The Cosmogonic Word in al-Shahrastani's
Exegesis of *Surat al-Baqara*

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This is an edited version of the article *The Cosmogonic Word in al-Shahrastani's Exegesis of Surat al-Baqara* published in the <u>Journal of Qur'anic Studies</u>, 16.2 (2014): 1-41.

Introduction*

Having played roles at the highest levels of the Saljuq state, as sometime confidant of the ruler himself, Sultan Sanjar, and head of his chancellery (*diwan al-rasa'il*),[1] Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani was to flee the capital, Merv, in due course.[2] Completing, as it were, the fully circular trajectory of his life, by the time of the great scholar's death in 548 AH / 1153 CE he was residing back in the minor town of his birth. Ten years earlier, in 538 AH / 1143 CE,[3] he had set to work on a Qur'an commentary of ambitious dimensions. What survives of this, apparently his last major project, only reaches to the end of the second sura, *Surat al-Baqara*, and may be all that the author ever accomplished of it.[4] The text, preserved in a unique manuscript in Tehran, has now been made available in entirety by Miras-i Maktub (The Written Heritage Research Centre) in Iran, in two volumes.[5] While enough to give us a solid picture of the character of al-Shahrastani's exegesis, this material makes all too plain the loss to the Muslim intellectual heritage of the commentary that might have been. Extrapolating from what survives, the complete work would have presumably filled around 20 similarly sized volumes of 500 pages or so. The portion that has come down shows a formidable richness of detail and, in the last section on each successive verse, entitled *al-asrar* (the 'Mysteries' or 'Arcana'), it systematically applies an interpretive methodology to the Qur'an that is as profound as it is idiosyncratic. In earlier offerings (including one published in this journal)[6] I suggested – following Jalali Na'ini, Danish-pazhuh, Monnot, Madelung, Steigerwald, and others – that notwithstanding al-Shahrastani's historical repute as an Ash'ari theologian, and his membership of the Shafi'i legal rite, the ultimate provenance and complexion of this unusual hermeneutical system was Isma'ili.[7]

Going over the many clues for al-Shahrastani's links with contemporary Isma'ilism would needlessly clog this presentation, as would re-tracing the details of the mentioned system's architecture.[8] Two key points, however, can be noted here. Firstly, that al-Shahrastani extends the main numinous concepts in this architecture to verse after verse of *Surat al-Baqara*, even at minutial levels of decipherment, just as he did earlier in his analysis of the *Fatiha*. Secondly, that the self-same system, in large part, turns out to be the implicit basis of his critique of Ibn Sina's thought in his work *Musara'at al-falasifa* ('Wrestling with the Philosophers').[9] These two key points prompt the following working hypothesis on our author's intellectual formation. Provoked inter alia by the contemporary challenge of Avicennan models for accommodating religion as an oblique, subordinate analogue of philosophical truth, al-Shahrastani sought an alternative approach that perfectly merged both. He found it in some kind of Isma'ili teaching, with its definitive aspiration to be 'the merger of the two wisdoms' (*jami' al-hikmatayn*): the wisdom of prophecy and the wisdom of philosophy. The background claim was that the philosophical perspective which had ultimate authority could be traced back through the long line of God's prophets to primordial times – that the 'überphilosophie' was a prophetic 'ur-philosophie', so to speak. The system of ideas was thus Janus-faced and simultaneously rational and prophetic or scriptural, this dual character being gratifyingly brought home by the deep conceptual correspondences between al-Shahrastani's critique of Ibn Sina and his Qur'an commentary.

This does not mean, however, that al-Shahrastani's project was in full rapport with Avicennan models of reason. His was not simply a counter-Avicennan system with a claimed prophetic cachet. The more the subtleties of the 'arcana' sections of the Qur'an commentary are explored the harder it is to hold

onto the view that this body of thought is some rational evolute. That al-Shahrastani understood the system as providing keys to the problems supposedly mishandled by Ibn Sina is a source of potential misunderstanding. Though he saw his system as able to engage with Ibn Sina and fully operate on his territory, this does not entail that it was, in turn, another reason-based project. This gets more and more clear as al-Shahrastani unfolds the Qur'anic arcana, taking up, say, kinds of hidden correspondence between different eras of sacred history, also between life in this world and the eschaton, intuitive inversions and chiastic formulations, semantic etymologies, lettric mysticism, angelology, and suchlike. Though the *Fatiha* commentary had content of this sort,[10] the sense that the author's semantics were broadly rooted in a form of reason stayed intact. A truer picture of our author's higher thought emerging from the arcana of *al-Baqara* must stress its trans-rational texture. Yet, throughout the following, al-Shahrastani's deep interweaving of philosophical and 'sacred' modes of discourse is seen – even when he explores ideas that seem most mysterious and recherché by the standards of, say, Avicennan philosophy.

The unifying theme of the sections of the Keys sampled here, is God's Word – constituting our author's epistemological and cosmological linchpin. A set of tightly linked topics constellate round this axial theme. The series starts with primary questions to do with the Muslim scripture, questions coming down to al-Shahrastani from *kalam* theology, namely: how to bring out the scripture's transcendental origin, i.e. its inimitability for humans, and next whether in view of its transcendental origin it is a created and historical artefact or else is somehow uncreated and above time. It emerges that al-Shahrastani views the Qur'an as a portal to, and substantial manifestation of, the Realm of the Command (*'alam al-amr*), which in his cosmology is an entire order of reality presupposed by the created universe (*'alam al-khalq*). Definitely esoteric and trans-rational aspects of the commentary impinge at this juncture with al-Shahrastani alluding to God's generation of the universe through a hyper-language consisting of phonemes or graphemes thought of on the model of the 28 Arabic letters. Finally, al-Shahrastani articulates the precise dynamics of how the graphemic and verbal realities of the Realm of the Command interact with the physical realities of the Realm of Creation, in terms drawn from Islamic angelology.

The Inimitability of the Scripture

A crucial starting point for the 'theology of the Qur'an' is the debate over its inimitability (*i'jaz*), as declared in a number of its verses, notably Q. 2:23, which falls within the portion discussed in al-Shahrastani's truncated commentary: *And if you are in doubt about what We send down to Our servant, bring a chapter like it, and summon your witnesses besides God, if you are honest!* The next verse states unequivocally … *and you will not do it*! (*lan taf'alu*), i.e. you will never bring a chapter that compares with it. Some wider picture can be formed of his position on this intractable topic by putting together his comments on this verse and his discussion in chapter 11 of his introduction to his Qur'an commentary. One difference of approach in such passages and in his quite lengthy treatment of the problem in chapter 20 of his *kalam* treatise, the *Nihaya*, is clear straightaway. Al-Shahrastani frames the discussion in the *Nihaya* as an exchange between, on the one hand, 'the people of deviation and falsehood' (*ahl al-zaygh wa'l-batil*), who dispute inimitability and on the other, 'the people of truth' (*ahl al-haqq*), apparently the *kalam* thinkers ranged against them, primarily Ash'aris (but in the case of this particular teaching, also Mu'tazilis).[11] However, despite some overlaps in his argumentation between the *Nihaya* and the Qur'an commentary, in discussing the arcana of Q. 2:23 in the latter al-Shahrastani is clearly highly critical of the whole pre-existing framework used by *kalam* thinkers. He problematises all their criteria for evidential miracles whereby prophets' claims are to be verified, listing their agreed conditions as follows: '…The reality and definition of an inimitable miracle is that (1) it is an act of God, disrupting [God's] custom (*khariq li'l-'ada*, i.e. disrupting "nature"), (2) beyond the power of any human beings, (3) in association with an act of

challenging, and (4) secure from being objected to. So if these four basic things do not come together, its being an inimitable miracle is unproven.'[12]

Taking on the sceptic's role, al-Shahrastani picks the list apart in a set of terse challenges. Against (1), the prerequisite that the event be seen to break the normal, customary (i.e. natural) course of events, he probably makes his most philosophically interesting objection when he points out: 'Now, you know that [with] what disrupts divine custom, ascertaining that it [truly] disrupts custom depends on[13] making sure to examine all customs.'[14] This telling reproach touches on the problem now sometimes termed 'incomplete induction'. In other words: we can only establish what constitutes a break with natural causality if we firstly establish what the latter is, and to do that beyond dispute, we would need all cases to be taken into account in our induction, even to infinity. On such grounds, fulfilling the first criterion is strictly impossible. Al-Shahrastani puts forward another, kindred hindrance to meeting criterion (2), which seems no less insoluble despite being a practical rather than logical obstacle: 'ascertaining that it is beyond the power of any human depends[15] on examining the capacity of all humans'.[16] Human incapacity would, presumably, need to hold not just for a given moment of time but throughout the race's history, and how is such a condition to be met?[17] Against (3), the condition that the miracle be bound up with a challenge (*maqrun bi'l-tahaddi*), al-Shahrastani counters with a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that, applied strictly, this would entail 'that the prophetic miracle and the challenge coincide, i.e. take place quite simultaneously, or as he puts it: 'it obligates God (exalted is He) to originate [the inimitable miracle] at the same moment as the challenge (*fi waqt al-tahaddi*)'.[18] It is, of course, recorded that the Qur'an, for its part, was delivered piecemeal over twenty-odd years.[19] Finally, against (4), the certainty that the miracle is irrefutable (*salim 'an al-mu'arada*), al-Shahrastani again brings forward the unlikelihood of this test being met: '… [establishing] irrefutability depends on presenting it to all the different kinds of human (*al-'arad 'ala jami' asnaf al-bashar*)'.[20] In concluding his dismissal of the list, al-Shahrastani urges that it amounts to such a vulnerable framework for establishing a prophet's authenticity, that the latter could never be asserted with any confidence: '… on this definition which the *kalam* thinker mentions, the truthfulness of a prophet would never ever be ascertained, and on the basis of [the *kalam* thinker's] teaching, no proof would be imposed[21] on anyone summoned [to religion]!'[22]

Al-Shahrastani goes on with his problematic of the *kalam* approach, referring to a fatal (as he sees it) absence of unanimity on the precise grounds for the Qur'an's inimitability: either its harmonious arrangement (*nazm*), or its rhetorical brilliance (*balagha*), richness (or 'firmness', *jazala*), and linguistic chasteness (*fasaha*), or the divine demotivation (*sarf al-dawa'i*) of human imitators, or else the occult information (*al-ikhbar 'an al-ghuyub*) within it. Taking up the stock sceptical trope of *diaphonia* (Gk., 'discord'), al-Shahrastani argues that the lack of any consensus on the basis of inimitability invalidates all these *kalam* theories, taken individually. If the prophet's claim is only argued for on a basis subject to dispute, its truth will, in turn, be in dispute and indemonstrable. The contested character of each individual basis means that it is indeed feasible, according to those who support the alternative grounds, that in terms of that basis it does lie within human capability. As our author puts the point:[23]

> Another arcanum is that the *kalam* theologians disagreed over which grounds the Qur'an was inimitable on. Some of them said: on the grounds of the harmonious order [of its words]; others said from the point of view of its eloquence, richness, and linguistic purity; others said the averting of the motives [of its would-be imitators]; and others said from the point of view of giving information about unseen things. Each contradicts the other's teaching, so that he affirms the one that he chooses. You know that the grounds for inimitability must be subject to consensus, so that the claim is verifiable on that basis, since the inability [of humans to imitate it] in regard to that aspect may [supposedly] be verified. Now, given that it is

conceivable for each of them that the basis which his opponent claims falls within the capability of humans, no agreement comes about concerning the basis of its inimitability, nor even on the principle of inimitability.

