

IMAM 'ALI

FROM CONCISE HISTORY TO TIMELESS MYSTERY

أَنَا مَوْلَى كُلِّ مَوَلَى آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ
مَنْ كُنْتُ مَوْلَى فُلَانٍ فَهُوَ مَوْلَى آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ

١٤ ٣٧

‘For whomever I am the *mawla*, ‘Ali is his *mawla*.’

PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Imam 'Ali

From Concise History to Timeless Mystery

by

Reza Shah-Kazemi



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Editor's Preface

In our times of frenzied news-seeking, it is easy to mistake the incessant flow of trivia for the originality of real art and craftsmanship, which makes the old new again every time. In fact, the word *news* has become meaningless, and finding new information, real *news*, becomes rarer with every passing day: not sneaky rehashes or bland summaries, but new knowledge, fresh from ever-flowing sources, elaborated in genuine ways with the selflessness and generosity of the authentic scholar who works *ad bonum commune*, for the benefit of everybody, sharing light. This is exactly what Reza Shah-Kazemi does with this book.

In his previous publications on Imam 'Ali, *Justice and Remembrance* (2007), and *Spiritual Quest* (2011), he had addressed contemplative aspects of the Imam's teachings in relation to mystical praxis, the principle of justice, and the hermeneutics of the Qur'an; this new work consolidates and approaches the subject from a more 'biographical' angle. The combined impression of these volumes is, for anyone interested in Islam, world religions or spirituality, that of an emerging iceberg, or rather more accurately, that of a long lost marvellous city which is discovered and brought to light, lovingly and painstakingly.

The life of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, fourth caliph of early Islam and revered fountainhead of Shi'ite and Sufi lineages, 'is both inspirational and controversial: *intrinsically* inspirational and *extrinsically* controversial.' These words set the tone for what is a detailed and penetrating view of the figure of Imam 'Ali

on various planes, the spiritual and ethical, the individual, the political and social. The author draws a unique kind of portrait in which the spiritual undercurrents of early Islamic history may be discerned at play, and where the sanctified heart of the Imam is revealed as a fulcrum of harmony between diverse and even divergent tendencies.

This book may be too Shi'a for some Sunnis, and too Sunni for some Shi'a, and it may be too political for some, and too spiritual for others, and so its main value lies precisely in a higher perspective where it reveals harmony, in a keen vision of the forces of *tawhid*, the drive to union, alive at the centre of historical events as in the hearts of men. It will have a cathartic effect upon the many, Sunnis and Shi'as alike, who wish to see 'Ali as a fountainhead of unity in Islam, not as a source of division. It makes accessible to both Muslims and non-Muslims the treasures of loving mercy flowing from 'Ali, a global paragon of initiatic wisdom.

In these days of urgent need for esoterism, of a return to the mettle of religion, where the intricacies and puzzling statements of theology are consumed in the fire of direct knowledge, the Matheson Trust is grateful and honoured to publish this contribution which is as timely and contemporary as it is traditional and timeless.

Juan Acevedo
 Director
 The Matheson Trust

A Note Concerning References

As the remit given to us was to make this short book as accessible as possible to a wide non-specialist readership, it was decided not to clutter the text with academic footnotes or endnotes. Instead, there will be a few references to some of the more important citations in parentheses in the text itself, with full details included in the Bibliography. References for almost all of the sayings of Imam ‘Ali, and those of the Prophet, cited in this text can be found in two of our earlier works based on Imam ‘Ali’s teachings, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam ‘Ali*, and *Spiritual Quest: Reflections on Qur’anic Prayer according to the Teachings of Imam ‘Ali*; and in the comprehensive 12-part article on Imam ‘Ali in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, published jointly by the Institute of Ismaili Studies and Brill. The few citations from Yasin al-Jibouri’s translation of the *Nahj al-balagha* (the first complete, reliable translation directly from the Arabic) are indicated in parentheses in the text itself, as are several important sayings of Imam ‘Ali translated by Tahera Qutbuddin in her excellent work, *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons and Teachings of ‘Ali*, a translation of al-Qadi al-Quda‘i’s collection of sayings of Imam ‘Ali, *Dustur ma‘alim al-hikam*.

Introduction

The life of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is both inspirational and controversial: *intrinsically* inspirational, one should say, and *extrinsically* controversial. We will focus on what is essential and inspirational in his life and thought, and ignore—as far as possible—the political, ideological and theological controversies that have, alas, obscured the radiance of his personality and the wisdom of his teachings. We do not aim to present here anything like a comprehensive biography, as this has been given in other works which can be easily consulted (see Bibliography). Rather, what we offer here is a series of reflections upon some of the essential elements of Imam ‘Ali’s life, basing these reflections on points of view opened up by his own teachings. These teachings are themselves applications of the principles conveyed by the essential sources of the Islamic revelation, that is, the Holy Qur’an and the spiritual reality of the Prophet, *al-Haqiqah al-Muhammadiyah*. These reflections on Imam ‘Ali’s life and teachings are intended to disclose the transformative nature of the ideals for which this great man lived and died—ideals which derive from the essence of the Islamic faith, but which also go to the heart of all authentic religions.

For the goal of Islam is nothing new; it aims to provide what every revealed religion provides: the means by which human beings can return to their original nature, created in the image of God. This original human nature is referred to in the Qur’an (30:30) as the *fitra*, and is defined in terms of ‘the perpetually established religion’ (*al-din al-qayyim*). This is

religion as such, not such and such a religion. It is the spiritual quintessence of all religions, and thus reducible to none. It is the supra-temporal substance of religion, not one historical form of religion amongst others. Primordial human nature is at once universal and immutable: 'there is no changing the creation of God,' the Qur'an affirms, in relation to the *fitra* (30:30). It therefore informs and transcends all subsequent historical religions, for it is identical to integral, heartfelt faith: that knowledge and love of God which is woven into the human heart. According to Imam 'Ali, God's purpose in sending messengers to human beings is to remind them of the graces of God, and 'to unearth for them the hidden treasures of their intellects.' In other words, it is the purpose of all religious revelations to awaken, revive and actualise the knowledge and the love of God, these being the greatest spiritual 'treasures' of human consciousness, the celestial 'melodies' resounding in the depths of the heart of every human being.

The life of Imam 'Ali speaks with an eloquent tongue in a universal dialect to all those concerned with the possibilities of transcendence inherent in human consciousness. For his story heralds the triumph of the human spirit over the difficulties, tragedies and absurdities which are inevitable in what the Qur'an refers to repeatedly as 'the life of this lower world' (*al-hayat al-dunya*). Imam 'Ali had to overcome outward hardships and challenges throughout his life, and he also had to confront, as caliph, three brutal rebellions against his rule, in which, for the first time, Muslims were fighting fellow Muslims. So while the the first part of Imam 'Ali's life, in the blessed proximity of the Prophet, was glorious and heroic, the end of his life was grim and tragic, beset by confrontation and adversity, and cut short by the poisoned blade of an assassin. But this tragic ending pertains only to the outward story, for both his wisdom and his conduct, his words and his deeds, reveal a very different inner story.

That inner story presents us with extraordinarily compel-

ling evidence of the way in which the Spirit (*al-Ruh*) can animate, guide and inspire the heart of a human being in all circumstances. The Spirit of God, breathed into man at his creation (15:29 *et passim*), is that which makes each and every human being inherently 'spiritual'. The human spirit, being in essence nothing other than the Spirit of God, can triumph over all manner of outer hardship, for it imparts the deepest peace, the greatest strength, and the clearest wisdom to which the human being has access. We may know this in principle, but Imam 'Ali helps us to see it in practice: indeed, to see it with dazzling self-evidence. And this is why contemplating the life of the Imam fortifies one's belief in the power, wisdom and goodness of the human spirit and, thereby, deepens one's faith in the source of that spirit, the Absolute.

His story shows us the kaleidoscopic range of virtues that flow from authentic faith. When, as we shall see in Chapter 2, he accepted the challenge to fight the pagan champion of the Quraysh, at the Battle of the Trench, the Prophet said: 'Faith (*iman*), in its entirety, confronts infidelity (*kufir*), in its entirety.' Similarly, the Prophet said to him: 'Only a believer will love you, O 'Ali, and only a hypocrite will hate you.' Such was the totality of Imam 'Ali's faith that it became something of a litmus-test or a touchstone. It brought to light the faith in the hearts of the faithful, this faith then being proved through their love for him; and at the same time it unmasked the hypocrisy of the hypocrites, their hypocrisy being betrayed by their hatred of him. The Prophet also referred to Imam 'Ali as the 'divider' or 'apportioner' (*qasim*) of Heaven and Hell, the meaning of which is connected to the principle that one's attitude to 'Ali reveals the measure of one's faith, and thereby, implicitly, one's fate in the Hereafter.

Imam 'Ali's absolute faith in God as the source of all power and knowledge, beauty and perfection, helps to account for the heights he attained in so many spheres of life and thought. He was a man of action and contemplation, being

the greatest hero of his age as well as its wisest sage: as renowned for his chivalry as for his sanctity. In public, he delivered inspiring sermons from the pulpit, and in private he expounded the most esoteric teachings to his closest disciples. His teachings were delivered sometimes with Zen-like mystery, at other times with disarming simplicity; he eloquently expressed the most profound truths accessible to human intelligence, when this intelligence is suffused with perfect virtue. It is not surprising to find that so many of the founding figures of later intellectual disciplines in the Islamic tradition looked back to Imam 'Ali as the teacher who taught the teachers of their own teachers—claims that were to a very high degree substantiated by the historical record. The multifaceted wisdom he imparted was therefore properly speaking 'seminal': it sowed the seeds for the formal articulation of such varied disciplines as Qur'anic exegesis, theology, philosophy, mysticism, jurisprudence, rhetoric (*balagha*) and grammar, calligraphy, together with various arcane sciences such as numerology (*jafr*) and alchemy. 'I am the city of knowledge,' said the Prophet, in one of his most famous indications of 'Ali's spiritual function, 'and 'Ali is its gate.' Imam 'Ali did indeed function, historically, as the 'gate' opening onto prophetic consciousness in the Islamic intellectual tradition. And he stands forth, after the Prophet himself, as the most stunning exemplar of what the mystical tradition of Islam refers to as 'the perfect human being', *al-insan al-kamil*.



