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THE REALM OF THE IMĀM

The Fatīmids in the tenth century

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I

Despite their period from the tenth to the twelfth century, at the height of the Middle Ages; despite their position in Egypt, at the centre of the civilization of the Near and Middle East; and despite their prominence as the third Caliphate of Islam, the Fātimids lack a satisfactory modern history of their dynasty. This is partly because of the length of their life, which covers the histories of so many hundreds of years; partly because of the span of their empire from North Africa to Egypt and Syria, stretching across the histories of so many regions; and finally because, at the level of Islam itself, their empire was divided between their *dawla* or state and their *da'wa* or doctrine. The doctrine, which focused on the Fātimid Imām as the *qutb* or pole of faith, gave the dynasty its peculiar strength and endurance. The failure of that doctrine to supersede the Islam of the schools, however, left the Fātimids increasingly isolated and ultimately vulnerable. Standing outside the mainstream of Islamic tradition, the dynasty's own version of its history was disregarded. Instead, its components passed out of their original context to be incorporated into the regional or universal histories of subsequent authors. Maqrīzī was alone in compiling his *Ittiʿāz al-hunafāʾ* as a history of the dynasty in Egypt, introduced by a miscellany of information on its origins and previous career. But the *Ittiʿāz* did not begin to find its way into print before the middle of the twentieth century, and has chiefly served the purposes of Egyptian history. Following the treatment of the dynasty in the sources, the modern study of the subject remains fragmentary.

Wüstenfeld's pioneering *Geschichte der Fatimiden Chalifen* of 1881, which brought together the accounts of writers such as Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn

al-Athīr in a narrative history of some 300 pages, has had few successors.[1] In English there has been De Lacy O'Leary, *A short history of the Fatimid caliphate* (London and New York, 1923), and in Arabic, Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Ḥasan, *Taʾīkh al-dawla al-fāṭimiyya* (Cairo, 1958). The history of the dynasty has usually been set in the context of Egyptian history, by Lane-Poole, for example, in his *A history of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London, 1901), by Wiet in his *L'Égypte arabe* (Paris, 1937), and most recently by Ayman Fūʾād Sayyid in *al-Dawla al-fāṭimiyya fī Miṣr/Les Fatimides en Egypte* (Cairo, 1992). In the wider context of Islam, the Fāṭimid state in Egypt provides Kennedy with his conclusion to *The Prophet and the age of the caliphates* (London and New York, 1986), a history of the Mashriq down to the middle of the eleventh century in which the ʿAbbāsid empire gives way to a host of provincial successors. In the history of the Maghrib, on the other hand, the reign of the Fāṭimids is treated by Georges Marçais in *La Berbérie musulmane et l'Orient* (Paris, 1946), as a foreign interruption in the tenth. Meanwhile the distinction between Fāṭimid state and Fāṭimid doctrine is nicely illustrated by Lewis and Stern in the volume commemorating the millennium of Cairo's foundation by the Fāṭimids in 969, *Colloque internationale sur l'histoire du Caire* (Cairo, n.d.), the one supplying 'An interpretation of Fatimid history', the other a description of 'Cairo as a centre of the Ismāʿīlī movement'. The distinction is even more apparent in the contrast between Canard's article 'Fāṭimids' in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and Madelung's article 'Ismāʿīliyya'. Nowhere are the Fāṭimids discussed in their entirety in the whole context of Islamic history.

Meanwhile, in the course of the twentieth century, an increasing volume of the Fāṭimids' own extensive literature has become available to supplement or correct the sources available to Wüstenfeld a hundred years ago. This offers a peculiar mixture of exoteric legal doctrine, esoteric theologies and philosophies, and sacred history centred upon the person of the Imām, which combine with first-hand witness and official records to present the historian with a challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge has evoked two principal responses from modern scholars: an investigation of the problem of Fāṭimid origins in the dark century before the emergence of the dynasty, and a study of the Neoplatonic cosmology embraced by the dynasty from the middle of the tenth century onwards. The current version of Fāṭimid origins was established in the 1950s and early 60s by Stern and Madelung, who at the same time took the evolution of Fatimid doctrine down to the threshold of its perfection from the mid tenth century onwards.[2] In *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismāʿīlīya*, Heinz Halm has built upon their conclusions to produce the principal account of this evolution out of the cabbalistic messianism surrounding the expectation of the Mahdi around the year 900.[3] At the same time he has published a series of important articles on the history of the dynasty before and after its

emergence. Of these, 'Der Mann auf dem Esel', *Welt des Orients* (1984), makes full use of the long, eyewitness account of the rising of Abū Yazīd in 944–47 which is contained in the *'Uyūn al-akhbār*, the major compendium of Fāṭimid history by the Yemeni *dāʿī* Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn in the fifteenth century.[4] Halm's exploitation of this account, which survives only in abbreviated form in the non-Fāṭimid sources, anticipates the argument of his latest work, *Das Reich des Mahdi*,[5] that with the recovery of the Fāṭimids' own version of their history, the story of the dynasty can at last be properly told.

Das Reich des Mahdi is the first volume of that story. It deals briefly with the origins of the dynasty in the Mashriq before describing the revolution in Ifrīqiya which overthrew the reigning Aghlabids and brought the Fāṭimid Mahdi ʿAbd Allāh to power in 910. The remaining three-quarters of the text narrates the history of his empire in the Maghrib down to the arrival of his great-grandson Muʿizz in Egypt in 973. The account of Fāṭimid origins follows that of Madelung and Stern, which I have discussed in Brett, 'The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the making of Ismāʿīlism'.[6] The history of the empire in the Maghrib, however, fills a considerable gap in the literature between the history of the previous Aghlabid dynasty by M. Talbi, *L'Emirat aghlabide* (Paris, 1966), and that of the subsequent Zirid dynasty by H. R. Idris, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Zirides* (Paris, 1962). The former describes the Fāṭimid revolution down to the flight of the last Aghlabid from his palace at Raqqāda in 909, in much greater detail than Halm. The latter deals with the period before 973 only as it concerns the rise of the Zirids as Fāṭimid protégés in the central Maghrib. On the Fāṭimid period itself, F. Dachraoui, *Le Califat fatimide au Maghreb* (Tunis, 1981), is a study on the lines of Idris's work on the Zirids and that of R. Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafsides* (Paris, 1940–47) on the Ḥafṣids: a political history followed by a treatment of institutions, society and economy. Valuable, indeed essential as Dachraoui is, however, his history of the years 910–73 is much shorter than Halm's, and skeletal on the period from 911 to 944. It is a preliminary to his discussion of the organization of the state, rather than a satisfying whole.

Das Reich des Mahdi is just such a satisfying whole, a measured account of the developments of the years from 910 to 973 which gives a balanced picture of the dynasty and its preoccupations during this period. Nevertheless it raises the question posed by Wansbrough in his review of Talbi's *Emirat aghlabide*, as to the possibility of writing such a history from such sources. Wansbrough's 'On recomposing the Islamic history of North Africa',[7] took Talbi to task for his positive attitude to sources 'remote in time, if not always in space, from the events they purport to describe', and belonging to a tradition of historiography that was never either neutral or profane in its approach to the affairs of the Muslim community either in the present or the past. Doubts about Talbi's meticulous reconstruction of political history

from such material were reinforced by his use of categories such as Sunnī and Shī'ī to provide a framework of explanation which Wansbrough considered anachronistic. Applied retrospectively, these categories yielded an interpretation of the Aghlabids in the West in terms of the 'Abbāsids in the East, which excluded both the elaboration of Islam and the Islamization of the Maghrib from consideration.

