

Ṭahārah: The Principle of Purity in Ismā‘īlī Interpretation

MIR BAIZ KHAN*

Abstract

Ṭahārah, purity in Arabic, is one of the primary principles of interpretation of the Islamic faith in the Ismā‘īlī intellectual and spiritual traditions. This article, drawing on the primary sources, explores the concept of purity and purification as it appears in the Qur’ān. Besides physical cleanliness related to the human body, hygiene and dwelling and praying spaces, the article investigates the concept in an abstract sense, that is, interpreting it through sources of authority as to how it is understood in terms of thought, behaviour, and belief. It concludes that for Ismā‘īlīs, the imām is the person who has the authority to interpret faith and his knowledge and guidance are the source of purification.

Keywords

Ismā‘īlī studies, purity, ṭahārah, hermeneutics, imāmat.

Introduction

The term *ṭahārah* is a Qur’ānic term which means purity and purification. According to Edward Lane, it is an infinitive noun of the root word *ṭahara* and *ṭahura* which means, “It was, or became, clean, free from dirt or filth, or pure.”¹ In its various derivatives and infinitive nouns which appear in the Qur’ān, *ṭahārah* or purification applies to bodily washing and cleaning of places, thoughts, beliefs, actions, and knowledge.²

* Former Head, Department of Research and Knowledge Mobilization, Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board for Canada (ITREB Canada), Burnaby, BC, Canada.

¹ Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Lahore: Islamic Book Centre, 1978), 5:1886.

² Qur’ān 22:26; 28:2; 56:79.

Ṭahārah in the Qur'ān

There are many verses in the Qur'ān which direct people to live a life that is clean and pure. They also point out various kinds of impurities that the believers should be mindful of and provide ways as to how cleanliness and purity are to be achieved.

Ṭahārah appears in the Qur'ān in an encompassing manner in that it pervades all facets of human life related to both material and spiritual aspects. There are many interlocking ways and means stated in the Qur'ān whereby human life can be purified to enable the liberation of the soul. As physical cleanliness and prayers are important elements for the purification of life, they do little, if any, without actions of devotion and submission, collectively referred to as good deeds (*al-a'māl al-ṣāliḥah*), a term which appears in the Qur'ān numerous times. Among other good deeds, a critically important one is sharing one's fortunes with those who are in need, such as those who are poor, orphaned, widowed, aged, physically dependent, sick, refugee, and the like.

As much as impurities of physical, habitual, and environmental nature can have harmful consequences for human life, the impurities associated with knowledge are equally or even more harmful. Knowledge can be a source of illumination or lead to darkness, it can refine human behaviour or distort it to be self-destructive and dangerous to others. Good knowledge brings quality to an individual's life and inspires others to seek it and to emulate in goodness. It can be a source of prosperity to individuals, families, and societies at large and contributes to the prosperity of subsequent generations. In contrast, corrupt or unethical knowledge can inspire only criminals and encourages destructive forces, thus, creating a chaotic environment in which families, communities, and societies at large are destroyed. Allah distinguishes good knowledge from undesirable knowledge through the metaphor of a tree wherein He says, "A goodly word like a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches (reach) to the heavens. It brings forth its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord. . . . And the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree; it is torn up by the root from the surface of the earth; it has no stability."³

The ultimate authority to purify belongs to God, Who is the source of all authorities. As for His authority with regard to purification, the Qur'ānic verse states, "Were it not for the grace and mercy of Allah on you, not one of you would ever have been pure; but Allah does purify

³ Ibid., 14:24–26. All Qur'ānic translations in this article are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, available at <https://corpus.quran.com>, except when expressed otherwise.

whom He pleases.”⁴ This divine authority of purification has manifested itself in the course of human history through Allah’s chosen people, the Prophets and Messengers and continued until the last and seal of them (*khātam al-nabiyyīn*) Muḥammad (peace be on him). The chain of revelation was complete when the Prophet received the revelation, “This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.”⁵ During his life time, the Prophet had uncontested divine authority to purify the believers by interpreting the revelation that he received, for the people.

With the passing away of the Prophet, the authority itself was subjected to contention which produced multiple sources of authority and an enormous volume of literature around the different claims. This literature of multiple sources include jurisprudential (*fiqhī*), theological (*kalāmī*), exegetical (*tafsīrī*), hermeneutical (*taʿwīlī*) approaches in addition to the collection of the Prophet’s sayings (*aḥādīth*) and examples of his actions (*sīrah*) and, in case of Shīʿah, sayings of the *imāms* from his family (*ahl al-bayt*). Ismāʿīlīs have preferred *taʿwīl*⁶ in their interpretation of the Qurʾān and *sharīʿah*. We will see below as to why and how the Ismāʿīlī scholars used this method. Before engaging in that discussion, however, I will briefly deliberate on the relevance of the topic to the life of today.

Ṭahārah in the Light of the Malaise of Today

Cleanliness and purity refer to a concept which is integral to Muslim belief and practice. It is a concept which penetrates, both in its literal and interpretative meanings, into the spheres of life including personal, socio-communal, religious, ethical, economic, and professional. Believing in purity and demonstrating it in all expressions of life, thought, action, behaviour, and habits are integral to live a life true to the spirit of faith. In common language, this means to live a balanced life, an ethical life in accordance with the time-tested universal human values, the topmost being respect for the sanctity of human life and dignity, caring for the needy, poor and sick, wishing for others as wishing for oneself, seeking peace and harmony in society, living with differences, earning a livelihood legitimately, sharing one’s good fortunes in terms of knowledge, skills, and material means with others, and the like. To put it

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24:21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:3.

⁶ *Taʿwīl* is a technical term denoting the educing of the inner or original meaning from the literal wording of a text, ritual, or religious prescription. For details, see Farhad Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismāʿīlīs* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 165–66.

in a nutshell, it is living a balanced life in which a healthy body and a God-conscious soul are equally nourished.

Physical impurities lead to physical ailments whereby rendering the human body incapable of functioning. Likewise an unconscious soul allows non-physical disorder to occur in human life perpetuating vanity, indulgence in negative habits, and demonstration of behaviours which ultimately lead to self-destruction. From the perspective of Islam, a gratified soul in a healthy body makes human life a balanced one. At the ordinary level, physical impurities are those harmful elements which affect and weaken the health of human body in that it gathers impurities causing it illnesses, both internally and externally. Thus, it is critical for a healthy body to be clean of the dirt which it accumulates and produces further discomforting by-products from the human body such as odor, bacteria and so on. Furthermore, human attire and sources of nourishment have to be clean in order to avoid damaging consequences for the body and life itself.

Keeping the human body and its clothing clean and consuming a healthy and clean diet are a necessity for the human body to be functional and enduring. There are impurities caused by an individual to the detriment of himself and by extension of others around him. These are habitual impurities which emerge from certain damaging habits and behaviours. Smoking, drinking, and substance abuse are examples of habitual impurities while vanity, excessive materialism, greed, and arrogance are examples of behavioral impurities which have a negative impact on the physical health of the human body and on the quality of life with grave consequences for those who are dependent on and care for those who indulge in such habits. Destruction of the human body as a result of cancer or other debilitating diseases caused by smoking and leaving behind a widow and minor children are a grave consequence of a habitual physical impurity.

