Measure for Measure: Prophetic History, Qur'anic Exegesis, and Anti-Sunnī Polemic in a Fāṭimid Propaganda Work (BL Or. 8419)

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Introduction: *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* or Ismāʿīlī *taʾwīl*?

Reference guides to the Arabic manuscript collection of the British Library list manuscript Or. 8419 simply as 'Stories of the Prophets and Patriarchs of Islām'. It appears as such in the library's handlist of Oriental manuscripts acquired from 1909 to 1921, and this identification is repeated in the more recent subject guide to holdings in the Arabic collection, where the work is categorised as a *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, or collection of 'tales of the prophets'.[1] Little is known about the history of the manuscript, which appears to have largely been overlooked, hardly surprising given the vast Arabic holdings in the British Library collections; thus the text does not seem to have been discussed in the major treatments of the genre published to date.[2] The handlist and subject guide indicate that the manuscript dates to the eighth/fourteenth or ninth/fifteenth century, an evaluation that was presumably made based on the hand and other physical indicators.

It is not difficult to see how a cursory examination of the text yielded the impression that it is a work of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. Pre-Islamic prophets such as Noah, Jesus, and especially Moses are mentioned repeatedly throughout the work, which is also replete with Qur'anic citations and anecdotes about the Prophet Muḥammad. Virtually every page features multiple references to the *banū Isrāʾīl*, *al-Yahūd*, and *al-Naṣārā*. However, one searches in vain for actual *qiṣaṣ* here; in contrast to the exemplary works of the genre by authors such as ʿUmāra b. Wathīma, al-Thaʿlabī, and al-Kisāʾī, very little in the way of extended narrative appears in this text. Instead, it consists largely of extended citations of scripture, concise allusions to events, and sometimes mystifying analogies. Unlike the authors of *qiṣaṣ* works, our author seems to have been unconcerned with elaborating upon the basic stories of the prophets presented in

Journal of Qur'anic Studies 16.1 (2014): 20–57
Edinburgh University Press
DOI: 10.3366/jqs.2014.0131

www.euppublishing.com/jqs

the Qur'an, and he often takes for granted that the audience will understand his laconic references to both Qur'anic episodes and events from history, whether it is that of the Islamic community or their monotheist predecessors.

Further, unlike typical *qiṣaṣ* works, the material on the prophets that is provided here does not appear in any logical order. It does not follow the chronological sequence of the appearance of the prophets and patriarchs in human history, as is the case in the Bible, or in world chronicles that record events of pre-Islamic (and even antediluvian) history such as the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī. Nor are the stories of the various prophets related according to the order of their appearance in the Qur'an either, as in works of *tafsīr*, though the work is certainly exegetical in nature.

Rather than identifying the text as a work of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, as the title 'Tales of the Prophets and Patriarchs of Islām' implies, we might instead characterise Or. 8419 as a work of *taʾwīl* or typological exegesis of the Qur'an. Exegesis of this sort, particularly of the passages in the Qur'an on the pre-Islamic prophets, was a central feature of classical Ismāᶜīlī literature, epitomised by the *Asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ* and *Sarāʾir al-nuṭaqāʾ* of Jaᶜfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. after 365/975) and the *Asās al-taʾwīl* of al-Qāḍī al-Nuᶜmān (d. 363/974).[3] *Qiṣaṣ* works usually compile material about the pre-Islamic prophets from diverse sources – ranging from Jewish and Christian materials to canonical or paracanonical *ḥadīth* – for the purpose of clarifying and expanding upon the spartan details supplied by the Qur'an, as well as to provide guidance to believers concerning their spiritual significance. In contrast, these *taʾwīl* works utilise particular readings of prophetic figures, often related in extremely abbreviated form, for the specific goal of promoting Ismāᶜīlī doctrines about the Imāmate or the virtues of the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet, specifically the ᶜAlids).[4] While communitarian (that is, politically and socially significant) themes are usually only implicit in Sunnī *tafsīr* and *qiṣaṣ* traditions about the prophets, the interpretation of these figures in Ismāᶜīlī *taʾwīl* is distinguished by its much more overt use of these stories to impart lessons relevant to contemporary circumstances or the (relatively) recent past.[5] Ismāᶜīlī exegesis of Qur'anic passages in *taʾwīl* tends to be much more explicitly political in nature, and the lives and missions of pre-Islamic prophets are essentially viewed as allegories that speak directly to the experience of the Shīᶜa – the partisans of ᶜAlī and his family – in the history of the Muslim community.

The distinctive exegetical approach of Or. 8419 resembles that of Ismāᶜīlī *taʾwīl* much more closely than it does that of conventional *qiṣaṣ* or *tafsīr*.[6] The author quotes long passages from the Qur'an – at least a third of the text consists of verbatim citations from scripture – which are then subjected to short, direct interpretation of a historicising sort. Passages taken to be references to episodes from the career

of Muḥammad, particularly his struggles against the pagans of Quraysh and the Jews of Medina, are provided with concise explanations of the circumstances of their revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), usually in the form of *ḥadīth* reports attributed to Companions or other authorities. Similarly concise anecdotal explanations are provided for Qur'anic passages describing significant events from the lives of pre-Islamic figures, including Noah, Jesus and Mary, and especially Moses, who is the pre-Islamic figure mentioned most often, receiving virtually as much attention here as Muḥammad himself. Whether the subject at hand is the career of Muḥammad or that of one of his precursors – the analogies between them are freely and frequently drawn – these brief exegetical expositions are often then subjected to a secondary, contemporising exegesis: a situation faced by the ᶜAlid Imāms, the *ahl al-bayt*, and their loyal supporters in the present or recent past is likened to a similar one that a prophet in the more distant past and his community (the companions, the virtuous among the *banū Isrāʾīl*, etc.) faced. Thus, Muḥammad may be compared to Noah, Moses, or Jesus; Fāṭima may be compared to Mary; ᶜAlī may be compared to Aaron, or his descendants compared to Muḥammad himself, and so on.

The most striking aspect of the author's exegesis, on the whole typical of *taʾwīl* as a genre, is the consistent blurring of boundaries between the past and the present, between ancient history and relatively recent events. This is also reflected in the free drawing of comparisons between one group that antagonised a prophet in the time of the *banū Isrāʾīl* and another who treated the faithful of a different, more recent, time in an analogous way. Thus, Moses and Muḥammad are linked through having been subjected to similar types of oppression by tyrants. Similarly, the author compares those who refuse to fight for the cause of justice (as our author understands it, at least) in the present day to the *munāfiqūn* or 'hypocrites' of the Medinan period who abandoned the cause of the Prophet after having pledged their unwavering support to him. The author's repeated presentation of these symmetries is the *leitmotif* of the work and the only perceptible organising principle to be found in what may otherwise seem to be a jumble of arbitrarily juxtaposed Qur'anic citations, *ḥadīth*, and historical anecdotes. A verse is cited, its primary historical context is mentioned, then it is applied to a second context that it fits in a largely metaphorical and figurative way. A verse about Moses' trials may be understood to describe not only the literal Pharaoh of Egypt but the 'pharaohs' of Quraysh who oppressed Muḥammad; another verse about the Jews' challenge to Muḥammad is taken as referring not only to these literal Jews but also to those Muslims who have acted like Jews in recapitulating their sins.

Again, it was no doubt the frequent occurrence of anecdotes and scriptural passages about Biblical persons in this work, especially the recurring mention of the *banū Isrāʾīl* and their prophets, that initially led to the identification of Or. 8419 as a collection of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. Similarly, given the equally frequent occurrence of derogatory statements about Israel and the Jews, especially the repeated description

of the various ways they went astray, whether in the time of Moses, Jesus, or Muḥammad, one could easily mistake this for an anti-Jewish work as well.[7] But, in fact, the author's characterisation of Jewish behaviour as the epitome of mendacity and corruption is clearly a rhetorical device, primarily intended to denounce the behaviour of Muslims of whom he disapproves. Thus, for our author, the negative portrayal of *sunnat banī Isrāʾīl*, the *sunna* or established practice of Israel – essentially, all the deeds of Israel in the past, all the blameworthy behaviours and actions for which the author would indict them – is a metonym for everything that is wrong with Islam, specifically the conduct of the majority of the Muslim community at the time when he was writing, who are here maligned as metaphorical Jews – *Yahūd ummatinā*, 'the Jews of our community'.[8]

Muslim portrayals of and denunciations of Jews often reflect authors' latent or overt anxieties about their own community's corruption, the *umma* claimed to resemble an imagined, even caricatured, conception of what Judaism is or is supposed to be. The construction of a negative and largely artificial image of the precepts of Judaism and the simultaneous projection of Muslim concerns onto this construct is one of the cornerstones of the representation of Jews in classical Islamic literature and tradition. The Jew as discursive object supplies a much-needed foil for the elaboration of an ideal conception of what Islam is, or what Muslims should strive to make it; this imagined Jew then becomes a straw man upon whom all the faults for which an author would seek to indict his fellow Muslims may be displaced.[9] In short, to paraphrase the well-known observation of Levi-Strauss about animals, it seems that for many Muslims, Jews are and have been 'good to think with'.[10] This text no doubt reflects this general trend, particularly in its insistent, even obsessive, repetition of the claim that most Muslims now follow the *sunna* of Israel and are therefore equivalent to Jews. The reiteration of this claim provides the pretext for the promotion of *taʾwīl* interpretations of various Qur'anic passages, equating the challenges and dangers faced by the pre-Islamic prophets, Muḥammad, and his present-day successors, the Imāms.

The author consistently uses this trope of the *sunna* of Israel to make a very particular argument about the state of the Muslim community. While others have claimed that the *umma* is following the path or practice of Jews and is thus rushing headlong down the road to perdition, such rhetoric is usually motivated by would-be reformers' concern with legal and ritual rectitude, informed by a conviction that Muslims have become too lax in observing one or another precept of Islam, or have adopted some practice deemed 'un-Islamic' that blurs the boundaries between Muslims and Jews. While he does complain about the various duties that his community now neglects, the *sunnat banī Isrāʾīl* that the author of Or. 8419 denounces mainly has to do with forgotten political, rather than ritual or devotional, obligations. The corrupt behaviour of present-day Muslims that the

author asserts to be an imitation of the ways of bygone nations – especially the Israelites' or Jews' treatment of the prophets of old – is the general denial of the claims of the ᶜAlid Imāms and the refusal of the majority of Muslims to recognise their leadership. The author expresses this argument in a number of different ways in the work, but always through the application of *taʾwīl* exegesis to the Qur'an, and always with the goal of exhorting his audience to abandon the *sunna* of Israel and follow the true guidance of the Imāms. Thus, despite the recurring denunciations of the behaviour of *banū Isrāʾīl* and *al-Yahūd*, it is not the Jews whom the author of this work is targeting – not that Jews would be likely to be swayed by such arguments anyway – but rather his fellow Muslims.

Throughout the text, claims are repeatedly made on behalf of ᶜAlī, the Imāms, and the *ahl al-bayt*. This signals at the very least a general sympathy for the Shīᶜī cause, and notably, a significant amount of the content of the work seems to derive from a common Imāmī tradition of the classical period, for parallels to some of the traditions therein appear in major Twelver sources.[11] The question is whether a more specific sectarian affiliation for the author can be determined. Unfortunately, the work is missing at least one folio page at both its beginning and its end, and so we are deprived of any colophon, incipit, introduction, or conclusion that might have clearly indicated who the author was or what his sectarian leanings were. However, aside from his pervasive use of *taʾwīl* as the prevailing exegetical method deployed within the work, there are brief references buried within the text's polemic that I would suggest support an identification of the author as an Ismāᶜīlī, or at the very least as a pro-Fāṭimid partisan.

In what follows here, I will first examine the rhetorical structure and exegetical approach of the work, especially the author's repeated claim that the Muslim community has gone astray in following the *sunna* of Israel. I will then turn my attention to the author's portrayal of the links and symmetries between Israelite history, the career of Muḥammad, and the affairs of the Muslim community in the present, especially his distinctive sectarian attitude towards episodes from the pre-Islamic past. Finally, I will attempt to locate this unique text in its political and religious context in early Fāṭimid history on the basis of its coded allusions to the emergence of the reign of the Mahdī in North Africa in fulfilment of purported prophecies about the 'rising of the sun in the west'.