The justification proposed by Halm is not only that the sources for the history of the Fāṭimids in the Maghrib include the voluminous works of the dynasty itself. It is the fact that these works provide a contemporary account of the period, one which, indeed, is extensively autobiographical. Far from being remote in time and space, they supply a mass of immediate detail which brings both authors and actors to life in their efforts to build their version of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Out of this mass emerges an authentic picture of the age, which is not simply picturesque. It reveals the atmosphere, the mind or mentality which produced the information and the anecdotes, and gave them meaning: *nur im Detail ist Leben.*[8] The narrative form is admirably suited to the exposition of this mentality, since the meaning in question was nothing if not historical, the evolution of God's purpose in God's good time. It is nicely illustrated by the story of the Crown Prince Ismā'īl before the final assault upon the stronghold of the rebel Abū Yazīd in 947. As he sat his horse in readiness for the attack, splendid in red and gold, arms and armour, girt with the sword of his ancestor 'Alī and wielding two lances, the animal pranced and one spear fell. The evil omen turned to good when the prince recited the Qur'ānic tale of Moses's staff, thrown down to confute the wizards of Pharaoh; and the narrator to whom the verse was addressed saluted the light of prophecy which laid the meaning of the holy Book open to his lord and master, the Son of the Messenger of God, the Imām of the Community.[9]

II

This apparently trivial incident, however, is not merely illuminating. In answer to Wansbrough's questioning of the value of such material for the writing of history, it is almost the nodal point of the story from the Fāṭimids' point of view as well as our own. The revolt of the Kharijite Abū Yazīd in 944 came close to wiping out their nascent empire. Saved from destruction by the walls of Mahdiya, the palace fortress built by the Mahdi on the Tunisian coast, however, the dynasty made a virtue of the catastrophe which had reduced the Mahdi's new realm to the circuit of his capital city. The rebel was cast in the apocalyptic role of the Dajjāl or Antichrist, whose coming had been ordained by God, and whose ultimate defeat had cleared the way for the final triumph of the Imām as the ruler of the Muslim world. On the threshold of his victory, Ismā'īl thus appears in glory as the Son of the Messenger of God, in the messianic role of the

Divinely Guided which he had inherited from his grandfather the Mahdi and his father the Qā'im, and which would pass to his heirs until the end of time.[10] The spear that was accidentally dropped signalled the opening of a new age, in which the self-confidence of the dynasty was amply rewarded by the conquest of Egypt.

In this scenario, the prompt acclamation of Ismāʿīl as the Imām by the Qāḍī al-ʿAskar al-Marwarrūdhī, whom Halm identifies as the author in question, played its own, crucial role. The prince had indeed been the sovereign since the death of his father the Qā'im at Mahdiya over a year before. From beginning to end of his campaign against Abū Yazīd, he had nevertheless behaved as the Walī ʿAhd al-Muslimīn or Crown Prince, writing his dispatches from the front back to his father as if he were still alive. Only with the defeat of the Dajjāl did he assume the Imāmate and Caliphate under the name of al-Manṣūr, 'the Conqueror'. In his capacity as commander of the army in the field, he had followed the example set by his father, who as Walī ʿAhd al-Muslimīn had campaigned for twenty years on behalf of the Mahdi, fulfilling the role of Sword of the Imām in place of the monarch himself. Whereas the father under the *kunya* Abū 'l-Qāsim had been officially proclaimed as heir apparent within two years of the Mahdi's accession, however, the son may never have been designated at all. In Halm's opinion, the succession of Ismāʿīl at Mahdiya in 946 was a coup effected by his Slavonic eunuch Jawdhar at the expense of his brothers and uncles, whom he left behind under Jawdhar's lock and key.[11] Jawdhar, in his autobiography, claimed that Ismāʿīl had been secretly designated by his father the Qā'im immediately after the death of the Mahdi, while he himself had been appointed *mustawdaʿ*, that is, the keeper of the secret until the time came for the announcement to be made.[12] The version of the *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, which Halm attributes to al-Marwarrūdhī, is that the designation was made by the Qā'im on his deathbed.[13] In the mysterious circumstances of Ismāʿīl's assumption of power, however, both stories are suspect, and al-Marwarrūdhī's tale of the spear takes on particular significance. On the battlefield, Ismāʿīl stands revealed to his entourage by his divine wisdom, at the climax of his epic struggle with his great enemy. Recognized and acknowledged by his servant, who thereby becomes the vehicle of the revelation, the true Imām is then disclosed to the world by his celebrated triumph over his adversary.

In the literature of the dynasty, on the other hand, it is the alternative version which has largely been preferred. Against the testimony of al-Marwarrūdhī must be set the authority of the Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, the principal spokesman for al-Manṣūr's son and successor al-Muʿizz. In his *Majālis*, al-Nuʿmān has the story of Ismāʿīl's designation by the Qā'im in 934 on the authority of Muʿizz himself.[14] In his *Iftitāḥ*, the story of al-Manṣūr's designation by his father on his deathbed in 946 has been altered into a simple command by the Qā'im to his son to take the offensive

against the great enemy.[15] No mention is made of Jawdhar. The context for the tale of Ismā'īl's victory over Abū Yazīd is nevertheless established; more importantly, so is the vital precedent for the crucial doctrine of *naṣṣ*, the designation of his successor by the Imām of the time. *Naṣṣ* was deemed necessary to ensure the continuity of the Imāmate, and thus the perpetuity of God's guidance for the community, and at the same time to provide for the succession to the Caliphate and the perpetuation of the dynasty. The succession to the Qā'im was particularly important in this respect, since it was in effect the first since the foundation of the realm: the Qā'im himself, the son and successor of the Mahdi, had arisen with his father in fulfilment of the prophecy that the Mahdi would bear the name of the Prophet, Muhammad b. 'Abd Allāh, and consequently as the Mahdi's double.[16] Acceptance of al-Nu'mān's, and Jawdhar's, *ex post facto* testimony to so critical a moment in the history of the world as the Qā'im's provision for the Imāmate after his death not only places them above al-Marwarrūdhī as witnesses to the divine purpose, but supplies historic proof of a fundamental tenet of the Fāṭimids and their creed.

III

Meanwhile, in an entirely different sense, the episode reveals the character of the sources on which Halm relies, however critically, to reconstruct the history of the Mahdi's realm. Although they incorporate earlier material, and are themselves to some considerable extent incorporated into later works, they all, without exception, date from the second half of Halm's period, or from the earliest years of the dynasty in Egypt, with the great majority from the reign of al-Manṣūr's son al-Mu'izz, 953–975. The story that Mu'izz himself had been designated by his father before Ismā'īl's accession, at the instigation of his grandfather al-Qā'im,[17] emphasizes the further fact that all, moreover, are preoccupied with doctrine, with the creed of the Fāṭimids which was elaborated under Mu'izz and has survived to the present day under the name of Ismā'īlism. Their purpose as histories is quintessentially Whig, to fashion the record of the Fāṭimid *dawla* or state down to the middle of the century into the sacred history of the *da'wa* or divine mission of the dynasty down to the reign of Mu'izz and his final entry into Egypt. That is as true of the memoirs of Ja'far, the servant of the Mahdi on his journey from Syria to the Maghrib, which were 'ghosted' in Egypt long after Ja'far's death, as it is of the multifarious works of the Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, the writer principally responsible for the articulation of this doctrine on behalf of his master. First and foremost, they document the making of a creed out of past events and present practice, as the monarchy evolved in the aftermath of the great rebellion to contemplate the government of the entire Muslim world.

It is fitting, therefore, that Halm's final chapter, dealing with Mu'izz's reign, should be entitled 'The Imam', in contrast to the chapter which deals with the Mahdi, the founder of the dynasty, under the heading of 'The Caliph'. However messianic the movement which brought the Mahdi to power in Ifrīqiya in 910, whatever the expectations of a final Revelation, 'Abd Allāh's concern in the first instance was to take power as the heir of Muḥammad and 'Alī to the empire of Islam. It was left to his great-grandson Mu'izz to develop this Caliphate of God into a full-blown creed of the Imāmate, in which the monarch as the supreme representative of God on earth laid down the Law in both theory and practice. One of the great merits of Halm's work is to situate the composition of this creed in the context of the Fāṭimid court, presided over by the 'bookworm' Mu'izz, whose personal involvement in the affairs of both *dawla* and *da'wa* make him, after the Mahdi 'Abd Allāh, the greatest sovereign of the dynasty. The Qāḍī al-Nu'mān in particular, the author of the *Da'ā'im al-Islām* or Pillars of Islam, the authoritative statement of the doctrine of the Imāmate which he composed at Mu'izz's behest, is shown on the one hand tirelessly collecting the traditions of the Imāms of the golden age from 'Ali to Ja'far al-Sādiq, and on the other, drawing out their sense in the vast *oeuvre* he composed even as he presided over the administration of justice, conducted the prayer, expounded the faith and engaged in a vigorous polemic with the dynasty's persistent opponents, the Malikite jurists of Qayrawān.

