

AMBIGUITY, HERMENEUTICS, AND THE FORMATION  
OF SHI'Ī IDENTITY IN AL-SHARIF AL-RADI'S (D.1015CE) QUR'AN  
COMMENTARY

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## ABSTRACT

Tehseen Thaver: Ambiguity, Hermeneutics, and the Formation of Shi'i Identity  
in al-Sharif al-Radi's (d.1015CE) Qur'an Commentary  
(Under the direction of Carl W. Ernst)

This dissertation addresses the question of how the relationship between language and revelation was articulated and contested in the Muslim intellectual tradition during its formative years. The specific context in which I explore this question is that of tenth century Baghdad, a moment when the authority of knowledge traditions rooted in logic and indebted to Greek philosophy were aggressively challenged by scholars who valorized the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition as the overarching sources for norms in Islam. These debates over the relative merits of "logic" and "language" as primary foundations of knowledge were intimately tied to a much larger hermeneutical and indeed theological problem and question: how should one understand the relationship between human language, which is culturally and temporally specific, and divine revelation, which is transcendent, universal, and applicable across time and space? This is the central question that informs the conceptual landscape of this dissertation.

Specifically, I analyze the Arabic Qur'an commentary of a prominent Shi'i theologian, poet, and historian of 10th century Baghdad, al-Sharif al-Radi (d.1015CE). His commentary, titled *Hermeneutical Realities in [Uncovering] the Ambiguity of Revelation (Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil fi Mutashabihat al-Tanzil)*, takes a distinctly literary approach to the Qur'an. In this work, al-Radi identified the Qur'an's "ambiguous verses"

as those verses deemed to contain theological, linguistic, and other difficulties that require the extensive exertion of hermeneutical energies.

I examine how al-Radi negotiates the interplay between literary exegesis and sectarian theology and pay particular attention to the function that religious identity played in his interpretive framework during a strikingly cosmopolitan period under the Buyid dynasty (955-1055CE), when religious thinkers, litterateurs, and rulers alike participated to create a rich and lively milieu of intellectual exchange. I argue that far from adopting rigid methods that conform to fixed sectarian templates, al-Radi strategically mobilized the literary trope of Qur'anic ambiguity for remarkably varied hermeneutical and political projects. Conceptually, I argue for a more carefully historicized approach to the study of Qur'anic exegesis that strives to understand the malleable ways in which individual Muslim thinkers have engaged the questions of language, authority, and interpretation at specific historical conjunctures.

In memory of:

Nani, who in her typically urgent voice had once advised:  
“whatever you do, never be *greedy* about knowledge!”

And Ustadh Yahya, who taught me the *mubtada* and *khavar*.

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All the errors and oversights in this dissertation are solely my own.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	xii
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### Chapter

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Questions .....	1
Thinking the Question of Imami Exegesis.....	2
Conceptual and Historiographical Intervention: Reframing Religious Identity.....	3
Qur'an Exegesis and the Problem of Sectarian Identity.....	9
Chapter Outline.....	15

#### II. COMPETING MEMORIES OF AL-RADI

Family and Political Background.....	17
Al-Radi as a Sayyid Poet Scholar.....	24
The Textual Field: al-Radi's Qur'an Commentary (the <i>Haqa'iq</i> ) .....	33

#### III. BUYID BAGHDAD AND AL-RADI'S HERMENEUTICAL IDENTITY

Intellectual Genealogies.....	38
Grand Narrative of the Buyid "Golden Age" .....	40
Twelver Shi'i Scholars during the Buyid period.....	43
Political Fragmentation and Narratives of Sunni/Shi'i Strife.....	49
Intellectual and Cultural Life Under the Buyids .....	51
Problem-Oriented Historiography.....	53

	Situating al-Radi’s Discontentment and Caliphal Ambitions .....	54
	Theories on Poetry, Language, Knowledge.....	59
	Conclusion.....	63
IV.	POLITICS OF A LITERARY APPROACH TO THE QUR’AN IN TENTH CENTURY BAGHDAD	
	Language Law and Revelation.....	65
	The First Ambiguity: Linguistic Eloquence.....	68
	The Second Ambiguity: Qur’anic Incoherence.....	84
	The Third Ambiguity: Rhetorical, Logical and Moral Conundrums.....	93
	Conclusion.....	97
V.	IS THE HAQA’IQ A MU‘TAZILI SHI’I EXEGESIS? INTERROGATING IMAMI-MU‘TAZILI RELATIONS	
	Section 4.1	
	Narratives of Mu‘tazili “Influence”.....	99
	The “Rationalization Thesis” in Euro-American Scholarship.....	100
	Objects of Rationalization.....	102
	Interrogating the hyphen in the descriptor “Mu‘tazili – Shi’i.....	103
	Limits of Social Constructionism.....	104
	Rethinking Religious Identity.....	107
	Heterological Classifications of al-Radi and the <i>Haqa’iq</i> .....	109
	Al-Radi’s Mu‘tazili Links: Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar.....	112
	Structural differences between al-Radi’s <i>Haqa’iq</i> and al-Jabbar’s <i>Mutashabih</i> .....	116
	Section 4.2	
	Theme 1: Agency of Human Beings.....	119

Theme 2: Sovereignty of God.....	129
Theme 3: Prophetic Intercession and Infallibility .....	139
Section 4.3	
Conclusion.....	149
VI. AMBIGUITY, METAPHOR, AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF CONCEALING AND REVEALING	
Al-Radi’s Interpretive Method.....	153
Key Concepts in al-Radi’s Interpretive Method .....	155
Al-Radi and the Philological Tradition.....	161
The Relationship between Ambiguity and Metaphor .....	164
Theological and Legal Values of Literary Concepts.....	170
The Hermeneutical Principle of <i>Muhkam-Mutashabih</i> .....	173
Intersections of Language and Ontology .....	178
Conclusion.....	186
VII. CONCLUSION.....	188
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	195

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1	Types of Ambiguity in al-Radi's <i>Haqa'iq</i> .....	36
Figure 4.1	Selection of Ambiguous Verses in al-Jabbar and al-Radi's Commentaries.....	115
Figure 5.1	Al-Radi's Identification of Ambiguous and Metaphorical Verses.....	168

## INTRODUCTION

### **Preliminary Questions**

The tradition of “Twelver Shi‘i<sup>1</sup> Qur’an commentaries” poses an interesting conundrum: if, according to Shi‘i thought, the authority to interpret the Qur’an lies exclusively with the Twelve Imams who succeeded Muhammad, then how is it that the production of Qur’an commentaries did not end with the occultation of the twelfth Imam in 941CE? Given the vitality of the tradition of Imami exegesis up until current times, with what reasoning do Imami exegetes transgress the limits they themselves have drawn for interpretive authority? And in what capacity do they present their oral and written interpretations?

I began my studies with a modest inquiry into this question, but it became apparent quite early that approaching “Twelver Shi‘i Qur’an hermeneutics” as an interpretive method that corresponds to clearly defined Shi‘i “beliefs,” is a relatively recent formulation that reflects a particular normative ideal of what the category of “Shi‘i” signifies. It belongs to a discourse that regards Shi‘i identity as a predetermined,

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<sup>1</sup> The Shi‘i School represents one of the two major divisions within Islam, the other being the majority Sunni school. Their main point of disagreement is over what count as authoritative sources after the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad. For the Shi‘is the authority of the hereditary successors (Imams) from the line of the Prophet’s daughter are binding, whereas for the Sunnis it is the consensus decisions of the scholars of the community. The “Twelver Shi‘i” school accepts the authority of twelve Imams (from which derives the other name in Euro-American scholarship for this school, simply as “Imami”). The official view of this school is that the twelfth Imam went into occultation in 940CE. Hence, although he remains in hiding, he is still the authoritative guide. Eschatologically, the twelfth hidden Imam is also revered as the messiah who will eventually return with Jesus at the end of time in order to establish justice. Twelver Imami Shi‘is represent the most numerous group among the Shi‘i School. Other Shi‘i groups include the five-Imami group known as Zaydis and the seven-Imami group known as Isma‘ilis.

predictable, unchanging entity which, under all circumstances, privileges the same historical and theological narratives. To invoke Twelver Shi‘i hermeneutics is to thus ascribe to these texts a commonality on the basis of their author’s sectarian affiliation, and to presuppose that the foremost determinant for their hermeneutical choices is sectarian orientation. As a normative ideal, the fashioning of a distinct Shi‘i hermeneutic derived from a self-evident Shi‘i identity serves the specific purposes of imagining a community that is connected through the memory of a shared past, present, and future.

### **Thinking the Question of Imami<sup>2</sup> Exegesis**

In 2009, during a trip to Qom, Iran, the main center of Twelver Shi‘i learning in the world today, I was pursuing this same question, which I understood as the conundrum of “Twelver Shi‘i exegesis”: I asked students and scholars how they explained the thriving tradition of Imami exegesis in the absence of the Imams. The most frequent response to this question was that in commentaries of the Qur’an, the role of Imami guidance is fulfilled through reference to the collected sayings and teachings of the Imams. This response is telling. It illustrates how the doctrinal demand for Imami authority determines current Twelver Shi‘i scholars’ conceptions and articulations of the common thread that ties “Imami exegesis” together. According to these students and scholars, faithful adherence to Imami authority is not forsaken in the absence of the Imams, but confirmed and revitalized through a hermeneutical structure that relies exclusively on their teachings.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Imami” is another expression for the label “Twelver Shi‘i.” It derives from the reference of “Twelver” to a follower of the school that adheres to a belief in twelve Imams.

I was surprised to find that the same description of Imami exegesis as a distinct genre that privileges the interpretive authority of the Imams is used in Euro-American scholarship. This is to say that the hermeneutics of scholars identified as Shi‘i are almost exclusively studied as products of an identifiable Shi‘i outlook. The primary concern in the majority of recent examinations of Shi‘i exegesis consists of identifying the ways in which a work meets the criteria of a typical Shi‘i hermeneutic.<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that this narrow approach leaves much to be explored in the vast corpus of literature that currently comes under the classification of Twelver Shi‘i exegesis.

### **Conceptual and Historiographical Intervention: Reframing Religious Identity**

A sectarian driven approach to the examination of Qur’anic exegesis holds far-reaching implications for how we might access the question of religious identity in the present. The idea that sectarian identity and interpretive horizons must correspond reinforces and perpetuates a modern understanding of identity as accountable and responsible to a particular narration of its memory. According to this scheme, accounting for an identity involves fashioning for it a memory through which it may differ from its competing others. It is precisely such a modern competitive imaginary of religious identity, at peace with the accounting mechanisms and powers of the modern state, that haunts the memory of the categories “Sunni” and “Shi‘i” today. Conceptually, at the heart of the Sunni-Shi‘i conflict is a conception of history as a linear unfolding of an innate antagonism between two communities with separate, distinct, and competing

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<sup>3</sup> Meir Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami-Shi‘ism*, (Boston: Brill, 1999); idem, “The Qur’an commentary ascribed to Imam Hasan al-Askari,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabica and Islam* 24 (2000): 358-379; Diane Steigerwald, “Twelver Shi‘i Ta’wil” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Pub, 2006); Mahmoud Ayoub, “The speaking Qur’an and the silent Qur’an: a study of the principles and development of Imami Shi‘i tafsir,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an*, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 177-198.

memory traces. And an approach towards the study of Qur'an exegesis that privileges sectarian identity as the underlying determinant of an exegete's hermeneutical choices reproduces such a competitive understanding of religious identity. Certainly the point here is not that the Sunni-Shi'i divide is a modern invention. However, positing a relationship of neat correspondence between hermeneutics and sectarian identity is clearly indebted to a modern conception of religious identities as accountable and responsible to their memories.<sup>4</sup>

In this dissertation I draw on the work of the religion scholar Ananda Abeysekara, to examine Shi'i identity as an ongoing moral argument that is invested with and divested off particular meanings and orientations in specific moments of authoritative discourse and debates. Seen this way one would approach Shi'ism as an "embodied argument," made possible and centrally visible in particular historical conjunctures of authoritative debates, discord, and disagreement and dissent.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, I argue that it is more productive to imagine Shi'ism as a dynamic discursive site whose authenticity or identity is always available for contestation and always unavailable for disciplinary canonization. The question of what does and does not count as "Shi'i" identity cannot be answered prior to those conjunctures of discourse and debate in which actors within the tradition seek to authoritatively answer that question. The critical purchase of this apparatus is that in place of a linear reading of religious identity, which remains focused on singular, pre-constituted identities and the change they undergo at the hands of external causes, this

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between identity, memory and accountability is eloquently argued in Ananda Abeysekara, *The Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 84-100.

<sup>5</sup> Ananda Abeysekara, "Identity for and against Itself: Religion, Criticism, and Pluralization," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004): 975.

reframing demands that we turn our attention to the very conditions that enabled certain components of the self/identity to come into central view. My own deployment of the label “Shi‘i” in this dissertation should thus be understood in the meaning of an “embodied argument.” I want to be clear that with this argument, I do not deny the heuristic value, or the existence, of a Shi‘i identity. This is evident from my own use of this term in this dissertation. However, I do hold that what it stands for cannot be canonized into a predictable and predetermined entity, even if we are bound by language to refer to it by this name.

My aim in this dissertation is to argue for and illustrate the importance of broadening our analytical horizons in the study of Twelver Shi‘i exegesis. As a first step in achieving this theoretical objective, the present study consists of a close reading of the Qur’an commentary authored by a prominent Twelver Shi‘i theologian, poet, and historian, al-Sharif al-Radi (d.1015CE), entitled *Hermeneutical Realities in [Uncovering] the Ambiguities of Revelation, (Haqa’iq al-Tawil fi Mutashabih al-Tanzil)*, (hereafter *Haqa’iq*). By highlighting moments in al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary that might poach the normative stability of binary frameworks of religious identity, this dissertation attempts to mobilize a discursive artifact from early Islam to open new avenues for approaching religious identity and understanding the tradition of Qur’anic exegesis.

In the *Haqa’iq*, al-Radi identifies the Qur’an’s “ambiguous verses” or those verses deemed to contain theological, linguistic, and other difficulties that require the extensive exertion of hermeneutical energies. Writing during a period of immense

intellectual fermentation and political flux (during the Buyid dynasty),<sup>6</sup> al-Radi's Qur'an commentary is the discursive product of the vibrant intellectual milieu and cosmopolitan literary culture of tenth/eleventh century Baghdad. Given the gamut of works that fall under the category, "Imami exegesis," a few words on why I chose this text and author are in order. First, it is important to introduce al-Radi's intellectual background, writing as he was during this pivotal period in early Islam. Al-Radi's both benefited from and actively participated in the thriving literary culture during this time. For instance, he studied grammar under famous Sunni teachers, and theology with two of the most influential Mu'tazili thinkers. His affiliation with the Shi'i school did not pose as a barrier for these relationships of scholarly exchange. Al-Radi's range of writings in scholarly arenas apart from exegesis, such as poetry and history, also reflect the cosmopolitan cultural milieu prevalent in Baghdad during that time.

However, not all of al-Radi's writings reflect a humanist spirit free from exclusivist sectarian sympathies. Whereas on some occasions the cosmopolitan climate of the time rendered al-Radi's sectarian leanings peripheral to his scholarly persona, at other moments his affiliation with the Shi'i School was central to his intellectual life. For example, in addition to works on literary exegesis, poetry, and history, al-Radi compiled the sermons and speeches of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d.661CE) (the Prophet's cousin and son in law), *Peak of Eloquence*.<sup>7</sup> This compilation of speeches has served as the second most important source of authority for Shi'i Muslims after the

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<sup>6</sup> The Buyid Empire, founded by Shi'ite military leaders of Iranian origin, stretched from the south and western parts of Iran to Iraq, and lasted from 945-1055CE.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Sharif al-Radi, *Nahj Al-Balaghah*, (Beirut: Anwar al-Hadi, 2006).

Qur'an itself.<sup>8</sup> Included in this text, are speeches by the first Shi'i Imam in which he criticizes the first three Sunni caliphs for usurping his position. Al-Radi's interest in compiling the sayings of 'Ali in what became a central text for the Shi'i position on the illegitimacy of the first three Sunni caliphs may well be tied to the tremendous literary excellence of this text rather than to his effort to exalt the claims of the Shi'i community against the Sunnis. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the message of the sermons contained in this text put forward a strong opposition to existing Sunni authorities. But al-Radi's links to this text did not hinder him from attaining important political positions. Thus his contrasting roles as writer, leader, and scholar illustrate the variegated and complicated nature of his attachment to the Shi'i tradition. These competing possibilities point to the complex social fabric of this period, in which the structure and function of religious identity did not conform to the modern anxiety to locate religious identity in a singular and clearly defined domain.

This background illustrates ways in which al-Radi's intellectual training and career were informed by a moment of tremendous epistemological cross-pollination between multiple scholarly traditions in early Islam. Yet, in recent Euro-American scholarship, al-Radi's writings continue to be approached through a framework that privileges his Shi'i identity as the primary determinant of his thought. For instance, in the recent edited volume, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, two articles by Mahmoud Ayoub and Kamal Abu-Deeb focused on al-Radi's exegetical

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<sup>8</sup> See Moktar Jebli, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, s.v. "Nahj al-Balagha," Brill Online, 2012, accessed on 06/15/2013 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nahdj-al-balagha-SIM\\_5752](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nahdj-al-balagha-SIM_5752)>

works.<sup>9</sup> Even as the authors brought attention to the distinctly literary taste and aesthetic of al-Radi, no attempt was made to situate his intellectual ambitions in the broader context of scholarly and imperial life in tenth century Baghdad.

Abu-Deeb suggests in his discussion that al-Radi's foray into the topic of the Qur'an's ambiguous elements reflects his Shi'i background and the supposed familiarity of any Shi'i scholar with the Qur'an's hidden (*batini*) meanings.<sup>10</sup> Abu-Deeb's reference is to an "esoteric dimension" generally regarded as characteristic of the Shi'i School. I will return to this and other characteristics identified as the key hermeneutical principles associated with Imami exegesis shortly. What I want to emphasize here is that the underlying methodological problem with this "sectarian-driven" approach is that it canonizes and de-historicizes religious identity by presuming a "functional" relationship between a particular school of thought and the interpretive approach that an exegete of that school adopts. The value of Ayoub and Abu-Deeb's articles is not in question here. Their work has been vital for extending the discourse on the various modes and styles of Qur'anic exegesis beyond a narrow selection of majority Sunni writings. However their work also alerts us to the way in which a lack of proper attention to the discursive palimpsest that layers a Qur'an commentary, like al-Radi's, leads to a markedly reified understanding not only of this work but of the larger milieu of which he was a part.

My selection of al-Radi's Qur'an commentary for this dissertation is therefore inspired by the larger goal of rethinking Shi'i identity and the predictable way it is

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<sup>9</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, "Literary Exegesis of the Qur'an: The Case of Sharif al-Radi" and Kamal Abu-Deeb, "Studies in the Majaz and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'an: Abu 'Ubayda and al-Sharif al-Radi," in *Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qur'an*, Ed. Issa J. Boullata, (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Abu-Deeb, "Studies in the Majaz and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'an," 316.

assumed to operate at different historical conjunctures. What is needed is a critical appraisal of our present understanding of religious identity and its function in the formative period of Islam. I argue against an approach that imagines Shi‘ism to have followed a singular trajectory of “development”, as if it were an object of zoological evolution. Instead I propose to approach Shi‘i identity as an ongoing moral argument that is invested with particular meanings and ideological projects at particular historical conjunctures, such as Buyid Baghdad. Through a close reading of al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary, I explore possible alternatives to frameworks that valorize sectarian and theological identity as the primary determinant of hermeneutical desires and sensibilities. Instead, it is my goal in the present study to show that a reexamination of al-Radi’s work can provide fresh insights into the trans-sectarian intellectual confluences that populated the discursive and institutional terrain of Muslim intellectual history during this particular era.<sup>11</sup>

### **Qur’an Exegesis and the Problem of Sectarian Identity**

I returned to Qom some years later, and in this setting, my selection of al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary for a dissertation topic of “Twelver Shi‘i exegesis” was met with disapproval. I was repeatedly advised that a better choice for my research was the work of his brother, al-Sharif al-Murtada; this reasoning was based on the fact that it is al-Murtada’s formulations of Shi‘i theological arguments that persist in centers of Twelver Shi‘i learning until today. What became clear to me through these conversations was that al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary is not part of the existing textual canon of Imami exegesis.

