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Is There a Shī'a Philosophy of History? The Case of Mas'ūdī

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Shī'a theology differs distinctly from Sunnī theology in its interpretation of the Qur'ān and of early Islamic political history. On the basis of these differences, it is postulated that Shī'a thought is also epistemologically different from Sunnī thought and that it builds on a radically dissimilar vision of the world. Thus, it is usually assumed that the Shī'a have a different conception and philosophy of history. Closer inspection, however, reveals no such variance. Specifically, this article examines the case of tenth-century historian Mas'ūdī, whose importance in classical Muslim historiography has been remarked upon by Muslim historians as well as by contemporary scholarship.¹ Mas'ūdī is believed to be a Shī'a of Twelver persuasion. Some have assumed that he was an Ismā'īlī, but the majority of scholars agree that he is more likely to be an adept of the Twelver Shī'a.² His extensive presentation of Shī'a beliefs, his excessive praise of 'Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib, and his sympathetic treatment of Shī'a claims certainly make him a likely candidate. That his actual beliefs remain to some extent an issue is due to the fact that he does not claim his religious confession outright in the books that have survived. He does refer the reader to his other books devoted to the matter and where he presumably clarified his position concerning Shī'a claims. The books that remained, however, are history books, and while he is not trying to hide his identity, Mas'ūdī is trying to write as much of an objective account of history and events as he can, and he avoids consciously taking position on such matters.³

¹ Abū al Ḥasan 'Alī, ibn al Ḥusayn al Mas'ūdī, lived approximately from 893 to 956 CE. All translations of Mas'ūdī's texts are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² See Charles Pellat, "Mas'ūdī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), and "Mas'ūdī et l'imamisme," in *Le Shi'isme Imamite*, ed. Robert Brunschwig and Toufic Fahd (Paris: Université de Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de France, 1970).

³ The two surviving books by Mas'ūdī are *Murūj al Dhahab wa Ma'ādin al Jawhar*, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, 2nd ed., 9 vols. (Paris: Société Asiatique, © 2006 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0022-4189/2006/8601-0002\$10.00

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Mas'ūdī's Shī'a beliefs are at the heart of some of modern scholarship's understanding of his thought. Thus, it is maintained that Mas'ūdī's view of history differs radically from that of Sunnis and that it is structured and conditioned by his religious beliefs. Rosenthal hints at his being a skeptic in matters of religion.⁴ Khalidi goes even further by affirming that Mas'ūdī rejects certain affirmations of the Qur'ān and that his writing can only be interpreted through an alleged sectarian lens.⁵ But a careful reading of Mas'ūdī casts doubt on these claims, whether in terms of the methodology he follows or the factual content of history that he reports.

I. METHODOLOGY

It is almost impossible to separate methodology from content in a historical narrative, as a historian's method is shaped and informed by his or her understanding of history. Yet this method needs to be identified, and in order to avoid speculative and flawed analysis, it is best to limit oneself to what Mas'ūdī himself has to say on his own approach to history. In the introduction to the most important of the two books that have survived, namely, *Murūj al Dhahab*, he maintains that history is the best of all science because it is a synthesis of all other disciplines.⁶ He openly recognizes his debt to the historians who preceded him and whose work he praises and criticizes in turn. He therefore has an understanding of his discipline as an independent science, and he has a certain concept of the ideal historical method to follow by which he judges other historians. He even contends that only a historian should assume the task of writing history because only he would be familiar with the proper historical approach, while scientists, for example, know little about this topic and may well report information that has not been verified.⁷ Proper training is required to write a correct historical narrative.

To present a truthful account of past and present events is then the historian's main goal. Verification is the first task of the historian, and the best verification is that of the historian's own witnessing of the events he is reporting. Verification does not apply only to events but

L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1970), henceforth referred to as *Murūj*, and *Kitāb al Tanbīh wa al Ishrāf*, ed. 'Abdallāh al Sāwī (1938; repr., Baghdad: Makhtaba al-Muthannā, 1967), henceforth referred to as *Tanbīh*.

⁴ Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968).

⁵ Tarīf Khalīdī, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).

⁶ *Murūj*, 1:21–22 and 3:135.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:19.

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also to theories and concepts, which must be checked and referred to their authors or reporters. Mas'ūdī is careful to indicate that one of the duties of the historian is to avoid plagiarism and to refer explicitly to his sources, including the works of other historians. He warns his readers against using his work in such a way and accuses Ibn Qutayba of having expressed ideas and views that were not his own. Authentication of events and theories can be carried out in several ways. Eye witnessing is the most reliable method. For all other reports, the authenticity of the content is to be judged according to the credibility of the sources. Two main criteria are cited, both of which are taken from the methodology followed by the science of the *ḥadīth*.⁸ This science, which in fact is the ancestor of historiography in Islamic culture, was fully developed by the tenth century. Its system of authentication is too complex and cumbersome for the historian's needs, and Mas'ūdī selects the methods appropriate to the goal of the historian as he sees it.

The first criterion is that of internal evidence. The report must be consistent, coherent, and should not contradict reason. It must obey the laws of logic, reason, and science. Mas'ūdī explicitly relies on sciences such as geography, astronomy, and biology to verify and assess the report. Of course, this does not require the historian always to provide justification for what he is reporting, as in the case where he is referring to the views and opinions of people. The second criterion is that of external criticism or verification of the channels through which the information has been obtained. Two criteria, in turn, must be met. The first is whether the report has been obtained through an uninterrupted line of reporters stretching back to the original source (called *isnād* in the science of *ḥadīth*). The second criterion is the reliability of each of the reporters and the background checks needed to assess their intelligence, honesty, and potential conflicts of interest in the event or opinion reported.

Both of these criteria, developed by the science of the *ḥadīth*, were extensively used in jurisprudence. As historiography emerged from the science of the *ḥadīth*, earlier historians, like Ṭabarī, relied primarily on these methods, and their works read more like a compilation of *ḥadīth* than a history text. Mas'ūdī uses the same method, but whenever possible, he refers the reader to earlier historians or *ḥadīth* reporters who have already verified the reports. This *isnād* is used mostly in the section dealing with the Prophet and his Companions. Very recent events, which can be assumed to be well known, do not require such exacting

⁸ The word *ḥadīth* means the reports of the sayings and actions of the Prophet. The science of the *ḥadīth* is an integral part of the science of jurisprudence in that the *Sunna*, or example, of the Prophet is mandatory to Muslims.

verification processes, and reports of ancient history and faraway lands need only be attributed to their presumed sources.

In order to craft a more readable text, historians had started relegating the *isnād* to the end of the paragraph or to the bottom of the page, akin to a footnote that would not break the cohesion of the text. Mas'ūdī makes full use of this custom and constructs his text according to other principles that are in agreement with the goal of the historian, as he understands it. In his view, the historical text is meant for the instruction of the reader. Events must be presented in a way that helps the reader to learn from the narrative factual information as well as the general principles of morality and behavior. In this, Mas'ūdī follows al Jāhīz, who believes that diversification of style and content helps sustain the reader's attention and interest and that all instructive texts (including the instruction of science) should be treated as a literary form.

Because it submits to a specific literary form, Mas'ūdī's text displays a far better structure than that found in earlier works. As he writes after a long line of Muslim historians, Mas'ūdī has the benefit of a well-established tradition of historiography and history sources on which he can depend. He therefore has fewer problems in terms of data collection and a better opportunity to select relevant material and organize it in a coherent structure. This allows him to develop a certain pattern for historical data and a consistent frame of reference for the selection and treatment of this data. Most chapters in Mas'ūdī's *Murūj* are loosely constructed around the caliph's reign, and all information about events occurring during that time are reported, though the subjects are not linked, and one cannot discern a developmental pattern. Only events or information deemed by Mas'ūdī to be of interest are reported—but information not related to his topic may also be reported. There are a large number of digressions and stories inserted in order to keep the reader entertained, especially in the chapters dealing with the less eventful reigns of some caliphs. These digressions obey the same rules as the main events reported by the author: they are meant to educate the reader by conveying analogies or a moral lesson. The text then obeys a specific purpose. Mas'ūdī does not analyze the events with a view to deduce a certain historical pattern, nor does he advocate explicitly such an aim. This does not mean that he does not have already a certain pattern in mind (and we shall identify it later); it simply means that his avowed aim—the general instruction of the reader—takes precedence in his approach to his subject. However, his presentation of the subject, if more organized and benefiting of a better topical arrangement than that of Ṭabarī, remains very close

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to the earlier historians. Though it avoids the awkward year-by-year reporting of his predecessors, the general structure and main divisions of time around the caliph's reign remain the same.