As is all too well known in our times, there are heated controversies between Sunnis and Shi'is over the status of 'Ali, centering on the question: was he, or was he not, designated by the Prophet as his successor? While our effort is to focus on the spiritual, intellectual and ethical principles opened up by 'Ali's life and thought, it is of course difficult to avoid altogether the issues attendant upon the Sunni-Shi'i divergence as regards

his place in Islamic history and theology. Despite our effort to be as impartial as possible, this book will doubtless be seen as ‘too Sunni’ for some Shi‘is, and ‘too Shi‘i’ for some Sunnis. Be that as it may, the massive common ground between these two branches of Islam is where we take our stand. All Muslims agree on what is essential regarding ‘Ali: that is, the essence of his personality and the wisdom of his teachings. This common ground has yielded particularly rich fruit in the fertile fields of Islamic spirituality—what is referred to chiefly as *tasawwuf*, or ‘Sufism’, in Sunni Islam; and *‘irfan* (‘spiritual knowledge’) in the Shi‘i world—despite the fact that there is significant overlap between the two traditions, and their roots are, practically speaking, identical.

Our perspective on ‘Ali is derived from these spiritual and mystical traditions of Islam wherein he played a crucial, indeed, definitive role, second only to that of the Prophet himself. For ‘Ali’s name appears at the head of all the chains of transmission of the Sufi orders, the *silsilas*, that connect each master with his predecessor in the order. ‘Ali serves as the crucial link between all these ‘chains’ of masters and the Prophet. These Sufi orders permeated the entire Muslim world, infusing the spirit of the Islamic revelation into the very flesh and blood of Muslim societies, Sunni and Shi‘i, from Morocco in the west to the Malay archipelago in the east, from the Urals in northern Europe to the sub-Saharan regions of southern Africa. It is difficult to exaggerate the influence of Sufism in the matrix of Islamic civilisation, and particularly in relation to the legal and theological traditions of Islam, which Sufism aerated and balanced with its emphasis on spiritual values. Suffice to quote this revealing comment by one of the foremost historians of ‘Islamicate’ civilisation, Marshall Hodgson, in his still unsurpassed multi-volume history, *The Venture of Islam* (2:125):

Sufism... became the framework within which all popular piety flowed together; its saints, dead and living, became

the guarantors of the gentle and co-operative sides of social life. Guilds commonly came to have Sufi affiliations. Men's clubs claimed the patronage of Sufi saints. And the tombs of local saints became shrines which almost all factions united in revering. It is probable that without the subtle leaven of the Sufi orders, giving to Islam an inward personal thrust and to the Muslim community a sense of participation in a common spiritual venture quite apart from anyone's outward power, the mechanical arrangements of the Shari'ah would not have maintained the loyalty essential to their effectiveness.

Wherever Sufism is present, the presence of Imam 'Ali will be felt. It was certainly no exaggeration when al-Junayd (d. 910), himself regarded as the 'master of the group' (*shaykh al-ta'ifa*) of the Sufis, claimed that 'Ali is 'our master as regards founding principles (*usul*),' and also as regards overcoming all 'trials and tribulations' (*bala*') of this world.

What we aim to do, within the limits of this modest book, is to give the reader a taste of some of the ways in which Imam 'Ali's life and thought reveal these 'founding principles' of spirituality; and how he can teach us to overcome whatever trials and tribulations this world may throw at us. Our efforts have been guided by the writings of two Sufi masters in particular: Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), known as 'al-Shaykh al-Akbar' ('the greatest master'); and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), known simply as 'Mawlana' ('our master'), or 'Mevlana' in Turkish—an epithet which is significant in relation to Imam 'Ali, who was designated by the Prophet as the *mawla* of all believing men and women. Both Ibn 'Arabi and Mawlana were profoundly attuned to the universal scope and mystical depth of Imam 'Ali's wisdom. In his magnum opus, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Ibn 'Arabi writes that at the dawn of creation, when God manifested His light to the primordial 'dust' (*haba*') in which the cosmos was contained in seed-form, 'that which possessed the greatest measure of receptivity to the light was

the Reality of Muhammad... [and] the nearest of all human beings to the [Muḥammadan Reality] is ‘Ali b. Abi Talib—may God be well pleased with him—imam of the world and the secret (*sirr*) of all the prophets’ (Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat* [1269/1853 ed.] 1:132).

Similarly, Rumi refers to Imam ‘Ali as ‘the pride of every prophet and every saint’ (*Mathnawi*, 1:3723). We shall turn repeatedly to Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, and occasionally to poems in his *Diwan-i Shams* and passages in his *Discourses*, for help in understanding certain principles embodied, enacted, or elliptically stated by Imam ‘Ali. The final narrative in volume 1 of the *Mathnawi* presents us with a magnificent portrait of Imam ‘Ali, brimming with revealing insights, mystical implications and imaginative trajectories. In the course of this book, we shall refer to some of the precious ideas expressed in this inspired poetic portrait of Imam ‘Ali.



Unfortunately, the controversial issues surrounding Imam ‘Ali are not only a question of history. They have indeed generated heated debate for over a millennium, but, in our times, they have resurfaced in a virulent and despicable manner. It is not a question here of blaming one side or the other; rather, it is incumbent upon all reasonable people to decry the fanatics and extremists of both sides, and to strengthen the bonds of understanding that exist between the overwhelming majority, that is, the (often too) silent, moderate majority within both Sunni and Shi‘i Islam. The disagreements between Shi‘is and Sunnis are insignificant in comparison with the common ground which they share. This commonality becomes clearer when seen in the light of the rich contribution that both schools have made to the exposition of the essential principles of the Islamic revelation, and to their crystallisation in the diverse arts, crafts, cultural and literary traditions of Muslim societies. Theological differences of opinion are marginalised

both by the wisdom of the spiritual dimensions of Islam, and by the beauty of the 'civilisational' achievements of Muslim cultures worldwide.

In this context, it is important to stress that there is complete agreement between Sunnis and Shi'is as regards the three quintessential principles of Islamic faith, expressed as follows by one of the leading Shi'i theologians of our times, Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani:

- ◊ belief in the oneness of God (*tawhid*);
- ◊ belief in the Qur'an as God's Revelation through Muhammad as His final Messenger (*risala*);
- ◊ belief in the Resurrection of the soul, and Judgement in the Hereafter (*ma'ad*). (Sobhani, 144)

Just as there is a consensus among all schools of thought in Islam on these definitive tenets, there is, likewise, complete agreement about that which essentially defines 'Ali ibn Abi Talib: his sanctity (*walaya*), in comparison with which all theological, historical and political differences of opinion pale into insignificance. His sanctity eclipses all the other elements of his story. The sanctity he embodied is of a universal order, for it is compounded of spiritual principles which transcend time and space, religion and culture. So, when thinking of Imam 'Ali, we should always bear in mind the distinction between the particular and the universal, the timeless and the time-bound, the essential and the secondary, the principal and the phenomenal. This will help us to see the vast gulf, indeed, the incommensurability, between the contingent phenomena which make up the outward destiny of Imam 'Ali, on the one hand, and the transcendent principles that articulate his inner sanctity, on the other. It will also help us to appreciate the inspiring way in which the light of his sanctity triumphed over the shadows of this lower world; and it can help us to translate his triumph 'in the past' into

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practical lessons in the present, lessons which teach us how to address our own personal challenges, surmount our own particular difficulties, and make progress in our own quest to be faithful to our true nature, our *fitra*, ‘according to which God created all human beings’ (Q 30:30).

The Light of Sanctity and the Veil of History

The aim of this book is to disclose some of the essential features of Imam 'Ali's sanctity, at the same time as presenting a brief account of the most significant events that are recorded in the outer chronicles of his life. We will try to interlace this short history with intimations of the Imam's inner mystery. What we mean by his 'mystery' is, basically, his sanctity, a quality which is unknowable in its essence, being rooted in the mystery of divinity itself, source of all sanctification and holiness; but which can be evoked or 'tasted' through its manifestations, and, in the case of the Imam, through his actions, teachings and his personality. In other words, we wish to encourage the reader to probe the mystery behind Imam 'Ali's persona, understanding the sanctity at the core of his persona as being both revealed and, paradoxically, concealed by the phenomena constituting his outward life. According to one etymology given for its Latin root, the word *persona* means 'mask'. The idea here is derived from actors on stage in Roman times: one has to discern the nature of the actor from the sound (*sonus*), the voice, that comes through (*per*) the mask. So *persona* has come to mean the role played by an actor in a play. Similarly, in respect of Imam 'Ali, the portrait of the person painted by the historical record is but a mask,

a veil, through which we must make an effort to discern the sanctifying light (*nur al-walaya*) of this extraordinary being.

We will try to see his time-bound story in the light of his timeless wisdom, rather than allowing our view of this spiritual wisdom to be distorted by the contingent phenomena of mundane history. If we do this, we shall have a better chance of glimpsing the light of his sanctity through the veil of history. There is, however, an organic unity between his inner life and his outer comportment, between his spiritual wisdom and the enactment of this wisdom in his life in the world. The mysteries and trajectories opened up by Imam 'Ali's teachings are thus, as it were, embedded or encoded within his history; when we approach his life in this manner, history can help to reveal rather than conceal the metaphysical core of his teachings. The 'voice' of timeless wisdom and profound mystery might then be heard, coming through the 'mask' of chronological time and contingent history.

Mawla 'Ali

As we shall see in the following chapter, the Prophet famously declared at a pool called Ghadir Khumm: 'For whomever I am the *mawla*, 'Ali is his *mawla*.' The word *mawla* can be translated, in this context, as 'master' or 'patron'. As the Qur'an says: 'Know that God is your *mawla*: the most excellent *mawla*!...' (8:40). Linking this verse to the Ghadir declaration, we might say that God is declaring that whoever considers Him their *mawla* must consider *both* the Prophet and 'Ali as their *mawla*. This hierarchy of spiritual 'patronage' is based on the principle of *walaya*, a principle that is both unique and unifying. The two words *mawla* and *wali* share the same root, and are in fact synonyms; they both mean 'possessor of *walaya*' (in addition to several other meanings). It is important here to address the meaning of *walaya*, as this is axiomatic

for our understanding of the sanctity of Imam ‘Ali, the most important key for unlocking the spiritual treasure of his mystery. It cannot be translated by a single word in English, as it connotes the following meanings: sanctity, guardianship, patronage, authority, proximity, initiatic power, friendship, loving devotion, orientation, affiliation. One who has this quality is called a *wali*, the plural of which is *awliya*: these ‘friends of God’ are what would be called ‘saints’ in English, although the two notions only partly overlap, there being significant differences between the Islamic conception of *walaya* and the Christian idea of sainthood (see for discussion, Chodkiewicz, *Seal, passim*). In Muslim belief, all the prophets are saints, but not all saints are prophets. It should be noted that the angels also refer to themselves as *awliya*, which, in this context, means ‘guiding friends’:

Those who say: ‘Our Lord is God,’ and are upright thereafter, the angels descend upon them [saying]: ‘Fear not, and grieve not; and hear the good news of the Garden which you are promised. We are your guiding friends, in the life of this world and in the Hereafter’ (Q 41:30).