Following the *sunna* of Israel: The 'Measure for Measure' *ḥadīth*

Or. 8419 is missing at least one page at both the beginning and the end of the manuscript. A British Museum collection stamp is found at the bottom of the recto of what is now the first folio, so obviously this damage occurred before the manuscript was acquired and bound in its current form. Nevertheless, the initial folios of the text,

as it is now extant, do have the character of an introduction; they clearly set the stage for the work as it unfolds in subsequent pages, so we might reasonably conclude that no more than one or two pages could have been lost from the beginning of the text, though we have no way of telling for sure.[12] Although the author's discussion now begins *in medias res*, with folio 1a opening halfway through a citation of a Qur'anic verse, we may still discern the thrust of the author's argument from the beginning, as well as observe the exegetical and rhetorical style that he will employ throughout:[13]

> *[Oh People of the Book, Our messenger has come to you to make things clear to you, after a break in the succession of messengers, lest you say, 'There has come to us] neither a bearer of glad tidings nor a warner'; for indeed a bearer of glad tidings and warner has come to you; and God is the One who determines everything* (Q. 5:19).
>
> So they became blind after things were made clear, and rejected [the true religion] after things were perfected, and they came to differ among themselves (*ikhtalafū*) after the clear explanations (*al-bayyināt*) and the guidance were brought, envious of one another and jealous of their own people.
>
> This is as God[14] has recalled regarding the communities of the past and those of bygone eras: *For they did not come to differ among themselves, envious of one another, until after the clear explanation* (*al-bayyina*) *had come to them* (Q. 45:17).

The passage opens with a Qur'anic verse (Q. 5:19) that expounds upon the theme of the obtuseness of people who resist the truth. It is obviously a reference to the *ahl al-kitāb*, recipients of older revelations such as Christians and Jews – especially the latter – who rejected Muḥammad and the new dispensation he brought, although they should have known better. The second citation, Q. 45:17, underscores one particular aspect of the history of these people, to whom revelation was previously brought, that the author will reiterate throughout his work: although they were entrusted with divine guidance, the *ahl al-kitāb* went astray anyway, in particular through their *ikhtilāf* or disagreement, presumably over the interpretation of the revelation bestowed upon them. This clearly presents an important lesson for the faithful of Muḥammad's own community, who are thus enjoined to take heed of the examples set by the 'communities of the past and those of bygone eras' (*al-umam al-māḍiyya wa'l-qurūn al-khāliyya*). This phraseology evokes the image of pre-Islamic peoples in more than just a general way; rather, for a Muslim audience, such language strongly recalls the theme of ancient peoples who were specifically destroyed on account of God's wrath at their going astray (typically associated with the phrase *umam khāliyya*, the 'bygone communities' or 'perished nations').

That Muslims must take heed of these examples is made more explicit as the author continues:[15]

> He has also spoken thus: *God wants to make things clear for you and show you the sunna of those who came before you* (Q. 4:26).[16] And also: *Do not be like those who broke into factions* (*tafarraqū*) *and came to differ among themselves* (*ikhtalafū*) *after the clear explanations came to them* (Q. 3:105). And also: *God did not lead a community whom He had guided astray until after He had made clear to them what they should fear* (Q. 9:115).
>
> So did the Prophet warn his community against factionalism and differing among themselves (*al-furqa wa'l-ikhtilāf*); and he informed them that they would surely follow the practices of the communities who came before them. He spoke thusly: 'You will surely follow the *sunna* of Israel, measure for measure and like for like.'

With these words of the Prophet, the author introduces his main theme, which will recur throughout the work: despite the Qur'an's numerous warnings about how older communities went astray, Muslims are doomed to repeat their mistakes, most of all those of Israel.[17] The author's later comments will make clear that this is not simply a hypothetical possibility; rather, as prophesied by Muḥammad, this state of affairs has already come to pass. As this theme is reiterated throughout the work, the author will make use of the same images and turns of phrase again and again – in making the same mistakes as the Jews and other people before them, Muslims are following in their footsteps, copying them measure for measure.

It is no mistake that the term used to describe the paradigm for behaviour set by one's predecessors here is *sunna*; as a *ḥadīth* related here by the author makes clear, *sunna* is everything:[18]

> ᶜAmr b. al-ᶜAwf b. Ṭalḥa al-Mazanī said: 'We were sitting with the Prophet in his mosque when Gabriel brought him a revelation; he covered himself with his garment, and remained thus a long time. Then he recovered, so he took off the garment, for he was sweating profusely, and he was grasping something in his hand.
>
> Then he said, "Do any of you know about dates?" The Anṣār replied to him, "O Messenger of God, we swear that we know everything about dates, for we are men who know the cultivation of dates well."[19]
>
> Then he opened his hand and in it was a date pit. "What is this?" "O Messenger of God," they replied, "It is a date pit." "And what does it represent?" "The *sunna*," they replied.
>
> "You are correct," he said. "Gabriel came among you just now to confirm your religion, for you will surely travel along the paths (*subul*)

> of those who came before you, measure for measure; you will surely follow their example, inch by inch, foot by foot, mile by mile – to the degree that if they entered a dark lizard hole, you will do it too.'"

This *ḥadīth* elaborates on the author's previous statement about Muḥammad's prophecy that his community will inevitably make the same mistakes as those who went before them, following along the well-trodden path established by their predecessors. It expresses this point in especially vivid language, using the striking image of the date pit left in the Prophet's hand after his visitation by Gabriel; the core of a fruit is a natural symbol for the *sunna*, here understood to be the very essence of religion. The obvious implication is that it is this essence that Muslims have lost in following the *sunna* of others.

There are numerous variations on the 'measure for measure' tradition in the *ḥadīth* corpus. It may be related in shorter or longer forms, with or without a specific comparison with Israel; versions attributed to major authorities are represented in many of the canonical *ḥadīth* works of the Sunnīs, while dozens of variants appear in Twelver Shīᶜa compendia such as al-Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī* and the *Bihār al-anwār* of al-Majlisī. The topos of the date pit in the Prophet's hand after Gabriel's visitation appears to be unique to the version transmitted from ᶜAmr b. al-ᶜAwf b. Ṭalḥa al-Mazanī, which is not particularly well attested; this is not surprising given that ᶜAmr is a rather obscure Companion to whom rather few traditions were attributed.[20] However, the actual dictum of the Prophet at the end of ᶜAmr's report – distinguished by the colourful reference to the lizard hole – is found more or less verbatim in more widely disseminated transmissions of the *ḥadīth* from major Companions such as Abū Saᶜīd al-Khuḍrī.[21] Finally, it should be noted that in some versions the Prophet explains at length exactly what it means to follow Israel 'measure for measure', for example by describing how the Jews splintered into sects, the Muslims sadly being doomed to do likewise.[22]

The author then proceeds to cite a number of other traditions that make analogous points, attributed to the Companions ᶜUbāda b. al-Ṣāmit, al-Mustawrid b. Shaddād, and Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān, concluding with a final tradition attributed to the famous ᶜAbd Allāh b. ᶜUmar, in which the Prophet once again admonishes his community that 'You will surely travel along the paths (*sunan*) of those who came before you, inch by inch and foot by foot, to the degree that if they entered a dark lizard hole, you will follow them into it'.[23] That the Ibn ᶜUmar *ḥadīth* specifically warns against the *sunan* of Israel in the plural ties this *ḥadīth* back to the citation of Q. 4:26 with which the passage began, which states that God has intended to guide the faithful away from the *sunan* of those who came before. The passage concludes with a rapid succession of Qur'anic quotations that drive home the author's point: God will surely distinguish between the truthful and liars (Q. 29:2–3); the *sunna* of God does not change

(Q. 48:23, Q. 35:43); you (the hypocrites in the Qur'an's original context, but perhaps understood here as addressed to all Muslims) engage in idle talk like those before you (Q. 9:69); those who oppose God and His Prophet will be humbled like those who came before (Q. 58:5); those who denied God's revelation said things like those who went before, for their hearts are alike (Q. 2:118).

These quotations serve as a coda to this introductory section of the text. The reader is clearly meant to infer from all this that while the true *sunna*, the core of religion, is unchanging, communities inevitably go astray and repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, though they believe they are on the right path. Thus the Muslims have in fact gone astray in the same way as previous communities, especially Israel, just as Muḥammad foretold, and despite the repeated warnings of the Qur'an. Throughout the rest of his work, the author elaborates on this theme dozens of times, in numerous imaginative ways. He proceeds according to no discernible logic or overarching sequence of points, but the work is bound together by his consistently following the same pattern in every example he gives. First he relates traditions about various episodes from the history of ancient Israel or from the *sīra*, the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, and then he links them to various examples of negative behaviour in the Muslim community that essentially recapitulate the errors of previous generations, Muslims now acting in exactly the same way as the wrongdoers of the past. Besides the constant repetition of the language of the Prophetic *ḥadīth* related in the introduction as he decries the ways in which Muslims have followed the *sunna* of Israel 'measure for measure', the unifying principle that holds the text together as the author moves from one example to the next is the continual anchoring of these lessons in the Qur'an, the author extrapolating from scripture to various historical events to the conditions of the present day through the application of *taʾwīl.*

Hell Fills Up: The Muslim Community's Recapitulation of Israel's Mistakes

Throughout his work, the author relies heavily upon *taʾwīl* to drive home his point about the parallels between the behaviour of the Israelites in the time of the ancient prophets, that of the Jews in Muḥammad's time, and that of Muslims who have gone astray in the present. Qur'anic references to events in the lives of the prophets, be they Moses, Jesus, or Muḥammad, are interpreted as depictions of timeless situations that contemporary believers will inevitably face in the present day, or that have caused them to fall into error sometime in the more recent past. Scripture is implicitly understood as naturally applicable to numerous different contexts without anachronism or incongruity. In the author's view, this is specifically because the history of various communities throughout time, and thus the missions of the numerous prophets sent to those communities, have followed identical trajectories, as the Qur'an itself is understood to assert.

Prophets must always endure the same struggles and trials in attempting to deliver God's message to their people, and their faithful followers have perennially faced the same challenges and hostility from obstinate rejecters and hypocrites. Thus, the messages of warning and consolation contained in the Qur'an may be interpreted as bearing the exact same lessons for the faithful of every era, whether they are persecuted by the enemies of Israel like Pharaoh, members of the *banū Isrāʾīl* who went astray such as those who denied Jesus and his Gospel, or the infidels of Quraysh who plagued Muḥammad and mocked his claim to the prophetic calling. That universal meaning of scripture, applicable to different times and contexts, may be considered the essence that the author's analogies draw out and make explicit – the *awwal* or primary meaning of the Qur'an made manifest by his *taʾwīl*.

This telescoping of history, or universalisation of the Qur'anic kerygma, is undertaken here for one purpose: to establish that the pattern that has prevailed throughout the bygone eras also applies to the present, except that the faithful to whom the Qur'anic messages of consolation are now aimed are specifically the ᶜAlid Imāms, the *ahl al-bayt*, and their partisans and supporters. Similarly, the opponents who are condemned and will eventually be consigned to Hell are not the *kuffār* of Moses' time in Egypt or the *kuffār* of Muḥammad's time in Mecca, but rather the *kuffār* of the present who call themselves Muslims but reject the leadership of the Imāms, the recognition of which the author views as incumbent upon all believers. Just as all divine messengers, prophets, and Imāms can be thought to conform to one rightly-guided type, so too do their enemies all conform to a universal type of the infidel, even those who profess Islam openly. While all Muslims would presumably agree with the proposition that scripture contains timeless truths that are relevant for every generation, our author has a very particular conception of what that means, and seeks to persuade his audience of his perspective.

