



BRILL

---

The Light Verse: Qur'ānic Text and Sūfī Interpretation

Author(s): Gerhard Böwering

Source: *Oriens*, Vol. 36 (2001), pp. 113-144

Published by: BRILL

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1580478>

Accessed: 02/04/2010 11:50

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=bap>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



BRILL is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Oriens*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# THE LIGHT VERSE: QUR'ĀNIC TEXT AND ṢŪFĪ INTERPRETATION

by

*Gerhard Böwering*

New Haven

*For Franz Rosenthal on his eighty-fifth birthday*

Throughout the ages, light has been valued as the most beautiful phenomenon of creation and the eye that perceives it as the most important human organ of sense perception. Monotheistic religions such as Islam seek the origin of natural light in God, the eternal source of light, an unapproachable light without darkness, and they actualize the desire to know God in an act of seeing the divine light. Maintaining the distinction between Creator and creation, earthly light is understood as an image of eternal light, though following the principle of like drawing to like, light can only be known through light. God can be seen only through an inner eye, the spirit or the intellect, and this vision of God cannot be achieved by human effort alone. Rather, it is ultimately a gift of God, an illumination. God is not identical in essence with light, and natural light does not coincide with divine light, although light is the most inclusive attribute by which God is described. At the same time, light is the most exalted image by which the invisible God can be represented in a visible and temporal world, and the most powerful symbol by which the eternal God can be apprehended in the human realm of sense perception and intellectual insight.

In the Qur'ān, the Holy Book of Islam, the theme of light, God's light, is most directly addressed in the famous "light verse," Q 24:35, which this article analyzes in two stages. First, explaining the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, the wording of the qur'ānic text is compared methodically with parallel passages, and this inner-qur'ānic evidence is set against the cultural and religious background of Arabia during Muḥammad's lifetime. Second, relevant Ṣūfī interpretations from the Qur'ān commentaries of Sulamī (d. 412/1021), Quṣayrī (d. 465/1072) and Daylamī (d. shortly after 593/1197) are selected to illustrate the overlay of the qur'ānic text with various themes

reflecting the cultural and religious background of 3rd/9th to 6th/12th century Iraq and Iran, in particular that of Baḡdād, the capital of the ‘Abbāsīd empire, and Ḥurāsān, its eastern province.

The verse Q 24:35 in the actual text of the Qur’ān, which we hold in our hands today, reads as follows:

ج  
 \* اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
 مِثْلُ نُورِهِ، كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ  
 الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبْرَكَةٍ  
 زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ  
 تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ  
 وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَلَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

The Arabic of the verse may be translated in the following standard way:

“God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp – the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star – kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light. God guides to His light whom He wills. And God strikes similes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.”

This verse, widely known in Muslim sources as the “light verse” (*āyat an-nūr*) and characterized as a simile or a metaphor, forms part of the Medinan sura that takes its name from this passage.<sup>1</sup> The full sura, as it stands, deals principally with domestic legislation and prescriptions for proper Muslim

<sup>1</sup> I. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, Leiden 1920, reprint 1970, 183-184.

conduct. It includes a veiled reference to the slandering of ʿĀʾiša (Q 24:11-20), following her disappearance during the return from the expedition against the Banū Muşṭaliq, an episode that has recently been analyzed by Schoeler.<sup>2</sup> Only loosely related to its principal themes, the sura also includes two larger passages which appear to be digressions and which exhibit signs of textual revision or interpolation, as already noted by Nöldeke and Schwally.<sup>3</sup> Neither passage seems pertinent to the context of the sura as a whole. Their unexpected appearance in the sura may be due to editorial confusion or, what I suggest is more likely, may be the result of express editorial insertion during the text's composition and final redaction.

The two passages in question are verses 34-45, which juxtapose God, the Light of the world, to the darkness of unbelief, and verses 46-56, which reproach those who, despite their oath of allegiance, do not join Muḥammad in warfare, possibly with reference to the battle of Uḥud and the siege of the Ḥandaq. Both passages commence with an almost identical phrase echoing crucial words included in the very first verse of the sura. Verse 34 begins, *wa-laqaḍ anzalnā ilaykum āyātīn mubayyinātīn*, "And We have sent down to you signs making all clear," and verse 46 starts with, *laqaḍ anzalnā āyātīn mubayyinātīn*, "We have sent down signs making it all clear." After the introductory *basmala*, the first verse of the sura begins with the phrase, *sūratun anzalnāhā wa-faraḍnāhā wa-anzalnā fihā āyātīn bayyinātīn*, "A sura that We have sent down and appointed; and We have sent down in it signs, clear signs" (24:1).<sup>4</sup> The pivotal words *āyāt* and *mubayyināt*, which also occur in Qurʾān 65:10 (*āyātī llāhi mubayyinātīn*), have their origin in the Meccan period of Muḥammad's qurʾānic proclamation. The particular use of the word *sūra*, however, referring to a short unit of revelation rather than an entire chapter of the book suggests a Medinan context, not unlike the other occurrences of this word within the qurʾānic text.<sup>5</sup>

The light verse forms a central and integral part of the *first* of the two particular passages introduced by *āyātīn mubayyinātīn*, namely verses 34-45. Its remarkable imagery is conveyed by the key words of the simile: the light (*nūr*), the niche (*mişkāṭ*), the lamp (*mişbāḥ*), the glass (*zuġāġa*), the

<sup>2</sup> G. Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, Berlin–New York 1996, 119-165.

<sup>3</sup> Th. Nöldeke and F. Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 3 vols., Hildesheim–New York 1981, 1, 210-212.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase, *wa-faraḍnāhā*, also appears to be an editorial insertion.

<sup>5</sup> *Sūra* occurs nine times in the singular and once in the plural, *suwar*, all in Medinan verses, cf. Qurʾān 2:23; 9:64; 9:86; 9:124; 9:127; 10:38; 24:1; 47:20 (twice) and 11:13 (*suwar*).



glittering star (*kawkabun durriyun*), the blessed olive tree (*šağaratīn mubārakatin zaytūnatin*), the light lit by itself without fire touching it (*wa-law lam tamsashu nārun*), light upon light (*nūrun ‘alā nūrin*), and the similes (*amṭāl*) of divine illumination. The verse itself, one of the most evocative of all Medinan verses, has long been regarded as an especially lofty and exalted one. Its first words adorn the cupola of the Aya Sofya mosque in Istanbul, its symbolism provided the theme for *Miškāt al-anwār*, al-Ġazzālī’s (d. 505/1111) famous mystico-philosophical treatise,<sup>6</sup> and its simile is echoed in the title of the highly popular Ḥadīṭ collection, *Miškāt al-maṣābiḥ*.<sup>7</sup> Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. 139/756) supposedly began his heretical imitation of the Qur’ān with the words, “In the name of the Light, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”<sup>8</sup> Christian readers of the Qur’ān may picture the verse against the solemn atmosphere of altars lit for worship in Eastern Christian churches and monasteries and detect in the qur’ānic wording phrases that recall the “Light of the World” in John’s Gospel and the “Light from Light” in the Nicene Creed.<sup>9</sup>

Linked in its qur’ānic context with the verses that directly precede and immediately follow it, the light verse occupies the pivotal point of a qur’ānic passage that clearly refers to forms of early Christian worship. The antecedent verse and the two subsequent verses frame the actual light verse with the assertion that it is a simile derived from those who have passed away and who are known for their glorification and remembrance of God both morning and evening in houses of prayer. The antecedent verse, Q 24:34, reads, “Now We have sent down to you signs making all clear, and an example from those who passed away before you (*wa-maṭalan mina llaḏīna ḥalaw min qablikum*), and an admonition for the godfearing (*wa-maw’izatan li-l-muttaqīna*).” The verses subsequent to the light verse, 24:36-37, continue the image of the shining light, “in houses (*fi buyūtin*) God has allowed to be raised up, and His name to be commemorated therein; therein glorifying Him, in the mornings and the evenings, are men whom neither commerce nor trafficking diverts from the remembrance of God and to perform the prayer, and to pay the alms, fearing a day when hearts and eyes shall be turned about.”

This perception of a coherent context for the passage, verses 34-37, finds

<sup>6</sup> cf. W.H.T. Gairdner, Al-Ghazzālī’s *Miškāt al-anwār* (“The niche for Lights”), London 1924.

<sup>7</sup> Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh at-Tabrizī, *Miškāt al-maṣābiḥ*, 2 vols. Beirut 1417/1996; English translation, J. Robson, *Miškāt al-Masabih*, 2 vols., Lahore 1973-1975.

<sup>8</sup> F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Leiden 1970, 157.

<sup>9</sup> D.B. Macdonald, “Allāh,” *EI* (reprint 1987) 1/303.

further confirmation once two sets of rhyme patterns are traced in the final redaction of the Qurʾānic text. In this case, an underlying rhyme pattern ending in the assonances of long *alif* (plus consonant) can be seen as overlaid and obscured by additions rhyming in long *yā* plus consonant. Attempts at tracing the overlaying rhyme patterns have been made by a few scholars, in particular Bell<sup>10</sup> and Blachere.<sup>11</sup> Although none of these attempts has been totally felicitous or conclusive, they offer compelling arguments that particular phrases were inserted at the final redaction of the text, as for instance, the obvious insertion in verse 37, “and to perform the prayer and to pay the alms” (*wa-iqāmi ṣ-ṣalāti wa-itāʾi z-zakāti*)<sup>12</sup> and the probable addition in verse 34, “and an admonition for the godfearing” (*wa-mawʿizatan li-l-muttaqīna*). With certain provisos, editorial activity may also be spotted in the last lines of the light verse, from the phrase “and God strikes similes” (*wa-yadribu llāhu l-amṭāla*) until its end. When these additions are removed, the powerful rhyme in long *alif* is left and an underlying Meccan version of the passage appears in striking contrast to its Medinan revision that, at the final redaction, was integrated into the actual passage of our present-day Qurʾān.

My assertion that there is a background for this passage in the prayer practices of Eastern Christian oratories can also be substantiated in more general terms, on the one hand through the literal meaning of the word Qurʾān, which implies a liturgical text recited in private and public worship,<sup>13</sup> and on the other hand through the not uncommon references of early Arabic poetry to Christian monks and hermits.<sup>14</sup> From such sources we know that, during their night vigils, these monks kept their lamps burning in their cells and places of prayer, the light of which could be seen from a distance and could guide the night traveler to a safe haven. The proclamation of the light verse was not influenced, however, by the use of oil-lamps introduced into Muslim public worship during Muḥammad’s lifetime. Tamīm ad-Dārī, an Arab Christian from Palestine who converted to Islam in Medina after the campaign to Tabūk in 9/63 became a companion of the Prophet and probably died in 40/660-661.<sup>15</sup> Though a wine merchant,<sup>16</sup> Islamic tradition portrays

<sup>10</sup> R. Bell, *A Commentary on the Qurʾān*, 2 vols., Manchester 1991, 1/601-603.

<sup>11</sup> R. Blachère, *Le Coran*, Paris 1966, 380-382.

<sup>12</sup> The paying of *zakāt* would be inappropriate to monks or priests, cf. Bell, *A Commentary*, 1, 60.

<sup>13</sup> E. Gräf, “Zu den christlichen Einflüssen im Koran,” *ZDMG* 111, 1962, 396-398.

<sup>14</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London 1979, 247-248; W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum*, Stuttgart 1922; E. Beck, “Das christliche Mönchtum im Koran,” *Studia Orientalia* 13, 1946, 1-29; C.H. Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, New York 1974, 2-33.

<sup>15</sup> G. Levi Della Vida, “Tamīm al-Dārī,” *EI* (reprint 1987) 8/646-648.