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<sup>11</sup> Some examples of other recent works that also argue for a trans-sectarian reading of writings by key figures from this period include (but are not limited to): Robert G. Morrison, *Islam and Science: The Intellectual Career of Nizam al-Din al-Nisaburi*, (New York: Routledge, 2007); Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur’an Commentary of Al-Tha‘labi (D. 427/1035)*, (Boston: Brill, 2004).

While his work is not outright rejected as falling “outside” the fold, it is certainly not considered “representative” of what is understood to constitute a distinct “Twelver Shi‘i hermeneutic.”

It is precisely through the regard for al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary as a work that *departs* from traditional Imami exegesis that I offer a rethinking of the very category of “Imami exegesis”. By approaching al-Radi not simply as a Shi‘i scholar rather as a member of a particular cultural dialectic and episteme that prevailed at his time, my dissertation seeks to intervene in current scholarship on early Muslim historiography by making the case for a reevaluation of what is termed “Shi‘i identity.” I argue that al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary presents a profitable site through which to trace the multiple processes that enable the construction of contingent religious identities. Through this line of inquiry I try to challenge the rigidity that has come to be associated with current taxonomies of Qur’an interpretation and to shed light on the hegemony of certain categories under which the discourse has thus far been governed.

The current categories used to differentiate one exegete or Qur’an commentary from another are derived first from the scholar’s sectarian affiliation (Shi‘i/Sunni/Isma‘ili/etc.), followed by their adopted interpretive emphasis (legal, philosophical, mystical, philological etc.).<sup>12</sup> Each grouping is associated with a set of dominant hermeneutical principles. This approach has led scholars to identify certain

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<sup>12</sup> Some general overviews of Qur’anic interpretation that employ this method include Feras Hamza, Sajjad Rizvi, and Farhana Mayer, eds. *An Anthology of Qur’anic Commentaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Andrew Rippin, *The Qur’an and Its Interpretive Tradition*, (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2001); Jane D McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering, *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

hermeneutical principles and strategies with Twelver Shi‘i exegesis, and it is useful to clearly enumerate the most common of these here. According to current characterizations, Twelver Shi‘i exegesis conveys an explicitly anti-Sunni bias,<sup>13</sup> is designed to support the doctrine of imamate and concepts derived from it,<sup>14</sup> adheres strictly to the tradition of sayings of the Imams (*tafsir bi ‘l-ma‘thur*),<sup>15</sup> is centered on the principle that the Qur’an has an outer dimension (*zahir*) and an inner dimension (*batin*),<sup>16</sup> and makes frequent use of allegory.<sup>17</sup>

While it is acknowledged that the main interpretive strategies adopted by the Imami School evolved over time under changing sociopolitical conditions,<sup>18</sup> I argue that the assertion that Shi‘i authors shared a set of common characteristics that were subject to the vicissitudes of time is itself problematic. This is because the grouping of Shi‘i authors into a single category presupposes a “functional” relationship between a particular school of thought and the interpretive approach that an exegete of that school adopts. Invariably,

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<sup>13</sup> Meir Bar Asher, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Exegesis ii. in Shi‘ism,” in Vol. IX, Fasc. 2, 116-119; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/exegesis-ii> (accessed on 20/06/13).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Meir Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*; idem. *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Exegesis ii. in Shi‘ism.”

<sup>16</sup> See Diane Steigerwald, “Twelver Shi‘i Ta‘wil”; Ayoub, “The Speaking Qur’an and the silent Qur’an,” 187.

<sup>17</sup> Meir Bar Asher, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Exegesis ii. in Shi‘ism.”

<sup>18</sup> In his overview of Shi‘i hermeneutics, Lawson divides the works and their main features chronologically, recognizing that “methods of interpretation in Shi‘ite exegesis themselves vary considerably, often according to the socio-political fortunes of the community.” See Todd Lawson, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Hermeneutics,” Vol. XII, Fasc. 3, pp. 235-239; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hermeneutics> (accessed on 20/06/13).

such a functionalist approach generates a palpably static notion of religious identity.<sup>19</sup>

In this dissertation, through a close reading of al-Radi's Qur'an commentary, I will argue that privileging sectarian identity as the primary determinant of exegetical hermeneutics is conceptually unsound. Throughout this study, I seek to question the tendency in the field of Qur'anic Studies to mobilize terms like "Imami exegesis" in a functionalist fashion as always signifying a particular notion of Shi'i identity, one that is assumed to operate in an unchanging discursive and institutional framework. As an alternative to this model that generates a closed system of attribution of the signifier to the signified, in this case the attribution of Shi'i identity to a Shi'i hermeneutic, and where the signs are assumed to be preceded by a truth or meaning already constituted by and within the notion of "identity," I do not attribute to al-Radi's writings any stable notions of a characteristically Shi'i work, or of a static external world.

I show that al-Radi's commentary, which defies a literal rendering of the text and prefers instead to refer to an altogether different register of understanding – the literary device of ambiguity - must be studied within a broader analytical framework, one that takes seriously important intersections between literary theory, sectarian theology, and exegesis in early Islam. An important qualifier is in order here. My argument is not that the category of "Shi'i" is altogether inapplicable to al-Radi. Rather, I wish to argue that al-Radi's hermeneutical temperament, one that is situated at the interstices of exegesis and literary theory, cannot be subsumed by the strictly defined sectarian identity of

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<sup>19</sup> Apart from al-Radi, other examples can also demonstrate the futility of this "functional" relationship. A figure like Husayn Va'iz Kashifi (d.1504CE) for example, was a preacher, scholar, Naqshbandi shaykh, astrologer, letrist, and classic polymath. The sheer diversity of genres that his writings cover would make it a grave error to classify his work titled *Rawdat al-shuhada'* as a "Shi'i" text. This is in spite of the fact that this same text became a crucial work for the lived Shi'i tradition. See M. E. Subtelny, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, s.v. "Kashifi, Kamal Al-Din Hosayn Wa'ez," [http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kasefi\\_kamal](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kasefi_kamal) (accessed on June 25, 2013).

“Shi‘i”. I suggest that while al-Radi may be identified as a Shi‘i scholar, his intellectual work or identity is not available for neat categorization through the master signifier of a “Shi‘i” exegete.

In addition to a sectarian driven approach to exegetical studies, another major problem in the study of Shi‘i Qur’an commentaries is that of periodization. As several scholars have pointed out, the assumption that Islamic political history is the primary framework for understanding the socio-historical development of Islamic thought is no longer tenable.<sup>20</sup> In addition, periodization schemes often lend themselves to narratives of “golden age” and “decline,” which do little more than reinforce the outdated Orientalist (and fundamentalist) perspective on the teleological direction of Muslim history.<sup>21</sup>

According to periodization schemes in the work of recent scholars that outline the development of Twelver Shi‘i exegesis, al-Radi’s scholarly career coincides with the time when the Shi‘i Buyid dynasty was in power, or what Lawson terms, a period characterized by a “hermeneutics of compromise.”<sup>22</sup> Although the distinct phases of Twelver Shi‘i exegesis and the dominant principles that characterize each period may be one way of evaluating the literature, it narrows the scope of comparison to one where the work of a Twelver Shi‘i scholar is integral only to the extent that it is part of a history that is imagined to be shared by works that come under the rubric of “Twelver Shi‘i exegesis.”

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<sup>20</sup> See Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A Window on Islam in Buyid Society: Justice and Its Epistemological Foundation in the Religious Thought of ‘Abd Al-Jabbar, Ibn Al-Baqillani, and Miskawayh*, (Ph.D. Diss Harvard University, 2003); Richard W Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Omid Safi, *Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> See Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad, Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 156.

<sup>22</sup> Lawson, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Hermeneutics.”

In the present study, I explore a different angle to al-Radi's Qur'an commentary. I defer to the view that not only religious "identity," but "contexts" too must be interpreted as verbal artifacts, much like the ideas and "texts" they produce. Accordingly, I shift attention away from situating the *Haqa'iq* as a work authored by a "Shi'i exegete writing during the Buyid period." Instead, I propose to expand the very task of contextualizing this historical actor and text by approaching both as contributing to and constitutive of a larger intellectual and institutional milieu. In so doing, I seek to move away from reductionist understandings of al-Radi's "Shi'i religious identity," as well as from generalized characterizations of "the Buyid dynastic period". Instead, I explore al-Radi's engagement with the multiple intellectual discourses that are inflected in his writings. I bring into focus the way in which al-Radi's hermeneutical choices reflect a certain understanding of the discourse of which he was a part, and of the specific manner in which he conceived and defined the very problems he sought to overcome.

In addition, I ask what hermeneutical and epistemological concerns informed the kinds of questions al-Radi raised in his commentary, and the kinds of answers he advanced to those questions. In this way, I refer to al-Radi's text not merely to represent his hermeneutical positions, but as a site through which to understand the discursive terrain that enabled him to adopt his chosen views and to defend them using the reasoning that he did. Conceptually, the larger questions that animate my reading of al-Radi include: what understanding of language informed his hermeneutical moves? How was the question of language connected to the way he understood the interaction of divine discourse and his own temporal authority as an exegete? How did al-Radi imagine the relationship between language and revelation? And what sources of normative

authority informed and undergirded his exegetical arguments and explanations? By pursuing this cluster of questions, I aim to sketch a picture of how in al-Radi's literary approach to the Qur'an, the various grammatical rules that he invokes, and literary arguments he constructs, cohere together to form a specific hermeneutical framework that is embedded in a distinct epistemological and theological conception of the relationship between language and revelation.

### **Chapter Outline**

The chapters in this dissertation are thematically organized. In chapter one, "Competing Memories of al-Radi," I present an overview of al-Radi as he has been remembered and represented in different types of literature, from biographical dictionaries and literary anthologies to Shi'i genealogical works. I then introduce the components and structural features of al-Radi's Qur'an commentary, the *Haqa'iq*, to give the reader a flavor of the length, style, and organization of the textual field.

Chapter two, "Buyid Baghdad and al-Radi's Hermeneutical Identity," explores the intellectual, cultural and political conditions in which al-Radi composed the *Haqa'iq*. This chapter provides the contextual backdrop for what I identify as al-Radi's hermeneutical identity. I examine the pressing questions around which heated scholarly debates were centered, the imperial set up of the Buyid dynasty, and other conditions that enabled a heightened spirit of inquiry and intellectual exchange. I discuss why, in this setting, the authoritative claims put forward by the custodians of language, lineage, and poetry, like al-Radi, carried the weight that they did.

Chapter three, "Politics of a Literary Approach to the Qur'an in Tenth Century Baghdad," engages al-Radi's understanding and application of the term "Qur'anic

ambiguity” through three illustrative examples from his Qur’an commentary. I bring attention to the literary arguments al-Radi employs in order to “resolve” the ambiguities, and connect this literary approach to his language philosophy. By pointing to his understanding of an authoritative linguistic structure that was fixed and predetermined (*wad‘*), I show the way in which his use of Qur’anic verses, common utterances by the Arabs, and poetic verses by pre-Islamic poets contributed to the canonization of an Arabic lexicon.

Chapter four, “Is the *Haqa’iq* a Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i Exegesis?” shifts to three theologically-oriented themes that dominate al-Radi’s commentary: human agency, divine sovereignty, and prophetic infallibility. I compare al-Radi’s treatment of these issues with that of his Mu‘tazili teacher, Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar and explore how their discussions on these themes converge and diverge. In conducting this comparative analysis, I move away from an approach that situates Twelver Shi‘i thought during this period as a direct product of Mu‘tazili influence, as has been often assumed. I instead propose that the intertwining of the theological and the literary in al-Radi’s work was a product of multiple intellectual currents that cannot be captured through a relationship of influence.

Finally, in chapter five, “Ambiguity, Metaphor, and the Hermeneutics of Concealing and Revealing,” I juxtapose al-Radi’s trope of “Qur’anic ambiguity” in the *Haqa’iq* with his focus on “Qur’anic metaphors” in a separate work, *Economy of Eloquence in Qur’anic Metaphors (Talkhis al-Bayan fi Majazat al-Qur’an)*. I show ways in which al-Radi’s approach to the literary devices of “metaphor” and “ambiguity” sheds light on the intersecting developments in literary theory and scriptural exegesis in early

Islam. Through two illustrative examples of al-Radi's treatment of Qur'anic verses, I point to al-Radi's explanation of the intellectual effort involved in navigating the Qur'an's dialectic of concealing and revealing meaning. I argue that the linguistic and the ontological dimensions coalesce in al-Radi's hermeneutical program. Language, for al-Radi, was a reflection of ontological reality, such that subtleties of linguistic expression represented the key through which realities of the world could subsequently be accessed and validated. Further, I show that central to al-Radi's hermeneutic is the theological principle of clarity. It is precisely through this crucial principle of clarity that al-Radi was able to frame his exegetical project as at once literary and literalist.

## CHAPTER 1: COMPETING MEMORIES OF AL-RADI

### Family and Political Background

A thirteenth century biographer reports the following exchange that transpired between al-Radi and his teacher Abu Sa‘id al-Sirafi (d.932CE), a prominent Sunni philologist of the time:

A young al-Radi not more than ten years of age was sitting in a study circle with his teacher of grammar, al-Sirafi. As is common in such lessons on Arabic grammar, al-Sirafi asked, “if I say *ra’aytu* ‘Amr (I saw ‘Amr), what is the sign of *nasab* (accusative case) on ‘Amr?” Al-Radi replied “*bugdh* (hatred) [of] ‘Ali.” All those present were amazed at al-Radi’s perspicacity.<sup>23</sup>

Al-Radi’s clever response is a play on the word *nasab*, which carries the technical meaning of “the accusative form of a noun,” but also conveys a general meaning of “having enmity.” In addition, al-Radi plays on the name “‘Amr,” which is a generic and meaningless character in the pedagogical context of Arabic grammar texts, yet historically a figure by that name is remembered by the Shi‘i supporters of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d.661CE) as a bitter rival. This brief exchange, frequently cited in several biographical sources, concisely conveys a few key characteristics about al-Radi that came to be remembered in the Muslim historical tradition. First, from the outset this narrative emphasizes al-Radi’s linguistic acumen and wit as he playfully challenges the foremost grammatical authority of the time. It also brings into focus his firm allegiance to the Imami Shi‘i struggle against unjust rule, a struggle that began with what the Shi‘i school regards as the usurpation of power from ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632CE. Finally, this exchange captures al-Radi’s bravado

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<sup>23</sup>‘Ali ibn al-Yusuf al-Qifti (d.1248CE), *Inbah al-Ruwat*, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriya, 1955), 114-15; Ibn al-‘Imad (d.1679CE), *Shadharat al-dhahab fi akhbar man dhahab*, vol. iii, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsi, 1931-2), 182-4; Yusuf Ibn Ahmad al-Bahrani (d.1772CE), *Lu‘lu‘at al-Bahrayn*, (Najaf: Matba‘at al-Nu‘man, 1966), 322-9.

and eloquence in the authoritative presence of his esteemed teacher. In addition to these details derived from the exchange itself, the transmitter of the report can also be read to serve a critical authenticating function. It is narrated by no less than Ibn Jinni (d.1002CE), another towering figure in the discipline of Arabic language who also happened to be al-Radi's teacher and also a Sunni. Thus this report plays a critical role in inscribing al-Radi's authority into the intellectual genealogy of leading Arabic grammarians of the time.

Some important insights about the intellectual and social milieu in Baghdad under the Buyids can also be glimpsed from this narrative. Reference to al-Radi's connections to two leading Sunni teachers, al-Sirafi and Ibn Jinni, along with the mention of his affiliation to the Imami Shi'i sect reflects a literary culture that recent historians have described as distinctly cosmopolitan.<sup>24</sup> Religious scholars, litterateurs, and rulers alike participated to create a rich and lively space for scholarly exchange. Similarly, circles of students assembled in mosques, courts, and the shops of book-dealers - transcending differences of faith, school and sect - to engage in theological, literary and juridical discussion. Al-Radi benefited from and actively participated in this environment and his sectarian identity did not hinder his movement in Baghdad's intellectual circles. From a young age, he enjoyed the tutelage of the finest teachers that Baghdad had to offer, and distinguished himself in their eyes as a quick learner with a sharp wit. It is important to note that al-Radi's identification as an "Alid," the label used at the time to identify Shi'i's descending from the line of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, did not "other" him in a way that bounded him off from other intellectuals of his time. Al-Radi received his training with an eclectic group of scholars. In addition to the two Sunni grammarians already mentioned, Ibn

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<sup>24</sup> Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the renaissance of Islam: The cultural revival during the Buyid age*, (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992); Lenn Evan Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Jinni (who is reported to have persuaded al-Radi to establish himself as a poet)<sup>25</sup> and al-Sirafi, al-Radi's teachers included the Sabian poet and litterateur, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Hilal al-Sabi (d.994CE), the Sunni Mu'tazili, 'Abd al-Jabbar (d.1025CE), the Shi'i theologian, Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1022CE), and the Maliki jurist, Ibrahim ibn Ahmad al-Tabari (d.1002CE), to name a few.

A few other details about al-Radi and his personal and intellectual genealogy occur frequently in the biographical sources. Several references are made to the nobility of his family, especially to the prestige and status of his father, Abu Ahmad al-Tahir (d.1010CE), who was well respected by the Buyid leadership and by the general populace. His wide-ranging popularity can be gauged from the fact that the honorific title "al-Tahir" (the pure) was bestowed on him by the Buyid princes, while the notoriously scornful poet accused of heresy, Abu'l 'Ala al-Ma'arri (d.1058CE) dedicated an elaborate elegy to him in his poetic collection, *The Spark of the Flint (al-Siqat min al-Zand)*.<sup>26</sup> As chief of the 'Alid community, Abu Ahmad was a crucial mediator between the Buyids, the 'Abbasid caliphs, and the larger populace. He was dispatched to settle disputes between the Buyids and neighboring dynasties like the Hamdanids in Syria, and also played an integral role in bringing peace to the Sunnites and the Shi'ites after violent struggles in Baghdad. In 965CE he was appointed to three distinguished positions: president of the court of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibn Jinni was also on good terms with the esteemed poet, al-Mutanabbi, and authored two commentaries on his *Diwan*. See J. Pedersen, "Ibn Djinni" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 7/8/13 at [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-djinni-SIM\\_3144](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-djinni-SIM_3144)

<sup>26</sup> The relationship between al-Ma'arri and al-Radi's brother al-Murtada however, was not cordial. Reports exist about al-Ma'arri being expelled (literally "dragged by the foot") from al-Murtada's literary salon on account of his critique of al-Murtada's lack of appreciation of the poet al-Mutanabbi. See P. Smoor, "al-Ma'arri," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 12/3/12 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-maarri-COM\\_0599](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-maarri-COM_0599)>

appeal (*Diwan al-Mazalim*),<sup>27</sup> caretaker of the Hajj pilgrimage, and *naqib* (chief) of the ‘Alids.<sup>28</sup>

These prestigious posts remained in the family between al-Radi and his brother. Al-Radi was first entrusted with these responsibilities at the age of twenty-four in the year 990CE when his father was unwell, and again after his death.