There is a distinct pessimism to the author's view of history, and especially his estimation of the state of the Muslim community in his own day. Muslim tradition, following the somewhat vague indications in the Qur'an on this point, often depicts the prophets of Israel as having inspired a small group of followers who upheld justice and righteousness while the majority of Israelites or Jews or Christians fell into error.[24] This state of affairs obviously applies to the Muslim *umma* as well if one adheres to the position of the Shīᶜa, who have historically tended to think of themselves as being like the faithful followers of prophets of the past for exactly this reason.[25] This is why our author finds the image of Muslims following the *sunna* of Israel measure for measure from the *ḥadīth* so appealing and dedicates an entire treatise to elaborating upon the numerous ways in which this prophecy has been fulfilled: the pattern established by the history of revelation to the *ahl al-kitāb* in the pre-Islamic era is made to confirm and validate the nonconformist position adopted

by the Shīᶜa. This is also why the method of *taʾwīl* is so useful for the author's argument: the Qur'anic statements about the prophets, those who followed them faithfully, and those who resisted and persecuted them, apply to multiple contexts simultaneously specifically because of the tendency of history to repeat itself – often tragically.

One of the most marked differences between the Sunnī and Shīᶜī views of history is in their perspectives on what is often portrayed as the golden age of Islam in the time of the Companions. Sunnī identity has always relied on a conception of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* ('pious forebears') – the generations immediately following the career of Muḥammad, usually encompassing the Companions and Successors – as representing the pinnacle of Islam's development in that historical moment in which the Prophet's guidance was followed most closely, and the piety and devotion of the community were at their most pure and vigorous. The Shīᶜa, on the other hand, have largely viewed the Companions negatively, seeing them as cheating ᶜAlī and his family out of their exclusive claim to leadership of the community; they thus tend to reject the Sunnī idealisation of the *salaf*, though some branches of the Shīᶜa became more accommodating and conciliatory towards Sunnī claims over time.[26]

It is quite clear that our author's view of the history of the community immediately after the Prophet's death is quintessentially Shīᶜī, as he decries the rapid, even immediate, decline of the *umma* after Muḥammad's death:[27]

> There was none of this following the *sunna* of the preceding communities measure for measure during the lifetime of the Messenger of God. But as soon as the Messenger of God departed from the world, most of his community regressed, just as had happened with the bygone communities after their prophets departed.
>
> Ibn ᶜAbbās spoke thus: 'Whenever God has sent a prophet and then taken him away, it is from that point on that Hell fills up.' God has spoken: *Muḥammad is only a messenger; the messengers before him have all passed away. If he died or was killed, would you regress? The one who regresses does not harm God in the slightest. God recompenses those who are grateful* (Q. 3:144).

Muḥammad's revelation of the Qur'an and guidance of his community had miraculously transformed a pagan people, but as soon as he passed away, that guidance became attenuated and, like so many peoples before them, the Muslims reverted to their old ways.

The Qur'anic reference to Muḥammad's followers backsliding after his death in Q. 3:144 – phrased in the text as a hypothetical occurrence, but confirmed as a reality

in our author's perspective – occasions an extended rumination on another example of a community going astray after the removal of their prophet: the Golden Calf narrative. The crux of this comparison is that Israel sinned by turning their back on Aaron, Moses' brother and designated representative, when they degenerated into idol worship with the Calf, while Muḥammad's people acted similarly by turning their back on his brother and designated representative, ᶜAlī – truly a remarkable accusation! Notably, while the author's use of *taʾwīl* usually proceeds from past to present – a Qur'anic reference to some event or situation in the past prompts him to draw a comparison with a more proximate analogue – this is one of a handful of examples in the text where the process is reversed in the exposition: an allusion to conditions after Muḥammad's death generates a comparison with a similar situation in ancient Israel's history. To the author, there seems to have been no difference between these procedures; the telescoping of history means that all rightly-guided leaders are one, all infidels one, all trials and tribulations one. Looking forward into the future from the vantage point of the past affords us the exact same view as looking backward from the present, when ancient foreshadowings and prophecies have come to be fulfilled.

For the author, this basic interchangeability of past and present means that the Muslim community inevitably recapitulates the failures of their predecessors. From the outside, however, we can see that his point of view sometimes dictates that he reshapes the history of earlier communities in idiosyncratic ways in order to force them to conform to his particular understanding of what is wrong with Islam in the here and now. This is not always the case: for example, the Qur'anic denunciation that the Jews go astray by killing their prophets without justification – an allegation that is ultimately derived from older Christian and even Jewish tradition – provides our author with a ready-made metaphor for the Umayyads' persecution and killing of the Imāms of the *ahl al-bayt*.[28] But in other cases, the author must be more imaginative in linking Qur'anic condemnations of previous communities to the particular sins for which he indicts his own; sometimes, establishing that all infidels conform to a universal type requires taking some creative license.

There are certain recurring faults for which the Qur'an condemns the older communities of *ahl al-kitāb*, the endemic flaws and repeated behaviours that caused them to go astray. Most prominent among these are the tendency towards *shirk* or associating created beings with God and the wilful tampering with or misinterpretation of scripture that the later tradition would label *taḥrīf*.[29] Although we might assume that the Qur'an is the ultimate foundation of the author's use of *taʾwīl* to link past and present, the Qur'an itself does not seem to dictate his conception, or rather portrayal, of how exactly the *ahl al-kitāb* went wrong. That is, although our author does mention both *shirk* and *taḥrīf* as sins of the

Jews and Christians, the most conspicuous fault for which our author denounces the Jews in particular is, oddly enough, political quietism – a hesitation to take up arms to right wrongs and the adoption of an accommodationist stance towards members of the community who were sinners or deviant in their beliefs or practice.

The claim that this was one of the main ways Jews and Christians went astray in the past is quite obviously motivated by the author's sectarian ideology. He equates Muslim groups who did not (and still do not) accept the Shīᶜī perspective on the definitive political struggles in the early community, but rather adopted a more conciliatory position on the question of legitimate authority, to those among the Jews in particular who separated themselves from the community and became pietists withdrawn from the concerns of the world:[30]

> When the decline of their community became apparent to the pious of Israel, they withdrew (*iᶜtizāl*) and built hermitages for their devotions up in the mountains. They neglected *jihād* and the commanding of right and forbidding of wrong. God has spoken thus: *Monkishness* (*rahbāniyya*) *is something they have invented for themselves* (*ibtadaᶜūhā*)*, We have not prescribed it for them; they should have preferred to pursue God's approval instead, for they did not undertake this properly* (Q. 57:27) – it means, 'We did not ordain it as a duty for them (*mā faraḍnā ᶜalayhim*), nor did We command them to do this'. But the monks of our community have done likewise, neglecting the commanding of right and forbidding of wrong …

The implications of *rahbāniyya* in the Qur'anic presentation and its implications for our author are clearly rather different. In its original context, Q. 57:27 appears to allude to *Christian* monastics, especially as it follows immediately upon a reference to Jesus and Mary in the previous verse; further, the main issue the Qur'an takes with their 'monkishness' is the improper eschewing of family life that accompanies ascetic withdrawal. In the eyes of our author, however, *rahbāniyya* seems to be a fault of the *Jews*, and the sin of such ascetics is not the avoidance of sex but rather their withdrawal from the community and its affairs, in particular their refusal to right wrongs and fight to save the community from its state of decline, although they recognised that it was becoming corrupt ('the decline of their community became apparent to them').[31]

Here, the author's particular bias in favour of political activism is quite conspicuous, and his interpretation of the Qur'anic denunciation of *rahbāniyya* is clearly shaped by his perception of the flaws of his own community, in particular the conciliatory and quietist ideology adopted by various groups among the Muslims. Throughout the text, the author cites Qur'anic verses and *aḥādīth* that denounce those who neglect

imperative religious duties such as *al-amr bi'l-maᶜrūf wa'l-nahy ᶜan al-munkar*, commanding the right and forbidding the wrong, which he interprets in a maximalist way: both particular individuals and various sects, especially the Muᶜtazila and Murjiᵓa, are condemned for neglecting this duty in refusing to take sides in partisan conflicts.[32] To our author, these quietists are no better than the Umayyads – here termed the *qāsiṭūn*, a well-established Shīᶜī codeword – who were actually the ones directly responsible for the persecution of the Imāms of the *ahl al-bayt* and their supporters.[33] Apparently, in his view, there is little difference between those who fight for the wrong cause and those who will not fight for any cause at all. Though they fully recognise the moral decay and laxity of the community, they refuse to get involved, and attend to their private concerns. It cannot be a coincidence that the *rahbāniyya* are specifically condemned for 'withdrawing' to their secluded places of devotion; *iᶜtizāl*, meaning not only a literal removal to a remote location but also a figurative adoption of a position of neutrality, is the basis for the name of the Muᶜtazila, who were famous for advocating *al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn* ('the position between the two positions', viz. a stance of neutrality on the leadership question between the partisans of ᶜUthmān and the Umayyads and the partisans of the ᶜAlids).[34]

Our author could not be more direct or more vocal in his denunciation of the advocates of neutrality such as the Muᶜtazila and the Murjiᵓa, who are subjected to scathing criticism through the use of a variety of colourful analogies. They are explicitly compared to the *munāfiqūn*, the 'hypocrites' who pledged to support Muḥammad in Medina but later refused to fight and shirked their duty; they are also compared to the people of Saul, who according to the Qur'an refused to fight when this was required of them.[35] Similarly, while the Muᶜtazila are implicitly likened to the *rahbāniyya* in the passage quoted above, in at least one instance, the Murjiᵓa are identified as those in the Muslim community who are most like the Jews in their killing of the prophets, a surprising accusation given that it was not the Murjiᵓa who were literally guilty of killing the Imāms and persecuting the *ahl al-bayt*. Rather, in the author's view, their quietism was actually *tantamount* to such killing.[36]

Of course, not all Muslims would accept the author's premise that the Imāms, whose deaths went unavenged, were really analogous to the prophets who were killed by the Jews, or that acknowledgment of their leadership is an indispensable duty in Islam. This objection is anticipated by the author, who constructs another interesting analogy: those who reject the claims of the Imāms are no better than the Sabbath-breakers, Jews who according to the Qur'an were transformed into apes and pigs.[37] Whereas the Sabbath-breakers failed to fulfil the critical religious duty of observing the regulations of the Sabbath, the Muᶜtazila and other groups who stay neutral regarding the leadership question thereby fail to obey the Imām,

though such obedience is likewise a critical religious duty. Alternatively, those Muslims who deny the necessity of such allegiance may also be likened to the Jews who denied Jesus:[38]

> The Jews of our community said that the Prophet did not entrust authority to ᶜAlī, and never appointed him to become his representative (*walī*) over the believers in the Messenger of God's stead. They lied in denying that he is the brother of the Messenger of God and that he is his delegate (*wazīr*) and designated successor (*waṣī*) among his people, and his caliph in his community. This is just like when the Jews denied the prophethood of Jesus; they followed the *sunna* of Israel and did exactly the same as they did.
>
> The Jews claim their faith in God and Moses and the previous prophets is sufficient for them, making unnecessary faith in Muḥammad – even though they recognised that he was a prophet, as do their descendants, though they denied him on account of jealousy for themselves [i.e. for their status as chosen people].
>
> Likewise, the Jews of our community claim that their faith in Muḥammad is sufficient for them, making unnecessary any recognition of the requirement of faith in the Imām of those who fear God, the leader of the resplendent ones, the commander of the faithful, the brother of the prince of the messengers, or of obedience to him, and they denied him on account of jealousy for themselves…

The quietism of groups like the Muᶜtazila and Murjiᵓa was famously motivated by a concern for the unity of the community; they sought to adopt a 'big-tent' conception of Islam that prioritised the values of tolerance and consensus, which eventually evolved into the distinctive Sunnī emphasis on communitarianism and a broad (though not unlimited) embrace of diversity of opinion. They denounced the Shīᶜa for their *rafḍ* or nonconformism, especially their unwillingness to accept a moderate stance on the leadership question and their rejection of the legitimacy of the early caliphs who preceded ᶜAlī, namely Abū Bakr, ᶜUmar, and ᶜUthmān.[39] This is yet another objection the author anticipates and skillfully deflects, in arguing that while the Shīᶜa only do their duty in recognising the authority of the Imām and rejecting allegiance to those guilty of denying the claims of the *ahl al-bayt* and persecuting them, it is the *other* groups – who neglect these duties – who are actually guilty of sectarianism and factionalism! Thus, it is these groups who may be likened to the Jews on account of their *ikhtilāf* and *furqa*:[40]

> When the Jews and Christians saw various other religious groups going astray while scripture was entrusted to their prophets,[41] they grew pleased with themselves, *and they said, 'None shall enter*

> *Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian'* (Q. 2:111). God continues: *Say: 'These are your fantasies; produce your proof of this, if you are truthful!'* Aforetimes, each group attested that the others were going astray. The Jews said, 'The Christians have nothing.' The Christians replied, 'The Jews have nothing.'
>
> Likewise, when our community was split, they became factions, each cursing the other. God has cast out of the true religion the Ḥarūriyya [Khārijītes], on account of their renunciation; and also the Muᶜtazila, for their desertion; and also the Jahmiyya, for their going astray; and all the other sects, for their sectarianism and innovation (*ahwāᵓihim wa-bidᶜatihim*).
>
> That leaves two sects that feign forgetfulness (*firqatayn mutanāsītayn*). The one claims that they are the people of community (*jamāᶜī*) and the other claims that they are the people of *sunna* (*sunnī*). The corruption of the positions adopted by the rest of the sects had become apparent to them, as did the fact that they had gone astray. Then they grew pleased with themselves, *and they said, 'None shall enter Paradise unless …* they are satisfied with the killing of Ḥusayn' – with the consequence that Ḥusayn was killed, while they pledged allegiance to Cursed, the son of Cursed [Yazīd b. Muᶜāwiya]; and as for the one who carried out the killing of Ḥusayn, he placed him in a golden basin [to present him to Yazīd]. Measure for measure!

