī*) and inspiration (*ilhām*) – even inspiration which has its origin in the divine -- is of fundamental importance to Islam, and this can be another cause of confusion for the occidental who has been told that the Qur'ān is the Muslim "Bible". The Old Testament contains material attributable to a number of different authors extending over a very long period of time, sometimes directly inspired and sometimes indirectly, while the New Testament is comparable to the 'traditions' of the Prophet, his acts and sayings, rather than to the Qur'ān as such. The Bible is a coat of many colors. The Qur'ān is a single fabric to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be abstracted. (Gai Eaton – Islam and the destiny of man p. 76)

Allah has entrusted the outside (*zāhir*) of the Qur'ān with those who have mastered its outside, and He entrusted its inside (*bāṭin*) with those whom He has given the inward vision (*baṣīra*).

Abū Madyan, in one of his *ḥikams* explains the danger of the scholar (*'ālim*) who has acquired knowledge of the exterior of the religion whilst being unmindful of its interior. He says, "The unmindful scholar (*al-'ālim al-ghāfil*) is the one who is rigid and confined only to the outward interpretations. He is unmindful of what lies beyond that, thinking or claiming that the ultimate goal lies in what *he* has achieved; not knowing that the Gnostics (*ārifūn*) possess the spiritual secrets by which they are distinguished. But most people have come to follow the exoteric *'ālim* because of his precedence in the rank of (exterior) knowledge and his popularity in society, and because the law (*sharī'a*) concerns the vast numbers of Muslims, and the Path of Sufism a limited group. And such a *'ālim* can become a barrier and a hindrance for the one whose desire is to transcend the outward knowledge and attain to the ultimate goal of Divine Knowledge (gnosis). However, there is a price to pay for rigidity amongst some scholars who may think that, 'what they don't know cannot be known'.

The *ārif* maintains the delicate balance between rigidity and flexibility because he has understood the outside and inside of the religion, since everything according to the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, has an outer and inner meaning.

Unlike the *tafsīr* of *al-baḥr al-masjūr*, the *tafsīr* of Sūrah al-Najm under discussion in this thesis is more esoteric, perhaps due to the spiritual character and nature of its content, and was therefore not approached from the four levels of interpretation. However, the hermeneutic principles of *al-baḥr al-masjūr* are most suitable for comparing the hermeneutics of al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī because they have a wide approach to the general hermeneutics of the Qur'ān. Both of these authors advocate a hierarchy of knowledge implied through the three levels of Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān* corresponding to *'āmm*, *khāṣṣ* and *khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*; a concept that is fully discussed in the appendix.

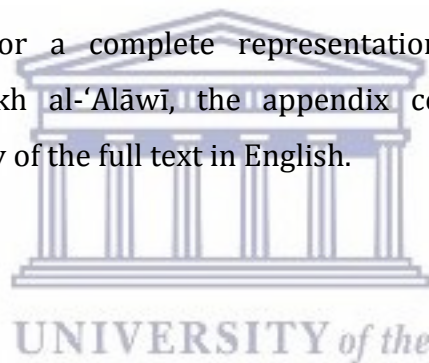
The Qur'ān is not limited to one interpretation and therefore should not be confined to the generations of the past, but rather, the Qur'ān should be seen as fresh and new in every age.

One of the principles of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is that 'the Qur'ān has many facets and its wonders will never cease, so that the understanding of the former generation cannot preclude the understanding of the latter.

The entire explanation of this hermeneutical principle with all its arguments and evidence can be found in the appendix.

One of the main rules outlined in their hermeneutics is that the literal meaning of the text should not be held separate from the hidden meaning.

In conclusion, for a complete representation of the hermeneutical principles of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, the appendix could be consulted with complete availability of the full text in English.



Introducing the hermeneutics of al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī

Al-Ghazālī was a great Sufi theologian (450-505 AH). His work, *Jawāhir-ul Qur'ān*, is a vital contribution of a strong foundation for *ta'wīl*-based hermeneutics. He liberated his own brainpower and intelligence by rejecting the previous doctrines of Muslim theologians through critical analysis and subsequently presenting a new sceptical approach.¹⁸¹ For the purpose of this dissertation, al-Ghazālī's approach to interpretation of texts forms the primary source for *ta'wīl*-based Qur'ānic hermeneutics. The composition of al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics is mainly derived from scepticism that results in the rejection of existing knowledge and explanations of the Qur'ān. There is

¹⁸¹ Kamal, "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology," p. 4.

no place for presupposition in his hermeneutics. Al-Ghazālī in his work has attempted to strike a balance between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the Qur'ān.¹⁸²

'He maintains that it is not through rational, but spiritual interpretation that the hidden meanings of the text can be discovered. For al-Ghāzali there are two levels (*ṭabaqāt*) of the sciences of the Qur'ān. The higher level is associated with the seeking of knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*), contemplating the divine essence (*dhāt*), and observing His deeds (*af'āl*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*). He asserts that most understandings would be wearied by the higher level of knowledge, and the weak, who are the most traditional in knowledge, would be harmed by it. Most do not reach this higher grade of knowledge; the knowledge of the elite and those who strive towards the purification and refinement of the soul (*nafs*). Al-Ghazālī's conviction is that revealed knowledge is not given to everybody. Except for the Prophet Muḥammad, knowledge of the true meaning of a given Qur'ānic verse is available only to those who are capable of understanding them. In order to get to this level, one has to stop the exclusive dependency on traditional interpretations supported by statements corroborated by the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, and start self-training in spiritual struggle and piety via guidance granted by God.¹⁸³

'One of al-Ghazālī's purposes in *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* is to present the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān as the only adequate way to deal with the revealed text. For this reason, he presents "the jewels and the pearls" of the Scripture as a valuable result of Sufi interpretation. The "jewels and pearls" to be earned through an introspective study of the Qur'ān are forms of knowledge related to God's essence (*dhāt*), attributes (*ṣifāt*) and deeds (*af'āl*) in the universe as well as the well-being of the Muslim community and the spiritual Sufi path. These forms of knowledge can be extracted out of the Qur'ānic text through a specific hermeneutical approach which penetrates

¹⁸² Rashid Ahmad Jullundhry, *Qur'ānic Exegesis in Classical Literature* (published in 2006 by Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore).

¹⁸³ Georges Tamer, "al-Ghazālī's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an, p. 64

through the text to reach the inner meaning. The hermeneutical approach presented in these jewels is the alternative al-Ghazālī suggests not only to traditional exegesis, but also to esoteric *bāṭini* and rational *mu'tazilī*. While the *Bāṭiniyya* marginalised the verbal text of the Qur'ān in favour of extracting the hidden meaning of the text by means of esoteric instruction, Mu'tazilite thinkers pleaded for a rational interpretation of the Qur'ānic text. According to al-Ghazālī, the verbal text does not lose its value in favour of the inner meanings, as the *Bāṭiniyya* taught. In opposition to both positions, he regards the verbal text of the Qur'ān as far more important and worthy, to be taken seriously in its interpretation, which serves as the only possible way to reach the inner level of the text. However, for Ghazālī, it is not through rational, but spiritual interpretation, which goes beyond rational restrictions, that the hidden meanings of the text can be discovered.

Al-Ghazālī's hermeneutic position can be summarised as follows:

1. His hermeneutical position commences with a presuppositionless beginning. It frees itself from all assumed structures, rules and judgments for the understanding of the meaning of the Qur'ān.
2. It stresses the unity of literal external and hidden internal meanings of the revealed text.
3. It relies on mystical intuition for understanding the meaning of the text. This intuitive experience is significant for obtaining knowledge as well as apprehending the meaning of the Qur'ān, because in intuition nothing stands between mind and its object.
4. It encourages emotional attunement to the text.

The structure of al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics, as it is described in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān (Jewels of the Qur'ān)*, can be said to be derived from his skepticism, which, like the Cartesian doubt, leads to a rejection of previous knowledge and hence a rejection of pre-given interpretations of the Qur'ān.¹⁸⁴

Al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics and phenomenology are described by him in his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*¹⁸⁵ as one of the internal

¹⁸⁴ Kamal, "Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology," p.80-81

¹⁸⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. 5 vols. (Beirut,).

rules for recitation and understanding of the meaning of the Qur'ān. According to Al-Ghazālī, the reader must isolate his or her mind from all extraneous influences when reading the Qur'ān and focus directly and intuitively on the text. This preliminary stage, which is the first step in the above list, has three functions:

1. To free the mind from the dogmas of theological schools and from assumed rules, interpretations and commentaries that limits and conditions one understands of the meaning of the Qur'ān. For instance, following an authority of a theological school might be correct, but it can also be an obstacle to understanding.
2. To free the mind from worldly purposes and from the desire for material benefits, which weaken spiritual strength.
3. To free the soul from sin, as sinners will be unable to understand the meaning of the Qur'ān. As mentioned earlier, this point is based on one of the fundamental characteristics of a divine text and its authorship.

The Sufi hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī are derived from the three levels of faith in Islam. The foundation of his hermeneutics is extracted from the famous Gabriel *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet spoke of Islam (submission),

Īmān (faith) and Iḥsān (excellence).¹⁸⁶ From the Sufi and Gnostic perspective, Islam represents the form of the religion which is the *sharī'a*, and Īmān

¹⁸⁶ 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb said: "One day we were sitting in the company of Allah's Messenger when there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothing; his hair was extraordinarily black. There were no signs of travel on him and none of us knew him. He (proceeded until) he sat before the Messenger, his knees supported against the Prophet, his palms placed on his thighs, and said, 'O Muhammad, tell me about Islam.' The Messenger of Allah said, 'Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah, and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah; and that you establish prayer, pay zakah (obligatory charity), observe the fast of Ramadan, and perform pilgrimage to (Allah's) House if you have the means to do so.' (The inquirer) said, 'You have told the truth.'" Umar bin al-Khattab commented, "It astonished us that he would ask and then verify the truth." (The inquirer) said, "Inform me about *Īmān* (faith)." Allah's Messenger replied, "It is that you believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Day of Judgment, and that you believe in Divine Preordination, whether good or bad." (The inquirer) responded, "You have told the truth." He then said, "Inform me about *Iḥsān* (beneficence)." Allah's Messenger said, "(It is) that you worship Allah as if you see Him, for though you don't see Him, (you know) He sees you." The inquirer said, "Inform me about the hour (of the Day of Judgment)." The Messenger of Allah remarked,

represents the Path (*Tarīqa*) which is the application of *sharī'a* with love, and *Iḥsān* (*ḥaqīqa*) is the perfection of the spiritual state and arrival at the divine knowledge of gnosis (*ma'rifa*).¹⁸⁷ It could be said that Islam is the level of the general masses (*'umūm*), *Īmān* is the level of the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) and *Iḥsān* is the level of the elite of the elite (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*).¹⁸⁸

According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, most people would fall into these three categories according to their ability, when it comes to worshipping God and understanding His words. An illustration of the three-dimensional approach of Shaykh al-'Alāwī regarding his understanding of Islam in its totality can be found in his explanation of the *ḥadīth*; "Make your prayer a farewell prayer as if there will never be a prayer after that." (*ṣalli ṣalāt al-muwadda'i*) This *ḥadīth* is found in the Sunan of Ibn Mājah, narrated from Ayyūb al-Ansārī and is graded *Ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) according to al-Bāni. The general (*'umūm*) understanding of this *ḥadīth* is, "The wise should pray as if bidding farewell because there is no security of permanence and it could likely be that it is your last prayer. Place death before your eyes and intensify the perfection of your prayer and take care of its application in every aspect, heart and soul. If you become well established in this state then your prayer is performed in accordance with the *sharī'a*." The second view point is the understanding of

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"The one being asked knows no more than the questioner." The inquirer said, "Tell me some of its signs." The Prophet said, "(They are) that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress (or master), and that you will find barefooted, destitute goat-herders vying with one another in the construction of magnificent buildings." Umar bin Al-Khattab said, "Then he (the inquirer) went on his way but I stayed with him (Allah's Messenger *Sallallahu a'laihi wa sallam*) for a long while." The Prophet then said to me, "Umar, do you know who this inquirer was?" I replied, 'Allah and His Messenger know best.' He remarked, 'It was (the angel) Gabriel. He came to you [people] in order to teach you your religion.'" Narrated by 'Umar al-Khattāb in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Kitāb Al-īmān* (Book on Faith), ḥadīth 1/8.

Gnosis in the doctrine of Sufism is summed up in a holy tradition (*Ḥadīth Qudsī*) which brings out the extra dimension of Islam in its depth and height, which is *Iḥsān*. It is mentioned in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that God says, "Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceases not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him I am the Hearing where with he hears and the Sight where with he sees and the Hand where with he grasps and the Feet with which he walks." Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. Edited by. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir Al-Nāṣir. Print: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt copied from Al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah. Būlāq, Egypt (1311 A.H.) Ḥadīth No. 6502 Vol. 8 Pg.105

¹⁸⁸ It can also be said that Islam is the body (*al-jasad*), *Īmān* is the heart (*al-qalb*) and *Iḥsān* is the soul (*al-rūḥ*).

the elite (*khāṣṣ*). The one who occupies this station sees the Prophet as saying, “Pray the prayer of one who is bidding farewell, meaning pray without seeing yourself pray, because the one who bids farewell to his prayer performs it and does not hold onto it. He does not see his prayer as having any existence, because he is absent in the vision of its occurrence over him; that is, he does not rely on it nor does he derive any support from it, to the point where it is as though he did not even pray it.” He will not contest with his soul on Judgement Day that he has any prayer because he is lost in the vision of Him to Whom he prayed. Such is the prayer of the one who bids farewell to his own prayer. As for the one whose prayer is the focus of his attention and who relies on his prayer both outwardly and inwardly, he has not bid farewell to his prayer. How could he possibly bid it farewell when he hopes to use it as an argument against God as though reminding Him of the favour he did Him by performing it? In the example of such a person, his prayer will never be raised from him because he is still attached to it (i.e the deed), and God says, “And He raises up the righteous deed,” Q.35:10. And if his prayer had truly been raised from him, he would have forgotten it and become oblivious of it until he would deem it paltry. And when something rises upwards, it shrinks in the eyes of those who behold it and becomes smaller and smaller until it disappears completely. The third viewpoint is the most distinguished (*khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*) approach to the *ḥadith*. The possessor of this station is the one, who, when he hears the word ‘prayer’ thinks immediately of the prayer of connection (*ittiṣāl*), known in the expression of the Gnostics as concealment or extinction (*fanāʾ*) because the prayer is a connection (*waṣlah*) between the servant and his Lord. Whenever this connection is made, illusions disappear and multiplicity falls away in the blinding light of direct vision. The one who bids farewell according to them is the one who says goodbye to all existence and breaks away from it and leaves it behind him. His arrival to the Presence cannot be realised except after he has bid farewell to everything, after that there is nothing to prevent the branch from connecting to the root. At this point the intermediary disappears, and there is no need for a connection or a link. In Arabic

grammar, when the subject (*mubtada'*) is identical with the predicate (*khabr*) it does not need a link (*rābita*), as God says in a *Ḥadīth Qudsi*, "I become his hearing, his seeing..."¹⁸⁹

This fact is brought out clearly in the hermeneutic principle of Shaykh al-'Alāwī which advocates that there were some Companions who received knowledge from the Prophet that was beyond the understanding of the general masses; the precaution they took in preserving this knowledge, not disclosing it to everyone, was a sign of their sound education and prudent advice they had taken from the Prophet. Even though this knowledge was inherent within the Companions, due to its esoteric nature, it was not popular amongst the masses and was therefore not included in the broader framework of the more popular exoteric principles.

The general people (*'umūm*) do not have the capacity to endure the understanding of the elite (*khawāṣṣ*), and the proof is that the Prophet used to speak to people according to their level of intellect.¹⁹⁰ Shaykh al-'Alāwī also asserts that this was a quality which distinguished Prophet Muḥammad from those (prophets) who came before him.

The hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, like other Sufi hermeneutics, explore the secrets and deeper meanings of the Qur'ān. It is clear from his hermeneutic principles that he was not influenced by any philosophical thoughts or dogmatic theories in the realm of exegesis, but rather as a

¹⁸⁹ Shaykh al-'Alāwī, *Kitāb A'dhab al-Manāhil*, (Mostaghanem: *al-Matba'a al-Alawiyya*, p.51.

¹⁹⁰ This fact is brought out clearly in the hermeneutic principle of Shaykh al-'Alāwī which advocates that there were some Companions who received knowledge from the Prophet that was beyond the understanding of the general masses; the precaution they took in preserving this knowledge, not disclosing it to everyone, was a sign of their sound education and prudent advice they had taken from the Prophet. Even though this knowledge was inherent within the Companions, due to its esoteric nature, it was not popular amongst the masses and was therefore not included in the broader framework of the more popular exoteric principles.

Gnostic and *mujtahid*.¹⁹¹ He exercised his *ijtihād*¹⁹² on traditional sources of *ḥadīth* and the Qur'ānic text, exploring the depths of meaning beneath the surface of the text together with spiritual contemplation (*baṣīra*). To prove the esoteric reality of the Qur'ān, Shaykh al-'Alāwī extracts from tradition and the mystical elements contained within the Qur'ānic text itself to establish his principles of spiritual Sufi hermeneutics. One of the forthright hermeneutic principles of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is derived from the *ḥadīth* quoted by Suyūṭī¹⁹³ in his *al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr*, regarding the renewer (*mujaddid*)¹⁹⁴ of the religion that will be sent at the beginning of every hundred years. Shaykh al-'Alāwī makes it clear that the renewer does not have to be someone who follows the opinion of others, but rather takes directly from the book of God and the *Sunnah*.¹⁹⁵ Shaykh al-'Alāwī believed that the Qur'ān is addressed directly to us, and we are not simply reading what was addressed to someone else before us. One of the main points stressed by him is that the Qur'ān must be seen as a living revelation, constantly offering new wonders to those who seek them. Although some verses have historical significance, they are not limited to this, but are personally relevant to everyone who reads them. According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, "The most important thing we can do when reading the Book of God is to consider that it is being transmitted to us right now from the divine Presence."¹⁹⁶

The Shaykh has also made a shift from the formative period of *tafsīr* and the post-Ṭabarī era which have mainly produced unoriginal and imitative

¹⁹¹Islam in its fullest sense consists of three planes—surrender or submission (*Islam*) in the narrower sense of the word), faith (*īmān*) and excellence (*īhsān*). Al-'Alāwī points out that there is scope on all three planes for the exercise of *ijtihād*: just as the plane of *Islam* crystallised into the different schools of law, Shāfi', Hanafi, Māliki and Ḥanbali; and the plane of *īmān* into scholastic theology in the example of Ash'ari and Māturīdi. Beneath the *ijtihād* of Junaid and other Sufis, the plane of *īhsān* became an organised branch of the religion. See Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.45.

¹⁹² The means of extracting principles and rules (*aḥkām*) from proofs found in the *sharī'a* and Qur'ān.

¹⁹³ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Khudayri al- Suyūṭī (1445 AD – 1505 AD) author of *Tafsīr al-Jalālain*.

¹⁹⁴ "God will send to this community, at the start of every hundred years, someone to renew its religion for it." Al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr Suyūṭī, , This *Hadith* is narrated by Abū Dāwūd (4291); classed as *saḥīḥ* by al-Sakhawi in al-Maqāsīd al-Ḥasanah (149) and by al-Bāni in as-silsilah as-saḥīḥa (no. 599).

¹⁹⁵ The *Sunnah* constitutes the second source of authority in Islam after the Qur'ān.

¹⁹⁶ Shaykh al-'Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi maḥd al-nūr*. (*Mostaghanem: al-Matba'a al-'Alawiyya*, 1995), p 30.

commentaries on the Qur’ān, when he says “the Qur’ān cannot be limited only to the understanding of the former generations.” He tells us, “There is no statement more harmful to knowledge, scholars and students than the claim of the one who says that the scholars of old have not left anything to be said by those who came after them.”¹⁹⁷ Such a statement would be to deny all the generous souls and great men of sound intellects, for the one who makes or believes such a claim has no basis for it other than his poor opinion of the remaining righteous believers (*al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt*). The Shaykh argues that if this is the case, then where is our share of contemplation when God says: *Do they not contemplate this Qur’ān?*¹⁹⁸

‘A similar characterization has been offered by Walid Saleh, who has called the discipline of *tafsīr* a ‘genealogical tradition’. This stands in explicit contrast to the views of many a previous Islamicist who considered the *tafsīr* tradition to be repetitive, imitative and mainly concerned with recycling the views of earlier exegetes, to the extent that Ignaz Goldziher claimed that, due to the large amount of exegetical traditions going back to the Prophet’s Companions, Muslim exegetes had no need to exert themselves intellectually, because rather than forwarding their own interpretations, which risked drawing blame for practicing *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* (exegesis based on their own, arbitrary, opinions), they could simply quote relevant traditions. This argument as Saleh rightly criticizes, completely ignores the intellectual endeavor involved not only in compiling the existing traditions and exegetical opinions—with the latter constituting an ever-growing body of sources, but also in making conscious selections, the motives and mechanisms of which can only be uncovered if one ceases to consider the genealogical mode of exegesis as a handicap.¹⁹⁹

However, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, like al-Ghazālī, conforms strictly to the conditions laid down in the application of specific hermeneutic rules when it

¹⁹⁷ This is in reference to our predecessors’ (*as-Salaf*) interpretation and explanation of the Qur’ān. See al-‘Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi maḥd al-nūr*. (Mostaghanem: *al-Matba’a al-‘Alawiyya*, 1995), p 14.

¹⁹⁸ Q. 4:81.

¹⁹⁹ Saleh, *Formation*, pp. 14-16

comes to Qur'ānic exegesis. Shaykh al-'Alāwī has also refuted the philosophers' persistence to use intellect in the metaphysics²⁰⁰ where it is naturally beyond the intellectual capacity of the mind to grasp the esoteric realm.²⁰¹

It is also important for the *mufassir* to have a thorough knowledge of the transmitted tradition of *tafsir* from the Prophet and his Companions. Zarkāshi argues, "Whoever claims to have an understanding of the mysteries of the Qur'ān without attaining proper knowledge of its exoteric dimension is like one claiming to reach the inner part of a house without passing through the door."²⁰² One of the most essential requirements for the *mufassir* is to know Arabic and the rules of its grammar, because in Qur'ānic hermeneutics the philological (*lugha*) dimension is axiomatic.

Hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī and that of Gadamer

Hermeneutics in general is seen as a way of questioning the object of inquiry, whether a text, a work of art, or historical events. To operate with a religious hermeneutic is to allow oneself to be guided by religious ideas when one poses questions, as when one asks, for example, about salvation, the meaning of one's personal life or history, the norms of moral action and order in the human community, and so on.

After observing the Sufi hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī we might want to see how it stands out in contrast with Western hermeneutics. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), an important figure that has influenced much of western hermeneutical thought comes to mind. However, we find

²⁰⁰ Regarding this matter, Shaykh al-'Alāwī wrote, *Mazhar al-Bayyināt fi-l-Tamhīd bi-l-Muqaddimāt*, in which he refuted the philosophers' persistence to use their intellect in the metaphysics where it is naturally beyond the intellectual capacity of the mind to grasp this realm.

²⁰¹ This brings to mind the *ḥadīth*, "I have come with a knowledge that is discursive and transmitted (*manqūl*) and a knowledge that transcends the intellect (*min warā al-'uqūl*)."
Narrated by Ḥakim Al-Tirmidhī in his book *Nawādir*, Ibn Abd al-Barr, Ibn Abī Shaybah in his *Mussannaf* as well as Al-Khatīb al-Bagdadī, Al-Asfahānī and Al-Bayḥaqī. al-Dāramī also narrated it.

²⁰² Zarkashi p. 155

that the hermeneutics of Gadamer cannot really be compared with that of Shaykh al-'Alāwī or al-Ghazālī. They have more differences than similarities in their hermeneutical approach when looking at a text. Gadamer is a symbol of the values of western hermeneutics, which in a way, could measure the hermeneutic distinction of the two worldviews viz. western and Islamic.

According to Gadamer, hermeneutic understanding happens as a fusion of horizons which, in hermeneutical terms, could mean that one cannot read the text in isolation. There should be a multi-method reading approach in understanding the meaning of it. The interpreter, however, according to Gadamer, needs to be aware of the hermeneutic circle, not merely to understand what the author meant. Life experience, use of language, and asking how the words resonate with the interpreter are tools for understanding. The issue therefore is not about finding the truth the author wrote about, but realising the truth it has for the reader, and how it becomes alive.²⁰³ Gadamer suggested that some presuppositions are accurate, so it is up to the reader to identify the fusion of horizons and shared understanding of text or speech, and any issues are entirely dependent on engaging openly with text and dialogue within the hermeneutical circle.²⁰⁴

The tools for an Islamic Sufi hermeneutic is somewhat very different to western hermeneutics; the interpreter has to acknowledge at the very beginning that all knowledge comes from God and that the Qur'ān cannot be seen on the same level of other books. The Muslim exegete has made a covenant with God to perceive divine knowledge as superior to all knowledge and that for him the Qur'ān is *the* knowledge par excellence.

Westerners in their hermeneutics of theology, as we see in the case of the Bible for example form their own vision of truth and reality, whereas in Islam there is a structured premise for interpreting the Qur'ān with a complete requisite for the most stringent ethical and moral values separating the two worldviews of hermeneutics. Scriptures are not to be apprehended as mere literary or philosophical texts.

²⁰³ Ibid. P.274.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 153.

Among western scholars, Gadamer's interpretation of hermeneutics is probably the closest to the esoteric hermeneutics of the Sufis from a subjective approach. Similar to Sufi hermeneutics, Gadamer employs a subjective approach to interpretation. But for Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī, the interpretation of Qur'ānic text is not just an intellectual exercise with free reign of reason and subjectivity, where each reader develops his own interpretation of the text as well as his belief in its validity. The subjectivity of the Gnostic has parameters, it arises from a spiritual state of the soul (*ma'rifa*) connected to the divine presence of which the result (fruit) is a transcendental knowledge, a knowledge that goes beyond the intellect.²⁰⁵ In al-Hujwīrī's view, the ordinary scholar (*'ālim*) relies on himself, while the gnostic relies on his Lord.²⁰⁶

Hermeneutics in general is seen as a way of questioning the object of inquiry, whether a text, a work of art, or historical events. To operate with a religious hermeneutic is to allow oneself to be guided by religious ideas when one poses questions, as when one asks, for example, about salvation, the meaning of one's personal life or history, the norms of moral action and order in the human community, and so on.

Finally, it is also important for the *mufassir* to have a thorough knowledge of the transmitted tradition of *tafsīr* from the Prophet and his Companions. Zarkāshi argues, "Whoever claims to have an understanding of the mysteries of the Qur'ān without attaining proper knowledge of its exoteric dimension is like one claiming to reach the inner part of a house without passing through the door."²⁰⁷ One of the most essential requirements for the *mufassir* is to know Arabic and the rules of its grammar, because in Qur'ānic hermeneutics the philological (*lugha*) dimension is axiomatic.

²⁰⁵ The Prophet said, "I came with a knowledge that is transmitted and discursive (*'ilm manqūl*), and with a knowledge that transcends the intellect (*'ilm warā al-'uqūl*)."

²⁰⁶ Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* of al-Hujwīrī: "The Revelation of the Veiled," Reynold A. Nicholson, London: Gibb Memorial Trust 2000, p.176

²⁰⁷ Zarkashi p. 155

Common Sufi Principles Agreed Upon by al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī: Similarities in their Hermeneutics

Here I will discuss some key ideas on Sufi hermeneutics which are shared by al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī with the hope of establishing a framework for Sufi principles. I try to integrate the thoughts of a classical Sufi scholar and a contemporary Sufi master, showing that the latter’s hermeneutics is in consonance with that of the former Sufi hermeneutics.

There were some differences in the hermeneutics of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī and al-Ghazālī which were not really that critical. In the case of al-Ghazālī there are good reasons to assume that his influence by the disciplines of Greek philosophy showed traces within some of his hermeneutics in a manner in which he would classify the Qur’ānic verses and connect several sciences to the Qur’ān according to a certain hierarchical order. It was not easy for al-Ghazālī to discard philosophical trends completely even after having been a critic of the philosophers in the end. For Shaykh al-‘Alāwī there is a vast difference in philosophy and the science of metaphysics, in fact the Shaykh wrote a book in which he disapproves of the philosophers’ attitude towards metaphysics and their attempt to speak about it without knowledge. Philosophy should not be mixed with metaphysics.

Direct Apprehension of the Meaning of the Qur’ān

In the study of Islamic hermeneutics, the question whether the meaning of the Qur’ān is clear, or else can only be understood via the methodology of a tradition, highlights two different points of view. The first holds that the Qur’ān possesses clarity and that a reader can gain direct access to its meaning without relying on assumed judgments and commentaries. The

second is that the revelation testified to in the Qur'ān cannot be correctly understood without the aid of existing exegesis, that is; the interpretations and commentaries that our predecessors have left us. These two points of view occupy distinct hermeneutic positions. The former insists on the sufficiency of the Qur'ān and the immediacy of its meaning when it is read without presuppositions. The latter, in stressing the lack of clarity, relies on exegesis provided by tradition.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī believed that the holders of the truth should not be confined to a specific era but should instead be considered present in every age, and that the individual should also see the Book of God as coming to him directly from the Presence of the Merciful.²⁰⁸

He believed the Qur'ān is the word of God addressed to all of us equally and not only to certain people in certain times. Through it God speaks to His servants, though they do not perceive it, and it's a book sent especially to them, though they do not realise it, and "*their hearts are distracted*,"²⁰⁹ thinking that it is all over and done with, as if those who came before us explained everything about the Book. It follows from this thinking that we take the set of laws from it without being the ones to whom it is actually addressed and intended. We act as though saying, "It was only revealed to Muḥammad and the people with him,"²¹⁰ and we take it merely by following, not by direct and independent contact with it.

The Prophet said: 'I am the Messenger to those who met me alive and those who were born after me.'²¹¹ Therefore in his addressing them, there is no difference between the people to whom the message was sent and those living now. So when God says, "*O you who believe*,"²¹² it encompasses all the believers. Furthermore, we do not say that "*He said*," but that "*He is saying now*," whether we are aware of it or not. Therefore the one to whom God has opened his inner vision (*baṣīra*), sees it as being "revealed by the trusted

²⁰⁸ Al-'Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr*, p. 23.

²⁰⁹ Q. 21:3.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Narrated Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* p.85

²¹² Q. 2:103.

Spirit (Gabriel)”²¹³ right now, and when he reads it, he reads it from an evident guide (*imām mubīn*).²¹⁴ And the greatest of them²¹⁵ in rank is the one who takes it directly from the Most Merciful²¹⁶ but they are, according to Shaykh al-‘Alāwī few, and do not deem it impossible for verily the speech is the Speech of God and no one else’s.

Yes, everyone believes it is the speech of God, but what they lack is hearing it from God, and they will not hear it from God unless God is their hearing, as He says about His true servant, ‘And when I love him I become his hearing...’ till the end of the *Ḥadīth Qudsi*. What is good in the present is often veiled by dreams in the past. Or perhaps the reader might not deny that this virtue still endures, but doubts that we are worthy of it.²¹⁷

Al-Ghazālī’s approach is phenomenological in the sense that consciousness has a direct relationship with the object without relying on pre-given ideas or theories. In al-Ghazālī’s view, the reader of the Qur’ān should abandon adherence to a particular theological school or to all presuppositions in order to apprehend the meaning of the Qur’ānic text directly. He insists on the sufficiency of the Qur’ān and the immediacy of its meaning when it is read without presuppositions.

Al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics are taken from his book, *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*. One of his purposes in *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* is to present the Sufi interpretation of the Qur’ān as the most comprehensive way to deal with the revealed text. From a gnostic point of view, most people are apt to take from the Qur’ān only its rules without direct contact with it, whereas, in the case of the gnostic, he sees it as coming to him directly from God’s presence and this is because of his proximity with the divine Presence through his spiritual state of gnosis.

²¹³ Q. 26:193.

²¹⁴ “And all things have We recorded in the evident Imam,” Q. 36:12.

²¹⁵ Reference here to *imām al-mubīn* (the evident imam) according to Shaykh al-‘Alāwī is the *murshid* (spiritual guide) who has attained to the complete state of gnosis

²¹⁶ Shaykh Adda Bin Tunis, the spiritual successor of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, says in one of his poems in praise of his master: “The Merciful has taught him [Shaykh al-‘Alāwī] the secrets of the Qur’ān—his Lord suffices him from all creation.” *Diwān al-Matba’a al-Alawiyya*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006) p. 41.

²¹⁷ Al-‘Alāwī, *al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr*, p. 30.

And this is where direct apprehension of the text comes in for Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī asserts in his *al-Jawāhir* that there is no place for a presupposition hermeneutic.

According to the hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī the most important thing for the reader of the Book of God is to see His words and hear it directly from God Himself, and this is when God becomes his hearing; *And when I love My servant I become his hearing with which he hears, his eyes with which he sees.....*).²¹⁸ For al-Ghazālī, in order to earn the jewels and secrets preserved in the Qur'ān the reader has to be intellectually and spiritually trained and must be occupied with adequate scientific tools.

The Inner Meaning of the Qur'ān Can Only be Perceived by those who Have Attained Spiritual Realisation

For Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī the disciplines and facets of the Qur'ān can only be uncovered by one who has attained spiritual realisation. One of the principles of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is:

'When we say that the Qur'ān came to us as a whole, we are referring to its words. Its meanings, however, are still in the care of the Trusted Spirit (*al-Rūḥ al-Amīn*) who brings them down to the hearts of those of the community of Muḥammad who are completely ready to receive them.²¹⁹

'Al-Ghazālī states that the Qur'ān itself casts (*yulqī*) to the reader who is not dominated by blind following (*taqlīd*) and has undertaken the adventure of diving into the depth of the text, to the level that the person is able to understand. The Qur'ān reveals its true and hidden meanings to the spiritual reader according to their ability to understand. This happens in a mysterious way, as if in a dream, the reader would read in spirit the preserved tablet (*al-*

²¹⁸ Ḥadīth Qudsī

²¹⁹ Ibid. p. 25.

lawḥ al-mahfūz). Typically only spiritually qualified readers are able to bear the knowledge obtained in this way. Obtaining true knowledge from the Qur'ān affects the reader, transforming him into a spiritual human being (*rabbānī*)²²⁰ who can perceive even the mysteries of paradise.

Elsewhere in *Jewels of the Qur'ān*, al-Ghazālī argues against those who only rely on the external meanings of the Qur'ānic verses:

Near to the science of reading is the science of the outward exegesis of the Qur'ān. This is the inner surface of the shell of the Qur'ān, which is next to the pearl. This is the reason why its resemblance with the pearl has become strong so that some people imagine that it is the pearl [itself] and that beyond it there is nothing more valuable than it. It is with it that most people are content. How great is their deception and deprivation, for they have imagined that there is no rank beyond theirs! However, in relation to those who possess the knowledge of [other] sciences of the shell, they are at a rank high and noble, since the science of exegesis is mighty when compared to other sciences of the shell, because it is not meant for them while they are meant for it.²²¹

Even while emphasising the esoteric meaning of the Qur'ān, al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī insist that the literal meaning of the Book cannot be discarded since its negation would amount to depriving the esoteric from a symbolic foundation, i.e. the exoteric (*zāhir*) letter from which to gain access to the esoteric (*bāṭin*) meaning through *ta'wīl*.

Al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī both stressed the intrinsic relation between the outward text and inward spirit of the Qur'ān. They clearly advocated that the verbal text does not lose its value in favour of the inner meaning. The letter of the Qur'ān is none other than the analytic and external manifestation of the true inner meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) of the text.

²²⁰ This is taken from the verse, "And be you spiritual beings (*wa lākin kūnū rabbāniyyīn*)", (Q. 3:79).

²²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān*, p. 36.

According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, the esoteric implication of the verse in the Qur'ān: *And enter your houses through the doors,*²²² alludes to first comprehending the literal meaning of the Qur'ān, which represents the level of *sharī'a*, thus making it clear that there can be no esoteric (*ḥaqīqah*) without the exoteric. The literal meaning of the text is like a body to the soul, or a protective container to a content; it is by virtue of this correspondence between the two that *ta'wīl* may occur. Al-Ghazālī outlines in one of his hermeneutical rules that the literal meaning of the text should not be held separate from the hidden meaning. He says in *Jewels of the Qur'ān*:

Then, know that the realities we hinted at have secrets and jewels; [but also] they have seashells, and the shell is that which appears first. Some people who reach the seashells know [only] these, while others break the shells and carefully examine the pearls [inside them].²²³

Al-Ghazālī did not intend to curtail an interpretation of the external meaning of the Qur'ān, rather he insisted on the connection between external and internal meanings; that is: between the pearl and the shell. He only disagrees with those exegetes who focus on the shell without dealing with the internal meaning of revelation (the pearl). As mentioned, in approaching the meaning of the Qur'ān intuitively, he does not preach *bāṭiniyya*. He believes that understanding the inner meaning of a verse is possible only through understanding of its outward parts; only inside the shell can one find the pearl.

The Qur'ān is the inimitable and uncreated word of God

Al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī both believed in the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the revealed text and that the letter of the Book is unchangeable, and that it contains the laws (*muḥkamāt*) and outward meanings which are addressed to the general masses (*'awām*).

²²² An esoteric interpretation of Q. 2:189 appears in, al-Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr*, p.18.

²²³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān*, p.71.

Shaykh al-'Alāwī wanted to prove beyond doubt the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān from both its outward (*zāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) aspects. He also wanted to show the validity of esoteric exegesis as an integral part of the religious teachings of Islam, and not something that was added later, so he searched the traditions for something worthy of evidence and consideration.²²⁴

Al-Ghazālī, like all scholars of the Qur'ān, identified the holy text as the speech of God, and thus as an attribute of His divine Essence (*dhāt*). It was no longer the verbal text of the Qur'ān which merits focus, as the Mu'tazilites²²⁵ had advocated, but rather the meaning of a divine speech. Nevertheless, they both believed in the most fundamental doctrine of Islam, that the Qur'ān is the Uncreated Word (*ghair makhlūq*) of God.

The Gnostic Sees the Qur'ān as Having Many Dimensions of Interpretation

Another important axiom of Shaykh al-'Alāwī is that the Qur'ān has many facets as mentioned in the *ḥadīth*, "its marvels will never cease."²²⁶ Because of this, the understanding of the scholars of earlier generations (*muta qaddimūn*) would not suffice to the exclusion of the understanding of the scholars of latter generations (*muta akhirūn*). According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, the Qur'ān is fresh and new in every age, and is the same now as it ever was. God said, and continues to say: "Will they not ponder and reflect on this Qur'ān?"²²⁷

Similarly, the Prophet says about the Qur'ān: "You will never comprehend all its meanings until you see the Qur'ān as having many facets."²²⁸ And, "Verily the Qur'ān has an outward (*zāhir*), an inward (*bāṭin*), a boundary

²²⁴ Shaykh al-'Alāwī provided scholarly evidence from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* to show the detractors and critics of Sufism that esoteric meaning has its roots in the Qur'ān.

²²⁵ The rational school of thought holding the view that the Qur'ān is created.

²²⁶ Narrated by 'Ali ibn Abī Tālib in al-Tirmidhī, Musnad Ibn Shaybah, Musnad Ishāq ibn Rahaway, Al-Dārami, Musnad Al-Bazzaar and the Shu'ab al-Īmān of Al-Bayḥaqī.

²²⁷ Q. 4:82; 47:24.

²²⁸ Al-Muṣannaf libn Abī Shaybah. Abū Bakr 'Abdullāh b. Muḥammad b. Abī Shaybah al-Kūfī. Edited by. Muḥammad 'Awwāmah. Print: Dār Qurtūbah – Beirut (First Edition 2006) Ḥadīth. 307889 Vol. 15 Pg.518

(*ḥadd*) and a horizon (*maṭlaʿ*).”²²⁹ This was mentioned in the Crown of Exegesis (*Tāj al-Tafsīr*), and based on this, one should not be quick to disqualify what those with knowledge of God say about the Book of God. Even if it is not fully understood by our intellect, we should deem it as one of the four facets mentioned in the above *ḥadīth*.

In his introduction to his main work of *tafsīr*, ‘The Swelling Sea’ (*al-baḥr al-masjūr*), Shaykh al-‘Alāwī arranged this work into four facets, or we could say four different levels of interpretations. The first is the exegesis (*tafsīr*), or the general meaning of the Book of God. He then mentions any rulings (*aḥkām*) that might be derived from it, which is a deeper level. Thirdly, he provides an allegory (*ishārat*) according to the language of the folk of God (*ahl Allah*); and finally, on an even deeper, esoteric level, is what Shaykh al-‘Alāwī refers to as the tongue of the Spirit (*lisān al-rūḥ*). He alludes to these four approaches as symbolic of four rivers, very similar to what is mentioned in the Qur’ān, *and all people knew their drinking place*.²³⁰ An example of the Shaykh’s four-method approach to *tafsīr* from his *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*²³¹ on *al-Fātiḥa* from the Qur’ān, using the verse, *King of the Day of Judgement*.²³² Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s exegetical interpretation (*tafsīr*) of this is the Day of Requital (*yawm al-jazāʿ*), wherein each soul will be given that which it has earned. The following verse, right after “the Compassionate, the Merciful,” compels believers to seek refuge in God, “*You we worship, and from You we seek help*.”²³³

Extrapolation (*istinbāt*): Shaykh al-‘Alāwī deduces twelve rulings (*aḥkām*) from *al-Fātiḥa*. First, we learn that nothing reaps the pleasure (*riḍā*) of God faster than acknowledging His Bounties and this is due to His Book beginning with His praises (*al-ḥamd*). Second, we learn that God acknowledges His

²²⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi refers to this tradition as a hermeneutic hierarchy that corresponds to the four degrees of understanding the Qur’ān. *The Meccan Revelations*, translations of chapters from the *Futuḥāt al-Makkiyya* by Michel Chodkiewicz, William Chittick and James Morris (Pir Publications Inc, 2002)

²³⁰ Q. 2:60.

²³¹ Al-‘Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr*, pp. 37-44.

²³² Q. 1:4.

²³³ Q. 1:5.

servant as His slave (*marbūb*) even if the slave does not acknowledge His Lordship (*rubūbiyya*), from His saying: “Lord of the worlds” (*rabbul ‘ālamīn*) and this is indicated in the possessive (*iḍāfah*). Third, we learn of the existence of the worlds (*‘ālamīn*) whose amount cannot be counted from His mentioning it in the plural form. Fourth, we learn that the divine Beauty (*Jamāl*) has precedence over the divine Majesty (*Jalāl*), since the Names ‘the Compassionate’ and ‘the Merciful’ are mentioned before any other Names. Fifth, we learn from His phrase, *King of the Day of Judgement*, that on the Day of Requit, God will manifest only with the quality of Justice, not with either Beauty alone or Majesty alone. Sixth, we learn from His words: “You we worship, and from You we seek help”, that Islam came with two halves, one pertaining to the Law (*sharī’a*) and the other to the Truth (*ḥaqīqah*).²³⁴ Seventh, we learn from His placing, *You we worship*, before *from You we seek help*, that the aspirant usually does not attain to the *ḥaqīqah* until he has first expended his effort in fulfilling his obligations of *sharī’a*. Eighth, we learn from the use of the plural pronoun “we” in “we worship” that it is preferred to offer the five daily prayers in congregation, since the context is one of humility, where it would not be fitting for an individual to magnify himself by saying ‘we’. Ninth, we learn from His words *You do we worship and from You we seek help*, that prayer is a time of intimate discourse, when we address God directly. Tenth, we learn that the most important thing to ask of God is guidance to the straight path. Eleventh, we learn that God wants us to raise our aspirations by asking Him for the highest stations, not the lowest. We can infer this from His words, *The path of those upon whom is Your Grace*²³⁵, since this clearly includes the prophets, the most sincere, the martyrs and the righteous.²³⁶ Twelfth, we learn that those upon whom there is wrath are lower than those who are astray, which is why they are mentioned first.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Q. 1:7

²³⁶ This is an allusion to Qur’ānic verse 4:69: “Whoever obeys God and the messenger they are with those to whom God has shown favour, of the prophets and the most sincere and the martyrs and the righteous.”

The allegory of (*ishārat*) in His Words, *You we worship, and from You we seek help*, inspire in us a consciousness of the necessary link between the law and the Truth. The first half of the verse is the Law and the second is the Truth;²³⁷ the first affirms an element of acquisition, and the second negates it; the first is closer to the common perception and the second is more preferable to the elite.²³⁸ This is because the first entails acting *for* God, while the second entails acting *by* God.²³⁹ The first is the act of the pious (*abrār*), because they act for the sake of God; the second is the act of those brought near (*muqarrabūn*), because they subsist in God. The goal of the first is to seek reward, while the second is its own reward; this is because the first is concerned with fulfilling religious obligations, while the second is concerned with the fruits of gnosis. The first half is strenuous effort; the second, witnessing. One endures the pain of worship; the other enjoys the delight of His Vision. *Unto each do We extend aid, these, as well as those, from your Lord's bounty.*²⁴⁰

Worship is mentioned before the seeking of help due to the perspective of the masses, which is to view the action before its outcome. The perspective of the elite (gnostics), on the other hand, is to view it [worship] afterward, since they are so absorbed in beholding the outcome that they do not see the action. The former seek the help of acts of worship to reach Him, while the latter seek help from Him to perform acts of worship, as for them (gnostics) He is the One Who acts (*al-fā'il*) and no other.

The wording of the verse brings the pronouns of the object and subjects of worship together, which is effected by delaying the verb: "*You we worship*". This serves to inspire in the worshipper a consciousness of how close he is to

²³⁷ Two of the elements of the common Sufi ternary: the Law (*sharī'a*), the Path (*Tarīqa*) and the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*).

