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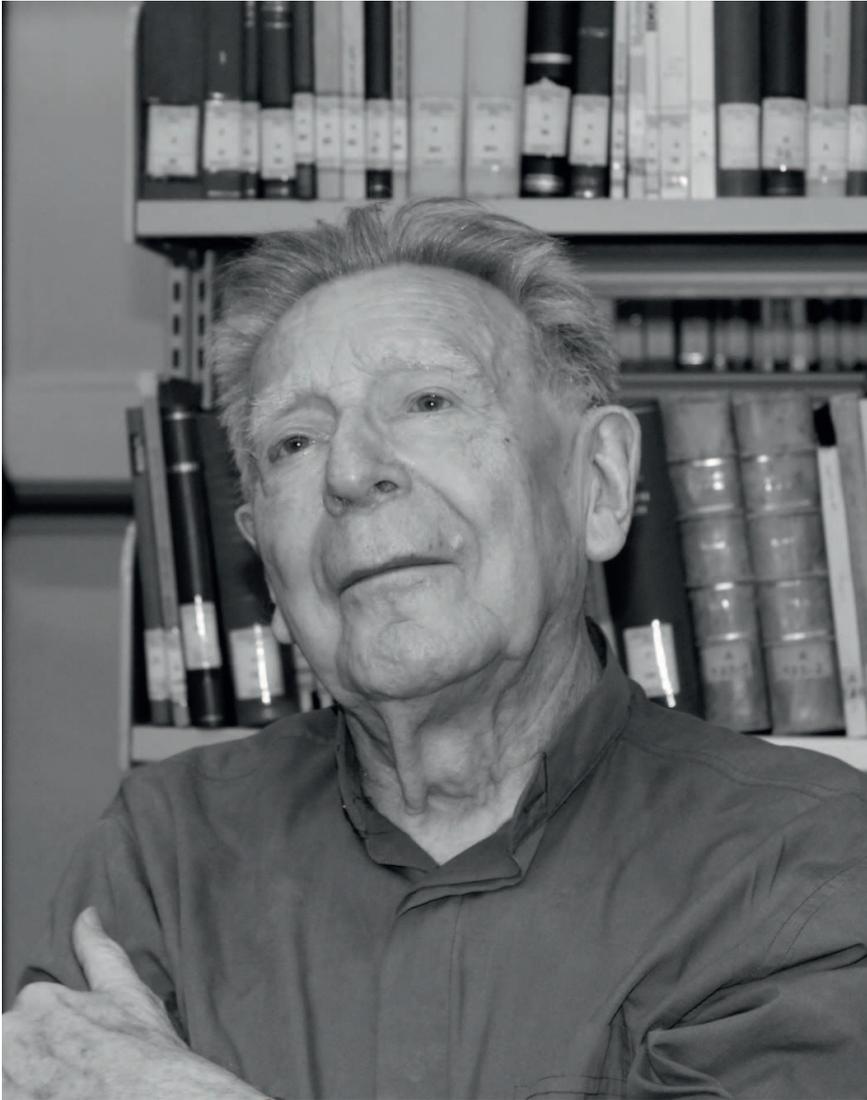


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Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v



Maurice Borrmans MAfr. (1925-2017)

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Embryology in an Ismā'īlī Messianic Context

The Manuscript Tradition of the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'

Carmela Baffioni*

Abstract

This paper discusses Ismā'īlī tendencies in some additions to the MSS of the *Rasā'il* Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' consulted for the new edition of the Encyclopaedia launched by the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. Embryology is addressed in particular, and may be understood as supporting Fāṭimid rule. The texts examined are in part copied from the *Risāla al-Ġāmi'a* and the *Risāla Ġāmi'at al-Ġāmi'a*. Even if the additions are later interpolations, they demonstrate that the Iḥwān's leaning towards Ismā'īlism was a common belief at least in a certain manuscript tradition.

Introduction

The Ismā'īlī commitment of the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' is one of the most debated – and still unsolved – issues concerning the Encyclopaedia. The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London is supporting a new edition of the *Rasā'il* to be based on the following MSS:

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris:

MS 2303 (1611 CE): [ر]

MS 2304 (1065/1654 CE): [ز]

MS 6.647-6.648 (AH 695; Yazd): [د]

Bodleian Library, Oxford:

MS Hunt 296 (n.d.): [ج]

MS Laud Or. 255 (n.d.): [ح]

MS Laud Or. 260 (1560 CE): [خ]

MS Marsh 189 (n.d.): [غ]

El Escorial:

MS Casiri 895/Derenbourg 900 (1535-1536 CE): [س]

MS Casiri 923/Derenbourg 928 (1458 CE): [ش]

Istanbul collections (mainly the Süleymaniye and associated libraries):

MS Atif Efendi 1681 (1182 CE): [ع]

MS Esad Efendi 3637 (n.d.; ca. thirteenth century CE): [ن]

MS Esad Efendi 3638 (ca. 1287 CE): [ف]

MS Feyzullah 2130 (AH 704): [ف]

MS Feyzullah 2131 (AH 704): [ق]

MS Köprülü 870 (fifteenth century CE, under the reign of Muḥammad al-Fāṭih): [ك]

*To Father Maurice Borrmans, a mentor and a guide.

MS Köprülü 871 (820/1417 CE): [ل]

MS Köprülü 981 (n.d.): [و]

Staatsbibliothek, Berlin:

MS 5038 (AH 600/1203 CE): [ب]

The Mahdavi Collection, Tehran:

MS 7437 (AH 640): [ط].

The Istanbul MS Atif (‘Āṭif) Efendi 1681 – the oldest MS of the *Rasāʾil* now available, dated 1182 CE, labelled [ع] – has been commonly taken as the ground of the new edition.