In addition to body-produced impurities like lice and bacterial diseases and behaviour-based impurities resulting in body's incapacity or death, there are also environment-related impurities in the living space, neighbourhood, and society at large. The pollution that humans produce in their living spaces and surrounding areas contains the impurities which have perilous consequences for human health. Now, with the advancement of scientific knowledge, it has been established, beyond doubt, that contamination of living, working, and socializing spaces as well as polluting the general environment results in spreading communicable illnesses and causing natural disasters. Impurities, whether produced in the human body, the living space, or environment,

have consequences, not only for physical existence, but also for psychological health.

A healthy body by itself does not ensure that an individual has a healthy life because it is also the sound mind, the processing hardware of human intellectual capacities, which is critical in bringing about harmony between what is visible and what is invisible in life. The purities and impurities, to a great extent, are the products of the environment in which an individual is born and raised. A child born in a nurturing home environment and growing in an enabling social setting is likely to become free of many physical, habitual, and environment-related impurities and the chances are that the resulting healthy mind will be capable of making sound decisions. Conversely, if the child is born in a dysfunctional or impoverished family and brought up in a social setting where human dignity and life is less valued and dominated by criminals and drug lords, it is quite likely that the individual will become a felonious person or self-destructive addict, mentally and emotionally damaged. These are the psycho-emotional malaises with destructive consequences for human life, which in the language of faith, are referred to as impurities.

The Qurʾānic notion of human life is that it is a combination of two parts, one being physical and the other spiritual. That is to say that a human being has a body and a soul, both of which are in need of a nurturing source of nourishment in order for them to be healthy and achieve their full potential. The prescribed physical ways of cleansing oneself are not only necessary for physical cleanliness, but they are also a reminder of and symbolic expressions for purifying the human soul which is created and resides in the body given to it as its physical form. The physical acts of worship through rituals are a means to enhance one's consciousness of the soul and the conditions that influence it. Impurities are not just limited to physical uncleanliness produced by the human body, but they also include a wide range of beliefs, thoughts, behaviours, and use of human organs such as eyes, ears, tongue, and procreative parts of the body. This means that the real impurities are all disbeliefs, sinful thoughts, and forms of wrong doing that are committed. An ideal human is one who cleanses herself or himself of them by sincerely repenting for what has been committed, getting rid of evil, and replacing it with good. In so doing, one commits oneself to replace undesirable thoughts with good ones, evil acts with good deeds, meanness with generosity, cruelty with kindness, hurtful language with polite speech, rudeness with respectful manner, selfishness with care for others, ignorance with seeking knowledge, vanity with humility, and the

like. This replacement and purification leads to consciousness of the sublime, invisible part of human life, the soul, as the Qur'ān states, "By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; truly he succeeds that purifies it."⁷

This brief introduction establishes that *ṭahārah* plays an important role in Islamic system of belief and practice. It refers to both the physical and spiritual cleanliness. The latter includes the purity of behaviours, beliefs, and thoughts. As this paper focuses on how Ismā'īlī tradition interprets the concept of *ṭahārah*, it is important to know the place of *ta'wīl* in Ismā'īlī thought.

Ta'wīl a Preferred Method of Ismā'īlī Interpretation

Two principles from the Qur'ān have provided methodology to interpret the Qur'ān, one is *tafsīr* method and the other *ta'wīl*. The *tafsīr* method is a logical, historical, and philological approach to the Qur'ānic interpretation, while the *ta'wīl* method is hermeneutic and symbolic in that the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān (*mutashābihāt*), detached letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'āt*), the *sharī'ah*, rituals, and historical events are treated as symbols (*amthāl*) and having meanings beyond the apparent ones. Thus, the focus of the *tafsīr* approach is the apparent meaning (*al-zāhir*) while the *ta'wīl* approach concentrates on the inner meaning (*al-bāṭin*). These *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* approaches are also translated as exoteric and esoteric respectively.

Ta'wīl as an allegorical or esoteric approach to the interpretation of the Qur'ān was a preferred approach of the Ismā'īlīs. It allowed them to reveal the inner meanings or truths behind the scriptures and laws. *Ta'wīl*, as its literal meaning suggests, is to return to the origin and in doing so to infer the inner meaning from the apparent. *Ta'wīl* is aimed at revealing the hidden meaning in order to uncover the spiritual truth. Moving from *tanzīl* to *ta'wīl* means transcending the word of revelation and knowing the spirit, the hidden message behind the words, hence seeking the object that the symbols embody. The *ta'wīl* method of interpretation became the hallmark of Ismā'īlī tradition, in its development stage and the bulk of the Ismā'īlī literature is in this genre. Wladimir Ivanow, the leading pioneer of modern Nizārī Ismā'īlī studies, describes the *ta'wīl*'s role as follows:

The *ta'wīl*, or allegorical interpretation, supplies a justification (*taṣdīq*) of every *zāhir*, and the latter rests on its corresponding *bāṭin*. The *bāṭin*, however, can be known only through its *zāhir*. Religious behaviour (*'amal*)

⁷ Ibid., 91:7–9.

does not bring a better chance of salvation (*ākhirat*) without the knowledge of its *bāṭin*. These ideas are carefully developed in copious quotations of verses of the Coran and of appropriate *ḥadīths*.⁸

As spiritual exegesis, *ta'wīl* “postulates the principle of the Imam as guardian of its secret.”⁹ While philologically the Qur'ānic text is open to everyone to translate and interpret, but, for Ismā'īlīs, the unveiling of its inner meaning is entrusted by God only to the *imām*.

The Role of the *Imām* in *Ta'wīl* Interpretation

Imāmat, the office of the *imām*, in Shī'ī belief is an exalted institution. The *imām* who holds that office is infallible and his knowledge is more perfect than anyone in his time. He alone determines “what religion is and what it consists of.”¹⁰ Interpretation of faith, thus, is the absolute prerogative of the *imām* and this privilege is based on the belief that there is the permanent need of mankind to have a leader who is flawless and divinely guided to govern it justly and teach and lead it soundly in religion in the absence of the Prophet. The *imāmat* thus is inextricably connected with the Prophetic chain which encompasses the entirety of the history of humankind.¹¹ As an extension of this Prophetic chain, after the Prophet, the *imām* through his entrusted knowledge enlightens and inspires his followers guiding them with the esoteric truths (*ḥaqā'iq*). Through his knowledge, he guides the devotees to a spiritual domain where they may experience the divine support (*ta'yīd*), the support that leads to spiritual transformation or second creation (*khalq thānī*).¹²

According to Shī'ah doctrine, the *imām* being linked to the Prophetic chain with his absolute prerogative to interpret faith is rooted in his authority as successor of the Prophet by his appointment. For example, with reference to the Qur'ānic verse “The Prophet is closer to the Believers than their own selves,”¹³ Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1021 CE), one of the leading Ismā'īlī thinkers, makes comments regarding the

⁸ Wladimir Ivanow, *Studies in Early Persian Ismailism* (Bombay: Ismaili Society, 1955), 130.