<sup>16</sup> Every year Tamīm ad-Dārī, assisted by his slave Sirāġ, brought a wine bag for the

him as a former monk who came to be known as the first storyteller of religious tales (*qāṣṣ*) about the apocalyptic end of the world, the Antichrist (*ad-dağğāl*) and the Beast (*al-ğassāsa*).<sup>17</sup> Tamīm ad-Dāri advised the Prophet on building a pulpit (*minbar*) in his mosque at Medina and using oil-lamps for its illumination, adopting their use from Christian Palestinian and Syrian practice.<sup>18</sup> According to Muslim sources, palm leaves (*saʿaf an-naḥl*) were burnt for lighting the interior of Muslim mosques prior to the use of lamps<sup>19</sup> and the practice of lighting lamps at night in mosques took root only after the Prophet had approved the custom for his mosque at Medina on the advice of Tamīm ad-Dāri. The accounts of this episode refer to the oil lamp with wick brought by Tamīm ad-Dāri from his native Palestine and lit in the Prophet's mosque at Medina by the synonym, *qindil* (candelabrum), which does not occur in the Qurʾān.<sup>20</sup> The absence of the term *qindil* from the Qurʾānic text, as well as the obvious fact that the underlying Meccan version of the light verse can be traced to the time before the *hiğra*, whereas Tamīm ad-Dāri's advice came years after it in Medina, demonstrate that neither the episode itself nor the actual language of its account influenced the composition of the light verse.

While the episode of Tamīm ad-Dāri and the use of the non-Qurʾānic term *qindil* reflect a Syrian Christian context, the Ethiopic loan-word, *miškāt*, translated either as a "niche in a wall," as observed by Jeffery,<sup>21</sup> or also as a "window," as suggested by Nöldeke<sup>22</sup> and Paret,<sup>23</sup> points to an Abyssinian Christian origin for this crucial term employed in the light verse. Already Muğāhid (d. 104/722)<sup>24</sup> and Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889)<sup>25</sup> maintain the

---

Prophet until the drinking of wine was proscribed. Sirāğ later became the guardian of the Temple in Jerusalem (*sādin bayt al-maqdis*), M. Lecker, "Tamīm al-Dāri," *EI* (new edition) 10/176. According to an-Nuwayrī (d. 732/1332), the People of the Book light a fire night and day in synagogues and churches (*buyūt al-nirān*, *buyūt al-ʿibādāt*) and have guardians (*sādin*, pl. *sadana*) who maintain the fire in the sanctuaries (*Nihāyat al-arab*, Cairo 1923-37, 1/103-129, especially 107), cf. T. Fahd, "Nār," *EI* (new edition) 7/960.

<sup>17</sup> I. Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2 vols., Halle 1889-1890, reprint Hildesheim 1961, 2/161.

<sup>18</sup> Clermont-Ganneau, *RHR* 81, 1920, 247-252.

<sup>19</sup> cf. M.A.J. Beg, "Sirādj," *EI* (new edition) 9/665, citing Ibn ʿAbdalbarr (d. 463/1070).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 9/665.

<sup>21</sup> The word *miškāt* occurs only once in the Qurʾān (24:35). The apparent Persian paronym *muškū*, *maškū* notwithstanding (cf. Clermont-Ganneau, "La lampe et l'olivier dans le Coran," *RHR* 81, 1920, 219), the word is doubtlessly of Ethiopic origin and can hardly be explained as an Arabic word derived from *šakā*, cf. A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, Baroda 1938, 266.

<sup>22</sup> Th. Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Strassburg 1910, 51.

<sup>23</sup> R. Paret, *Der Koran, Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart 1980, 360.

<sup>24</sup> as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, Calcutta 1852-54, 324.

Ethiopic origin of *miškāt*. Wansbrough's analysis of the interview that Muḥammad's cousin, Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 8/629 at Mu'ta), had with an Ethiopian ruler, based on Ibn Hishām's biography of the Prophet, which quotes the word *miškāt*, may also be cited in support of an Abyssinian Christian background for the term.<sup>26</sup> Again, *miškāt* is a hapax in the Qur'ān, while the term *mihrāb*, which became the dominant expression for "niche" in Arabic literature, is mentioned in different contexts of the Qur'ān, referring to "sanctuary" (Q 3:37; 3:39; 19:11) and "palace" (Q 38:21; and 34:13, plural, *maḥārīb*).<sup>27</sup> Although widely used from early Islamic times, the term *manār* or *manāra*, "lampstand" does not appear in the Qur'ān.<sup>28</sup> The pre-Islamic poet Imra' al-Qays (d. about 550 C.E.) compares the countenance of his beloved to "the nightlight (*manāra*) of the anchorite devoted to God,"<sup>29</sup> and questions, "Was it its blaze, or the lamps of a hermit that dwells alone, and pours o'er the twisted wicks the oil from his slender cruse?"<sup>30</sup> while his namesake, Imra' al-Qays, living in early Islamic times, says that "the stars (*nuḡūm*) resemble the lamps of monks (*maṣābiḥ ruhbān*)."<sup>31</sup> Placed in a *miškāt*, a niche or a hollow in the wall, the lamp, *miṣbāh*, which may also be translated as "lighted wick," generates more light than it would in an open space. This lamp, in turn, is depicted as kept in a glass (*zuḡāḡa*), like the lighted wick fed from a tray of oil and ringed by a tube or flask of glass that is suspended from the ceiling. It is worth noting that the term *zuḡāḡa* is employed in the Qur'ān only in *āyat an-nūr*.<sup>32</sup> Other Qur'ānic references to glass-like substances deploy different vocabulary. For example, the blessed in paradise are said to drink from "vessels of silver and goblets of crystal"

<sup>25</sup> "*Al-miškāt* means 'small window' in the Ethiopic language (*al-kūwa bi-lisān al-habaša*)," Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-kātib* (ed. M. Grünert), Leiden 1900, 527.

<sup>26</sup> J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, Oxford 1977, 38-43.

<sup>27</sup> For the architectural appearance of *mihrāb* as a doorway and the variant interpretations of the term, from "throne-recess" and "burial place" to "most important place" and "space between columns", cf. G. Fehérvári, "Mihrāb", *EI* (new edition) 7/7-15.

<sup>28</sup> The word *manār* can also be used interchangeably with *sawma'a*, "a monk's cell having a high and slender head," E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, London 1863-1893, 1728.

<sup>29</sup> Imra' al-Qays, *Mu'allāqa* (ed. C.J. Lyall), London 1894, 18 (line 39); cf. *GAS* 2/122-126.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* 26 (line 72), cf. C.J. Lyall, *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry*, London 1885, re-print 1930, 103-104.

<sup>31</sup> L. Cheikho, *Le Christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam*, 2 vols., Beirut 1912-19, 2/56-60; C. Hechaime, *Louis Cheikho et son livre "Le Christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam"*, Beirut 1967.

<sup>32</sup> The word *zuḡāḡa*, "glass vessel, crystal," occurs only in Q 24:35 (twice) as a loanword from the Syriac. "It was probably when the Arabs came to use glass that they took over the word along with the article," cf. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 150-151.

(*bi-āniyatin min fiḍḍatin wa-akwābin kānat qawārīrā*) (Q 76:15-16), which latter term is well-known from the “pavilion smoothed of crystal” (*ṣarḥun mumarradun min qawārīra*), mentioned in the Qur’ānic story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba (Saba’) (Q 27:44).

The light verse also has a certain resemblance to a night vision recorded in the Hebrew Bible, namely in the fourth chapter of Zechariah: “And the angel asked me, ‘What do you see?’ I answered, ‘I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it; it holds seven lamps, and there are seven pipes for the lamps on top of it, with two olive trees standing by it, one on the right of the bowl, and another on the left’” (Zechariah 4:2-3).<sup>33</sup> This biblical reference, as well as the place of the olive tree in Talmudic texts, may indicate a connection between this verse and rabbinic lore and literature. Zechariah’s vision appears to be reflected in the image of the two olive trees mentioned in the Apocalypse of John in the Greek New Testament: “These are the two olive trees and the two lamps that stand in the presence of the Lord of the earth” (Apocalypse 11:4).<sup>34</sup> Both Horowitz<sup>35</sup> and Speyer<sup>36</sup> have collected references from Jewish and Christian

<sup>33</sup> The verses of Zechariah 4:2-3 form a textual unit with 4:11-14; cf. C. Jeremias, *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja*, Göttingen 1977, 176-188; L.G. Rignell, *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja*, Lund 1950; Clermont-Ganneau, “La lampe et l’olivier dans le Coran,” *RHR* 81, 1920, 213-259; especially, 225-227. The seven-branched lampstand, made of pure gold, was erected in the temple (Exodus 25:31-40) and the Jews kept the lamp, fueled by olive oil, burning perpetually in the sanctuary (Exodus 27:20-21) as a symbol of the divine presence (*kabod*, cf. S. Aalen, *Die Begriffe Licht und Finsternis im Alten Testament, im Spätjudentum und im Rabbinismus*, Oslo 1971, 75, 85). Obviously, there are many crucial references to “light” in the Bible, such as, “God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light” (Genesis 2:3), “God said, ‘Let there be lights in the vault of heaven to separate day from night’” (Genesis 1:14), “wrapped in a robe of light, Thou hast spread out the heavens like a tent” (Psalm 104:2), “I am the Lord, there is no other; I make the light, I create darkness” (Isaiah 45:6-7), “in the light of Thy presence” (Psalm 4:6; 44:3; 89:15), “in Thy light we are bathed in light” (Psalm 36:9), “the Lord shall be your everlasting light” (Isaiah 60:19), “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2), “the Lord is my light” (Micah 7:8) and “the Lord is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27:1). Mention may also be made of the lamps used at the feast of Chanukka (cf. Aalen, *ibid.* 130-152). In the New Testament, “God is light and in Him there is no darkness” (1 John 1:5), God is “the Father of the lights of heaven” (James 1:17), who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16), whereas the Word is “the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) and “the true light that enlightens every man” (John 1:9). Finally, 2 Peter 1:19 compares the prophetic word to “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” In addition, Christian liturgy is focussed on the coming of the divine light into the world of darkness, especially at Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas and Easter, and occupies an important place at baptism, communion and funerals.

<sup>34</sup> The Apocalypse of John also includes two short parallel passages to the shining lampstands, cf. Apocalypse 1:12 and 1:20; cf. R. North, *Biblica* 51, 1970, 183-206.

<sup>35</sup> J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin and Leipzig 1926, 123-125.

<sup>36</sup> H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Hildesheim 1961, 62-66; 430-431.

literature that understand the olive tree as related to the tree of life, the tree of paradise, the olive tree of which Jesus's cross was made, and the tree that stands in the center of the world. In the Jewish and Christian sources, however, this tree is usually located in Jerusalem unlike its qur'anic placement at Sinai. Wensinck has devoted a special study to the cosmic tree and the sun in Near Eastern religions, and has examined a broad range of traditions that locate the tree at the ends of the earth, in its center, or even in paradise and hell.<sup>37</sup> The general conclusions of all these studies, to which I cannot refer in detail in this article, point to an understanding of the olive tree as a tree of heavenly rather than terrestrial origin, whose oil is a source of both life and light. The phrase of the light verse, "an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West" would correspond well with the explanation of the tree as superterrestrial and celestial, while the phrase, "whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it," would corroborate its nature as suprasensual and heavenly.

Two crucial Meccan passages provide intra-qur'anic evidence that the olive tree in Q 24:35 refers to one growing on Mount Sinai, which is also understood as the tree of paradise in the Qur'an. The qur'anic verses, Q 23:19-20, state: "Then We produced for you therewith gardens of palms and vines wherein are many fruits for you, and of them you eat, and a tree issuing from the Mount of Sinai that bears oil and seasoning for all to eat (*wa-šağaratan taħruğu min tūri saynā'a tanbutu bi-d-duhni wa-šibğin li-l-ākilina*)."<sup>38</sup> The other Meccan passage, Q 95:1-2, begins with an oath invoking the olive and Mount Sinai, "By the fig and the olive and the Mount Sinai and this land secure (*wa-t-tini wa-z-zaytūni wa-tūri sinina wa-hāda l-baladi l-amīn*)."<sup>39</sup> If these two passages are set next to each other and com-

<sup>37</sup> A.J. Wensinck, *Tree and Bird as Cosmological Symbols in Western Asia*, Amsterdam 1921.