Another aspect of al-Shahrastani's problematic of the pre-existing *kalam* defences of the Qur'an's inimitability is found in chapter 11 of his introduction. He here, in passing, disqualifies the linguistic type of basis for inimitability for a different reason from the lack of unanimity just mentioned. The new reason is that searching out such grounds amounts to unwitting impiety. As he states: 'Whoever takes it upon himself to search for the most elegant (*afsah*) of its words and verses has belittled the Qur'an (*qad azra bi'l-Qur'an*), since he selects words restricted in number from it. He has underestimated the perfection of linguistic purity for it and implied that the rest is not up to the splendour of that perfection. What he understands – perhaps what he believes – to be linguistically pure is other than what he declares bad as rejected.'[24] Thus, inevitably, a quest for instances of rhetorical superlativity implies a negative judgement on, or disesteem for, the passages not selected. The exercise paradoxically profanes and relativises the text in the very bid to show its sacredness and transcendence. Al-Shahrastani adds, 'Whoever occupies himself with criticism (*intiqad*) must have some speech superior to what is criticized so that the criticism by him holds true'.[25] The approach discreetly sets the exegete in judgement over the very text he seeks to treat as absolute. A split between his approach in the arcana and in his *kalam* treatise is perhaps shown by how, in the latter, al-Shahrastani arguably does try to no god but God" Qur'an's linguistic perfection.[26]

What, then, is al-Shahrastani's alternative to these *kalam* stances on the Qur'an's inimitability? He begins his comments on the arcana of Q. 2:23 by arguing that the prime grounds of inimitability, thus the true 'proof of our Prophet', is simply to be found 'in a formula which he designated "the comprehensive words" (*jawami' al-kalim*), meaning: "no god but God" (*la ilaha illa'llah*)'.[27] Al-Shahrastani proposes that this paramount Islamic formula, the 'formula of testimony' (*kalimat al-shahada*), is the true irrefutable miracle (*hiya al-mu'jiza al-salima 'an al-mu'arada*) which is what accompanies the Prophet's claim (*hiya al-muqarana li-da'wahu*). The close 'accompaniment' mentioned here is not only a circumstantial detail of the events of the Prophet's career, but seems to refer to nothing less than the coupling of 'no god but God' with the second great formula of the twin-testimonies (*shahadatan*) that together incept Islam: 'Muhammad is God's Messenger' (*Muhammad rasul Allah*). This is surely what our author has in mind by 'the Prophet's claim' conjoint with the irrefutable or inimitable first formula. Al-Shahrastani moreover ventures that the formula 'no god but God' lies at the very core of the Qur'an, all of which, he proposes, is but a grand dilation of its theme. The inimitability of the formula is thus, by implication, the inimitability of the Qur'an. As he puts it: 'The affirmation of monotheism and the negation of rivals in the glorious scripture is only as a commentary and explanation (*sharh wa-bayan*) [on 'no god but God'] that He added and set forth, just as He affirmed [for example] in the above verses [i.e. Q. 2:21–2] through establishing the fact that He (exalted is He) is a creator and provider, unique in [His] creativity and [His] providing.'[28]

So al-Shahrastani apparently holds that no one would sincerely deny the truth of monotheism that the first formula enshrines, for 'there is no one' he says, 'who contests [the Prophet] in affirming monotheism and negating rivals'.[29] This last assertion is clearly historically contentious and is moreover prima facie at odds with our author's own position in his (at bottom, Isma'ili) critique of Ibn Sina. There, his stated view was that while the belief in godhead is the consensus gentium, the belief in its singularity is not. Thus the prophets came in the first place to summon human beings, not to the truth that divinity exists but to the truth that it is not multiple.[30]

So when our author states on Q. 2:23 that no one would oppose the shahada he obviously does not mean that all already incline to monotheism, but that, when once it is presented to human understanding, its truth is incontestable. Al-Shahrastani of course admits that opposition of a kind is possible, but is keen to draw

a careful distinction between refusing (*inkar*) and contesting (*munaza'a*), the former being a wilful and intellectually insincere act of resistance, the latter being an intellectually sincere doubt about the truthfulness of what is presented. Al-Shahrastani feels that the latter response was impossible, though there were undoubtedly countless historical cases of the former response, the famed anti-prophet Musaylima being precisely the epitome of it.[31] In upshot, al-Shahrastani's position is seemingly that if the intrinsically intelligible truth of monotheism is once grasped, it is impossible to gainsay in all honesty, though it can be stubbornly refused.[32]

Al-Shahrastani's approach to *i'jaz* is evidently a bid to give it a maximal intellectual resolution and force. According to him, there is a sense in which the Prophet's claim (*da'wa*) is at one with the formula 'no god but God', in which case, unlike the case of other prophets and faiths, the evidential sign proving Muhammad's claim is *identical* with the claim itself. The idea is that, where Islam is concerned, the miracle that proves the message *is* the message. As al-Shahrastani reasons, 'If inability to contradict an inimitable miracle indicates the truthfulness of the person making the claim, then inability to contradict the very claim *itself* is even more decisive an indication of the truthfulness of the person making the claim, and even more silencing of the denier!'[33] There are other vital facets of his teaching on this subject to mention, other features of al-Shahrastani's bid to right the perceived flaws of pre-existing approaches of the *kalam* theologians, of whom he says:[34]

> How far is their teaching, their thinking and their mind from verifying the inimitable miracles of the prophets (peace be upon them)! And how far they are from seeing miracles in their every movement of speech and of deed! For the motions of the human being are inimitable for an animal, and the inimitable miracles of the prophets are likewise – for their movements are [in turn] inimitable for a human being.

In this very dismissal of *kalam* thinking, al-Shahrastani has slipped in a crucial key to his own alternative thinking on the issue. He has already referred to this key in chapter 11 of his introduction and it is even seen in his treatment of the inimitability of the Qur'an in the *Nihaya*. The vital concept in question is 'hierarchy' (*tarattub*), the complement of 'contrariety' (*tadadd*) in his lattice of hermeneutic dyads.[35] Both the outer universe and the inner realm of religion are held to be intrinsically informed by this principle of hierarchy. Al-Shahrastani argues that existence involves hierarchy and, by contraposition, from the absence of hierarchy follows nonexistence, i.e. destruction.[36] He observes this principle deeply at work in the text of scripture, for example in verses 6 and 7 of the *Fatiha*: *Guide us on the straight path ...* (i.e. a supplication of the subordinate category of believers who seek guidance), *... The path of those whom You have graciously favoured* (i.e. a reference to the super-ordinate category who give guidance). These relations of hierarchy operate between human beings and animal species beneath them, as between the pre-eminent kind of human, namely prophets (virtually treated by al-Shahrastani as a separate species) and the human species beneath them. In short, our author argues for the Qur'an's inimitability on the basis of a hierarchy in 'speech' (*nutq*), which for Shaharastani connotes both oral declaration and the discernment or thought preceding it. He thus argues:[37]

> Speakers (*natiqun*) are according to a hierarchy and an inequality … [which] culminates in ascension to the rank of independence from discursive thinking in the category of 'discerning', such that the unseen becomes for him openly seen and what arises for someone else through discursive thinking arises for him through innate nature. It is the same in the category of 'declaration', so that all of his speech becomes revelation and what arises for someone else through authoritative instruction, arises for him through intuition.

Now, inimitability is simply taken to refer to the limitations of subordinate beings within a hierarchy, in relation to what is above them, and the 'inimitability of the Qur'an' refers to these human limitations specifically in regard to prophetic speech, of which the Qur'an is a prime instance.

Through identifying the Qur'an in this way as generically inimitable, al-Shahrastani can revert, without hypocrisy, to the inquiry into its superlative character linguistically and rhetorically, so that 'harmonious order' (*nazm*), for example, is a recurring rubric in his commentary. He can freely investigate the verses from all such angles. Every angle holds true through the postulate of its inimitability, which is itself founded on separate principles.[38] In the context of his theory, a critical analysis from such angles is an exercise in appreciation and in deepening understanding. In the penultimate sentence of his discussion of the arcana of Q. 2:23 al-Shahrastani in fact claims that the more knowledgeable one is about rhetoric and the forms of textual criticism, the more one will appreciate its inimitability from this point of view: 'The more someone knows about the grounds of eloquence (*wujuh al-balagha*), the clearer to him is its inimitability'.[39]

On the other hand, his ultimate statement opens up a vast avenue of inquiry and alludes to what may prove to have been the decisive basis for our author's own deep sense of the scripture's transcendental origins. He states simply 'the more someone understands its arcana, which are limitless in number and whose end neither thought nor mind may attain, the more he knows its inimitable miracles'.[40] That is, through his distinctive hermeneutical system, applied under the 'arcana' rubrics to unlock the deep structures hidden within the text, al-Shahrastani claims that a cumulative certainty of its inimitability will come about. It is highly noteworthy that the dyadic system in question was believed by al-Shahrastani to be on the authority of the Prophet's lineal representatives, and it can be traced in various details to the heritage of Isma'ilism. Moreover, hierarchy – a principle with a definitive role in Isma'ili thought – was seen above to be wholly central to al-Shahrastani's attempt to ground the Qur'an's inimitability more philosophically and provide it with an a priori basis. It thus emerges from preliminary scrutiny of the Qur'an commentary in discussions of this particular topic, that al-Shahrastani, after severely problematising the received *kalam* approaches to inimitability, answers them with those from his secret Isma'ili conceptual universe.

The Pre-eternity of the Scripture

Closely linked to inimitability is the second major question in the 'theology' of the scripture – is it created or uncreated in status? Provocative tensions seem to mark this area of doctrine in al-Shahrastani's higher thought. I have dealt elsewhere in detail with the deep paradox in al-Shahrastani's stance on the Qur'an's nature and suggested how to resolve it.[41] In summary: al-Shahrastani airs extreme historical theories on the text and its compilation, and treats the evolution of its orthography and the etymological derivation of its words under other rubrics; however, under the rubric al-asrar he paradoxically views the text as divinely-ordained and meaningful in every minute detail, and indeed, as a supra-historical blueprint for the entire creation. The resolution of this seemingly schizoid stance may be sought in models put forward by the author (not only in his Qur'an commentary but also his *Nihaya*), such as *zuhur* ('epiphany'), *tamaththul* ('configuration'), and *libas* ('clothing') – by which the perfect, transcendental reality of God's Word enters into the historically contingent, human realm. Moreover, al-Shahrastani appears in places to apply to the Qur'an that fundamental conceptual dyad of his higher thought, 'the accomplished' and 'the inchoate' (*al-mafrugh 'anhu wa'l-musta'naf*). The Qur'an in our midst is thus a manifestation in the unfolding, inchoate realm, of a reality that is perfect and ever accomplished – al-Shahrastani adding that regular exegesis (*tafsir*) focuses on the former manifestation, while hermeneutics (*ta'wil*), identifiable with the content of the

arcana-sections, focuses on the latter reality.[42] It is through concepts such as these that the gulf between the (so to speak) historicist and esotericist al-Shahrastani may perhaps be bridged.

Our author's enigmatic stance can be explored further through his presentation of the arcana of Q. 2:4–5, … *And those who believe in what was sent down to you and what was sent down before you, and who are certain of the Hereafter. Those are in accordance with guidance from their Lord, and those are they who are successful*. Spurred on by this reference to the descent of God's Word or Speech, our exegete explores the dynamics of the manifestation of the latter through various stages or levels. He traces out an epiphanic chain: The Command - > the holy words - > the glorious Qur'an - > the heart of the Chosen One - > the hearts of the Qur'an's human audience. While these different loci of manifestation (*mazahir*) are marked out, al-Shahrastani typically stresses the unitary identity of the divine Word in its manifestations, which are like a series of reflections which are the reflected. In particular, its epiphany in the Prophet's heart is emphatically held to have been direct and undistorted: 'Its first locus of manifestation in this world is the person of the Chosen One (peace be upon him) or his soul or his mind or his heart … That is the meaning of revealing and sending down without rendering by imagination (*min ghayr intiqalin bi-takhayyul*), it being like facing mirrors (*ka'l-maraya al-mutaqabila*) in which appear the forms of existents in the most inspired way possible and the quickest way awaited. It is moreover the meaning of inspiration and direct emission into the mind.'[43] If the Prophet is here the prime locus, al-Shahrastani adds that a secondary locus is whichever individual receives the Qur'an and engages with it by hearing and understanding, or transmits it by recitation and writing.[44]

This oneness of the epiphanised and its epiphany is a key to al-Shahrastani's view of the Qur'an. Its identity-relation with the Command is urged again a few pages later in his critical perusal of *kalam* views on the precise nature of the link between God's Speech and the content of the physical codex. Al-Shahrastani firstly outlines what he takes to be the authoritative stance of the earliest believers and what the Qur'an itself gives us to understand. He says:[45]

Another arcanum is that the *kalam* theologians mention their various doctrines in their instruction on the descent of the Qur'an and the sending down of scripture. The righteous early Muslims (al-salaf) had all agreed that the Qur'an is God's Speech and that what is recited from the physical codex is God's scripture. The scripture [itself] has reported that God (exalted is He) sent down the scripture to His servant, narrated stories to him, laid down verses and elaborated on them, and explained the legal parameters and the rulings within it, clarifying them. They were all in agreement that God's Speech is what is between the two covers, that God's Speech is in our midst and we hear it, recite it, study it, and teach it.

The thrust of these statements is that the scripture in our midst and God's Word or Speech are essentially identical. Al-Shahrastani hereby affirms 'inlibration' in the strongest terms.