In dealing with the verification of the content of the historical report, Mas'ūdī can rely on the works of a solid tradition of scientists versed in several domains such as biology, chemistry, astronomy, medicine, and so forth. He also refers to Greek and Persian works, which by then had been translated and incorporated into the Muslim corpus of knowledge. Mas'ūdī insists on the evaluation of reports on the basis of reason and common sense and checks them against the scientific knowledge available in his time. However, he does not seem to step outside the traditional framework accepted by scientists and developed by the orthodox schools of theology against the Hellenistic-inspired philosophers. The orthodox schools of theology had developed the concept of customary knowledge, according to which God re-creates everything every instant.⁹ This concept allows orthodox theologians to refute the Greek notion of nature operating through an immutable law first set by the Prime Mover but now functioning independently of Him. Ghazālī will later reinforce this view in orthodox Islam through his powerful critique of the concept of causality.¹⁰ It is on the basis of this concept that scientific explanations are accepted and justified by the orthodox schools of theology and that the possibility of miracles is validated. God's omnipotence is affirmed through His constant re-creation of the world. However, He makes everything hap-

⁹ There is a debate among contemporary historians as to whether Mas'ūdī was a follower of the Mu'tazila or the Ash'ariyya *Kalām* schools of theology. In fact, there is a problem with the conventional orientalist classification of the schools. Whereas the Mu'tazila was identified as such by subsequent theologians, there is a question as to whether there is indeed a school that can be referred to al Ash'arī himself, as it seems that the concept of the Ash'ariyya as a school was a later construction projected back in time. (See on this matter George Makdisi, *Religion, Law and Learning in Classical Islam* [Hampshire: Variorum, 1991].) Be that as it may, there is certainly a theological reaction to the Mu'tazila, and a number of anti-Mu'tazila concepts will be developed by the orthodoxy. Khalidi, who uses the conventional classification, assumes that Mas'ūdī does not follow the Ash'ariyya but does not give proof or evidence for such a claim. He does admit that Mas'ūdī uses the concept of customary knowledge but does not refer it to the Ash'ariyya or to the anti-Mu'tazila orthodoxy that elaborated it. See Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, 35. Similarly, S. Maqbul Ahmad, in "Al Mas'ūdī's Contribution to Medieval Arabic Geography," in *Islamic Culture* 28 (1954): 275–86, assumes that Mas'ūdī is of the Mu'tazila because he uses some terms like "possible," "impossible," and "necessary." But while the use of these originated with the Mu'tazila, they were also used by the other orthodox schools of theology, though with different conclusions. (For the assumed Ash'ariyya views, see Abū Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'il al Ash'arī, *Maqālat al Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al Musalliyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter [Istanbul: Maṭba'at al Dawla, 1929].) In effect, after describing the five beliefs of the Mu'tazila, Mas'ūdī adds that if one disagrees even partially with one of these, then he could not be counted as a Mu'tazilite—thus strongly implying that it is the case for him. He may, however, have agreed with some of their views.

¹⁰ Al Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al Falāsifa*, 6th ed. (Cairo: Dār al Ma'ārif, 1980).

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pen according to customary patterns (the *sunan*, plural of *sunna*, referred to by the Qur'ān) so that one can expect natural phenomena to happen in accordance to these patterns, as observed by scientists. Breaking this pattern is not impossible to God (though this power belongs only to Him), and that is why miracles are possible. But miracles are rare and occur only in accordance with a divine purpose that can be found in revelation. Thus, while the possibility of miracles is affirmed, their actual occurrence is to be doubted unless witnessed by several reliable sources or confirmed by revelation. In all other cases, the customary pattern prevails and can be used as a consistent principle on which science can build dependable knowledge. That these patterns are willed by God is made amply clear when, after describing the patterns of planets and climates, Mas'ūdī goes on to add: "In this way, [God's] handiwork becomes apparent as does the wisdom of His commands and the evidence of His Lordship. Thus *do effects get linked to their causes*, thereby witnessing to the intervention of a Maker and the marvels of His wisdom."¹¹ The word "customary," which Mas'ūdī uses to describe natural events, is then far from being an unfortunate translation he just happens to use, while in effect relying on Greek concepts of natural law developed by Aristotle and reported by Kindī, as mistakenly assumed by Rosenthal and Khalidī.¹² It is in full accordance with orthodoxy that Mas'ūdī describes scientific phenomena, validates miracles as divine interventions, and warns against naive acceptance of impossible phenomena not confirmed by revelation.¹³

In this approach, there is none of the religious skepticism that is ascribed to Mas'ūdī. Rosenthal, for instance, had concluded that Mas'ūdī, by virtue of dealing with certain topics and reports, "made it quite clear by implication that he was approaching a scientific subject which might be in contradiction to the religious precepts of Islam."¹⁴ But the evidence adduced by Rosenthal from the following text does not support his claim, whether directly or indirectly:

What we have mentioned with respect to the beginning of creation is what has been brought by revelation and transmitted by former generations . . . ; we have reported it . . . as we found it in their books, [*as have we reported*] *the proofs for the creation of the world ex nihilo* . . . but we do not describe here the opinions of those who agreed with these [views] . . . *nor do we respond to those*

¹¹ *Tanbīh*, 8, emphasis added. Consider also "the fire from earth's entrails mixed with the water causes the latter to rise in evaporation into clouds; these then turn into rain in accordance with their custom and habit" (*Murūj*, 1:278–79).

¹² Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 40.

¹³ *Murūj*, 4:112–13.

¹⁴ Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography*, 108.

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who disagreed with them and [instead] maintained the eternity of the world, for we have treated this at length in earlier books. . . . However, we do allude in many passages of the present book to accounts of theoretical [or speculative], demonstrative, and dialectical sciences related to various opinions and religions through historical reports.¹⁵

Nothing in this paragraph indicates Mas'ūdī's rejection of Islamic teachings. It does show that he is willing to report views that contradict these, but his words indicate, in effect, his conviction that there are proofs for the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and confirm his full agreement with the orthodox schools of theology on the matter.¹⁶

Pushing well beyond Rosenthal's assumptions, Khalidi claims that Mas'ūdī expresses outright skepticism vis-à-vis the Qur'ānic text, a charge that must cause the—by all accounts devout—historian to turn in his tomb. The claim is founded solely on a single passage, to which Mas'ūdī appends the well-known idiom “and God knows best,” which peppers all theological and scientific discourse in Muslim tradition: “The progeny of these eighty people died out and God caused the [new] population of earth to spring out from Noah's three sons. Thus has God informed [us] when He said ‘and We caused his progeny to endure,’ and God knows best about this interpretation.”¹⁷

According to Khalidi, the last sentence “expresses unusual scepticism with regard to the koranic verses.”¹⁸ It is quite obvious that a sentence stating, “God knows best *about this interpretation*,” does not express any skeptical attitude toward the Qur'an but rather toward *that particular interpretation* of the verse.¹⁹ In effect, the idiom “and God knows best”

¹⁵ *Murūj*, 1:54–55, emphasis added.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:55 and 103–4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:75f.

¹⁸ Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, 85.

¹⁹ Muslim tradition had generally accepted the Old Testament version of a universal flood, though nowhere in the Qur'an is there a specific statement to that effect. Some indicate the opposite: “And so We saved [Noah] and those who stood by him, in the ark, the while We caused those who had given the lie to Our messages to drown” (Qur'an 7:64); “We said [unto Noah] ‘Place on board of this [ark] one pair of each [kind of animal] of either sex, as well as thy family—except those on whom [Our] sentence has already passed—and all [others] who have attained to faith—for only a few (of Noah's people) shared his faith’” (Qur'an 11:40, emphasis added); and “O Noah! Disembark in peace from Us, and with [Our] blessings upon thee as well as upon the communities [*umam*, plural of *umma*] with thee” (Qur'an 11:48). Though most of the commentators still believe, on biblical authority, that only Noah's descendants would eventually survive, they explicitly adopt a different tradition according to which Noah's family was not the only one saved: forty couples had boarded the ark with them. Mas'ūdī who, like his predecessors, tries to reconcile whenever possible the Old Testament with Muslim tradition, reports the tradition but then (contrary to earlier historians who ignored the implications of the story), considers the obvious difficulty of reconciling that fact with the belief that only Noah's descendants survived. He obviously believes in the orthodox interpretation justified by Muslim tradition on the basis of verse 37:75, which states: “We saved [Noah] and

is always used to mean the relativity and uncertainty of one's own understanding since no one can claim absolute knowledge. It was and is still used extensively in this sense in the Muslim world, and all commentators routinely add the expression whenever they interpret verses of the Qur'ān. To impute to the idiom any meaning other than humility and recognition of God's absolute power indicates a lack of understanding of classical Muslim culture and infuses classical expressions with modern meanings that were simply not part of the ethos of the times. Besides, it would indeed be the height of absurdity to use an expression deferring to God in order to express skepticism of Him!