<sup>38</sup> Rather than *zayt*, "olive oil," this passage employs the term *duhn*, "oil," probably with the implication of its meaning fuel, while *šibğ* refers to "seasoning" or "condiment," possibly implying that the tree provides both illumination and sustenance. In the light verse (Q 24:35), however, the term *zayt* is used to denote the fuel for the lamp; cf. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 124; Paret, *Kommentar*, 353. *Duhn* and *zayt* appear each only once in the Qur'an (23:20). The olive (*zaytūn*) is mentioned four times in the Qur'an, twice together with the pomegranate (*rummān*, Q 6:99; 6:141), twice together with the date palm (Q 16:11; 80:29) and once with the fig (Q 95:1). The olive was not indigenous among the Arabs and the Arabic words, *zayt*, "olive oil," and *zaytūn*, "olive tree," can be explained as early borrowings from the Syriac, cf. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 156-157.

<sup>39</sup> A prophetic Ḥadīṭ on the authority of Abū Hurayra states: "Among the cities God chose four, Mecca, the city par excellence (*al-balada*), Medina, the palmtree (*al-naḥla*), Jerusalem, the olive tree (*az-zaytūn*), and Damascus, the figtree (*at-tin*);" cf. H. Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jérusalem et d'Hébron*, Paris 1876, 186. Another Ḥadīṭ states, "The Figtree (*at-tin*) is the mosque of Damascus, the olive tree (*az-zaytūn*) the Mount of the Olives (*Tūr Zaytā*), the mosque

pared with the light verse, “a tree issuing from the Mount of Sinai that bears oil and seasoning” echoes the description of “a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the linguistic evidence of vocabulary originally foreign to Arabic employed in Q 24:35 (*miškāt, zuġāġa, zayt, zaytūna*), as well as a number of loan words in the parallel passages that have been cited, also indicate a non-Arab and, most likely, Christian setting of the imagery included in the light verse.

This evidence can be corroborated by two episodes from the Qur’ānic story of Moses, who received the Torah on Mount Sinai (Q 23:20; 95:1) and encountered God in the burning bush “on the right side of the Mount” (*min ġānibi t-ṭūri l-ayman*, Q 19:52; 20:80; 28:29).<sup>41</sup> In the Bible the revelation of the Torah and the encounter at the burning bush occur at two different sites; the Qur’ān, however, seems to place them on one and the same mountain.<sup>42</sup> Citing the introductory oath of the Meccan passage that begins sura 52, named *aṭ-Ṭūr*, one encounters a clear reference to Mount Sinai, the place where Moses received the Torah, “By the Mount (*wa-t-ṭūri*) and a Book inscribed in a parchment unrolled, by the house inhabited and the roof uplifted and the sea swarming” (Q 52:1-6). Mount Sinai also is the place where Moses beheld a fire (*nār*) and fetched a brand of it (*qabas*, Q 20:10; *ṣihāb qabas*, 27:7; *ġadwa min an-nār*, 28:29) for his people.

Other than in the light verse, the term *nār* occurs 128 times in the Qur’ān, 111 times with reference to hellfire, the punishment of which is also five times called, *‘adāb al-ḥariq* (Q 3:181; 8:50; 22:9; 22:22; 85:10), while *ġaḥim* and *sa‘ir* appear 26 and 16 times, respectively, as synonyms of *nār* with the implication of hellfire. Q 55:35 cites fire as a sign of divine power and Q 3:183 “a sacrifice devoured by fire” (*bi-qurbānin ta’kuluhu n-nār*) as a test authenticating the prophetic mission.<sup>43</sup> Q 15:27 and 55:15 assert that the *ġinn*

---

at Jerusalem, and the Mount of Sinai (*Ṭūr Sinin*) is the mountain on which God conversed with Moses.” *ibid.* 410

<sup>40</sup> There is the remote, though unlikely, possibility that the word *aṭ-ṭūr* may refer either to the Mount of Olives, known as *Ṭūr Zaytā* and still called *Ġabal aṭ-Ṭūr*, which lies east of Jerusalem across the valley of Cedron (called *wādī Ġahannam*), or to the hills of Tabor, the site of Jesus’ transfiguration, or to Gerizim, the mountain of the Samaritans, both also called *aṭ-Ṭūr*; cf. E. Honigmann, “al-Ṭūr,” *EI (reprint)* 8/868-870.

<sup>41</sup> Deuteronomy 33:2

<sup>42</sup> Speyer, following the distinction made by Horovitz (*Koranische Untersuchungen*, 124-125), notes that the *ṭūr al-ayman* (Q 19:53; 28:29; 28:46), the site of the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3:2), is different from the *Ṭūr* where the Torah was revealed (Q 52:1-2; 2:87; 2:213; 3:3; 5:46) although he also reckons with a possible confusion of the two sites in the Qur’ān (*Biblische Erzählungen*, 255).

<sup>43</sup> cf. Genesis 4:3-5, the offerings of Cain and Abel; 1 Kings 18:21-40, Elijah on Mount Carmel.

were made of fire, and Q 7:12 and 38:72 cite Iblīs's insistence on his nature having been created of fire. The Qur'ān mentions fire (*nār*) as the punishment inflicted on Abraham by his polytheistic persecutors (Q 21:69; 29:24)<sup>44</sup> and rejects the worship of the celestial fire of the sun by the queen and people of Saba' (Q 27:24) and the cult of the sun, the moon and Venus adored by Abraham's adversaries (Q 6:74; 37:86; 41:37).<sup>45</sup> In pre-Islamic times, fire was used ritually to obtain rain in times of drought, to conclude a pact between parties (with the *kāhin* throwing salt in the fire to make it crackle and intimidate), and to seal the departure and prevent the return of an unwelcome guest. It was also a pre-Islamic custom to light fires as a sign of hospitality, guiding travellers toward a safe haven or greeting them on their safe return, as a summons to war, signalling men from afar to gather against a hostile attack, and as a sign of victory after a raid, enabling the defeated tribe to ransom or reclaim what was left of the spoils. Somewhat obliquely, Ġāhiz (d. 255/868-69) mentions oil lamps ignited on the eve of festivals without fire through the trickery of monks at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>46</sup>

As Moses approached the fire, a voice came: "Blessed be He who is in the fire, and he who is about it. Glory be to God, the Lord of all Being" (Q 27:8), or: "Moses, I am your Lord; put off your shoes; you are in the holy valley of Ṭuwan" (Q 20:11-12). In this "holy valley of Ṭuwan" (*bi-l-wādi l-muqaddasi Ṭuwan*), Moses receives his mission to Pharaoh (Q 79:16), with his brother Aaron as a companion, and is given the various signs of his mission, his rod thrown on the ground and quivering like a serpent and his hand turned white when drawn out from his armpit (cf. 20:11-36; 28:29-32). When Moses approaches the burning bush "on the side of the mountain" (*min ġānibi t-ṭūr*, 28:29), the voice cries from "the right bank of the valley (*min šāṭi'i l-wādi l-ayman*), in the sacred hollow, coming from the tree (*fi l-buq'ati l-mubarakati mina š-šağara*): Moses, I am God, the Lord of all Being" (Q 28:30), or in a parallel passage, God calls "from the right side of the Mount" (*min ġānibi t-ṭuri l-ayman*), bringing Moses near in communion (Q 19:52). On this "right side of the Mount" God made His covenant with the children of Israel, sending down on them manna and quails (Q 20:80).

<sup>44</sup> Possibly taking up Daniel 3:13-30.

<sup>45</sup> T. Fahd, *Le panthéon de l'Arabie Centrale à la veille de l'hégire*, Paris 1968, 9-18; "Le feu chez les anciens Arabes," *Le feu dans le Proche-Orient antique*, Leiden 1973, 43-61; "Nār," *EI* (new edition) 3/957-960. Abraha, the ruler of pre-Islamic South Arabia, is known as "the man of *manār*" because he was the first to orient convoys travelling by night in the desert in time of war by placing "fire" landmarks along their routes, cf. T. Fahd, "Le feu chez les anciens Arabes," 43-61.

<sup>46</sup> T. Fahd, *Le panthéon*, 9-18; "Le feu chez les anciens Arabes," 43-61; "Nār," *EI* (new edition) 3/957-960.



Three Medinan verses confirm the event, “And We raised above them the Mount (*aṭ-tūr*), making the covenant with them” (Q 4:154; 2:63; 2:93; cf. also the late Meccan verse, 7:171).<sup>47</sup>

As is well-known, the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world, St. Catherines at the northern foot of Mount Sinai, was founded a generation before Muḥammad’s birth.<sup>48</sup> It was, and still is located at the foot of the mountain which, with terms of Syriac origin, the Qur’ān once calls Saynā’ (Q 23:20) and once Sinīn (Q 95:2), for the sake of rhyme. It is otherwise simply referred to in the Qur’ān as *aṭ-tūr* (Q 2:63; 2:93; 4:154; 19:52; 20:80; 28:29; 28:46; 52:1). To its north lies the desert of the “wanderings” (*tīh*), in which, according to the Qur’ān, the children of Israel, wandered about because they were forbidden by God to enter the holy land for forty years (Q 5:26, *fa-innahā muḥramatun ‘alayhim arba‘īna sanatan yatihūna fī l-ard*). The Qur’ān does not refer to this monastery, but the circumstantial and linguistic evidence of the Meccan passages that have just been quoted makes it a possible type of location for the phenomenon of light described in the light verse. By the time of Muḥammad the ascetics of Sinai and the monastery at the foot of the mountain were well known to the Arabs. Since the middle of the fourth century C.E. hermits and anchorites had lived in the caves of the mountain (Ġabal Serbāl) bordering the fertile oasis of Wādī Fayrān which served as a caravan-staging point, became the site of cenobitic communities and had become a bishopric by the Council of Chalcedon. In 371-372, and again in 395-400, many of the monks were massacred by marauding Kushite tribes crossing over to the Sinai from the Egyptian shores of the Gulf of Suez or by pagan Arabs who offered human sacrifices to the Morning Star, Venus.<sup>49</sup> When the ascetics of the Sinai suffered again from nomadic incursions in 498 and 529, they petitioned the Byzantine emperor Justinian for protection. Justinian had a fortress built on the

<sup>47</sup> B. Moritz, “Der Sinaikult in heidnischer Zeit,” *Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Berlin 1916, 1-64, especially 58-61.

<sup>48</sup> Although hermits had at times lived on Mount Sinai, the monastery was only built at about the same time as the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople during the rule of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (ruled 527-565 C.E.); cf. C. Bailey, “Sinā’,” *EI* (new edition) 9, 625; Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 184-185. In the 4th/10th century, Muḥammadī observed, “The Christians have a monastery in Mount Sinai surrounded by well cultivated fields where olive trees grow. They are mentioned by God in the Qur’ān in a passage concerning the ‘blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West.’ The olives of these trees are sent as gifts to kings”; cf. G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, Boston and New York 1890, 73; R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, London 1968, 115-116.