It is noteworthy that he now goes on to blame all the *kalam* positions that he presents for straying from this, including that of the Ash'aris – the school of which he was generally known as an affiliate and arch-defender. As he says: 'Not all of [the above] is the case in the teaching of the *kalam* theologians as a whole. For the Ash'ari, when he says: "God's Speech is one of His attributes subsisting in His essence, and it is unitary – neither stories, nor reports, nor legal parameters and rulings, nor verses and words; what we recite and listen to are *references* to it and *quotations* from it", well, the reference is not the referent and the quotation is *not* the original!'[46] The author's complaint here is that the Ash'aris, seemingly as the price for affirming that the Speech is an essential divine attribute (hence is eternal), distinguish the scripture in our midst from it. The school characterises the Qur'an as merely references to the eternal Speech (*dalalat 'alayhi*) and quotations of it (*hikayat 'anhu*). Note that al-Shahrastani's criticism of Ash'ari teaching on

this score is also found expressed in similar terms in his famous treatment of *kalam*, the *Nihaya*, which was of course largely formulated in defence of Ash'arism.[47]

Al-Shahrastani next turns to the Mu'tazili teaching: 'Moreover, the Mu'tazili, when he says: "God's Speech is one of His acts, created in a substrate made from a tree or a board, and it is among accidents, without any subsistence. As He makes it exist He also makes it pass away, and as He incepts it He also destroys it. What we recite and listen to is quotations (*hikayat*) from that thing which passes away and it consists of our own acts subsisting through the articulations of letters which we get either wrong or right. We are castigated for getting it wrong and rewarded for getting it right" (like the poetry of Imru' al-Qays which the reciter transmits and the rhyming prose which the narrator quotes!) – well, the quotation is not the original and the transmission is not the actual thing transmitted!'[48] So in this teaching, according to al-Shahrastani, the Mu'tazilis identify God's Speech as a temporally incepted entity which in itself constitutes God's act (*fi'l*) – disagreeing in this with the Ash'ari school who identify it as an eternal attribute of God's very essence. But they agree with the Ash'aris in likewise denying inlibration and viewing the Qur'an in our midst as a mere quotation distinguishable from the divine Speech as such. Thus according to the Mu'tazilis the Qur'an as recited by us is in a sense doubly incepted in status, i.e. something generated by our recitation which in turn devolves on something incepted by God. Al-Shahrastani adds what I take to be a polemical put-down, namely, that this barely differs from reciting a respected man-made text such as pagan Arab poetry, which will also provoke blame if done badly or recompense if done well.[49]

Al-Shahrastani refers finally to a third position on the issue, that of the Karrami school, soon to become defunct.[50] It is presented as yet more unfortunate than the Mu'tazili position in identifying God's Speech as an act incepted not outside Himself but within His very essence (the possibility of temporal and transient states in the divine essence being notoriously affirmed by the Karrami sect).[51] But be that as it may, the Karramis are akin to the others in denying inlibration and marking off the Qur'an from God's Speech. In fact that they go even further than framing it as 'quotations from' or 'references to' it and instead simply assert that it is *not* God's act but is the product thereof and *other* than it.[52]

Averse as he is to all these positions on the Qur'an's nature, al-Shahrastani instead counsels cleaving as closely as possible to the righteous early believers (*salaf*) and to the scripture's self-characterisation: 'What, then, of the word of the righteous early Muslims, and what of that scripture which is *a guidance for the God-conscious* (Q. 2:2)?!' He urges that someone sincere stands here before two forking paths: either to pursue or renounce subjective opinion. Now according to al-Shahrastani, 'someone who takes knowledge from its proper source and does *not* talk about God on the basis of his own opinion and intellect' must unqualifiedly affirm one thing of the Qur'an and suspend judgement on another. Namely, he must affirm the Qur'an's simple identity with God's Word, and he must suspend all inquiry into how that is so, i.e. whether the Qur'an involves an eternal attribute of God's essence or His temporal act. Thus, 'he proceeds on the path of security and believes in God, in His angels, His scriptures and His messengers, and confesses the truth of His scripture, that it is His inspiration, His revelation, His Speech, His verses, and His words, without taking any liberty with his own intellect to the effect that it describes an essence or an act, and he does not discuss whether it is pre-eternal or temporal or incepted. He delegates the understanding of all of that to God (exalted is He) and to the Messenger of God (may God bless him and his family). Thus he will reply, if questioned, "I say about it what God and His Messenger say."'[53] It may be significant that in his *Milal* al-Shahrastani attributes a similar formula of pious epochē to the followers of Hasan b. Muhammad b. al-Sabbah (d. 518 AH / 1124 CE), the founder-figure of the Nizari movement.[54] Be that as it may, several studies reveal that this stance, which is promoted here by al-Shahrastani as that of the *salaf*, was indeed probably the 'primitive' Islamic stance: the simple, unqualified assent that the Qur'an *is* God's Word.[55]

As our thinker's whole point here is to forswear further speculation we are left in the dark about his overall understanding of this matter. Yet a construction of his likeliest teaching from the scattered allusions reveals a view which in a fundamental way is at one with Ash'arism (thus, at odds with the other *kalam* positions presented). For al-Shahrastani is quite clear in places under the *asrar* rubrics of his Qur'an commentary, where circumspection is no concern, that the Command as such is pre-eternal – this status is unquestioned. For instance, in his lettric discussions provoked by the *muqatta'at* of Q. 2:1 (to be discussed in more detail, shortly) he refers to the *kaf* and *nun* of *kun* ('Be!', the divine existentialising imperative) as 'the first epiphany of the <u>pre-eternal</u> Command (*huwa al-mazhar al-awwal li'l-amr alqadim*)'.[56] He again insists in his comments on the arcana of *kun fa-yakun* ('Be!' and it is …) in Q. 2:117, that God gives existence through the Command <u>outside of time</u> (*la fi zaman*).[57] Thus the Logos-Command, by turns spoken of as an entire 'realm' (*'alam al-amr*), itself transcends the dimension of time. It is that through which all-temporal creation takes place, so must itself be uncreated. Further evidence is available in the Persian-language *Majlis*. This is another text characteristic of al-Shahrastani's higher thought, which can be tentatively dated to around 538 AH / 1145 CE near the end of his career, thus linking it closely with the *Mafatih*.[58] The entire sermon indeed opens with a clear affirmation that the Command has the status of sempiternity (*abadiyyat va sarmadiyyat*).[59]

It can be taken, therefore, that the arguments for this by al-Shahrastani in his Ash'ari work the *Nihaya* are not just given through 'double-talk', but are perfectly sincere. For example, he argues that Q. 7:53, *Are not the creation and the Command*. This indicates that creation and the Command are two opposites (*yataqabalan*) and is thus a basis for inferring that the Command is uncreated (*ghayr makhluq*). He adds that Q. 16:42, *What We say to something when We will it is that We simply say to it 'Be!'* and it is, indicates the priority of the Command to what is temporally incepted in an absolute sense (*al-taqaddum 'ala'l-hadith al-mutlaq*), which entails the Command's pre-eternity (*la yakun illa bi'l-azaliyya*).[60] So al-Shahrastani's parting from the Ash'ari norm is not over the pre-eternity of the Logos-Command, i.e. the divine 'speech', which he also upholds throughout his works. The vaunted parting lies rather in his strident assertion of inlibration, i.e. the Command's wholesale identity with the Qur'anic text, which he takes to be its substantial epiphany. He thus rejects marking the Qur'an off as the contra-distinct 'expression of', 'quotation of', or 'reference to' the Command.

Al-Shahrastani's harsh rejection of the Ash'ari nomenclature of 'reference' and 'quotation' has a certain irony, given that he himself fully grants the scripture's historicity and takes the inquiry into how the Uthmanic *textus receptus* came about to an outspoken pitch for his times, unusual for any Ash'ari.[61] His stridency on the oneness of the pre-eternal Command and its epiphany as the Qur'an, counterbalances this heightened critical sense of how the scripture's canonisation took place. Yet his stridency should not be dismissed as a disingenuous tactic to deflect the impious implications of his scrutiny of the historical canonisation process. Rather, it may make good sense in his higher system of ideas. As mentioned above, the scripture is presented by him as involving both an 'inchoate' (*musta'naf*) and an 'accomplished' (*mafrugh*) aspect. He seems to identify the scripture's 'coming down' (*tanzil*), i.e. its promulgation in the historical, human world, with its inchoate aspect, just as he identifies its higher interpretation (*ta'wil*) with its accomplished aspect.[62] A single reality thus confronts us, albeit bi-modal – one mode above historical and human contingencies (i.e. *mafrugh*), the other mode emerging through them (i.e. *musta'naf*). This alternate way of framing the link affirms the mystery of inlibration and eschews the view that the Qur'an is but a detached representation or signification of the eternal Command, while simultaneously acknowledging the Qur'an's historicity. By putting to work such concepts from his Isma'ili system as the accomplished and the inchoate, al-Shahrastani can chide al-Ash'ari for failing to equate the Qur'an and the eternal Command unequivocally, while simultaneously himself approaching the Uthmanic *textus receptus* in surprisingly radical, historical terms.

From the above, clearly al-Shahrastani has not simply disowned Ash'arism in the way he approaches the 'theology of the Qur'an' in the arcana sections of his Qur'an commentary. The picture is more intriguingly entwined and original: he has rather yoked certain Isma'ili ideas to a hyper-scripturalism deriving from Ash'arism itself and amounting to an intensive case of its own Qur'anic sensibility.[63] That this arguably added up to a doctrinal departure within Isma'ili thought emerges from a close comparison of al-Shahrastani's position with earlier Isma'ili approaches to the Qur'an. The originality of his stance can be gauged by juxtaposing him, for example, with Nasir-i Khusraw, who more than once discusses the 'theology of the Qur'an' in his works. The comparison reveals that, notwithstanding al-Shahrastani's divergences from Ash'arism, his Isma'ili teaching is deeply marked by it.

The details could be laid out as follows. To begin with, the teaching that the divine Word or Speech is pre-eternal and uncreated is held in common by both Ash'ari and Isma'ili thinkers, so Nasir-i Khusraw says ('The Divine Word is eternal and the cause of all existents (*kalima-yi bari subhanahu ... qadimast wa sabab-i hama-yi budanihaust*)').[64] This consensual acceptance of the Word's pre-eternal character is obviously al-Shahrastani's point of departure, but let an irksome difference be immediately noted: Ash'arism was driven to view God's Speech as an essential divine attribute. This followed precisely because it was eternal, and so if it were not an integral aspect of God Himself but a distinct reality, two eternals would result. Isma'ili thinkers, however, did not shrink from that conclusion and, moreover, the extreme radicalism of Isma'ili negative theology precluded identifying the Word or Speech as a divine attribute. In Isma'ili cosmology the eternal Command (*al-amr*) or Word (*al-kalima*) is in a true sense the *urgrund* of being, the apex of the hierarchy of existents which it is responsible for bringing about. To make the apex the godhead per se, was viewed as catastrophic inexactitude and miscegenation. The very status of the godhead sets it beyond all human predication or ideation. The uppermost limit attained by the latter is in reality the Command – the lesser, demiurgic, entity to which the referential range of theologemes is inevitably restricted. In the portions reviewed here, al-Shahrastani forgoes exploring this key difference, so it cannot be fully resolved in this place. He conceivably accommodated the Ash'ari designation of the Word as a divine attribute, as a *façon de parler*, for he elsewhere adjusts such attributes for his ultratranscendental theology by taking them strictly equivocally (*bi'shtirak al-lafz*), while rejecting the *kalam* notion that they are objective entities which subsist in God's essence.[65]

Moving on, Nasir-i Khusraw, in laying out the respective positions of the group who say 'the Qur'an is created' (*Qur'an afarida ast*) and the group who say 'the Qur'an is *uncreated*' *(Qur'an afarida nist)*, is evidently strongly inclined to the former group, i.e. the Mu'tazilis. But he presently shelves the whole foregoing discussion as being that of the commonalty, at which point he proceeds to say that the people of truth (*ahl-i haqq*) in a sense go even further than the Mu'tazilis. They supposedly set God's Speech (*guftar-i bari*) in the separate, strict sense of the meta-cosmic reality identifiable with God's existentialising command 'Be!', above the Qur'an's transcendental point of origin. As he states: 'the doctrine of the people of truth from amongst the followers of the family of the Messenger – may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him – is that you should know that [both] the speaker (*sukhanguy*) and the speech (*sukhan*) which is his act are created by God'.[66] The Isma'ili philosopher supports this with Q. 6:102, *There is no God except Him, the creator of all things (khaliqu kulli shay')*, so worship Him, for, since both the speech and the speaker are a 'thing' (*chizi*), they must be created beings. This last argument is unlikely to mean the 'speaker' in the sense of the Prophet Muhammad, whose created status is hardly cause for comment. It must instead mean the transcendental source itself from which the scripture derives, which Nasir-i Khusraw enjoins must be a reality definitely subordinate to God qua God. By this he is evidently referring to the Universal Intellect.[67]