Polemic, indeed, governed his entire output, not least the *Da'ā'im al-Islām*. Under the subheading of 'The Seven Pillars', Halm describes not only the author but the work itself, in which *ṭahāra* or ritual purity and *jihād* or 'holy war' join the familiar five obligations to make up the sacred number. The first, the profession of faith, nevertheless remained by far the most important, charged as it was with peculiar significance. It was equated with *walāya* or recognition of the Imām, without which there might be *islām*, 'submission', but not *īmān*, 'true faith'. The proposed distinction between Muslim and Mu'min was calculated to enrage the schoolmen. So, too, was the corollary, that only the *madhhab ahl al-bayt* or 'way of the Prophet's family' represented the true practice of the Sunna, which had been eroded by the *ikhtilāf* or divergence of opinion among those jurists who erroneously relied upon the authority of their own uninspired predecessors.[18] Still more was the conclusion that only the Imām of the time could guarantee its authenticity as the authority appointed by Muhammad himself.[19]

Whatever the niceties of the argument at the time, this predication of the Imām on the Sunna and the Sunna on the Imām has been variously criticized by modern scholars, most often for its failure to rewrite the Sharī'a on the authority of God's representative on earth. As Halm remarks, the Law ascribed by the Qāḍī al-Nu'mān to the Fāṭimid Imāmate is essentially the Law of Islam observed with minor differences by Sunnites and Shī'ites alike. That, in the opinion of Crone and Hinds, is hardly surprising: the

Fāṭimid attempt to combine political power with religious authority was both archaic and utopian, harking back to the original vision of the Caliphate in the days of the Umayyads, before the final separation of the state from the source of revelation, and looking forward to an ideal future when government and guidance would be reunited in a kingdom of heaven on earth. In the interim the Fāṭimids, like the ʿAbbāsids before them, were obliged to come to terms with a definition of the Law of God in which the Imāmate had no place. As statesmen, they merely ruled over subjects who were either disillusioned with their claims or indifferent to their pretensions.[20]

The utopian character of their jurisprudence is more narrowly criticized by Fyzee. His *Compendium of Fatimid law* was intended as a guide to those of its rules and regulations which would apply in a modern court of law in India; for this purpose it took the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* as the basic text of a school of Law which, as Halm observes, is now the sixth largest of Islam.[21] Not only, however, did Fyzee observe that in this capacity, the *Daʿāʾim* was virtually alone; he considered that as the basis of a legal system, the work was fatally flawed by the role it ascribed to the Imām as supreme authority. In any empire, he said, it would have been wholly impracticable to refer all doubtful cases to the monarch as the sole guide.[22] This problem has been variously overcome by the Fāṭimids' successors, the Nizārīs and the Ṭayyibīs, as described most recently by Daftary.[23] But Fyzee's doubts do raise the question of the original character and purpose of the *Daʿāʾim*.

It was certainly regarded as authoritative on the subject of the Law. In reply to a request for guidance from the *dāʿī* in the Yemen, Hārūn b. Muḥammad, Muʿizz's grandson al-Ḥākim wrote in 1001 that all legal questions should be answered from the *Daʿāʾim* 'in preference to all the other books which have been handed down'.[24] The work itself, however, is too short to serve as a detailed work of reference, and never gave rise to the voluminous literature of commentaries and case histories that might be expected of a legal tradition founded upon so fundamental a text. Nor, as Fyzee noted, was there an alternative. To judge from Ḥākim's pronouncement, the very much longer compilation of legal traditions by the Qāḍī al-Nuʾmān, the *Īḍāḥ*, on which the *Daʿāʾim* may have been based, had disappeared or fallen into disuse at an early date.[25] From this lost giant may derive two other shorter works ascribed to al-Nuʿmān, the *Ikhbār* and the *Yanbūʿ*. But of these, the *Yanbūʿ* is thought by Fyzee to be much later, from the beginning of what he calls the textbook tradition in Mustaʿlian (or Ṭayyibī) *fiqh*.[26] Neither the lost *Īḍāḥ* nor the extant *Daʿāʾim* gave rise to any systematic attempt on the part of the Fāṭimids to recompose the Sharīʿa in its entirety, or to alter its application from top to bottom in the courts.[27] The appeal of the *dāʿī* of the Yemen for guidance is unique; Ḥākim's reply looks like the exception that proves the rule. Only in matters of public worship, the highest of human obligations, did the dynasty see fit

rigorously to impose its own version. Thus Halm, having reminded us that al-Nuʿmān has long passed for an Ithnā ʿAsharī jurist, tells the tale of the *qāḍī* of Barqa who in 953 was put to death by Muʿizz for observing the fast of Ramadan by the sighting of the new moon rather than the astronomical calculations of the Imām.[28]

From this point of view, the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* stands out as a definitive statement of the claim of the Fāṭimid Imām to rule the community of the faithful as the representative of God on earth. It is, in other words, a definition of his title to the Caliphate of God as discussed by Crone and Hinds. We might well regard it as the product of forty years of polemical argument with the Malikite jurists of Qayrawān, but should not think of it as being either archaic or utopian. It was the reiteration of a position held from the beginnings of the Caliphate, before, during and now after the formulation of the Sharīʿa by the scholars of Islam in opposition to the authority of its rulers for the faith. In the aftermath of that formulation, it was not for the Fāṭimids either to deny the achievement of these scholars or to rewrite it, root and branch, in accordance with the principles of jurisprudence which those scholars had established. Rather it was to employ it as the justification for their dynasty, and the formula of their government. As guarantors of the Law, they could emerge as the authentic protectors of Islam, and pose as the rightful rulers of its realm. The *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* is a prescription for the empire established by the Fāṭimids after their move to Egypt, in which the dynasty rose majestically above the religion of the masses and the political divisions of the Muslim world, to preside over a federation of states and a multiplicity of schools, united in their formal obedience to the Caliph and submission to the Imām.

IV

Prescription it may have been, but Egypt remained to be conquered. The Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān was writing in the 950s, before the conquest of Egypt had been prepared, and perhaps even before Muʿizz had conceived of it as a practical possibility. Although Egypt was the obvious way back for the Fāṭimids from the periphery to the heartland of the empire they aspired to rule; although it had therefore twice been invaded by the Mahdi and his heir Abū ʾl-Qāsim; although they had retained possession of Barqa in Cyrenaica as a base for further attack; and although in the aftermath of the Antichrist, only the conquest of Egypt could offer convincing proof of the claim that the dynasty would now enter into its inheritance; it is not clear that its takeover was planned as distinct from envisaged by Muʿizz until the Ikhshidid regent Abūʾl-Misk Kāfūr ascended the Egyptian throne in 966, and as a eunuch left open the question of succession. It is certainly at this point that Egypt resurfaces in Halm's narrative out of the wars, power politics and diplomacy in the Maghrib and the Mediterranean which

occupied the years from 955. Once taken, however, the decision became a commitment to drastic change. The realm of the Mahdi was replaced by that of the Imām as the dynasty entered upon a new life and a new future in the Mashriq.