This is perhaps the author's most strident dismissal of the quietism of those who adopt a position of neutrality in the community's political struggles. As happened in the time before Islam, people became divided into a number of groups, the *ḍalāla* ('going astray') of most of them being readily apparent. Just as the Jews and Christians had pretentiously declared themselves to be saved while dismissing others as hopelessly misguided, some within the Muslim *umma* did the same – the 'centrist' Sunnīs, the 'People of the *sunna* and Community' (*ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamāᶜa*), here imagined as two distinct groups, no doubt to preserve the symmetry with the Jews and the Christians as two distinct but related groups. The corruption of other groups 'had become apparent to them' (*qad ẓahara la-hum*) – perhaps a subtle allusion to the aforementioned *rahbāniyya*, to whom the decline of their community was plainly apparent, though their response was to stand aside, failing to rectify the problems that they openly recognised.

Sunnī quietism is here once again equated with indifference to injustice in the most uncompromising terms. While the Jews and Christians claimed that only one who professes their faith attains salvation, these groups claimed that the only way to attain salvation was to stand aside in the partisan conflict and accept the wrong done to the Imāms – here expressed as pleasure or satisfaction with the killing of Ḥusayn,

a proposition that 'they' accepted. The referent is not specified, though we may readily conclude that our author is here indicating those Muslims who acquiesced in the persecution of the Imāms through their tacit submission to Umayyad authority in the time of the early conflicts over leadership that split the community. The Sunnī acceptance of the right of the Umayyads to rule is directly equated with responsibility for that death, the standard Sunnī position being that the reigning Umayyads were all legitimate, even Yazīd, 'Cursed, son of Cursed,' a position that would seem absurd to a Shīᶜī partisan. The final line, an allusion to the killers of Ḥusayn bringing his head to Yazīd in a golden bowl, culminates in a simple, restrained restatement of the central argument of the work. All this – the Sunnīs' perverse acceptance of injustice, the claim that such acceptance was necessary for salvation, and the killing of the divinely guided leader – recapitulated what had transpired among earlier communities with the withdrawal of the *rahbāniyya*, the Jews and Christians claiming exclusive access to salvation, and their killing of their prophets. With all this, Muslims repeated their mistakes *hadhwa al-naᶜl bi'l-naᶜl*, measure for measure.

The *taʾwīl* of the Pre-Islamic Prophets as Commentary on Islamic History and Society

The compression of different historical moments through *taʾwīl* exegesis of the Qur'anic text – demonstrating the symmetries between the careers of the prophets of Israel, the ministry of Muḥammad, and the fate of the Imāms of the *ahl al-bayt* in the present – is absolutely fundamental to the author's call to the Muslim community for reform. This dictates a certain approach to the Qur'anic allusions to Biblical episodes and characters, which are interpreted not quite allegorically, but with the definite goal of universalising and essentialising them, to the degree that the parallels between their stories, the *sīra* of Muḥammad, and events in the lives of the Imāms would seem obvious, even undeniable, to the author's intended audience.

Scholars have long recognised the distinctive aspects of Ismāᶜīlī engagement with Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly the application of *taʾwīl* exegesis not only to the Qur'an but to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament as well. In the earliest period of the tradition's development, the extension of the community's exegetical embrace to the scriptural materials of the *kitābī* communities had a particularly countercultural aspect to it; the Ismāᶜīlīs deliberately flaunted the conventional Muslim view of these materials as corrupt and not worthy of the status of legitimate revelation, setting themselves apart from the mainstream and establishing their reputation as possessors of special esoteric knowledge by doing so. Even after the downplaying of the more radical aspects of Ismāᶜīlī teaching after the reforms implemented by the Fāṭimid caliph-Imām al-Muᶜizz (r. 341–65/953–75), Ismāᶜīlī thinkers continued to engage with *kitābī* scripture for various purposes.[42] While it was once held that this engagement was primarily intended as an appeal to Jews

and Christians, as Hollenberg's more recent work demonstrates, the intention was probably not to proselytise communities for whom the Bible was sacred, but rather to exploit this material to communicate specific messages to a Muslim audience, especially Ismāʿīlī initiates.[43] The use of episodes from Israelite history – culled from the Qur'an, the Bible, and noncanonical sources alike – by various Muslim groups to polemicise against rivals is well documented.[44]

However, the author of Or. 8419 is not particularly concerned with citing traditions from *kitābī* sources. Rather, he generally relies on what we might term 'Qur'anic Biblical traditions', those passages in the Muslim scripture recounting episodes from the history of Israel that themselves have some direct or indirect source in Jewish and Christian scriptural tradition. These passages are typically supplied with only a minimal amount of explanatory glossing, the author largely taking for granted that the audience will be familiar with a given Qur'anic reference.[45] Sometimes the author employs what we can recognise as common Shīʿī tropes in the interpretation of this Qur'anic Biblical material, though there is nothing about these allusions that would be especially difficult for a non-Shīʿī to decipher. Thus, using a symbol commonly deployed in Imāmī works, the *ahl al-bayt* are compared to Noah's Ark; with the community flooded with strife and corruption, only the faithful will survive the deluge. Our author further extends the analogy in specifically comparing three of ʿAlī's most loyal supporters, Salmān, Abū Dharr, and al-Miqdād, with the three sons of Noah who escaped by clinging to the ark, thus surviving the flood to propagate humanity.[46]

Other aspects of the author's use of Qur'anic allusions to Biblical imagery are more challenging to our expectations. As previously noted, much of this text is devoted to Moses in particular, who receives practically as much attention from the author as Muḥammad himself. Certain elements in the Moses legend are more significant for the author, of course; thus we see repeated allusions to the confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh that also loom so large in Qur'anic treatments of the story of Moses. The author is especially fond of exploiting Pharaoh's image as the paradigm of the nefarious villain who seeks to oppose the divine messenger but ultimately fails because God is on the prophet's side; thus the recurring reference in the text to Muḥammad's opponents as the 'pharaohs' of Quraysh. However, other aspects of the Exodus are of rather less concern to our author, for example the theophany at Sinai and the revelation of the Torah, which receive little attention in the work.

Given the author's generally negative attitude towards the Jews (whether termed *banū Isrāʾīl* or *al-Yahūd*), his emphasis on one aspect of the Exodus topos is somewhat surprising:[47]

> God has spoken thus: *When we rescued you from Pharaoh and his kin, they were imposing a most evil punishment upon you, slaughtering*

> *your sons while letting your womenfolk live. In that was a trial from your Lord most grave* (Q. 2:49) – and also: *We caused the people who were considered weak to inherit the eastern parts of the land We had blessed, and the western parts as well. Thus was your Lord's good pledge to the Israelites fulfilled on account of what they endured, and We demolished what Pharaoh and his people sought to make and build* (Q. 7:137).
>
> The oppressors of the kinfolk of Muḥammad did likewise – slaughtering their sons while letting their womenfolk live!
>
> He promised them that He would surely annihilate their enemy and deliver them from their enemy and cause them to inherit in the land that was the Israelites'. Thus has God spoken: *God promised those among you who believed and did upright works that He would cause them to inherit in that land that He caused those who came before you to inherit, and firmly establish for them the religion He chose for them, and substitute security for the fear they felt previously. [He said:] 'Let them worship Me and not associate anything with Me'* (Q. 24:55). He has also spoken thus: *This is God's promise; God never breaks His promise* (Q. 30:6) – and also, *That which will sustain you, which you were promised, is in Heaven* (Q. 51:22) – this is the Mahdī, the one who rises from the family of Muḥammad (*qāʾim āl Muḥammad*), measure for measure.

The analogy between the treatment of the Israelites in Egypt and that of the *ahl al-bayt* by those who persecuted them would seem to be a natural one, insofar as the Qur'anic allusion to *a most evil punishment, slaughtering your sons while letting your womenfolk live* (Q. 2:49) would, for a Shīᶜī audience, inevitably bring to mind the most important event in their hierohistory, the battle of Karbala (61/680) and its aftermath. It was at Karbala that the Imām Ḥusayn was killed at the orders of Yazīd b. Muᶜāwiya (the aforementioned 'Cursed, son of Cursed'), along with most of his family and supporters; however, the ᶜAlid line of the *ahl al-bayt* survived because the Umayyads took the women and children captives to Damascus after the battle.[48]

Nevertheless, there is something rather odd about the analogy between the Israelites and the *ahl al-bayt* given that, for the author, the *sunna* of Israel represents the very epitome of waywardness. After all, it is not only the pious remnant of the community of Moses who were persecuted by Pharaoh, but rather the Israelites as a whole. Further, this was not for their heroic principles or struggle for justice, as was the case with the *ahl al-bayt*; rather, they were passive victims of Pharaoh's tyranny, not being singled out for any particular beliefs or principled stance. But perhaps this is testing the analogy too strenuously; after all, it is ultimately meant to communicate

something about the oppressors – the comparison between Pharaoh and the Egyptians and the Umayyads being a rather obvious and rhetorically useful one – more than the oppressed.

This is less true of the second part of the passage, where Israel and the *ahl al-bayt* are directly linked as analogous inheritors of divine promises. The main Qur'anic prooftext cited here (Q. 24:55) pledges that believers will inherit the patrimony of the Israelites and have their religion securely established; this is of course understood not as a general commitment to the Muslims as a community, but only to those who faithfully support the Imāms of the *ahl al-bayt.* Thus, we can see that the invocation of the Exodus narrative on the whole serves as a fitting symbol for the drama of the Imāms and their supporters, insofar as both stories are, in the end, about the fulfilment of divine commitments to a chosen people after, and in spite of, considerable difficulties and trials. While the reference to the Mahdī, the quasi-messianic redeemer anticipated by the Shīᶜa, may imply that the inheritance in question is an eschatological one, we might also think of the specific pledge of inheritance of the land of the Israelites as a rather concrete allusion to the Holy Land (*arḍ al-qadas*) and greater Syria beyond – the heartland of the Umayyad dynasty. Given the strong association of the former territory of the Israelites with the Umayyads, the inheritance of this land in particular may betoken a reversal of history, with the dominion of the Umayyads, whose entire reign was built upon the denial of the claims of the Imāms of the *ahl al-bayt*, representing nothing less than the ascendancy of Sunnism, which would eventually be overthrown with the vindication of the Shīᶜa after the emergence of the Mahdī.

The millenarian motif of the coming of the Mahdī is also central in our author's exegesis of another Qur'anic passage relating to the Exodus, the Golden Calf episode. This passage constitutes one of the most unusual scriptural interpretations in the entire work; the latent political message of the Qur'anic narrative of the Calf in *Sūrat al-Baqara* is brought to the fore here in a way that is not found in any other commentary on the episode in either the *tafsīr* literature in general or known works of Ismāᶜīlī *taʾwīl* more specifically. I have argued elsewhere that the interpretation of the short reference to the Calf episode in Q. 2:51–4 in Muslim tradition changed over time in response to the particular discomfort Sunnīs felt with the implications of some aspects of the episode. Specifically, some exegetical traditions explaining Moses' command to the idolatrous Israelites, *Turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator* (Q. 2:54), present this moment as an execution, the innocent bystanders among the Israelites being tasked with slaying those guilty of idolatry.