That the Qur'ān stands as the supreme source of truth in Mas'ūdī's worldview cannot possibly be doubted given the references that point to this throughout his work.²⁰ Indeed, Khalidī's main assessment of Mas'ūdī as a devout Shī'a, whose religious views allegedly determine a particular philosophy of history, belies the very claim of skepticism and makes his thesis self-contradictory. But the assumption of skepticism has often been made in orientalist literature whenever there is an expression of rational inquiry with respect to theological claims or to scientific endeavors, in general. Consider, for example, Rosenthal: "The scientific spirit once aroused showed itself astonishingly hardy and not easily subdued by theology. It is only necessary to read the brief chapter on rivers and oceans in Ibn [Kathīr]'s *Bidāyah* to realize how much this chapter, with its references to Ibn Sina and Ptolemy, deviates from the traditional description of the creation of the world that surrounds it."²¹

The archetype for this account of history is that of Western thought and the development of science in relation to the church, which constitutes the background of orientalism. But there is no single paradigm

his household from that awesome calamity and caused his offspring to endure." But there still is the problem of the forty couples—so he goes on to assume that their progeny must have eventually died out. Thus, having advanced an assumption on the basis of his interpretation of verse 37:75, but without Qur'ānic evidence, it is only normal that Mas'ūdī would conclude with "and God knows best about the interpretation of this verse," a typical statement whenever a commentator is faced with perplexing and competing accounts and is suggesting explanations not confirmed by revelation. It is self-evident that Mas'ūdī is not doubting the Qur'ān but, rather, wondering about the accuracy of his own interpretation and whether the verse indeed meant that the forty couples had no enduring progeny. There is no doubt, then, that he subscribes to the concept, endorsed by orthodoxy, that all people descend from Noah, and any claim to the contrary leads to postulating incoherence in Mas'ūdī's text. Thus does Khalidī, after forcing on Mas'ūdī's text the claim of skepticism toward the Qur'ān regarding the universality of the flood, suspect him of inconsistency for referring all nations to Noah's descendants! (See Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 88.)

²⁰ There are too many of these examples to cite, but here is just one: After discussing a number of theories concerning the development of the fetus, he concludes that they all have to yield to the Qur'ān, as it is the ultimate reference (*Murūj*, 3:436).

²¹ Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography*, 109.

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that fits all cultures and religions. By and large, the development of science in the Muslim world did not fall to the theological schools, which tended to control instead jurisprudence and philosophy. Polemics centered on the latter and rarely on the work of scientists proper. No doubt, there were issues arising around the formulation and especially the epistemology of thought, and these were expressed in the intense controversies relating to the "philosophers" and their adoption of a Hellenistic system of thought that, in its fundamentals, was clearly in opposition to the Islamic worldview expressed in (or read into) the Qur'ān. But without going further into the polemics relating to the methodology followed by the schools of theology and philosophy and whether or not the schools of theology were inspired by Greek thought (an issue not directly relevant to this topic), the fact remains that Muslim theologians were using refined and critical reasoning and argumentation in advancing their positions on issues like creation ex nihilo and the eternity of the Qur'ān.

It is a gross oversimplification to assume skepticism whenever one encounters rational debate and sophisticated or scientific argumentation—as simplistic as postulating that Sir Isaac Newton had to be a religious skeptic. There were, of course, Muslims who took religious data uncritically, especially among the Traditionists (i.e., scholars of the *ḥadīth*), whom Mas'ūdī criticizes often.²² But even in this case, there were intense internal debates among the Traditionists on the matter, especially when reports related to jurisprudence, where a clear and intelligible *ratio legis* was the basis for law derivation, and in the elaboration of the science of the *ḥadīth*, where a number of rational and coherent rules were established in order to ensure the validity of the latter. It is also true that a large body of stories and legends, derived from biblical sources or of unknown origin, had evolved over time to explain and supplement the very laconic verses of the Qur'ān that dealt with creation and pre-Islamic history. However, Mas'ūdī's criticism of it is neither surprising nor exceptional. Other thinkers, whether Traditionists, theologians, or historians, had questioned this corpus, and since the latter is external to the Qur'ān, such criticism is only normal. Indeed, it was provoked and strengthened by the Qur'ānic claim of *tahrīf*, or manipulation of earlier revelations, and it is explicitly on this basis that Mas'ūdī attacks the legends of yore and the corpus of Jewish-inspired reports that circulated in his time.²³

In terms of methodology, then, we find that Mas'ūdī is simply fol-

²² For example, *Murūj*, 1:269, where he accuses some Traditionists of accepting nonsense.

²³ See text below and n. 47.

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lowing the historians of his time. His understanding of science and natural law is the one prevalent in his day and age among the orthodox schools of theology. There is no new methodology in terms of assessing the *isnād* of the reports that he investigates. Instead, he relies fully on the orthodox methods developed and used by the science of the *ḥadīth*. It is true that he displays far more critical skills than his predecessors did and that he was generally mindful of logic and skeptical of wild claims. However, it would be incorrect to assume a consistently rational and scientific approach. A large number of theories and stories are reported uncritically, whether in terms of historical research or scientific observation.²⁴ And while his writing represents in many respects a great improvement in comparison to earlier works, it is more a matter of refinement of the latter than of substantial change.

II. CONTENT

Mas'ūdī's methodology is fully consistent with that of orthodox historians and theologians and is neither an expression of skepticism nor even of some undefined Shī'a ideology. But do his Shī'a beliefs provide him with a perspective of history that differs from that of other historians, as has been claimed? A clear Shī'a position is normally expressed through an explicit endorsement of the Shī'a version of the historical events that relate to the Shī'a controversy, and this would be made clear in the reports on the Islamic era, whence the issue arose. In itself, however, even an unequivocal endorsement of Shī'a claims would not be enough to indicate a different view of history per se. Such a different perspective must affect one's view of history as a whole and would therefore be expressed most clearly in the pre-Islamic era where no explicit Shī'a claims are made. We shall consider these periods in turn.

A. The Islamic Era

One should expect Shī'a views and topics to be reported in full by a Shī'a author, as indeed they are. In the opening pages of the chapter on Islamic history, Mas'ūdī addresses the issue of whether 'Alī had

²⁴ Thus Pellat will consider Mas'ūdī more as a litterateur than a historian (*Encyclopedia of Islam*); see also Charles Pellat, "Was al Mas'ūdī a Historian or an *Adīb*?" in *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 9 (1961): 231–34. Ibn Khaldūn takes Mas'ūdī to task for reporting some facts uncritically. See W. J. Fischel, "Ibn Khaldūn and al- Mas'ūdī," in *Al Mas'ūdī Millenary Commemoration Volume*, ed. S. Ahmad and A. Rahman (Aligarh: Indian Society for the History of Science, 1960), 51–59.

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been the first Muslim convert. There was no incontrovertible evidence as to whether Abū Bakr or 'Alī converted first, and as the Shī'a claimed 'Alī to prove his preeminence, the Sunnīs countered with Abū Bakr's earlier shot at conversion. Regardless of the subtle and not-so-subtle arguments on both sides (and the eventual "politically correct" reconciliation that stated that Abū Bakr was the first "man" and 'Alī the first "boy" to convert), it was a political issue, and the choice between the two possibilities a matter of sectarian preference. Mas'ūdī starts, as should be expected, with the story of 'Alī's conversion, which he acknowledges to be the position of "some people." He covers all arguments on both sides, and then refers the reader to his other books in which he treated these controversies more fully and held polemical discussions on the subject.

So far, all this is still in perfect agreement with his declared intention to report objectively in a history book the various theories and interpretations available. Other than objectivity, there does not seem to be anything special about Mas'ūdī's approach, and nothing so far indicates a new philosophy of history. One can grant without difficulty the author's Shī'a sympathies, though he does not take an explicit position on the matter in his surviving books. He does, for instance, report the sayings about the Prophet telling 'Alī that anyone who obeys him would be obeying the Prophet himself and that 'Alī is to him as Aaron was to Moses.²⁵ In the *Murūj*, Mas'ūdī mentions that "many people" reported 'Alī's sinlessness.²⁶ But he neither comments nor takes sides on the issues.

The Shī'a had claimed the caliphate of 'Alī on the basis of a *naṣṣ* (explicit statement), a delegation "given" to him by the Prophet. Mas'ūdī does not mention the explicit Shī'a reports on this matter but only indirect ones.²⁷ No attempt is made at portraying the first three caliphs as having knowingly or unknowingly usurped 'Alī's position (the usual Shī'a partisan claim). He does mention, however, that Abū Bakr had allegedly told 'Alī that he accepted the caliphate only to avoid civil turmoil and not because he had any more rights to it than 'Alī. The anecdote, which in effect is all to the praise of Abū Bakr, may be taken to mean that 'Alī did have a right to the caliphate, but it does not prove the existence of a *naṣṣ*. No details are provided in the *Murūj* concerning the civil war that Abū Bakr wanted to avert, but Mas'ūdī acknowledges in the *Tanbīh* the strife and violent disputes to which Abū Bakr had immediately attended. The exchange between

²⁵ *Tanbīh*, 198–99.

²⁶ *Murūj*, 4:34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:175–76.

Abū Bakr and ‘Alī was also reported by Bukhārī and cannot therefore be attributed only to Shī‘a authors. When Mas‘ūdī treats the election of ‘Umar ibn al Khaṭṭāb, no mention of ‘Alī (or his rights) is made.