The catalyst for what would become al-Radi’s successful poetic career occurred in the year 980CE, when his father was captured and imprisoned by the Buyid ruler ‘Adud al-Dawla and deprived of his properties. Sources suggest that the reason for his imprisonment was ostensibly for divulging state secrets, but the real reason was his mounting prestige which, according to some, even exceeded that of the caliph.<sup>29</sup> This event proved to be an important milestone in al-Radi’s career as a vocal and critical poet. It marked his entry onto the political stage through a powerful literary voice, which he used to plead the case of his father. He criticized the Buyid ruler ‘Adud al-Dawla in a bold and eloquent style which would come to characterize his verses. Abu Ahmad was released in the year 986CE by Sharaf al-Dawla (d.989CE), ‘Adud al-Dawla’s son who succeeded him. At this time al-Radi used the power of his verses to express his gratitude to the new prince and his vizier Sabur ibn Ardeshir (d.1025CE).

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<sup>27</sup> J.S. Nielsen explains that the “jurisdiction of *mazalim* tended to be very wide. Receiving and processing petitions against official and unofficial abuse of power was an important part of its activity, but it also on occasion functioned as a court of appeal against the decisions of *qadis*.” See “Mazalim” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 12/3/12 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mazalim-COM\\_0721](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mazalim-COM_0721)>

<sup>28</sup> Members of the Banu Hashim clan were the ancestral relatives of the Prophet. They were divided into two groups, the ‘Alids and ‘Abbasids, on the basis of their specific genealogical link. Both groups received a salary from the government due to this prestigious lineage. They also had their own court, headed by their own religious leader called the *naqib*. It was under the Buyid ruler Mu‘izz al-Dawla (d.967CE) that the ‘Alids were first separated from the jurisdiction of the ‘Abbasid *naqib*. The duties of the *naqib* comprised of “genealogical, material and moral matters,” including “to keep a register of nobility, enter births and deaths in it and to examine the validity of ‘Alid genealogies. He also had to restrain them from excesses. He had other special duties including certain juridical powers.” See A. Havemann, “Naqib al-Ashraf,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 12/3/12 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nakib-al-ashraf-COM\\_0841](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nakib-al-ashraf-COM_0841)>

<sup>29</sup> Abu al-Mahasin Yusuf Ibn Taghribirdi, (d.1412CE), *Nujum al-Zahra*, vol. iv, (Cairo: Matba‘at Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyah, 1929-52), 223, 240. Cited in Moktar Jebli, “al-Sharif al-Radi.”

Over time, al-Radi cultivated close relations with the ruling political elite including the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ta‘i (d.1003CE) to whom he dedicated many poems of praise. The Buyid prince Baha al-Dawla (d.1012CE) was the main figure with whom al-Radi had close relations and for whom he wrote a glowing elegy. In return, Baha al-Dawla crowned al-Radi with numerous honorific titles, including the one by which he is remembered until today, al-Radi (“the well pleasing.”)

Like other poets of the day, al-Radi too first made his name in scholarly circles through the writing of praise poems dedicated to the Buyid sultans, their viziers, and the ‘Abbasid caliph of the period. Since these ruling figures were also the main patrons and hosts for the literary arts, al-Radi’s skills put him on friendly terms with the leading political players of Buyid Baghdad. But al-Radi did not only use the power of his poetry and the recognition it enjoyed to shower lavish praise on the leaders. At times, he also condemned the unjust use of political power and expressed his distrust of hypocritical sovereign rulers. When, for example, the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ta‘i, with whom he enjoyed good relations, was deposed by the Buyid ruler Baha al-Dawla, al-Radi happened to be present in the court. Although al-Radi himself managed to escape, he captured the humiliating incident that he witnessed:

How wonderful that I should retain my life after  
it has been attacked by disasters virgin and matron.  
And that I should have escaped the day of the palace when others  
succumbed;  
I however, retained some discretion which saved me.  
I darted thence swooping like a shooting-star.  
Just as the doors of destruction were closing on me.  
After the master of the realm had been smiling  
Upon me, each of us affable to the other, I  
Found myself pitying him whom I had envied;  
Truly honor and disgrace are near neighbors.  
Never shall I be deceived by a sovereign again;  
Fools are those who enter sovereign’s doors.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Islam Abu ‘Ali, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, (Ph.D. Diss., University of Durham, 1974), 9.

Al-Radi's resentment and suspicion of political power was also directed at the exaggerated titles that rulers adorned themselves with, and he mocked their self-aggrandizing ways in his verses. However, despite these critiques, at other moments, al-Radi conveyed a contrasting attitude towards political rule. Not only did he not object to the flowery honorifics he himself was given by the same rulers, he also made his own desire for higher office clear in his poetry. In one set of particularly controversial lines, he expressed his aspirations for acquiring the seat of the caliphate.<sup>31</sup> He felt that his noble 'Alid lineage and esteemed scholarly status entitled him to a position much more expansive than what he enjoyed. No doubt, these political ambitions made al-Radi a detestable presence in the eyes of those figures whose positions he sought and threatened. On several occasions, al-Radi was removed from the posts he held in retaliation for his critical words (only to be given them again with the next generation of rulers). In sum, al-Radi's varied encounters with the courts and his periodic stints of political power as leader of the 'Alid community ultimately left him with strong feelings of discontentment. It can be said that the force of al-Radi's verses both acquired for him a privileged place amidst the personalities he chose to praise, and also earned for him periods of political isolation, enforced by those he targeted with his critique.

It is interesting to note that some of al-Radi's critiques of the establishment were framed in the language of illegitimate political rule. This trope resonated with a broader Shi'i critique of the Muslim political set up after the death of the Prophet. According to this view, political power had been usurped from the rightful leaders - the members of the Prophet's family. Although al-Radi's associations with the courts and leaders indicate that for the most part, he did not raise any objections to the 'Abbasid caliph or the Buyid sovereigns on the basis of political legitimacy,

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<sup>31</sup> I discuss this issue in detail in chapter three, titled, "Politics of a Literary Approach to the Qur'an in Tenth Century Baghdad."

there were a few instances where he did express his disapproval. What is striking is that in these moments, al-Radi presented his objections as part of an ‘Alid resistance by allying himself with the Fatimid caliphs in Egypt on the basis of their shared ‘Alid lineage:

I am clothed in humiliation in my enemies’ abodes,  
While in Egypt rules an ‘Alid caliph,  
Whose father is my father, whose master is my master,  
While [in Baghdad] one distant [in kinship] oppresses me.  
My blood is joined to his by the two lords of the people,  
Muhammad and ‘Ali.<sup>32</sup>

The Sunni historian Ibn al-Jawzi (d.1200CE) reports that these provocative words of al-Radi led to a confrontation between the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Qadir and al-Radi’s father, Abu Ahmad (who was made to account for al-Radi’s impetuosity). Abu Ahmad reassured the caliph that his family’s loyalties had always been with them, at which point al-Qadir challenged him to put this affirmation in writing and send it to the Fatimid leader. When Abu Ahmad instructed al-Radi to retract his words and send such a letter to the Fatimids, al-Radi refused, and this led to discord between al-Radi and his father.<sup>33</sup> It is evident that the caliph al-Qadir felt extremely threatened by any show of support for the Fatimids, since it is reported that in 1011CE, he assembled a group of scholars and notables and commanded them to declare in a written document that the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (d.1021CE) and his predecessors lacked genuine ‘Alid ancestry. Apparently, al-Radi also signed this document along with his teacher Shaykh al-Mufid, and his brother al-Murtada.<sup>34</sup> Noteworthy here is that although the Buyid period is often described as a time of tolerance with regard to the freedom and access granted to Shi‘i religious

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<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Stetkevych, “Al-Sharif al-Radi and the Poetics of ‘Alid Legitimacy: Elegy for al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali on ‘Ashura’, 391 A.H.,” in *Arabic Literary Thresholds: Sites of Rhetorical Turn in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Muhsin Jasim Musawi and Jaroslav Stetkevych, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi (d.1200CE), *al-Muntazam*, vol. xv, (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1992), 115-119.

<sup>34</sup> Tamima Bayhom-Daou, *Shaykh Mufid*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 27.

scholars, these narratives present the view that under some Buyid rulers and ‘Abbasid caliphs, the ‘Alids faced significant challenges, and the political positions granted to them were conditional to their support of the establishment.<sup>35</sup> Also important to note from the above discussion, are what appear to be competing memories of al-Radi’s “‘Alid identity.” What I mean by this is that he does not consistently express his authenticity through symbols of particularistic belonging to the ‘Alid cause. Rather than interpret this as al-Radi’s decision to “abandon” Shi‘i resistance to authority, as some earlier scholars have done,<sup>36</sup> I argue that it is more productive to explore the possibility of a conceptual vocabulary that does not limit the operations of identity, particularly that of a minority group, to simply be vacillating between assimilation and resistance. In chapter two, I return to this point and examine alternate readings of the relationship between the ruling elites of Baghdad and Twelver Shi‘i scholars like al-Radi.

### **Al-Radi as a Sayyid Poet Scholar**

Above, I presented a brief sketch of al-Radi’s aristocratic background and poetic personality in the political context of tenth century Baghdad. I turn now to the way in which al-Radi has been remembered in the Muslim tradition. Relying on biographical dictionaries, literary anthologies and historical works, I show that al-Radi has been memorialized first as an outstanding Arab poet, comparable to the most renowned and esteemed poets in early Muslim history. In addition, he is venerated as a *sayyid*, or descendant of the family of the Prophet, and the significance of this sacred lineage has shaped many of his biographical accounts. Finally,

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<sup>35</sup> Relations between the Buyids and the Twelver Shi‘is is discussed in more detail in chapter two, titled “Buyid Baghdad and al-Radi’s Hermeneutical Identity.”

<sup>36</sup> Adam Mez, for example, has argued that al-Radi was the first ‘Alid aristocrat who publicly abandoned resistance to authority. Mez supports this position by referring to an incident where al-Radi exchanged the white dress, which his father had worn, for the black uniform of the ‘Abbasid courtier and official. See Adam S. Mez, Khuda Bukhsh, and D. S. Margoliouth, *The Renaissance of Islam*, (Patna: Jubilee Print. and Pub, 1937), 153, 272.

turning to al-Radi's scholarly output, I present his portfolio of writings, and point out how his expertise in language and literary topics permeated all his works, which covered a variety of disciplines.

In the majority of sources that paint a portrait of al-Radi's biography, his reputation as a poet surpasses all his other achievements. One of the earliest (extant) testaments of his poetic abilities is cited in the work of al-Tha'alabi's (d.1035CE) literary anthology in which he states that it would not be far from the truth to call al-Radi the best poet from among the Quraysh.<sup>37</sup> The same recognition is accorded to al-Radi's poetic fame by the respected historian, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071CE).<sup>38</sup> The positive review by al-Khatib gains additional significance when compared with his scathing critique of al-Radi's primary teacher in Imami theology, Shaykh al-Mufid:

He wrote many books in their (*Rafida's*) errors and in defence of their beliefs and tenets, as well as polemics against the early generations, the Companions and the Followers, and against the generality of jurists who use *ijtihad*. He was one of the imams of error. A large number of people were ruined by him before God gave the Muslims rest from him.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that unlike al-Mufid, al-Radi was not profiled pejoratively as an Imami Shi'i (or as a *Rafidi*, the derogative label used by their opponents at the time).<sup>40</sup> Instead, in al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, al-Tha'alabi and several other Sunni sources, al-Radi's poetic persona

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<sup>37</sup> Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Malik al-Tha'alabi, *Yatimat al-dahr*, vol. iii, (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1983), 131-51.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071CE), *Ta'rikh Baghdad*, vol. ii, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1931), 246-7. It is cited with its full chain of transmission in Ibn al-Qifti, *Inbah*, 114-15; Ibn al-'Imad, *Shadharat*, 182-4.

<sup>39</sup> Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh Al-Mufid (d. 413/1022)*, (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq éditeurs, 1978), 8.

<sup>40</sup> Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

overshadowed his sectarian affiliation.<sup>41</sup> The wide circulation of al-Radi's poetic compendium, *Diwan al-Radi*, can also be observed from Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*, which catalogs all existing manuscripts of Arabic literary works. Brockelmann lists numerous copies of al-Radi's *Diwan* as compared to his other writings, thus affirming the popularity and widespread distribution of this work.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the emphatic statements affirming al-Radi's poetic genius in the majority of his biographical accounts, al-Radi's name is also tied to the purity of the family of the Prophet through genealogical connections. As the title in his name "al-Sharif" (noble) indicates, his parents were direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. His father's side of the family went back to the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kazim (d.799CE), and his mother's side went back to the third Shi'i Imam, Zayn al-'Abidin (d.712CE), thus earning al-Radi the weighty honorific of *Dhul Hasabayn* "of the two nobilities." Al-Radi's noble lineage is most authoritatively and visually depicted in the biographical sources through a powerful dream narrative. The anecdote appears in recent Shi'i studies on al-Radi and his works,<sup>43</sup> although the earliest mention of this narrative occurs in a thirteenth century Sunni source, the Shafi'i Mu'tazili Ibn al-Hadid's

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<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to note that in Ibn 'Inaba's (d.1424CE) *Umdat al-Talib*, whose main authority is the Shi'i genealogist 'Umari, the author compares al-Radi to the finest poets from the Quraysh tribe, including Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, the arch-enemy of Islam in the Shi'i imagination, and the tyrant who was responsible for the massacre at Karbala in 680CE. See Ibn 'Inaba (Ahmad ibn 'Ali Dawudi Hasani), *Umdat al-Talib fi ansab Al Abi Talib* (Beirut: Manshurat Dar Maktabat al-Hayah, 1980), 167-173.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1943), I, 81-82, S I, 131-2 (Arabic tr. Najjar, Cairo 1961, ii, 62-4).

<sup>43</sup> Muhammad Ibrahim Nijad, *al-Sharif al-Radi: the Compiler of Nahj al-Balagha*, tr. Sayyid Hussein Alamdar, (Qum: Ansariyan, 2001), 32-35; Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Mazandarani (d.1800CE), *Muntaha al-maqal fi ahwal al-rijal*, vol vi, (Beirut: al-Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt), 28-29; Vahid (Waheed) Akhtar, *Early Shi'ite Imamiyyah Thinkers*, (Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1988), 127; Abdul Husayn Ahmad Amini Najafi, *al-Ghadir*, vol. iv, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1967), 184.

(d.1258CE) commentary on al-Radi's text, *Peak of Eloquence (Nahj ul Balagha)*.<sup>44</sup> The narrative goes as follows:

Renowned Shi'i theologian Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1032CE) has a dream in which the Prophet's daughter Fatima comes to him with her two young sons, Hasan and Husayn (the second and third Shi'i Imams respectively) and asks him to accept them as his students. The following (waking) day, al-Mufid is at the mosque delivering a sermon and the mother of al-Radi, Fatima,<sup>45</sup> enters holding by the hand her two young sons, al-Radi and al-Murtada. She approaches al-Mufid and requests him to take trusteeship of the education of her two sons. On realizing the powerful meaning of this moment, and how it is a realization of his dream from the previous night, al-Mufid is overcome with emotion and moved to tears.

The power of dreams such as this one rely on an understanding of the oneiric imagination not as the realm of individual fantasy and fiction but as an intermediary realm between the spiritual and the material, the Divine and the human, the dreamer and multiple others. In Islamicate dream culture, albeit with certain qualifications, dreams function as authentic conduits of communication from the invisible world.<sup>46</sup> In addition, as anthropologist Amira Mittersmeier has convincingly argued, dream-stories insert the dreamer into a wider network of relationships and meanings, offer guidance, and place the dreamer in relation to the Divine.<sup>47</sup> By calling into question conventional parameters of the "real", they invite a more radical rethinking of community and subjectivity.

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<sup>44</sup> Abu Hamid ibn Hibat Allah Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj ul Balagha*, vol. i, (Beirut: Dar ihya al-kutub al-arabiya, 1975), 31-41.

<sup>45</sup> Fatima's own predilection for theological discourse is also mentioned and further affirmed in a report according to which Shaykh al-Mufid dedicated one of his treatises on theology to her. See Muhammad Agha Buzurg Tihrani, *al-Dhari'a ila Tasanif al-Shi'a*, vol. i, (Najaf: Matba'at al-Ghari, 1936), 302.

<sup>46</sup> Kazuo Morimoto, *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 18; Louise Marlow, *Dreaming across boundaries: the interpretation of dreams in Islamic lands*, (Boston, Mass: Ilex Foundation, 2008), 1-11.

<sup>47</sup> Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 2-3.

Al-Mufid's dream can more explicitly be situated in a tradition of dream narratives specifically concerned with the *sayyids/sharifs*, or the descendants of the Prophet. Kazuo Morimoto, in his recent work on the *sharifs* has shown the way in which dreams involving the *sayyids* can function as an important trope.<sup>48</sup> It is useful to consider the main elements associated with dream-narratives of this kind. Morimoto argues that the dreams invariably feature charismatic figures from the Prophet's family who transform the course of events in a given present despite the long period of time separating them from that present.<sup>49</sup> The significance of the dream and its truthfulness is reinforced by the appearance members of the Prophet's family. Not only do they vouch for the content of the dream, their presence also differentiates it from satanic dreams. This is so because according to the Shi'i tradition, a dream in which a member of the Prophet's family appears could not have been inspired by Satan. It is worth noting that this has led dream stories to carry authoritative weight comparable to that of *hadith* (written sayings of the Prophet and the Imams).<sup>50</sup> Another important characteristic of dreams concerning *sayyids* is that in such dreams they are not represented as impartial demonstrators of universal norms but as affectionate forebears personally invested in the fate of their family members. Thus, *sayyids/sharifs* in these stories can count on the care and protection of the Prophet's family members with whom they share the most intimate of bonds, a blood relationship.<sup>51</sup> Seen this way, the emotive and indeed genetic power of kinship erases the apparent temporal distance separating the family of the Prophet and later *sayyids*. Most often the proper action that is

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<sup>48</sup> Morimoto, *Sayyids*.

<sup>49</sup> Morimoto, *Sayyids*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Leah Kinberg, "Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadith in Classical Islam: A Comparison of Two Ways of Legitimation," *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 279-300, cited in Morimoto, *Sayyids*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Morimoto, *Sayyids*, 18-19.

presented to the dreamer in the stories is to support the livelihood of *sayyid/sharifs*, especially the poor among them.<sup>52</sup> In sum, it is the idea of the existence of a trans-temporal supernatural circuit between *sayyids/sharifs* and their holy and affectionate forebears in all later times that underpins these edifying dream stories.<sup>53</sup>

In al-Mufid's dream, the apparition of the two Shi'i Imams and the daughter of the Prophet all act as authoritative messengers communicating with al-Mufid and instructing him to take al-Radi and al-Murtada into his intellectual tutelage. Additionally, the theme of transmitting knowledge in al-Mufid's dream also evokes the Shi'i conception of the Imams as having access to concealed knowledge.<sup>54</sup> The imagery in the dream thus also endows al-Radi's intellectual apprenticeship under al-Mufid, and his overall scholarly status with sacred significance. In sum, by visually inscribing al-Radi and his brother in this unbroken chain of knowledge, al-Radi and his family are placed in a sacred connection with the spiritual authority of the Imams. This narrative, presented alongside mentions of al-Radi's noble *sayyid* lineage, effectively posits an inextricable link between his lineal and epistemological purity. In addition, this prophetic dream plays an important role in authorizing the contributions of al-Radi and his brother al-Murtada to the Shi'i canon.