Just as angelic forces guide, demonic forces deceive and mislead: these forces being referred to as the *awliya*’ of the devil (Q 4:76). God Himself is described as *al-Wali*, as we shall see in a moment. He is also described as *al-Mawla*, as just noted. In addition to calling ‘Ali the *mawla* of the believers, the Prophet also referred to him as the *wali* of the believers. In one narration, as found in an important compilation of Ahmad al-Nasa’i—writer of one of the four canonical compilations of *hadiths* in Sunni Islam—entitled *Khasa’is Amir al-mu’minin* (“The Special Qualities of the Leader of the Faithful”)—we read the following statement by the Prophet: “‘Ali is part of me and I am part of him, and he is the master (*mawla*) of every believer after me’ (Nasa’i, *Khasa’is*, 62).

What needs to be stressed here is that the quality of

walaya is at once divine in essence and human (as well as angelic) as regards manifestation, the divine quality being expressed through human intermediaries, by refraction. This unitive principle is understood from what is arguably the single most important verse of the Qur'an alluding to Imam 'Ali's sanctity: 'Truly your *Wali* is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe—those who observe prayer and pay the alms-tax while they bow down [in prayer]' (5:55). Many commentaries have been made on the meaning of this verse, but there is broad agreement among the exegetes, Sunni and Shi'a alike, that the occasion for its revelation was as follows. A beggar came into the mosque asking for alms; Imam 'Ali was performing the canonical prayer, but heard the beggar's request for help, and pointed to his ring, indicating that the beggar should take it and sell it. It is important to note he made this indication while in the bowing posture (*ruku'*) of the prayer (that is, the very posture referred to in 5:55, which is bowing down from the waist, as opposed to bowing down in prostration, one's head touching the earth, *sujud*). So 'Ali is being referred to, implicitly, through the plural form, 'the believers', the whole category of believers being as it were symbolised by this one 'believer'. As noted above, the Prophet referred to 'Ali as 'faith, in its entirety.'

The mystical import of this, and several other verses and prophetic statements, is that the quality of *walaya* pertains in the first instance to God, and then, by refraction, is manifested through the Prophet (and by implication all prophets) and through Imam 'Ali (and by implication all 'believers' who have attained the rank of sainthood, whatever their religion). This rank is described in the following *hadith qudsi*, a saying in which God speaks in the first person, through the Prophet; it is accepted as authentic by both Sunni and Shi'i scholars of *hadith* and is to be found in the canonical collections of both schools of thought:

My servant draws near to Me through nothing I love

more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I become his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he seizes, and his foot by which he walks.

This saying is preceded by the words: ‘whoever opposes a friend (*wali*) of Mine, I declare war on him.’ Therefore the extraordinary modes of cognition and action ascribed to the one whom God ‘loves’ are so many ways of describing the divine dynamic operating through the entire being of the *wali Allah*, the ‘friend of God’, the saint. He sees God because it is in truth God who ‘sees’ through him, inasmuch as he, the saint, has seen ‘through’ the veil of his own selfhood, realising the deepest truth of the first testimony: *la ilaha illa’Llah*, ‘no divinity (reality) but God (the sole Reality).’ Thus, as it is said in the Sufi tradition, none comes to see ‘Him to whom nothing is similar’ but ‘Him to whom nothing is similar’; in other words, none sees God but God. This fundamental principle of Islamic spirituality is articulated by Imam ‘Ali in the following aphorism, as simple as it is profound: ‘Know God through God’ (*i’rafu’Llah bi’Llah*). The vision which the saint enjoys is a vision of God by God through God: that is, as regards the subject of vision, as regards the object seen, and as regards the medium—the light—through which the vision takes place.

The light in question radiates from the illumination of divine *walaya*, for indeed, it is the very function of *walaya* to illuminate and enlighten: ‘God is the *Wali* of those who believe. He brings them forth from the darknesses into the Light’ (Q 2:257). If God, as *al-Wali*, brings enlightenment to the believers, so too does the saint as *wali Allah*, or rather: God alone brings enlightenment, whether through direct Revelation, or mediated through His ‘friends’, the prophets and the saints, whose complete self-effacement before God renders them, in some indefinable but nonetheless palpable

way, transparent to the light of God, the only light there is: 'God is the light of the Heavens and the earth' (Q 24:35).

The Prophet makes a remarkable statement about Imam 'Ali—a *hadith* found in the collections of both Shi'i and Sunni Islam: 'Looking at the face of 'Ali is an act of worship' (*al-nazar ila wajhi 'Ali 'ibada*). The most obvious meaning of this (at first sight) baffling statement is that seeing a saint reminds one of God, and being reminded of God (or simply: remembering God) is an act of worship. One thinks here of the contemplative function of icons in Christian worship (see for discussion Williams, 2002), and of the role of *darshan*, the 'witnessing' of a holy person or divine image in Hinduism (see Eck, 2007). Indeed, according to the Qur'an, remembrance of God is the greatest act of worship: 'Establish the prayer (*al-salat*); truly the prayer keeps one away from shameful and wrong deeds. But the remembrance of God is greatest (*wala-dhikru'Llahi akbar*)' (29:45). So, on the simplest level of contemplation, if looking at the face of this great saint induces a state of remembrance of God, it can be referred to as an act of worship. As the Prophet said, describing the 'friends of God', *awliya' Allah*: 'When they are seen, God is remembered.'

The repercussions of this act of worship will vary according to the depth of the comprehension, and the quality of the contemplation, of the person engaging in this implicit act of worship. Most importantly, perhaps, the devotee should be aware that 'Ali's spiritual station as the *wali Allah*, the saint or beloved 'friend' of God, is an embodiment or exteriorisation of the inner reality of the Prophet—the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyya*. According to the mystical tradition of Islam, *walaya* is the inner dimension of prophethood (*batin al-nubuwwa*). Understanding this inner relationship will help the devotee to see that the mystery in the affirmation, *'Aliyyun wali Allah*, 'Ali is the Friend of God,' leads to a more profound comprehension of the meaning of the second testimony of Islam: *Muhammadun rasul Allah*, 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' The inner

reality or mystery of the ‘Messenger’, is that he is a perfect revelation or manifestation of God. The divine Reality which is absolutely unknowable in Its Essence makes Its Names and Qualities knowable through the mirror of the Messenger. So, the inaccessible transcendence of the Essence—expressed in the formula *la ilaha illa’Llah*—is compensated by the manifestation of the Names and Qualities of the Essence reflected by the Messenger, thereby making these divine Qualities both accessible to human beings and assimilable by them. The Prophet is the embodiment both of *walaya*, the inner dimension of prophethood, and of prophethood itself, *nubuwwa*. Whereas Imam ‘Ali is the embodiment of *walaya*, not of *nubuwwa*. He therefore makes more explicit that which is implicit or hidden in the Prophet’s prophethood: hence the many sayings of Imam ‘Ali which relate to the esoteric dimension, the inner aspect of the Prophet’s message, and of the Prophet’s nature, pertaining to the *haqiqa*, spiritual reality. In his allusions to his own mystery, then, Imam ‘Ali is unavoidably alluding, *a fortiori*, to the mystery of the Prophet, to the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyya*, or the *Nur Muhammadiyya*, ‘the Muhammadan Light.’

Imam ‘Ali thus helps us to understand how the mystery of divinity, the ultimate *Haqiqa*, is at least partially opened up by the mystery of the Prophet, the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyya*; and how the mystery of *walaya*, accessible in principle to every human being, evokes a synthesis of the mysteries of divinity, prophethood, and humanity. All three mysteries pertain to beauty, *husn*: the divine Nature is described in terms of the ‘most beautiful Names’ of God (*al-asma’ al-husna*, see Q 17:110 *et passim*); the Prophet is not just an exemplar, but a ‘beautiful’ role-model (*uswa hasana*, see Q 33:21); and every believer is bound to follow the Prophet for the sake of that beauty of soul, *ihsan* (literally, ‘making beautiful’) which enables the soul to consummate its love of God, such love being the very reason for following the Prophet: ‘Say [O Prophet, to the people]: If you love God, follow me; God will love you’

(Q 3:31). Hence the prophetic saying: 'Assume the character-traits of God (*takhallaqu bi-akhlaqi'Llah*),' alluding to these three degrees of spiritual beauty.

The Beauty of Truth

'Know the Truth, and then you will know its people (*ahl*),' the Imam tells us. Do not think you can come to the Truth, he adds, simply by knowing 'its people.' Again: 'look at what is said, not who has said it.' In relation to the phenomenon constituted by Imam 'Ali, then, if we wish to discern his true reality (*haqiqah*), we can only do so in the measure that we have assimilated the Truth as such, *al-Haqq*.

So our search for deeper significance in the life of Imam 'Ali cannot be divorced from our own personal quest for meaning; on the contrary, our own quest can help us to see him and ourselves in the light of the spiritual Truth, which Imam 'Ali never ceased to stress in his teachings. He wishes us to cultivate and deepen our own discernment, rather than simply engage in praise and imitation of those who are deemed to be enlightened, those who may be called 'the people of the Truth.' While it is no doubt true that, in our spiritual quest, our initial orientation towards the Truth requires teachers and guides, the point the Imam is making in these sayings is that we must make an active effort to realise, 'to make real' (through *tahqiq*) within our hearts the truths that our guides are teaching us. Such truths given to us from 'without' awaken us, making us aware that those truths and the realities to which they correspond, are already within our deepest consciousness. Then we will be able to see who the 'people of Truth' are: we will have discovered our own inner discernment, recognising in such souls as Imam 'Ali a perfect embodiment of the Truth which we have already recognised, to some degree, within ourselves. Our inner discernment will also reveal to us the

incommensurable chasm separating our own 'embodiment' of the Truth from his: we will see our own imperfections more clearly in the mirror of his perfection.

