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## The Greatest Name of God: ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib as a cosmic image in Rajab al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār*

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### Abstract

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661)—a revered figure in Islamic history as both the first Shi‘ī imam and the fourth caliph—serves as a significant image of sacral power in the Persianate world and beyond. ‘Alī’s authority underwent a profound reimagining in the early modern era as he emerged as a captivating imperial emblem from the Timurid renaissance to the Safavid revolution, rivalling other prominent figures of political authority such as Chinggis Khan (d. 1227), and becoming a symbol of human perfection for both Sunni and Shi‘ī intellectuals alike. ‘Alī transcended his role as a Shi‘ī imam to assume the status of a cosmic figure, gradually becoming an ideal symbol for imperial branding. However, there is little scholarly knowledge and appreciation of his changing role in this period. This article examines how al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī’s (d. circa 814/1411) *Mashāriq al-anwār*, which has remained highly popular throughout the Persianate and Shi‘ī world, contributed to the reshaping of ‘Alī’s image, portraying him as the quintessential archetype of sacral power and unmatched authoritative feats.

**Keywords:** ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; sacral power; Islamic intellectual history; Shi‘ism; al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī

### Introduction

In the pivotal Battle of Chaldirān (d. 920/1514), Shah Ismā‘īl (d. 930/1524), the magnetic architect of the Safavid empire, found himself facing the formidable army of Sultan Selīm (d. 926/1520). Confronted with the undeniable numerical advantage of his Ottoman adversary, Shah Ismā‘īl recognised the need for more than just military might to inspire his troops. Indeed, he drew on the sacral power of the first Shi‘ī imam ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to bolster the morale and determination of his soldiers:

Inform Sultan Selīm that although I may not wield the force necessary to subdue your formidable army of ninety thousand, I have mustered these eighteen thousand troops, placing my trust in the unyielding spirit of the conqueror of Khaybar’s Gate, the invincible lion of God, who reigns supreme over all, the awe-inspiring marvel, the heir of the Prophet, the imam of the Occident and the Orient, the sovereign of all mankind, the lion of God, the *walī* of the Almighty, the last Prophet’s son-in-law, the radiant sun and moon, the vision of the discerning eye, the foremost among just rulers, the fearless and audacious Ḥaydar, the commander of the believers, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yad Allāh Shukrī (ed.), *‘Ālam ārā-yi Ṣafavī* (Tehran, 1350/1970), p. 489.

The Safavid emperor was not the first world conqueror in the early modern Islamic world to strive for the sacral power of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in harnessing ‘Alī’s spiritual authority, the zealous Twelver Shi‘i emperor was following in the footsteps of his Sunni predecessor, Timūr (d. 807/1405), who presided over one of the most formidable empires of the early modern era.<sup>3</sup> Muslim Mongol rulers had previously aspired to balance two distinct models of legitimacy rooted in Turco–Mongolian and Perso–Islamic traditions, with Chinggisid authority serving as the linchpin of this emerging political framework—an archetype that post-Ilkhānid dynasties such as Jalāyirids also strived to wield effectively.<sup>4</sup> However, Timūr’s Islamic legacy acquired a notably Shi‘i character when Ulugh Beg erected a cenotaph at Timūr’s tomb, symbolising the emperor as the incarnation of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.<sup>5</sup> Timūr’s genealogy, as documented on his mausoleum in Samarqand, alludes to the creation of his ancestor Alan Qo’a from a ray of light—a concept intriguingly akin to the early Shi‘i traditions that centred on the theme of light. As Michal Biran writes:

the divine light which impregnated Alan Qo’a [the mythical ancestor Chinggis Khan] is therefore connected to God’s hidden light emanating through Adam via the Prophet Muhammad into the family of ‘Alī, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the founder of Shi‘i Islam, thereby creating a connection between the families of Chinggis Khan, Tamerlane, and the Prophet.<sup>6</sup>

The enduring allure of ‘Alī unquestionably persisted beyond Timūr’s era, as is best demonstrated by the discovery of the alleged shrine of ‘Alī at Balkh, now known as Mazār-i Sharīf, during the reign of the Timurid Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqurā (d. 911/1506). This site, which, during Seljuq Sultan Sanjar’s (d. 552/1157–1158) reign, was previously linked to ‘Alī’s shrine, drew the attention of the Sufi ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 871/1492) and his disciple ‘Abd al-Ghafūr Lārī (d. 912/1506). The site remained under the control of Timurid appointees and continued to attract a substantial influx of pilgrims.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Sultan Ḥusayn promoted the site as an alternative pilgrimage destination, as a substitute for the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>8</sup> From Timūr and his descendants

<sup>2</sup> See M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘World as (Arabic) text: Mīr Dāmād and the neopythagoreanization of philosophy in Safavid Iran’, *Studia Islamica* 114 (2019), pp. 385, 401–402, 410, 415.

<sup>3</sup> See J. E. Woods, ‘Timur’s genealogy’, in *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson*, (eds.) M. M. Mazzaoui and V. B. Moreen (Salt Lake City, 1990), pp. 87–88.

<sup>4</sup> B. Forbes Manz, ‘The empire of Tamerlane as an adaptation of the Mongol empire: an answer to David Morgan, “The empire of Tamerlane: an unsuccessful re-run of the Mongol state?”’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26.1–2 (2016), pp. 283–286.

<sup>5</sup> Woods, ‘Timur’s genealogy’, pp. 87–88.

<sup>6</sup> M. Biran, *Chinggis Khan* (Oxford, 2007), p. 117; also see D. Aigle, ‘Les transformations d’un mythe d’origine: L’exemple de Gengis Khan et de Tamerlan’, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (2000), pp. 151–168; B. Forbes Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 209–210. On the topic of the light of Muḥammad, see K. Andani, ‘Metaphysics of Muhammad: the Nur Muhammad from Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765) to Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 672/1274)’, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 8.2 (2020), pp. 99–175.

<sup>7</sup> M. E. Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 208–212. As Robert D. McChesney notes, the Timurids treated the shrine discovery seriously in light of political motives and due to the prevalent Sunni Ahl Baytism presence in Balkh during that era, which transcended the Shi‘i–Sunni sectarian divisions. While the shrine experienced relative neglect during internal tensions among the Shaybānids in the sixteenth century, ‘this discovery set a pattern for future state-shrine relations. Especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sources indicate a close identification of the shrine and its administration with the policies of the authorities in Balkh’. R. D. McChesney, *Waqf in Central Asia: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine, 1480–1889* (Princeton, 1991), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, p. 213.

to other ‘avatars of ‘Alī’, such as Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 869/1464), the giver of light, or Muhammad ibn Falāḥ Musha‘sha‘a (d. 866/1462), the captivating imperial magnetism of ‘Alī was undeniably connected to the manner in which both Shi‘i and Sunni intellectual circles reimagined and reinvented his image in their literary creations during this era.<sup>9</sup> Premodern and early modern Persian poetry, for instance, abound with poetic reverence for ‘Alī that transcends sectarian affiliations. An example of such devotion can be found in the works of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī—a Sunni Sufi affiliated with the Naqshbandiyya order, as demonstrated in a poem composed during his sojourn in Iraq:

I pledge myself as your pilgrim, protector of Najaf  
 My life is dedicated to your sacred shrine.  
 You are the direction of prayers and the refuge for the needy,  
 The face of hope turns toward you with longing.  
 I kiss the threshold of your majestic palace,  
 In the eyes, tears of apology for our shortcomings flow.  
 Should the jewel-like tears adorning my eyes, veiling my sight,  
 Grace the rug of your tomb, it would be an honor so bright.  
 I find joy in joining the ranks of your sacred shrine’s servants,  
 Aspiring to redeem a life misspent, making amends.  
 I have turned to you from every corner of the world,  
 where I shelter and shed tears for the sorrows of time.  
 I aspire my heart to hear the divine decree:  
 ‘Fear not’, through the gracious stroke of your pen’s generosity.  
 The marvel that no eye has seen a yellow moon,  
 For your beauty’s moon shines golden, like the radiant sun.<sup>10</sup>

Jāmī’s reverence for ‘Alī is not a singular case in the Sunni intellectual milieu of that era;<sup>11</sup> rather, it exemplifies the wider attraction of ‘Alī as an enduring symbol of *walāya*.<sup>12</sup> While the Muslim ‘Alī and the ‘infidel’ Chinggis might, at first glance, appear

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of these avatars of ‘Alī, see A. A. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York, 2012), pp. 60–63.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Dīwān-i kāmīl-i Jāmī*, (ed.) Hāshim Raḍī (Tehran, 1356/1976), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning that Hamid Algar counters the view that Sufi orders, particularly the Naqshbandis, promoted hybrid proto-Shi‘i religiosity and argues that the Naqshbandis strategically used Shi‘i imams to support Sunni causes and were not doctrinally inclined towards Shi‘ism. See H. Algar, ‘Naqshbandis and Safavids: a contribution to the religious history of Iran and her neighbors’, in *Safavid Iran and Her Neighbors*, (ed.) M. Mazzaoui (Salt Lake City, 2003), pp. 7–48.

<sup>12</sup> The term *walāya* is difficult to translate, as it acquires different meanings in various Shi‘i and Sufi contexts. Terms such as friendship and sainthood have been commonly offered to render *walāya* in English. See M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints, prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn Arabī* (Paris, 1986); W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989). In the context of Shi‘ism, this term is also more often translated as initiation, love, and guardianship, among other things. See M. A. Amir-Moezzi, ‘Notes à propos de la walaya imamite (aspects de l’imamologie duodécimaine, X)’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.4 (2002), pp. 722–741; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *La preuve de Dieu: la mystique shi‘ite à travers l’oeuvre de Kulaynī* (Paris, 2018); E. R. Alexandrin, *Walāyah in the Fāṭimid Ismā‘īlī Tradition* (Albany, 2017), pp. 1–19; H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, four vols (Paris, 1972), vol. 4, pp. 81–82; M. M. Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi‘ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, 2007), pp. 15–31. More recently, *walāya* has also been translated into sacral power. See M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘Of Islamic grammatology: Ibn Turka’s letrist metaphysics of light’, *Al-‘Uṣūr al- Wusṭā* 24.1 (2016), pp. 57, 65, 69, 71, 85; Melvin-Koushki, ‘World as (Arabic) text’, pp. 385, 401, 402, 410, 416; M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘Powers of one: the mathematicalization of the occult sciences in the high Persianate tradition’, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 5 (2017), pp. 130, 137, 155, 168. This translation allows us to think about the connection of *walāya* to premodern and early modern imperial projects and sacral kingship and empire. Al-Bursī frequently treats both *walāya* and *maḥabba* (love/friendship) as

to share little common ground, the two of them emerged as figures that appealed to emperors and intellectuals in the premodern and early modern Persianate world, drawing the admiration of both groups.<sup>13</sup> As Azfar Moin has argued, during this time, ‘Alī is not only revered as a Sufi figure or celestial and cosmic authority, but also depicted as Islam’s ultimate warrior in epic narratives such as *‘Alī-nāma* (*Book of ‘Alī*) or *Khāwar-nāma* (*Book of Khāwar*).<sup>14</sup> *‘Alī-nāma* stands as a compelling exemplar of this epic portrayal of ‘Alī. The able Iranian scholar and book’s editor Muḥammad Riḍā Shafī‘ī Kadkanī described it as ‘a Shi‘ī epic from the 11<sup>th</sup> century’ patterned after Ḥakīm Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī’s (d. 416/1020) famous *Shāh-nāma* (*Book of Kings*), with 12,000 verses recounting the courageous and heroic characters and attributes of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.<sup>15</sup>