In the accounts of the caliphates of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, there is no criticism of their leadership. Instead, Mas‘ūdī praises them and extols their political know-how; their sagacity and wisdom; and, above all, their piety, justice, and morality. With respect to ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, the third caliph, Mas‘ūdī’s assessment is not as positive. He acknowledges that ‘Uthmān was elected in due form, and he appends the customary *raḍīya Allāh ‘anh* (may God be pleased with him) to his name, which all orthodox historians do for the first four caliphs as a recognition of their legitimacy. But while he praises ‘Uthmān’s ethics and good deeds, he criticizes his concern for wealth and the nepotism that took place during his caliphate.²⁸ He also compares him negatively to ‘Umar.²⁹ At no point, however, do we find the specific Shī‘a complaint of the usurpation of power to the detriment of ‘Alī, nor is he singled out for his Banū Umayya ancestry. The reservations expressed with respect to ‘Uthmān’s term, such as charges of nepotism and accusations of accepting presents from his governors, are mentioned by other historians as well (including Bayḍāwī, Ibn Ḥajar, Ibn Sa’d, etc.) and are not in themselves of Shī‘a essence or directly related to ‘Alī.

More praise is lavished on ‘Alī in the section dealing with his caliphate than on any other caliph.³⁰ But while it is clear that Mas‘ūdī, as all good Twelver Shī‘a should, idealizes ‘Alī, there is no evidence that his belief in ‘Alī’s right to the caliphate colored his assessment of the other caliphs’ leadership or the framework of this assessment. If this had been the case, the first two caliphs would have been criticized, since the alleged usurpation of power started with them. But in contrasting ‘Uthmān with ‘Umar, Mas‘ūdī makes it clear that his frame of reference in terms of criticism is one of political acumen and moral probity. Neither Shī‘a claims nor a Shī‘a philosophy of history can be discerned in the cogent and rational arguments that Mas‘ūdī offers in his assessment of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate.

As can be expected, the Umawī dynasty that follows the rightly guided caliphs is subject to far more criticism. Mu‘āwīya, the founder of the dynasty and infamous cause célèbre of ‘Alī’s downfall, is reviled by all Shī‘a. But it is also certain that no ‘Abbāsī historian, living in the ‘Abbāsī age under a dynasty that claimed legitimacy precisely on account of its opposition to Umawī usurpation of power and the ill

²⁸ Ibid., 4:253–54.

²⁹ Ibid., 4:256–57.

³⁰ Ibid., 4:441ff.

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treatment of a duly elected caliph, could be expected to defend Mu'āwiya. Since this applies to both Sunnīs and Shī'a, the criticism of the Umawīs cannot be taken as evidence of a shift in paradigm. In fact, Mas'ūdī shows remarkable objectivity and fairness in his analysis. While Mu'āwiya is harshly criticized, he is also praised for his intelligence, his political sagacity, and his amazing ability to rule and command allegiance from his followers. The same qualities are reported admirably of his descendants Hishām and 'Abd al Malik.³¹ Moreover, there is no reference to some intrinsic sinful or evil nature in the portrayal of Mu'āwiya—instead, it is the latter's very human thirst for power that is given as the reason for his ruthless and unjust behavior. Mas'ūdī's criticism of the Umawīs constantly refers to their injustice, bad government, debauchery, love of luxury, wine, and women:

We were diverted by pleasures from devoting ourselves to what needed our attention. So we were unjust to our subjects and they despaired of our justice and wished to be rid of us. Our domains fell into decay—our treasuries were empty. We trusted our ministers, but they preferred their own interest to ours and conducted the affairs of state independently of us, and without our knowledge. We were late in paying our soldiers, so they overthrew their allegiance. When our enemies called them, they made common cause with them and warred against us. We sought out our enemies but could not apprehend them because our followers were few. The fact that the news was hidden from us was one of the most important for the overthrow of our kingdom.³²

All these are social, political, and economic causes due to the injustice and immoral behavior of the rulers. The normal dislike that a Shī'a harbors for the Umawīs should prompt Mas'ūdī to condemn all of them equally on a religious basis. But that is not at all what we find. For instance, he refuses to call them caliphs, but he makes an exception and explicitly confers that title to one of them, namely, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al 'Azīz, on account of his morality, justice, and piety. Had the frame of reference been anything other than moral behavior in judging the caliphs, he doubtless would have denied 'Umar the title. It is clearly not his Shī'a convictions that are determining his position.

The account of the revolt against the Umawīs is told by Mas'ūdī as the natural result of their bad leadership. The 'Abbāsīs claimed a religious legitimacy on the basis of their kinship to the Prophet (and therefore to 'Alī), a claim to which Mas'ūdī gives a lukewarm assent. Their ancestor, 'Abdallāh ibn al 'Abbās, is described as having praised

³¹ Ibid., 5:279ff. and 272ff.

³² Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 129.

‘Alī more than his own family and waived any right to succeed him.³³ Al ‘Abbās, the leader of the revolution, is not praised much, and his harsh treatment of his subjects is related at length. The same complaints of harshness are levied against Maṣṣūr, though his sense of justice and his competence as a ruler are praised.³⁴ However, Mas‘ūdī recognizes the ‘Abbāsīs as legitimate rulers and confers on them the title of caliph, which he had denied the Umayyads. There are no negative accounts of al Mu‘taṣim and al Mutawakkil, though mention is made of their severity, which curtailed freedom of thought. But they are praised for their good government, despite their harsh treatment of some Shī‘a partisans. Al Mutawakkil, who destroyed ‘Alī’s tomb at Najaf and that of Ḥusayn at Karbalā’, is described as one of the best caliphs by an author whose views are supposed to be determined mainly by his Shī‘a sympathies!³⁵

Among the lesser caliphs whom Mas‘ūdī nonetheless praises, there is only the case of al Muntashir, who had killed his father in order to seize power. He was quite good to the Shī‘a, but after the praise of al Mutawakkil, it is doubtful that this would be the reason for Mas‘ūdī’s favorable opinion of him. Among the great caliphs who were also good to the Shī‘a, there is the particular case of al Ma’mūn, on whom excessive praise is lavished. But al Ma’mūn’s reign is indeed exceptional in terms of political and cultural achievements, so one cannot attribute to Mas‘ūdī reasons other than those he himself details in the assessment of the caliphs’ reigns. Finally, one should note that a section is devoted to each of the Twelve Imāms. But Mas‘ūdī also describes in laudatory terms the Sunni Imāms such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Shāfi‘ī.

From the general survey of Mas‘ūdī’s account of the ‘Abbāsī times, one finds that only two of the caliphs who were praised were clearly pro-Shī‘a, but one of them is explicitly praised for the political and intellectual flowering during his reign. (Mas‘ūdī takes no position on the so-called inquisition of al Ma’mūn.) Other caliphs are praised who treated Shī‘a dissidents harshly but were good and just rulers. It then appears that the reference to justice, good rule, and ethical behavior was far more important to Mas‘ūdī than partisan Shī‘a beliefs. It is along such lines that he describes the reasons that led to the collapse of the ‘Abbāsī state:

³³ *Murūj*, 6:55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:87ff. On Maṣṣūr, see 6:156ff.

³⁵ “He passed over in silence the atrocities of Caliphs and other public men because of their favoritism to the ‘Alids, while he condemned the actions of others, perhaps more worthy of praise, largely because of their lack of sympathy for the ‘Alid cause” (Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 145). For Mas‘ūdī’s lavish praise of Mutawwakil, see *Murūj*, 7:189ff.

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His reign [al Muqtadī's] witnessed certain events unprecedented in the history of Islam. For example, he succeeded to the Caliphate at an age at which no other Muslim ruler had succeeded, since he came to the Caliphate at the age of thirteen. . . . He reigned for twenty-five years less fifteen days, longer than any other Caliph or ruler before him. He appointed twelve wazīrs, of whom women were appointed twice or three times. Such a number of wazīrs was unknown before his reign. Then there was the dominance of women over the kingdom and the administration so that a slave girl of his mother's . . . used to preside over assemblies of mazālim . . . attended by the wazīr, the secretary, the judges and the scholars. In 317, the pilgrimage was canceled . . . although no pilgrimage had ever been canceled since the beginning of Islam.³⁶

The reasons that Mas'ūdī offers for the disintegration of the caliphate are political, economic, and social. As far as we can tell, there is nothing in his writings that shows even partisan Shī'a positions. He seems to succeed in his stated goal of reporting history objectively—and that is certainly to his credit.

B. Pre-Islamic History

So far then, Mas'ūdī's Shī'a beliefs have failed to impact his account of Muslim history, whether implicitly or explicitly. But could there be an unconscious pattern of historical development at play that would be due to his religious beliefs and would set him apart from his Sunnī colleagues? Khalidī sets the claim forthright:

This divine plan, that is, the election of Muḥammad and his line, was not revealed all at once with the creation of the world. Instead, God chose to conceal this plan until Muḥammad was able to reveal it in all its temporal and eternal, inward and outward manifestations. It may be assumed, therefore, that the pre-Islamic era is one to which the full truth as embodied in God's plan was not accessible. Thus, whereas innate human reason has attested, *ab aeterno*, to the election of Muḥammad and his line, God so disposed mankind that it did not gain complete knowledge until a certain moment in history finally arrived. Seen in this light, the history of the world would therefore be a history of the progress of mankind towards the attainment of final revelation.³⁷

Spreading this view to include not only Shī'a beliefs but the whole Muslim worldview, Rosenthal echoes this assessment of alleged Islamic messianism with the following statement: "The entire preceding history [to Islam] and, to some degree, the subsequent history of non-Muslim peoples were considered a story of errors which would fulfill

³⁶ Translated by Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 135.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

the great purpose of historiography, which was to illustrate the truth of Islam.”³⁸ Let us then turn to Mas‘ūdī’s account of pre-Islamic history, which covers the history of revelation and the history of mankind and in which, presumably, this great pattern of a hidden divine plan is embedded.

