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ABSTRACT

Given the whole spectrum of views that have developed throughout Ismaili history, it is not easy to define any one of these as representing an exclusive form of Ismaili interpretation. Focusing on the Fatimid period, this article attempts to develop a basis for understanding Shi'i Ismaili interpretations of the Holy Qur'an. It illustrates how the Ismailis used the foundational doctrine of *ta'wil* as a tool to interpret Qur'anic concepts such as *tawhid*, Creation, Prophecy, *shari'a* and Adam. Believing that mere *zahir* without *batin* is not complete; they see each human being as part of a purposeful sacred history, imbued with Divine purpose where human destiny is exalted, moving forwards and upwards to its origin.

Key words

Fatimids, Qur'an, Ta'wil, Tawhid, shari'a, zahir, batin, salat, Adam

When one speaks of Ismaili thought, it is of course important to keep in mind that there is a whole spectrum of views involved, which have developed against a changing historical background. The roots of the tradition go back to the Shi'i orientation of Islam; we then have the initial period of specifically Ismaili development in the 8th and 9th centuries CE. Then comes the Fatimid period, generally regarded as the "classical" tradition, out of which emerges the Nizari and the Musta'lian traditions. Hence it would be impossible to define any one of these as representing an exclusive form of Ismaili interpretation, since most in any case have as yet to be fully studied. I shall try and limit myself generally to the "classical" period of the Fatimid Ismailis since there are more works of the period available and the literature is represented in both Arabic and Persian.[1]

This paper will attempt to develop a basis for understanding Ismaili interpretations of several Qur'anic concepts. Initially the foundational doctrine of *tawhid* will be considered, followed by an analysis of the concepts of Creation, Prophecy and Adam. Having done this, I hope also to focus briefly on a specific instance of an esoteric interpretation of the ritual of *salat* and finally attempt to draw some general conclusions about the Ismaili interpretation of the Holy Qur'an.[2]

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[1] I.K. Poonawala, *Bibliography of Ismaili Literature* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1977), Part One, is now the definitive source for the literature of the Fatimid period. Its bibliography also contains an extensive history of secondary sources. For an overview of Ismaili history and doctrine see the Introduction to the above work and also Aziz Esmail and Azim Nanji, "The Ismailis in History" in *Ismaili Contributions to Islamic Culture* ed. S.H. Nasr, (Teheran: Imperial Academy of Iranian Philosophy, 1977), pp. 225-265. There are several other excellent essays by noted specialists in the book.

[2] This paper has benefited greatly from participation at other conferences where I had presented papers on specific aspects of Ismaili interpretations of the Holy Qur'an, namely at a symposium on Islam and the History of Religion at Arizona State University (November, 1979) and at the American Academy of Religion's annual meetings in 1978 and 1979. This paper represents a synthesis of some of the ideas presented there and elsewhere, and also draws widely from the studies on Ismailism by Henry Corbin, Hosayn F. Hamadani, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Wladimir Ivanow, Wilferd Madelung and others.

BACKGROUND

Traditional Ismaili thought is posited on the notion that there are levels of meaning in the Holy Qur'an. An understanding of these levels of meaning can be arrived at through mastery of an elaborate curriculum that leads the individual through progressive study, where one acquires the tools necessary for understanding the Holy Qur'an and is able to relate this understanding to certain basic truths that lie at the heart of the Qur'anic message. The tool requisite for the process is _ta'wil_, the hermeneutical analysis, by which one arrives at the root of the original meaning of revelation. The complement of _ta'wil_ is _tanzil_, that is the part of revelation that defines the formal aspects of religious life, the vessels within which the truths are contained. As reflected in the curriculum developed in Fatimid Ismaili seats of learning such as _al-Azhar_ and _Dar al-Hikmah_, the student commenced studies by mastering _al-'ibadat al-'Amaliya_, the sciences that were necessary to grasp and define the _shari'a_. Once this had been done, the student went on to study _al-'ibadat al-'ilmiyyah_, the sciences that expounded the _haqa'iq_, the esoteric dimension of revelation and _shari'a_. Thus the two methods of study and the subject-matter complemented each other, providing in the Ismaili view a comprehensive understanding of Islam and of the Holy Qur'an, in both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions. This is illustrated for instance in the works of al-Qadi al-Nu'man, the famous Fatimid jurist and writer of the tenth century, who after having written his classic juristic formulation, _Da'a'im al-Islam_,[3] detailing the _shari'a_ according to the Ismaili _madhab_, then wrote a complementary work entitled _Ta'wil al-Da'a'im_, where the foundational pillars of Islam are discussed in terms of their esoteric meaning. This dual and complementary aspect of Ismaili thought[4] is reflected in much of the classical Fatimid writings; where the concepts of _zahir_ and _batin_, the formal and the inner dimensions of both revelation and practice of faith are discussed.