*Khāwar-nāma* holds even greater relevance for our purposes here because it was composed by Ibn Ḥusām Khūsafī (d. 875/1471) during the Timurid era, making it contemporaneous with Rajab al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār*. Similarly to *‘Alī-nāma*, *Khāwar-nāma* follows the stylistic tradition of *Shāh-nāma*, comprising approximately 22,500 verses that narrate a wide range of mythical and epic tales. They include vivid depictions of ‘Alī’s victories over not only his enemies, but also serpents, demons, dragons, and talismans, showcasing his prowess and valour in historical and imaginary battles.<sup>16</sup> The rise of ‘Alī as an epic figure during this era was closely intertwined with the flourishing of epic Persian literature, notably evidenced by the multitude of *Shāh-nāma* manuscripts crafted during the Mongol era. Such widespread popularity prompted Persian historian Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī (d. circa 744/1344) to study several of these manuscripts meticulously and to produce a critical edition of the work.<sup>17</sup> Notably, works inspired by *Shāh-nāma*, such as Aḥmad Tabrīzī’s *Shahanshāh-nāma* (d. eighth/fourteenth century), Ḥakīm Zujājī’s *Humāyūn-nāma* (d. seventh/thirteenth century), and Nūrī Azhdarī’s *Ghāzān-nāma* (eighth/fourteenth century), emerged as examples of epic literature during this era.<sup>18</sup>

Akin to ‘Alī, Chinggis Khan emerged as an emblem of the archetypal warrior during this era. As Beatrice Forbes Manz has argued, Mongol chroniclers such as ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juwaynī (d. 681/1283) documented not only the victories of the Mongols, but also their devastating and destructive power, portraying them as the agents of divine wrath and

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interchangeable terms, which poses a significant challenge in translation. In this article, I opt for the Arabic originals *walāya* and *awliyā*, and employ the term ‘sacral power’ to convey the cosmic authority of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib in al-Bursī’s works. That is because the sacral power is certainly conveyed by *walāya*, but this sacral power indeed permeates throughout the book.

<sup>13</sup> As Azfar Moin writes: ‘before Timur could become a Lord of Conjunction in his own right, his charisma had depended on how he ritually and symbolically engaged with the memory of Chinggis Khan and Ali. On the plane of Islamic history, as we understand it, it is difficult to see the equivalence between these two men. Indeed, they could not be farther apart. Chinggis was a cruel “pagan” conqueror who uprooted Islam and imposed his own law in its place. Ali, on the other hand, was a foundational figure of Islam... However, the differences between Ali and Chinggis Khan fade away when we realize that both figures were Lords of Conjunction of the highest order, men destined to inaugurate new epochs and dispensations.’ Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–67.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of this work, see Muḥammad Riḍā Shafī‘ī Kadkanī, ‘Ḥamāsa’-ī Shī‘ī az qarn-i panjum’, in *‘Alī-nāma*, (ed.) Muḥammad Riḍā Shafī‘ī Kadkanī (Tehran, 2009), pp. 11–75.

<sup>16</sup> For an overall analysis of this work, see J. Rubanovich, ‘Khāvarān-nāma i: the epic poem’, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/khavarana-nama-1> (accessed 15 February 2024).

<sup>17</sup> See Khalīl Kahrīzī, ‘Ḥāshiyā-yi Zafar-nāma, dastniviśi mu‘tabar az Shāh-nāma’, *Pazhūhish-hā-yi Naẓm va Nathr-i Fārsī* 4.10 (1399/2021), pp. 11–40.

<sup>18</sup> Aḥmad Tabrīzī, *Shahanshāh-nāma: tārikh-i manẓūm-i Mughulān va Ilkhānān az gharn-i hashtum-i hijrī*, (ed.) Mahshīd Guharī Kākhakī and Javād Rāshkī ‘Alī-Ābād (Tehran, 1397/2019); Ḥakīm Zujājī, *Humāyūn-nāma*, (ed.) ‘Alī Pīrniyā (Tehran, 1383/2005); Nūrī Azhdarī, *Ghāzān-nāma-yi manẓūm*, (ed.) Maḥmūd Mudabbirī (Tehran, 1380/2002).

compelling their audience to yield to their legendary strength.<sup>19</sup> This tendency is notably pronounced in Juwaynī's narrative concerning Chinggis Khan, who allegedly introduced himself as the scourge of God sent to punish the people of Bukhāra for their grave sins. While it remains uncertain whether he actually uttered these words or they were attributed to him by later historians, the narrative significantly endows the Mongol Khan with an invincible epic triumph that surpassed all rivals.<sup>20</sup> Chinggisid legitimacy, which would soon undergo reconceptualisation in the Islamic context, was indeed construed as a universal and absolutist form of sacral kingship that did not have the restrictions imposed by the earlier Sunni and juridical conceptions of political authority.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, while 'Alī was portrayed as the paramount figure of Islamic spirituality, his epic strength and valour also matched and rivalled those of Chinggis Khan, presenting the first Shi'ī imam as an appealing source of sacral power to a wide range of audiences. As will be discussed in this article, Rajab al-Bursī's narrative of 'Alī not only delineates his esoteric wisdom, spiritual eminence, and cosmic significance, but also presents him as a formidable warrior of Islam whose power and might subjugated not just humans, but also jinn, angels, and even the fabric of time. Certainly, 'Alī's allure was both mythic and mystical, as he was revered not only as the lion of God by his devotees, but also as the repository of divine and esoteric knowledge, embodying sacral power and love.

Chinggisid legitimacy and authority underwent a gradual decline, leading to Chinggis's transformation into a symbol of decline and brutality in the modern Islamic world. Hence, Chinggis and his Mongol successors are now widely regarded as mere symbols of terror and calamity in the Islamic world. In contrast, 'Alī's powerful image reverberated throughout the Persianate world, reaching a renewed peak during the Shi'ī Safavid Dynasty, and it has been preserved up to the present day, with his influence continuing to galvanise, motivate, and inspire millions of people. However, while 'Alī undeniably has been a potent symbol of both religious and political authority in the premodern and modern periods, our understanding of him beyond the early and formative periods of Islam remains incomplete.<sup>22</sup> This article endeavours to shed light on this overlooked historical aspect by examining 'Alī's portrayal in al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī's (d. circa 814/1411) *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī ma'rifa amīr al-mu'minīn*. This literary piece garnered remarkable popularity during the Safavid reign, with more than 100 manuscript copies found in Iran alone.<sup>23</sup> It gained immense significance to the extent that Shah Sulaymān Ṣafavī (d. 1105/1694) assigned Ḥasan Khaṭīb Qārī Sabzawārī (fl. eleventh/seventeenth century) to translate

<sup>19</sup> B. Forbes Manz, 'Unacceptable violence as legitimation in Mongol and Timurid Iran', in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism*, (eds.) R. Gleave and I. Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh, 2018), p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the Bukhāra speech, see T. May, 'The Mongols as the scourge of God in the Islamic world', in Gleave and Kristó-Nagy (eds.), *Violence in Islamic Thought*, pp. 32–57.

<sup>21</sup> See J. Brack, 'Theologies of auspicious kingship: the Islamization of Chinggisid sacral kingship in the Islamic world', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60.4 (2018), pp. 1143–1171.

<sup>22</sup> For some research on 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib in early Shi'ī literature, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Alī and the Quran: aspects of the Twelver Imamology XIV', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 98.4 (2014), pp. 669–704; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Muḥammad the Paraclete and 'Alī the Messiah: new remarks on the origins of Islam and of Shi'ite Imamology', *Der Islam* 95.1 (2018), pp. 30–64; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *Alī, le secret bien gardé: figures du premier maître en spiritualité shi'ite* (Paris, 2020), (trans.) F. J. Luis and A. Gledhill, *Alī: The Well-Guarded Secret: Figures of the First Master in Shi'ī Spirituality* (Leiden, 2023); S. W. Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Saba' and the Origins of Shi'ism* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 195–239; N. A. Husayn, 'Treatises on the salvation of Abū Ṭālib', *Shii Studies Review* 1.1–2 (2017), pp. 3–41; S. Kara, 'The suppression of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's codex: study of the traditions on the earliest copy of the Qur'ān', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 75.2 (2016), pp. 267–289.

<sup>23</sup> Fankhā lists 115 manuscripts of *Mashāriq al-anwār* found only in Iran. See Muṣṭafā Dirāyatī, *Fihristigān-i nuskhā-hā-yi khattī-yi Īrān (Fankhā)*, 35 vols (Tehran, 1392/2013), vol. 29, pp. 505–512.

and annotate it into Persian to make the text accessible to Persian readers, which aligned with the Safavid imperial agenda to bolster its Shi'i ideological legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

While scholars have studied various aspects of this literary work, *Mashāriq*'s core theme, namely the virtues of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, has not been the subject of a dedicated article.<sup>25</sup> The text serves as a case study offering insights into how Muslim intellectuals in the premodern and early modern Islamic world envisioned and depicted 'Alī as a cosmic figure, fuelling the aspirations of Muslim emperors and intellectuals, and inspiring them to dream of 'Alī's sacral power, love, and knowledge. In other words, the making of 'Alī as a cosmic figure in the Islamic literature of this period was a building block in the rendering of his imperial image—a legacy that endures, still captivating the hearts and minds of many.<sup>26</sup>

First, furnishing some context about Rajab al-Bursī's *Mashāriq al-anwār* is in order. At its core, *Mashāriq al-anwār* serves as a collection of Hadith. Al-Bursī indeed identifies himself as *Rajab al-muḥaddith*, or a scholar of Hadith<sup>27</sup>—a role that aligns perfectly with the overall framework of the book, which encompasses a diverse array of Hadith—many of which trace their origins back to early Shi'i sources, such as al-Ṣaffār al-Qummi's (d. 290/903) *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*,<sup>28</sup> *Kitāb Sulaym ibn Qays* of Sulaym ibn al-Qays al-Hilālī (d. circa 76/695),<sup>29</sup> and Ibn Bābawayh's (d. 381/991–992) works,<sup>30</sup> as well as later Hadith

<sup>24</sup> Ḥasan Khaṭīb Qārī Sabzawārī, *Maṭāli' al-asrār fi sharḥ mashāriq al-anwār*, MS *Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis* 10682, Tehran. There were several other Persian translations of this work. Mentions need to be made of Muḥammad Sa'īd ibn Muḥammad Nā'ini's translation, followed by two other translations during the Qajar era by Muḥammad Ṣādiq ibn 'Alī-Riḍā Yazdī as well as Mohammad ibn Yahyā. See Dirāyatī, *Fihristigān*, vol. 29, p. 505.