<sup>49</sup> A. Smith Lewis, “The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert and the Story of Eulogius,” *Horae Semiticae* 9, Cambridge 1912; H. Skrobucha, *Sinai*, London 1966, 20-22; L. Eckstein, *A History of Sinai*, London 1921, 97.

north side of the mountain (Ġabal Mūsā) between 548 and 562 that became the present monastery of St. Catherine and marked the transition of the majority of the monks from the Monophysite to the Chalcedonian line of Church doctrine.<sup>50</sup>

Some philological observations should also be made about the term “light” and its synonyms in the Qur’ān. The term light, “*nūr*” occurs 43 times in the Qur’ān, always in the singular, in contrast to the term for darkness which appears in the plural. The active participle, “illuminating” (*munīr*), is mentioned four times as an epithet of revealed scripture (Q 3:184; 22:8; 31:20; 35:25), once with reference to the moon (25:61) and once with reference to the Prophet (Q 33:46). Only in the light verse is God explicitly called “the light of the heavens and the earth” (*nūru s-samāwāti wa l-ard*).<sup>51</sup> The other parallel qur’ānic passages simply mention the “light of God” (*nūra llāhi*, Q 9:32; 61:8) or the “earth shining with the light of its Lord” (*bi-nūri rabbiḥā*, Q 39:69), or speak of “a light that has come from God” (*mina llāhi nūrun*, Q 5:15). Q 39:22 asks abruptly, “Is he whose breast God has expanded unto Islam, so he walks in a light from his Lord” (*fa-huwa ‘alā nūrin min rabbiḥi*), while verses Q 4:174, 7:157 and 64:8 refer to the light that God has sent down to humanity. The Qur’ān, however, neither employs the phrase, “light of lights” (*nūr al-anwār*), by which God is frequently cited in later Islamic writings, nor states that God’s nature or essence is light. The word for light, *nūr*, may be understood as paralleled by the qur’ānic *diyā’*,<sup>52</sup> which refers to the sun (Q 10:5), to the revelation (*al-furqān*) given to Moses and Aaron that is termed a light (*diyā’an*) and a remembrance (*ḍikran*) for the godfearing (*muttaqīn*, 21:48), and to the illumination (*diyā’*) God would offer on the Day of Resurrection had humanity to live in darkness until then (Q

<sup>50</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London 1979, 257; cf. Procopius of Caesarea, *Wars, Secret History: Buildings* (ed. and tr. H.B. Dewing and Downey, Loeb), 7 vols., 1914-40, 5/8.

<sup>51</sup> Similarities in the wording of this phrase and the wider context of the light verse are also exhibited in, “To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth (*mulku s-samāwāti wa-l-ard*); and God is powerful over everything. Surely in the creation of the heavens and earth and in the alternation of night and day there are signs for men possessed of minds who remember God, standing and sitting and on their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth.” (Q 3:189-190). Yahuda, however, sees a Jewish rather than a Christian prayer practice reflected in these words, cf. A. S. Yahuda, “A contribution to Qur’ān and Hadith interpretation,” *Ignaz Goldziher Memorial Volume* (ed. S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi), 2 vols., Budapest 1948, 1/280-308, especially 292.

<sup>52</sup> *Diya’*, directly related to the verbal noun, *daw’*, with the identical meaning of the same Arabic stem, and not a loanword in Arabic, may be associated nevertheless with the Sanskrit *dev*, Latin, *Deus*, expressing a personification of the source of light, as suggested by T. Fahd, “Nār,” *EI* (new edition) 7/957.

28:71). Other derivatives from the same root as *diyā'* denote the light of fire (*nār*: Q 2:17, *aḏā'at*), of lightning (*barq*: Q 2:20, *aḏā'a*) and of the burning oil lamp (*zayt*: Q 24:35, *yuḏī'u*). In Q 10:5, *diyā'* seems to have a more intensive meaning than *nūr*, since the light of the sun is called *diyā'* and that of the moon, *nūr*. It is questionable, however, whether the Qur'ān thereby implies that *diyā'* refers to the light of light-producing bodies, such as the sun, and *nūr* to that of light reflecting in bodies, such as the moon.

The imagery of the light verse suggests that its context is the night, a fact confirmed by the occurrence of the phrase, "a glittering star" (*kawkabun durriyun*) which, like all stars, glows in the darkness with self-luminous radiance. The light verse employs the word *kawkab* rather than the more frequently cited term *nağm* for "star" in the Qur'ān. When *kawkab* occurs in the singular, other than in the light verse, it is used in the context of biblical figures, Abraham and Joseph respectively (Q 6:76; 12:4); when it occurs in the plural, it refers to the apocalyptic scene of the catastrophic end of the world, "when the stars are scattered" (*wa-idā l-kawākibu ntaṭarat*, Q 82:2), or to God's creation of the stars as adornment of the lower heaven (*bi-zīnati l-kawākib*, Q 37:6). This latter verse, Q 37:6, stands in textual proximity to the qur'ānic reference to God as the Lord of the East and the West (Q 37:5; cf. 70:40; 7:137; 26:28; 73:9; 55:17), or as one may be inclined to translate the phrase, the Lord of the sunrises and the sunsets, meaning the Lord whose light rules both the day and the night. In this perspective of sunrise and sunset, the enigmatic phrase of the olive tree "that is neither of the East nor of the West" would refer to a source of illumination that is beyond day and night.

Among the passages that employ the term *nağm*,<sup>53</sup> passages Q 55:6 and 22:18 both speak of the stars and the trees bowing before God, a theme echoed in Psalm 136:4-9, a hymn praising God with a unique antiphonal pattern.<sup>54</sup> It is worth recalling that from ancient times the Bedouins were skilled stargazers because they needed the fixed stars to predict the weather and rainfalls, to determine the seasons, and to provide orientation for their nightly travels. As a matter of fact, in classical Arabic literature the phrases, *maṣābiḥu n-nuğūm* and *a'lāmu l-kawākib* signify the stars or constellations that are signs of the way for travellers.<sup>55</sup> A broader comparison with the qur'ānic verses dealing with the sun (*šams*) and the moon (*qamar*), which the studies of Fahd<sup>56</sup> and Rodinson<sup>57</sup> have examined against the pre-Islamic back-

<sup>53</sup> In the Qur'ān, *nağm* appears four times in the singular (Q 16:16; 53:1; 55: 86:3) and nine times in the plural, *nuğūm* (Q 6:97; 7:54; 16:12; 22:18; 37:88; 52:49; 56:75; 77:8; 81:2).

<sup>54</sup> M. Dahood, *The Psalms*, 3 vols, New York 1970, 3/264-267; cf. R. Paret, "Die Bedeutung von an-Nağm in Sure 55,6", in: *Der Koran* (ed. R. Paret), Darmstadt 1975, 304-308.

<sup>55</sup> E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, London 1863-1893, 1643, 2140.

<sup>56</sup> T. Fahd, *Le panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'hégire*, Paris 1968, 150-153.

ground, also presents powerful images. Lunar and solar cults played a significant role in pre-Islamic Arabia, especially in Ḥaḍramawt and Sabaʾ, and the nomads of the desert, avoiding the heat of the day, relied on the moon for their activities at night. The Arabs developed a rich vocabulary for the moon and its mansions, observed its phases to calculate time, used the crescent to fix ritual events, compared the beautiful human face to the full moon and associated the moon with magical and astrological practices. Mentioned 36 times in the Qurʾān, the moon is invoked by solemn oaths (Q 74:35; 84:18; 91:2) and the sun, mentioned 33 times, is conjured by its brightness (Q 91:1), the dawn (Q 89:1) and the high forenoon (Q 93:1). As apocalyptic signs, the sun is darkened (Q 81:1) and the moon is split in two (Q 54:1) or eclipsed, merging with the sun (Q 75:8-9). Beyond the moon waxing and waning and the sun rising and setting, Abraham discovers the true God (Q 6:77-78). Sun and moon are “signs” of God’s power and neither of them should be worshiped (Q 41:37). Both are subjected by God to a stated term (Q 16:12; 39:7; 31:28) and each of them follows its course in its own sphere (Q 21:34; 36:39-40).

Yet another fruitful connection could be made between this verse and the depiction of the divine throne. Although the Qurʾān does not describe the divine throne on which God rested after completing His work of creation, referred to in Q 7:54 and its parallels (cf. also the throne verse 2:255), as consisting of light, post-qurʾānic Šīʿa interpretation pictures the light issuing from the divine throne as having colors, not unlike the rainbow, and forming the light of the heavens and the earth as well as that of the sun and the moon.<sup>58</sup> Further, the light that, according to the Prophet’s biography by Ibn Ishāq (d.150/767), appeared as a prophetic blaze (*ḡurra*) on the forehead of Muḥammad’s father, was interpreted by the Šīʿa as split into two and shared by both Muḥammad and ʿAlī.<sup>59</sup> Two principal themes run through the Šīʿa accounts, procreation in the genealogical line of Muḥammad’s physical ancestors or transmission in the spiritual line of his prophetic forebears. On the one hand, the primordial substance of the light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) is transmitted with the sperm through the generations of Muḥammad’s Arab ancestors, on the other hand, the pre-existent divine light (*nūr Allāh*) passes at the death of one prophet to the next until it reaches

<sup>57</sup> M. Rodinson, “La lune chez les Arabes et dans l’Islam,” in: *La lune, mythes et rites* (Sources orientales, 6), Paris 1962, 153-215.

<sup>58</sup> J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, Band 4, Berlin 1997, 4/407-409.

<sup>59</sup> U. Rubin, “Pre-existence and light,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 5, 1975, 62-119, especially 83-104; A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, London 1955, 69 (cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sira* 101).

the spirit of Muḥammad and is passed on as his hereditary authority in the line of the imams.<sup>60</sup> Despite many stylistic similarities with qurʾānic language, the Šīʿa claim that the so-called “sura of the two lights” (*sūrat an-nūrayn*) referring to Muḥammad and ʿAlī, formed originally part of the Qurʾān cannot be substantiated.<sup>61</sup>

While there is only one verse in the Qurʾān, 24:35, that has acquired the name *āyat an-nūr*, there are a few other verses that may also be considered qurʾānic light verses. They focus on two images, either that the light is the qurʾānic revelation itself or that it is Muḥammad, the Prophet. The *first* image is based on two passages, 64:8 and 61:8, both included in Medinan suras. Q 64:8 says: “Therefore believe in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have sent down.” The meaning of the phrase, “the light which We have sent down,” as referring to the qurʾānic revelation is confirmed by the intra-qurʾānic evidence of Q 5:44, *innā anzalnā t-tawrāta fihā hudan wa-nūrun*, “Surely We sent down the Torah, wherein is guidance and light.” This qurʾānic verse, not unlike Proverbs 6:23, speaks of the Torah as light (*nūr*), an explanation borne out by the principle of Jewish biblical interpretation that wherever the word light appears in the Hebrew Bible, the Torah is meant.<sup>62</sup> With a change in rhyme pattern, Q 61:8 directly follows the famous passage in which Jesus, son of Mary, announces a messenger coming after him, named Aḥmad (Q 61:7). This passage, supported by the parallel passage Q 9:32, accuses the evildoers of puffing up their cheeks and blowing out the flame of the qurʾānic revelation, “They desire to extinguish with their mouths the light of God (*yuridūna li-yuḥfiʿū nūra llāhi*); but God will perfect His light (*wa-llāhu mutimmu nūrihi*)” (Q 61:8; 9:32).

The *second* image is included in the crucial qurʾānic passage, Q 33:45-46, and runs: “O Prophet, We have sent you as a witness, and good tidings to bear and warning (*šāhidan wa-mubašširan wa-naḍīran*) calling unto God by His leave (*wa-dāʿīyan ilā llāhi bi-idnihi*), and as a light-giving lamp (*wa-sirāḡan muniran*).” This passage compares Muḥammad to a shining lamp, for which the word *sirāḡ* (cf. also Q 25:61; 71:16; 78:13) is employed rather than *mišbāḥ*, which appears only twice in Q 24:35 (and, in the plural, *mašābiḥ*, in the two Meccan verses, 41:12 and 67:5, with reference to the lights of the lower heaven that serve as a protection against evil forces). Both images, light identified with qurʾānic revelation and with Muḥammad, have

<sup>60</sup> T. Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde*, Stockholm 1918, 322-326; U. Rubin, *IOS* 5, 1975, 62-119; “Prophets and progenitors in the early Šīʿa tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1, 1979, 41-65.

<sup>61</sup> This “sura” has been shown to be a falsification, probably not antedating Šafavid times, cf. Th. Nöldeke and F. Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns* 2/100-112.