I have edited the logical epistles 10-14, the natural epistles 15-21 and epistles 23, 25, 39, 40 and 50. In the course of my editing I have found a number of additions that are missing in the printed versions of the Encyclopaedia.¹ One of these additions is in MS [ع]; the others belong to some of the MSS I was provided for examination (all the above-mentioned MSS except [س] and [و]):

<i>Epistle</i>	MSS in which the addition is found
<i>Epistle 10, end</i>	MS [ع], fol. 123b2-18 ²
<i>Epistle 12, end</i>	MS [i], fols. 67a16-b1 ³
<i>Epistle 15, just before the conclusive exhortations of the treatise (Atif, fol. 147a12).⁴</i>	MSS [ج], fols. 101a20-101b19; ⁵ [ز], fols. 113b16-114a10; [ف], fol. 81b5-23; ⁶ [ك]; ⁷ [ل], fol. 144b, in the margin; ⁸ and [ن], fol. 135 (136)a28-b21. ⁹

¹ They have been printed in Bombay (ed. Wilāyat Ḥusayn, 1887-1889), Cairo (ed. Ḥayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, 1928), and Beirut (ed. Buṭrus al-Bustānī, 1957; henceforth: Ṣādir), all in four volumes. There is a more recent ed. in 5 vol. by ‘Ā. Tāmir, Beirut 1995. These versions provide no indications about the manuscripts used, and do not substantially differ from each other.

² The text has been published and translated in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Logic. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 10-14*, ed. and tr. C. Baffioni, Oxford U.P. - Institute of Ismaili Studies, New York 2010, pp. 157-65. I have showed that this addition is very close to *Epistle 35, III*, pp. 234.6-236.19 Ṣādir, where emanationism is also mentioned (*ibid.*, p. 164). Therefore, it could be removed from *Epistle 10* without damaging its logical content or its consistency.

³ The text has been published and translated in *On Logic* (above, n. 2), pp. 181-6. Cf. also C. Baffioni, “Il ‘computo delle proposizioni’ nel MS Esad Effendi 3638 e la tradizione siro-araba”, in C. Noce - M. Pampaloni - C. Tavolieri (eds.), *Le vie del sapere in ambito siro-mesopotamico dal III al IX secolo*. Atti del Convegno internazionale tenuto a Roma nei giorni 12-13 maggio 2011, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome 2013 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 293), pp. 253-8.

⁴ The passage is lacking in Ṣādir, but present in F. Dieterici, *Die Abhandlungen der Ichwan es-Safa in Auswahl*, zum ersten Mal aus arabischen Handschriften herausgegeben, J.C. Hinrichsche Buchhandlung, Leipzig 1883, pp. 40-2. The addition is edited and translated in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 15-21*, ed. and tr. C. Baffioni, Oxford U.P. - Institute of Ismaili Studies, New York 2013, pp. 359-69, with careful textual analysis. I have established the text on the basis of MS [ف] that, except for a few cases, seems to provide the best version, with the support of [ك] and [ل].

⁵ With regard to *Epistle 15* in MS [ج] the foliation seems to exist but it is hardly visible.

⁶ The Arabic foliation of MS [ف] on the top *recto folio* is not always visible.

⁷ The foliation is not visible in the PDF I have been provided with. The text goes from line 31 of the *verso* (right side) to line 17 of the *recto* (left side) of the fourth sheet of my PDF.

⁸ MS [ل] gives the addition in the margin, a sign that the copyist is probably comparing several versions.

⁹ The addition is inside a passage by another hand, signalled as an interpolation by a row of dots in red ink at the top of the page.

<p><i>Epistle 16</i>, after the words <i>wa-lāhum yahzanūn</i> (Atif fol. 157a5) and before the final invocations.¹⁰</p>	<p>MSS [ج], fols. 108a23-111a6 and [ف], fols. 85b22-87a19. It occurs identical in both MSS.</p>
<p><i>Epistle 20</i>, after Atif fol. 187b6, before recalling that Abraham placed the Black Stone.¹¹</p>	<p>MS [ف] has <i>waḍ'īhi</i> only instead of <i>waḍ'īhi l-ḥaḡar</i>, followed by an addition at fols. 101b13-102a14.¹²</p>
<p><i>Epistle 23</i>, after the words <i>al-ḥiḡāra tilka al-madīna wa-āḡurrubā</i>.¹³</p>	<p>It is provided by all the MSS consulted (in complete form, in MSS [ز] and [ك] only): MSS [إ], fols. 122/132b18-123/133a15;¹⁴ [ج] fols. 208a7-208b25; [ر], fols. 240/241b19-241/242a18; [ز], fols. 205a27-206a30;¹⁵ [ك]¹⁶; [ن], in the upper and right margins of fol. 260a.</p>

¹⁰ This addition is neither in Dieterici nor in Šādir. Cf. on this text *On the Natural Sciences* (above, n. 4), pp. 385-92. The complete text with translation and commentary has been published in C. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shī'ism in the Additions to Ancient Manuscripts of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Šafā'*”, in M.A. Amir-Moezzi - M. De Cillis - D. De Smet - O. Mir-Kasimov (eds.), *L'Ésothérisme shī'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements / Shī'i Esotericism, its Roots and Developments*, Brepols, Turnhout 2016, pp. 281-326. The first part of the addition is the same as in the *Risāla al-Ġāmī'a*, pp. 351.3-357.17 of the version attributed to Aḥmad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Ismā'il b. Ġa'far al-Šādiq, the second veiled (*mastūr*) *imām* after 'Abdallāh and before his son al-Ḥusayn, and 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī, who later became the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty. Cf. *Al-Risāla al-Ġāmī'a. Tāḡ Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Šafā' wa-Ḥullān al-Wafā', tālif al-imām al-mastūr Aḥmad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Ismā'il b. Ġa'far al-Šādiq*, ed. M. Ġālib, Dār al-Andalus, Bayrūt 1984, henceforth [J(1)], ending with the words *ilā mustahaqqīhi*. The text corresponds to pp. 33.1-45.2 of the second volume of the version attributed to the Spanish scientist and scholar Maslama al-Maḡrītī, who is supposed to have introduced the epistles to Spain (but discussion on this point needs to be postponed for another occasion). Cf. *Al-Risāla al-Ġāmī'a al-mansūba li-l-ḥakīm al-Maḡrītī, al-Ġuz' al-awwal*; *Al-Risāla al-Ġāmī'a al-mansūba li-l-ḥakīm al-Maḡrītī wa-ḥiya tāḡ Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Šafā' wa-Ḥullān al-Wafā', al-Ġuz' al-tāni*, ed. Ġ. Šalībā, Maṭba'at al-Taraqqī, Damascus 1949, henceforth [J(2)]. The same text is found in the *Risāla Ġāmī'at al-Ġāmī'a*, starting in chapter 6 and continuing to the first half of chapter 9, pp. 79.2-87.9. Cf. *Risāla Ġāmī'at al-Ġāmī'a*, ed. 'Ā. Tāmir, Dār maktabat al-ḥayāh, Beirut, n.d. The second part corresponds to [J(1)], pp. 519.12-524.9 and to [J(2)], vol. II, pp. 359.2-367.6. The last part of the text corresponds to [J(1)], p. 525.1-7 and to [J(2)], vol. II, p. 368.2-9. I took MS [ج] as the basis for the text, with some exceptions.