²³⁸ This statement is in conformity with a very deep *ḥikam* of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, "He does not know God, who says, 'You we worship', and he does not worship God, who says, 'From You we seek help.'" (*mā 'araf Allah man qāla 'iyyāka na'bud', wa mā 'abada Allah man qāla iyyāka nasta'in.*)

²³⁹ "You we worship," entails '*ikh'lās*' which is acting 'for God' (*li'llah*); "from You we seek help" entails *ṣidq* which is acting 'by God' (*bi'llah*). *Ikh'lās* is the level of *sharī'a* and *ṣidq* is the level of *ḥaqīqa*.

²⁴⁰ Q. 14:20.

God in principle, whatever he may had felt his position in relation to God was prior to the acts of worship coming into being. Worship, then, is not the means by which proximity is attained; this is why the Prophet said, “None of you shall enter Paradise by his deeds.” This means that the worshipper exists before the worship. Hence gnosis comes before worship; it is gnosis that makes worship necessary, and not the other way around. Concerning the shift from the third to the second person; that is, from “Praise be to God” to “You we worship”, this teaches the aspirant how the journey will end, taking him from absence from God to presence with Him, until all intermediaries are removed and it becomes a direct discourse between the two parties: “*You we worship, and from You we seek help*”, and no other.

Spiritual (*lisān al-rūh*): The ‘we’ of “*You we worship*” is annihilated in that of “*from You we seek help*,” so that when the worship is limited in the seeking of help, there remains the seeking of help and the Helper; what, then, becomes of the worship and the worshipper? If you are possessed of true certainty, you will see that the worshipper’s innermost secret heart (*sirr*) worships Him, while his reality (*ḥaqīqa*) beholds Him. He who only says, “*You we worship*,” does not know God, and he who only says, “*From You we seek help*,” does not worship Him.²⁴¹

Al-Ghazālī presents the Qur’ān in *the Jewels* as an infinite, inexhaustible sea which shows numerous forms of knowledge, though obscures what is preserved for those who are qualified to discover it. In his view, the text of the Qur’ān as such is a treasure of signs and allusions and an attraction for those who desire to obtain knowledge. In order to earn the wealth preserved therein they have to be intellectually and spiritually trained and occupied with adequate scientific tools.

Ghazālī’s significant contribution was to provide a sound intellectual basis for the new, still fragile emancipation of Sufism, which had thus far been fostered by a favourable social and political climate. In his *Ihya’* and in other

²⁴¹ Shaykh al-‘Alāwī says in one of his aphorisms (*hikam*): “Whoso knows God does not worship Him; only his innermost secret heart (*sirr*) worships Him.” (*man ‘araf Allah lā ya’buduhu; innamā sirruhū ya’buduh*). See Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s *Diwān* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 2006). p 143.

works, such as the *Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, Ghazālī argues unequivocally for the intellectual superiority of ma'rifa.²⁴²

Moreover, it appears that the *Ihyā'*, and Ghazālī's Persian work the *Kīmiyā-yi Sādat*, were not written exclusively for the 'Ulamā' or for a Sufi elite, but, as Hodgson has observed, "for a private person, concerned for his own life or charged with the spiritual direction of others."²⁴³ In the *Ihyā'*, Ghazālī discusses all the *sharī'a* laws that are obligatory for each individual as well as almost every aspect of religious life, explaining its intellectual significance, its moral and social benefit, and how it can become a means for the purification of the soul, if not for spiritual realisation. In this work, as well as in others, al-Ghazālī explicitly speaks of a threefold hierarchy of knowledge in society: the commonalty ('*āmm*), or those who believe in the truths of religion without questioning; the elite (*khāṣṣ*), who learn reasons for their beliefs (religious scholars and especially speculative theologians); and finally the elite of the elite (*khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*), those who directly experience religious truth, namely Sufis.

'Hodgson has observed that for al-Ghazālī, this hierarchy of knowledge also implied a moral function, such that each of the classes could teach the one below it and act as an example for it. It follows by implication that those who are lower in the hierarchy should be receptive to the knowledge of those in the class above, and that therefore "the *sharī'a* men of religion had the responsibility to receive Sufi inspiration so far as they could, and to spread the inward spirit of religion and not merely the outward doctrines, among the populace generally." This point leads Hodgson to observe: "Thus the high evaluation of Sufi experience as a vindication of truth had social consequences which Ghazālī did not quite dare spell out but which he himself provided a living example of."²⁴⁴

²⁴² Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Qur'ān*, p.26

²⁴³ Hodgson, M. the Venture of Islam vol. 2 Abu Hamid Muhammad *Al Ghazālī* Deliverance From Error, (*al-Munqid min al-Dalāl*).

²⁴⁴ Hodgson M, The order of the Assassins

Ghazālī's achievement, therefore, was to have placed the spiritual and intellectual disciplines of Sufism firmly among the traditional sciences of Islam. Certainly, after him Sufism was no longer preoccupied with defending its right to exist.

There are disciplines in the Qur'ān that are not for popular consumption

Shaykh al-'Alāwī believed that the Qur'ān contains sciences and disciplines that are not disseminated amongst the general public. According to him, the one who clings to the outer meanings does not see anything in the Book of God, except that to which his own limited resources lead him, and so he denies everything else. He does not realise that what he perceives of the outer meaning of the Book is only the peel around the core, beyond which lies, "what no eye has seen, and no ear has heard and what no human heart imagined."²⁴⁵ Does he believe that what his intellect has perceived is what the Companions²⁴⁶ of the Prophet have understood about the Book of God? This principle is based on the *ḥadīth* and the sayings of the Companions

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²⁴⁵ Reference to a well-known *Ḥadīth* describing Paradise. Saḥīḥ Muslim, Kitaab al-Emaan, no.363.

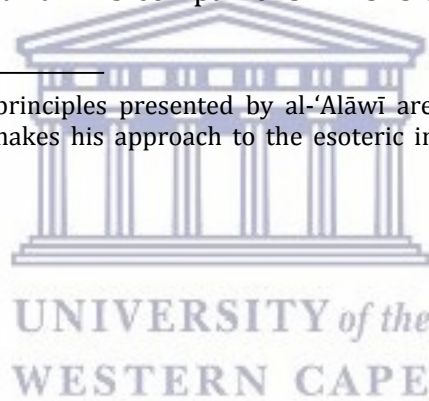
²⁴⁶ Could we suppose that the deeper esoteric meanings of the Qur'ān passed unperceived over the heads of the Companions, and that they were only noticed by later generations, and is it good psychology? No men have been more 'men of the Book' than the Companions were, and there is every reason to believe that no generation of Islam has ever surpassed them in weighing the phrases of that Book and in giving each one its due consideration. They would have been the last people on earth to suppose that the Qur'ān ever meant *less* than it said. This does not necessarily mean that they would have interpreted, for example, as formulations of Oneness of Being, all those Qur'ānic verses which the Sufis so interpret, for some of these verses admit more readily of other interpretations. But there are some which do not. If we take for example, the verse: "He is the First and the Last and the Outward Manifest and the Inward Hidden," Q.57:3 It is difficult to conceive how the Companions would have understood these words other than in the sense of al-Ghazālī's, "there is no object of reference other than He," though they may never have formulated the truth in question except with the words of the Qur'ān itself, or with expressions such as Abu Ubaidah's: "I have never looked at a single thing without God being nearer to me than it," or the Prophet's saying, "Thou are the Outward Manifest and there is nothing covering Thee" (Saḥīḥ Muslim, Da'wāt); Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.130.

regarding their understanding of what lies beyond the text of the Qur'ān.²⁴⁷ To clarify any doubt around this principle Shaykh al-'Alāwī quotes some important *'ahādīth* and sayings of the Companions.

The Prophet said, "There is certainly a hidden knowledge known only by those who know God, and if they were to make it manifest, they would be renounced by those heedless (ignorant) of God."²⁴⁸ And in another *ḥadīth*: "Inner knowledge (*'ilm al-bāṭin*) is a secret among the secrets of God, He casts it into the hearts of those servants whom He wishes."²⁴⁹ This indicates that the hidden sciences are not the same as the disseminated sciences.

And in the following narrations Shaykh al-'Alāwī intends to familiarise the reader with the spiritual degrees of the Prophet's companions and his imparting unto them of the secrets and deeper meanings of the Qur'ān which he did not share with all his companions. This is a side of the companions

²⁴⁷ The hermeneutical principles presented by al-'Alāwī are well-supported by authentic *ḥadīth*, which is what makes his approach to the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān so unique.



²⁴⁸ Shaykh Al-'Alāwī in his book *al-Minaḥ al-Qudsiyyah* comments on the above *ḥadīth* and says: "let the scholar (*ālim*) consider if he has a share in this knowledge, of which its disclosure to the public (masses) is not permissible. And if he has a share in it, then he is (according to the *ḥadīth*) considered to be among the scholars of divine knowledge (*ahl al-ma'rifa*). And if he has no share in it, the least required from him would be to believe them, accept them and to love them. And if he rejects what God has disclosed to them then he falls under the last part of the *ḥadīth*; "those who are heedless (ignorant) of the Knowledge of God." God (*al-Ḥaqq*) has disclosed to them (gnostics) what He has veiled from others, until they were able to see with the eye of faith (*īmān*) and certainty (*iqān*). And they have accomplished the rights (*ḥuqūq*) which is due upon them towards the Divinity to the best of their ability. And to sum up all of that, they have relinquished (resigned) all that which is other than God to the level of non-existence in relation to Him (His existence) which is *wājib al-wujūd*. In their view and in their expression they consider (treat) all otherness as having no existence (in reality) alongside of Him. And for those who have no (knowledge) insight about them the matter could become confusing, thinking that they have negated (expelled,) the existence of the dependent (*al-taklif*) because he is dependent on existence other than himself." See al-'Alawī, *al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiyya al-nāshir- Abd al-Wakīl al-Darūbi*, p.24. Damascus – (year of publication not mentioned in original Arabic work).

²⁴⁹ Kanzul 'ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wal af'āl, 'Alā al-Dīn 'Alī al-Muttaqī b. ḥus al-Dīn al-Hindī. Edited by. Shaykh Bakri Ḥayyānī and Shaykh

shown by Shaykh al-'Alāwī which is clearly esoteric in essence, which for some reason, is either ignored or quietly dismissed as unfounded, in the books of exoteric scholars. The most logical support for this discussion is the popular *ḥadīth* of distinction in which the Prophet gives his prudent advice, "Speak to people according to the level of their intellects."²⁵⁰ The Prophet knew that among his companions there would be those who would not be able to understand all of his words so he would always, in public, address them in a manner that is clear for the masses to understand, and in this did he take the prudent advice from his Lord, "*And lower your wings (O Muḥammad) unto the believers*".²⁵¹ Such was his approach in public, yet in private he would share the innermost meanings and secrets with those who were worthy of comprehending and preserving it. So the companions who received this special knowledge would take much care in preserving it and in turn share it only with those who were worthy of receiving it and they were also aware of the possible consequences of those incapable of understanding.

Abu Umar narrated that Abū Huraira said (what has been popularly attributed to him) in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāri*, "I memorised from the Messenger of God two containers of knowledge; as for the one, I have already narrated it, and as for the other, if I were to narrate it, you would slit my throat."²⁵² And narrated from Ibn Abbas who said, "If I were to tell you what I know of the exegesis of God's saying in the Qur'ān, "*His command descends between them*,"²⁵³ you would stone me to death or you would say verily he is a disbeliever." Sha'rānī²⁵⁴ mentioned this in his book *al-Yākūt wa al-Jawāhir*. Salmān al-Fārisi said, "If I told you everything I know, you will say, may God have mercy on the killer of Salmān," and Imam 'Ali said, "Verily on my side (in

²⁵⁰ Jāmi' al-Aḥādīth, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī Edited by. 'Abbās Aḥmad Ṣaḡar and Aḥmad 'Abd al-Jawād. Print: Dār al-Fikr. Beirut (First Edition 1994) Ḥadīth No. 4667 Vol. 2 Pg.175

²⁵¹ Q.15:88. I have heard from my own Shaykh Sidi Alawī bendi Murād, who once said that the Prophet was given three kinds of knowledge; the first was a knowledge that was meant only for him and no one else, the second was a knowledge for him to choose among the believers and the third was a knowledge which he could share with everyone.

²⁵² Saḥīḥ Al Bukhari :: Book 1 :: Volume 3 :: Ḥadīth no.121]

²⁵³ Q. 65:12.

²⁵⁴ The Egyptian jurist and Sufi (d. 1565).

my heart) there is a knowledge I possess, if I should utter it, you would sever this from this”, and he pointed to his head and body.

All this is to evince the point that in the time of the Prophet’s companions there already existed different levels of understanding the religion among themselves, and those who possessed something of the deeper knowledge taught to them by the Prophet himself took extreme precaution in the disclosure of their special knowledge to the public which, if misunderstood in its hidden form could be taken as blasphemy or even put their lives in danger. This, in the same way that the very deep utterances of the great gnostics had caused some of the exoteric scholars of the law to accuse them of blasphemy and kufr (disbelief). And among the gnostics there would be a strict discipline in their education. They would choose with whom to share the divine knowledge and inner meanings of the Qur’ān and even in this age, those who attain to the ultimate goal of *ma’rifa* are few. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī says in his *dīwān* ‘*li man naḥkī sirrī ya Allah, Li man nurīk ya Allah*’ (To whom shall I disclose my secret O Allah, to whom shall I reveal Your Countenance O Allah?).²⁵⁵ And al-Ghazālī also had the same conviction that ‘revealed’ knowledge is not given to everybody. This knowledge comes with conditions and is only given to those who possess the desire (*shahwa*) to know God.

According to al-Ghazālī, amongst the sciences related to the Qur’ān is the science of the pith. These are of two different levels, the lower level (*al-ṭabaqa as-suflā*) and the higher level (*al-‘ulyā*). Most people do not reach this higher grade of knowledge, which is the knowledge of the elite (*khāṣṣ*). The elite are those who strive towards the purification and refinement of the soul and remove from it the obstacles of the destructive qualities, and beautify it with saving qualities. This knowledge occupies a higher position than *fiqh* and *kalām*. This is the seeking of the knowledge of God (*ma’rifat Allah*), contemplation of the divine essence (*dhāt*), and observing His deeds (*af’āl*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*). Al-Ghazālī asserts that despite his short life, being busy with many tasks and calamities, he wrote some books which he did not

²⁵⁵ *Dīwān*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al’Imiyya, 2006) p.55

disclose, because most people's understanding would be wearied by it, and the weak that are the most traditional in knowledge, would be harmed by it. This kind of knowledge is appropriate to be disclosed to one who transcends the knowledge of the outward (*'ilm al-zāhir*) and follows the Sufi path in searching for God. Al-Ghazālī states that it is unlawful for those into whose hands the Book falls, to disclose it except to one who possesses all these qualities. Al-Ghazālī's conviction is that revealed knowledge is not given to everybody. With the exception of the Prophet Muḥammad, knowledge of the true, deeper meaning of the Qur'ān is available only to those who are capable of understanding them. In order to get to this level, one has to stop the exclusive dependency on traditional interpretations supported by statements supported by the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad and start self-training in spiritual struggle and piety which results in guidance granted by God. God-granted guidance requires that man's desire is true and that he endeavours to seek knowledge with "help of those who have insight" (*ahl al-baṣīra*).²⁵⁶ The goal is the ability to perceive all beings, even the inanimate, as living entities and to understand their language. Al-Ghazālī connects this highly speculative idea to the Qur'ān which states that all beings without exception glorify God.²⁵⁷ Only when this stage of perception is reached, can the hidden secrets of the Qur'ān be understood.²⁵⁸

In *Jewels of the Qur'ān*, al-Ghazālī speaks of the secrets of *al-Fātiḥa*: "Most Gracious, Ever Merciful (*al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*)" for the second time, indicating His attributes once again. This might appear to be a repetition, but there is no repetition in the Qur'ān, for repetition is defined as that which does not contain any additional benefit. The mention of mercy after the mention of "all the worlds" and before the mention of "the Master of the Day of Judgement," has two great benefits in expounding the channels of mercy. One pays attention to creation by the Lord of all the worlds; He has created every one

²⁵⁶ These are the gnostics who have attained the perfection of divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*).

²⁵⁷ "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him and there is not a single thing except that it glorifies His Praise. But you understand not their glorification." Q.17:44.

²⁵⁸ George Tamer (ed.), *Islam and Rationality: the Impact of al-Ghazālī: Papers Collected on his 900th Anniversary* (Brill: Leiden, 2015). p.68.

of these according to the most perfect and best of its kind and has given it everything it needs. One of the worlds God has created is the world of animals, the smallest of which are the mosquito, the fly, the spider, and the bees. Look at the mosquito, how God has created its limbs. He has created in it every limb which He has created in the elephant.²⁵⁹ This is a sample from the wonders of God's works and His kindness and mercy to His creation, for the lowest constitute an evidence of the highest. Even in the long lifetimes of many men it is impossible to thoroughly study these strange events, i.e. that part of them which is revealed to man, and that is surely small in relation to that part which is not revealed. This knowledge is exclusively appropriate to God and the angels. Sometimes you will find remarks of this kind in *the Book of Gratitude* and *the Book of Love* (from the work, *The Revival*). Al-Ghazālī says, seek them if you are fit for them, otherwise close your eyes to the signs of God's mercy and do not look at them, do not graze in the field of the knowledge of His works, and do not be a spectator of it, but rather be occupied with the poems of Mutanabbi,²⁶⁰ the wonders of the syntax of grammar of Sībawayh,²⁶¹ consequences of Ibn al-Ḥaddād²⁶² in the rare matters of divorce, and tricks of arguments in theology.

This list shows al-Ghazālī's depreciation of some genres of Arabic literature and his disdain of the obsession with strange cases of grammar, *fiqh* and *kalām*, since, to his mind, spending time on this kind of issue is not helpful in pursuing the path of God. Remarkably, works of logic and philosophy are not listed as useless. The reason could be that al-Ghazālī considers those who are qualified to study logic and philosophy as able to scrutinise the nature of things and therefore, to be qualified to reflect upon God's signs in the universe. In other words, it seems that al-Ghazālī holds

²⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī goes on to explain certain insects which he mentioned in detail. *Jawāhir*, 99/67.

²⁶⁰ Abū Tayyib al-Mutanabbī (303/951-354/965) is one of the greatest Arab poets. He is especially known for his panegyric and egomaniacal poems- a reason for the Sufi al-Ghazālī to ironically reject him.

²⁶¹ Al-Khālīd ibn Aḥmad Sībawayh (ca. 148/760-ca. 180/793) is a celebrated grammarian and philologist who through his *Kitāb* greatly influenced the development of Arabic grammar.

²⁶² Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥaddād (264/878-344/956) was a *shāfi'i* jurist in Egypt.

those who are intellectually unable to pursue philosophical studies as equally unable to recognise God's attributes.²⁶³

Al-Ghazālī continues, “The words of God”, and, *Master of the Day of Judgement*, are indications of the life to come which is the concern of one of the fundamental divisions²⁶⁴ of Qur’ānic verses, together with an indication of the meaning of kingdom and the Master which belongs to the attributes of divine glory. The words of God, “You alone we worship,” comprise two great parts. One is worship with sincerity in relation to Him especially, and this is the spirit of the straight path, as derived from *the Book of Vice of Influence and Ostentation*, and, *The Revival*. The second is the belief that none other than God deserves worship and this is the essence of belief in divine unity (*tawhīd*). This is achieved by abandonment of belief in man’s ability and power and by the knowledge that God is alone in [the execution of] all works and that man is not independent by himself and without His help. Thus His words, “You alone we worship,” are an indication of making the soul beautiful by worship and sincerity, while His words, *You alone we implore for help*, are an indication of its purification from belief in partnership and from paying attention to [man’s] ability and power.

Al-Ghazālī has already mentioned that traversing the straight path is supported by two things: One is purification of the soul (*nafs*) by the denial of that which is not befitting, and the other is making it beautiful by the achievement of that which should be achieved, and these two are comprised in these two sentences of *al-Fātiḥa*.

The words of God, *Guide us along the straight path*, are a prayer which is the marrow of worship, from [the Book of] Mention of God and Invocations from the books of *The Revival*. “These words of His make man aware of the need for entreaty and supplication to Him which form the spirit of servitude

²⁶³ Ibn-Rushd (Averroes) argued in his famous book *Faṣl al-maqāl* in justification of the study of philosophy: Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb Faṣl al-maqāl* with its Appendix (*Damīma*) and an extract from *Kitāb al-Kashf ‘an mnāhij al-adilla*, Arabic text edited by George F. Hourani, (Leiden: Brill, 1959), p.1; English: Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religion and philosophy: A translation with introduction and notes, of Ibn Rushd’s Kitāb Faṣl al-maqāl*, with its appendix (*Damāma*) and an extract from *Kitāb al-Kashf ‘an manāhij al-adilla*, by George F. Hourani, (Leiden: Brill, 1961), p.1.

²⁶⁴ Belief in the hereafter is considered one of the conditions of *īmān* (faith)

and also make man aware that the most important of his needs is guidance along the straight path, for it is by following this path that advancement towards God is, as already mentioned, accomplished’.

God’s words, *The path of those on whom You have bestowed Your favours*, (to the end of the Chapter), are a reminder of His favors to His friends and His revenge upon, and anger towards His enemies, in order that encouragement may be given and awe may be excited from the depth of the hearts of people. As mentioned, the stories of prophets and God’s enemies related in the Qur’ān form two great divisions of Qur’ānic verses.²⁶⁵

Complete Gnosis (*ma’rifa*), the Means for Sufis in Obtaining the Inner Meaning (*bāṭin*) and Secrets (*asrār*) of the Qur’ān

Al-Ghazālī’s esoteric interpretation of the Qur’ān is derived from his traversing the path of Sufism and attainment of the divine knowledge of gnosis (*ma’rifa*), his spiritual quest for understanding the hidden secrets (*asrār*) of the Qur’ān, and acquiring the subtleties of spiritual intuition (*ilhām*). Al-Ghazālī in his book *Mishkāt al-Anwār* indirectly propounded the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and there is a clear reflection of this truth captured in his interpretation of the Light verse which will be discussed in detail in chapter three.²⁶⁶

Lings quotes al-Ghazālī as saying,

The Gnostics rise from the lowlands of metaphor to the peak of Verity; and at the fulfilment of their ascent they see directly face to face that there is naught in existence save only God and that ‘everything perishes but His Face’ [Q. 28:88] not simply that it perishes at any

²⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Qur’ān*, p.50.

²⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (Cairo:Matba’at as-Sidq, 1922); Q. 24:35.

given time but it has never perished . . . Each thing has two faces, a face of its own, and a face of its Lord; in respect of its own face it is nothingness, and in respect of the Face of God it is Being. Thus there is nothing in existence save only God and His Face, always and forever.²⁶⁷

In his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, written at the end of al-Ghazālī's life (he died in AD 111) he says,

There is no he but He, for 'he' expresses that unto which reference is made, and there can be no reference at all save only unto Him, for whenever you make a reference, that reference is unto Him even if you don't know it through your ignorance of the Truth of Truths. Thus 'there is no god but God' is the generality's proclamation of Unity, and "there is no he but He" is that of the elite, for the former is more general, whereas the latter is more elect, more all-embracing, truer, more exact, and more operative in bringing him who uses it in the Presence of Absolute Singleness and Pure Oneness.²⁶⁸

From the above quotation of al-Ghazālī it is possible to also consider the fact that his book was written about a hundred years earlier than Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Shaykh al-'Alāwī makes it clear that it is through gnosis (*ma'rifa*) that the Gnostic receives intellectual enlightenment in the heart enabling him to have inner vision (*baṣīra*), through which he perceives *ḥaqīqa*.²⁶⁹ He also alluded to the divine knowledge of gnosis when he said,

..When we say that the Qur'ān came to us as a whole, we are referring to its words. Its meanings, however, are still in the care of the Trusted Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-amīn*) who brings them down to the hearts of those of the community of Muḥammad who are completely ready to receive them. He brings them in stages, as they are needed, just as once the words of the Qur'ān themselves were brought down in stages. So do

²⁶⁷ Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.123.

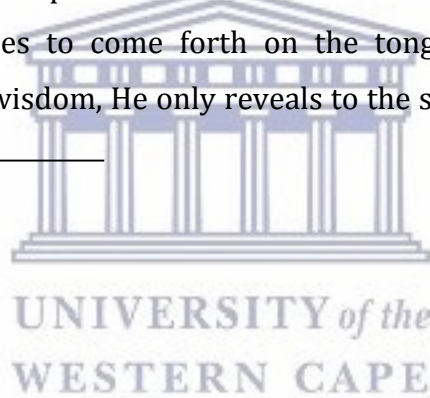
²⁶⁸ *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, pp. 117-8

²⁶⁹ "The Qur'an is the orchard (*bustān*) of the Gnostics." This is a statement by the Tabi'i Muḥammad ibn Wasi' narrated in *Hilyat il-Awliya*. Also narrated as part of the first *hadith* in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*

not find it far-fetched that meanings could be brought down to the hearts of the Gnostics by angels. Those who say, *Our Lord is God, and then follow His straight path, on them descend the angels* [Q. 12:30]. If this is still not clear, consider the *ḥadīth*, ‘The earth is never without forty men who are like the friend of the Compassionate (*khalīl al-rahmān*)’ – how close are the angels to the hearts like the hearts of God’s Friend! The hearts of the Gnostics are occupied by the Supreme Assembly (*al-Mala’ al-A’lā*) and this is why they partake in the mystical knowledge of the angels. And God continues to explain the meanings of the Qur’ān in every age and time. He said, and He continues to say, *When We recite it, follow its recitation; and then it is upon Us to explain it*²⁷⁰

One aspect of the explanation he has undertaken to give is found in the meanings God causes to come forth on the tongues of His chosen elect (*khawās*).²⁷¹ In His wisdom, He only reveals to the sages (*‘ulamā*) of each age

²⁷⁰ Q. 75:18-19.



²⁷¹ What could be understood by this is that in every age there will be *‘arifūn* (gnostics) who will, through His Hands, come with Knowledge which is required for that time, and there is a certain knowledge that will not be made manifest before its time and God says, “Hasten not with the Qur’ān until its revelation has been given unto you”, (Q.20:114). According to the spiritual allusion, this prohibition of haste pertains to the exegesis of the Qur’ān’s meanings. The Almighty is saying, as it were, “Do not hasten, O Muḥammad, in explaining all the meanings of the Qur’ān before their proper time has come. God will bring these meanings to light via those *‘ulamā* of your community endowed with knowledge, and this is alluded to in the following *ḥadīth*, “*The ‘ulamā’ are the heirs of the prophets*. This *ḥadīth* is related by Tirmidhi, Abu Dāwud, Nasa’i, Ibn Māja, Ahmad, Ibn Ḥibbān and others. The *‘arif* takes from the secrets of the Qur’ān; and one can also understand from the *ḥadīth* that there are *‘ulamā* of the outward (*zāhir*) who preserve the *sharī’a* and establish the laws of the Qur’ān and the *‘ulamā* of the inner (*bāṭin*) meanings of the Qur’ān are the *‘arifūn* who have taken from both the *sharī’a* and *ḥaqīqa* of the Qur’ān and this is the perfection. Shaykh al-Buzidi, the Shaykh of al-‘Alāwī says in one of his poems, “hold onto the *sharī’a* and you will have a pure *ḥaqīqa* perfected (*tamassak bihī tufīd kamāl al-ḥaqīqati*)”, see *Dīwān*, p.116. And because the *‘arifūn* took from the outer and inner part of the Qur’ān, their speech was in accordance to what was needed for that time. And every community will have its share of understanding of the Qur’ān.

what the people of that age require; sages here means those who truly implement the knowledge they inherit and uphold God's proof to the world--those by means of whom God preserves this religion until they pass it on to those who come after them.²⁷²

Sufi Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) in the Qur'ān

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's exegesis shows strong tendencies towards the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*²⁷³ (Oneness of Being) which has been taken from the broad frame of Muḥyidīn Ibn 'Arabi, who is also known as the first exponent of this doctrine. However, though it is clear from the Shaykh's writings that his understanding of 'being' is identical to that of Ibn 'Arabi and the other proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he prefers to speak of Pure Unity (*al-tawḥīd al-maḥd*),²⁷⁴ the affirmation of belonging to God alone and no other, which clearly reflects the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* without any difference except in name. There are certain verses that openly belong to the domain of this metaphysical truth (*ḥaqīqa*), and according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī the formulations of this doctrine are to be found in the Qur'ān. In certain passages it reaches a level which infinitely transcends the duality²⁷⁵ of Creator and created, Lord and slave, and which is no less than the degree of

²⁷² Shaykh al-'Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*, p.25.

²⁷³ One of the principles of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is, "There is no doer except God." (*lā fā'ila illā Allah*).

²⁷⁴ The identical resemblance here is the essential principle of the pure *tawḥīd* of "Oneness of existence"

²⁷⁵ In Martin Lings' response to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of some western writers like (Massignon, Gairdner and Nicholson) in their equating the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to pantheism, monism and dualism, failing to understand its true meaning he says, "The truth is that all the Sufis are 'dualist' or 'pluralist' at lower levels; but it is impossible that any of them should have believed that at the highest level there is anything other than the Divine Oneness, for though the Qur'ān changes the plane of its utterance more often even than the Sufis themselves, it is absolutely and inescapably explicit as regards the Eternal that *all things perish but His Face* and *all things that is therein suffer extinction, and there remains the Face of your Lord in its Majesty and Bounty*. This last word is a reminder that for the Sufis Oneness of Being is that in which there is no loss but only pure gain or, otherwise expressed, that in which all that was ever lost is found again in Infinite and Eternal Perfection. Therefore let those who shrink from this doctrine as a 'pantheistic abyss' or what Nicholson calls 'blank infinite negation' ask themselves if they really understand it." See Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 126.

the divine Essence Itself.²⁷⁶ In his explanation of *Sūrah al-Najm*, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī discusses two specific verses in detail alluding to this doctrine. First, “You threw not when you threw (O Muḥammad), but it was God who threw.”²⁷⁷ And second, “See by Him and hear by Him.”²⁷⁸

For Shaykh al-‘Alāwī the doctrine of Oneness of Being is also implicit in the Divine Name *al-ḥaqq*, meaning the Truth, or the Reality; for there could be no point in affirming Reality as an essential characteristic of the Godhead if anything other than God was real. The word ‘being’ expresses this absolute reality. It refers to that which is, as opposed to that which is not, and Oneness of Being is the doctrine that behind the illusory veil of creative plurality there lays the one Divine Truth.

In his book, *What is Sufism*, Martin Lings gives a very accurate description of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*:

Analogously, the essential meaning of the Shahāda (*lā ilāha illallah*) is veiled by its outer meanings. One such veil is the meaning ‘none is worshipable but God’; and he adds this meaning can be a veil so thick as to make it difficult even for a would-be Sufi to see the meaning which lies at the root of all Sufi doctrine.²⁷⁹

To understand this deepest meaning it is necessary to bear in mind that each of the Names of the Divine Essence comprises in Itself, like *Allah*, the totality of Names and does not merely denote a particular Divine Aspect. The Names of the Essence are thus in a sense interchangeable with *Allah* and one such Name is *al-Ḥaqq*, Truth, Reality. We can just as well say that there is no truth but the Truth, no reality but the Reality as that there is no god but God.

²⁷⁶ Among the Sufis of the doctrine of Oneness there are some celebrated verses of this kind, i.e. “Everything is perishing save His Face” (Q.28:88); “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (Q.24:35); “Wherever you may turn there is the Face of God” (Q.2:115).

²⁷⁷ Q. 8:17; These words are addressed to Muḥammad with reference to his throwing a handful of gravel at the enemy during the battle of Badr, an act which changed the tide of the battle in favour of the Muslims, who completely defeated a Meccan army three times as large as theirs. This was the first battle of Islam, 624 CE.

²⁷⁸ Q. 18:26; this translation attempts to capture the Shaykh’s esoteric interpretation of the words “*abṣir bi hī wa as-asmī*”, which might ordinarily be translated as, “See how well He hears and how well He sees!” See al-‘Alāwī, *Lubāb al-ilm fī Sūrah al-Najm*, (Mostaghanem: al-Matba’a al-‘Alāwiyya, undated.)

²⁷⁹ Lings, *What is Sufism*, p. 64

The meaning of all this is identical. Every Muslim is obliged to believe in this theory, that there is no reality but the Reality, namely God; but it is only the Sufis, and not even all those who are affiliated to Sufi orders, who are prepared to carry this formulation to its ultimate conclusion. The doctrine which is based on that conclusion is termed “Oneness of Being” for Reality is that which is, as opposed to that which is not; and if God alone is Real, God alone *is*, and there is no being but His Being.

It will now be apparent why it was said that the doctrine presupposes at least some virtual degree of certainty in the soul, for the mind that is left to itself, unaided by any ray of intellectual intuition, will be in danger of supposing this term to mean that God is the sum of all existing things. But absolute Oneness excludes not only addition but also division. According to the Islamic doctrine of Unity, the Divine Infinity is without parts. The Name *Aḥad* (One), for full justice to be done to its meaning must be translated, “the Indivisible One and Only”. The doctrine of Oneness of Being means that what the eye sees and the mind records is an illusion, and that every apparently separate and finite thing is in Truth the Presence of the One Infinite.

*Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. Verily God is the infinitely Vast, the Infinitely Knowing, says the Qur’ān.*²⁸⁰ The Name of the Omniscience is added here to the Name of Omnipresence partly as an argument: if the Divinity knows everything, it follows that the Divinity must be everywhere, for in the Absolute Oneness there is no separative polarity between Subject and Object, between knower and known. To be known by God is thus, mysteriously, to be God.²⁸¹ According to al-Ghazālī, this doctrine is only

²⁸⁰ Q.2:115.

²⁸¹ In this context Jalāluddīn Rūmī remarked to his disciples: “Take the famous utterance (of the Sufi mystic *al-Ḥallāj*), ‘I am God’. Some men reckon it as a great pretention; but ‘I am God’ is in fact a great humility. The man who says ‘I am the servant of God’ asserts that two exist, one himself and the other God. But he who says, ‘I am God’ has naughted himself and cast himself to the winds. He says, ‘I am God’, that is; ‘I am not, He is all, nothing has existence but God. I am pure non-entity, I am nothing’. In this the humility is greater.” Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Discourses of Rumi*, Arthur J. Arberry (ed.) (Curzon Press, 1961), p.55.

concerned with Absolute Reality.²⁸² It has nothing to do with ‘reality’ in the current sense; that is: with lesser, relative truths which he calls ‘metaphorical’.

Weighing the gnostics’ esoteric approach towards understanding the divine text has to be seen, according to Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, from the point of gnosis which is the level of *Ihsān*.²⁸³ Esoteric understanding is derived from gnosis, i.e. a spiritual and supra-rational heart knowledge²⁸⁴ derived from spiritual contemplation.

‘The Gnostic has attained the knowledge of God so he starts with the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), in Himself, and a true contact with the Qur’ān amounts, first of all to an awakening of the intellect through gnosis, since the theme of the Qur’ān is, above all, God Himself with Whom the Gnostic has attained union. The

²⁸² ‘God has an Absolute existence; any existence beside Him is relative. If the world is real then it is only relatively so, but there could also be the illusion that this relative reality is absolute, which it is not, for it is ultimately reducible to the Divine Reality, the only one that is. This is the deepest content of the Testimony of Faith *Lā ilāha illa ‘llah* (There is no divinity but God), which in its Sufi guise, would be: “There is no reality but the Divine Reality.” There cannot be two infinities or two Absolutes; this would be *Shirk* (the cardinal sin in Islam). See Ahmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, *Ibn Aṭāillah’s Sūfī aphorisms: (Kitāb al-Ḥikam)* translated by Victor Danner (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973). p. 41.

²⁸³ On *ihsān*, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī says, “it is the finality of what precedes it, that is; the finality of submission (Islam) and the finality of faith (*Īmān*). Therefore is it named excellence (*Ihsān*) in the sense of perfecting a thing or being an adept at it, and whoso has no foothold in the Station of Excellence, his submission unto God comes short of the measure.” See *Minah*, p.79. In other words, *ihsān*---or Sufism---is an extra dimension, of depth or of height, added to Islam and *iman*. *Ihsān* itself may also be considered as susceptible to taking on an extra dimension, and thus he says (p.77) that whereas the beginning of *ihsān* is *murāqaba* (vigilance), its end is *mushāhada* (direct contemplation). Elsewhere (p.151) he remarks that the inward aspect of Islam, *iman* and *ihsan* are respectively *istislām* (see p. 169), *iqān* (certainty) and *‘iyān* (face to face vision).

²⁸⁴ The Qur’ān says, “It is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts.” (Q.22:46). This shows and it would be strange if it were otherwise, that the Qur’ānic perspective agrees with that of the whole ancient world, both of East and West, in attributing vision to the heart and in using this word to indicate not only the bodily organ of that name but also what the corporeal centre gives access to, namely the centre of the soul, which itself is the gateway to a higher ‘heart’, namely the Spirit. Thus ‘heart’ is often to be found as a synonym of ‘intellect’ not in the sense in which this word is misused today but in the full sense of the Latin *intellectus*, that is the faculty which perceives the transcendent. The heart is also the faculty of direct spiritual (or intellectual) vision, and from this point of view the heart can be considered as synonymous with ‘Spirit’ which has a divine as well as a created aspect. For the Sufis, the heart is considered the “centre of consciousness” which vivifies the whole of man’s psycho-physical being, and this principle has its roots in the Prophet’s definition of *ihsān* (excellence) which is directly related to Heart-knowledge (*ma’rifa*). “Excellence is that you should worship God as if you see Him; for if you see Him not, yet He sees you.” Lings, *What is Sufism?*, p.58.

Gnostic, in his explanation, due to his gnosis and spiritual proximity to *al-ḥaqq* (the real) starts from the creator downwards to the creation; since gnosis takes its departure with the Real and not with creation. In the case of the theologians and the philosophers it is different;²⁸⁵ their knowledge is acquired through discursive reasoning and rational science. They argue from the imperfection of things to the perfection of God, from multiplicity to the divine unity, so they start from the creation towards the creator. But the Gnostics claim that their argument is defective, for God is not 'absent' at any given moment that one has to prove Him inferentially, nor is He so 'distant' that it is via multiplicity that one must reach Him. On the contrary, He is Present and Near, we should start with Him, not the world.²⁸⁶ The certainty of the Sufis is based on their direct intuitive experience (*al-'ayān*) on a higher spiritual level in the realm of metaphysics.²⁸⁷

The Aspect of the Absolute and the Relative

This discussion of the absolute and the relative by Shaykh al-'Alāwī in his *kitāb al-Minah* links in with the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* from the aspect of God's absolute existence *lā mawjūda bi ḥaqqin illa 'Llāh* (there is no existence in reality but God). This is further explained in the saying: 'God was, and there was nothing alongside Him, and He is now as He was.'

²⁸⁵ Regarding methodology in the field of Qur'ānic hermeneutical exegesis there are various approaches: (a) The objective and historical approach (b) the linguistic and metaphorical approach of which the first two was adopted by scholars of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*; and (c) a purely subjective and personal approach adopted by the Sufis. Although the characteristics of mystical interpretation are mainly considered in the third approach, all three approaches are utilised for mystical commentaries of the Qur'ān, since each one of these highlights a unique realm of perception, the approach of the gnostics could be considered as more transcendental and holistic.

²⁸⁶ Victor Danner, *Kitāb al-Ḥikam of Ibn 'Aṭā'illa*, p. 28.

²⁸⁷ An exoteric approach explains the signs of the scripture by considering the objectivity of the scriptures and external references (historic, linguistic), whereas, an esoteric approach is formed based on the mindset of the interpreter, which is the fruit of divine inspirations. In reading the Qur'ān, a gnostic accesses deeper semantic layers of the scripture that is inaccessible via rational thought because this realm is of different dimensions of perception and is a product of revelation and contemplation. (Musharraf, "Study on the Sufi Interpretation of Qur'ān and the Theory of Hermeneutics, p.37.)

‘The Gnostic (*‘ārif*) is only a Gnostic when he has knowledge of God from every standpoint and from every direction, “*And for everyone there is a direction of which He is the focal point.*” [2:148]

And the Gnostic has only one direction which is the Essence (Being) of the Real (*al-Haqq*). “*Wherever you may turn there is the Face of God*”. Meaning, wherever you may turn your senses towards sensible things, or wherever you may turn your intellects towards the realms of the intellect, or wherever you may turn your imagination towards the realms of imaginable things *there is the Face of God*, and so in every *ain* (where) there is the ‘*ain* (essence) And all is contained in the testimony of *Lā ilāha illā ‘Llāh* (there is no god but God). This is why the author says, ‘it encompasses everything and know that all of existence falls under *Lā ilāha illā ‘Llāh* wholly and partially, or you could say ‘*al-wujūd*’ (being) or *al-mawjūd al-majāzī* (that which exist metaphorically), or you could say the Being of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) and the being of creation (*al-khalq*), so that the being of creation falls under *Lā ilāha* and the meaning of this is that everything besides God is naught, meaning, it is negated and without any affirmation. And the Being of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) falls under our expression of *illā‘Llāh*. All the faults and sins fall under the first half of the expression *Lā ilāha* just as all that which is praiseworthy fall under the second half *illā‘Llāh* and ‘*He (God) is the First and the Last*’ and if you have understood this you will know the reality of the *Jalāl* (Majesty) and the *Jamāl* (Beauty), and when the *Jalāl* and *Jamāl* come together its result is the *Kamāl* (Perfection) which is nothing other than the Being worthy of the divinity and this is the meaning of *Lā ilāha illā ‘Llāh*.

And you could also make it fall under the name of the noblest of His servants in our saying *Muḥammad Rasūlu ‘Llah*, and similarly there are three words gathered in the same form of expression revealed to Jesus (Peace be upon him) in the name of the *Father* the *Mother* and the *Son* and in our expression it is the three words as in the Messenger-ship, the Moḥammadan (light) and the Divinity (*al-risālah*, *al-Muḥammadiyah* and *al-ulūhiya*). Thus it is obtained

from this that the expression *'Muḥammad Rasūlu 'Llāh'*²⁸⁸ is combined into the three Realms (worlds) of the *Mulk*, *Malakūt* and *Jabarūt* (the physical world, the spiritual and intermediary world) so the expression *Muḥammad* is equivalent to the *Mulk* which is the manifestation of the physical beings and *Risālah* is equivalent to the *Malakūt* i.e. that which is hidden in the Universe (*al-kawn*) of (divine) Secrets and knowledge and it is the intermediary between the evanescent (*al-ḥudūth*) and the Eternal (*al-Qidam*) referred to as *al-rūḥ al-amīn* and the word *al-ulūhiyah* is equivalent to the *Jabarūt* which is the ocean from which to taste the physical and the spiritual, while the physical is a 'thing' (*shay'un*) and the spiritual is a 'thing' (*shay'un*) and: *"The Real has no like unto anything"* (*Laysa kamithlihī shay'un*), or one could say 'He is the One Whose existence is in everything. We say the name *Rasūl* is the intermediary between the evanescent (*al-ḥudūth*) and the Eternal (*al-qidam*). Yes, it certainly is the intermediary for had it not been for this (intermediary), existence would be destroyed because when the evanescent meets (clashes) with the eternal the evanescent disappears (is destroyed) and only the Eternal remains and since the Prophet was suitable for the two sides the world then became orderly and uniform. From the point of his exterior existence the Prophet was a clot of clay and from the aspect of his interior he was the representative (*Khalīfa*) of the Lord of the worlds. And it was for this reason that he became the intermediary (*al-wāsiṭah*) between *al-ḥudūth* and *al-qidam*. And know that it is this Messenger (*Muḥammad*) who is alluded to as the barrier²⁸⁹ (*al-barzakh*) in reference to the verse in the Qur'an in *Sūrah ar-Raḥmān*

"He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they might meet: yet between them is a barrier which they may not transgress." [Q.55: 19].

²⁸⁸ *Muḥammad Rasūlu 'Llāh* in a sense also refer to *sharī'a* and the *Muḥammadan* light (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadiya*)

²⁸⁹ In Martin Lings' discussion on the aspect of the Absolute and the relative, taken from Shaykh al-'Alāwī's *Minaḥ*, Lings, in his book *The Sufi Saint* talks about the barrier, but does not include the Shaykh's explicit mentioning of the Christian's error in removing the barrier between Jesus and God, and his quotation of the above verse as God's response to the Christians' claim that Jesus is God. The omission could possibly have been intentional because the verse stands in direct contrast to the perennial doctrine to which Lings ascribes himself.

For were it not for the barrier of the *Risālah* the creation would have become disorderly and muddled, to the point that the worshipper would disappear in the existence of the Worshipped, because if you were to remove the word *Rasūl* from the saying--*Muḥammad Rasūlu 'llah* (Muḥammad is the Messenger of God), the result would then be *Muhammad Allah* (Muhammad is God) and that does not make sense and the removal of the barrier would be the cause of disorder and defectiveness.

And the reason for the downfall of the Christians is that they have removed the barrier (*barzagh*) which is the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*) in the saying: *Īsa rūḥu 'Llah* (Jesus the spirit of God) so they said *Īsā Allah* (Jesus is God) to which the divinity responded in the Qur'ān:

“Indeed have they gone astray, those who say that verily God is Jesus the son of Mary” (Q.5:72)²⁹⁰

Shaykh al-'Alāwī makes it very clear from the above discussion that in Islam there will always remain the existence of a barrier between the two oceans of the Absolute Being and the relative. This is an unmitigated primacy when it comes to the exoteric and legislative creed of the Islamic doctrine of Unity (*Tawḥīd*)--- *Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh Muḥammad Rasūlu 'Llāh*.²⁹¹ Thus, had it not been for the barrier of *rasūl* the relative would clash with the Absolute until the relative would easily be confused for the Absolute. And so, “*rasūl*” can never be removed from what it stands for which is separating the evanescent (*al-ḥudūth*) represented by the outside (*ḥiss*) of Muḥammad from the Eternal (*al-Qidam*) the One Absolute Divinity, *Say, He is the One God, God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of all Being. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.* (Q.112:1-4).