<sup>25</sup> For research on al-Bursī, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Al-Durr al-Thamīn attribué à Rajab al-Bursī: un exemple des 'commentaires coraniques personnalisés' shi'ites (aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine XVI)', *Le Muséon* 130 (2017), pp. 207–240. For its English translation, see Amir-Moezzi, *Alī*, pp. 203–229. Also see T. Lawson, 'The dawning places of the lights of certainty in the divine secrets of the commander of the faithful by Rajab Bursī (d. 1411)', in *The Heritage of Sufism volume II: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, (ed.) L. Lewisohn (Oxford, 1999), pp. 261–276; P. Lory, 'Souffrir pour le vérité selon l'ésotérisme chiite de Rajab Borsī', in *Le Shi'isme imamate quarante ans après: hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, (eds.) M. A. Amir-Moezzi et al. (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 315–323; M. Melvin-Koushki, 'Safavid Twelver lettrism between Sunnism and Shi'ism, mysticism and science: Rajab al-Bursī vs. Maḥmūd Dihdār', *Global Intellectual History* 8.4 (2023), pp. 1–38; S. Rizvi, 'Esoteric Shi'i Islam in the later school of al-Ḥilla: Walāya and Apocalypticism in al-Ḥasan b. Sulaymān al-Ḥillī (d. after 1399) and Rajab al-Bursī (d. c. 1411)', in *Reason, Esotericism, and Authority in Shi'i Islam*, (eds.) R. Adem and E. Hayes (Leiden, 2021), pp. 190–241. For the French translation of al-Bursī's *Mashāriq al-anwār*, see Rajab Borsī, *Les Orient des Lumières*, (trans.) H. Corbin, (ed.) P. Lory (Paris, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> For a useful and popular example that showcases 'Alī as a symbol of piety, spirituality, and social justice in the modern era, see 'Alī Sharī'atī, *'Alī ḥaqīqatī bar gūna-yi asātīr* (Tehran, 1389/2000). For a broad survey on 'Alī, which also includes chapters dedicated to the Ottoman context, see Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (ed.), *From History to Theology: Alī in Islamic Belief* (Ankara, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fi asrār Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, (ed.) 'Alī 'Āshūr (Beirut, 1422/2001), p. 287. Despite multiple publications of *Mashāriq al-anwār*, a proper critical edition of this work is still lacking. In this article, I use 'Alī 'Āshūr's edition for its insightful comments and notes, yet it does not excel compared with other printed versions. It also needs to be mentioned that two versions of *Mashāriq al-anwār* exist and, despite their core similarities, notable differences remain between them. It seems that al-Bursī composed the second version as a response to critiques of the initial version. Printed versions of *Mashāriq al-anwār* rely on this second version. For details, see Mas'ūd Bīdābādī, 'Mu'arrif-yi Mashāriq awnār al-yaqīn', *Ūlūm-i Ḥadīth* 22 (1380/2002), pp. 137–138, 164–165. It appears that the late Muḥsin Bīdarfard had initiated the project of a critical edition of *Mashāriq al-anwār* but, unfortunately, he passed away before its completion. Currently, Iranian scholar Muḥammad Riḍā Lāyiqī is working on a critical edition using one of the oldest manuscripts of *Mashāriq al-anwār*, completed in around 969/1562. My thanks to Muḥammad Riḍā Lāyiqī for bringing attention to this development.

<sup>28</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār*, pp. 105, 112, 130, 251, 301.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304, 237.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 92, 130, 171, 238, 285.



works such as *Kitāb al-ghumma* of ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā al-Irbilī (d. seventh/thirteenth century)<sup>31</sup> and *Manāqib* of Muwaffaq ibn Aḥmad Akḥṭab Khwārazm (d. 568/1172).<sup>32</sup> Al-Bursī, however, went beyond the role of a mere Hadīth narrator, as he often provided commentary on the Hadīth he cites, infusing them with Sufi and mystical concepts. In essence, al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār* is a reflection of the intellectual developments in the premodern and early modern Islamic world, such as the lettrist tradition<sup>33</sup> and the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240).<sup>34</sup>

Al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār* is an enigmatic book. It contains scant information about the author’s personal life, mentors, and followers, or the historical and political events of his era. The historical accounts concerning the life of al-Bursī are so lacking that some scholars have questioned whether he actually existed.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Ibn Turka Iṣfahanī (d. 835/1432) and Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī (d. 858/1454), who had close connections to the court life and imperial developments of the early modern Islamic world, we find ourselves in a considerably less advantageous position when it comes to al-Bursī’s intellectual and political affiliations. While we possess limited information about al-Bursī’s own life, we have a much clearer picture of the posthumous impact of his *Mashāriq al-anwār*. Following a period of relative obscurity for *Mashāriq al-anwār*, we observe a resurgence of interest in it during the early modern period, particularly in the Safavid era. For example, Taqī al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Alī al-Kaf‘amī (d. ninth/fifteenth century) cites our author in his *Miṣbāh*,<sup>36</sup> as well as *Majmū‘ al-gharā‘ib wa-mawḍū‘ al-raghā‘ib*.<sup>37</sup>

While al-Bursī received criticism for his alleged extremism (*ghuluww*), particularly from figures such as Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī (d. 1110/1699)<sup>38</sup> and al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī (d. 1104/1693),<sup>39</sup> many other Safavid intellectuals approvingly incorporated materials from *Mashāriq al-anwār*. This can be observed in the works of Fakhr al-Dīn ibn Muḥammad ‘Alī Ṭurayḥī (d. circa 1085/1674),<sup>40</sup> Walī ibn Ni‘mat Allāh Raḍawī Ḥā‘irī (d. circa tenth/sixteenth century),<sup>41</sup> Sayyid Hāshim ibn Sulaymān Baḥrānī (d. twelfth/nineteenth century),<sup>42</sup> Sayyid Ni‘mat Allāh Jazā‘irī (d. 1112/1701),<sup>43</sup> and ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Īsā Afandī (d. circa 1140/1727).<sup>44</sup> Safavid Shah Sulaymān Ṣafavī’s decision to sponsor the translation and annotation of this text can be seen as an imperial embrace of its widespread

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 141.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 104.

<sup>33</sup> See Melvin-Koushki, ‘Safavid Twelver lettrism’.

<sup>34</sup> Lawson, ‘Dawning places’, pp. 270–273.

<sup>35</sup> Ḥabīb Allāh Dānish Shahrakī, Ni‘mat Allāh Ṣafarī Furūshānī, and Muḥammad Riḍā Lāyiqī, ‘Arzyābi-yi ibhāmāt darbāra-yi vujūd-i tārikhī-yi mutakkallim va ‘ārif-i Shi‘ī-yi gharn-i hashtum va nuhum’, *Justār-hā-‘ī dar Falsafa va Kalām* 53.1 (1400/2020), pp. 195–215.

<sup>36</sup> Taqī al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Kaf‘amī, *Miṣbāh al-Kaf‘amī*, two vols (Beirut, 1992/1412), vol. 1, pp. 195–215.

<sup>37</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Kaf‘amī, *Majmū‘ al-gharā‘ib wa-mawḍū‘ al-raghā‘ib*, (ed.) al-Sayyid Mahdī al-Rajā‘ī (Qom, 1412/1991), p. 249.

<sup>38</sup> Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 110 vols (Beirut, 1403/1983), pp. 54: 349; 42: 301.

<sup>39</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, *Amal al-Āmil*, (ed.) al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī, two vols (Baghdad, 1362/1982), vol. 2, p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ṭurayḥī, *al-Muntakhab*, (ed.) Niḍāl ‘Alī (Beirut, 1424/2003), pp. 210–211.

<sup>41</sup> For example, see Walī ibn Ni‘mat Allāh Raḍawī Ḥā‘irī, *Kanz al-Maṭālib wa-baḥr al-manāqib fi faḍā‘il ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*, (ed.) ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Kāzīm ‘Awfī, three vols (Karbala, 1436/2015), pp. 1:350, 2: 199, 260, 265, 274, 312, 3:10.

<sup>42</sup> Sayyid Hāshim ibn Sulaymān Baḥrānī, *al-Burhān fi tafsiṣ al-Qur‘ān* (Qom, 1415/1994), pp. 3:499, 500, 821, 4:76, 84, 265, 266, 375, 570, 658, 847, 5:189, 689, 813, 908.

<sup>43</sup> Sayyid Ni‘mat Allāh Jazā‘irī, *al-Anwār al-nu‘māniyya*, (ed.) Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Qāḍī al-Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, four vols (Beirut, 1431/2010), vol. 1, pp. 63–64.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Abd Allāh Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-‘ulamā‘ wa-ḥiyāḍ al-fulḍalā‘*, (ed.) Aḥmad Ashkivarī, seven vols (Beirut, 1431/2010), vol. 2, pp. 304–310.

acceptance. Therefore, Rajab al-Bursī's *Mashāriq al-anwār* swiftly gained recognition as a prominent work in Shi'ī literature during the early modern era in the Persianate world.

### 'Alī as a fount of esoteric knowledge

Rajab al-Bursī bore witness to the era of flourishing Persianate culture, which reached its zenith during the Ilkhanid–Timurid era when numerous Sunni and Shi'ī intellectuals were extensively engrossed in occult sciences, particularly lettrism, astrology, and geomancy. Sunni intellectuals of al-Bursī's period, such as Ibn Turka Işfahānī, Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī, and the New Brethren of Purity,<sup>45</sup> were deeply invested in occult sciences and esoteric knowledge not as mere clandestine incantations to be cast out by the witch-hunts of sociopolitical establishments, but rather as the very cornerstones upon which the grand edifice of imperial ambition was erected—an odyssey to conquer not just lands, but the very cosmos itself. The persona of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib took on a fresh and distinct significance in this era, intriguing both Shi'ī and Sunni intellectuals alike. He was not merely seen as a Sufi and mystical figure, but also as the wellspring from which all esoteric and occult knowledge originated.

The esoteric knowledge of 'Alī takes centre stage in *Mashāriq al-anwār*. 'Alī is portrayed as asserting that his knowledge surpasses the confines of Mount Qāf—a geographical symbol often cited as Earth's remotest point. He lays claim to comprehending the mysteries of all seven heavens and Earth itself, underlining his status as the Greatest Name of God (*ism al-a'zam*), the greatest divine sign (*al-āya al-'uzmā*), and the most conspicuous miracle (*al-mu'jiz al-bāhir*).<sup>46</sup> He goes to the extent of asserting that, like Adam, God taught him His names<sup>47</sup> and that the Prophet communicated to him what would transpire after his passing, including foreknowledge of the succession crisis, details of the battles he would partake in, and what he would need to do during each of these incidents.<sup>48</sup> 'Alī is even said to have had knowledge about the deceased, as illustrated by a story in which he advised his companion Kumayl ibn Ziyād to tread quietly in a cemetery, for the departed souls could sense his footsteps.<sup>49</sup>

While al-Bursī, as an adept lettrist with a fascination for both theoretical and practical dimensions of Arabic letters, was an offshoot of the Shi'ī-Sunni continuum that was forged during the premodern and early modern occult revival of the Persianate world, he indeed reclaimed and reinstated 'Alid occultism within the Twelver Shi'ī tradition.<sup>50</sup> 'Alī is introduced as the ultimate source of lettrism or science of letters (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*)—one of the most common forms of occult sciences in the Perso-Islamic world.<sup>51</sup> Al-Bursī writes:

The expanded *alif* (*alif al-mabsūt*) is the letter *bā'*, which is the first thing that was revealed to the Prophet of God, and the first thing in the scripture of Adam, Noah, and Abraham.<sup>52</sup> The expansion of *alif* upholds this letter, which is the secret

<sup>45</sup> See Melvin-Koushki, 'Safavid Twelver lettrism', pp. 6–8, 10–11. For this network, also see I. E. Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamic Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 66.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>50</sup> Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Ṭalḥa (d. 652/1254), a crucial figure in Islamic occult sciences, is one example of such narratives in the Sunni context. See Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ṭalḥa al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Durr al-muntaẓam fī al-sirr al-a'zam*, (ed.) Mājid ibn Aḥmad al-'Aṭiyya (Beirut, 1425/2004), pp. 32–33.

<sup>51</sup> See Melvin-Koushki, 'Safavid Twelver lettrism', pp. 11–15.

