Context of the commentary

More than one context presents itself for Shahrastānī's accomplishment in his Qur'ān commentary, the first volume of which is presented here translated into English, based on Dr Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab's *editio princeps*.[1] The work belongs to the great thinker's last years and, to judge from his own words, amounted for him to the achievement of an arduous quest. Expressed in the broadest terms, the latter's circumstances were the Seljuq period's counterpoints of exoteric and esoteric science, vying revelationist and philosophical epistemologies, and lastly Sunnism and different forms of Shīʿism (some revolutionary). These all find unexpected resolution in Shahrastānī's less known and chronologically later works, which are only now getting scholarly attention. But among these, the Qur'ān commentary – holding pride of place in any Muslim thinker's *oeuvre* through the prestige and foundationality of the divine Word within the tradition – is a witness of distinct value. It enshrines at its core a worldview sufficiently radical for some to have consigned it to pseudepigraphical status,[2] and for its very survival to have slenderly rested on a unicum manuscript held at the library of the National Consultative Assembly in Tehran.[3] Yet this precious – sadly incomplete – text preserves a superlative example of anagogic interpretation within Islamic culture.

While penetrating the *sensus anagogicus* of the Qur'ān in many ways represented the climax of our author's intellectual journey, to map the latter is hard through his own secrecy. The path may be tentatively reconstructed combining the limited materials available: references by contemporaries and in later *rijālī* works,[4] key evidence from the corpus of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) a century later, and finally, the striking but all too dark allusions by Shahrastānī himself to his own development. Abū'l-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. Abī'l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Abī Bakr Aḥmad al-Shahrastānī, known as 'the most learned' (*al-afḍal*), 'proof of the Truth' (*ḥujjat al-Ḥaqq*) and 'the crown of religion' (*tāj al-dīn*), was most likely born in the year 479/1086 in the township of Shahrastāna (to be identified

with the settlement near Nasā or Darreh Gaz close to the Iran-Turkmenistan border, not the towns of that name in Fārs and near Iṣfahān).[5] It was here that he would have received his earliest education, as well as in Gurgānj, the town of Khwārazm on the River Oxus/Jayḥūn.

At some point in his youth Shahrastānī left 'in quest of knowledge' (*fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*), journeying 140 miles south east to Ṭūs – famously linked with his epoch-making older contemporary Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). This first rite of passage – seemingly the real inception of Shahrastānī's intellectual quest – saw him attach himself to a figure who had actually been Ghazālī's fellow student, Abū'l-Muẓaffar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Muẓaffar al-Khawāfī (d. 500/1106), chief justice (*walī al-qaḍā*) in Ṭūs and its surrounding districts. No common lawyer, Khawāfī is described as having been the 'foremost in speculation (*anẓar*) among his contemporaries and the most expert of them in the methods of disputation and jurisprudence [...]'.[6] He had studied, in his youth, under such famous figures as Abū Ibrāhīm al-Ḍarīr and al-Juwaynī, known as the '*imām al-ḥaramayn*' (d. 478/1085), who compared him with his other chief students in the famous statement reported by Subkī: 'Khawāfī's strong point is verification, Ghazālī's is speculation, and Kiyā's is explanation.'[7] Shahrastānī's thorough grounding in the Shāfiʿī rite is doubtless rooted in his early connection with this impressive legist.

Shahrastānī's search extended as he traveled to one of the world's original university towns, Nīshāpūr, which, in the 5th and 6th centuries AH, was a lure for scholars and intellectuals in eastern Islam, as well as having long been a forum for the mystical movement. Shahrastānī now studied under the greatest living pedagogues, no doubt benefiting from Nīshāpūr's new Niẓāmiyya college and making full use of its library.[8] It is probable that he here began to make his mark as a scholar and it has been argued that by the time he left Nīshāpūr, Shahrastānī was already operating as a teacher, not just a student.[9] Prominent among his teacher-mentors at this time is the name of Abū Naṣr ʿAbd al-Raḥīm b. ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d. 514/1120), a scholar of wide fame and learning, skilled in jurisprudence, *uṣūl*, Ashʿarī theology, mathematics, rhetoric and belles-lettres. Though well known in his generation in his own right,[10] Abū Naṣr was in fact none other than the son of the celebrated Ashʿarī scholar, Ṣūfī theorist and mystical exegete, Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074).

A seeming trait of Shahrastānī's biography is that despite the mystical

zeitgeist and the impingement of Ṣūfī influences throughout his milieu, the Ṣūfī strain of Islamic esotericism leaves no trace on his reputation or extant writings. Another example of a teacher with striking Ṣūfī connections is Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Aḥzam al-Madīnī (d. 494/1101) known as 'the caller to prayer' (*al-muʾadhdhin*), who appears to have supplied the young Shahrastānī's groundwork in Prophetic Tradition. Madīnī had himself supposedly been instructed in his youth by the great scholar of mysticism, Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).[11] However, the most significant case of Shahrastānī's debt to a contemporary scholar chronicled as a Ṣūfī (e.g. by Subkī), may well be that of Abū'l-Qāsim Salmān al-Anṣārī (d. 512/ 1118).

Ṣūfī cynosures had taught the youthful Anṣārī, notably the aforementioned Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī as well as Abū Saʿīd b. Abī'l-Khayr (d. 440/1049). Though cited as among Anṣārī's teachers in *uṣūl* and Tradition, mysticism too was surely in their bequest to him, for he is commended by Fārisī for his sanctity, as '[...] the imam, the pious, godfearing ascetic, at one time the beloved of his age. His house was the house of righteousness, Ṣūfism and *askesis*. He was amongst those who were peerless in the science of principles (*uṣūl*) and scriptural exegesis [...]'.[12] Subkī's account also conveys an evocative picture of this intensely spiritual character:

> [Anṣārī's] gnosis was half spoken (*fawqa lisānihi*) and his meaning was greater than his outward [words]. He was in possession of seniority in Ṣūfism and the mystical path, modest in his eating. He earned his livelihood by making paper, and he never mixed [with people], nor did he enter sociably into any worldly eating-house. He would be seated in the great library of the Niẓāmiyya at Nīshāpūr, applying himself to his religion. He was stricken at the end of his life with weakness in his eyesight, and a cavity got going in his ear.[13]

Moreover, this shy, godly figure seems to have shared a supernatural aura with others from the mystical cadre, given Subkī's transmission of the following (on the authority of Abū Naṣr ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Khāṭibī):

> I heard Maḥmūd b. Abī Tawba, the vizier, say: 'I proceeded to the door of Abū'l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī and lo! the door was closed and he was having a conversation with someone, so I stood for an hour and the door was opened – and no one but he was in the house! So I said "With whom were you having

a conversation?" and he said "One of the spirits (*jinn*) was here to whom I was speaking [...]".'[14]

This last quotation is, inter alia, evidence that Anṣārī was of sufficient eminence to be visited by the highest state-functionaries such as the vizier, and keep them waiting.

Anṣārī's slight recorded legacy is in the disciplines of the religious mainstream, as a traditionist, scriptural exegete and Ashʿarī theologian.[15] But Shahrastānī signals that he truly marked a crux in his search, confiding to him a way into the arcanal reaches of the revealed text. In particular, though he regails this teacher as 'the defender of the sunna', he also states that Anṣārī was versed in a hermeneutic of the Qurʾān issuing from the Prophet's lineage, initiating Shahrastānī into these dimensions: '[...] he would inform me about the [different] readings of the noble words from the People of the Prophet's House and their friends (may God be pleased with them), in line with buried arcana and firm principles in the science of the Qurʾān'.[16] The innuendo here is startling. The 'buried arcana and firm principles in the science of the Qurʾān' (*asrār dafīna wa uṣūl matīna fī ʿilm al-Qurʾān*) seem an allusion to the lattice of complementarities by which Shahrastānī penetrates the *sensus anagogicus* and which is discussed in detail below. These are none other than the arcana (*asrār*) referred to in the title of his commentary. The added detail that Anṣārī conferred these hermeneutical keys to his disciple as a legacy from the Prophet's line and its 'friends' (*awliyāʾ*) hints strongly that he is Shahrastānī's original contact with the heritage of Ismāʿīlī thought. For there are remarkable grounds for arguing that the roots of Shahrastānī's hermeneutical system for the arcana lie in the latter. The conclusion seems to be that Anṣārī's reputation for Ṣūfism hid other, unchronicled influences, handed in turn to our own author. Perhaps Anṣārī's interlocutor overheard (potentially so disastrously) by the Seljuq vizier, was in fact anything but a *jinn*.

Rather than the finale, Anṣārī was the verge of the real breakthrough in Shahrastānī's quest – now pursued apace on the basis of Anṣārī's leads. In the autobiographical passage from the beginning of the *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* (henceforth *Mafātīḥ*) in which Shahrastānī speaks of Anṣārī with his imambased interpretation, he goes onto allude to another, greater figure in his inner formation. This anonym seems to have been Shahrastānī's most decisive mentor, significantly likened by him to the unearthly figure of God's

'virtuous servant' (generally identified with the immortal sage *al-Khaḍir*, 'the Green One') encountered by Moses in Q. 18:65–82:

> So I searched for 'the truthful' as passionate lovers might search. And I found one of the virtuous servants of God, just like Moses (peace be upon him) with his young man: 'Then the two of them found one of Our servants whom We bestowed as a mercy from Us, and We taught him knowledge from Our presence' (Q. 18:65). So I learnt from him the ways of the creation (*khalq*) and of the Command (*amr*), the degrees of contrariety (*taḍādd*) and hierarchy (*tarattub*), the twin aspects of generality (*'umūm*) and specificity (*khuṣūṣ*), and the two rulings of the accomplished (*mafrūgh*) and the inchoative (*musta'naf*). I thus had my fill of this single dish, not the dishes which are the foods of error and the starting points of the ignorant. I quenched my thirst from the fountain of submission with a cup whose blend was from Tasnīm [...].[17]

This passage, with its allusion and pathos, points to the climax of our author's intellectual journey – the achievement of his quest. Everything points to a teacher of crowning importance, bearing prime responsibility for Shahrastānī's esoteric hermeneutic and higher theology. Significantly, the Qur'ānic passage cited is often found as a prooftext for the prerogatives of an esoteric dimension in Islam, be it Ṣūfī or Shī'ī. The stark asymmetry of exoteric and esoteric norms is implied in the Qur'ānic tale as it unfolds: the archetypal wisdom-mouthpiece will shock Moses with his bizarre behaviour and end by summarily dismissing the great prophet for failing to keep faith with him, with the words: 'This is the parting (*firāq*) between you and me' (Q. 18:78). The initiator's anonymity in Shahrastānī's account obviously implies the need for circumspection, as expected for a sectarian figurehead of this kind. Moreover, as will emerge, at least three of the hermeneutical complementarities which Shahrastānī drew (presumably in more depth than from Anṣārī earlier) from this 'virtuous servant of God' smack of contemporary Ismā'īlī doctrine and form part of the total argument for our author's own Ismā'īlī links.[18] It follows that behind the mystagogue's intentionally blurred image may lie a living authority in Ismā'īlī teaching, a learned *dā'ī* – a henchman, perhaps, of the inceptor of Nizārī Ismā'īlism, al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), or even the man himself?

Dates for this contact are of course an enigma. Ādharshab speculates

however, that even while at Nīshāpūr Shahrastānī was inwardly on a trajectory tangential to the Ashʿarī and Shāfiʿī establishment which he publicly fostered. He suggests that through frustration with the latter he returned to Khwārazm, and there used his newfound rhetorical skills to preach, galling peers with his idiosyncracy.[19] A barbed comment by Khwārazmī lends itself to this interpretation: 'And there had been disputes and talks between us and he used to go to excesses in supporting the teaching of the philosophers and defending them. And I was present many times at sessions of his preaching and the expression "God said" and "God's Messenger did not say" was not in them, nor responding to legal questions.'[20] This indeed suggests that Shahrastānī was giving freer rein to his personal intellectual and spiritual interests.

Shahrastānī set out for the Ḥijāz on the Greater Pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) in the year 510/1116, probably aged about thirty years old. He then opted to live in the caliphal capital Baghdad for three years (511/1117–514/1120) during which time he was involved at the principal Niẓāmiyya college, inter alia convening further sessions of preaching from which he gained wide popularity, though an elitist mentality may mean that Khwārazmī is slyly belittling him in alluding to this. It yet hints that the fresh approach for which Shahrastānī stood touched a nerve in the populace.[21] Whatever the case, Khwārazmī also snubs him more openly by alleging nepotism in his appointment at the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya – through his friendship with Asʿad al-Mayhanī, a figure of prominence at the college who had been close to him back in Khurāsān.[22] Khwārazmī's illfeeling, whether from pious suspicion or rivalry, is sensed in these references to Shahrastānī.