The history of revelation.—As can be expected, Mas‘ūdī starts his book with the account of creation. In the attempt to provide details that the Qur’ān does not supply, Muslim tradition had accumulated a disparate amalgam of hypotheses and stories unrelated to the holy text. Of these, Mas‘ūdī selects two. The first account is ascribed to ‘Abdallāh ibn al ‘Abbās and is the recounting of an old legend of obscure origins, according to which earth was created and made to rest on a whale that rests on stones carried on the back of an angel, itself resting on a rock floating in the wind. The second account is attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib through the Imām Ja‘far. In this account, God took a ray of light, which He shaped in the image of Muḥammad. He then informed Muḥammad’s image that he was elected to carry God’s light and the light of His guidance. No knowledge would be concealed from him or the members of his family after him. God then set the oath testifying to the belief in Him and in His unity (the first part of the *Shahāda*) before all His creatures (i.e., in precreation), as well as the oath testifying to the belief in the election of Muḥammad (the second part of the *Shahāda*) and the election (*imāma*) of his family (the additional component incorporated by the Shī‘a in the traditional *Shahāda*).³⁹ All of God’s creatures were then made to take the triple *Shahāda* before God consigned it to temporary oblivion and proceeded with actual and present creation. The angels were created and informed of the triple *Shahāda*. It was then the turn of Adam, who became the *imām* of creation and was entrusted with the revelation and guardianship of the divine light. The fullness of the latter would, however, be withheld until Muḥammad was created and the full *Shahāda* fulfilled.

This account is obviously a Shī‘a version of the Qur’ānic account of creation itself: “We extracted from Adam’s sons all of their descendants from their spinal chord and made them all stand up before God and witness unto themselves that We are their Lord. [We did this] lest you say on the Day of Judgment: “we were unaware of this” (Qur’ān 7:172). The Qur’ānic claim has been spruced up with the main claim of Shī‘a dogma, namely, the election of ‘Alī and his descendants. Thus, to the

³⁸ Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography*, 90.

³⁹ The *Shahāda*, the first pillar and summary in a nutshell of Islam, is the claim required from any convert and incorporated in Muslim prayers: “I hereby witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His prophet.” The Shī‘a add to this “and ‘Alī is His *waliy*.”

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Shahāda that God extracts from humanity in precreation (which, in the Qur'ān, includes, of course, only the first part of the pledge, namely, witnessing to God's unity and lordship), the Shī'a version adds the second part of the pledge (the prophethood of Muḥammad), which allows it to then introduce 'Alī's election (the Shī'a additional element in the *Shahāda*). The whole event is reported in an admittedly not very Qur'ānic mystical style of divine light and images of the Prophet. To the Qur'ānic affirmation that Adam was a prophet and received revelation from God, the Shī'a version adds that he and the angels were also made to uphold and witness the "hidden light of information" about Muḥammad and 'Alī. Though the Shī'a version only mentions Adam and omits the subsequent prophets, one can presume that they will all be made to recognize Muḥammad's preeminence and 'Alī's election. Indeed, this can be gleaned from the accounts given by Mas'ūdī, who follows orthodox Sunnī tradition (itself probably copying Christian tradition) in enumerating the prophets and monks who predicted or were aware of Muḥammad's coming. The Shī'a follow the same traditions but, of course, add to the accounts the election of 'Alī.

The Shī'a account builds on the Qur'ānic account and tries to remain within the bounds of the possible. Thus, to accord with the Qur'ān the claim that mankind was made to witness in precreation not only to God's lordship over them but also to the preeminence of Muḥammad, the subsequent revelations are said to demand from communities only faith in God (the first part of the pledge) and (of course) their own prophets. No attempt will be made to enforce the belief in the prophecy of Muḥammad and the election of his cousin, which will not be revealed until Muḥammad's time. Indeed, it would not possibly make sense to seek from pre-Islamic communities a profession of belief in the future election of Muḥammad and 'Alī—it was obviously hard enough from the Qur'ānic account to have them recognize their own prophets! Since, however, Sunnī Muslim tradition had accepted the claims of having former prophets predict Muḥammad's coming, the Shī'a version could, without difficulty, have them be equally aware of 'Alī's election. But it is acknowledged that such profession of faith is not to be required of pre-Islamic communities (after all, such claims would then go directly counter to Qur'ānic affirmations as well as to historical facts); as far as these communities are concerned, the acknowledgment of God and of their own respective prophets was enough.

The "concealment" of the knowledge of the coming of Muḥammad is not, then, the point of the Shī'a version of the creation story. It is there only as a logical necessity in order not to create conflict between

the additions effected to the Qur'ānic account and the latter. The main point of the Shī'a version is to address the central problem of the Shī'a, namely, the Sunnī claim that no proof of 'Alī's election was offered in the Qur'ān. The Shī'a version remedies this by supplying such information in the form of details added to the creation story of the Qur'ān and proclaiming 'Alī's election as just as much a part of the divine plan as that of any other prophet. But the Shī'a version does not change in any way the essence of the story. In both versions, God withholds from His creatures the knowledge of the pledge He obtained from them in precreation. The knowledge of God's existence could now be obtained only through His prophets. (Of course, God's existence also could be inferred rationally, but such inference cannot constitute sensible proof, as revelation is taken to be in Muslim tradition.) The history of revelation is to proceed as described in the Qur'ān, with the prophets being endowed with the revelation of God's existence and of the Day of Judgment. As far as pre-Islamic communities are concerned, the part of the *Shahāda* that relates to Muḥammad's prophecy (and the election of his family) is to remain concealed from mankind until Muḥammad's time. This "concealment" is neither mysterious nor apocalyptic: it is rational and evident and, moreover, needed if one were not to contradict the Qur'ān. One could say, of course, that God's plan for the prophecy of Muḥammad and the election of 'Alī comes to full fruition only when Muḥammad's time comes and that, therefore, there is indeed a divine plan to history, but the same can be said of Jesus or Moses. There is obviously no need to "dispose mankind" in such a way as to make them unaware of Muḥammad's coming. They will simply not be aware of any future prophet or any future event, for that matter. The Shī'a version of the creation story does not contribute any new reading to the Qur'ānic story. It simply adds the details it needs to bring 'Alī within the history of revelation.

The history of mankind.—The claim by the Shī'a that some verses of the Qur'ān have a latent, esoteric (*bāṭinī*) meaning, expressing the election of 'Alī, has been inflated into all kinds of claims about a Shī'a messianic understanding of history. On the basis of the postulate that the Shī'a have a messianic understanding of history and the fact that they tended to favor the rationalism of the Mu'tazila, it is then claimed that Mas'ūdī considered history to have a *bāṭinī* meaning. He is said to believe in a progression of history set in motion for a particular aim and culminating in the final revelation brought by Muḥammad. At the same time, his Mu'tazila Shī'a rationalism, which claims the supremacy of reason over revelation, makes it unnecessary to portray

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earlier prophets as part of the Qur'ānic historical scheme, and this allows him to treat these as products of their own culture and history:

The election of Muḥammad and his progeny by God and the "mixing" of this with human reason was shown to be derived largely from Shi'ite sources. The doctrine of the transmission of light presupposes a continuous process of revelation which in one sense, goes beyond Muḥammad. . . . This increasing availability of divine truth, as embodied in successive revelations to prophets and in divine guidance in the post-Muḥammadan era to the imāms, was a characteristic feature of the history of revelation. . . . If the history of prophecy showed a gradual progress in revelation, there was no need to turn any pre-Islamic prophet into a proto-Muslim. Likewise, since reason alone could lead to knowledge of God as well as the formulation of rational duties, there was no need for him to turn any virtuous sage or king into a proto-Muslim. By consulting the written and other sources of the various religions and nations, Mas'ūdī was able to do historical justice to prophecy and paganism while fitting their history into his pattern of reason and revelation.⁴⁰

Strictly speaking, the belief in a divinely determined history of revelation runs counter to concepts derived from "reason" alone and to the "formulation of rational duties." Obviously, what the author means here is "objective" or "nonpartisan," rather than "rational" (a confusion that is quite common in orientalist scholarship). The belief in a religiously determined history of revelation could be rational or not, depending on whether it allows internal inconsistencies or not. Similarly, a nonreligious belief could equally be rational or not. That aside, the belief in a determined history of revelation cannot possibly be said to be objective and impartial. Contrary to the author's claims, such a belief is by definition partisan and nonobjective, and it cannot possibly allow a historian to portray earlier societies in a nonpartisan or objective way. In effect, it even validates and calls for the concept of the so-called proto-Muslim. For if revelation is tabled in such a way so as to lead to its culmination, one can hardly see how these revelations are not taken to be divinely determined in order to fulfill the sacred order of history. Every prophet becomes a pawn in the divine great game, in effect not only a proto-Muslim but also a proto-Shī'a. Conversely, these prophets cannot be simply reflecting their own society and time (as Mas'ūdī is allegedly having them do on the basis of his rationalism) while at once fulfilling a given divine plan. Either there is a divine plan (however gradual it may be), and all prophets fit a certain profile and are predetermined to fulfill it—or there is no divine plan unfolding, and these prophets are simply the reflection of their own

⁴⁰ Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, 69–70, 79.

society. To assume that a Shī'a belief in predetermined history leads to an objective understanding of history based on reason alone is incoherent. Of course, Mas'ūdī could have been confused and entertained illogical and self-contradictory views. But if he did not actually articulate such notions—and he does not—why attribute to him a premise that is in itself absurd?