All interpretation of the Holy Qur'an in Ismaili thought assumes such an exegetical basis, leading via levels of meaning, to the ultimate truths expressed as _haqa'iq_. Though the validity of _zahiri_ meaning is not denied, it is to be but one aspect of the overall meaning that can lead to higher understanding. It is this process of interpretation that I have chosen to highlight around a cluster of key Qur'anic concepts.

THE CONCEPT OF TAWHID

The first concept I have chosen to illustrate the Ismaili mode of interpreting the Holy Qur'an, is the most fundamental tenet of Islam – _tawhid_. The essential problem in early _kalam_ had to do with a definition of Qur'anic verses that spoke of Allah's attributes, in particular the attributes such as sitting, hearing, speaking, etc., which reflected human qualities of association. The Mu'tazili and Ash'arite positions on this are too well known to bear repetition. For the Ismaili thinker this controversy highlighted one of the problems he came to be concerned with in understanding and explicating Qur'anic verses on the nature of Allah and His Unity. Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (d.971 CE / 349 AH) in works such as _Kitab al-Iftikhar_[5] and _al-Maqalid_[6] and Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani in his classic, _Rahat al-'Aql_,[7] both begin with a demonstration of _ta'wil_, the application of which they maintain enables a

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[3] al-Nu'man, al-Qadi, Da'a'im al-Islam, 2 vols. ed. A.A. Fyzee (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1951-60).

[4] al-Nu'man, al-Qadi, Ta'wil al-Da'a'im, 2 vols. ed. M. al-Azami (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif. 1968-1972).

[5] Poonawala, I.K. (ed. with commentary) Kitab al-Iftikhar by Abu Ya'qub Ishaq b. Ahmad Al-Sijistani (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2000).

[6] See Poonawala, _Ismaili Literature_, p. 85 for this work. I am grateful to Professor Poonawala for his assistance in developing some of the ideas for this paper based on manuscript material in his possession. For al-Sijistani's thought see also Paul Walker, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani and the development of Ismaili Neoplatonism (Ph.D. thesis submitted to University of Chicago, 1974).

[7] _Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, Rahat al-'aql_ ed. M.K. Husayn and M.M. Hilmi (Cairo: Dar al Fikr al-kabi, 1952).

better understanding of the seemingly contradictory nature of verses in the Holy Qur'an regarding the nature of Allah.

Their goal is to be free of the two errors they attribute to other schools of Islam – committing *tashbih* (i.e., trying to understand God by comparison of analogy and in the process coming close to anthropomorphism) or *ta'til* (i.e., denying *tashbih* and thereby denuding God of all attributes). It must be noted that their concern was not to establish the existence of God here, but, rather according to Sijistani, to understand God as He deserves to be understood and to accord to Him the true worship that is due to Him alone. The *ta'wil* applied to the concept of Allah in the Holy Qur'an leads in both writers through the process to *tanzih* (i.e., removing all association from God) and in some sense like the Mu'tazilites freeing the conception of God from all human associations or conceptualising. This is however the first step and both writers recognise that such a position would in fact lead to an accusation that they too had committed *ta'til*, which as far as they are concerned would leave them open to a charge of "hidden anthropomorphism". The step that leads from this as defined by al-Sijistani is that having denied that God cannot be described, located, defined, etc., one must negate the previous negation.

