Ta'wīl of the Qur'ān and the *Sharīʿa* according to
Ḥakīm Nāṣir-i Khusraw
by Faquir Muhammad Hunzai

Ḥakīm Nāṣir-i Khusraw's contribution to the Ismaili *daʿwa* in particular and to Islamic thought and literature in general is universally recognised. This paper seeks to highlight his role in the process of *ta'wīl* and its importance in Islam and the Ismaili *ṭarīqa*. First, however, as a context for his contribution it would be important to briefly describe the lexical meaning of the term *ta'wīl* and the different approaches to it in Islam.

Ta'wīl, on the measure of *tafʿīl*, stems from the Arabic root letters *alif*, *wāw* and *lām*, that is, *āla ya'ūlu*. Its synonyms in Arabic are *rajaʿa yarjiʿu* and *ʿāda yaʿūdu*, that is, to return. Thus lexically *ta'wīl* means *raddu'sh-shay'i ilā awwalihi*, i.e. to cause a thing to return to its beginning or origin.[1] In Ismaili terminology it means to cause the spiritual realities that are revealed in the form of parables (*amthāl*) to return to their origin, the spiritual world. It is one of the fundamental subjects of religion. It co-relates to *tanzīl* and together they make the religion complete. Nonetheless it has been a controversial subject among Muslims. The controversy is about the positioning of punctuation marks in *Sūra* 3, verse 7, the subject matter of which is the *muḥkamāt* (univocal) and *mutashābihāt* (equivocal) verses and the *ta'wīl* of the latter. The verse may be rendered as follows:

> "He it is Who has sent down to you the Book, of which are univocal (*muḥkamāt*) verses, they are the mother of the Book and others are equivocal (*mutashābihāt*). As for those in whose hearts is perversity follow that [part of] it which is equivocal, seeking discord and seeking its *ta'wīl*. But no one knows its *ta'wīl* except Allah and those who are well grounded in knowledge saying: We believe in it, all is from our Lord".

This translation is from the point of view of those who maintain that the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābih* is known to the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ʿilm* in addition to Allah and they do not place a full stop after Allah in "*wa-mā yaʿlamu ta'wīlahu illa'llāhu wa'r-rāsikhūna fi'l-ʿilm*". This is the reading of Shiʿa Islam and of the majority of *mutakallims*,

philosophers and Ṣūfis in Sunni Islam. The literalists of Sunni Islam, however put a full stop after Allah and they confine the knowledge of the *mutashābih* to Him alone. They consider that a new sentence begins with "*wa'r-rāsikhūna fi'l-ᶜilm*" instead of it being a continuation of the preceding predicate. The reason for their reading thus is that if the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* are made partners with Allah in the knowledge of the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābih*, they would be severed from "*yaqūlūna āmannā bihi*" as there is no conjunctive *wāw* here to necessitate two verbs for them.[2]

The others however, do not agree with this grammatical explanation. For instance, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), a prominent scholar of Sunni Islam, whom Nāṣir mentions in his *Khwān al-ikhwān*,[3] argues that this stand is wrong both lexically and logically. He asserts that there are many examples of this kind in the Arabic language, in which the second verb, i.e. *yaqūlūn* is not used as an independent verb, rather as the *ḥāl* (state). For example, it is said: *Lā ya'tīka ᶜAbdu'llāhi wa-Zaydun yaqūlu: anā masrūrun bi-ziyāratika*. Here *yaqūlu* is used as *qā'ilan* (saying). That is: "Nobody comes to you except ᶜAbd Allāh and Zayd saying: 'I am happy visiting you'". He also quotes Ibn Mufarrigh al-Ḥimyarī's poetry to substantiate his argument:

> *Wa'r-rīḥu tabkī shajwahā; wa'l-barqu yalmaᶜu fi ghamāma*[4]
> The wind weeps its grief and the lightning [also] shining in a cloud

Here *yalmaᶜu* is used in the sense of *lāmiᶜan*, i.e. in the sense of *ḥāl*. That is, the lightning also weeps shining in a cloud. If the lightning did not participate with the wind in weeping, there is no sense in mentioning it and its shining.