Perhaps again not easily fitting the establishment's mold, by 514/1120 our author felt driven to head back east for Merv, the so-called *Shāhjān*, most famous of the towns of Khurāsān and chosen by the Seljuq sultan Sanjar as his capital. Free again to operate as a private scholar, Shahrastānī now set to work on the cycle of books on which his posthumous reputation rests, no doubt making full use of Merv's great library. Above all, as a major centre of the Seljuq government, the city gave hope of solid backing for Shahrastānī's projects. He was in fact successful in gaining the support of at least two powerful regional figures: Abū Tawba Naṣīr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. al-Muẓaffar al-Marwazī, Seljuq vizier from 521/1127 to 526/1131, and also Tāj al-Maʿālī Majd al-Dīn Abū'l-Qāsim ʿAlī b. Jaʿfar b. Ḥusayn, Quddāma al-Mūsawī, syndic (*naqīb*) of the ʿAlids in Tirmidh and generally recognised

as the headman in Khurāsān. Both these figures were well-known as patrons of scholars and promoters of learning in Khurāsān and through them Shahrastānī even succeeded in approaching the court of the Seljuq ruler himself, Sanjar, presently becoming 'close to the mighty throne of the Sultan and his confidant'.[23]

In these meridian years Shahrastānī would draft his famous study in comparative religion and philosophy, *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal* (The Religions and Sects; henceforth *Milal*), for the vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn,[24] next his major study of Kalām theology, *Nihāyat al-aqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām* (The Furthest Steps in Theology; henceforth *Nihāya*),[25] and finally his *Muṣāraʿat al-falāsifa* (Wrestling with the Philosophers; henceforth *Muṣāraʿa*),[26] dedicated to the ʿAlid syndic Tāj al-Maʿālī. All three works fit Shahrastānī's role as a leading authority on dogmatics in the Seljuq religious scene: respectively, a universal heresiography, a plenary treatment of Ashʿari orthodoxy, and a refutation of Avicennism on behalf of scriptural norms. But the message of these books is not stereotypical and scrutiny shows their deeper contiguity with the unusual teachings of the *Mafātīḥ*, as may emerge from the following.

The architecture of the *Milal* uses two great spans: the first being 'on the exposition of the adherents of religions and religious denominations (*milal*) consisting in the Muslims and People of Scripture and in whoever has the like of the scripture of the Muslims';[27] and the second, 'a commentary on the people of opinions and sects (*niḥal*) who are ranged against the adherents of religions in the manner of contrariety (*taḍādd*) as we mentioned, their reliance being on the sound primordial predisposition, perfect intellect and pure mind'.[28] The prior overarching section deals with recognized scriptural traditions and an elaborate account of Islamic groups is naturally included in it, along with Jewish, Christian and Mazdean doctrines; the second section instead covers supposedly non-scriptural belief systems, comprising treatments of the Hellenistic philosophers, 'eternalists' (*dahriyya*), pseudo-Sabaeans of Ḥarrān, image-worshippers and so-called Brahmins. In this manner, the differential of the two spanning sections of the book is clearly presented in terms of the principle of contrariety. Moreover, the organisation of the material *within* these sections explicitly builds on the leitmotif of both hierarchy[29] and contrariety (*al-tarattub wa'l-taḍādd*). And again, in each chapter and subsection the account moves systematically from the general level (*ʿumūm*) to the specific (*khuṣūṣ*).

These characteristic contours of the *Milal* are very noteworthy since the couples hierarchy/contrariety and generality/specificity are conceptual talismans with wide and profound applications throughout Shahrastānī's thought, especially in his discussion of scriptural arcana, to which they are vital keys. The weaving of his doxography on the loom of these complementarities is fully consistent with these deeper aspects of his thought, with their arguably Ismāʿīlī stimulus. Amongst various other features of the *Milal* which are similarly noteworthy, mention might also be made here of the richness of data which was clearly available to the author concerning Ismāʿīlism, particularly the 'new mission' (*daʿwa jadīda*) of al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāḥ;[30] and the long section of over thirty-five pages, considered 'one of the most important things in this book', in which the Ḥanīfs defend the 'true faith' against the pseudo-Sabaeans. Monnot has pointed out that this theological dialogue may well emerge from the celebrated debate between the 'free-thinking' philosopher Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 311/923) and the major Ismāʿīlī thinker and missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933), as presented in the latter's *Aʿlām al-nubuwwa*.[31] According to Monnot then, Shahrastānī's Ḥanīfs ultimately represent Ismāʿīlī teaching.[32] It will emerge that, in other works, our author indeed refers to his Ismāʿīlī 'higher theology' in these very terms.[33] The most recent discovery in this unsuspected Ismāʿīlī dimension of our author's best known work is that, in key respects, it is indebted to an earlier Iranian-Khurāsānian tradition of Ismāʿīlī heresiography, enshrined in Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Zīna* and in particular Abū Tammām's *Kitāb al-Shajara*. (On this, see Gaiser, 'Satan's Seven Specious Arguments'.)

   Comparable idiosyncracies of the *Nihāya*, for their part, are the more striking given its prima facie aim of rehearsing Ashʿarī teachings. It opens with the strongly universalistic ruling that the doctrine espoused by the elite 'people of truth in all religious communities' (*madhhab ahl al-ḥaqq min ahl al-milal kullihā*) affirms the existence of a Creator and that 'God was and there was naught with Him' (*kānaʾllāhu wa lam yakun maʿahu shayʾ*).[34] A similar judgement comes at the start of the second chapter in regard to the teaching that the inception of whatsoever exists is through God – again acknowledged by these 'people of truth'. The term is numinous and the referent designedly enigmatic.[35] Steigerwald notes that the grouping can hardly simply be equated with the Ashʿarīs (to whom Shahrastānī generally refers in the text as 'our colleagues', *aṣḥābunā*). Yet neither can his *ahl al-*

ḥaqq simply be a code for the Ismāʿīlīs (which, in any case, would surely be too bold in the context of this Ashʿarī treatise) since he clearly acknowledges the presence of the *ahl al-ḥaqq* both in Islam (*min ahl al-islām*) and in other faiths (*min ahl al-milal*).[36] The safest identification of the *ahl al-ḥaqq* of Islam in our author's mind is probably simply with the final arbiters of truth within the religion. Given his overall views, this means the Prophet, his Household and its adherents, in which case the *ahl al-ḥaqq* in other faiths are apparently to be interpreted as pre-Islamic prophets, imams and *their* adherents. The terminology may thus hint at Ismāʿīlī teaching after all, Shahrastānī's underlying concept being of the perennity of the core truths and religious structures of Ismāʿilism – as assumed in many relevant sources, from the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ with their notion of an 'eternal wisdom' (*al-ḥikma al-khālida*) to the *Asās al-taʾwīl* of al-Qāḍī Nuʿmān, with its central concept of the timeless mission of the true faith (*daʿwat al-ḥaqq*), or the *Ithbāt al-imāma* of Aḥmad al-Naysābūrī, which details the repetition of the religious hierarchy for each great prophet and indeed employs the expression *ahl al-ḥaqīqa*. Minimally speaking, the ecumenical undercurrents here in Shahrastānī's text chime with positions in his late works with their arguable Ismāʿīlī trend, for example, his subtly inclusive interpretation of Islam's abrogation of earlier faiths in the *Mafātīḥ* itself, discussed below.

Whatever the case, the author's comparativist impulse remains very much in evidence in the *Nihāya*. Shahrastānī establishes the teachings of his Ashʿarī colleagues on a series of twenty theses (*qawāʿid*, sing. *qāʿida*) in careful distinction from those of the Muʿtazila, philosophers, 'eternalists' (*dahriyya*), extremist Shīʿa (*ghulāt*), and even pseudo-Sabaeans and 'Brahmins'. Though these schools are obviously foils for the text's Ashʿarism, the latter is not servile. In some details Shahrastānī explicitly criticises the school and takes things in a new direction. Ādharshab notes that while Shahrastānī's teaching in the work is basically 'in line with the Ashʿarī school [...] from time to time he may oppose this school (*qad yukhālifu hādhāʾl-madhhab aḥyānan*)'.[37] Steigerwald claims that he gives *creatio ex nihilo* a different interpretation from Ashʿarism and develops a concept of primordial instauration (*ibdāʿ*) in its place, adopted from the 'ancient sages'.[38] Moreover, in her view, his concept of the necessity of imamate is much closer to Shīʿism than to Ashʿarism, despite the fact that Shahrastānī is here formally critical of Shīʿism.[39]

A noteworthy divergence to which Guillaume drew attention in his

edition and abridged paraphrase of the *Nihāya,* is the discussion of divine aid (*tawfīq*) and abandonment (*khidhlān*) in human moral agency.[40] Shahrastānī criticises *both* the Ashʿarī and Muʿtazilī positions here, the first being allegedly guilty of 'extremism' (*ghulūw*) and the second of 'shortfall' (*taqṣīr*). For the Ashʿarīs take both aid and abandonment as God's direct compulsion of specific individuals, respectively to obey and disobey Him. The Muʿtazilīs instead take aid to be God's general bequest of guidance to humanity as a whole via intellect, revelation and divine law, and they basically deny that abandonment (in the sense of causing human wrongdoing) is conceivable for God. Ashʿarism's 'extremism' here clearly lies in attributing to God the agency of sin and Muʿtazilism's 'shortfall' lies in stinting God's omnipotence.

Shahrastānī's own answer to the antinomy typically draws subtle consequences from his beloved distinction of generality (*ʿumūm*) and specificity (*khuṣūṣ*). A general kind of divine aid must be carefully marked out from a specific one, and the presence of the general is compatible with the absence of the specific.[41] For Shahrastānī, general aid is constituted by the universal bequest to humanity of reason and thereby the basic theological truths which flow from it, and then prophetic guidance. But qua specific, aid may be absent for a given individual: 'Man's adult independence and mature intelligence need great support from *tawfīq*. This is where men stumble (*mazillat al-aqdām*) [...] *Khidhlān* means that God does leave [the individual] to trust in himself and his own resources.'[42] So when aid is withdrawn at the individual level, God's 'abandonment' is indeed in evidence.

In sum, by using his generality/specificity complementarity, Shahrastānī manages to acknowledge God's justice like the Muʿtazilīs, since He never withholds aid absolutely, *and* to acknowledge God's omnipotence like the Ashʿarīs, since He indeed figures in individual wrongdoing through engaging in *khidhlān*. However, the vital point here is simply that Shahrastānī is clearly *not* immured in the Ashʿarī viewpoint, even in this, his most Ashʿarī work. More especially, the generality/specificity *distinguo* – to be explored at greater length below – is a major element in the lattice of complementarities for decoding the Qurʾān's arcana in the *Mafātīḥ*, and to recall, it features prominently in the teachings derived by Shahrastānī from his initiating 'virtuous servant' of God.

Next, the *Muṣāraʿa* too wields the generality/specificity principle,[43] as well as other elements from his complementarities.[44] Despite its notional

analogy with Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers; henceforth, *Tahāfut*),[45] Shahrastānī's own critique of Avicennism is arguably fraught with the enigmatic servant's teachings and belongs among the works most evidential of the author's Ismāʿīlī links. Thus his completed treatment of five philosophical 'issues' (*masāʾil*, sing. *masʾala*)[46] within the *Muṣāraʿa* generally breaks down into three further sub-sections: the first, made up of quotations from Ibn Sīnā; the second, made up of Shahrastānī's criticism of these on the basis of alleged internal inconsistency and *ilzām* (i.e. bringing out absurdities from Ibn Sīnā's premises); and the third, made up of what Ibn Sīnā *should* have said. It is this last sub-section, entitled 'the correct choice' (*al-mukhtār al-ḥaqq*) which is particularly valuable for re-constructing the deeper Shahrastānian cosmological and metaphysical system. The keynote of the latter is found to be an extreme transcendentalism in keeping with contemporary Ismāʿīlī thought.

Scrutiny in fact reveals a submerged unity within these sections, so that the *ilzām*, then Shahrastānī's remedy of Ibn Sīnā's absurdity-entailing premises and then his preferred solution to the issue in question, are profoundly concordant. Hence, most of the *ilzām* arguments turn Ibn Sīnā's own principle of divine simplicity against him; Shahrastānī's remedy is to treat as equivocal the predicates which threaten to compound divinity; finally, the transcendentalised sense retained by him for the predicate as applied to God, is crucial in his 'correct choice' of solution to the given issue. In more detail: if a general concept such as 'intellect' (*ʿaql*), 'oneness' (*waḥda*), 'substantiality' (*jawhariyya*) or 'being' (*wujūd*) were equally applied to God and creatures, it would make God a *compositum*. For such a concept would amount to a kind of genus and insofar as it is found both in God and in others, God would unavoidably comprise the genus in question *and* a differentia. In this way, composition is implied in the very idea of the so-called 'Necessary Being' (*wājib al-wujūd*), the core of Ibn Sīnā's thought. For, claims Shahrastānī, 'being' is a pseudo-genus which would then be present in the divine identity together with the differentia 'necessary'. His most uncompromising remedy for this impasse is to limit 'being' to a level beneath God, who in Himself is 'exalted and sanctified above His glory falling within the hierarchy of existents (*taqaddasa wa taʿālā ʿan an yakūna jalāluhu taḥtaʾl-tartīb fīʾl-mawjūdāt*)'.[47] This is a patently Neoplatonic, in fact Plotinian, turn of thought, unusual in Islam but wholly characteristic of contemporary Ismāʿīlism.[48]

The concord of the subsections comes out in the following. From a slightly different angle to that just presented, Shahrastānī urges denying any idea of God which has a counterpart (*qasīm*), giving as prooftext Q. 2:22: 'Do not knowingly set up rivals (*andād*) for God.'[49] For divine composition would again follow, with God demarcated from the said counterpart within a shared genus, by combining the latter and a differentia. Shahrastānī metaphorises this as a law court: 'Contraries are litigants and variant things are legal appellants, and their judge is not numbered amongst either of His two appellants, the two litigants before Him.'[50] Yet he stresses the paradox that the Qur'ān itself enjoins using divine predicates with formal counterparts: 'And to God belong the most beautiful names, so call upon Him with them. And spurn those who deviate in respect of His names – they will be punished for what they used to do' (Q. 7:180).[51] By citing this last verse and Q. 2:22 in juxtaposition, Shahrastānī celebrates the paradox, whose solution, we learn, is to take such terms as *equivocal* rather than univocal (or even the middle option, as analogical).