<sup>62</sup> Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 297.

exerted an influence on various interpretations of the famous light verse, Q 24:35, either explicitly by syncretical Qur'ān interpretation or implicitly in analytical ways of explanation. But, while these other Qur'ānic light verses refer to the light of the sun, the light of revelation, whether Qur'ānic or biblical, and the light of the Prophet, the famous *āyat al-nūr* speaks of *God's* light and uses an elaborate simile (*maṭal*) to portray it. The Qur'ān contains numerous, often quite vivid similes in all kinds of contexts. Linguistically, however, the light verse stands out, both by its unique imagery and by its explicit self-reference as a simile through the two phrases, "the likeness of His light is as a niche" (*maṭalu nūrihi ka-miškātin*) and, "God strikes similes for men" (*yadribu llāhu l-amṭala li-n-nās*)."<sup>63</sup>

Before moving to the exegetical section of this article, I will close this examination of the inner-Qur'ānic evidence that is pertinent to an understanding of Q 24:35 by summarizing the *Sitz im Leben* that I have proposed for this verse: the simile of *āyat an-nūr* replicates a night-time experience, one in which the desert traveler is surrounded by the stars and guided by "the light of the heavens and the earth." Moving under this canopy of stars that cast a mysterious glow over the night's darkness, the traveler feels as if he has entered a huge house of prayer illuminated by burning oil lamps that hang from its ceiling. This evocative experience is then expressed in a language that borrows elements from beyond the boundaries of Arabic and draws upon the rich symbolic resources of Arabic poetry, Jewish and Christian biblical lore and Eastern Christian practices of prayer.

As a prelude to entering the field of Ṣūfī interpretations of the light verse, it may be helpful to recall that the cultural and religious background of Islamic society had changed significantly from the time of Muḥammad to that of the 'Abbāsīd empire of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries. Through military conquests and cultural integration the Muslim community had encountered a wide range of worldviews which had a deep influence on it. Light speculations, rooted in gnostic conceptions,<sup>64</sup> Hellenistic Judaism,<sup>65</sup> Manichaeic ideas,<sup>66</sup> and Neoplatonic philosophy<sup>67</sup> as well as in the Iranian tra-

<sup>63</sup> In parallel Qur'ānic verses the latter phrase is continued with words such as, "perhaps they will remember (*la'allahum yataḍakkaru*)" (Q 14:25; 39:27) or, "perhaps they will reflect (*la'allahum yatafakkaru*)" (Q 59:21; cf. also 29:43; 47:3; 22:73).

<sup>64</sup> W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen 1907; F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua*, Paris 1949; cf. R. Bultmann, "Zur Geschichte der Lichtsymbolik im Altertum," *Philologus* 97, 1948, 1-36.

<sup>65</sup> E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism*, New Haven 1935.

<sup>66</sup> H.C. Puech, *Le manichéisme, son fondateur, sa doctrine*, Paris 1949; G.P. Wetter, *Phos, Eine Untersuchung über hellenistische Frömmigkeit, zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Manichäismus*, Uppsala 1915.

<sup>67</sup> I. Goldziher, "Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente im Ḥadīṭ," *ZA* 21, 1908, 107-

ditions of Mazdaism and Zurvanism<sup>68</sup> captured its attention. The essence of these worldviews, exhibited in the works of Arabic science, optics in particular,<sup>69</sup> in the Theology of Aristotle,<sup>70</sup> and in the Iranian dualism of Light and Darkness<sup>71</sup> had become part of the cultural and religious background in which Ṣūfism flourished. Furthermore, when Ṣūfism began to compile its major Qurʾān commentaries, such as the commentaries of Sulamī, Quṣayrī and Daylamī, traditional Muslim exegesis had already laid a foundation of qurʾānic interpretation.

Traditional Muslim exegesis of the Qurʾān, as presented mainly in the Qurʾān commentary of Ṭabarī (d. 310/923),<sup>72</sup> explains the many facets of the light verse by dividing it into text segments, following the method of a continuous and running commentary on the Qurʾān. The main lines of qurʾānic exegesis noted by Ṭabarī may be summarized in the following clusters of images.<sup>73</sup> God, the light of the heavens and the earth, is understood in three ways: as the guide of the inhabitants of heaven and earth, the ruler of the world who adorns the universe with light by day and by night, and the one who illuminates the hearts of the believers. The likeness of His light, depending on the crucial interpretation of the suffix “*hu*” in *nūrihi*, is also explained in three ways, as the light of divine guidance, the heart of the believer which enshrines the light of faith and the Qurʾān, or the light of Muḥammad, an explanation of the Prophet’s luminous nature traced back to Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652 or 34/654), Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) and Muqātil (d. 150/767). The niche is explained literally, as a windowless recess in the wall of a house, a candlestick or a wick, and symbolically, as the chest of the believer holding the lamp of faith and the Qurʾān in the glass of his heart, or as the body of Muḥammad enclosing the lamp of faith. The glittering star

---

134 (246-344); P. Merlan, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism*, Den Haag 1953; C.J. de Vogel, “A la recherche des étapes précises entre Platon et le Néoplatonisme,” *Mnemosyne* 4/7, 1954, 99-112; F.N. Klein, *Die Lichtterminologie bei Philon von Alexandrien und in den hermetischen Schriften*, Leiden 1962.

<sup>68</sup> H.H. Schaeder, “Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland,” *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, vol. 7, Leipzig-Berlin 1926; M. Mokri, “La lumière en Iran ancien et dans l’Islam,” in: M.M. Davy, A. Abécassis, M. Mokri and J.P. Ranneteau, *Le thème de la lumière dans le Judaïsme, le Christianisme et l’Islam*, Paris 1976, 325-428; M. Mokri, *La lumière et le feu dans l’Iran ancien*, Leuven 1982.

<sup>69</sup> H.J.J. Winter, “The optical researches of Ibn al-Haytham,” *Centaurus* 3, 1954, 190-210; D. Pingree, “‘Ilm al-hay’a,” *EI* (new edition) 3, 1135-1141.

<sup>70</sup> W. Hartner and T.J. de Boer, “Nūr,” *EI* (new edition) 8/121-123.

<sup>71</sup> H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Boulder and London 1978.

<sup>72</sup> Abū Ġaʿfar Muḥammad b. Ġarīr at-Ṭabarī, *Ġāmiʿ al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 30 vols., Beirut 1406-07/1986-87; cf. *GAS* 1/323-328; F. Rosenthal, “The Life and Works of al-Ṭabarī,” *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Albany 1989, 1/5-134; J.D. McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians*, Cambridge 1991, 38-45.

<sup>73</sup> Ṭabarī, *Ġāmiʿ al-bayān*, 18/104-114 (ad Qurʾān 24:34-38).

is traditionally explained by Ibn 'Abbās as one of the five brilliant planets or, by Muqātil, as either Venus or Jupiter, whereas Ṭabarī leaves open the possibility of interpreting the adjective “glittering,” as either *durrīyun*, without *hamza*, sparkling like a pearl, or as *dirrī'un/durri'un*, with *hamza*, repelling evil, like a shooting star that is launched against the devil.

The blessed tree is explained as bathed in sunlight all day, with the sun neither rising nor setting on it, and as raised high on a hill, with neither a mountain casting a shadow on it nor a valley reflecting its shade. The tree is not of this world, yet stands at the very center of the universe (in Syria), neither a fraction to the east nor a fraction to the west, encircling all trees of the world. The tree resembles the believer, who worships God with pure intention, without ascribing partners to God, is grateful for the divine blessings, steadfast in trials, just in actions and truthful in words. The oil of the olive tree, with its sap shining through the bark, is likened to Muḥammad's prophethood that was transparent to the eyes of others even before he publicly proclaimed it, just like olive oil appears as a translucent, brilliant substance before being touched by fire. Muqātil sees in the blessed tree a symbol of Abraham, who prayed neither to the east, as the Christians do, nor to the west, as it is the custom of the Jews (living east of Jerusalem), but toward the Ka'ba of Mecca. The phrase, light upon light, is explained either as Muḥammad following upon Abraham, his prophetic forebear, or as the light of Qur'ānic revelation given by God to humanity, in addition to the light of divinely infused religion shared by all human beings since creation.<sup>74</sup>

Some of the major lines of Ṭabarī's interpretation of the light verse can be found in the Qur'ān commentary attributed to 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās (d. 68-70/687-89), which also follows the basic structure of a running commentary and briefly lists two lines of interpretation for the simile focused on the likeness of “H/his” light.<sup>75</sup> One line interprets God, the light, as the guide (*al-hādī*) of the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, the one who adorns (*munawwir*) the heavens with stars and the earth with plants and rivers and enlightens (*muzayyin*) the hearts of the people of the heavens and the believers on earth. The likeness of God's light (*nūr Allāh*) in the believer's

<sup>74</sup> The skeleton of this traditional exegesis of the light verse was fleshed out by Ḥadīṭ accounts and stories from the literature of the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, which cannot be analyzed in this study.

<sup>75</sup> Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Firūzābādī (d. 817/1415), *Tanwīr al-miqbās min Tafṣīr Ibn 'Abbās*, Cairo 1380/1951, 220. For Ibn 'Abbās as Qur'ān commentator, cf. *GAS* I, 25-28; for the question to what degree Ibn 'Abbās' Qur'ān commentary can be reconstructed on the basis of the commentaries of Ṭabarī (following his *isnād* on 'Alī b. aṭ-Ṭalḥa's authority) and the citations included in the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, cf. C. Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue, et théologie en Islam*, Paris 1990, and idem, “Portrait mythique d'Ibn 'Abbās”, *Arabica* 32, 1985, 127-184.



heart is like a small opening, meaning in Ethiopic a skylight without opening (*kūwa gayr nāfida*), that holds a burning light (*sirāğ*) in a lamp (*qindil*) made of pearl and shining like a brilliant star, one of the five planets, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Mars (*bahrām*) or Saturn. The oil fueling the flame is taken from an olive tree (*zaytūn*) standing on a hill in a desert that neither casts a shadow nor is reached by the sun, rising and setting, and yet whose oil shines through its bark without having been set afire. All is wrapped in light, the flame, the lamp and the oil, light upon light, and God guides to His light whoever is worthy of it through God's knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and religion (*dīn*).

The other line in the commentary attributed to Ibn 'Abbās sees the likeness of the light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) enshrined in the loins of his forefathers, like a burning lamp enclosed in a niche and kindled from the tree of Abraham's light, the true monotheist (*hanīf*), who was neither a Jew nor a Christian and whose good actions, like oil fueling the flame, burnt in the loins of Muḥammad's ancestors. Had God not appointed Abraham to be a prophet, he would not have possessed this light, neither would the believers, had God not favored them with it. God strikes the simile of the light to empower the believers to know and thank God and by it demonstrate that God's knowledge (*ma'rifa*) illuminates, yields benefits, and overpowers the darkneses of unbelief and idolatry. God's knowledge is taken from God like oil from the olive tree which, neither of the east nor of the west, signifies that the believers' religion is truly monotheist (*ḥanafī*), taken neither from Judaism nor from Christianity. Just as the oil is lit from the tree without fire touching it, so no kindling is needed to light the faith of the believer. Not unlike light engulfing flame, lamp and niche, so the believer, worthy to receive it, is enclosed by the light of God's knowledge in body and soul (literally, heart and breast) from the beginning to the end of life.<sup>76</sup>

Šūfī Qur'ān interpretation, as collected by al-Sulamī in his *Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr* and the *Ziyādāt*, its separate appendix, follows the framework of a continuous Qur'ān commentary and selects a large number of verses as the basis for Šūfī exegesis.<sup>77</sup> Sulamī's commentaries consist of two strands of inter-

<sup>76</sup> In the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, Ibn 'Abbās continues to explain that the "houses" (*buyūt*) God has commanded to be built are houses of prayer (*masāğid*) in which candelabras are suspended; *ibid.* 220.