With respect to logic, he says: Would it be permissible for anyone to say that the Prophet did not know [the *ta'wīl* of] the *mutashābih*? If it is permissible for him to know, despite Allah's saying: "And nobody knows its *ta'wīl* except Allah", then it is also permissible for the divines among his companions to know. Indeed, he taught ᶜAlī the exegesis and prayed for Ibn ᶜAbbās and said: "*Allāhumma ᶜallimhu't-ta'wīla wa-faqqihhu fi'd-dīn*", that is, "O Allah! Teach him the *ta'wīl* and instruct him in religion".[5]

Ibn Qutayba further says that if the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* had no share in the knowledge of the *mutashābih* except saying: "We believe in it, all is from our Lord", then they

would have no superiority over the students, indeed over the ignorant ones among the Muslims, because all of them say the same thing.[6]

It should be noted that those who maintain that the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* know the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābih* also differ in the meaning of the term. In Shiᶜa Islam, the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* are the Prophet, Imam ᶜAlī and the Imams from their progeny in their respective times.[7] In Sunni Islam however there is no such restriction, anyone who attains enough knowledge of the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* and classical Arabic literature can claim to be among the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm*.

With respect to the grammatical structure of *Sūra* 3 verse 7, Ismaili *dāᶜis* agree entirely with the analysis of Ibn Qutayba, as Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī, an eminent Ismaili *dāᶜī*, in his *al-Maṣābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma*, gives the same explanation as the former.[8]

As regards logic, in Shiᶜa Islam *ta'wīl* is not only permissible, but it is necessary because without it the purpose of religion cannot be fulfilled. It is argued that the purpose of *tanzīl*, the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*, is to inform about the next world, which is imperceptible to the human senses, as the Prophet has said about paradise: "In it is that which no eye has seen, nor has the ear heard, nor has it occurred to the human heart".[9] However, Kirmānī and other *dāᶜīs* argue that since human intellects on their own, without attaining the spiritual eye (*baṣīra*) through the teaching of the Prophet or the Imam, have no way to recognise it except through the perceptible examples, the Prophets convey the realities of that world in the guise of the physical and perceptible examples. Further, as God commanded the Prophet to invite people on the basis of wisdom (16:125), these examples have to be based on the foundation of intellect and logic. Nonetheless, he argues that the *ẓāhir* of what the Prophet has brought of the Qur'ān and the *sharīᶜa* is contrary to the rules of the intellect, such as in verse (7:172) the impossibility of taking out the *dhurriyyat* or the offspring of Adam's children from their loins and taking covenant from them in the form of the smallest of ants[10] as understood by the literalists.[11] It is prohibited in Islam to accept the testimony of infants and young boys, let alone that of offspring in the loins. Similarly, the physical impossibility of the Prophet's saying: "Between my grave and my pulpit there is a garden from among the gardens of Paradise", as there is no trace of such a garden. Since the Prophet is a sage and ignorance cannot ever be attributed to him, such

statements require *ta'wīl* compatible and acceptable to the intellects. Thus, it is the *ta'wīl* through which the *tanzīl* can be proven to be true.[12]

Further, the Qur'ān abounds in references to *ta'wīl*:

- Verses (12:6, 21; 18:65-82),[13] confirm that Ḥaḍrat Yūsuf and Ḥaḍrat Khidr possessed the knowledge of *ta'wīl*.
- Verses (31:20; 6:121)[14] mention the *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* of Divine bounties as well as human actions.
- Verse (36:36)[15] emphasises the creation of everything in *azwāj* (pl. of *zawj*) or pairs, thus it is argued that *ta'wīl* is necessarily the pair of *tanzīl* or its *bāṭin* or inner counterpart.

About the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* who are the source of *ta'wīl*, Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir is quoted as saying: "The most excellent of them is the Prophet whom God has indeed taught all that which He has revealed to him of the *tanzīl* and *ta'wīl* and nothing was revealing to him except that he knew its *ta'wīl*, then the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm* after him are *awsiyā'* (pl. of *waṣī*), the legatees who know its *ta'wīl* entirely".[16]

Qāḍi Nuᶜmān says that Allah has made the *ẓāhir*, that is, the *tanzīl* (exoteric aspect) of the Qur'ān the miracle of His Messenger, and its *bāṭin*, that is, the *ta'wīl* (esoteric aspect) the miracle of the Imams from his *ahl al-bayt*, which is found only with them. Just as nobody can bring the *ẓāhir* of the Book except their grandfather, Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, nobody can bring its *bāṭin* except the Imams from his progeny. It is a knowledge abounding among them and entrusted to them. They speak of it to every community according to their capacity to understand and they grant to every individual of the *ḥudūd* that which he or she deserves, and hold it back from others and repel those who deserve to be repelled, as God says in verse (38:39): "This is Our gift, so give freely or withhold it, without an account".[17]

Further, on the basis of verse (7:53): "Do they wait for anything other than its *ta'wīl*? The day its (the Qur'ān's) *ta'wīl* comes",[18] it is argued that in contrast to *tanzīl*, which is confined in time and space, *ta'wīl* is a continuous process. Its continuity is both in an historical as well as in a personal, individual sense. Historically there is a good testimony of *ta'wīlī* literature throughout history. Personally, an Imam gives different *ta'wīls* to an individual *murīd* for his spiritual development. With reference to this