The aim of divine revelation is to remind us of truths we have forgotten. According to Sermon 1 of the *Nahj al-balagha*:

God sent to humanity His messengers, dispatching prophets in succession, in order to claim from His creatures the fulfilment of the covenant of His creation; to remind them of His forgotten graces; to remonstrate with them through communication [of His Revelation]; *to unearth for them the buried treasures of the intellects*; and to show them signs of omnipotence: the outspread earth laid low beneath them, provisions which give them life, finalities which mete out death; ailments hastening their decrepitude, and a succession of events that flow over them (emphasis added).

It is as if the Imam is saying: enlighten yourself by means of the twofold light God has already given you: the light revealed through scripture, and the light breathed by God into your own intellect, resulting in 'treasures' which are, for the majority, buried under the rubble of forgetfulness. The Truth given to us by God through prophetic revelation, and by our teachers through formal instruction, must resonate with, and thus awaken, the Truth that resides in the depths of our own heart. And it is only because they resonate with that inner Truth that the spiritual, intellectual and ethical precepts imparted from 'on high' stimulate the aspiration for an ever more profound conformity to the Truth, and an ever more transformative assimilation of the Truth.

This is one of the most important of all the intellectual principles taught to us by Imam 'Ali. It opens up to us the means by which we can attain the spiritual essence of the intellect, leading us away from a merely cerebral conception of things to a heartfelt realisation of the ultimate reality of

things. This, in accordance with the well-known supplication of the Prophet: 'O Lord, show us the ultimate reality of things (*haqa'iq al-umur*),' and with the simpler expression of the same prayer for pure objectivity: 'Our Lord, show us things as they are' (*Rabbana arina'l-ashya' ka-ma hiya*). To the degree that we are shown things as they truly are, we shall, in that measure see that what the prophets and the saints manifest is our own deepest reality. Rumi teaches us this lesson in a most revealing manner, in a reflection on one of the deeper meanings of the verse 'Truly there has come unto you a Prophet from yourselves (*minkum*)' (Q 9:128):

In the composition of man all modes of knowledge were originally commingled so that his spirit might show forth all hidden things, as limpid water shows forth all that is under it... and all that is above it, reflected in the substance of water. Such is its nature, without treatment or training. But when it was mingled with earth or other colours, that property and that knowledge was parted from it and forgotten by it. Then God Most High sent forth Prophets and Saints, like a great, limpid water such as delivers out of darkness and accidental colouration every mean and dark water that enters into it. Then it remembers; when the soul of man sees itself unsullied, it knows for sure that so it was in the beginning, pure, and it knows that those shadows and colours were mere accidents. Remembering its state before those accidents supervened, it says, *This is that sustenance which we were provided with before* (Q 2:25). The Prophets and the Saints therefore remind him of his former state; they do not implant anything new in his substance. Now, every dark water that recognises that great water, saying, 'I come from this and I belong to this,' mingles with that water... It was on this account that God declared: *Truly there hath come unto you a Prophet from yourselves* (9:128) (Rumi, *Discourses*, 44-45).

He reinforces the teaching in another discourse: ‘Those who acknowledge the truth see themselves in the Prophet and hear their own voice proceeding from him and smell their own scent proceeding from him.’ To deny the Prophet is tantamount to denying one’s own reality. ‘No man denies his own self. Therefore the Prophets say to the community, “We are you and you are we; there is no strangeness [i.e., alienation or otherness] between us”’ (*Discourses*, 227).



So, following the Prophet’s example, Imam ‘Ali’s intention is to stimulate and awaken our intelligence, helping us to see the Truth for ourselves, using our own intellectual, spiritual, and ethical resources, and not simply blindly imitating (through *taqlid*) some putative authority. To use one’s ‘ethical’ resources for the sake of deepening our intelligence sounds strange to the modern ear: what has ethics got to do with intelligence? It has everything to do with it, for in the Imam’s perspective, the intelligence cannot realise its full, God-given potential in the absence of ethical purity; if there is no beauty of soul—that inner beauty which is woven out of all the essential virtues—there can be no depth of intelligence. If the soul is lacking in virtue, the intellect will be stunted, or disfigured.

‘The excellence of the intellect,’ Imam ‘Ali tells us, ‘resides in its capacity to perceive the beauty of outwardly manifest things (*zawahir*), and inwardly hidden ones (*bawatin*).’ In other words, one must retrace the outward forms of beauty to their invisible archetypes, which are located both within the heart and in Paradise—both ‘places’ being symbols of degrees of consciousness, the one subjective and microcosmic, the other objective and macrocosmic. This can be seen as an elaboration upon the prophetic teaching: ‘God is beautiful and He loves beauty.’ The true intellectual sees the beauty of all things, formal and outward, essential and inward. The beauty thus perceived radiates through his intelligence into his character,

deepening and enriching all the fundamental virtues. The intellectual is therefore not someone who has accumulated a huge amount of data and has an impressive power of recall. Rather, the truly intelligent person is one in whose soul all the essential virtues are present—at least to some degree (through good intention and sincere effort), if not in all their plenitude; because the virtues contribute in a vital way to the process by which the spiritual essence of the intelligence is brought to fruition.

There are many sayings of the Imam in which the intellect is described as deficient if it lacks such and such a virtue—humility, sincerity, forbearance, courtesy, restraint, generosity, kindness, patience, contentment, gratitude, and so on. The intellect is also deficient if it lacks joy: the most joyous of people is the intellectual, Imam 'Ali tells us. The intellectual is also one from whom love radiates. 'Loving (*al-tawaddud*) is half of the intellect,' he says. Imam 'Ali cannot but manifest love, because he objectively perceives and subjectively assimilates beauty; and just as God 'loves beauty,' the Imam cannot help loving beauty, to which his love is drawn by spiritual magnetism. Without the radiance of love, and without beauty of soul, there can be no completeness or integrity of intelligence. By contrast, if the intelligence is activated and deepened by love and beauty, it will more acutely perceive the truth of the prophetic teaching that 'God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.' The intelligence will then be enriched by the harmonious interplay between knowledge, love and virtue, all three qualities opening the 'eye' of the heart, allowing it to see God: 'Eyes see Him not according to outward vision; rather, hearts see Him according to the realities of faith (*haqa'iq al-iman*),' the Imam tells us, in a statement which can be read as the positive counterpart to this verse of the Qur'an, describing the reason why it is that disbelievers do not believe in God: 'It is not the eyes that are blind; rather, blind are the hearts within their breasts' (22:46).

If, however, these virtues and qualities are lacking in the soul, then an intelligent person, objectively aware of his limitations, will engage in what the Prophet called the ‘greatest struggle’ (*al-jihad al-akbar*), the spiritual battle against the vices or faults of the soul. In the words of Imam ‘Ali: ‘Struggling against the soul through knowledge—such is the mark of the intellect.’ In this connection Imam ‘Ali teaches us something most inspiring about the principle of *rahma*, which we can translate not just as mercy and compassion but as *loving* mercy and compassion, the element of ‘love’ being essential to the meaning of the word, which is etymologically related to the word for ‘womb’ (*rahim*). A clear evocation of the maternal love that is inherent in this notion was given by the Prophet, when, during the peaceful conquest of Mecca, he compared the *rahma* of a mother for her new-born babe with the *rahma* of God towards all human beings—the latter of course being infinitely greater, but the point is that both maternal love and divine love are manifestations of the same essential quality, emanating from the divine and inspiring the human. According to a holy utterance, in which God speaks in the first person, ‘I derived My Name, *al-Rahman*, from the word *rahim* (womb).’

Against this background, Imam ‘Ali’s description of the greatest spiritual struggle is most revealing: he tells us that it is *rahma* which will empower the intellect in its struggle against the soul’s vices and faults. Within the soul, the intellect is the commander of the ‘forces’ of *al-Rahman*; while egoistic desire (*hawa*) is the commander of the ‘forces’ of *al-Shaytan* (the Devil). Through this image he teaches us that in this, the greatest of all struggles, we must always have a spiritual sense of the infinite power flowing from divine mercy. It is not our own efforts, however indispensable they be, that will enable us to triumph in the greatest struggle of all; it is the absolute power of God, manifesting as merciful love and compassion, which will give us victory: our efforts serve to

attract this empowering grace, in the measure of our moral and spiritual conformity to the requirements of divine mercy. 'The dispensing of mercy brings down upon one [divine] mercy,' the Imam tells us; and again: 'I am astounded by the person who hopes for mercy from one above him, while he is not merciful to those beneath him.'

This emphasis on *rahma* helps us to understand what otherwise might be a paradox concerning the character of Imam 'Ali. For, on the one hand, he was renowned for his rigorous—some would say severe—sense of justice, together with all the virtues that one associates with a warrior of his formidable reputation, virtues such as courage, discipline, vigilance and so on. However, on the other hand, we are told in the sources that he had a 'gentle disposition' (*linjanib*), that he led with 'a light touch', that he was known for the 'charismatic ease of his character' (*sajahat al-akhlaq*) and for the 'joyfulness of his countenance' (*bishr al-wajh*). As we shall see in Chapter 3, these character traits of Imam 'Ali became proverbial, to the point that his enemies at the Battle of Siffin exploited his gentle qualities in their propaganda campaign against him: such a man, they said, was too light-hearted to be taken seriously as a leader. What his enemies apparently failed to realise was that Imam 'Ali's happy disposition was the outward expression of an other-worldly joy, which he was constantly experiencing in the depths of his heart, despite the terrible trials he was enduring. The Imam tells us that his heart is already in Paradise, only his body is 'at work' in this world. He is one who rejoices in his 'intimacy with the spirit of certainty (*ruh al-yaqin*), making easy what the extravagant find harsh, and befriending that by which the ignorant are alienated.' He is immersed in the depths of *spiritual* joy through his intimate contact with the *spirit* of certainty (*ruh al-yaqin*), because that of which he is certain is nothing other than God, and God is pure *rahma*: mercy and compassion, inseparable from love, beauty and beatitude. Intimate contact with the source of

infinite beatitude imparts supernatural happiness; that is, it bestows such a profound degree of spiritual joy and inner peace upon the heart, upon the inmost core of consciousness, that no outward affliction from the world can unsettle it. Only the outer surface of the soul can be affected by outward tribulation, the heart remaining at peace. ‘The believers are well in all circumstances,’ the Prophet said. In other words, the *true* believer, one in whose heart faith has become deepened into certainty, is permanently in a state of divine remembrance, and thereby at peace: ‘Those who believe and whose hearts are at peace in the remembrance of God: is it not in the remembrance of God that hearts are at peace?’ (Q 13:28).