That is not to say that Mu'izz had not already turned his attention to the East. His correspondence documents a campaign of persuasion directed at his natural allies among the Shī'a, that broad church of the Prophet's family whose historic concern had been less with the formulation of the Law, and much more with the monarchy under whose auspices the faith had developed. The elevation of the Imām in the *Da'ā'im al-Islām* as the representative of God on earth required the acknowledgement of the Fātimid ruler as the Imām in question, and *ipso facto* as the Caliph, the sovereign of the world. That depended upon his acceptance as the successor to Muhammad and 'Alī, and that in turn upon his descent from these founding fathers of the faith. His claim to their inheritance was clearly at odds with that of the 'Abbāsids, who might be members of the house of the Prophet, but were by their own definition not 'Alids, and as possessors of the Caliphate, were self-evidently the enemy. The Twelvers who looked to the line of Husaynids which ended with the death of Hasan al-'Askarī in 874, on the other hand, were potentially sympathetic to a dynasty which claimed the same ancestry down to the critical figure of Ja'far al-Sādiq.

Since 941 the Ithnā 'Ashariyya had passed in principle beyond the reach of Fātimid propaganda with an Imām who was not merely in a different line of descent from Ja'far, but in permanent *ghayba*, occultation till the end of time. Mu'izz nevertheless surely hoped to recruit those Twelvers who felt the need for some less arcane representative of God on earth. At the beginning of his *Iftitāh al-da'wa*, his account of the revolution in Ifrīqiya which brought the Fātimids to power, al-Nu'mān depicts Ibn Hawshab, the head of the mission to the Yemen before the appearance of the Mahdi, as just such an Ithnā 'Asharī deprived of guidance at the death of Hasan al-'Askarī, the eleventh Imām. In his desolation, he turns instead to the Mahdi's own predecessor, the true hidden Imām, in *satr*, 'concealment', rather than *ghayba*, 'absence', happily encountered on the banks of the Euphrates.[29] While the story purports to be historical, the message is certainly contemporary, down to the weeping of the hidden Imām for the death of Husayn, at a time when the Buyids were lending themselves to the cult of the martyr. It should be read alongside al-Nu'mān's *Urjūza al-mukhtāra*, the long poem he had written in the reign of the Qā'im to celebrate the designation of 'Alī by Muhammad at Ghadīr Khumm. Although it is primarily a celebration of Shī'ite principle levelled at the 'Abbāsids and their latterday Sunnism, it serves to claim the inheritance of the Prophet for the dynasty in the West rather than the 'once and future' messiah of the Twelvers in the East.[30]

More pointedly still, Mu'izz's propaganda was aimed at the Seveners, the Shī'ite category to which the Fāṭimids themselves belonged. As I have argued in 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn and the making of Ismā'īlism', this was not because the ancestors of the dynasty were the founders of a sect of such Seveners which had subsequently divided over their claim to the Imāmate, but rather because they had exploited the messianic expectations of a seventh and final Prophet to come to power in the Maghrib. Those expectations had collected around the death of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq in 765, with his identification as the sixth and last successor of Muḥammad in the Ḥusaynid line. The Fāṭimids had traded on the notion of a lineage in *satr* or concealment before the appearance of the Mahdi or Qā'im; others for whom the number seven was crucial had preferred to believe in the return of a single figure from the past, in *ghayba* or absence until his triumphal reappearance in the world. These latter had fixed upon the person of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl ibn Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, whereas the Fāṭimid Mahdi had claimed descent from Ja'far's son 'Abd Allāh. In making this claim, he had striven to consign the name of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl to oblivion,[31] much as the Fāṭimids evidently hoped to do with Muḥammad al-Muntaẓar, the Hidden Twelfth Imām of the Ithnā 'Ashariyya, with whom the figure of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl had a great deal in common. That he had failed is apparent from the references from Iran and from the correspondence of Mu'izz discussed by Stern.[32] The problem was that while Sevener Shī'ism continued to provide the Fāṭimids with their claim to the Imāmate and Caliphate, it yielded no more agreement upon their title than any other Shī'ite persuasion. At best it raised doubt, at worst it generated hostility. Convincing its various adherents was a necessary preliminary to convincing the world.

By the middle of the tenth century, Fāṭimid propaganda had gone so far as to win at least some of the followers of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl to the belief that the dynasty was in some sense *mustawda'*, a line of *khulafā'* or lieutenants of the Hidden Imām who were the custodians of his office until his return. Such a compromise was unacceptable to Mu'izz, who insisted that his Imāmate was nothing if not *mustaqarr*, 'firmly settled'. For the purpose of his campaign, he was nevertheless prepared to abandon the claim of the Mahdi to descent from 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far. Instead he accomplished what Madelung calls his reform, that is, he admitted Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl into the genealogy of the dynasty as a figure of peculiar importance, the Seventh Imām in line from the Prophet, with whom the Imāmate had withdrawn into *satr*. There the cycle of seven had recommenced, to reappear at its critical mid-point, number four, with the Fāṭṭimid Mahdi, and culminate in Mu'izz himself, the Second Seventh.[33] It was a solution which failed to win over the Carmathians of Bahrayn, who seem to have believed in the return of their own Mahdi, their founder Abū Sa'īd.[34] But it appears to have brought the Iranians into the fold, a numerous, articulate and

influential array of Seveners who looked for the return of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl as the Mahdi or Messiah. For Madelung they represent 'the Persian school', and are classified by Halm as 'the Neoplatonists' who had enriched the messianic tradition of the Seveners with the input of Greek philosophy; and with their recognition of the Fāṭimid Imāmate the history of the Fāṭimid *daʿwa* enters a new phase. Their conversion to the Fāṭimid cause is most clearly represented by the important figure of al-Sijistānī, whose position shifted from the notion of a *fatra* or interval between the disappearance of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl and his return as the Qāʾim or Messiah, in which the Hidden Imam was represented only by *lāḥiqs* or 'attachés' and *khulafā* or deputies. At some point round about 960 he would have come round to a view of the Fāṭimids as a line of legitimate Imāms presiding over the fateful interval before the second coming of the Messiah as the Lord of the Resurrection.[35]

V

Despite his significance, al-Sijistānī himself remains an obscure figure, and his works imperfectly known. Enough are now available, however, for Paul E. Walker to make an important full-length study of his thought, supplemented by a translation and commentary upon a key text, the *Kitāb al-yanābīʿ* or 'Wellsprings of wisdom'.[36] As the title indicates, the emphasis of *Early philosophical Shiism: the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* is upon philosophy, and al-Sijistānī's relationship to the subject. It rapidly transpires that he is not a philosopher at all in the line that runs from al-Farabī to Avicenna and on to Averroes. These are the *falāsifa*, whose Aristotelian concern to establish the laws of nature by reasoning distinguish them from the Neoplatonists, with whom they are frequently confused because of the emanationist principle of creation to which some of them subscribe. A fundamental difference between the two is the Neoplatonic doctrine of inferior Soul as distinct from superior Intellect as the creative principle of the natural world. This mystifies and moralizes the incarnation of Intellect in form and matter rather than explaining and rationalizing its operation. As a Neoplatonist, Sijistānī is a firm believer in Soul as well as Intellect, remaining particularly close to Plotinus in maintaining that each of these hypostatic beings is indivisible. On the subject of the Deity, he goes still further than the master in the belief that the God who transcends both Intellect and Soul is neither Being nor not-Being, and as a result, is wholly unintelligible.[37] Meanwhile, since Soul is an ambiguous principle by comparison with Intellect, losing itself down-wards in the multiplicity of creation while striving upwards for the perfection it consequently lacks, the way is open for Revelation to establish the parallel world of religion or divine law by means of Prophecy, 'the deputy of Intellect'. Through Prophecy, Intellect achieves a complementary