These traditions are preserved in relatively early sources like the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) as well as in sectarian works such as the *tafsīr* of the

third/ninth-century Ibāḍī Hūd b. Muḥakkam. Notably, these sources also tend to at least hint that Aaron's great offense in allowing the people to go astray worshipping the Calf was that he did not secede from the community with his righteous followers or intervene in the affair by force. Thus, the purification of the community through violence prescribed by Moses rectifies the situation of injustice that Aaron allowed to prevail. In contrast, later commentators such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/932) emphasised that what this act of killing achieved was a collective atonement, expiatory bloodshed that was as much a punishment upon the killers as it was upon those killed; simply put, all sinned together, so all were punished together. These later authors also seem to be more reluctant to impute blame to Aaron for not abandoning or disavowing the sinners among Moses' people.

I have suggested that the sometimes subtle differences that we find in exegesis of this story in sources of the second/eighth through the fifth/eleventh century reflect the gradual ascendance of Sunnī ideology among Qur'an commentators. The reluctance to see Moses' command to the Israelites to *slay yourselves* as a divine mandate for a purge of idolaters from the community stems from a Sunnī discomfort with a model of communal relations in which the pious are required to adopt a militant stance against sinners. The rejection of this interpretation by al-Ṭabarī and others reflects values instilled by Sunnī ideology, especially *irjāʾ* or postponing judgement, as well as the attempt to marginalise rival sectarians, whether Shīʿa or Khārijīs, who embraced a more militant and perfectionist view of communal relations (whether or not they actually advocated taking up arms against sinners and the unjust).[49] It is not necessarily the case that commentators who preserved what we might characterise as a more activist interpretation of the episode in *Sūrat al-Baqara* were actual sectarians; most of them were not. But for al-Ṭabarī and others who rejected this interpretation, their refusal to see the episode as a political metaphor, or their projection of a more communitarian ethos into it, clearly was driven by ideological considerations.[50]

Given his total opposition to the perspective of the Murjiʾa and other accommodationist groups on communal affairs, it is perhaps not surprising that our author embraces a radically militant interpretation of the Golden Calf episode that underscores precisely those aspects of the narrative that made Sunnīs uncomfortable, particularly its apparent advocacy of purgative bloodshed and violence undertaken to right wrongs within the community. His exegesis thus highlights the principle of the necessity of the faithful cleaving to the divinely appointed prophet or Imām and obeying his representative in his absence. In a crucial passage, which follows directly upon the aforementioned discussion of how the Muslim community regressed after Muḥammad's death, a comparison is drawn between the *umma*'s behaviour towards

ᶜAlī at that time and that of the Israelite Calf worshippers when Moses left them in the care of Aaron, his surrogate:[51]

> *Muḥammad is only a messenger; the messengers before him have all passed away. If he died or was killed, would you regress? The one who regresses does not harm God in the slightest. God recompenses those who are grateful* (Q. 3:144). So they regressed and abandoned the brother of the Prophet, and his delegate (*wazīr*) among them, the representative (*walī*) of the Messenger of God and his designated successor (*waṣī*) among his people, and his caliph over his community. This is exactly what Israel did to Aaron after Moses disappeared from among them (*ghāba ᶜanhum*).

In Imāmī parlance, *ghayba* refers to the state of suspension when God temporarily takes the prophet or Imām away from the community, prolonging his life until the future time in which he is restored – a fitting description of what happened when Moses ascended to Sinai, where he remained protected in God's presence while the Israelites eagerly awaited his return. For the Shīᶜa *ghayba* connotes a period when it is important for the people not to lose hope or go astray, but rather remain confident in future deliverance from their predicament – which is ironic, since this is exactly what the Israelites *failed* to do, losing hope in Moses' return and thus turning to the Calf.

The author then describes the people going astray by worshipping the Calf, as well as Moses' anger upon his return:[52]

> So then he sought to set them right. The condition for their repentance was killing, for God, may He be exalted, had spoken thus: *Turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator* (Q. 2:54).
> So the Calf worshippers sat covered up in their garments before Aaron and his partisans (*shīᶜa*). Anyone who looked up or tried to stand, their repentance was not accepted. Then Aaron and his partisans put them to the sword until He commanded them to desist.

The author then proceeds to point out the differences between what happened when the Israelites went astray after the Calf and the present state of affairs, when those who have currently gone astray linger in their sin, without correction or chastisement, abiding in a condition basically tantamount to *ridda*, apostasy:[53]

> When He took our Prophet, he did not disappear the way Moses disappeared from among the Israelites.[54] And the Calf worshippers of our community have remained in error, constantly backsliding (*yataraddadūna*); they do not repent, nor do they reflect upon the time when they drank the Calf deep in their hearts (cf. Q. 2:93),

> right up to the day of the caliph of God, al-Mahdī, and so the day when the Calf of our community prevails continues [until now].
> In the time before the emergence of the Mahdī, the community of the Prophet had to forego killing. Then, when the caliph al-Mahdī emerged, the gates of repentance were shut tight for the Calf worshippers from this community, just as they were shut tight for those who did not believe before the rising of the sun in the west.
> God has spoken thus: *On a day when some of the signs of your Lord appear, belief in them then will profit a soul nothing, if it did not believe before then, nor merited anything good on account of its belief* (Q. 6:158). This is [the sign of] the rising of the sun in the west. For the Calf worshippers, this is the day when they will pay for believing in the Calf and obeying al-Sāmirī. As for the one who believed in the brother of their prophet and his caliph among them, they reckoned him weak just like Israel did to Aaron and his partisans, and they said, 'Kill the sons who believe along with him, but let their womenfolk live!' (cf. Q. 2:49) – following the *sunna* of Israel and doing exactly as they did.

By repeatedly referring to Aaron's loyal supporters as his *shīᶜa*, the author has elided the distance between Biblical history and more recent events. That is, the story of how this prophet and his loyal followers bided their time until they could take up arms and exact a violent punishment upon those of their community who went astray after the Golden Calf is obviously interpreted as a message of consolation for the loyal followers of the ᶜAlid Imāms in his own day. The author's use of this narrative as foreshadowing the reversal that appears to have now come to pass, when the Mahdī has emerged and the gates of repentance have been closed to the Calf worshippers (presumably meaning that they will have to pay for placing their loyalties elsewhere), is truly striking.

In addition to the extreme frankness with which it pledges terrible retribution against those who have persecuted the Shīᶜa and rejected their cause, what is most surprising about this passage on an exegetical level is the way in which the crime that the Qur'an ascribes to the Egyptians, who 'slaughtered the sons while letting the womenfolk live' according to Q. 2:49, now seems to be associated with the Calf worshippers of the Israelites, who did this (or at least threatened to do this) to Aaron and his partisans. In the same way, this transference of the crime from the few to the many applies to the present as well; it is not only the sin of those who directly persecuted the Shīᶜa, but may now be imputed to the 'Calf worshippers of our community' in general. That is, those denounced as 'believing in the Calf and obeying al-Sāmirī' and 'reckoning those who believed in the brother of their prophet and his caliph among them weak' are presumably not just those who did violence to the *ahl al-bayt* directly, but rather

all those who acquiesced in it as well. The implication is that those who will pay now that this moment of messianic deliverance has been realised are all those who have been on the wrong side of the conflict over the leadership of the community – a chilling threat issued, it seems, to the Sunnīs as a whole for their collective complicity in the crime of idolatry, following the Golden Calf of an infidel caliphate instead of the true Imāms of the family of the Prophet.[55]

Conclusion: Reconstructing the Provenance and Purpose of Or. 8419

Overall, the now-anonymous text represented in Or. 8419 is distinguished by its use of a highly politicised exegesis of passages from the Qur'an in its single-minded pursuit of the argument that Sunnīs have gone astray just as Israel went astray before them. Nevertheless, as previously noted, both the text's contents and approach show many points of overlap with other extant works and traditions from both the Twelver Shīᶜī and Ismāᶜīlī communities, though the particular exegetical style used by the author is much more similar to Ismāᶜīlī *taʾwīl* than to Sunnī or Twelver *tafsīr*. On some level, even the invocation of the symbol of the Mahdī, the anticipated Imām whose advent would usher in a new, transformative era of peace and justice for the Shīᶜa, is not particularly distinctive – except, perhaps, for our author's claim that the Mahdī has, in fact, already arisen and is currently establishing his millenarian reign.

There are only three passages in this text that make direct mention of the Mahdī: in the Calf narrative cited above; in the brief allusion to the righteous faithful inheriting what Israel inherited ('*That which will sustain you, which you were promised, is in Heaven* – this is the Mahdī, the one who arises from the family of Muḥammad, measure for measure'); and in one other passage that alludes in a similar way to the current appearance of the Mahdī in the context of a discussion of inheritance and women being spared while men are killed.[56] It is the passage on the Calf we cited at length above that provides us with our most tangible clue regarding the likely provenance and origins of this text.

As we have seen, the author draws a stark distinction between the situation leading up to the present – when the 'Calf worshippers of our community' have prevailed and refused to repent of their error – and the current time, in which the Mahdī appears to have emerged, with the gates of repentance now firmly shut for those who have denied the truth and persecuted God's faithful. Until now, wickedness and idolatry similar to that perpetrated by the Israelites who rebelled against Aaron and followed al-Sāmirī may seem to have triumphed, but now it appears a reckoning is at hand. Just as the Israelites who followed the Calf paid a terrible price when Moses returned from his period of absence (*ghayba*) on Sinai, so too, now, does the coming of the Mahdī portend retribution against the present-day Calf worshippers. This new reckoning is associated with a unique sign: the 'rising of the sun in the west' (*al-maghrib*).

Our author refers to this sign in connection with a particular Qur'anic verse, Q. 6:158, *On a day when some of the signs of your Lord appear, belief in them then will profit a soul nothing, if it did not believe before then, nor merited anything good on account of its belief …* (Strangely, the author does not quote the conclusion of the verse, which would seem to be just as relevant to a millenarian context: *qul intaẓirū innā muntaẓirūn – Say, 'Just wait; we are waiting too'*.) There is a widely attested *ḥadīth* found in many collections in which the Prophet explains this verse as a reference to a day upon which the sun will rise in the west.[57] Our author interprets the 'rising of the sun' symbolically, as an allusion to the advent of the Mahdī, but arguably, he takes *maghrib* wholly literally, not only as a reference to the west in general, but specifically to the region universally known to Muslims as the 'western lands', the *maghrib* or North Africa (in distinction to the eastern Islamic lands or *mashriq*).

There are numerous indications that Muḥammad's prophecy of the sun rising in the west was understood by some Ismāᶜīlīs as a reference to the emergence of the Fāṭimid dominion in the Maghrib, the promised deliverance alluded to in the tradition having been realised with the establishment of a Shīᶜī state in Ifrīqiyya in 297/909 by the Fāṭimid dynasty. The Fāṭimid caliph-Imāms, who claimed to be ᶜAlids descended directly from ᶜAlī and Fāṭima, clearly presented their rise to power as a transformative millenarian event in world history; this was signalled, above all, by the fact that the first Fāṭimid caliph-Imām took the regnal title 'the Rightly-Guided One' – that is, *al-mahdī*.