²⁹⁰ *Al-Minah*, p. 59-60

²⁹¹ The *ma'rifa* comes with the great force of *jalāl* and for the 'ārif to maintain this state he is in need of the *jamāl*, so the first half of the creed (*Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh*) is *jalāl* and the second half (*Muḥammad Rasūlu 'Llāh*) is *jamāl* because Muḥammad is *raḥma* and this makes the *ma'rifa* more easier.

“God was, and there was nothing alongside Him, and He is now as He was, no change overtaketh Him.” God has brought everything into existence. All things are in God while He is also beyond all things.

What we also need to understand is that Islam has a *sharī'a* (exoteric axis) and a *ḥaqīqa* (esoteric axis) and they are both from one and the same source, as Shaykh al-'Alāwī says, '*sharī'a* is the essence of *ḥaqīqa*' (*as-sharī'a 'ainul ḥaqīqa*). They are complementary and indispensable, especially for those who wish to arrive to the *ḥaqīqa*, the condition is that they must first enter through the door of *sharī'a*, '*wa'tul buyūta min abwābihā*' (and enter the houses through its doors.' (Q.2:189)

When Sidi 'Alawi Bendi Murād was asked about those westerners who aspire to the path of Sufism as to why only very few of them attain to the ultimate goal of gnosis (*ma'rifa*). He answered saying, “It is because they did not give much value (*ta'thīm*) to the *sharī'a*; and here we are talking about the basic essentials of *sharī'a* and not its detailed sciences. Sidi Alawi bendi Murād could possibly have alluded to Frithof Schuon in whose teaching René Guénon²⁹² saw an increasing eclecticism.

“Adding to that was the gradual slide towards disassociation from the Islamic *sharī'a*, which now began at the hands of Schuon. This included some practices, such as his allowing his followers not to fast in Ramadan and to drink wine in gatherings – which made others doubt their Islam, and other similar things, which he justified for them on the basis of the difficulty of living in an environment hostile to Islam. This was, however, a subject of scorn on the part of some of his followers, such as Michel Valsan, his *muqaddam* in Paris, and the subject of sharp criticism on the part of René Guénon.²⁹³

“Sufi hagiography is replete with anecdotes that highlight the legal, moral, and social preconditions for the spiritual path. Thus, for example, in the eighteenth century, a Sufi Shaykh like Mūlay al-'Arabī ad-Darqāwī could set

²⁹² Among the very few western Sufi scholars did Sidi Alawi Bendi Murād consider Guénon as one of those who arrived towards the 'Goal' of *ma'rifa*.

²⁹³ Mark Sedgwick *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (op. cit.), p. 126

the outer knowledge of the *sharī'ah*, or Islamic law, as a precondition for any further advancement, while at the same time emphasizing a need to focus on the essentials of this external domain.²⁹⁴ He said, "If you wish your path to be shortened in order to attain realization swiftly, hold fast to what is ordained (in the Qur'ān) and to what is particularly recommended concerning voluntary observances; learn outer knowledge (*sharī'a*) as it is indispensable for worshipping God, but do not linger on it, since you are not required to study this deeply."²⁹⁵

'In the same order of consideration, Michel Chodkiewicz has emphasized the extent to which one of the greatest gnostics of Islam, Ibn 'Arabī, "establishes an exact correlation between spiritual realization (*taḥaqquq*) and humble, painstaking submission to the *sharī'ah*."²⁹⁶

The Difference in Sufi Hermeneutics between Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī

Shaykh Al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī had more in common than they had in differences despite the huge gap between them in time. Perhaps most significantly, they were both Sufis with great spiritual magnitude who have mastered the doctrine of gnosis (*ma'rifa*). Both were also scholars of *sharī'a* and *ḥaqīqa*. They were also scholars of *ijtihād*.

Al-Ghazālī may be said to have built the bridge between *sharī'a* and Sufism, and more than anyone prepared the way for the general recognition of the latter. It was his scepticism that brought him to the path of Sufism. Since he was one of the prominent exoteric authorities and leading theologians of Baghdād in the eleventh century he reached a point of crisis when, as he tells us, for a period of nearly two months he was in doubt about the truth of

²⁹⁴ Massignon, *Les trois prieres d'Abraham*, p.70

²⁹⁵ *Letters of a Sufi Master The Shaykh al-'Arabī ad-Darqāwī* (Louisville, KY, Fons Viatae, 1998), 15.

²⁹⁶ Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 106.

religion. It was perhaps this scepticism and doubt which caused al-Ghazālī to emancipate his own mind from dogmatic doctrines of Muslim theologians and rationalist philosophers and freed himself from all pre-conceived religious structures.

Shaykh Al-'Alāwī on the other hand, had an almost simultaneous contact with both the esoteric and exoteric world of religion during his time, without much interference and influence from any philosophical or rational thought. It was later when Shaykh al-'Alāwī came into contact with the science of metaphysics and philosophy that he wrote books on both metaphysics and philosophy, even though it had no real influence on his understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān. He was also extremely critical of those philosophers who tried to explain metaphysics from a philosophical point of view.

Al-Ghazālī, having transcended philosophy in the end, still showed traces of philosophy in his teachings. The most significant philosophical feature in *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* is probably al-Ghazālī's classification of the Islamic sciences connecting them to the Qur'ān. Almost all classifications in Arabic before al-Ghazālī were undertaken by philosophers. This method resembles al-Farābī's and Ibn Sīna's previous dealing with the Islamic sciences from a philosophical point of view. The former describes in his *Iḥsā' al-'ulūm* (The Emanation of Sciences) famous sciences (*al-'ulūm al-mash hūra*) and their parts presenting the objectives and qualities of each one of them. He divided the sciences into five areas: philology, logic, mathematics including music, physics, metaphysics and social sciences including *fiqh* and *kalām*.

There are good reasons to assume that al-Ghazālī was influenced by the disciplines of Greek philosophy in the manner in which he classified the Qur'ānic verses and connected several sciences to the Qur'ān according to a certain hierarchical order. Particularly, the statement he makes from a theological point of view that the origins of secular sciences lie in the Qur'ān. This reveals an Avicennian influence, as Ibn Sīna's above statement shows.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ Like the statement he makes from a theological point of view that the origins (*awāilihā*) of secular sciences in the Qur'ān reveal an Avicennian impact.

By assigning books of his own to each one of the religious sciences, he appears to be following Ibn Sīnā's example in assigning classical books of philosophy to most of the rational sciences.²⁹⁸

Like these philosophers, al-Ghazālī determines that eternal bliss is the result of searching for and obtaining knowledge in life. However, he differs from them in regards to the quality of knowledge which leads to that state. He ascribes eternal bliss to those who possess knowledge of God and His deeds in the visible world – a judgement which seems to be a reply to the view that eternal happiness is given through rational knowledge. The knowledge he presents in *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* is not exhausted in, but based on the rational study of beings in order to achieve a better knowledge of their creator, who is seen as acting in and through every part of the creation. The knowledge al-Ghazālī advocates is transcending rationality without eliminating it.²⁹⁹



Al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī's Esoteric Perspective on the Story of Abraham

I would like to unpack the esoteric interpretation of a particular narrative in the Qur'ān which leaves many exegetes (exoteric as well as esoteric) with various theological interpretations regarding Abraham's utterance of "*This is my Lord*" when he encountered the star, the moon and the sun.

Before discussing the esoteric interpretation of this narrative I will mention some of the more popular theological understandings amongst traditional exegetes.

'Al-Ṭabarī raises a theological argument related to a *ḥadīth*, narrated on the authority of Ibn-Abbās, that Abraham believed that these heavenly bodies were his real Lord. Theologically, al-Ṭabarī argues that it is impossible for a true prophet to associate others with Him even for a moment. In other words, he strongly criticized those traditionists who claimed that a prophet could

²⁹⁸ Cf. the discussion of al-Ghazālī's attitude towards the philosophers, particularly Ibn Sīnā, provided in Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, pp. 81-101.

²⁹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān*, p. 79.

have worshipped that which is not God before reaching the age of maturity and beginning his ministry. In his person, such an individual would have to have been completely innocent of such worship, regardless of his age.’³⁰⁰

‘The second interpretation concerns al-Ṭabrisī’s explanation of Abū Alī al-Jubbālī’s opinion that Abraham said this before he reached this mental maturity and deliberated upon God’s creatures only after he reached it: When Abraham saw the star and its splendor he thought that was his Lord, but when it set changing from one stage to another he said “I don’t like those that set.” Abraham imposed the same judgment on the moon when it arose in its splendor and set (observing that it was bigger and more luminous) He said “unless my Lord guide me,” to the right path, favor me to the desired objective in His unicity, “I shall surely be among those who go astray” by worshipping these creatures. Now when he saw the sun filling the earth with its brilliance, and splendor he again said “this is my lord this is bigger than the star and the moon.” When the sun set he said to his people “*O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to Allāh*” who created all of us. When God bestowed him with matured understanding and careful deliberation through level-headedness and perspicacious mental exercise he excelled in understanding the stark difference between the qualities of the creatures and the attributes of God. He said *For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth,*” genuinely inclining away from polytheism to the unicity of God “*and never shall I give partners to Allāh.*”

Al-Ṭabrisī mentioned that Abū –Alī al-Jubbā’ī raises two other theological questions. The first one is how could Abraham say this in such an emphatic manner when he had no knowledge of this, the uncertainty expressed in an emphatic statement is repugnant.’³⁰¹

‘The third interpretation is that Abraham said, *This is my Lord*, with uncertainty. Rather, he knew emphatically that his Lord is not one of the celestial bodies. Al-Ṭabrisī explains:

³⁰⁰ Ṭabarī 1954, xi: 481

³⁰¹ Ṭabrisī 1995, IV:90

‘Abraham has chosen to say that in order to decry the practice of his people and to direct their attention to the fact that the true One worthy of worship should not be similar to His creatures. Abraham therefore says “This is my Lord” based on one of two interpretations: (a) his people’s religion and belief or (b) questioning and warning them of worshipping the heavenly bodies.’³⁰² ‘Al-Zamakhsharī interprets God showing Abraham the kingdom of heaven and earth to show him His lordship and sovereignty and to teach him how to correctly deduce valid arguments.⁶² Thus, we can see that al-Zamakhsharī is interested in how reason helps one acquire divine knowledge. He uses this story to argue that Abraham actually meant to guide his people rationally to the fact that God, who created everything and controls all of their movements, manages their rising and setting.’³⁰³

Both al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī discuss the mystical interpretation of this narrative searching out its spiritual significance and divine fruits and secrets.

And in the exegesis of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī this narrative is explained on the level (*maqām*) of *Ihsān* which is direct contemplation (*mushāhada*) of the divine manifestations, *Wherever you may turn there is the Face of God.*³⁰⁴ This verse for Shaykh al-‘Alāwī is an expression of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *sidq*³⁰⁵ in God. And Abraham is the proof and example of this verse. When he looked at the sun, he did not say ‘this is the sun’; no, he said ‘this is my Lord’ (*hādha rabbī*), because he had a strong gnosis (*ma’rifa*) and *sidq* with God. Abraham never doubted the divinity (*ulūhiyya*) of God, no; he asserted it because he was drowned in it.

I will also discuss some key ideas on Sufi hermeneutics which are commonplace between al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī with the hope of establishing a framework for Sufi principles on the allegorical and esoteric

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Zamakhsharī 1987, II: 29-31

³⁰⁴ Q. 2:115

³⁰⁵ *Sidq* for the Gnostics is to have the super sincerity with God; it is not like *ikhlās*, it is to have no existence alongside the Beloved. The Qur’ān mentions first the prophets and then the *siddiqīn* and then the martyrs (*shuhadā*) and then the pious (*ṣāliḥūn*).

interpretation regards the inner truth (*ḥaqīqa*) on the story of Abraham in the Qur'ān and transcending its rational meaning.

Al-Ghazālī's esoteric interpretation of the story is generally symbolic and more allegorical. He makes this clear in his *Mishkāt* speaking on the symbolism of divine Light manifested in the star, the moon and the sun:

Listen now, if the World of the Realm of Supernal contains Light-substances, high and lofty, called 'Angels', from which substances the various lights are effused upon the various mortal spirits, and by reason of which these angels are called 'lords,' then is Allah 'Lord of lords,' and these lords will have differing, grades of luminousness. The symbols, then, of these in the visible world will be, preeminently, the Sun, the Moon, and the stars...and the pilgrim of the Way rises first of all to a degree corresponding to that of a star.

The effulgence of that star's light appears to him. It is disclosed to him that the entire world beneath adores its influence and the effulgence of its light. And so, because of the very beauty and superbness of the thing, he is made aware of something which cries aloud saying, *This is my Lord?*³⁰⁶ He passes on; and as he becomes conscious of the light-degree next above it, namely, that symbolized by the moon, lo! In the aerial canopy he beholds that star set, to wit, in comparison with its superior; and he said, "Nought that setteth do I adore!"³⁰⁷ And so he rises till he arrives at last at the degree symbolised by the sun. This, again, he sees is greater and higher than the former, but nevertheless admits of comparison therewith, in virtue of a relationship between the two. But to bear relationship to what is imperfect carries with it imperfection--the 'setting' of this allegory. And by reason thereof he said, *I have turned my face unto That Who made the heavens and the earth! I am a true believer, and, not of those who associate other gods with Allah!*³⁰⁸

What is meant to be conveyed by this "That Who" is the vaguest kind of indication, destitute of all relation or comparison. Was anyone to ask, "What

³⁰⁶ Q. 6:76.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Q. 6:79.

is the symbol comparable with or corresponding to this "That'?" No answer to the question could be conceived. He who transcends all relations is Allah, the One Reality. Thus, when certain Arabs once asked the Apostle of God, "To what may we relate Allah?" this reply was revealed, "Say, He, Allah is one! His days are neither ended nor begun; neither is He a father nor a son; and none is like unto Him, no not one." The meaning of which verse is simply that God transcends relation.³⁰⁹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's approach was more transcendental and *ḥaqīqa* oriented because he goes beyond the outward interpretation of the narrative justifying the ultimate spiritual station of Abraham in his perception of *tawḥīd* and the significance of the Qur'ān to be comprehended on all three levels; Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān*. In the following exegesis Shaykh al-'Alāwī gives the reason to interpret the Qur'ān on the level of *Iḥsān* which is the special understanding of the elite amongst the servants of God. Shaykh al-'Alāwī makes it very clear at the end of his explanation that the desire which Abraham had within himself was to impart unto others the knowledge to which he had attained, and raise them to the level of *Iḥsān*, but they could not comprehend his desire until he realised that they were not ready for this level of comprehension, so he prayed to God that perhaps after him there will come a people who will understand his intention and give value to the truth of his words. Because Muḥammad came with the three levels of Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān*, he was able to be more discrete and spoke to his people according to the level of their intellects; an advice which Muḥammad prudently shared with his community.³¹⁰

It is mentioned in the Qur'ān that Abraham said: *And (Lord!) Grant me a worthy repute among the latter folk*³¹¹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī says that, "the meaning of the latter folk (*al-ākhirīn*) here alludes to the community (*ummah*) of Muḥammad, since Abraham's prayer was answered in them. I do not know of any community (says al-'Alāwī) who

³⁰⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, p. 125.

³¹⁰ Jāmi' al-Aḥādīth, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī Edited by. 'Abbās Aḥmad Ṣāqar and Aḥmad 'Abd al-Jawād. Print: Dār al-Fikr. Beirut (First Edition 1994) Ḥadīth No. 4667 Vol. 2 Pg.175

³¹¹ Q. 26:84.

holds Abraham in a high repute as he merits, save for this blessed community (of Muḥammad), this is because he (Abraham) came to his people with a most amazing story:

*And when the night overshadowed him with its darkness he saw a star and exclaimed, 'this is my Lord!' to the end of the verse*³¹².

But this message was not received favourably by the minds of the weak followers of Abraham. This is because they were unable to digest such truths (*ḥaqāiq*), therefore they turned away from him, after having followed him at first. And so Abraham said, *O Lord confer on me a worthy repute among the latter folk that I do not be reviled as I was by the earlier folk.*³¹³ Shaykh al-'Alāwī continues: 'then Prophet Muḥammad was sent forth, bringing with him the way (*millah*) of our master Abraham. And it was Muḥammad's community who came to know the true meaning of his words when he looked at the star and said, "this is my Lord" (*hādha rabbī*), since it was they who gave an interpretation that was most befitting to his intention and they did believe in what he truly saw and witnessed (of the divine Presence). When Abraham said to the star, "This is my Lord", he was not ignorant of the Divinity, nor did he say it to make comparisons. It was only because he was completely immersed in the majesty of God Most High, seeing Him in all things.³¹⁴ And when he informed them about this particular incident his people decried him, and therefore he said, "Behold, unto Him Who brought into being the heavens and the earth have I truly turned my face, and never shall I give partners³¹⁵ to God."³¹⁶

³¹² Q. 6:76.

³¹³ Q.26:84.

³¹⁴ "The Cosmos (*al-kawn*) is all darkness. It is illuminated only by the manifestation of God (*zuhūr al-ḥaqq*) in it. He who sees the Cosmos and does not contemplate Him in it or by it or before it or after it is in need of light and is veiled from the sun of gnosis by the clouds of created things (*al-athār*)", Danner, *Ḥikam Ibn 'Ata 'illah*, p.14.

³¹⁵ Since Abraham was sent to his people as proof of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*).

³¹⁶ Q. 6:79; He has permitted you to reflect on what is *in* created beings, but He has not allowed you to stop at the self-same creatures: "Say, Behold what is in the heavens and the earth." (Q.10:101). Thus with His words, Behold what is *in* the **heavens**. He opened up the door of instruction for you. But He did not say, "Behold the heavens" so as not to lead you to the mere existence of bodies. Danner, *Ḥikam Ibn 'Ata 'illah*, p. 40

Shaykh al-'Alāwī was asked; When Abraham said to the star *This is my Lord* was he ignorant of the true station (*maqām*) of the divinity?" The Shaykh answered, "Far be he from that! He was completely immersed in the Majesty of God and spoke only in utter affirmation of God's Transcendence." And it must be taken into account the fact that all Prophets are exempted from all minor and major sins, before and after their prophethood. So could it ever be possible that any form of ignorance regarding divinity could come from them? To add more clarity to this truth regarding the statement, *This is my Lord*, it happened after the spiritual unveiling of the heavens and the earth (to Abraham) when God said: *And thus have We shown Abraham the (spiritual) kingdom of the heavens and the earth so that he may have the certainty (yaqīn)*³¹⁷

It was this certainty³¹⁸ that prompted him to say *This is my Lord!* and the rule says:³¹⁹ "When the certainty (*yaqīn*) has arrived, the inner vision appears at the loss of the outer. So he witnessed with the eye of inner faith (*Imān*) the existence of God in every direction and in every place,³²⁰ and divulged this secret with a cry, *This is my Lord!* and when he said 'this' (*hādhā*) his desire was to raise his people from the degree of *Imān* to the highest degree of *Iḥsan*, but no, they clung to the earth.³²¹

Most exegetes (exoteric as well as esoteric) believe that at the time when Abraham said *This is my Lord*, he was in the stage of doubt and faced with the

³¹⁷ Q. 6:76; "Everything has an ample share of God's Manifestation in them, because if the heaven remained heaven and the earth remained earth", meaning; if they were really empty of any precious revelation then God would not have praised Abraham in His words. Thus have We shown Abraham the (spiritual) kingdom of the heavens and the earth so that he may have the certainty (*yaqīn*). This, according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, is perhaps no wonder that Abraham could say, "This is my Lord."

³¹⁸ The certainty (*yaqīn*) when God unveiled to Abraham the secrets of the heaven and the earth, (Q. 6:76).

³¹⁹ In the realm of the Qurān the gnostics have defined two visions, *al-baṣar* (outer vision) of forms and *al-baṣīra* (inner vision) also known as *mushāhada* (direct witnessing) transcending all forms.

³²⁰ According to al-'Alāwī, this is the true esoteric meaning of the verse, "Wherever you may turn there is the Face of God." (Q.2:115) And the verse, "Everything is perishing save His Face" (Q.28:88). Also according to al-'Alāwī, the verb 'perishing' (*hālikun*) is in the present continuous tense which could mean that everything is perishing now, except for His Face. The verse however, is popularly translated as everything 'will' (future tense) perish save His Face.

³²¹ Al-'Alāwī's, *Kitāb A'thab al-Manāhil*, p.128.

darkness of error. Shaykh al-'Alāwī's interpretation is diametrically opposed to this argument with two most significant points: firstly, Abraham was not ignorant of the divinity of his Lord when he said *This is my Lord* but instead, completely immersed in the majesty of his Lord, seeing Him in all things. Secondly, he could never have been ignorant of the divinity when he said *This is my Lord* considering the fact that the Prophet Muḥammad said "All Prophets are exempted from all minor and major sins before and after their prophethood", and to add more clarity to this truth is, when Abraham said "*This is my Lord*", this was said after the revelation in which God unveiled to him the kingdom of the heavens and the earth.

Conclusion

In my concluding remarks I find that both al-Ghazālī and Shaykh al-'Alāwī have made a distinct scholarly and esoteric contribution to the subject of Sufi hermeneutics with regard to the narrative in the Qur'ān. Even while stressing an esoteric sense of Qur'ānic statements, Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī, against the Bātinītes, do not neglect the value of the verbal text of the Qur'ān; they state that only through it, is it possible to penetrate the deep meanings preserved within the Qur'ān, as illustrated in the text of the esoteric exegesis of al-Fātiḥa and the story of Abraham. They have in a sense combined faith and knowledge in mystical harmony which cannot always be intellectually captured by reason, because for the gnostics the intellect is not the highest authority of knowledge; it is inferior to the spirit (*al-rūḥ*) which cognizes the world by means of the eye of the heart (*al-baṣīra*) through mystical contemplation. The intellect however, is not excluded from this process of cognition; it delivers to the spirit the knowledge that it can achieve.³²²

It is clear from this that the Sufi hermeneutics advocated by Shaykh al-'Alāwī and al-Ghazālī is appropriate only for the intellectual and spiritual

³²² And in the dua of his munājāt Shaykh al-'Alāwī says, 'O Allah, be for me a Defender and a Protector, and let the intellect ('*aql*) be my minister over my heart.' (*Allahumma kun lī nāṣiran wa mujīran waj'al al-'aql 'alā qalbī wazīran*) Shaykh al-'Alāwī, *Al-Munājāt*, p.83

elite, as Imām Junaid al-Baghdādī said, “No-one can truly understand our speech except those who are like us.”

My knowledge of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī and my personal education from my Shaykh (Sidi Alawī Bendi Murād), who was directly in the presence of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī himself, has convinced me that the Shaykh was accustomed to speak different things to different people according to their level of understanding.



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CHAPTER THREE:

AL-'ALĀWĪ'S ESOTERIC EXEGESIS

Introduction

This chapter attempts to illustrate the gnostic's hermeneutical approach to the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān based on the exegetical principle of Shaykh al-'Alāwī which speaks about "That which indicates that the Qur'ān has many facets, and its wonders will never cease, so that the understanding of the earlier generation (*muta qaddimūn*) does not suffice in exclusion of the understanding of the latter generation (*muta akhirūn*)."³²³

In his explanation of this principle Shaykh al-'Alāwī says that the Qur'ān will continue to remain a ripe garden and an all-encompassing forest, to the extent that the one who interprets it would almost be adding to it were it not that, "*No falsehood can approach it from any angle.*"³²⁴

Shaykh al-'Alāwī also maintains that the Qur'ān is fresh and new in every age, and is the same now as it ever was. God said, and He continues to say, *Will they not ponder and contemplate on this Qur'ān?*³²⁵

The goal of this chapter is to also emphasise the many facets of various esoteric commentaries. Apart from Shaykh al-'Alāwī's perspective of esoteric commentary in this chapter, I also present al-Ghazālī's esoteric commentary on the 'light verse' from the *Niche of Lights*, and the esoteric commentary of Sidi Alāwī bendi Murād, one of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's disciples on selected verses from the Qur'ān.³²⁶

The aim of these exegetic examples is to essentially demonstrate the various approaches of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. However, the purpose for also bringing in al-Ghazālī and Sidi 'Alawi bendi

³²³ Al-'Alāwī, *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*, p.17.

³²⁴ Q. 41:42.

³²⁵ Q. 4:82; Q. 47:27

³²⁶ My spiritual initiation (*bay'a*) into the 'Alawiyya Tarīqa was with Sidi Alawī Bendi Murād in Madina al-Munawwara 1985 at the time of my Arabic studies at the Islamic university of Madina.

Murād is to compare the premise from which all three commentators approach the inner meaning of the divine text, and to establish a common ground for gnosis as a means for interpreting the Qur’ān on the level of *Ihsān*. The latter part of the chapter is a discussion on *Sūrah al-Najm* as a prelude to Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s esoteric *tafsīr* on the entire *Sūrah* in the following chapter and highlighting essential parts of the *sūrah*.

First, I present an overview of the chapter and Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s perception of the verses concerning the Prophet’s efforts to preach to the people and their subsequent rejection of him as a symbol of the spiritual guide (*murshid*) in his efforts to lead his disciples along the path to God and ultimately to the *maqām* of *ma’rifa*, *the utmost end*³²⁷ the words of God to which Shaykh al-‘Alāwī alludes to in the final end (*al-muntahā*) of the aspirant’s journey in his attainment to *ma’rifa*, beyond which there is only the manifestation of the divine Presence.

Second, I will present Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s discussion on the historical background of *Sūrah al-Najm* and its significance to Muḥammad’s spiritual status with God and his prophethood and the importance of the Prophet’s special reverence and attachment to this *Sūrah*.

Third, his discussion on the so-called “satanic verses” and the issue of *al-Gharānīq* and his unique perspective on the story as opposed to the views of many classical exegetes, specifically those who addressed the issue of the satanic verses will be presented.

Interpreting the Qur’ān on its Symbolic and Metaphysical Levels

One of the main objectives of this thesis is to illustrate Sufi hermeneutics in general and that of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī in specific. My aim is also to provide a framework to understand Qur’ānic hermeneutics with regards to its spiritual dimension of *bāṭin* interpretation. The spiritual knowledge of the Sufi is found in the realm of *bāṭin* knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*)

³²⁷ Q. 53:43.

The Sufis generally distinguish between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) levels of meaning. This distinction has its basis in the Qur'ān and also in the prophetic ḥadīth. As for the Qur'ān the Sufis generally agree that this is not a specific analysis of words and verses but a hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān in general. There are verses that clearly indicate the notion of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* in the Qur'ān.³²⁸

In the hermeneutic principles of Shaykh al-'Alāwī there is a very deep perception of the *bāṭin* meaning of the Qur'ān where he mentions the four facets of interpretation stated in the prophetic ḥadīth. He warns the reader not to be quick to disqualify what those with knowledge of God (*'ārifūn*) say about the Book of God. Shaykh al-'Alāwī also argues that these four facets³²⁹ don't just appear in the Qur'ān as a whole. He says:

"It most certainly appears in every verse and word, or we could say in every letter. Therefore every letter of the Qur'ān contains the whole of the Qur'ān."³³⁰

What gives Sufi commentary its distinctive character is their focus on the Qur'ānic text's philological meaning to discover its inner meanings which is clearly brought out in Shaykh al-'Alāwī's hermeneutic principles. He speaks about the four facets:

"Indeed, it most certainly appears in every verse and word, or we could say in every letter. Therefore every letter of the Qur'ān contains the whole of the Qur'ān. And here God says: *We will reveal to you a weighty word (statement)* ³³¹ and in another verse: *Those who listen to the speech and follow the best of it.*³³²)

God used the *expression* of speech (*qawl*) rather than word (*lafẓ*), or discourse (*kalām*) in order to include both words and letters, since 'speech'

³²⁸ Sufis have assumed that Q.6:120, Q.6:151, Q.7:33, Q.31:20, and Q.57:3 indicate the notion of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* in the Qur'ān.

³²⁹ The Prophet said, "*Verily the Qur'ān has an outward (ẓāhir), an inward (bāṭin), a boundary (ḥadd) and a horizon (maṭla')*". Ṣaḥīḥ ibn Ḥibbān bi tartīb Balibān, Al-Amīr 'Alā al-Dīn 'Alī b. Balibān al-Fārisī Edited by. Shu'ayb Al-Arna'ūt. Print: Mu'assasah al-Risālah - Beirut (Second Edition 1993) Ḥadīth No. 75 Vol. 1 Pg.276

³³⁰ Al-'Alāwī, *al-baḥr al-masjūr*, p. 17.

³³¹ Q. 73:5

³³² Q. 39:18

encompasses them all. Every part of the Book of God, supposing that it can be divided into parts, is weighty, because of all the countless meanings it contains. Another proof that each letter of the Qur'ān is itself a Qur'ān is the *ḥadīth* narrated by Tirmidhi on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd that the prophet said, *Whoever reads a letter from the Book of God will receive one good deed (ḥasanah) and one good deed is rewarded ten-fold.*' So it's clear from this that a letter in the Qur'ān has meanings. And in another narration it is added, *'I do not say that alif- lām-mīm³³³ is a letter, but alif is a letter, lām is a letter, and mīm is a letter.'*

The hidden (*bāṭin*) meanings in the Qur'ān in a given Qur'ānic passage indicated by its subtle allusion (*ishāra*) has prompted the Sufis to extract it by means of *istinbāṭ* which became the focal point of Sufi hermeneutical methods.

Practical examples of Sufi commentators approaching the Qur'ān through "allegorical" and "metaphorical" explanations will help to explain my point.

In his book *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, Shaykh al-'Alāwī clearly brings out his Sufi hermeneutical principles linked to his mystical experiences and Sufi orientation when he answers some questions regarding certain verses in the Qur'ān.³³⁴

He was asked concerning the verse, *Have not those who disbelieve seen that the heavens and the earth were joined together as one united piece? Then We parted them? And We have made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?*³³⁵ The question also included, "where was the substance of the water when the heavens and the earth were of one piece, meaning one substance fastened together? Was the substance of the water part of their substance, or separate from them? And was the substance of our life already within it", since He says, *"And from the water We made every living thing?"*

³³³ Reference here is made to the abbreviated letters that appear in the beginning of the second chapter of the Qur'ān. These are letters put together with no outward meaning yet filled with great divine secrets.

³³⁴ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.31

³³⁵ Ibid. Q. 21:30.

In response to the question, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī gives the following answer: “The verse is not concerned with the primordial substance (*awwal al-mawād*) but was revealed in the context of an argument for the existence of a divine Director of the universe, and not to the believers. In any case, I shall comment on the verse itself; and all clarity comes from God.”

In this exegesis of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī we will observe that his commentary on the above verse was oriented more towards a specific allegorical approach with information relating to the natural sciences which was more allegorical and exoteric in form. This was the response given in accordance to the requirement of the situation, which Shaykh al-‘Alāwī makes clear in the following response: “Every verse has a near meaning, a nearer meaning, a far meaning and a farther meaning; these four perspectives are alluded to in a *ḥadīth* by the terms ‘outward’ (*zāhir*), inward (*bāṭin*), boundary (*ḥadd*) and horizon (*maṭla*). The ‘nearest’ meaning of this verse, the one which is easily understood by all, is that the heavens and the earth were ‘of one piece’, and then the heavens were separated with rain, and the earth with vegetation. *Verily in this there are signs.*³³⁶ There are traditions to support this interpretation.³³⁷

“There are also traditions to support the second interpretation, which is that the heavens, earth and their contents were ‘of one piece’, that is; gathered in a single substance, and then were split. This is what Ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have said, and it has been the opinion of many scholars over the ages, that the nature of how things are brought forth by the divine Power is as blueprints and then as particulars.³³⁸

If we follow the interpretation of Ibn ‘Abbās, it is not clear why this should be addressed to the unbelievers in general, since they are unaware of what went on when the world was created; although it could be indeed addressed to the wise among them. God guides whom He wills to that wherein is goodness, so that the overwhelming proofs may be on His side. It may be that

³³⁶ Q. 10:67.

³³⁷ Al-‘Alāwī, *A’dhab al-Manāhil*, p.32

³³⁸ Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās, *Tanwīr al-Miqbās min tafsīr ibn ‘Abbās*, Beirut (2001)

the divine Wisdom decreed that the meanings of this verse be reserved for the later generations, because its content was destined to be confirmed by those to whom it was addressed thanks to their investigations into the beauty of the universe, which led them to the knowledge that separation follows unity, and that all things were once gathered together before they were separated.³³⁹ This is something to which only the elite of each group has access; for the rest, it was enough for Him to alert them to the general principle of causality, along the lines of His words, *Have they not beheld the camel, how it was created?*³⁴⁰ and the like.

In our observation of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary some allusions are made regarding the possibility that God in His infinite Wisdom may have decreed that the meaning of this verse be reserved for the later generations, as he states in one of his hermeneutic principles that, 'each generation will receive their allotted share of knowledge from God because 'the wonders of the Qur'ān will never cease'. And God continues to explain the meanings of the Qur'ān in every age and time. God said, and He continues to say, *When We recite it, follow its recitation; and then its upon Us to explain it. [Q. 75: 18-19].*

One aspect of the explanation He has undertaken to give is found in the meanings God causes to come forth on the tongues of His chosen elect. In His wisdom, He only reveals to the sages ('*ulamā*') of each age what the people of that age require; by 'sages' here, we mean those who truly implement the knowledge they inherit and uphold God's proof to the world --- those by means of whom God preserves this religion until they pass it on to those who come after them.³⁴¹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī continues: 'Moreover, this verse contains an allusion to the knowledge that non-Muslims have attained, such as astronomy and the secrets of the universe they have discovered³⁴², to the extent that they have

³³⁹ Perhaps referring to what is known as the Big Bang Theory.

³⁴⁰ Q. 88:17.

³⁴¹ Al-'Alāwī, *al-baḥr al-masjūr*, p.25

³⁴² Reference here could be made to the non-Muslims own discovery in astronomy as experiential and not necessarily referring to them as the founders of astronomy. Because from a historical context, the foundations of modern astronomy were built by Muslims in the Medieval Middle East. The first astronomical observatories were already well-established by

become certain that all things were originally one substance, which then separated and multiplied. It is my view, that this verse is one of the miracles of the Qur'ān because of how direct it is in its subject matter, which those whom it addresses have come to learn. It is our view that we should acknowledge all the information they possess, save for that which has to do with religion such as their denial of certain truths and other necessary elements of faith. Of these latter, they are ignorant, although they do have knowledge of other things, as the Qur'ān itself says, *They only know an outward appearance of this lower life; of the hereafter, they are oblivious.*³⁴³

Shaykh al-'Alāwī affirms the accuracy of the divine Wisdom through the rhetorical question made in the Qur'ān, *Have the unbelievers not seen?* Since 'seeing' is stronger than 'knowing' because information is not like direct observation.

'What I said about the verse having an allusion to the knowledge attained by those it addresses can be inferred from the rhetorical question; *Have the unbelievers not seen...?* Rhetorical questions are only asked of things which the addressee acknowledges to be true. The fact that the verse says, *seen* and not *known*, points to the accuracy of their discovery. God is saying, as it were; has it not been clearly established by the unbelievers that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, that is; a single substance (every one has their own technical term for it) after which He separated them completely; who was it that caused this one piece to exist, and who caused it then to split from the composition in which it appeared to be? My intuition is that if any honest person kindles even the smallest of torches from the flame of his thought, and uses it to examine the way in which the elements of the world are composed, he will not hesitate to say, *Glory be to God, the best of creators.*³⁴⁴ He will say this because of the beautiful order he beholds, and the magnificent

the 9th century. European scholars of astronomy in the 10th century produced knowledge based on what was already well known by that time in the Muslim world.

³⁴³ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.35 Q. 30:7.

³⁴⁴ Q. 23:14.

arrangement, measure and supreme balance by which all things are flawlessly weighed.³⁴⁵

Here we see the close link between the exegete's ability to practice *istinbāt* and his strict compliance with the precepts of the divine law. This according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī is available only to those who act in accord with the book of God, outwardly and inwardly, and follow the messenger of God, outwardly and inwardly. Therefore, God makes them heirs to the knowledge of subtle allusion (*'ilm al-ishārah*) and unveils to the hearts of his elect servants carefully guarded meanings (*ma'ānī madkhūrah*), spiritual subtleties (*laṭā'if*) and well-kept secrets.' Ages and years have passed, and nights and days have succeeded one another, yet in all this time the celestial bodies have continued in their motion without interruption or collision. *Each in orbit glides outwards*,³⁴⁶ and, *Glory be to Him Who raised the heavens aloft and set the balance*,³⁴⁷ so that neither scale outweighs the other. This is not merely a balance for weighing of oats and barley; it is far nobler and loftier than that, and perhaps it is the means by which the substances of the world are kept in place and by which all things are set in their place; that is, by which they are balanced. Who designed this and wound it up, and prevented the universe from clashing with itself or straying from its position? *Were the heavens and the earth to deviate, there is no one who could grasp them in His stead*.³⁴⁸

They (unbelievers) might say that it is gravity that naturally causes all things to remain in their positions or follow their orbits. To this, I say: "So who designed gravity and set down the balance, and linked effects to their causes? Need anything else be said? Indeed, the honest and fair unbeliever needs even less than this to affirm the existence of a creator; *If one should go astray, you shall find no guiding ally*.³⁴⁹

'As for His words, "And from the water We made every living thing"³⁵⁰, what was said above also applies to them, and their literal meaning is clear.

³⁴⁵ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.36

³⁴⁶ Q. 36:40.

³⁴⁷ Q. 4:7.

³⁴⁸ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.36 Q. 35:41.

³⁴⁹ Q. 18:17.

³⁵⁰ Q. 21:30

God says, *He sends down water from the sky by which He gives life to the earth after its death.*³⁵¹ Thus everything that has life draws the substance of its life, and the sustenance of its existence, from water. Animals and plants are equal in this respect; indeed, they are all plants, for God says, *God brought you out of the earth growing.*³⁵² From this perspective animals and plants are equal; everything on earth that has a body that grows can be considered a plant, and then from this general class animals are a specific group, namely; that which grows by being separate from the earth and drawing substance from what lies above it, whilst everything else is rooted in the earth and draws sustenance from what is beneath it. An animal is nothing but a tree that has been separated from the earth, which sometimes moves by its own volition and sometimes by compulsion; a tree is nothing but an animal which is rooted in the earth and has no free will, but is nevertheless not denied its own share of *tawhīd* and faith: God says, *The star and the tree prostrate.*³⁵³ Since we see that all living things on earth are plants, and that plants cannot do without water, it becomes clear to us that water is the life of all growing bodies. What is meant here is the life of the physical body, or we might say the life of this world, which means the connection of the spirit to the body to which God refers when he says, *Give them the parable of the life of this world: it is like water We send from the sky, so that the plants of the earth mingle with it; and in the morning it is straw scattered by winds.*³⁵⁴

As for life in and of itself, before it is connected to the body, it has no need for material things which are subject to decay. Thus matter is necessary for life to remain in the body, but not for life itself to exist, since it existed before all bodies; a *ḥadīth* says that “God created the spirits a thousand years before the bodies.” The span of time here is only meant to tell us that subtle being existed before gross being, and that this is the way of God in His creation, to which He alludes by saying, *God is He who sends forth the winds that stir up*

³⁵¹ Q. 30:24.

³⁵² Q. 71:17.

³⁵³ Q. 55:6.

³⁵⁴ Q. 18:45.

*clouds, which He spreads in the sky as He wills, and shatters them; then you see rain coming forth from the midst of them.*³⁵⁵

As we follow the discussion of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary on the relevant verses in this article, it is obvious that he manifests a specific exegetical method of different issues that predominate in his interpretation of Qur'ānic content in Sufi *tafsīr*—such as allusion, figurative expressions or metaphors, symbols, and allegories.

'Every cause is subtler than its effect: the wind causes the clouds to exist, and the clouds cause the rain to exist, and the rain causes the plants to exist, and the plants cause the animals to be sustained, and God is the cause of all causes, and all things go back to Him.

As for the question about the substance of the water, and whether it was interconnected with the substance of the heavens and the earth, I say: the unity of the beginning is established, just as the precedence of the subtle over the gross is established. The most subtle and influential of all the elements is the element of ether, which the ancients called the element of fire; then comes the elements of wind, then water and then earth. Each lower element is composed of those above it, and precedes from it, and each composition is under the power of those from which it is composed. Earth proceeds from the three elements of water, wind and ether, and is therefore under their power. Water is under the power of wind because it proceeds from it, and under examination it can be seen to be composed of it and of what comes before it; and this is why it becomes one with air when it evaporates. *This is the way of God, as We began the first creation, so shall We return it.*³⁵⁶

Wind is under the power of ether because it proceeds from it, and that may be so by means of the Spirit (*al-Rūḥ*). As for the Spirit, it cannot be fathomed by the mind, *They ask you about the Spirit. Say, the Spirit proceeds from the commands of my Lord, and you have not been given knowledge (there of) save but a little.*³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.36 Q. 30:48.

³⁵⁶ Q. 21:104.

³⁵⁷ Q. 17:85.

As we have also seen in this article of Shaykh al-'Alāwī that his Sufi hermeneutical principles, however, indicate that his understanding and attitude do not differ from his understanding of other sciences. According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī the Qur'ān reveals what is required for every era; and in one of his hermeneutical principles he says:

'God did not specify that one generation contemplate the Qur'an and another not. For if such was the case that only some had been singled out for this, it would mean that the meaning of the Qur'ān had been exhausted, when this is clearly not the case given for the Prophet said that, *'The wonders (marvels) of the Qur'ān will never cease'*. And one of its wonders is that the one who contemplates it sees wonders in it every day that he had not seen before that.'³⁵⁸

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's esoteric tafsīr of Sūrah al-Aṣr

Another example of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's exclusive hermeneutic approach to the Qur'ān can be seen in his esoteric *tafsīr* of Sūrah al-Aṣr (Chapter on 'Time'), a hermeneutic that accommodates the deeper understanding of the divine message.

In his book, *'kitāb -miftāḥ 'ulūm as-sirr'* the Shaykh al-'Alāwī expounds on interpreting the chapter of al-'Aṣr and unveils its hidden secrets and the mystery of 'time' itself, and distinguishes between the different statuses of humans on the scale of spirituality and faith along with the position of the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) whose traits are well explained in the Qur'ān.

The Almighty says,

By the token of Time verily man is in woeful loss.

The Shaykh explains this verse and speaks of man's imperceptions of his ruinous loss when compared to the state he was in before his spirit entered his body; were he able simply to imagine it, the emphatic language used in this verse would not have been required. He says, 'as for the word 'aṣr', the exegetes have explained it in many ways, the most fitting of which is that it

³⁵⁸ Al-'Alāwī, *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*, p. 18

means 'time', as was the opinion of Ibn Abbas. The reason God swears by it is because it is the most strange of all created beings. One aspect of its strangeness is illustrated in the words of the Prophet as narrated by Tabarani on the authority of Abū Umāma with a sound chain, 'Do not revile (curse) Time, for time is God'.

Despite the above tradition, we usually define time as being determined by the motions of the heavenly bodies; this would mean that it is borne of a contingent being, and all that is borne out of a contingent being is itself a priori contingent. Yet if we give a moment's reflection to the aforementioned tradition, it will force us to discard this definition for an altogether different understanding of time than that which we have previously imagined, and it will cast us out into an endless ocean, and our original cogitations will '*Come away dazzled and defeated*' [Q. 67: 4]. Or else we will see that 'Time' here does not mean the time we know, composed of material motions of day and night. In any case, the time known to us is not bereft of its share of its rays of this ever-flowing Presence without beginning or end; that is, whose beginninglessness and endlessness are each without end. With respect to this beginningless and endless flow, does the thing we know as 'time' simply disappear in that substance of Pure Being, or does it have a certain independence? If we can consider the latter, then the mind would find it impossible to conceive of anything like it among created things, in that its past and its future do not exist, and its present is a part of it which cannot be divided; it is in fact the fate (*qadar*) that separates what is past and what is future. Thus it is almost too subtle for the imagination to touch upon. This pertains to the position of man within it; and from this point of view, man can barely even acknowledge its existence.

He also makes reference to the two states of man as the first man and the second man comparing man's physical life with his spiritual life and the life man was in before the spirit entered the body. This was when the spirit roamed freely among the Supreme Assembly and swam in the ocean of lights, as far as could be from the taint of all that is other than God.

The soul then was in a position of great nobility and privilege, receiving its call directly from God without any intermediary, and giving an unambiguous reply alluded to in the Qur'ānic verse, *Remember when your Lord took the seeds of the sons of Adam from their loins and made them bear witness against themselves, and said: 'Am I not your Lord? They said, 'Yes we testify. [Q.7: 172].* It retained a share of this nobility even after its Fall and its attachment to the first human body; for He crowned it with the crown of knowledge and adorned it with the jewels of understanding, teaching that which it had not known before.

Sufficient proof of this is that He made the angels prostrate before it, and before every human soul in the seeds of the loins of Adam. Yet when it [the soul] was enclosed in the body, it gained an outer form which it had not had before; this made man imagine that he was but another kind of animal, acting according to the nature of his species.