Looking at Mas'ūdī's text itself, let us see how he portrays earlier prophets in comparison to earlier historians and whether one can identify the effect of a *bāṭinī* meaning playing out in the development of the history of mankind. Mas'ūdī is certainly more critical than his predecessors in examining the stories and legends that were circulating during his time, and he favors using original sources whenever possible. Earlier historians relied on the Old and New Testaments to supplement the very laconic verses of the Qur'ān dealing with Semitic history and tradition, but they also often included in their works stories and legends about prophets that were reported neither in the Qur'ān nor in the earlier texts. Whether that was a conscious attempt at presenting a certain view of the history of prophecy or, in more likelihood, simply the uncritical reporting of all the stories circulating in their community is not directly relevant to the fact that Mas'ūdī would shun such reports and prefer instead to use the written texts of earlier traditions. His critical approach is certainly to his credit, but it does not indicate a different understanding of history—rather, a better capacity at determining authentic sources.

In fact, it is clear that it is the Qur'ān that remains the ultimate reference in all matters, even with respect to the texts of earlier traditions. In the words of A. Shboul: "al Mas'ūdī may prefer the evidence of the [Torah] to traditions current among Muslims *providing that the biblical report does not contradict that of the Qur'ān*."⁴¹ Thus, we see Mas'ūdī typically prefacing his reports of the Christian and Jewish versions of history by referring his readers to what the Qur'ān has to say on the matter. Since the Qur'ān itself gave the earlier scriptures as evidence, there is nothing strange in using them as references in the judicious pruning of proliferating legends. The Qur'ānic account, however, reigns supreme and provides the framework in which information that does not contradict it is included. Any information contrary to the Qur'ān is either signaled as incorrect or at times simply eliminated. This is the case, for instance, with the account of the life of Jesus. Mention is made, of course, of the beliefs

⁴¹ Ahmad M. H. Shboul, *Al Mas'ūdī and His World* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), 100, emphasis added.

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of the Christians, but instead of providing all the details given by the New Testament on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—details in obvious conflict with the Qur'ānic account—Mas'ūdī finds it better “to avoid [reporting this information] because God, may He be exalted, did not inform [us] of any of this and nor did His prophet Muḥammad.”⁴²

One can hardly say that such a view is “objective” and not conditioned by Mas'ūdī's commitment to his faith. It is true that he is far more willing to take information from the Old Testament, but for the most part there is no such clash of religious ideology with the latter, and it is easier to use it to provide more details on the stories mentioned by the Qur'ān. Mas'ūdī does use critical and rational analysis when he treats earlier scriptures—but this criticism itself is based on the Qur'ānic claim of *tahrīf*, or manipulation, of the earlier religious texts by various editors: “We do not accept [all that] the Jews say since the Qur'ān affirms that they shift the words of revelation from their proper place and conceal the truth; and that they reject revelations and the signs that God, may He be exalted, sent to them through the miracles of Jesus and the proofs and arguments of our Prophet, may God's blessings be upon him.”⁴³ Mas'ūdī warns his readers not to be gullible and adds that were it not for man's penchant for the fantastic, he would have provided far more such stories from the past.⁴⁴ He also criticizes some historians for accepting on faith the body of Jewish (or assumed Jewish) lore known as *isrā'īliyyāt*⁴⁵ and points out contradictory reports in the Jewish sources.⁴⁶ In all of this, his approach is in line with Qur'ānic claims, and his ultimate reference remains the Qur'ān as he himself clarifies:

The things we have just reported are neither absolutely impossible nor [given] dogma that we must accept [on account of our faith]. They are within the realm of the possible because the way they are reported is through individuals and single reports, and not through uninterrupted transmission chains of knowledgeable people. If such reports are accompanied by irrefutable proofs, then they must be accepted. As to the information and directives provided by earlier revelations, we must do as God, may He be exalted, has instructed us to do, namely, to take what the Prophet has given [us] and to avoid what he has prohibited [us] from taking.⁴⁷

It is quite clear that Mas'ūdī follows very closely the views of the

⁴² *Murūj*, 1:124.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4:111–12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:112–13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:391. The claim can be found repeated several times throughout the book.

⁴⁶ *Tanbīh*, 170.

⁴⁷ *Murūj*, 1:270–71.

Qur'ān and its determination of what is true in earlier scriptures. In fact, he does not even stray from the interpretation of the Qur'ānic text as provided by the orthodox schools of theology. Consider, for example, the claim that it is possible to apprehend God's existence through reason. Such an inference can be based on the Qur'ān, as for example with Abraham (Qur'ān 6:74ff.). As was said earlier, the concept of a determined history of prophecy does not negate a rational understanding of the process—though it certainly negates an objective or nonpartisan one. The constancy of the divine message is precisely the reason why it was possible for the Qur'ān to point to human faculty as a means to identify the existence of God, rather than relying on extraordinary proofs such as miracles. But orthodox Muslim theological tradition, wary of the Mu'tazila's claims of the preeminence of reason over revelation, had actually explicitly instituted the dogma of the precedence of revelation. This, of course, did not mean opposition of revelation to reason but, quite literally, the precedence and preeminence of revelation. And indeed, Mas'ūdī falls in line with the orthodox dogma. After explaining how Abraham reasons his way to God's existence (for which he offers various dismissive explanations such as describing the episode as closer to a child's questions than to real rational inquiry), he adds: "However, [Abraham] had already [before this] received guidance and he who receives guidance [from God] cannot make mistakes and cannot worship other than God."⁴⁸

If Mas'ūdī were to claim that the prophets of yore did not bring again and again the same message as that of Islam, he certainly would be going directly counter to the Qur'ān (let alone Shi'a beliefs). But nowhere in his text do we find any such statement or even implication—in fact, quite the opposite. He asserts that pre-Islamic prophets always received revelation concerning the existence and unity of God (the standard Qur'ānic claim). More important, nowhere does Mas'ūdī allude to a progression in the religious message. The same pattern can be found whether in Noah's, Abraham's, or Moses's time:⁴⁹ as unbelief and immoral behavior spread, prophets bring revelation to their people and try to warn them; God punishes the unbelievers; and only those who believe and act morally are saved. Eventually, immorality spreads again as people allow the divine messages to be distorted by not using their reason and by allowing their natural tendency toward lethargy and self-gratification to overtake them. Such a pattern is taken from the Qur'ān, and there is nothing new in this understanding:⁵⁰ "These

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1:84.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1:74, 84, 93.

⁵⁰ For example, Qur'ān 10:47, 2:134, 2:213, 4:41, 7:168, etc.

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nations we have mentioned did not disavow their maker. They knew that Noah was a Prophet and that he fulfilled the threat of torment he made to his people. However, confused opinions (*shubah*) prevailed among them because they had forsaken research and the use of their critical skills. Their spirits then tended towards lethargy and towards the pleasures and blind imitation to which man's natural characteristics (*ṭabā'i'*) beckon."⁵¹

There is then a consistent pattern that Mas'ūdī identifies and that repeats itself because of man's nature, which allows the distortion and eventual neglect of the divine warnings. New prophets are sent again, but they reiterate the same message.

The same framework can be seen in Mas'ūdī's examination of the people of the world not described by scripture. Mas'ūdī distinguishes seven great nations (*umma*) before the advent of Islam: the Persians, the Chaldeans, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Turks, the Indians, and the Chinese. For Mas'ūdī, as for the Qur'ān, human beings constituted at first a single community (deriving from Noah) with a common language and a single religion. As they grew and spread about, different languages and cultures emerged, as well as new interpretations of the original faith. Eventually, new religious practices and modes of worship emerged, and these fell into planet and idol worship.⁵² Each of these new nations develops common internal characteristics, such as language, law, and ruling systems. This unity of characteristics tends to disappear with the disintegration of society as it breaks up into separate kingdoms with several rulers. The communities that stand fast by their religion (which provides them with the ethical framework that is needed for the rise and elaboration of civilization) are able to produce an ordered society and a flourishing culture with great advances in art, knowledge, craftsmanship, and so forth. These advances are subject to geographic location, climate, and modes of worship, which provide each community with special characteristics. Thus, the Persians can be said to excel in statesmanship, the Greeks in science, the Chaldeans in agriculture, and so forth. These communities do share a common body of knowledge, to which they add their own specialization.

This view of nations emerging from a single *umma* and differing in their interpretation of religion is simply the reiteration of Qur'ān 2: 213. Even after the distortion of the prophets' messages, it is possible for these communities to use their reason and realize that idols really indicate a single God; then, if they are wise in interpreting their reli-

⁵¹ Translated by Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography*, 53.