This is an unusual and extreme solution, atomising the meaning of the word, giving it discrete senses, and setting the word's 'divine' sense outside human understanding. Yet we discover that Shahrastānī keeps a single crucial sense for these divine equivoques. If God is described as X and X has a counterpart –X, then, according to Shahrastānī, X here means God's being the *cause* of both X and –X. In regard to the predicate 'truth', for example, God is truth in the sense that He makes the truth true and He makes the false false; likewise God is 'living' in the sense that He causes life and death in others.[52] For Shahrastānī, inter-related opposites and paired contraries point to an absolutely independent, i.e. non-paired, agent, both to bring them about in existence and to relate them (*jāmiʿ ghanī ʿalā'l-iṭlāq*). Crucially, this then becomes the key to Shahrastānī's own preferred solutions to questions addressed by Ibn Sīnā, for instance his (admittedly enigmatic) argument for God. While Shahrastānī maintains that God in Himself is strictly indemonstrable, or rather that He is 'too well known for His existence to be proved by anything',[53] he nevertheless holds that there is an argument for the necessity of God's existence from the presence of necessity and its counterpart in the world.[54] The same reasoning follows in arguing for God's inconceivably elevated unity, which Shahrastānī holds to be the ultimate source of relative instances of unity *and* multiplicity in the world:

14

'Oneness' is applied to God (Exalted is He) and to existents purely equivo-cally (*bi'l-ishtirāk al-maḥḍ*). He is one *unlike* the [relative] 'ones' mentioned – one such that the two opposites, unity and multiplicity, both emanate from Him, one in the sense that He brings things that are 'one' into existence. He was unique in unicity, then He made it overflow on His creation. Unity and existence belong to Him without an opposite opposing Him or a rival com-paring with Him, 'And do not knowingly set up rivals for God! (Q. 2:22).'[55]

In sum, the homology of the *Muṣāraʿa* and the *Mafātīḥ* lies in the former's use of certain of the servant's complementarities and its intensely transcendentalist theology, presumably Ismāʿīlī in basis. This last is demon-strably the mainstay of the whole exercise from issue to issue.[56] It may be noted that the *Muṣāraʿa* euphemises this atypical higher theology as 'the Ḥanīfī revelation' (*al-sharʿ al-ḥanīfī*).[57] Texts show that Ismāʿilism was exactly self-styled thus at the time.[58] Moreover, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī inde-pendently confirms that the counter-Avicennan theology of the *Muṣāraʿa* was indeed Ismāʿīlī. As part of his agenda of defending Avicennism, he for-mulated a reply to the *Muṣāraʿa*, called *Maṣāriʿ al-muṣāriʿ* (Wrestlings with the Wrestler), in which he identified its core teaching – that God must be raised beyond all degrees and contraries – as the teaching of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs (*madhhab al-taʿlīmiyyīn*).[59] The point is telling, because an insider's. Ṭūsī had himself been an active affiliate and had authorised (if not actually himself written) a thorough account of the Nizārī system in his *Rawḍat al-Taslīm* (Paradise of Submission). In his separate Nizārī Ismāʿīlī confession, he tells of the process of his entry to the community, explaining that his father directed him to a local philosopher, Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāsib, who would intimate that 'the truth [may be found] among people who are, in the eyes of the group that you know, the most contemptible people'. That is, the then much feared Nizārīs. Ṭūsī's Ismāʿīlī-inclined father, we learn, was educated by a maternal uncle described as an actual student-attendant of our own Shahrastānī. And astonishingly, Ṭūsī refers to the latter at this point as Chief Missionary (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*) – a high rank indeed in the *daʿwa* hierarchy.[60]

In this we spy the full, stressful complex of Shahrastānī's allegiances. It is not that he was a figurehead in one realm, a nonentity in the other. Rather, he operated as a figurehead in both: in public, a doctor of Ashʿarī ortho-doxy, a veteran of the *madāris niẓāmiyya*, a Seljuq courtier and confidant of the sultan; but, it would seem, in secret, a leading missionary and authority

in Ismāʿīlism, considered the prime political and religious threat by the Seljuqs themselves throughout the period. Negotiating this split may have been torment. Certainly, contemporary references show that our author failed to escape suspicion. Samʿānī (d. 562/1166) says in his *Taḥbīr* that Shahrastānī 'was suspected of heresy (*ilḥād*) and inclining to [the heretics]; he was extreme in Shīʿism'.[61] Subkī (quoting Dhahabī, quoting Samʿānī again) says more specifically that Shahrastānī 'was suspected of inclining to the people of the mountain fortresses, meaning the Ismāʿīlīs, their missionary activity, and defending their calamities'.[62] Perhaps expectedly, Subkī immediately tries to salvage his fellow Ashʿarī's reputation against the allegation: 'I don't know whence Ibn al-Samʿānī had that, for Abū'l-Fatḥ's works indicate the very opposite!' Shahrastānī was simply too big a name, too fine a contributor to the Shāfiʿī-Ashʿarī heritage to be lightly surrendered to such a claim.

But suspicions like Samʿānī's must have volatised our author's situation. Indeed, court vicissitudes sank both his patrons. Firstly, Sultan Sanjar in 526/1132 took against his vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn, prompting Shahrastānī to excise the old introduction to the *Milal* which praised him as sponsor. Another introduction was discreetly inserted. Presently Shahrastānī's new patron, the ʿAlid syndic Tāj al-Maʿālī, was in turn to fall foul of Sanjar – arrested and imprisoned on his orders on the grounds of informers' allegations.[63] Finally, Sanjar himself met his nemesis in the form of the pagan Ghuzz federation of the Qarā Khiṭāy, who defeated him at Qaṭwān near Samarqand in 536/1141. While the great Seljuq ignominiously took flight to Tirmidh and then Balkh, his old rival the Khwārazm-Shāh seized the opportunity to ransack his capital Merv. It seems likely that the collapse of Sanjar's state and of the sustentative environment of the court at Merv irreparably damaged Shahrastānī's situation. The odd truncation of the *Muṣāraʿa*, which ends after five issues instead of the scheduled seven, is probably explained by the said events. At any rate, Shahrastānī hints at some such cataclysm in the following words:

> When I brought the discussion on this issue to this point, and wanted to start on the sixth and seventh issues, I was diverted from their exposition by something the heaviness of which distressed me, and the burden of which weighed heavily on me, consisting in the trials of the time and the blows of misfortune (*fitan al-zamān wa ṭawāriq al-ḥidthān*). And to God complaints are addressed and upon Him is reliance in adversity and prosperity![64]

It thus seems that Shahrastānī abandoned Merv around 536/1141, taking final refuge in his birthplace Shahrastāna. By now probably nearing his sixties, he lived on in relative isolation for the last decade of his life. The composition of the *Mafātīḥ* is known to have begun a little way into this period, in 538/1143.[65] Shahrastānī was to die ten years later in 548/1153. Ādharshab poignantly notes that a recent report by one of the councils for surveying the Iranian-Soviet (now Iran-Turkmenistan) borders states that in the ruins of the old town of Shahrastāna a grave was found which locals simply refer to as 'Mullā Muḥammad's grave'.[66] Whatever the value of this, there is significance in the geographical circularity of Shahrastānī's biography, its return to its beginning. For he himself, as already quoted, presents his intellectual biography as a consuming quest. And according to one eminent modern mythographer, heroic quests do generally include these returns to beginnings. As though bearing out Shahrastānī's own charged sense of his intellectual search, it turns out that the basic rites of passage of such pilgrimages each feature in his biography: the 'nuclear unit of the monomyth' comprising separation, initiation and return.[67]

It is in the hitherto neglected works post-dating his rite of return and final seclusion that Shahrastānī's deeper views truly emerge. In this, our Qurʾān commentary is twinned conceptually and also probably chronologically, with the *Majlis* (Preaching Session; henceforth *Majlis*)[68] – a Persian witness to his higher thought rescued from oblivion by Nāʾīnī, and more recently studied and rendered into French by Steigerwald.[69] The latter's rich analysis should be consulted for a fuller understanding of this text and its vital link with the *Mafātīḥ*. Suffice to say here that the *Majlis* amounts to a bright sidelight on the conceptual system at work in Shahrastānī's penetration of Qurʾānic arcana. The treatise's sermonic form should not mislead the reader, for the theological, cosmological and hermeneutical world of the *Mafātīḥ* is also on show here, but in brief. Complementarities from the list presented below are eloquently framed and explored, including revelation/hermeneutics (*tanzīl/taʾwīl*, literally 'sending down' and 'taking back up'), creation/the Command (*āfarīnish/farmān*), and the accomplished/the inchoative (*mafrūgh/mustaʾnaf*).

Such are, moreover, already in use in the *Majlis*, not only as core aspects of a great, self-consistent philosophical system, but to unfold the Word's *anagōgē*. Notably, Shahrastānī is occupied for the whole last part of the work by an elaboration of that topos of Muslim esoterism, the Moses-Khaḍir

encounter (Q. 18:65 ff).[70] To anticipate here the following section: Shahrastānī's interpretation takes Khaḍir, whose actions outrage the conventional law, as representing the dimension of the accomplished, while Moses represents that of the inchoative. The specifically Ismāʿīlī complexion of this would of course stand on the question of the pedigree of these concepts, as discussed below. But the Ismāʿīlism of other elements in the *Majlis* is transparent. For instance, the messianic figure called the *qāʾim* who will sift those worthy of Paradise from the rest is identified in line with Ismāʿīlī traditions as none other than ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[71] A cyclical understanding of the development of the Prophet is adopted in the text, of likely Ismāʿīlī provenance.[72] Perhaps most notable of all, Shahrastānī evaluates the different theological movements of Islam in the light of the story of Satan's refusal to prostrate before Adam.[73] Adam is significantly presented here as the original 'mediator of the Command' (*mutawassiṭ-i amr*), that is, the functional archetype of the imam in Shīʿism. It is vital in this connection that Shahrastānī claims that the group he himself espouses is alone in its true commitment to what God and His Messenger said.[74] The definitely Ismāʿīlī thrust of the discussion in fact only comes out by matching it with the equivalent portion of the *Mafātīḥ*, i.e. the arcana of Q. 2:34 where this story is first referred to. All becomes explicit here in Shahrastānī's comments:

> [...] Just as Iblīs did not acknowledge the present, living, current imam, the commonalty are the same as that, while the expectant Shīʿa only acknowledge the awaited, hidden imam. And God has blessed servants on earth who do not get ahead of Him in speaking and they act on His Command, servants who are the purified servants of God, over whom Satan has no authority [...].

In this explosive statement, our author explicitly criticises both the Sunnī masses (*al-ʿāmma*) and the 'expectant', i.e. Twelver, Shīʿa (*al-shīʿa al-muntaẓira*) for refusing, like Iblīs, to acknowledge the pontifex right in their midst, who is referred to as 'the present, living, current imam' (*al-imām al-ḥāḍir al-ḥayy al-qāʾim*) – a concept which it would seem wayward to account for as other than Ismāʿīlī.[75]

Shahrastānī goes on to equate the said purified servants' speech with God's, their hand with God's, allegiance to them with allegiance to Him and war on them with war on Him. He then says:

> Whoever loves them has loved God, whoever submits to them has submitted to God, whoever prostrates to them has prostrated to God, whoever turns

towards them has turned towards God and whoever places confidence in them has placed confidence in God. 'So what is it with these people who don't even understand a statement'[76] and they talk on about how the prostration to Adam took place and what its interpretation was?! They do not grasp that prostration to Adam was prostration to God – rather, that so long as prostration to God is not combined with prostration to Adam, it is *not* prostration to God, just as, so long as the formula 'no god but God' is not combined with the formula 'Muḥammad is God's messenger', it is *not* the formula of testification and of sincerity![77]

The Qurʾān commentary

Basic issues

The present translation and study of Shahrastānī's *Mafātīḥ* is part of a bigger attempt in modern scholarship to retrieve this unusual text from the very brink of oblivion. Aside from the work of Ādharshab, vital preliminary research has already been done by Monnot who, in 'Islam: exégèse coranique' has translated many significant passages into French and provided a detailed synopsis of Shahrastānī's text. For a summary of Monnot's contribution, readers are referred to Steigerwald, *La Pensée*, pp. 70–72. Most recently, Steigerwald has also included a valuable discussion of the text in her article 'Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl'.

The unicum of the *Mafātīḥ* contains (1) twelve introductory chapters, (2) the commentary on the Exordium (*al-Fātiḥa,* Q. 1), and (3) the commentary on the chapter of the Cow (*Sūrat al-Baqara,* Q. 2). (1) and (2) are presented in this volume, respectively providing a full exposition, and a good sample, of Shahrastānī's hermeneutics. Early in the introduction he says that his work is to be a verse by verse commentary, claiming that through this and the twelve introductory chapters, 'all other commentaries have become redundant!'[78] Shahrastānī's *Mafātīḥ* is indeed conscientiously inclusive in framework and combines detailed discussion of concerns such as variant readings, lexicography, semantics and tradition-based exegesis, with intensive discussion of the arcanal dimensions of each verse. Systematic study of verses under such headings is hardly unique to Shahrastānī, whose models are probably to be sought among works of Shīʿī

exegesis representative of the post-Būyid Muʿtazilī turn.[79] In its involved linguistic and exoteric aspect, the *Mafātīḥ* should be viewed as strictly a 'commentator's commentary' in its author's intention – aimed at the specialist, not the beginner. It shows off the ripe state of the Qurʾānic sciences in Shahrastānī's time, coordinating a wealth of received material on the scripture, derived from respected *ḥadīth* compendia (particularly Bukhārī), also from exegetical works like Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, through to numerous, more obscure sources like Ibn Fāris's linguistic studies.