The absolute transcendence of Allah is established by the use of double negation, in which a negative and a negative of a negative are applied to the thing denied – the first freeing God of all association with the material and the second removing Him from any association with the non-material. God is thus neither within the sensible material world nor within the non-material. Such a definition in the Ismaili view is an act of cognisance of God and thus an act of worship in itself. A little later in the paper I will explore this in terms of the *ta'wil* of *salat* itself.

THE VERSE OF CREATION

The second concept that I have chosen to illustrate the Ismaili interpretation of scripture is the doctrine of Creation. More specifically, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-din Shirazi's interpretation of the Qur'anic verse:[8] "God created the heavens and the earth in six days." (7:54)

He starts by demonstrating that the reference to days has nothing to do with the general conception of a day measured with the rising and setting of the sun. Since there was no sun to speak of before creation, it would be absurd in his view to suppose such a measure of time in relation to God's creative power. He then refers to other Qur'anic references where God is said to create things faster than the twinkling of an eye, and concludes that the reference to heaven and earth and days has in reality nothing to do with the heaven, earth and days as we conceive of them. The *ta'wil* of the verse according to him reveals that the reference to six days connotes the six cycles of Prophecy each of which reflect a time-cycle. These Prophets are, of course, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

"Today, I have brought to completion for you your *din* and called it Islam" (5:4), according to al-Shirazi represents the fulfillment of the creative process embodied in the mission of the six Prophets. Each Prophetic mission is to provide a *shari'a*, a pattern of life revealed to ensure that society will conform to the Divine Command. Each action contained in the *shari'a*, according to Ismaili thought, reflects a passage in one's inner growth and must be accompanied by a deeper spiritual understanding to guide the act.

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[8] For al-Shirazi, see Poonawala, *Ismaili Literature*, The interpretation contained in his Ismaili literature, pp. 103-104. al-Majalis al-Mu'ayyadiyah has been summarised in J. Muscati and A. M. Moulvi, *Life and Lectures of al-Mu'ayyad* (Karachi, Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1956). An excellent study of Ismaili notions of Prophetic cycles and Ismaili Cosmology in general is H. Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismailiyya: Eine Studie zu islamischen Gnosis* (Weisbaden: Kommissionverlag Franz Steiner, 1978).

INTERPRETATION OF SALAT

Ismaili doctrine, as I have alluded to earlier, places a particular emphasis on the complementarity of *zahir* and *batin*, conventionally translated as 'exoteric' and 'esoteric'. Works defining the *zahir* or the Ismaili concept of *shari'a*, shared a number of essential characteristics with the *shari'a* in force among other Muslim schools of law. One distinctive feature of Shi'a (including Ismaili) law, however, was the principle of <u>walaya</u>, devotion to the Imams, which, together with the use of *ahadith* going back to recognised Imams, constituted the *usul* on which the *shari'a* was based. While the *zahir* present in the prescriptions of the *shari'a,* constituted the "Pillars of Islam," Ismaili writings also provided a *batini* interpretation of these pillars. The *batin* did not cancel out the *zahir*; it represented a dimension which went beyond the *zahir* by elaborating its meaning rather than contradicting it. Thus Ismaili thought did not deny a literal interpretation, it merely pointed out that such an interpretation was incomplete.

In order to illustrate a specific instance of this type of esoteric interpretation of ritual, I have chosen *salat* or the daily prayer in Islam as an example.

In defining the *ta'wil* of *salat*, al- Nu'man states[9] that it symbolises *da'wa*, not in the limited sense of the organisation under the Fatimids which carried on the tasks of studying and preaching Ismaili doctrine, but in the wider sense of a call or summoning to the Prophet's message and its continuing affirmation by the Imam of the time. *Salat* then stands for Islam, to which the Prophet and the Imams after him, each in their role as *da'i*, call humankind.