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Meanwhile the problem of knowledge remains, for us as for Sijistānī, as we look in his text for the meaning he sought to find in Scripture. Epistemology underlies Walker's exposition of Sijistānī's philosophy in *Early philosophical Shiism*, from God down to the purpose of history. This follows the order of its exposition by Sijistānī himself in *The wellsprings of wisdom*, Walker's translation of his *Kitāb al- Yanābī*. Walker's commentary on the text both supplements and clarifies the argument of the book. Only occasionally does it obscure the meaning, notably with a rendering of *hamm/ humūm* as 'psychic-motifs', which simply makes the task of explanation doubly difficult. Not only does this draw attention to the fact that any translation must be an interpretation, and any reading an interpretation of that interpretation. Ironically, it reminds the reader of the importance of interpretation in Sijistānī's own thought. His insistence upon revelation rather than reason as the source of true knowledge gives priority to Scripture as the beginning of human wisdom. True knowledge is none other than the meaning of Scripture, which can only be attained through *ta'wīl* or interpretation of the text as the means to its understanding. The epistemological problem this raises was common to Islam as a whole, and Walker has not the space, in *Early philosophical Shiism*, to set out the range of solutions in the order of their appearance in the wider literature, or the slippery nature of the terminology.[44] The antithesis he cites between *haqīqa* and *majāz* was established by Jurjānī a hundred years after Sijistānī as the difference between a straightforward statement and a figurative expression.[45] But Walker appears to identify *haqīqa* with real meaning, however it may be expressed, following Sijistānī's own use of the term in the plural for the verities communicated by the words. *Ta'wīl*, interpretation, then becomes *tahqīq*, verification.[46]

This definition of *haqīqa/haqā'iq*, according to Walker, reflects the distinction familiar in Ismā'īlism between *zāhir* and *bātin*, 'patent' and 'concealed', although the terms themselves do not appear to be used by Sijistānī himself in his *Wellsprings*. Once again the sense of the distinction is elusive, for *zāhir* seems on the one hand to correspond to the text itself, and on the other to its plain meaning. As the text it is *tanzīl*, 'revelation', a form of words which requires *ta'wīl* to elucidate the sense, as matter requires form.[47] As the plain meaning of the text it is the Sharī'a, the Law, the rules and regulations that govern human actions, while at the same time they represent a higher, hidden truth.[48] The *bātin*, the hypostatic principles of divine order expressed in the words of Scripture, is correspondingly ambiguous, comprising either the entire meaning of the text, or the higher significance of its phraseology which can only be understood through metaphorical interpretation. As the higher meaning of the Revelation, it would be the subject of Sijistānī's philosophy, as briefly expounded in *The wellsprings of wisdom*. On the one hand this *bātin* would set the Sharī'a firmly in the historical context of the seven ages of Prophecy. On the other it

would look forward to its own eventual disclosure in the time of the Resurrection, when *quicquid latet apparebit*, and Intellect no longer needs symbolic form in either words or deeds.

Interpretation, however, requires interpreters, and in that sense the problem of knowledge remains. Sijistānī's doctrine of interpretation required the inspiration of the Nāṭiq to formulate the *ḥaqā'iq* in the words of Scripture, and the Asās and the Imāms who came after him to read back the *ḥaqā'iq* into those words. Their reading of Scripture, however, could not be written down in any canonical shape or form, since like *The wellsprings*, such a text would then need its own interpretation by its readers. Only the Imām of the time could transmit the real meaning of the Revelation to his community and to his successors.[49] But about this living authority, Sijistānī has little to say. On the one hand he anticipates the coming of the Messiah, al-Mahdī al-Qā'im, with whom the authority of the Imām will end in the final enlightenment of the Resurrection. On the other hand, the Messiah in question has already arrived in the person of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, the seventh Imām in line from the Prophet. His final apocalypse, however, has been deferred far beyond the length of his natural life. During this period of his *ghayba* or occultation, he is represented by a line of seven *khulafā'*, who in Sijistānī's major extant works have quite clearly become the Fāṭimids, whatever may have been his thinking at the outset of his career.[50] The Khalīfa, however, has no place among the ten Ḥudūd of the ʿĀlam al-Wadʿ, the World of Religion which will come to an end only with the last coming of the Mahdi. In that world, the true deputies of the Imāms are the Lāḥiqs, who share in some lesser measure in the Imāms' powers of interpretation, and collectively compose the Daʿwa, the organization for the preservation and spread of the true faith in the world.[51] They seem to correspond to the twelve Apostles for the twelve Jazā'ir or divisions of the world who are so marked a feature of the earlier apocalyptic literature of the Fāṭimid revolution.[52] Meanwhile they appear to include Sijistānī and his fellows among the ranks of the *ahl al-ḥaqā'iq*, the people of eternal verities, practitioners of *ta'wīl* and *taḥqīq*.

VI

This question of the authority for the faith in this period of *ghayba* thus becomes a question of the relationship of al-Sijistānī to Ismā'īlism on the one hand and to the Fāṭimids on the other. As I argued in 'The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the making of Ismā'īlism', we are looking at a world of many doctrines coalescing in the future rather than dividing in the past. In the bringing together of the majority of these doctrines under the rubric of Ismā'īlism, the Fāṭimids played a crucial part,[53] while Sijistānī emerges as an equally crucial contributor. What we lack is any clear picture of his *daʿwa* as a movement or organization in the mid tenth century in Iran.

Beyond remarking on the fact that the country was evidently home to Ismāʿīlī philosophy cultivated by a scholarly élite, Walker cannot help, partly because the information is lacking, partly because he follows the familiar description of the origin of Ismāʿīlism in 'a large, sophisticated, multi-national enterprise covering the whole of the Islamic world from Spain to India' that broke in two in 899.[54] The main source for the activities of Sijistānī's predecessors in Iran, none other than the *Siyasat-nāma* of that great opponent of the Fāṭimids, the Seljuk wazir Niẓām al-Mulk in the second half of the eleventh century, relates them to this worldwide movement in a long chapter on the risings of the Carmathians in Iran, Iraq and Syria.[55] But while Niẓām al-Mulk thus spells out the conspiracy theory of Fāṭimid origins, he does no more than repeat the black legend on which it is based, put into circulation over the previous hundred and fifty years by Ibn Rizām, Akhū Muḥsin and al-Baghdadī. Stern himself, a principal advocate of the conspiracy theory and the scholar most responsible for establishing the outline of the history of the *daʿwa* in Iran, could find little connection between such a farflung enterprise and the religious and political affairs of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī in Rayy and Tabaristan, and al-Nasafī in Khurasan. He simply noted that they and their fellows eschewed the popular revolts and spectacular risings of Sevener revolutionaries elsewhere in the Islamic world, and aimed instead to convert the rulers.[56] Even then they are figures more of fiction than of fact, whose efforts at conversion appear in the literature as diabolical plots against the Islamic state. For Niẓām al-Mulk their histories point a political moral and adorn a cautionary tale, as they stand on the brink of ill-gotten success before plummeting to a well-deserved death. Al-Nasafī in particular converts the Samanid Amīr Naṣr b. Aḥmad, but perishes along with all his followers at the hands of Naṣsr's son and successor Nūḥ in 943.[57] Then, as Walker says, the curtain falls over the historical record, leaving al-Sijistānī to emerge almost entirely through the works which Walker plausibly dates to the reign of Muʿizz.

Stern's cautious observation seems nevertheless to hold the key to the character of the *daʿwa* in Iran to which Sijistānī belonged. Whatever its antecedents, it looks like a society of members of the scholarly class who married their Shīʿism to their messianism, and their messianism to their Neoplatonism. In the preternatural absence of their Imām, they had constituted themselves as an élite of cognoscenti, the *ahl al-ḥaqq, ahl al-ḥaqā iq, ahl al-taʾwīl* or *rāsikhūn fī ʾl-ʿilm*, the ones 'of sound instruction' in Qurʾān 3:7. In that capacity they devoted themselves to 'the wellsprings of wisdom', the hypostatic principles of the faith, whose definition gave rise to philosophical disputes between al-Nasafī, al-Rāzī, and finally al-Sijistānī.[58] At the same time they sought political patronage and political influence, if not political power. The nature of their appeal to the political establishment is obscure, but it was evidently controversial, and ended in catastrophe.