Al-Radi's ties to the family of the Prophet, over and above that of his brother, are also forcefully established through his work, the *Nahj al-Balagha* (Peak of Eloquence), a compilation of the sermons and letters of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.<sup>55</sup> Al-Radi is credited with

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2011), 131; Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p 207, note 427.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Sharif al-Radi, *Nahj Al-Balaghah*.

the task of collecting this literature and putting it in the form of a single work.<sup>56</sup> The *Nahj al-Balagha* has ensured for al-Radi, a permanent place in what has come to be regarded as the Shi‘i canon, in which the collected sayings of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib are second only to the Qur’an in the rhetorical perfection, guidance, and knowledge they are understood to contain.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Radi’s noble lineage and scholarly achievements are further supplemented by anecdotes that extol his morally upright character. These narratives do not only figure in studies that seek to inscribe al-Radi’s authority in the Shi‘i tradition. On the contrary, stories of al-Radi’s moral integrity are commonly featured across the wide range of biographical literature in which he is represented. In these narratives, al-Radi is projected as an exemplary figure who withstood the temptations of material and political gain under Buyid rule. In his own writing, al-Radi attests to this moral challenge. He explains how he set himself apart from the debauchery that characterized courtly life, and describes his own assemblies as “limited and unstained by evil.”<sup>58</sup> The biographical accounts convey al-Radi’s austerity and moral high ground through the succinct but weighty attestation, “he did not accept a single thing from anyone.” This assertion is often supported with some or all of the same set of anecdotes; the selected number varies depending on the amount of space the author has opted to give to each individual entry in his work.

Once, on the occasion of a birth in al-Radi’s house, the Buyid vizier Fakhr al-Mulk sent him one thousand dinars. Al-Radi refused to accept it. The vizier sent it again as a gift for the nurses. Al-Radi refused it on the grounds that in the family of the Prophet to which he belonged, none but the women of the family were employed on such an occasion. The vizier sent it a third time

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<sup>56</sup> Debates over the authorship of this text still exist. See Moktar Jebli, “Nahj al-Balagha.”

<sup>57</sup> Hasan Amin, “Nahj ul-Balagha,” in *Da’irat al-Ma’arif al-Islamiyya al-Shi’iyya*, (Beirut: Mu’assasat ‘Abd al-Hafiz al-Bisat), 1972), 355-363.

<sup>58</sup> *Diwan al-Radi*, vol. II, 724. Cited in Islam ‘Abu ‘Ali, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, 39.

requesting the poet to distribute it among the students who attended his academy.<sup>59</sup>

On another occasion, al-Radi was reading the Qur'an with his teacher, the Maliki jurist Ibrahim ibn Ahmad al-Tabari. The teacher asked al-Radi, "where do you stay?" Al-Radi replied, "in my father's house in *Bab al-Muhawwal*." Al-Tabari, as a compliment, states, "someone like you should not be in his father's house," and then presented al-Radi with a house in Karkh. Al-Radi refused the gift, insisting that he does not accept anything from anyone but his father. To this, al-Tabari argued, "my right over you is greater because I made you memorize the Book of God." Only then did al-Radi accept the house.<sup>60</sup>

Lending further weight to al-Radi's abstinent ways is the story that praises him for his immense generosity. Al-Radi is noted as one among a few leading figures of this period to have set up an independent center of learning (*Dar al-'Ilm*).<sup>61</sup>

He provided for all the needs of his students including the oil for their lamps. In a telling anecdote, it is said that one day a student needed oil for his lamp but the caretaker of the *Dar al-'Ilm* was absent. On learning about this incident, al-Radi had keys made for all the students so that they could access all the material themselves.<sup>62</sup>

These narratives portray al-Radi as a scholar who was deeply invested in the attainment, production, and transmission of knowledge.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *al-Muntazam*, vol. xv, 115-119; Ibn 'Inaba, *'Umdat al-Talib*, 170-173; It is interesting to note that in some sources, (Ibn Jawzi and Ibn 'Inaba), this story is presented as part of a longer anecdote, which compares al-Radi to his brother al-Murtada. In it, the vizier Fakhr al-Mulk gives al-Radi a more welcoming reception than his brother, and is asked about this by his companion. Embedded in the questioner's inquiry is the assumption that al-Radi would rank lower due to his fame as a poet, as opposed to al-Murtada who had achieved recognition as a scholar of religious disciplines. In reply, Fakhr al-Mulk narrates an incident where he had to charge al-Murtada a sum for administrative purposes, and al-Murtada had made a request for a discount on this charge. He then compares this incident with the event of his gifting al-Radi one thousand dinars on the birth of a son, and receiving the reply that he did.

<sup>60</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *al-Muntazam*, vol. xv, 115-119; Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj ul Balagha*, vol. i, 31-41.

<sup>61</sup> Others included the vizier Sabur ibn Ardeshir.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat*, vol. iv, (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1968-72), 414-20; 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan, *al-Sharif al-Radi*, (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1970), 18; 'Abd al-Husayn al-Hilli, introduction to *Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil fi Mutashabih al-Tanzil*, by al-Sharif al-Radi, (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa, 1986), 85.

In terms of al-Radi's own scholarly output, in addition to the *Haqa'iq*, which is best described as a literary analysis of the Qur'an, al-Radi also dedicated two other treatises on the literary trope of metaphor: one on the Qur'an, *Economy of Eloquence in the Metaphors of the Qur'an (Talkhis al-Bayan fi Majazat al-Qur'an)*, and the second on Prophetic hadith, *Prophetic Metaphors (Majazat al-Nabawiyya)*. Al-Radi also left an indelible mark in Arabic literature with his two volumes of poetry, *Diwan al-Radi*. Additionally, he authored three works on the poetry of leading poets of his time, Ibn al-Hajjaj (d.1001CE), al-Sabi, and Abu Tammam (d.845CE). The titles of these works are: *al-Hasan min Shi'ir al-Husayn*,<sup>63</sup> *Mukhtar Shi'ir Abi Ishaq al-Sabi*, and *al-Ziyadat fi Shi'ir Abi Tammam*.<sup>64</sup> Another important genre through which al-Radi displayed his literary skills was in the ornate Arabic prose exemplified in literary exchanges. Al-Radi's correspondences were collected under the title, *Rasa'il al-Sharif al-Radi*. However, only his letters to al-Sabi have survived and been put together as *Rasa'il al-Sabi wa al-Sharif al-Radi*.<sup>65</sup> Finally, on the topic of Arabic language specifically, al-Radi authored the *Ta'liq 'ala Idah Abi 'Ali al-Farisi*,<sup>66</sup> which was most likely a commentary on this renowned grammarian's book, *al-Idah*.

Al-Radi also turned his attention to the biographies of charismatic figures. He had always held his father in great esteem, and in his honor he authored a biography titled, *Sirat al-Tahir*.<sup>67</sup> Next al-Radi focused on a short biographical survey of the twelve Imams, *Khasa'is al-a'imma*.

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<sup>63</sup> Al-Rida, Introduction to *Haqa'iq*, 92.

<sup>64</sup> These works are not extant. See al-Rida, Introduction to *Haqa'iq*, 92; Cited in Islam 'Abu 'Ali, *Al-Sharif al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, 144.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Rida, Introduction to *Haqa'iq*, 91.

<sup>66</sup> This work is not extant; but it is possible that this was a commentary on his teacher, al-Farisi's book. Mentioned in al-Najashi, *Kitab al-Rijal*, (Tehran: Manshurat Markaz Nashr Kitab), 1965, 310-311; Ibn 'Inaba, *'Umdat al-Talib*, 170-173.

<sup>67</sup> This work is not extant. See al-Rida, Introduction to *Haqa'iq*, 92.

He explains that it was while compiling this book that he came across the speeches and sermons of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib which he then put together in the famous *Nahj ul-Balagha*. Finally, al-Radi also sought to document features of his own historical period, through a history of the judges of Baghdad, *Akhbar Qudat Baghdad*, and a work titled, *Ta’liq Khilaf al-Fuqaha*,<sup>68</sup> which we can infer dealt with pertinent legal topics of his day.

### **The Textual Field: al-Radi’s Qur’an Commentary (the *Haqa’iq*)**

Al-Radi’s predilection for literary composition and analysis is evident from his scholarly oeuvre. In the *Haqa’iq*, al-Radi combines his aptitude as a litterateur with his training in a host of religious subjects and other ancillary disciplines. Thus the coalescence of al-Radi’s multiple intellectual genealogies is most vividly observed in this work. The *Haqa’iq* also most thoroughly captures al-Radi’s Qur’an hermeneutic, in which al-Radi employs the classical method of organizing his discussion under distinct queries or questions (*masa’il*), to give the text a clear and lucid organization. Rather than the typical verse-by-verse commentary, which was the custom for exegetes of this period, al-Radi selects for analysis only those verses that result in “ambiguities.”

The single surviving volume of al-Radi’s exegesis includes his commentary on the entire third Sura (chapter) of the Qur’an, titled “Household of ‘Imran” (*Al ‘Imran*). It also includes a small portion of his commentary on the first few verses of the fourth Qur’anic Sura titled “The Women” (*al-Nisa’*).<sup>69</sup> The title of the third Qur’anic chapter, Household of ‘Imran, refers to the

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<sup>68</sup> These works are not extant. See al-Rida, Introduction to *Haqa’iq*, 92.

<sup>69</sup> There are two main manuscript sources for the current edition of volume five of the *Haqa’iq*. The first, composed around the year 531CE, approximately 125 years after al-Radi’s death, is located in the Imam Rida shrine library in Mashhad, Iran. It was assembled with the help of another copy which had been read to al-Radi. The renowned Shi’i scholar Mirza Husayn Nuri Tabrisi (d.1902CE) played a critical role in making this manuscript available by copying it during his visit to the library and by circulating it among scholars. The second main

narratives this chapter contains on Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, Mary and Jesus - all of whom come under the Household of ‘Imran.<sup>70</sup>

The entire third Sura consists of two hundred verses, of which al-Radi identifies and explains thirty-one verses. These verses are selected by al-Radi on the basis of the ambiguities (*mutashabihat*) they raise. From the fourth Sura, only the first forty-eight verses fit in this surviving volume, and of those, al-Radi narrows down a total of six verses as ambiguous. In sum, the fifth volume of al-Radi’s commentary is framed by thirty-seven questions (*masa’il*) that correspond to thirty-seven ambiguous verses. Al-Radi devotes approximately ten to twelve pages of discussion to each question. The number and selection of verses that al-Radi categorized as “ambiguous” is important, since even though many exegetes shared the exegetical principle of structuring their commentaries according to the clear/ambiguous verses, they differed on the question of *which* verses would count as ambiguous. In other words, the “ambiguous” verse in contrast to the “clear” verse may have been a common exegetical principle, but the nature of “Qur’anic ambiguity” and the different forms that it could take varied considerably. The reason for these variances, as I will argue, is that authors were informed by multiple factors, not limited to their sectarian and theological affiliations.

A study of the thirty seven questions raised through the ambiguous verses in the *Haqa’iq* will enable us to discern how al-Radi understood the category of Qur’anic ambiguity and the

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manuscript source is located in a private library in Isfahan. However, as the editor of the *Haqa’iq* al-Hilli bemoans, “this manuscript is replete with errors, indicating the copyists lack of knowledge and linguistic expertise.” See the introduction to the *Haqa’iq* by ‘Abd al-Husayn al-Hilli, *Haqa’iq*, 10-12.

<sup>70</sup> References to the figure ‘Imran in the Qur’an generally point to the father of Mary, mother of Jesus. The “Household of ‘Imran,” as per the title of the third sura refers to the family that God chose along with Adam, Noah, and the family of Abraham. According to the dominant exegetical tradition, the family of ‘Imran is an allusion to Mary and Jesus. A variant exegetical trend adopted by one of the early exegetes Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d.767CE) is that “Household of ‘Imran” refers to the family of Moses and Aaron. This is because the name ‘Imran also refers to the father of Moses and Aaron, the biblical ‘Amraam. See Roberto Tottoli, “ ‘Imran,” *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, Ed. Jane McAuliffe, Brill Online, 2013. Accessed on 06/07/13 at [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/imran-SIM\\_00219](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/imran-SIM_00219).

multiple types of ambiguity that, for him, come under this grouping. In my analysis of this work, I identify four primary forms of ambiguity that frame al-Radi's discussion of the *mutashabih* verses. In Figure 1.1 below, I map the thirty-seven issues (*masa'il*) under these four themes. Although the classifications adopted in this figure are in no way definitive, the purpose of this chart is to provide the reader a birds-eye view of the different kinds of topics covered in the *Haqa'iq*, as well as the weight that al-Radi gives to each one. Since al-Radi himself does not divide the *masa'il* according to the themes that I have enumerated, the reader should keep in mind that this thematic division reflects the conceptual scheme that I see as governing al-Radi's broader discussion. This figure has also guided my selection of specific discussion topics (*masa'il*) in the rest of this dissertation. Given the impossible task of addressing all the topics contained in al-Radi's single volume, I chose those themes that occurred most frequently in his discussion. In order to cast a wide net on al-Radi's work, in the third chapter of this dissertation, titled "Politics of a Literary Approach to the Qur'an in Tenth Century Baghdad," I discuss three of the four main types of ambiguity, namely, "grammatical," "logical," and "ethical." Chapter four of this dissertation, titled "Is the *Haqa'iq* a Mut'azili-Shi'i tafsir? Rationalism and Imamism in al-Radi's Qur'an Commentary," is devoted to the discussion of "theological" ambiguity - the fourth and most dominant type dealt with in al-Radi's Qur'an commentary.

**Figure 1.1 - Types of Ambiguity in *Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil fi Mutashabihat al-Tanzil***

Theological		Grammatical	
Qur'an 3:8 - God as cause of human of deviation? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.2)		Qur'an 3:7 - Use of singular noun "mother" ( <i>umm</i> ) to describe plural noun "verses" ( <i>ayat</i> ) ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.1)	
Qur'an 3:14 - God as beautifier of desires ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.4)		Qur'an 3:45 - Jesus as the word of God, mismatched gender of pronoun ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.10)	
<b>Qur'an 3:26 - God gives power to the unjust? (<i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.6)</b>		Qur'an 3:61 - Mubahala verse; How can the Prophet invite himself? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.12)	
Qur'an 3:40 - Zachariah's doubt on having a son ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.9)		Qur'an 3:91 - Superfluous letter 'waw' ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.18)	
Qur'an 3:60 - Prophetic doubt ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.11)		Qur'an 3:110 - Repetition of God's name (in discussion ( <i>fasl</i> ) section) ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> , 3.23)	
Qur'an 3:83 - Forced submission? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.16)		Qur'an 4:22 - First clause in present tense, second in past tense ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.1)	
<b>Qur'an 3:90 - Repentance of unbelievers not accepted? (<i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.17)</b>			
Qur'an 3:102 - Obeying God as He ought to be obeyed ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.21)			
Qur'an 3:109 - All actions must return to God - were they ever detached? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.22)			
Qur'an 3:128 - No actions are from you ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.25)			
Qur'an 3:154 - What has been written down will happen ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.29)			
Qur'an 3:178 - Respite for unbelievers so they increase in sin ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.31)			
Qur'an 4:48 - Forgiveness for sins, except sin of associating others with God ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.6)			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	

  

Logical		Ethical/Social	
Qur'an 3:13 - God reduced the no. of Muslims in the eyes of polytheists? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.3)		<b>Qur'an 3:26 - God gives power to the unjust? (<i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.26)</b>	
Qur'an 3:18 - God testifies on Himself? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.5)		Qur'an 3:28 - Taking unbelievers as allies ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.7)	
Qur'an 3:36 - The man is not like the woman ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.8)		Qur'an 3:64 - People of the Book taking other gods? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.13)	
Qur'an 3:81 - Prophets must recognize earlier prophets? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.15)		Qur'an 3:75 - Unreliable cheaters from the People of the Book ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.14)	
Qur'an 3:96 - Mecca as the first house? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.19)		<b>Qur'an 3:90 - Repentance of unbelievers not accepted? (<i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.17)</b>	
Qur'an 3:97 - Equating unbelievers with believers unable to perform Hajj ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.20)		Qur'an 3:110 - "Best 'umma" as reference to the past community? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.23)	
Qur'an 3:111 - It won't hurt you except it will pain ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.24)		Qur'an 3:145 - Equivalence of reward seekers of this life & the Hereafter ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.28)	
Qur'an 3:133 - Breadth of paradise equal to heaven & earth ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.26)		Qur'an 4:43 - Forbidding intoxication while in prayer (but permitting it when not in prayer?) ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.4)	
Qur'an 3:143 - Vision of death? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.27)			
Qur'an 3:175 - Satan fears his allies? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.30)			
Qur'an 4:3 - Link between "doing justice to orphans" and "marrying women?" ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.1)			
Qur'an 4:42 - Disobeying wish the earth is leveled with them ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.3)			
Qur'an 4:47 - God's promise of disfigured unbelievers not coming true ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 4.5)			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	

**Notes**

- Two numbering schemes are used in this figure. The first refers to the Sura and verse number in the Qur'an, for example "Qur'an 3:1" means verse 1 in Sura 3. The second refers to the Sura and chapter number in al-Radi's text, for example, *Haqa'iq* 3.1 means chapter one of Sura 3.
- Bold and highlighted verses cover more than one theme and therefore appear more than once

My four-fold division of al-Radi's approach to ambiguity in the Qur'an is based on the nature of the query that is built into the majority of the questions (*masa'il*) posed at the start of each chapter, which take various forms. Some directly challenge the Qur'an's coherency, like "why does the Qur'an state the obvious?" Others express concern with verses that insinuate a prophetology that is theologically problematic (for al-Radi), such as "how can the Qur'an say that prophets exhibit doubt?" Still others remain occupied with preserving the linguistic perfection of the Qur'an and ask, "How can a feminine pronoun be used to refer to a masculine noun?" This question and answer structure was characteristic of the "writerly culture"<sup>71</sup> of tenth

<sup>71</sup> Shawkat M. Toorawa, *Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005). Toorawa describes the emergence of the writerly culture in ninth century Baghdad that witnessed the expansion of manuscript markets and transformed learned and literary life.

century Baghdad, during which books continued to function as written records of personal lessons, and where the form and structure of a hypothetical exchange in person is preserved.

Having sketched critical lineaments of al-Radi's biographical cum scholarly persona and literary output, in the next chapter, I turn to a discussion of the socio-political context in which he operated, that of Buyid Baghdad.

## CHAPTER 2: BUYID BAGHDAD AND AL-RADI'S HERMENEUTICAL IDENTITY

### **Intellectual Genealogies**

In the year 932CE, the leading Muslim philosopher Matta ibn Yunus (d.940CE) squared off in a famous public debate against the prominent philologist of that era, Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi (d.979CE). This debate was held amid much fanfare. It was attended by various members of the religious and social elite of Baghdad, including the vizier of the reigning Buyid dynasty Ibn al-Furat (938CE). In this debate, Matta ibn Yunus and al-Sirafi battled out the relative merits of “grammar” and “logic”. Al-Sirafi’s version of this event is preserved in a famous historical record of the period<sup>72</sup> in which he triumphantly reported: “the outcome of this celebrated occasion was a decisive victory for grammar *over* logic.”<sup>73</sup>

This tenth century debate vividly captures a moment in early Muslim history when the authority of knowledge traditions rooted in logic and indebted to Greek philosophy was aggressively challenged by scholars such as al-Sirafi who held the view that the Qur'an and the normative teachings of the Prophet (*Sunnah*) represent the overarching sources for norms in Islam. This valorization of revealed sources over logic was tied to a theory of language that privileged grammar as the foundational source of knowledge. Amidst these debates, other subsidiary questions loomed large. Which language was to be crowned as the official canon? And who would be the custodians of this canon? Among the many groups that raised their

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<sup>72</sup> In Abu Hayyan Tawhidi, *Kitab Al-Imta Wa-Al-Mu'anasah*, (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, 1965).

<sup>73</sup> Kraemer, *Humanism in the renaissance of Islam*, 110.

voices, authoritative claims were also put forward by a rising class of scholars of which al-Radi was a vocal member. This group regarded themselves as the custodians of a pure Arabic language and of an authoritative pre-Islamic poetic lexicon. The political and intellectual conditions under the Buyids favored an environment in which the claims of this emergent scholarly class came to carry immense political weight.

This chapter is divided into two main discussions. In the first, I present an overview of the sociopolitical context during the Buyid period, albeit with some important qualifications on how I approach the very function of “context” for understanding specific “texts.” I present the conceptual poverty of approaching “contexts” as definitive categories, and point to the difficulties of drawing a neat correspondence between political policies and religious thought. Specifically, I alert the reader to the problematic conclusions this framework has generated with respect to the history of Twelver Shi‘i thought under the reign of the Buyid dynasty.