<sup>52</sup> For a similar analysis of the work of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. circa 787/1385), see M. A. Mansouri, 'Walāya between lettrism and astrology: the occult mysticism of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 787/1385)', *Journal of Sufi Studies* 9 (2021), pp. 182–191.



of invention and lights, and all the secrets of truth pertain to the dot written beneath the letter *bā*’, which is alluded to in the saying of the commander of believers [‘Alī], ‘I am the dot written beneath the expanded *bā*’.<sup>53</sup>

The secret of God is deposited in His books, and the secret of His books is deposited in the Qur’an, as it is comprehensive and all-encompassing, wherein one can find elaboration for everything. The secret of the Qur’an is also deposited in its disjointed letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa‘a*) at the beginning of all suras, and the knowledge of these letters is in the letter *lām* in the letter *alif*, which is the same *alif* that contains all hidden and apparent secrets, and the knowledge of this *lām* is an *alif* within another *alif*, and its knowledge is in a dot that it contains, and the knowledge of the dot is in genuine knowledge. The secret of the Qur’an is also in the sura Fātiḥa, and its secret is in its beginning, which is *basmala*. The secret of the *basmala* is in its *bā*’, and its secret is in its dot.<sup>54</sup>

According to this account, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s esoteric knowledge finds its root in his distinctive dot-like essence, granting him access not only to the secrets of the Qur’an, but also to those in all other divine books that have been disclosed to humanity across history.<sup>55</sup> Al-Bursī also depicts ‘Alī as the greatest word (*al-kalima al-kubrā*), encompassing all other words in the world. He is envisioned as emanating from the divine essence, much like all numbers originate from the number one.<sup>56</sup> The portrayal of ‘Alī as the repository of lettrist knowledge is further exemplified in a story in which Ibn al-‘Abbās (d. 68/686) reportedly claimed that, during a single night, from dawn until dusk, ‘Alī explained the secrets of the *basmala*. However, he was only able to reach the second letter, *sīn*, before extinguishing the light at dawn, saying: ‘If I wanted, I could load forty camels with my commentary only on the *bā*’ of *basmala*.’<sup>57</sup> It is also said that ‘Alī possessed knowledge of the magical-mathematical values of the Arabic letters, known as abjad numerals (*ḥisāb al-jumal*). According to al-Bursī, God granted this knowledge to Muhammad exclusively on the night of his ascension (*laylat al-mi‘rāj*) and he bestowed it upon ‘Alī and his descendants, who are destined to hold this knowledge until the end of the world. This knowledge, as al-Bursī explains, ‘consists of eight words and twenty-eight letters, each containing the names of Muhammad and ‘Alī, both in hidden and apparent forms. Only those acquainted with the mysteries of letters and their corresponding numerical values can unveil them’.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to lettrism, ‘Alī emerges as an alchemic authority *par excellence* in *Mashāriq al-anwār*. A story attributed to the housemaid of Fāṭima al-Zahrā (d. 11/632), Fiḍḍa al-Nūbiyya, who is alleged to be a princess of Indian descent, serves as a compelling example in this context. According to our source, Fiḍḍa was initially struck by the simplicity of ‘Alī’s household and lifestyle upon joining Fāṭima’s entourage. Perhaps due to her lineage as the daughter of an Indian king, Fiḍḍa had knowledge of alchemical processes. One day, she took a piece of copper and skilfully transformed it into the shape of a fish, subsequently transmuting it into gold. Upon ‘Alī’s return home, she presented the gold to him, but he told her that, if she had first melted the copper before the transformation, then the resulting gold would have been even more precious. Impressed by the depth of the imam’s knowledge, Fiḍḍa ventured to inquire whether he was also knowledgeable

<sup>53</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> Ḥaydar ‘Amulī offers a similar narrative. See Mansouri, ‘Walāya between lettrism and astrology’, pp. 181–191.

<sup>56</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 190.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124–125.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

in alchemy. The imam, in a gesture towards his son Ḥasan, remarked that even his young child possessed such knowledge and his family was privy to even more profound insights. To illustrate his point, ‘Alī gestured towards the earth, at which moment a camel laden with gold materialised. He instructed Fiḍḍa to place her crafted gold alongside this wealth, which was then added to the concealed treasures of the earth.<sup>59</sup> In a parallel tale, ‘Alī entrusted a piece of stone to his disciple ‘Ammār al-Yāsir. He instructed his follower to recite the imam’s name upon it, causing the stone to transmute into gold, thereby enabling ‘Ammār to settle his debts.<sup>60</sup>

Al-Bursī also portrays ‘Alī’s triumph in a battle of wits against astrologers. According to the narrative, as ‘Alī was en route to the Battle of Nahrawān, a Persian peasant who practised astrology cautioned him against joining the battle due to unfavourable astrological omens. Yet, ‘Alī persisted by posing inquiries that left the man unable to answer without consulting his astrolabe. Undeterred, the imam continued to challenge the astrologer’s knowledge, such as inquiring whether the astrologer could pinpoint the precise location where the Chinese king had slept the preceding night, or identify the universe that had just perished, the moment when the Sāwa Sea had evaporated and the Khashrama Sea surged, the overthrow of the Roman king by his brother, the ascension of a new king to power in Rome, or even the simultaneous birth of 70,000 universes, each containing an additional 70,000 universes, all transpiring in a single night.<sup>61</sup> Narratives like these, showcasing ‘Alī’s unparalleled mastery of lettrism, alchemy, and astrology, strive to present him as the ultimate fount of all occult disciplines, surpassing rival practitioners on their very terrains.

It is crucial to note that, in al-Bursī’s view, ‘Alī’s mastery in all forms of knowledge is ultimately rooted in his connection with the heavenly preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), which is mentioned in the Qur’an.<sup>62</sup> Al-Bursī states that there is no concealed knowledge between God and the Prophet. This principle remains consistent for God and ‘Alī because ‘Alī, along with the Prophet, was the very first being created by God. This is why ‘whatever God unveiled from the world of the unseen (*ghayb*) and inscribed on the preserved tablet is inherently known to both the Prophet and the *walī*’.<sup>63</sup> According to al-Bursī, the creation of the preserved tablet would serve little purpose if its contents were inaccessible, yet it is also not open to the general public. Instead, awareness of its contents is reserved for those who belong to the prophetic lineage (*āl Muḥammad*).<sup>64</sup>

Al-Bursī presents an innovative narrative to underscore that ‘Alī possessed direct access to the preserved tablet and his knowledge unquestionably emanated from this sacred source.<sup>65</sup> Our author posits that this relation can be understood in three distinct ways. First, tablets are repositories of inscribed words and lines; thus, in this sense, ‘Alī possessed knowledge of these written divine words. Second, al-Bursī explains that the Arabic term preserved (*maḥfūz*) adheres to the linguistic pattern of *maf’ūl*, which is a passive participle. However, ‘Alī stands as a clear imam (*al-imām al-mubīn*) and the Arabic term *mubīn* conforms to the linguistic pattern of *fa’īl*, which represents an active participle. Al-Bursī concludes that the latter is linguistically considered more dignified than the former, implying that ‘Alī surpassed even the preserved tablet.<sup>66</sup> Third, ‘Alī is the

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

<sup>62</sup> For example, see Q. 85:22.

<sup>63</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 208.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>66</sup> This is why al-Bursī asserts that ‘Alī is, in fact, the preserving tablet (*al-lawḥ al-ḥafīz*), representing the earthly embodiment of the preserved tablet, which ‘contains lines that pertain to the hidden realm of God,

absolute *walī*, denoting that his guardianship encompassed everything (*muḥīt bi-l-kull*). Consequently, every entity, including even the preserved tablet, falls within the scope of his knowledge, and he possessed an awareness of the intricacies of those entities.<sup>67</sup>

Al-Bursī acknowledges that these narratives may not resonate with those who question their authenticity and view them as exaggerations or historical fabrications. To establish the plausibility of these narratives, he leverages the prevailing interest in occult sciences during his own time. He describes an instance in which he observed an exoteric scholar (*raḡul min ahl al-fatwā*) dismissing the notion that ‘Alī could possess knowledge of the unseen (*‘ilm al-ghayb*), as such knowledge can be attributed solely to God. Notably, this same individual, as our author recounts, turned to geomancers and astrologers to glean insights into his future affairs. Al-Bursī conveys his astonishment at the absurdity of accepting the teachings of magicians (*ghawī al-kuhhān*) while simultaneously dismissing the words of an infallible imam.<sup>68</sup> This highlights the widespread fascination with occult sciences in the premodern and early modern periods, extending beyond Sufis and occultists to even jurists, and providing fertile ground for al-Bursī’s endeavour to portray ‘Alī as an unparalleled master of occult sciences and esoteric knowledge.

### From the sword to the supernatural: ‘Alī’s mythic and mystique feats

Tales of the extraordinary power of ‘Alī, portraying his abilities that transform him into a supernatural persona, are abundant in *Mashāriq al-anwār*. Comparable to his occult and esoteric qualities, this aspect of the text significantly contributes to the formation of an iconic image of ‘Alī—one radiating charismatic power and an alluring mystique, rendering him an enticing conduit to cosmic authority. For instance, ‘Alī is depicted as possessing the ability to communicate with jinn and even exerting control over them. In a story attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), a notable episode unfolds during one of ‘Alī’s sermons in Kufa. During this event, a serpent disrupted the assembly with its roars, but ‘Alī urged people to allow the creature to approach him. The serpent slowly advanced, kissed his foot, emitted three resounding roars, and then departed. ‘Alī told the crowd that the serpent was, in fact, a jinn whose offspring had been killed at the hands of an individual named Jābin ibn Sabī‘, a member of the Helpers (*anṣār*), without any repercussions. ‘Alī interceded on behalf of Jābin, seeking forgiveness for his actions. At this point in the narrative, a man in the gathering confessed to being the person who had killed a viper in the vicinity of the assembly. He complained that the serpent’s roars had plagued him for seven nights, which is why he had taken refuge in the mosque. ‘Alī finally advised him to return to the exact location at which he had encountered the viper and sacrifice a camel, as this act would dispel the disruptive presence of the jinn.<sup>69</sup>

In another account, it is said that, when a jinn was present in the Prophet’s company, the entry of ‘Alī onto the scene triggered a remarkable transformation in the jinn’s demeanour, leading him to diminish in stature until he resembled a sparrow. The jinn beseeched the Prophet for protection, harking back to when he had attempted to submerge Noah’s ark, endangering the lives of all aboard. However, it was ‘Alī who interceded with decisive force, delivering a single potent blow that severed the jinn’s hand.<sup>70</sup> In one account, it is recounted that ‘Alī had the remarkable ability to spot a

akin to the preserving tablet on Earth, wherein the concealed world of God finds its repository’; Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 223.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191–192.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

camel carrying a corpse, foreseeing its arrival in Najaf three days in advance and accurately predicting the precise moment at which his companions would also see it.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, a number of other tales depict the sacral, mythic, and cosmic power of ‘Alī, which sets him apart from others. The following story about the battle of Khaybar sheds light on this aspect of ‘Alī’s depiction in *Mashāriq al-anwār*. As the story goes, one day, Gabriel explained the wonders of ‘Alī’s power to the Prophet:

When God commanded me to destroy the people of Lūṭ, I elevated their seven cities from the lowest seventh earth to the highest seventh earth using only a single feather from my wings. I kept them in that position, and I could even clearly hear the sound of their roosters and the laughter of their children, maintaining it until the divine decree arrived at dawn. However, when he [‘Alī] delivered the powerful Hāshimī blow that day, God commanded me to hold back his sword, preventing the earth from splitting and sparing the cow that carries the world from a similar fate. Such an event would have plunged all of creation into chaos. Indeed, the force of ‘Alī’s blow surpassed the challenge of lifting the seven cities of the people of Lūṭ, even with the assistance of angels Israfil and Michael in holding back his mighty hand.<sup>72</sup>

‘Alī is also introduced as having universal compassion for his followers. For instance, in one narrative, he conveyed to his follower Ramīla, who was suffering from illness, that when any Shi‘a falls ill, the imams share in their suffering; when Shi‘as experience sorrow, the imams share in their sorrow; and when they supplicate for anything, the imams also supplicate on their behalf, for the imams stand by their followers no matter where they may be in the world.<sup>73</sup> It is also mentioned that ‘Alī is believed to be present during a person’s final moments in the world<sup>74</sup> and he possessed the ability to see the deceased: ‘O Aṣḡbagħ! I can discern the souls of every believing man and woman beyond this barrier. If your vision were unveiled as mine, you would witness them enlightening people from luminous pulpits.’<sup>75</sup> *Mashāriq al-anwār* also presents narratives to demonstrate that ‘Alī’s wonders go beyond the Muslim community, representing him as an icon of universal power and love. In one story, it is said that a certain monk assured ‘Alī’s father Abū Ṭālib that he would become a father to a son who would become ‘the master of all people of his time (*sayyid ahl zamānihi*)’ and ‘the greatest nomos (*nāmūs al-akbar*)’.<sup>76</sup> ‘Alī is also depicted as having known the secrets of the scripture of Noah and Abraham, the Bible, and the Torah upon birth,<sup>77</sup> and in one instance deciphered the secrets of a church’s bells for a monk.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it is said that ‘Alī is mentioned in previous divine books. In a Hadīth attributed to the Prophet, it is stated: ‘O ‘Alī! You and your followers have been mentioned in the Torah since before the inception of anything good, and the same holds true for the Bible, which extols your Shi‘as for our benefit.’<sup>79</sup> The sacral power and love associated with ‘Alī and other members of the prophetic family (*ahl*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–171.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120. On the imams’ knowledge of previous scriptures, see E. Kohlberg, ‘Authoritative scriptures in early Imami Shi‘ism’, in *In Praise of the Few: Studies in Shi‘i Thought and History*, (ed.) A. Ehteshāmi (Leiden, 2020), pp. 349–364.