Though the arcana are naturally the most intellectually striking dimension of the overall project, they should not be casually isolated from the content of these earlier rubrics. It is not just that they build *technically* on the foregoing material. A deeper issue is also implicit, which might equally be presented in terms of 'etiquette' (*adab*) or epistemology. For our author, the Qurʾān is the sacred text par excellence. A process of self-humbling is therefore called for in its would-be student, the proper inward configuration needed for ascent to its higher meanings. The subtleties of these levels of meaning are only reached via the intellectual catharsis enshrined in the disciplines of the earlier rubrics.

Cumulatively, the arcana induce a liminal sense of the Qurʾān's deeper intelligibility. Verse by verse a scheme of higher concepts, noumenal yet profoundly consistent, sharpens into focus: a *philosophy* of the scripture. This scheme, ostensibly Ismāʿīlī in basis, has intrinsic interest as a major example of a sapiential (i.e. *ḥikma*-based) approach to the Qurʾān. And this seems to have been how the author's actual contemporaries classed it in their reactions. Bayhaqī notably writes:

> [Shahrastānī] was composing a Qurʾān commentary, interpreting the verses according to the canons of the law and wisdom (*ḥikma*), and other things too. So I said to him, 'This is to give up what is right! The Qurʾān is not to be commented on except by the reports of the pious ancestors consisting of the companions and their successors. Wisdom [i.e. philosophy] is something quite separate from the exegesis of the Qurʾān and its hermeneutic – especially so if its hermeneutic is already recorded. One may not combine the law and wisdom better than the imam Ghazālī did (may God have mercy on him)!' Shahrastānī was consumed by anger because of that [...].[80]

So Bayhaqī's attention, as ours, is mainly drawn by the aspect of the commentary stressed even in its title: *Keys to the Arcana*. Greatest interest

inevitably lies in this anagogic aspect rather than in Shahrastānī's richly informative but otherwise derivative discussion of the literal. Yet a vital point is that Shahrastānī asserts comparably high credentials, the same authoritative transmission, for his insights on the arcana and the tools by which he unlocks them, as he does for the other side of his commentary. He proudly holds his hermeneutic to be guaranteed by the same levels of prophetic authority and religious sanction which Bayhaqī associates with transmitted commentary (*tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*). And it is this, not prickliness over Ghazālī's repute, which may really explain his aggrieved reaction to Bayhaqī's judgement of his efforts, mentioned in the above passage. Shahrastānī in fact expresses horror at all personal, opinion-based inter-pretation of divine writ and takes pride in avoiding it. For example: 'I seek refuge with God, the All-Hearing, the Omniscient, from speaking about [Qur'ānic verses] on the basis of a personal opinion and independent rea-soning, rather than an authoritative report and chain of transmission, and [I seek refuge with God from] investigating their arcana and their meanings randomly and extravagantly [...].'[81] In another typical statement in which our author is discussing the arcana of the *basmala*,[82] he says: 'Who is it who has the ability to comprehend these arcana without guidance from the people of the Qur'ān, who are the people of God and His elect (peace be upon them) or has the audacity to bring them up in books without permis-sion and authorization from them?' He goes on to pray:

> I take refuge with God, the Hearer, the Knower, from the stoned Satan, so that there may not occur in my thought, neither flow from my pen that by which I would take up my seat in hellfire. May God (Mighty and Majestic) grant refuge from hellfire and its blazing, and may He protect us from swerv-ing and slipping up in the hermeneutic of the verses of the Qur'ān and their exegesis![83]

Scorn for individualistic subjectivity in interpretation explains Shahrastānī's recourse to those known as 'the people of the Qur'ān' (*ahl al-Qur'ān*) in hermeneutics. Such expressions here mean the Prophet's lineage or its representatives.[84] A strong Shīʿī element is thus at work in this aspect of Shahrastānī's commentary, such that in all matters anagogic he ascribes what he says to the imams' authority. Aside from the heightened aura with which this invests his daring teachings in this field, this ascription also follows from his views on the canonisation of the Qur'ān. In Chapter 2 of

his introduction, having gone over the standard account of the historical events leading up to the *textus receptus*,[85] Shahrastānī quickly takes a controversial turn, albeit basing himself on traditional reports.

He begins by mentioning the case of Q. 33:23,[86] a verse at first missing from the ʿUthmānic text as it was being assembled, but recovered for it by Zayd b. Thābit from Khuzayma b. Thābit.[87] Shahrastānī stresses that the verse refers inter alia to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[88] Does the chronicled case of this verse's first omission hint at a wider picture of resistance to preserving revelations on the Prophet's Household?[89] This is essentially the older Shīʿī claim, that just as the Bible's transmission had involved (according to prevalent Muslim teaching) a suppressive conspiracy (*kitmān*), so had the Qurʾān's.[90] Shahrastānī goes on to refer to other generally acknowledged cases of material dropped from the Muslim scripture.[91]

No less bold is his look at the credentials of the two main agents of the ʿUthmānic project. While Saʿīd b. al-Āṣ was esteemed as a linguist, he had not recited to nor *been* recited to by the Prophet.[92] On these grounds, Ubayy b. Kaʿb (for whom the Prophet is said to have gone through the whole Qurʾān, and whose recitation was followed by many early Muslims) stood against the project.[93] For his part, Zayd b. Thābit was known as 'the scribe of the revelation'. Yet even he was criticised by the nonpareil authority on the Qurʾān, Ibn Masʿūd, when he gave notice that he had already acquired 70 chapters of revelation from the Prophet in person when Zayd 'with his sidelocks'[94] was still amusing himself with other children. The Prophet had indeed backed Ibn Masʿūd's recitation, as a facsimile of the revelation as sent down.[95] On these grounds, Shahrastānī says that Ibn Masʿūd, like Ubayy b. Kaʿb, resisted ʿUthmān's codification and protested his destruction of rival versions, dubbing him 'the codex burner'. The gist of a report is given that the Caliph finally acted against his outspoken critic, dispatching a slave who knocked Ibn Masʿūd down, so killing him.[96] Shahrastānī goes on to cite great early authorities like Ibn ʿAbbās himself and ʿĀʾisha, that the ʿUthmānic text contained orthographical errors and solecisms (*alḥān*) originating with its transcribers.[97]

Matching these criticisms is Shahrastānī's support for the reality of a codex of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Through a series of reports he outlines how, after the Prophet's death, ʿAlī set about a definitive version of the Qurʾān, not even enrobing till he had seen the task through.[98] The text's fidelity in sequence etc. rested on the Prophet's direction in his lifetime.[99] Aside from

its virtually apographal status, it contained ʿAlī's own commentary, focused mainly on parallel verses (or perhaps equivocations) – such details presumably adding to the plausibility of its existence.[100] Our author also argues its existence rationally: that the Prophet should not have charged someone with the central task of collecting the Qurʾān (none being better placed for this than ʿAlī) is incredible.[101] At any rate, the product was reportedly rather bigger than the extant version, a tradition stating that it was 'a camel load' in quantity.[102]

The tale's denouement has ʿAlī and his slave Qanbar convey this load to the Prophet's mosque, only to be rebuffed by all present. His duty done, ʿAlī swears henceforth to hide the text: 'By God! You will never see it again.'[103] The scenario's improbability is offset by the precedent of Aaron, to whom ʿAlī is openly likened in well-known traditions.[104] Shahrastānī thus brackets ʿAlī's situation with Aaron's at the time of the Torah's revelation to Moses at Sinai. For, as both the Bible and Qurʾān tell, Aaron had to bow to a similar rebellion in the famous event of the golden calf, acquitting himself to his brother Moses, in the Qurʾānic account, with the statement 'the people reckoned me as weak and nearly killed me' (Q. 7:150) and by stressing his motive of preserving unity: 'I feared lest you would say "You have caused a division among the Israelites and [so] disrespected what I said."' (Q. 20:94)[105] But the real thrust of this parallel only comes out when Shahrastānī ventures that though the Torah in its prevalent form is subject, according to the Qurʾān, to human meddling (*taḥrīf*), the original tablets etched by God Himself remain in a copy with the Jewish high priesthood, Aaron's descendents (*ʿinda'l-khāṣṣati min awlādi Hārūn*). Clearly, the imamate descending from ʿAlī and the Prophet is taken to be the precise Islamic counterpart of the Aaronides. We infer that Shahrastānī takes it that the ʿAlid codex is likewise the verbatim divine Word protected in Islam's own 'high priesthood'.[106]

That the latter's main function is indeed to safeguard the Qurʾān is argued through a number of prooftexts, notably 'the tradition of the two precious things' (*ḥadīth al-thaqalayn*). Found in both Shīʿī and Sunnī sources, the Prophet here bequeaths the Muslims 'two precious things: God's Scripture and my immediate family'. He next promises that 'as long as you hold fast to them both, you will never go astray. The two will not be sundered till they reach me at the Pool [of Paradise]'.[107] For Shahrastānī, this tradition is the true significance of Q. 15:19: 'We it is who sent down the

Remembrance, and We are the protector thereof.' Against a widespread view, this verse is *not* taken by him as a pledge that the ʿUthmanic Vulgate is beyond taint. It instead means that 'though the Qurʾān is neglected with one people, it is protected and shielded with another people',[108] the Prophet having assured his followers that the Qurʾān would *never* be separated from his elect descendents in the *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn*. And though ʿAlī's oath that 'you will never see it again' makes open access to his codex impossible, access of a kind is indeed feasible through the imamate's teachings.

Vitally, if unexpectedly, Shahrastānī combines all this with basic reverence for the ʿUthmānic text, which he declares to enshrine God's Word.[109] He quotes ʿAlī's own ban on derogating ʿUthmān and his codification, and he mentions how he and other imams set an example of respect by personally transcribing it.[110] Shahrastānī also draws attention to how the Qurʾān honours the Torah and the Gospel, simpliciter, as divinely revealed, despite the intractable questions of authenticity applying to them.[111] Light is shed on this outwardly contradictory stance when Shahrastānī refers to both pre-Qurʾānic scriptures as having multiple transmissions. The case of the Torah with its massoretic and supposed Aaronic transmission has already been mentioned. The Gospel instead comes down in four primary lines through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – these in fact being likened by Shahrastānī to exegesis in which lie quotations of God's Word.[112] Notwithstanding their involved transmission, the Qurʾān inculcates awe for these scriptures. That Shahrastānī here envisages a parallel with the Muslim scripture seems inescapable. His teaching amounts to a theory of binary transmission for the Qurʾān. His 'meta-Qurʾān' is made present through two channels, neither of which suffices per se. For while the ʿUthmānic text has the said problems in transcription, the ʿAlid codex is only *implicit* in the imams' teachings and may never be seen openly. But together, the two channels do allow a uniquely authentic encounter with God's Word – an achievement precisely claimed for the *Mafātīḥ* in view of its careful blend of both transmissive lines.

So, despite this theory's obvious controversy, irreverence for the ʿUthmānic text does not follow from it. The ʿUthmānic text remains sacred as a portal to the noumenon of the Word.[113] The real upshot of Shahrastānī's theory seems instead to be just to reinforce his reliance on the imamate in the arcana. Yet, in view of this, it may be surprising how little he frames his analysis of particular verses in terms of the explicit sayings of the

imams. While he clearly takes it that his basic hermeneutical keys derive from the imamate, its link with the details of his analysis of this or that verse's *anagōgē* seems only *implied*. In one major statement, he even claims the imams' authority in a more mystical than conventional sense. In launching his discussion of the *basmala*'s arcana he says:

> [...] since I am specified by the transmitted prayer 'O God, benefit us by that which You teach us, and teach us that by which You benefit us, by the truth of the chosen ones amongst Your servants', *I found in myself* [translator's emphasis] the faculty of being guided to the word of prophecy and I understood the language of the divine message, so I was thereby rightly guided to the arcana of words in the glorious Qur'ān without my doing exegesis of the Qur'ān by [mere] personal opinion.[114]

Here the derivation of Shahrastānī's hermeneutic from the Prophet's line seems metaphysical rather than historical. In fact, it means the author's *spiritual* effacement in the imams – as he says, he is singled out by the prayer which requests that God teach through the 'chosen ones amongst God's servants'. Through this inner relationship Shahrastānī explicitly says that he finds *within himself* the ability to do hermeneutics, which is, a priori, no longer mere individual opinion. It appears that such a claim springs from the idea, present in certain Ismāʿīlī teachings, of the true disciple's inward configuration (*tamaththul*) of the imam.[115]

Main hermeneutical concepts

As alluded to earlier, apropos of the virtuous servant of God in Shahrastānī's quest, Ismāʿīlism is the likely source for the hermeneutic talismans had from him – the 'keys' of the work's title. These are formed of the said complementarities, the full list of which covers creation/the Command, hierarchy/contrariety, the accomplished/the inchoative, and also, better known antonyms from Qur'ānic exegesis such as generality/specificity, the abrogating/the abrogated, the clear/the ambiguous, and revelation/hermeneutics.[116] Through applying these, either singly or in coordination, to each verse, the arcanal aspect of the Qur'ān opens.