⁹ Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul International, 1986), 156.

¹⁰ Paul E. Walker, ed. and trans., *Master of the Age: An Islamic Treatise on the Necessity of the Imamate* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 2–3.

¹¹ For the Ismā'īlī cyclical view of history, see Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1983), 84–103.

¹² For details, see Wilfred Madelung, “Aspects of Ismā'īlī Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God beyond Being,” in *Ismā'īlī Contributions to Islamic Culture*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: IIAP, 1977), 55.

¹³ Qur'an 33:6.

Prophet's appointment of 'Alī with the authority to command and prohibit at Ghadīr Khumm. He says that the quoted verse of the Qur'ān constitutes God's appointment of the Prophet as guardian of the believers to command them and prohibit them. He goes on to state that the Prophet accepted the same agreement from those who were with him at Ghadīr Khumm as the verse of the Qur'ān and said, "Am I not dearer to you than you to your own selves?" To this they replied, "Yes," three times. Al-Kirmānī says that after taking the commitment from those who were present, the Prophet said, "So of whomever I am the master (*mawlā*), 'Alī is his master."¹⁴

Al-Nu'mān b. Ḥayyūn al-Maghribī (d. 363/974), the foremost Ismā'īlī jurist of the *khilāfat-i Fāṭimiyyah*, discusses in the introduction of his book *Asās al-Ta'wīl* (The foundation of *ta'wīl*) the reason why *ta'wīl* is necessary for interpreting the Qur'ān. He narrates a saying of Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). Responding to a question, he is reported to have said, "I interpret one word (of the Qur'ān) in seven different ways." The person who asked the question was confused and said, "Seven! O progeny of the Messenger of Allah?" He responded, "Yes, and seventy (ways) and if required of us, we will add more."¹⁵ After quoting a number of verses from the Qur'ān, al-Nu'mān states that he wrote a book *Ḥudūd al-Ma'rīfah* (The limits of gnosis) in which he extensively discussed confirmation of the knowledge of *ta'wīl* and *bāṭin* and refuted its repudiators. He continues that it is necessary for every perceptible (*maḥsūs*) to have *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*; its *ẓāhir* is what is discernible through senses and its *bāṭin* is what it contains and one knows that it is in it.¹⁶ With reference to the Qur'ānic verse 51:49, he says that there is nothing created that does not have a pair, so is a human being who is one individual, but made of a pair, namely, body and soul. Thus, body is *ẓāhir* and soul is *bāṭin*. He quotes several verses of the Qur'ān including "None knows its *ta'wīl* except God and those (who are) firmly rooted in knowledge"¹⁷ and "Do they just wait for the final fulfilment of the event? On the day the event is finally fulfilled, those who disregarded it before will say: 'The messengers of our Lord did indeed bring true (tidings).'"¹⁸ He quotes a saying of the Prophet, "No verse of the Qur'ān was revealed to me

¹⁴ For more details, see Walker, *Master of the Age*, 88.

¹⁵ Al-Nu'mān b. Ḥayyūn al-Tamīmī al-Maghribī, *Kitāb Asās al-Ta'wīl*, ed. 'Ārif Tāmīr (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1960), 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ Qur'ān 3:7. This translation is not from Yusuf Ali's translation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:53.

without having a *ẓāhir* and a *bāṭin*.”¹⁹ Al-Nu‘mān then explains that in the Qur’ān there are many verses related to *amthāl* (symbols), *ẓāhir*, and *bāṭin* that are well known to the language of the Arab people in which the Qur’ān was revealed and in which they are addressed. This was one of the miracles (*mu‘jizāt*) and marvels (*gharā’ib*) of its compilation, in that it came as a single entity but having (a pair within itself) an exoteric and esoteric meaning.²⁰ For him, Allah, the Glorious, made its *ẓāhir* a miracle of His Messenger and its *bāṭin* a miracle of the *imāms* from the *ahl al-bayt*, which is found nowhere but with them. As no one can produce the *ẓāhir* (corpus) of the Qur’ān except Muḥammad, the Messenger of Allah, the ancestor of them (*imāms*), no one can bring forward its *bāṭin* (inner meaning) save the *imāms* from his (Prophet’s) progeny.²¹

After providing a brief introduction to the place of *ta’wīl* in Ismā’īlī tradition and explaining the role of the institution of *imāmat* in its functioning, it is time to discuss how the Ismā’īlī scholars interpreted the concept of *ṭahārah* in its exoteric and esoteric senses employing the method of *ta’wīl*.

Interpretation of Ṭahārah in Ismā’īlī Thought

The classical Ismā’īlī theologians during the Fatimid Caliphate era referred to the interpretation as the doctrine of the *mathal* and *mamthūl*.²² *Mathal* is the symbol and *mamthūl* or *mumaththal* is the reality that it represents. In the Qur’ān, there are numerous references to the heavens and the earth, mountains, rivers, trees, birds, insects, fruits, people and forms of prayers and supplications. All of these are manifest to the senses and, if reflected upon, can lead to the understanding of the intelligible, that is, the reality that the symbols represent. In the Ismā’īlī interpretation, the visible world itself is a sign or symbol of the spiritual creation, an understanding of which can lead to understanding of the spiritual reality. Nāṣir-i Khusrau (d. 1088 CE), one of the leading Ismā’īlī *dā’īs*, theologians, philosophers, and poets, refers to the natural world as a book of God to be observed and reflected upon. He says, “Thus, that book which is to be seen—I mean, the creation itself—and this book which is to be heard—I mean the Noble Qur’ān—are both God’s

¹⁹ Al-Nu‘mān, *Asās al-Ta’wīl*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn, ed., *Dīwān al-Mu‘ayyad fī ‘l-Dīn Dā’ī ‘l-Du‘āt* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-Miṣrī, 1949), 106–07; Tahera Qutbuddin, *al-Mu‘ayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Da‘wa Poetry: A Case of Commitment in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 105–12.

writings.²³ The Qur'ān allows multiple interpretations from both exoteric and esoteric perspectives. Thus, the creation being the divine book of observation and the Qur'ān being the revealed book of listening unlock endless possibilities of ever increasing variety of interpretations.

In Shī'ī interpretation, the authority to receive alms and purify the believers belongs to the *imām*,²⁴ as it belonged to the Prophet in his life time. The *imām* is the embodiment of the Prophet's authority in its entirety with regard to the interpretation of faith.²⁵ While all Shī'ī communities belonging to Ithnā 'Asharī and Ismā'īlī branches adhere to the doctrine of *imāmat*, it is only the Shī'ah Imāmī Nizārī Ismā'īlī branch that has a living *imām* heading the institution of *imāmat*.²⁶ From here on, we focus on the concept of purity and its expressions in the Nizārī Ismā'īlī tradition.