In the aftermath of disaster in 943, they may have been persuaded to turn to the distant Fāṭimids, accepting them first as *khulafā'* of the Hidden Imām, and finally as Imāms in their own right. In moving from the one kind of Imām to the other, they were doubtless confronted with the argument employed by the Qāḍī al-Nu'mān against the Twelvers at the outset of his *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*, that *ghayba* left the community of the faithful without a guide.[59] Sijistānī, on the other hand, evidently hoped that the stakes had been raised rather than lowered. Mu'izz, the second Seventh in line from the Prophet, would be the last of his line, having prepared the way for the return of the first, Muhammad b. Ismā'īl, as the Messiah, the Seventh and Last of the Prophets with whom history would come to an end.[60] Such an apocalyptic expectation and revolutionary anticipation may have brought about his death rather than his disappointment. His works, by Walker's reckoning, were all written before 971,[61] so that he presumably perished before Mu'izz himself in 975: a single, very late reference has him executed in his native Sijistan by an Amir who ruled from 964 to 1003.[62]

Certainly, Walker describes his *Iftikhār* as stridently polemical, a defence of his theology and an attack upon all others in Islam.[63] It surely chimed with Mu'izz's propaganda as he prepared for the conquest of Egypt in 969 and his own arrival there in 973. The conquest of Egypt, which gave Mu'izz the proof he required in the aftermath of the defeat of the Dajjāl, that his dynasty was destined to rule the world, was a far cry from Sijistānī's millennium. Nevertheless it evidently brought his fellow Iranians and their doctrines firmly into the Fāṭimid fold. There, as responsibility for the creed and the organization of teaching expanded out of the household of the Imām into an office of state under a Chief Dā'ī, the Iranians came to form a large provincial body of such *dā'īs* or missionaries under the general direction of Cairo, continuing their campaign for recruits in high places as well as low. By the reign of Ḥākim at the beginning of the eleventh century, they were rivalling the sons and grandsons of the Qāḍī al-Nu'mān as chief spokesmen for the creed of the Imām in Cairo itself.[64] In the course of the eleventh century, in the writings of al-Kirmānī and al-Shirāzī, not to speak of Nāṣir-i Khusraw, that creed was given its full philosophical expression. It was notoriously diverted into extreme sectarianism by the Iranians al-Akhram, Ḥamza and al-Darazī, the founders of the Druzes who identified the Fāṭimid al-Ḥākim as the Hidden Imām. Meanwhile, however, Kirmānī's theology became the basis of Musta'lian Ismā'īlism in the Yemen after the break with the Fāṭimids in 1131, while in Iran itself the creed was transformed into the Da'wa Jadīda of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ.

VII

By the beginning of the twelfth century, in the *Kitāb al-milal* of al-Shahrastānī, the creed itself, in all its forms, passed firmly under the

name of Ismāʿīlism.[65] In answer to the question raised by Wansbrough in his review of Talbi, on the subject of the elaboration of Islam, it is worth contrasting its doctrines with the creed of the Ithnā ʿAshariyya. Like that of Twelver Shīʿism, the creed which evolved under the auspices of the Fāṭimids is quintessentially Imāmī, predicated on the continuity of God's guidance to his community after the death of the Prophet in the person of his appointed successor, the infallible Imām. On the other hand, it has eschewed, from the foundation of the dynasty, the notion of an Imām in *ghayba* or absence, preferring to believe in the constant presence of the Imām of the time, whether visible, as in the case of the Fāṭimids themselves and the Nizārīs of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, or in *satr*, 'concealment', as in the case of the Mustaʿlians. That is not surprising, since it began life as the creed of a dynasty whose determination to perpetuate itself through a form of apostolic succession is evident in the accounts of the accession of al-Manṣūr in 946. The powerful combination of religious and political authority which this succession entailed found its natural expression in the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*, the doctrinal statement of the authority of the Imām for the Sharīʿa. This, the Islamic Law, was proclaimed by the dynasty as the *ẓāhir*, the open or patent doctrine of Muḥammad for which the Imām was responsible as the successor to the Prophet of Islam.

Meanwhile the apocalyptic messianism which had surrounded the dynasty's birth, complete with the cosmic myth of Kūnī and Qadar, Jadd, Fatḥ and Khayāl, had been given Neoplatonic expression in Iran by the self-appointed representatives of a more mysterious figure. In preternatural occultation, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl was an earlier product of that line of thought which by the middle of the tenth century had led the Ithnā ʿAshariyya to identify their lost Imām as Muḥammad al-Muntaẓar, the Messiah expected at the end of the world. But at the time when the Twelvers had finally agreed upon the doctrine of the greater *ghayba* of the Imām, the passage of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl in the other direction, into the lineage of the continuous Imāmate of the Fāṭimids, allowed the incorporation of the Neoplatonic formulae of al-Sijistānī's school into the doctrine of the dynasty. There it facilitated the elaboration of a comprehensive theology which served a very different purpose from that of Ithnā ʿAsharism. Without a state to call its own, or a spiritual guide to direct it in person, Ithnā ʿAsharism developed as a school of Law, a *madhhab* little different from those of Sunnī Islam, with its own jurists and jurisprudence. Under the government of the Fāṭimids, Ismāʿīlism failed to do any such thing; the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* remained a polemical statement of principle rather than the starting-point of legal practice. According to Sijistānī, that was correct; no other text than Scripture could bear the weight of the interpretation required to elicit the divine truth, a task reserved to the Imām in person, and his 'attachés'.[66] The fatal flaw ascribed by Fyzee to the *Daʿāʾim* as a legal code, its insistence upon the Imām as the sole guide in doubtful cases,[67]

is shown to be intrinsic. Instead of generating a typical Muslim community following a tradition of jurisprudence, the *Daʿāʿim's* 'open' doctrine of the Sharīʿa on the authority of the Imām became encapsulated in a comprehensive 'hidden' doctrine of creation and sacred history which glorified the Imām as the instrument of salvation. As a doctrine of world empire, ruled by the Imām in his capacity as Caliph, it required from the people at large, submission rather than conformity in anything other than worship.

VIII

The establishment of such differences between Ismāʿīlism and Twelver Shīʿism is certainly part of the elaboration of Islam. Nevertheless, it cannot be explained solely in terms of divergence. Shīʿism as a form of Islam may be derived historically from the career of ʿAlī and the fortunes of his offspring, through the long tale of attempts to win the Caliphate for his descendants. Conceptually, however, it involves a reduction into formally Islamic and specifically ʿAlid terms, of motifs belonging to a much older and wider world of religion. In his *Sectarian milieu*, Wansbrough proposed that Islam itself was formulated in this manner out of the common stock of such motifs in the biblical tradition, through the attribution of stories and the exegesis of texts, in the prolonged effort to provide the faith with a historical and scriptural identity distinct from the earlier expressions of monotheism in Christianity and Judaism.[68] In the case of Shīʿism, that same effort over the same length of time served to identify the Imām as the critical figure in the transmission of the Revelation from generation to generation. In establishing the identity of this Imām in accordance with the increasingly specific criteria of Islam, the historical designation of ʿAlī as the successor to Muḥammad became paramount. The historical account of Shīʿite origins which results from that designation in the literature has largely determined the treatment of the subject today. It is chosen by Halm for his brief study of Shīʿism, in which he attributes the formulation of the doctrine of the Imāmate to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq and his circle in the second half of the eighth century.[69] In the most radical departure of recent years, Crone and Hinds are more interested in the concept than the vehicle, but still treat the doctrine of the Imāmate as a phenomenon of Islamic history, regarding it as an offshoot of the original, historical, practice of the Caliphate.[70] In his article on the origins of the Ithnā ʿAshariyya, however, Etan Kohlberg takes the formulation of the doctrine by the disciples of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq for granted, and concentrates instead upon the peculiar doctrines of a specifically twelfth Imām in *ghayba*.[71] Finding the significance of the number twelve and the concept of *ghayba* to be very early motifs in Islamic history, with clear antecedents for the number twelve in Christianity and Judaism, he opens up quite a different perspective on the origins of Shīʿism.