<sup>78</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 126–127.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

*al-bayt*) are believed to transcend not just other religious traditions, but also human boundaries, acquiring cosmic dimensions. The following Hadith are pertinent to this point:

It is narrated from Abū ‘Abd Allāh [al-Ṣādiq] that ‘God created a belt made of green beryl’. When asked, ‘What is this belt?’ he replied, ‘It is a veil (*hijāb*). God possesses seventy thousand worlds beyond this veil, far surpassing the number of jinn and humans. They all love us and condemn those who oppose us’.

It is also narrated by Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh, who heard from Abū Ja‘far [al-Bāqir] that ‘there are forty suns beyond this sun, each separated by forty years. In these places, no one is even aware that God created Adam or Satan. However, God constantly reveals to them our love and animosity towards our enemies’.<sup>80</sup>

These Hadith universalise love for the prophetic family by ascribing it to all inhabitants in the thousands of worlds across the cosmos. There are many such narratives in *Mashāriq al-anwār*, each shedding light on different aspects of ‘Alī’s sacral and cosmic power across time and space. Al-Bursī’s depiction of ‘Alī’s sacral power and wondrous feats undeniably constituted a vital element in the widespread embrace of ‘Alī as a cosmic emblem. Through his sacral power and deeds, ‘Alī emerges as more than just a spiritual guide; he is also introduced as a symbol of cosmic significance.

### ‘Alī is the Greatest Name of God

In Islamic tradition, the divine names, often referred to as the Most Beautiful Names of God (*asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā’*), bear immense significance<sup>81</sup> and this tradition finds its roots in the Qur’an: ‘The Most Beautiful Names belong to God: use them to call on Him, and keep away from those who abuse them—they will be requited for what they do.’<sup>82</sup> Various Muslim scholars have explained different facets of these names,<sup>83</sup> yet they gained renewed importance in premodern and early modern Islamic intellectual history, notably through the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī, in which divine names assume a central cosmological role.<sup>84</sup> Al-Bursī was certainly engaged in these intellectual currents. He wrote a work called *Lum‘at al-kāshif*, which, while non-extant, was about the practical utilisation of divine names and their potential influence in the daily practices of devout believers.<sup>85</sup> Al-Bursī’s theory regarding divine names holds special significance in his evaluation of ‘Alī’s status in *Mashāriq al-anwār*. He views prophets as manifestations (*mazāhir*) of divine names, which ultimately can all be traced back to the divine name Allāh. He also maintains that all prophets and messengers can be traced back to seven

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>81</sup> For a comprehensive study of the divine names in Islamic thought, see D. Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>82</sup> Q. 7:180. I rely on the following translation throughout the article, incorporating necessary changes and modifications: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Qur’an* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> As an example, see Aḥmad Sam‘ānī, *rūḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā’ al-malik al-fattāh*, (ed.) Najīb Māyil Hiravī (Tehran, 1384/2005). For its English translation, see Aḥmad Sam‘ānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names*, (trans.) W. C. Chittick (Albany, 2019). Also see al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, (trans.) D. Burrell and N. Daher (Cambridge, 1999); Ibn ‘Arabī, *Secrets des noms de Dieu*, (trans.) P. Beneito (Paris, 2019); Fakhr ad-Dīn Ar-Rāzī, *Traité sur les noms divins*, (trans.) M. Gloton (Paris, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> See M. Ebstein, “‘In truth you are the polytheist!’: mythic elements in Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s teachings on the divine names”, *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* 6.3 (2018), pp. 359–387; G. Elmore, ‘Four texts of Ibn al-‘Arabī on the creative self-manifestation of the divine names’, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 29 (2001), pp. 1–43.

<sup>85</sup> For this, see Melvin-Koushki, ‘Safavid Twelver lettrism’, pp. 13–15.

figures: Adam, Idrīs, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and Jesus, whose final point of reference (*marja'*) is none other than Muhammad.<sup>86</sup> Al-Bursī writes:

Adam is the manifestation (*mazhar*) of the divine name the Speaker (*nāṭiq*), and he carries the full influence of the Creator (*khāliq*). Adam's dwelling is the heaven of the moon, which is the house of dignity. It is where the most comprehensive and good words find their home. Idrīs is the manifestation of the divine name the Alive (*ḥayy*), and his dwelling is the heaven of the sun, the wellspring of vitality for both animal and plant life. It is from this heaven that the secrets of minerals and vegetation emanate. Abraham is the manifestation of the divine name the Generous (*jawād*), and he carries the full influence of the Lord (*rabb*). Abraham's dwelling is the heaven of Saturn, which is the initial source of nourishment. Joseph is the manifestation of the divine name the Willing (*murīd*), he carries the influence of the Beautiful (*jamil*), and his dwelling is the heaven of Venus. Moses is the manifestation of the divine name the Powerful (*qādir*), he carries the influence of the divine names the Potent (*qawī*) and the Intense (*shadīd*), and his dwelling is the heaven of Mars. Aaron is the manifestation of the divine name the All-Knowing (*'alīm*), he carries the influence of both the Commander (*āmīr*) and the Rejector (*nāhī*), and his dwelling is in the heaven of Jupiter. Jesus is the manifestation of the divine name the Impartial (*muqsiṭ*), and he carries the influence of the Wise (*ḥakīm*). This is why he possessed the remarkable ability to heal the blind, cure lepers, and revive the deceased, and his dwelling is in the heaven of Mercury. Yet, all these heavens, names, and numbers ultimately converge in Muhammad, who is the manifestation of the comprehensive divine name, and his heaven is at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer.<sup>87</sup> He is the compendium of all secrets, the manifestation of all lights, and the comprehensive locus of all words.<sup>88</sup>

The seven divine names that al-Bursī identifies as corresponding with the seven prophets are indeed the seven names that are commonly known as the leaders of all divine names (*a'immat al-asmā'*) in the Akbarian tradition, exerting control over the world and its affairs.<sup>89</sup> Amongst the divine names, he dedicates special attention to the Greatest Name of God (*ism al-a'zam*), which in Islamic spirituality and magic is traditionally perceived to be the most potent name of God.<sup>90</sup> This name also acquires a strong letrist dimension in al-Bursī's works. For example, he explains that the letters comprising this divine name equate to a numerical value of 72. These letters further correspond to the number 264 and this sacred name can manifest itself in the letters themselves or their corresponding numerical values.<sup>91</sup> It seems that *alif-lām-mīm*, one of the disjointed letters

<sup>86</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 48.

<sup>87</sup> 'Until he was two bow-lengths away or even closer', Q. 53:9.

<sup>88</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>89</sup> See Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ibn al-'Arabī, 'Inshā' al-dawā'ir', in *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-'Arabī*, (ed.) H. S. Nyberg (Leiden, 1919), p. 33.

<sup>90</sup> It is noteworthy that the treatise *al-Lum'a al-Nūrāniyya*, which is attributed to Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. circa 622/1225), is sometimes known as *Sharḥ al-ism al-a'zam*, due to its focus on this topic. For this and also issues surrounding the attribution of this treatise to al-Būnī, see N. Gardiner, 'Forbidden knowledge? Notes on the production, transmission, and reception of the major works of Aḥmad al-Būnī', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 12 (2012), pp. 81–143.

<sup>91</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 39–40. Al-Bursī's explanation of the equation is notably intricate. He asserts that the Greatest Name of God is mentioned in Surat al-Ḥamd, the first Sura, comprising seven verses—a number he deems to be the most complete. Al-Bursī then explains the numerical details of this Sura, ultimately identifying the luminous letters (*al-ḥurūf al-nūrāniyya*) from which the Greatest Name of God and all other names can be extracted. These letters are *alif*, *rā'*, *ḥā'*, *yā'*, *mīm*, *nūn*, *kāf*, *sīn*, *hā'*, *ṣād*, *qāf*, and *ṭā'*, with their respective



that commence various suras in the Qur'an,<sup>92</sup> bears a distinctive significance from al-Bursī's perspective. He asserts that its letters, both individually and collectively, encompass the Greatest Name of God.<sup>93</sup> This preference may stem from the numerical value of these letters, which is 71—the value closest to 72 when compared with other disjointed letters in the Qur'an. Hence, it serves as the most suitable letrist-numerical Qur'anic device to encapsulate the Greatest Name of God. Rajab al-Bursī's interest in the number 72 may be rooted in early Shi'ī Hadith literature, specifically in narratives detailing the letters of the Greatest Name of God. For example, the following Hadith attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is relevant in this context:

The Greatest Name of God comprises seventy-three letters, yet 'Āṣaf possessed knowledge of just a letter from this divine name. When he pronounced it, the earth cleaved open from his location to the throne of the Queen of Sheba, allowing him to retrieve the throne with his hand, and the earth reverted to its original state, all transpiring in the blink of an eye. However, we hold knowledge of seventy-two letters of the Greatest Name of God, and a single letter has been reserved by God Himself, concealed within His own knowledge of the unseen (*ilm al-ghayb*).<sup>94</sup>

Al-Bursī builds on such narratives by asserting that preceding prophets had access to merely two of these 72 letters. In contrast, Shi'ī imams possess the remaining 70 letters in addition to the initial two. This is the key to their ability to exert influence in the world and possess knowledge of the unseen.<sup>95</sup> The link between 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Greatest Name of God is particularly significant, as al-Bursī depicts the first Shi'ī imam not merely as a manifestation of a certain divine name, but as the Greatest Name of God:

How can it be otherwise? He is the Greatest Name, whose influence resonates throughout the universe—a sovereign capable of intervening in the affairs of all other beings. He stands as the First and the Last, the Apparent and the Hidden. He is the first among lights, and resides in the last cycle of creation, encompassing both the hidden secrets and the apparent impacts. As the supreme lord, he demands

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numerical values totalling 699. However, al-Bursī acknowledges the complexities of this matter, recognising that the Greatest Name of God may manifest in a single letter, number, or combination thereof, as per God's will. He provides examples of letter and number combinations equating to 110, 99, 112, and finally 72. The latter corresponds to the letters *alif*, *lām*, *rā*, 'ayn, *hā*', *yā*', *mīm*, *nūn*, *kāf*, *sīn*, *hā*', *ṣād*, *qāf*, and *ṭā*'. The narrative of al-Bursī is notably unclear, as he asserts that three letters and three numbers from all the combinations distinctly point to the Greatest Name of God. He leaves aside 11 letters (*alif*, *rā*', *hā*', *mīm*, *nūn*, *kāf*, *sīn*, *hā*', *ṣād*, *qāf*, and *ṭā*') that do not distinctly refer to the Greatest Name of God. By comparing the various letrist combinations that he offers, it appears to me that the three letters that al-Bursī considers as explicit references to the Greatest Name of God are *ya*' (2), *lām* (3), 'ayn (7). These letters clearly refer to the name 'Alī (علي). Al-Bursī further explains that, if we count some letters several times, then the letters of the Greatest Name of God add up to 72, with a numerical value of 264. He states: 'These are the letters and numbers of the Greatest Name, and the Prophet or imam can compose it at will and pray with it.' Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 40. The printed editions provide the names of only 66 letters, making it challenging to compile the full list of these 72 letters. I examined MS *Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis* 9419, MS *Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis* 7615, and MS *Masjid-i A'zam*, but they offer different variants. Until a proper critical edition is available, certainty about these 72 letters remains elusive. Based on al-Bursī's numerical model, my calculation suggests that the 66 identified letters collectively yield a numerical value of 245. Consequently, it appears that the missing six letters are likely to possess a cumulative numerical value of 19.