Firstly, creation (*khalq*) and the Command (*amr*) are seen as the two

great orders of reality issuing from God. The Command, identified with the Qurʾānic *esto*, 'kun' ('be!'), is the very means by which the things of creation enter existence, a prerequisite, then, for the entire created realm.[117] It bears close comparison with the concept of the Logos in John 1: 1–3, without which 'was not anything made that was made'. It is vital that Shahrastānī extends his identification of the Command to encompass the entire Qurʾān, and the religious law in principle rooted in the latter (i.e., precisely, divine *commandments*). Hence he takes the scripture to have a literal cosmogonic role, and with this as premise, he develops a radically non-figurative kind of esoteric hermeneutic, far, say, from the *sensus allegoricus* of the Quadriga in Christian scholasticism. Shahrastānī is instead led to theorise on the Qurʾān's occult significance at the level of its very words, particles and letters. In these ingenious interpretations (of which cases will come, in sketching the Exordium commentary below), outer reality is viewed as unfolding *through* the Qurʾān's details and deep structures; the impact is not the other way around. In sum, our author's positive identification of the Qurʾān with the creational blueprint brings about an ingenious sensitivity to its literal aspect: the location of certain verses between others, the use of a *kāf* here or a *nūn* there, the very shape of this or that Arabic letter.

The correspondence (the term is used here in a consciously Swedenborgian way) between the two great orders of reality is thus profound; they interrelate unfathomably. In line with this, in one passage Shahrastānī equates creation and the Command with the 'scales' referred to in many Qurʾānic verses.[118] He gives prooftexts for the mutual implication of creation and the Command, for example: the very formula 'Be [= Command] and it is [= creation]' (e.g. Q. 16:40); also: '[...] He created humanity [= creation]. He taught it speech [= Command]' (Q. 55:1–4); again 'A goodly word [= Command] is as a goodly tree [= creation]' (Q. 14:24).[119] In such dicta, either the Command reference or the creation reference precedes. This spurs Shahrastānī deeper into the symbolism of the scales, concluding that 'when what is weighed consists in things pertaining to the Command and the religious law, its scales are the creation and creational things; and when what is weighed consists in creational things, its scales consist in things pertaining to the Command'.[120] In other words, to fathom a thing from one dimension, it is counterpoised with its equivalent in the other, as the load in one scale-pan of a balance is only gauged by placing its equal in the twin. The deep mutuality of revelation and reason,

of religion and philosophy, and of the spiritual and physical order, thus rests for Shahrastānī on the Qurʾānic topos of the scales. So foundational is the complementarity of creation/the Command to our thinker that he often elaborates the others through subdividision with it. It is noteworthy in this connection that the relevant complementarity was central to Ismāʿīlī thought, much of whose theological concern focused on the Command-Logos. This hypostasis was daringly assimilated by Ismāʿīlī philosophers of the time with the *deus revelatus*, the very demiurge.[121]

Next, hierarchy (*tarattub*) and contrariety (*taḍādd*) are seemingly drawn from Ismāʿīlī theory too.[122] The first of these great principles is an ultimate 'vertical' differential while the second is an ultimate 'horizontal' one. Their role, in simple form, in the internal organisation of the *Milal* was remarked above. But, given Shahrastānī's mentioned habit of schematic elaboration, here in the *Mafātīḥ* he further splits contrariety between creation and the Command, and even says that contrarieties *within* creation and the Command can be in two distinct ways. Thus, within creation there may be contrariety between an existent and a non-existent, and also between one existent and another; and within the Command there may be contrariety between faith and unbelief, and also between one faith and another faith. The Qurʾān, for Shahrastānī, is marked by its constant expression of the contrariety principle: 'There is no verse in regard to the believers but another verse follows it in regard to the unbelievers, and there is no quality of good without one of the qualities of evil being mentioned after it.'[123] He even claims that 'were you to examine the words of the Qurʾān you would find this contrariety in every word, except what God wills'.[124] The scripture's title, *al-Furqān* ('the Criterion', from the verbal root *faraqa*, 'to discriminate'), is said by our exegete to voice this trait. On the other hand, the title *al-Qurʾān*, derived through a semantic etymology from *qarina*, 'to join' (rather than its standard, historical derivation from *qaraʾa*, 'to recite'),[125] is said to voice the scripture's correlative trait of 'gathering together the things hierarchically ordered within it (*mutarattibāt fīhi*)'. Both characteristics are alluded to in one breath in Q. 17:106: 'And it is a Qurʾān that We have divided up (*faraqnā-hu*) [...].'

Given the Qurʾān's cosmic function, hermeneutics and metaphysics merge. Thus hierarchism in holy scripture matches that in existence itself. Shahrastānī quotes a prophetic tradition confirming that there is no exis-

tence at all without hierarchy: 'Human beings continue to prosper as long as they are different. When they become equal they are destroyed.'[126] He goes on to point out hierarchies in different species of being – between one angel and another, one prophet and another and one human being and another.[127] One human will thus be a teacher of knowledge, and another, a disciple (in view of hierarchy); and where one will be a disciple, another will be a mere 'dungfly' (in view of contrariety)![128] Ismāʿīlī teachings doubtless leave their stamp here, notably the principle of authoritative instruction (*taʿlīm*) with its teacher-disciple (*ʿālim-mutaʿallim*) relationship, also the stark juxtaposition of initiates and the rest, and the general mirroring of cosmic and human hierarchies, the latter expressed par excellence in the levels of the *ḥudūd al-dīn*.

Shahrastānī harnesses this hierarchism in unexpected ways. It emerges, for example, as his own 'rational' grounds for the Qurʾān's inimitability. For if humanity ranks above other species through its faculty of speech and reason (both covered by the word *nuṭq*), this faculty being inimitable for whatever ranks below humanity, then prophets rank above humans through the *perfection* of that faculty, this perfection being likewise inimitable for whatever ranks below prophets.[129] Moreover, given that *nuṭq* covers speech *and* reason, not only the Qurʾān's inimitability qua speech follows from this line of thought but also qua reason, i.e. in its intellectual/ethical content. On these grounds, our author, perhaps surprisingly, stands against claiming the rhetorical superlativity of this or that part of the Qurʾān.[130] For, he says, such implies having a standard *beyond* it, in using which the text is evaluated. Rather, through hierarchy in *nuṭq* the whole scripture should be viewed as a priori inimitable.[131] In this, Shahrastānī, at a stroke, shelves proofs for inimitability based on analyses of the Qurʾān's rhetorical perfection as also on the supernatural information supposedly within it.[132] In place of the pseudo-aposteriority of such proofs, his own has radical apriority.

For its part, the complementarity of the accomplished (*mafrūgh*) and the inchoative (*mustaʾnaf*) is also argued to have a likely Ismāʿīlī source.[133] However, in chapter ten of his introduction, Shahrastānī simply draws them from a prophetic tradition which he quotes in full. It may be noted, nevertheless, that this full version of the tradition seems absent from the respected Sunnī compendia, and this may be because the context, as our author provides it, is a clash between the great Abū Bakr and ʿUmar.[134] The

Prophet is upset to hear them get heated discussing predestination, as he gathers from them on intervening. He tells them to think in terms of a mighty angel whose constitution is half fire, half ice. The fire in it is not allowed to melt the ice and the ice in it is not allowed to extinguish the fire. The great angel praises God without cease for maintaining its paradoxical nature in existence. But ʿUmar finally puts the question bluntly to the Prophet: are the lives of us humans as yet unfolding (*anif*), i.e. inchoative (*musta'naf*), or are they instead already accomplished (*mafrūgh*), with contents quite determined? The Prophet concedes that they are accomplished. But nevertheless we must also act: 'Act! And each is eased towards what he has been created for', says the Prophet.

This then, for Shahrastānī, is the original authority for the terms,[135] of which (by some lapsus calami?) he takes the symbol of the inchoative to be the angel's ice and that of the accomplished to be its fire, while it seems more natural that the solid element, ice, stands for the accomplished and the mobile element, fire, stands for the inchoative. (Perhaps what was in his mind is that ice is as yet in a state of latency, and is resolved through the action of fire, hence the equation of ice with the inchoative and fire with the accomplished). But such details should not divert us from the genius of the Prophet's explanation. The symbol of the paradoxical angel effects the necessary transition from the natural viewpoint in which the antinomy remains intractable, to a viewpoint in which the logically 'impossible' combination of the terms is taken positively, as perpetual testimony to the Supreme Being's power.[136]

Shahrastānī has both exegetical and theological uses for the complementarity. In theology, extreme positions like that of the necessitarian Jabriyya, who unqualifiedly denied free will, and the libertarian Qadariyya, who unqualifiedly affirmed it, are held to follow from ignorance of the complementarity. From the Jabriyya's fixation with the dimension of the accomplished arises their negligence (*tafrīṭ*) in claiming that God commands sinners what they are unable to fulfil – a teaching which fosters laxism. On the other hand, from the Qadariyya's fixation on the dimension of the inchoative arises their exaggeration (*ifrāṭ*) in denying that human actions depend on God – a teaching which stints God's omnipotence. The key is to acknowledge the coexistence of the two dimensions, in step with the Prophet: '[...] his statement [to ʿUmar] "act!" is an allusion to the judgement of the inchoative and "each is eased towards what he has been created for"

is an allusion to the judgement of the accomplished'.[137] All this echoes Shahrastānī's aforementioned discussion of aid and abandonment in the *Nihāya*, in which context however, he relied on another complementarity – that of generality/specificity – to solve the clash between necessitarians and libertarians.

The exegetical use of the inchoative/accomplished complementarity has to do with reconciling Qur'ānic verses, the prime exegetical task of *tarjīḥ*. Some, for instance, urge Muḥammad to reprove and guide unbelievers, as Q. 20:44: 'Speak to him a gentle word, perhaps he will pay heed or be god-fearing.' Others instead say that such efforts are vain, as Q. 2:6: 'It is all the same for them if you warn them or do not warn them. They will not believe.' But as Shahrastānī sees it: for him who does not understand the two judgements [the inchoative and accomplished], combining the verses of those who defy admonition with the verses of the command to admonish, is hard. 'And that is the secret of secrets!'[138] That is, revelations urging guidance refer to the inchoative and verses repudiating it refer to the accomplished. Again, Shahrastānī puts this complementarity with creation/the Command, to yield a more involved picture. The accomplished and the inchoative in the Command (qua Qur'ān) are the two kinds of verse just mentioned, necessitarian ones and those of commandment or admonition, respectively. Next, the accomplished and the inchoative in creation are the two great classes of being: spiritual ones above space-time and material ones within space-time.[139]

The next complementarity, generality (*'umūm*) and specificity (*khuṣūṣ*), is standard in Qur'ān interpretation, without necessary derivation from Ismāʿilism. Yet even here some read Ismāʿīlī influence.[140] Whatever the case, Shahrastānī's handling seems subtler than normal in legal exegesis (not least in his own Shāfiʿī school), where the pair are used to weigh the force of different injunctions and again, to reconcile revelations.[141] But for Shahrastānī further degrees enter: general, specific, and *individual.* As he says: 'There is no general expression in the Qur'ān without specification having entered it, and there is no specification without individualisation having joined it.'[142] The past trend, he says, has been to overlook the last of these registers, i.e. individualisation (*tashkhīṣ*).

Shahrastānī brings out even more shades of meaning, using Qur'ānic verses. 'Humanity' (*nās*), for instance, covers the whole human species in a verse like Q. 2:21: 'O humanity (*ayyuhā'l-nās*)! Worship your Lord.' But

such commands are not binding on the level of total generality, given that Islamic law grants that children and the mad are not legally answerable, though they of course fall within humanity. A higher degree of specificity is understood from a verse like Q. 2:199: 'Then hasten to where humanity (*nās*) hastens.' Referring to the rites at ʿArafāt in the Greater Pilgrimage, this in fact tells those answerable to imitate a more specific group, whom Shahrastānī calls the 'rightly-guided guides' (*al-hudāt al-mahdiyūn*). These are, nonetheless, called 'humanity' in the said verse. Finally 'humanity' is also found in the Qurʾān at the individual level since traditional commentaries state that *nās* in the following verse (Q. 4:54) means none other than the Prophet himself: '[...] or are they jealous of humanity (*nās*) because of what God gave them in His bounty?'[143]

In this look at *nās* in the Qurʾān, Shahrastānī takes the stock *distinguo* into no less than *four* degrees: general, relatively specific, more specific, and finally, individual. A like dilation is found in the case of 'mercy' (*raḥma*) in the Qurʾān. Three degrees of it are yielded from a single verse, namely Q. 7:156–7, in which they unfold in precise sequence: '[1] My mercy encompasses everything, and [2] I will stipulate it for those who are God-conscious and give the poor-due and who believe in Our signs, [moreover for] [3] those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet.' In this, the most universal register of the concept comes first: 'My mercy encompasses everything.' It is next relatively specified as for the godly, but not limited in time or tradition: 'I will stipulate it for those who are God-conscious and give the poor-due and who believe in Our signs.' Lastly it is mentioned, in a yet sharper register, as for the godly of Islam: '[...] those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet'. And beyond this, Shahrastānī draws attention to a wholly individual sense for 'mercy' in the Qurʾān, given that a verse like Q. 21:107 uses 'mercy' for the Prophet alone: 'We only sent you as a mercy for the worlds (*raḥmatan li'l-ʿālamīn*).'