The Speaking Qur’an

‘The Qur’an consists of a book inscribed, between two covers; it speaks not with a tongue, it cannot do without an interpreter’ (*tarjuman*). Imam ‘Ali was the interpreter of the Qur’an par excellence for his generation, following the death of the Prophet. He claimed that ‘Not one verse has been revealed of which I know not where it was revealed, what it concerns and its subject matter.’ According to several narrations, he knew the circumstances of the revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and the inner meaning of every verse; all abrogating and abrogated verses; those of definite (*muhkam*) and those of polyvalent (*mutashabih*) meaning (referring to 3:7); and those of general (*‘amm*) or particular (*khass*) applicability. He taught, following and reinforcing the Prophet’s teachings, that the Qur’an has a variety of aspects (*wujuh*), each verse having seven or seventy levels of meaning. He claimed he could load seventy camels with the pages of a commentary he could give on the *Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Qur’an, consisting of seven verses. This claim is not quite so fantastic as may appear at first sight, given the multiple levels of meaning in each verse of the

Qur'an, the polysemic nature of the Arabic language (and thus the semantic fields of significance opened up by virtually every single word of the revealed Speech), and in the light of the following hermeneutical principle of the Imam, which was to establish an entire genre of exegesis known as *tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an* ('the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an'): 'The Book of God is that by means of which you see, speak and hear. Parts of it speak through other parts, and some parts of it bear witness to other parts.'

If therefore we wish to explore any idea expressed in any verse of the Qur'an, we need to study many other verses which contain meanings and implications which have a bearing on that idea. We need, on the one hand, to have a comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'an; and on the other hand we need to exercise our intuition in relation to the potentially unlimited allusions, hints, and intimations (*isharat*) that each verse, and each word of the revealed discourse contains. These allusions fly like sparks from the words and verses in one part of the Qur'an, casting light on nuances of meaning being expressed, explicitly or implicitly, in other parts of the Qur'an. We are thus plunged into an unfathomably profound and unimaginably intricate nexus of interwoven themes and reciprocally illuminating truths. We see how the Qur'an is indeed 'a clarification of *everything*' (16:89; emphasis added); how it contains the seeds of the solution to every conceivable question pertaining to metaphysics, cosmology, spirituality, psychology, ethics, law and society; how someone like Imam 'Ali could indeed write camel-loads of pages of commentary on just seven verses of the text. All that exists in the cosmos, and beyond it, is either expressed or intimated within a matrix of discourse, a revealed tapestry woven out of principles, images, allusions symbols, similitudes, and parables intertwining in infinitely varied patterns: 'And indeed, We have expounded in this Qur'an every kind of image-similitude (*mathal*) for mankind' (18:54).

Imam 'Ali was, however, much more than just a commentator and interpreter of the Qur'an: he referred to himself as 'the speaking Qur'an' (*al-Qur'an al-natiq*). He made this claim when his opponents at the Battle of Siffin (see Chapter 3) hoisted pages of the Qur'an on their spears, appealing to the Word of God for arbitration. He was not merely engaging in battlefield rhetoric. In another saying, he tells us: 'Everything in the Qur'an is in the *Fatiha*; everything in the *Fatiha* is in the *Basmala* [the formula of consecration, the first verse of the chapter: *Bismi'Llah al-Rahman al-Rahim*, 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful']; everything in the *Basmala* is in the *ba*' [the letter 'b']; everything in the *ba*' is in the dot [beneath it]: and I am that dot.'

We may be able to understand better what the Imam means by this extraordinary claim, to be one with the quintessence of the entire Qur'an, if we take into account his application of the concept of *tajalli*, 'Self-disclosure', or theophany (the manifestation of God through phenomenal form and spiritual energy). This notion can be complementarily juxtaposed with *tanzil* (or *nuzul*), which is the 'descent' of the Qur'an, the revelation, or bringing into the world, of the divine discourse. To refer to the Qur'an as a *tajalli* means that it is not simply the revelation of the message of God; rather, it means that the Qur'an is, in and of itself, a theophanic Self-disclosure, a manifestation of something of the very Being of God, of the Divine 'substance' or 'energy', mediated by melodic sound and meaningful speech. The Imam says: 'He has theophanised Himself to them [His creatures] in His Book' (*fa-tajjala lahum fi kitabihi*). He also describes God as one who has theophanised Himself (*mutajalli*), to His creatures *by means of* His creatures (*li-khalqihi bi-khalqihi*). The whole cosmos, in other words, manifests the divine to the creatures, in a way analogous to the manifestation of God to His creatures through the Qur'an: both the cosmos and the Qur'an are modes of theophany. The Qur'an can thus be concretely

perceived—and not just abstractly conceived—as a sonoral and textual recapitulation of the entire cosmos; while, for its part, the cosmos can be seen as the Qur'an writ large.

Just as Imam 'Ali indicated the correspondence between the Qur'an and the whole of creation, so the Prophet alluded to an equally mysterious correspondence, between the Qur'an and the Imam: 'The Qur'an is incumbent upon you, so take it as an *imam* and a leader (*qa'ida*).'⁷ This *hadith* can be read most profitably in the light of another, more famous one, in which the Prophet refers to his legacy: 'Truly, I am leaving behind amongst you the two weighty things (*al-thaqalayn*): the Book of God and my Ahl al-Bayt, they will not be parted from each other until they return to me at *al-hawd* [the paradisaal pool].'⁸ Similarly, we have this saying of the Prophet: 'Ali is with the Qur'an and the Qur'an is with 'Ali. They will not separate from each other until they return to me at *al-hawd*.' The spiritual substance of 'Ali is at one with that of the Qur'an, such that he could without exaggeration call himself a 'speaking Qur'an.' However, according to Imam 'Ali, each human being can be regarded, in one sense, as a divinely revealed 'book'; for the human being, made in the image of God, is properly speaking a theophany. As we have already seen, God makes Himself manifest, as *al-mutajalli*, to His creatures by means of His creatures; so each human being is a microcosm, a 'small world', by means of which God reveals Himself. This idea is marvellously expressed in one of Imam 'Ali's most famous couplets:

Although you see yourself as an insignificant speck,
 within you the entire universe is encapsulated;
 You are thus yourself the *meaningful book*
 whose letters make manifest that which is concealed.
 (*Diwan*, 72.)

Imam 'Ali gives us another clue to his own nature and to the transformative impact of the Qur'an, what one might call its 'realisational power', in the following saying. He describes

the recitation of the Qur'an as a process of infusing the quality of prophethood into the soul: 'For one who recites the Qur'an, it is as if prophethood is being woven into his very being (*fa-ka'annama udrijat al-nubuwwa bayna janbayhi*), except that he cannot be the recipient of the Revelation [i.e., cannot be regarded as a prophet in the strict sense].' The one who recites the Qur'an with his heart, and not just with his tongue, is thereby opening himself up to the theurgic power of the revealed speech fulgurating with the divine presence. It is as if he were being inwardly transformed into a prophetic being; but only one who receives the Revelation directly and immediately from God is a prophet in the full sense; all of those who receive the Revelation as mediated by the Prophet cannot therefore be qualified as prophets, hence the phrase *ka'annama*, 'as if'. This phrase comes again in a saying attributed to the Prophet: 'For one who recites a third of the Qur'an, it is as if he were given a third of prophethood; and he who recites two-thirds of the Qur'an, it is as if he were given two-thirds of prophethood; and he who recites the whole of the Qur'an, it is as if he were given the whole of prophethood.' Recitation of the revealed discourse is akin to imbibing from the celestial fountain whence the Revelation flows, and being inwardly transformed by this wine of divine Speech *into* the wine itself. As the great German mystic, Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), says in a different religious context, but with a metaphysical logic that applies whatever be the religious context: 'The bodily food we take is changed into us, but the spiritual food we receive changes us into itself' (Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, 1:50). This spiritual transformation is wonderfully expressed by Imam 'Ali in the following esoteric saying:

Truly, God has a drink for His friends (*awliya'ih*). When they drink it, they are intoxicated (*sakaru*); and when they are intoxicated, they are enraptured (*tarabu*); and when they are enraptured, they are blessed (*tabu*); and when

they are blessed they dissolve (*dhabu*); and when they dissolve, they are free (*khalasu*); and when they are free, they devote themselves purely (*akhlasu*); and when they devote themselves purely, they seek (*talabu*); and when they seek, they find (*wajadu*); and when they find, they arrive (*wasalu*); and when they arrive, they are at one (*ittasalu*); there is no difference between them and their Beloved.

The mystical union being referred to here is the ultimate mystery, which is ineffable and inexpressible. As for union with the Qur'an, this relates to the process of becoming one with the *tajalli*, the theophanic self-manifestation, and not just self-disclosure, of the divine Reality. Rumi helps us to understand what this can mean.

Ask about the meaning of the Qur'an from the Qur'an
alone;

And from that one who has set fire to his desires;

And has sacrificed himself to the Qur'an and is laid low;

So that the Qur'an has become the essence of his spirit.

The oil that has sacrificed itself totally to the rose—smell
either the oil or the rose: as you please!

(*Mathnawi*, 5: 3127–3130.)

Here, the distinction is drawn between the form of the human being—the 'oil'—and the essence of the Qur'anic spirit, the 'rose'. The person who has totally extinguished himself in the divine spirit of the Qur'an is described as one who has 'set fire to his desires,' a vivid description of the state of *fana'*, extinction of selfhood. The scent of the oil is one with the scent of the rose: two different forms, but united by the same essence, the same fragrance—the same *baraka* ('blessing'), one might say. In one of the poems from his *Diwan*, Rumi pleads with us to enter into this state, and become one with the Qur'an:

You love me, I'll make you perplexed, listen attentively!

Build less, as I ruin you, listen attentively!

If you build hundreds of cells like bees and ants,

I'll make you deserted, homeless and alone, listen attentively!

You endeavour that people, both men and women, may become dazzled by you,

I intend to dazzle and bewilder you, listen attentively!

...

Now, diminish your recitations, stay silent and have patience,

So that I may read and make you identical with the Qur'an, listen attentively!