¹¹ This addition is found neither in Dieterici nor in Šādir. I could not find any passage similar to this addition elsewhere in the Iḥwānian corpus. The text is published and translated in *On the Natural Sciences* (above, n. 4), pp. 371-83.

¹² With regard to *Epistle 20* the foliation [100] is placed only on the page where the treatise begins. At fol. 102a14-16 the copyist repeats – with some differences – Atif fol. 187b3-5 (*al-diyānat al-nabawiyya [...] ilā mā ašāra ilayhi*), and then he begins again to report the text, with the words *waḍ'īhi l-ḥaḡar*, etc.

¹³ I have taken the version of MS [ك] as basis; the various versions differ from each other in several details, but MSS [إ],[ج],[ر], and [ن] belong to one “family”, and MSS [ك] and [ز] to another (as often happens in my editions). MS [ج] that is by far the closest to Atif has this addition, but the Atif MS has not. The edition and translation of the text have not yet been published.

¹⁴ The text has a double foliation on the *recto*, in Arabic and Latin figures (120-23 and 130-33 respectively).

¹⁵ The text has a foliation on the *recto*, in Latin figures.

¹⁶ The foliation is not visible in the PDF I have been provided with. The text goes from line 25 of the *verso* (right side) of the fifth sheet to line 12 of the *verso* (right side) of the sixth sheet of my PDF.

<i>Epistle 50</i>	Alternative version of the treatise in MS [ġ], fols. 366b-371a. ¹⁷
<i>Epistle 50</i>	MS [i], fols. 280a3-282a5. ¹⁸

The topics addressed are set out in the following table:

topics addressed	Epistles
anthropology	<i>Epistle 50</i>
embryology	<i>Epistles 15, 16, 50</i>
<i>Imāms</i>	<i>Epistles 20, 23, 50</i>
last Judgement	<i>Epistles 16, 50</i>
letters of the alphabet	<i>Epistle 50</i>
onto-cosmology	<i>Epistles 10, 16, 50</i>
soul-body relationship	<i>Epistle 23</i>
resurrection	<i>Epistle 50</i>
ymbology	<i>Epistles 20, 50</i>

In this paper, I shall highlight possible Ismāʿīlī traits with regard to embryology.

¹⁷ The text can be considered to be a sort of “summary” of a great part of the Encyclopaedia. My discussion of this version is forthcoming with text, translation and commentary in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On God and the World. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 49-51*, ed. and tr. W. Madelung - C. Uy - C. Baffioni - N. Alshaar, Oxford U.P. - Institute of Ismaili Studies, New York 2019 (Appendix B). I have partially considered this version in “Onto-cosmology and Hierohistory in the Manuscript Tradition of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*”, paper presented at the International Conference on “Intellectual Interactions in the Islamic World: The Ismaili Thread”, London, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 19-21 October, 2016, forthcoming.

¹⁸ With regard to *Epistle 50*, this MS is numbered with Western and Eastern figures at the top of each *recto*. Text, translation and commentary are forthcoming in *On God and the World* (above, n. 17), Appendix A. I have partially considered this version in “Onto-cosmology and Hierohistory in the Manuscript Tradition of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*” (above, n. 17); in “The Esoteric Meaning of the Sin of Adam in the Manuscript Tradition of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*”, paper presented at the International Conference on “The Problem of Evil: a Challenge to Shīʿi Theology and Philosophy in Islam”, Palermo, 26-28 October, 2016, forthcoming; in “Il Linguaggio di Adamo, la Caduta di Adamo. Walter Benjamin alla luce di un inedito testo arabo medievale”, forthcoming; paper presented at the International Conference on “Centri e periferie nella storia del pensiero filosofico”, Lecce, 26-28 March, 2017, forthcoming; and in “The ‘Language of God’ in Muslim and Jewish Traditions: A Case Study”, paper presented at the International Conference on “Human Diversity in Context: Social Co-existence of Different Identities: Models of Diversity in Historical Perspective”, Trieste, 25-26 September 2018, forthcoming.

Embryological Texts in the Manuscript Tradition of the Rasā'il

The addition to *Epistle* 15 contains an allusion to human development during pregnancy, and later during life in this world. The aim is to awake the initiate's soul "from the sleep of carelessness and [...] the slumber of ignorance" so that he may experience the "second generation" after death:

[...] there was a long time for you, in which you were nothing worthy of mention, then you were created from sperm [made] of vile water, then you were moved into a womb, in a solid abode. You remained there nine months in order to bring [your] structure to completion and [your] form to perfection, then you were moved to this wide air, and you remained [in that state] four years in order to bring [your] education to perfection and to construct [your] strength.