In sum, this stance involves a more extreme lowering of the Qur'an than that of the Mu'tazilis, whereas al-Shahrastani's is a more extreme raising of the Qur'an than that of the Ash'aris. Although Nasir-i Khusraw also stands by the pre-eternality of the meta-cosmic reality, the divine Word or Command, he refuses to identify this as the origin and basis of the Qur'an, claiming that the transcendental origin of the Qur'an is a lower, created entity[68] and that the historically promulgated scripture is in turn a definitely created artefact. Al-Shahrastani instead clearly identifies the transcendental basis of the Qur'an as the eternal meta-cosmic reality, the divine Command which he considered to be a demiurgic entity at the uppermost bound of 'being' itself, and via the doctrine of inlibration he insists on a profound identification of the Qur'an with it (notwithstanding the fact that the scripture has a fully historical, 'inchoate' epiphany – an aspect in which he shows very keen interest). Both thinkers endorsed the Isma'ili cosmology which placed an interface, known as the Command, between the realm of created being and the godhead, but in situating the Qur'an in relation to it, Nasir-i Khusraw has been as strongly inclined to set the two apart as al-Shahrastani has been to identify them. Notwithstanding the fact that al-Shahrastani upbraids Ash'arism for compromising the teaching of inlibration, the stimulus of his pre-existing Ash'ari affiliation in his emphatic equation of the two is unmistakeable. Yet the cosmological system in which this teaching is so fiercely avowed is evidently a firmly Isma'ili one, in which the hypostatic Command is accredited with a function without parallel in other Muslim systems – that is, the responsibility (seemingly divine) of generating the entire realm of being. A closely related feature of this Isma'ili system of ideas is that the godhead is declared *wholly* beyond, i.e. a theology of absolute transcendence. This means that, unlike in the case of the related Ash'ari and Hanbali versions of inlibration (in which an essential divine attribute, Speech, is what is deemed to be objectively 'inlibrate'), there is no compromise of God's transcendence, notwithstanding how the *textus sacer* is ascribed with a well-nigh demiurgic role, arguably even loftier than its function in Ash'ari and Hanbali thought. It is as if in this esoteric theology, for all practical purposes the text that reveals God is God, that is, the phenomenal God of scripture is assimilated with the scripture itself. Meanwhile, the noumenal godhead itself withdraws into absolute unknowability.
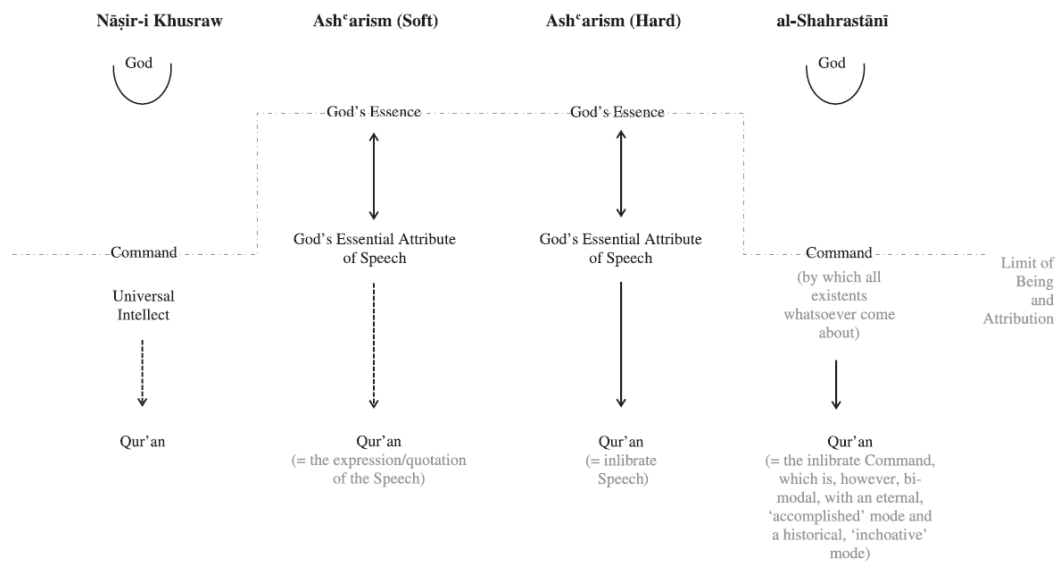

Fig. 1. Of Schema of Relevant Positions on the Qur'an's Metaphysical Status[69]

Transcendental Graphemes

Linking the *urgrund* of the cosmos with a textual matrix leads straight to facets of our author's higher thought which seem most at odds with reason. He envisions the divine Command on a linguistic model, and pursues it far beyond the bound of the metaphorical. Ironically, even here al-Shahrastani can be shown to be as intent as ever on putting forward a basically 'philosophical' concept of Islam. A place where he elaborates enough for us to see that he envisages a systematic 'science' of lettric cosmogony is al-Shahrastani's lengthy opening discussion of the 'disjointed letters' (*muqatta'at*) that constitute verse 1 of *Surat al-Baqara*: *alif lam mim*.

The verse is the cue for our author to put forward, over several pages, an involved theory of the significance of the letters of the Arabic alphabet (*huruf al-tahajji*). Though he does elsewhere treat Arabic and its orthography in frankly historical terms,[70] the discussion in these pages backs an esoteric cosmogonic theory which evokes the finer details of the Arabic language. In part, al-Shahrastani discovers the relevant correspondences through his own 'intuitive scrutiny' (*al-tawassum bi-hads*).[71]

Early in the discussion he makes clear that these correspondences are not just symbolic but underlie the very generation of the cosmos: 'Someone who says, "[These *muqatta'at*] allude to the letters which are the bases of speech, the scripture, the verses and divine names" is, in a sense, correct. Yet if he had the good fortune to acquire hermeneutics from the proper authorities in hermeneutics, he would say, "Letters are the bases of all existents (*al-huruf mabani al-mawjudat kulliha*), transcendent or terrestrial, simple or compound".'[72] Based on the idea that existence is traceable to graphemes, our author even freely acknowledges a magical, or theurgic, science which is likewise linked to the potencies of the 28 Arabic letters, for he says: 'Every letter of [the Arabic alphabet] has a characteristic quality (*hukm*) and a nature which influences (*tu'aththiru fi*) natures and mixtures, and every word composed from them has a characteristic quality which has an influence in fulfilling supplications and changing circumstances. Just as the transcendental words are things which influence intellects, souls, natures, and compounds, orally articulated words are likewise things which influence intellects, souls, natures, and compounds'.[73] Words, and their component phonemes, are here taken to be of two kinds: the oral/aural, human sort (*al-kalimat al-qawliyya*) and the transcendental sort (*al-kalimat al-'ulwiyya*), which is its archetype. If the latter, as constitutive of 'the World of the Command' (*'alam al amr*), are the very means by which 'the World of Creation' (*'alam al-khalq*) has been (and is being) projected into existence, it is inferred that the former can somehow function in that way too.

Ordered sequences modelled on the *muqatta'at* of the Qur'an are employed in talismanic magic and in magical invocations and, as al-Shahrastani goes on to propose in a highly suggestive passage, this is partly how Solomonic magic worked:[74]

> You have heard from the glorious Qur'an the case of the throne of Bilqis: … *When the one possessed of learning in scripture said: 'I will bring it to you [Solomon] in the blink of an eye'. So when [Solomon] saw it settled beside him he said: 'This is through the grace of my Lord!'*[75] (Q. 27:40), it was by use of composite words and ordered letters that Asaf b. Barakhya fetched it.[76] They have been quoted in reports, as follows: 'There is no distance for you, O Everlasting! There is no dwindling away for you, O Living One who gives life to the dead, who presides over every soul with what it has earned! I ask you by the seams of divine might on Your Throne and the scope of divine mercy in Your scripture, and I ask you by Your utmost glory, Your most beautiful names and most exalted attributes, O *Kaf ha' ya' 'ayn sad*, make the throne of Bilqis present!' Then [Solomon] saw it settled beside him from a distance travelled in two months. That signet-ring, which you have heard belonged to Solomon (peace be upon him), is the seal of kingly power, and the subjugation of the jinn comes about through it: … *And gathered together for Solomon were his hosts of jinn, men, and birds, marshalled into*

ranks (Q. 27:17). Some holy words and transcendental letters were written on it, likewise spells (ta'widhat) and perfect words of God protecting against the evil of what He has created, also praises and glorifications using the words of God which are written on the first part to emerge of the rising sun, on the faces of the stars and the eight who bear the Throne, and using the most beautiful names – as is mentioned in the reports.

Let us look further into the lettric cosmological theory that is the background of this passage – the postulate of transcendental words and graphemes (or phonemes) which are assumed as the model for such theurgic formulae and how they operate. Al-Shahrastani's discussion of the arcana of the disjointed letters of Q. 2:1 opens with a loud repudiation of speculative interpretation that is already familiar from his commentary on the *Fatiha*: 'Those who do exegesis of the Qur'an through their own personal opinions, let them take their place in hellfire!'[77] In this way he shelves wholesale the readings of these letter-sequences which head many chapters of the Qur'an that have been aired by him in the prior pages,[78] for example as encrypted expressions for God's names, coded titles for the chapters, or abbreviated references to individuals. With the evocativeness sometimes marking al-Shahrastani's discourse, he frames such bids to grasp the *muqatta'at* as the impudence of someone who 'has snatched at what the angels of God murmur to one another or what the saints of God whisper to one another'.[79] Instead of these theories, our interpreter puts forward a view of the *muqatta'at* which he sees as rooted in scriptural authority: that they are for 'paving the way', or 'making tractable', to faith (*al-ta'bid bi'l-iman*).[80] In the first instance, the mysterious letter-sequences were to make the Prophet himself tractable to faith in God and in God's 'transcendental, holy words' (*kalimat 'ulwiyya qudsiyya*), and in the second instance, to make the Prophet's human audience tractable to faith in God and in His Prophet, who promulgated the message through our kind of words. There is some distinction here in the verbal foci (a) of our faith and (b) of the Prophet's faith, and al-Shahrastani unearths evidence for the distinction in a verse such as the following: *So (a) have faith in God and His Messenger, the illiterate Prophet, who (b) has faith in God and His words …* (Q. 7:158).

What, then, is this 'hyper-language' experienced by prophets? Though al-Shahrastani differentiates the Arabic of the Qur'an from it, there is a sufficiently close relation between them for him to infer many of its features through Arabic – he assumes an imponderable analogy between them, and indeed, seems to identify them in practice. So, for example, just as there are 28 spoken letters (*huruf nutqiyya*) which underlie the infinitely numerous verbal words (*kalimat lafziyya*) of Arabic, likewise there are 28 transcendental letters (*huruf 'ulwiyya*) which constitute the infinite holy words (*kalimat qudsiyya*).[81] His thinking about the functions of specific letters is curious and highly intuitive but has its own 'internal logic'. For example he reasons that only fourteen of the 28 Arabic letters are found in the *muqatta'at* in the Qur'an, therefore, these fourteen must relate to the Logos-Command and its epiphanies (*al-amr wa mazahiruhu*), whereas the remaining fourteen are, by implication, subordinate and relate to the created universe and its points of origin (*al-khalq wa masadiruhu*).[82]

Shahrastani specifies what he means by the epiphanies (*mazahir*) of the Command as (a) the verses of holy scripture, i.e. par excellence, the Qur'an, and crucially, (b) the human individuals in possession of [the knowledge of] the arcana of the verses (*al-ashkhas alladhina ladayhim asraruha*). This last expression seemingly refers in practice to the imamate. The discussion indeed reiterates the claim that, interchangeably with revealed scripture itself, an élite of human individuals are, like it, manifestations of 'the holy words' which in turn are manifestations of the isolated transcendental letters. As he states: '… The holy words are epiphanised through specific individuals (*zaharat al-kalimat al-qudsiyya bi-ashkhas makhsusin*)'.[83] Al-Shahrastani is quite explicit that this (in context, Isma'ili) doctrine is extended from the paradigmatic case of Jesus, who is, for instance, referred to as [God's] Word which He cast into Mary (Q. 6:171).[84] This mystery, our author suggests, is hinted by the fact that the disjointed letters at the head of certain chapters

not only come in association with a reference to scripture (e.g. Q. 2:1–2) or to divine names and formulae (e.g. Q. 3:1–2), but also sometimes with references to individuals, for instance: *kaf ha' ya' 'ayn sad. The mention of your Lord's mercy on His servant Zakariyya* (Q. 19:1–2).[85] Al-Shahrastani even declares that, whereas in the former case God has disclosed His phonemes, words and signs to the Prophet as aural phenomena for faith to come about through their reality (*fa-hasala lahu al-iman bi-thubutiha*), in the latter case He has disclosed them to the Prophet as concrete individuals, for full certainty to come about through their existence (*fa-hasala lahu al-iqan bi-wujudiha*). In this mode of disclosure the Prophet experienced them actually 'individualised right in front of him (*mushakhkhasa bayn yadayhi*) speaking the truth and exercising justice …'.[86] Al-Shahrastani's doctrine of the human individualisation of transcendental words perhaps concerns, most of all, the person of Muhammad himself, of whom he says '[God] made him a locus for the manifestation of the holy words (*mazhar al-kalimat al-qudsiyya*) and an origin for the sanctified words, they being the beginnings of the chapters, the keys of the unseen which only [God] understands, and the means to unlock heaven and earth …'.[87]

The fourteen special letters included in the *muqatta'at* (hence signifying *amriyyat* or realities pertaining to the Command) are *alif, ha', ra', sin, sad, ta','ayn, qaf, kaf, lam, mim, nun, ha'*, and *ya'*, and, as just mentioned, the remaining fourteen letters (*ba', ta', tha', jim, kha', dal, dhal, za', shin, dad, za', ghayn, fa', waw*) signify creational things (*khalqiyyat*), their causes and principles. The intuitive 'logic' of al-Shahrastani's cosmological interpretation of these Arabic letters is especially apparent in his discussion of the first three creation-letters, the shape of whose Arabic graphemes (*'alamat*) are all similar and embody truths about the three highest cosmological entities. To begin with, al-Shahrastani equates the vertical stroke of the *alif* – first and most epitomic of the fourteen Command-letters – with the 'First Command which is the origin of [all] existents (*masdar al-mawjudat*)'.[88] The equation of the *alif* with the Command is surely prompted by the fact that it is the first letter of the Arabic word *amr* ('Command'). The Command has a transcendental unity which then spills over to produce the first being of the creational hierarchy, which is the First Intellect – the latter signified by the first of the fourteen creation-letters, namely the ba'. The single diacritical point beneath this letter in Arabic orthography alludes to the radical unity of the First Intellect, which is itself derived straight from the transcendental oneness of the Command, or as al-Shahrastani puts it, interwoven with Qur'anic quotations, 'As for the unity of the intellect, it is through the overflow of the Command: Our Command is but single! (Q. 54:50) – and the light of the Intellect is from it: … Like the twinkling of an eye (Q. 54:50)'.[89] The next cosmological reality is the Universal Soul, which is signified by the second letter of the creation-sequence, the *ta'*. This is surmounted by two points in Arabic orthography, indicating the duality of the Soul. The cosmological reality next in rank is prima materia (*'unsur*), underlying all bodies,[90] which is signified by the *tha'*, whose three surmounting points in orthography indicate the triplicity of prima materia.