In the second part of this chapter, I outline the conceptual approach that I employ in my examination of al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary. I explain that rather than read his hermeneutical choices as products of his historical context, we must broach al-Radi’s work as a moral argument that is situated in a particular question and answer space. I argue that this framing shifts our attention to his understanding of the problem or question to which he saw his commentary as a response. This approach, which allows for an examination of al-Radi’s commentary as part of a larger discourse, brings into focus the importance that his role as a poet had for his hermeneutical paradigm. I show that the critical link between his poetic persona and the decisions he makes in his Qur’an commentary is his view of language; this is because he regarded language as the hermeneutical key for interpreting the Qur’an, and in this distinct historical juncture under the Buyids, the poets had emerged as the authoritative custodians of language. Thus I show that al-

Radi's position as a renowned poet in Baghdad's intellectual circles represents the most important vantage point through which to approach and understand his "hermeneutical identity."

Al-Radi's confidence in his own ability to provide answers to Qur'anic conundrums provides important insight into his attitude towards the larger question of who was most qualified to explain the Arabic language, and demonstrates his view of the Qur'an as first and foremost an *Arabic* text that ought to be understood through the mastery of this critical linguistic tool. The fact that his Shi'i identity did not neatly translate into a definable Qur'anic hermeneutic and nor into a definitive conception of language amplifies the conceptual problems attached to the very category of a "Shi'i hermeneutic," a category that stands authorized through the unsound assumption that sectarian identity and hermeneutical imagination readily correspond in a predictable and seamless fashion. By describing the multivalent interpretive traditions that informed al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic, it is precisely this assumption that I challenge and question.

But in preparation for a closer examination of al-Radi's thought, it is imperative to first consider the intellectual and political conditions in which al-Radi's career as a scholar unfolded. It is to this task that I now turn.

### **Grand Narrative of the Buyid "Golden Age"**

In the field of Islamic studies the tenth century in particular has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. It has been described as an age of intellectual "renaissance," a blueprint for a distinctly Islamic "humanism," and a century that saw an unprecedented efflorescence of cosmopolitanism in Islam.<sup>74</sup> The decentralized rule of the Buyids, which paved the way for multiple networks of patronage under different dynasties, played a critical role in this change of

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<sup>74</sup> Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*; Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*; Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*.

climate and according to most historians some of the major beneficiaries of this climate of open exchange were Twelver Shi‘i scholars.<sup>75</sup> Recent scholars have argued that the background of the Buyid rulers as Persian Daylamite Zaydi Shi‘is, and their later adherence to the Twelver sect of Imami Shi‘ism led them to favor prominent Shi‘i personalities.<sup>76</sup> Specifically, this meant including them in their smaller circles of advisers, propping them up as appointed leaders of highly coveted posts such as chief judge of the courts of appeal (*mazalim courts*) and overseers of the Hajj pilgrimage. Buyid Shi‘ism is said to have translated into a general climate of tolerance, such that previously privatized Shi‘i beliefs were given a safe public platform. In other words, the Buyids are given credit for offering Imami Shi‘i intellectuals a taste of freedom not previously available, thus marking the Shi‘i “coming out” so to say, from their previous state of *taqiyya* (dissimulation). For example Meir Bar Asher, author of what is to date the only comprehensive study of Twelver Shi‘i exegesis (until the tenth century) states:

A dramatic change in the fortunes of Imami Shi‘ism occurred soon after the Major Occultation with the rise to power of the Buwayhid dynasty in Baghdad, the heart of the ‘Abbasid state.... Whatever their relationship to Imami Shi‘ism, it seems beyond doubt that during their rule (334/945-447/1055), Imami Shi‘ism thrived. In fact, the reign of this dynasty marks a golden era for Imami Shi‘ism, which had earlier experienced continual persecutions. The legitimization accorded to Imami Shi‘ism under the Buwayhids brought about an important cultural shift, characterized by extensive literary activity and far-reaching innovations in Imami doctrine. In studying early Imami literature a distinction must therefore be drawn between works composed prior to the rise of the Buwayhids (or up to the Major Occultation) and those written during their period.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See for example, Cl. Cahen, “Buwayhids or Buyids,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 12/3/12 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM\\_1569](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/buwayhids-or-buyids-SIM_1569)>; Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*; Muhammad Ismail Marcinkowski, “Twelver Shiite Scholarship and Buyid Domination. A glance on the life and times of Ibn Babawayh Al-Shaykh Al-Saduq (D-381/991),” *The Islamic quarterly* 45 (2001): 199; Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami- Shi‘ism*; Kabir Mafizullah, *The Buwayhid Dynasty of Baghdad, 334/946-447/1055*, (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1964); John Donohue, *The Buwayhid Dynasty in Iraq 334 H./945 to 403 H./1012: Shaping Institutions for the Future*, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami-Shi‘ism*, 9.

Aspects of this grand narrative have been challenged by recent scholars.<sup>78</sup> It is still generally agreed that sources point to the flourishing of intellectual activity during the Buyid period in the varied realms of Muslim social, political and intellectual life. It is also acknowledged that there was an increase in the participation of scholars from multiple schools of thought in the realm of public debate. At the same time, the limitations of using categories such as “renaissance,” “age of humanism” or “golden age” are emphasized. That is, reviewers question how such frameworks evaluate Muslim history according to terms determined through the narrow filter of Euro-American experience. And more importantly, how the tying of scholarly productivity under the Buyids to humanistic ideals of pluralism remains anachronistic and misleading.

One recent work that has shown the conceptual poverty of positing a neat correspondence between political policies and religious thought during the Buyid period in particularly instructive ways is Kambiz GhaneaBassiri’s 2003 dissertation, *A Window on Islam in Buyid Society*. In this work GhaneaBassiri presented a trenchant critique of Euro-American research on the development of Muslim religious thought under the Buyid dynasty. He argued that most works on this subject have historically contextualized religious thought during Buyid rule in juxtaposition with ongoing imperial politics, namely the decentralization of power under the Buyids and the impact that this had on the institution of the caliphate. He points out that in doing so these studies “exemplify a prevailing trend in Islamic studies that is based on the assumption that religion and politics are one and the same in Islam.”<sup>79</sup> Questioning the salience of this approach which views Islamic political history as an all-encompassing framework for

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<sup>78</sup> See for example, M. G. Carter, “[Review of] Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 2 (1989): 304-305; Ira M. Lapidus, “[Review of] Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 1 (1988): 199; GhaneaBassiri, “A window on Islam in Buyid society.

<sup>79</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *A Window on Islam in Buyid Society*, 1.

understanding the socio-historical development of the religion of Islam, GhaneaBassiri argues for a reevaluation.<sup>80</sup> This reevaluation, he argues, is to be achieved by “examining the way in which Muslims of varying schools of thought who lived within a similar historical context, sought to practice their personal understanding of humanity’s ideal relationship with both God and the world.”<sup>81</sup>

Taking seriously these critiques, it is important to examine more carefully how the sociopolitical conditions changed under Buyid rule such that the emergence of a wider array of voices was made possible. It is also critical to consider which voices, if any, were left out as a result of the shakeup.

### **Twelver Shi‘i Scholars During the Buyid Period**

The reign of the Buyid dynasty marked a transitional period between the cohesive political structure of the ‘Abbasid dynasty that came before, and the mostly independent Islamic states that arose afterwards in the eleventh century. Historians describe this period as one marred by immense political fragmentation; several independent dynasties scattered a landscape that had previously been united under the ‘Abbasids. The Buyids (Shi‘i) occupied the southern and western parts of Iran and all of Iraq, the Samanids and later the Ghaznavids (both Sunni) neighbored them in the east, the Hamdanids (Shi‘i) had their stronghold in Aleppo and Mosul, while Egypt and Syria had come under the rule of the Fatimids (Isma‘ili-Shi‘i).

The Buyid conquest over the ‘Abbasids represents a dramatic and decisive moment in Islam’s political and religious history. This is so because as adherents of the Twelver Shi‘i School, the Buyids could have put an end to the institution of the caliphate altogether. The

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<sup>80</sup> Similar arguments against a dynastic approach to history have been made in Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*; and Omid Safi, *Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

<sup>81</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *Window on Islam in Buyid Society*, 1.

fundamental objection and criticism of the Shi‘i School, from the time of its earliest form, was that the caliphs were illegitimate rulers who had usurped power from the rightful successors of the Prophet, that is, the Imams. In other words, the only acceptable sources of authority for the Shi‘i community were the divinely designated Imams. Upon seizing power, the Buyids made no attempt to revise the situation by deposing the caliph. In fact, not only did they not put an end to the caliphate, they emerged as the first Shi‘i dynasty to create a principality that was on the one hand independent of the caliphate, but on the other hand parallel to it.

When the Buyids came into office, they significantly curtailed the caliph’s power and mobilized the religious authority invested in that position to assemble their own legitimacy as the new political rulers. By claiming honorifics such as “*shahanshah*” (king of kings) the Buyids also revived the Persianate tradition of kingship (sultanate). The symbolic transfer of sovereignty, from caliph to king, was also facilitated by practices such as the caliph’s bestowing of honorific titles on the Buyid rulers (titles often selected by the ruler himself). But underlying such political maneuvers and strategies was a fundamental ambiguity: the Shi‘i doctrinal covenant that only the Imams possessed the sovereign authority for political leadership. So how did the Buyids uphold the institutions of the caliphate and sultanate without subverting Shi‘i dogma on the Imams’ encompassing authority? The answer to this question lies in the subtle yet significant shifts within Shi‘i intellectual traditions during this hinge moment in Muslim history. The Buyids ascended to power in the years just after the twelfth and final Imam’s occultation in 941CE. This crisis compelled Twelver Shi‘i scholars to revisit and rethink their established positions on acceptable forms of political authority. Previously they had categorically rejected any form of illegitimate, meaning non-Imami rule. But under the unusual and unprecedented circumstances of the tenth century, whereby the Imam was no longer among them, the Shi‘i

community did not protest the Buyid configuration of sultanate-caliphate-occult imamate. Since the Imams were no longer around, their doctrinal status and prestige were not diminished by the political rule of non-Imams.

In addition to doctrinal innovation, the Buyid era also witnessed important shifts in the intellectual and political milieu in which Shi‘i scholars operated. Under the Buyids, Twelver Shi‘i scholars benefited from a general climate of intellectual exchange, and were organized into an autonomous body so as to counterbalance the ‘Abbasids. Formerly, the ‘Alid family unit was integrated into and dominated by the ‘Abbasids.<sup>82</sup> But under the Buyids, although they were never permitted entry to the high ranks of sultan, caliph or vizier, Twelver Shi‘i scholars nonetheless took part in the literary assemblies and scholarly circles that flourished at this time.

The intellectual vitality of Twelver Shi‘i scholars during this period, as seen in their numerous public positions and scholarly contributions, has led some contemporary historians to conclude that the tolerant attitude of the Buyids played a formative role in what has been called “the critical turn” in Shi‘i thought: namely the increasingly public role of Shi‘i scholars and a concomitant rationalization of Shi‘i doctrines.<sup>83</sup> According to this narrative, a tradition that was previously hidden in the shadows of dissimulation assumed visibility during the Buyid reign. And as a result, so the narrative goes, the exaggerated and hyperbolic features of the Shi‘i tradition, such as the association of supernatural qualities with the figure of the Imam, made way for a more “rationalized” and sober expression of Shi‘ism. Such a reading of Shi‘i history is conceptually wanting for a few reasons. The fundamental shortcoming of the view that Shi‘ism transformed from a dissimulated to a public and correspondingly, an “irrational” to a “rational”

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<sup>82</sup> Cahen, “Buwayhids or Buyids.”

<sup>83</sup> I treat this issue of the “rationalist turn” in Shi‘i thought more fully in chapter four, “Is the *Haqa’iq* a Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i Exegesis?”

tradition during the Buyid era is the assumption that Shi‘ism represents a linear category whose passage from one state to another is readily available for disciplinary canonization. According to this view, a fixed and unchanging category called the “Shi‘i position” simply shed off its dissimulated past as it saw the light of publicity under the Buyids. Moreover, as Shi‘ism became more public, it also became more “rational”; the opening up of Shi‘i scholars and scholarly traditions to other currents of Muslim intellectual thought (read Sunni thought) enabled Shi‘ism to become more moderate, public, and rational. In other words, having been exposed to normative patterns of “orthodoxy”, Shi‘ism assumed a more orthodox form. What is lost from such a teleological approach towards religious identity is the a priori canonization of what counts as “rational” or “orthodox” prior to the intellectual arguments and discourses through which the boundaries of such categories are articulated, presented, and contested.

Implicit in this reasoning is the argument that Shi‘i membership in a more cosmopolitan *and* more Sunni milieu led them to cast off the more “radical” or “heterodox” elements of their doctrinal apparatus. In other words, increased social interaction, exchange, and exposure, led Shi‘i scholars to *concede* or *conform* to the majoritarian view. For instance the recent entry on the Buyids in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* illustrates this trend quite well:

At no time did the Buwayhids plan the persecution of the Sunnis by the Shi‘is — both sects were represented in their army; rather they intended to set up a sort of ‘Abbasid-Shi‘i condominium, which freed the Shi‘is from the obligation of a certain *taqiyya* and provided them, as well as the Sunnis, with an official organisation... Without the smallest doubt, Twelver Shi‘ism owes to the Buwayhid regime not only this organisation, but even a part of its doctrinal structure.<sup>84</sup>

It is evident that the author is referring to the appointment of elite Shi‘i figures like al-Radi’s family to prestigious administrative posts as evidence of the new conditions in which the Shi‘is actively participated in the governance of their own community as well as that of the Muslim

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<sup>84</sup> Cahen, “Buwayhids or Buyids.”

community at large. But it would be hasty to associate the nominal Shi‘i prominence in the public sphere with a desire on the part of the Buyids to be more tolerant towards the minority.

As I outlined in the introduction, in this dissertation, my approach to understanding religious identity begins by arguing against a view that ascribes a predetermined essence to “Shi‘ism,” and against a framework that fails to account for the ways in which the very structure of religious identity gets constituted under shifting intellectual and institutional conditions. Instead, I approach Shi‘i identity as an ongoing moral argument that is invested with and divested off particular meanings and orientations in specific moments of authoritative discourse and debates. In so doing I turn attention to particular historical conjunctures of authoritative debates, discord, and disagreement in which Shi‘ism as an “embodied argument” is made possible and centrally visible. The post-occultation Buyid period is one such conjuncture that brings into view different configurations of a Shi‘i identity, and enables certain versions to be inscribed and persist. Thus rather than remain focused on a singular, pre-constituted Shi‘i identity and the change it underwent at the hands of external causes – in this case the freedom granted by Buyid rulers - this reframing demands that we turn our attention to the very *conditions* that enabled certain components of the Shi‘i identity to come into central view.

Accordingly, I argue against the view that it was Buyid tolerance that led the official Shi‘i position to take the turn that it did towards a position that came to increasingly resemble the majority Sunni School. What such a narrative does not account for are the shifting alliances and strategic moves characterizing the political landscape of Buyid Baghdad. As noted earlier, the Buyid decision to organize and prop up the Twelver Shi‘i community, independent from the ‘Abbasids, was a pragmatic political strategy that earned the rulers greater legitimacy on the basis of which they further distinguished themselves from the ‘Abbasid caliph. Crucial to note

here is that since the Buyids adhered to the Twelver School, it was precisely the Twelver Shi‘i scholarly elite who represented their most formidable competitors. This can be witnessed in the cautious reserve with which they decided on which Twelver Shi‘i scholars were to be given which administrative and official posts, and for what duration. Al-Radi’s political career constitutes a series of cycles where he was granted certain leadership positions and then removed from them. Al-Radi’s father as well, Abu Ahmad, was famously employed by different Buyid rulers to serve as an intermediary on their behalf and conduct dialogue with their most threatening adversaries in the surrounding regions. But after Abu Ahmad achieved success at his assigned task and became popular as a result, another Buyid leader imprisoned him for seven years; he found Abu Ahmad’s sudden rise in popularity as an imminent political threat. Thus it is critical to note that Buyid attitudes towards Twelver Shi‘i scholars were far from uniform or predictable, making it very difficult to posit a linear or predictable relationship between the political orientation of the Buyids and fluctuations in Shi‘i thought during this era.

Another problem with reading Shi‘i scholarly productivity during this period as a product of Buyid tolerance is that this view does not take into account the significant shift in historical circumstances that occurred around the same time. As mentioned earlier, the Buyid rise to power occurred just a few years after the occultation of the twelfth Imam. Thus, it remains to be asked to what extent the increase in Shi‘i scholarly participation can be tied to the fact that the Shi‘i community was no longer bound by the doctrinal covenant that prevented them from serving any ruler other than the Imam. These markedly altered conditions in the absence of the Imams, complemented by a new political leadership whose rulers adhered to Shi‘i principles even as they maintained the Sunni ‘Abbasid caliph, may very well have enabled a new willingness on the part of the Shi‘i community to be associated with the establishment.

## Political Fragmentation and Narratives of Sunni/Shi'i Strife

Above I have demonstrated the conceptual limitations of broaching Twelver Shi'i thought in the tenth century as the product of Buyid tolerance, and pointed out that this view results from the problematic assumption that there is a neat correspondence between the religious and political currents in Islam. I want to turn now to another prevailing assumption in existing narratives of Buyid history, according to which sectarian difference is uncritically posited as the primary cause for division and discord.

An important development during the Buyid reign was an overall fragmentation of political authority.<sup>85</sup> The Buyid Empire comprised of three separate principalities ruled by different members of the same family. From a political standpoint, this meant that measures undertaken by the different leaders were executed with consideration to the particular interest of individual principalities rather than that of a collective Muslim empire. Fragmented political objectives, in turn, led to significant internal strife within the three principalities, which manifested in the form of fierce rivalries between competing claimants to political authority. Historians have typically depicted this division as a sectarian battle between the majority Sunni and minority Shi'i Schools. The fact that this historical interlude was dominated by the reign of Shi'i dynasties, has also led scholars to label the period as "the Shi'i century."<sup>86</sup> Yet this label blurs the vast difference between the political ambitions and modalities of governance adopted by the various Shi'i empires. If anything, to refer to the period as some kind of Shi'i "golden age" is to employ the language of the Seljuqs in the thirteenth century, who cast themselves as the revivers of an "orthodox" Sunni Islam, destined to free Muslim society from the stronghold

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<sup>85</sup> Cahen, "Buwayhids or Buyids."

<sup>86</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. ii, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 36.

of the heterodox Shi‘i sect. Recently, scholars such as Richard Bulliet and Omid Safi have brought to our attention the way in which depictions of this historical period as a momentous showdown between Sunni and Shi‘i forces represent uncritical recapitulations of the traditional Sunni narrative.<sup>87</sup> Their reevaluation of the source material suggests that much more so than a sectarian battle between the Sunni and Shi‘i sects, it was a dramatic and caustic intra-Sunni contestation between the Shafi‘i and Hanafi legal schools that dominated the political landscape of this era.