[At that time], you experienced with senses their proper objects, and comprehension [...] and innate knowledge arose for you. Then you were admitted to school and were taught what you did not know [...]; then you were promoted to the meetings of the people of science and virtue in mosques [...] so that you might experience this world [...]; all that, so that your soul might be awoken from the sleep of carelessness and woken from the slumber of ignorance, you might reflect on what you have experienced, and you might take warnings from what you have seen of the states of this world; and [so that you might] know by sure knowledge that you will be moved, after death, from here to another kingdom, and that you will be generated a second time.¹⁹

This passage is in line with the other embryological contexts of the Encyclopaedia.²⁰ The most original approach to this topic is found in the addition to *Epistle* 16, after the allusion to the Last Judgement, in the paragraphs that I have numbered as 17-25:²¹

Know that the individuals who came with order and prohibition to [this] world from Adam, upon him be peace,²² until the sixth one [= the prophet Muḥammad], upon him be peace, came into the world in order to straighten the form of His religion through [its] representation in the souls of those who receive it [...]. They were at the [same] level of a body, the form of whose organs is completed in the womb of its mother before its appearance in the abode of the earthly world, [before] the spirit of life breathes, and [before that] by its manifestation it emerges from the stricture [of the womb] towards wideness. Adam was the first who appeared with the religious form necessitating, by order and prohibition, the composition of the matter to which the souls and the bodies of the rational world are subject. He was

¹⁹ Cf. *On the Natural Sciences* (above, n. 4), pp. 364-5.

²⁰ Further data can be collected from my previous articles devoted to embryology in the *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'*. Cf. "L'*Epistola* sul concepimento nell'*Enciclopedia* degli *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'*", *Medicina nei secoli, Arte e scienza* 6/2 (1994), pp. 365-76; "L'influenza degli astri sul feto nell'*Enciclopedia* degli *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'*", *Medioevo. Rivista di storia della filosofia medievale* 23 (1997), pp. 409-39; "L'embriologia araba fra astrologia e medicina. Abū Ma'ṣar al-Balḥī e Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā' al-Rāzī", in R.B. Finazzi - A. Valvo (eds.), *La diffusione dell'eredità classica nell'età tardo-antica e medievale. Il "Romanzo di Alessandro" e altri scritti*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 1998, pp. 1-20; "L'inizio del concepimento in scienziati greci e musulmani", in L. Cagni (ed.), *Biblica et Semitica. Studi in memoria di Francesco Vattioni*, Istituto Universitario Orientale (Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici), Napoli 1999, pp. 1-15; "Cenni per una storia dell'embriologia arabo-islamica", in L. Melillo (ed.), *Storia della Medicina Scienza dell'Uomo, Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Napoli 2007, pp. 57-66; "L'embryologie islamique entre héritage grec et Coran: les philosophes, les savants, les théologiens", in L. Brisson - M.-H. Congourdeau - J.-L. Solère (eds.), *L'embryon: formation et animation. Antiquité grecque et latine, traditions hébraïque, chrétienne et islamique*, Vrin, Paris 2008 (*Histoire des Doctrines de l'Antiquité Classique*, 38), pp. 213-31.

²¹ Cf. Baffioni, "Esoteric Shi'ism" (above, n. 10), p. 281.

²² The eulogy in MS [ج] demonstrates that Adam is here considered to be the first prophet, and not the first human being.

the first speaker, who spoke by God's order and revelation, and he was the father and the root of human beings. Because of that his name collects them all, and his memory is prolonged in them for the relation to him, and [as] an indication of him. He was at the level of the *quintessence of clay* [cf. Qur'ān 23:12], as he [= Iblis] said: *Thou didst create me from fire* [cf. Qur'ān 7:12].

Noah was at the level of *(a drop of) sperm in a place of rest* [cf. Qur'ān 23:13], located in its [first] origin, stable in its ramification,²³ subsisting in its form in the prophetic faculty, namely, the faculty from which the pure progeny descended from Noah's line – those whose call assembled and *gathered with him in his ark* [cf. Qur'ān 29:15]. They are his children, created from that drop of sperm placed at rest in [the womb], and from him there was increase in his progeny, and it arrived at Abraham.

[Abraham] was as *a leech-like clot* [cf. Qur'ān 22:5, 23:14, 40:67, 75:38] attached to the matters [*umūr*]²⁴ of the two roots, and of the two ramifications generated by him [and] attached to him, namely, Ismā'īl and Ishāq. The course flowed in the pure prophets [coming] from the house of prophecy and wisdom, [from] the house of imāmate and mercy, and [from] the place of the grace God conferred to Abraham, and by which He gave preference to him over the learned, with the immense nobility and the honoured position that were decreed for him.

Then Moses was like a [woman] pregnant with an embryo between potentiality and actuality. The being of an embryo as a drop of sperm in the spine of its father is an existence in potentiality, whereas its generation in the womb of its mother is a being that leads to actuality, and its manifestation at the birth is the first [moment] of actuality. Likewise, Moses was pregnant with the order [that belonged] in potentiality to the prophets who preceded him and that pointed at the coming-to-be of the three who would have come afterwards, the future [prophets] in actuality. Likewise, his inspirational help was related to God's Word, and in his Tawrah mention was made of those who had preceded him and of those who would have come after him.

From his call the Messiah appeared and according to his law he spoke, namely the childhood [*mabūd*] in which he spoke to the people [cf. e.g. Qur'ān 3:46],²⁵ and he was a child who had not come of age [cf. e.g. Qur'ān 19:29]. The three preceding were at the level of being in potentiality with regard to the spirit – namely Adam, Noah, and Abraham – whereas the three who [come] after Moses were at the level of the apparition in actuality foreordained for it [= a new-born]. The likeness of Moses's law is a mother that raises her child [in her womb]. It is the first book established about ruling principles,²⁶ and in it the forbidden was forbidden and the prophets judged according to it. His order was strengthened by God's Imperative and Word, whereas those before him [had been strengthened] by God's revelation and inspiration, except Adam. He was God's bosom friend and the conveyer of His word [*kalimuhu*] when he was in Paradise, but when he was sent down to the earth, His inspirational help [could] arrive through revelation [only],²⁷ so God chose Moses by himself, as He had created Adam by his own hand, and had made His angels prostrate themselves before him.²⁸

So, he who ends is like he who begins, but he is free from lapse and exempt from error. God, be He exalted, gives him His inspirational help through His angels, and asks them to prostrate themselves

²³ The words *fi aṣliḥā* may be an allusion to the *sulāla min al-ṭīn* mentioned above, but the word *far'* leads to the hypothesis that *aṣl* refers to Adam, and *far'* to Abraham.