Shahrastānī's look at the otherwise standard exegetical pair, the abrogating (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*), holds surprises despite its brevity. Abrogation is the main tool for the task – already mentioned several times – of reconciling verses and weighing divine injunctions. Prima facie contradiction is resolved on grounds of chronology, the earlier Qurʾānic ruling taken to be abrogated, the later, abrogating.[144] But it turns out that Shahrastānī's concern here is not just one Qurʾānic verse's relation with another but the Qurʾān's relation as a whole with earlier scriptures. That is,

he covers not just intra-textual abrogation but also inter-textual abrogation. A startling, ecumenical side to his thought comes into view, perhaps to be expected for the author of the *Milal* with its global interest in beliefs.

In fact, the unmistakable thrust of his discussion is to *deny* abrogation in the recognisable sense. Our author moots three definitions: abrogation might be taken as the annulment of an established injunction (*rafʿ al-ḥukm al-thābit*); it might be the expiry of the time allotted to the injunction (*intihāʾ muddat al-ḥukm*); or finally, it might be viewed as a process of perfection (*takmīl*, alternatively 'supplementation').[145] In the following discussion, Shahrastānī favours the third. That any revelation becomes redundant is ill sounding to him – it cannot be what abrogation means. He even states categorically: 'Never hold the opinion that one divine system (*sharīʿa min al-sharāʾiʿ*) is negated by another or that its injunctions are annulled and others laid down.'[146] Instead, for Shahrastānī, each successive *sharīʿa* is supplementary (*mukammila*) to what preceded it in an unfolding process from Adam till the Resurrection.[147]

Despite appearances, Shahrastānī does not compromise Islam's axiomatic superiority in this. He proposes that it is the final and noblest (*ashraf*) of *sharīʿa*s.[148] But his subtler sense of the true status of this *sharīʿa* comes out in the following three models. Our author starts with a case from creational data (*khalqiyyāt*) – that of foetal development, as celebrated in, for example, Q. 23:12–14. He says: 'Were the sperm, amongst *khalqiyyāt*, negated or annulled, it would not attain the second stage, nor the third, but it would reach the limit of its perfection and would not become another form of perfection, with the fulfilment of its identity.'[149] That is, the biological process is mainly seen in terms of continuity, with earlier stages persisting within the growing organism. Next, Shahrastānī moves on to data linked to the Command-Logos (*amriyyāt*) and explicitly brings in the case of revealed systems or *sharīʿa*s. He here draws an exact parallel with the continuum of foetal development, using close phraseology: 'Were the first *sharīʿa* negated or annulled, it would not attain the second [stage] and the third, but it would reach the limit of completion and would not become a form of perfection, with the consolidation of its identity.'[150] Finally Shahrastānī comes to the case of intra-textual abrogation, the chain of abrogated and abrogating rulings within the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān, he says, contains two aspects. Only one is in fact liable to processes of abrogation, namely, that aspect consisting of the juristic branches (*furūʿ*). Yet God, he

still stresses, only abolishes for some perfection (*li-kamālin*) in which [the abrogated] has culminated.'[151] The other aspect of the Qur'ān is, by contrast, wholly changeless, amounting to the 'principles of religion' (*uṣūl al-diyāna*) and the 'Mother of the Scripture' (*Umm al-Kitāb*). Shahrastānī likens this to the essence in relation to the form (*al-dhāt li'l-ṣūra*) and the foundation in relation to the house (*al-asās li'l-bayt*).[152]

In each case above, Shahrastānī seems to accent continuity over change. The harshest case is, in fact, abrogation within the Qur'ān, where the changeable aspect is, in passing, cast in terms of pure abolition (*maḥw*). But there is still the general stress on continuity in the *Umm al-Kitāb*, the changeless core of the scripture.[153] At any rate, when Shahrastānī delves further into abrogation within the Qur'ān (i.e., in the juristic branches) it is, after all, given a twist which practically denies that rulings expire – a negation then, of abrogation as widely understood. He thus takes up the supposed abrogation of the 'verse of acquittal' by the 'verse of the sword'. The first is Q. 109:6: 'To you your religion and to me my religion.' The second is represented by Q. 2:216: 'Fighting is prescribed for you' and Q. 9:14: 'Fight them, God will punish them at your hands.' Our thinker stands against the view that the charge to fight simply *overturns* the charge to leave alone 'the religions of the unbelievers'. For him, the verse of acquittal represents the ne plus ultra in self-acquittal through verbal declaration, unsurpassable as the credal affirmation of monotheism. It is simply that once this affirmation is in place it must be complemented by acquittal through action, namely, the affirmation of monotheism militarily.[154] Both self-acquittals stand in their own right, though the second assumes the first. And crucially, this non-eliminative concept of abrogation extends for Shahrastānī to *all* cases of abrogation within the Qur'ān: 'Likewise every verse of the Qur'ān which is said to be abrogated by another verse, the abrogating verse is found to be set up by the abrogated, not annulling it, nor negating it (*lā rāfiʿa wa lā mubṭila*).'[155] The rigour of the legislation in this example disabuses us of the idea that Shahrastānī's generous concept of abrogation blunts the earnestness of his faith. Yet the clear thrust of each of his models of abrogation is that, whatever the right of the abrogating form to assert itself, its role is to confirm, not eliminate. In terms of inter-faith relations – of utmost concern – implicit in our thinker's concept seems to be the Islamic state's upkeep of earlier faith communities as official 'custodial peoples' (*ahl al-dhimma*). On their payment of the protection tax (*jizya*) the state was in fact bound actively to defend them and their places of worship from attack. Is this

not a vital upshot of Shahrastānī's talk of the later *sharīʿa* subsuming but not eliminating the earlier? There are again possible Ismāʿīlī stimuli for elements of his concept here.[156]

Next, Shahrastānī notes that the clear/ambiguous complementarity stands out since the Qurʾān itself states that its verses are split in line with it, notably in Q. 3:7: '[God] it is who sent down to you the scripture consisting in clear verses (*muḥkamāt*) – they are the essence [literally, mother] of the scripture – and other ambiguous ones (*mutashābihāt*)[...].' Though views vary on how to define these categories, Shahrastānī rules that the 'people of realisation' amongst the learned simply define the clear verses through the aforementioned dimension of the *accomplished* and the ambiguous verses through the *inchoative*.[157] He next observes that hermeneutics (*taʾwīl*) – the problematic task of interpretation, as against mere exegesis (*tafsīr*) – focuses on the text's ambiguous or inchoative part. Shahrastānī seems to draw this from the next part of the same verse (Q. 3:7): 'As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they follow what is ambiguous of it, seeking dissension and seeking its hermeneutic (*taʾwīl*).' Hermeneutics, centring on the ambiguous, is here barred to the plain believer and is made the imamate's preserve. Though unstated by Shahrastānī, this privilege follows from the rest of this famous verse, for it goes on to state that the Qurʾān's hermeneutic is only known by God Himself and by 'the firm-rooted in knowledge', i.e. the imams.[158]

In sum, this hinted background means that while the accomplished side of the Qurʾān is open to Sunnī exegesis, its inchoative side is only open to the imams. The practical upshot of this only comes out when Shahrastānī, as before, further splits the clear/ambiguous between creation and the Command to get a more elaborate final scheme. Firstly, there are the clear verses, some of which correspond with the accomplished aspect of creation (i.e. events already fulfilled through divine predestination, *qadar*) and others of which correspond with the accomplished aspect of the Command (i.e. already known legal injunctions).[159] All such verses, as clear, fall within the scope of conventional exegesis. But secondly, there are the ambiguous verses, some of which correspond with the inchoative aspect of creation (i.e. forthcoming events through the divine decree, *qaḍāʾ*) and others of which correspond with the inchoative aspect of the Command (i.e. legal injunctions which, though rooted in scripture, are only subsequently actualised).[160] It may be taken, then, that for Shahrastānī, all in these last cate-

gories, comprising Qurʾānic prophecies about the future as well as later legal applications rooted in its verses, falls *beyond* the reach of conventional exegesis and rests on the hermeneutic of the imams. If this brief, allusive and complex discussion has been decoded rightly, it shows that Shahrastānī's dependence on the imamate reaches even to the legal side of his religion, albeit that in the light of his Shāfiʿī links this presumably stayed just a theoretical implication of his teaching.

Reference is made at points of the commentary to the imamate's prime, indeed divine, role. In the doxology, Shahrastānī even speaks of the role of the imams as mirroring that of the angels. Angels are the means of 'sending down' (*tanzīl*) revelation, the first part of the process. The imams and their scholar-adherents (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-ṣādiqa*) are then the means of 'taking back up' (*taʾwīl*, 'hermeneutics', literally translated) the revelation, the second but no less important part of the revelatory process.[161] Both in tandem bring about the full cycle of revelation, from God to God, and both in fact exercise a *divine* function, as enshrined in Q. 15:9: 'We send down the Remembrance and We are its protector.' That is, God is the true agent of the descent of the scripture to earth through the angels and He is also the true protector of its ultimate meanings through the imams. Shahrastānī even speaks of the imams (and their scholar-adherents) in terms that the Qurʾān reserves for angels, as ranged in ranks 'accompanying [the believer] on all sides' (Q. 13:11: *muʿaqqibāt min bayni yadayhi wa min khalfihi*), thus stressing the deep kinship of the two orders of divine functionary.[162]

The Exordium commentary

The above lattice of complementarities is used to the full in opening the Qurʾān's arcanal dimension. Each verse, to repeat, is explored in depth under slightly shifting headings such as lexicography (*lugha*), linguistic coinage (*waḍʿ*), etymology (*ishtiqāq*), grammar (*naḥw*), harmonious order (*naẓm*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), semantics (*maʿānī*) and, finally, arcana (*asrār al-āyāt*). Data under the earlier headings are often assumed in this last, which is therefore the true fruit of the overall project. Interest is also concentrated in the arcana because of their Ismāʿīlī trend. Their content will thus be the focus in the following.

A prime case of how Shahrastānī's commentary finds fulfilment in the

arcana is in the question of whether the *basmala*-formula should be taken as integral to the Exordium, or not, and simply be seen as a division-marker. This is arguably the problematic to the whole Exordium commentary. From the beginning, some took the consecrative formula to lie outside the text of the chapter itself or indeed *any* of the scripture's chapters.[163] But the partisans of this view had to deal with the clear definition of the Exordium as sevenfold, from its identification in prophetic traditions with the mysterious Seven Doubled Ones (or Seven Repeated Ones, *sabʿun min al-mathānī*) of Q. 15:87: 'We have given you [Muḥammad] Seven Doubled Ones and the mighty Qurʾān.' In this identification, the said 'doubling' is taken to refer to the repetition of the Exordium in each cycle (*rakʿa*) of Islam's formal prayer (*ṣalāt*). But the main point is that the identification of the Exordium as the *Seven* Doubled Ones implied its division into seven verses – straightforward enough if the *basmala* was included as verse one, harder if it was not. So the authorities who took the *basmala* as outside the text had to work out a *new* verse division to make seven verses out of the six left. They did this by treating the words '[...] those whom You have graciously favoured' (*anʿamta ʿalayhim*) in verse seven as the end of a new verse six, with the rest of that verse as the new seventh.[164]

Shahrastānī argues against this from tradition, reason, and, finally, from what transpires in the arcana. Of the first kind of proof is a prophetic tradition that any affair begun *without* the consecrative formula is 'emasculated' (*abtar*).[165] Religious consensus also holds that there are four pauses in the Exordium's recitation, and *anʿamta ʿalayhim* is not one of them – going against the adjustment made by those who exclude the *basmala* from the numbered verses. On the other hand, a proof from reason centres on the phonological harmony (*insiyāq*) of the verse endings. For this clearly involves the vowel *-ī* followed by a final consonant whose vowel remains unpronounced, thereby generating the following perfect sevenfold series: *-ḥīm*, *-mīn*, *-ḥīm*, *-dīn*, *-ʿīn*, *-qīm*, and *-līn*.[166] The phrase *anʿamta ʿalayhim* breaks this pattern.

Valid though such proofs are, for Shahrastānī it is only through the arcana that deeper certainty is reached. His exploration of the arcana thus uncovers an unforeseen division of the Exordium into precisely seven elements. But this sevenfold pattern differs from the one simply involving its number of verses. In this new interpretation, the doubling referred to in the Exordium's Qurʾānic title is not to do with the repetition of its verses in

prayer-cycles; rather, it involves a set of profound conceptual doublings, echoes or perhaps 'reprises' (*mardūdāt*) which run through the whole chapter. The vital point is that these *mardūdāt* – explored in detail in the arcana – *only* reach the perfect aggregate of seven if the *basmala*-formula is seen as within the chapter. For our thinker then, this upshot of the arcana is the real proof that the formula is part of it. Needless to say, most of the *mardūdāt* involve unearthing the function of the hermeneutic complementarities within the Exordium's verses. The complementarities readily fit Shahrastānī's needs here.