Having made this general point, Ismaili writers then embark on relating the various steps of the *salat*, according to the Ismaili <u>madhhab</u> to their symbolic meanings. *Al-Qadi al-Nu'man* for instance emphasises that the *zahiri* aspects of *salat* consist of steps that are incumbent on Muslims to follow – such as the call to prayer, the times of prayer, the ritual postures within prayer, those elements in *salat* which are *fard* and <u>sunna</u> and so on – whereas the *batini* aspects, corresponding to these steps, are concerned with establishing the true meaning of religion in life, in all periods of human history, and with structuring and ordering society in such a way as to relate religion to the welfare of all humankind.

Specifically, he begins with the *ta'wil* of the times for ritual prayer, based on references to the Holy Qur'an (including 2:238, 17:78-79). The five established prayers during each day signify the five great epochs of the *shari'a* with five great Prophets that came after Adam – the *salat al-zuhr* symbolising the *da'wa* of Prophet Nuh, the *salat al 'asr* of Prophet Ibrahim, *salat al-maghrib* of Prophet Musa**,** *salat al 'isha'* of Prophet 'Isa and *salat al-fajr* of Prophet Muhammad.

Nasir Khusraw[10] also attempts to elaborate *ta'wil* of the three stages of time he identifies within the ritual of prayer itself – the beginning, the middle and the end, where the beginning stage symbolises the *natiq*, the Ismaili term for the Prophet as the promulgator of Revelation, the middle stage stands for <u>asas</u>, the interpreter of the inner meaning of Revelation, and the final stage for the <u>Qa'im al-Qiyama</u> in which both the outer and the inner are fused and transcended. Such a cyclical view of history is an important aspect of Ismaili thought and illustrates the dual dimension of time that Ismaili writers saw reflected in the Holy Qur'an. A first dimension provided a body of rituals and doctrines for historic community; a second transposed these rituals and doctrines to a level of meaning beyond

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[9] *Ta'wil al-Da'a'im,* Vol.1 pp. 176. where the discussion begins.

[10] Nasir Khusraw, *Wajh-i-din* (Berlin: Kacani, 1943), The section on *salah* is dealt with in the nineteenth chapter, pp.130.

the historical constraints of time, where this *tanzil* is metamorphosed by *ta'wil* to provide the individual Muslim an opportunity to grasp the root, cosmic meaning of the revealed law.

Before discussing specifically the performance of the ritual prayer itself, *al-Nu'man* makes an interesting reference to the *qibla*, taking as his reference the verse "so set thy face steadily to *din-i hanifan*" (30:30). He points out that at one level this is the point of orientation to which *hunafa* like Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Adam set themselves – the *Ka'ba* (or even perhaps Jerusalem) – but in its esoteric sense, the *din-i hanifan*, i.e., the faith of one entirely devoid of idolatory, is the *wasi*, the Prophet's successor through whom the Prophet turns his face to the community, through whom the *batin* of religion is affirmed during the Prophet's own lifetime, and the *zahir* established to serve as a point of continuity after his death.

The discussion then proceeds to the steps incorporated within the prayer itself. These according to Nasir Khusraw are seven:

1) *Takbir* which symbolises the taking of the covenant from a *mu'min*. During *takbir*, the believers are required to be silent and to concentrate their attention fully on the performance of prayer – in the same way a *mu'min* from whom the covenant has been taken, should not manifest his quest for the *batin* openly lest his intentions be misconstrued and his words misunderstood.

2) 'Standing', *Qiyam*, which symbolises the firm affirmation of the *mu'min* to stand by his covenant and not be swayed from it.

3) Recitation of the *Fatiha* and an additional *sura* (or parts thereof), which symbolises communication with the rest of the community, conveying to them the meaning of faith and elaborating it for them.

4) *Ruku*, which symbolises the recognition of the *asas* and in his temporary absence the *hujja*, who is the evidence for his existence.