²⁴ Probably the essence of Adam and Noah.

²⁵ Cf. for a similar expression, Qur'ān 5:110; 19:29.

²⁶ Here there is an allusion to the divine Law.

²⁷ Here there is an allusion to Adam's fall.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. Qur'ān 2:34; 7:11; 15:30; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:73. Yusuf 'Alī translates the verb with "to bow down to, unto", "prostrate oneself to".

to him – and they were those who carried His order out, those with whom the conveyer of God's [word] spoke. [God] raised his degree above the degree of those who preceded him, conveyed to him all the lights, and appointed him as His successor in His earth, as He had appointed Adam, and had left him and his wife Paradise in heritage. He is His proof, extracted from Him just as Eve was extracted from Adam, and his progeny appears, the forthcoming upheaval happens to him and through him, his children are numerous, and his seed fertile. From him the second creation will come, and his power will be raised to the place of the spiritual beings. He is the root of [what is] noble and high, the peak of the lofty reign, and God admitted us in the felicitous day [in which he will arrive].²⁹

Later Jesus came, like *a morsel of flesh* [cf. Qur'ān 22:5, 23:14] in the sense of the morsel of flesh of the laws of those who preceded him, and his squeezing their night-time until the morrow came for him, for he who came after him, and for the [Children of] Israel who answered him and persisted in the law he had brought them. His call was like Adam's call; it discloses its truths by means of parables and by ordering pious deeds until the sixth came.

[The sixth] was at the level of bones when [the embryo] is concealed inside her [= the mother; *fi bāṭimihā*] from the marrow through which life [comes], and [as] the strength hidden in the human body. For that [reason], he said to him when the unbelievers disputed with him: *Say, 'He will give them life Who created them for the first time!'* [cf. Qur'ān 36:79]. Indeed, this saying was from the one who knew this level, then denied and rejected it, and thought that he would have disappeared as the bones disappear from mortal remains. But God accused him of lying by His saying, *Say, 'He will give them life'* with the manifestation of its [= the *šarī'a*] secrets, the explanation of its allusions, the clarification of its meanings and of what is established in it at the moment of the second creation, and at the time of the forthcoming cycle, which will unveil the greatest Mahdī, *then we clothed* [cf. Qur'ān 23:14] those who followed him after him, who are his children in truth, namely, his flesh and his blood.³⁰

The text speaks of the six *nuṭaqqā'* compared to the various stages of development of the embryo according to the Qur'ānic descriptions.³¹ Adam – the first speaker, the father and the root of human beings, whose name encompasses them all – is like clay. Noah is like sperm in the womb because he preserved human progeny. Abraham, who came later, is compared to a leech-like clot: he gave origin to the two nations whose founders were Ismā'īl and Ishāq; the noblest position was decreed for him. Moses, who came later still, is seen as a pregnant woman in that the embryo is between potentiality – when it existed as a drop of sperm in the spine of its father – and actuality at the time of delivery when the pregnancy comes to an end. In fact Moses was “pregnant” with the Law that was potential in Adam, Noah and Abraham and that will be brought to actuality by the three who follow him – Jesus, Muḥammad and a “seventh” one. In the same way Jesus is like a morsel of flesh. The prophet Muḥammad is not mentioned explicitly but is called “the sixth”, and is compared to the bones that strengthen the embryo still hidden in the womb. After the reference to Qur'ān 36:79 – “Say, ‘He will give them life...’” – that exalts God's omnipotence, the text mentions “secrets”, “allusions” and “meanings” of the Law that will be revealed at the advent of the Mahdī. This moment is marked by a quotation of the second part of Qur'ān 23:14, which in its completeness reads as follows: “[then we] clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature [...]”. According to Yūsuf

²⁹ This is probably an allusion to Qur'ān 11:105.

³⁰ Cf. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shi'ism” (above, n. 10), pp. 308-10.

³¹ The embryological parallel with prophets and *imāms* has been highlighted already by Husayn al-Hamdani. Cf. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shi'ism” (above, n. 10), p. 320, note 609.

‘Alī’s explanation, humanity is descended from a mere animal.³² According to our text, however, these words suggest the followers of the Mahdī – his children, his flesh and his blood.

The two lines following the presentation of Moses as he who conveyed the word of God are especially interesting. The words “From his call the Messiah appeared and according to his law he spoke, namely the childhood in which he spoke to the people, and he was a child who had not come of age” refer to Jesus. He is called a ‘Masīḥ’, and his preaching is linked to Moses’s law. Jesus speaking to people when being a child is a tradition drawn from the *Apocrypha*. Immediately later, the text comes back to Moses. Moses is introduced as the watershed between potentiality and actuality, and explicitly named as the first religious ruler; in that he was supported by God’s Imperative and Word, he is distinguished from Adam, Noah and Abraham, who were strengthened by God’s revelation and inspiration. Adam, the first conveyer of the Word of God until he was in Paradise, lost God’s inspirational help after the fall and could only obtain divine assistance from revelation – this means that humanity needs the prophets to be rescued. At this point Moses and Adam are compared: “God chose Moses by himself, as He had created Adam by his own hand, and had made His angels prostrate themselves before him”.