Qāḍī Nuᶜmān quotes an incident about Imam Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq that once one of his followers said to him: "O son of the Prophet of Allah! [This time] we heard from you different from the previous time". The Imam replied: "I speak about a single word in seven modes". The person reflecting on this answer exclaimed: "Seven [modes] O the son of the Prophet of Allah!" The Imam answered: "Yes, [not only seven, but] seventy modes, and still if someone were to ask us for more, we would have given him more". Thus, Qāḍi Nuᶜmān concludes that this knowledge is granted according to the capacity of the *ḥudūd*.[19]

In Shiᶜa Islam, as already mentioned *ta'wīl* co-relates to *tanzīl*. That is, with every law-giving Prophet (*nāṭiq*), who brings the *tanzīl*, God also appoints someone as his *waṣī* or *asās*, to give the *ta'wīl*. For example, Ḥaḍrat Shīth was the *asās* of Ḥaḍrat Ādam. Similarly, the *asās* of Prophet Muḥammad was Imam ᶜAlī, about whom he said: "The best among you is the one who will fight for the sake of *ta'wīl* as I fought for the sake of *tanzīl*".[20] After Imam ᶜAlī, every Imam of the time from his descendants has the same position.

Prior to Nāṣir Khusraw, many eminent *dāᶜīs* in their respective times, wrote works on the necessity, the source and continuation of *ta'wīl*, such as Muḥammad b. Ahmad Nakshabī (or Nasafī) (d. 331/942), Abū Ḥātim Rāzī (d. after 322/933-4), Abū Yaᶜqūb Sijzī (or Sijistānī) (d. after 360/970), Jaᶜfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. 365/975 or 380/990), Qāḍī Nuᶜmān (d. 363/974), Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. after 411/1021), al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) and others.

Abū Muᶜīn Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāṣir-i Khusraw b. Ḥārith-i Qubādiyānī, Yumgānī, the *ḥujjat* of Khurasan comes after such a rich heritage of *ta'wīlī* literature. He was born in Qubādiyān in 394/1004 and passed away after 469/1076 in Yumgān. In his early years he acquired the prevalent sciences of his time, subsequent to which he joined government service. In 437/1045,[21] as a result of a vision he resigned from government service and set out in search of the Imam of the time. He reached Cairo in the time of Imam al-Mustanṣir bi'llāh I (d. 487/1094) and accepted the Ismaili *madhhab*. He movingly expresses his experience of the *dīdār* of the Imam as follows:

> *Bar jān-i man chū nūr-i imām-i zamān bi-tāft*
> *Laylu's-sarār būdam-u shamsu'ḍ-ḍuḥā shudam*

Nām-i buzurg imām-i zamānast zin qibal
Man az zamīn chū zuhra badū bar samā shudam[22]
When the light of the Imam of the time shone upon my soul,
Even though I was dark as night, I became the glorious sun.
The Supreme Name is the Imam of the time;
By which I ascended, Venus-like, from the earth to heaven.

Whilst in Cairo, he rapidly climbed the ladder of *ḥudūd-i dīn* until he was appointed the *ḥujjat* of Khurasan.[23] He left Cairo in 441/1050 and arrived back in Balkh in 444/1052.[24] He began to preach the Ismaili *daᶜwa* here and in the surrounding regions and initially had great success. Soon, however he faced opposition and fleeing Balkh, he took refuge in Yumgān, which at the time was ruled by an Ismaili prince ᶜAlī b. al-Asad.[25] He spread the Ismaili *daᶜwa* actively and peacefully from here. He describes this in his Dīwān:

Har sāl yakī kitāb-i daᶜwat; Ba-aṭrāf-i jahān hamī firistam[26]
Every year a book of *daᶜwat* I send to the corners of the world