Setting aside the unfolding of the seven doublings for now, Shahrastānī's first section on arcana is dedicated to God's name, *Allāh.* These teachings on the arcana of God's *nomen proprium* are credited to a group called 'the magnifiers of God's names' (*al-muʿaẓẓimūn li-asmāʾiʾllāh*).[167] While such authorities spurn the claim that the name is derivative (*mushtaqq*), Shahrastānī does, under 'linguistic coinage', air theories to the contrary. He gives thought-provoking etymologies for the name '*Allāh*' from *waliha*, 'to become mad with love' (the idea being that such madness befalls God's worshippers) and also from *lāha*, 'to hide oneself' (implying God's absolute transcendence of creation).[168] Another prominent view, attributed here to al-Ḥasan al-Jurjānī, is that the name comes from the verb *aliha*, 'to seek protection'. This produces the word *ilāh* (god), signifying that 'refuge is taken in Him' (*yūlahu ilayhi*) on the analogy of *imām* (leader), which signifies that the individual in question 'is followed as example' (*yuʾtammu bihi*). The Arabic definite article, *al-* was then supposedly added to this earliest form of the word as an honorific, yielding *al-ilāh*, 'the god'. But through frequent use the *a* of *al-* and the *i* of *ilāh* coalesced, leaving the name in its familiar form: *Allāh.*[169]

But, as just mentioned, Shahrastānī himself denies that the divine *nomen proprium* is just some accident of linguistic history: 'How', he protests, '*could* there be an etymology for it?'[170] In the arcana he instead gives a set of interpretations which show the deep theological sense of the word's form. As he puts it: '[...] the letters, which are the basis of the word, point to what it is obligatory to know and is made known to be obligatory'.[171] Perhaps the most gripping of these interpretations takes the pronoun *Huwa* (He) as its starting point. The pronoun is implied by the final *h* of the word *Allāh* which, fully vowelled in the nominative, would be *Allāhu*. *Huwa* would then be yielded from the final *hu* by adding the consonantal

'consort' (*qarīna*) of *u* namely *w*. Shahrastānī says that this seed of the divine name stands for a first reification of the godhead, acknowledging its 'thingness' (*shay'iyya*). More particularly, it refers to God's majesty (*jalāl*) or utter transcendence, given that it acknowledges, by implication, that *only* God's 'He-ness' (*huwiyya*) or quoddity (the fact *that* He is) is known, not His identity (*māhiyya*) or quiddity (*what* He is), which stays wholly outside understanding.

Next, the *l*, central to the name as a whole, is added to this basic *hu* and great meaning is again found in this. In Arabic, the prepositional form *li-* signifies that what adjoins it has the status of possession (or perhaps, responsibility). Shahrastānī renders it with the stock grammatical term, the '*lām* affirming possession' (*lām al-tamlīk*). Prefixed to the pronoun –*hu* to make *lahu* (i.e. 'His', or perhaps 'due to Him'), it acknowledges that everything other than God is His possession (*milk*) and dominion (*mulk*). This then is held by our author to refer to the great complement of God's attribute of majesty or transcendence, namely, His 'bounty' or 'creative largesse' (*ikrām*) – a complementarity rooted in Q. 55:26–7: 'All that is in the world will pass away and your Lord's face (or 'self') alone will endure in its majesty and bounty (*dhū'l-jalāli wa'l-ikrām*).' The impact of these twin attributes of majesty and bounty is later spelt out in Shahrastānī's statement: 'He is veiled from them through His majesty, so they may not perceive Him, and He manifests Himself to them through His bounty, so they may not deny Him.'[172] So it is that these two affirmations – one through the final *h* and one through the medial *l* of the name – capture the paradox that God is at once incomprehensible *and* undeniable, or as Shahrastānī puts it: 'Insofar as He is He (*Huwa*) He is ungraspable and insofar as all belongs to Him (or is due to Him, *la-hu*) He is undeniable.' Lastly the *a* is prefixed to the *l* to give *al-*, the Arabic definite article. For Shahrastānī, the true meaning of grammatical definition (*ta'rīf*, literally 'making known') in regard to God is to get across that He is indeed *better* known (*a'raf*) than all else.

So it is that through this ingenious understanding, the divine *nomen proprium* voices synthetically the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*. For it enshrines in its extrema the paradox that God is both wholly hidden (i.e. through-*hu*) *and* unhidden (i.e. through *al-*). Moreover, through its median (i.e. *l*), the name shows precisely in *what* way the hiddenness does not contradict the apparentness. Before moving on, it may be noted that the

direction of this analysis moves from the *h* of reification, through the *l* affirming possession, to the *a* of grammatical definition. This inverts the sequence of phonemes in the natural, verbal articulation of the name. Thus the unfolding of the inward meanings of the name by Shahrastānī is in a chiastic or mirror relation with its outward letters. The relation of inward signficance with outward form often involves such inversions.

A prime role of the Qurʾān in Shahrastānī's thought is to express God for the benefit of creation. This is, in fact, an act of self-giving amounting to a substantive manifestation, particularly in the case of the divine names in the text. Shahrastānī thus shifts from the milder stance that the divine names tell us about God, to the stance that God is actually offered to His creation through them. He here makes use of the old Ṣūfī distinction of God's disclosure through something else (*taʿrīf*) and His self-disclosure (*taʿarruf*): 'Wherever you find in the Qurʾān a verbal expression for whatever is linked to one of the divine names, it is for the sake of disclosing [God], every disclosure (*taʿrīf*) being [God's own] *self-disclosure* (*taʿarruf*) to something, and every self-disclosure being an epiphany (*tajallī*) of His [...].'[173] Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's words are quoted here to carry the point: 'God manifests Himself (*tajallā*) to His servants through His scripture.'[174] These grounds yield a strangely positivistic scriptural mysticism in which sense and reference merge and divine names in the text are credited with an objective cosmological function.

Such premises change the very concept of hermeneutics. As said earlier in presenting Shahrastānī's identification of the Qurʾān with the Command, the penetration of the Qurʾān's higher meanings is seen here *ipso facto* as an encounter with the world's transcendental roots. God's *nomen proprium* is a good case of such reasoning. For Shahrastānī, the constituent letters of the divine name (i.e. the *alif, lām, lām, hāʾ*) are the root cause of created existence in a literal sense; he even terms them the 'four foundations' (*al-mabādiʾ al-arbaʿa*).[175] He traces the germinal form of tridimensional space, the so-called 'primary body', to the different characteristics of the Arabic letters in question. The height of this body follows from the vertical extension of the *alif*, its breadth from the horizontal extension of the *lām*, and its depth from the cavity (so to speak) of the *hāʾ*.[176] While literally causal for our author, these correspondences surely also function to sacralise the whole spatial domain. The divine name is in effect iconised in the very structure of space. Again, an Ismāʿīlī background is at hand for all this. It

appears, for example, to have been a doctrine in the circle of the renegade Fāṭimid *dāʿī* al-Ḥasan b. Ḥaydara al-Akhram (d. 408/1018).[177]

Shahrastānī links the great names of God found in a chain in the *basmala*, that is, *Allāh*, *al-Raḥmān*, *al-Raḥīm*, with primary divine functions. The sequential attributes of *ilāhiyya*, *raḥmāniyya* and *raḥīmiyya*, he explains, are responsible for existentiating, maintaining, and rewarding creatures.[178] He also speaks of each as sustaining one of the three 'worlds': respectively that of creation, the Command, and the future *eschaton* (or the 'world of merit').[179] Qur'ānic texts are given for these correspondences. The link of *ilāhiyya* with creation follows from Q. 48:87: 'If you ask them who created them, they will surely say *Allāh*.' That of *raḥmāniyya* with the Command follows by a more associative kind of thinking, from Q. 25:60: 'What is *al-Raḥmān*? Are we to prostrate to whatever you command us?' Finally, that of *raḥīmiyya* with the eschatological realities of reward and merit follows from Q. 33:43: 'He is compassionate (*raḥīm*) towards the believers.'[180] It is important here that the mode of mercy (*raḥma*) manifest in the name *Raḥmān* is not the same as the mode in the name *Raḥīm*. The former name is more intensive in its grammatical form, so that the analogous form *ghaḍbān*, from *ghaḍiba* 'to be angry', means not just 'angry' but '*consumed by* anger', 'furious'. The epithet *Raḥmān*, 'infinitely merciful', is kept in the Qur'ān for God alone and is even treated as close to the divine *nomen proprium* itself in its exclusivity: 'Pray to *Allāh* or pray to *al-Raḥmān*.' (Q. 17:110.) The case of the name *Raḥīm* is quite different, for it applies to God *and* creature, so the Qur'ān describes the Prophet by it, as in Q. 9:128: 'For the believers [the Prophet] is full of pity, compassionate (*raḥīm*).'

Shahrastānī's teaching on *Raḥmān* and *Raḥīm* goes back to a very early tradition on Q. 7:156, as already quoted in the context of the general/specific complementarity: 'My mercy encompasses everything and I will stipulate it for those who are God-conscious [...].' In an interpretation on the authority of such great exegetes of the first period as Ibn ʿAbbās, Muqātil b. Sulaymān and Saʿīd b. Jubayr, the verse refers (as mentioned above) to both a universal, indiscriminate mode of mercy and a particular, discriminate one. In line with the verse, the first of these modes covers all existents whatsoever, while the second is held back for the God-conscious believers alone. This splitting of mercies would have a long history and would get detailed treatment in the thought of the great Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) who sharply marks off what he calls the 'mercy of gratuitous gift' (*raḥmat*

al-imtinān) which is to do with the intensive name *Raḥmān*, from the 'mercy of obligation' (*raḥmat al-wujūb*) which is to do with the name *Raḥīm*.[181] Be that as it may, in his discussion Shahrastānī captures the symmetry between the two epithets in a potently chiastic formula: *Raḥmān* is exclusive in predicability (used only of God) but inclusive in operation (extending to all existents) while *Raḥīm* is inclusive in predicability (used of God and creature) but exclusive in operation (extending only to believers). In Shahrastānī's own tighter phraseology: '*Raḥmān* is specific as a name (*khāṣṣ al-ism*) but general in meaning (*'āmm al-ma'nā*) and *Raḥīm* is general as a name (*'āmm al-ism*) but specific in meaning (*khāṣṣ al-ma'nā*).'[182]

The question of the seven doublings finally enters here, for Shahrastānī says that the two mercies of the *basmala* are one of the said sevenfold set. They are, in fact, the *second* of the doublings, the first being the entire *basmala*-formula of verse one, and the entire *ḥamdala*-formula of verse two (i.e. 'Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds'). The two formulae go naturally together, for even outside the Qur'ānic context the *basmala* is the consecrative formula with which the believer's activities begin, whereas the *ḥamdala* is the thanksgiving formula with which the believer's activities end, or in Shahrastānī's words, the two verses are 'sequential in verbal expression (*lafẓ*) and concordant in meaning (*ma'nā*) [...] "in the name of God" is at beginnings and "praise belongs to God" is at completions'.[183] This per se is evidence that the *basmala* must be within the Exordium. As Shahrastānī says, the evocation of praise and gratitude to God in the *ḥamdala* logically follows the evocation of God's grace and mercy in the *basmala*, so the *ḥamdala* assumes the presence of the *basmala*.

Shahrastānī offers an arcanum from the *ḥamdala* which, though brief, shows well how arcana build on earlier headings. Under the lexicography (*lugha*) of verse two he has said that the word *ḥamd* (praise) in Arabic could have two distinct senses: either eulogy or thanks. *Ḥamd* means eulogy if it responds to a noble quality in the praised and it means thanks if it responds to some grace from the praised. Next, God is fundamentally attributed with both majesty and bounty, as expressed in Q. 55:27 where He is 'possessor of majesty and bounty (*dhū'l-jalāli wa'l-ikrām*)'. With impressive consistency, Shahrastānī now proposes in the arcana that *ḥamd* in the *ḥamdala* has both its senses at once: eulogy in view of God's inherent majesty and thanks in view of His inherent bounty.[184]

The third doubling comes in verses two and four, the twin titles of God: 'the Lord of the worlds' (*Rabb al-ʿālamīn*) and 'the Ruler of the Day of Judgement' (*Mālik yawm al-dīn*). On etymology Shahrastānī cites the *Maqāyīs* of Aḥmad b. Fāris (d. 395/1004) for the view that the first of these means 'the educator of creatures'. This follows by deriving *rabb* from *rabā*, 'to grow' (hence, form II, *rabbā* = 'to make grow', 'to educate') and through interpreting *ʿālamīn* as each genus of creation.[185] It matters to Shahrastānī that the epithet 'Lord of the worlds' relates specifically to creation and this world, while 'Ruler of the Day of Judgement' relates to the Command and the next world (as implied by texts like Q. 82:19: '[...] *the Command that day is God's*'). Creation concerns the corporeal while the Command concerns the spiritual, in other words, God's realm of omnipotence (*jabarūt*) as distinct from His realm of sovereignty (*malakūt*) respectively. A passage follows which presents the subtle dependence of created beings on those of the world of the Command, an intensity of relation which Shahrastānī strips of the clumsy analogy of physical proximity:

> [...] there is no existent amongst the existents of the world which He has created out of something or which He has originated *ex nihilo*, without there being an angel from His realm of sovereignty which directs it, and a Word (or Logos) which is its active agent determining it – even the rain drop from the sky falls accompanied by an angel and the mote of dust from the earth rises upwards accompanied by an angel. The two worlds are not adjacent to one another in the manner of bodies, nor do they combine intimately in the manner of bodies with shape and form. Rather they are distinct in significance and in reality [...].[186]