One might expect that the following paragraph, which begins “So, he who ends is like he who begins”, also refers to Moses and Adam. But the terminology used quickly leads us to realize that the comparison is between Adam and the Mahdī. Unlike Adam, “he who ends” is infallible and impeccable. Because of his perfection, God’s direct inspiration, nullified by Adam’s fall, is re-established and angels are ordered to prostrate themselves before him. God made him the most perfect of men: he has the highest rank, standing above the ranks of the *nuṭaqa’*. God enlightened him and made him the new successor of Adam on Earth. Not only is the imām “the proof of God”, he is like a part of God – a part of His light. To continue the parallel, the text says he is “extracted” from God as Eve “was extracted from Adam”. Note that the story of Eve being extracted from a rib of Adam is not found in the Qur’ān, so it may be a recollection of the biblical version. After the advent of this pure imām, a felicitous age will come and the “second creation” with it. This expression should indicate here the reign of the Mahdī in absolute reality, with power as great as that of spiritual beings. With regard to the imām being “the proof”, we might understand this word as “reasoning” – the guiding intellect (*‘aql*) that comes directly from God just as Eve came from Adam.

These lines – so strangely disrupting the successions of the *nuṭaqa’* – have to be put into relationship with the lines that follow the presentation of the Prophet of Islam, when the “second creation” is again mentioned as the time of the “forthcoming cycle”:

His course will continue so until the time of the second creation, at the rising of the seventh through whom the form of religion will be completed, the spirit of life will appear in it and through it the world will pass from the abode of the earthly world to the abode of the hereafter, as the spirit of a new-born when the Sun looks at it and is effused in it, and the spirit of life secures it from the womb to the abode of the earthly world, and as the spirit of a learned believer [will pass] from the abode of the earthly world to the hereafter at [his] death, through which he enters Paradise and has his second creation, namely the angelic form, the form of completion and perfection.

The second creation is the command of the seventh, and it is the last creation in the last day, *So blessed be Allah, the best to create!* [cf. Qur’ān 23:14].³³

³² ‘A. Yūsuf ‘Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’ān*, New Edition with Revised Translation, Commentary and Newly Compiled Comprehensive Index, Amana Publications, Beltsville, Maryland 1409/1989, p. 846, n. 2874.

³³ Cf. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shī‘ism” (above, n. 10), pp. 310-11.

These words mention a “seventh” who – after the succession of the six *nuṭaqa'*, and followed by a new mention of Jesus and by the mention of the Prophet Muḥammad – can only be the Mahdī, who will bring Islamic Law to its full completion. The mention of the Sun adds to the passage a symbolic meaning: future knowledge is identified with a full life. In the passage from “the abode of the earthly world” to “the abode of the hereafter” embryology once again has a role. When the Mahdī is compared to a “new-born” looked at by the Sun, that is an expression of the Platonic theory of the Sun as “the spirit of life”.³⁴

We have seen how embryological doctrines are associated with eschatology and hiero-history, but the lines concerning “the seventh” in the addition to *Epistle* 16 might even suggest in a symbolic way the history of the Imāmic succession. Having introduced the second creation as “the command of the seventh”, well-known embryological doctrines are referred to:

To a new-born it is not incompatible to come out [from the womb] in the sixth month, but he is stillborn, without life in him, whereas he lives if he comes out in the seventh [month]; he does not live if he comes out in the eighth [month], and he lives [if he comes out] in the limit of the ninth [month]. The search for that is a great secret, that God did not decree for the sixth [prophet] that he had a son from his line [who may keep] memory of his loins, be the heir of his position in the community, and his children died during his life. Therefore, [those who came after the sixth prophet] fell from his rank, and the level [of the sixth prophet] was destined to the one among His children, whom God had decreed. [...] He decreed for him [= the seventh] that he had a child, but he did not reach his level, nor was he raised to his degree, and that was the eighth. So, a new-born in it [i.e., in the eighth month of pregnancy] falls from the rank of maturity, [and] so [it happens], as long as the days of the eighth month last [...].³⁵

These lines hint at the non-viability of a new-born at six months of pregnancy, whereas he lives if he comes out in the seventh month and not in the eighth month, but he lives if he comes out at the ninth month of pregnancy. The secret meaning of these facts is linked to the sequel of the *nuṭaqa'*: God did not decree for the sixth prophet that he had a son who might become his heir; so, the rank of prophecy fell.

The allusion to the moral decay of the successors of the Prophet of Islam after his death in the absence of a son seems to be an attack on the first three *ḥulafā' al-rāṣidūn*. A subsequent allusion refers to one of the Prophet's “children” – in a figurative sense – as chosen by God in order to resume the prophetic succession – and the rank of the sixth.

We know that Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl is the seventh imām of the *Ismā'īliyya*; and I believe this text to be inspired by *Ismā'īlī* convictions. If we explore it in the light of the history of early Islam, however, the choice may be different. If Muḥammad is “the sixth”, to whom might these texts also refer as “the seventh” *from a historical standpoint*?³⁶ Not to 'Alī, I assume, because both his sons reached the imāmate, and al-Husayn is held in high esteem by Šī'īs and *Ismā'īlīs*, whereas the text says that his child “did not reach his level”.

A good option seems to identify “the seventh” as Ġa'far al-Šādiq, the last imām common to Šī'īs and *Ismā'īlīs*. His pivotal position in the Imāmic succession, whatever current one may consider, legitimizes this hypothesis. More importantly, the child of “this” seventh – the eighth –, *Ismā'īl*, died

³⁴ Plat., *Resp.* 508 A - 509 B.

³⁵ Cf. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shī'ism” (above, n. 10), p. 311.

³⁶ In what follows my approach to the political meaning of this text is different from that in Baffioni, “Esoteric Shī'ism” (above, n. 10), pp. 322-4.

before his father and did not reach his level – imāmate –, just as a new-born at the eighth month of pregnancy is not viable.