The unity, duality, and triplicity of these three respective cosmological realities, signified by the different pointing of the three graphemes, is not just related to their relative ranks in the creational hierarchy, but also their emanative basis in this Neoplatonic cosmogony. The Intellect is the result of the overflow (*fayd*) of the Command, which is its single source and is itself characterised by a transcendental oneness. The Soul is then the result of the overflow of the two prior realities: the Command and the Intellect. Matter is finally the result of the overflow of all three prior realities: the Command, the Intellect, and the Soul.[91] Notwithstanding the patently symbolic, associative, and intuitive grounds of these lettric correspondences, it is noteworthy that the cosmology and terminology evoked here are firmly those of Muslim philosophy, as al-Shahrastani himself points out: 'Intellect, soul and nature [sic] do not consist in expressions of revealed religion (*shar'*), but they consist in expressions of philosophy (*hikma*).'[92]

More specifically, the system underlying the whole discussion is a form of Isma'ili Neoplatonism. This is glimpsed in many details, for instance al-Shahrastani's equation of *alif* with the Logos-Command – that definitive focus for Isma'ili cosmological reflection. As was mentioned earlier, a refrain of Isma'ili theology is its insistence on the dizzying upraising of the godhead beyond being and the tracing of being to an upper limit at a level beneath the godhead, namely the level of the Command. This (originally Plotinian) teaching that the godhead is even higher than being has a major role in al-Shahrastani's critique of Ibn Sina's thought[93] and it is seen at several turns in al-Shahrastani's commentary, including here. But we can be even more specific. In the medieval Isma'ili elaboration of this cosmology, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. after 427 AH / 1036 CE) tended to stress the identity of the Command and the First Intellect, whereas in Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Nasafi's (d. 332 AH / 943 CE) and Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani's (d. c. 361 AH / 971 CE) earlier systems the Command was viewed as distinct from, and yet higher than, the Intellect. It is this latter view that is taken over in al-Shahrastani's cosmology, as can be seen in the commentary on the *muqatta'at* of Q. 2:1 when he makes the already quoted statement: 'The *alif* amongst [the letters] alludes to the First Command which is the origin of [all] existents (*masdar al-mawjudat*)'.[94] Then, distinct from and subsequent to the Command, comes the Intellect, signified by the *ba'*. God, for His part, is directly implied to be above existence.

Other details in al-Shahrastani's lettric cosmology also link it with specific Isma'ili teachings. He says, for instance, that the seven paired letters (*sab'atu hurufin muzdawajat*) signify seven paired translunar entities and also seven paired sublunary entities. The letters in question (*dal/dhal*, *ra'/za'*, *sin/shin*, *sad/dad, ta'/za'*, *'ayn/ghayn,* and *fa'/qaf*) are described as 'paired' in the sense that each two of them have a form in Arabic orthography which is identical except for their diacritical pointing. The seven translunar entities which they signify are described as spiritual beings (*ruhaniyyat*), i.e. separate intellects which govern the seven planetary spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In their case the doubling which is signified by the paired letters is each intellect's association with its given planet or sphere. Next, amongst sublunar entities, the seven paired letters are said to 'signify the seven corporeal beings paired with their seven saints (*dallat 'ala'l-jismaniyyat al-sab'a al-muzdawajat bi-awliya'iha al-sab'a*) … each of the pairs amongst them is in some particular era and on some particular task, they being from a starting point stopping short at Adam (peace be upon him), until the Resurrection'.[95]

Some background is needed to understand this last statement. Much later in the commentary, in his discussion of the arcana of Q. 2:62, al-Shahrastani will explore the imposture of the Sabaeans (i.e. the Pseudo-Sabaeans of Harran) according to which mediators between God and humanity supposedly must be spiritual, celestial entities, not entities that are terrestrial and corporeal like prophets, and this is indeed a keynote of his lengthy argument between the Sabaeans and the Hanifs in his *Milal*,[96] and is also referred to in his *Nihaya*.[97] It is thus fairly clear that when al-Shahrastani refers here, in his discussion of the seven paired letters, to the seven sublunar corporeal entities, as opposed to the translunar spiritual entities, he means seven great prophets. He is in fact speaking about the seven cycles of Isma'ili hiero-history pertaining to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the future apocalyptic figure, 'the Resurrector' (*al-qa'im*). According to the reiterated patterns of this early Isma'ili theory of sacred history, each speaking prophet (*natiq*) is accompanied by a legatee (*wasi*) who is silent (*samit*) in the sense that he guards the esoteric aspect of the messages revealed to the prophet with whom he is linked, and this guardianship passes to the legatee's descendants.[98] While the original theory held that each line of imams in the seven cycles was also a heptad, this was modified by the Fatimids, for obvious reasons.[99] At any rate the basic theory that prophethood and legateeship go in tandem seems to be what al-Shahrastani has in mind in his reference here to the seven 'saints' (or 'friends', *awliya'*) who are paired with the seven sublunar, corporeal equivalents of the seven planetary intellects.

Such readings of the Arabic graphemes' symbolism in terms of Isma'ili cosmological and historical teachings have an elegant intricacy and give the sense of a full-fledged system.[100] But other interpretations are frankly presented by al-Shahrastani as open questions – what he provides are merely methodological clues and 'the likes of us do not have the power of understanding them …'.[101] He admits this, notably, in regard to his proposed method for finding the specific hidden allusions of the various sequences of *muqatta'at* in the Qur'an. Even here, though, the basic principle of the technique is gratifyingly clear. Letters at the head of chapters are found alone, or in twos, threes, fours, or fives. Al-Shahrastani thus proposes that single letters refer to lone realities, identifiable from the verse following; double letters refer to twofold realities, identifiable from the verse or verses following; triple letters refer to threefold realities, identifiable from the verse or verses following, and so on. Thus, for example, *Qaf. By the glorious Qur'an* (Q. 50:1), supposedly shows us that the prime referent of the initial *qaf* is none other than the holy scripture itself. But our interpreter hereby finds two deeper referents implied, each identifiable with the Qur'an: (1) what it epiphanises, namely, the first speech (*al-qawl al-awwal*), i.e. the Command, and (2) what epiphanises it, or amounts to its human 'extension' or 'prolongation' (*tul*), namely, the final individual (*al-shakhs al-akhir*) 'who speaks about it correctly and who is responsible for it by right (*al-qa'im 'alayhi bi'l-haqq*)'.[102] Al-Shahrastani says of this latter figure, that the verse implicitly refers to both the 'precious things' (*thaqalan*) – the scripture and the Prophet's household – to which the Muslims were told to cleave and so never go astray, in the famous 'hadith of the two precious things' (*hadith al-thaqalayn*).[103] But, prompts al-Shahrastani, '[God] hid the second [precious thing], concealing on account of ellipsis and the situation (*satran li'l-qissa wa'l-hal*)'.[104] It seems that the 'individual' in our author's mind is Ali b. Abi Talib.

If these interpretations, then, have an elusive rationale of their own, there are others given of the graphemes which simply defy such scrutiny, whatever their suggestiveness. One example is al-Shahrastani's very explanation of the *muqatta'at* mentioned in Q. 2:1 itself, which occasioned this whole discussion: *alif lam mim*. Amongst a frustratingly random series of meanings, our author ventures that the *alif* refers to the first cycle of time and the upward direction of space, the lam refers to the middle cycle of time and the middle part of space, and the *mim* refers to the last cycle of time and the 'downward' direction of space. Again, the *alif*, we are told, refers to the first ruling of the rulings of the accomplished, the *lam* refers to the second ruling of the rulings of the accomplished, and the *mim* refers to the last ruling of the rulings of the accomplished.[105] It may be that the very bid to fathom such speculations misses their real impetus, namely, to cultivate the liminal sense of an intelligible groundwork underlying the perceptible world. This 'pre-geometry' or 'implicate order' (to use a present-day, Bohmian, idiom) was understandably thought of in Islam in terms of the readiest paradigm in its radically scripture-based worldview. Existence was felt to have, quite literally, a subtext and the world's buried roots were conceived of as somehow hierographic. On the same trajectory, Sufism would come to speak of the entire creation as a sacred text, an 'existential Qur'an' (*Qur'an takwini*) that was subject, in the same way as the 'recitative Qur'an' (*al-Qurʾan al-tadwini*), to an esoteric hermeneutics (*ta'wil*).

It is tempting to trace the lettric speculations of the kind indulged in by al-Shahrastani, back to that other staunch logocracy, Judaism. The foundation text of Kabbalah, the Sefer Yetsirah ('The Book of Creation') proves to have some key elements in common with al-Shahrastani's Isma'ili letter mysticism. At its heart lies the idea that God has created all things through basal graphemes, namely, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.[106] The grouping of these letters is also highly comparable. There is, for instance, a set of seven paired Hebrew letters (*beth, gimel, daleth, kaf, pe, resh, and tav*) – paired, in this case, because they are pronounced in two ways, according to 'a structure of soft and hard, strong and weak', i.e. depending on whether or not they possess *dagesh*.[107] What this sevenfold set is said to signify (or rather, actually to generate in creation) chimes fascinatingly with al-Shahrastani's view, for the list of

correspondences begins 'seven universes (*shiv'ah 'olamot*), seven firmaments (*shiv'ah reqi'in*) …'. The seven firmaments here match al-Shahrastani's seven celestial intellect-spheres, and the seven 'universes' are interpreted in some sources as referring to a Jewish sevenfold periodisation of terrestrial time, based on the six (plus one) days of creation familiar from Genesis.[108] These seven millennial epochs were indeed each associated with key figures and phases of Biblical history: the first with Adam, the second with Noah, the third with Abraham, and so on, through to the Messianic times that usher in the sabbatical millennium. This may well also be the hidden reference a little later in the *Sefer Yetsirah* when another heptad is mentioned that is signified by these letters, namely, the seven days of the week. Based on the Biblical idea that *A thousand years in Your sight are like a day that has just gone by* (Psalm 90:4), the *Sefer Yetsirah* may, by the seven 'days' (Heb. *shiv'ah yamim*) and the 'week' (Heb. *shavu'a*), be referring to much more than the conventional calendric days and weeks.[109] 'Therefore', states the *Sefer Yetsirah*, 'He made sevens beloved under all the heavens'.[110] Glimpsed correspondences such as these are certainly thought provoking between the lettric esotericism linked with the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the Isma'ili system unfolded by al-Shahrastani. However, the true direction of influences here is wholly moot. Though some scholars date the *Sefer Yetsirah* to the first century CE, or even earlier,[111] considered opinion has more recently, on strikingly cogent grounds, backed a much later composition date for it, around the ninth century CE. Not only was the intellectual stimulus for this foundational Kabbalist text possibly Islamic but it is even argued to have been specifically Isma'ili.[112]

The Angelic Nexus

The question arises as to whether al-Shahrastani proposes any actual theory of the causal process by which these graphemic or verbal realities from the World of the Command act upon – or function as agents for – the entities of the World of Creation? A place (perhaps unexpected) where he goes into the dynamics of the Command's action on creation is in commenting on verses Q. 2:19 and 20, *Or like a rain cloud from the sky, in which are dark shadows, thunder, and lightning. They put their fingers in their ears because of the claps of thunder, fearing death. God encompasses the unbelievers! The lightning almost snatches away their sight. Whenever it illumines them they walk in it, and when it casts darkness over them they come to a standstill. If God wanted, He could take away their hearing and their sight. God can do anything!*

The context of these verses is an allegory for the situation of disbelievers, verse 17 having just compared them to someone who kindles a feeble fire in the night, without which he is plunged into utter darkness. The Qur'an now goes on to liken them to travellers caught in a thunderstorm. Inter alia, al-Shahrastani chillingly takes the verses as a basis for imagining, beyond the veil of earthly realities, the, as yet, inconceivable conditions of the souls of the damned in the eschaton, such that 'their state in the hereafter is as the likeness of a rain cloud in the sky which pours forth different kinds of punishment on them … as for the thunder, it is the voice of the avenging angels (*sawt al-zabaniya*) moaning above them with the sound of proud contempt (*sawt al-zabuna*)[113] and disdain, from which lightning flashes that snatches sight away – since they failed to listen to the truth in this life with the ears of their hearts and they failed to see the truth with the eyes of their intellects.'[114] Setting aside such awesome, otherworldly visualisations, however, al-Shahrastani presently turns to speak about cloud formation, precipitation, the phenomena of thunderstorms, and other meteorological events on our planet, in self-consciously secular terms drawn from the natural sciences of his day:[115]

> Amongst the celestial phenomena are clouds, wind, thunder, and lightning. The philosophers have said of them that they are aqueous bodies which rise as vapours into the atmosphere, or fiery bodies which rise as fumes into the atmosphere; then the wind penetrates them and so

makes them heaped up masses and some cold from the air collides with them, so they turn into water on account of the coldness which inheres in them, just as they were at first turned into air on account of the heat which inhered in them. Thus they fall as rain, as they rose up as vapour. If the cold is stronger it induces them to become ice, snow, and hail, depending on the force and the intensity in it. When the wind penetrates them, and some of them strike others, or emerge at speed from the gaps in them, a sound of striking or rending originates within them, and is known as thunder. The force of the sound depends on the intensity of the striking and the rending, and light in the atmosphere originates from the collision and is known as lightning. The strength of the light depends on the intensity of the collision.