The cosmopolitan intellectual environment that marked the Buyid era also brings into doubt the accuracy of a sectarian reading of Buyid history. The tenth century was a moment of tremendous intellectual fermentation and cross-pollination among the Muslim scholarly elite, often blurring the boundaries separating Shi‘i and Sunni scholars. Rather than a dichotomous division between majority and minority sects, there was a fluid exchange of students and teachers between various schools of thought. More generally, the shifting allegiances of individual scholars transcended sectarian, theological, and legal affiliations. The following incident captures well the ideological porosity found during the Buyid period:

In 401AH, the Hanafi Chief Judge (*Qadi al-Qudat*) found himself in direct conflict with the Shafi‘ites in the city. Abu Hamid al-Isfara‘ini, leader of the Shafi‘ite jurists and a close associate of the Caliph, succeeded in having his protégé, Abu‘l-‘Abbas Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Abiwardi appointed as deputy for Ibn al-Akfani in the Harim. Ibn al-Akfani refused the appointment on the grounds that custom was against a Shafi‘i holding a judgeship in Iraq, for such posts had always been assigned to Hanafites. Abu Hamid interpreted the refusal to the caliph as an act of insubordination, and succeeded in having Abu‘l-‘Abbas al-Abiwardi assigned as Chief Judge. This appointment split the ulama into two factions. The Sharif Radi who was syndic of the Talibids at the time, Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi, leader of the Hanafites, and the latter’s followers, sided with Ibn al-Akfani, while the Caliph’s secretary (Ibn Hajib al-Nu‘man), Abu Hamid and the Shafi‘ites backed Abiwardi. Allegedly, Ibn al-Akfani wrote to Mahmud of Ghazna, a Hanafite partisan, complaining of the Caliph’s persecution of the Hanafites. But the crucial letter was that written by Radi to Fakhr al-Mulk, who was recently appointed governor of

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<sup>87</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*; Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*.

Baghdad. Accusations against Abiwardi for the misuse of funds in a previous post were made to Fakhr al-Mulk, who wrote signifying his support of the Hanafites. At this juncture, the Caliph considered it opportune to break with the Shafi'ites by reappointing Ibn al-Akfani and by dismissing Abu Hamid from the palace precincts.<sup>88</sup>

This incident illustrates well not only the way in which al-Radi emerges as a critical mediator in a Hanafi/Shafi'i dispute, but also that he aligned himself with the Hanafis against the Shafi'i's. Also noteworthy is the Sunni Hanafi complaint against the Sunni Caliph, where he is accused of persecuting the Hanafis. As this incident shows, sectarian and ideological loyalties and allegiances were remarkably fluid and dynamic during the Buyid period. What must be emphasized here is that this fluidity was enabled by the political fragmentation and the diminished role of the caliph during this era. In short, political fragmentation paved the way for intellectual and ideological bricolage, which is further discussed below.

### **Intellectual and Cultural Life Under the Buyids**

From a cultural perspective also, the political fragmentation under the Buyids catalyzed an unprecedented boon. The establishment of regional principalities resulted in the expansion of impressive courts and cultural centers that were at par with the flourishing city of Baghdad. With the establishment of a wider patronage system, and with increased contact with diverse peoples inhabiting the fringes of the empire, the intellectual climate was imbued with a new vitality. For instance, important schools were established, such as the *Dar al- 'ilm* (House of Learning) established by the vizier Sabur ibn Ardeshir, hospitals were set up in Baghdad and Shiraz, and impressive libraries were built in Shiraz, Rayy and Isfahan by successive generations of Buyid leaders. These developments in the cultural and intellectual infrastructure of the empire also energized the scholarly life of the Muslim community.

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<sup>88</sup> Donohue, *The Buwayhid Dynasty in Iraq*, 299.

Although the first generation of Buyids had inadequate knowledge of Arabic, they equipped themselves with the most illustrious Arabic scholars of their day, including Ibn al-‘Amid (d.970CE) and Ibn ‘Abbad (d.995CE). Moreover, the courts frequently hosted the finest Arabic poets. Persian poets too were welcomed. For example, the preeminent Persian poet Abu ‘l-Qasim Ferdowsi (d.1020CE) was invited at the court of the Buyid ruler, Baha al-Dawla. Other notable scholars who benefited from this practice of patronage and from the culture of scholarly exchange cultivated during the Buyids included the philosopher/historian Miskawayh (d.1030CE) and the celebrated philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d.1037CE) to name just two. The two treasuries of Arabic literature, Abu’l-Faraj al-Isfahani’s (d.967CE) “Book of Songs,” and al-Nadim’s (d.995CE) *Fihrist*, were also compiled during this time. Scholars of different stripes were invited to come and publicly debate at the courts for the pleasure and learning of the vizier who served as their host. The famous debate between al-Sirafi and Matta ibn Yunus, with which this chapter began, had also taken place in the presence of the Buyid vizier, Ibn al-Furat (d.938CE). Moreover, distinguished scholars were well received by the Buyid rulers and by their viziers, especially those scholars whose expertise could be put to practical use such as geographers, astrologers, physicians, and mathematicians.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly then, the intellectual and political context in which al-Radi wrote was more complicated and nuanced than what a sectarian reading of this moment, conducted through a binary prism of an a priori Sunni/Shi‘i division would suggest. Furthermore, the intellectual efflorescence and cosmopolitanism that saturated the Buyid period is also important to consider with regards to appreciating and contextualizing the multivalent hermeneutic found in al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary.

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<sup>89</sup>Cahen, “Buwayhids or Buyids.”

## Problem Oriented Historiography

Thus far, I have sought to argue that approaching al-Radi's hermeneutical identity through a narrative that positions him as a Twelver Shi'i scholar who was given a voice under the Buyids, so that a hitherto hidden Shi'i position, was made public, is fraught with conceptual and historiographical problems. I have shown that this approach assumes a rigid notion of religious identity, and views Islamic political history as a singularly adequate framework for understanding the socio-historical development of religious thought. By moving away from a rigid reading of Shi'i religious identity and from reductionist conclusions about Islamic political history, I seek to explore al-Radi's engagement with the multiple intellectual discourses that are inflected in his writings. In so doing, my objective is not to historicize al-Radi *better* but to shift attention away from the simply thematic content of his history, and to expand the understanding of contextualizing a historical text by seeing it as part of a larger discourse. Put differently, I refrain from attempting to identify the historical "context" of al-Radi's Qur'an commentary, and instead subscribe to the view that "contexts" must be interpreted as verbal artifacts, much like the ideas and "texts" they produce.

My conceptual approach is indebted to the work of anthropologist David Scott, and especially his reading of the historian cum theorist Reinhart Koselleck. Scott invoked a conceptual relation between what Koselleck called the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" to discuss how concrete histories are always produced within the medium of particular experiences and expectations.<sup>90</sup> For Koselleck, "space of experience" refers to the "present-past", that part of the past that has been preserved and remembered in the present. On the other hand, "horizon of expectation" signifies "the future made present", meaning the

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<sup>90</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), in which he draws on Reinhart Koselleck and Keith Tribe, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (Cambridge (Mass.): MIT, 1985), 44.

expectations, desires, and anxieties that are projected to an imagined future. For Scott, crucial to Koselleck's theory is the idea that moral arguments are constructed by positing a particular temporal relationship between the past that is to be preserved or overcome and the future that is to be attained. A moral argument, in other words, not only provides an "answer" to a problem. More importantly, the persuasiveness and moral force of an argument depends on how it describes the "problem" or the "question" that is to be resolved and answered. The idea of a "question and answer" space in which moral arguments are embedded can be very fruitful in analyzing and describing the religious thought of a scholar like al-Radi. As a moral argument, his Qur'an commentary was situated in a particular problem-space that he navigated. Al-Radi's hermeneutical choices reflected a certain understanding of the problem to be overcome and the dissatisfactions that he sought to address. Rather than reading al-Radi's hermeneutics as neatly correlated to his historical context, I instead focus on the question and answer space that animated his hermeneutical enterprise. This requires a closer investigation into how he understood and described the problem or the question to which he saw his Qur'an commentary as a response. It is to this task that I now turn.

### **Situating al-Radi's Discontentment and Caliphal Ambitions**

A helpful study that identifies al-Radi's poetic writings as expressions of his discontentment with his fate in Baghdad political landscape is Suzanne Stetkevych's article titled "Al-Sharif al-Radi and the Poetics of 'Alid Legitimacy: Elegy for al-Husayn ibn 'Ali on 'Ashura', 391 A.H." In this study of al-Radi's fifty-eight line *qasidah* (poem) about the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (d.680CE), Stetkevych argues that al-Radi's poem goes beyond the strictures of an "elegy," which is how it has commonly been described and classified. Instead, she contends that it is a polythematic poem and in it al-Radi has

“masterfully manipulated classical Arabic *qasidah* conventions, including form, genre, imagery and diction, to promote a politico-religious claim for ‘Alid legitimacy – his own imminent Imamate – and to create, at the same time, a meticulously crafted and perduring work of the poetic art.”<sup>91</sup>

The crux of Stetkevych’s argument is that in this poem the distinction between the elegizer and elegized collapses. This is because she interprets al-Radi’s lament on the usurpation of the caliphate from al-Husayn by the Umayyads as a reflection of al-Radi’s own ambitions and frustrations under ‘Abbasid caliphal rule. Thus this poem nicely illustrates al-Radi’s aspirations of becoming the leader of the larger Muslim community. In addition to this specific poem, Stetkevych offers other examples from al-Radi’s *Diwan* (collection of poems) to illustrate his shifting loyalties in the hope of receiving recognition and position to which he felt his talent and ‘Alid lineage entitled him. For example, she cites the verses where he is unequivocally critical of the ‘Abbasids and proclaims the superiority of his lineage over theirs:

Return the inheritance of Muhammad, return it!  
For neither the staff nor the [Prophet’s] mantle are yours!  
Does blood like Fatimah’s flow in your veins,  
Or do you have a grandfather like Muhammad?<sup>92</sup>

Also, in the final lines of another *qasidah* which al-Radi had dedicated to the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Qadir (d.1031CE), he boldly declares:

When men compete in glory there is no difference between us  
At all: each of us is of the noblest origins-  
  
Except for the Caliphate: I am deprived of it  
While you are crowned!<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Stetkevych, “Al-Sharif al-Radi and the Poetics of ‘Alid Legitimacy,” 53.

<sup>92</sup> Al-Sharif al-Radi, *Diwan*, cmt. Yusuf Farahat, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1995), 1:337-4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:39.

In these verses al-Radi invokes his spiritual genealogy through the Imams to connect himself to the Prophet. This argument provides a helpful glimpse into how ‘Alid lineage continued to command critical clout in the claim to legitimate rule in tenth century Baghdad. As noted earlier, this period in early Islamic history is characterized by the political shakeup wrought by the Persianate Buyid dynasty from the time they took power in 945CE, stripped the ‘Abbasid caliphs from any real political control, and introduced the sultanate as a way of invoking the political authority of Persian kingship.<sup>94</sup> Since the Buyids had assumed the role of the political sovereign while making no decisive claims about religious authority, it opened up the space for a discursive battle over religious legitimacy between the ‘Abbasids and ‘Alids to freely wage without posing any direct threat to the Buyid sultanate.

The air of aristocracy that al-Radi exudes in his poetry is legitimized by the purity of his lineage. Distinct about this attitude is that unlike other theologically grounded writings by ‘Alid scholars on the legitimacy of ‘Alid rule, such as that of his brother al-Murtada (d.1044CE), al-Radi’s argument for his own candidacy for political rule does not concern itself with theological explanations. Another curious detail about al-Radi’s claim to the caliphate is that according to the biographers it was al-Radi’s friend al-Sabi (d.994CE)<sup>95</sup> (the Sabian) who convinced him to pursue these political aspirations. Al-Radi’s relationship to al-Sabi resembles that of a protégé to an older mentor, particularly since al-Sabi was a famous litterateur employed by the Buyid courts

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<sup>94</sup> Wilferd Madelung, “The Assumption of the Title Shahanshah by the Buyids and “The Reign of the Daylam (Dawlat Al-Daylam),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1969): 168-183.

<sup>95</sup> Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sabi served as the secretary to the Buyid Mu‘izz al-Dawla, and to the ‘Abbasid caliphs al-Mu‘ti and al-Ta‘i. He is also the author of a history of the Buyid dynasty *al-Kitab al-Taji fi akhbar al-dawla al-Daylamiyya*. The book was commissioned by ‘Adud al-Dawla as a price of al-Sabi’s release when he, along with a few others including al-Radi’s father were imprisoned by ‘Adud al-Dawla. These conditions are provided as the reason for reports about al-Sabi’s assertion that the history was nothing but a pack of lies (the veracity of this report has been questioned. See Wilferd Madelung, “Abu Ishaq al-Sabi on the ‘Alids of Tabaristan and Gilan,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 1 (1967): 17-57.

and had been a close companion of al-Radi's father.<sup>96</sup> An extant work titled *Rasa'il al-Sabi wa'l Sharif al-Radi* showcases a literary exchange between al-Radi and al-Sabi in highly ornate Arabic poetry and prose. In these writings it is evident that despite their difference in age and religious orientation, al-Radi and al-Sabi shared a talent and passion for the Arabic letters. The anecdote quoted by several biographers in which al-Sabi is given credit (or blamed) for planting the seed of political ambition in al-Radi reads as an exchange where al-Sabi shares his hopes for al-Radi to him:

O Abu Hasan! In the matter of men I have intuitive knowledge (*ilm al firasa*),  
It fails me not in speaking the truth,  
It has informed me that you are a man of nobility who will rise to the highest  
rank,  
So I gave you full honor before it was due, praying "may God prolong the life of  
Sayyid!"  
Not revealing yet a phrase which I kept secret, until I see myself free to spell it  
out.<sup>97</sup>

A contemporary biographer of al-Radi, 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan, reports that al-Sabi denied uttering these words when they were distributed since he feared repercussions by the caliph.<sup>98</sup> If this report can be trusted, then this further complicates reading the Buyid period as one where scholars of all schools of thought were granted "freedom", since what was permissible for al-Radi to utter as an 'Alid was considered dangerous for his Sabian friend. Irrespective of the credibility of this account, it is worth noting that the narrative it forms successfully isolates al-Radi's individual claim for the caliphate from the more sustained and systematic body of

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<sup>96</sup> Biographers like 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan have interpreted their friendship as proof of al-Radi's open mindedness in light of their difference in age and religion. See 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan, *al-Sharif al-Radi*.

<sup>97</sup> Adapted from the translation in Islam Abu 'Ali, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi*, 123.

<sup>98</sup> 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan, *al-Sharif al-Radi*, 23.

literature that came to represent the Shi‘i canon. According to this literature,<sup>99</sup> arguments for ‘Alid legitimacy begin with ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and end with the twelfth Shi‘i Imam.

Consequently there was no place in canonical Shi‘ism for a figure like al-Radi, writing some fifty years after the occultation of the twelfth Imam, to seek the position of what was rightfully considered the jurisdiction of the Imam in occultation.<sup>100</sup>

Outright contestations for power between ‘Alid and ‘Abbasid leaders as well as the intellectual exchange between al-Radi and al-Sabi offer critical snapshots of the political and intellectual culture that thrived under the Buyids in Baghdad in the late tenth and early eleventh century. As I have already discussed, historians have described this period as a time of political fragmentation since it was the first time that a non-Arab dynasty had taken control of the majority of Muslim lands. But this political fragmentation produced conditions for tremendous intellectual fermentation that transcended boundaries of religious, ethnic, and linguistic difference, which also had the effect of dislodging the Arab-centrism that had characterized earlier discourses on political authority.

In al-Radi’s writings it is possible to discern a critical response to this changing political climate. Not only did he express discontent with the ‘Abbasids’ claim to spiritual rule over the ‘Alids, he also mourned the impact of the diminishing influence of Arabic letters in scholarly circles. In particular he made explicit his lament of the infiltration of an uncultured class in an otherwise pure and noble tradition of classical Arabic poetry. Disgruntled by the increasing influence of scholars unfamiliar with the nuances of the Arabic language preserved in the rich

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<sup>99</sup> The writings of al-Radi’s teacher Shaykh al-Mufid and his brother al-Sharif al-Murtada are central to this body of literature. As for al-Radi, his name is remembered not so much for his writings on the Qur’an or the Imams but mostly for his contribution as the compiler of the *Nahj ul-Balagha*.

<sup>100</sup> It is noteworthy that al-Radi’s claim to the caliphate, as well as his refusal to deride the first three caliphs led some biographers to identify him as a “Zaydi.” See Al-Mirza Muhammad Baqir al-Musawi Khwansari, *Rawdat al-jannat fi ahwal al-‘ulama’ wa-al-sadat*, (Tehran: Maktabat Isma‘iliyan, 1970); Ibn ‘Inaba mentions this move on the part of some biographers, without making clear his own position, see *‘Umdat al-Talib*, 172.

oral tradition of poetry, al-Radi produced writings that can be interpreted as a plea for the return of political and religious power to the ‘Alids - a people pure in both lineage and language.

### **Theories on Poetry, Language, Knowledge**

In trying to explore the questions that al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary may have been a response to, or the specific question and answer space it was part of, I have noted al-Radi’s overall discontentment with the marginalization of lineal and linguistic purity. I pointed to his lament against the conditions of his time where political power lay with a family that was not of a pure and sacred lineage like his own. Additionally, he expressed his opposition to the social mobility granted to poets who didn’t uphold the strictures of a pure Arabic language. At this juncture, I want to stress the important place these issues had in the formation of al-Radi’s “hermeneutical identity.” This is to say that al-Radi’s standing as a renowned poet of ‘Alid lineage played a determining role in how he conceived of the interpretive enterprise. In the rest of this chapter, I explain why this is the most instructive vantage point from which to understand al-Radi’s position on interpreting the Qur’an.

Part of al-Radi’s resistance to Buyid decentralization of power was his affiliation to the literary circle of poets and the authority they wielded as custodians of the Arabic language, particularly in terms of the threat they faced in light of competing disciplines of knowledge in tenth century Baghdad. I suggest that his experience as a renowned poet in Baghdad’s literary circles most powerfully outweighs, in some respects, his theological and sectarian leanings. Some important developments deserve consideration for understanding the background to the poetic culture in tenth century Baghdad, namely, the critical shift of poetry from a source of knowledge to a source of language, and the professionalization of the poetic enterprise.

First, it is important to note the shifting function of ancient Arabic poetry as it went from a foundational source of all knowledge to a repository for knowledge of the Arabic language. This transformation reflected the attempt by scholars to reconcile Qur'anic verses in which the Prophet Muhammad was clearly distinguished from the "poets." In his study of Arabic poetics in early Islam, Vicente Cantarino has pointed out that by establishing Arabic poetry as a grammatical and linguistic canon, scholars who responded to the Qur'anic denunciation of poetry worked hard to assert poetry's "falsity" as compared to the Qur'an's "veracity." The intention here was to separate the two forms of writing by such dramatic strokes so as to have the effect of protecting the poetic tradition from being completely superseded by the Qur'an. As long as the two were never held to be similar or comparable by the critical measure of "truth," the poetic tradition could be kept alive and appreciated as a source of grammatical reference.<sup>101</sup> What is crucial to note here is that arguing the grammatical authority of Arabic poetry was intricately connected to its preservation as a literary tradition. This is because it enabled the poetic tradition to function as an authoritative repository of grammatical rules, or proof texts that could be employed in order to illustrate unusual applications of the language.<sup>102</sup>

The second important development in the social function and standing of Arabic poetry was its increasing professionalization and the competitive environment this produced. Abd al-Wahhab al-Maliki (d.1031CE), a struggling poet, who like many others came to Baghdad in search of an intellectual community and recognition for his talents, is reported to have composed the following verses about his experience:

Baghdad is a delightful residence for those who have money,

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<sup>101</sup>Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age: Selection of Texts Accompanied by a Preliminary Study*, (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 27-39.

<sup>102</sup> I illustrate this application of the poetic tradition in al-Radi's Qur'an commentary in the following chapters.

but for the poor it is an abode of misery and suffering.  
I walked all day through its streets bewildered and desolate;  
I was treated with neglect like a Qur'an in the house of an atheist.<sup>103</sup>

A similar resentment is recorded in the writings of other struggling scholars such as the famous Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d.1023CE) and al-Ma'arri (d. 1058CE), all of whom lamented their destitute poverty and the lack of recognition they received for their skills. Although al-Radi is noted not to have been among those that took money for his verses, it is clear that at times, his writings performed a similar task of gaining proximity and favor from the rulers. But the struggles of al-Maliki, al-Ma'arri and others reflect a second important development during the tenth/eleventh centuries: the increasing professionalization of the poetic art.