Although the concept of purity (*ṭahārah*) is one of the primary principles of the Ismā'īlī interpretation of faith, it is fused with the other primary principles in a manner as water permeates in an agricultural field reaching every seed of the seeded land and roots of every growing plant. It transforms the concepts into pure abstract forms as water transforms seeds into healthy yields of large amount. As without water no yield is possible, likewise without the principle of purity, other principles, whether they are related to the physical aspect of human life or ethical and spiritual aspect, have no meaning. For example, the principle of unity and uniqueness of God (*tawḥīd*), as belief and concept, according to the Ismā'īlī interpretation, needs to be purified from the impurities, that is, associating anything in the creation with God and His authority. We will allude to the primary principles of the Ismā'īlī belief and interpretation and discuss how they all are underpinned by the principle of *ṭahārah*.

Historically, Ismā'īlīs have referred to their organization as *al-da'wah al-hādiyah* (the rightly guiding mission) created by their *imāms* to represent their guidance, articulate and propagate their teachings, and carry out their directives in matters related to ethics and practices of

²³ Nāṣir-i Khusrau, *Kitāb Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatain*, ed. Henry Corbin and Muḥammad Mu'īn (Tehran: Kitābkhān-i Ṭahūrī, 1984), 232; Eric Ormsby, trans., *Between Reason and Revelation: Twin Wisdom Reconciled* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012), 204.

²⁴ In Shī'ī interpretation, there is only one *imām* at a time who is appointed by his predecessor *imām*.

²⁵ For details, see Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*, trans. and ed. Reza Shah-Kazemi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 103–07.

²⁶ For the genealogical tables of *imāms*, see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 505–13.

Islam. The learned Ismā'īlī scholars who were authorized by the *imām* would carry out the mission interpreting the faith in light of his guidance that they would have received. They also would engage in intellectual debate with scholars of other interpretations on issues of significance in addition to their religious and diplomatic role.²⁷ With their multifarious responsibilities, the functionaries within the organization were commonly known as *dā'īs*, a term derived from the Qur'ān where the Prophet is addressed as one who invites to God by His authority and as a lamp spreading light.²⁸

Al-Kirmānī states that the *da'wah* exoterically includes practices of ritual ceremonies as similitudes and signs, which in their bare form (without esoteric meaning) do not fully benefit the soul.²⁹ The exoteric *sharīah*-based rituals, forms of prayers, and acts of expression are like ocean water which contains sodium chloride and is unsuitable for growing and drinking. He compares the exoteric expressions of the *da'wah*, that is, the ceremonies, commandments, and hierarchies with ocean water, which need to be interpreted in order to reach their inner meanings as pure water needs to be separated from other elements in the ocean water in order to be used for nourishment and growth. Extending his metaphor of salty ocean water, al-Kirmānī explains how water is purified in the world of nature to meet drinking and growing needs. He says that when the sun heats the ocean, water in pure form is lifted as vapour which is sweet while salt remains in the ocean.³⁰ The dense elements such as salt remain behind in conformity with the rest of natural elements in complete frozen place.³¹

Al-Kirmānī's metaphor illustrates that Prophetic knowledge, the *sharīah*, is like an ocean which contains all different elements within it, and water which is suitable for human consumption and growing vegetation and crops needs to be separated and purified of other elements. Likewise, in order to nourish the human soul, pure knowledge needs to be separated from the ocean of the Prophetic knowledge. Explaining his metaphor, he states that the source of knowledge of

²⁷ *A'lām al-Nubuwwah* of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and *al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah* of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī are two examples of books which are the result of intellectual debate with scholars of other interpretations. Verena Klemm's *Memoirs of a Mission* is a good example of al-Mu'ayyad's engagement in diplomacy. Nāṣir-i Khusrau's *Zād al-Musāfirīn* challenges Abū Bakr Zakariyyā al-Razī's philosophy of pleasure.

²⁸ Qur'ān 33:46.

²⁹ Aḥmad Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1967), 381.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 382.

Prophet's legatee (*waṣī*) and his mission is rooted in the Prophetic knowledge which is the ocean. The *waṣī* and each *imām* in his progeny separates pure knowledge to provide nourishment to human souls. As it is necessary that the sweet water in its existence is from the water of the ocean, likewise the pure knowledge that is necessary for nourishment of human soul is in its existence from the Prophetic knowledge which encompasses, both what is obligatory and spiritual. The *imām*'s authorized teachers and preachers in hierarchical order of the mission (*da'wah*) known as *ḥujaj* (pl. of *ḥujjah*, lit. proof) and *du'āt* (pl. of *dā'ī*, lit. preacher) through hermeneutic interpretation (*tā'wīl*) provide right contexts to what is obligatory and what is spiritual. This, then, becomes the cause for spiritual creations in the sense of spiritual development.

In his book *al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah*,³² al-Kirmānī states that soul, in its direction and functions, becomes a circle on the pivot of the conviction as he explained in his book *Iklīl al-Nafs wa Tājuhā* (The garland of the soul and its crown). Within this circle, there are islands of the command from where comes its sadness or happiness. He who is loyal to his lord (*mawlā*), does not differentiate between his preference and the *imām*'s command in terms of obedience which is happiness for him.³³ Such a soul, for al-Kirmānī, is sheltered in the protective garb of good health and safety, not of filth and sins. Its good deed purifies it like little amount of dirt has no effect on a large volume of water, but the dirt itself gets cleaned; its need (for cleansing) vanishes in essence and its activities of disobedience—i.e., sicknesses and blameworthy activities—that hinder it from attaining happiness become refined; it reaches the utmost perfection and its actions and speeches in essence become source of information and witness. As a soul, its health, safety, and perfection comes from satisfaction, strength, hope, trust, purity, bravery, generosity, forbearance, steadfastness, trustworthiness, affection, asceticism, piety, sincerity, magnanimity, governance, love for all kinds of excellence, dislike for all kinds of malice, loyalty, compassion, dignity, graciousness, pride, eagerness, sincere advice, guidance, knowledge, acumen, sagacity, passion, protection, modesty, and trustworthiness in the community. Through these virtues of moral excellence, the soul is transformed by acting on the commands of Allah from the level of animal nature to the level of angelic sainthood whereby its development

³² Al-Kirmānī, *al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣāwī (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1972).

³³ *Ibid.*, 133.

leads its image to be saintly, worthy of being in the proximity of the friends of Allah.³⁴

Another prominent Ismā'īlī thinker Abū Ya'qūb Ishāq b. Aḥmad al-Sijistānī (d. ca. 971 CE) illustrates the concept of *ṭahārah* using water as a metaphor.³⁵ For him, there are two kinds of wellsprings, a physical wellspring and a spiritual wellspring. The physical wellspring consists of springs that flow with the physical elements on which depends the natural world for its sustenance. The other wellspring is a spiritual one from which flow springs with divine knowledge. Souls have spiritual hierarchies beginning from the believers to *imāms* and Prophets and their archetypes in the spiritual world. The Speaker-prophet (*nāṭiq*),³⁶ in al-Sijistānī's words, resembles water in all of its characteristics and all wisdom and knowledge come from him.