Al-Shahrastani goes on, in like vein, to speak of meteorites, comets (*adhnab al-kawakib*), the nimbus, rainbow, and other atmospheric phenomena. Such explanations, he says, constitute the wisdom of the philosophers (*hikmat al-falasifa*) and are the valid framework for understanding any sense-datum 'qua physical object of sense perception (*min haythu huwa jismani mahsus*)'.[116]

Yet, according to al-Shahrastani, in naturalistic explanations like these the philosophers 'have been unmindful about acknowledging the intelligible in regard to [such phenomena of the earth's atmosphere]'. This is the self-same event, contrastingly viewed 'qua spiritual object of intellect (*min haythu huwa ruhani ma'qul*)'.[117] Here, then, is the explanatory framework proper to the wisdom of prophecy (*hikma al-nubuwwa*) and it is in his picture of causality in terms of the latter framework in contrast to that of philosophy, that al-Shahrastani gives more detail on how the verbal realities from the World of the Command generate the physical realities of the World of Creation. All events and entities in the physical realm are stated to devolve on 'an active word' (*kalima fa'ala*) within the World of the Command. But the causal nexus between these radically distinct dimensions involves an interface. This interface is emphatically identified by al-Shahrastani with the angelic orders. It is through the various levels of entities known as *mala'ika* ('angels') – spiritual in constitution but functionally bi-dimensional – that the verbal (and ultimately graphemic) realities of the Command are transposed into the physical realities of creation. As he states:[118]

In the wisdom of prophecy (*hikma al-nubuwwa*) it is mentioned that nothing incepted in the physical world is incepted without being accompanied by an active word from the Command of the Creator (exalted is He), the bearer of this word pertaining to the command (*kalima amriyya*) being a spiritual angel. Creation is thus ordained on the basis of the Command, and the sense-datum is not devoid of the intelligible, nor the physical of the spiritual. So the angel in charge of the clouds orders them forward and holds them back, and that constitutes his glorification in praise of Him (exalted is He).

Al-Shahrastani goes on to say that in view of this vital role of angelic agency, it is feasible in prophetic discourse for the phenomenon of thunder to be referred to simply as an angel or, conversely, for an angel to be referred to as thunder.[119] That is why the Qur'an can say *the thunder gives glorification, in praise of Him* (Q. 13:13), when in fact it is the given angelic servant who glorifies God through performing its ordained function in regard to the meteorological event.

Al-Shahrastani or his teachers have purportedly derived this highly specific, meta-cosmic function for angels from scripture and Prophetic tradition. It may be gleaned from these sources that angels are subject to God's command and also its bearers to others – the paradigmatic case of this being the Archangel Gabriel, deliverer of the divine word into the heart of the Prophet (e.g. Q. 2:97), or, mutatis mutandis, to the Virgin Mary. But in al-Shahrastani's cosmology, all created data whatsoever emerge through God's words. From such scriptural clues has thus been extrapolated a teaching that the primary cosmological

function of transferring divine words from the 'Realm of the Command' into the 'Realm of Creation' – a supreme act of translation without which nothing whatsoever within the latter realm could occur – is always being performed by angels.[120] This ubiquity of angelic activity is supported by other texts in the Prophetic canon, such as a tradition which al-Shahrastani alludes to here according to which there is an angel for each single raindrop that falls.[121]

Despite the importance to al-Shahrastani that the authority for this alternate way of thinking about creational effects was 'prophetic', much in this theory could be seen as a scriptural or religious rendition of philosophical concepts. The 'active words' (*kalimat fa'ala*) presupposed by each entity or event in the physical universe, evoke the *logoi spermatikoi* of Plotinus' Enneads, and also of Stoic physical theory. His angelology is moreover in clear accord with longstanding developments within the Neoplatonic side of the philosophical heritage.[122] Though al-Shahrastani freely speaks of angels with awesome traditional imagery (as in the reference just now, to the *zabaniya* and their terrifying voices), they have effectively become a linking postulate in a philosophical cosmology, and alternatively, in an epistemology. For, insofar as our author equates creation and the Command with sensibilia (*mahsusat*) and intelligibilia (*ma'qulat*), respectively, angelhood is simply what explains and guarantees the relation between the latter. Al-Shahrastani here even applies to angels the terminology of universal (*kulli*) and particular (*juz'i*), a vital element of Peripatetic meta-theory first introduced in Aristotle's Organon: 'Amongst the angels is that which is a whole or universal (*kulli*), and amongst them is that which is a part or particular (*juz'i*). So accompanying every rain shower, for example, there is a universal angel (*malak kulli*), and accompanying every tiny droplet which falls from the sky is a particular angel (*malak juz'i*)'.[123] Though al-Shahrastani's philosophical way of thinking about angels seems exotic, it satisfyingly accounts for statements in tradition in which angels are held responsible for collective entities (e.g. storms) and for singular entities (e.g. raindrops). According to al-Shahrastani, acknowledging the angelic agency underlying all our world's data, from the universal down to the highly particular, is deeply tied to acknowledging its rational directedness and thus God's own agency. Remove these linking cosmological functionaries and you remove the very grounding of the empirical world in a higher intelligence, and in effect declare existence to result from random factors and blind coincidence, or in al-Shahrastani's words: 'Were it not so, creation would be to no avail, existence would be by random accident (*al-wujud ittifaqan*), the wisdom in the orderly arrangement of the world would be false, and the signs in creation and the Command, the origin and the return would be useless.'[124]

To repeat: despite the philosophical trend of this angelology, al-Shahrastani stresses its revealed basis. Angelic aetiology belongs to prophetic knowledge, whereas naturalistic aetiology belongs to philosophical knowledge. However, just as the world about us is itself an awe-inspiring combination of the intelligible and the perceptible, i.e. a profound syngamy of the Command and creation, so our own theory of it must itself combine the wisdom of prophecy with the wisdom of the philosophers. As al-Shahrastani declares at the close of his comment on the arcana of Q. 2:19–20:[125]

> Glory be to Him! How mighty is His rank and how very evident is His proof, the way in which He established the perceptible blended with the intelligible, and the way He assigned what pertains to the Command to what pertains to creation! Whoever positions himself on the two wisdoms (I mean the wisdom of the philosophers in confirming the celestial effects and the wisdom of prophecy in confirming the effects relating to the Command) knows that the difference between the two of them is like that between the hoof-print and the hoof[126] and the exchange between them is like that between the pendant and the porcelain [it is made from].'

This is a telling formulation by al-Shahrastani of his conjoint epistemology since, as mentioned near the beginning of this article, the idea of the imperative of combining the wisdom of prophecy and of philosophy

is a leitmotif of the Isma'ili tradition and indeed constituted the title of one of the most important texts by the fifth/eleventh century Isma'ili thinker Nasir-i Khusraw.[127]

Conclusion

This analysis grows from initial work on the first quarter of the commentary on *Surat al-Baqara*. Further study of the commentary will doubtless bring to light more details of al-Shahrastani's higher teachings on the subject of the cosmogonic Word. Each of the four facets presented here shows the intense interplay of influences in our hermeneut's own teachings. Given his Ash'ari formation and reputation it is unsurprising that Ash'arism is a major influence, yet the fact remains that within the arcana rubrics, al-Shahrastani tends to predicate what he says about this subject on criticisms of Ash'arism's approach. The impact of teachings traceable to his Isma'ili affiliation instead seems unmistakeable. Without wishing to underplay the originality and independent interest of al-Shahrastani's thinking, the Isma'ili traits within it may be pinpointed, with a view to some kind of conclusion.

Firstly, having strongly rejected the established *kalam* framework for proving the Qur'an's inimitability, al-Shahrastani bases himself on a fundamental Isma'ili principle of hierarchism, in this instance informing the entire domain of 'language' in the broadest sense, inclusive of intercommunication within other animal species. He also puts forward as decisive cumulative evidence of inimitability his own unfolding of the Qur'an's arcana, which depends on applying his dyadic hermeneutical system – Isma'ili in pedigree. Next, on the issue of the Qur'an's eternity, al-Shahrastani chides Ash'arism for too weakly linking God's eternal Word with the historically promulgated scripture, and he affirms an identity relation between them on the authority of the 'righteous early Muslims' (*salaf*) – a doctrine of inlibration. This position admittedly seems to deepen the stance of the Ash'aris themselves on the scripture rather than having much to do with prior Isma'ili views. A major Isma'ili thinker like Nasir-i Khusraw, for example, opts for a temporal view of the Qur'an's status, akin to the Mu'tazili view.

The Isma'ili dimension of al-Shahrastani's teaching on this subject is instead to be found in the specifics of his concept of the eternal Word with which the scripture is supposedly identifiable. For al-Shahrastani it is synonymous with the Command, the cosmological reality which he takes to be the uppermost bound of 'being' itself (as numerous references by him to it testify), and of which, in some ways, he thinks as a demiurge. The effect of combining a strong teaching of inlibration with this Isma'ili cosmogony focused on the Command, is to elevate the scripture's significance in an unprecedented way. Existence in entirety comes to be viewed as its projected shadow or adumbration. Being as such is entextualised. Ironically, our thinker is deeply exercised by the historical study of the scripture, from quoting considered views on the etymons of its vocabulary to even problematising the assembling of the Uthmanic text. He sometimes articulates the identity of the latter with the eternal Command using his Isma'ili system of dyadic concepts, notably, the dyad of the inchoate and the accomplished. The Qur'an involves both dimensions and so al-Shahrastani can simultaneously approach it as an eternal hypostasis and as a historically emergent artefact. Another markedly Isma'ili feature of our author's teaching to note here is that just as the Command is epiphanised as the Qur'an, it is also held to be epiphanised as certain individuals.

Next, envisioning the instrument of cosmogony on the model of a literary or phonemic entity, leads straight to the idea of an esoteric science of letters. The Realm of the Command, underlying the created universe, is thought of as a hyper-language whose graphemes form the roots of all manifest reality. The Isma'ili complexion of this lettric system is clear in many of the details alluded to by al-Shahrastani. For

example, the *alif* signifies the aforementioned Command, 'the origin of all existents' (*masdar al-mawjudat*), and by implication, God as such is held to transcend existence in line with the radical stance typical of Isma'ili theology. Again, reference is made to seven pairs of graphemes identical in basic form (*rasm*) but distinct in pointing (*nuqat*). These signify: a translunar heptad of paired entities, namely the spiritual intellects twinned with their given spheres; and a sublunar heptad of paired entities, namely, the corporeal prophets twinned with their given legatees. The latter heptad unmistakeably refers to the details of Isma'ili 'hiero-history'. Finally, al-Shahrastani puts forward a compelling understanding of how the verbal realities of the Command are translated into the perceptible realities of the created universe. The nexus between these radically different orders of reality is said to be the angels. It is thus imperative to explain a given event in our phenomenal world through the activity of natural causes and also through the activity of angels, the former mode of explanation being proper to philosophical wisdom and the latter to prophetic wisdom. To synthesise the 'twin wisdoms' is a defining aim of medieval Isma'ili thought and a catchphrase in its discourse.

A last observation: the ostensive movement of al-Shahrastani's thinking on the cosmogonic Word in his scripture commentary typically starts with a neutral, doxographical presentation of earlier, broadly exoteric, answers to the relevant inquiries – the doxographical focus being wholly in step with the author's trend in his *Nihaya* and, of course, *Milal* (arguably the pre-eminent Muslim doxography). It next proceeds in the arcana sections to a fierce problematic of suchlike answers. Lastly, it advances the supposedly real solutions, which are clearly drawn from the esoteric realm of his higher, broadly Isma'ili, system. This is deeply akin to the structure of his critique of Ibn Sina, which begins with verbatim quotations (*nusus*) of the Chief Shaykh's teaching on a given philosophical issue, proceeds to a problematic of them (*tanaqud/i'tirad*), and finally offers the supposedly correct teaching (*al-mukhtar al-haqq*) on the issue, drawing on the principles of his Isma'ili system. Both the scripture commentary and the philosophical critique thus have an intrinsic form which is highly comparable, consisting of problematised theses and their esoteric resolution. Both texts' construction retraces in detail, as it were, the bigger pattern of al-Shahrastani's biography, which precisely involved a steeping in exoteric systems, a sense of their supposed limitation and relativity, and intellectual deliverance through the discovery of Isma'ili thought. Close scrutiny hints, nevertheless, that the binary opposition of a thesis consisting of suchlike systems of thought and its resolution through an Isma'ili antithesis, is a simplistic characterisation of our author's intellectual trajectory. Ash'arism, and also Avicennism, continue to reverberate in his higher thought, and leave their clear trace in certain of its reflexes and details. This means that al-Shahrastani's higher thought may be viewed as a breakthrough which is truly synthetic in its quality – the product of a threefold, not merely twofold, progression.

NOTES

[1] Hashimi, *Tawdih al-milal*, vol. 1, p. 19.
[2] It is speculated that this break followed the defeat of Sanjar by the Qara Khitay in 536 AH / 1141 CE, but in reality many such details of the chronology of al-Shahrastani's biography are obscure (Mayer, [*Keys to the Arcana*](#), pp. 16–17).
[3] Library of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Tehran, MS 8086/B78, folio 1A. Note that the folio reference for this date given in note 65, Mayer, Keys to the Arcana, p. 54, is incorrect.
[4] At the very end of the commentary on *Surat al-Baqara* the copyist, Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Zanji, states 'The transcription of the book [from al-Shahrastani's autograph] is completed, praise be to God and how excellent is His

aid, at the conclusion of God's month of al-Asamm, Rajab 667[/1268] …'. There is also another statement here: 'This manuscript was transcribed from the original which is in the handwriting of the author, the imam, the knower of the arcana of the Qur'an, the crown of the faith al-Shahrastani, may God cover him in His grace. The original was in two volumes …', i.e. apparently the full extent of MS 8086/B78 from the library of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Tehran, as published by Miras-i Maktub.