(*Kulliyat*, 5: 56–57, no.2204)

What, then, does it mean to become one with the Qur'an? Rumi gives this answer:

When you have fled (for refuge) to the Qur'an of God, you have mingled with the spirit of the prophets (*rawan-i anbiya'*).

The Qur'an is the states of the prophets (*hal-hay-yi anbiya'*), the fishes of the holy sea of (Divine) Majesty.

(*Mathnawi* 1:1537–1538).

According to Rumi, becoming identical to the Qur'an means, among other things, becoming one with 'the spirit' of all the prophets, and this implies assimilating *all* the states of consciousness of *all* of the prophets. It is, in other words, to become one with the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyya*, that spiritual reality of the Muhammadan substance to which the Prophet referred when he said that he was a prophet while Adam was still being moulded out of water and clay. This is the same reality to which Jesus refers when he said: 'Before Abraham was, I am' (John, 8:58): it is Jesus insofar as he is identified with the Logos, the 'Word', which was 'in the beginning'

and 'from which all things were made' (see John, 1:1–3); just as the Prophet is describing himself insofar he is identified with that *Haqiqa* through which creation was manifested. Just as the Qur'an comprises the spiritual substance and states of consciousness of all previous prophets, so too does the Muhammadan Reality, the *batin* of *nubuwwa*, in other words: the *walaya*, emanating from God as *al-Wali*, and being manifested through all of God's 'friends', the prophets and the saints. Ibn 'Arabi affirms the same principle in a rather elliptical way, by saying that the spirit of the Qur'an manifests itself in form not only as the Book, but also as the man, Muhammad:

He who—among the members of his community who did not live during his epoch— wishes to see Muhammad, let him look at the Qur'an. There is no difference between looking at it and looking at God's Messenger. It is as though the Qur'an had clothed itself in a form of flesh named Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib (Chodkiewicz, *Seal*, 71).

If we note that the Prophet referred to 'Ali as being like his very self (*ka-nafsi*), it becomes easier to see the way in which the two selves are as one in their common spiritual substance, the *walaya* which, flowing from God, is divine and thus unique in its essence, while assuming infinitely diverse modes and degrees in the forms through which it traverses. The Prophet said to 'Ali: 'You are from me, and I am from you.' 'Ali is, quite evidently, 'from' the Prophet insofar as the immediate source of 'Ali's sanctity is the *walaya* coming from God through the Prophet. But the Prophet can also be seen as coming 'from' 'Ali if we appreciate that the Prophet is speaking symbolically: this is only insofar as 'Ali symbolises *walaya*, and he, the Prophet, symbolises *nubuwwa*, alone, without reference to the *walaya* that *nubuwwa* comprises at its heart. We are reminded here of the Prophet's famous designation of Fatima: *umm abiha*,

‘the mother of her father.’ For, even if the Prophet is always superior to the saint, in human terms, and the sanctity of the Prophet is always greater than the sanctity of the saint, nonetheless, the principle of *walaya* takes precedence over the principle of *nubuwwa*.

The relationships in question are more clearly seen when we recall that *al-Wali* is a name of God, whereas *al-Nabi* is not. In his *Fusus al-hikam*, Ibn ‘Arabi makes this point, and tells us that sainthood is ‘the encompassing, universal orbit, and this is why it does not end.’ By contrast, ‘law-giving prophethood and messengerhood, these do come to an end’ (Dagli, *Ringstones*, 152). *Walaya* pertains to ultimate Reality, whereas *nubuwwa* is specific and time-bound, determined by the specific needs and imperatives attendant upon a particular legislative function in respect of a given community. The knowledge which defines the prophet’s message, as prophet, is determined by the needs of his community. However, when a prophet expresses realities that fall outside the domain of the specific revealed Law (*shari‘a*) with which he is sent, he does so in his capacity as ‘a saint and a knower.’ So his station as being a knower is ‘more complete and more perfect’ than his station as a lawgiving prophet. Therefore, what is meant by the claim that the saint is superior to the prophet is that this is so within ‘a single individual’ (Dagli, *Ringstones*, 153): the prophet’s consciousness as a saint is superior to his consciousness as a prophet. This teaching comes through with particular clarity in the story of al-Khidr and Moses in the Surat al-Kahf (‘The Cave’, no. 18), to which we will be turning shortly.

In the light of these considerations, we may understand more deeply the meaning of the statement by Ibn ‘Arabi, cited above: that ‘Ali is ‘imam of the world and the secret (*sirr*) of all the prophets’ (*Futuhat* [1269/1853 ed.] 1:132); and Rumi’s reference to Imam ‘Ali as ‘the pride of every prophet and every saint’ (*Mathnawi*, 1:3723). All of the prophets take pride in ‘Ali

because he outwardly manifests the station of sanctity which at once transcends the station of their own prophethood, and defines the quintessence of their own inward reality. Let us note in this context another allusion to the mystery of Imam 'Ali, from a Persian commentary on one of the most important early manuals of Sufism, the *Kitab al-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf*, by Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (d. 990). The latter writes about the five founding fathers of Sufism: Imam 'Ali, his two sons, Imams Hasan and Husayn, then Imam 'Ali b. Husayn (Zayn al-'Abidin), and Imam Muhammad al-Baqir. In his commentary, Abu Ibrahim Mustamli Bukhari (d. 1042) says that 'Ali is 'the secret mystery of the gnostics (*sirr-i 'arifan*)'; and asserts that 'the whole Muslim community agree that he represents the breaths of inspiration of all the prophets (*anfas-i payghambaran*)' (cited in Lewisohn, *Ethics*, 113).

The following saying of the Prophet reveals—at least partially—the way in which Imam 'Ali can be seen as 'the pride of every prophet and every saint' and the 'secret of all the prophets':

He who wishes to see Adam as regards his knowledge,
 Noah as regards his obedience,
 Abraham as regards his friendship [with God],
 Moses as regards his awe [of God], and
 Jesus as regards his purity:
 Let him look at 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Seeing Through the Lens of *Ta'wil*

The Prophet made a distinction between the *tanzil* of the Qur'an and its *ta'wil*. The latter concerns the esoteric interpretation of the revealed Book, disclosing its spiritual essence, while the former describes its 'descent', the revelation of the form of the Book, its outward, self-evident meaning. The

Prophet distinguished between *tanzil* and *ta'wil* in the following prediction: 'One of you will fight for the sake of the *ta'wil* of the Scripture, as I have fought for the sake of its *tanzil*.' He did not name 'Ali, but rather, in the spirit of *ta'wil* itself, made an allusion (*ishara*) to him. Various companions asked, one after the other, if he would be the one in question. The Prophet replied in the negative to each of them. Then he said that the person who would fight for the *ta'wil* of the Qur'an would be the one who was mending his sandals. At that moment, this was precisely what 'Ali was doing. As we shall see, this prophecy was fulfilled in more than one way.

The principle of *ta'wil* draws our consciousness towards the inner significance of Scripture, from the *zahir* (the 'outwardly apparent') to the *batin* (the 'inwardly hidden'). But this interiorisation of scriptural revelation presupposes a particular state of mind, an intuitive cognitive predisposition, whereby not only scripture but the whole of existence is 'interpreted' according to spiritual or archetypal principles. Our consciousness needs to be oriented from the world of particular phenomena and material facts to the domain of universal archetypes and spiritual symbols.

This shift of focus is alluded to in the following verse of the Qur'an: 'We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own souls, until it be clear to them that He [or 'it'] is the Truth' (41:53). The Truth or the Real translates *al-Haqq*, one of the Names of God. As the great mystical philosopher Henry Corbin insisted, if we wish to perceive the spiritual reality of any phenomenon, we have to link outer, empirical perception to inner, spiritual consciousness. We need to read the 'signs' on the horizons of terrestrial geography as symbols of what resides in the spiritual topography of our own souls.

The notion of *ta'wil* takes us to the heart of the quest for the inner spiritual reality (*haqiqa*) of things, as the very root of the word, *awwala*, indicates: 'taking back to the beginning.' The beginning or origin of all things, *al-Awwal*,

'The First', is a Name of God. Looking at the past, in the spirit of *ta'wil*, is all about going back to the beginning, but it is also all about going to the end of all things. Both initiation and consummation are found in God: *al-Akhir*, 'The Last', is also a Name of God. For the spiritual processes of *ta'wil*, phenomena of the past and the future are contained in the inner space of the soul if our perspective on time is archetypal. That is, if we see history as a multi-layered stage upon which universal principles and archetypes manifest themselves rhythmically, rather than seeing history as a one-dimensional plane upon which isolated phenomena appear and disappear from moment to moment.

Imam 'Ali teaches us something about his own archetypal mystery in relation to Dhu'l-Qarnayn ('Possessor of two horns'), who is mentioned in the Surat al-Kahf ('The Cave'; see 18:83-98), often identified with Alexander the Great. When asked whether this person was a king or a prophet, Imam 'Ali replied in a manner that directs our attention away from the particularities of formal history and towards a universal archetype which manifests itself through different people in different times and places. First, he says that Dhu'l-Qarnayn was neither a king nor a prophet, but 'a slave who loved God and so was loved by God.' This is a double allusion to the archetype which he, Imam 'Ali, manifests. For the Prophet referred to 'Ali in just this way at the Battle of Khaybar (see Chapter 2), as one 'who loves God and His Messenger and is loved by God and His Messenger.' Secondly, it alludes to the principle of *walaya*: the *wali Allah* is the one who comes so close to God through voluntary devotions that God 'loves him'—this divine love investing and transfiguring all of the faculties and organs of the beloved devotee, as we saw above.

Then Imam 'Ali more directly refers to his own archetypal quality when he describes Dhu'l-Qarnayn as one who is raised up to his people, is struck by them 'on his right horn', and then placed by God into occultation for hundreds of years; raised

up again, struck by his people ‘on his left horn’, and then again placed into occultation for hundreds of years. The idea here is of a recurrent manifestation of an archetype, the function manifested taking priority over the person manifesting it, the universal archetype being more significant than its particular embodiment. Imam ‘Ali then adds: ‘and among you is one like him’—implying himself (see *Tafsir al-Qummi*, 2:15). One is reminded here of the Old Testament prophet Enoch (the Muslim ‘Idris’), who, on account of being loved by God, was raised up into Heaven and did not die. Genesis tells us that Enoch did not die, but simply ‘walked with God and he was no more, for God took him away’ (Gen. 5:24). Enoch’s profession was that of a cobbler who made and mended sandals (as noted by Amir-Moezzi, *Spirituality*, 320). It may not be a coincidence that, as noted above, when the Prophet designated the one who would ‘fight for *ta’wil*,’ he referred to ‘Ali not by name, but as ‘the one who is mending my sandals.’ Also, it is noteworthy that the ascension of Enoch/Idris is described in the Qur’an as an ascent to an ‘exalted place’, the Arabic phrase here evoking the name of ‘Ali: *makanan ‘aliyyan* (19:57).