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What is true of the number twelve is evidently true of the number seven in Ismāʿīlism, and equally true of the messianic element which the Fāṭimids strove so hard to exploit and at the same time to control. In his *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismāʿīlīya*, Halm provides an inventory of antecedents for the whole range of beliefs, from the cycle of seven Prophets to the expectation of the Mahdi, represented in the apocalyptic literature of the dynasty from the late ninth century onwards.[72] They range from Gnosticism to the Kabbala, from the fringes of Christianity to those of Judaism. Neoplatonism served to give them philosophical expression. Walker's discussion of the doctrine of *taʾwīl* shows how the synthesis was then anchored in the text of Scripture to complete the doctrinal definition of the dynasty. As the explanation of the hidden meaning of a given text, *taʾwīl* became the formal instrument of inquiry to ascertain the ultimate truth. In principle, therefore, it supplied the inductive proof of a deductive proposition, *tanzīl* or Revelation, the representation of the verities of God in the sacred Word through the inspiration of the Speaking Prophet.[73] But since it depended for its efficacy upon the equivalent inspiration of the Imām and his deputies, *taʾwīl* never became in practice a rigorously logical procedure for this purpose. That is the gravamen of Walker's final complaint against al-Sijistānī, that he is not really a philosopher at all in rational pursuit of understanding, but a poet who employed the idiom of philosophy for the expression of his faith.[74] In that expression, it was the principle of *taʾwīl* that counted; as the necessary complement of *tanzīl*, it betokened the inspiration of the Imām as the necessary complement of the Prophet in the exposition of God's ways to man. As such a token, it was sufficiently central to Sijistānī's way of thinking to serve in its own right as a definition of Ismāʿīlism, in its own eyes and in those of the world.

IX

As an explanation of Shīʿite origins, however, *taʾwīl* is a principle of ambiguity. Did the meaning come before the text it purports to explain; or did the text come before the meaning ascribed to the words? The question underlies John Wansbrough's *Quranic studies*.[75] As far as the roots of Ithnā ʿAsharī and Ismāʿīlī Imāmism are concerned, that question is twofold. Are we really looking, as history would have it, at an internal Shīʿite, *sc.* partisan opposition to the leaders of the Muslim community and the rulers of its empire, which gave Islamic expression to a range of exotic beliefs as it became increasingly doctrinal and consequently sectarian? Or are we looking at a range of such beliefs which fastened on this Shīʿite opposition to take Islamic form? The answer I gave to the question of Fāṭimid origins in 'The Mīm, the ʿAyn and the making of Ismāʿīlism' was of the first kind— an ʿAlid Jacobitism that exploited a Muhammadan Messianism to accomplish its revolution. But the Messianism itself might well have

belonged to the second kind. For Ian Netton the question is irrelevant, if not mistaken. In his discussion of 'the God of medieval Ismāʿīlism', he speaks of the infiltration of Neoplatonism into Ismāʿīlism, where it was adopted and adapted 'wholesale' by the sect.[76] The outcome is a comprehensive myth, which is not to be analysed in terms of its antecedents, but rather on its own terms as the product of its day and age.[77] That is certainly so. In presupposing the existence of the sect, however, his account of the myth ignores the genesis of the myth-making. In the sectarian milieu which gave it birth, are there any sectarians who might be held responsible?

The literature of Shīʿism repeatedly points to the *ghulāt*, 'the excessives' who believed in the divinity of Muḥammad, of ʿAlī, or the Imām. The very term identifies them as heretics who have taken their faith beyond the bounds of Islam. Nevertheless they are persistently coupled with the names of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq and his son Ismāʿīl. On the one hand they are firmly dissociated from the position of Jaʿfar himself as the true Imām. On the other, they enter into the controversy surrounding his son and the succession to the Imāmate. In both cases they serve to strengthen or undermine the credentials of these major figures in the development of Shīʿite Islam. As deviants, the *ghulāt* themselves are relegated to the realm of heresiography, condemned as non-Islamic and excluded from consideration in the elaboration of the faith. Modern scholarship, whether it be that of Massignon, Corbin or Filippano-Ronconi, has so far failed to bring them into focus except as participants in a doctrinal *mêlée* in the early Muslim community, in which some of their beliefs were in fact accepted while others were rejected. The beliefs themselves are ascribed to the pre-Islamic past, but traced forwards rather than backwards by Hodgson, who finds many that became characteristic of Ismāʿīlism.[78] The *ghuluww* or 'excess' which is employed in the literature to define the boundaries of Islam is thus seen to include that gamut of concepts listed by Halm which found their way into the faith itself. Halm himself takes a narrower view of its content as the essence of Nuṣayrism rather than Ismāʿīlism, of that divinization of ʿAlī by the eponymous Ibn Nuṣayr and his successors, which resulted in their exclusion from the body of Islam in accordance with the scheme of the heresiographical literature.[79] Such discrimination is clearly necessary to establish the elements of the spectrum of belief in question, despite Netton's objection. As I suggested in 'The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the making of Ismāʿīlism', however, it cannot in our present state of knowledge of the formative years be entirely categoric. Certainly it leaves aside the question of ultimate origin. This requires a different perspective, on the shadowy figure of the *ghulāt* themselves rather than their *ghuluww*. Seen as entrants into the faith rather than leavers, not only do they represent a wide spectrum of pre-Islamic belief in the process of absorption into the new faith. They represent a process of change of my second kind.

That process is the process of Islamization of the Near and Middle East, not a simple matter of conversion to a simple new faith, but the reworking of its ancient civilization by its inhabitants under the rubric of Islam. The Islam that resulted: religion; way of life; civilization, was the end product of that process, which evidently continues today. The great question is how and why it happened that the rubric was chosen for this purpose and employed in this way, especially in the years from the seventh to the tenth, the Fāṭimid, century. It lies behind Wansbrough's review of Talbi, with which this article effectively began. Of the Berbers who brought the Fāṭimids to power in the West, Wansbrough observed that 'for Islamic history the significance of the tribal elements consists in their (relatively) inferior degree of Islamization and, thus, their sensitivity to revolutionary propaganda. That the propaganda in this particular case should have been Ismaʻili is historically, but not phenomenologically, relevant.'[80] That is certainly the case, as the subsequent examples of Abū Yazīd al-Dajjāl, the Almoravids and the Almohads clearly demonstrate. Each of these great Berber risings was doctrinally different, all were socially the same. Together, the Fāṭimids, the Almoravids and the Almohads not only accomplished the Islamization of the Berbers, but achieved the political and cultural unification of North Africa.[81] A phenomenon which was apparent to Ibn Khaldūn,[82] however, was invisible to the actors. In the literature of the Mahdi's realm, all subsequent rebellions among the Berbers are branded as heretical. The *ghulāt*, addicted to a similarly revolutionary propaganda, have suffered a similar fate. Their fate is all the worse since, unlike the Berbers, they are not a people, and their background is not clear. Did we know more about them, or simply regard them in a different light, we might be able to say of them too, 'that the propaganda in this particular case should have been (Shiʻite) is historically, but not phenomenologically, relevant.'

Notes

1 F. Wüstenfeld, *Geschichte der Fatimiden Chalifen* (Gottingen, 1881).
2 cf. S. M. Stern, *Studies in early Ismāʻīlism* (Jerusalem and Leiden), 1983, and more particularly W. Madelung, 'Fatimiden und Bahrainqarmaten', *Der Islam*, xxxiv, 1959, 34–88, and 'Das Imamat in der früher ismailitischen Lehre', *Der Islam*, xxxvii, 1961, 43–135.
3 Wiesbaden, 1978.
4 Idrīs ʻImād al-Dīn, *'Uyūn al-akhbār wa funūn al-āthār*, vols. 4–6 (ed. M. Ghalib, Beirut, 1973–78); vol. 5 *Ta'rīkh dawla al-fāṭimiyya bi 'l-Maghrib* (ed. F. Dachraoui, Tunis, 1981); *Ta'rīkh al-khulafā' al-fāṭimiyyīn bi 'l-Maghrib* (ed. M. Yalaoui, Beirut, 1985).
5 H. Halm, *Das Reich des Mahdi: der Aufsteig der Fatimiden* (Munich, 1991).
6 *BSOAS*, lvii, 1, 1994, 25–39.
7 *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1969, 161–70.
8 *Reich des Mahdi*, 13.