Shahrastānī finds the fourth doubling in verse three of the Exordium, where God is mysteriously acknowledged *again* as 'the Infinitely Merciful, the Compassionate'. Here revert the two mercies already discussed under the *basmala* in verse one. Yet nothing in the Qurʾān should be seen as random or pleonastic – for Shahrastānī these mercies certainly have some new significance. He finds this in their very placing in the Exordium's structure, whose every detail he takes as meaningful, indeed, as deeply related to the greater order of reality. These mercies, in brief, are located between 'Lord of the worlds' in verse two and 'Ruler of the Day of Judgement' in verse four. Now, these epithets were said above to relate respectively to the dimensions of creation and the Command. So

Shahrastānī proposes that the mercies in the context of verse three are evoked in a fresh sense, insofar as they here have a mediatory function, interlinking these two great dimensions.[187]

The next doubling, the fifth, is found in the two declarations of verse five: 'It is You we worship and it is You we ask for help.' Shahrastānī's complementarities, notably generality/specificity and the Command/creation, have already served in the arcana. The one now used as the key to this verse's arcanum is the inchoative/accomplished. For unspoken in the phrase 'It is You we worship' is not just the undertaking of God's commandment but also the acknowledgement that the human agent acts freely in response to it, for merit or demerit. For our author then, this first declaration of verse five negates unqualified necessitarianism, and is rooted in the dimension of the inchoative. But balancing this is the second declaration, 'it is You we ask for help', which acknowledges the human agent's dependence on divine aid and which therefore negates unqualified libertarianism, as rooted in the dimension of the accomplished.[188]

A good case of the mentioned 'positivism' of the mysticism of the *Mafātīḥ*, follows here when we are told of two definitive influxes of divine light. The creature undergoes one influx on its projection into existence (*ījād*) by God, and another in its heart on its self-submission (*taslīm*) to God. Now Shahrastānī states enigmatically that the Arabic letters *kāf* and *nūn* trigger both. For *kāf* and *nūn* in the form of the divine creative fiat *kun* ('Be!', as mentioned in Q. 16:40 etc.) trigger the first influx of the creature's history. Next, the cardiac light of submission too is triggered through contact with the same letters, but how? We learn that this is because the declarations of verse five of the Exordium *ipso facto* enact the creature's self-abandonment to God. Accordingly, the details of the Arabic of these declarations must be weighed: *iyyāka naʿbudu wa iyyāka nastaʿīn*. Shahrastānī notes that the second person singular pronominal suffix *-ka* ('you', as in 'it is You'), technically known as 'the "k" of addressing' (*kāf al-khiṭāb*), grammatically betokens direct confrontation with, or witnessing of (*mushāhada*), the addressee. The latter is implied to be actually present to the speaker. Next, the inflexion of the first person plural of the imperfect *na-* ('we', as in 'we worship' and 'we ask for help') betokens the speaker's capacity in carrying through the action of the verb. The *kāf* and the *nūn* of verse five thus fulfil the criteria for reception of the cardiac light: respectively, acknowledgement of the divine object and free self-submission thereto.[189] Thus, both influxes

indeed equally come about by the letters *kāf* and *nūn* according to this letter mysticism, which contrasts with the numerological variety. For its part, the topos of the cardiac 'light of *taslīm*' can doubtless be traced to texts such as Q. 39:22 which asks whether 'one whose breast God has opened to Islam so that he has a light from his Lord' is not better than 'those whose hearts are hardened against God's remembrance'. That said, Shahrastānī seems briefly to shift in this talk of self-submission as an inner 'photic' experience, to the experiential terms more usual of Ṣūfism.

According to Shahrastānī, the Exordium pivots on verse five. For its earlier verses have to do with positive declaration (*taʿrīf*) i.e. the declaration of truths about God, while its later verses have to do with 'entrustment' (*taklīf*) i.e. the worshipper's entrustment of needs to God. This follows from the famous tradition, one of the 'divine sayings' (*aḥadīth qudsiyya*): 'I divide the formal prayer between Me and My worshipper into two halves [...]'.[190] Our exegete claims to find a subtle pattern in verse five which reflects its pivotal status: at a deep level it looks back to and retraces the verse with which the chapter began – the *basmala*. The two verses thus bracket the Exordium's first half. Shahrastānī here shows that buried in verse five is the same set of three divine names found at the start: 'In the name of God (*Allāh*), the Infinitely Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), the Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*).' His premise is that the request for help in 'It is You we ask for help' is in fact twofold: for God's help simpliciter, and for God's help qua guidance. When this consideration is skilfully coupled with pertinent verses from the Qurʾān, his proof emerges: verse five points (1) to *Allāh* in the statement 'It is You whom we worship', because the name *Allāh* primarily bespeaks the deservingness of being worshipped. It points (2) to *al-Raḥmān* in the request for help simpliciter in the statement 'It is You we ask for help', because the name *Raḥmān* bespeaks the deservingness of being asked for help, as for instance shown by Q. 21:112: 'Our Lord is *al-Raḥmān*, the one sought for help (*mustaʿān*).' Lastly, it points (3) to *al-Raḥīm* in the request for help qua guidance, again in the statement 'It is You we ask for help', because the name *Raḥīm* bespeaks the deservingness of being asked for guidance, as for instance shown by Q. 7:52: '[The scripture is] a guidance and a mercy (*hudan wa raḥma*) for a people who believe.'

The unfolding of the arcana of the rest of the chapter, verses six and seven, is complex and makes wide use of the complementarities. The real key however seems to be hierarchy/contrariety. Hierarchy in the first

instance underlies the plea in verse six, 'Guide us on the straight path' and the statement in verse seven, 'The path of those You have graciously favoured'. In Shahrastānī's view, the former plea pertains to the guidance-seekers, and the 'graciously favoured' in the latter statement refers to the guides stationed above them.[191] Bringing in other complementarities, our author says that the seekers belong to the inchoative while the guides (in the final analysis, the imamate) belong to the accomplished.[192] On the other hand, contrariety is at work between these two groups and the two mentioned in the rest of verse seven: 'Not those against whom is Your wrath nor those who go astray'. These are the precise infernal analogue of the same two ranks – described by our author as a disparity (*tafāwut*) rather than a hierarchy (*tarattub*).[193] So the 'guides' are in contrariety with those subject to divine anger ('those against whom is Your wrath'), while the 'seekers' are in contrariety with 'those who go astray'. These two pairs – the guides and the guided, and their infernal opposites – are the sixth and seventh of Shahrastānī's doublings. The sevenfold chain thus ends and with it not only the divulgence of the supposed true sense of the Exordium's Qur'ānic epithet, the Seven Doubled Ones, but also the real proof that the *basmala* is an inseparable part of the chapter, since the formula yields the first two doublings of the series, which runs, in sum, as follows:

(1) The *basmala* and the *ḥamdala* (verses one and two).

(2) The two modes of mercy represented by the names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* in the *basmala* (verse one).

(3) 'The Lord of the worlds' = creation (verse two), 'the Ruler of the Day of Judgement' = the Command (verse four).

(4) The mediatory forms of the *basmala*'s two modes of mercy (verse three), interconnecting between creation and the Command, as represented by verse two and verse four.

(5) The two affirmations (verse five): 'It is You we worship' = inchoative; 'it is You we ask for help' = accomplished.

(6) 'Guide us on the straight path, the path of those You have graciously favoured' = hierarchy of guided and guides, respectively (verses six and seven).

(7) 'Not (of) those against whom is Your wrath, nor those who go astray' = infernal guides and guided respectively, in contrariety with (6) (verse seven).

To conclude: Excluding (1), this series emerges through the complementarities or 'keys' which Shahrastānī took himself to have inherited (albeit via Anṣārī and the 'virtuous servant') from the imamate. It is through the latter that his hermeneutical keys have their supposed authority and prophetic aura. That said, the minutiae of the arcana seem to emerge by a secondary process, worked out by the author's initiators or by himself as an independent hermeneut. It may be that to prove in detail the Ismāʿīlī roots of this methodology for entering the awesome terra incognita of the Qurʾān's interior is to miss the obvious point. We are confronted, in all this, by the liminal awareness of a great structure of higher-order concepts underlying the text of the scripture. This mysterious system is, arguably, at one with the coordinated body of teachings which Shahrastānī puts to use in other contexts, notably the philosophical context of the *Muṣāraʿa*, where he uses it to challenge the supposed impostures of Avicennan metaphysics. In the *Muṣāraʿa*, Shahrastānī explicitly attributes his counter-Avicennan philosophy to the prophets – it is a *ḥanīf* revelation, a prophetic kind of philosophical thought.[194] The 'philosophical' system of revelation discovered in the Qurʾānic arcana is then the obverse of this revealed system of philosophy evinced in the *Muṣāraʿa*. With this Janus-faced, fundamentally noumenal body of teachings, we finally and decisively penetrate to the core of Shahrastānī's identity and worldview – the Shahrastānian 'truth'. And it is surely here that the Ismāʿīlī stimulus of his thought most shows through: a concept of truth in which the religious and the philosophical wholly unite, a complete mergence of both 'wisdoms' (*jāmiʿ al-ḥikmatayn*).

Note on the Arabic text

As already mentioned, this translation is based on the first volume of Ādharshab's edition. The annotation has partly drawn on references provided in the latter, some of which (e.g. references to certain *rijāl* works) have proved hard to verify, but which have been retained for their potential value to researchers. The Arabic of Ādharshab's edition has also been provided here for consultation and coordination with the text of the translation. All annotation is, however, confined to the translation, including information on any emendations to the Arabic text. The system followed in noting these emendations is that the text as corrected (and translated) is placed *before* the colon,

and as uncorrected, *after* the colon. Depending on the case, these emendations will be Ādharshab's corrections of the original manuscript or my corrections of Ādharshab's edition; the latter is always marked with the initials MA. Apart from these noted emendations, Ādharshab's text has been modified only a little in its punctuation and the arrangement of some paragraphs, in order to bring it in line with the English translation. Qur'ānic quotations are in floriated brackets and are vowelled more fully than in Ādharshab's text.

Some words are called for, regarding the manuscript used for Ādharshab's edition, the unicum, MS no. 8086/B78, from the Library of the Iranian National Consultative Assembly, Tehran.[195] The manuscript contains 434 folios, i.e. 868 pages of 25 lines each, 34 cm long and 13.5 cm wide. The first part of this is taken up with Shahrastānī's introductory chapters, ending at folio 27A, and the second part is his commentary on the Exordium, ending at folio 45A – together comprising the contents of the present volume. Part one of Shahrastānī's commentary on Q. 2, the Cow, ends at folio 240B. Part two then begins with Q. 2:124 ('And when his Lord tried Abraham with certain words [...]') and ends at the completion of Q. 2.

The commentary is written in black ink on Syrian paper with rubrics in red, and on the cover the full title given is:

> The Book of the Keys to the Arcana and the Lanterns of the Godly in the Exegesis of the Qur'ān, the composition of the imam, the researcher, the crown of the community and the faith, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī – may God water his garden with the showers of forgiveness and cause him to take his place in the highest of paradises!

Beneath this title is the following statement:

> ʿUbayd Allāh, the one confidant in His grace, Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. al-Muʾayyad Abū'l-Majāmiʿ al-Ḥamawī al-Juwaynī[196] had it transcribed for himself (*istansakhahu li-nafsihi*), may God protect him, guide him and grant him success in achieving what takes him forward to His satisfaction, and may He forgive him and his predecessors, and forgive him his lapses and excesses, and may He set in order the affairs of his two abodes [i.e. this world and the next] through His grace, and may He forgive through His longed for bounty the sins which he sent ahead of him, by the truth of Muḥammad and his pure chosen family, may God bless him and his family as long as night is quiet and day is bright! The writing of these lines was completed on 4th Shaʿbān 667 AH [=1268 CE].

Another inscription is found at the end of the commentary on Q. 2, which says: 'The transcription of the book is completed, praise be to God and how excellent is His aid, at the conclusion of God's month of al-Aṣamm [= 'the deaf one', an epithet of the month of Rajab] Rajab, 667 AH. O God, forgive its transcriber Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Zanjī!' The latter inscription strongly suggests that the commentary as it came into the hands of the scribe in question, was not longer than the content of the Tehran manuscript, since it clearly states 'The transcription of the book is completed [...]' and not 'The transcription of the *second part* is completed [...]'.

Important information on the history of the commentary's composition is found in a number of references in the manuscript. For example: 'The beginning of this composition occurred in the months [*sic*.] of the year 538 AH [=1143 CE].' Following it is found the statement: 'We are transcribing it from the handwriting of the author [himself].' In the margin of folio 241A is found the statement by Shahrastānī:

> This is the beginning of volume two of the Qurʾān commentary. O God, benefit us by that which You teach us, and teach us that by which You benefit us, by the truth of the Chosen One (upon him be peace). The volume was finished in Muḥarram of the year 540 AH [1145 CE]. May God endow it with good and may He seal it with bliss!

After it there is another statement: 'A transcript of the original in the handwriting of the author.' Finally, on the last page of the manuscript is the following statement by the scribe: 'This manuscript was transcribed from the original which is in the handwriting of the author, the imam, the knower of the arcana of the Qurʾān, crown of the faith al-Shahrastānī, may God cover him in His grace. The original was in two volumes, and this narration [...].' The part of the page containing the remainder is truncated, including, it would seem, the date of the completion of the second volume of the commentary by Shahrastānī. This last statement incidentally implies again that this was the full extent of the work in the scribe's possession.