The mention of an “eighth” leads us to exclude that the author(s) of the addition belong to the *Ismā‘īliyya al-ḥāliṣa* or *al-wāqifa* that waited for the return of Ismā‘īl – supposed to be “in occultation” – as mahdī. Similarly, it seems impossible that by “the seventh” these lines mean Ismā‘īl ibn Ğa‘far al-Šādiq, because his son did not die: subsequently the mention of non-viability at the eighth month, which symbolizes the abasement of his level, would imply a critique of the one chosen after Ismā‘īl had disappeared.

The “great secret” spoken of in this passage even suggests that *two different individuals* were “the eighth” in the succession. Otherwise there would have been no call to speak of a “fall from the rank of maturity” having mentioned that an elevated degree had not been attained. But if the first “eighth” is Ismā‘īl ibn Ğa‘far, it remains to be indicated who else did not reach his predecessor’s rank of imām and can be said to have “fallen from the rank of maturity”.

As we know, after the death of Ismā‘īl different currents of opinion emerged with regard to the choice of his successor:

- i. Some people chose Muḥammad, the son of Ismā‘īl.
- ii. Others chose Ismā‘īl’s brother, ‘Abd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ, but after his death in 766 they joined the followers of Ismā‘īl’s step-brother, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, who became the seventh imām of the *iṭnā ‘ašariyya*.
- iii. Yet others chose Muḥammad, another son of Ğa‘far.

The option in favour of Muḥammad ibn Ğa‘far is too marginal. It cannot even be an allusion to al-Afṭaḥ’s death, because that would make it impossible to identify a “ninth one” – yet the text mentions viability at the ninth month of pregnancy, hence implying a “positive” evaluation that is obviously to be extended to the personage it symbolizes. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that the “fall from the rank of maturity” may hide a critique addressed to the *iṭnā ‘ašariyya*.

Therefore, this second “eighth” can only be Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl. After the death of his uncle ‘Abd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ, he remained the eldest male member of imām al-Šādiq’s family, which gained him a certain degree of esteem and seniority in the Fāṭimid branch of the ‘Alids. After the recognition of the imāmate of Mūsā al-Kāẓim by the majority of Ğa‘far’s followers, however, his position in Ḥiǧāz became untenable and he left Medina and went into hiding, thereby acquiring the epithet *al-Maktūm*. His emigration marks the beginning of the period of concealment that ended with the establishment of the Fāṭimid caliphate.³⁷ By speaking of a “fall from the rank of maturity”, our text might just suggest that Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl originated a Cycle of Occultation (*dawr al-satr*).

Our text continues with the phrase

[...] until the [conditions proper to the] seventh [month] return in the space of the ninth [month], and at that [moment] the birth [*al-waḍ’*] will occur in completeness of structure, and the coming of the second creation [will occur as well].³⁸

If my hypothesis is tenable, the allusion to “the ninth” may indicate the expectation of the imām opening a new Cycle of Unveiling. The wording of the text is very accurate: in the passage quoted at p. 175 (“so [it happens], as long as the days of the eighth month last [...]”) the duration of the

³⁷ F. Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs. Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2007², pp. 95-6.

³⁸ Cf. Baffioni, “Esoteric Shī‘ism” (above, n. 10), p. 311.

painful “eight-month period” is mentioned. Historical correspondences are also possible here. After his death, some of the supporters of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl claimed that he would return as mahdī, giving origin to the Qarmaṭ movement; but these lines probably refer to the period of the descendants of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, the so-called “veiled Imāms” (*a'imma mastūrūn*): 'Abd Allāh al-Akbar, Aḥmad and Ḥusayn, who were the predecessors of 'Alī, the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty under the name of 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī.

The addition to *Epistle* 50 found in MS [i] could confirm my interpretation because it seems to describe a period of concealment before the advent of 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī.

In this text, the expression “second – or last – creation” is used in a different meaning from the one set out above. In paragraph 16 of the addition we find another kind of passage from potentiality to actuality, as was the case for Moses. We read that “what was in potentiality at the time of the first beginning passed to actuality at the time of the second beginning”. Here, the “first beginning” indicates on the one hand the origin of the heavenly hypostases and on the other the creation of the scriptural Adam who, after the fall, opened our Cycle of Occultation. The “second beginning” is the actual advent of the imām. Another shift is also evident, from eschatology to hiero-history: the expected advent is no longer the advent of the Mahdī, but the alternation of Cycles of Unveiling and Cycles of Occultation.

This addition contains the clearest allusion to Imāmic cycles, and also suggests resurrection. The text explains that during the Cycle of Unveiling the particular souls return to the Universal Soul in sincere obedience, free from natural passions, because the perfect form – the Imām who restores the state of resurrection – has become manifest. In the Cycle of Occultation this perfect form is absent.

This idea is also approached in the peculiar version of *Epistle* 50 in MS [ġ], which differs radically from the current text of the epistle. Here, the “second creation” is mentioned in Chapter 9 – “On the Death of the Body of Man and on the Life of his Soul”. As with plants, once perfection is achieved the composition of the human being begins to degrade and the body eventually returns to the “natures” from which it was created. The soul returns to its substance and its world – according to deeds accomplished during life – until the moment of “later creation” (Q29:20 is mentioned). This passage can be related to the passage of the addition to *Epistle* 16, where the new-born is also the symbol of a believer who passes from this world to Paradise after death, thereby entering his “second creation”, which in this case indicates the attainment of angelic form in completion and perfection.

But let us come back to the epoch to which these additions possibly refer (and/or in which they were possibly written). Chapter 4 of the addition to *Epistle* 50, which deals with primordial language, introduces an Adam who may be either the scriptural Adam, or the imām. The text subsequently speaks of the particular Adam, who “became manifest in actuality at [the time of] the second beginning, with the coming-to-be of the Cycle of Occultation”. To him God “had delivered [...] the letters of the names by which the knowledge of things is extracted, after [their] composition and aggregation”.³⁹

Letters form the names when they come in the state of “aggregation and composition”, but our text claims that this state of aggregation and composition was “contrary” to the state of letters during the Cycle of Unveiling:

However, they combined with each other in a way contrary to the disposition at the time of the Cycle of Unveiling when those letters were separated in the subtleties of speculations [...] and [...] not veiled from their reading and their dispositions.