⁵² *Tanbih*, 68ff. and 73ff.

gions, and if they live by the ethical guidelines, which God's *fiṭra* (natural religious inclination created in all human beings) demands, then their civilization will flourish. If they give in to irrational beliefs and unethical conduct, their societies are doomed.⁵³ In other words, the most important characteristics of an *umma* are its religion and mode of worship, which in turn determine its culture and civilization. That is precisely the perspective of the Qur'ān, which identifies nations as religious communities rather than tribal entities, as pre-Islamic custom did. Religion is the main factor that allows the rise and spread of culture.⁵⁴ These communities all follow the same pattern, and there is no difference in what is allotted to them, regardless of time and place.⁵⁵ In fact, all the comparisons that Mas'ūdī makes between the 'Abbāssī caliphate and the older nations (and there are too many of these to quote) clearly indicate that he did not see any difference between the functioning of his own society and that of past communities. Mas'ūdī acknowledges a progression of knowledge and craftsmanship over time, but the internal development of each community runs along immutable principles: moral behavior and piety lead to success, immoral and irrational behavior to failure. Though societies exhibit success and eventual failure, this is conditioned by the behavior of people and is not subject to historical determinism. As can be seen, there is no cyclical theory of time or a mandatory cycle of evolution of societies (as will be developed by Ibn Khaldūn). Nor is there a change in the principles that determine the rise and fall of societies.

III. PHILOSOPHY

Let us recapitulate the main features of Mas'ūdī's historical approach. In terms of methodology, he uses the methods of the science of *ḥadīth* for verification and validation of reports, adapting the use of *isnād* to his own needs. He adopts al-Jāhīz's new approach to teaching science through a new literary genre and applies it to history. His understanding of science and philosophy is that of the traditional schools of the-

⁵³ Anthropomorphization and superstition are the reasons why the religion revealed by God's prophets is distorted (*Murūj*, 4:42). The Persians, whose kings are said to have performed the pilgrimage prior to Islam (*ibid.*, 2:148), are described as eventually giving in to superstition and the worship of stars, which appealed to the "weak of mind" (*ibid.*, 2:111).

⁵⁴ It is this belief that led some Muslims to assume that Brahman was a prophet (*ibid.*, 1:157). That is based on the claim by the Qur'ān that there were no nations to whom a prophet was not sent.

⁵⁵ Thus a Persian vizier informs his king that the prosperity of a state comes from the law, the obedience of God, and the realization of His will, before showing him how, by not heeding this precept, he had led his kingdom to break down (2:172). The same reasons for prosperity are given for the reign of Mutawakkil (*ibid.*, 7:189ff.).

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ology and not that of the more Hellenized Muslim philosophers. He has organized his material in topical order, centered on the reign of the caliph, with asides on geography, astronomy, science, and culture inserted wherever he finds an opening for them. It is the same general pattern of his precursors, and though Mas'ūdī is far more systematic and critical, with a better and tighter organization, he is following closely in the footprints of his predecessors.

Mas'ūdī's approach to history is both rational and nonsectarian. But the fact that it is nonsectarian (which was his avowed goal) does not mean that it is nonpartisan. For it is certainly from within his Muslim understanding of the world as the Qur'ān portrays it, a worldview he staunchly defends against other accounts, that he represents history. He is objective, for he does acknowledge his beliefs, but he is not skeptical. He agrees that other nations and religions may see facts in another light, but whereas he would never knowingly alter or fabricate facts to suit his understanding, he reserves judgment as to their interpretation, which for him must be consistent with the Qur'ān. That it is the Qur'ān that constitutes the ultimate reference—and not his Twelver Shī'a beliefs—is made evident from the fact that he acknowledges the latter to be an interpretation of the Qur'ān by some (however much he may agree with it). But the Qur'ān itself is never represented as a mere interpretation among competing traditions; its views are never questioned, and it is constantly taken as the gauge for the truth of both fact and theory.

The most interesting feature in Mas'ūdī's analysis of old and new nations is his use of the thoroughly Qur'ānic concept of *umma*.⁵⁶ His predecessors have the same understanding, but because his work is much better organized than theirs, the concept of *umma* comes to full view in his writings as he applies it to pre-Islamic communities. The latter are cohesive entities, organized around their beliefs. If these are rational and ethical (in other words, if their religion is not vitiated), then they will be successful. These principles do not change, but there is no fate or necessary determination. If people live up to their religious ideals, they are successful; otherwise, they fail. This is a linear understanding of history and time. Like all his contemporaries, Mas'ūdī accepts the Qur'ānic depiction of creation as finite, with a beginning and an end (which he corroborates with proofs of the progressive decay of the world and of the beginning and end of natural phenomena).⁵⁷ Though his scientific claims are disputed by some theologians, all

⁵⁶ See on the meaning of *umma*, Maysam al Faruqi, "Umma: The Orientalists and the Qur'ānic Concept of Identity," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16 (2005): 1–34.

⁵⁷ *Murūj*, 4:103–4.

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agree that history stretches from creation to the Day of Judgment and is of linear nature.

This linear nature can be found in the understanding of society, human life, and the rise and fall of nations. Consider the general mechanism along which nations operate. Religion is at the core of society, and moral commands are the essence of religion. All nations start with revealed religion and share these moral commands, which can also be apprehended by human reason through the *fiṭra* that God sets in every human being. Through reason, man can stop false interpretations and imaginary concepts (*shubah*) from distorting his faith, in which case a high degree of civilization can be attained. If religion has been corrupted, but the ruler is wise and regards idols as mere symbols to help him worship God rather than gods in themselves, his society will be successful. Therefore, it is always through piety and rational observation of the faith that human beings can build a mighty civilization on the basis of their religion.⁵⁸

If the reasons for the flowering of society are always the same, the reasons for its collapse are equally predictable. When Mas'ūdī describes the Greek or Persian collapse, one could think that one is reading the account of the 'Abbāssī or Umawī fall only with different names. The collapse of civilization is illustrated by social unrest, injustice, corruption, a bankrupt economy, and the abuse of power. These are always explained as the result of impiety, self-interest, and immorality, while the good ruler is always described in terms of piety, morality, and justice.

Mas'ūdī identifies in the historical data precisely the pattern of the Qur'ānic teaching that maintains that all prophets brought the same message and that the observation of this message is the basis of the human success while its rejection or alteration leads to destruction and decay. The thrust of this divine message is moral and can be recovered, therefore, even from altered and corrupt religious traditions. But it is the same principle, and we therefore see remarkable similarity in the process of the rise and fall of nations and civilizations in Mas'ūdī's account. Obviously, in such a straight structure, there is little room for improvement through a *bāṭinī* (latent, esoteric) explanation of history, since the *ẓāhirī* (apparent) interpretation accounts for the rise and fall of societies as well as the full history of revelation. If Mas'ūdī did believe that history had a *bāṭinī* meaning, he utterly failed to convey it in his understanding of prophecy and civilization, which remains thoroughly orthodox throughout his book.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1:295ff. and 298–99.

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This understanding of history is the same with other Muslim historians (with the exception of Ibn Khaldūn), and its moral thrust can be found summarized in the following passage attributed to Sa'īd ibn al Musayyab: "God sent His prophet to encourage and to warn (mankind). He encourages those who act righteously and tells them to increase their activities. He cautions those who do evil, and tells them to repent. The study of history . . . is a mirror for the observers. It tells the truth and thus arouses in him the desire for good deeds and makes him afraid of evil ones. It serves to improve men of insight and natural qualifications. History is the means through which God keeps alive the meaning of those of His servants who in His opinion merit that and deserve His fine reward and compensation."⁵⁹

This is the general view of history's meaning that can be said to be shared by classical Muslim historians, and there is nothing surprising in seeing that Mas'ūdī's approach to history is the same as that of his fellow historians and of the Qur'ān. From his writings, Mas'ūdī reveals himself to be a man of great intelligence, tolerance, and immense culture. He is rational and analytical but also capable of a synthetic sweep. He is objective and has strong opinions, but he also has a charming, somewhat aristocratic bearing and is never condescending or acerbic. But skeptic, he is not. He is fully in line with the orthodox theology of the time in its understanding of creation, science, and history.

But what is of more interest here is the reason why his Shī'a beliefs have no impact on his view of history. According to Rosenthal, who mistook the whole religious perspective of Islam as messianic but astutely noticed the similarity of reporting between Sunnī and Shī'a authors, the reason is the absence of Shī'a political actualization and hence of Shī'a history. Because of the demand for objective (i.e., non-sectarian) reporting,

therefore, it also was not possible for historians who belonged to an unorthodox religious group to re-evaluate "general" history in the light of the experiences of their own group. Dissident historians could write the particular history of their sect, but since this history was seen by Muslims mainly as a purely religious struggle and since, consequently, even so large a movement as the 'Alid [Shī'a] had little real "political" history, they have written comparatively few historical works of their own. When a historian happened to be a [Shī'a], he would note contemporary events which concerned his persuasion more readily than an orthodox historian but this was or appeared to be factual information which was in no way offensive to the later orthodox historians who did not mind copying it. . . . The historians thus did not use (or abuse) their works for the expression of their personal aspirations or the aspirations of

⁵⁹ Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography*, 292.