As in al-Kirmānī's example, not any water, but the purified water is a source of nourishment for the soul's growth and sustenance, in al-Sijistānī's metaphor not all what the Prophetic wisdom and knowledge contain is suitable for the nourishment of all souls in the same way. In other words, just as in the natural world, purification of water from other elements is an integral part of the natural system, in the world of faith, purification of wisdom and knowledge is an integral part of the Prophetic tradition. In order for water to be purified of other elements, it needs to be lifted from the ocean as vapour and this happens when the sun heats the ocean. Then, it turns into clouds and rain and becomes a wellspring for many springs of sweet pure water. In the same manner, pure form of wisdom and knowledge to be lifted from the Prophetic ocean of wisdom and knowledge separating its pure form from the rest of the elements, which then becomes the wellspring of many springs of interpretations.

From the Ismā'īlī perspective, the wellspring represents the wisdom and knowledge that flow from the *imām* of the time. It is he from whom the purified knowledge and wisdom flow starting from the ocean of the Prophetic knowledge and wisdom and separating it from the rest of the elements through his interpretation (*ta'wīl*), which becomes the

³⁴ For further details, see *ibid.*, 133–41.

³⁵ Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom: A Study of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's Kitāb al-Yanābī'* (Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 1994).

³⁶ *Nāṭiq* is the Messenger Prophet Enunciator. In Shī'ī particularly Ismā'īlī theology, there are six *nuṭaqā'*—Ādam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, 'Īsā, and Muḥammad, each brought and proclaimed a revealed message, a scripture containing in its apparent and exoteric (*ẓāhir*) aspect, a religious law. See Madelung, "Aspects of Ismā'īlī Theology," 55; Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 184.

wellspring of wisdom and knowledge for many springs which nourish the sustenance and maintenance of the souls in accordance with their spiritual capacity. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, is the first and founding *imām* (*asās*) of this tradition of interpretation. In al-Sijistānī’s hierarchies, the Prophet is referred to as *nātiq* and ‘Alī as his legatee (*waṣī*) or founder (*asās*) of the tradition of esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*).

Al-Sijistānī has devoted a chapter in his book *Kitāb al-Iftikhār* to the cognition of ritual ablution (*wuḍū’*) and purification (*ṭahārah*). He considers ritual ablution a symbol and holds that the real impurity is that of the soul. For him, impurity means the darkness of injustice and the purpose of purification is to illuminate the soul and refine it. He explains that just like water is used to clean physical impurities, in a spiritual sense, it is through knowledge by which souls are purified of disbeliefs and the hearts of believers are cleansed of uncertainties and abominable contradictions. As water emerges (rains) on the surface of the earth, it causes springs; some are springs of salty water and others of sweet water. Likewise, when knowledge is provided to human senses, it endures on them and from them flow knowledge based on imitation (*‘ulūm taqlīdiyyah*) and knowledge based on essence (*‘ulūm ḥaqīqiyyah*). The former is like water which is bitterly salty and the latter is like water which is deliciously sweet. It is the knowledge of essence which, in al-Sijistānī’s view, is referred to in the verse of the Qur’ān which reads,

Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness, to give you calm as from Himself, and he caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith.³⁷

Al-Sijistānī interprets the Qur’ānic verse in the context of the event at Ghadīr Khumm as referred to earlier. He writes that when the Prophet on Allah’s behalf appointed his legatee at Ghadīr Khumm in an open declaration in broad daylight, he covered the believers with (the protection of) “the limit” (*al-ḥad*), that is, his legatee who would protect the believers from ignorance and bewilderment and purify them with the Prophetic knowledge of the Satanic filth—i.e., the contradictory disputations in which they alter faith and corrupt it by their whims and wishes. Through Prophetic knowledge, the believers are fortified from doubt and uncertainty. Al-Sijistānī interprets another verse of the Qur’ān in which Allāh has awarded purity to the *imām* from the family of

³⁷ Qur’ān 8:11.

the Prophet and said, “And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.”³⁸ Thus, purity of the *imāms* does not result from natural water which is shared by every creature and animal. On the contrary, their purification results from the sweet spiritual water which makes the pure *imāms* distinguished. And the verse of the Qur’ān, “And We send down pure water from the sky,”³⁹ according to al-Sijistānī, means that Allah sends down from the sky of faith the Prophet with the knowledge by which hearts and souls are purified of the filths of doubt. This Prophetic knowledge is, thus, a cure for one who has been blessed by Allah with (the guidance of) the *imāms*.⁴⁰

From the point of view of Islamic law (*fiqh*), al-Nu’mān b. Ḥayyūn, in his book *Da’ā’im al-Islām* (The pillars of Islam), has treated the subject of ritual purification in detail with references to the verses of the Qur’ān and sayings of the Prophet and those of the early Shī’ī *imāms*. For example, he quotes the Prophet saying, “No prayer is valid without ritual purity.” The Prophet also said, “No act is valid without intention; no worship is performed without conviction and no honour is obtained without piety.” Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq is also reported to have said, “God does not accept prayers without ritual purity.” Al-Nu’mān makes a reference to the Qur’ānic verse in which Allah says, “For, Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.”⁴¹ How the Prophet was particular about the physical cleanliness is indicated in his saying, “Bravo to those who perform the *takhallul*!” When he was asked the meaning of *takhallul*, the Prophet explained, “*Takhallul* in ablution is [running the water and rubbing] between the fingers and the nails, and *Takhallul* after meal [is cleaning the teeth].”⁴²

Al-Nu’mān goes into the details of the inner meanings of purity (*ṭahārah*) in his book *Ta’wīl al-Da’ā’im*. He mentions that the Prophet said that indeed prayer was not rewarded and accepted without knowledge and purity.⁴³ Those who do not know the Prophet who brought the prayer (*ṣalāh*) and do not believe in him, their prayer is not accepted,

³⁸ Ibid., 33:33.

³⁹ Ibid., 25:48.

⁴⁰ For more details, see Ishāq b. Aḥmad al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, ed. Ismā’īl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwālā (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2000), 417–19.

⁴¹ Qur’ān 2:222.

⁴² For more details, see Asaf A. A. Fyze, trans., *The Pillars of Islam: Da’ā’im al-Islām of al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 123–53.