9 *Reich des Mahdi,* 285–6. Ironically, the story has been omitted(?) from the *'Uyūn,* and is found only in the Egyptian sources: al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-hunafā',* 3 vols. (Cairo, 1967–73), I, 88–9.

10 For this doctrine of the Mahdi, cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn and the making of Ismā'īlism', cited above, n. 6.

11 *Reich des Mahdi,* 276–7.

12 *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar* (ed. M. K. Husayn and M. A.-H. Sha'irah, Cairo, 1954), 30–41; transl. M. Canard, *Vie de l'Ustadh Jaudhar* (Algiers, 1958), 53–7.

13 *Ta'rīkh al-khulafā',* 338 ff.

14 Al-Qādī al-Nu'mān, *al-Majālis wa 'l-musāyarāt* (ed. H. el-Feki, I. Chabbouh and M. el-Yalaoui, Tunis, 1978), 448. Cf. *Vie de l'Ustadh Jaudhar,* 56, n. 40.

15 Al-Qādī al-Nu'mān, *Iftitāh al-da'wa wa ibtidā' al-dawla* (ed. W. al-Qādī, Beirut, 1970; F. Dachraoui, Tunis, 1975), 333: 'When the Qā'im saw that the time of the Dajjāl's destruction was approaching, he instructed and commanded, *'ahida ilā ... wa amara,* the Imam al-Mansūr to combat him.'

16 cf. M. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn', see esp. pp. 33–4.

17 cf. F. Dachraoui, *Le califat fatimide au Maghreb 296–362/909–73* (Tunis, 1981), 297–8.

18 *Reich des Mahdi,* 330.

19 cf. transl. A. A. A. Fyzee, *The Book of Faith* (Bombay, 1974), a translation from *Da'ā'im* of the section on the Imāmate.

20 P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph* (Cambridge, 1986), 99–103, 108, n. 76; cf. pp. 80–93.

21 *Reich des Mahdi,* 330; the characterization of such an Ismā'īlī school is naturally complicated by the division of the sect into Nizārīs and Tayyibīs: cf. D. Hinchcliffe, review of Fyzee, *Compendium, BSOAS,* xxxiii, 3, 1970, 626–7.

22 A. A. Fyzee, *A compendium of Fatimid law* (Simla, 1969), xlviii–l.

23 F. Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: their history and doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990); for the Tayyibīs on this point see esp. pp. 317–18. The legal implications of the Nizārī doctrine of *qiyāma* are not discussed; but see e.g. pp. 469, 477–8, 491, 516, 526, 528–32.

24 Fyzee, *Compendium,* xxiii–iv.

25 cf. Halm, *Reich des Mahdi,* 328.

26 Fyzee, *Compendium,* xxviii; cf. I. K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā'īlī literature* (Malibu, 1977), 48 ff.

27 cf. Dachraoui, *Califat fatimide,* 404–16.

28 *Reich des Mahdi,* 331. Cf. R. Brunschvig, '*Fiqh* fatimide et histoire de l'Ifrīqiya', in Marçais, G., *Mélanges d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Occident musulman* (Algiers, 1958), II, 13–20, and in idem, *Études d'Islamologie* (Paris, 1976), I, 63–70.

29 Al-Qādī al-Nu'mān, *Iftitāh,* ed. Dachraoui, 3–7.

30 Al-Qādī al-Nu'mān, *Al-Urjūzat al-mukhtārah* (ed. I. K. Poonawala, Montreal, 1970); cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn', 35.

31 cf. A. Hamdani and F. de Blois, 'A re-examination of al-Mahdī's letter to the Yemen', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* 1983, 173–207; cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn', 31.

32 S. M. Stern, 'The early Ismā'īlī missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurasan and Transoxania', and 'Heterodox Ismā'īlism at the time of al-Mu'izz', *Studies in early Ismā'īlism,* Part 2, chs. iii, v.

33 Madelung, 'Imamat', 86–101.

34 cf. F. de Blois, 'The Abū Sa'īdīs or so-called "Qarmatians" of Bahrayn', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies,* xvi, 1986, 13–21.

35 Halm, *Reich*, 336–7.
36 Paul E. Walker. *Early philosophical Shiism: the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge. 1993): *The wellsprings of wisdom: a study of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's Kitāb al-yanābī̄* (Salt Lake City. 1994).
37 *Early philosophical Shiism.* 35–8. 77–8.
38 ibid.. 92. 123.
39 ibid.. 123, 142.
40 ibid.. 152–3.
41 ibid., 47. 49. 89.
42 ibid.. 109–11. 119. Cf. S. Calderini, "*Ālam al-dīn* in Ismā'īlism: world of obedience or world of immobility?'. *BSOAS.* LVI. 1. 1993. 459–69.
43 ibid.. 141.
44 cf. J. Wansbrough, 'Arabic rhetoric and Qur'ānic exegesis'. *BSOAS,* XXXI, 3. 1968, 469–85; '*Majāz al-qur'ān:* periphrastic exegesis', *BSOAS.* XXXIII, 2. 1970, 247–66; and *Quranic studies.* (Oxford, 1977).
45 *Early philosophical Shiism,* 125: Wansbrough, '*Majāz al-qur'ān* ', 266.
46 *Early philosophical Shiism,* 129.
47 ibid.. 127–8.
48 ibid., 132.
49 ibid., 127.
50 ibid., 20–1.
51 ibid., 18–19, 28–9, 163. nn. 58, 59.
52 cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn', 29.
53 ibid.. 39.
54 *Early philosophical Shiism,* 9–11.
55 Nizām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings* (transl. H. Darke, London. 1960), ch. xlvi, 213–38.
56 Stern, 'Early Ismā'īli missionaries', *Studies,* 222–2.
57 *Book of Government,* 218–24. For the bare story, cf. Stern, ibid., 219–20.
58 cf. Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism.* 51–60.
59 see above, at n. 25.
60 Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism,* 140–1.
61 ibid., 20–1.
62 ibid., 17–8, from Stern, 'Early Ismā'īlī missionaries', *Studies in early Ismā'īlism,* 221, 228.
63 ibid., 23.
64 cf. S. Stern, 'Cairo as the centre of the Ismā'īlī movement', *Studies in early Ismā'īlism,* 234–53; R. Gottheil, 'A distinguished family of Fatimide Cadis (Al-Nu'mān) in the tenth century', *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* XXVII, 1906, 217–96.
65 Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa 'l-niḥal* (Cairo, 1968), I, 191–8; Book I, 'Muslim sects', transl. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, *Muslim sects and divisions* (London, 1984), 163–70; transl. D. Gimaret and G. Monnot, *Livre des religions et des sectes,* I (Louvain, 1986), 550–65.
66 see above, at n. 51.
67 see above, at n. 22.
68 J. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu* (Oxford, 1978).
69 H. Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh, 1991).
70 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph.* 99 ff.
71 E. Kohlberg, 'From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-'ashariyya', *BSOAS,* XXXIX, 3, 1976, 521–34.

72 see above, n. 3; cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn'.

73 cf. Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, 128, 131–2.

74 ibid., 146 ff.

75 Oxford, 1977.

76 I. R. Netton, *Allāh transcendent* (London and New York, 1989), 203.

77 ibid., 234–43.

78 cf. M. G. S. Hodgson, 'How did the early Shī'a become sectarian'. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXV, 1955, 1–13; idem, art. 'Ghulāt', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.).

79 Halm, *Kosmologie*, 143–68; cf. Brett, 'The Mīm, the 'Ayn', 26–7, 39. The sectarian consequences of such doctrines are reviewed by M. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: the Ghulāt sects* (Syracuse, New York, 1988).

80 'On recomposing the Islamic history of North Africa', 168.

81 cf. M. Brett, 'The unification of North Africa by Islam in the seventh to thirteenth centuries', *Morocco, Occasional Papers No. 1*, 1994, 3–12.

82 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, transl. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols. (2nd ed., New York, 1967), I, 305–6.