Corroborating evidence of the significance of our author's interpretation of the *ḥadīth* about the 'rising of the sun in the west' comes from other important Ismāᶜīlī sources, which demonstrate that the Fāṭimids commonly invoked this symbol as proof that their dominion signalled the realisation of messianic-chiliastic prophecies. For example, in his *taᵓwīl* of the prophets, Jaᶜfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman uses the image of the sunrise, especially the miraculous rising of the sun in the west, as a symbol for the advent of the Imāms and the flourishing of a new epoch of justice.[58] These references are for the most part quite vague, and cannot specifically be correlated to the emergence of the Mahdī per se; arguably, already by this point the Fāṭimids had begun to downplay the more radical elements in their doctrine in favour of a more moderate conception of the Imāmate and a deferred eschatology – their establishment of the caliphate-Imāmate in Ifrīqiyya still representing the beginning of a new world order, but one without antinomianism and apocalypse.[59]

Still, that the image of the sun rising in the west, as the author of Or. 8419 presents it, is meant to allude to the Fāṭimid dominion is almost indisputable. In his *Iftitāḥ al-daᶜwa*, his account of the early history of the Fāṭimid state, al-Qāḍī al-Nuᶜmān preserves poems by Ismāᶜīlī supporters who were contemporaries of the caliph-Imām al-Mahdī that invoke this symbol. One describes the realisation of the millenarian

moment awaited by the faithful with the advent of the Fāṭimids in this telling line: 'This is the hour of truth whose time has come / The moment has come for the reign of the unjust to fall / Already I see the sun of the earth rising / From the west, together with the crescent.'[60]

For our author, as for later Fāṭimid authors who invoked this tradition, the era of the messianic deliverance had clearly begun. In another passage, commenting upon Q. 7:159, *Among the people of Moses there is a community that is guided by truth and by means of it deals justly*, this verse is explained as referring to the community of Jews who live beyond China, in the region before the horizon where the sun rises (*al-mashriq*). The author then cites Q. 7:168, *some are righteous, and some not*, asserting that while the former are those Jews who live at the edge of the earth, the latter refers to the Jews whom the reader would encounter every day – 'those whom you see right here.' Likewise, among the community of Muḥammad, those who are rightly guided by truth are those who are in the region before the horizon where the sun sets (*al-maghrib*) – while those who are not are obviously all the other Muslims, groups such as the Murjiʾa and so forth.[61] The author clearly does not construct this symmetry in an abstract way or for general homiletic impact, but rather plays upon the *mashriq-maghrib* dichotomy to make a very concrete point, to suggest that the rightly-guided people whom he has idealised throughout the work are ascendant in the *maghrib* right now.

The author's perspective on events suggests that he must have written this work sometime after the establishment of the Fāṭimid caliphate in Ifrīqiyya in 297/909. A more precise identification of context or author may not be possible given the lack of other explicit indications in the text that would facilitate this. An obvious objection to this identification would be that the work totally lacks technical language or concepts of the sort that are ubiquitous in known Ismāʿīlī texts dealing with prophetology, the Imāmate, and Qur'anic exegesis. The specialised terminology of *nāṭiq* and *ṣāmit*, the 'speaker prophet' and the 'silent prophet,' does not appear anywhere in the work; nor is there any attempt to explain the doctrine of the relationship between these prophetic types (termed *izdiwāj*, syzygy, elsewhere) or of the prophetic succession itself according to its characteristic Ismāʿīlī interpretation (the *adwār* or cycles of history). Nor do we find any explicit reference to the inner and outer meaning of scripture, the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, arguably indispensable to any Ismāʿīlī discussion of the proper interpretation of the Qur'an. The only terminology with conspicuously sectarian associations deployed in the work is that found in Imāmī works more generally; for example, the author frequently uses language referring to the Imāmate such as *waṣiyya*, *walāya*, and so forth, and calls the faithful followers of a prophet or an Imām his *shīʿa*. The recent publication of an important work of ʿAbdān, an early Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī* and theorist, on the succession of prophets demonstrates that specialised terminology is already in evidence among the earliest Ismāʿīlī authors

whose works have come down to us, so the total absence of technical Ismāᶜīlī terms and concepts here in a work dealing with the *taʾwīl* of the prophets would seemingly militate against identifying it as Ismāᶜīlī.[62]

The surviving Ismāᶜīlī texts with which we might compare Or. 8419 were all intended for internal consumption, representing the Ismāᶜīlī *daᶜwa* to insiders initiated into the basic doctrines associated with the movement. However, given this text's exclusive emphasis on argumentation from Qur'an and *ḥadīth* alone, one might conclude that it was primarily directed at outsiders. This would explain not only its lack of technical language or specifically Ismāᶜīlī doctrines, but also its central concern with demonstrating how the *sunna* the community at large follows is actually the *sunna* of Israel – an attack on the very foundation of Sunnī identity. If this were the case, this text would constitute virtually our only surviving example of pro-Fāṭimid propaganda meant for general circulation, intended to draw the uninitiated to the movement.[63] Given its strong sense of the advent of the Mahdī as a present reality, it is also possible that this text is very early, dating from the time of the foundation of the Fāṭimid state and representing an initial attempt at interpreting the Qur'anic references to the prophets to bolster the claims of the regime. We might thus see it as anticipating the later *taʾwīl* works of Jaᶜfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman and al-Qāḍī al-Nuᶜmān, but in a relatively rudimentary and non-doctrinaire form.[64]

One might question whether a text lacking the philosophical language and technical terminology so strongly associated with Ismāᶜīlī tradition should properly be characterised as Ismāᶜīlī at all. Nor, hypothetically, must it even necessarily be Fāṭimid. Some scholars have claimed that the Fāṭimids appropriated the language and sentiment associated with a more general 'Mahdist' movement percolating throughout the Islamic world in the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries, based on poetry and other traditions that supposedly circulated in North Africa and other territories foretelling the anticipated rise of the Mahdī, including prophecies of the imminent 'rising of the sun in the west'.[65] It is possible that our text is an artifact of this pre-Fāṭimid 'Mahdist' movement – for example, from the time of the *dāᶜī* Abū ᶜAbd Allāh al-Shīᶜī who first worked to establish the Fāṭimid dominion among the Kutama Berbers of Ifrīqiyya at the end of the third/ninth century. But we should be very cautious about making such claims, seeing as most, if not all, of the information that survives about this 'Mahdist' movement actually comes from later Fāṭimid sources.[66]

Moreover, even the most staunchly Ismāᶜīlī authors did not write exclusively in a conspicuously Ismāᶜīlī mode. For example, Jaᶜfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman himself did not employ Ismāᶜīlī technical language in all of his works; the *Kitāb al-ᶜālim wa'l-ghulām* attributed to Jaᶜfar elaborates at length on classic Ismāᶜīlī themes,

especially the necessity of progressing through successive stages of wisdom through guidance by a master and initiation, but without an overly conspicuous use of Ismāᶜīlī technical language.[67] Given its presumed function of proselytising non-Shīᶜa, the absence of Ismāᶜīlī technical terms in Or. 8419 need not prevent us from recognising it as Ismāᶜīlī in orientation, and its direct acknowledgement of the advent of the caliph al-Mahdī and the 'rising of the sun in the west' as a present reality does most likely indicate specifically Fāṭimid origins.

If this is so, this text's value as another example of Ismāᶜīlī exegesis of Qur'anic passages on the pre-Islamic prophets and perhaps the only surviving example of what we might call 'popular' propaganda from early Fāṭimid history cannot be overestimated. Its consistent, even relentless, use of *taʾwīl* interpretation of the Qur'an – the exegesis of which links the prophets of ancient Israel, Muḥammad, and the ᶜAlid Imāms – to argue that the Muslim community has fatally gone astray just as their predecessors, especially the Jews, did before them, is distinctive as well; therefore, the work also makes an important contribution to our understanding both of intra-Muslim sectarian polemics and Muslims' use of a negative image of Jews and Judaism as a polemical trope.

One school of thought says that Muslims originally collected traditions on the pre-Islamic prophets in order to bolster Muḥammad's prophetic credentials and to assert, implicitly or explicitly, that the revelation of the Qur'an and the advent of Islam both fulfilled and superseded the divine dispensations made to older monotheistic communities. Thus, generally speaking, the presentation of the predecessors of both Muḥammad himself and his community in Islamic tradition is tailored in such a way as to make Islam the natural culmination of the history of God's covenantal, prophetic, and revelatory interactions with humanity, making Israel, the Jews, and the Christians into steps on a path that inevitably leads to Muslim dominion and ascendancy.[68] However, in Or. 8419, we see a strikingly different use of material on Israel and Muḥammad's prophetic precursors. Here, the author draws comparisons between the Jews and the *umma* as well as between Muḥammad and earlier prophets not to demonstrate the authority of the Messenger of God as the successor to and culmination of the prophetic tradition of the past, but rather to demonstrate that the Muslim community were successors to the legacy of Israel in a *negative* way. For our author, ever since the death of Muḥammad, the majority of Muslims have gone down a slippery slope in erring in exactly the same way as their predecessors did, with only a loyal few preserving the true *sunna* the Prophet imparted to his people. For him, a reckoning is due. While the faithful few now have cause to celebrate the dawning of a new era, it is perhaps too late for Sunnīs, the 'Jews of our community', to mend their ways in light of the new dominion of the Mahdī dawning over the horizon to the west.

NOTES

My research on this manuscript in summer 2012 was generously supported by an award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as by funding from the Office of the Provost of Elon University. I must thank Omar Ali-de-Unzaga and Wilferd Madelung for discussing the text with me while I conducted research in London, as well as Colin Baker of the British Library for his frequent (and patient!) assistance. I also owe a significant debt of gratitude to David Hollenberg, who discussed the text and its significance with me extensively. My interpretation of the work also benefited considerably from the comments of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this article.

1 See Stocks and Baker, *Subject-Guide to the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Library*, 238, listed in section I.2 ('Biography – General'), under author 'Anon.' The manuscript was purchased from Abdul Majid Belshah in November 1919. According to his obituary, Belshah was an Iraqi who worked at the (then) School of Oriental Studies in London from its opening in 1917 until his death in 1923; he hailed from Baghdad, specifically the neighborhood of Kazimayn (or al-Kāẓimiyya), and it thus seems possible that the manuscript had been preserved by the Shīᶜī community there.

2 The authoritative treatments of the genre are Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāᵓ*, and Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, pp. 138–64. See also Tottoli, 'New Sources and Recent Editions', for a recent discussion of the state of the field.

3 For a brief overview of what is known of the lives of these authors and their careers at the court of al-Muᶜizz, see Daftary, *The Ismāᶜīlīs*, pp. 163–72.

4 A comprehensive study of *taᵓwīl* as a distinctive mode of Muslim engagement with the Qur'an has yet to be written; Poonawala's concise survey, 'Ismāᶜīlī *taᵓwīl* of the Qurᵓān', remains unsurpassed, but should now be supplemented with Bar-Asher, 'Outlines of Early Ismāᶜīlī-Fāṭimid Qurᵓān Exegesis'. Here, following the author of Or. 8419, I privilege a particular aspect of *taᵓwīl*, namely typological interpretation of Qur'anic verses that link historical events of the past with other events of particular concern for the sectarian community. Other forms of *taᵓwīl* are commonly employed by Ismāᶜīlī authors as well, particularly a more expansive, allegorical form that interprets Qur'anic verses symbolically, reading them as allusions to cosmology, physiognomy, aspects of doctrine, and so forth. The author of Or. 8419 seldom engages in this form of exegesis; rather, he tends to read Qur'anic verses rather literally, simply changing their specific historical referents from the more obvious context (the lives of the pre-Islamic prophets, the career of Muḥammad) to a less obvious one (various events in the more proximate history of the ᶜAlid Imāms).

5 As Bar-Asher has shown, this was a common trend in Imāmī *tafsīr* before the major intellectual and cultural shifts of the pre-Būyid era; though they did not apply the label *taᵓwīl* to their exegetical methodology, fourth/tenth-century Imāmī Qur'an commentators frequently made use of symbolic and allegorical interpretations of a political nature. See Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, pp. 104–24.

6 Something is surely lost in blithely equating *qiṣaṣ* and *tafsīr* as I have done here; it is hardly my intention to efface the important stylistic and methodological distinctions between works in each of these genres. I mean only to highlight what they have in common specifically in contrast to works of *taᵓwīl,* which are conspicuously different in style, exegetical approach, and general outlook.

7 The Prophet's conflict with the Jews in Medina is a frequently recurring topos in the text; however, true to the author's tendency to telescope historical periods and events, the behaviour of the Medinan Jews, accused of knowingly denying Muḥammad though they secretly recognised that he was a legitimate prophet foretold by scripture, is often equated with the offenses of earlier Jews against older prophets, particularly Jesus. Shīᶜī attitudes towards

and relationships with Jews have historically been complex, rendered even more complicated by the varied ways in which they reflect and refract aspects of Shīᶜī-Sunnī relations. See the recent overview of Moreen, art. 'Shiᶜa and the Jews', and also Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, ch. 3, *passim*, and '"The Šīᶜīs are the Jews of Our Community": An Interreligious Comparison within Sunnī Thought.'