⁴³ Al-Nu’mān b. Muḥammad, *Ta’wīl al-Da’ā’im*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-A’zamī (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1972), 3:57.

both in expression and in meaning. Likewise, he who does not know the *imām* of his time and does not have love for him will have similar consequences. As a person's ritual prayer is not acceptable without ablution with natural water, the knowledge of the person who joins the mission of the truth, the *Ismā'īlī da'wah*, needs to be purified in an esoteric sense from the filth of unbelief, polytheism, uncertainty, and sins. If his belief remains static, he does not belong to the people of the true *Ismā'īlī* mission. Al-Nu'mān quotes the Qur'ānic verse, "But those will prosper who purify themselves. And glorify the name of their Guardian-Lord and (lift their hearts) in prayer."⁴⁴ The Prophet explained this in his saying, "No prayer without *zakāh*, no fortune in Islam for one who discards prayer, no prayer without purity and no purity except with knowledge."⁴⁵ He goes on to state that *zakāh* also means goodness and piety (*ṣalāh*) which is not possible without purity (*ṭahārah*) like a person cannot be pious (*ṣāliḥ*) without being pure (*ṭāhir*) of sins nor can he be pure without being pious.⁴⁶

Al-Nu'mān offers interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān, "And remember Abraham and Isma'il raised the foundations of the House"⁴⁷ and "We covenanted with Abraham and Isma'il, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves."⁴⁸ He says that they both built the House in the sanctuary in Mecca for *Ismā'īl* and made it a symbol of him and of every *imām* from his progeny after him. Furthermore, partaking the water of Zamzam is a symbol of accepting the (authorized Prophetic) knowledge (dispensed through the *imām*), its continuation and yearning for it.⁴⁹

Ja'far b. Maṣūr al-Yaman (d. 347/958), an early *Ismā'īlī dā'ī*, refers to water as a symbol of knowledge by referring to the Qur'ānic verses in which the two bodies of flowing water are mentioned.⁵⁰ These are "It is He Who has let free the two bodies of flowing water: One palatable and sweet, and the other salt and bitter,"⁵¹ and "Nor are the two bodies of flowing water alike,—the one palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, and the other, salt and bitter."⁵² He says that the salty water is the symbol of

⁴⁴ Qur'ān 87:14–15.

⁴⁵ Al-Nu'mān, *Ta'wīl al-Da'ā'im*, 3:58.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Qur'ān 2:127.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:125.

⁴⁹ For further details, see al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-Ta'wīl*, 107–17.

⁵⁰ James W. Morris, ed. and trans., *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001).

⁵¹ Qur'ān 25:53.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35:12.

knowledge of the outward aspect of things, which does not contain any (spiritual) calling and has no callers to the good, just like the salty water which has no usefulness for growing things or anything else. But the sweet, fresh water is the symbol of the inner, spiritual aspect; it is either springs flowing in the earth, or rain water flowing down from above the earth. Thus, that true knowledge, knowledge of the inner spiritual aspect, is either of its outward aspect that is conveyed by the *dāʿīs*, or else the inner spiritual knowing, which is hidden.⁵³ He further explains that among the honour of human intellects is their quest for the truth, the fruit of seeking is ultimately finding it, and the distinctive signs of discovering it are the absolute sweetness of what is found. Every fresh water has its outward aspect which is drinkable and also has an inner dimension which is hidden. Jaʿfar goes on to explain that the first of the contemplative duty is the preparatory purification of hearts through virtuous deeds, which include seeking knowledge. The duty of seeking knowledge is acting on it and then purifying it by willing obedience to the master of true authority (i.e., *imām*). Moreover, one needs to be patient because spiritual knowledge, understanding, and experience cannot be claimed as a result of one's own efforts, for ultimately, it is a blessing of Allah received by those having great fortune.⁵⁴

Nāṣir-i Khusrau provides us with an elucidation of the concept and practice of purity in his discussion on ablution and its appropriate observances. According to him, ablution is prayer's door as faith is Islam's door. The outward expressions of ablution is washing and wiping with wet hands if water is available, and ablution with clean earth (*tayammum*) in absence of water. In essence, ablution as a whole is a covenant of loyalty to the lord of the time (i.e., *imām*) and dissociating oneself from the enemies of Allah's chosen friends and prayers are a proof of solidarity with them. Ablution is done only with pure water and pure water is a proof for knowledge of eloquence.⁵⁵ As clean natural water is used for washing dirt on the human body, likewise impurities of the human soul are purified with the knowledge of eloquence. Similarly, as prayer is not permissible without physical cleanliness and heeding to the true knowledge, which is the essence of the prayer, it is not permissible without sincere oath of loyalty to the Prophet and *imām*, each in his time embodies the divine command. Impurities of the body

⁵³ Morris, *The Master and the Disciple*, 90, Arabic text, 23.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, 117–18, Arabic text, 47.

⁵⁵ It refers to the Qurʾān 55:4, the knowledge that is revealed to the Prophet and his family and flows through the teaching of the *awliyāʾ* and *imāms* from the *ahl al-bayt* in Shīʿī interpretations.

are caused by urine, blood, pus, and odorous air and the impurities of the soul are caused by ignorance, sins, polytheism, anthropomorphism, denudation of the divine essence, befriending the enemies of God's chosen friends, and repudiating the *imāms*.⁵⁶ Thus, whoever is negligent out of ignorance should seek the true knowledge in order to purify himself of the impurities and ignorance. Quoting a saying of the Prophet "No purity except with good intention," Nāṣir-i Khusrau explains that ablution with intention means love for the family of truth (*ahl al-bayt*), which is an obligation on the believers from God and no deed of theirs is acceptable without having love for the *ahl al-bayt*, a reference to the Qur'ānic verse in which Allah says, "Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this except the love of those near of kin.'"⁵⁷ The Prophet, his legatee, and the *imām* of the time—each in his own life time—are the names of Allah, because through them Allah is recognized, just like things are recognized by their names. When a faithful believer utters Allah's name at the time of ablution, it indicates his conviction that he will reach Allah by following the path of Allah's chosen friends and purify himself of their enemies.⁵⁸

We say, by the grace of God, the Exalted, that giving *zakāh* is, for the believer, to be pure in which is the growth of his soul. This is because the purity of an individual's soul is linked with the purity of his body; the purity of his body is in the food (he consumes); the purity of food is to make it legitimate (*ḥalāl*); to make it legitimate means to separate from his material means (*māl*) what is due to God and deserving (authority) among people regarding the right of God is His Prophet and the one who, on His command, succeeds him.⁵⁹

The two terms *tavallā* (solidarity) and *tabarrā* (dissociation) which Nāṣir-i Khusrau has used assumed prominence during the Alamut era of the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs. Al-Kirmānī before him uses the terms as undivided love for good (*maḥabbah li 'l-khayr jumlatan*) and absolute dislike for evil (*bughḍ li 'l-sharr jumlatan*). An epistle *Maṭlūb al-Mu'minīn*⁶⁰ written during the Alamut time explains the two concepts. According to this source,

⁵⁶ For *tavallā* and *tabarrā*, see S. J. Badakhchani, ed. and trans., *Shi'i Interpretations of Islam: Three Treatises on Theology and Eschatology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 25–32.

⁵⁷ Qur'ān 42:23.

⁵⁸ For more details, see Nāṣir-i Khusrau, *Wajh-i Dīn*, ed. Ghulām Rizā A'vānī (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 112–21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁰ For description of this epistle, see Farhad Daftary, *Ismaili Literature* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London 2004); Badakhchani, *Shi'i Interpretations of Islam*, 18.

whoever claims to be faithful, two things are unavoidable for him, *tavallā* and *tabarrā*. *Tavallā* means facing someone and *tabarrā* is its opposite or looking the other way. Both concepts have exoteric and esoteric meanings. Exoterically *tavallā* means to face the people of goodness and esoterically it means to face Allah's command that is embodied in the *imām* of the time (*imām-i zamān*). *Tabarrā* exoterically means to turn away from bad people and dissociate oneself from them. In an esoteric sense, it means to distance oneself from anything that affects one's solidarity with the *imām*.