<sup>77</sup> The references to Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr* are based on the following manuscripts: MSS *Istanbul, Hūdai Efendi* 77 (399 ff., 553 h.); *London, British Museum, Or.* 9433 (388 ff., 564 h.); *Istanbul, Fatih* 262 (296 ff., 672 h.). For the *Ziyādāt*, cf. *Ziyādāt ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr* (ed. G. Böwering), 2nd ed., Beirut 1997, 106. For basic information on Sulamī, cf. G. Böwering, "al-Sulamī," *EI* (new edition) 9, 811-812; *idem*, "The Qur'ān Commentary of Al-Sulamī," in: W.B. Hallaq and D. P. Little (eds.), *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, Leiden 1991, 41-56; *idem*, "The Major Sources of Sulamī's Minor Qur'ān Commentary," *Oriens* 35, 1996, 35-56.

pretation, actual Ṣūfī glosses, directly and intimately linked to the Qur'ānic text on which they comment, as well as Ṣūfī sayings, echoing the tenor or topic of particular Qur'ānic verses. Both kinds of interpretation are cited interchangeably in such a fashion that a number of different Ṣūfī authorities and their sayings are quoted one by one after each Qur'ānic phrase. This creates a fairly unified thematic picture while at the same time conveying the often pithy statements of a highly variegated spectrum of authorities. The Ṣūfī interpretations of the light verse, collected by Sulamī, shall be illustrated by references to prominent Ṣūfī authorities, active in the second half of the 3rd/9th or the first half of the 4th/10th century, whose biographies are marked by persecution or violent death. They are Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥarrāz, Sahl at-Tustarī, Ibn 'Atā' and Abū Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāğ, all of them contemporaries of Ğunayd (d. 297/910) and associated with his Ṣūfī circle in Bağdād. In addition to these five earlier representatives of Sunnī Ṣūfism, two additional, slightly later authorities, Abū 'Alī al-Ĝūzağānī and Pseudo-Ĝāfar aṣ-Ṣādiq, offer somewhat more elaborate glosses on the light verse. The statements of all these Ṣūfis interiorize the light verse, projecting the cosmic image of the Qur'ānic verse onto the inner transformation of the mystic's soul. The earlier authorities stay within the range of the Qur'ānic simile; the later ones have moved to the level of a full-fledged allegory, only tangentially connected to the Qur'ānic text.

Ğunayd (d. 297/910)<sup>78</sup> differentiates three ways of interpreting the light verse. God, the light of the heavens and the earth, illuminated the hearts of the angels so that they fell down before Him in adoration and glorified Him. He illuminated the hearts of the prophets so that they knew Him through direct knowledge and worshipped Him with true adoration. And God illuminated the hearts of the believers by bestowing on them knowledge and granting them divine guidance.<sup>79</sup> Ḥarrāz (d. 277/891)<sup>80</sup> interprets the light verse as an explicit simile for Muḥammad, the prophet and spiritual legatee of Abraham. Ḥarrāz says: "The niche is the cavity of Muḥammad's heart, and the glass is his heart. The lamp is the light that God placed in his heart. 'As if it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree' means that the tree is Abraham in whose heart God placed the same light He placed in Muḥammad's heart."<sup>81</sup> Further on he states, "God created Muḥammad from His own light, then consumed him with His light, then returned him into

<sup>78</sup> A.J. Arberry, "al-Djunayd," *EI* (new edition) 2, 600; A.H. Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, London 1962.

<sup>79</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 221b; *British Museum, Or. 9433*, f. 202b; *Fatih* 262, f. 158b.

<sup>80</sup> W. Madelung, "al-Ḥarrāz," *EI* (new edition) 4, 1083-1084.

<sup>81</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 221a; *British Museum, Or. 9433*, f. 202a; *Fatih* 262, f. 158a.

His greatest majesty of light. But when God makes Himself manifest to him, namely Muḥammad, He does not consume him because he has become a light from His light, upon His light, and in His light, 'light upon light'.<sup>82</sup> While Ġunayd was content with the distinction of various levels of divine light made manifest in angels, prophets and believers, Ḥarrāz focuses the light on the Prophet in a spectacular way, not unlike Sahl at-Tustarī (d. 283/896) whose conception of *nūr Muḥammad* as a pillar of light in pre-existence I have treated elsewhere.<sup>83</sup>

Ibn 'Atā' (d. 309/922),<sup>84</sup> on the other hand, is inspired by the correspondence between the macrocosm of the heavens and the microcosm of the soul and explains the qur'ānic phrase, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth," on this basis: "God has adorned the path of the planets in the heavens with the twelve castles of the signs of the zodiac. They are the Ram, the Bull, the Twins, the Crab, the Lion, the Spike, the Scales, the Scorpion, the Archer, the Goat, the Bucket and the Fish. And He adorned the hearts of the gnostics with twelve qualities, namely intellect, awareness, receptivity, intelligence, knowledge, certitude, understanding, intuition, life of the heart, fear, hope and shame before God. As long as these signs of the zodiac remain standing, the universe is fully ordered and plentifully furnished. In the same way, as long as these qualities remain firmly established in the gnostic's heart, there is in it the light of well-being and the sweetness of worshipping God."<sup>85</sup> Ibn 'Atā' continues to interpret the olive tree "that is neither of the East nor of the West," as a tree "that is without relation to nearness or distance, because God is near to distance and distant to nearness,"<sup>86</sup> and identifies it with the believer's heart. He says: "The tree is the heart, its root firmly grounded in true faith and its branches the limbs of the body, educated to perform works of obedience. The root of this tree is knowledge, its branches are the religious duties and its twigs the customs of the Prophet. Its water is the Qur'ān, its fruit wisdom and its juice the love of God."<sup>87</sup>

Hallāġ (d. 309/922)<sup>88</sup> understands God as the one who enlightens (*munawwīr*) the hearts of the believers and interprets "the light of the heavens

<sup>82</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 223b; *British Museum, Or. 9433*, f. 204b; *Fatih* 262, f. 160a.

<sup>83</sup> G. Böwering, "Sahl at-Tustarī," *EI* (new edition) 8, 840-841.

<sup>84</sup> R. Gramlich, *Abu l-'Abbās b. 'Atā': Sufi und Koranausleger*, Stuttgart 1995. P. Nwyia, *Trois oeuvres inédites de mystiques musulmans*, Beirut 1986, 23-182.

<sup>85</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 220b-221a; *British Museum, Or. 9433*, f. 202a; *Fatih* 262, f. 158a.

<sup>86</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 221a; *British Museum, Or. 9433*, f. 202b; *Fatih* 262, f. 158b.

<sup>87</sup> *Ziyādāt*, 106.

<sup>88</sup> L. Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallāġ*, 4 vols., Princeton 1982. idem, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, 2nd ed., Paris 1968, 385-386.

and the earth” as a symbol of God’s eternal oneness to which the hearts of those are guided by illumination whom God has chosen to be His friends and His elect. Through His divine favor, God creates the blessings they have received, and through His will, He maintains and perfects them. “God is the light of light (*nūr al-nūr*); He guides whom He wills through His light to His omnipotence, and through His omnipotence to His mystery, and through His mystery to His eternity, and through His eternity to His being without beginning and end, and through His being without beginning and end to His unity. There is no god but He (Q 23:116), memorable are His work and His omnipotence, may He be glorified and exalted. God grants increase in knowledge to whom He wills through His being professed as one and unique, through the exaltation of His station and unity, and through the glorification of His being Lord.”<sup>89</sup> For this purpose, so Hallāğ states, God has entrusted inner gifts of illumination to the believer. Hallāğ says: “In the believer’s head there is the light of divine revelation, between the eyes (in the forehead) the light of secret communion with God, in the ear the light of certitude, on the tongue the light of manifest proof, in the chest the light of faith, and in the limbs of the body the light of worshipping God.”<sup>90</sup> Empowered by these lights, the believer is guided from the world of creation to the mystery of divine eternity and ultimate union with God. In a parallel passage, Hallāğ says, “in the body there is the light of glorification, namely the acclamation, ‘There is no god but God!’, the laudation, ‘Praise belongs to God!’, and the exclamation, ‘God is great!’ Whenever one of these lights is aflame, it overpowers the other light and draws it into its own power. When it abates, the power of that other light returns, more abundant and perfect than it was before. When all lights are aflame together, they become ‘light upon light’. And God guides to His light whom He will.”<sup>91</sup>

With Pseudo-Ğa‘far aš-Šādiq and Abū ‘Alī al-Ğūzağānī, both flourishing in the first half of the 4th/10th century, the allegorizing tendency of qur’anic exegesis assumes full flight. Pseudo-Ğa‘far aš-Šādiq<sup>92</sup> enumerates different types of light that are found in the believer’s heart and exemplifies each by a particular class of believers. They are the light of introspection, fear, hope, love, meditation, certitude, recollection, knowledge, shame, faith, Islam, good works, blessings, graces, benefits, generosity, compassion, prudence, awe, perplexity, life, intimacy, steadfastness, humility, tranquil-

<sup>89</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 223b; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 204b; *Fatih* 262, f. 160a.

<sup>90</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 224a; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 205a; *Fatih* 262, f. 160b.

<sup>91</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 224a; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 205a; *Fatih* 262, f. 160b.

<sup>92</sup> For the authorship of the statements attributed by Sulami to Ğa‘far aš-Šādiq (d. 148/765), cf. G. Böwering, *Oriens* 35, 52-56 and P. Nwyia, “Le Tafsir mystique attribué à Ğa‘far Šādiq,” *MUSJ* 43, 1968, 181-230.

ity, majesty, splendor, power, beauty, justice, strength, divinity, oneness, unicity, endlessness, everlastingness, eternity, beginninglessness, permanent subsistence, wholeness and divine He-ness. Each of the believers possesses one of these lights, some may have a share in two or three of them, but only the Prophet possesses them all because he stands in the presence of God as a true servant who loves God.<sup>93</sup> In another passage, Pseudo-Ğa'far as-Şādiq describes God as the light of the heavens by means of the light of the stars, the sun and the moon, as the light of the earth by means of the light reflected in the plants which are red, yellow, white, etc., and as the light of the hearts of the believers through their faith and submission to God. He also makes a distinction between four lights of the heavens, the angels Gabriel, Michael, Isrāfīl and 'Azrā'īl, and four lights of the earth, surprisingly, Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uṭmān and 'Alī, all four representing ways leading to God.<sup>94</sup>

Abū 'Alī al-Ğūzaġānī, a Şūfī of the 4th/10th century who apparently left no trace in the biographical sources, derives the certitude of faith, found in the believer's heart, from the divine light. By virtue of this light, the believer is able to see the entire divine kingdom, beholding the marvels of God's creation, perceiving God's power, might, command and rule, and being granted a vision of what is hidden in the seven heavens and the seven earths. The 'niche' refers to the believer's soul likened to a house in which there is the lamp of knowledge and to the believer's mouth through the opening of which, as through a window, he speaks forth whatever his heart has been allowed to recollect of the illuminations descending from the divine throne. The glass refers to divinely given success, the wick to renunciation, the oil to contentment and the lamp suspended at the window to intelligence.<sup>95</sup> When the lamp is lit, it sparkles in the light of three jewels, fear, hope and love, and the whole being of the believer becomes a light shining forth in the purity of his inner attitudes and the clarity of his outer actions.<sup>96</sup>

Quşayrī, Abu'l-Qāsīm 'Abdalkarīm b. Hawāzin b. 'Abdalmalik an-Naysābūrī al-Ustuwā'ī al-Quşayrī (d. 465/1072), a descendant of a land-owning Arab family in the region of Nishapur in north-eastern Iran, received his instruction in Sūfism first from Abū 'Alī ad-Daqqāq (d. 405/1015) and then, from Abū 'Abdarrahmān as-Sulamī (d. 412/1021). He also studied Şāfī'ī law with Abū Bakr Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭūsī an-Nawqānī (d. 420/1029) and Aş'arī

<sup>93</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 222a; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 203a-203b; *Fatih* 262, f. 159a.