As mentioned earlier, at this time, multiple dynasties in different parts of the Muslim lands had emerged. These included the Fatimids in the East, Buyids in Iraq and western Iran, Hamdanids in Syria, and the Ghaznavids and Samanids in eastern Iran and parts of Central Asia. One medium through which each of these dynasties competed for power was through their patronage of the arts and literary culture. Thus if a talented personality in one region faced hardships under a particular regime, it was possible for them to seek high positions in the court of a different ruler. As a result, the networks of patronage multiplied, as did the number of poets they were able to support. In addition, the excellence and mastery of each court poets, biographers, historians etc. also reflected the excellence and stature of the dynasty. Political strength and cultural vitality went hand in hand. Moreover, the kind of poetry through which a poet was best able to communicate his expertise to his royal patrons was through praise poetry that employed innovative techniques for glorifying the caliphs, sultans, and their viziers. These developments consequently enabled a professionalization of poetry that had not previously

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<sup>103</sup> Ibn Khalikan, *Wafayat al-A'yan*, tr. De Slane, vol. ii, (Paris: 1848-1871) 167, cited in 'Abu 'Ali, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, 44.

existed. Poetry became a commodity that attracted a host of claimants motivated by the desire to attain power and a place in the courts.<sup>104</sup>

What is crucial to note in this development is the way it threatened the intimate connection between noble lineage, purity of language, and the mastery of Arabic poetry, which formed the foundation of the older poetic tradition. Al-Radi represented a voice of an early class of poets with ties to a noble lineage from both his parents, and he was openly critical of the increasing professionalization of the poetic enterprise. His views are captured in the following verses:

Buy stature with what you want, but real stature is not for sale,  
With some gold if you like, or with long nights of discourse,

Lacking in intelligence is the deceived, who tries to purchase stature with wealth,  
For the price of high station, wealth is a despicable thing<sup>105</sup>

Al-Radi was a vocal critic of the side effects of the democratization of knowledge and increasing social mobility made possible under the various political dynasties scattered across the Muslim lands. Most notably, he argued against the commodification of poetry at the hands of the rulers, although he too was forced to comply with their demands through the writing of numerous elegies that lavished praise on the ‘Abbasid caliphs, Buyid sultans, and their viziers.

It is also important to consider that although the Buyids were strong supporters of the arts and literature, they themselves were of Persian descent and the early generations of leaders are said to have used interpreters in their communications.<sup>106</sup> Thus these changed circumstances played a critical role in how poets like al-Radi imagined their own role as the new custodians of Arabic language which was regarded as the key for interpreting the Qur’an. In the next chapter, I

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<sup>104</sup> Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary criticism in medieval Arabic-Islamic culture: The making of a tradition*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 58.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Ta’rikh Baghdad*, vol. ii, (Cairo: 1931), 246-7.

<sup>106</sup> Cahen, “Buwayhids or Buyids.”

show how al-Radi's literary approach to the Qur'an, which seeks to interrogate and resolve Qur'anic ambiguity, is tied to a theology of language that locates interpretive power in the hands of the exegete. The fact that al-Radi's hermeneutic made no attempt to reconcile the absence of the Imams and his own authority as an interpreter of the Qur'an indicates that he did not view this situation as contradictory.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began by presenting the changed sociopolitical and cultural conditions under the Buyids. I pointed out the way in which political fragmentation had the corollary effect of creating multiple patronage networks, which led to intensified cultural and intellectual productivity during this period in history. I also demonstrated the conceptual limitations of drawing neat correlations between the central visibility of al-Radi's thought in the Buyid public sphere and general characterizations of the Buyid rulers as enablers of free intellectual discourse and debate. I noted that the problem with such a narrative is that it assumes an unchanging entity called "Shi'ism," which subject to external conditions, can be readily concealed and revealed. Instead, I argued for an altogether different approach to thinking about the operations of religious identity, as an embodied argument that responds to the specific historical conditions in which it is constituted. I proposed that the task of identifying al-Radi's hermeneutical identity must situate his work in the multiple intellectual discourses in which he participated and identify the concerns and questions that animated these traditions.

Accordingly, I suggested that al-Radi's position as a poet is the most instructive vantage point from which to understand the hermeneutical choices he made. With this proposal, my goal is not to simply assume that his interest in a literary approach to the Qur'an is a reflection of his literary profession. Rather, it is to argue that the role of the poets in tenth century Baghdad under

the Buyids reflects an emergent group of voices who sought to preserve the purity of the Arabic language. Al-Radi in particular tied his own authority as an exegete to the “purity” of his lineage that traced back to the Prophet. To reiterate: This is not to say that al-Radi’s position as a Shi‘i scholar played no part in his hermeneutical choices. However, what I have sought to argue is that al-Radi’s Shi‘i identity cannot be abstracted from the multiple intellectual traditions that thrived and came into view in tenth century Buyid Baghdad. Most importantly, debates surrounding the authority of language over logic represented a critical backdrop to al-Radi’s exegetical project. His hermeneutical identity did not neatly correspond to his sectarian identity as a Shi‘i scholar and nor was his sectarian identity the overarching driver of his hermeneutics. In the next chapter, I continue to develop this underlying argument through a close reading of al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary to explore ways in which he imagined the interaction of language, revelation and interpretive authority.

## CHAPTER 3: POLITICS OF A LITERARY APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN IN TENTH CENTURY BAGHDAD

*“A grammatical mistake in speech is uglier than smallpox in the face.”*

Ibn Qutayba (d.885CE)

### **Language, Law, and Revelation**

The previous chapter provided an overview of the flourishing intellectual climate of tenth century Baghdad and positioned al-Radi as a vibrant player and stakeholder in the debates that ensued over the authority of language over logic. This chapter will take a closer look at some of the issues at stake in the debate between language and logic as the foundational source of knowledge. Rather than understand the dispute abstractly as a battle between reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*naql*), I argue that we must examine more carefully some of the internal contestations that persisted among the groups that participated in this discourse. In addition to deepening our understanding of the contours of the reason/revelation debate, examining al-Radi’s role as a participant, expands the analysis of these critical discussions beyond the narrow purview of their significance in Sunni Islam. To limit the significance of these debates to the impact they had in exclusively Sunni circles effectively isolates the tussle between language and logic (as sources of religious authority) from the wider social and political stakes that they brought to the fore, and de-historicizes them from the very milieu that accorded them their significance.

Along these lines, it is important to interrogate the multiple participants involved in the reason/revelation debate, and to ask in what way they assembled their arguments. Did sectarian

identities play a determining role in the differences that emerged? I emphasize the relevance and need for exploring these questions as a way of shifting away from a paradigm that is attentive to sectarian identity only when it is made evident through discord and difference. The current paradigm in Euro-American studies on Shi‘ism for example, has been to focus on individuals, doctrines, and historical moments that somehow mark the splitting off of the Shi‘i community from the larger Sunni majority. Included in this trend are the many articles by Etan Kohlberg,<sup>107</sup> whose studies Robert Gleave (in his overview of current research on Shi‘ism) describes as “of such importance that they take on almost canonical status in the study of the history of early Imamism.”<sup>108</sup> Another useful illustration of this phenomenon is a recent anthology, titled *Shi‘ism*, put together by Paul Luft and Colin Turner.<sup>109</sup> Divided into four volumes, the subject headings are: I-Origin and Evolution; II-Theology and Philosophy; III-Law, Rite and Ritual; IV-Shi‘ism, State and Politics. The impression a collection such as this leaves us with is that within Shi‘ism there are alternate perspectives on each of these aspects that deserve separate study. Not surprisingly, the articles include surveys of Shi‘i views on the Qur’an, on *jihad*, on *taqiyya* (dissimulation), the Mahdi (messianic emphasis), Muharram rituals, revolutionary ideology, heterodox splinter groups, etc. It becomes increasingly clear that the very selection of material that is considered relevant, and the focus on specific doctrines, point to a conceptual understanding of Shi‘ism as a reified identity and heterodox “other” that can neatly be separated from an “orthodox” Sunni Islam.

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<sup>107</sup> Etan Kohlberg, “From Imamiyya to Ithna-‘ashariyya,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 39, no. 3 (1976): 521-534; Idem, “Some Notes on the Imamite Attitude to the Qur’an,” *Oriental Studies*, (1972), 209-224.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Gleave, “Recent Research into the History of Early Shi‘ism,” *History Compass* 7 (2009): 1600, doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2009.00625 (accessed June 15, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Paul Luft and Colin Turner, ed., *Shi‘ism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, Volume I-IV, (London: Routledge, 2008).

Moving away from this approach of examining Shi‘ism solely through the looming shadow of its Sunni “other” allows for a shift in focus, onto a spectrum of ideas, discourses, personalities and events that count as equally significant in the study of religious trends in early Islam. Critical to this shift is the recognition that religious identities and affiliations such as that of Shi‘i and Sunni are not unchanging and predictable such that a firm grasp of their “origin” or “splitting off” from an “other” suffices for an understanding of how they operate. It is thus with the premise that religious identities cannot be isolated from the larger socio-political and intellectual networks of which they are an integral part that our study must begin.

I begin the process of situating debates such as the reason/revelation debate in their wider discursive contexts by exploring what the politics of al-Radi’s literary approach to interpreting the Qur’an might be. In adopting a literary approach, al-Radi’s work privileges language as the primary hermeneutical key to determining the meaning of the Qur’an. I ask how al-Radi interpreted “language,” and inquire which literary canon authorized his interpretation. In addition, I explore how, if at all, competing religious sects and legal schools approached the tradition of language and in what way, if any, their position on these questions lent further credence to their doctrinal positions.

In interrogating al-Radi’s role in the reason/revelation debate, I select discussions from his *Haqai’q*, and present an overview of his language philosophy – that is, his position on its temporal and/or transcendental qualities, his view of the relationship of language to time and alterity and its epistemological function in early Muslim society. Remaining attentive to the sociopolitical environment of which al-Radi was a part, I situate the elements of al-Radi’s language philosophy within the highly politicized climate of debate on sources of intellectual

authority taking place in Baghdad at the time.<sup>110</sup>

I have chosen three illustrative examples of ambiguous Qur'anic verses that constitute three separate chapters in the *Haqa'iq*. The rationale for selecting these verses over others is twofold. First, of the many “types” of ambiguity that al-Radi invokes (see Figure 1.1 in chapter one), these verses represent three of the most common kind: grammatical, logical, and ethical/moral. Second, al-Radi's discussion of these ambiguous verses provides helpful glimpses of his overarching language philosophy.

My study of al-Radi's discussion on individual Qur'anic verses will include different levels of analysis. At the most elementary level, I will provide the specific interpretive problem that the verse in question posed. Second, I will summarize the views of other exegetes, as enumerated by al-Radi, in order to provide a general overview of the issue at stake for exegetes of the period. Third, I will outline al-Radi's argument on the existing debate, and identify the hermeneutical tendencies and principles that characterize his particular combination of interpretive rules and invocations of authority. This will provide a picture of how al-Radi imagined the task of interpretation, and how much control over meaning he allocates to authors, texts, and interpreters. Fourth, and most importantly, I will reconstruct his assumptions about language, epistemology, divine speech, human agency, divine sovereignty, and the role of exegetes in the absence of the Imams.

### **The First Ambiguity: Linguistic Eloquence**

The first ambiguity which al-Radi highlights is tied to the Qur'an's grammatical and linguistic eloquence. Micheal Carter has convincingly argued that “linguistic ability” in

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<sup>110</sup> For example, the famous debate outlined in the previous chapter, between the grammarian al-Sirafi (d.932CE) and the philosopher Matta b. Yunus (d.940CE). For further discussion, see Muhsin Mahdi, “Language and Logic in Classical Islam” in Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference and Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1970).

Baghdad's intellectual milieu in the tenth century had become synonymous with social power and given rise to a scholarly elite that aggressively defended a full-fledged grammatical orthodoxy.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, he makes the arresting observation that oftentimes a desire for professional infallibility was the real motive behind these disciplinary differences, such that the crux of the issue was ideological not theoretical. Under these conditions, the knowledge of grammar became a handy tool with which to discredit your opponent without engaging their ideas. Thus Carter suggests that critiques of poor linguistic ability were often convenient tactics by which to sidestep and eliminate an opponent's ideas. In this context, it should be noted that the *Haqa'iq* also conforms to a "disputational style"<sup>112</sup> of writing, and it is in the sections where al-Radi seeks to defend a grammatical point that he adopts a distinctly belligerent tone. Carter's observations suggest that what are today read as arguments over hair splittingly tedious details, in fact carried immense critical purchase during al-Radi's time. Taking Carter's insights into consideration, I argue that limiting our understanding of differences about linguistic detail to external expressions of deeper, ideological motives risks concluding that these exchanges did not yield any other critical force. Furthermore, a quest for the "underlying motivations" of early Muslim arguments over language might presume that not only professional infallibility but a predetermined identity politics governed the start and end point of these exchanges.

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<sup>111</sup> Michael Carter, "Language Control as People Control in Medieval Islam: The Aims of the Grammarians in Their Cultural Context," *al-Abhath* 31, (Beirut: 1983), 65-84.

<sup>112</sup> Structurally, al-Radi's work partially fits into a scheme termed the *Masa'il wa ajwiba* (question and answer) style common to theological argumentation. As pointed out by Gabriel Reynolds in his work on 'Abd al-Jabbar, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbar and the Critique of Christian Origins*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 26, this method of presenting one's argument developed as a tool through which to demonstrate one's position (not derive it). More tactics employed to achieve this goal entailed the positing of questions by hypothetical opponents, and then driving those same hypothetical interlocutors to the inane logical end of their positions. Al-Radi's entire discussion does not follow this scheme, but only the beginning of each chapter where he posits a hypothetical interlocutor's question. In general the question and answer style reflects how recently scholars had moved away from a traditionally oral setting in which these arguments and debates had previously taken place. See Johannes Pedersen, *The Arabic book*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), in which he discusses the setting of mosques as literary circles.

While acknowledging the value of Carter's insights, I want to move away from a singular line of reasoning that regards linguistic debates as ideological battles. Instead, I argue that it is crucial to consider the constitutive and productively conditioning features of these exchanges by shifting our attention from the ideological "motivations" of the actors to the conditions of possibility or what can be termed the "discursive terrain" that makes these debates thinkable and possible in the first place. Accordingly, the *Haqa'iq* can be understood as "a piece of living action or an ideological maneuver that takes up a position and puts forward a move in a particular historical-discursive context of argument."<sup>113</sup> With this shift in focus, it is possible to explore how al-Radi's theories on reading the ambiguous verses, according to the linguistic interpretations that he proposes, carried significant discursive and social power.

An example that well illustrates the constitutive power of debates over philological details occurs in chapter twelve of the *Haqa'iq* where al-Radi discusses verse 3:61, commonly referred to as the "*mubahala*" (mutual invocation of a curse) verse.<sup>114</sup> The verse reads:

If anyone disputes this with you [Prophet] now that you have been given this knowledge, say, 'Come, let us gather our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves (*anfusana*) and yourselves, and let us pray earnestly and invoke God's rejection on those of us who are lying.'<sup>115</sup>

Historically, the verse refers to an incident that took place in 632CE, where the Prophet participated in what may be called an "embodied argument" in its very literal sense. Two parties, namely the Prophet and his companions, and the Christians of Najran had disagreed over the nature of Jesus Christ (whether he is man or god). As a way of "resolving" their disagreement,

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<sup>113</sup> The conceptual apparatus of this approach is drawn from Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 53.

<sup>114</sup> W. Schmucker, s.v. "Mubahala" *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Brill Online, 2013), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mubahala-SIM\\_5289](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mubahala-SIM_5289) (accessed April 5, 2013).

<sup>115</sup> Qur'an 3:61, Translation M. A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: English translation and parallel Arabic text*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the physical presence of each group at an agreed meeting place symbolized the offering up of their bodies for the proof of their claim. It was understood that God's wrath on the lying party would finalize the disagreement through a vivid display of separating the right from the wrong. In an event of this kind the companions that accompanied the leader of each party functioned as guarantors of the leader's claim. The Prophet took with him (according to al-Radi) his daughter Fatima, his son in law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and their sons Hasan and Husayn, and together they waited for the rival delegation to arrive. The Najrani group never arrived, and their failure to take on the challenge was interpreted by exegetes and historians as a victory for the message of the Prophet.

#### Recent Literature on the *Mubahala*: Two Main Approaches

Before turning to al-Radi's discussion of this verse, it is important to first examine some of the recent literature surrounding this unusual incident. There are two main topics through which the *mubahala* verse has been treated in recent studies. First, the *mubahala* event has piqued the interest of several scholars of mysticism for the way in which it vividly illustrates the themes of "divine designation" and "substitute-sacrifice."<sup>116</sup> The view of the *mubahala* as a *shared* mission between the Prophet as leader and his family as the guarantors of his mission gave rise to the concept of a *substitution* between the two groups. Herbert Mason, in his biography on the mystic Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj points to the significance of the theme of "substitution" in the *mubahala* event:

...they [the 'Alids] were his [Muhammad's] private heirs according to the unwritten Arab law, but also, and especially, that they were established publicly as his juridical "substitutes," acting in this capacity vis-a-vis his clients as his debts of blood. This substitution dates, as the whole of Shi'ism affirms and the Qur'an and historical data agree, from a public test of an ordeal, the *mubahala* of 21 Hijja 10/March 22, 632. On this particular day, in Medina, Muhammad had

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<sup>116</sup> Louis Massignon, *La Mubahala de Medine*, (Paris: Libr. orientale et américaine, 1955); Idem, *La Mubâhala de Médine et l'Hyperdulie de Fatima*, (Paris: Librairie orientale et américaine, 1955).

challenged the Christian Banu ‘Abd al-Madan emissaries of the Balharith of Najran to a “judgment of God” (seized with fear, the Christians declined it the next day, signing a *musalaha*, “capitulation,” the first between Christianity and Islam). For this “judgment of God,” Muhammad had placed as hostages of his sincerity (about the negation of the Incarnation) and of his faith (in his own mission), “his own people,” the “five whom he covered with his mantle” (*ashab al-kisa’*): his two grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law ‘Ali, [and himself]. Henceforward this solemn judiciary substitution was to transfer to each of them the expectation of justice and the devoted service that the true friends of Muhammad had pledged to him; and it also transferred equally all vendetta, all of the hatred that the Umayyads, of the Quraysh, nurtured against the founder of Islam for their pagan dead killed in cold blood after Badr (in A.D. 624).<sup>117</sup>

This theme of substitution and specifically substitute-sacrifice also emerges as a trope in Sufi discourses. For example, Louis Massignon, whose biographical reconstruction of al-Hallaj has dominated how he is now remembered, notes a provocative exchange between al-Hallaj and the vizier who condemned him.

Al-Hallaj: I will die attached to the Cross!

Vizier: Do you think you are taking up the *mubahala* of the Christians of Najran?

Through this conversation, Massignon gestures towards the Christ-like character of al-Hallaj, and how through his martyrdom, he became a substitute (*badal*) for the Christians of Najran who had not dared to confront the trial themselves.<sup>118</sup>

The second approach most frequently found for studying the *mubahala* verse is in the domain of traditional Shi‘i scholarship, where authors seek to support the argument that ‘Ali is the rightful successor to the Prophet and the Household of the Prophet are the authoritative

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<sup>117</sup> Louis Massignon, Trans. Herbert Mason, *The passion of al-Hallaj: mystic and martyr of Islam*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 154.