How vast, then, is the gulf between the two levels, and the distance between the two states----that of the first man and that of the second man, because of the blinding light between the two levels. The difference is so great that they are almost two different beings, and it would not be farfetched for us to say that the first man is not the second man. The word 'man', then has two meanings: one is this human being we consider a kind of animal, who can be seen and touched in the flesh, distinguished only by his species; the other has attributes and distinctions which make him virtually the opposite of the first. The first is called the tangible (*maḥsūs*) man', the second the transported (*manqūl*) man'. Or we might say that the first is called the 'animal (*ḥayawānī*) man', the second the 'Godly (*rabbānī*) man'; and one should strive not to be animal but to be godly. *Nay, be you godly (men)! [Q. 3:79].*

The Godly man is the one who voyages from his outer being to his inner being, and shakes off the burden of his own ego (*nafs*), that he may behold his own nobility and glory, from which he has until then been veiled, which is returning his human soul to its primordial state as it was in the realm of perfection, until he will say, *I have been given a kingdom greater than was given to any being!* That is eternal felicity; and it was to this that Imām 'Alī

alluded when he said, 'You were created for eternity'. This is the man of mysterious nature, known for his elevated status, he is the man *created in the most perfect moral virtue* (Q. 95.4) and the other is the man *reduced to the lowest of the low* (Q. 95.5). The former is the object of God's words, *We created you* (Q.7.2), and the latter is the object of His words ... *and then We formed you* (Q. 7. 2). so the first man was created, but not formed. It is to this that the *ḥadīth* refers to, which says 'God created Adam in His form', he did not say 'God formed Adam in His form', because the creation came before the form, and that which was created in His form had no form of its own. Thus there is no form at all, neither for the first man nor for that which was created in the first man's form. You can see then, that man has lost as much knowledge about himself as he has about his Lord, because he has forgotten what he used to be. *They forgot God, so He made them forget themselves.* (Q.59. 19)

In sum, the woeful loss of man is that he thinks that it is his body that makes him human. But he does have the ability to come to realize the glory he has lost, but only if he can see that it is his spirit that makes him human. The reason the verse says that he is in this loss, that is, that this loss contains him, is to imply that this loss surrounds him and all those like him, save only for those whom the following verse exempts.

Except those who believe and do good deeds, and exhort one another unto truth, and exhort one another unto patience. (Q. 103.3)

How few are they, those who are blessed with these great and noble qualities that make them obtain their happiness untarnished by the least grief, neither in the short nor the long term; for one might perhaps believe but not do good deeds; and one might do good deeds but not exhort unto truth; and one might exhort unto truth but not unto patience. Ultimate salvation cannot be attained or even imagined in its fullest sense, without the combination of these four qualities, which are faith (*īmān*), good deeds (*al-a'māl al-ṣāliḥa*),

the enjoining of truth (*al-twāṣī bi'l-ḥaqq*) and the enjoining of patience (*al-tawāṣī bi'l-ṣabr*) for the sake of truth.

If a person should miss out on the share of his faith in the life of this world (God forbid), he will suffer manifest loss (Q. 4:119), which will make him say, when he sees the joy of the saved and the grief of the damned, O would that I were but dust! (Q. 78:40). And if he does attain to his share of faith in this life, so that he is separated from the world of unbelief in God and His Messenger, he thereby takes a large step in the direction of his salvation and eternal bliss, but then, his feet are only made firm by good deeds. Good deeds are a class containing every praiseworthy act, and excluding every blameworthy act. This takes him another step closer to salvation and bliss; but his feet will still not yet be totally firm unless he moves unto exhortation unto the truth. The person who does not exhort unto truth will likely not remain on the way of the truth, since the foremost of all good deeds is to enjoin what is right and condemn what is wrong. If one neither enjoins what is right nor condemns what is wrong, then there is a risk that one day he will neither adhere to what is right nor abstain from what is wrong.

Since these qualities (speaking the truth, adhering to the truth and exhorting unto the truth) usually require one to endure things he dislikes, so God connects them to exhortation unto patience. If one does not fortify himself with patience, he is unlikely to remain firm in the call to God. Luqmān's advice to his son reminds us of this when he says, *O my dear son! Enjoin the doing of what is right, and condemn what is wrong, and bear with patience whatever may befall you. Indeed, this is something to set ones heart upon!* (Q. 31:17).

Ultimately, part of exhorting unto the truth is enjoining what is right and condemning what is wrong, as we have mentioned, and part of exhorting unto patience is bearing harm as well as preventing harm. These noble qualities are found in the prophets naturally and in all other guides by a certain amount of effort although this effort is eased by the prophetic inheritance, 'The sages are the heirs of the prophets.'

This is what the prophets have left behind in their inheritance, and it is what the sages have inherited from them. Those who have knowledge should reflect on their share of this bequest, and on their sincerity and their level of devotion to God, His Messenger and the believers. If they find something in their character to indicate that they indeed have a share of this bequest, then let them hold onto it. If not, this means that their connection has been severed, and they must look for someone to re-establish it for them before they breathe their last breath and leave this world in such a state, and thus bitterly regret the circumstances of their deaths. For after this life there is only Paradise or Hell; may God save us and all who submit to Him from a bad ending.

Man's foremost duty then, is to strive for his own salvation by doing all he can to meet God with a clear conscience, and the believer's conscience can only be completely clear if he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. This above all is what gives the spiritual guide the incentive to give others sincere guidance towards God. He wishes for salvation and eternal triumph for himself, how then can he be at ease, and how can his heart be tranquil, when he sees his fellow man, and the people of his faith, in the state that they are in, when he loves for them what he loves for himself? In this, he follows the noble *ḥadīth* which states that 'the believer is not truly a believer until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself'.

All in all, the struggle of this sort of person is perpetual, and it is something upon which perfect faith is contingent, as we have mentioned above.³⁵⁹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's distinctive esoteric interpretation on the last two verses of Sūrah al-Zalzala

The Shaykh al-'Alāwī was asked about the verses:

³⁵⁹ Al-'Alāwī, *Kitāb -Miftāḥ 'Ulūm al- Sirr fī Tafṣīr Sūrah al- 'Aṣr*, Mostaghanem, n.d. p. 3-17

And whoever does good equal to the weight of an atom shall see it. And whoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom shall see it. [Q. 99:7-8]

The Shaykh answered:

“In most cases the pronouns (in the Qur’ān) in essence go back to God, especially the pronouns, *I, You and He* because in reality they are Names of God by which He has called Himself in His knowledge of pre-eternity (*fil sābiq*). And regarding this the people with deeper (special) understanding, wherever they find a pronoun they would see it in reality as having an attachment to the Named (*al-musammā*), referring it back to Him with an interpretation comprehended only by those who have (divine) knowledge, in which case the pronoun cited in the above verse *yarahū* (he will see it) goes back to God, and the address here is then to those whose faces will be directed and turned (towards Him)³⁶⁰

.As if God is saying, “Whoever amongst you does the smallest of good deeds with sincerity even though it be the weight of an atom shall see Him” and this is what the overflowing divine mercy and absolute generosity contains. This is also alluded to in the *ḥadith al-qudsī* (holy prophetic tradition): (*When My servant approaches Me by a hand span I will draw closer to him by an arm’s length*)

Then the Shaykh was asked, ‘so in that case, what about the pronoun in the other half of the verse; does that pronoun also refer to God, in which He says, *And whoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom shall see It.*, would the action of a bad deed become a means of anyone seeing God? The Shaykh replied:

“The reference of this pronoun returning to God is much more easier (to understand) than the one before it because the possessor of this station is mentioned by God as a doer of good deeds and that is derived from the verse itself, (And whoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom shall see it.)

As if He is saying, “As for the one who has no evil (deeds) except for what might be the weight of an atom, this does not hinder (hold him back) from his

³⁶⁰ in Arabic the 3rd person pronoun *hū/huwa* is used for both animate and inanimate nouns

travelling towards God. So as it stands; the first one is seen as having no deeds but then sets off turning away from everything (bad) and making his return to Him a sincere one so his one (first) atom of good deeds becomes for him a *mi'rāj* (spiritual ascension) towards the Presence of God. And the second one did not commit any wrong act except for one that was the weight of an atom, so God mentions that it really has no impediment (hindrance) in his quest for God.³⁶¹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's exegesis on the symbolic reality of the three groups (*azwājan thalātha*) mentioned in Sūrah Wāqī'a

'The three main divisions of the spiritual hierarchy mentioned in the Qur'ān are, *al-muqarrabūn* (the foremost) who are the Gnostics. *aṣḥāb al-yamīn* (The people of the right) – those who observe a certain moderation in their worship, and they are the pious scholars and the ascetics, and then there is *aṣḥāb al-shimāl* (the people of the left), they are the deniers, who are the lowest in rank-- the infidels who follow the path of Satan.

Those nearest to personifying the Qur'ān at the summit of the hierarchy are the Gnostics. In his exegesis on verse four of Sūrah al-Najm Shaykh al-'Alāwī alludes to a similar concept that speaks of the 'Universal Tree' which he assimilates with the Lote-Tree (*sidrat al-muntahā*) which symbolizes the very essence of the vision of God.³⁶² He speaks of this Universal Tree composed of three elements: *fruits*, *leaves* and *thorns* just as all beings are also divided into three categories, and reference here is made to Sūrah al-Wāqī'a in which God mentions the three categories of beings, (*al-muqarrabūn*, *aṣḥāb al-yamīn* and, *aṣḥāb al-shimal*)³⁶³.

³⁶¹ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-manāhil* p111

³⁶² "Indeed, he saw Him at another descent, by the Lote-tree of the uttermost end". (Q. 53:13-14)

³⁶³ This is in reference to the verse in *Sūrah al-Wāqī'a* that speaks of the three classes of people, "the foremost, the people of the right and the people of the left." See Martin Lings, *A Return To The Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), p. 64.

And God strikes parables unto man that perhaps they may contemplate.
(Q.14:25)

The first group represents Adam and they are the Gnostics, who have been endowed with great intelligence and have arrived to the ultimate goal, because they have (like Adam) attained to the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of the 'divine' Names (*asmā'*) and the realities (*ḥaqāiq*), of the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and its subtleties (*laṭāif*), knowing the essence (*dhāt*) and what it contains. They are surely entitled to be the representatives of God (on this earth) and the proof over all mankind. The second group is those who represent the angels, and they are the dedicated worshippers and scholars (*al-'ulamā al-'āmilūn*) and pious ascetics (*zuhād*). Yet they are unable to perceive what lies beyond the veil of spiritual truths (*al-ḥaqāiq*). And this, according to Shaykh al-'Alawī is perhaps why we can find them at times criticizing the Gnostics, just like the angels who were critical about Adam at the time when they asked God about His *placing in it (the earth) those who will cause mischief and bloodshed?* (Q.2:30). The question which the angels asked may have seemingly appeared on the outside as a shortcoming on their part in their conduct towards God's statement for which God did not reprimand them. But this happened only before God would reveal to the angels of the privileges and innermost secrets hidden within the human qualities of Adam. Similarly, after the pious scholars' acquaintance with the knowledge of the Gnostics they would become most remote from refuting the truth. God has also tested them with prostration (*sujūd*) towards the Gnostics, just as He tested the angels with *sujūd* towards Adam. This is why one will not find a scholar who is characterized with true piety except that he will show 'abatement' in his *dīn* towards the Gnostics, recognizing their knowledge. You will find them in the presence of the Gnostics in the same way that the angels were in the presence of Adam. This group is the closest to sainthood (*wilāya*).

The third group is those who are most remote from God; they are those who have followed the Way of Satan. God says, *And follow not the path of Satan*, (Q.

6:142) for this path has not acknowledged the Truth, seeing existence as though it was empty.³⁶⁴

In his explanation and extrapolation on the story of Adam in the Qur'ān, Shaykh al-'Alāwī reveals the postulated sequence of God's consultation (*mashūra*) with the angels and Satan's reaction to God's command to him. This development of events is indirectly played out and reflected on the greater universal stage as a typical manifestation of what was to come in the scheme of human behavior.

It is clear from the *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān that Iblīs (Satan) was not present at God's meeting (*mashūra*) with the angels in the beginning when God spoke to them saying, *And remember the time when your Lord said to the angels verily I am placing upon this earth a vicegerent (khalīfa)*. (Q. 2: 30). Iblīs did not hear Adam reveal any of the Names (*asmā*), he only came at the time when God commanded the angels with *sujūd* and so he refused to make *sujūd* to Adam and in the words of the Qur'ān *They all prostrated (to Adam) except Iblīs, he refused* (Q. 2: 34) and the form of exclusion (*istithnā*) in the verse is that the excluded (*mustathnā*) is not of the same kind (*istithnā munqati'*) because Iblīs was of the Jinn, and the refusal came from him for reasons he believed were justifiable irrespective and regardless of what preceded.

The Shaykh al-'Alāwī interestingly through his hermeneutics, extrapolates some of the reasons as to why Iblīs refused to make *sujūd* to Adam:

First: Iblīs was not present at God's meeting and consultation (*mashūra*) with the angels.

Second: Iblīs did not hear directly from Adam at the time when he disclosed the knowledge of the Divine Names (*al-asmā*) to the angels which, if Iblīs had been present, as in the case of the angels, it would make abasement (*sujūd*) towards Adam incumbent (as though, seemingly an excuse for Iblīs's refusal in showing abasement towards Adam).

³⁶⁴ Al-Baḥr al-Masjūr, p. 92

Third: The fact that Iblīs was a devout worshipper and that Adam did not precede him with any deeds, could not make him see Adam as having any claim to preference or superiority over him.

Fourth: Iblīs presumed that he was better than Adam from the aspect of his nature (creation), that is, the superiority of fire over clay.

Fifth: The address was to the angels and Iblīs was of the Jinn.

Sixth: Iblīs was veiled from witnessing the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) in Adam.³⁶⁵

Seventh: Iblīs's reliance was on God's prohibition that His servants should not make *sujūd* to other than Him.

Eighth: He believed that his status (position) with God would not fall away by merely refusing to make *sujūd* to a human being who's just another creation of God.

Nineth: He might have wanted to enquire like the angels did when God announced to them that He was going to create Adam, *They said, will You place therein those who will cause mischief and shed blood?*³⁶⁶

Tenth: He was propelled and driven by his arrogance (*kibr*).

Eleventh: Everything (ultimately) had to be in compliance with the divine decree (*qadar*), the reason why all the angels made *sujūd* except Iblīs who (*refused and was arrogant*) and in denial of God's knowledge, and the reason why he refused to make *sujūd* was because he asserted his superiority over Adam.³⁶⁷ But it must be made known that the denial (*kufr*) of Iblīs was not towards God and His attributes (*ṣifāt*), no, Iblīs is farthest away from denying the Oneness (*waḥdāniyya*) of God because of his former obedience to God; his denial (*kufr*) was only out of sheer stubbornness.

³⁶⁵ This is reminiscent of what Ibn 'Ajība mentions in his *tafsīr*, and what he finds reprehensible for instance, is the conceit that is at the origin of some people's incredulous denial of sainthood. He argues that the existence of people who deem improbable the existence of sainthood is akin to the incredulousness of Satan at Adam's superiority as a being made from clay, or the incredulousness of the unbelievers at the possibility of Prophecy emanating from humankind.

³⁶⁶ It would seem that this was not intended in the divine decree. In the case of Iblīs it was, above all an act of God's Will.

³⁶⁷ Iblīs is described in the Qur'ān as arrogant, and it was this arrogance that veiled him from seeing God's light manifested in the being of Adam.

Finally, the Shaykh sums up the dualistic nature and character of the *khalīfa* as not only a physical but also a spiritual being with potential Godly attributes which Iblīs had failed to recognize in Adam³⁶⁸, and then compares it to the spiritual *maqām* of the Gnostic by demonstrating how the Gnostic perceives the role of the *khalīfa* and how the *khalīfa* becomes the prototype for the Gnostic:

“The King’s representative (*khalīfa*) is an expression of the one entrusted (*mutawalli*) to carry out all of his affairs. This means that the *khalīfa* rules in the place of the one who appointed him as successor. So there has to reflect within him some of the qualities and traits of the king from the aspect of the gift (*al-aṭa*) and the deprivation (*al-man*’), benefit (*an-manfa’a*) and harm (*al-mafsada*), amongst other qualities attributed to the king, which distinguishes him from the slaves (*mamlūk*). This means that he will be a king, yet also a slave (*mamlūk*) at the same time from another perspective. And on this basis did God appear in Adam with all His (divine) names (*asmā*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*).³⁶⁹ And were it not for this, the angels would never have made *sujūd* to Adam.³⁷⁰ So whoever has recognized the face of the King in the *khalīfa* has indeed fulfilled his right. And the one who has not recognized Him will earn His wrath. And this is the only distinction between the angels (*malāika*) and the Satans (*shayātīn*); so noticing the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) in the creation (*al-khalq*) is the state of the angels, and the inability to notice Him is the state of the *shayātīn*.’

In one of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s ḥikams, he explains in a similar vein the *maqām* of the Prophet Muḥammad, saying that the name Jibrīl comes from *Jabarūt* and he is the *bāṭin* and Muḥammad is the *ẓāhir* of the *Jabarūt* even though they are one as there is only One.”

The above example is again to demonstrate that without the esoteric dimension of exegesis the complete meaning of the Qur’ān in depth and

³⁶⁸ “And be you godly” (*wa lāki kūnū rabbāniyyīn*) [Q.3:79]

³⁶⁹ “God created Adam in His image.” (Ḥadīth)

³⁷⁰ Shaykh al-‘Alāwī alludes to this state in his dīwān when he says, “I am neither man nor jinn, I am the secret of ar-Raḥmām” (*ana lastu insān wa lā minal jinn, ana srru Raḥmān*) Dīwān, p. 38

height would be incomplete. It is also an example of the Shaykh's distinct *zāhir-bāṭin* exegetical approach that is central in his commentary of Qur'ānic exegesis. And it is apparent that Shaykh al-'Alāwī was more concerned with the hermeneutical perspective of *tafsīr* and adding new meaning to the text than with defending a specific theological dogma. His methodology is clear and has created intellectual currents relevant for modern exegetical thought.

Kitāb A'dhab al-Manāhil

Another example of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's unique hermeneutic perspective of interpretation is regarding the story of Prophet Yusuf and his brothers (*asbāt*) in the Qur'ān.

The Shaykh's distinct application of *ijtihād* and extracting textual proof regarding the debate on the 'prophet-hood' of Yusuf's brothers, and the symbolic interpretation of the *nafs* personified in various forms within the Sūrah is worth mentioning.

The Shaykh was also asked if Yusuf's brothers were Prophets, and if so then what was the meaning of their actions towards Yusuf and his father? And what is the symbolic and divine purpose of this narrative in the Qur'an?

'The Shaykh answered: 'With regards to their prophet-hood, this is the nearest to what the Qur'an holds and expresses, since God included all of them (*asbāt*) when He spoke of revelation in Surah Nisā.

Verily We have revealed to you (O Muhammad) just as we have revealed to Nūh and all the prophets after him as We revealed to Abraham and Ismail and Ishāq and Ya'qūb and their descendants. And that which focuses attention on their rank are the words of Saydna Yusuf, Verily I saw eleven stars..... and the brothers' assimilation to the stars in the realm of dreams is also proof of their prophet-hood, because a star is that which gives guidance, as God says in Surah An'ām—And it is He Who has set up for you the stars so that you might be guided by them.

As for their actions towards Yusuf, this could stand for interpretation. If we carefully study what had caused them to do these actions, we find nothing

except their extreme love and desire for their father's attention, and as the saying goes – 'every lesson relates to the intention'.

And the excuse is evident; they wanted to banish Yusuf so that their father could be given to them alone, as if they wanted to buy time in order to be with the Messenger of God, and the proof is when they said, *Slay Yusuf or cast him out to some (unknown) land so that the favor of your father may be given to you alone.* [Q.12:9] *And there will be enough time for you to be righteous.* [Q.12:9]

And as for the killing; that was just an idea (suggestion), it was never translated into action, since the actual intention was only to banish him which is evident in the verse, *He will be picked up by some caravan of travelers, if you must do something.* [Q.12:10]

The Sufi hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī on the symbolic reality of the narrative in this chapter of Yusuf is characteristic of the Gnostic's deep spiritual relation with the Qur'an.

The Shaykh says: 'what can be derived from this story is that it is the way to follow for the heart which God has chosen for Himself and its relationship with the blameworthy Soul (*nafs al-Ammārah*).

Just like what happened to Yusuf and the wife of the Aziz; because the nafs tries to win over the heart by every possible means in order to make use of it for its own objectives because of the naf's piercing love for the heart. And in this way it (nafs) makes the heart yield towards it until she (nafs) has '*locked all the doors*'. Then the nafs says to the heart, "*Come thou unto me!*" (*hay talak!*), the heart that is sincerely for God answers, '*May God preserve and protect me, behold! Goodly has my master made me stay in this house.*' [Q. 12:23], since He created me for Him and, *Verily the wrong doers will never succeed.* [Q. 12:23]. And they both rushed to the door; he (the heart) in order to free himself and she (the nafs) in order to obtain the heart.

And through his mere seeking of refuge he (the heart) finds her master at the door, and she (the nafs) according to her habit of betrayal and deception towards the heart (Yusuf) having torn his garment from behind, says, *What is the punishment for the one who has evil desires towards your family?* [Q.12:23],

and the heart answers, *It was she who sought to make me yield myself unto her. [Q.12:26].*

Then one of those present, a member of her own household came forward to testify in the judgment, and that was the 'intellect' saying, *If his shirt was torn from the front* (which is the *Imān*) which is the direction and cause of belief in the unseen, then she is telling the truth and that would be a proof of his (the heart's) corruption and incompetence of carrying the secrets. But if his shirt was torn from behind, which is an expression of some of the heart's shortcomings with regards to the obligatories, and that would come from the faithlessness and disloyalty of the *nafs* in her shortcomings in observing the obligations of *Imān*. [Q. 12:27].

"And when he (the husband) saw that his shirt was torn from behind, the judge said, *Verily, this is an instance of your scheming, and indeed your scheming is great. [Q.12:28].*

What can be gathered from the placing of the singular form of *nafs* into the plural is that all the souls (*nufūs*) receive one and the same accusation, even if it were to declare openly as God says, *And even if it (nafs) were to offer every ransom, it shall not be accepted.* And when the heart discovers the predicament and dilemma of the dictating soul (*nafs al-Ammārah*) the *nafs* then transforms and changes into the blameworthy soul (*nafs al-Lawwāmah*) and that is the *nafs* that returns the blame to itself when the visitor of regret comes to knock at its door and God makes reference to this when he says, *And seek forgiveness for your sin, verily you have been greatly at fault" [Q12:29].*

As for the verse in which God says, *And the women of the town spoke (to one another) saying, the wife of the Aziz is trying to induce her slave-boy to yield himself unto her, her love for him has pierced her heart. [Q.12:30].*

The reference here to the women are the rest of the souls (*nufūs*); like the blameworthy soul (*al-Lawwāmah*), the inspired soul (*al-Mulhamah*), the satisfying soul (*ar-Rādiyyah*), the satisfied soul (*al-Mardiyyah*), the tranquil soul (*al-Mutma'innah*) and the perfect soul (*al-Kāmilah*). There is not a single one amongst these souls (*nufūs*) except that they want to obtain their goal

from the heart, because of the unceasing love they have for the heart when it reveals to them (*nufūs*) its true Countenance and all of the *nufūs* would exclaim, *Glory be to God! This is no mortal; this is nothing but a noble angel.* [Q. 12:31].

And this is how God attaches some of the hearts to Himself, making them the custodians and trustees of the earth's treasures. And perhaps for fear of some exaggeration we could almost have said the treasures of the heavens.³⁷¹

An Example of the influence of Shaykh al-'Alawī's Exegesis by his pupil Sidi 'Alawī Bendi Murād,³⁷²

In the following example I wish to illustrate the shift from the exoteric interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse *Enter your houses through the doors*³⁷³ taking the reader beyond the *zāhir* understanding of the text and showing how the gnostic arrives to the mystical meaning and *bāṭin* knowledge³⁷⁴ of the Qur'ān.

The Prophet said: "verily there is a hidden knowledge known only by those who know God, and if they were to make it manifest, they would be renounced by those heedless (ignorant) of God."³⁷⁵

And in another ḥadīth, "Inward knowledge is one of God's secrets; He casts it into the hearts of those servants whom He wishes." And he said further: "Knowledge is of two kinds; knowledge in the heart, for that is true beneficial

³⁷¹ A'dhab al-Manāhil, pp. 91-96

³⁷² Sidi Alawī Bendi Murād (1917-2005) was also the spiritual successor of Shaykh 'Adda bin Tunis, who in turn was the spiritual successor of Shaykh al-'Alawī. Sidi Alawī received gnosis (*ma'rifa*) from Shaykh Aḥmad al-'Alawī at a young age and his education (*tarbiya*) he took from Shaykh 'Adda Bin Tunis. Sidi Alawī's father, Sidi Salaḥ Murād was one of the very close disciples (*murīd*) of Shaykh al-'Alawī, and was a gnostic and also a successful businessman.

³⁷³ Q. 2:189

³⁷⁴ This notion of inner knowledge (*'ilm al-bāṭin*) is considered "a divine gift granted to individual Sufis after intense ascetic effort and spiritual discipline [on their part]. Possessed by [the] elite of mystics who were granted the inner sight of and insight (*baṣīrah*) into the realities, hidden within their souls, *'ilm al-bāṭin* was acquired in two principal ways: intuition and extra sensory perception." Ernst also indicates that all of these definitions "accomplish a powerful rhetorical transaction; the person who listens to or reads these definitions is forced to imagine the spiritual or ethical quality that is invoked by the definition, even when it is paradoxical." See Ernst (1997: 23-24)..

³⁷⁵ Narrated from Abu Huraira in *al-Targhīb wa al-Tarhīb*, ḥadīth no.66

knowledge, and knowledge of the tongue and that (knowledge) is God's proof against the son of Adam."

Shaykh al-'Alāwī in one of his hermeneutical principles says:

Once we reflect on how the Qur'ān is a book from God addressed directly to us, we cannot consider any of God's warnings or promises therein to refer to other people. Rather, if anyone of them is applicable to someone, this means it is indeed addressed to him personally. The same applies to all the commandments, prohibitions, encouragements and discouragements. This is one way in which the Book is addressed to us. As for the historical circumstances of the revelation of certain verses, which seem to suggest that they were intended for specific people, this only means that the people in question served as the means by which the description or ruling was issued for a particular person type. We should reflect on the broader meaning of God's words, not the narrow circumstances of their revelation.³⁷⁶

Böwering writes:

One of the key features of Qur'ānic commentary is the unveiling (*kashf*) to the Sufi commentator of a relationship between the Qur'ānic verse and the Sufi's concepts. It also represents the metaphysical dimension of the Sufi commentator's consciousness and existence. The Sufi interpreters have approached Qur'ānic exegesis through allegorical and metaphorical interpretation because they believe that its text maybe understood as including the multi-layered depth of divine meaning hidden underneath the literal meaning. They also assert that *bāṭin*, the inexhaustible level of meaning contained in the divine word of the Qur'ān, has its counterpart in the spiritual knowledge the Sufis acquired through introspection into the inner emotions stirring their souls. In this context, developing the mystical vision of the Qur'ān was directly linked with the Sufi idea of *bāṭin* knowledge and allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the mystical language of the Qur'ān.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Al-'Alāwī, *al-baḥr al-masjūr*, p. 27

“The Sufis' distinctive subjective methods of interpreting Qur'ān, find compatibility with the Hermeneutic science of modern time in some distinct ways. Discovering the liberalizing instruments of language was also a common characteristic of great masters of the classical era, like al-Ḥallāj and al-Tirmidhi, etc., and prominent Western figures of our time, Ricoeur³⁷⁸ and Husserl.”³⁷⁹

God says in *Sūrah al-A'rāf*,

It is He who sends down the winds (al-riyāḥ) as glad tidings from His mercy, until when they have carried the heavy-laden clouds, We drive them to a land that is dead, and We make rain to descend thereon, and

³⁷⁷ Böwering, Gerhard, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'ānic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl at-Tustarī*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980)

³⁷⁸ Husserl's approach is most fitting for understanding mystical interpretations, because a Gnostic is trying to explain himself through the text. By reading a text, a Gnostic achieves an understanding that is the product of revelation and contemplation; a realm of understanding which is not accessible through pure reason. In such a case, a Gnostic is not only detached from his time and location, but he also goes beyond the understanding through polysemy and metaphors. Here, there is a complete floatation of meanings. Here, his interpretation is beyond the common ration of language, and that is why mystical interpretations and texts need explanation and interpretation themselves. Ibn Ata' al-Adami (309/921), a close friend of Hallaj, compares this kind of understanding to rain, which streams in all lands (i.e., all hearts) and every part of the soil is fertilized according to its capacity and spiritual understanding. The hermeneutic theory presented by Ricoeur bears a lot of similarities to Jurjani's exegetical ideas. (See Gary Brent Madison, *The Hermeneutics of post modernity studies in phenomenology and existential philosophy*, (Indiana: University Press, 1990), p.10-16.

According to Ricoeur, the most fundamental provision for creativity in sentences is the utilization of polysemic character of the words. Through the semiology of a sign, the limitations of the word could be determined. The semiology of a sign determines the dimension of the word and its domain. In fact, it determines the semantic feature of the word in the language system. But he believes, as Jurjani does, that a word cannot be decoded unless it is put in the syntactic combination of a sentence, and in general, in the whole context. A new meaning in context is the product of the interaction of semantic realms. In other words, it is as if a semantic realm in a whole text substitutes another realm. In the Moses example, his stick in the realm of traditional interpretation, with its semi-historical context, is recounting of the fact that Moses is a shepherd and also refers to his incident with sorcerers. In the second realm, Moses is the code for any saint who gradually reduces his materialistic dependencies on his spiritual path. Therefore, a set of signs replaces another in order to create a new semantic context. In the first semantic context, Moses's stick is for the fear of sorcerers, and in the second context it is for Moses's fear itself. (Paul Ricoeur, John Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, (Cambridge:University Press, 1981), pp.145.

³⁷⁹ M Musharraf - A Study on the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān and the Theory of Hermeneutics, 2013 booksandjournals.brillonline.com.

*produce every kind of fruit therewith: Thus shall We raise up the dead, so that perhaps you may remember.*³⁸⁰

On the level of its outer (*ẓāhir*) meaning the verse is an example of how God is able to give life to the dead earth and from it provide sustenance, and also how He will resurrect the dead; and for the Muslim water is the great purifying agent which washes away even the most deeply rooted sins, and it has been chosen by God to be intimately associated with our prayers through the ablution which precedes them. God says, “*And We made from water every living thing.*”³⁸¹

The esoteric interpretation of this verse which we are about to see is purely allegorical and mystical transcending its *ẓāhir* meaning yet at the same time not discarding its exoteric meaning, but rather on the basis that ‘the Qur’ān has an inner and outer meaning, a boundary and a horizon’³⁸² and ‘the wonders of the Qur’ān will never cease.’

‘Gnostics have set a higher level of essentially inexplicable spiritual experience in the context of language and have widened the language domain extensively, transcending at times rational thought because this realm of knowledge is of a different dimension of perception and is a product of spiritual intuition (*ilhām*) and contemplation (*ma’rifā*).’³⁸³

The gnostic’s engagement with Qur’ān and his intellectual contemplation and meditation of its verses is as a result of his state of dhikr, and according to Shaykh al-‘Alāwi, it is this state of ‘presence’ with the name of ‘*Allah*’ that is the quintessence of the Qur’ānic formulas and it contains therefore the

³⁸⁰ Q. 7:57.

³⁸¹ Q. 21:30

³⁸² A hermeneutic hierarchy that corresponds to the four degrees of understanding the Qur’ān (cf. *Futuḥāt*, 1, 188,1V, 138)The tradition, the division is founded on: “*There is no verse that does not have an outer (ẓāhir) and an inner (bātin) meaning, an edge (ḥadd) and a higher (maṭla’) point of view*”, this Hadith is not usually admitted by the traditionists, even though it was reported by Ibn Hibbān (cf. O.Y. *Futuḥāt* 111, 187, paragraph 153). Ibn Arabi claims that it is authentic for the “people of unveiling”. Nevertheless, Tabari, citing his source as Ibn Mas’ūd, reports it in this form: “*The Qur’ān was revealed according to the seven modalities (ḥarf, pl. ḥurūf), each ḥarf has an outer and inner face (ẓāhir, bātin) each ḥarf has its edge and each edge a higher point of view*,” *Jāmi’ al-Bayān*, ed. Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1, 22-23.

³⁸³ M Musharraf - A Study on the Sufi interpretation of the Qur’ān and the Theory of Hermeneutics, 2013.

whole Book.³⁸⁴ And the entire Qur'ān is absorbed into the essential unity of the Divine Name and for Shaykh al-'Alāwī the name is the essence of the Book. The remembrance of God that is crystallized by the utterance of this Name is 'greater' (*wa la dhikrullahi akbar*).³⁸⁵

Sidi Alawī says in his explanation, "When God speaks of the wind in the singular form (*al-rīḥ*), it has a negative connotation. However, when He speaks of it in the plural sense (*riyāḥ*) as mentioned in the above verse, it signifies something good."³⁸⁶

In this verse the winds in its esoteric sense signify the spiritual force (*himma*) of the spiritual guide (*murshid*). The glad tidings (*bushrā*) "from His mercy" (*bayna yaday raḥmatihī*) is symbolic for the divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*).

The phrase "clouds are gathered" (*aqallat saḥāban thiqālan*) according to Sidi Alawī, signifies the turbulence (*ghafla*) that lies over the heart and keeps it in darkness. The water that rains upon the dead land is symbolic to the heart that is inert and dry and then given life by the *murshid* who represents the water. This water (*murshid*) washes the heart and gives it the inner vision (*baṣīra*) and makes it live in the world of the soul.

This was a typical illustration of the Sufi's idea of *bāṭin* knowledge with its allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the mystical language of the Qur'ān. We have also seen in this case how a word becomes a sign for something else based on its similarity with the use of polysemic characteristics of the word as well as metaphors and allegories to widen the semantic horizon.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ *Al-Dhikr* is also another name for the Qur'ān

³⁸⁵ Al-'Alāwī, *al-minaḥ al-quddusiyya*, p.30

³⁸⁶ This perception is agreed upon by all exegetes (exoteric and esoteric) as a linguistic rule that the singular form of 'rīḥ' denotes something negative whereas its plural 'riyāḥ' signifies something positive and good.

³⁸⁷ By proposing the theory of *al-Nizam* (coherence) and *al-Sitigah* (*Texture*), Jurjani shed light on the structure and meaning of the text of Qur'an and highlighted the importance of context in metaphorical and polysemic interpretation of Qur'an. His ideas brought incredible changes in Islamic hermeneutics because he stressed that we cannot assess a word separate from its context and text.

An esoteric approach to the verse, *Enter the houses through the doors* with an in depth explanation of its symbolic meaning by Sidi 'Alawī Bendi Murād in one of his discourses:³⁸⁸

The purpose of including this discourse would be to illustrate the hermeneutic theory of lexical, metaphorical and polysemic interpretation,³⁸⁹ widening the semantic horizon where a word becomes a sign for something else based on its similarity. This kind of interpretation is also called deduction (*istinbāt*).³⁹⁰

Henry Corbin's emphasis on spiritual hermeneutics reminds us that Scriptures are not to be apprehended as mere literary or philosophical texts for they demand from us a latent intuition of the realities to which they point. Reading should be neither a forced limitation nor a sterile reification of Scriptures.³⁹¹

At the beginning of his discourse Sidi Alawī (1991) says:

"In the Qur'ān there is a verse in which God orders His servants to approach every fundamental religious act in the correct manner.

³⁸⁸ Most of the transcription in this discourse is by Sidi Alawī Bendi Murād, recorded by myself in the zawiya of Lausanne, Switzerland.

³⁸⁹ Polysemy is when using words which are written the same but mean different

³⁹⁰ To give further clarification on the concept of *istinbāt* we look at some of the classical writers on Sufi exegesis. This example is related to the time when God spoke to Moses (Q 17:18) and asked him, "What do you have in your right hand?" "This is my stick which I rely on," answers Moses. What is interesting is the question posed by God. Does not he know what he has in his hand? Most interpreters have given accounts of this matter; majorly, they consider this as eloquence and have reasons for the manner of God's communication. For instance, al-Tabari (d. 310/923) stated that God wanted to remove Moses' fear. But Gnostics provide different account for these verses. They say that Moses' stick is a sign for relying on another. In mystical interpretations, Moses, himself, is the symbol of the perfect human being and God's saint. Mansur al-Ḥallāj (d.309/922) says that God wanted to notify Moses of the risk of relying on others and shows him that any support except upon God is spurious and dangerous in essence and therefore, manifested the stick as a snake upon him. Later, however, God gave him assurance, asking him not to fear it and pick it up. This account implies an indirect critic against scholars' reliance on their knowledge and the pride that they feel because of that. (Gerhard Bowering: 'The Qur'an Commentary of Al-Sulami', in B.Hallaq and Donald P. little. ed, *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles j.Wael.* (Leiden:Brill, 1991), pp 41- 56).

³⁹¹ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London and New York, 1993, P.11.

*Piety does not consist of your entering houses from the back, but truly pious is he who is conscious of God. Hence, enter houses through their doors, and remain conscious of God.*³⁹²

This counsel seems to be quite trivial and evident, but upon closer observation it implies a great deal; for if one is obliged to enter by the window it means either that one is a thief or an undesirable in that house, or he is negligent and lost his key. However, the scope of this simple image is far from being limited only to our brick houses; no, there are many doors and many houses in the domain of manifestations and of divine reality and this divine order apply rigorously to all:

*Enter the houses through the doors.*³⁹³

On numerous occasions we find verses in the Qur'ān, as well as in the prophetic traditions, which mention different doors and different houses which have well defined conditions regarding their entrance and one's passage through them: One does not move around as one wishes in the house of God. Each house has its doors, and each door has its guardian: paradise as well as hell, as well as each state.

Islam, *īmān* and *iḥsān* are houses and each having their door and guardian. In these houses, as any other, there are no visitors who before having sojourned in the reception room, did not have to pass through the hall; let alone a guest in the private quarters who did not first have to pass through the reception room. God indicates this very clearly to us when He reveals in the Qur'ān:

*O you who believe! Do not enter the houses of the Prophet unless permission is given to you for a meal not waiting for it to be prepared.*³⁹⁴

Although the order initially directs itself to the simple house in Madina, it is nevertheless also valid for the spiritual houses of the Prophet and for the elevated nourishments that are prepared there and offered to the believers. Above the door of each of the spiritual houses of the Prophet shines a motto,

³⁹² Q. 2:189.

³⁹³ Ibid

³⁹⁴ Q. 33:53.

and at the threshold of the house he himself greets us and tells us according to God's order: "Say, if you love God, then follow me, God will love you and forgive you your faults."³⁹⁵ Thus, the first condition, the one which constitutes the incontestable basis for all spiritual paths, is to follow the Prophet; to follow him initially in the *sharī'a*, then in the *Sunnah* and finally in the education (*tarbiya*). The door of the house of Islam, which is the hallway of the house of the Prophet, is the *sharī'a*. All attempts to penetrate this house by another opening are illegitimate and doomed to failure.

"Nothing hinders as much the realization of a goal as having neglected its foundation", says a Sufi proverb. After having been given the consent to reside in the hall, and if the period of residence has awakened in us the desire to progress further in the house, we are ushered to the door of the reception hall wherein the guests of confidence of the courteous hosts reside. Here one has come to the door of *iman*, whose passage also has its conditions, and on its threshold God admonishes us: *Enter this city, then eat from it abundantly from wherever you wish, and enter the gate in prostration (sujjadan), and ask for forgiveness. We will forgive you your wrong doings and give more to those who do good.*³⁹⁶

Here it is repentance (*istighfār*) that opens the door, and one enters the abode of qualities, of attributes (*ṣifāt*); it is the house of the education of the heart: of the emulation of the divine qualities. It is the house of the wayfarers (*sālikūn*). God says: *We will give more to those who do good (the muḥsinīn).*³⁹⁷ Here we are at the door of the private rooms of the Prophet, of the house of knowledge (*iḥsān*).

On the Prophet's household he tells us: "I am the house of knowledge and Ali is its door³⁹⁸." It means: If you wish to reside there, you must go through the *murshid*, the *murshid* is the indispensable door of knowledge, the obligatory access, the only legitimate one and the *murshid* at the household

³⁹⁵ Q. 3:31.

³⁹⁶ Q. 2:58.

³⁹⁷ Q. 2:58

³⁹⁸ Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn, Abū 'Abdillāh al-Ḥākim al-Naysabūrī. Edited by. Dr. Yusuf 'Abd al-Raḥmān Al-Mar'ashlī. Print: Dār Ma'rifah. Beirut (undated) Hadith No. 4637 Vol. 3 Pg.126

gives us in his turn his counsel, this very beautiful saying that Shaykh al-‘Alāwī has given us: “You have entered by the door of love, stay in the love!” If one respects the conditions of this door, one arrives then at the saint of saints; one enters then the intimate abode of the Beloved:

Is he then who knows that what has been revealed to you from your Lord is the truth like him who is blind? Only those who possessed of understanding keep this in mind, those who fulfill the promise of God and do not break the covenant. And those who join that which God has bidden to be joined and have awe of their Lord and fear the evil reckoning. And those who are constantly seeking the pleasure of their Lord, and keep up prayer and spend out of what We have given them secretly and openly and repel evil with good, as for those, they shall have the final abode, the gardens of perpetual abode which they will enter along with those who do good from their parents their spouses and their offspring; and the angels will enter in upon them from every gate. Peace be on you because you were constant, how excellent, is then the issue of the abode.³⁹⁹

But if one does not respect the legitimate access, if one wants to violate the divine abodes, then comes the chastisement. God admonishes us clearly: *The doors of heaven shall not be opened for them, to those who reject our communications and turn away from them haughtily, nor shall they enter the garden.... And thus do We reward the guilty.⁴⁰⁰*

He says again:

On the day when the hypocritical men and hypocritical women will say to those who believe: Wait for us, that we may have light from your light. It shall be said: Turn back and seek a light! Then separation would be brought about between them, with a wall having a door in it, as for the inside of it, there is mercy and as for the outside of it is suffering.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ Q. 12:19-23

⁴⁰⁰ Q. 7:39.

⁴⁰¹ Q. 57:13.

All those passages from the Qur’ān, and there are many more, make it evident that the houses are numerous in the divine kingdom, and each, as mentioned, has its door that respectively either admits or forbids its access, like so many *barzaḥs*. Access or denial to these houses is stipulated by well-defined conditions, which is precisely what the *ṭarīqa in Sufism* aims to teach us: spiritual education is the very thing, and on our obedience or ignorance of these principles rests our progress in the houses of knowledge. (‘Alawī, 1991)

It is the interplay of the *adāb* and the *riḍā* which springs from it. A saying of Shaykh al-Alawī that Sidi Alawī Bendi Murād has brought us sums it for us in its totality: “In the time of Shaykh al-‘Alawī a faqīr in a state of exaltation cried out one day, “The door of knowledge is open!”(Shaykh al-‘Alawī, quotation by Sidi ‘Alawī Bendi Murād 1991)

“Yes,” said Shaykh al-‘Alawī, “it is open, it is open to enter and it is open to leave.”⁴⁰²

It is open to enter on the condition that one accepts in its totality the education of the Prophet in Islam, *Īmān* and in *Iḥsān*.⁴⁰³ As He said: “If you love God then follow me!”⁴⁰⁴

This is my transcription of the above discourse (*mudhākara*) given by my Shaykh (Sidi Alawī, bendi Murād),⁴⁰⁵ recorded by myself in the *zāwiya* of Lausanne, Switzerland September 1991.

⁴⁰² According to Sidi ‘Alawī Bendi Murād, this ‘door’ is in reference to the ma’rifa and the one who has a lack of adab and an insincere intention will not receive any of its divine gifts and his stay will be an unpleasant one.

⁴⁰³ The condition made by Shaykh al-‘Alawī is a very harsh one demanding a strict discipline, because to obtain the knowledge of God is not easy. And in the Qur’ān is a verse in which God says, ‘He has a door of which the inside is mercy and the outside is suffering.’ Q. 57:13 This verse is also mentioned in the ḥikam of Shaykh al-‘Alawī where he says, “The truth of the matter is not to see God after the veil is lifted but instead, the real truth of the matter is to see Him within the veil and, ‘He has a door of which the inside is mercy and the outside is suffering.’ (*Ḥikam al-‘Alāwiyya*, ḥikam no.16, al-Matba’a al-‘Alāwiyya, Mostaghanem)

⁴⁰⁴ Q. 3:31.

An Overview of Sūrah al-Najm (the Chapter of the Star)

To begin with, Shaykh al-'Alāwī finds the entire Chapter encapsulated in the Star which also happens to be the name given to the Chapter. According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, in the opening verse of this Chapter, "By the star when it sets"⁴⁰⁶, the word *star* tells us that something of great importance is to be expounded; for a star rises and sets, ascends and descends, and therefore it is full of wondrous mysteries.⁴⁰⁷

If the one who hears these words reflects on the setting of the star and how, despite its enormous size and high position, it sets and then rises again, he will not be incredulous when he hears how the Prophet ascended to the heavens, and how Gabriel descended to earth. Instead, he will see this as perfectly possible and well within the power of the Almighty.⁴⁰⁸

Shaykh al-'Alāwī also tells us that the purpose of this Divine oath "by the star" is to symbolise a brilliant light which is the source of all lights and the foundation of vision and all insight; this refers to the Muḥammadan soul (*al-nafs al-Muḥammadiyya*) and the eternal Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-abadiyya*). The basis of the symbolism which exists between the star and the Muḥammadan Soul is that each is a source of guidance. In addition, they are united in the light which they emit. The meaning of this is that a star can be used as a guide⁴⁰⁹ because of how it sets and rises; were it not for this motion, it would not be a source of guidance, for its shifting and its motions are necessary for guidance. The same is true for the Muḥammadan Soul: it guides because of how it moves away from its highest position, turning away from the Divine Realities in order to fulfil those human functions which are necessary for it,⁴¹⁰ so that it may become a model and a guide for those who seek guidance.

⁴⁰⁶ Q. 53:1

⁴⁰⁷ In the words of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, "the approach to his *tafsīr* should be to the reader like a ladder leading up to its secrets." (*al-Baḥr al-Masjūr fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, p.13)

⁴⁰⁸ Al-'Alāwī, *kitāb A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p48

⁴⁰⁹ "And as signposts (for the travelers at night) do they find guidance from the star." (Q.16:16).

⁴¹⁰ Reference is made here to the Prophet's ascension (*mi'rāj*) into the heavens and his return to his earthly duty.