5) The fifth step is *sujud* or prostration which symbolises the recognition of the *natiq* as the heralder of a "great cycle" and the Imam of that cycle.

6) The sixth is *tashahhud* which symbolises the recognition of the *da'i*.

7) The seventh, the offering of *salam*, marks the giving of permission to manifest in conversation and action one's faith, just as after the offering of *salam* in ritual prayer, one is permitted to converse.

When the worshipper completes the performance of *salat* in *zahir*, he has correspondingly sought to fulfill his inner quest, which involves recognition of the inner meaning of the steps. In essence then, the *ta'wil* of the steps within *salat* is that they are stages in the journey of the individual soul in its quest for the inner realities of the Faith.

In summing up his interpretation of prayer, Nasir Khusraw says, "The exoteric aspect of prayer consists in adoring God with the postures of the body, in directing the body towards the *qibla* of the body, which is the *Ka'ba*, the place of worship of the Most High in Makkah. The esoteric of prayer means adoring God with the thinking soul and turning towards the *qibla* of the Book and of the *shari'a,* that is towards the spirit which is the temple of God, the House in which the *haqiqa* is enclosed".[11]

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[11] Translated and quoted by H. Corbin in "Nasir-i Khusraw and Iranian Ismailism", *Cambridge History of Iran* R.N. Frye (ed.), Vol. IV, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.523.

One result of studying these examples of *ta'wil* is a recognition of the dialectic that underlies their hermeneutics. As the *ta'wil* unfolds, it moves always from the level of the specific and temporal to that of the cosmic and eternal. *Ta'wil* is historically rooted in the community and in tradition; it builds and shapes itself until the individual experiences it as part of his intellectual and spiritual growth. According to these writings, the performance of prayer ought to involve each Muslim in a constant dialogue with the meaning of life and the cosmos, an idea that is at the heart of Ismaili doctrine. Another result of this study is the recognition that the *batin* of *salat*, what Nasir Khusraw calls the "adoration with the thinking soul," complements the *zahir*, so that in the outward performance of the act of prayer, one is simultaneously involving the intellectual and spiritual faculties.

THE QUR'ANIC ADAM

Finally I would like to discuss briefly the Ismaili interpretation of the Qur'anic account of Adam (from *sura al-Baqara* 35-39 and *A'raf* 19-25, also *sura Ta Ha* 116-123) to illustrate the links between the various concepts we have discussed so far. The *ta'wil* of the account of Adam in the Garden, his being tempted by Iblis and his subsequent fall are all interpreted on a cosmic plane, that is to say as taking place in a pre-existing world called *'alam al-ibda'*. Adam is called *Adam Ruhani*, 'Spiritual Adam'. Within *'alam al-ibda'*, there existed seven *'uqul* or Intelligences. Adam was the third Intelligence after what in Ismaili thought are referred to as *al-'aql al-awwal* and *al-'aql al-thani*. The aspect of the tree that Adam might not approach is *al-'aql al-awwal*, i.e., to say that God in His wisdom had defined for Adam the limits to which he could attain. It is however Iblis, here interpreted as his own lack of acceptance of this limit, which causes Adam to commit the sin of transgressing the limits in order to attain equality of rank with *al-'aql al-awwal*. The expulsion from the Garden denotes the loss of his rank and preeminence over other intelligences below him. He in fact becomes a tenth intelligence. His eventual act of contrition or *tauba* is both a recognition of the limits and the possibility of return. It is by returning through the Intelligences above him that Adam can, in the sense that he symbolises all humankind, return to his original status.

The concepts of *tawhid*, Creation, Prophecy, *shari'a* and Man interpreted through the spiritual hermeneutic known as *ta'wil* illustrate that Ismaili thought sees each human being as part of a purposeful sacred history, imbued with Divine purpose where human destiny is exalted, moving forwards and upwards to its origin; where such a process of history culminates in the Qur'anic concept of a *Qiyama* or Resurrection – a resurrection of all souls to the esoteric Garden of pre-eternal times and to the original status of *Adam Ruhani*.