<sup>92</sup> For some of the instances, see Q. 1:1, 2:1, 3:1, 7:1, 10:1, 13:1, 14:1, 15:1, 19:1.

<sup>93</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 188.

<sup>94</sup> Abu Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī, *al-Kāfi*, (ed.) Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dirāyatī, 15 vols (Qom, 1387/2009), vol. 1, p. 571.

<sup>95</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 158.

our following, serving as the conduit through which the divine word is spoken and the origin from which His affairs, both apparent and hidden, come to be.<sup>96</sup>

‘Alī, as the Greatest Name of God, rises above all previous prophets, ranking higher than nearly every prophet except the Prophet Muhammad, whose divine light mirrors that of ‘Alī. In the Akbarian tradition, *walāya* surpasses prophethood (*nubuwwa*), but prophets maintain a higher status than *awliyā*, which contrasts with the classical Sufi perspective from which prophethood was considered superior to *walāya*.<sup>97</sup> This Akbarian narrative certainly influenced various later Shi‘i writers. A useful case in point is Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (circa 787/1385), who arguably offered the first systematic response to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works in the Shi‘i tradition. Ḥaydar Āmulī was rather critical of certain ontological positions of Ibn al-‘Arabī,<sup>98</sup> but he generally remained loyal to this Akbarian framework of *walāya*. In short, he asserted that, while *walāya* is the highest spiritual rank in Islam, *awliyā* are not necessarily higher in rank.<sup>99</sup>

The idea of *walāya* in al-Bursī’s work also needs to be understood as a corollary to the Akbarian model of thought that revolutionised *walāya* as not merely on a par with prophethood, but indeed surpassing it, elevating it to a status higher than prophethood itself. In other words, the placing of *walāya* as a central tenet of Shi‘ism in al-Bursī’s work is a natural offshoot of the Sunni-Shi‘i cosmopolis.<sup>100</sup> However, al-Bursī asserts that ‘Alī, as a *walī* and as the Greatest Name of God, occupies a position that is even superior to that of all preceding prophets, which further radicalises the Akbarian theory of *walāya*.<sup>101</sup>

### ‘Alī as the arbiter for Heaven and Hell

According to Rajab al-Bursī, mere adherence to Islam does not assure entry into Heaven; instead, it is through ‘Alī ibn Ṭālib that this privilege is bestowed. That is why an extensive

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>97</sup> For a survey of this notion in the Akbarian tradition and its reception in Shi‘ism, see Mansouri, ‘Walāya between lettrism and astrology’; M. Rustom, ‘Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī’s seal of absolute walāya: a Shi‘i response to Ibn ‘Arabī’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31.4 (2020), pp. 407–423.

<sup>98</sup> See M. A. Mansouri, ‘The sea and the wave: a preliminary inquiry into Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī’s criticism of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology’, *Journal of Muhiiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 68 (2020), pp. 75–101.

<sup>99</sup> For Ḥaydar Āmulī’s position on this matter, see Mansouri, ‘Walāya between lettrism and astrology’, pp. 178–179.

<sup>100</sup> I use ‘Sunni-Shi‘i cosmopolis’ to describe the diverse intellectual milieu of the Persianate world before the Safavid era, in which the lines between Shi‘as and Sunnis are, in many instances, blurred, making it challenging to discern confessional gaps and doctrinal bridges. For a brief but useful survey of different scholarly perspectives on sectarian and non-sectarian relationships between Sunnism and Shi‘ism during this period, see S. H. Rizvi, ‘Before the Safavid-Ottoman conflict Jāmī and sectarianism in Timurid Iran and Iraq’, in *Jāmī in Regional Contexts*, (eds.) T. d’Hubert and A. Papas (Leiden, 2018), pp. 227–229. For the fusion of Sunni and Shi‘i ideas and practices in this era, also see J. Pfeiffer, ‘Confessional ambiguity vs. confessional polarization: politics and the negotiation of religious boundaries in the Ilkhanate’, *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th-15th Century Tabriz*, (ed.) J. Pfeiffer (Leiden, 2014), pp. 129–168; J. E. Woods, *The Aqqyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Salt Lake City, 1999), pp. 3–4.

<sup>101</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 194–195. The distinction between Ḥaydar Āmulī’s and al-Bursī’s stances on *walāya* showcases the diverse Shi‘i conceptualisations of this doctrine in this period. It is also important to note that one encounters ideas similar to al-Bursī’s narrative of the Greatest Name of God in early *ghulāt* literature. See M. Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shi‘i Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and their Beliefs* (London, 2017), pp. 102–103; B. Tendler Krieger, ‘“Abd Allāh b. Saba” and the role of the Nuṣayrī Bāb: rehabilitating the heresiarchs of the Islamic tradition’, in *L’ésotérisme shi‘ite: ses racines et ses prolongements*, (eds.) M. A. Amir-Moezzi et al. (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 470–471. Hence, al-Bursī’s portrayal of ‘Alī as the Greatest Name of God can be seen as a synthesis that blends the Akbarian and *ghulāt* elements. However, without a comprehensive study of the concept of *walāya* in premodern and early modern Shi‘i thought, it remains difficult to ascertain whether other Shi‘i writers adopted al-Bursī’s position or it stands as a relatively isolated perspective.

array of attributes is presented for ‘Alī in *Mashāriq al-anwār*, all strategically aimed at illustrating his authority to decide who gains entry into Heaven and who is destined for Hell. For example, he is introduced as the distinguisher between truth and falsehood (*al-fārūq bayn al-ḥaqq wa-l-bāṭil*)<sup>102</sup> and as the firmest bond (*‘urwat al-wuthqā*).<sup>103</sup> ‘Alī is likened to Noah’s ark (*safīnat al-Nūh*), which can save whoever mounts it, and loving him is counted as one of the five pillars of Islam, alongside obligatory praying, almsgiving, fasting, and Hajj.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, ‘Alī is presented as a standard (*‘alam*) between humanity and the Divine, whereby those who acknowledge it become believers and attain entry into Heaven, while those who disregard it turn into disbelievers and remain barred from Heaven’s gates.<sup>105</sup> Redemption through following ‘Alī is said to have been established prior to the Creation, when God addressed all beings with ‘Am I not your Lord? and they replied, “Yes”’.<sup>106</sup> Drawing on a prophetic Hadith, al-Bursī explains that God then queried the assembly regarding the prophethood of Muhammad, which garnered widespread agreement. In contrast, the imamate of ‘Alī encountered denial from those except a select few who were referred to as ‘the people of the right hand (*aṣḥāb al-yamīn*)’, constituting a ‘minority within a minority (*aqall al-aqall*)’.<sup>107</sup> ‘Alī is also introduced as the distributor (*qassām*) of one’s placement in Heaven and Hell:

This is confirmed by what Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī narrated in the book of *al-Amālī* from Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad, who stated that the Prophet had said, ‘When the resurrection occurs, God will grant you, ‘Alī, a radiant calf and a glowing crown. The crown will have four ornaments, each proclaiming the oneness of God, Muhammad as His Prophet, and ‘Alī as His chosen guardian. At that moment, the throne of honor will be readied for you, and the keys to both heaven and hell will be entrusted to your care. Subsequently, people from all ages, from the earliest to the last, will gather in a single location. Your devoted followers (*shī‘a*) will find entry into heaven, while your adversaries will be consigned to hell. This is because you hold the authority to apportion heaven and hell and will serve as God’s trustee on that day.’<sup>108</sup>

‘Alī is thus prophesied to receive a radiant calf and a crown, symbolising his authority over the keys to Heaven and Hell. The concept of *walāya* also holds a pivotal significance in al-Bursī’s examination of the redeemed and the perished, and he frequently employs it interchangeably with the notion of *maḥabba* (love). The following narrative sheds light on his view of *walāya* and its relevance to the redeemed and the perished:

A sacred hadith states that, ‘The *walāya* of ‘Alī is my fortress; whoever enters it shall find refuge from my hell’. Therefore, protection from hell is solely dependent on embodying ‘Alī’s *walāya*, as recognizing it requires affirming prophethood and monotheism... Those who embody *walāya* for ‘Alī are the safeguarded believers, while those who do not belong to this category are perishing hypocrites, and this status remains unalterable’.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>102</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 86.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>106</sup> Q. 7:172.

<sup>107</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, 27. On the notion of *Shī‘as* as a select few, see E. Kohlberg, ‘In praise of the few’, in Ehteshāmi (ed.), *In Praise of the Few*, pp. 250–265.

<sup>108</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 285; also see *ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

In essence, the tally of good deeds remains incomplete without love for ‘Alī. That is why al-Bursī narrates numerous Hadith to the effect that, no matter how pious and righteous one becomes, they will never be able to enter Heaven so long as they do not embody *walāya* for ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, since he is the scale (*mizān*) according to which the righteous will enter Heaven and the wicked will enter Hell:

The Glorious God states, ‘We will set up scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection’.<sup>110</sup> Ibn al-‘Abbās stated: The scales refer to the prophets and *awliyā’*. For any scale to function, it requires two pans, a fulcrum, and witnesses. Thus, the first pan reads ‘there is no god but God’, the fulcrum bears the inscription ‘Muhammad is His Prophet’, and the second pan reads ‘Alī is his *walī*’ pan. The following verse alludes to this matter: ‘He has raised up the sky. He has set the scale’.<sup>111</sup>

A scholar further elucidates this verse, equating the sky to the Prophet of God and the scale to ‘Alī. People’s actions are measured based on the degree of their love for him. His speech: ‘Weigh with justice and do not fall short in the scale’,<sup>112</sup> means that you should not wrong ‘Alī as there is no scale to measure the deeds of those who are ignorant about his rights.

About His speech, ‘It is God who has sent down the scripture with truth and the scale’.<sup>113</sup> It is narrated that the scripture is the Qur’an and the scale is *walāya*. ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm [al-Qummi] stated that the scripture is ‘Alī and the scale is also ‘Alī. The absence of *walāya* for ‘Alī results in an incomplete religious commitment, and certainty remains beyond reach for such individuals. That is because *walāya* is the scale for the servants in the hereafter.<sup>114</sup>

In this spirit, not only is love for ‘Alī required for the good deeds to be counted in the hereafter, but it also indeed transforms the nature of one’s actions. Al-Bursī similarly states that there are three groups of people in the hereafter: believers (*mu’min*), infidels (*kāfir*), and hypocrites (*munāfiq*). There is no scale for the last two groups, so their good deeds cannot be counted, and it is as if they have no good deeds on their record. However, believers have a different story and, due to their love for ‘Alī, their bad deeds are transformed into good deeds, hence granting them warranted access to Heaven.<sup>115</sup> Thus, while one can become Muslim, in order to become a believer (*mu’min*), and hence redeemed, one should embody love for ‘Alī.<sup>116</sup> This love can save his followers from the dreads of the hereafter:

Ibn al-‘Abbās reports the following from the Messenger of God: ‘There will be overwhelming fear on the Day of Resurrection. Those who wish to escape its fears and distress should embrace the love for my *walī*, legatee (*waṣī*), caliph, and companion of my bounteous pool, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. He turns away those who oppose him from this pool and pours from it for his *awliyā’*. Those who do not drink from it shall endure eternal thirst, while those who drink will be forever satiated. The love for ‘Alī serves as a distinguishing mark between belief and hypocrisy. Those who embody love for him possess belief, whereas those who oppose him are

<sup>110</sup> Q. 21:47.