This work did not follow the usual pattern of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary with the four levels of interpretation⁴¹¹ as was the case in his *tafsīr* of *sūrah al-Baqara*, for example. This commentary was more gnostic-orientated as a symbol of the Sufi 'wayfarer' (*sā'ir*) on his way to God. Shaykh al-'Alāwī seemed to have disclosed many secrets and extracted many precious jewels from the *Sūrah* contained in the Pure Unity which he refers to as (*Tawhīd al-Maḥḍ*),⁴¹² the affirmation of belonging to God alone and to no other. The exegesis of the second half of *al-Najm* is centered on the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and annihilation (*fanā*), the path which the Gnostic follows to reach full experiential realisation of the divine Presence.

The first half of *al-Najm* is concerned with the events of the Prophet's Ascension (*mi'rāj*) into the heavens. Shaykh al-'Alāwī focuses on a particular aspect of the Ascension, that of the moment when the Prophet "*drew close by two bows, or even nearer*"⁴¹³ to God. According to many Sufi exegetes, virtually all gnostics (*ārifūn*), partake of the Beatific Vision. Shaykh al-'Alāwī takes the opportunity to speak at length about this vision, not only as it applied to the Prophet but as it may apply to all gnostics, and in doing so he puts forth some interpretations, which are uncommon to say the least, but dazzling in their insight. For one, he takes the verses, *And He drew clear in view when He was on the uppermost horizon; then He drew closer and came down*,⁴¹⁴ to refer to God, not the angel Gabriel, as the commentators usually

⁴¹¹ A more comprehensive approach of this outline can be found in Shaykh al-'Alāwī's four method interpretation of the Qur'anic verses in his *tafsīr* of *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, where he *first* mentions the *tafsīr*, that is, the general meaning of the Book of God, and then any ruling (*aḥkām*) that might be derived from it, which is a deeper level. Then he provides an allegory (*ishāra*) intended for the people of the Path of Sufism, and finally speaking on an even deeper level, by means of the tongue of the Spirit (*lisān al-ḥāl*). See al-'Alāwī's *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, p.13.

⁵ The Pure Unity here is in relation to the doctrine of Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which is never clearly mentioned in Shaykh al-'Alāwī's works, though it is clear from his writings that his understanding of the doctrine is identical to that of Ibn 'Arabi and the other proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. See Lings, *A Sufi Saint in the Twentieth Century*, chapter five.

⁴¹³ Q. 53:9.

⁴¹⁴ Q. 53:6-8; The general interpretation of these verses is: "Then he (Gabriel) approached and came closer. And he was at a distance of two bows' length or even nearer. So God revealed to His slave (Muḥammad) through (Gabriel) whatever He revealed." (Q.53:8-10) Abū l-Fidā Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa an-Nihāya*, 14 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a as-Salafiyyah, 1932). P.53.

opine, which provokes a deep and subtle metaphysical explanation of the way in which God 'comes down' to the gnostics even as they 'go up' to God.

The Night Journey (*mi'rāj*) is of great significance in Sufism as it was then that the Prophet had seen two visions of the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*); one with the outward (*zāhir*) eye and one with the inward (*bāṭin*) eye. The vision of the Lote Tree marks the highest degree of gnosis (*ma'rifa*). This vision (of the Lote Tree) was with the eye of the senses, whereas the previous one had been with the eye of the heart. In Arabic, the genitive case after the Lote Tree is possessive. What is meant is the Lote Tree of Him at whom all things reach their end. *Verily unto thy Lord is the Uttermost End.*⁴¹⁵ The Lote Tree here signifies the whole of manifestation which grows from its roots in Him.⁴¹⁶ Thus it is also named the Tree of the Universe (*shajarat al-kawn*).

This vision was more excellent than that which preceded it in virtue of its union of separate elements and its integration of widely scattered fragments. Thus, He said; *Even here is the Garden of ultimate Refuge.*⁴¹⁷ Meaning that the Lote Tree marks a finality of Gnosis, and that he who has attained this point is enshrouded by the Lights of the Divine Presence—nay, the whole world is enshrouded,⁴¹⁸ so that he sees naught without seeing therein God. This is explained in the words, *When there enshrouded the Lote Tree That which enshrouded,*⁴¹⁹ that is, when it was enfolded and covered by the all-enshrouding Lights of divinity, so that the whole hierarchy of created beings disappeared, the majestic and the lowly, in the manifestation of the Lights of the Names (*asmā'*) and qualities (*ṣifāt*). *God is the Light of the Heavens and the earth.*⁴²⁰

“It was through the appearance of these, which is referred to in the words “at another revelation” (*nazlatan ukhrā*) that Muḥammad attained unto more through the vision of the outward eye than through the vision of the heart alone. His outward eye was at its vision one with his inward eye, and

⁴¹⁵ Q. 53:42

⁴¹⁶ Lings, *ASufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.173

⁴¹⁷ Q.53:15.

⁴¹⁸ Al-'Alāwī, *A'dhab al-Manāhil*

⁴¹⁹ Q.53:16.

⁴²⁰ Q. 24:35.

therefore did God praise him with the words: “His eyes wavered not, nor did it transgress”⁴²¹, that is, the outward eye wavered not from what the inward eye beheld, nor did it transgress by going beyond the bounds and turning its attention away from that wherein the Truth manifested Himself unto him, but it kept its gaze upon Him in each of several things.”⁴²²

“Now the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) is not to be seen by any outward eyes whatsoever except their sight be inverted and has taken on the function of the inward eye, even as the sight of Muḥammad’s outward eye had been inverted and become one with his inward eye... his other worldly sight was united with his earthly sight so that with the former he beheld the inward aspect of the Truth in respect of His name the Inwardly Hidden (*al-bāṭin*), and with the latter he beheld the Outward Aspect of the Truth in respect of His Name the Outwardly Manifest (*al-zāhir*).⁴²³

The Ascension (*mi’rāj*) is not just a historical account of an experience unique to the Prophet, but a symbol of the process whereby all saints ascend to God and attain an experiential knowledge of Him,⁴²⁴ except that their *mi’rāj* is only spiritual while that of the Prophet was also bodily. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī also draws our attention to the habit of the blameworthy soul (*nafs al-ammāra*) and its refusal to recognise the pure *tawḥīd* because it is this that necessitates its annihilation.⁴²⁵ The symbolic and transcendent metaphysical approach of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s exegesis to *Sūrah al-Najm* is a clear indication of his intention to transcend the surface of its exoteric meanings. The methods of Sufism have their roots in the Qur’ān. But the present context calls for at least a mention of the fact that certain formulations of the Qur’ān

⁴²¹ Q. 53:17

⁴²² Lings, *ASufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.173.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Al-‘Alāwī in one of his poems addresses his aspirant (*murīd*) whose desire is to know God, saying: “If you want to know Him then make the *Isrā* and *Mi’rāj*, and take from me my secret, with it will you meet God.” In *shi’ta tadrī ta’ruj wa tasrī khudh ‘annī sirrī bihī talqā Allah Diwān*, (al-Matba’ah al-‘Alāwīyya, Mostaghanem, 1993), p.66.

⁴²⁵ Ahmad al-‘Alāwī, *The Qur’ān and the Prophet in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alāwī*. Translated by Khalid Williams, (Islamic Text Society, 2013).

would seem to be, even as regards their literal message, for the Sufis and for no one else.⁴²⁶

There are a number of verses in this Sūrah to which Shaykh al-'Alāwī has given an esoteric meaning from the very literal manifestations of these verses without the requirement of any special interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and in the words of Martin Lings; "these are 'open' verses which every believer can apply to himself or herself but which may none the less be said to apply pre-eminently to the Sufis."⁴²⁷ Examples of these verses are; "*he does not speak of passion.*"⁴²⁸; "No soul shall bear the load of another, and man shall only have that for which he strives."⁴²⁹; *And unto thy Lord is the Utmost End.*⁴³⁰

What is interesting in this case is that Shaykh al-'Alāwī, in a very unique way, justifies the exoteric meaning of the verse, "*And he does not speak of passion,*"⁴³¹ indirectly with the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, where the outer meaning itself can have a profound and deep meaning from its literal rendering or apparent meaning. Then, arriving at the esoteric meaning of the

⁴²⁶ An example would be: "We (God) are nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein." (Q.50:16). This cannot be called an 'open' verse such as "Guide us along the straight path" (Q. 1:6), which everyone is free to interpret according to his conception of the path and of straightness. Nor is it comparable to those verses whose literal meaning is a veil over the truth that is not for everyone. The 'inside' is here, especially the literal meaning, since this proximity alludes to the state of annihilation (*fanā*). Ibn 'Ata 'illah speaks of this proximity when he says: "Only His extreme nearness (*shiddatu qurbih*) to you is what veils God (*al-Ḥaqq*) from you", in *Ḥikam Ibn 'Ata 'illah*, no.164, Victor Danner, p.47. Al-'Alāwī says in his *ḥikam*: "Proximity implies that there are two and the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) is One." In *al-qurb ithnain wa al-Ḥaqqu wāḥid*, *al-'Alāwī kitāb al-ḥikam*, no. 30.

⁴²⁷ Lings, *A Sufi Saint in the Twentieth Century*, p.27.

⁴²⁸ Q. 53:3; The word '*hawā*' has several meanings; usually here it is rendered 'desire' or 'whim', but based on Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary it has been rendered as love (*maḥabbah*).

⁴²⁹ Q. 53:38-39; According to al-'Alāwī the literal rendering of this passage is in actual fact its esoteric meaning, for in its most perfect sense, 'striving' (*sa'y*) only means seeking God, whilst to seek anything else is a waste and illusion, and it is best to understand the verse in this way which is the literal way; for if, on the other hand, we took 'striving' to mean 'seeking reward,' which is the interpretation of the majority of commentators, this would instead require interpretation (*ta'wīl*), since one person can benefit from the prayers of another, as is also the case with intercession, and there are other ways too in which he can derive benefit from the deeds of others. Yet the verse states that this cannot be, and therefore it must refer to the journey to God. For the traveler (*sālik*) towards God cannot benefit from the journey of anyone else, only when he himself is sincere can he reach his goal.

⁴³⁰ Q. 53:52.

⁴³¹ The general meaning of the verse is that Muḥammad does not speak about the Qur'ān from his own desire; he only speaks by the divine order and through revelation.

verse, he singles out the word *hawā'* as having two possible meanings. Shaykh al-'Alāwī says:

But then I say that the best way to explain the word 'passion' (*hawā'*) is love (*maḥabbah*), and in this case the divine love, which would then render the verse: 'And he (Muḥammad) does not speak of the secrets of love which his heart contains-- and with which he was singled out above the rest of mankind.'⁴³²

The verse, *They have thereof no knowledge, except that they follow mere surmise, and indeed surmise is of no avail against the truth*,⁴³³ is intended by Shaykh al-'Alāwī to describe the inconsistency and fluctuation of faith (*īmān*) among those who have no perception of the higher knowledge obtained by the gnostics. He says, 'those in pursuit who are not of the people of certitude (*yaqīn*) and illumination (*nūr*), they have no perception of God's knowledge, they but follow mere surmise; this is why sometimes their faith (*īmān*) is strong and sometimes it weakens and fluctuates, and as a result they do not know what situation they're in because of their inability to arrive at the reality and essence of things, unlike the gnostics, who have attained the knowledge of God. It is through their knowledge that they know the essence of things, and this is because they have "Entered the houses through the doors."⁴³⁴ Until when He unveils to them the total realities of the essence in which all names and qualities are gathered. And they know Him in a way which behooves God's majesty, and their knowledge is the fruit of unveiling (*'ayān*) and direct vision (*mukāshafa*), not proofs (*dalīl*) and arguments (*burhān*).⁴³⁵ It is they who can truly be said to possess knowledge, because knowledge means to possess the object as it truly is, beyond all veils which

⁴³² Muḥammad was given the epithet of the 'Beloved' (*al-ḥabīb*).

⁴³³ Q. 53:28.

⁴³⁴ Q. 2:189; the esoteric meaning of this is that they (gnostics) have arrived to God through God, since, "Gnosis takes its departure with the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) in Himself, not with the creation (*al-khalq*), it therefore works downwards to the world, not upwards from the world to God, as would be the case for the theologians and philosophers and others, who argue from the imperfection of things to the perfection of God, from multiplicity to the Divine Unity". See Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, p. 28.

⁴³⁵ An allusion to the contrast between the gnosis of the Sufi and the rational belief of the theologian: because *'ayān* and *mukāshafa* belong to the realm of gnosis whereas *dalīl* and *burhān* belong to the theologians and philosophers.

might cover it. They are witnesses to God's Oneness just as He is a witness to this Himself: *God bears witness⁴³⁶ that there is no god but He, He and the Angels and those endowed with knowledge.*⁴³⁷ The one who has not arrived at their level, or station, cannot truly be described as a possessor of knowledge. In other words, it's not befitting for him to be considered a possessor of divine Knowledge (*'ālim billāh*), whilst he could still perhaps be called a possessor of the knowledge of God's Laws (*'alim bi aḥkām Allah*).

This subject also inspired Shaykh al-'Alāwī to quote some of the most difficult passages from the Gospel of John, and to find in them support for his own perspective, which could present a problem to many Muslim scholars. One of the distinctive qualities of Shaykh al-'Alāwī was that he was never deterred by any religious statement but was always able to relate to his own viewpoint, no matter how seemingly foreign it might seem to be to the Muslim view of things. For example, when he quotes the words of Jesus from the Gospel, "I and the Father are one",⁴³⁸ which most Muslims, exoterists and esoterists alike, would probably dismiss as a falsification,⁴³⁹ are for Shaykh al-'Alāwī a perfectly valid expression of the 'pure Unity' in which he is interested—of course an expression which requires interpretation, just as some of the statements of the gnostics require the same.

Concerning the latter part of *Sūrah al-Najm*, we see that Shaykh al-'Alāwī sees, in the verses concerning the Prophet's efforts to preach to the people and their subsequent rejection of him, a symbol of the spiritual guide (*murshid*) in his efforts to lead his disciples along the path to God—"the uttermost end".⁴⁴⁰ *The one who "turns away"*⁴⁴¹ means the one who traverses the path for a while, and then is distracted or obstructed by a delusion or vain fancy-- the *surmise* of which the Chapter speaks. For those disciples who are

⁴³⁶ According to the Sufis the word 'witness' in this verse refers to the *mushahāda* (*contemplation*) of the divine Presence which for the gnostics is *ma'rifa* (gnosis).

⁴³⁷ Q. 3:18.

⁴³⁸ John 10:30, New International Version.

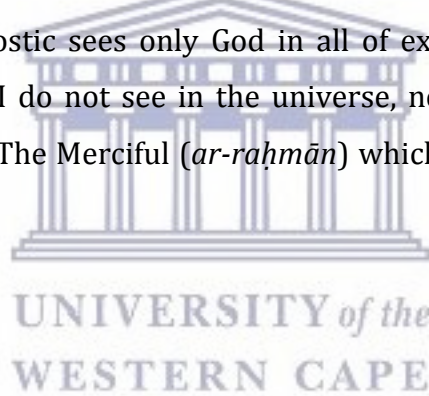
⁴³⁹ This does not imply in any way al-'Alāwī's agreement or ascription to the doctrine of Perennialism as some would want to claim; Shaykh al-'Alāwī in his writings, clearly alludes to the Christians' error of their belief in the Trinity.

⁴⁴⁰ Q. 53:42.

⁴⁴¹ Q. 53:33.

able to avoid these obstacles, the utmost end of the path to which the guide leads them is “annihilation in God” (*al-fanā’ fi’llah*). Shaykh al-‘Alāwī sees this manifested in the final verses of the Chapter.⁴⁴² For him this symbolises the extinction of the Sufi in his Lord, wherein all things disappear and only God remains; if God whelmed all these actions in His own action, and if He destroyed all those towns and people, “this is what He does with all creation in the eyes of the Gnostic when He shows His magnificence to him. Nothing remains but God.”⁴⁴³ Verses 43 to 50 are usually interpreted to refer to the events of the Last Day (*ākhirā*) and thus translated in the future tense, but Shaykh al-‘Alāwī interprets them to signify how all created things are rendered non-existent for the one who is annihilated in God.

This whole interpretation of Shaykh al-‘Alāwī alludes to the gnostic’s arrival at *ma’rifā* when he has reached the state of complete annihilation (*fanā’*) until the gnostic sees only God in all of existence. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī says in his *dīwān*: “I do not see in the universe, nor within my soul (*nafsi*) save the essence of The Merciful (*ar-raḥmān*) which has brought coolness to my eye.”⁴⁴⁴



Conclusion

This chapter was able to reveal the Sufi hermeneutics expressed in a contextual sense with spiritual exegetical methods used by the three Sufi commentators mentioned. Their hermeneutical efforts also differed from the classical school of interpretation by tradition, and the same repetitive and imitative approach which completely ignores the intellectual endeavours found in every age. Will they not contemplate this Qur’ān? And so the Shaykh al-‘Alāwī asks, ‘where is our share of contemplation of the Qur’ān? And the gnostic’s engagement with the Qur’ān is an engagement of intellectual contemplation, and their level of interpretation at times transcends rational

⁴⁴² Q. 53:43-53.

⁴⁴³ Al-‘Alāwī, *The Qur’ān and the Prophet*, p xvii.

⁴⁴⁴ Al-‘Alāwī, *Dīwān*, p. 36.

thought. A variety of esoteric examples were necessary especially the ones discussed by Shaykh al-'Alāwī to show the consistency of his esoteric principles. Shaykh al-'Alāwī has stressed in his hermeneutical principles that the Qur'ān must be seen as a living revelation, constantly offering new wonders to those who seek them; and that although some verses have historical significance they are not limited to this, but are personally relevant to everyone who reads them.⁴⁴⁵

God has certainly made the gnostics His heirs to the *bāṭin* which is the inexhaustible level of meaning in the Qur'ān.

We were also able to see much of a symbolic method advocated in their *tafsīr*. For example, the symbolic and figurative expressions of Sidi Alāwī in elucidating the Qur'ān are a kind of display that gives Sufi commentary its distinctive character in its idea of *bāṭin*.

The exegetical methods used by Sufi commentators of the Qur'ān seem to reflect not only the spiritual, but also the intellectual and educational level of the Muslim community's elite, because for them in general, the Qur'ān is the divine book to which everything must be held. Shaykh al-'Alāwī had a personal affinity⁴⁴⁶ with *Sūrah al-Najm* and was able to extract the many jewels from this *Sūrah*. The *tafsīr* of this *Sūrah* by Shaykh al-'Alāwī was also unique in its hermeneutical approach in that he adopted the doctrine of *al-tawḥīd al-maḥd*, the affirmation of belonging to God and no other, which is nothing other than the 'Oneness of Being' of which the Sufis speak.

In the next chapter I will present an annotated translation of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's detailed esoteric *tafsīr* on *Sūrah al-Najm*.

⁴⁴⁵ "The most important thing we can do when reading the Book of God is to consider that it is being transmitted to us right now from the divine Presence", al-'Alāwī, *Al-Baḥr al-Masjūr*, p.27.

⁴⁴⁶ Shaykh al-'Alāwī's personal affinity with *Sūrah al-Najm* can be seen in the way he approaches the *Sūrah* where his main concern is to extract from it the cream of its spiritual content. This is clearly manifested in the way he has confined the *Sūrah* to its esoteric exegesis transcending all other levels of interpretation. He has made this *Sūrah* his forte of spiritual secrets and a blue print for the aspirant (*murīd*) on the spiritual path towards the ultimate goal of gnosis.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Historical Background on the Revelation of Sūrah al-Najm by Shaykh al-'Alāwī'⁴⁴⁷

Shaykh al-'Alāwī was asked about how *Sūrah al-Najm* was revealed and about that which relates to the issue of the Sacred Birds (*al-gharānīq*).

He answered saying, "*Sūrah al-Najm* was revealed to Prophet Muḥammad in one complete revelation, which was different to the usual order of the early Meccan revelations."⁴⁴⁸ This *Sūrah* has seized the Prophet from both the exoteric and esoteric aspects and it has acquainted him with his true rank in the sight of his Lord. (And why should it not be so, asks Shaykh al-'Alāwī),⁴⁴⁹ when it made a proclamation so dear to mankind, declaring his honourable status and his well-preserved secret with God, this all from the aspect of the inward (*bāṭin*), and how he drew closer to Him and approached Him.

Whoever reflects on this chapter, it's likely that he would want to do the prostration (*sajdah*) before reaching the actual verse of prostration,⁴⁵⁰ which appears at the end of the Chapter. For this reason, the Prophet wished that if he were to read it unto the idolaters⁴⁵¹ (of Mecca) the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (Unity, or oneness of God) would eradicate all apostasy. The Prophet went to them with this desire (to eradicate apostasy), completely overwhelmed by it, but then Satan cast doubt upon his hope; *Except that God abolishes that which the Satan casts; then God establishes His revelations.*⁴⁵²

In Shaykh al-'Alāwī's explanation, "The Prophet, accompanied by a group of his followers, entered the Holy mosque and came upon the Quraish. The Prophet saw that, if *Sūrah al-Najm* was to be read despite Satan, he too would

⁴⁴⁷ Al-'Alāwī, *kitāb A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p. 47-49.

⁴⁴⁸ This *Sūrah* was amongst the early Meccan revelations.

⁴⁴⁹ Al-'Alāwī, *kitāb A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p. 47

⁴⁵⁰ The final verse of 'The Star' is one of the verses of prostration (*ayāt al-sajda*) of the Qur'ān, those verses upon the recital of which the Muslim who utters them or hears them uttered must prostrate himself.

⁴⁵¹ *A'dhab al-Manāhil* p.47

⁴⁵² Q. 22:52.

fall into prostration because of the profound and overwhelming realities contained in it, and because of its irresistible power as it has proved. When the Prophet recited the *Sūrah*, it completely seized the listeners; the Prophet then prostrated when he reached the verse of prostration, and so did his followers who were with him. The idolaters (*mushriks*) followed them in the prostration (*sujūd*) without having perceived why they were so affected and overpowered by the revelation. Seeing this, the believers were completely bewildered by the prostration of the idolaters. His desire intensified that the idolaters might also become believers. But then again as the poet says: “Man attaineth not always that which he desires – The winds often blow where the ships need them least.”⁴⁵³ God says in *Sūrah al-Najm*, *Or shall man obtain all that which he desires?*⁴⁵⁴ This means that not all that which he desires is obtainable. This is why the throne of Satan shook at the prostration of the idolaters (*Mushriks*), until he inspired one of the idolaters to say, “I have not made prostration to the God of Muḥammad; it was only when I heard him recite the verse.”⁴⁵⁵

And he (the idolator) said, “I heard the words: ‘these are the Sacred Birds (*al-gharānīq*) and their intercession is much sought’, and it was for this reason that I made the prostration.”⁴⁵⁶

When the other idolaters heard the idolator say this, all of them made the same claim, saying: “our prostration was for this reason too, not anything else”; this in support of their own doctrine because they saw their prostration with Muḥammad as a shameful thing. And when this madness struck them, the Prophet’s desire had then changed, because the Prophet had expected the opposite of what happened to them until the pure joy of the gathering faded and his hopes in them were dashed, and he fell into a somber mood, until eventually God consoled him and alleviated his sorrow by saying to him:

⁴⁵³ *A’dhab al-Manāhil*, p.48

⁴⁵⁴ Q. 53:24.

⁴⁵⁵ “Have you seen Lāt and Uzzā and Manāt the other third (god) besides them?” (Q.53:19).

⁴⁵⁶ *A’dhab al-Manāhil*, p. 48.

Never have We sent a Messenger or a Prophet before you, except when he hoped, Satan would cast doubt upon his hope, yet God abolishes that which Satan casts; then God establishes His revelations, verily God is the all-Wise, all-Knowing.⁴⁵⁷

This is God's Way (*Sunnah*) towards His creation; whenever a Prophet or a Messenger had a hope; and none of them hoped for anything save that for which Muḥammad hoped (which was that his community should become believers). Satan cast doubts on his hopes, so that which was pure and clear became impure and the truth became mixed with falsehood, yet God always removes that which Satan tries to cast, and then establishes His revelations.⁴⁵⁸ God says, *Verily, it is We Who have revealed this reminder (al-Qur'ān) and it is We Who preserve it.*⁴⁵⁹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī's distinctive approach to the interpretation of the so-called "Satanic Verses" ⁴⁶⁰

The so-called "Satanic Verses" which are mentioned not in the major books of *ḥadīth* but rather in some of the classical commentaries on the Qur'ān, whose authors generally collected everything which had reached their ears about a particular verse of the Qur'ān without comment or discrimination—states that when the Prophet first recited *Sūrah al-Najm* to Quraysh at the Ka'ba, when he reached the verses, *Have you seen, then, al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and*

⁴⁵⁷ Q. 22:51; This is Shaykh al-'Alāwī's interpretation of this Qur'ānic verse; the verb *tamannā*, translated here as 'hoped', is usually interpreted as meaning 'recited', and the word '*ummiyyatih*', translated here as 'his hope', is usually interpreted as meaning 'that which he recited' (the Arabic language allows both possibilities; indeed the most common meaning of *tamannā* is 'to hope'). Thus al-'Alāwī affirms that it was not the verses of the Qur'ān revealed to the Prophet that were 'touched' by Satan, but rather the interpretation of these verses in the minds of the idolaters, who sought to excuse themselves for being unable to resist the power of the Qur'ān and thus prostrating. This means that Satan did not 'cast a false revelation' into the Prophet's heart, but rather he 'cast doubt' on the hopes of the Prophet for the conversion of the Qurayshi pagans.

⁴⁵⁸ Al-'Alāwī *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.47

⁴⁵⁹ Q. 61:14.

⁴⁶⁰ Here again, we see the boldness and unshakeable composure when it comes to Shaykh al-'Alāwī's explanation of the story of the so-called 'Satanic Verse', where again he does not concern himself with an examination of the historical soundness of the story, but simply offers his explanation of it as though it was true, since either way it presents no problem to him.

Manāt, the third, the other?,⁴⁶¹ Satan cast into his heart a false inspiration which made him then utter, “These are the Sacred Birds, and their intercession is much sought”.⁴⁶² The Quraysh interpreted this to mean that the three goddesses mentioned in these verses had been accepted by Islam as intermediaries between God and man, and thus rejoiced and fell down in prostration along with the Prophet and the other Muslims. The Prophet and the Muslims had prostrated themselves as per the final verse of *al-Najm*, *Prostrate yourself and worship God*.⁴⁶³ Soon after, however, God inspired the Prophet with the verses which actually were meant to follow verse 20, *What, have you males, and He females? That was indeed an unjust division. They are but names you have named—you and your forefathers; God has sent down no authority for them*.⁴⁶⁴ Thus the false verses were obliterated and replaced with the correct ones, to the dismay of the Quraysh, who had seen the event as a kind of compromise for which they have been hoping. The story is rejected by most exegetes as uncorroborated and somewhat fantastical even as they relate it (e.g. Nasafī, Bayḍāwī, Ibn Kathīr, Qurtubī, Rāzi, Nīsāpūri, etc.)⁴⁶⁵, but the nature of classical Qur’ānic exegesis, based as it often is on the indiscriminate narration of every tradition or story connected with a verse, sometimes with any comment from an exegete, has meant that the story has remained in the Muslim consciousness to this day. Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, which includes a fictionalised portrayal of the event in question, brought this matter to the attention of the West upon release of the novel in 1988;⁴⁶⁶ before this, it had been a matter of interest almost exclusively to Orientalists and Arabists. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s comments here were made some fifty years before the novel was written and thus naturally pertain to the then question of the original alleged incident, not to the controversy aroused by the novel; we

⁴⁶¹ Q. 53:19-20.

⁴⁶² *A’dhab al-manāhil*, p. 48

⁴⁶³ Q. 53:20.

⁴⁶⁴ Q. 53:21-23.

⁴⁶⁵ The comments of the classical commentators on the story of al-Gharānīq can be found in the *tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr. .

⁴⁶⁶ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988).

have nevertheless retained the phrase ‘Satanic Verses’ because it has become familiar to Western readers.

TRANSLATION OF THE TAFSĪR OF SŪRAH AL-NAJM

The following is a complete annotated translation of the tafsīr of Sūrah al-Najm by Shaykh Aḥmad Bin Muṣṭafā’ Al-‘Alāwī

Lubāb al-‘ilm Fī Sūrah al-Najm

The Kernels of Knowledge - on the Chapter of the Star

Tafsīr by: Shaykh Aḥmad Bin Muṣṭafā’ al-‘Alāwī

Al-‘Alāwī the self-effacing servant of his Lord begins his exegesis with the following words, “Praise be to Him, the One who has made to spout forth from the hearts of His saints (*awliyā’*) a spring of His well-preserved Secrets, causing to stream from their lips that which give joy to the soul.”⁴⁶⁷

Then he turns our attention to God’s profound words in the Qur’ān:

*And ask the people of Dhikr⁴⁶⁸ (remembrance) if you don't know.*⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ *Lubāb al-‘ilm fī sūrah al-Najm*, al-‘Alāwī, [p. 52]

⁴⁶⁸ *Dhikr*, is the Remembrance of God, and al-‘Alāwī’s mentioning of ‘*ahl al-dhikr*’ in this verse is an allusion to the gnostics. This is clearly implied in a statement in his book ‘*al-minaḥ al-quddūsiyya*’ when he says: The Prophet said: “The earth shall never be found lacking in forty men whose hearts are as the heart of the friend of the All-Merciful”. One has only to study the traditions to find they tell us explicitly that there is within the community an elect to whom God has revealed the secrets of the Book and the Wont, and where else is this body of men to be found save amongst the Rememberers (*dhākirūn*), who are marked out for having devoted their lives to God? (Sufi Saint of the 20th Century, Lings, p. 90) This same verse by many exoteric exegetes is given preference to an indirect (metaphorical) interpretation in favor of its direct and literal meaning of (*ahl al-dhikr*). They say ‘*ahl al-dhikr*’ in this context

'Until the hearts of men flocked to their circles so that they might see that which had been veiled from them of the unseen realities (*al-ghuyūb*)? Hence the clouds of mercy rained upon their hearts, and the suns of gnosis and the moons of wisdom shone upon them. And they took from this enough to suffice all of the worlds. Then the hearts returned to us saying, "Glory be to God, the best of creators."⁴⁷⁰

Thus have you asked us O beloved brother, may God grant us and you a good end! To formulate a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān in accordance with the method of the men of special understanding and sound experience (*dhawq*).⁴⁷¹ What you requested would not be impossible, were there but time to do it. In any case, in confirmation of your request, I began contemplating to which part of the Qur'ān I should restrict myself after first having purified myself of my own understanding, and detached myself from my own conjecture, and then *Sūrah al-Najm* came to me.

So I plunged into its midst and delved into its secrets, and it became clear to me that I could spend much time swimming in its ocean, so I said, 'God suffices me and He is the best Guardian', and through Him alone comes assistance. I have named what I compiled, "The Kernels⁴⁷² Of Knowledge on The Chapter of The Star"⁴⁷³

The Almighty says:

In The Name Of God the Compassionate the Merciful

By the star⁴⁷⁴ when it descends⁴⁷⁵

should be understood as 'ahl al-'ilm' (the people of knowledge) instead. This is a rather peculiar and unusual case where exoterists of all people, especially scholars of the Salafi school would prefer *ta'wīl* to a clear and direct verse. But then again, as Shaykh al-'Alāwī says, 'who else are more evidently known as the people of dhikr if not the Sufis and their ultimate representatives, the gnostics.?'

⁴⁶⁹ Q. 16:43.

⁴⁷⁰ Q. 23:14.

⁴⁷¹ *Dhawq* literally, taste; for the Sufis the word *dhawq* is to experience the ultimate truth existentially.

⁴⁷² The word '*lubb*' (pl. *al-bāb*) (kernel) refers to the main part or essence of a thing. *Ulul al-bāb* in the Qur'ān would usually be an address to the people of intellect and reason. The name of the *tafsīr* clearly spells out the intent of the author and his desire for intellectual engagement with the divine word remaining almost irresistible.

⁴⁷³ *Lubāb al-'Im fī sūrah al-Najm*, al-'Alāwī, [p. 52]

⁴⁷⁴ The star, according to the view of al-'Alāwī is an important analogy symbolising Prophet Muḥammad's ascent into heaven and his descent back to Earth.

The opening of this *Sūrah* with the word 'star' makes us realise that something of great importance is to be expounded. For a star rises and sets, ascends and descends, and it is therefore full of amazing secrets.⁴⁷⁶

'We have already presented some of it. In addition, if the one who hears these words reflects on the setting of a star, and how despite its huge size and high position, it sets and then rises again, he will not be surprised when he hears how the Prophet ascended to the heavens, and how Gabriel descended to the earth. Instead, he will see all this as perfectly possible and well within the power of the Almighty, and he will assert that this is an aspect of God's way with His Prophets. When each is ready for the ascension, He takes him up, and this is part of the nature (*fiṭra*) which He has given them.

Concerning Prophet Idris, He says, *And We raised him to a high place.*⁴⁷⁷ With regard to Īsa (Jesus) He says, *"Nay, God raised him up unto Himself."*⁴⁷⁸



⁴⁷⁵ Q. 53:1.

⁴⁷⁶ Here Shaykh al-'Alāwī unfolds an amazing mystery in the hermeneutic context of the *Sūrah's* name (al-Najm) with which it starts **"By the star when it ascends and descends"**, Q. 53:1, capturing the entire *mi'rāj* in this one word which was for the Prophet a journey of ascending into the heavens and returning back to the earth. What is also striking is al-'Alāwī's analogy of the star with Muḥammad in bringing out the brilliant points of similarity in guidance and light between the star and the Muḥammadan soul. The movement of the star from one place to another has become the very reason for its ability to guide, in the same way that Moḥammad's changing of **locality** through his *mi'rāj* (ascension) from earth to the heavens became one of the necessities for his guidance in his turning from his sublime Centre which in actual fact is his facing (*tawajjuh*) towards God and receiving from the divinity to the inevitable point of the incumbent human needs and other matters of importance by which the Prophet became a model (*uswah*) of guidance for the one seeking guidance. There is also the view from certain exoteric exegetes that the star has really nothing to do with the Prophet or the content of the *Sūrah* since God has the prerogative to swear by any of His creation as He wishes. Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi expresses the following view in his tafsīr *"Tafhīm al-Qur'ān"* (The meaning of the Qur'ān): 'In the original word "an-Najm" has been used. Ibn 'Abbas, Mujahid and Sufyan Thauri opine that it implies the Pleides. Ibn Jarir and Zamakhshari have held this same interpretation as preferable, for in Arabic when the word an-Najm is used absolutely it usually implies the Pleides. Suddi says that it implies Venus; and Abu Ubaidah, the grammarian, holds that here the word an-Najm has been used generically so as to express this idea: "When the day dawned, and the stars set." In view of the context we are of the opinion that this last interpretation is more preferable.'

⁴⁷⁷ Q. 19:57.

⁴⁷⁸ Q. 4:158.

Similar to these two Prophets is Muḥammad, except that Muḥammad returned to complete his mission, he returned in body but not in spirit; his spirit never left the high station of the Divine Presence.⁴⁷⁹

Referring to this station, the Prophet said; "I spend my nights with my Lord, He gives me to eat and to drink."⁴⁸⁰ This refers to his spirit, whilst his body remains on earth in its usual state.⁴⁸¹

Shaykh al-'Alāwī continues, 'So I say that the object by which the *qasam*⁴⁸² has been made is to symbolise a brilliant light which is the source of all lights, and the foundation of all vision and all insight. This refers to nothing else save the Moḥammadan Soul (*al-nafs al-Muḥammadiyya*) and the eternal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-Abadiyya*) and every man partakes in this to the extent he aspires, and every heart may contain as much of this as it can bear.

When God says, *By the star when it descends*,⁴⁸³

The symbolic resemblance between the star and the soul of Muḥammad is that each one of them is a source of guidance, and they are united in the light which they emit. The star is able to give light because of its setting and rising; were it not for this motion, it would not be a source of guidance, for its alternation and movement are necessary for its guidance. The same is the case with the soul of Muḥammad. It guides because of how it moves away from its highest position, turning away from the divine Realities in order to fulfill those human functions which are necessary for it, so that it may become an example and a guide for those who seek guidance.⁴⁸⁴ Whenever the soul (*nafs*) of the Prophet is turned towards something, we must believe that in that turning there are many wise lessons and beneficial secrets, which may be perceived by those endowed with knowledge (and

⁴⁷⁹ In his poem Shaykh al-'Alāwī makes reference to the Prophet's spiritual status in his night jourey (*mi'rāj*) and his meeting with his Beloved: "You have returned from the Holy Presence (O Muḥammad)---Though (in spirit) you have never left (His) Presence." (*min ḥadrat al-quḍsi ji'ta---wa anta fihā lam tazal*) See al-'Alāwī, *Diwān*, p.86.

⁴⁸⁰ Ḥadīth

⁴⁸¹ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p.54]

⁴⁸² *Qasam* is the oath made by God, in reference to the opening verse of the chapter.

⁴⁸³ Q. 53:1

⁴⁸⁴ That is, the coming of a divine Messenger to earth to live amongst men is a kind of sacrifice on his part.

insight) And the one who knows is not like the one who knows not. Let us then take heed not to imagine that his inclination towards anything was simply the result of human nature and personal choice, which would imply a deviation from the path of righteousness and virtue. Nay, the Knower of all secrets and hidden conversation says:⁴⁸⁵

*Your companion (Muḥammad) has not strayed nor has he erred.*⁴⁸⁶

‘Meaning, he did not go astray in the state of his involvement with that for which he was inevitably created, which is preoccupation with God and turning solely towards Him. What this means is that the Prophet’s actions were not based on human nature like those of others, but rather as he said (in a *ḥadīth*), “Three things of your world have been made beloved to me.”⁴⁸⁷ He did not say “I love” there by ascribing the action to himself⁴⁸⁸; the one possessed of insight may therefore see that he was compelled in this matter and not free. In the company of men he was the same as in the company of God, the one did not veil him from the other. “Each one has a direction to which he turns his face.”⁴⁸⁹ It would have been inappropriate for him to speak in front of men about the nature of the state which he has realised when he was in the company of the Truthful (*al-Ḥaqq*). And this is why God says in the next verse,

*Nor does he speak of passion.*⁴⁹⁰

What can be understood immediately is that the Prophet does not simply invent the Qur’ān of his own desire⁴⁹¹ and more general than that, is that he

⁴⁸⁵ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p.55]

⁴⁸⁶ Q. 53:2.

⁴⁸⁷ Al-Sunan Al-Kubrā. Abūbakr Al-Bayhaqī. Print: Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif Al-‘Uthmāniyyah – Hyderabad, India (First Edition 1934). Vol. 7 Pg.78

⁴⁸⁸ Two observations from this *ḥadīth*; first, the Prophet said ‘I was made to love’ because the verb (*ḥubbiba*) is in the passive case which means God made him love these things, second, the Prophet said ‘from your world’ because in reality he had no attachment to the world as such.

⁴⁸⁹ Q. 2:148.

⁴⁹⁰ Q. 53:3.

does not do any act openly or secretly except that God Himself is the One Who acts through⁴⁹² him as He says in another verse: *It was not you who threw at the time you threw (O Muḥammad), but it is was God Who threw.*⁴⁹³ And similar to this is the verse in the Qur'ān, *See by Him and Hear (by Him)*!⁴⁹⁴

“But then I say that the best interpretation for the word ‘*hawā*’⁴⁹⁵ is love (*maḥabbah*), and in this case the divine love, which would then render the verse as: “And he does not speak about the love”, meaning he (Muḥammad) does not disclose that which his heart has concealed of the secrets of love with which he was distinguished from the rest of mankind.

And few are those who have the strength to withhold it (divine love), to the point where God says, *The Fire*⁴⁹⁶ *of God which is lit has taken the hearts*,”⁴⁹⁷ and this fire certainly is the love, as it is said in another verse: “*Our*

⁴⁹² This is referred to in the expression of the Sufis as the state of ‘*fanā*’ (annihilation).

⁴⁹³ Q. 8:17.

⁴⁹⁴ Q. 18:26; (*abṣir bihī wa asmi*) these two verses have been quoted in support of the doctrine of ‘*waḥdat al-wujūd*’ (The Oneness of Being).

⁴⁹⁵ The word ‘*hawā*’ has more than one meaning; it is usually translated as ‘passion,’ ‘desire,’ ‘wish,’ or ‘caprice,’ but based on Shaykh al-Alawī’s favored commentary it has been rendered as ‘love’ (*maḥabbah*). According to Lane’s Lexicon the word ‘*hawā*’ means love and is a synonym for ‘*ḥubb*’- Edward William Lane, Islamic Text Society, 1984, p.3046. The Arabic dictionary, *Mu’jam al-ma’ānī* says ‘*hawā*’ is a *maṣdar* and *al-hawā* is to orient the nafs towards either the love of good or bad and this same meaning is also found in *al-mu’jam al-wāsiṭ*, p.80. And in describing the inner significance of this verse, Shaykh al-‘Alawī explains the principle of priority that guides his hermeneutics to interpret the verse with three distinct interpretations; first giving its exoteric meaning and then the implication of annihilation (*fanā*) whereby Muhammad speaks and acts through God and not himself, and then the expression of the word ‘*hawā*’ as having the meaning of love, and the fact that (divine) love is in complete harmony with the main thrust of the Sūrah which is the Prophet (*al-Ḥabīb*) meeting with his Beloved in his spiritual journey (*mi’rāj*). The priority of the Prophet’s love for God and his preservation of the secret of this love is the essence of the Prophet’s spiritual station by which he transcends all of humankind to the point that he was named ‘*al-ḥabīb*’ the beloved one. And this is why he says that the preferred interpretation of *hawā* for him in this verse is to say that it means love (*maḥabbah*) even though Shaykh al-‘Alawī had given three distinct interpretations to this verse.

⁴⁹⁶ It is interesting that Shaykh al-‘Alawī refers to the fire here as the fire of love and not the fire of Hell which is of course the exoteric meaning of the verse. However, the esoteric meaning can be justified and supported grammatically: first, the word fire is attached to the possessive noun ‘Allah’ (*idhāfa*), since God didn’t say the fire of Hell, He said ‘the fire of Allah’. Second, the verse says, ‘the fire that has taken the hearts’ and not the bodies for it is in the heart that love resides and it is the hearts that burn with the flame of love for the beloved, and for the Sufis love is the essence of the Sufi Path. Shaykh al-‘Alawī says in his *dīwān*, ‘Beware that you should deviate from the way (*madhhab*) of love.’ (*īyyāk tamīl ‘an madhhab al-ḥubb*) *Dīwān*, p.84

⁴⁹⁷ Q. 104:6.

*Lord, do not place upon us a burden we cannot bear.*⁴⁹⁸ The burden is the (divine) love when it has exceeded its possessor and is too much for a man to bear, and it is the Prophet who received the greatest share of this love, until he was given the title of '*al-ḥabīb*' (the beloved). And despite this, he never showed any sign openly to display any longing he felt, because the condition of love is not to disclose the secret of the Beloved, and even though in difficulty, for if he were to be burdened to reveal what his heart conceals, most ears would not have been able to comprehend him, nor could their inherent nature been able to accustom them to it, because the servants are usually accustomed to discord, averting and digressing from what is more important, except after having restored the link and having reattached to the mediator (*wāsiṭa*) [who is the Prophet] And this is why God says:

*It is not but a revelation inspired.*⁴⁹⁹

This means its utterance is not easy, and regarding this it is said (in a poem): "Among the lovers is a secret which they do not disclose by any words, nor any deeds of man". What has appeared to Muḥammad regarding the lights of Divine Presence and the wonders of the heart has also appeared to Īsa (Jesus), except that Muḥammad was stronger in carrying these secrets than others. He did not reveal anything which might cause confusion in the minds of men or seem farfetched to the intellectuals. This is because of the education he received from God (*al-Ḥaqq*) as to how he should preserve these Secrets, and this is (found) in the next verse,

*He was taught by One mighty in power, One vigorous.*⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ Q. 2:286.

⁴⁹⁹ Q. 53:4.

⁵⁰⁰ Q. 53:5-6.

“This means that it is the Mighty and Powerful One, because the word *mirra*⁵⁰¹(vigor) means steadfastness and strength, so that Muḥammad may be powerful and strong enough in preserving the secrets. The praising of the teacher is allotted in turn to the teacher’s student, and this is why he (Muḥammad) never divulged anything regarding (the secrets) except among those who were worthy of it. One of his companions asked him once, saying "Do I speak about and relate everything I hear from you O Messenger of God?" The Prophet said, “Yes, except those words which are beyond the minds of the common people, lest it becomes a *fitna* for some of them.”⁵⁰² And for this reason we find, whatever was far-fetched for the intellect would not emanate from the Companions, with the exception of the senior men among them (*al-qawm*)⁵⁰³, and they said many things which did require much explanation and interpretation.”⁵⁰⁴

This is similar to the case of Jesus, whose words and sayings also required explanation. This happened to the point where his disciples, in most cases were unable to analyse and unravel his expressions until he himself explained it to them. And those who took them in their literal sense and did not bother to arrive at the inner meaning would use them as proof for his divinity. And amongst these expressions mentioned in the *Injil*,⁵⁰⁵ if it is free from change or distortion is that Jesus said to the general masses, "You are from beneath and I am from above. You are of this world, and I'm not of this world."⁵⁰⁶ He also said in the *Injil*, "I and the Father are one."⁵⁰⁷ He also replied to the one who asked him, “Show us the father”.

⁵⁰¹ *Mirra* alludes to a special strength endowed to Muḥammad from God to preserve the divine secrets and not to divulge them except to those worthy of receiving them.

⁵⁰² Kanzul ‘ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wal af’āl, ‘Alā al-Dīn ‘Alī al-Muttaqī b. ḥus al-Dīn al-Hindī . Edited by. Shaykh Bakri Ḥayyānī and Shaykh Ṣafwat Al-Saqqā. Print: Mu’assasah al-Risālah - Beirut (Fifth Edition 1985) Ḥadīth No. 29011 Vol. 10 Pg.192

⁵⁰³ *Al-qawm* is in reference to the gnostics among the Companions of the Prophet.