According to *Maṭlūb al-Mu'minīn*, the Prophet asserted, "Religion is love and hate for the sake of God."⁶¹ *Tavallā* and *ṭabarrā* include four things, namely, gnosis, love, emigration, and endeavour (*jihād*), each of which has an exoteric and esoteric meaning. Gnosis in an exoteric sense means to recognize the man of God who is the *imām* of the time, Allah's vicegerent on earth. Esoterically, it means that no one except him (*imām*) is worthy of recognition (as Allah's vicegerent on earth). Love in an exoteric sense is absolute devotion to the *imām* and unbounded friendship with him. In esoteric sense, it means distancing oneself from the adversaries of and claimants to his authority and finding it revulsion. The exoteric meaning of emigration is to keep away from *imām*'s adversaries due to their repulsive actions. From an esoteric perspective, it means that nothing should deter one from being united with the *imām*, even if it means detaching oneself from family, or life itself. The exoteric connotation of endeavour is to consider *imām*'s adversaries as his adversaries and in an esoteric sense it means to struggle within oneself to overcome one's materialistic and capricious desires and clearing them from the path of truth.⁶²

For an Ismāʿīlī, purity in its absolute sense means to make one's life a mirror of *imām*'s guidance by submitting to his authority and leading a life that is in total consonance with his guidance, both in material and spiritual domains. Thus, by effacing himself and submitting to the *imām*, he purifies himself. The articulation of the concept of purity is not just limited to the theological, historical, and philosophical texts of the Ismāʿīlī intellectual tradition, but it has also been expressed in its devotional literature in poetic language. Below are some examples.

⁶¹ See Badakhchani. *Shi'i Interpretations of Islam*, 39–40.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 24–25.

Poetizing the Concept of Purity

The chief *dā'ī* of the Fatimid *da'wah* al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) has poetized the knowledge of the *imām* using the allegory of water. Below are selected verses from his *Dīwān*.⁶³

The proof of your [i.e., *imām*'s] knowledge is above the staff; you are the conqueror of the sorcerers all the time.⁶⁴

You are the opening to the passage of the water of life, but this water is not permitted to the animal.

It is visible to the intellect and not superstitious talk, because the witness is superior to the reporter.

If all the trees were pens held by one of my fingers, and if I had all the paper to write your virtues,

And if the sea were amplified by seven more seas as ink to record the loftiest of your praise,⁶⁵

Even then, it would not surpass your glory; I would stop writing and fall short of praising you.

May Allah bestow blessings on you as long as the dawning light disperses the veil of darkness.

Verily, I am Ibn Mūsā, your servant, who by your strength walks proudly among the people.

Knowledge is my sword, integrity my mount, concealment is my armour and trust my helmet.⁶⁶

Nāṣir-i Khusrau poetizes the notion of purification as follows:

Observe self-restraint like the men of God, both of eyes, ears and other organs (of the body) too. As long as you have not left this world unrestrained because you will find yourself in the next world as purified. There you will be served with (the water of) *Salsabīl*⁶⁷ and here consider wine filthy.⁶⁸

⁶³ For Arabic text, see Ḥusayn, *Dīwān al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn*, 222 and for English translation, see Mohamad Adra, trans., *Mount of Knowledge, Sword of Eloquence: Collected Poems of an Ismaili Muslim Scholar in Fatimid Egypt* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011), 89.

⁶⁴ An allusion to the combat between Moses and the Pharaoh's magicians mentioned in the Qur'ān 20:56–70; 26:34–48. See Adra, *Mount of Knowledge*, 89n158.

⁶⁵ A reference to the Qur'ān 31:27.

⁶⁶ By "concealment," al-Mu'ayyad means the Shī'ī principle of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation of belief), practised as a precautionary measure against persecution in hostile environments. See Adra, *Mount of Knowledge*, 90n160.

⁶⁷ One of the two rivers in Paradise; the other is *kawthar*.

⁶⁸ Nāṣir-i Khusrau, *Dīwān-i Ash'ār*, ed. Sayyid Naṣr Allāh Taqavī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tā'īd-i Iṣfahān, n.d.), 17.

Reaching Cairo, the capital city of the Fatimid Caliphate, Nāṣir-i Khusrau describes his experience encountering the intellectual and spiritual knowledge generated under the guidance of the Fatimid caliphs-*imāms*.

I came to the City that resembled a garden full of fruit and flowers within its ornamented walls, with its ground planted with trees, its fields resembling the pattern of precious brocade, its Spring of Water which was as sweet as honey, resembling *kawthar*.⁶⁹

In another poem, he says,

The *āb-i ḥayāt* (the eternal life sustaining water) flows beneath his eloquent sayings; drink the *āb-i ḥayāt* and be eternal, never to die.⁷⁰

Comparing other languages with the divine speech (the Qur'ān), Nāṣir-i Khusrau says poetically,

In the ocean of languages, the best speech is of God; which is filled with precious pearls. The literal words of *tanzīl* (of the Qur'ān) is salty like the ocean; *ta'wīl* (authoritative interpretation) is like pearls for people of understanding extracted from it. All pearls are beneath the ocean, thus seek to be diver; since you are only jogging on the shore of the ocean.⁷¹

The water metaphor continued in the devotional poetics of the community during the Alamut period composed in praise of the Nizārī Ismā'īlī *imāms*. Here are examples from Ḥasan Maḥmūd Kātīb's *Dīwān*.⁷²

O Unique Lord of the Time! For the sake of that no blessings descend from the heaven except on your name, rain on physical forms, literally on our mold and clay, of *āb-i ḥayāt*, eternal life sustaining water from the clouds of your generosity and kindness.⁷³

[Nūr al-Dīn] Muḥammad [the twenty-fourth Nizārī *imām*] is *āb-i ḥayāt* from the encompassing ocean of the resurrection for the people in this world and the next.⁷⁴

For Ismā'īlis, the knowledge of the *imām* is the source of interpretation; it is like a seed which produces multitudes of its kind. In other words, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 174–75. The translation is of Alice C. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), 61.

⁷⁰ Nāṣir-i Khusrau, *Dīwān-i Ash'ār*, 158.

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

⁷² Ḥasan Maḥmūd Kātīb, *Dīwān-i Qā'imīyyāt*, ed. S. J. Badakhchani (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011).