We have already seen that the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an is a continuous process through the Imam of every time and his *ḥudūd-i dīn*. Every *dāᶜī* has emphasised the basic principles of *ta'wīl*, that is, its necessity and its main source the Imam of the time and its continuity, in the language and circumstances of his own context. Prior to Nāṣir, almost all the Ismaili *ta'wīlī* literature was written in the Arabic language. Apart from *Bunyād-i ta'wīl*, which is a translation of Qāḍī Nuᶜmān's *Asās al-ta'wīl*, attributed to al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn Shirāzī, *Sharḥ-i qaṣīda-yi Abu'l-Haytham* by Muḥammad b. Surkh Nishāpūrī (4th/10th-5th/11th century), and *Kashf al-maḥjūb* of Abū Yaᶜqūb Sijistānī, the remainder of the extant *ta'wīlī* literature appears to be in Arabic. Even among these three works only *Sharḥ-i qaṣīda* is originally in Persian, both the others being originally in Arabic. Nāṣir realised the needs of the *daᶜwa* in his area where under the influence of the Samanids and Ghaznawids, the importance of Persian was increasing. The domain of his *daᶜwa* was Persian speaking, he thus wrote all his works in Persian, with the exception of a *Dīwān* of poetry in Arabic, which is now non-extant.[27] This is an enormous contribution to the Persian speaking Ismaili *jamāᶜat* and to the Persian Islamic world in general. He is universally acclaimed as a pioneer in introducing *ḥikmat* or wisdom in Persian poetry. With the exception of *Safar-nāma*,

all his works are immersed in *ta'wīli* teachings, particularly *Wajh-i dīn*, which is devoted entirely to the *ta'wīl* of the fundamental teachings of Islam, such as *walāyat*, *ṭahārat*, *ṣalāt*, *zakāt*, *ṣawm*, *ḥajj*, *jihād* and other related subjects.

It is intended to concentrate in this paper on the three essential aspects of *ta'wīl* as dealt with by Nāṣir, that is: its necessity, its source and continuation.

1. **Necessity of *ta'wīl***: As mentioned in the first part of this paper, *tanzīl* and *ta'wīl* are co-related. Thus, in order to understand the nature of *ta'wīl*, it is important to understand the nature of *tanzīl*. Nāṣir defines *tanzīl* as "an expression of intellectual things, which are made to resemble perceptible things".[28] *Ta'wīl* on the other hand "is to take the perceptible things back to their original intellectual state".[29] He uses many synonyms for *tanzīl* and *ta'wīl*, such as word and meaning, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*), etc. He establishes its necessity from the very nature of the human constitution. He argues that the Divine message is for the sake of the guidance of human beings, who with respect to their subtle soul are alike, whereas with respect to their body are different. Thus, the Prophets who bring the Divine message have to convey it accordingly. They ordain it in such a way that it has a physical aspect and a spiritual aspect. Nāṣir says: "The Prophets ordain for the human beings such actions that they are based on knowledge, so that they may perform actions with their bodies and seek the knowledge hidden in them with their soul". For instance, for the bodies have been enjoined *ṣalāt*, *zakāt*, *ṣawm*, *ḥajj*, *jihad*, etc. and for the soul to know their meanings.[30] Nāṣir compares religion with a human being, of which action (*ᶜamal*) is like the body and the knowledge (*ᶜilm*) is like the soul. Thus, whoever performs action without knowledge, his religion is without soul.[31] The purpose of religion cannot be fulfilled only with the *tanzīl* or actions without knowledge or *ta'wīl*. In his *Dīwān*, he uses the analogy of salt water for *tanzīl* and lustrous pearls hidden in it for the *ta'wīl*. He says:

    > *Shūr ast chū daryā ba-mathal ẓāhir-i tanzīl*
    > *Ta'wīl chū lu'lu'st sū-yi mardum-i dānā*[32]
    > The exoteric of *tanzīl* is like brackish water,

But the *ta'wīl* is like pearls in wise people's eyes.

2. **Source of *ta'wīl***: According to Nāṣir, the source of *ta'wīl* is the Prophet himself and his *waṣī* or *asās*. The Prophet or *nāṭiq* has the two ranks of *tanzīl* and *ta'wīl*, but the *asās* has only the rank of *ta'wīl*. Practically however, the *nāṭiq* in his time transmits *ta'wīl* only to his *asās* and it is the latter who continues the function of doing *ta'wīl* after the Prophet. In Shiᶜa Islam, further to Allah, the Prophet, his *waṣī* and the Imams from their descendants know *ta'wīl*. The rest of the *umma* attain it through obedience and devotion to them. Nāṣir says: "No one can attain knowledge of the equivocal verses by reasoning, except the lord of the *ta'wīl*. We did not find anyone in the community who invites [people] to solve the obscurities of the equivocal verses except a group from the Prophet's Family (*ahl al-bayt*). Therefore, we resolved to go to them and found knowledge of the equivocal verses of the Qur'ān and the *sharīᶜat*. We came to know that they are the lords of the command of God, may He be exalted, whose obedience He has enjoined upon us by this verse: 'O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Prophet and obey those who possess the Divine Command (*ulu'l-amr*) amongst you' (4:59)".[33]