[5] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih al-asrar*. The volumes were published with the assistance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, and Tehran University.

[6] Mayer, 'Shahrastani on the Arcana of the Qur'an'.

[7] In addition to the reference above in note 6, see the translator's introduction in Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, pp. 6–7, p. 10, p. 13, pp. 15–19.

[8] See Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, pp. 25–35. The architecture in question comes down to four prime complementarities (*muzdawajat*): the Command and creation, hierarchy and contrariety, generality and specificity, and the accomplished and the inchoate. These in turn imply a radically transcendental theology, since the divine principle which is the ultimate cause of these complementarities and of all the realities informed by them, must be elevated wholly above them. Al-Shahrastani bases this on the verse *Do not knowingly make rivals for God* (Q. 2:22). Finally, insofar as God is (self-)described with predicates which do have counter-terms, or 'rivals', these predicates are to be strictly interpreted on the basis of equivocity, not univocity, i.e. they have meanings radically apart from their usual meanings in human parlance. Note that while al-Shahrastani's system of dyads is distinctive, the notion that created reality is formed from pairs is a leitmotif of medieval Isma'ili thought. See, for example, Madelung and Walker, 'The *Kitab al-rusum*'. See also al-Nu'man, *Asas al ta'wil*; and the discussion by Poonawala, 'Isma'ili *ta'wil* of the Qur'an'.

[9] An attempt to show how the system operates in each successive issue of 'The Wrestling' is found in Mayer, 'Shahrastani's Hanif Revelation'.

[10] For example, al-Shahrastani gives an esoteric analysis of the letters constituting the name Allah running in the reverse direction to its outward form; he mentions the teaching that the main constituent letters of the name Allah (*alif, lam, ha'*) underlie 'the primary body' of space; he also sees much significance in the role of the letters *kaf* and *nun* in Q. 1:5 (Mayer, Keys to the Arcana, pp. 144–6 (English), pp. 82–4 (Arabic); also pp. 172–3 (English), p. 107 (Arabic). Also see my discussion at pp. 37–40, and pp. 43–4).

[11] The school positions defended by al-Shahrastani in the *Nihaya* are broadly Ash'ari, though in the case of the doctrine of the Qur'an's inimitability, there was an overlap of the Ash'ari approach with that of Mu'tazili *kalam* thinkers, who also elaborated on this particular teaching. A classic earlier treatment of inimitability from within the Ash'ari school is by al-Baqillani (d. 404 AH / 1013 CE); see al-Baqillani, *I'jaz al-Qur'an*. On this last, also see Bouman, *Le conflit autour du Coran*. Other important Ash'ari treatments were by Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 471 AH / 1078 CE) in his *Dala'il I'jaz al-Qur'an*, and by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606 AH / 1209 CE) in his *Nihayat al-I'jaz fi dirayat al-I'jaz*. Major Mu'tazili treatments of the issue include those by al-Rummani (d. 384 AH / 994 CE) and Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d. 415 AH / 1025 CE); see al-Rummani, *al-Nukat fi I'jaz*; also Rahman, 'The Miraculous Nature of Muslim Scripture'; Larkin, 'The Inimitability of the Qur'an'; and Vasalou, 'The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'an'.

[12] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[13] *Tatawaqqafu … 'ala* : *yatawaqqfu … idha* MA.

[14] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[15] *Tatawaqqafu* : *yatawaqqafu* MA.

[16] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[17] Al-Shahrastani's point that human incapacity would need to be verified throughout the race's history specifically reverses the grounds of al-Nazzam's critique: namely, the incapacity is only restricted in duration. The predominant view however appears to have been in step with al-Shahrastani's presentation, i.e. the incapacity should persist throughout all ages. See al-Rafi'i, *I'jaz al-Qur'an*, p. 156.

[18] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[19] In his *Nihaya*, al-Shaharastani seems himself to supply some answer to his objection here in the Qur'an commentary, by comparing the subsequent display of a prophetic miracle, with its original occurrence. He says that the evidential force of (a) the direct creation of the miraculous (*khalq al-mu'jiz*) is like (b) publishing it abroad or displaying it (*izhar al-mu'jiz*), and so the latter may well be what accompanies the prophetic claim and challenge. (Note: I here strongly suggest reading *li-anna* instead of la in the crucial sentence *fa-yakun izhar al-mu'jiz maqrunan bi'l-da'wa wa'l-tahaddi la* [= *li-anna*!] *izhar al-mu'jiz ka-khalq al-mu'jiz fi'l-dalala ala'l-sidq*: 'thus, displaying the miraculous is combined with the claim and the challenge, since displaying the miraculous is akin to creating the miraculous, in indicating [a prophet's] veracity'.) In this regard, the case of the she-camel (al-*naqa*) of the folk of *Thamud*, referred to in the Qur'an, is similar to the case of the Qur'an itself. God firstly created the she-camel, according to some accounts, inside a rock (see Brinner, The History of al-Tabari, Volume III, p. 41). Next, what coincided with the claim

made by the prophet Salih was her being displayed by the rock opening up. Likewise in the case of the Qur'an and the claim of Muhammad, God firstly created [sic] the inimitable ordered expressions en bloc upon the so-called Guarded Tablet; then Gabriel, the Prophet, and subsequently we ourselves, recite them and publish the expressions abroad (see Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, p. 453(Arabic)).

[20] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[21] *La tulzamu* : *la yulzamu* MA.

[22] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[23] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[24] Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 121.

[25] Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 121.

[26] For example, he says that, in Q. 52:9, *On a day when heaven will move with a motion* (*yawma tamuru'l-sama'u mawran*), the verb *tamuru* is more elegant (*afsah*) than alternatives like *taharrakat, sarat, ja'at, and dhahabat* (Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, p. 456 (Arabic)).

[27] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 215. Al-Shahrastani explicitly identifies the *jawami' alkalim* with the Formula of Testimony. However the Prophet's endowment with the *jawami' alkalim* was often interpreted more generally in terms of his ability to express himself fluently and pithily. For the hadith concerning the 'comprehensive words' see Muslim, Sahih, vol. 1, *Kitab al-masajid wa-mawadi' al-salat*, pp. 371–2, *ahadith* 5–8.

[28] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 215. The verses (Q. 2:21–2) state: *Humanity! Worship your Lord who created you and those who were before you – perhaps you will be Godconscious! He who made for you the earth as a bed, and heaven as a canopy and He sent down water from heaven, and by it He brought forth fruits as a provision for you. So do not knowingly make rivals for God!*

[29] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 215.

[30] Madelung and Mayer, *Struggling with the Philosopher*, p. 56 (English), p. 61 (Arabic).

[31] 'Neither is there anyone in the world who contests him in the claim which he announces … By my life, some rejecter (*munkir*) and pigheaded resister (*mu'anid*) did exist for [the Prophet] – confuted by the very act of rejecting! But never hold the opinion that Musaylima the Liar was contesting (*kana munazi'an*) the illiterate prophethood …' (al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, pp. 215–6).

[32] To all this he adds a slighter argument, whose gist is the implausibility, psychologically, of the Prophet spreading a deception about himself, predicated on the formula 'no god but God'. For 'there is no one in the world' al-Shahrastani supposes, 'who would falsely maintain that claim [to prophethood] through affirming monotheism and negating divine rivals'(al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 215).

[33] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 216.

[34] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217.

[35] On these concepts, see my discussion in Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, pp. 25–35.

[36] Al-Shahrastani quotes the following hadith in support: 'Human beings go on thriving as long as they are different. When equalised, they are destroyed (*fa-idha istawu halaku*).' See, with a very slight difference of wording, al-Hindi, *Kanz al-'ummal*, vol. 3, p. 690.

[37] Mayer, Keys to the Arcana, pp. 120–1.

[38] Al-Shahrastani declares: '… we know by proof that the Qur'an is inimitable in entirety and [a specific] basis of its inimitability may not be ascertained by us. Instead we say: the inimitability in it is from every angle: harmonious order, eloquence, chasteness of language, and richness – not on one basis apart from another' (al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 217).

[39] Al-Shahrastani, Mafatih, vol. 1, p. 218.

[40] Al-Shahrastani, Mafatih, vol. 1, p. 218.

[41] Mayer, 'Paradoxes in Shahrastani's Lexicological Methodology', forthcoming.

[42] Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 108.

[43] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 145. Al-Shahrastani presents a set of proof-texts here for his claim that what the Prophet received and delivered to others is identifiable as the very epiphany of God's Word (thus not merely the representation or expression thereof): 'God (exalted is He) said: *The trustworthy Spirit came down with it to your heart* (Q. 26:194–5), and this is [tantamount to affirming] a locus of manifestation. He also said: *In a clear Arabic tongue* (Q. 26:195), and this is [also tantamount to affirming] a locus of manifestation. He also said: *Thus We inspired you with a spirit through our Command. You used not to know what scripture was, nor belief* (Q. 42:52), and this is [also tantamount to affirming] a locus of manifestation. He also said: *It is the statement of a noble messenger, possessing power, mighty in the presence of Him who possesses the Throne, one who is obeyed, and trustworthy too. Your companion is not possessed by some jinn!* (Q. 81:19 ff), and this is [also tantamount to affirming] a locus of

manifestation. He also said: *He inspired His slave with what He inspired. The mind did not lie about what it saw!* (Q. 53:10–11), and this is [also tantamount to affirming] a locus of manifestation'.

[44] 'The individual insofar as it is a totality is a locus for the Qur'an to manifest, in regard to [its] hearing, sight and mind it is a locus for the Qur'an to manifest, and in regard to [its] tongue and pen it is a locus for the Qur'an to manifest' (al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 145).

[45] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 147.

[46] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 147.

[47] Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, pp. 103–5 (English), pp. 310–13 (Arabic). Al-Shahrastani here speaks of al-Ash'ari as violating consensus by saying that what we recite is only God's Word metaphorically (*majazan la haqiqatan*). The Ash'ari teaching in this respect resumes that of Ibn Kullab (d. ? 241 AH / 855 CE), the theologian first credited with firmly arguing for the eternality and uncreatedness of God's Word, who felt obliged thereby to mark off the historically promulgated scripture from it, viewing it as only the temporal trace (*rasm*) and expression (*'ibara*) of God's eternal Word, not identical with it. In other terms, the Kullabi position denied 'inlibration'. See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 248–51. According to Wolfson, there is ambiguity in al-Ash'ari's pronouncements, such that we must acknowledge both a Kullabi side to his teaching and a Hanbali side, respectively denying and affirming inlibration. The text which is most representative of the Hanbali side is al-Ibana *'an usul al-diyana* (Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 254–7). However, al-Shahrastani's generalisation about the effective denial of inlibration by the Ash'ari school does closely reflect a stance like that of al-Juwayni (d. 478 AH / 1085 CE), an Ash'ari thinker bordering on his own lifetime. The latter is clear that God's eternal Word does not inhere in codices, and the 'sending down' (*inzal*) of God's Word is to be understood non-literally as the Archangel Gabriel's descent with the *meanings* thereof, duly conveyed to the Prophet (al-Juwayni, *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs*, pp. 72–5).

[48] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, pp. 147–8.

[49] This somewhat snide aside fits with al-Shahrastani's comment in his *Nihaya* on the Mu'tazili view of the Qur'an: 'According to the Mu'tazila the Qur'an is of the same genus as the speech of the Arabs, so they can produce the like of it [*yaqdaruna 'ala mithlihi*], just as they can their [own] speech. Thus upholding [the doctrine of] the inimitability of the Qur'an did not last for [the Mu'tazila]' (Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, p. 461 (Arabic), translation mine).

[50] The last region of Karrami influence was Ghur in central Afghanistan, where the great Ash'ari theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606 AH / 1209 CE) engaged them in polemical debates, occasioning a riot in 500 AH / 1202 CE. On the Karramiyya, see for example, Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 88–94; also Malamud, 'The Politics of Heresy'.

[51] In his *Milal*, al-Shahrastani notes of the Karramiyya: 'They hold that there are many occurrences in God's essence; such as, for example, the giving of information about past or future events, the revealing of books to the prophets …etc.' (Kazi and Flynn, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, pp. 93–4).

[52] 'And then the Karrami, given that he says "The Word of God is an act [or 'a making'] and a [deed of] creating which is incepted within His essence, and what we recite and hear is something made and created, the act *not* being the thing enacted, and the creating not being the thing created", now this is even more disgraceful and blasphemous!' (al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 148). I take it that al-Shahrastani sees this as offensive on two scores: that the act is understood to be temporally incepted within God's very essence; and that the Qur'an is understood *not* to be the act.

[53] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, pp. 148.

[54] '… If one of his followers was asked, "What do you say of God? Is he one or many? Knowing or not? Powerful or not?" he would only say: "My God is the God of Muhammad"' (Kazi and Flynn, Muslim Sects, p. 170).

[55] For example, Madelung, 'The Origins of the Controversy'.