<sup>94</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 225a; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 206a; *Fatih* 262, f. 161a-161b.

<sup>95</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 221b-222a; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 202b-203a; *Fatih* 262, f. 158b.

<sup>96</sup> MSS *Hūdai Efendi* 77, f. 224a-224b; *British Museum, Or.* 9433, f. 205a-205b; *Fatih* 262, f. 160b-161a.

theology with Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015). In his time Quṣayrī was known as a masterful preacher and a renowned teacher of Ḥadīth. He became famous as the author of the Sūfī handbook, *ar-Risāla*, completed in 438/1046.<sup>97</sup> In addition Quṣayrī is known as the compiler of two Qur'ān commentaries, one of which has appeared in print, entitled *Laṭā'if al-iṣārāt* and written in 434/1042-43. Prior to this work, which includes traditional and mystical modes of Qur'anic interpretation, Quṣayrī compiled his great commentary on the Qur'ān (*at-Tafsīr al-kabīr*), extant in a manuscript copy of his weekly teaching sessions during the months of Du'l-Ḥiġġa to Rabī' I, 413-414/February to May, 1023, numbering the sessions (*maġlis*) 462 to 477 and covering suras 57:21 – 66:12.<sup>98</sup> Obviously, the latter work does not include his commentary on the light verse which, however, appears in its appropriate place in the continuous and eclectic commentary, *Laṭā'if al-iṣārāt*.<sup>99</sup>

Quṣayrī divides his exegesis of the light verse into two parts, a traditional explanation of its crucial phrases and a mystical exposition of its symbolism, and adds a lengthy excursus on the experience of mystic illumination. God, the guide of the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, is called "light" (*nūr*) for He is its origin because the thing that is named derives its name from the name-giver. As Creator, God establishes the perfect structure, the principles that order the heavens and the earth, and illuminates them, fashioning their splendor and beauty and endowing them with their magnificent phenomena. As God lights up the lower heaven arching the earth with the stars as "lamps" (*maṣābiḥ*, quoting Q 41:12), so He adorns the human hearts with lights – intellect, understanding, knowing, certitude, knowledge of God and oneness with God –, the rays of which, increasing and decreasing, are reflected in the hearts according to their aptitude. The "likeness of his light" refers to the light of the believer's heart which is the knowledge

<sup>97</sup> (ed. 'Abd al-Halim Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd aš-Šarīf), 2 vol., Cairo 1972-74; R. Gramlich, *Das Sendschreiben al-Quṣayrīs über das Sufitum*, Wiesbaden 1989.

<sup>98</sup> This large section of Quṣayrī's *at-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, MS *Leiden 1659* (297 ff.; 535 h), in which Quṣayrī cites his teacher, "our master (*shayḥunā*) Abū 'Alī (ad-Ḍaqqāq)," is clearly different from the *at-Taysīr fī 'ilm at-tafsīr*, which H. Ritter (*Oriens* 3, 1950, 46-47) attributes to Quṣayrī's son Abū Naṣr 'Abdarrāḥim b. 'Abdalkarīm b. Hawāzin (d. 514/1120). MS *Istanbul Üniversitesi 3228* (303 ff., 866 h; sura 1-31), however, represents a mainly philological commentary on the Qur'ān identified as an extract of a larger commentary (*tafsīruhu'l-mukhtaṣar min tafsihi'l-basīṭ*, ff. 1a) and compiled by an author whose name is given as Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. al-Hawāzin al-Quṣayrī (f. 1a; cf. 303a). There is no similarity in method and content between MSS *Leiden 1659* and *Istanbul Üniversitesi 3228*, and the latter cannot represent an abbreviation of the former. For the confusion between Quṣayrī, father and son, in the bibliographical sources, traced back to Ḥaġġī Ḥalīfa (*GAL* I, 432, S I, 772), cf. H. Ritter, *Oriens* 3 1950, 46-47; G. Bowering, *Orientalia* 58, 1989, 569-572; G. Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, Berlin-New York 1980, 21, 31; R. Ahmad, *Islamic Quarterly* 13, 1969, 16-69.

<sup>99</sup> Quṣayrī, *Laṭā'if al-iṣārāt*, 3 vols., Cairo 1981, 3/611-614.

of God. The heart, enclosed in the body (literally, the breast), is lit like the lamp (*qindīl*) in a niche that resembles a brilliant star. This lamp, the heart, is fed by the knowledge of God as if it were pure oil fueling the flame of a lamp (*sirāġ*) that is taken from a perfect olive tree and kindled without fire touching it. The believer's knowledge of God resembling pure olive oil signifies the law of the Prophet and his monotheist religion (*dīnuhu l-ḥanafī*) which is neither that of the Jews<sup>100</sup> praying to the West nor of the Christians praying to the East.

"Light upon light" either signifies that light is both acquired by one's effort and received by God's grace, adding the gift of direct witnessing (*'iyān*) to the human effort of rational proof, or that it is Muḥammad's heart whose knowledge of God is lit from the tree of Abraham, his monotheist forebear. The olive that is neither of the East nor of the West stands in the light of the sun all day and night, growing to a perfect shape and yielding the purest oil. For the mystics the tree that is neither of the East nor of the West symbolizes the completely balanced states of fear of God and hope in God (as well as other antipodes of spiritual experience), preventing the hearts from either slipping into despair or showing complacency. Their hearts (*himam*), having the characteristics of aliens (*al-ġurabā'*), are at home neither east nor west, neither in the upper nor lower world, neither among jinn nor humans, neither at God's throne nor footstool, rising above the creatures and yet unable to gain access to ultimate reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Because the Real One is beyond comprehension, they remain separated from God never permanently united with Him, forever aliens, illustrated by the prophetic Ḥadīth, "Islam began as a stranger and will return as a stranger just as it began."

Concluding his exegesis of the light verse with a fine mystico-theological exposition, Quṣayrī gives a rare account of the way in which early Sūfism describes the gradual illumination of the mystics' hearts. The heart, motivated by its discomfort with idleness and driven by its desire to ponder is aided by the light of divinely given success (*nūr at-tawfiq*) to make extraordinary efforts to counteract its evil inclinations, overcome its complacency and invigorate its rational reflection. In this endeavor, the heart acquires knowledge and certitude, experiences consolation and desolation and receives rewards and requitals, as its insights increase with persistent efforts and ecstatic devotion (*waġd*) overtakes continuous prayer (*wird*). Then, in the divine illuminations of both appropriate social conduct (*nūr al-mu'āmalā*) and personal spiritual struggle (*nūr al-munāzala*), there appears in the hearts the daylight of mystical union and the sunlight of oneness with God, with no cloud casting a shadow on their inmost beings and no rancour appearing

<sup>100</sup> Implicitly referring to Jews living east of Jerusalem.

on the horizon. The appearance of the light of God asking for account (*nūr al-mu'tālaba*) incites the mystics to an examination of conscience. Inspecting the register of their spiritual accounts and perceiving the depth of their sinfulness, the mystics are granted the light of interior scrutiny (*nūr al-mu'āyana*) so that they cast blame on themselves and empty the "cups" of remorse, progressing henceforth with lasting purpose, purified from any moments of listlessness.

With steadfastness at this stage, the light of spiritual fixation (*nūr al-murāqaba*) is unveiled, making them aware of God's ever watchful presence as privy to their thoughts. Then they are illuminated with the perception of God's presence in their mind (*nūr al-muḥāḍara*) as flashes of inspiration strike their hearts. Now, they are granted the light of experiencing the divine attributes (*nūr al-mukāšafa*) as these are unveiled and the light of witnessing them directly (*nūr al-mušāhada*) as if night enlarges into day and the stars' dimmer glow expands into moonlight and then swells into sunshine. Then there appear the lights of oneness with God (*anwār at-tawḥīd*) introducing the mystic into a transconsciousness of being alone with the Only One, unable to distinguish what is human from what is divine. Incapable of perceiving anything but this oneness, they can neither define their state nor capture it by allusion, the latter being obscure and the former inconsequential, for it is impossible to perceive anyone or anything else in this state. Now, corresponding to the apocalyptic moment of the universe described in the beginning of suras 81, 82 and 84, "when the sun will be darkened, the stars thrown down, the mountains set moving, the pregnant camels abandoned, and the heaven split open," whatever belongs to transitory non-existence vanishes from the mystics' consciousness and whatever pertains to true existence continues to subsist in them. There remain only majestic unity, glorious eternity, holy everlastingness and pure divinity.<sup>101</sup>

Daylamī, Šamsaddīn Abū Tābit Muḥammad b. 'Abdalmalik aṭ-Tūsī ad-Daylamī (d. shortly after 593/1197),<sup>102</sup> known as the teacher of Maḥmūd-i Ušnuhī (d. 7th/13th century),<sup>103</sup> was an original, yet obscure, Šūfī author, described by Ğāmī "as a great master and scholar whose teachings on the true reality of time, as set forth in his writings, are rarely found in the works of others."<sup>104</sup> Daylamī wrote about twenty treatises mainly in Arabic, some

<sup>101</sup> With regard to the "houses" (*buyūt*) Qušayrī adds that the mosques are houses of prayer (*buyūt al-'ibāda*) and the hearts houses of religious aspiration (*buyūt al-irāda*).

<sup>102</sup> G. Bowering, "Deylamī," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 7, 341-342; A.J. Arberry, "The Works of Shams al-Dīn al-Dailamī" *BSOAS* 29, 1966, 49-56; G. Bowering, "The Writings of Shams al-Dīn al-Daylamī," *Islamic Studies* 26, 1987, 231-236; *GAL* 2/207.

<sup>103</sup> Qāsim Anšārī, "Tāğuddīn-i Ušnuhī wa-tarğuma-i nawišta'ī az-ū," *Āyandah* 9, 1362/1983, 770-780.

<sup>104</sup> 'Abdarrahmān b. Aḥmad al-Ğāmī, *Nafāḥāt al-uns min ḥaḍarāt al-quḍs* (ed. Tawḥīdīpūr), Tehran 1373/1954, 355.



also in Persian, most of them preserved only in manuscript form, except one that has appeared in print.<sup>105</sup> The most voluminous of them is *Futūḥ ar-Raḥmān fī iṣārāt al-Qurʾān*, also known by the title, *Taṣdīq al-maʿārif*, which is a continuous yet eclectic commentary on the Qurʾān.<sup>106</sup> In the introduction to this commentary Daylamī mentions his radical intellectual change from a critical stance toward Sufism in his early writings to a favorable appreciation of Islamic mysticism at later stages of his life. While there is no explicit reference, either in his own works or in the Islamic biographical sources<sup>107</sup> that he was a Jewish convert to Islam, it is certain that Daylamī was able to read the Hebrew Bible with accurate understanding, as can be shown by the quotations from the Hebrew Bible in Arabic script included in his commentary on the Qurʾān as well as in some of his other writings.

The quality and significance of Daylamī's knowledge of Hebrew can best be documented from a passage in *Ġawāhir al-asrār*,<sup>108</sup> his treatise of Šūfī theology in which he defines the parameters of his mystical vision. He revised and completed this treatise in 589/1193, having changed its title upon divine inspiration from the earlier title, *Kašf al-ḥaqāʾiq bi-kunh ad-daqaʾiq*. The work is divided into 14 chapters and adopts the scholastic style of Islamic dialectical theology, framing its statements as responses to rhetorical questions (*fa-in qāla qāʾil...qulnā*). Its main themes are the nature of the human intellect, the vision of God, the compatibility of time and space with the idea of God, and the interpretation of Islamic monotheism in mystical experience. The frequent cross-references to most of Daylamī's other writings in Arabic and Persian indicate that the work was revised by the author toward the end of his life. The Hebrew passage included in *Ġawāhir al-asrār* is cited from the beginning of the decalogue (Deuteronomy 5: 7-9a; cf. Exodus

<sup>105</sup> *Ġāyat al-imbkān fī dirāyat al-makān*, the work of Daylamī that has been published, is wrongly ascribed to ʿAynalquḍāt al-Hamadānī (d. 525/1131) by R. Farmanēš, *Aḥwāl-o-āṭār-e ʿAynalquḍāt*, Tehran 1339s/1959, appendix, 1-54. According to Ġamī, Maḥmūd-e Ušnuhi wrote a treatise with an almost identical title, *Ġāyat al-imbkān fī maʿrifat az-zamān waʾl-makān*, cf. Ġamī, *Nafāḥāt*, 355.