⁵⁰⁴ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*,[p. 58]

⁵⁰⁵ The New Testament of the Bible

⁵⁰⁶ John 8:23, New International Version (NIV).

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

He said: "The one who has seen me has seen the Father,⁵⁰⁸ so how can you ask me to show you the Father? Do you not believe that I'm in the Father and the Father is in me? The word that I speak unto you I speak not of myself but it is the Father Who is abiding in me and it is He Who does the deed."⁵⁰⁹

"These expressions, if its report is true, require explanation and interpretation, in the same way that some sayings of the Sufis also require the same thing. Because taking something in its literal form can be harmful to the masses, and its rejection could be even more harmful, because these sayings are certainly not void of wisdom which the intelligent ones are able to perceive. And Muḥammad for this reason was distinctly unique, since he never compelled his Companions to analyse what was difficult to understand, instead, he informed everyone in accordance with their capacity and understanding of the Divine knowledge because human intellects are at different levels and the secrets⁵¹⁰ vary and this is in reference to the saying of the Prophet, "Speak to people according to the level of their intellects, for would you want that people should make God and His Messenger a liar"?⁵¹¹ By doing so he did the people a great kindness. Even to the point where Jesus had said, alluding to Muḥammad's coming and mission as Prophet, according to what is mentioned in the Gospel of John.

"I have yet many things to say unto you , but you are not ready (able)to bear them now, but when the Holy spirit comes he will teach you many things about the Truth (al-Ḥaqq), because he will not speak from himself; nay , he will speak only by what he hears (from Him), and he will inform you of

⁵⁰⁸ This statement needs explanation because in its pure literal form it implies ambiguity and duality in meaning and could lead to misunderstanding and confusion among the masses and perhaps the reason why some may have attributed divinity unto Jesus. If Jesus, (according to al-'Alāwī) did make this statement and if it is true then surely he meant not for it to be understood in its literal sense from the Islamic perspective because the Qur'ān has freed him from any ascription to Divinity

⁵⁰⁹ John 14:9-10, New International Version (NIV).

⁵¹⁰ The concept of secrets (*asrār*) in the Sufi context usually refer to the divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*) which comes in degrees and is given by God to the gnostic in accordance to his spiritual status. This knowledge is usually obtained under the spiritual guidance of a Sufi master who has perfected the degrees (*tabaqāt*) of the divine knowledge. This is why one refers to the gnostic as '*qaddas Allahu sirrahu*' (may God sanctify his secret).

⁵¹¹ Al-Kafi, Volume 1, p.3

what is to come, (happen) and he will praise me, and he will take from what I have and he will show it unto you."⁵¹²

This glad tidings, by the grace of God came from Jesus including most of the Prophet Moḥammad's attributes. Then in the following verse, coming back to the Qur'ān God says:

*And He grew clear to view when He was at the upper most (point) of the horizon.*⁵¹³

"The pronoun 'He' in the verb (*fastawā*) 'He grew clear to view' refers to 'One mighty in power' (*Shadīdul Quwā*), and in the words 'on the uppermost horizon' speak of a special condition and a transcendent rank, free from any suspicion of comparison or addition;⁵¹⁴ and it does not encompass the entirety of His Divine Being (Essence). It is but only one of His directions;

*For everyone there is a direction of which He is the focal point.*⁵¹⁵

And there are directions (*wujūhun*) innumerable and infinite attributes, by which God (*al-Ḥaqq*) comes down to His loved ones and His chosen ones, so that their knowledge of Him finds complete strength. For them to perceive Him in this way is difficult, or even impossible, except after He comes down to them, just as He descended unto Muḥammad.⁵¹⁶ The verse continues,

*And then did He draw near, and descended.*⁵¹⁷

Meaning metaphorically, from the point of Station (*maqām*), not the point of place (*makān*) because of the impossibility of His change of locality and His attachment or detachment to anything, Then He says, "And descended." This is an exaggeration of God's resigning Himself in station, not in the lowering of place.

⁵¹² John 14: 9-10, New International Version (NIV).

⁵¹³ Q. 53: 6-7.

⁵¹⁴ Al-'Alāwī considers these words to refer to God, not to the angel Gabriel as most commentators suggest; therefore he takes special care here to affirm the symbolic and essential mystical nature of this passage.

⁵¹⁵ Q. 2:148.

⁵¹⁶ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 59]

⁵¹⁷ Q. 53:8.

*Till He was at a distance of two bow lengths, or nearer*⁵¹⁸

“This is in reference to the ultimate proximity and His saying “Or nearer.” The meaning of this: closer than that is the ultimate proximity, until the Prophet became absent from Proximity itself, extinct in the Sublime closeness. And were it not for God’s Nearness and His Lowering and His Manifestation, it would then not have been possible for Muḥammad to know Him in this special manner with such intimacy, when he was in the highest horizon (*al-ufuq al-a’lā*).”

It is impossible to perceive His Essence in any way except if He agrees to descend to one where upon one may perceive Him according to the knowledge one possesses, one can only perceive Him in creation, because the individual is part of creation. The meaning of this is that He will not appear except in the mirror⁵¹⁹ of created beings (*al-kā’ināt*), and He is already Manifest, but it is only the servant who must discover this manifestation (*zuhūr*) until he says, “I saw The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) in the creation”, as in the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, “ I saw my Lord in a beardless young man”⁵²⁰ and in another *ḥadīth*, ‘I have not looked at anything except that I saw God in it’.. Prophet Abraham said of the stars, (*hādihā rabbī*) “This is my Lord” and Jesus saw Him within his own self and said, “I and the Father are one, the one who has seen me has seen the Father”⁵²¹ and so forth.

The truth of the matter is beyond all of this. This is with regard to what the human intelligence can perceive or attain to. And you could say that in reality, “*Everything is perishing*”;⁵²² and the truth of the matter cannot be expressed more than this; for were His qualities to be fully revealed all of His

⁵¹⁸ Q. 53:9.

⁵¹⁹ In one of his poems al-’Alāwī says, “The universe for Him is a mirror, and a manifestation for His qualities. (*lahu al-kawnu mir’āt wa mazhar al-sifāt*). *Diwān*, (Mustaghanim, al-Matba’a al-’Alāwīyya). P.73.

⁵²⁰ Al-La’ālī al-Maṣnū’ah fil Aḥādīth al-Mawḍū’ah. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī Edited by. Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥman Ṣalāh b. Muḥammad. Print: Dār al-Kutub al-’Ilmiyyah. Beirut (First Edition 1996) Vol. 1 Pg.34

⁵²¹ John 14:9, New International Version (NIV)

⁵²² This is in reference to the verse: “*All things are perishing save His Face*”, Q.28:88.

creation would be annihilated. Speaking of how the Prophet was completely enveloped in the Being (*dhāt*) of his creator, God says:

*And He revealed unto His servant that which He revealed.*⁵²³

Only alluding to what was revealed, instead of stating it plainly, indicates that it is something which cannot be easily expressed. The meaning is that it was greater than anything which the mind can fathom, and that it was not simple words of command and prohibition, but was something which grasped the heart and imparted a great secret unto it. This is explained by what follows in the next verse:

*The heart lied not as to what it saw.*⁵²⁴

Revelation in this case came through a state of grasping nearness and direct contact with his Lord and direct communication (*mushāfaha*); a state shrouded in mystery and cannot be conveyed by any means other than direct experience, for words cannot express it, even the words of he who was given authority in speech (*jawāmi'ul kalim*).⁵²⁵

There has emanated from the Prophet that which is closest to understanding, and still many hard-hearted people who have become accustomed to rigidity still refuse to believe it,⁵²⁶ denying it as others had denied similar things of old. God thus rebuked them, saying:

*So will you dispute with him as to what he sees?*⁵²⁷

Meaning, you want to dispute with Muḥammad regarding what was unveiled to him of His Divine Majesty and Greatness? And the truth is that your resistance is lacking in what he (Muḥammad) informed you about

⁵²³ Q. 53:10.

⁵²⁴ Q. 53:11.

⁵²⁵ A quality usually attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad for his articulation and eloquence in speech.

⁵²⁶ This is in reference to those who reject the belief that the Prophet Muḥammad had seen his Lord on the night of Ascension (*mi'rāj*).

⁵²⁷ Q. 53:12.

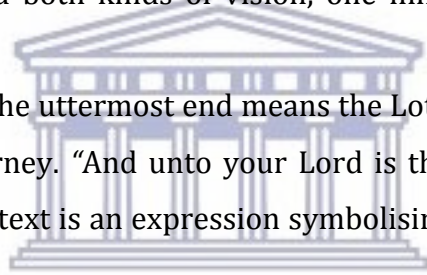
concerning his seeing his Lord (*al-Ḥaqq*). Because the heart sees that which the eye cannot, so how would it be, if he were to inform you what happened to his outer vision (eye) when it witnessed the divine Names and Attributes?⁵²⁸

"So whosoever wishes to believe let him believe and whosoever wishes to disbelieve let him do so",⁵²⁹ and;

*He certainly saw Him at another descent, by the Lote-tree of the uttermost end.*⁵³⁰

‘Meaning, he saw Him again on another occasion. God uses the word descent (*nazla*) to express again how He came down, because this vision was sensory (*fi ‘l-ḥiss*), whereas the previous one was spiritual (*fi ‘l-ma’nā*), so the Prophet experienced both kinds of vision, one inner (*bāṭin*) and the other outer (*zāhir*).⁵³¹

The Lote-tree of the uttermost end means the Lote-tree which stood at the very end of the journey. “And unto your Lord is the uttermost end.”⁵³² The Lote-tree in this context is an expression symbolising the very essence of the



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⁵²⁸ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p. 61]

⁵²⁹ Q. 18:29.

⁵³⁰ Q. 53:13-14.

⁵³¹ When Moses asked to see God distinctly, apart from the world, He answered him: “Thou shalt not see Me, for I am not outside this world nor am I in it; I am neither separate from it, nor joined unto it. Gaze upon the mountain: if it stands firm in place, then shalt thou see Me.” And when His Lord manifested Himself unto the mountain, and the shadow gave place to the substance, and separation attained unto union, and the mountain and all other places were levelled out of sight, Moses fell down senseless, for ‘between’ had been obliterated and ‘where’ had vanished, and the eye had been refreshed with Eye. The difference between the Manifestation of the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) to the mountain for the sake of Moses and to the Lote Tree of the uttermost end for the sake of Muḥammad would seem to be that whereas Moses was unprepared – hence the extreme violent attendant upon the vision – Muḥammad was fully prepared in as much as on the Night Journey (*mi’rāj*) he was altogether in the next world which meant that his outward eye was spontaneously and perfectly coordinated with his inward eye. Shaykh al-‘Alāwī affirms that it is none the less possible for the outward eye, while in ‘this world’ to see the Truth provided that it can first achieve a perfect coordination with the inward eye. The outward eye is the ray of the inward eye and the *faqīr* should not open his outward eye (in the hope of seeing Reality) until the connection has been established between it and his inward eye. When, in virtue of this connection, his outward eye has become pure inward vision, then will he see the Lord of the verse “Naught is like unto Him” with all his faculties just as he will also hear him with all his faculties even as one of us have said: “I am all eyes when He appears before me. Even as when He converses with me, I am all ears.” See Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 171.

⁵³² Q. 53:42.

vision, and some express this by calling it the 'Universal Tree'. The point of similarity between the Lote-tree and what we have mentioned is that the tree is composed of three elements: thorns, fruits and leaves as all beings are also divided into three classes⁵³³. *And God strikes parables unto man that perhaps they may contemplate*⁵³⁴

I say, moreover, that this vision was stronger than the one before it, because of all the many singular elements it combined and brought together. It was too strong to appear unto other than Muḥammad except by means of inheritance (as in the saying of the Prophet), "The sages (*ulamā*) are the heirs of the Prophets,"⁵³⁵ and this is why God says:

*Near it is the Garden of the Ultimate.*⁵³⁶

This means the ultimate end of the experiential Knowledge (gnosis) of God which is possible; when a person reaches it, the lights of the divine Presence envelop him, nay, they envelop the entire world so that he does not see anything except that he sees God in it as previously mentioned in the *ḥadīth*, and this is found in the words of the next verse:

*When there enshrouded the Lote-tree, that which enshrouds.*⁵³⁷

Meaning, it enveloped it and covered it and everything was enshrouded by the Divine Lights, until all existence whatever their rank, whether majestic or lowly, basking in the glow of the light of God's Names (*asmā'*) and Qualities (*sifāt*);⁵³⁸ "Allah is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth."⁵³⁹ Due to this

⁵³³ This is in reference to the verse in sūrah al-Wāqī'a that speaks of the three classes of people, "the foremost, the people of the right and the people of the left." See Martin Lings, *A Return To The Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), p. 64.

⁵³⁴ Q. 14:25.

⁵³⁵ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Abū 'Īsā Al-Tirmidhi. Edited by Ibrāhīm 'Aṭwah 'Iwad. Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī (Second Edition 1975) Ḥadīth No 2682 Vol. 5 Pg.49

⁵³⁶ Q. 53:15.

⁵³⁷ Q. 53:16.

⁵³⁸ According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, this is what God does with all the creation in the eyes of the Gnostic when He shows His Magnificence to him.

⁵³⁹ Q. 24:35; encompassing the whole creation with the Lights of Witnessing.

second Divine Manifestation referred to in the verse as the “other descent” (*nazlatan ukhrā*) did Muḥammad become firm in the external vision of the eye in addition to what happened to him regarding the vision of the heart. And his outward vision at this point became the very source of his inward vision.’⁵⁴⁰

And it is for this reason that God most High praised him when He says:

*The sight (of the Prophet) did not swerve nor did it transgress (its limits).*⁵⁴¹

Meaning, the outer eye (*baṣar*) wavered not from that which the inner eye (*baṣīra*) saw, and the words (*mā ṭa ghā*) mean “he did not transgress” nor did he turn away from wherever the real (*al-ḥaqq*) manifested itself, but rather paid full attention to it. The Prophet knew his Lord better than anyone, and he never missed any of His manifestations (*tajalliyāt*), no matter how it appeared or occurred. It is obtained from all this that the two visions (inner and outer) was combined for Muḥammad. First God says,

*The heart lied not as to what it saw.*⁵⁴²

And in the second verse, *The sight of Muḥammad wavered not nor did it transgress.*⁵⁴³ And in this respect Muḥammad said: "I saw my Lord with my eye (*baṣar*), and with my heart (*baṣīra*)."⁵⁴⁴ Know that the outward eye is not able to see the real (*al-ḥaqq*), unless its sight reflects that of the inward eye (*baṣā-ir*) just as the outer vision of the Prophet was reversed until his outer and inner vision became one.

The *mufassir* Ismāil Ḥaqqi al-Barūsawi of *'Rūḥ al-Bayān* says in citing *al-Ta'wīlāt al-Najmiyah*, that, " the Prophet's inner eye was united with his outer eye until he saw with his inner eye (*baṣīrah*) the inwardness of the Real in

⁵⁴⁰ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 63]

⁵⁴¹ Q. 53:17.

⁵⁴² Q. 53:11

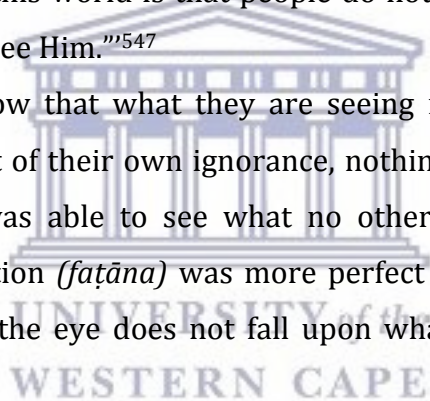
⁵⁴³ Q. 53:17

⁵⁴⁴ Narrated in *Saḥīḥ Muslim* by Tirmidhi, *ḥadīth* no. 245

the spiritual world (*malakūt*), he was able to witness the Inner of the Real (*bāṭin al-ḥaqq*) in view of God's name, The inward Hidden, (*al-Bāṭin*) and with his outer eye (*baṣar*) in the exterior world (*al-mulk*), he was able to witness (*zāhiral-ḥaqq*) the Exterior of the Real, in view of His name (*al-Zāhir*) The Outward Manifest.⁵⁴⁵ It is obvious that the outward can only be seen by the outward, and that the inward can only be seen by the inward.⁵⁴⁶

If you were to ask why no one but the Prophet can partake of the direct vision of God in this world, although nothing can come between the eye and His outward Manifestation; and if you ask why the Prophet was singled out alone for this, "this is not because the Supreme Essence (*al-ḥaqīqa dhātiyya*) cannot be seen; rather, it is because no eye possesses the ability to see It. This is why one of the great saints said that all that prevents the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) from being seen in this world is that people do not recognize Him; they can see but they do not see Him."⁵⁴⁷

"They do not know that what they are seeing is the Real. The veil has appeared as a result of their own ignorance, nothing else.⁵⁴⁸ And the reason why the Prophet was able to see what no other could see was that his intellectual penetration (*fatāna*) was more perfect than theirs, for he knew with certitude that the eye does not fall upon what is inexistent, and thus



⁵⁴⁵ *Tafsīr Rūh al-bayān*, Ismāīl Haqqī (d. 1137) p. 223.

⁵⁴⁶ The outward eye (*baṣar*) is confined to the terrestrial world of forms, whereas the inward eye (*baṣīra*) belongs to the transcendent world of the spirit.

⁵⁴⁷ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p. 64]

⁵⁴⁸ In his oral teaching, al-'Alāwī used to paraphrase Shaykh al-Buzīdī's formulation of these truths as follows: "The Infinite or the world of the Absolute which we conceive of as being outside of us is on the contrary universal and exists within us as well as without. There is only One World, and this is It. What we look on as the sensible world, the finite world of time and space, is nothing but a conglomeration of veils which hide the Real World. These veils are our own senses: our eyes are the veils over True Sight, our ears the veils over True Hearing, and so it is with the other senses. For us to become aware of the existence of the Real World, the veils of the senses must be drawn aside... What remains then of man? There remains a faint gleam which appears to him as the lucidity of his consciousness... There is a perfect continuity between this gleam and the Great Light of the Infinite World, and once this continuity has been grasped our consciousness can, by means of prayer, flow forth and spread out as it were into the Infinite and become One with It, so that man comes to realize that the Infinite alone is, and that he, the humanly conscious, exists only as a veil. Once this state has been realized, all the Lights of Infinite Life may penetrate the soul of the Sufi, and make him participate in the Divine Life". See Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p.136.

whatever the eyes fall upon must have the Real manifested in it,⁵⁴⁹ for in themselves all things are nothingness. Because of this, he was able to partake of the vision of the eye (*al-ru'yā al-baṣariyya*); and he who has the slightest share of the prophetic penetration will not be denied his own share of God's manifest presence in all things (*al-kā'ināt*).⁵⁵⁰

Then Shaykh al-'Alāwī says: "the matter regarding the vision of the heart is closer in relation to the real (*al-ḥaqq*) unlike the vision of the outer eye (*al-baṣar*) for which the combination of singularities and diverse secrets are impossible except when the universe (*al-kawn*) is covered, or enveloped, by the divine Lights of *Tawḥīd*, lit by a tree, then... "Wherever you may turn, there is the Face of God",⁵⁵¹ and for the one who has obtained it, it is the ultimate goal for him, and this is what the verse alludes to regarding the Prophet.⁵⁵²

*Certainly he saw of all the signs of his Lord, the Greatest.*⁵⁵³

'Meaning, he saw among the signs of his Lord, the greatest sign, and the word (*kubrā*) the 'Greatest'⁵⁵⁴ is an adjective describing a noun that is hidden. This verse is different to the verse mentioned in *Sūrah al-Nisā*, *That*

⁵⁴⁹ Mawlay Darqāwī once said, "Show me where is the world of the forms (*al-mulk*); I will show you there too is the world of the spirit (*al-malakūt*), show me where is the world of the bodies; I will show you there too is the world of the souls (*al-arwāḥ*). (Mawlay al-Arabi ad-Darqāwī, Letters from a Sufi Master)

⁵⁵⁰ Similar to this meaning is the aphorism of Ibn 'Atā illah, "There is a light wherewith He unveils for you His created things (*al-kā'ināt*)" Ibn 'Atā Illah, *Sufi Aphorisms*,- hikam no. 153.

⁵⁵¹ Q. 2:115. See also Q. 24:25; the 'tree' referred to here is the tree of God's Light that is neither of the East nor the West (the tree of 'where so ever you turn') meaning the tree of Gnosis.

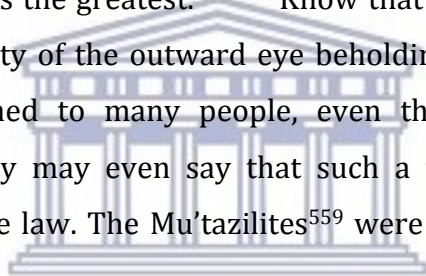
⁵⁵² *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 64]

⁵⁵³ Q. 53:18.

⁵⁵⁴ Here Shaykh al-'Alāwī presents a much stronger argument hermeneutically speaking, regarding the Prophet's vision of his Lord on the night of *mi'rāj* than the argument of those who maintain that the Prophet had seen the angel Gabriel and not his Lord. The word '*kubrā*' (greatest) certainly indicates something of the extraordinary, transcending all created beings. This witnessing (of the Prophet) is in relation to the Light of the divine Essence (*dhāt*), which transcends the witnessing of the divine names (*al-asmā*) and the divine attributes (*as-ṣifāt*), a witnessing that is already attributed to the spiritual state of the Prophet. Having witnessed one of God's created beings would certainly not compare to the ultimate sign (*kubrā*), for created beings are one of His many signs and not the ultimate Sign which would only be the Beloved Himself.

We might show him of Our signs,⁵⁵⁵ because of its specification in the word the 'Greatest' (*kubrā*) and what we can also derive from this expression of '*kubrā*' is that it is not related to created beings nor is it of the manifestations of the divine Names (*al-asmā*) and Attributes (*al-ṣifāt*); it but only goes back to the 'witnessing' of the Lights of Divine Essence, this is why it was restricted to (*al-kubrā*). This state was surely greater than all the other states for the Prophet, and regarding this state he (peace and blessings upon him) said, "I have a (special) time with my Lord, in which He encompasses no one else but me"⁵⁵⁶ and what also relates to this is the saying of the Prophet, "O God increase my amazement in You".⁵⁵⁷

If this sign was other than the vision, it would have had to be greater than the vision. Since God calls it the Greatest: and indeed: "The *Riḍwān* (goodly acceptance) of God is the greatest."⁵⁵⁸ Know that what we have spoken of, namely the possibility of the outward eye beholding the real (*al-ḥaqq*), will seem very far-fetched to many people, even those who claim to have knowledge, and they may even say that such a thing is impossible both rationally and by the law. The Mu'tazilites⁵⁵⁹ were of this opinion, and they



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⁵⁵⁵ Q. 17:1.

⁵⁵⁶ *Kashf al-Khafā' wa muzīl al-Ilbās 'ammā ishtahara min al-aḥādīth 'alā alsinat al-nās. Ismā'il b. Muḥammad al-'Ajlūnī* Edited by. 'Abbās Aḥmad Ṣāqar and Aḥmad 'Abd al-Jawād. Print: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī. Beirut (Second Edition 1353 A.H.) Ḥadīth No.2159 Vol. 2 Pg.173

⁵⁵⁷ This prayer of the Prophet is mentioned in the *munājāt* of al-'Alāwī' in which he makes it his prayer adding something before it, 'And while Glorifying You O God, You make me amazed in you---O God increase our amazement in You' (*Al-Munājāt*, p. 75.

⁵⁵⁸ Q. 3:15.

⁵⁵⁹ Mu'tazila is a rationalist school of Islamic theology that flourished in the cities of Baṣra and Baghdad during the 8th to 10th centuries. Since the beginning of the school, Mu'tazilites have been rejected and persecuted by Sunni Muslims, but, to this day, Mu'tazila theology and teachings are considered to be logical and authoritative from the Zaid branch of Shia Islam. The adherents of the Mu'tazili school, known as Mu'tazilites, are best known for denying the status of the Qur'ān as uncreated and co-eternal with God, asserting that if the Qur'ān is the word of God, He logically must have preceded His own speech. The philosophical speculation of the Mu'tazilites centered on the concepts of divine justice and divine unity. The school worked to resolve the theological "problem of evil": how to reconcile the justice of an all-powerful God with the reality of evil in the world. It believed that since God is just and wise, He cannot command what is contrary to reason or act with disregard for the welfare of His creatures.

Mu'tazilites believed that good and evil were not determined by revealed scripture or interpretation of scripture, but they were rational categories that "could be established through unaided reason, because knowledge was derived from reason, reason was the "final arbiter" in distinguishing right from wrong.

were satisfied that this was necessary because of the consideration that for the eye to see something, this thing must be confined to a physical space. Yet it did not occur to them that this in truth would deny that God's sight can fall upon created beings, because in doing so His sight would be confined to the location of the object seen. And we would thus have to conclude that God has no perception. How far exalted is He above this. Success here lies with those who give this matter over to those who truly understand it, for it is too mysterious for every mind to comprehend. God says, "Do not concern yourself with that of which you have no knowledge, for verily the hearing, the sight and the heart, all will be questioned (on that day)."⁵⁶⁰ So the sight (*baṣar*) becomes questionable whenever it falls upon anything but God. Likewise the hearing becomes questionable when it hears anything from anyone but God, and so does the heart when it gives thought to anyone but God.

"If but for a forgetful moment, desire for any but You occurred to my mind, I would charge myself with apostasy."

God condemns those whose eyes have fallen upon other than God Most High, and God speaks about them reproachfully,

Have you then seen al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā and Manāt,⁵⁶¹ the third, the other?⁵⁶²

Meaning, you consider it far-fetched and deny what Muḥammad experienced regarding the unveiling of the Essence of Realities (*ḥaqā-iq*) which is most deserving for the eye to behold, than anything else, so why don't you cast blame upon yourselves for what has happened to your eyes;

The Mu'tazilite school of Kalām considered the injunctions of God to be accessible to rational thought and inquiry and that reason, not "sacred precedent", is the effective means to determine what is just and religiously obligatory. The movement emerged during the Umayyad Caliphate. After the 10th century, the movement declined. It is viewed as heretical by some scholars in modern mainstream Islamic theology for its tendency to deny the Qur'ān being eternal.

⁵⁶⁰ Q. 43:36.

⁵⁶¹ *Al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt* were among the main idols of Quraish. See Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 15

⁵⁶² Q. 53:19-20.

and the attachment of your desires to the created beings⁵⁶³ (*al-mukawwināt*) which in reality has no existence? These are but only false images and imaginary forms that say to the intelligent person, through their very states: "We are but only a trial, so do not disbelieve!"⁵⁶⁴

Is it not strange that you occupy yourselves with it? You relied and believed in it until you made from them gods, and your gaze is fixed upon them and you come to see *al-Lāt* and *al-'Uzzā* and *Manāt* the other third and many other things, which contradicts the Oneness of the Essence, such as means (*'ilal*), causes (*asbāb*) and intermediaries (*wasā'it*).

Then your trust in yourselves was greater than your trust in God, When He says,

*Is the male for you and for Him the females, this indeed is a division unfair.*⁵⁶⁵

Meaning you have erred and done an injustice⁵⁶⁶ in your sharing in which case, you gave a greater share to yourselves than to God, so what share have you in the Sacred Names, and divine actions? Until error has reached its ultimate point; this means that whatever you have seen and all you have relied upon has no truth at all.

*They are but names which you have given, you and your forefathers, for which God has sent down no authority.*⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶³ Al-'Alāwī connects verse 18 with verse 19, the former alluding to Muḥammad's vision of the Real and the latter alluding to the Pagans' vision of the idols; connecting the two verses in this way is perhaps a unique approach in the realm of *tafsīr* by Shaykh al-'Alāwī.

⁵⁶⁴ Q. 2:102.

⁵⁶⁵ Q. 53:22.

⁵⁶⁶ Is it not enough that they have committed the sin of shirk (pantheism) and now they want to ascribe angels as daughters to God whilst they deem it a disgrace and a shame when their wives give birth to females, yet the males whom they value with pride and esteem they claim for themselves, they are truly the furthest away from being just and faithful to God in their trivial claims, let alone their failure in understanding the real crux of the matter which is the Divinity and Oneness of God and not to ascribe partners to Him. So how could such base minds hope to partake of the many forms of divine knowledge and unveiled mysteries?

⁵⁶⁷ Q. 53:23.

Meaning, you have no reliable proof that they have any influence on existence, or that they even partake in it.

*They follow not except mere surmise and that which the soul (nafs) desires.*⁵⁶⁸

It's a known fact that the *nafs*⁵⁶⁹ only desires what is in compliance with illusions (*al-wahmiyyāt*) because its own existence is an illusion. "And surmise does not affect the truth in any way."⁵⁷⁰

'Then I say about the *nafs*, its inborn nature is its refusal to submit even next to the truth (*al-ḥaqq*). This is why it opposes, or resists, the *tawḥīd* that

⁵⁶⁸In his book, *al-Mawād al-Ghaithiyya*, al-'Alāwī comments on one of the *ḥikams* (aphorisms) of Shaykh Abu Madyan, who was one of the famous gnostics in Tunisia. This *ḥikam* which talks about the prisoners of the *nafs* with the explanation of al-'Alāwī is very relevant to our discussion,

"The prisoners are three, prisoner of the *nafs*, the prisoner of desire and the prisoner of passion. The one who is a prisoner of his *nafs* will have to bear all the misfortunes that will befall him because his wrong doings never stop. He is endlessly driven. What characterises the *nafs* is its demand for independence and the desire to escape from Divine Authority. It tries by every means to rule, and if it loses on one front, it does not abandon the others. The Prophet said: 'Oh Lord do not abandon me to my *nafs*, not even for a blink of an eye.' Can you not see that before entering Islam the *nafs* totally denies the existence of Divinity until it is guided and can support the weight of the recognition of Divinity? Yet, it still denies the Divine Reign upon it and will only yield to it by perseverance and training? And even if it yields to it, and becomes firm in it, and evolves in the acts, it does not abandon its demand for recompense, and it will say, 'I did this and must be recompensed. Then if you are strict with it and educate it to abandon this demand for recompense by telling it, 'Where is the sincerity (*ikhlas*)?' It will forego the recompense, but it will not leave the vision of seeing itself as being the one who acts until you tell it, 'Where is the Unicity (*Tawḥīd*)', and, 'where is your understanding of the Divine word?' 'And God created you and your actions' (Q. 37:96). Then it abandons the action but does not abandon its existence, and it says, 'I exist.' Even if there remains only the illusion of an image to which it hangs and is attached, it does not accept its annihilation. Then if God bestows upon him His favor of annihilation and manifests Himself in all His Glory, it is obliged to disappear exhausted and to be effaced from the landscape of existence. It will then find repose in not claiming existence because the Real has taken its place. However, after this turning, it will say, 'My speech is by God. I acknowledge it without vanity.' Then there only remains the speech. In conclusion the wrong doings of the *nafs* are greater than one can imagine, and its categories are innumerable. May God preserve us from its harm." Al-'Alāwī, *al-Mawād al-Ghaythiyya*, v. one p. 20.

⁵⁶⁹ Al-'Alāwī says, "What prevents man from seeing the Divine Light and what has veiled this light is the existence of the *nafs* because the *nafs* is only darkness. So where is its existence in the realm of, "God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth"?"

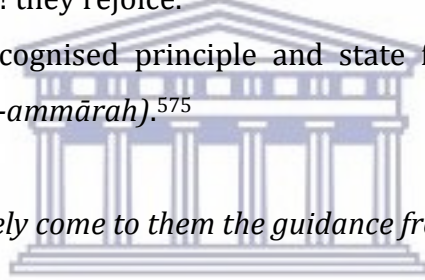
⁵⁷⁰ Q. 53:28.

necessitates its annihilation, in every possible way. Even if it were to confirm the existence of causes and effects, or even in a figurative sense-- and this is due to its envy, no matter how much it is shown of the pure *tawḥīd* and that creation in reality has no real existence, and that God Most High is the Unique One in existence, in His Essence (*dhāt*), Attributes (*ṣifāt*), and deeds (*afʿāl*), there is nothing beside Him (in existence).

When the *nafs* hears this, it retreats in rejection saying; "We have not heard this from our forefathers of old."⁵⁷¹ In these words is what obliterates its traces from the plane of existence,⁵⁷² and it is for this reason that it shudders at the mere mentioning of the Pure Unity⁵⁷³ (*tawḥīd al-maḥḍ*). "When God is mentioned in His Unity (Oneness) the hearts of those who do not believe in the hereafter feel unhappy, and when anything else beside Him is mentioned then lo! they rejoice."⁵⁷⁴

This is a well-recognised principle and state found in every soul that 'enjoins evil' (*nafs al-ammārah*).⁵⁷⁵

*And there has surely come to them the guidance from their Lord.*⁵⁷⁶



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⁵⁷¹ Q. 23:24.

⁵⁷² This is because the doctrine of *tawḥīd al-maḥḍ* compels one to ascribe existence to none other but God, for any existence alongside Him would imply duality which would be the existence of the self and the existence of the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*). The following is an excerpt from the *mināḥ al-quddūsiyya* of al-'Alāwī, "Claiming existence for oneself in the path of the great gnostics (*al-qawm*) is considered an uncomparable sin (*kabīra*). It is said that once Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (the great woman saint of Islam) had met with some of the gnostics and she asked one of them about his state to which he replied, 'I have never committed one sin since the time God created me.' She said, 'Woe to you my son, your existence is a sin with which no other sin can be compared!' So seek then my brother, the path of the *muwaḥidīn* (those who ascribe pure unity to God) and do not confirm any existence other than God, for indeed, if any of the great gnostics (*al-qawm*) asserts existence to himself then he has committed the sin of shirk with God and far be they from that! But in the case of the general masses ('*awām*) there is no escape for them except that they confirm existence to other than God. (*al-mināḥ*, p. 14)

⁵⁷³ The Pure Unity here is in reference to the Sufi doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, and according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, the reason why the *nafs* rejects this doctrine of *tawḥīd al-maḥḍ* is because of the fear of giving up its own existence in the presence of the Real because the *nafs* is jealously protective of its own existence.

⁵⁷⁴ Q. 39:45.

⁵⁷⁵ Reference to the three stations of the soul in Islamic thought: the 'soul which enjoins evil' (*nafs al-ammāra*), the 'self-reproaching soul' (*nafs al-lawwāma*), and the 'soul at peace' (*nafs al-mutma'inna*). See R. A Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), p.110.

⁵⁷⁶ Q. 53:23.

But in reality, only for the one who wants to be guided. *And how many a sign in the Heavens and in the Earth passes them by, whilst they turn away from it.*⁵⁷⁷

The divine scriptures and prophetic narrations contain many allusions to the doctrine of the pure and absolute *tawhīd*, but instead some souls (*nufūs*) prefer to remain attached to the earth and adhere to notions of multiplicity. Is it not clear in the words of God; "*Wherever you may turn there is the Face of God*".⁵⁷⁸ And in His saying; "He is the First and the Last, He is the Outward Manifest and the Inward Hidden".⁵⁷⁹ And that which obliterates the traces of all otherness, like in the verse, "See by Him and hear by Him!"⁵⁸⁰ And the verse: *And God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.*⁵⁸¹

The Prophet said in a *ḥadīth*, "If you were to descend on a rope to the seventh level of the earth you would arrive towards God." And other sayings, all of which give us a sense of how God encompasses all things in their very essences; there is only He and nothing else. And this is the manner in which the Messengers and Prophets would allude to the doctrine of the pure Unity in such a way as could be comprehended by those who heard them; *Among them are those who have wronged (oppressed) their soul (nafs), and among them are those who adopt the middle course and among them are those who have excelled in virtue (goodness) by the permission of God.*⁵⁸² This, so that the *nafs* cannot say, "*no bringer of good news (bashīr) has come to us*",⁵⁸³ meaning no bringer of good news has come to tell us about the special station of knowledge. *And God possesses the ultimate evidence against this.*⁵⁸⁴ Amongst

⁵⁷⁷ Q. 39:45.

⁵⁷⁸ Q. 2:115.

⁵⁷⁹ Q. 57:3.

⁵⁸⁰ Q; 18:26; this translation attempts to capture al-'Alāwī's esoteric interpretation of the words, "*Abṣir bihī wa asmi*" (See by Him and hear by Him!), which is the literal and direct translation of the verse, though popularly translated by most exegetes as "How well He hears and sees!"

⁵⁸¹ Q. 24:26; this verse and the four preceding verses are mentioned as proof of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*

⁵⁸² Q. 35:32.

⁵⁸³ Q. 5:19.

⁵⁸⁴ Q. 6:149.

this is the proof of Prophet Abraham toward his people when he saw the star and said "*This is my Lord*" (*hādhā rabbī*).⁵⁸⁵ Yet he found that the people's hearts were not ready to receive these pure truths. So God consoled him and bade him not to grieve for the shortcomings of his people by saying to Abraham, "*We raise (elevate) the degrees of whomsoever We will*".⁵⁸⁶ And one of the Gnostics said regarding this:

‘Other things than You appeared to the eye That delighted in You, and I saw naught but You; Just as, before me, the Friend (*al-khalīl*)⁵⁸⁷ looked above and turned his eyes to the firmament's stars’.

There is not a single caller to God by His leave (i.e. the Messengers and the spiritual masters) except that they strive painstakingly in guiding and showing the way towards God to give proof of His existence, so that people have no complaint to raise with God once the messengers are gone.⁵⁸⁸

‘To make reference to some of this: It is found in the Book of Genesis, that Saydnā Ya'qūb (Jacob) said.

"Verily God the controller of everything appeared to me at *lūz* in the land of Canaan. And similar to this is what appeared in the Book of Exodus regarding Sayyidnā Mūsā (Moses) who said; "My Lord appeared to me in the flame of the fire." This is also in reference to the verse in the Qur'ān "Verily, beyond all doubt I have seen a fire".⁵⁸⁹

In the New Testament (*Injīl*) there is so much regarding this matter, it's not possible to convey or transmit everything. And there is plenty in the *Sunnah* too. We did not mention this except that we should know that there is reference to earlier and later scholars aiming at what lies beyond the form of things and that they were not created in vain, and that they have an ample share of God's Manifestation in them or through them. We must not restrict things to their outward appearances only; for if Heaven remained only Heaven and the Earth remained only Earth, meaning if there was nothing

⁵⁸⁵ Q. 6:76.

⁵⁸⁶ Q. 6:83.

⁵⁸⁷ *Al-Khalīl* or *Khalīlullah* (the Friend or the Friend of God) is one of Abraham's names in Islam.

⁵⁸⁸ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 69]

⁵⁸⁹ Q. 20:10.

more than that and if they were empty of any precious revelation then God Most High would not have praised Abraham in 'His words; *And thus have We shown Abraham, the Kingdom of the Heavens and the Earth, so that he may be of those who have the certitude.*⁵⁹⁰

We know that in the *zāwiyas* there are secrets hidden, and that which points, or alludes to this, are the words of God in the Qur'ān. *Say, Behold what is in the Heavens and the Earth.*⁵⁹¹ This verse and the like of it is what guides towards the beneficial knowledge, and God Most High is the One who takes charge over every soul (*nafs*) as to what it has earned. One of the great saintly scholars of our time has said, "If you wish to rise above the level of those who require proofs (*dalīl*) and evidence (*burhān*) of God, then repeat frequently the words, 'Say He takes charge over every soul as to what it has earned'⁵⁹² And ask yourself if you can find anyone else who stands firm, self-sufficient and unchanging. You will find only people who are dying and being renewed at every moment. And once you have seen with your own eyes, there is no longer any need for proofs (*dalīl*) and evidence (*burhān*"); "He is the First and the last, the Outward (Manifest) and the Inward (Hidden)"⁵⁹³ at all times and stages.

"God was, and there was nothing alongside Him, and He is now as He was".⁵⁹⁴ Such is the case with those who have attained to the knowledge of God (*al-'ulamā billāh*), every allusion (*ishāra*) made by those who possess intimate knowledge of God contains guidance to the highest levels of spiritual excellence. "But God guides whomsoever He wills"⁵⁹⁵ Since God knew that the spiritual guide (*murshid*) is by nature accustomed to the desire in guiding all

⁵⁹⁰ Q. 6:75.

⁵⁹¹ Q. 10:101; "He has permitted you to reflect what is in created beings, but has not allowed you to stop at the self-same creatures. Thus, with His words, "Behold what is *in* the Heavens", He opened up the door of instruction for you. But He did not say, "Behold the Heavens" so as not to lead you to the mere existence of bodies. A commentary on the verse by Ibn 'Ata Illah, *Sufi Aphorisms*, translated by Victor Danner (Netherlands: Leiden E. J. Brill, 1978), p. 44.

⁵⁹² Q. 13:33.

⁵⁹³ Q. 57:3.

⁵⁹⁴ This implies the realisation that there is nothing outside of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). This is a saying widely circulated amongst the Sufis and is indicative of the absoluteness of the Real in Itself, without associates. Danner, *The Book of Wisdom*, p. 55.

⁵⁹⁵ Q. 22:16.

of creation to God, and particularly in the case of Muḥammad with his *ummah*, God wanted to awaken the attention of that noble rank to that which relates to the Divine Will and the hidden matters predestined, so that he, the guide, should not be grieved by the cause of what may contradict or oppose his desire; so God tells him,

*Or shall man have whatever he desires?*⁵⁹⁶

Meaning, no man whoever he may be, shall have everything he desires except what is in agreement with the Divine Decree.⁵⁹⁷ So do not let your desire and eagerness to guide others, O spiritual guide, obstruct your sincere resignation to the will of God; otherwise, as He says, *If you are able, then seek a tunnel through the earth or a staircase into the Heavens, so that you may bring them a sign. And if God willed He could have gathered them all to guidance.*⁵⁹⁸ But the matter is that He did not will it as such. And if He were to gather them all to guidance, this would have contradicted the supreme wisdom which dictates, "Some must attain to Paradise, whilst others must be condemned to the Fire",⁵⁹⁹ [Q. 42:7] also derived from the words of God,

*And to God belong the Last and the First.*⁶⁰⁰

Both abodes⁶⁰¹ belong to God Most High, and He chooses what to do. Of His complete concern was in consoling Muḥammad, lest he be overcome by grief and sadness which could affect his inner spiritual self (*bāṭin*) if his

⁵⁹⁶ Q. 53:24.

⁵⁹⁷ According to al-'Alawī the cause of revelation (*sabab nuzūl*) for this verse was that the Prophet had a desire that if he were to read the *Chapter of The Star* to the idolaters of Makkah the doctrine of *tawḥīd* would eradicate all apostasy and they would all become believers. His desire intensified when the idolaters prostrated together with the believers at the recitation of the final verse of this chapter which is: "Prostrate yourself to God and worship Him" (Q.53:62), but then again, this was not the will of God. See *A'dhab al-Manāhil*, p.48

⁵⁹⁸ Q. 6:35.

⁵⁹⁹ Q. 42:7.

⁶⁰⁰ Q. 53:25.

⁶⁰¹ The life of this world and the hereafter.

people were to continue treating him harshly and cruelly by refusing to follow him, despite all the kindness he offered them, such as guidance, compassion and concern to lead them to the Truth both privately and publicly. He continued to do so despite the divine cautions which came to him, telling him not to be so severely concerned with this matter: "You cannot give guidance to (all) those whom you love, but it is God Who guides whomsoever He wills",⁶⁰² and, "It is not befitting for the Prophet and the believers with him that they should seek forgiveness for the idolaters (*mushrikīn*) even if they were next of kin",⁶⁰³ and, "It is the same for them whether you ask (pray) for their sins to be forgiven or not",⁶⁰⁴ and, "You have no say in the matter."⁶⁰⁵ Other verses beside these which can also be heartbreaking.⁶⁰⁶

The Prophet could perhaps have blamed himself and see all of this as a shortcoming on his part that the many forms of guidance which he offered his people was not heeded. God then says to him offering consolation and encouragement,

*And how many angels there are in the Heavens whose intercession will be of no avail to them.*⁶⁰⁷

However, in the same way, whatever happens to you is no reproach to your position O Muḥammad, nor to those intercessors beside you. Intercession only comes with what is in conformity with the Divine Will, which is found in the following part of the verse.

*Except after God has given leave for whom He wills and is pleased with*⁶⁰⁸,

Meaning no creation can have any influence over this matter nor intercede for anyone except after the Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) has given leave for whom

⁶⁰² Q. 28:56.

⁶⁰³ Q. 9:113.

⁶⁰⁴ Q. 63:6.

⁶⁰⁵ Q. 3:128.

⁶⁰⁶ Lubāb al-‘ilm, [p. 73]

⁶⁰⁷ Q. 53:26.

⁶⁰⁸ Q. 53:26.

He wills and among whom He wills. Based on this, it means intercession is only from God, not anyone else;

"Whoever obeys the Messenger has indeed obeyed God and whosoever turns his back --- We have not sent you to be a guardian over them",⁶⁰⁹ and, "Verily those who have made the pledge with you (O Muḥammad) have indeed made their pledge with God."⁶¹⁰ This means no one has an influence on intercession except God, despite the presence of those who make the intercession. It is all in the hands of God. Yet He may decide to manifest His overwhelming Grace, Mercy and Compassion through whosoever He wills, as He did through Muḥammad,⁶¹¹ who thus stood opposed to the divine wrath in this life, and will so stand in the hereafter.

It was the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) Who opposed Himself, through Himself, which is exactly what the divine Names (*al-asmā'*) and divine Qualities (*al-ṣifāt*) necessitate, for everything is governed by this. This is why the Prophet said, "I seek refuge with Your *Riḍā* from Your anger, and I seek refuge in You from You". And this expresses the ultimate perception of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) as both the Subject and Object in every element of pleasure and wrath, and yet it is too transcendent a concept for most minds to grasp, thus, do not despair, O Prophet if they are not able to see these things, whilst you are.