[56] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 125.

[57] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 535.

[58] Steigerwald, *La pensée philosophique*, p. 297.

[59] Si tu mets en rapport [le couple de] l'éternité (*qidam*) et de l'adventicité (*huduth*) avec [le couple de] la création (*khalq*) et de l'Ordre (*Amr*), l'éternité appartiendrait à l'Ordre puisqu'il est éternel et perpetual; l'adventicité appartiendrait à la création puisqu'elle a uncommencement et une fin' (*agar qidam va huduth-ra qismat kuni bar khalq va amr, qidam nasib-i amr ayad ki abadiyyat va sarmadiyyat u-ra'st; huduth nasib-i khalq ayad ki bidayat va nihayat u-ra'st*) (Steigerwald, *Majlis*, p. 80).

[60] Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, p. 307 (Arabic), translation mine. Al-Shahrastani's use here of these proof-texts to defend the Word's pre-eternity can be traced to earlier Ash'aris, see Klein, al-Ibana, pp. 66–7; for the Arabic text, see al-Ash'ari, *al-Ibana, Bab al-kalam fi anna'l-Qur'an kalam Allah ghayr makhluq*, pp. 31–8. Also see McCarthy,

The Theology of al-Ash‘ari, pp. 20 ff; al-Bayhaqi, al-I‘tiqad, *Bab al-qawl fi’l-Qur’an*, pp. 95–115, esp. p. 95 and p. 97.

[61] See translator's introduction, Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, pp. 22–5; also ch. 2 ('On the Manner of the Collection of the Qur'an'), in al-Shahrastani's introduction, *Mafatih*, pp. 68–76.

[62] For example, Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 108.

[63] It is to be stressed that the more Hanbali aspect of the Ash‘ari school's eponymous founder, as represented in his *Ibana*, also asserted inlibration. Though al-Shahrastani frames his support for inlibration as a critique of the Ash‘ari position, his support could also be seen as an Ash‘ari stance, building on the precedent of the *Ibana* itself.

[64] Khusraw, *Knowledge and Liberation*, p. 82 (English), p. 49 (Persian).

[65] See for example, al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 535, bottom paragraph.

[66] Khusraw, *Knowledge and Liberation*, p. 82 (English), p. 49 (Persian).

[67] That this is Khusraw's reference is confirmed in his treatise *Wajh-i Din* ('The Face of Religion'). Here he speaks of the Qur'an as a 'support' (i.e., guidance) which passes from the Universal Intellect through the mediation of the Universal Soul (*ta’yid az ‘aql-i kulli rafta ast bi-miyanji-yi nafs-i kulli*) reaching the pure soul of Muhammad in regard to the inner meanings of the words now recorded in codices (*ba ma‘ni-yi in sukhan ki imruz dar mushafha nivishta ast bi-nafs-i pakiza-yi rasul*), but not (we take it) in regard to the recorded words themselves, (Khusraw, *Wajh-i Din*, p. 72).

[68] In his presentation in *Wajh-i Din*, as opposed to *Gushayish va Rahayish*, Khusraw again, in effect, asserts the created status of the entity which is the Qur'an's transcendental source, but in more carefully nuanced terms. He states that we can technically call it not created (*afarida nist*), in the sense that the Universal Intellect and the Soul, its underlying sources, are not brought about through the lesser kind of creation that he terms *khalq* (= formation, generating something from something else), but through the higher kind that he terms *ibda‘* (= *creatio ex nihilo*, generating something from nothing). According to his terminological system, then, these transcendent sources are 'uncreated' (*makhluq nistand*) in this special sense, but are definitely created in the sense of having been generated ex nihilo (*padid awarda na az chizi*) (Khusraw, *Wajh-i Din*, p. 72).

[69] The following points may be noted regarding this schema. A dashed line signifies the denial or qualification of inlibration and a continuous line signifies the affirmation of inlibration. Al-Shahrastani typifies Ash‘arism in terms of the 'soft' position (qualifying or denying inlibration), not the 'hard' position found, say, in the *Ibana*. In the context of this particular discussion al-Shahrastani presents the divine Speech as synonymous with the Command, pointing out in the *Nihaya* that 'The Revelation calls [God's attribute of Speech] "Command"' (Guillaume, *Summa Philosophiae*, p. 307 (Arabic)). That said, the two may be differentiated insofar as God's Command, in the specific sense of 'giving injunctions', was generally viewed in mature Ash‘ari teaching as an extrinsic divine attribute of action (*sifa fi‘liyya*), whereas God's Speech as such was viewed as an essential divine attribute (*sifa dhatiyya*).

[70] For example, the discussion of the orthography (*kitaba*) of the formula *bi’smi’llahi al-rahmani al-rahim* (Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, pp. 142–3 (English), p. 81 (Arabic); also the etymological discussion of the name Allah at pp. 143–4 (English), pp. 81–2 (Arabic); and pp. 146–8 (English), pp. 84–5 (Arabic)).

[71] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 124.

[72] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 124.

[73] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 122.

[74] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 123.

[75] For some reason, Azarshab has begun the quotation after the expression *When the one possessed of learning in scripture said*. This is in fact part of the relevant verse in the Qur'an.

[76] According to Islamic tradition, Asaf b. Barakhya was Solomon's vizier and was the individual praised in the quoted verse as 'the one possessed of learning in scripture' (*alladhi ‘indahu ‘ilmun min al-kitab*). Asaph ben Berechiah (or Berachiah) is also mentioned in the Bible (I Chronicles 6:39 and 15:17) as having been, prior to Solomon's accession, a Levitical priest who sang and played music before the Ark of the Covenant when David had it transferred to Jerusalem. See Brinner, *The History of al-Ṭabari*, Volume III, p. 167 ff.

[77] Al-Kashani, *Kitab al-Safi*, vol. 1, p. 21.

[78] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol.1, pp. 115ff.

[79] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol.1, p. 119.

[80] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol.1, p. 119.

[81] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, pp. 119–20. Al-Shahrastani celebrates the paradox that in the case of both kinds of language an infinite is in some sense circumscribed by a finite – the infinite set of words subsumed within the finite set of letters: 'Just as the spoken letters are the bases of articulated words and are limited to a known number, while the words which are based on them are limitless and fall within the characterisation of what is infinite, similarly the transcendental letters are the bases of the holy words and are limited to a known number, while the words which are

based on them are limitless and fall within the characterisation of what is infinite. God (Exalted is He) said: *Say: If the ocean were ink for my Lord's Words, the ocean would be exhausted before my Lord's Words were exhausted – even if We brought its equivalent as help* (Q. 18:109) (p. 120).

[82] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 120.

[83] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 119.

[84] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 119.

[85] Al-Shahrastani, Mafatih, vol. 1, p. 120. In this regard it is noteworthy that a number of references to holy scripture in close association with the *muqatta'at* could also be seen as references to the individual who receives the scripture, for example, Q. 7:1–2, Q. 13:1, Q. 14:1, etc.

[86] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 120.

[87] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 126.

[88] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 124.

[89] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 121.

[90] Al-Shahrastani refers to it here as the 'material substrate of the entire universe' (*maddat al-'alam kullihi*) (*Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 121).

[91] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 121.

[92] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, pp. 121–2.

[93] As pointed out first by Madelung, 'Aspects of Isma'ili Theology'. Also see my 'Shahrastani's Hanif Revelation'.

[94] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 124.

[95] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 122.

[96] Al-Shahrastani, *Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal*, vol. 1, pp. 125–47.

[97] For example, Guillaume, The *Summa Philosophiae*, pp. 428–9 (Arabic).

[98] Adam's legatee or imam was said to be Seth, Noah's was Shem, Abraham's was Ishmael, Moses' was Aaron, Jesus's was Simon Peter, Muhammad's was Ali, and the future figure of the *qa'im* (somewhat conflicting with the neatness of al-Shahrastani's arrangement of seven pairings) *merges* the function of imam and prophet.

[99] See Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, pp. 139–41. Also see Corbin, *Cyclical Time*, pp. 96–8.

[100] It is a desideratum to work out what in this system is drawn from earlier Isma'ili authorities and what is owed to al-Shahrastani himself. For example, al-Sijistani dedicates a chapter of his *Iftikhar* to 'The Seven Transcendental Letters' (*Fi ma'rifa al-huruf al-'ulwiyya al-sab'a*), which are similarly coordinated with the (same) seven great prophetic figures and their cycles. However, in al-Sijistani's interpretation the seven letters are those forming the words *kuni-qadar* (i.e. *kaf, waw, nun, ya', qaf, dal, and ra'*) (al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-iftikhar*, pp. 123–37). For other Isma'ili thinkers the seven key creative graphemes are the ones in the formula *kun fa-yakun* ('Be!' And it is …'), i.e. *kaf, nun, fa', ya', kaf, waw, and nun* (Morris, The Master and the Disciple, pp. 79–80).

[101] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol.1, p. 124.

[102] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 123.

[103] For example, al-Tirmidhi, *al-Jami' al-sahih*, vol. 5, p. 662, #32, (*Bab manaqib ahl bayt al-nabi salla Allah 'alayhi wa-sallama*); al-Hindi, *Kanz al-'ummal*, vol. 1, pp. 185–6 (943); also al-Naysaburi, *al-Mustadrak*, vol. 3, pp. 117–8 (*Bab ma'rifat al-sahaba*).

[104] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 123.

[105] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 124.

[106] 'And with them, [God] depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed' (Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 100). An alternative rendition: '[God] formed by means of them the whole creation and everything that should be created' (Stenring, *The Book of Formation or Sepher Yetzirah*, p. 24).

[107] Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 159. The critical inclusion of *resh* in the list, making the total of seven letters, is unusual but a possibility in Talmudic grammar (see Kaplan's comment, p. 160). Note that the differentiation of each two forms of the seven paired Hebrew letters by the *dagesh* is analogous to the differentiation of each two forms of the seven paired Arabic letters by the *nuqta/nuqaat*.

[108] Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 185.

[109] Note that this interpretation of the six (plus one) days of creation as referring to the series of prophetic cycles is also very typical of Isma'ili hiero-history. For example, 'As for the creation of this world in six days, these six days refer to the cycles of the founders of [six] religions (*adwar-i ashab-i sharayi'*) … And each day is a thousand years: Verily one day of God (*rabb*) is one thousand years of your reckoning (Q. 22:47)' (Badakhchani, Paradise of Submission, p. 68). It may also be noted that Saturday stands for the cycle of the Resurrector (*al-qa'im*) in this Isma'ili periodisation just as it corresponds with the Messianic millennium in the Jewish equivalent – indeed the

correspondence with the Jewish Sabbath is explicitly noted in Isma'ili texts. For example, Khusraw, *Wajh-i Din*, para. 95–8.

[110] Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 185.

[111] For example, Kaplan pointed out that a work with this name is mentioned in connection with 'a leading figure of the first century [CE]', Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Chananya (Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. xvi).

[112] Wasserstrom, 'Further Thoughts'. My thanks to Orkhan Mir-Kasimov for bringing this article to my attention.

[113] *Zabuna : zubana*.

[114] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 200.

[115] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 201.

[116] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 201.

[117] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 201.

[118] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 201.

[119] Several *ahadith* state 'Thunder is an angel …' (*al-ra'du malakun …*). For example, al-Suyuti, *al-Haba'ik fi akhbar al-mala'ik*, pp. 75–6, # 258, 259, 260, 266; see Burge, *Angels in Islam*, pp. 186–7.

[120] In his Persian sermon, *Majlis-i Maktub*, al-Shahrastani says that this vital nexal function of angels is hinted in their very name in Arabic, via metathesis. He says: 'The root of *kalima* ("word") is *kaf-lam-mim* and the root of *malak* ("angel") is *mim-lam-kaf*; both are a metathetic version of one other (*asl-i kalima kaf-lam-mim wa asl-i malak mim-lam-kaf; har du maqlub-i yakdigar*)' (Steigerwald, *Majlis*, p. 83).

[121] See for example, al-Suyuti, *al-Hay'a al-saniyya*, 7:27. The teaching that angels are responsible for all terrestrial things, and so are ubiquitous, is found in *ahadith*. For example, 'There is no place [the size] of the eye of a needle without an angel being responsible for it, raising knowledge about it up to God and the angels of heaven. [The angels] are more numerous than the number of specks of dust and as small' (translated from al-Suyuti, *al-Haba'ik fi akhbar al-mala'ik* in Burge, Angels in Islam, p. 117). The *hadith* is not recorded in all manuscripts of Suyuti's *Haba'ik*, and is absent from the Zaghlul edition cited in the preceding note.

[122] Al-Shahrastani's angels have a kindred role to the various higher beings (daemons, heroes, encosmic and hypercosmic gods) who in the thought of Iamblichus Chalcidensis (d. c. 330 AD) mediate our relation with the intelligible realm (*kosmos noeros*). In the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, such beings were naturally configured as the complex hierarchy of angels, exactly as in al-Shahrastani's thought.

[123] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 202.

[124] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 202.

[125] Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih*, vol. 1, p. 202.

[126] *Al-Qadam wa'l-farq*. The expression seems obscure. Alternatively, it may mean: 'the hoof and the cleft of the hoof', or possibly 'the foot and the parting of the hair', i.e. the lowest and highest part of a single person.

[127] *Jami' al-hikmatayn* is the work referred to here; see the recent English translation by Ormsby, Between Reason and Revelation.

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