<sup>106</sup> Daylamī's commentary on the Qurʾān is extant in a good number of manuscripts, two of which have been used for this article, MSS *Istanbul, Velīyüddin 430* (123 ff.; 794 h) and *Istanbul, Yeni Cami 57* (154 ff.; 892 h). The other manuscript copies which I have inspected are: MSS *Aleppo, Aḥmadiya 14095/1* (ff. 1a-139b; 772 h), *Aleppo, Mawlawiya 18264* (120 ff.; 875 h; *sūra 36* to the end), *Istanbul Köprülū 53/1* (110 ff.; 935 h), *Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye 307* (204 ff.; 989 h), *Istanbul, Baġdatli Vehbi Ef. 185* (136 ff.; n.d.; suras 1-68), *Bursa, Haraccioġlu 134* (279 ff.; 1066 h), *Istanbul, Feyzullah 2163* (612 ff., n.d.).

<sup>107</sup> The biographical sources of Islam are totally silent about Abū Ṭābit al-Daylamī, though they include references to his contemporary and namesake, Šamsaddīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbd-almalik, known as Ibn al-Muqaddam, who was a general under Nūraddīn and Šalāhaddīn and died in 583/1187-88; cf. Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil fī ʾl-taʾriḫ*, Beirut 1403/1983, vol. 9, 126-131; Safadī, *al-Wāfi biʾl-wafayāt*, Beirut 1401/1981, vol. 4 (ed. S. Dederling), 39.

<sup>108</sup> *Ġawāhir al-asrār*, MS *Istanbul, Şehit Ali 1346/1* (ff. 1b-38a; 795 h.).

20:3-5a) and is offered by Daylamī as confirming his interpretation of the Qur'anic phrase, 42:11, "*laysa ka-miṭlihi šay'un*, "like Him there is naught."<sup>109</sup>

Presenting his interpretation of this phrase, Daylamī first cites the Hebrew verses of Deuteronomy 5:7-9a in Arabic script (omitting verse 6) and then gives an almost flawless phrase-by-phrase Arabic rendering of their meaning. By introducing his citation of the Hebrew Bible with the phrase, *qāla fi 't-tawrāt*, "He said in the Torah," Daylamī seems to imply that he accepts the revealed nature of the Hebrew scripture. In addition, he identifies the passage as taken from the decalogue, referring to it as the "beginning of the ten commandments" (*ibtidā' ašar kalimāt*), and cites a variant reading of a Hebrew phrase, clearly locating its precise point of citation in the text with the statement, *wa-fi nuṣḥatin uḥrā* ("and in another version"). He adds the Arabic version of Deuteronomy 5:6 to his phrase-by-phrase translation, copying it from an actual Arabic translation of the Hebrew Bible at his disposal, termed *Kitāb tarğamat at-tawrāt*, while stating his awareness of having omitted the verse in his Hebrew citation.<sup>110</sup> He then proceeds to cite the Arabic rendering of Deuteronomy 5:7-9a in toto copying it from the very same Arabic translation at his disposal. Daylamī's familiarity with the Hebrew Bible is also reflected in his Qur'an commentary, in which he cites Hebrew text segments of the creation story, drawn from Genesis 1:26-27.<sup>111</sup>

The key to Daylamī's understanding of the words "likeness" (*miṭl*) and "simile" (*maṭal*) is the biblical idea of the human being created in the image of God, a symbolism which he employs as the pivotal point of his commentary on *āyat an-nūr*. Daylamī develops a twofold interpretation of the light verse,<sup>112</sup> one being an allegory for faith and the other a simile for the soul. He claims that he was taught the interpretation of the verse directly

<sup>109</sup> *Ġawāhir al-asrār*, f. 29b; Deuteronomy 5:7-9a: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God."

<sup>110</sup> Deuteronomy 5:6: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

<sup>111</sup> E.g. the Hebrew segments quoted from the Bible corresponding to Genesis 1:26-27 ("Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness'...So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him") are cited in Daylamī's commentary on Qur'an 2:30, "*innī ġā'ilun fi'l-arḍi khalifatan*, I am setting in the earth a viceroy" (MSS *Veliyüddin* 430, f. 8a; *Yeni Cami* 57, f. 8b) and on the light verse, Q 24:35 (MSS *Veliyüddin* 430, f. 80b; *Yeni Cami* 57, f. 101a). They are also cited in Daylamī's *Muhimmāt al-wāšilin*, MS *Chester Beatty* 4142, f. 10a, cf. MSS *Damascus*, *Zāhiriya* 1989 (ff. 153a-177b; 856 h.); *Topkapi E.H.* 1810 (22 ff; 1063 h), and MS *Şehit Ali* 1346/1 (ff. 1b-38a; 795 h.).

<sup>112</sup> *Futūh ar-Rahmān fi iṣārāt al-Qur'an*, MS *Veliyüddin* 430, ff. 79b-81a; *Taşdiq al-ma'arif*, MS *Yeni Cami* 57, ff. 99b-101b.

by his Lord, in the world of “light upon light” which he calls the world of bewilderment (*hayra*). God taught him with certainty that the “heavens” in this verse refer to the world of divine omnipotence (*ġabarūt*) and the “earth” to the worlds of divine sovereignty (*malakūt*), reaching from beyond the divine throne to beneath the ground, the former world referring to the world of the spirits and the latter worlds to those of the bodies. God struck the simile of the light verse to facilitate human understanding and said, with emphasis on the comparison, “the likeness of His light is as a niche,” meaning thereby the human soul. Inner-qur’ānic evidence, a statement of the Prophet recorded in Ḥadīṡ, and crucial quotations from the Torah confirm that the human soul is the simile closest to God’s own light. The verse following the light verse, “in houses God has allowed to be raised up” (Q 24:36), which mentions the elite of men engaged in recollection, and the verse, “I am setting in the earth a viceroy” (Q 2:30), namely Adam, both refer to the vision of God the prophets and great saints possess on account of their pure and peaceful souls. The simile, corroborated by the statement of the Prophet, “God created Adam after His image,”<sup>113</sup> is most deeply rooted in a passage from the Torah, cited by Daylamī in Hebrew (written in Arabic script), “then God said, ‘let Us make man in Our image’... so God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him” (Genesis 1:26-27).

In his allegory for faith, Daylamī remains within the confines of qur’ānic imagery without recourse to an explicit biblical reference and applies a symbolic interpretation to the olive-tree, the olive, and its oil. The tree and its fruit, the olive, refer to the believer’s faith, which is an acquired faith, while the oil refers to the divine gift of faith. The blessed tree (*šaġara*) represents one half of the faith, namely its profession as included in the word (*kalima*), “there is no god but God,” because the Qur’ān says, “a good word is as a good tree” (Q 14:24). Its other half, the belief of the heart (*taṣḍīq al-qalb*), which is the firm belief realized by rational reflection and logical inference, is represented by the olive (*zaytūn*), the tree’s fruit. The blessed olive tree is neither of the East nor of the West because the belief is acquired by rational reflection rather than taken blindly from the people of the East or the West. To these two pillars of faith, its profession by the tongue and the belief in the heart, is added a third pillar of faith, represented by the oil (*zayt*), which is the gift of faith, cited in the Qur’ān, “He has written faith upon their hearts” (Q 58:22). The perfect believer bases himself on these three pillars of faith, one divinely infused and two acquired, the innate faith being the oil and the acquired faith being the tree and the

---

<sup>113</sup> A.J. Wensinck and T. Fahd, “Šūra,” *EI* (new edition) 9/889-892. In the context of his argument Daylamī clearly intimates, “after His (i.e. God’s) image (*‘alā šuratihī*).”

olive. Symbolically expressed in the light verse, the divinely given faith and the humanly acquired faith can be captured in one allegorical definition of faith, just as the education a father gives to his son is something that is acquired while the son himself is given. The divinely infused faith shines forth even if it remains untouched by divine love (*maḥabba*), but once touched by the fire (*nār*) of love, it becomes “light upon light.”

In his simile for the soul, however, Daylamī bases himself on the imagery culled from the Hebrew Bible and applies the symbolism of the light verse, the niche, the lamp and the glass, to the human soul (*nafs al-insān*). The niche of the human soul is the simile and image of the divine light, because the human soul comes nearest to God’s own light. The niche of the soul holds the lamp of the spirit, called secret (*sirr*) or inmost being (*ḥafī*), assisted by the intellect and enshrined in the pure glass of the heart like a glittering star.<sup>114</sup> Daylamī distinguishes the believing soul, the soul of ordinary believers and the seat of faith that remains in the world of the bodies, from the pure and peaceful souls of the prophets and the great saints that are able to ascend to the world of the spirits in their visionary experiences. Employing his method of dialectical argumentation, Daylamī poses the rhetorical objection: Why did you substitute the soul for the niche, the heart for the glass and the inmost being for the lamp, etc., rather than taking the niche, the glass, the lamp, the tree, the olive, the oil and the fire in their literal meaning, i.e. describing the niche as a whitewashed recess in a wall or comparing the lamp to a small lantern carried in the hand of someone walking in the dark or depicting the glass as made of precious stone or the tree as yielding timber? To this Daylamī gives a two-pronged answer, namely that his symbolic interpretation follows an instruction he received directly from God and that God struck this simile to explain His own light symbolically in order to facilitate human understanding. God used the light of the human soul as the simile of His light because, once purified, as in the prophets and great saints, the soul reaches God’s essence and attributes, comprehending and understanding that which cannot be reached by the lights of sun and moon, the most powerful lights grasped by human sense perception. The light of the soul by which one comprehends, understands and believes is the light possessed by each of the believers. The light of the prophets and great saints, however, is the light of those who purify their souls, cleanse their hearts from concerns with this world and the next, enter the world of inner peace, ascend to the world of the spirits, progress in their very being to the world

<sup>114</sup> Daylamī explains his views on the body, soul, heart, faith, intellect, spirit, secret and inmost being at great length in his *Kitāb al-mir’āt wa-ṣūrat al-wiḡāh*, MS *Ṣehit Ali 1346* (252ff; 795 h), ff. 39b-81b, and MS *Gotha 70/6* (ff. 77a-84b; 1033 h.).

of the divine essence and attributes, and “travel in God,” witnessing with their souls, seeing with the inner eyes of their hearts and inmost beings. These lights of the prophets and great saints are the souls nearest to the light of God because they are the strongest lights, reaching a greater height and traveling longer distances than all other lights.

This article began with the earliest layers of the qur'ānic text and now concludes with the allegories of Ṣūfī interpretation. Tracing that chronological and textual trajectory has involved both synchronic and diachronic analysis. Using inner-qur'ānic connections to explore the linguistic complexities of the light verse, I have suggested a specific Christian context as the generative point of its multilayered imagery. While the qur'ānic text requires the explanation of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān against the cultural and religious background of Arabia during Muḥammad's lifetime, the Ṣūfī interpretations came to life against the widely enlarged background, pervasive three to five centuries later in Iraq and Iran. The Ṣūfis, possibly more than any other group among the Muslim exegetes, felt inspired by the light verse, finding in it an exceptionally evocative simile. In applying their creative imagination to the text, the Ṣūfis mined a treasure of qur'ānic keynotes drawn from their own mystical experiences that allowed them to unearth a multilayered depth of meaning hidden both in the qur'ānic text as well as in the introspection of their souls. Exegesis evolved into eisegesis, and intense attention to the text combined with deciphering the soul's most intimate secrets.