8 The Qur'an only rarely uses the term *sunna* in reference to the bad behaviour of peoples of the past, and never explicitly in connection with Israel or Jews; the distinction between the good behaviour of the prophets and their followers as correct *sunna* and that of their opponents as bad *sunna* is at most only implicit in the Qur'an. This distinction, of course, is more explicit in Muslim sources dealing with pre-Islamic history when the concept of *sunna* becomes more central in Islamic culture on the whole. This question is naturally intertwined with the question of trustworthy sources of religious knowledge: Muslims have a scripture and Prophetic example that has been safeguarded by reliable transmitters throughout the generations, whereas the corruption of the ways of Jews and Christians is linked to the faulty transmission of their scriptures and knowledge of the past.

9 On the use of images of Jews and Judaism as a negative foil for Muslim practice, see Maghen's wide-ranging examination of the issue in *After Hardship Cometh Ease*; cf. also Freidenreich, 'The Implications of Unbelief'.

10 Specifically, paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss' claim that animals are not *bonnes à manger* but rather *bonnes à penser* (good for thinking, not good for eating; Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, p. 89). The use of the Jew as a discursive object critical for religious self-fashioning and construction of the ideal self in Islamic sources is naturally founded upon the Qur'an's similar use of the Jew as antipode, with the Qur'anic conception of the Jews as epitomising negative behaviour in turn mirroring and drawing upon Christian precedents.

11 Although the Shīᶜa transmitted a considerable number of traditions on the Biblical prophets in the Qur'an with a decidedly partisan cast, discrete *qiṣaṣ* works by Shīᶜī authors are quite rare and generally late. See Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, pp. 167–8, and notes thereon. Or. 8419 does not appear to resemble any of the works Tottoli discusses there.

12 Because the work lacks both incipit and colophon, as well as any other indications of its author's identity, it is extremely difficult to determine if other manuscript collections might have copies of this work. I have checked what seem to me to be the most pertinent discussions of anti-Jewish literature, *qiṣaṣ* and *tafsīr* works, and major collections of Ismāᶜīlī literature, and have not been able to discern any listings or descriptions of known works or manuscripts that might correspond to BL Or. 8419. Given the vast numbers of uncatalogued and unexamined Arabic manuscripts still extant in collections throughout the world, it is impossible to discount the possibility of another copy being recovered someday, which would perhaps solve the mystery of its authorship, date, and provenance.

13 BL Or. 8419, 1a. I have supplied the first part of Q. 5:19 (the portion in square brackets) to make the author's point in citing the verse clearer. In addition to the prooftext from Q. 45:17 explicitly cited here, the author's language also evokes Q. 2:213: *Only those to whom the clear explanations* (*al-bayyināt*) *were brought came to differ among themselves regarding it, envious of one another …* Q. 45:17 actually reads *baᶜd mā jāʾahum al-ᶜilm* (*until after knowledge had come to them*) but the author has *baᶜd mā jāʾahum al-bayyina* (*until after the clear explanation had come to them*) here, presumably because he had Q. 2:213 in mind.

14 I have omitted the conventional honourific phrases used when referring to God, as well as the pious eulogies the author consistently uses after references to Muḥammad, the other prophets, and the Imāms, which often take distinctively Shīᶜī forms.

15 Or. 8419, 1b. The key phrase in the *ḥadīth* is '*la-tarkabanna sunnat Banī Isrāʾīl ḥadhwa al-naᶜl bi'l-naᶜl wa'l-qudha bi'l-qudha*'. Both '*ḥadhwa al-naᶜl bi'l-naᶜl*' and '*ḥadhwa*

al-qudha bi'l-qudha' mean 'measuring one shoe/sandal by another' – that is, a new piece of footwear is crafted according to the pattern of an old one and duplicates it precisely. A more colloquial rendering would be 'you will follow in their footsteps, step by step.'

16 The most obvious meaning of *yahdiyakum sunan alladhīna min qablikum* is *guide you on* (or *towards*) *the sunan of those who came before you*, i.e. 'show you the good practices of your virtuous forebears', but in the immediate context here, in which the author is denouncing the *sunna* of peoples of the past who went astray, it is possible that the author has construed this phrase to mean 'show you *the sunan* of those who came before you as a warning', that is, so that you may avoid them.

17 In Or. 8419, *banū Isrāʾīl* ('Israel') is a floating signifier, as it so often is in classical Islamic texts. Sometimes it is simply synonymous with *Yahūd* ('Jews'); at other times it specifically refers to the ancient Israelites who are the subject of Qur'anic and Biblical narratives while *al-Yahūd* are the later (and contemporary) remnant of that nation. Sometimes Christians are tacitly included in the broader category of *banū Isrāʾīl* (so that an example of Christian behaviour may be cited to illustrate how Muslims will go astray following the *sunnat banī Isrāʾīl*), while contemporary Jews are typically distinguished, at least nominally, from Christians, as in the oft-repeated binary *al-Yahūd wa'l-Naṣārā.*

18 Or. 8419, 1b–2b.

19 Naturally, since the men of Medina were date farmers. The oath as represented here is 'Between us, you, and our mother'; in parallels, it is 'By our fathers, you, and our mothers too!'

20 The Companion's name is usually given as ʿAmr b. ʿAwf b. Malḥa, Ṭalḥa being an understandable substitution of a more common name. Parallels to this version of the tradition are found in the *ḥadīth* collections of al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, al-Ṭabarānī, and al-Haytamī; it does not seem to be represented in the canonical works, presumably due to the deficiency of its main transmitter, Kathīr b. ʿAbd Allāh (ʿAmr's grandson), who was widely considered to be unreliable.

21 The version with the *juḥr ḍabb* is attributed to Abū Saʿīd as well as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhr and Saʿd b. Mālik in major works of such authors as al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥanbal, and al-Ṭabarī. Curiously, Abū Saʿīd is also the source of the well-known *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet disdains lizard meat because said lizards may be Israelites who were punished for provoking God by being transformed into reptiles (cf. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, p. 152; for a parallel attributed to Thābit b. Yazīd, see pp. 494–5). This certainly provides a provocative subtext to the claim that Muḥammad's people will replicate the deeds of their predecessors, even to the extent of following them into a dark lizard hole – the insinuation being that the Muslims, like the Israelites, may suffer the penalty of *maskh,* transmutation into animals, for their sins.

22 Cf., e.g. al-Haytamī, *Majmaʿ al-zawāʾid*, 7.364–5 (no. 12100). Thus, certain transmissions of this tradition overlap not only with the well-known *ḥadīth* about Gabriel coming to the Prophet to confirm the fundamentals of Islam, but also with the equally well-known *ḥadīth* about the division of the *umma* into 70 sects.

23 Besides Ibn ʿUmar, one of the most prolific transmitters of *ḥadīth* among the *ṣaḥāba*, the most famous of the figures cited here is ʿUbāda, an Anṣārī who was a chief of the Banū Khazraj present at the ʿAqaba meeting. His *ḥadīth* were promulgated by a number of major authorities of the second/eighth century such as al-Awzāʿī, al-Zuhrī, Qatāda, and Ibn Isḥāq (see Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, p. 419, pp. 643–4). Among the figures cited here at the beginning of the work, only Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān was known as a partisan of ʿAlī. See the lengthy *tarjama* on him in Ibn Saʿd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, vol. 4, pp. 250–8.

24 Cf., e.g. Q. 3:52, *Jesus said: 'Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?' and the disciples replied, 'We are the helpers of God; we believe in God, and testify that we are*

submitters'; and also Q. 7:159, *Of the people of Moses there is a community that is guided by truth, that deals justly according to it*.

25 It has sometimes been conjectured that the phenomenon of Muslims gathering, interpreting, and disseminating traditions of the type now commonly called *Isrāʾīliyyāt* was first stimulated by the Shīᶜa, who were particularly interested in pointing out the affinities and similarities between the prophets of the Israelites and the *ahl al-bayt*; cf., e.g. Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors', pp. 51–9.

26 On the major shifts in Shīᶜī culture effected during the Būyid age after the Greater Occultation and the attempts at normalisation found among Twelvers in particular, see Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, pp. 9–16, and Bayhom-Daou, *Shaykh Mufid*, *passim*.

27 Or. 8419, 29a–b. There are a handful of extant parallels to the tradition quoted in the passage below, generally found in classical but non-canonical *ḥadīth* collections such as those of al-Bazzār and al-Ṭabarānī. The author seems to have a complex attitude towards the ᶜAbbāsids. While some traditions here appear to reflect an attempt to co-opt ᶜAbbās and Ibn ᶜAbbās, the eponymous dynasty that sought legitimacy as genuine members of the *ahl al-bayt* on account of descent from them is largely ignored; in contrast the Umayyads are more or less openly vilified. As Bar-Asher has shown, Imāmī authors of the pre-Būyid age were unafraid to openly criticise the ᶜAbbāsids (*Scripture and Exegesis*, pp. 216–23) so the absence of any explicit mention of the dynasty here is a bit puzzling.

28 Cf. Q. 2:91; Q. 3:112 and 181; Q. 4:155. Note the implicit equation between the Imāms and the prophets.

29 See Adang and Schmidtke, art. 'Polemic (Muslim–Jewish)'. Sunnīs and Shīᶜīs repeatedly accused one another of falsifying the Qur'an to support their claims, likening this to the *taḥrīf* of the Jews.

30 Or. 8419, 55a–b.

31 It is possible that the *ᶜubbād banī Isrāʾīl* mentioned here could be Christians rather than Jews. But it seems more likely to me that it was simply more convenient and consistent for the author's argument to posit that the origins of monasticism lay with Jews rather than Christians. However, it is ultimately irrelevant for the author's point whether this *rahbāniyya* originates with Jews or Christians; what matters is that this is a clear precedent for similar – and similarly problematic – behaviour among Muslims.

32 This is obviously a particularly Shīᶜī conception of *al-amr bi'l-maᶜrūf,* understood as the obligation to resist an unjust ruler and thus, by implication, take sides in conflicts over leadership. In this, our author clearly subscribes to an activist conception of this religious duty. See the discussion in Cook's magisterial *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong*, pp. 231–7, in which he contrasts the views of the Imāmīs (here the proto-Twelvers rather than the Ismāᶜīlīs) and the Zaydīs, who at least theoretically adopt a position closer to that of our author.

33 The term stems from Q. 72:15, *those who deviate* (*qāsiṭūn*) *are the fodder for hellfire*, which from an early time was applied by the Shīᶜa to those who opposed the caliphate of ᶜAlī (Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, p. 96).

34 The question of the political orientation of the Muᶜtazila is a complex one, not helped by the fact that the disposition of the group on theological matters, and thus its political complexion, changed over time. The comprehensive treatment of Gimaret (art. 'Muᶜtazila') has yet to be surpassed. The more recent discussion by Crone (*God's Rule*, pp. 65–9) emphasises the central tension (if not paradox) of the movement: while its origins lie with early Companions and Followers who sought neutrality in the civil wars, in the Umayyad period most Muᶜtazila actually favored the ᶜAlids (some even gravitating towards Zaydism), and yet increasingly elaborated a political philosophy that Crone characterises as anarchist. This perhaps explains the

hostility of activist Shīᶜa to the Muᶜtazila: while both communities upheld the justice of the ᶜAlid cause, the Shīᶜa saw the Imāmate as indispensable, even in the absence of an actual Imām, while the Muᶜtazila argued that the Imāmate was essentially superfluous whether or not a legitimate candidate presented himself. It is also worth noting that the author of Or. 8419 repeatedly takes up the issue of who is consigned to Hell, on what grounds, and for how long; these were fundamental issues for both the Murjiᵓa and the Muᶜtazila.