Imam ‘Ali helps us to attune our sense of history (and of ‘his story’) to the supra-temporal domain of recurrent archetypes by referring to another prophetic figure who has the station of immortality: the prophet Elijah (in Greek, ‘Elias’; in Arabic, ‘Ilyas’). Imam ‘Ali says, in one of his most esoteric discourses (entitled *Khutbat al-bayan*, ‘the discourse which elucidates’): ‘I am he who in the Gospel is called Elijah.’ It is significant that he should have referred to the Gospel rather than the Old Testament, wherein Elijah figures in several places, most notably where he, like Enoch/Idris, is described as being taken directly to heaven without dying: ‘... there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire... and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven’ (2 Kings 2:11). Like Enoch, then, Elijah is regarded in the Jewish tradition as immortal. It is prophesied that before the Final Judgement,

Elijah will come forth again: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; lest I strike the land with total destruction' (Malachi, 4:5-6).

In referring explicitly to the Gospel, however, and not the Old Testament, the Imam appears to be drawing our attention to the way in which Jesus refers to Elijah, identifying him with St John the Baptist. Jesus asks the people who they saw when they went to see John: 'A prophet? Yes, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: "I will send my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you." [paraphrasing Malachi, 3:1].... And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear' (Matthew, 11:9-15). Also in the Gospel of St Matthew we find the disciples, after witnessing the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor (and witnessing Moses and Elijah by the side of Jesus), asking Jesus why the scribes of the scriptures say that Elijah must come before the Messiah. Jesus replies 'To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I say unto you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him.' The disciples then understood 'that he was talking to them about John the Baptist' (Matthew 17:10-13).

Jesus is clearly referring not to the individual prophet named Elijah, but to the spiritual function, the archetype which can be manifested through different individuals, in differing degrees of plenitude, and with differing accentuations of this or that facet of the archetype. One of the key aspects of the Elijah archetype is to prepare the way for the Messiah, which is precisely what St John the Baptist did in relation to Jesus, and what will be done by Elijah, 'the Tishbite' as he is called in Judaism, in relation to the Messiah still awaited by the Jews. Elijah paves the way for the Heavenly Peace to be inaugurated by the Messiah in the New Jerusalem (see Schaya,

‘Mission of Elias’). But this is not the only spiritual function of Elijah.

According to Jewish tradition, he is the invisible, immortal spiritual master who continues to guide and inspire those seekers whose sincere thirst for God attracts the corresponding grace of realisatory power. His role in this respect is particularly accentuated within the mystical tradition of Judaism, the Kabbalah. Gershom Scholem tells us that the visions and revelations of Elijah (*gilluy Eliyahu*) are invoked at key points in the development of the Jewish mystical tradition. This tradition is therefore regarded not only as that which was transmitted on earth, but also as ‘that which was received from the “celestial academy” above.’ Scholem helps us to appreciate the scope and the subtlety of the ways in which Elijah operates (and let us note: in the Jewish tradition, Elijah is also regarded as an angel):

The Prophet Elijah is for rabbinic Judaism the guardian of the sacred tradition. In the end, with the arrival of the Messiah, he will bring the divergent opinions of the teachers of the Torah into harmony. To the pious, he now reveals himself on diverse occasions in the marketplace, on the road, and at home... It is by no means the mystics alone who encounter him: he may just as well reveal himself to the simple Jew in distress as to one perfect in saintliness and learning (Scholem, *Origins of Kabbalah*, 35–36).

In order to help us see how this relates to Imam ‘Ali, it would be useful to turn to one of Henry Corbin’s great statements concerning the ‘universal and liberating function of the active imagination’:

...To typify, to transmute everything into an Image-symbol (*mithal*) by perceiving the correspondence between the hidden and the visible. And this typification (*tamthil*) of immaterial realities in the visible realities that

manifest them, accomplished by *ta'wil*, as the function par excellence of the Active Imagination, constitutes the renewal, the typological recurrence of similitudes (*tajdid al-muthul*), and that precisely is creation renewed and recurrent from instant to instant (*tajdid al-khalq*)... The symbolic exegesis that establishes typifications is creative in the sense that it transmutes things into symbols... and causes them to exist on another plane of being. To ignore this typology is to destroy the meaning of vision as such, and purely and simply to accept data as they present themselves in the raw (Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 242–243).

Let us, then, use our 'active imagination' and engage in this process of typification (*tamthil*) in relation to Imam 'Ali. We may well arrive at a liberating vision of his archetype, that to which he appears to be alluding when he identifies himself, not simply with 'Elijah' but with 'he who in the Gospel is called Elijah,' thus, the archetypal figure who cannot be confined within any one religious framework. This archetype, which we can designate as *Alawi* (pertaining to the quality personified by 'Ali), has many aspects, and corresponding functions, but at its heart is the function of sanctification through enlightenment. In other words, the individuals who manifest or personify this archetype impart spiritual initiation, guiding their disciples along the path to enlightenment. But the archetype does not only manifest its function through ordinary human intermediaries—imams, shaykhs, pirs, etc—through the regular channels of initiation and guidance. It also performs its work through the epiphany of sacred symbols and images, transmitted through spiritual visions, veridical dreams; or through the invisible casting of mystical intuitions, insights and openings; or through the awakening of the Truth already immanent in the heart—what the Imam referred to as 'unearthing the buried treasures of the intellect,' this being the essential function of all divine inspiration: enlightenment

of the heart through the remembrance of God: ‘God is the *Wali* of those who believe. He brings them forth from the darkneses into the Light’ (Q 2:257). With the help of our ‘active imagination’, we can see without difficulty that this *Alawi* function, flowing from and manifesting the divine Name, *al-Wali*, transcends the boundaries of Islam, and is universal in its scope—as the Imam’s explicit self-identification with ‘he who in the Gospel is called Elijah’ makes clear.

At the Transfiguration of Jesus, briefly mentioned above, the Gospel tells us that Moses and Elijah were present. This is significant. For, according to the Kabbalah, these two figures are representative of the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric. Moses is the Lawgiver, Elijah the Spiritual Guide. When we note that, in the Islamic tradition, the figure of Elijah (Ilyas) is identified with al-Khidr, to the point that they are seen as the same individual (as Louis Massignon noted in a seminal article, ‘Élie et son rôle transhistorique’, 269), we are taken back to the Surat al-Kahf, where the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, the *batin* and the *zahir*, is given its most explicit expression. At the heart of this chapter is the dramatic confrontation between Moses and ‘one of Our slaves, unto whom We have given mercy from Ourselves, and knowledge from Our presence (*min ladunna*)’ (18:65). This ‘slave’ is identified by Muslim tradition with al-Khidr, and, as noted above, the latter is in turn identified with Elias—we are clearly in the presence of the *Alawi* archetype.

The story, in brief, of the encounter between Moses and al-Khidr is as follows: Moses, accompanied by his servant, is searching for the confluence of ‘the two rivers’ (symbolising the ‘Waters of Life’ or *Fons vitae*, the fountain of immortality). He comes upon al-Khidr and seeks to accompany this personage in order to learn from him. Moses is accepted on condition that he not question any of the actions of his teacher. After being bewildered by three apparently unlawful or inappropriate acts committed by his master,

Moses remonstrates with him, and is then shown the divine purpose underlying each of the acts. Al-Khidr says to him finally: 'This is the *ta'wil* of that which you had not the patience to bear' (18:60–82). Moses is thus taught the science of *ta'wil*, by means of which the outward, *al-zahir*, is retraced to its inward reality, *al-batin*.

All of this is clearly bound up with the essence of *walaya*, and it should be noted that the word *walaya*, in this form, comes only once in the whole of the Qur'an, in this very chapter (18:44). One of the central messages of this chapter is, precisely, the superiority of *walaya* vis-à-vis *nubuwwa*. But, as Ibn 'Arabi points out, the whole drama of the encounter between the guiding saint and the lawgiving prophet is to be seen as unfolding within the soul of Moses. In this microcosmic interpretation, al-Khidr symbolises a degree of consciousness within the heart of Moses: 'He [al-Khidr] showed him [Moses] nothing but his own form; so it was his own state that he beheld, his own soul with which he remonstrated' (Gril, 342). In other words, the 'al-Khidr' of Moses' being is that element of his own consciousness which transcends the formal limitations attendant upon the specific ordinances of religious law. We return to the fundamental theme: *walaya* is the quintessence of *nubuwwa*.

Understood thus, this chapter shows us the subtlety of the relationship between *walaya* and *ta'wil*, and helps us to appreciate that the 'methodology' of *ta'wil*, as taught by al-Khidr to Moses, is not just about the esoteric interpretation of scripture: it is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, about the esoteric understanding of events, phenomena, 'scriptural' signs all around us and, most importantly of all, within us. Let us repeat: 'We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own souls' (Q 41:53).

This is the kind of *ta'wil* that the prophet Joseph is taught, according to the chapter named after him, Chapter 12. His father, Jacob, says to him, after hearing of Joseph's dream:

‘Your Lord has chosen you, and will teach you the *ta’wil* of events (*ahadith*)’ (12:6). In the same chapter, after Joseph has been sold into slavery in Egypt, God declares: ‘Thus We established Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the *ta’wil* of events’ (12:21). And again, after Joseph declares that the prostration of his parents and his brothers to him is the fulfilment of his dream—or rather, it is ‘the *ta’wil* of my dream of old’ (12:100)—he shows us that *ta’wil* is not restricted to dream interpretation or scriptural interpretation. For he repeats the phrase, which now comes for the third time in this chapter: ‘O my Lord, You have given me [a part] of sovereignty, and You have taught me the *ta’wil* of events,’ and he adds this allusion to the relationship between *ta’wil* and *walaya*: ‘You are my *Wali* in the world and in the Hereafter’ (12:101).