<sup>111</sup> Q. 55:7.

<sup>112</sup> Q. 55:9.

<sup>113</sup> Q. 42:17

<sup>114</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 96.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

hypocrites. ‘Alī’s lovers stride the Straight Path with swiftness akin to a flash of lightning, thus gaining entry to heaven without undergoing any reckoning.’<sup>117</sup>

This Hadith conveys that embracing love for ‘Alī is the key to alleviating fears on the Day of Resurrection and ensuring swift entry into Heaven without undergoing any reckoning. By offering a diverse collection of Hadith and interpretations of Qur’anic verses, al-Bursī illuminates a crucial element of his Imamology, which revolves around the cultivation and nurturing of *walāya* for ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib as the ultimate and definitive arbiter of one’s destiny between Heaven and Hell. This profound love and devotion, especially directed towards ‘Alī, serve as the decisive criteria distinguishing those who find redemption in Heaven from those consigned to damnation in Hell. Premodern and early modern Persianate Sunnism was, in fact, centred on ‘Alidism or Sunni Ahl Baytism as its Shi‘i counterparts and, in numerous instances, it was virtually indistinguishable from Shi‘i devotional practices.<sup>118</sup> This can explain why, while al-Bursī’s narrative about enemies of ‘Alī is harsh and unapologetic, it is not transformed into an anti-Sunni polemic. In other words, al-Bursī’s attack on ‘Alī’s enemies should not be seen as an anti-Sunni polemic, but rather as a devotional veneration of ‘Alī beyond sectarian divisions.

### Almost divine: ‘Alī vs. God

Al-Bursī has been commonly accused of propagating ideas about Shi‘i imams that eliminate the border between the Shi‘i imams and God, hence falling into the trap of extremism (*ghuluww*).<sup>119</sup> However, al-Bursī did not think of his ideas as having anything in common with those of extremists and he engaged in extensive criticism of extremist ideas across *Mashāriq al-anwār*.<sup>120</sup> ‘Alī indeed possesses qualities and attributes in *Mashāriq al-anwār* that approach the divine, but they are not divine. Al-Bursī’s examination of light traditions, aimed at explaining the unique cosmic status of ‘Alī and the Prophet, holds relevance in this context.<sup>121</sup> In various instances, al-Bursī recounts Hadith that elevate ‘Alī from a mere human status to a cosmic figure shaped and moulded by divine light. This concept is demonstrated in the following prophetic traditions:

The first thing God created was my light. From it, he extracted the light of ‘Alī, and, instead of descending, we traveled in light until God brought us to the veil of greatness after eighty thousand years. He then formed all people from our light, making us His creations (*ṣanāyi ‘Allāh*), and others are created after us and for our sake.<sup>122</sup>

Muḥammad ibn Sinān narrated from Ibn al-‘Abbās that, ‘We were in the company of the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, when ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib arrived. The Prophet then greeted him, saying, “Greeting to he who had been created forty

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>118</sup> See M. A. Mansouri, ‘Casket of light, padlocked with light: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, Ahl al-Bayt, and Shi‘i philosophical esotericism’, *Shii Studies Review* 7 (2023), pp. 3–9.

<sup>119</sup> For studies on *ghuluww*, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, ‘Les imams et les *ghulāt*: nouvelles réflexions sur les relations entre Imamisme “modéré” et Shi‘isme “extrémiste”’, *Shii Studies Review* 4.1–2 (2020), pp. 5–38; Anthony, *Caliph and the Heretic*; Asatryan, *Controversies*; W. F. Tucker, *Mahdis and Millenarians: Shi‘ite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq* (Cambridge, 2008); Ni‘matullāh Ṣafarī Furūshānī, *Ghāliyān: Kāvushī dar jarayān-hā va barāyand-hā* (Mashhad, 1378/2000).

<sup>120</sup> For example, see al-Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>121</sup> These Hadith were frequent in early Shi‘i Hadith canon. See U. Rubin, ‘More light on Muḥammad’s pre-existence: Qur’anic and post-Qur’anic perspectives’, in *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of his 75th Birthday*, (eds.) A. Rippin and R. Tottoli (Leiden, 2015), pp. 288–311.

<sup>122</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, pp. 60–61.

thousand years before his father, Adam.” We asked, “O Prophet, so the son existed before his father?” He replied, “Yes, God created ‘Alī and me from the same light (*nūr wāhid*) before the creation of Adam in the aforementioned time. Then, He split it in half, and created all things from my light and ‘Alī’s light. He then placed us on the right side of the throne. He praised us, the angels also praised us, He glorified us, the angels glorified us, He extolled us, the angels also extolled us. That is why everyone who praises and extols God has learned it from ‘Alī’s and my teachings”<sup>123</sup>.

This passage showcases ‘Alī’s transformation from a mere human into a cosmic figure shaped by divine light, predating the creation of Adam. It also emphasises the transcendent nature of ‘Alī, positioning him alongside the Prophet in the cosmic order. Even the marriage of ‘Alī with Fāṭima is described as a marriage of light with light (*al-nūr bi-l-nūr*).<sup>124</sup> It is also recounted that there exist two lights for ‘Alī—one upon Earth and another in the heavens—with the purpose of ensuring the redemption of all creation.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, al-Bursī states that ‘Alī is a divine light (*nūr ilāhī*) whose belonging to the body is accidental (*‘arīḍī*), as he is primarily a light that illuminates the Occident and the Orient.<sup>126</sup> However, none of these traditions is meant to deliver ‘Alī’s divinity. The equilibrium between the cosmic elevation of ‘Alī and his separation from God is evident in al-Bursī’s commentary on the following Qur’anic verse: ‘God is the light of the heavens and earth.’<sup>127</sup> According to him, the term ‘God’ (*Allāh*) represents the divine essence in this verse, while the subsequent word ‘light’ (*nūr*), which emanates from this essence, refers to the Muhammadan realm (*al-ḥaḍra al-Muḥammadiyya*) and signifies the light of Muhammad and ‘Alī: ‘They are the veils for the divine realm, and they are its deputies, and gates, and the treasurers of the secret of lordship.’<sup>128</sup> The light of God, as described here, is clearly separate from God’s essence, which is exclusively God’s and the wellspring from which the light of ‘Alī and Muhammad emanates.

‘Alī represents the eternal divine light that has endured across the annals of history, yet he is not divinity itself; instead, he serves as the intermediary veil that distinguishes God from all else. Al-Bursī indeed often clarifies that Shi‘i imams are servants of God and, although God’s attributes and actions can be ascribed to them, God’s essence is the exclusive domain of God and cannot be attributed to anyone else but Him.<sup>129</sup> Numerous Hadith in al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār*, including the sermon of Glory (*iftikhār*) or Two Gulfs (*taṭanjayn*), which some interpreted as having elements of extremism (*ghuluww*), indeed need to be understood within this framework.<sup>130</sup> These sermons or Hadith frequently

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62; E. Kohlberg, ‘Some Shi‘i views of the Antediluvian world’, in Ehteshāmi (ed.), *In Praise of the Few*, pp. 327–348.

<sup>124</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 76.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>127</sup> Q. 24:35.

<sup>128</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 44.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

<sup>130</sup> While this sermon is not found in early Shi‘i Hadith collections, many similar passages exist in these works. Before al-Bursī’s era, writers from the Twelver Shi‘i tradition, including Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, as well as Ismaili works such as *Rawḍa-yi taslīm*, attributed to Khwāja Naṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), and even some Sunni writers such as Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Ṭalḥa (d. 652/254), incorporated various versions of this sermon. It seems that Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī and Rajab al-Bursī played pivotal roles in popularising this sermon within the Twelver Shi‘i tradition in the Persianate world. For details about this sermon, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, ‘Aspects de l’imāmologie duodécimaine I: Remarques sur la divinité de l’Imām’, *Studia Iranica* 25.2 (1996), pp. 193–216; Riḍā Asadpūr, ‘Khuṭbat al-bayān va shaḥṭhiyyāt-i ‘arīfin’, *Pazhūhish-nāma-yi Adyān* 2.3 (1378/1999), pp. 1–40; H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, (trans.) L. Sherrard and P. Sherrard (London, 2006), pp. 49–51; T. Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur’an, Exegesis, Messianism, and the Literary Origins of*



adhere to a consistent structure that shall be characterised as ‘a pronoun-centric style’ in which ‘Alī often employs the I/we narrative format to assert an array of mythic, cosmic, and godlike attributes that distinguish him from humanity. A typical example of these pronoun-centric Hadith is from a conversation between ‘Alī and two of his followers, Jundab al-Azdī and Salmān al-Fārsī, in which we read:

On this matter what Salmān and Abū Dhar narrated from the commander of believers is relevant. He stated, ‘The burden of the misdeeds of those whose outward actions (*zāhir*) manifest my *walāya* more than their inner qualities (*bāṭin*) is lighter. O Salmān! The faith of believers remains incomplete until they comprehend my luminous nature. Once they recognise me in this manner, they truly become believers. God tests their hearts with faith, expands their chests to embrace Islam, and endows them with profound knowledge of His religion. Those who falter are sceptics and heretics. O Salmān and Jundab! Knowing my luminous nature is akin to knowing God, and knowing Him is akin to knowing me. It represents the essence of pure religion, as the Glorious God also affirms: “Though all they are ordered to do is worship God alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him.” This signifies sincerity (*ikhlas*). His statement: “People of true faith” acknowledges the prophethood of Muhammad and true faith (*al-dīn al-ḥanīf*). His utterance “keep up the prayer” also affirms my *walāya*. Those who embody *walāya* for me are as if they have kept the practice of praying in the world, the most challenging of endeavors. “And pay the prescribed alm” is the acknowledgment of imams, and “for that is the veracious religion” signifies that it is the veracious religion of God.<sup>131</sup> The Qur’an attests that the veracious religion is monotheism through sincerity and acknowledging prophethood and *walāya*. Those who possess these qualities embody the true essence of religion.<sup>132</sup>

O Salmān and Jundab! Muhammad was the speaker, and I am the silent one, for in every era there must be both a silent and a speaking one. Muhammad is the possessor of all, while I am the possessor of the assembly. Muhammad serves as the warner, and I am the guide. He is the possessor of heaven, and I am the possessor of the return. Muhammad is the possessor of the pond, while I am the possessor of the standard. He holds the keys [to the unseen], and I am the possessor of both heaven and hell. Muhammad is the possessor of revelation, and I am the possessor of inspiration. He is the possessor of reasons, whereas I am the possessor of miracles. Muhammad is the seal of prophets, and I am the seal of legatees. He is the possessor of the calling, and I am the possessor of the sword and might. Muhammad is a noble Prophet, while I am the Straight Path. He is a gentle and compassionate person, and I am the most exalted and the most supreme (*al-‘alī al-‘azīm*).