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their particular groups, but the changing forms and contents of historical works were the natural and true reflection of the changing cultural and political atmosphere in which the individual historians lived.⁶⁰

It is true that Muslim authors were aware of the possibility of diverse interpretations by different religious sects and that they realized the importance of providing facts or at least acknowledging the competing theories. But as we have seen, this nonsectarian attitude is not non-partisan: it does not extend to other religions or to an areligious view of history. The historians' interpretation was solidly rooted in the Qur'ān. As to the claim that Shī'a reporting was distorted by the lack of political actualization, it is an assumption that cannot be corroborated by fact and, in any event, it is pointless to speculate how a different historical course could have affected any culture or ideology. Moreover, the claim can be questioned, for it is ideology that shapes one's approach to history, and if a certain Shī'a philosophy existed, it would still have transpired in the Shī'a account of world history. There can be then only one reason as to why the works of a Shī'a author like Mas'ūdī exhibit the same understanding of history as that of his colleagues—the Shī'a simply have the same philosophy of history as the Sunnīs.

And indeed, if one considers Twelver Shī'a beliefs, one can see that the main theological difference with Sunnī thought is political. It is not theological nor, a fortiori, of a different philosophical perspective. The main issue at play is the structure of the leadership of society after Muḥammad, with the Shī'a insisting on divine election of the leader and the Sunnīs rejecting it. However, the rest of the theological structure is the same. For the Shī'a, as for the Sunnīs, God is the sole Lord of the universe. He creates mankind to obey His will, and He sends prophets to remind His creatures of their obligations and of the Day of Judgment. These prophets are all equal, a clear sign of God's care and concern for humanity, always bringing forth the same message and reminders of the proper path to follow in life. Muḥammad is the last of these prophets, and the Qur'ān is the last message to be sent to humanity. For both traditions, Muḥammad's teachings and the Qur'ān are to endure to the end of time. But for the Sunnīs, the community is equipped to interpret these teachings, while for the Twelver Shī'a, it is impossible that God would not continue sending guides to help His creatures and ensure proper understanding of the sacred texts. These guides are not prophets—the Twelver Shī'a are firm believers in the seal of prophecy—but simply appointed religious leaders who

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64–65.

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would always be a reference so that the sacred text may not be misinterpreted. Thus, Shī'a belief builds on the Qur'ānic claim of constant divine intervention but interprets it literally in the form of the continuation of the guidance that God had always provided. Regardless of whether this claim is the accurate interpretation of the Qur'ān or not, the fact is that it is not inconsistent with the Qur'ānic philosophy: God sends messengers to guide His creatures and never leaves them without guidance. Not all His messengers were prophets—some were simply warners or guides. Why would He not also send, after Muḥammad's prophecy, guides who would not be here to bring yet another message but simply to ensure the presence of a proper reference so that the correct interpretation of Muḥammad's message remains available? That would neither change history nor take away the agency of man to freely accept or reject guidance, as it had always been with all prophets and guides throughout time. Nor does this change in anyway the essence of the Qur'ānic text and its injunctions—which explains why there is so much consistency and similarity in matters of theology and law between the Sunnīs and the Shī'a.

The concept of continuing divine guidance is not added to the Qur'ān, it is taken directly from it. The Sunnīs themselves agree to the concept of constant divine intervention even after the end of prophecy, but there is no institutionalized inspiration to elected leaders. In fact, Sunnī theologians and jurists elaborated a doctrine of continuing guidance, which maintains that every century, God sends a *mujaddid* (renewer) from within the community, who will bring the *umma* that may have strayed back to the accurate interpretation of the sacred texts. Of course, there will be great differences since there is no concept of infallibility of the *mujaddid*, as is the case with the Shī'a Imāms. This in turn will affect the importance and elaboration of *ijmā'* (consensus) and *ijtihād* (individual interpretation) since, for the Sunnīs, the community is the last expression of authority, while for the Shī'a, it is the divinely elected leader. But in both cases, it is still only a matter of interpretation, the divine guidance having been already consigned in the Qur'ān. As a result, there is agreement on most of its commands and injunctions.

In effect, in Twelver Shī'a thought, the institutionalized guidance of the Imāms is eventually terminated, thereby bringing back to the fore the concept of consensus of the jurists, just as with the Sunnīs. The main difference is that they will now add to the texts that they analyze the interpretations of the Imāms. (Even that is not that much different from Sunnī tradition, which adds for its part the *ijtihād* of the Prophet's Companions to its sources.) But the termination of institu-

tionalized guidance has to be explained; hence, the necessity for the concept of the Mahdī, who will come back eventually and who would, according to one school of thought, reestablish proper interpretation and, to others, simply usher in the Day of Judgment, with the understanding that the guidance of the past Imāms is enough to help the Muslim community until that time. In this sense, the Mahdī is the logical continuation of the concept of the Imāmate.

Scholars' imputation of a messianic meaning to the political doctrine of the Shī'a is, however, an importation from the history of Christianity and distorts the actual meaning of the Mahdī. It is based on the unfortunate interpretation of the Mahdī as a Messiah and the assimilation of the Shī'a *bāṭinī* hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'ān (meant to provide proper justification to the claim of leadership of the family of the Prophet) to an esoteric messianic interpretation of history. It is true that the Mahdī is a future figure linked with concepts dealing with justice, liberation, and vindication.⁶¹ But so is the Day of Judgment a future event, and, in a sense, the destiny of all those who believe in God can be associated with such concepts. It is also true that Shī'a interpretation must have recourse to a hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'ān. But not all future events and esoteric interpretations carry a messianic dimension. The concept of the Mahdī is radically different from Christian and Jewish traditions: "The Islamic doctrine of salvation does not conceive of man as a sinner who must be saved through spiritual regeneration. Rather it holds that man is not dead in sin, so he needs no spiritual rebirth." Nor does it carry the Jewish understanding of "its peoples' salvation in nationalistic terms."⁶²

The Shī'a Mahdī doctrine is not then messianism, since it does not change the history of a people (as with Jewish messianism) or alter creation (as with Christian messianism). The Mahdī is not anymore a messiah (present or future), in either the Christian or Jewish sense, than Muḥammad himself was, and at no point does he even overshadow the Prophet (as the concept of messianism would imply). Muḥammad remains the last Prophet and the seal of prophecy, while the Mahdī is simply the last guide sent by God. In that, there is neither a new message nor a specific development and ultimate culmination of history, nor some form of divine salvation. He is simply the last guide of a long and uniform series, ushering in the last day, during which all power remains solely with God Himself. At no point is history altered or changed. "In Shī'a piety, the role assigned to al-Mahdī, de-

⁶¹ See on these ramifications, Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdī in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

⁶² Ibid., 2.

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scended from al-Ḥusayn, the martyr, at the end of human history, is the fulfillment of the mission of all these great prophets," the last installment of divine guidance, and his return "can be interpreted as a prelude to the final resurrection," simply indicating the end of historical time, that is, the end of creation.⁶³

The whole difference between the Sunnī and the Shī'a views ultimately revolves around whether more guidance may be forthcoming from God. The only difference in terms of interpretation of the sacred text refers to the existence of these guides. Thus, the Shī'a look forward to further guides (for a time), while the Sunnīs do not. Such a view will shape Shī'a tradition and theology, but at no point do the Shī'a believe that this guidance will be any different from the guidance that God has offered mankind again and again over the course of history. Prophecy does end—but guidance and reminders to obey Muḥammad would not. There is a linear progression of history punctuated with prophets (the Sunnī view) and also guides (the Shī'a view), who would all in essence reiterate the same divine message, and none of whom will have an extraordinary or salvific role.

The difference then between Shī'a and Sunnīs is that God intervenes again and again in history until the time of Muḥammad for the latter and until the end of time for the former. It is therefore not accurate to speak of messianism in the Shī'a Twelver tradition—though certainly there are forms of messianism in other Shī'a sects that emerged from the Shī'a movement, as well as radically different theologies. The term "messianism" has been used by a few authors, such as Abdulaziz Sachedina, who is, however, careful to indicate how it differs fundamentally from the meanings normally associated with it. But such usage eventually gives rise to improper assumptions and distorted interpretation of Shī'a texts, and to the reading of the Christian paradigm in the cultural history of Islam, as has been shown in the case of Mas'ūdī. Because of this, it would be much better to use the term "Mahdism" instead of "messianism" when dealing with Twelver Shī'a doctrine, especially since the former ties in immediately with the crucial concept of the Imāmate, while the latter does not. While Mahdism provides for religious political differences between the Shī'a and the Sunnī views, it still builds on the general thrust of the Qur'ānic text, and it still operates within the same general conception of history and guidance, whether the latter ends with Muḥammad or with the last Imām. In either case, this last prophet or imām

⁶³ Ibid., 182.

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is no savior who would alter the very nature of creation or its “rules of engagement”; he is simply the true end of the repeated divine interventions that homogenize the story of creation and punctuate the uniform and linear ribbon of the history of mankind.