*Verily those who do not believe in the Hereafter have named the angels by female names.*⁶¹²

So how could such base minds hope to partake of the many forms of divine knowledge and unveiled mysteries, when they harbour such fanciful delusions, of which they cannot be rid? Even to the present day, you may find those who seek to utilise such means of drawing nigh to God, imagining that

⁶⁰⁹ Q. 4:80.

⁶¹⁰ Q. 48:80.

⁶¹¹ It was Muḥammad's overflowing mercy that sometimes made him forget the Absolute Will of God and His divine decree of justice, and in reference to this, Shaykh Adda bin Tunis personifies the Muḥammadan mercy in a poem: "O Mercy sent in the form of Ahmad (*ya raḥmatan unzilāt fī sūratī Ahmada*)" *Dīwan*, (Mustaghānim: al-Matba'a al-'Alāwīyya, 1993), p.37.

⁶¹² Q. 53:27.

they are fortunate indeed. They argue about God without having knowledge enough to do so, and they neither listen to any counsel nor heed any caution.

*They have thereof no knowledge, except that they follow mere surmise, and indeed surmise is of no avail against the truth.*⁶¹³

In short, it's the veil that prevents them from the realities (*haqā'iq*) as it were.⁶¹⁴

'So all those in pursuit who are not of the people of *yaqīn* (certitude) and illumination (*nūr*), they have no perception of God's Knowledge, they but follow mere surmise; this is why sometimes their faith (*īmān*) is strong and sometimes it weakens and fluctuates, and as a result they do not know what situation they're in because of their inability to arrive at the reality and essence of things, unlike the gnostics, who have attained the Knowledge of God. Through their knowledge they know the essence of things,⁶¹⁵ and this is because they have "entered the houses through the doors".⁶¹⁶ Until He unveils to them the total realities of the Essence in which all Names (*asmā*) and Qualities (*ṣifāt*) are gathered, and they know Him in a way which behooves His majesty, and their knowledge is the fruit of unveiling (*'ayān*) and direct vision (*mukāshafa*), not proofs and arguments.⁶¹⁷ It is they who

⁶¹³ Q. 53:28.

⁶¹⁴ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 75]

⁶¹⁵ In theory, the gnostics added an esoteric dimension to their interpretation in their approach of *ta'wīl* based Qur'ānic hermeneutics which deals with the concept of mystical unveiling (*kashf*) where mystical and spiritual experience of the exegete could help him reveal the secret layers and meanings of Qur'ānic verses. *Kashf* and *ma'rifa* are extra dimensions added to the Sufi hermeneutic approach of the Qur'ān (perhaps to use Gardamer's expression, 'a fusion of horizons') The Sufi maxim, according to the great esoteric exegete, Muḥyidīn ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240): "He who knows his own self knows his Lord," can be expanded to say that he who knows his own self comes to know his Lord's speech i.e. the Qur'ān. Hermeneutically speaking, according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī, knowledge of scripture is contingent upon knowledge of the self.

⁶¹⁶ Q. 2:189; the esoteric meaning of this is that gnostics have arrived to God through God, since, "Gnosis takes its departure with the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) in Himself, not with the creation (*al-khalq*), it therefore works downwards to the world, not upwards from the world to God, as would be the case for the theologians and philosophers and others, who argue from the imperfection of things to the perfection of God, from multiplicity to the Divine Unity". Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, p. 28.

⁶¹⁷ An allusion to the contrast between the gnosis of the Sufi and the rational belief of the theologian made by Shaykh al-'Alāwī

can truly be said to possess 'knowledge' because knowledge means to possess the object as it truly is, beyond all veils which might cover it. They are witnesses to God's Oneness just as He is a witness to this Himself; "God bears witness⁶¹⁸ that there is no god but He, He and the Angels and those endowed with knowledge." The one who has not arrived to their level, or station, cannot truly be described as a possessor of knowledge, meaning it's not befitting for him to be considered a possessor of divine knowledge (*'ālim billāh*), whilst he could still perhaps be called a possessor of the knowledge of God's laws (*'ālim bi aḥkām Allah*).

The honour of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) is in accordance with the honor of the Known (*al-ma'lūm*). And anyone who does not pay attention to what lies beyond the creation of everlasting secrets and permanent Lights, his heart will not be safe from devilish insinuations, causing doubt, misgivings and suspicion, considering that surmise (*ẓann*) is the highest of all these uncertainties, it avails naught against certitude, as mentioned by God in the next verse;

*And indeed surmise is of no avail against the truth.*⁶¹⁹

What is most strange and amazing is that people who exist in this state desire not to be removed from it, despite the doubts and misgivings they suffer on its account. The cause of all this is that they have turned away from God, and have not strived to give themselves over entirely to the divine Essence, as they should, preferring it to everything else. Since they have done the opposite, replacing the spiritual with the material, and the heart with the ego (*nafs*), they must be rejected, as the Almighty now says to His Prophet:⁶²⁰

*So turn away from whoever turns his back from Our Remembrance (dhikr) and whose desire is only the life of this world,*⁶²¹

⁶¹⁸ Q. 3:18; According to Shaykh al-'Alāwī the word 'witness' in this verse refers to the witnessing (*mushāhada*) of the divine Presence which is the state of the gnostic.

⁶¹⁹ Q. 3:19.

⁶²⁰ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 77]

⁶²¹ Q. 53:29.

‘Meaning, turn your entire being away from him with all your strength. Don't attach your heart to the hope of bringing him out of the state which he is in. The Way is made easy for each to become what he was created to become. “So whether you admonish them or not, they will not believe. Admonish only the one who follows the Dhikr (remembrance)”,⁶²² not the one who turns away from it and “takes his passion to be his god,⁶²³ especially those whose hearts are completely immersed in the love of this world, and pre-occupied by it. There is no way to guide such a person, for he is utterly annihilated and extinguished in his beloved and oblivious of all else but his goal, which is called the world.

“And the one who loves something is enslaved to it, and thus naturally, he neither hears nor sees anything but it; and he looks with contempt at all those who follow any path other than his, and seek any other than that which he seeks”. You have not loved anything without being its slave, but He does not want you to become someone else's slave.”⁶²⁴

The Shaykh continues: We have encountered many people whose hearts have been seized by the love of this world, and we have found them to be mere images with no meaning. “They have hearts with which they do not understand they have ears with which they do not hear”,⁶²⁵ they say, “We hear, yet they hear not”.⁶²⁶ “Their hearts are heedless”,⁶²⁷ so it appeared to me that they are images who were created as an example, a lesson to be learnt from, “So take note you who possess the vision and (insight)”.⁶²⁸ “They are like cattle, nay! They are worse, those are the heedless ones.”⁶²⁹ When the revelation exaggerated in diminishing the one who fills this description it

⁶²² Q. 26:10-11. It must not be forgotten that “remembrance of God is greater (than the ritual prayer)” (Q. 29:45). One of the meanings of this key passage is that turning towards the inner centre is ‘greater’ than turning towards the outer center. The ideal is for the two to be simultaneous inasmuch as the outward turning was above all, instituted for the sake of the inward turning. See Lings, *What is Sufism?*, p. 36.

⁶²³ Q. 45:22.

⁶²⁴ Danner, *Hikam Ibn ‘Atā Illah*, p. 53.

⁶²⁵ Q. 22:46.

⁶²⁶ Q. 8:21.

⁶²⁷ Q. 21:3.

⁶²⁸ Q. 59:2.

⁶²⁹ Q. 7:179.

takes the listener's attention toward moderation, so that he does not think too badly of his fellow creatures and thus lose his sense of forbearance and his awareness of the divine Decree; therefore God says,

*Such is their share of knowledge.*⁶³⁰

It is therefore incumbent upon the one who has contemplative vision (*baṣīra*) that he should not look at the creation in their different levels except with an eye that would excuse them for that which they follow. The meaning of this is that we see their situation and what they follow as part of the Divine Wisdom. The situation is that everything in existence, even a mosquito, has a Divine purpose. This is the vision of God's elite servants among the people of *tawhīd*. It is said by one of them.

There is no futility and the creation was not created in vain,
Even if their deeds seem void of purpose;
The Names of God are manifest in their affairs,
The Qualities of the Essence thus made plain;
He holds them in His two grasps, here and there:
A grasp of blessing and a grasp of damnation
It is thus; the soul may recognise it, or may not
Though the Criterion (*Furqān*⁶³¹) be read to it every morning.⁶³²
As if God is saying to His Prophet in the verse:

"Turn, then, from the one who turns away from Our *dhikr* (remembrance)."⁶³³

And do not oppose or avoid what your heart is experiencing, lest the secret of the Divine Decree escapes you.⁶³⁴

'A man cannot realise complete submission (*taslīm*) to the Divine Will until he discovers the true nature of predestination (*qadā'*) and fate (*qadar*).

⁶³⁰ Q. 53:30

⁶³¹ *Al-Furqān*, another name for the Qur'ān.

⁶³² Ibn al-Fārid in his *Tā'iyya*

⁶³³ Q. 58:29

⁶³⁴ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p.77]

Otherwise, despite his best efforts, his mind will not be able to perceive guidance with the presence of error, nor purity with the presence of impurity; and if one element of this is made clear to him, another will be beyond him. The only way he will move past this is to see how all events are enveloped by the measure of fate.⁶³⁵ When he does this, he will retain not even the slightest doubt in the manifestations of the Divine Will, and he will see everything in the best light and the most perfect way. Such wisdom is too precious to be clear to everyone, and understood by everyone, and only the innermost elite of those who affirm the Divine Unity can hope to discover such truths.

Moreover, the inner states of the spiritual elite, their secret discourse with God and their means of reaching Him and being annihilated (*fanā'*) in Him, are not easy things to speak of. Anyone who wishes to discover information about them and gain knowledge of their natures, without actually following the path they have followed, is doomed only to get further and further away from God. This still continues today; there are people who seek out information about them and argue about their intentions, as someone said, "People say all kinds of things about us, making us the target of baseless surmises."

The tongues of the creation continue to see them between praise and censure and everyone speaks about them with their own opinion,⁶³⁶ and the truth is beyond all that. And what is well-known or obvious is that any person whoever he may be, it does not occur to him that arrival of the gnostics towards God is in actual fact arrival towards his self (*nafs*), nothing else. And even if the gnostic were to acknowledge this, he does so only by way of faith and blind acceptance, but the true nature of it remains a mystery to him. And as for the method, or means, this is unknown.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁵ The Arabic word for 'fate' is *qadar*, which literally means 'measure'.

⁶³⁶ Shaykh Adda Bin Tunis also alludes to this 'surmise', which many people have about the gnostics, when he says in a poem: "The one who has no knowledge of the state of the people of annihilation (*fanā'*), he will remain in denial, in doubt and consumed with grief for the rest of his life." (Al-'Alāwī, *Diwān*, p. 42.)

⁶³⁷ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 79]

'But the Qur'ān indicates this when it says: "Whoever seeks guidance, seeks it only for his 'self'⁶³⁸ (*nafs*)."⁶³⁹

The meaning of this is that the goal of the spiritual traveler (*sā'ir*) in seeking guidance is that he seeks guidance towards his own self (*nafs*), meaning seeking guidance to know his *nafs*. The one who knows his self (*nafs*) knows his Lord.⁶⁴⁰ The reason for the traveler (*al-sālik*) falling into error is because he is ignorant about himself; he is ignorant about his *nafs*, and that is taken from God's saying in the Qur'ān, "They forgot God, so God made them forget their own selves (*anfusahum*)."^{641, 642}

It is for this reason says Shaykh al-'Alāwī, that, the path that makes us arrive towards God is more subtle for the elect, let alone the general masses, despite the efforts which the spiritual guides (*murshids*) exert themselves with in explaining and clarifying the path and establishing the proofs. And when it comes to the understanding of the masses, the elusiveness of this path is multiplied over and over again, and this is why God says,

Indeed, your Lord knows best those who have strayed from His path,⁶⁴³ and He knows best those who are guided.⁶⁴⁴

For this reason has it become clear and evident to us; that which God has mentioned here of guidance (*hidāya*) and misguidance (*dalāl*) in this verse are not those with which the exoteric way is concerned, for clearly these are

⁶³⁸ Meaning, for his own sake (*li nafsi hī*); but according to Shaykh al-'Alāwī's understanding in this context, it may be interpreted as "He who is guided is guided only to himself".

⁶³⁹ Q. 10:108.

⁶⁴⁰ This is mentioned in the *al-ḥāwī lil fatāwa* of Imam Nawawī who says there is no confirmation on this as *ḥadīth* and Ibn Taymiyya says it is *mawḍū'*

⁶⁴¹ Q. 59:19; *Anfus* is the plural of the word *nafs* translated into English as both 'self' and 'soul'.

⁶⁴² In the well-known tradition it is said, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord". Similar to this is the poem of al-'Alāwī, "I went out into the world in search of You O Allah --- I started with my 'self' and then I found You O Allah". Al-'Alāwī, *Dīwan*, p.55.

⁶⁴³ The path here is in specific reference to the path of God because of its attachment to the personal pronoun 'His' Path (*sabīlihi*) and not the path towards Paradise; for the path to Paradise there is no confusion – it is straightforward and has to do with *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* (*sharī'a*), but the path towards God (*ḥaqīqa*) holds secrets kept away and this is why according to the Sufis, for this path one needs a spiritual guide. (al-'Alāwī, *lubāb al-'ilm*, p. 79)

⁶⁴⁴ Q. 53:30.

not known only to God and He has made them perfectly clear to us. Otherwise its knowledge would not have been entrusted or assigned to God for the clarification of the way, or method. This is different to the verse: "And take whatever the Messenger brings to you, and refrain from whatever he has forbidden you from."⁶⁴⁵

So it is earmarked that the meaning must be something deeper than that, something known only to God "and those firmly rooted in knowledge (*rāsikhūn fil 'ilm*)."⁶⁴⁶ Another thing which supports what we have said is that the word 'path' is ascribed to the divine pronoun 'His' path, which tells us that the path meant here is nothing other than the path of the Divine Presence. Whosoever follows this path will eventually arrive at God, and of those who follow it not, God says; "We will turn him wherever he wants to turn."⁶⁴⁷ Because of his perseverance and this path being so hidden, it requires a guide, and therefore the Almighty says; "And follow the path of the one who turns frequently to Me."⁶⁴⁸ Unlike the path towards Paradise (*Jannah*), in which there is no confusion for anyone here because of how plainly manifest the way of error is. Since the lawful (*ḥalāl*) is clear and evident and the unlawful (*ḥarām*) is clear and evident, except for the one who is overcome by his misfortune and, "Takes his passion to be his god",⁶⁴⁹ even he is well aware that he has deviated from the straight path.

As for the path that leads to that which unites one with God, it becomes obscure to the traveler, whatever the case may be, except when he has taken a guide for himself. This path is often confused with the path which leads to *Jannah*, which the seeker might choose because he surmises it to be the best of the paths which leads to the Divine Presence because of all the rewards he sees therein. "Whoever does one good deed will be rewarded tenfold."⁶⁵⁰ He then takes this path until he reaches his goal and *Jannah* embarks upon him and displays what it has within itself and then he says to the Paradise, "You

⁶⁴⁵ Q. 59:7.

⁶⁴⁶ Q. 3:7.

⁶⁴⁷ Q. 4:115.

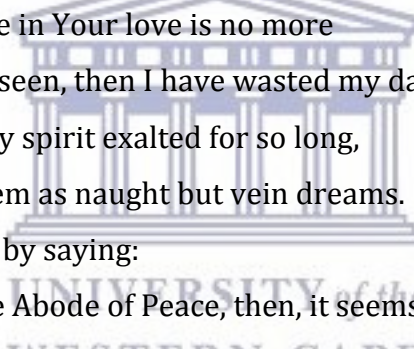
⁶⁴⁸ Q. 31:15.

⁶⁴⁹ Q. 25:43.

⁶⁵⁰ Q. 6:160.

were not my goal”, and Paradise tells him, “but I am your reward and your share”. He would not be happy with Paradise as his reward except that he will be dragged towards it in chains, as is mentioned in the *ḥadīth*, “Your Lord is amazed at some people who will be taken to *Jannah* in chains until they enter it, and when they enter it they will be grieved by sorrow.”⁶⁵¹

And among these *aḥādīth* is the saying of the Prophet: “Verily, some of the inhabitants of Paradise will moan in Paradise, just like the moaning of the inhabitants in Hell”,⁶⁵² or something like that.⁶⁵³ The reason for this is that they have missed out on their true goal, and they would have remained in this state, were it not that God has endowed them with His Divine Acceptance (*riḍwān*). In this respect there is one of them who said,⁶⁵⁴ when his station in *Jannah* was revealed to him, as he lay dying, when his desire was something beyond that:



"If the share I have in Your love is no more
 Than what I have seen, then I have wasted my days:
 Hopes in which my spirit exalted for so long,
 Yet today I see them as naught but vein dreams.
 And he continued by saying:
 I have reached the Abode of Peace, then, it seems.
 Through the doors of my faith and my submission;
 O my Lord, then allow me to look upon You
 When I arrive, and grace me with Your kindness!
 A wish (desire) with which my soul has conquered with time.'⁶⁵⁵

‘In short, God gives the station (*maqām*) to the servant in accordance with the station that the servant gives to God within himself (in his heart).

⁶⁵¹ Jāmi' al-Aḥādīth, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī Edited by. ‘Abbās Aḥmad Ṣāqar and Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Jawād. Print: Dār al-Fikr. Beirut (First Edition 1994) Hadith No. 8371 Vol. 3 Pg.238

⁶⁵² Al-'Alāwī alludes to this meaning in two of his *ḥikams*, (a) “When the gnostic's share from God is restricted to Paradise only, it will be a suffering for him like the suffering of someone who is veiled and who's reward is the Hell-fire”. (b) “When the gnostic is entered into Paradise as his (allotted share) it will only be because of his negligence of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*)’.

Al-'Alāwī, *Al-Ḥikam al-'Alāwīyya*, -*ḥikam* no. 22 and 23 p.65.

⁶⁵³ *Aw kamā qāl*, ‘or as he said’, an expression used when the meaning of the *ḥadīth* is given, but not the exact wording.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibn al-Fārid, *Mīmīyya*,

⁶⁵⁵ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p.80]

"And he whose migration is to God and His messenger, then his migration will be to God and His Messenger".⁶⁵⁶

*And to God belong all that is in the Heavens and in the Earth, that He may re-quite those who do evil with that which they have done and reward those who do good with what is best,*⁶⁵⁷

Meaning your Lord will not wrong anyone; whoever follows a path will arrive at his goal. Whatever his share is in this world (*dunyā*), it will not be denied unto him, and the one whose desire is the Hereafter, it is God's duty to reward him with it, and the one who has no desire in the Hereafter nor the *dunyā*, the real (*al-ḥaqq*) Most High will offer His own Self as his reward,⁶⁵⁸ and will compensate him with an aspect of His own Self; "If they are needy, God will enrich them from His Bounty."⁶⁵⁹ So I say, people in most cases who fulfill this description will say, "by God, their life is a truly exalted one, and their rank is lofty, and their path is difficult, so it is impossible to strive after what they have, for we are not worthy of it." This is generally the expression of the ones characterised with piety, never mind others. This is one of the nets, or traps of Satan which he casts upon the spiritual seeker, in the hope that he might never escape it. Because of God's goodness in facilitating ease upon the seekers, His compassion towards the travelers upon the path, is in order to remove that doubt from the traveler who thinks that he is not fit or suitable to be present with God, because of what he sees in his *nafs*, so God tells him who exactly deserves to stand at His door by His grace. So He says:

*Those who avoid the major sins and abominations except the small sins,*⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵⁶ Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. Edited by. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir Al-Nāṣir. Print: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt copied from Al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah. Būlāq, Egypt (1311 A.H.) Ḥadīth No. 54 Vol. 1 Pg.20

⁶⁵⁷ Q. 53:31.

⁶⁵⁸ Al-'Alāwī says people are in three categories in their understanding of God and to each one is his allotted portion, "All do We aid, these as well as those, from the bounty of your Lord. And the bounty of your Lord is not limited" (Q. 17:2).

⁶⁵⁹ Q. 24:32.

⁶⁶⁰ Q. 53:32

Meaning whoever conforms to this description, whatever he commits of small sins should not hinder him in the state of his travel;

*Verily your Lord is vast in forgiveness.*⁶⁶¹

He will restore your outer and purify your inner spiritual heart by pouring into it the Lights of His divine Unity (*tawhīd*), “Verily the kings when they enter a town, they turn it upside down and cause the powerful to be humiliated.”⁶⁶²

So when will the servant ever be ready or prepared to get rid of all his sins until he has emptied himself and then be free to reach the real (*al-ḥaqq*)? In the *ḥikam* of Ibn 'Atā 'illah it is said:

If you were to be united with Him, only after the extinction of your vices, and the effacement of your pretensions, you would never be united with Him. Instead, when He wants to unite you to Himself, He covers your attribute (*wasf*) with His Attribute and hides your quality (*na't*) with His quality. And thus He unites you to Himself by virtue of what comes from Him to you, not by virtue of what goes from you to Him.⁶⁶³

There may be, among those who seek God, some who rely on the knowledge and work they amass on their journey, and some who might be turned back because of this without realising it. God Almighty wants to spare them such a fate by His kindness, and says,

⁶⁶¹ Q. 53:32.

⁶⁶² Q. 27:34; the symbolic interpretation of this verse is that the ‘town’ represents the heart of the aspirant and the ‘Kings’ represent God or the ‘lights of the divine Unity’. It is said that the heart is the capital city and whoever takes over the capital rules and the great *jihād* is not to allow the *nafs* to enter this heart but to give it to God, its rightful owner. When God enters a heart everything changes and the heart is spiritually alive. The Prophet has made it clear that the spiritual heart is the treasure and abode of the Beloved. It is narrated in a holy tradition in Saḥīḥ Bukhārī that God says: “Neither My heaven nor My earth can contain Me, but it is the heart of My believing servant that can contain Me,” and the king changes everything

⁶⁶³ Danner, *Ḥikam Ibn 'Atā Illah* no. 130, p. 42.

*He is most knowledgeable about you, since it is He Who created you from the Earth, and when you were fetuses in your mothers' wombs, so ascribe not purity to yourselves; He knows best as to who is mindful [of Him].*⁶⁶⁴

As if God is saying, “do not declare yourselves to be pure until you have been purified”. The address here -- and God knows best-- returns to the one who is not proficient in the station of annihilation in God (*fanā' fi 'llah*). As for the one who has mastered the station, his praising of the *nafs* is from the point of showing thanks to the favour.’⁶⁶⁵

“The Prophet said: "I am the master of the children of Adam, and it is without boast.”⁶⁶⁶ In this respect there are many similar statements made by the gnostics, and when the gnostic says such things he is speaking with God’s voice,⁶⁶⁷ not his own, and expressing the essence of the Real, not his own essence; thus, he is not one of those whom this verse addresses. The spiritual station (*maqām*) is too sublime to be attained by every traveler and most turn back even before they begin to reach it. God wants to draw the attention of the traveler to this truth as a grace from Him, so that he does not turn back after beginning his journey so He says;

*Have you seen the one who has turned away; and gave a little, then refrained grudgingly?*⁶⁶⁸

God mentioned this verse as a means of strengthening the heart of the spiritual traveler upon the path and a measure of precaution that he not be deceived to withdraw after having traversed the path of guidance by God’s will, and to know that, “No-one should feel safe from God’s decree”,⁶⁶⁹ for he will only be harmed on account of his negligence towards God. It is he who is

⁶⁶⁴ Q. 53:32.

⁶⁶⁵ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p. 83]

⁶⁶⁶ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Abū ‘Īsā Al-Tirmidhi. Edited by Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwah ‘Iwad. Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī (Second Edition 1975) Ḥadīth No. 3148 Vol. 5 Pg.308

⁶⁶⁷ This is when the gnostic speaks by God, also known as the tongue of the Truthful (*lisānul Ḥaqq*) and these utterances are called *shaṭaḥāt* (ecstatic expressions).

⁶⁶⁸ Q. 53:33-34.

⁶⁶⁹ Q. 7:99.

meant by God's words: "he gave a little then stopped giving",⁶⁷⁰ meaning he became stingy and thus turned back from his path without realising it.

This is one of the reasons why many turn away from God, because the *nafs* in most cases does not accept to give up everything. "And the merchant (seller) is far too exalted to be outwitted by the buyer".⁶⁷¹ He gave good advice who said:

So strive in giving up the self (*nafs*) in the struggle against passion.

For if it accepts this, then what a fine effort!

for a man who can forgo the pleasures of his *nafs*,

Though the whole world was offered, has truly forsaken stinginess.⁶⁷²

*Is with him the knowledge of the unseen, so that he sees?*⁶⁷³

"The rhetorical question in this verse implies condemnation of this person's barren intentions and his fruitless and contemptible conduct. Any such intention would be a useless journey that would only result as futile and non-existent. It is as if God is saying "the very goal or intention of his achievement is depravation because of his inability to acquire anything of what the gnostic possess of unseen knowledge and secrets tasted (*asrār dhawqiyya*)".⁶⁷⁴ Then He continues to speak about the one turning away from God and who is ignorant about the people of old (*al-aqdamīn*) and what they have endured in their search after the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), otherwise the Almighty would not have referred to them when He says,

*Or is he not informed of what is in the Scriptures of Moses and of Abraham, the one who fulfilled (all his obligations).*⁶⁷⁵

A known fact is that if he were to become aware of the traces and history of the Prophets and the elite amongst the professors of Unity (*al-*

⁶⁷⁰ Q. 53:33

⁶⁷¹ Frithjof Schuon, "Metaphysical knowledge is sacred. It is the right of sacred things to demand of man all that he is." *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Perennial Books: London, 1987), p. 142.

⁶⁷² Ibn al-Fārid, *Lāmiyya*

⁶⁷³ Q. 53:35.

⁶⁷⁴ *Asrār dhawqiyya*, literally means 'mysteries of taste.'

⁶⁷⁵ Q. 53:36-37.

muwaḥḥidūn), no disappointment would afflict him in his path, and this is why God has mentioned Abraham when He said;

“The one who fulfilled (*waffā*) all that which God commanded him with”.⁶⁷⁶ It is as if He is saying that Union is born out of integrity (*al-wafā*), and this is, “the religion of your forefather Abraham.”⁶⁷⁷ The integrity of Abraham was shown when he gave himself up to the fire, and when he obeyed the command to sacrifice his beloved son; “Verily Abraham was one who invoked God with humility (*awwāhun*) and he was forbearing.”⁶⁷⁸ It is narrated from Ḥasan⁶⁷⁹ that God did not command Abraham with anything except that he fulfills all the commands.⁶⁸⁰

‘It is narrated from ‘Atā ibn as-Sā’ib⁶⁸¹ that Abraham made a promise that he would not ask anything from the creation, so when he was thrown into the fire, Gabriel asked him, if he had need of anything, he answered, “from you, nothing!”

Whosoever takes the least amount of time to study how the truthful strive and how the lovers yearn, will surely see himself as remiss in his devotion to the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), whatever his state may be, except if he were to submit to the annihilation, or death which for the gnostics is considered as one of the necessities of escape; “And it is Allah Who causes the dead to be resurrected”.⁶⁸² “And the Truth more deserves to be followed.”⁶⁸³ The Real should be sought above all else, for God’s Presence is too dear to be purchased with affectation. The “Critic is discerning”,⁶⁸⁴ for however you are so shall He be. Since delusions afflict all kinds of seekers, there are those of them who believe their lineage will be enough to take them along the path swiftly, and so on and so forth; God Almighty chose to dispel these delusions,

⁶⁷⁶ Q. 53:36

⁶⁷⁷ Q. 22:78.

⁶⁷⁸ Q. 9:115.

⁶⁷⁹ This is Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, one of the *tabi’ūn* who was of the generation after the Companions of the Prophet, considered one of the earliest Sufis, renowned for his asceticism (d. 728)

⁶⁸⁰ *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p. 85]

⁶⁸¹ One of the *tābi’in* and a narrator of *Ḥadīth*

⁶⁸² Q 6:36.

⁶⁸³ Q. 10:35.

⁶⁸⁴ This is an Arab proverb which says: ‘Be devoted to your work, for the critic is discerning.’ Here, Shaykh al-‘Alāwī makes God ‘the critic’.

lest any seeker rely on anyone else in his journey as many initiates do, also relying on their fathers and their ancestors, and other things which in reality play no part in the journey to God but rather usually serve to hinder it. This is why God says,

*No burdened person with sins shall carry the burden of another, and man shall not attain except that which he strives for.*⁶⁸⁵

This verse has made it apparent that the sins of a person's son do not impede on him or restrain him, and neither can he advance or progress through the obedience of his father. It is therefore imperative that man should not rely on anything in his journey towards God except for that which he himself has obtained, "And We have tied every man's deeds to his neck."⁶⁸⁶

"And he will acquire only that which he has striven for". This is the esoteric interpretation⁶⁸⁷ of the preceding verse, for in its most perfect sense, 'striving' (*sa'y*) only means seeking God, whilst to seek anything else is a waste and an illusion. I deem that it is best to understand the verse in this way, which indeed is the literal way to understand it; for if on the other hand, we took striving to mean 'seeking reward', then this would require further interpretation (*ta'wīl*), since a man can benefit from the prayer of another, as is the case with intercession, and there are clearly other ways in which he can derive benefit from the deeds of others. This verse states that this cannot be, and therefore it must refer to the journey to God; for the spiritual traveler cannot benefit from the journey of anyone else, but only when he himself is sincere can he reach his goal.⁶⁸⁸

Thus the *ḥadīth* states:

⁶⁸⁵ Q 53:38-39.

⁶⁸⁶ Q 17:13.

⁶⁸⁷ *Al-Fahm al-khāṣṣ*, literally 'the special understanding' implying that the word 'striving' (*sa'yī*) in the context of the verse should preferably be understood as 'seeking God', which is the literal way to understand it, and any other meaning like 'seeking reward' for example, would require interpretation (*ta'wīl*)

⁶⁸⁸ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, p. 87

“When My servant comes a hand’s span nigh unto Me, I go an arm’s length nigh unto him; and when he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed.”⁶⁸⁹

This is what God means by saying:

*And his striving shall surely be seen,*⁶⁹⁰

Meaning, in the shortest span of time will he obtain the fruit of his striving, in retrospect unlike the one in search after the Hereafter, which he will not obtain except after death, and even though death is near, yet the real (*al-ḥaqq*) is nearer to him, "And We are closer to him (man) than his jugular vein".⁶⁹¹ The distance is not far except for the one who turns away. He spends a little and becomes stingy, as mentioned before, but; "If only they were sincere with God it would have been better for them".⁶⁹² And one of them⁶⁹³ wrote in praise of the one who has these qualities:

Though they offer only vain hopes, they decry what fate offers them;

They plunge into the sea of love, yet are not wetted.

They seek to travel without getting up from their places;

They tire themselves out in their journey, yet get nowhere.

This is the state of the one who has not fulfilled his promise, but as for the one who has taken a covenant with God not to turn to other than Him, fulfilling the promise, or covenant which he has made with God; "The Beneficent will grant him a love",⁶⁹⁴

*And he will be rewarded with the most complete*⁶⁹⁵ *reward",*⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁸⁹ Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī. Edited by. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir Al-Nāṣir. Print: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt copied from Al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah. Būlāq, Egypt (1311 A.H.) Ḥadīth No. 7405 Vol. 9 Pg.121

⁶⁹⁰ Q. 53:40.

⁶⁹¹ Q. 50:16.

⁶⁹² Q. 47:21.

⁶⁹³ Ibn al-Farid, *Lāmiyya*

⁶⁹⁴⁶⁹⁴ Q. 19:96.

⁶⁹⁵ The most complete reward for the gnostic in this context is the Face of the Beloved and His divine Knowledge (*ma'rifa*)

⁶⁹⁶ Q. 53:41.

Meaning, more than he could imagine; and it is said by one of them: I attained my desire, more than I ever hoped for, O! What a delight, were this to stay ever more with me!"

"And what is with God is best for those who do good".⁶⁹⁷ Since the perfect soul (*nafs*) refuses to strive for other than God as its reward, it's always worried that its share would be other than His vision beholding Him, so naturally it (*nafs*) desires to hear a guarantee from God, increasing it in contentment and that its goal, or purpose should not be mixed with anything else. God responds to the possessor of this *nafs* in a way that necessitates the most sanctifying super abundance when He says:

*"And unto your Lord is the final end."*⁶⁹⁸

This made the hearts happy and content, confirming the pleasure (*riḍa'*) of the Beloved. "So let them find their joy in that, it is better than that which they hoard."⁶⁹⁹ Such is the servant's desire from his Lord, and this is expressed and interpreted as 'annihilation' in God (*fanā' fi Allah*), because the end towards the Lord necessitates annihilation (*fanā'*) in Him which is a necessity for the non-permanence of the contingent (*al-ḥudūth*) in comparison with The Eternal (*al-Qidam*). "And when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust."⁷⁰⁰ At this point there is no creation, and only He remains; "I become his hearing, his eyes"⁷⁰¹...to the end of the *ḥadīth Qudsi*. Then He unveils to him, his servant, the reality of existence so as to discover that there is no existence alongside with Him, and there is nothing to be seen besides Him. So where is your existence that you could testify that there are other gods alongside with God? Say, "I do not

⁶⁹⁷ Q. 3:198.

⁶⁹⁸ Q. 53:42; *Al-Muntahā* is the ultimate end of gnosis and as stated in the *ḥikam* of al-'Alāwī, "requesting for something beyond this point is only a sign of ignorance on the part of the *murīd* (aspirant) because this is the most which a servant can ask from his Lord." al-'Alāwī, *Kitāb al-Ḥikam al-'Alāwīyya'*, -*ḥikam* no. 50, p. 72.

⁶⁹⁹ Q. 10:58.

⁷⁰⁰ Q. 7:143.

⁷⁰¹ Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. Edited by. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir Al-Nāṣir. Print: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt copied from Al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah. Būlāq, Egypt (1311 A.H.) Ḥadīth No. 6502 Vol. 8 Pg.105

testify”; say, “He is but the one and only God”, meaning He is the Manager over the affair of every soul and the detail of what we have *summarised* are in the following verses:⁷⁰²

And it is He Who makes one laugh, and it is He Who makes one weep. And it is He Who causes death and gives life. And He creates the two mates; the male and female, from a sperm drop when it is emitted. And incumbent upon Him is the second genesis. And it is He Who enriches and suffices, and it is He Who is the Lord of the Sirius ⁷⁰³

‘And it is He..., and it is He..., to the point of infinite He-ness (*Huwiyyah*) in the manifestation of ‘I-ness’ (*Anāya*)”. “He is the First and the Last, the Outward Manifest and the Inward Hidden.”⁷⁰⁴ This is the goal to which the traveler of union (*al-wāsil*) arrives, opening unto him the spiritual domain of the Heavens and the Earth; he does not see anything transcending God, the One and Unique (*al-Wāḥid al-Fard*).

“God is the Light of the Heavens and of the Earth”.⁷⁰⁵ Thus it is no surprise that he should say; “This is my Lord” (*hādhā rabbi*), as was said by Abraham. When Prophet Abraham saw the star he said: “This is my Lord”⁷⁰⁶ “This is the creed of your forefather Abraham”,⁷⁰⁷ “And he was not of those who ascribed partners to his Lord”,⁷⁰⁸ “And when the night covered him with darkness he (Abraham) saw a star and said, this is my Lord”.⁷⁰⁹ He did not say this except after having witnessed the Divine Presence (*al-mushāhada*) “But do not let their speech (conversation) grieve you”.⁷¹⁰ (Those who say) Abraham had no knowledge about the Divinity at that time.⁷¹¹ “Such is their

⁷⁰² *Lubāb al-‘ilm*, [p. 88]

⁷⁰³ Q. 53:43-49; Sirius is a star that was worshipped by the polytheistic Arabs.

⁷⁰⁴ Q 57:3.

⁷⁰⁵ Q 24:35.

⁷⁰⁶ Q. 6:76; as Abraham did when he beheld the star, the moon and the sun.

⁷⁰⁷ Q. 22:78.

⁷⁰⁸ Q. 2:135.

⁷⁰⁹⁷⁰⁹ Q. 6:76.

⁷¹⁰ Q. 36:76.

⁷¹¹ Most theologians opine that when Abraham underwent this experience of searching, he knew nothing about God and was not yet a prophet, and this is the only reason he mistook

speech which they utter with their mouths”.⁷¹² “They have no knowledge about it, they follow but mere surmise.”⁷¹³ The one who has no knowledge in accordance with what necessitates the divine Being (*al-dhāt*) could possibly ask, “so what does your Lord do with things, that they become imperceptible to the gnostic when he is in the throes of annihilation?” The answer is: “Then say, my Lord destroys it with one blow (completely), and then He leaves it a desolate (barren) area and you will see neither crookedness nor weakness in it.”⁷¹⁴

So do not deem what we have said as far-fetched, for He is well able to do it. Then God says,

*And it is He Who destroyed the first people of Ād, and Thamūd; and He did not spare them. And the people of Noah before Verily they were more unjust and more rebellious and transgressing; and the Subverted City He did overthrow,*⁷¹⁵

meaning, He has destroyed and caused everything to fall to a distant place, and this is what He does with the rest of the creation in the view of the gnostic when he’s in the presence of the great Manifestation, which refuses that anything should pervade or permeate it, and reference to this is made in the following verse;

*So that He covered it by that which He covered.*⁷¹⁶

That is to say; He covered the creation and encompassed them with the Lights of Witnessing (*shuhūd*). This is what He does with all the creation in

the star for his Lord. See for example Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984), p. 184.

⁷¹² Q. 33:4.

⁷¹³ Q. 53:28.

⁷¹⁴ Q. 20:105; these verses are usually interpreted to refer to the events of the Last Day and thus translated in the future tense, but Shaykh al-‘Alāwī interprets them here to signify how all created things are rendered non-existent for the one who is annihilated in God.

⁷¹⁵ Q. 53:50-53.

⁷¹⁶ Q. 53:54.

the eyes of the gnostic when He shows His Magnificence to him, for he does not allow it to mix with anything else. This is signified by His words, "So He covered it by that which He covered."⁷¹⁷ All created beings are covered and enveloped by the resplendent Lights of direct witnessing (*anwār al-shuhūd*), so that they cannot be seen on their own, but only seen through the manifestation⁷¹⁸ of the Almighty within them. Since man usually deems it far-fetched that the Almighty could be manifested in all that is grand and all that is lowly, and in all that is great and all that is small, and since he does belittle the works of his Lord, the Almighty says to him,

*Then which of the favours of your Lord do you want to dispute?*⁷¹⁹

Meaning, which of your Lord's favours do you want to scorn, disputing that it could be worthy of the divine Manifestation? The truth is that all things are enveloped in the divine Quality which engendered them; "And the Heavens are folded (rolled) up in His Right Hand."⁷²⁰ All things draw their being from His divine Names and Qualities. One of them said,⁷²¹

"When you deem an ugly thing to be His deed, the beauty in it comes rushing towards you".

After God has spoken comprehensively of things which nevertheless cannot be grasped by most ordinary people, He now alerts us of this fact, so that His words are not mistaken for simple common place remarks.⁷²²

*This is a warner, of the warners of old!*⁷²³

⁷¹⁷ Q. 53:54

⁷¹⁸ Ibn 'Atā illah alludes to this when he says, "It is a marvel how Being (*al-wujūd*) has been manifested in non-being (*al-'adam*) and how the contingent (*al-ḥādith*) has been established alongside of Him Who possesses the attribute of Eternity (*wasf al-Qidam*). Danner, Ibn 'Atā Illah, *Ḥikam* no. 16, p.16.

⁷¹⁹ Q 53:55.

⁷²⁰ Q. 39:67.

⁷²¹ Ibn al-Fārid, *'Ayniyya*,

⁷²² *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 90]

⁷²³ Q. 53:56.

'Of those secrets which were granted to the first of the Prophets and Messengers, and which the Real in His glory chose to reveal to the people of the latter days, as an honour to His Prophet Muḥammad that the people of knowledge among his community might share in what was granted to the Prophets of the Israelites (*Banī Isrāīl*),⁷²⁴ in conformity with the *ḥadīth* "The sages (*ulamā*) are the heirs of the Prophets",⁷²⁵ and since hearts are so difficult to be united,⁷²⁶ and so reluctant to receive counsel, even when it comes to the precious truths and subtle mysteries which we have just expounded, the Almighty warns them by saying;

*The Imminent is imminent; apart from God no one can disclose it. Do you then marvel at this discourse?*⁷²⁷

How amazing! That you find it so difficult to acknowledge the truth of this imminent reality! '

*And you laugh!*⁷²⁸

Scorning and mocking those who speak about it, whilst he is expected to have clear insight (*baṣīra*) about his Lord.

*And you do not cry?*⁷²⁹

Meaning, and you do not weep for what you have lost from God? Although you are yourselves lost, and have wasted your lives aimlessly. And someone⁷³⁰ said, "For his own self let him weep whose life is lost without his gaining anything from it",

*Whilst you haughtily turn away,*⁷³¹

⁷²⁴ Alluding to the *Ḥadīth*, 'The sages among my community are like the Prophets of the Israelites.' (*ulamā ummati ka ambiyā Banī Isrāīl*)

⁷²⁵ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Abū 'Īsā Al-Tirmidhi. Edited by Ibrāhīm 'Aṭwah 'Iwad. Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī (Second Edition 1975) *Ḥadīth* No 2682 Vol. 5 Pg.49

⁷²⁶ That is, to have one purpose, to concentrate on one thing.

⁷²⁷ Q. 53:57-59.

⁷²⁸ Q. 53:60

⁷²⁹ Q. 53:60.

⁷³⁰ Ibn al-Fārid, *Mīmīyya*,

⁷³¹ Q. 53:61.

Meaning you are unmindful of all the allusions and signs coming to your attention and presented to you. Whatever may be the case,

Prostrate unto God and worship (Him).⁷³²

That is, even if you have lost out on the deepest knowledge of Him, it's not necessary to consider it a shortcoming in worshipping Him, for there are such people whom He chose for His service (*li-khidmatihī*) so that they would be suitable for His Paradise, and people whom He chose for His love (*li-maḥabbatihī*), until they would be suitable for His Presence.⁷³³ *All do We aid, these as well as those, from the bounty of your Lord.⁷³⁴*

And the bounty of your Lord is not limited.⁷³⁵



⁷³² Q. 53:62.

⁷³³ Note the threefold classification, namely; servants, lovers and gnostics, implying the three ways of approaching the Divinity through fear (*makhāfa*), love (*maḥabba*) and gnosis (*ma'rifa*).

⁷³⁴ *Lubāb al-'ilm*, [p. 91]

⁷³⁵ Q. 17:2; people fall into degrees in their understanding of God and each one has his station (*maqām*). The general people (*'umūm*) do not have the capacity to endure the understanding of the elect (*khuṣūṣ*). "All are watered with the same water, yet some have We given preference above others in the tasting thereof." (Q.13:4). Al-'Alāwī, *A'thabul Manahil*, p.51.

A Brief Evaluation of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's commentary of Sūrah al-Najm

After a thorough observation of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's esoteric *tafsīr* of Sūrah al-Najm it is obvious that his aim was to target a specific level of intellects. From the Sufi's point of view, providing literal accounts and lexical meanings and background of verses might be fruitful to the general public, but it would not satisfy the elite (*khawāṣ*).

Throughout his interpretation of Sūrah al-Najm Shaykh al-'Alāwī does not leave the transcendental realm of deep contemplative interpretation. The entire journey through this Sūrah is a spiritual and symbolic one with an almost tangible experience of a spiritual ascension (*mi'rāj*) towards the divine Presence. This is why one of the distinct characteristics in Shaykh al-'Alāwī's perception of the Qur'ān is that he does not see it as other than the speech of God that is being addressed to him in that state, as though for the Gnostic God is mysteriously present in the Book.

It is also evident that the great hermeneutic tool of *ta'wīl* with all its symbolic and metaphysical characteristics, its paradoxes and obscurities has featured throughout the Sūrah. And through the commentator's mystical experience and esoteric insight, hermeneutics was vivified by an extra dimension of gnosis and Sufi doctrine transcending the limitations of hermeneutics as a science. The doctrine referred to here is the doctrine of *at-tawhīd al-mahḍ* (the pure Oneness of being) almost seen in the semblance of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. It is this doctrine that leads to the secret of gnosis which is the means for arriving at the transcendental Knowledge and secrets of the Qur'ān.⁷³⁶

The most intrinsic hermeneutic principle of Shaykh al-'Alāwī in the interpretation of Qur'ān— the three levels of Islam, *Īmān* and *Iḥsān* should be given the attention it deserves because it is the sum-total of the religion. Because the Qur'ān being the word of God it ought to appeal to all levels of understanding. However, the level of *Iḥsān* is only meant for those whose

⁷³⁶ "The Qur'ān is the orchard of the Gnostic." (*al-Qur'ān bustān al-'ārfīn*)

desire is to transcend the higher levels of understanding. And each one receives from the Qur'ān in accordance to his desire and capacity like a river that passes; the one who comes with a cup to the river takes a cup's worth and the one who comes with a tank takes more, and the one who makes a canal from the river receives all the time. So the one who comes with a cup cannot say to the river, 'hey! you only gave me a cup's worth. And the river will say, but you only brought me a cup! And only in accordance to the preparation will the giving take place, (*'alā qadril isti'dād ya'tī al-istimdād*) and the Qur'ān gives all the time:

All are watered with the same water, yet some have We given preference above others in the tasting thereof. (Q.13:4)

Shaykh al-'Alāwī when speaking of *Īhsān* says: 'It is the finality of what precedes it, that is, the finality of submission (Islam) and the finality of faith (*Īmān*). Therefore is it named excellence (*Īhsān*) in the sense of perfecting a thing or being an adept at it, and whoso has no foothold in the Station of Excellence, his submission unto God comes short of the measure.' (*al-Minah* p.79). in other words, *Īhsān*---or Sufism is an extra dimension, or depth or height, added to Islam and *Īmān*. *Īhsān* itself may also be considered as susceptible of taking on an extra dimension, and thus he says (p.77) that whereas the beginning of *Īhsān* is *murāqabah* (vigilance), its end is *mushāhadah* (direct contemplation). Elsewhere (p. 151) he remarks that the inward aspects of Islam, *Īmān* and *Īhsān* are respectively *istislām* (see p. 169), *īqān* (certainty) and '*ayān* (face to face vision).