35 Cf. Q. 2:246–50.

36 Or. 8419, 74a–b. The postponing of judgment for which the Murjiᵓa were named might be considered the diametrical opposite of the ethos of radical commitment to the claims of the *ahl al-bayt* that characterised the Shīᶜa. The familiar Sunnī construct of the *rāshidūn* or 'the Four Righteous Caliphs' is the ultimate symbol of the former, as the heresiographer al-Shahrāstānī (d. 548/1153) recognised; as he put it in his famous *Kitāb al-milal wa'l-niḥal,* 'Some say that *al-irjāᵓ* means bringing ᶜAlī down from the first to the fourth place. Understood in this sense the Murjiᵓa and the Shīᶜa become two opposed sects' (*Muslim Sects and Divisions*, p. 119).

37 Cf. Q. 2:65, Q. 5:60, and Q. 7:166.

38 Or. 8419, 79a–b.

39 On the evolution of *rafḍ,* see the brief but indispensable note by Kohlberg, 'The Term "Rāfiḍa" in Imāmī Shīᶜī Usage'.

40 Or. 8419, 66a–67a. Recall again the aforementioned passages that equate quietism with the killing of the Imāms, a brilliant rhetorical inversion of the claim that it is the Shīᶜa who are guilty of extremism and factionalism because of their aberrant militancy.

41 '*Rāᵓū ḍalālat ahl al-adyān wa-kāna fī anbiyāᵓihim al-kitāb* …' In other words, while Jews and Christians exclusively enjoyed the privilege of having true revelation bestowed upon them, they scoffed at people of other religions who went hopelessly astray without it – the irony being that they themselves went astray *despite* receiving the true scripture.

42 The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the *dāᶜī* al-Kirmānī, on whom see Walker, *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī*. As Walker notes (p. 55), al-Kirmānī's copious use of *kitābī* material attracted scholarly notice even before any of his works had been published; see Kraus' groundbreaking article of 1931, 'Hebraïsche und syrische Zitate in ismāᶜīlitischen Schriften'. Nevertheless, al-Kirmānī's use of this material has yet to receive the thorough treatment it deserves.

43 See Hollenberg, 'Disrobing Judges'.

44 See Kister's classic discussion in '*Ḥaddithū ᶜan banī Isrāᵓīla wa-lā ḥaraja*' and more recently Rubin, 'Traditions in Transformation'.

45 Notably, Hollenberg's discussion of Jaᶜfar's version of the Judah and Tamar story from Genesis 38 demonstrates that the author seems to have assumed that the story needed to be explained to his audience, and thus highlighted those aspects of it that seemed unfamiliar or exotic. This is presumably because the story has no analogue in the Qur'an and was thus perceived as totally foreign.

46 Or. 8419, 31b–32a. Along with ᶜAmmār b. Yāsir, who is lavishly praised elsewhere in the text, Salmān al-Fārisī, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, and al-Miqdād b. ᶜAmr are commonly known as the 'pillars of the Shīᶜa' for their unwavering support for ᶜAlī. The tradition identifying the *ahl al-bayt* as Noah's Ark is discussed in Kohlberg, 'Some Shīᶜī Views of the Antediluvian World'.

47 Or. 8419, 50b–51a.

48 Hollenberg, 'Disrobing Judges', pp. 140–1, specifically notes a thematic undercurrent in Jaᶜfar's work in which women were portrayed as safeguarding divine knowledge and thus, essentially, as Ismāᶜīlī *duᶜāt*. Our author's portrayal of the importance of the women of the

ahl al-bayt in preserving the ᶜAlid line and ensuring the survival of the future Imāms seems to have a similar resonance.

49 Some, like al-Matūrīdī (d. 333/944), were so reluctant to embrace the Qur'an's apparent sanction of a violent purge of sinners within the community that they rejected the literal sense of *kill yourselves* entirely, interpreting *fa'qtulū anfusakum* as urging the people towards a self-abnegating posture of repentance for their crime – a reading adopted by many modern exegetes who are similarly embarrassed by this story.

50 See Pregill, 'Turn in Repentance to your Creator'.

51 Or. 8419, 29a–b.

52 The exegetical traditions on this episode describe the killing of the idolaters in a variety of ways. Sometimes this moment is depicted essentially as an execution or purge that the killers undertook willingly, indifferent to their kinship ties or familial bonds with those whom they were tasked with slaying; at other times, exegetes take pains to assert that the Israelites tasked with the slaying did so remorsefully, and that it was necessary to conceal the identity of those whom they slew, presumably to spare their feelings or prevent them from hesitating.

53 Or. 8419, 30a–31b.

54 Since Moses did eventually return to his community, while Muḥammad did not, passing his authority on to his designated successor (*waṣī*), ᶜAlī, instead.

55 This exegetical slippage is in the end not so difficult to explain, as it is ultimately consistent with the author's larger perspective on the early history of the *umma*. In Egypt, Israel were a weak, persecuted group who were faithful to God and ultimately delivered from their travails on account of God's promises to them; however, in the wilderness, after the making of the Calf, they became more like the tyrannical sinners from whom they had been rescued. The same pattern could be seen as applying to the Muslim community: at one time weak and persecuted, they later became tyrannical oppressors (this time of the *ahl al-bayt*) after their deliverance from and eventual triumph over the pagans of Quraysh, just as bad as those who had oppressed them in former times.

56 Or. 8419, 69a: God has entrusted His religion into the hands of the caliph al-Mahdī while the unbelievers despise it.

57 Cf. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, p. 418; the *ḥadīth* is narrated from Abū Hurayra and attested in the works of Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Ṭabarī, as well as al-Mizzī's *Tuḥfat*, the basis of Juynboll's collection. The canonical collections preserve various references to the rising of the sun in the west as one of the preconditions of the Hour and the advent of the Mahdī or the Dajjāl (cf., e.g. Muslim, *Fitan* nos 6931–2, nos 7025–7, and nos 7039–40) without the explicit connection to Q. 6:158. It is unfortunate that the *Kitāb al-malāḥim* Ibn al-Nadīm ascribes to ᶜAbdan is no longer extant, since it would no doubt be informative to see how this pre-Fāṭimid Ismāᶜīlī *dāᶜī* presented this tradition, and to what degree later authors may have drawn on earlier Ismāᶜīlī treatments of the topos. See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, pp. 470–1 (where Dodge mistranslates '*malāḥim*', the terrible battles associated with the End Times, as 'the National Events').

58 Cf. al-Yaman, *Sarāʾir*, pp. 61–3, a long tradition in which the reference to the sunrise in Q.18:17 is glossed as 'the sun of *khilāfa* and the light of *imāma* … its rising is the advent of the *nāṭiq*'; elsewhere, he refers to the *ḥadīth* in which Muḥammad prophesies the sun rising in the west and interprets this as a sign of the future deliverance of the faithful with the return of the true Imāms (p. 255 and p. 263).

59 The classic account of the reform of al-Muᶜizz is in Madelung, 'Das Imamat', p. 86 ff.; cf. Daftary, *The Ismāᶜīlīs*, pp. 163–7.

60 Translated in Haji, *Founding the Fatimid State*, p. 74, and see also the poem quoted on pp. 68–9 referring to the coming of the Mahdī as the rising of the 'Sun of God' in the west. Cf. the later reference to this tradition in the *Zahr al-maʿānī* of the fifteenth-century Yemeni *dāʿī* ʿImād al-Dīn Idrīs, who uses this tradition to polemicise against the Twelver Shīʿa, who denied the prophecy; see Ivanow, *Ismaili Tradition*, p. 51 (Arabic), p. 238 (English). The association of this image with the early Fāṭimid caliph-Imāms, especially al-Mahdī himself, was so strong that propagandists for the Umayyads of Spain found it politically advantageous to appropriate it; see Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, p. 48. On the realisation of the various prophecies of the coming of the Mahdī with the revelation of ʿUbayd Allāh al-Mahdī as the first Fāṭimid caliph-Imām in 297/909 and the arguments for his legitimacy that followed, see the account in Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids*, pp. 100–32.

61 Or. 8419, 67b–68a.

62 See Madelung and Walker, 'The *Kitāb al-Rusūm wa'l-iẓdiwāj wa'l-tartīb*'. There are indications that some of the terminology that came to be exclusively associated with the Ismāʿīlīs, or nearly so, originated rather early in Shīʿī history; for example, the language of *nāṭiq* and *ṣāmit* appears to have been pioneered by the Khaṭṭābiyya, a second/eighth-century sect of the *ghulāt* or radical Shīʿa (Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, pp. 85–6).

63 It is widely known that decades of preparation preceded the Fāṭimid takeover of Egypt; while early attempts at military conquest after the establishment of the caliphate in Ifrīqiyya in 297/909 were successfully repelled, the Fāṭimids laid the foundation for their eventual triumph in Egypt decades later partially through the covert waging of a propaganda war. It is entirely reasonable to conclude that Fāṭimid propaganda in Egypt and elsewhere could have been multidimensional, simultaneously targeting different groups with different commitments in different ways – for example, making more sophisticated, philosophically sophisticated arguments to the elite and more straightforward, direct arguments of the sort elaborated in this text to the general public. See the classic account of Stern, 'Fāṭimid Propaganda Among Jews'. Hollenberg has quite rightly questioned Stern's assumption that the Ismāʿīlī use of Jewish and Christian scriptural materials was primarily meant as an appeal to non-Muslims (cf. 'Disrobing Judges', pp. 132 ff.), but this does not undermine Stern's general point about Yefet's coded references being a response to the impact Ismāʿīlī propaganda apparently had on the Jewish community.

64 The text thus makes an interesting counterpart to ʿAbdān's *Kitāb al-iẓdiwāj*; each expresses very different, but ultimately complementary, early Ismāʿīlī approaches to prophetology. Somewhat surprisingly, I have not found any trace of the 'measure for measure' tradition in the *ḥadīth* collection of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān; meanwhile, the expression is used only a handful of times in the *taʾwīl* of Jaʿfar (e.g. in comparing the unjust deaths of the Imāms to Cain's killing of Abel, or the treatment of Jesus by his people to that of Ḥusayn by his; cf. al-Yaman, *Sarāʾir*, p. 52, p. 241). A wider and more comprehensive comparison of the contents of Or. 8419 with extant Imāmī traditions more generally – for example with the vast amount of material on the prophets preserved by al-Majlisī, or the specific material on Moses in the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of the Twelver Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāwandī (d. c. 573/1177) – has not been possible here, but would presumably help illuminate the extent to which the author of our manuscript drew on older Shīʿī exegesis in constructing his highly politicised *taʾwīl*.

65 As Qutbuddin so eloquently puts it: 'In the following decades and centuries [after 297/909], poets of the Fāṭimid dynasty would tap into this more general mahdist tradition; they would consistently refer to the various themes of mahdist *ḥadīth* and highlight the mahdist titles; in their treatment of empire-related topics, they would combine the mahdist discourse with Qurʾānic vocabulary of imminent victory to produce a specific Fāṭimid religio-political vision' ('Fatimid Aspirations of Conquest', p. 200). It is hard to imagine that Fāṭimid propagandists invented the 'Mahdist' mythology out of whole cloth, of course, but it is also undeniable that

the regime had compelling reasons to portray the rise of the dynasty as having been announced in widely known, publicly acknowledged prophecies.

66 Given that most of the work expresses what we might call a generically Shīᶜī outlook on prophetology and history, it is also possible that the work is of older vintage, with the specific references to the coming of the Mahdī with the sun rising in the *maghrib* – where the best people of the community are now found – having been interpolated into the text by a pro-Fāṭimid redactor who recycled the work to deploy it for his own purposes. While it is very problematic to project this text back so far, arguably, this would explain the work's strange omission of any criticism of the ᶜAbbāsids, inasmuch as Fāṭimid partisans were typically not shy in denouncing the ᶜAbbāsids and proclaiming their imminent overthrow (see Qutbuddin, 'Fatimid Aspirations of Conquest', *passim*). For a discussion of the historiographic problems surrounding our reliance on Fāṭimid sources for the history of the pre-Fāṭimid *daᶜwa*, see Lindsay, 'Prophetic Parallels', pp. 41–3.

67 See the introduction to Morris' translation of the *Kitāb al-ᶜālim*, on the complex literary and intellectual background to this work.

68 On this, see Newby's comments on the work of Ibn Isḥāq in 'Text and Territory'.

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