3. **Continuation of *ta'wīl***: We have already discussed verse (7:53), according to which the process of *ta'wil* is continuous, as the verb used in it "*ya'tī*", is a *muḍāriᶜ* or aorist that gives the meaning of both the present and the future. Nāṣir establishes the continuity of *ta'wīl* on the basis of such verses as (16:44): "We have sent down to you [O Muḥammad] the Remembrance (the Qur'ān) so that you may explain to the people what has been sent down, and so that they may reflect"; and verse (17:106): "And a Qur'ān, which We have divided into parts in order that you may recite it to the people at intervals." He argues that in the light of such verses there has to be someone to explain the Book, because God does not say to the Prophet to give it to them so that they may read it themselves, rather He commands him to explain it to them. In verse 17:106, to recite the Qur'ān "at intervals", according to Nāṣir means to explain its *ta'wīl* in every time. The one who does this is the Imam of the time.[34]

In conclusion, *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān is necessary to convey the complete meaning of religion. It is however not open to each and every individual, it is known only to the *rāsikhūn fi'l-ᶜilm*, who are the Prophet and his *waṣī* Imam ᶜAlī and their descendants. It is through their *ta'wīl* that the Qur'ān becomes the perennial source of guidance in every time and age; the form of interpretation changes but the essence of the Divine message remains the same. In this way the faith of Islam remains dynamic and relevant for all times and places.

[1] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ᶜArab* (Beirut, n. d.), XI, 32-34.

[2] Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, ed. A. Ṣaqr (Cairo, 1973), p. 100.

[3] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Khwān al-ikhwān*, ed. A. Qawīm (Tehran, 1959), p. 69.

[4] *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, pp. 98-99.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 99.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[7] Qāḍī Nuᶜmān, *Daᶜā'im al-Islam*, ed. A.A.A. Fyzee (Cairo, 1963), I, 22-23; Muḥammad Kulaynī, *Uṣūl-i Kafi*, translated into Persian by Jawād Muṣṭafawī (Tehran (?), n.d.), I, 279, 308-10; Muḥammad Ayāshī, *Kitāb al-Tafsīr*, ed. Hāshim Maḥallatī (Qum, 1380/1960), pp. 162-64; ᶜAlī b. Ibrāhīm Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, ed. Ṭayyib Musawī (Najaf, 1386/1966), I, 96-97; Fayḍ Kashanī, *al-Ṣāfi*, ed. Abu'l-Ḥasan Shaᶜrānī (Tehran, 1977), I, 246-48.

[8] Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī, *al-Maṣābīḥ fi ithbāt al-imāma*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut, 1969), pp. 71-72; hereafter cited as *al-Maṣābīḥ*.

[9] Al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn Shīrāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, ed. Ḥātim Ḥamīd al-Dīn (Bombay, 1975), I, 284.

[10] *al-Maṣābīḥ*, pp. 66-67.

[11] Muḥammad b. Jarīr Ṭabarī, *Jāmīᶜ al-bayān* (Cairo, 1954), IX, 110-18).

[12] *Al-Maṣābīḥ*, p. 67.

[13] Qāḍī Nuᶜmān, *al-Himma*, ed. M. K. Ḥusayn (Cairo, 1948), p. 131; Qāḍī Nuᶜmān, *Asās al-ta'wīl*, ed. ᶜA. Tāmir (Beirut, 1960), p. 31.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 31.

[15] *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, I, 103.

[16] See above note 7.

[17] *Asās al-ta'wīl*, p. 32.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 29.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 27.

[20] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Wajh-i dīn*, ed. Gholam-Reza Aavanī (Tehran, 1977), p. 269; Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Jāmīᶜ al-ḥikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mo'in (Tehran/Paris, 1953), p. 61; *The Holy Ahl-i Bayt in the Prophetic Traditions*, compiled and translated by F. M. Hunzai & R.N. Hunzai (Karachi, 1999), pp. 13-14.

[21] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Safar-nāma*, ed. M. D. Siyāqī (Tehran, 1984), p. 2.

[22] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Dīwān*, ed. Naṣr Allāh Taqawī (Tehran, 1925-28), p. 273.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 176.

[24] *Safar-nāma*, pp. 109, 174.

[25] *Jāmīᶜ al-ḥikmatayn*, pp. 15-18, 100, 314-16.

[26] *Dīwān*, p. 298.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 15.

[28] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Zād al-musāfirīn*, ed. Badhl al-Raḥmān (Berlin, 1923), p. 399.

[29] *Wajh-i dīn*, p. 95; *Jāmiᶜ al-ḥikmatayn*, p. 116.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[32] *Dīwān*, p. 3.

[33] *Wajh-i dīn*, p. 281.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.