The outward and inward appear as different aspects of one reality; outer significations do not lose their validity but are encompassed within inner signification. The inner meaning does not nullify the outer signification of Qur'anic verses. In fact, it is precisely the correspondence between the two that allows readers to cross over from the outward to the inward.

This concludes the phenomenal and transcendent approach of Shaykh al-'Alāwī's esoteric *tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Najm*. Shaykh al-'Alāwī ended the *tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Najm* with the following *Du'ā* (prayer):

‘O Lord! You are the One Who gives in abundance, I beseech You with all of my heart and tongue, and that You approach us with Your abundant Goodness. Treat us with Your kindness and veil and protect what is inside of us with that which is inside You. O God, the One Who takes charge of every soul in accordance to what they have earned, do not ascribe (assign) us to our *nafs*, and do not conceal (deprive) our share from what is ours, except if our share is with You.

O God, make our share an ample share, and remove the veil that has been over us, and make our return to You an easy one. Increase our happiness and delight with You. O God, bless our great master Muḥammad and increase him in status, veneration and in light. We are certainly not able to estimate his status in salutations and blessings except Your estimation of salutations upon him. And grant Your *riḍā* (pleasure) to all his followers from our time till his time, and show mercy to all who have followed him and those who strove painstakingly in assisting him. And grant him a blessing of which its fragrance will spread upon all those who are devoted to the Truth and its understanding.⁷³⁷

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⁷³⁷ These lines of *tafsīr* on *Sūrah al-Najm* have been completed with that which God has made possible in compliance with the one who has endeavored (in it) May God increase every one with light upon light. This *tafsīr* was completed on the morning of the 15th of Zil Qa’da in 1333 Hijri. Corresponding with the 24th of September, 1915

CONCLUSION:

In this dissertation, I have attempted a critical, analytical, and comparative study of the Sūfi hermeneutical analysis used to understand the deeper meaning of divine text. Despite the emphasis on esoteric interpretation in this thesis, its essence is ultimately derived from the literal or exoteric meaning of the divine word of God.

Exoteric *tafsīr* must be addressed in principle because it is the foundation from which springs the wealth of esoteric meaning and the two cannot be separated, at least in essence.

Since the early days of Muslim history, *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* is the most important science in the Islamic tradition because it deals with the appropriate understanding of God's word. Thus, the literary meaning of the term *tafsīr* is mainly concerned in explaining what is meant by a difficult word, especially in Scripture. In addition, the *mufasssīrūn* considered that *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* is the discipline that covers the meaning, explanation, exposition, elucidation, explication, interpretation, and commentary of the Qur'ān. And since the early days in Muslim history, there has been a development of the contextual meaning of *ta'wīl*, which was applied to hermeneutics, helped classical exegetes establish *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, and other *tafsīr* schools. The use of reason to interpret the Qur'ānic text, which appeared via the development of Muslim sects, was also considered necessary.

In the realm of esoteric *tafsīr* we were able to engage with the deeper meaning that transcends the literal text of the divine Message which is not limited to the application of grammar, linguistics and rhetoric even though this exoteric method (as seen above) has provided its own Qur'ānic hermeneutics. In esoteric exegesis the exegete dives into the depths of the Qur'ān's ocean of pearls and hidden meanings.

The sacred text however, remains at the center of the religious stage, both because of its linguistic and literal objectivity and because its accessibility

makes it an immediate reference and support for all those who want to fortify and strengthen their faith or find a firm foundation upon which their quest for meaning may grow. Here it is essential to know how meaning and language, essence and form, are married in the text of the Qur'ān.

I have also attempted to explain and demonstrate in the body of my thesis that the Sufi exegetes in their esoteric *tafsīr* works have employed various methods of interpretation in order to attain *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* knowledge. They have generally distinguished between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) levels of meaning. This distinction has its basis in the Qur'ān and also in the prophetic *ḥadīth*. As for the Qur'ān, the Sufis generally agree that this is not a specific analysis of words and verses but a hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān in general. As for the prophetic tradition, a specific *ḥadīth*, narrated by ibn Mas'ūd and often cited in the Sufi writings, mentions the following terms: *ẓahr*, *baṭn*, *ḥadd* and *maṭla'*.

This thesis also considers the distinct differences between the two approaches (i.e. exoteric and esoteric), although the Sufi exegetes consider the metaphorical, allegorical and mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān as the fundamental source of knowledge, self-transformation and self-transcendence. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to a better understanding of the hermeneutics of Shaykh al-'Alāwī, and if published, should be made more known to the Muslim world that is being threatened by the literalist and fundamentalist ideologies. My main aim was to demonstrate the validity of esoteric *tafsīr*, and I have used exegetic text of Shaykh al-'Alāwī as a method for the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān.

I have also developed the Sufi hermeneutic principles based on the combined teachings of Shaykh al-'Alāwī and Imām al-Ghazālī; albeit that I have noted a deeper insight of meaning in the case of the former. We live in an enlightened age of scientific and technological advancement, an age wherein all perspectives of knowledge have evolved, which must, therefore also include the intellectual evolution of spiritual knowledge, and this perhaps can be attested to by the words of Shaykh al-'Alāwī himself when he speaks

of the gnostics among his predecessors; “They had more deeds than us, but we have more knowledge (gnosis) than them.”



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APPENDIX

Shaykh al-‘Alāwī’s Hermeneutic Steps to an Esoteric Tafsīr: A Translation from *Al-Baḥr al-masjūr fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi maḥḍ al-nūr* (pp. 8-30)

Step One: the proponents of the truth exist in every age

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr and other eminent scholars have said when relating the words of their predecessors, *‘There is no statement more harmful to knowledge, scholars and students than the claim of the one who says that the scholars of old have not left anything to be said by those who came after them.’*

Indeed this is so, since such a statement would be to deny all the generous souls and great men of sound intellects. God suffices us and He is our best Guardian. Yet the one who makes or believes such a claim has no basis for it other than his poor opinion of the remaining righteous believers (*al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt*)⁷³⁸. Because of this, I searched the traditions (*ḥadīths*) for something more worthy of consideration. Far be it for God to leave the community (*ummah*) of His beloved (Prophet) wandering in bewilderment; it remains a community which upholds the truth and does justice in its light and judge by it.⁷³⁹

‘If we only maintain a good opinion of the community of Muḥammad, this would be sufficient to prove this point, especially given that there are authentic narrations to support it as follows: Abu Umar reported on the authority of Abu Uthmān al-Khulānī that the Prophet said, *‘God will continue to plant seeds in this religion and use them in His service.’*⁷⁴⁰ I say that He

⁷³⁸ The good deeds that would endure forever

⁷³⁹ Ibid. p.14

⁷⁴⁰ Narrated by Imām Ibn Shahīn in his book *‘sharḥ madhāhib ahl al-sunnah’* ḥadīth no. 43, *Ṣaḥīḥ*

would not plant a seed except for the useful wisdom and benefit that comes from it. Suyūti quotes the following *ḥadīth* in his *al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr*,

*'God will send to this community at the beginning of every hundred years, someone to renew its religion for it.'*⁷⁴¹ Now in my opinion, this renewer (*mujaddid*) is not someone who follows the opinions of others, but rather takes directly from the Book of God and the Sunnah of His Messenger without any intermediaries; and he only makes use of what serves to renew the faith. The reader will not fail to observe the ambiguity of the language of the *ḥadīth*, and how this 'someone' could be one or many people.

Suyūti in *al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr* relates the following *ḥadīth*, 'Every generation of my community will have its foremost (*muqarrabūn*).' And also, 'The earth will never be void of forty men like the Friend of the Compassionate (*khalīl al-Raḥmān*). By their means will you be given rain, and by their means will you be given aid. When one of them dies, God substitutes another in his stead.'

In general, by researching the traditions on this matter one cannot fail to find something in the community of Muḥammad to please him. The Prophet said, 'My community is like a garden tended by its owner, he weeds it, keeps its rows clear and straight, and prunes it, so that it becomes more fruitful with each passing year. It maybe that the last fruit it gives has the finest bunches and the longest stalks. By Him Who sent me with the truth, the son of Mary will surely find worthy replacements for his disciples amongst my community.'⁷⁴² This is related in *al-mabāḥith al-aṣliyyah*.⁷⁴³

'The Prophet also said, 'My community is a blessed community: no one knows if the first part or the last part is better.' And, 'My community is like rain, it is not known whether the first part or the last part of it is more beneficial.' Ṭabari' narrates on the authority of Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of God said, 'O, how I wish I could meet my brothers! The Companions said, 'O Messenger of God, are we not your brothers? He said, 'Of course, they are a people that will come after you, they will have faith like your faith, and they will

⁷⁴¹ Narrated by Abu Huraira and is sound, found in the book of Abu Dāwud '*maqāsid ḥasanāt*

⁷⁴² *Ḥadīth Ṣaḥīḥ* narrated by Anas Ibn Mālik, '*majmū' al-fatāwa*' Ibn Taymiyya, p.306

⁷⁴³ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p.15

*believe in me like you believe in me, and assist me as you assist me. Oh, if only I could meet my brothers!’*⁷⁴⁴

And it is related in another *ḥadīth* that Abu Jum’ah al-Anṣārī said, ‘I said, ‘O Messenger of God, will there ever be any people more greatly rewarded than us, since we believe you and follow you?’ He said, ‘And what stops you from doing so when the Messenger of God is amongst you, bringing you revelation directly from Heaven? But there will come a people after you who will receive the Book of God between two covers and they will believe in it and act upon it. Their reward shall be greater than yours.’⁷⁴⁵ This was narrated by Aḥmad and Bukhāri in his *Tārīkh*, and quoted in *Fath al-Bayān*.⁷⁴⁶

‘Now this does not mean (says the Shaykh) that the latter generations are superior to, or equal to the former generation who migrated, I would not say this. What I am saying, just as only a fool or a deluded person would deny the virtue of the early generations, likewise, only a wretched and intellectually bankrupt person would deny that this virtue still exists. Yet often it’s not that such ignorant people deny its existence, but that they deny even having experienced it, since they are incapable of recognizing it in any one. What is good in the present is often veiled by dreams in the past. Or perhaps the reader might not deny that this virtue still endures, but doubts that we are worthy of it. In that case, this book of mine might be of use to those who will come later, even if it does not please my contemporaries.

*Say: I ask of you no payment for it, nor am I a pretender*⁷⁴⁷

*And you will come to know the truth about it in time*⁷⁴⁸

*And the best end will be for the reverent*⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁴ Narrated Anas Ibn Mālik, in ‘*musnad*’ of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥambal, *ḥadīth* no.32

⁷⁴⁵ Narrated from Abu Huraira in the ‘*musnad*’ of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥambal, *ḥadīth ṣaḥīḥ*

⁷⁴⁶ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 15

⁷⁴⁷ Q. 38:86

⁷⁴⁸ Q. 38:88

⁷⁴⁹ Q. 7:128

Step Two: the Qur’ān has many facets and its wonders will never cease, so that the understanding of the former generation cannot preclude the understanding of the latter

That which brings joy to the inner and outer vision, and that which has astounded the intellects, and captivated the minds, is the Book of God the Almighty and oft forgiving. It will continue to remain a ripe garden and an all-encompassing forest, to the extent that the one who interprets it would almost be adding to it were it not that, “*No falsehood can approach it from any angle*”⁷⁵⁰. It is fresh and new in every age, and is the same now as it ever was. God said, and He continues to say: “*Will they not ponder and contemplate on this Qur’ān?*”⁷⁵¹

It is stated in a *ḥadīth*, “*The marvels of the Qur’ān will never cease, and it has many dimensions*”.⁷⁵² On the authority of Abu Dardā (may God be pleased with him) says about the Qur’ān: You will never comprehend all its meanings until you see the Qur’ān as having many facets. This has been said in a *ḥadīth* from Shaddād ibn Uwais and mentioned by Ibn ‘Abd al- Barr.

And what aids this (*ḥadīth*) is the saying of the Prophet, “*Verily the Qur’ān has an outward (zāhir), an inward (bāṭin), a boundary (ḥadd) and a horizon (maṭla’)*.”⁷⁵³ This was mentioned in the ‘Crown of Exegesis’, and based on this, do not be quick to disqualify what those with knowledge of God say about the Book of God. Even if it is not fully understood by our intellect, we should deem it as one of the four facets. Do not think that these four facets appear in the Qur’ān only as a whole, not at all! Indeed it most certainly appears in every verse and word, or we could say in every letter. Therefore every letter of the Qur’ān contains the whole of the Qur’ān.⁷⁵⁴

⁷⁵⁰ Q. 41:42

⁷⁵¹ Q. 4:82 & Q. 47:24

⁷⁵² Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Abū ‘Īsā Al-Tirmidhi. Edited by Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwah ‘Iwad. Mustafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī (Second Edition 1975) Ḥadīth No 2682 Vol. 5 Pg.49

⁷⁵³ Narrated from Ibn Ḥabbān in his *‘ṣaḥīḥ* from the *ḥadīth* of Ibn Mas’ūd, 856.

⁷⁵⁴ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 18

‘And here He says:

“We will reveal to you a weighty word (statement)”⁷⁵⁵ and in another verse:

“Those who listen to the speech and follow the best of it.”⁷⁵⁶

God used the *expression* of speech (*qawl*) rather than word (*lafz*), or discourse (*kalām*) in order to include both words and letters, since ‘speech’ encompasses them all. Every part of the Book of God, supposing that it can be divided into parts, is weighty, because of all the countless meanings it contains. Another proof that each letter of the Qur’ān is itself a Qur’ān is the *ḥadīth* narrated by Tirmidhi on the authority of Ibn Mas’ūd that the prophet said, ‘Whoever reads a letter from the Book of God will receive one good deed (*ḥasanah*) and one good deed is rewarded ten-fold.’ So it’s clear from this that a letter in the Qur’ān has meanings. And in another narration it is added, *I do not say that alif- lām-mīm*⁷⁵⁷ is a letter, but alif is a letter, lām is a letter, and mīm is a letter.

‘And thus it’s also narrated that, ‘Verily what is contained in the Book (*Qur’ān*) is contained in *Sūrah al-Fātiḥa* (the opening chapter), and what is contained in the *fatiḥa* is contained in *Bismillā hir raḥmān niraḥīm*, and what is contained in the *basmalah* is contained in its *bā* and what is in the *bā* is in the dot under the *bā*.⁷⁵⁸

‘And if the Book of God did not contain such marvels, then we would not have been ordered to contemplate it through the passing of time. He Most High says:

*Will they not contemplate this Qur’ān?*⁷⁵⁹

And the Prophet also said, ‘Analyze the language of this Qur’ān and seek out its marvels’.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁵ Q. 73:5

⁷⁵⁶ Q. 39:18

⁷⁵⁷ The first abbreviated letters that appear at the beginning of the second chapter of the Qur’ān and all abbreviated letters are usually placed in the beginning of a *Sūrah*. These letters have no real outward meaning. However, if the reward for each of these letters is so immense then surely what it hides of symbolic meanings must be equal to the reward.

⁷⁵⁸ The Shaykh has written an entire treatise on this subject

⁷⁵⁹ Q. 4:82

⁷⁶⁰ Narrated Abu Huraira in the *Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, *ḥadīth* no.160

Perhaps there are those who might say, 'God has relieved us from the burden of extracting its jewels by having those who came before us do it. Then I say, in that case, we have lost our portion of contemplation in it, God forbid. No intelligent one could say this, nor could one who is filled with faith. And if that is the case, then the people of the second generation would not have spoken about it since the people of the first generation had already done so, and the same thing for the third generation and so forth. This then confirms the truth that He did not specify that one generation contemplate and another not. And if this was the case that only some had been singled out for this, it would mean that the meaning of the Qur'ān had been exhausted, when this is clearly not the case given for the Prophet said that, '*The wonders (marvels) of the Qur'ān will never cease*'.⁷⁶¹ And one of its wonders is that the one who contemplates it sees wonders in it every day that he had not seen before that.'⁷⁶²

Abdul Wāhid bin Sulaiman said, 'Ibn Aoūn used to say, there are three things that I love for myself and my brothers, and one of the things he mentioned was that when a man contemplates the Qur'ān and ponders over it, it is almost as if he stumbles on knowledge that he did not know before.' And this is also indicated in what was narrated by Abū Nuaim and others from Abduraḥmān bin Zayyān who said, it was said to Moses (AS) "*The parable of the Scripture of Aḥmad (another name for the Prophet Muḥammad) in relation to the other revealed scriptures is like a container of milk, every time it is churned it gives rise to butter.*"⁷⁶³

This and similar statements are summarized in what Abū bakr bin al-'Arabī said in his book '*Funūn al-Ta'wīl*', he says, "The number of sciences in the Qur'ān are seventy seven thousand four hundred and fifty multiplied by four since every word has an outward meaning, an inward meaning, a boundary and a horizon. Now this only refers to each individual word, and

⁷⁶¹ Ibid

⁷⁶² *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 19

⁷⁶³ Ibid

not to compounds and linking words, which are beyond reckoning and only known to God.

The disciplines and facets of the Qur'ān can only be uncovered by one who has attained to spiritual realization. As for the one who is veiled, he is only called from a *'far place'*⁷⁶⁴ and he hears from behind an iron curtain. He barely reaches the ultimate meaning of its outer, so how could he ever see the meaning of its inner, let alone its boundary and its boundless horizon.

And whoever God inspires to understand something of its meanings, it would not be farfetched for him to say, as did Imam Ali, 'if I wanted to I could load forty camels with the interpretation of Sūrah al-Fātiḥa.'

And perhaps you may ask, 'does the like of Imam Ali exist today, with such knowledge as he had? I would say, 'By God, how wondrous and strange! despite his great knowledge, only a few of the people of his time gave him his due, to the extent that he would say from the pulpit, *I am the side of God that you have neglected* and those who overlook the people of their own time now are akin to those who overlooked him then.'⁷⁶⁵

Step Three: there are sciences in the Qur'ān that cannot be shared amongst the general masses ('awām)

Perhaps, the one who cleaves to the outer meanings does not see anything in the Book of God save that to which his own limited resources lead him, and so he denies everything else. And he does not realize that what he perceives of the outer meaning of the Book is only the peel around the core, beyond which lies, *'what no eye has seen, and no ear has heard and what no human heart imagined.'* So does he believe that what his intellect has perceived is what the companions of the Prophet have understood of the Book of God? Never! So let him examine his soul and see if what his heart hides is greater than what his words contain. And if it does, then he will be *'one whom his*

⁷⁶⁴ Q. 12:44

⁷⁶⁵ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 19

*Lord has made certain*⁷⁶⁶ and if not, then what he has lost is greater than what he has achieved. He (Prophet) said: *Verily there is a hidden knowledge known only by those who know God, and if they were to make it manifest, they would be renounced by those heedless (ignorant) of God.*⁷⁶⁷

And in another *hādīth*, “*Inward knowledge is one of God’s secrets; He casts it into the hearts of those servants whom He wishes.*” And he said further: “*Knowledge is of two kinds; knowledge in the heart, for that is true beneficial knowledge, and knowledge of the tongue and that (knowledge) is God’s proof against the son of Adam.*”⁷⁶⁸

So this indicates that the hidden sciences are not the same as the disseminated sciences. Abu Umar narrated that Abū Huraira said⁷⁶⁹ in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāri*, “I memorized from the Messenger of God two containers of knowledge, as for the one, I have already narrated it, and as for the other, if I were to narrate it, you would slit my throat.”⁷⁷⁰

And narrated from Ibn ‘Abbās who said, “If I were to tell you what I know of the exegesis of God’s saying in the Qur’ān, *His command descends between them*⁷⁷¹ you would stone me to death or you would say verily he is a disbeliever.

Sha’rāni mentioned this in his book *‘al Yākūt wa al-Jawāhir’*⁷⁷² ‘and of what has been attributed to Zain al-‘ābidīn who said:

O Lord, were I to proclaim a certain jewel of knowledge,
They would accuse me of being an idol worshipper
While the Muslims would declare my blood permissible,
And they would consider the worse things done to me as beautiful

⁷⁶⁶ Q. 11:17

⁷⁶⁷ *Jāmi‘al-Aḥādīth*, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī Edited by. ‘Abbās Aḥmad Ṣaḡar and Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Jawād. Print: Dār al-Fikr. Beirut (First Edition 1994) Ḥadīth No. 8481 Vol. 9 Pg.308

⁷⁶⁸ *Kanzul ‘ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wal af‘āl*, ‘Alā al-Dīn ‘Ali al-Muttaqī b. ḥus al-Dīn al-Hindī. Edited by. Shaykh Bakri Ḥayyānī and Shaykh Ṣafwat Al-Saqqā. Print: Mu‘assasah al-Risālah - Beirut Fifth Edition 1985) Ḥadīth No. 29390 Vol. 10 Pg.262

⁷⁶⁹ what has been popularly attributed to Abu Huraira

⁷⁷⁰ *Kitāb Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari* under the chapter *bāb al-‘ilm*, p. 262

⁷⁷¹ Q. 65:12

⁷⁷² *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 21

Salmān al-Fārisī said: “If I told you everything I know, you will say, may God have mercy on the killer of Salmān,”

And Imam ‘Alī said “Verily on my side (in my heart) there is a knowledge I possess, if I should utter it, you would sever this from this’, and he pointed to his head and body.

This indicating that in the *Zāwiyas* (spiritual institutions) there are hidden things.

And in his counsel to our master Kumail ibn Zayād indicates what confirms most of what we have mentioned earlier and we cite this, even though it is long, because it contains wisdom that we cannot do without.

He (Ali) said, “O Kumail; these hearts are containers, the best of them is the one that contains the largest capacity for good. And people are of three (kinds) ; the knower of his Lord (Godly sage), the seeker of knowledge for the sake of salvation, and the hungry flock who follow every caller, not seeking the light of knowledge and not seeking the refuge of a firm pillar.

Then he pointed to his breast and said, ‘ here lies knowledge that if I were to give even a part of it to someone he would not use it reliably and would use religion as a means for worldly gain, and use God’s proofs as an argument against His Book, and his bounties (blessings) as excuse to sin. Cursed be the carrier of truth who does not have inner vision (*baṣīra*) to see it. Doubt enters his heart as soon as he encounters uncertainty, and he does not know the truth. If he speaks, he errs and is not aware of it. He is distracted by things, but does not know of their real truth and he is a trial for those who are tested.

The best of all is he whom God has made knowledgeable about His religion, and lack of knowledge is sufficient for a man to know that he is ignorant of his religion. Thus, does knowledge die with the death of its carrier? Never will God leave the earth without one who will uphold God’s proof. He could either be known publically or hidden and unknown. Thus God’s proofs will never be nullified. And yet how rare are they! By God, they are the fewest in number but the greatest in stature. By them does He defend His proofs and messages, that they may convey them to their contemporaries

and plant them in the hearts of the peers. Knowledge raised them to the level of true insight, connecting them to the spirit of certitude. And they find easy what worldly people find hard (impossible). And they are content with what ignorant people cannot abide. And they occupy the world with their bodies while their souls are connected to a high place. They are the representatives of God in His earth and the teachers of His religion. Oh! how I desire to see them.”

And in conclusion to what we have mentioned is that everything that the books refer to is only a fraction of what the hearts contain.⁷⁷³ *‘And what is with God is better for those who are righteous.’*⁷⁷⁴

Step Four: the Qur’ān addresses us all equally with no preference of one nation over another

‘So I say, verily the Qur’ān is the word of God. Through it He speaks to His servants, though they do not perceive it, and it’s a book sent especially to them, though they do not realize it, and *“their hearts are distracted”*⁷⁷⁵, thinking that it is all over and done with, so now they take the set of laws from it without being the ones to whom it is actually addressed and intended. They act as though saying, ‘It was only revealed to Muḥammad and the people with him’, and they take it merely by following, not by direct and independent contact with it. God forbid!

The Prophet said: *‘I am the Messenger to those who met me alive and those who were born after me.’*⁷⁷⁶ Therefore in his addressing them, there is no difference between the people to whom the message was sent. So when God says, *“O you who believe”*, it encompasses all the believers, furthermore, we do not say that *‘He said’*, but that *‘He is saying now’*, whether we are aware of it or not. Therefore the one to whom God has opened his inner vision

⁷⁷³ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 22

⁷⁷⁴ Q. 3:198

⁷⁷⁵ Q. 21:3

⁷⁷⁶ Narrated from Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d in *kitāb Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, p. 85

(*baṣīra*), he sees it as being ‘revealed by the trusted Spirit (Gabriel)’⁷⁷⁷ [Q. 26 :193] right now, and when he reads it, he reads it from ‘an evident guide (*imām mubīn*)’⁷⁷⁸.

And the greatest of them in rank is the one who takes it directly from the Most Merciful but they are few, and do not deem it impossible for verily the speech is the Speech of God and no one else’s.⁷⁷⁹

‘Yes, everyone believes it is the speech of God, but what they lack is hearing it from God, and they will not hear it from God unless God is their hearing, as He says about His true servant, “And when I love him I become his hearing.... till the end of the *Ḥadīth Qudsi*.”⁷⁸⁰

And this characteristic cannot be separated from what it describes, but it only appears from behind the veil which covers it. God says:

*And it is not for any man that God should speak to him unless by revelation, or from behind a veil*⁷⁸¹.

When Moses heard the call from the right side of the mountain, he recognized it as God’s voice without needing any proof because of the sound sensitivity and taste he has been granted. And such is the case amongst us when we grow stronger in certitude and our inner being expands with the words of the Qur’ān that we hear, we deem them nothing other than words God is speaking to us in that very instant, and needs no further proof of this because of the profound impact it has on the heart.

At-Ṭabari narrates on the authority of Nawās bin Sam’ān that the Prophet said, “When God speaks revelation the heavens begin to shudder violently out of fear of God. And when the people of the heavens hear it they fall down in prostration. Then the first one to lift his head would be the angel Gabriel and God speaks to him by revelation what He wishes. Then he will come with it to the other angels, and each time that he comes across a heaven, the

⁷⁷⁷ Q. 26:193

⁷⁷⁸ Q. 36:12

⁷⁷⁹ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 23

⁷⁸⁰ Al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Abū ‘Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā’īl al-Bukhārī. Edited by. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir Al-Nāṣir. Print: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt copied from Al-Maṭba’ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah. Būlāq, Egypt (1311 A.H.) Ḥadīth No. 6502 Vol. 8 Pg.105

⁷⁸¹ Q. 42:51

people of that heaven will ask him, “What did our Lord say?” He will say, “The truth” until he comes to take it where he was commanded.

Similarly, when Gabriel took it down to Muḥammad, the power of the revelation would cause the Prophet to shake in his bones; and it continues to have this power. Whenever it visits an unblemished heart, it has a powerful effect on it. Praise be to God, a share in this was allotted to me, so that whenever I heard the word of God I would tremble in awe of it and feel as though I could hear the echo of a bell: and when I picked up the Qur’ān, I held it as reverently as if it were a message delivered to me personally from the all-Wise and the All-Knowing, beginning (after the *al-Fātiḥah*):

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. alif-lām-mīm. This is the Book beyond doubt. [Q. 2 :1-2]. Then I would take it and read it as eagerly as a lonely man reads a letter from his family, delighted in it and not feeling satisfied until he has read everything in it. By means of this favor, God be praised, God allowed me to glimpse some of its jewels. Now do not think that what I have written here is the sum of all that I have understood, or even a tenth of it; for ‘*The wonders of the Qur’ān will never cease*’⁷⁸².

Step Five: every word of the Qur’ān concerns everyone in every age

Once we reflect on how the Qur’ān is a book from God addressed directly to us, we cannot consider any of God’s warnings or promises there in to refer to other people. Rather, if anyone of them is applicable to someone, this means it is indeed addressed to him personally. The same applies to all the commandments, prohibitions, encouragements and discouragements. This is one way in which the Book is addressed to us. As for the historical circumstances of the revelation of certain verses, which seem to suggest that they were intended for specific people, this only means that the people in question served as the means by which the description or ruling was issued

⁷⁸² *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 24

for a particular person type. We should reflect on the broader meaning of God's words, not the narrow circumstances of their revelation.

'The souls are like armies bound together,'⁷⁸³ all equally able to relate to what is addressed to them; the souls do not precede one another in time in the way bodies do. For example, the souls of all hypocrites, from the time of the very first of them, to the last of them, are all addressed by the Qur'ānic warnings to hypocrites and those verses were revealed about every single one of their kind. The same applies to all the other types of people the Qur'ān addresses. To deny this would be to make a dead letter or having outlived the relevance of a great deal of the Qur'ānic text. I do not believe that there is a single dead letter in the Book of God; everything in it can be applied to those who fit the description in every age or in every moment even. This means that its entire words pass from one addressee to the next at all times, falling into their proper places without any addition or subtraction.'⁷⁸⁴

'More amazing still is that even the words addressed literally to the Prophet could also apply figuratively to his spiritual heirs, by way of allusion. Conversely (on the other hand), anything therein that seemed to warn him or ascribe a shortcoming to him could be applied literally to his heirs, since they are more likely than him to be actually guilty of shortcomings. When the *Quṭb*⁷⁸⁵ (leading representative) of Muḥammad or the one who is in the state of our master Abraham's heart, hears God's words, 'O Prophet' or 'O Messenger', 'convey that which has been sent down to you'⁷⁸⁶ he sees this as nothing other than a command from God to him personally telling him to convey the teachings of religion. This is the wisdom (and God knows best) behind God not addressing him (the Prophet) in His glorious Book by his name by saying 'O Muḥammad' or 'O Aḥmad' as He addresses all the other Prophets but rather calling him 'O Prophet'⁷⁸⁷; 'O Messenger'⁷⁸⁸ 'O you who are

⁷⁸³ Narrated Abu Huraira in *al-kitāb al-maqāsid al-ḥasanah*, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. *ḥadīth* no. 94

⁷⁸⁴ *Al-baḥr l-maṣjūr*, p. 27

⁷⁸⁵ The *quṭb* in Sufi terminology is the Pole, the living head of the hierarchy of saints, very similar to the term *mujaddid* in *sharī'a* terminology.

⁷⁸⁶ Q. 5:67

⁷⁸⁷ Q. 33:1

⁷⁸⁸ Q. 5:41

*wrapped in your garment.*⁷⁸⁹ *O you who are wrapped in your cloak.*⁷⁹⁰ and so on. This allows the addresses to apply to his spiritual heirs who convey his teachings as well, by way of allusion:

“The sages are the heirs of the Prophets,⁷⁹¹ and those who convey the teachings of their messengers are their heirs. Do you not see that when Jesus sent his apostles to Antioch. God called them ‘messengers’ and declared that He Himself had sent them saying, *We sent them two, but they denied them, so We strengthened them with a third*⁷⁹². So there is nothing to prevent anyone from the Muḥammadan community who delivers His teachings being called by the Qur’ān in this way, and being the one intended by God’s knowledge.⁷⁹³

‘Do you not see that He also called Muḥammad in the Torah and elsewhere in the same way, saying, ‘Gird your sword upon your thigh, O most mighty!’⁷⁹⁴ ⁷⁹⁵ This address too could have applied metaphorically to someone else in that age, the literal meaning being saved for the Prophet.

‘As for the wisdom behind God calling the other Prophets by their names alone, it is (and God knows best) that their laws were not destined to last forever, unlike the Law (*shari’a*) of Prophet Muḥammad. It will last forever and calling others by means of it applies to every prophetic spiritual heir until finally passing on to the Mahdi and then to Īsa (Jesus). When God commands Muḥammad He commands them both; when He addresses him, He addresses them. This is why He addresses him in the Qur’ān with ‘*O You*’.

Know also that the true conveyer of the teachings of the Qur’ān past, present and future is none other than Muḥammad. His Light hidden within his vicegerents (*khulafā*), is what hears the calls addressed to him. He said, ‘God have mercy on my vicegerents! God have mercy on my vicegerents!’ they said, ‘Who are your vicegerents, O Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘They who

⁷⁸⁹ Q. 74:1

⁷⁹⁰ Q. 75:1

⁷⁹¹ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Abū Īsā Al-Tirmidhi. Edited by Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwah ‘Iwad. Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī (Second Edition 1975) Ḥadīth No 2682 Vol. 5 Pg.49

⁷⁹² Q. 36:14

⁷⁹³ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 28

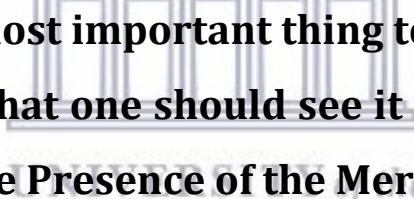
⁷⁹⁴ Psalms 45:3

⁷⁹⁵ This passage is from the Psalms of David and is often interpreted by Muslims as referring to the Prophet Muḥammad.

love my Sunnah, and teach it to God's servants.' This was narrated by Ibn Abd al-Barr.

What makes us even more aware of this point is that the word, 'Say', has not been removed from the recitation or written text of the Qur'ān, even though it is not a necessary part of the content of what is said. When God said to His Prophet *Say: I have no control over benefit or harm for myself, save as God wills*⁷⁹⁶, the mind immediately registers, *I have no control over benefit or harm for myself* without the word, *Say!* The reason this word is retained is that it is a permanently active verb like any other, and applies to everyone who ought to say these words whenever he understands that God wills this. We are speaking here of the spiritual heir of Muḥammad. If the word 'Say' were removed, our share would be diminished; or we might say that our understanding of the Book of God would be diminished.⁷⁹⁷

*None understand this save those endowed with intelligence (wisdom)*⁷⁹⁸.



Step Six: the most important thing to remember about the Qur'ān is that one should see it as coming directly to one from the Presence of the Merciful

The most important thing for us to consider when reading the Qur'ān is that we should see it as coming directly to us from God's Presence right now, in the form in which it has between the two covers, declaring of itself, *'This beyond doubt is the Book.'*⁷⁹⁹ The proof that it is coming to us directly from God in this format is the *ḥadīth* that we mentioned earlier of Abi Jum'ah. It is clear that the Book of God does not come from anyone except God. The fact that the Book was compiled and arranged in its present form and then sent out to the world by the Companions should not cause you any difficulty, indeed it was so, but they were divinely guided as He says, *'Verily We are the*

⁷⁹⁶ Q. 7:188

⁷⁹⁷ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 27

⁷⁹⁸ Q. 29:43

⁷⁹⁹ Q. 2:1

revealers of this remembrance, and it is We who preserve it.⁸⁰⁰ For God has taken upon Himself to preserve it as He has taken upon Himself to reveal it and thus in reality He is the *compiler* and *organizer* of it in a manner known to Him in His infinite knowledge. This refers to the arrangement of the chapters (*Sūrahs*) since there is a dispute as to whether this was taken directly from the Prophet or was done by the reasoning of the Companions. As for the arrangement of the verses (*āyāt*) within the Chapters, there is a consensus that this was done according to revelation from God, as the traditions make clear. Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūti quotes Qādi Abū Bakr as saying, 'Our view is that all of the Qur'ān that God sent down and ordered to be kept and written and did not abrogate, is what is present between the covers of the written copy of Uthmān, with no omissions or additions. It is arranged and ordered as ordained by God Himself and directed by His Messenger. It came down surrounded by light and angels and its meanings were transmitted by inspiration (*wahyī*) from God to those hearts ready to receive it.

Aḥmad narrates in his Musnad on the authority of Ma'qal ibn Yassār that the Messenger of God said, '*Al-Baqara is the peak and summit of the Qur'ān; with every verse of it descended eighty angels.*'⁸⁰¹

Do you suppose that those angels who came down to earth with this Chapter delivered it and then just left it on earth alone? Of course not! By God's aid, His Book will continue to be surrounded by angels until God calls the earth and all upon it back to Himself; '*All things return to God.*'⁸⁰²

Do not worry if some demonic people interfere with individual copies of it, for it is preserved and spread throughout the world in its proper state.

As for *Sūrah al-Baqara* being the peak and summit of it, this shows that God Himself arranged it in His eternal knowledge, and that the Messenger of God knew of its final form.⁸⁰³

⁸⁰⁰ Q. 15:9

⁸⁰¹ Narrated from Ma'qal Ibn Yasār in the '*musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥambal, *ṣaḥīḥ*, *ḥadīth* no.19828

⁸⁰² Q. 11:123

⁸⁰³ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 31

An Important Note:

The Holy Qur'ān was revealed to the Companions of Muḥammad in stages. This is true of how it was revealed to them; but when it comes to how it was revealed to *us*, it came to us from God as a whole, through the intermediary of those by whom God preserved it until our time. It was God Who preserved it,

*'It is We Who sent down the Remembrance, and it is We Who will preserve it.'*⁸⁰⁴. This applies to those who came before us, and will apply to those who come after us.

Our words, 'it came to us from God as a whole' are still supported by the aforementioned *Ḥadīth* of Abu Jumu'a al-Ansāri , *'I said, O Messenger of God, will there ever be any people more greatly rewarded than us, since we believe in you and follow you?' He said, "And why would you not do so, when the Messenger of God is amongst you, bringing you revelation from Heaven? Nay, a people will come after you to whom the Book of God will come written on pages between covers, and they will believe....."* The key words here are **'to whom the Book of God will come written on pages between covers'**, which tells us beyond doubt that the Book of God is addressed directly to us, and we are not simply reading what was addressed to someone else before us. When we say that the Qur'ān came to us as a whole, we are referring to its words. Its meanings, however, are still in the care of the Trusted Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-amīn*) who brings them down to the hearts of those of the community of Muḥammad who are completely ready to receive them. He brings them in stages, as they are needed, just as once the words of the Qur'ān themselves were brought down in stages.

So do not find it far-fetched that meanings could be brought down to the hearts of the Gnostics by angels. Those who say,

*'Our Lord is God, and then follow His straight path, on them descend the angels'*⁸⁰⁵.

If this is still not clear to you, consider the *ḥadīth*,

⁸⁰⁴ Q. 15:9

⁸⁰⁵ Q. 12:30

'The earth is never without forty men who are like the friend of the Compassionate' – how close are the angels to the hearts like the hearts of God's Friend! The hearts of the Gnostics are occupied by the Supreme Assembly (al-mala al-a'lā) and this is why they partake in the mystical knowledge of the angels.

Aḥmad ibn Abi al-Hawāri said to Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, I heard my Shaykh, Ibn Sam'ān saying, "When souls become used to abstaining from sin, they rise up into the angelic realm and then bring back rare pieces of wisdom to their owners, without any human teacher conveying it to them."

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal said, "You speak the truth, Aḥmad, and so does your Shaykh."

I say, then, that God continues to explain the meanings of the Qur'ān in every age and time. God said, and He continues to say,

*'When We recite it, follow its recitation; and then its upon Us to explain it.'*⁸⁰⁶

One aspect of the explanation He has undertaken to give is found in the meanings God causes to come forth on the tongues of His chosen elect (*khāṣṣ*). In His wisdom, He only reveals to the sages (*'ulamā*) of each age what the people of that age require; by 'sages' here, we mean those who truly implement the knowledge they inherit and uphold God's proof to the world -- those by means of whom God preserves this religion until they pass it on to those who come after them. We do not mean those prattlers *'whose efforts have been wasted in this life'*⁸⁰⁷ [Q. 18:104]; they are visited by none but the hosts of Satan, who give them the means with which they would (undo) unravel the religion, were it not that:

*God abolishes that which Satan casts and then establishes His revelations.*⁸⁰⁸

'It occurred to me to arrange it by first mentioning the exegesis (*al-tafsīr*), which would represent the general meaning of the Book of God; and then to

⁸⁰⁶ Q. 75:18-19

⁸⁰⁷ Q. 22:52

⁸⁰⁸ *Al-baḥr l-masjūr*, p. 25-26

mention any ruling that might be derived from it (*istinbāt al-aḥkām*), which is a deeper level, then to provide an allegory (*al-ishāra*) that might be derived from it according to the language of the Gnostics ; and finally to speak on an even deeper level, by means of the tongue of the soul (*lisān al-rūḥ*). These are four rivers, as you can see, *and all people knew their drinking place.* (Q. 2:6)

The discourse of the Spirit is not like the discourse of the mind 'most of what is in this Book has come to us on the tongue of special inspiration (*lisān al-khuṣūṣiyya*) and which we have by no means mastered; saying, all we have is what has been granted to us from the Divine Presence. What this means is that my work is the product of neither strenuous effort, nor random understanding; I do not absolve myself of shortcomings, nor do I ignore the good that has been granted to me.'



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GLOSSARY

<i>af'āl</i>	_____	<i>deeds</i>
<i>aḥkām</i>	_____	<i>laws</i>
<i>ahl al-fahm</i>	_____	<i>people of understanding</i>
<i>ahl Allah</i>	_____	<i>the folk of God</i>
<i>ākhira</i>	_____	<i>Last Day</i>
<i>'ālamīn</i>	_____	<i>worlds</i>
<i>al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt</i>	_____	<i>the remaining righteous believers</i>
<i>al-fanā fi'llah</i>	_____	<i>annihilation in God</i>
<i>āmm</i>	_____	<i>general</i>
<i>'āqiba</i>	_____	<i>end of a matter</i>
<i>arwāḥ</i>	_____	<i>spirits/souls</i>
<i>asbāb al-nuzūl</i>	_____	<i>causes of revelation</i>
<i>aṣfiyā'</i>	_____	<i>the elect</i>
<i>Asrār</i>	_____	<i>secrets</i>
<i>awliyā'</i>	_____	<i>God's elect friends</i>
<i>'ayān</i>	_____	<i>face to face vision</i>
<i>Baqā</i>	_____	<i>subsistence</i>
<i>batn</i>	_____	<i>esoteric</i>
<i>dhāt</i>	_____	<i>essence</i>
<i>dirāyah</i>	_____	<i>comprehension</i>
<i>fanā</i>	_____	<i>annihilation</i>
<i>ghair makhlūq</i>	_____	<i>Uncreated</i>
<i>ḥadd</i>	_____	<i>boundary</i>
<i>ḥadīth</i>	_____	<i>prophetic tradition</i>
<i>ḥaqīqa</i>	_____	<i>reality/truth</i>
<i>Iḥsan</i>	_____	<i>excellence</i>
<i>i'jāz</i>	_____	<i>inimitability</i>



<i>ilhām</i>	_____	<i>inspiration</i>
<i>‘ilm al-ishārah</i>	_____	<i>subtle allusion</i>
<i>Īmān</i>	_____	<i>faith</i>
<i>īqān</i>	_____	<i>certainty</i>
<i>ishārat</i>	_____	<i>allegory</i>
<i>Islam</i>	_____	<i>submission</i>
<i>istimbāt</i>	_____	<i>extrapolation/deduction</i>
<i>‘ayān</i>	_____	<i>unveiling</i>
<i>kashf,</i>	_____	<i>eye witnessing</i>
<i>khāṣṣ</i>	_____	<i>elite</i>
<i>Khāṣṣ al Khāṣṣ</i>	_____	<i>elite of the elite</i>
<i>latā’if</i>	_____	<i>spiritual subtleties</i>
<i>latā’if asrārihi</i>	_____	<i>His subtle secrets</i>
<i>lisān al-rūḥ</i>	_____	<i>tongue of the Spirit</i>
<i>ma’āni</i>	_____	<i>the science of meanings (of the Qur’ān)</i>
<i>ma’ānī madkhūrah</i>	_____	<i>carefully guarded meanings</i>
<i>malakūt</i>	_____	<i>dominion</i>
<i>mansūkh,</i>	_____	<i>abrogated</i>
<i>ma’rifah</i>	_____	<i>highest level of faith</i>
<i>maṭla’</i>	_____	<i>horizon</i>
<i>mufassir</i>	_____	<i>exegete</i>
<i>muḥaqqiqūn</i>	_____	<i>the actualised</i>
<i>muḥkam</i>	_____	<i>clear</i>
<i>mujaddid</i>	_____	<i>renewer of religion</i>
<i>mujtahid</i>	_____	<i>independent thinker</i>
<i>muta qaddimīn</i>	_____	<i>earlier generations</i>
<i>mutashābih</i>	_____	<i>ambiguous</i>
<i>nāsikh</i>	_____	<i>abrogating</i>
<i>qulūb</i>	_____	<i>hearts</i>

<i>riwāyah</i>	_____	<i>transmission</i>
<i>ṣifāt</i>	_____	<i>attributes</i>
<i>sūrah</i>	_____	<i>chapter</i>
<i>tadabbur</i>	_____	<i>contemplation</i>
<i>Tāj al-Tafsīr</i>	_____	<i>Exegesis</i>
<i>tarīqa</i>	_____	<i>Path</i>
<i>ṭarīq al-fahm</i>	_____	<i>method of understanding</i>
<i>ṭarīq al-ishārah</i>	_____	<i>allusion</i>
<i>ta'wīl</i>	_____	<i>interpretation</i>
<i>'umūm</i>	_____	<i>general masses</i>
<i>'uqūl</i>	_____	<i>intellects</i>
<i>waḥdat al-wujūd</i>	_____	<i>Oneness of Being</i>
<i>yawm al-jazā</i>	_____	<i>Day of Requit</i>
<i>zāhir</i>	_____	<i>exoteric</i>



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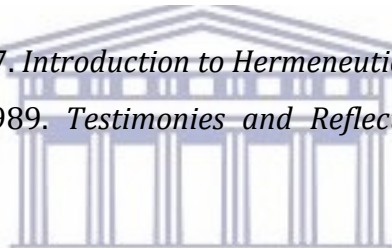
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