We can conclude this discussion of *ta’wil* with the following extract from Rumi’s *Mathnawi*. It helps us grasp the difference between historicism—in which empirical facts of history are reified, seen as ‘data’ pertaining only to the past—and the ‘transhistorical’ perspective that is created by a vision of the perpetually present realm of spiritual archetypes, the kind of vision opened up by Imam ‘Ali’s teachings. In the middle of one of his stories concerning Moses and Pharaoh in Book 3 of the *Mathnawi*, Rumi suddenly breaks off the narrative and speaks directly to his readers—in what might be interpreted, in modern parlance, as the poet’s own ‘deconstruction’ of the ‘reifying’ processes of thought in his readers’ minds:

The mention of Moses has become a chain to the thoughts (of my readers), for (they think) that these are stories which happened long ago. The mention of Moses serves for a mask, but the light of Moses is thy actual concern, O good man. Moses and Pharaoh are in thy being: thou must seek these two adversaries in thyself. The (process) of generation from Moses is (continuing) till the

Resurrection: the Light is not different (though) the lamp has become different (*Mathnawi*, 3:1251–1255).



In the chapters that follow, we will try to view the life of Imam 'Ali, a 'perfect human being', through the lens of *ta'wil*. We hope to glimpse thereby something of the *haqiqa*, or spiritual reality, of the person who, as we noted in the Introduction, was designated by the Prophet as the 'gate' to prophetic consciousness; that is, consciousness of the *Haqiqa* as such, the ultimate Reality, revealed to and through the Prophet. This book aims to demonstrate that Imam 'Ali opens the gate of prophetic wisdom, here and now, for each and every one of us, through his wisdom; and also by showing us, among other things, how a perfect human being inwardly overcame a far-from-perfect world. After the Prophet's death, Imam 'Ali lived a quiet life, far from the political domain, teaching all those who came to him for guidance, including each of the three rulers of the Muslim community who preceded him. Then, after around twenty-five years of life as an imam, that is, as a spiritual guide, he became caliph, the ruler of an immense empire. As head of state he initiated a series of major reforms of Muslim society, even while being pre-occupied by the appalling civil wars precipitated by rebellions against his rule. Tragically, his efforts to reform the corruptions inherited from the previous regime were thwarted by the sword of the assassin, after just four and a half years of rule.

Nonetheless, the wisdom expressed through his sayings, and embodied in his actions and intentions, remain permanently accessible to those 'with ears to hear': those whose hearts are, to whatever degree, attuned to the remembrance of God. They will find that the degree of perfection attained by Imam 'Ali—a reflection of the perfection of the Prophet himself—is not something metaphysically incomprehensible and ethically unattainable. For Imam 'Ali manifested his sanctity in ways

that are intelligible to all: his mystical teaching and chivalrous virtue went hand in hand with what the Qur'an calls 'small acts of kindness':

Do you see the person who denies the religion? He is the one who repels the orphan, and does not exhort people to feed the poor. So woe be to the worshippers! Those who neglect [to do what is required by] their worship; those who are only showing off; and refuse small acts of kindness (107:1-7).

Imam 'Ali was famous for 'small acts of kindness' throughout his life, and these acts became particularly well known when he was caliph: he would very often travel alone, in disguise, through his domains, performing whatever acts of charity he could, without the beneficiary of his charity knowing who he was. The sources abound with anecdotes of his kindness, but the following will suffice. Towards the end of his caliphate, after the Battle of Nahrawan against the Kharijites (see Chapter 3), he came across a woman who was struggling with a heavy load. He helped her with it, carrying it to her home. In the course of conversation, he discovered that she was a widow, whose husband was a Kharijite who had been killed by Imam 'Ali's army at Nahrawan. He also saw how difficult it was for her to meet the daily needs of her orphaned children. She severely criticised the caliph, without knowing that the man helping her was none other than the caliph himself. The following day, Imam 'Ali returned to her with a bag full of food, and engaged in conversation with her children affectionately while lighting the fire for the widow. A neighbour came in, and when he recognised the caliph he remonstrated with the widow for the way she was speaking to the 'Commander of the Faithful'. She fell to the ground, begging for forgiveness. Imam 'Ali said: 'It is 'Ali who must feel ashamed at having neglected you' (Lalljee, 227-228). As we shall see in Chapter 3, one of Imam 'Ali's highest priorities as ruler was to

provide for the poor, the aged, the widows, the orphans, the disabled and prisoners of war. During his caliphate, 'small acts of kindness' were writ large as a policy, or rather, as an imperative moral obligation of the state towards all those in dire need of assistance.

The sources are replete with such stories. They serve an extremely important function, for they illustrate how the loftiest truths of the Spirit go hand in hand with 'small acts of kindness' which are well within our reach. If we do not perform acts of kindness, as the Qur'an tells us, our acts of religious devotion are nothing but show, and we are guilty of 'denying' Islam. When, however, religious devotion is accompanied by kindness, and all the virtues mentioned above, then not only is the religion of Islam properly upheld, but also, the texture of our intelligence is immeasurably enriched. We begin to assimilate the truth with our heart, rather than just our mind; the deeper realities of faith, referred to by Imam 'Ali as *haqa'iq al-iman*, begin to unfold for us. We start understanding, with the heart, the deeper teachings of the religion; and we are initiated into the process by which ordinary belief becomes heartfelt faith, faith becomes unshakeable certainty, and certainty becomes liberating gnosis (*ma'rifa*).

Appendix

‘Ali in the Sayings of the Holy Prophet

The following sayings of the Holy Prophet, drawn from highly authoritative Sunni sources, paint a kind of prophetic portrait, or *hilya*, of Imam ‘Ali. Several of these sayings have been mentioned in the text, but putting them together in this way as a list might help us to see the Imam as the Holy Prophet saw him. Reflecting upon this prophetic portrait can also help to evoke Imam ‘Ali’s ‘stellar’ radiance in the constellation of Islamic spirituality.

- ◊ ‘For whomever I am the master (*marwla*), ‘Ali is his master.’
- ◊ ‘I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate; so whoever desires knowledge, let him enter the gate.’
- ◊ ‘Truly, ‘Ali is from me and I am from him, and he is the *wali* [synonym of *marwla*] of every believer after me.’
- ◊ ‘Ali is with the Quran and the Quran is with ‘Ali. They will not separate from each other until they return to me at the pool [of Paradise].’
- ◊ ‘Three things were revealed to me regarding ‘Ali: he is the leader of the Muslims, the guide of the pious and chief of the radiantly devout.
- ◊ ‘Looking at the face of ‘Ali is an act of worship.’

- ◊ 'May God have mercy on 'Ali. O God, make the truth revolve around 'Ali wherever he turns.'
- ◊ 'O 'Ali, you are a leader (*sayyid*) in the world and the Hereafter. Your beloved is my beloved, and my beloved is the beloved of God; your enemy is my enemy, and my enemy is the enemy of God. Woe be to those who hate you after me [after I have passed away].'
- ◊ 'Whoever desires to live my life and to die my death and to take his rest in the eternal Garden my Lord has promised me, let him orient himself towards 'Ali, for truly he will never cause you to depart from right guidance, nor cause you to enter into error.'
- ◊ The Holy Prophet said that 'Ali was 'like my own soul' (*ka-nafsi*).
- ◊ He said to 'Ali, 'You are from me and I am from you'.
- ◊ '... whoever obeys 'Ali obeys me, and whoever disobeys him disobeys me.'
- ◊ 'You will clarify for my community that over which they will differ after me.'
- ◊ 'There is one amongst you who will fight for the interpretation of the Quran as I have fought for its revelation... it is he who is mending my sandal.' According to this report, Muhammad had given 'Ali his sandal to mend.
- ◊ 'O 'Ali, there is in you something akin to Jesus, on whom be peace and blessings. The Jews hated him to such an extent that they slandered his mother; and the Christians loved him to such an extent that they ascribed to him a rank he did not possess.'
- ◊ 'O 'Ali, whoever separates himself from me separates himself from God, and whoever separates himself from you, O 'Ali, separates himself from me.'

- ◊ ‘Whoever curses ‘Ali curses me, and whoever curses me curses God.’
- ◊ The Holy Prophet was reported to have asked his wife Aisha, ‘Call unto me the leader (*sayyid*) of the Arabs.’ She asked, ‘O Prophet of God, are you not the leader of the Arabs?’ He said, ‘I am the leader of the children of Adam, and ‘Ali is the leader of the Arabs.’
- ◊ ‘The first of you to enter the [paradisal] pool is the first of you who entered Islam, ‘Ali.’
- ◊ ‘‘Ali is from me and I am from him, and nobody can fulfil my duty but myself and ‘Ali.’
- ◊ Ali himself relates that the Holy Prophet had said to him that none but a believer will love him [Ali], and none but a hypocrite will hate him.
- ◊ It is reported that when the Holy Prophet was about to depart for an expedition to Tabuk, he left ‘Ali as his deputy in Medina. ‘Ali was sad not to be joining him. The Holy Prophet said, ‘Are you not happy that you should have in relation to me the rank of Aaron in relation to Moses, except that there is no prophet after me?’
- ◊ It is reported that the Holy Prophet prayed to God to bring ‘the most beloved of Your creatures’ to partake with him in a meal of fowl. Others came but only when ‘Ali came did the Holy Prophet ask him to join him and partake of the meal.
- ◊ Among the several verses of the *Qur’an* which were apparently commented upon by the Holy Prophet with reference to Imam ‘Ali is 13: 7: ‘Verily you are a warner, and for every people there is a guide.’ The Holy Prophet is reported to have said, ‘I am the warner... you are the guide, O ‘Ali. After me, the rightly-guided shall be guided by you.’

- ◊ Quran commentators relate verse 55 of Chapter 5 ('The Table Spread'), 'Verily your *wali* is only God and His Messenger and those who believe, establish the prayer and give alms while bowing in prayer,' to an incident when Imam 'Ali, whilst bowing in prayer, held out his ring for a beggar who had asked for alms. The Holy Prophet is reported to have recited this verse when told of the incident, and added the words already cited from the Ghadir hadith: 'For whomever I am the *mawla*, 'Ali is his *mawla*.'
- ◊ Quran commentators report that when the Holy Prophet was asked about the identity of 'the best of creatures (*khayr al-bariyya*)', mentioned in Surat al-Bayyina (98:7), he replied: 'Ali and his Shi'a ('partisans').'

See for further discussion, Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, pp. 18–22.

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