O Salman! The Almighty God stated, “He sends the spirit with His teachings to whichever of His servants He will”.<sup>133</sup> This spirit is not bestowed upon anyone except those to whom command and measure are granted. I breathe life into the lifeless, I possess knowledge of all that resides in the heavens and the earth, I am the clear book. O Salmān! Muhammad established the proof, but I stand as the proof of God (*ḥujjat al-ḥaqq*) over all creation. Through me, the spirit ascends to the heavens. I carried Noah in his ark, I am the possessor of Yonah in the belly of the whale, I guided

*the Babi Religion* (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 86–87; M. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, 1987), pp. 179–180. Riḍā Asadpūr has recently studied various commentaries written on this sermon: Riḍā Asadpūr, *Khuṭbat al-bayān* (Qaem Shahr, 1399/2021).

<sup>131</sup> These verses are passages of the following verse: Q. 98:5.

<sup>132</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-anwār*, p. 255.

<sup>133</sup> Q. 40:15.

Moses through the parted sea, annihilated ancient civilisations, and bestowed knowledge upon prophets and legatees. I am the concluding remark, and with me, the prophethood of Muhammad reached its culmination. I made creeks and seas flow, caused springs to gush forth from the earth, and turned away the world's distractions. I am the punishment on the day of darkness, Khidr the teacher of Moses, the teacher of David and Solomon, I am the possessor of two horns. I am the one who dispels its danger with the aid of the Almighty and Majestic God, and I conquered its vast lands, I am the punishment on the day of darkness. I beckon all from distant realms, I am the beast of the earth, just as the Prophet proclaimed, "O 'Alī! You possess two horns, [which refers to the world] and you hold dominion over both corners of the world as well as the hereafter". O Salmān! Our departed remain eternally alive even after their passing, our murdered are never truly extinguished, our absent are never truly absent, we are not born from maternal wombs, and none can be likened to us! I spoke through the tongue of Jesus while he was yet in his cradle. I am Noah, I am Abraham, I am the possessor of the female camel (*nāqa*), I am the possessor of tremors and earthquakes. I am the preserved tablet from which all knowledge is derived; I can assume any form as God wills. Whoever beholds these indeed beholds me, and whoever perceives me, indeed perceives them. In reality, we are the eternal, unchanging light of God'.<sup>134</sup>

This Hadith is known as 'knowing the luminous nature of imam (*ma'rifat al-imām bi-l-nūrāniyya*)' and it exemplifies the concept of inner knowledge (*ma'rifa*) concerning 'Alī. It demonstrates that this knowledge not only forms the basis of faith or *īmān*, but also crucially distinguishes Islam from disbelief, asserting *walāya* for 'Alī as equivalent to monotheism.<sup>135</sup> While al-Bursī's *Mashāriq al-awnār* stands as one of the earliest sources containing this Hadith, it exerted its influence later in the Safavid and Qajar eras. Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī (d. 1241/1826), Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1111/1699–1700), Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679), Qāḍī Sa'īd Qummī (d. *circa* 1107/1696), Quṭb al-Dīn Nayrīzī (d. 1173/1795), and Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī (d. 1289/1873) have incorporated this Hadith into their works, contributing to its prominence in the early modern and modern eras.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-awnār*, pp. 256–257; for the full version of this conversation, see *ibid.*, pp. 255–258; also see Rizvi, 'Esoteric Shi'ī Islam', pp. 229–230.

<sup>135</sup> It is also important to note that al-Bursī aligns with the prevailing Shi'ī tradition, emphasising imamate as a foundational tenet of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*). That is why he perceives imamate or *walāya* as the crucial element that sets Islam apart from disbelief. See al-Bursī, *Mashāriq al-awnār*, p. 202. For the doctrine of imamate as a pillar of religion in Shi'ī Islam, see Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *al-Bāb al-ḥādī 'ashar li-l- 'Allāma al-Ḥillī ma' a sharḥayh al-nāfi' yawm al-ḥashar li-Miqdād ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Suyūrī wa-miftāḥ al-bāb li-Abī al-Faṭḥ ibn Makhḍūm al-Ḥusaynī*, (ed.) Maḥdī Muḥaqqiq (Tehran, 1365/1986), pp. 40–52.

<sup>136</sup> Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī cites this Hadith without providing his source. He simply notes that he encountered it in an ancient text (*'atiq*). See Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Bihār al-awnār*, 110 vols (Beirut, 1403/1983), vol. 26, pp. 25–28. Later on, Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī, drawing upon the authority of Majlisī, composed a commentary on the same Hadith; see Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī, *Sharḥ-i ḥadīth-i 'Alawī-yi Ma'rifat bi-l-nūrāniyya*, MS *Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis*, 12657, Tehran. Earlier sources also cited this Hadith: see 'Alī Naqī ibn Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī, *Nahj al-maḥajja fī ithbāt imāmat al-'athnā 'ashar 'alayhim al-salām*, two vols (Najaf, 1370/1951), vol. 1, pp. 270–271; Qāḍī Sa'īd Muḥammad ibn al-Mufīd al-Qummī, *Sharḥ tawḥīd Shaykh Ṣaddūq*, (ed.) Najaf-Ghulī Ḥabībī, three vols (Tehran, 1373/1994), vol. 1, pp. 621–625. Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī, however, informs us that this Hadith is documented in al-Bursī's work. Likewise, Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī states that he drew on Rajab al-Bursī's work in incorporating this Hadith; see Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, *al-Kalimāt al-maknūna*, (ed.) 'Alī-Riḍā Aṣgharī (Tehran), pp. 233–235. Therefore, it seems that al-Bursī's *Mashāriq al-awnār* was a major source for many subsequent works that included this Hadith. The Ismaili author Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn al-Qurashī (d. 872/1468) also documented this Hadith; see Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn al-Qurashī, *Zahr al-ma'ānī*, (ed.) Muṣṭafā Ghālīb (Beirut, 1411/1991), pp. 223–226. There are also several Persian poetic adaptations of this Hadith; see Muḥammad Khvājavi (ed.), *Sharḥ va tarjuma-yi manẓūm-i ḥadīth-i ghamāma va nūrāniyyat* (Tehran, 1374/1995), pp. 101–192; Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad

One encounters plentiful instances of such pronoun-centric Hadith and sermons across *Mashāriq al-anwār* and they communicate the same basic message despite being of different lengths. These texts, resplendent with entrancing literary eloquence, serve as the manifestos of ‘Alī’s sanctified authority and sacral power. ‘Alī emerges as a triumphant figure in them, vanquishing his adversaries and transcending the boundaries of mortality. He assumes the mantle of a universal sovereign, reigning not only over earthly realms from east to west, but also over the vast expanse of the cosmos and the very fabric of time. His dominion, universal and everlasting, extends across all lands, both imaginary and real, and all times, past and future; at times, his dominion is marked by awe-inspiring dread yet, at others, it is imbued with boundless mercy and compassion. ‘Alī’s knowledge of both the past and the future stands as unquestionable and he is presented as the exclusive means to humanity’s salvation and redemption. The aesthetic allure of these passages, along with the artful repetition of pronouns, serve as potent instruments for articulating ‘Alī’s sacral authority. He is positioned not as a deity, but as the sacred isthmus between God and time/space—the ultimate source of authority that unites the above and below and the past and future.

### Concluding remarks

As Azfar Moin has demonstrated, ‘Alī’s resurgence during the early modern period was, on the one hand, influenced by the Sunni Sufi tradition, which revered him as a mystical and cosmic figure. On the other hand, his renewed prominence also stemmed from the accounts in epic narratives, such as those in *‘Alī-nāma* (*Book of ‘Alī*), *Khāwar-nāma* (*Book of Khāwar*), and *Kitāb Jāmāsp* (*Book of Jāmāsp*), which depict him as the preeminent warrior of Islam.<sup>137</sup> Rajab al-Bursī’s portrayal of ‘Alī was certainly a significant component within this larger context of the emergence of ‘Alī as a pivotal figure during this period, resonating with both Shi‘as and Sunnis alike. As noted, al-Bursī’s *Mashāriq al-anwār* includes numerous Hadith depicting ‘Alī not only as an esoteric, mystical, and cosmic figure, but also as profoundly mythical and epic. These narratives collectively portray him as the foundation of esoteric knowledge, as the arbiter of Heaven and Hell, and, though not divine, as the supreme name of God, showcasing mythic and mystic characteristics. In essence, the Hadith in *Mashāriq al-anwār* do not contain the typical legal, ethical, or social matters commonly seen in many Hadith works. Instead, *Mashāriq al-anwār* narrates devotional, esoteric, and epic stories about ‘Alī that can explain the widespread reception and adoption of this work in the Shi‘i world.<sup>138</sup>

Al-Bursī’s depiction of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, with its esoteric, mystical, and mythical aspects, has been discarded and branded as ‘superstitious’, ‘gullible’, and ‘extreme’,<sup>139</sup>

Nayrīzī, *Manzūma-yi ḥadīth-i nūrāniyyat*, MS *Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis*, 162901, folios 96r.–110v. For a brief analysis of this Hadith during the Qajar era, see S. H. Rizvi, ‘Mullā ‘Alī Nūrī’, in *Philosophy in Qajar Iran*, (ed.) Reza Pourjavady (Leiden, 2019), pp. 151–152.

<sup>137</sup> See Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, pp. 54–55, 63–67.

<sup>138</sup> With regard to the reception of al-Bursī, Matthew Melvin-Koushki maintains that Rajab al-Bursī ‘draw freely on the early Shi‘i “esoteric nonrational” Hadith corpus, in some cases rescuing otherwise unattested traditions for Twelver posterity. Indeed, his lettrism aside, this was a primary reason for his eager reception by Safavid scholars, given the ardent *ad fontes* ethos so definitive of Safavid intellectual history generally’; see Melvin-Koushki, ‘Safavid Twelver lettrism’, p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> For examples, see Muḥsin al-Amīn, *A ‘yān al-Shī‘a*, (ed.) Ḥasan al-Amīn, 12 vols (Beirut, 1403/1983), vol. 6, p. 466; C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, two vols (Leipzig, 1901), vol. 2, p. 204; Rasūl Ja‘fariyān, *Tārīkh-i tashayyu‘ dar Irān: az āghāz tā tulū‘-i dawlat-i Ṣafavī* (Tehran, 1387/2008), p. 766; Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 1, p. 10; Ni‘mat Allāh Ṣāliḥī Najafābādī, *Ghuluww: darāmadi bar afkār va ‘aqā‘id-i ghāliyyān dar dīn* (Tehran, 1384/2005), p. 89; Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Shaybī, ‘al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Bursī wa-l-‘anāṣur al-Ṣūfiyya fī afkārihi al-ghāliyya’, *Kulliyat al-Adāb Jāmi‘a Baghdād* 9 (1966), pp. 273–311.

-serving as a symbol of decay and intellectual delusion that marred post-Golden Age Islamic intellectual history, in which the philosophy and rational thinking of luminaries such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) were supplanted by the bewildering ‘irrationalities’ of Sufis, occultists, and ‘pseudo-scientists’.<sup>140</sup> However, it is imperative to note the intricate historical context in which al-Bursī’s portrayal of ‘Alī and his sacral power emerged. It was an era in which rulers, empires, and intellectuals tirelessly sought the acquisition of sacral power, not as mere intellectual amusement or frivolous musings on absurdities, but as pragmatic instruments to construct empires vying for universal dominion.<sup>141</sup> Al-Bursī’s portrayal of ‘Alī was thus not an extreme and isolated work, but it did indeed mark a pivotal moment in the Sunni-Shi‘i continuum, effectively disseminating ‘Alī’s sacral power and love to a broad spectrum of readers.

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<sup>140</sup> See M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘Is (Islamic) occult science science?’ *Theology and Science* 18.2 (2020), pp. 303–324.

<sup>141</sup> See Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*; M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘Early modern Islamic empire’, in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, (eds.) A. Salvatore, R. Tottoli, Babak Rahimi, M. Fariduddin Attar, and Naznin Patel (Chichester, 2018), pp. 351–375.

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