⁷³ Ibid., 76–77.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 91.

knowledge of the *imām* spreads through those who are willing to benefit from it and ready to receive it. The following verses from the *kalām* of the two *imāms* are examples of how they have alluded to their vested knowledge through a metaphor of water which continue to be recited during religious ceremonies:

Although I am like a drop which is separated from the ocean,
but if you (truly) recognize the drop, you will know I am akin to the ocean.⁷⁵

Unless an oyster is worthy of producing a pearl, I don't let a drop fall on it.
Unless a garden is worthy of growing flowers, I don't shower it with a rain drop.⁷⁶

I appear to be like a drop, but in reality, I am an encompassing ocean and the eye of all eyes.⁷⁷

***Tahārah* Symbolism in Contemporary Ismā'īlī Rituals**

Muslim rituals, being rooted for their underlying principles in the Qur'ān, are subject to authoritative interpretation. For Ismā'īlīs, the authority to interpret belongs to the *imām* of the time. The interpretation of the Qur'ān and the ensuing rituals have two layers of meaning; one is apparent from the lexical perspective, and the other is a deeper layer or layer upon layers which contains the esoteric meanings. These two layers of interpretation known as *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* are intertwined in the sense that the former is interpretation of the apparent, while the latter is uncovering the hidden meaning which lies beneath the apparent. However, exoteric interpretation which is philological in nature is subject to change and is reflective of changing time, space, context, and language itself, while the search for esoteric meaning remains constant because it deals with symbols which are constant and universal such as the heavenly bodies. As the Qur'ān says, "Soon will We show them Our signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own selves."⁷⁸

Al-Nu'mān, in his book *Ta'wīl al-Da'ā'im*, refers to the exoteric and esoteric meanings of the ritual of *zakāh*⁷⁹ and states that he has explained

⁷⁵ Shāh 'Abd al-Salām (thirty-third *imām*).

⁷⁶ Shāh 'Abd al-Salām.

⁷⁷ Shāh Nizār II (fortieth *imām*).

⁷⁸ Qur'ān 41:53.

⁷⁹ While in the classical Ismā'īlī literature, the term *zakāh* is commonly used for religious dues, the contemporary Ismā'īlīs use a variety of terms depending on the segments of different languages and cultural backgrounds. In South Asia, the term used is *dasundh* (lit. one-tenth) which is translated into Arabic as *'ushr* and in Persian as *dah-*

the exoteric and esoteric meaning of the ritual in detail in his book *Da'ā'im al-Islām*. He then moves on to providing his readers with the *ta'wīl* of *zakāh* the innermost of which is the knowledge, wisdom, blessing, and mercy of Allah expressed through the mouth (lit. tongues) of His chosen friends, *awliyā'*, of which only the *ẓāhir* has been revealed to the people. The worship in the esoteric sense is to worship the authority vested in the *awliyā'* (the Prophets and *imāms*) in that listening to them and obeying them are obligatory. Indeed, an act of worship is of no benefit in *ẓāhir* and in *bāṭin* except through this endowed authority. As Allah has explicitly said in the Qur'ān, "Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those charged with authority among you."⁸⁰ Allah asked His Prophet, "Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this except the love of those near to kin. And if any one earns any good, we shall give him an increase of good in respect thereof.'"⁸¹ Thus, he asserts that Allah, the Exalted, informed His Messenger concerning acceptance of good deeds and increasing in them the reward when they obeyed His *awliyā'*, recognized them, and had love for them. Allah said through the mouth of His Messenger, Muḥammad that whoever obeys them, indeed, obeys Allah and whoever disobeys them disobeys Him. Thus, Allah linked obedience to them with obedience to Him and His Messenger.⁸²

In Ismā'īlī interpretation, the *imām's* authority as *ulū 'l-amr* is the hinge to which all rituals are linked and revolve around. Once a ritual is detached from the *imām's* authority or introduced without being authorized by him, it loses legitimacy in a religious sense. The concept of *ṭahārah*, in the context of the practice of faith, is inseparably linked with and dependent on the authority of the *imām*. It is he who interprets and unveils the inner meaning for his followers thereby purifying them. They believe that no one can touch the inner meaning of the Qur'ān except the Prophet and the *imāms* because they are both the purified and

yak. Besides these terms, Ismā'īlīs in Central Asia including Afghanistan, Northern Pakistan, and China, continue to use the term *zakāh* along with other terms such as *māl-i imām*, *māl-i wājibāt*, and *māl-i sarkār*. While *zakāh* or *dasundh* is obligatory in religious sense, the actual amount submitted depends on the individual's level of commitment to the practice of his/her faith. Historically, Ismā'īlīs pay two per cent over and above the ten per cent obligatory tithe which was for the expenses of the individuals who were responsible for conducting the religious duties. For other forms of devotional contributions including celebration of Jubilees of the forty-eighth and the present *imām* in which all Ismā'īlīs globally participated, see Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis*, s.v. "tithe," 167.

⁸⁰ Qur'ān 4:59.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 42:23.

⁸² See al-Nu'mān, *Ta'wīl al-Da'ā'im*, 3:56.

purifier as per the word of Allah, “That this is indeed a Qur’an honourable, in a Book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean.”⁸³

Symbolic expressions of the spiritual relationship between the *imām* and his followers have been an integral part of Ismā‘īlī rituals throughout history. In the contemporary ritual observances, attestation to the authority of the *imām*, having unconditional allegiance to him, and seeking his prayers and blessings take various forms. In the past, one of the ways in which this was expressed was that the *imām* would send sugar crystals embodying his prayers and blessings for his *jamā‘at* (community of his followers) through his representatives who would visit him from different far flung regions of the world. The blessed sugar crystals would be dissolved in water and dispensed to the members of the community in a ceremonial context. Today, on important occasions, a bowl of water is presented to the *imām* to bless it with his prayers and a small amount of which is sent to each country, generally accompanied with a *ta‘līqah*, a written message of blessings from the *imām*. The blessed water is known as *āb-i shifā’* or *al-mā’ al-ṭahūr* (lit. water of curing or purifying), symbolizing *imām*’s authority, his prayers, and protection. The tradition of *āb-i shifā’* is also a symbolic reminder of the Qur’ānic promise of “healing for (diseases) in your hearts—and for those who believe”⁸⁴ and “their Lord will give to them to drink of a Wine, pure and holy.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

This research shows that *ṭahārah* (purity) is the principal concept of the Ismā‘īlī interpretation of Islam. It applies to every other concept relating to beliefs and practices. At the level of belief in one God (*tawḥīd*), *ṭahārah* in the Ismā‘īlī interpretation means to believe in Allah Who is above *tashbīh* and *ta‘ṭīl*. *Tashbīh* means associating attributes of created beings to Allah Who is Unique and nothing is like Him.⁸⁶ His Majesty can be understood only through His chosen people, the Prophets and the *imāms*. This is how one can guard oneself from committing *shirk* which is a dreadful sin.⁸⁷ Refraining from associating anything or comparing with the divine authority is extended to the authority of the final Prophet and the *imām* who, in Ismā‘īlī tradition, is always to be from the Prophet’s

⁸³ Qur’ān 56:77–79.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 10:57.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 76:21.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 42:11.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 31:13.

family and his progeny through his daughter Fāṭimah and ‘Alī, his cousin and son-in-law. Thus, *ṭahārah* in all its expressions is sought through unconditional allegiance to the *imām* and mirroring his teachings and guidance in one’s material and spiritual aspects of life. The *imām*’s knowledge flows through various channels as al-Mu’ayyad would end his session of wisdom (*majlis al-ḥikmah*) addressing his audience, “O the community of faithful believers! Allah may quench your thirst from the pure water flowing through the springs of wisdom.”⁸⁸

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⁸⁸ Hibat Allāh al-Shīrāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu’ayyidiyyah*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1974), 492.