³⁹ These are the names that in paragraph 7 God imposed on creatures: names “of what was to come and appear” from the primordial “couples” of which the passage speaks.

When [Eve] disobeyed and involved [Adam] in her disobedience, she looked for God's mercy but her disobedience had concealed it. He gave in to it and to what she had read out [namely, the letters in their primordial isolation], and considered what she had been looking at when she succumbed and evil overcame her. So, they were sent in the world of body and dropped <...>, and those forms turned into incomprehensible letters. When they were aggregated, the names of those luminous forms were drawn out from them – [as] the letters proper to the [Universal] Soul – and he [= Adam] was characterized by names without meaning (fol. 281 b 14-19).

After the fall, the letters became “incomprehensible”, that is they joined in a way that did not correspond to the forms inscribed in the Active Intellect, and hence the Cycle of Occultation began:

For that [reason] the Cycle of Occultation came after that Adam, with his progeny, was charged with the names: among them [= Adam's progeny] [there was] he who worshipped a name without meaning, he who worshipped a meaning and did not conceal it with a name, and he who knew the name and was sure of the meaning – for this one, worship was perfect (fol. 281 b 19-21).

This text seems to mean that only someone remembering the “original” names, whose meaning matches them, can accomplish perfect worship – that is, attain the degree of the angels. This person must definitely be the imām, who knows all the forms inscribed in the Active Intellect – the letters that in primordial time were separated from each other and could be read in another kind of “disposition”.

But in the Cycle of Occultation the imām, like the scriptural Adam after the fall, gives the people of his cycle names “without knowledge of meanings”. This is the person before whom Iblīs – the only survivor of the Cycle of Unveiling – refuses to prostrate himself. According to our tale his “being made out of fire” means that he has read the names in their primordial isolation, in the state of innocence. His disobedience causes the fall of Iblīs and his expulsion from Paradise:

When Iblīs, who was the last one to remain of the people of the Cycle of Unveiling, saw that [that] Adam did not give names composed of letters [in the correct disposition] – indeed, he was giving the people of his cycle names without knowledge of meanings, abstracted from their matter –, he disdained His order to obey and said, *I am better than he: Thou didst create me from fire, and him from clay* [Qur'ān 7:12] – meaning that he had read those names without aggregation or composition, through a luminous investigation and a rational consideration, free of turbid faults. But when he resisted with this [kind of] resistance, he was veiled from that view, was turned upside down, became confused, ceased from that consideration and was veiled from it, and it was said to him, *get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures)* [Qur'ān 7:13], for your resistance and your opposition [cf. Qur'ān 7:12; 17:66] (fol. 281 b 21-25).

This text portrays an imām who retains the memory of the original names but gives them “without knowledge” of their meanings. The only way to understand these words is as if they meant “without making people know” – which is part of the practice of *taqiyya*. For this reason the refusal of Iblīs to comply with God's order causes his expulsion from Paradise. Not only is this Iblīs charged with the sin of *hybris*: the text says that he “expected the pure worship, but [in reality], by opposing to his Lord, desired to be associated [with Him]” (fol. 281 b 12) because he wanted to appropriate for himself functions proper to God – in this case, divine judgement.

At the end, the text says:

[...] This is an indication of what is found in the human circle and [in] the descendants of Adam when chiefs come and those who follow them in the Cycle of Unveiling: through their essential, luminous

lights they investigate knowledge as if it were a reflection without composition or aggregation, and the intermediaries that pass that knowledge to them are [of the same nature as the Universal] Soul, holy [for the] faculty of the [Active] Intellect. [Instead,] in the Cycle of Occultation the meanings of the intelligible and the sensible objects are notified to them, but their investigation [is associated] with composition and aggregation, and with the conjunction of the subtle with the dense (fols. 281 b 33– 282 a 1).

In this phrase we might trace a parallel between the fall of the scriptural Adam and the fall of the imām in the Cycle of Occultation: the chiefs and those who follow them in the Cycle of Unveiling may hint at the highest degrees of the Ismā'īlī hierarchy: in the Cycle of Occultation, they have investigated isolated letters and pure forms and transmitted such a knowledge, which should have been kept secret.

To sum up: in the state of primordial innocence, the letters are isolated, but perfectly comprehensible in themselves. In the Cycle of Unveiling, God submits them to Adam in the correct composition and aggregation. In his perfection, the imām knows the letters in their primordial isolation. But after the fall, in the Cycle of Occultation, the understanding of the meanings of sensible and intelligible things is endangered by changed composition and aggregation: from the ontological standpoint, the junction of the rarefied with the dense corresponds with this. The “letters” in the lower world are only a pale image of the letters of the heavenly world, characterized by their direct origination from God. The imām is obliged to keep their true meaning secret until he decides to disclose this meaning before its time – thereby committing a sin.

Conclusion

A textual element in favour of the identifications proposed in this article is provided by the term *ḥuǧǧa* – ‘proof’, which occurs in our text in its literal meaning. As we know, ‘Abd Allāh al-Mahdī claimed in his letter that although he and his ancestors maintained relations between the hidden imām and the people, he and his ancestors had called themselves *ḥuǧǧas* of the imām as a *taqiyya* expedient. But they were in reality the true imāms of ‘Alid origin. This determined the secession of the Qarmāṭs, who remained faithful to the idea of Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl as the expected Mahdī. The allusion to the *ḥuǧǧa* in our passage further invalidates the theory that places the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' in a relationship with the Qarmāṭs and confirms that the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' sided with Ismā'īlism and were also advocates of Fāṭimid rule.

Even though it is highly probable that the additions to the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* were not composed by one person or at the same moment, it is possible that some of them were written at the time of the three *a'imma mastūrūn*, as the case of embryology examined here seems to demonstrate.