<sup>118</sup> John Victor Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 296.

interpreters of the tradition.<sup>119</sup> According to this view, the family members who accompanied the Prophet acted as guarantors of his claim and they too were infused with authority and conferred with a “divine right” like that of the Prophet. The *mubahala* is thus celebrated as a public demonstration of this investiture of authority. What is interesting is how this investiture is understood as visually communicated such that the Prophet’s companions offer their bodies as sites for the public confirmation of his claim. In doing this, their own right to share in the authority of the Prophet is assured. The *mubahala* event has been remembered in the Shi‘i tradition alongside two other pivotal moments. The first of these is the *Hadith al-Kisa’* (report of the cloak) which narrates how the Prophet gathered the same five family members under his cloak, immediately after which the Qur’anic verse 33:33 is said to have been revealed: “God wishes only to remove taint from you, people of the Household, and to make you utterly pure.” The *Hadith Kisa’* is accordingly invoked as proof of the purity and infallibility of the Family of the Prophet. The second crucial incident to which the *mubahala* is connected is the occasion known as *Ghadir Qumm* (Pool of Qumm), which is the location where the Prophet publicly proclaimed ‘Ali as *mawla* (master) of the Muslim community. By interpreting “*mawla*” as “successor,” traditional Shi‘i scholars have argued that this incident is evidence of ‘Ali’s succession to the Prophet. Together, these three events, namely, the *mubahala*, *hadith kisa’*, and *ghadir qumm*, form a powerful cluster of publicly witnessed events where members of the Family of the Prophet were not only distinguished by the Prophet but physically made to *share* in his mission.

#### Al-Radi on the *mubahala*

It is important to note that al-Radi’s interpretation of this verse does not hinge on an

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<sup>119</sup> Ali Ma‘muri, “Bar Rasi-i Ta’rikhi-i Ayah-i Mubahala wa Baz Tabha-yi Kalami-i An,” *Fasalnamah-i Shi‘ah Shanasi* 5, no 19 (1964): 85-100; Qawam al-Din Muhammad Washnawi, *Ahl Bayt wa Ayah-i Mubahala*, (Tehran: Dar al-Nashir); Muhammad Rada Ansari, *Asrar-i Mubahala*, (Tehran: Dalil-i Ma, 1963).

effort to demonstrate the Family of the Prophet’s participation in a divine right. While this point is certainly alluded to by al-Radi through a vivid report by the eighth Shi‘i Imam ‘Ali al-Rida (d.818CE) (see below), it is placed in al-Radi’s discussion as one amongst other complementary facets concerning this verse. Instead, al-Radi’s discussion of the verse is centered on the seeming incoherence of the grammatical structure of the sentence. How, asks al-Radi’s questioner, can God’s injunction (Say!) (*qul!*) direct the Prophet to state, “let us invite our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves (*anfusana*) and yourselves?” In other words, how can anyone *invite* him or herself? In order to tackle the puzzle of *who* the term *selves* (*anfus*) is referring to, al-Radi begins by giving his readers a visual depiction of all the people present, including details of their physical arrangement in relation to the Prophet. Standing before the Prophet (*bayna yadayhi*) was the Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali, behind the Prophet was Fatima, to his right was Hasan, and to his left was Husayn. He then proceeds to decipher the Prophetic invitation of the term “ourselves” through a careful process of elimination. “Our sons” refers to (*masrufan ila*) Hasan and Husayn, “our women” refers to Fatima, which leaves the term “ourselves”, and its reference to either ‘Ali or the Prophet. Al-Radi concludes that the term “ourselves” must refer to ‘Ali since there was no one else present in the congregation to whom this could apply and it was not grammatically correct for the Prophet to have invited himself.<sup>120</sup>

Al-Radi then turns to a sustained defense of the linguistic rule that categorically negates the possibility of the term *anfus* being used in reference to the Prophet. The rule is that an individual cannot invite, command or forbid him or herself. Quite remarkable in this discussion

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<sup>120</sup> Similar logic was used in the famous debate between al-Sirafi and Matta, where al-Sirafi asked Matta to distinguish between the two phrases: “Zayd is the best of the brothers” and “Zayd is the best of his brothers.” The argument he gave for the correctness of the first construction “the brothers” was that the term “his brothers” could not include Zayd himself. Similarly, in this verse, al-Radi marshals his knowledge of Arabic grammar (acquired under the tutelage of none other than al-Sirafi amongst others) in order to defend the view that the command giver cannot be included in the act of fulfilling the command. See Mahdi “Language and Logic in Classical Islam”.)

is the way in which al-Radi, in an effort to offer proof texts (*shawahid*) for this normative ruling, goes as far as to reduce a historical moment from the Prophet's life to the performative illustration of a linguistic rule! Specifically, he refers to a narration by al-Waqidi (d.823CE) in his book on the battles and expeditions of the Prophet (*maghazi*). When the Prophet left Badr<sup>121</sup> in 624CE, with him were the prisoners from the hypocrites including Suhayl ibn 'Amr, who was tied to the camel of the Prophet. When they reached Medina, Suhayl managed to free himself and fled. At this point, the Prophet said to his companions that whoever finds Suhayl ibn 'Amr should kill him. As it turns out, the Prophet found Suhayl hiding under the cover of a tree branch, and he brought him back (instead of killing him). Here, al-Radi's narration of al-Waqidi ends, and he puts forward his own view on this incident. He explains that since the Prophet himself had issued the order, he was not obliged to abide by it himself, whereas if someone else had found Suhayl they would be obligated to kill him.

So what may have been interpreted by al-Radi as an exemplary moment of Prophetic kindness and forgiveness is put forward as a clear proof of how the Prophet's life can also be read as a manual for grammatical rulings. This indicates that for al-Radi, the Prophet's lived tradition was no different from his verbal statements. If a Prophetic saying or another Qur'anic verse could be offered as the proof text of a linguistic rule, so could a Prophetic *action*. Of course, al-Radi's emphasis on the linguistic and grammatical harmony of the Prophet's life does not preclude the possibility that it carried other ethical-moral meanings. Yet the purpose of the *Haqa'iq* was to creatively forge a correspondence between the revelatory sources (Qur'an and Prophetic *hadith*) and a preexisting literary canon, and this is what al-Radi successfully achieved.

It is also interesting to note that to bolster his interpretation of the *mubahala* verse by

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<sup>121</sup> Badr is a small town southwest of Medina, known as the location of the first battle of the Muslim community (named the battle of Badr) in which the followers of Muhammad successfully defeated the Meccans.

allusion to a grammatical rule, al-Radi cites an exchange involving the eighth Shi‘i Imam, ‘Ali al-Rida, and the caliph al-Ma’mun (d.833CE), in which the Imam presents the same interpretation of the *mubahala* verse. Al-Radi introduces the Imam’s report as a conversation recounted by Qasim ibn Sahl al-Nushjani between himself and the caliph al-Ma’mun in Marv, where the Imam ‘Ali al-Rida was also present. The ‘Abbasid caliph asks al-Nushjani which of the stories praising the companions (*fada’il*) is the best? Al-Nushjani replies, “the *mubahala* verse since in it God fuses the self of the Prophet with the self of ‘Ali.” Al-Ma’mun, apparently familiar with an existing variance in the interpretations of this verse, persists by asking al-Nushjani what his response would be if his opponent were to argue that people understand *al-anfus* to mean the Prophet himself. Al-Nushjani confesses that the question stumps him, so al-Ma’mun turns to ‘Ali al-Rida and asks his opinion. Al-Rida explains, “in this [question] is a thing which cannot be omitted.”<sup>122</sup> Al-Ma’mun inquires what that is, to which al-Rida provides the following explanation: “the Prophet extended the invitation, and the one who invites cannot include himself in the invitation, he can only invite others. The Prophet invited the sons and women, but it was not correct for him to invite himself. The only plausible reference for his invitation to selves is ‘Ali ibn ‘Abi Talib since there was no one else present to whom this invitation could refer to. If it were not this way then the verse would not make sense.” Al-Nushjani proclaims: “it became clear to me!” Al-Ma’mun paused, then satisfactorily expressed: “O Abu al-Hasan, when the target is hit, no answers are left!”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 112.

<sup>123</sup> A similar report is cited in the work of al-Mufid, al-Radi’s teacher of Shi‘i theology, with some differences. First, al-Nushjani is omitted from the exchange, and the conversation occurs directly between Imam al-Rida and al-Ma’mun. Second, al-Ma’mun asks al-Rida to cite for him the best praise of ‘Ali that is found *in the Qur’an*. Third, al-Ma’mun is said to have challenged al-Rida’s position by presenting the argument that the term “sons” is plural even as it refers to Hasan and Husayn, and the term “daughters” is in the plural even as it refers to Fatima alone, so it is possible that the term “ourselves” refers to the Prophet. To this challenge al-Rida is quoted to have provided the rule that one who invites is like the one who commands, where both cannot be the subject of their

The Imam's explanation establishes the unity of the self of 'Ali and the self of the Prophet through a logical process of elimination. Al-Radi further deepens this argument by mobilizing examples from the literary canon. Drawing on the speech of Arabs, Qur'anic verses, and poetry, al-Radi sought to argue that justifications for a substitution of "selves" were intimacy (*qaraba*) and a shared religiosity (*al-ijtima' fi 'aqd al-diyana*). This argument clearly carried significant weight, since it implicitly made the case for 'Ali's substitution with the Prophet in the *mubahala* verse on the basis of a shared religiosity. For other examples of this rule, al-Radi first turns to the Arabic usage of the term "*nafs*" in the meaning of an intimate friend, and how a close relative can be called the "self" of the person with whom s/he shares that relation. The same rule is further demonstrated in the Qur'anic verse 49:11: "...nor defame nor be sarcastic to yourselves (*anfusakum*), nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames." Al-Radi explains that the verse intends to state that believing Muslims should not slander their believing brothers. Critically, al-Radi argues that their brotherhood in *religiosity* (*al-ukhuwwa bi al-diyana*) becomes the basis for their brotherhood in intimacy (*al-ukhuwwa fi al-qaraba*).

Al-Radi also brings in a verse by pre-Islamic poet Dhu l-'Isba' Hurthan al-'Adwani<sup>124</sup>: "as if on the Day of Qurra...we were killing ourselves (*iyana*)" Al-Radi explains that the poet intended a substitution between the selves (*nufus*) of a person's kin with his own self (*nafs*) on the basis of their marital connections (*shawabik al-'isam*), paternal relations (lit., relations of the flesh, (*nawa'it al-luham*)), and maternal relations (lit. relations of the womb, (*atit al-raham*)).

Finally al-Radi refers to the Qur'anic verse 24:61, which states: "when you enter any

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own invitation/command. Finally al-Ma'mun's expression of satisfaction at al-Rida's reasoning is also slightly modified, where he is quoted to have exclaimed: "When the answer is reached, the question falls away!" See Muhammad ibn Muhammad Mufid, *al-Fusul al-mukhtarah min al-'Uyun wa al-mahasin*, (al-Najaf al-Ashraf: Mansurat al-Matba'ah al-Haydariyah wa Maktabatiha, 1962), 16.

<sup>124</sup> Poet and warrior from the late sixth century of the common era, who mourned the past glories of his tribe al-'Adwan.

house, greet yourselves (*anfusakum*) with a greeting of blessing and goodness as enjoined by God.” Al-Radi employs this use of *anfusakum* to explain that the intended meaning is “for some of you to greet others since it is not possible for a person to greet him or herself. The use of the term yourselves then is fitting since the selves of all believers coalesces into a single self due to the bond of a shared religiosity and the common language of the Shari‘a (*nufus al-mu‘minin tajri majra al-nafs al-wahida, lil ijtima‘ fi ‘aqd al-diyana wa l-khitab bi l-lisan al-shari‘a*). So when one of them greets his brother, it is as if he has greeted himself, because of the removal of difference and the mixing of their selves.”<sup>125</sup>

Despite the framing of this question in linguistic terms, it is clear that the discussion has significant theological and mystical implications. Yet it is the subtlety with which these themes are woven into al-Radi’s commentary that demands further examination from us as readers. Was al-Radi trying to make a doctrinal assertion about the deeply mystical connection between ‘Ali and the Prophet? Although it may be tempting to attribute to al-Radi, a leading figure for the ‘Alid community of the time, the quality of masterfully defending foundational Shi‘i tenets in his commentary, other parts of al-Radi’s discussion not only in the same text, but in the same chapter make this assertion more difficult to support.

#### Legal implications of the *Mubahala*

Another notable component of the *Haqa’iq* text that the *mubahala* chapter illustrates is that while the text is structured in a simple question and answer format, an equally rich discussion is woven in through al-Radi’s numerous “digressions” which veer him onto varied paths well outside the strictures of the questions his interlocutor poses. In this chapter, al-Radi turns to two corollary questions that arise from the *mubahala* verse which hold special

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<sup>125</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 114.

importance in the Shi‘i context. The first issue concerns the status of the Prophet’s *daughter’s* sons given that the Prophet had no son. Al-Radi uses the *mubahala* verse to argue in favor of extending the term “sons” to include the “sons of daughters” and in doing so, stakes a claim for the children of Fatima as legitimate references for the posterity of the Prophet. Although al-Radi does not mention the relevance of this issue in his commentary, it can be inferred that it had immediate relevance in justifying the legal stipulation of a stipend being paid to the children of the Hashimites.<sup>126</sup> In his discussion, al-Radi also acknowledges the view of Sunni scholars on this point. He presents the opinion of Hasan ibn Ziyad al-Lu’lu’yi, an important pupil and transmitter of the works of Abu Hanifa (d.767CE), eponymous founder of the Hanafi school of law. Ibn Ziyad agreed that the sons of a person’s daughters as well as the sons of a person’s sons were implied when a will spoke of inheritance to the “sons” of an individual. Al-Radi simply mentions, (without overtly rejecting any of these claims), that his teacher Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarazmi (d.993CE)<sup>127</sup> told him that this view of Ibn Ziyad differs from that of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan<sup>128</sup> who held that it only referred to the sons of a person’s son. It is questionable what al-Radi intended for his readers to gain from such casual references of scholarly opinions, where his objective was neither to offer a comprehensive summary of views, nor to present his own argument. However what is striking is al-Radi’s examination of sources that transcend differences between sects in an effort to interrogate the issue of the posterity of the Prophet, an extremely sensitive and delicate issue for Shi‘i theologians and jurists.

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<sup>126</sup> The editor points out that al-Radi’s brother al-Murtada, whose works include theological and legal treatises from the Imami perspective, used this rule to justify the levying of the *khums* tax. See al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 115.

<sup>127</sup> Al-Khwarazmi was an Imami Shi‘i scholar, and celebrated author of epistles in artistic prose as well as poetry.

<sup>128</sup> Most likely a reference to Abu Hanifa’s other pupil and transmitter, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ibn Farqad al-Shaybani (d.805CE).

Another corollary question raised through the *mubahala* verse was that of how Hasan and Husayn as minors could participate in an affair that involved mutual imprecation, “since children were not deserving of a curse even if they were the children of the hypocrites, because they could not commit sins that would make them deserving of such a thing.” It is interesting to note that even the editor seems to have been taken aback by al-Radi’s approach to posing and resolving these corollary questions.<sup>129</sup> In a footnote, he expresses his admiration for al-Radi’s neutrality when addressing these issues. He explains that generally, Imami exegetes use two arguments to answer the question of Hasan and Husayn’s young age. First, they posit that maturity was not a condition of the *mubahala*. Second, they assert that participation in the *mubahala* has to do with the perfection of the intellect and discernment, regardless of age. The age of Hasan and Husayn at that time, seven and five, did not prevent them from attaining the perfection of intellect. The editor further informs the reader that Imami scholars complete their response by adding that it is possible that God also made Hasan and Husayn extraordinary by elevating their intellect and distinguished them with this quality that others don’t possess to make clear the proof of their status. Thus he argues that it is remarkable that the author of this text [al-Radi] managed to maintain impartiality to any group, sect or creed in his interpretation. As the editor put it: “Indeed it is rare to find an exegete of the Qur’an who passes over this noble verse without being bold about his creed and digressing to his inner belief.”<sup>130</sup> These opinions of the editor are telling. The “age question” was a pressing issue in the context of Shi‘i theology. It is echoed in the context of the eligibility of the twelfth Imam as the leader of the Imami Shi‘i community, since he was of an extremely young age at the time of his father’s death and his subsequent

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<sup>129</sup> The editor of this work, Muhammad Rida al-Kashif al-Ghita, is a contemporary scholar from Iran. We do not know much about the editor but it seems clear that he was ideologically invested in how al-Radi’s memory was preserved and projected.

<sup>130</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 115-116.

succession.<sup>131</sup> The editor is aware of the theological implications of this verse and appreciative of al-Radi's ability to defend the challenges posed by opponents without falling back on apologetic arguments. Rather, al-Radi's interaction with a variety of teachers and scholars from multiple schools of thought is celebrated as evidence of a non-partisan defense of a crucial theological question.

Returning to al-Radi, the only "response" he offers to the interlocutor's question on the age of Hasan and Husayn is by citing the opinion of his Mu'tazili teacher 'Abd al-Jabbar. 'Abd al-Jabbar argued, "the rule of Divine punishments by elimination for falsifying the prophets was a universal rule that included children, even if recompense was in the form of a trial not a penalty. This could occur through the infliction of diseases, illnesses, bone injuries and types of death." Al-Radi makes no additional comments to this proclamation, and instead presents an opposing view, where the last sentence of the same Qur'anic verse 3:61 is put forward as evidence that children cannot be cursed: "let us invoke God's rejection on those of us who are lying." The hypothetical opponent uses transitive logic to make his point: "since the verse indicates that God's curse is for those who falsify, and those who falsify are those who tell lies about God and the Prophet, and children cannot be attributed with these qualities, it is clear that children cannot be deserving of a curse."<sup>132</sup>

Al-Radi does not respond to this objection, perhaps because he is satisfied with 'Abd al-Jabbar's response cited earlier. He moves on to his final point, which is also connected to the last clause of the Qur'anic verse 3:61: "let us invoke God's rejection on those of us who are lying." He explains that the verse is saying the following: "we ask and you all ask God (may He be

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<sup>131</sup> See Hossein Modarressi Tabataba'i, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam: Abu Ja'far Ibn Qiba Al-Razi and His Contribution to Imamite Shi'ite Thought*, (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1993).

<sup>132</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 116.

glorified) in our prayer and your prayer, to necessitate the curse on the liar amongst us and amongst you all.”<sup>133</sup> By rephrasing the verse this way, al-Radi emphasizes how the statement is in the form of a supplication to God, and argues that no one is entitled to give God’s curse to another person except God who is the Creator of His curse. Thus only God can launch a curse on the deserving party and attach it to the person that quite literally asks for it. With this logic, he concludes that it is permissible for the meaning to be: “let us invoke the *name* of God on the liars” since it is God who conducts the necessary action upon them of retribution, torment, banishment, and exile.

By raising the question of metaphors for the self, al-Radi’s discussion sets the stage for making important legal arguments in favor of the family of the Prophet, theological arguments in support of ‘Ali’s authority, and mystical arguments that draw from the notion of the “selves” of the Prophet and ‘Ali fusing into one. Yet, al-Radi’s focus on grammar as the lynchpin of his hermeneutical stance contrasted with other exegetical styles of his time in important ways.

Al-Radi’s discussion of this verse departs from the interpretations of other major exegetes of his time, such as al-Qummi (tenth century Shi‘i), al-Tusi (d.1067CE) and al-Tha‘alabi (1035CE), to name a few examples. Al-Qummi’s Qur’an commentary is associated with an *akhbari* approach, which relies solely on traditions of the Prophet and the Imams to explicate the verses. He narrates the *mubahala* event without much discussion. He simply states what transpired between the Prophet and the Christian delegation and mentions the names of those who accompanied the Prophet. Al-Tusi, who succeeded al-Radi and his brother al-Murtada as the leading Twelver Shi‘i scholar of the time, was also their student. In his exegesis titled *Tibyan*, he states that his contemporaries refer to this verse as evidence of ‘Ali being the most virtuous of the Companions for two reasons. The first is because the gathering was one where truth was to

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

be distinguished from falsehood, and who could be better suited for such a task than ‘Ali? The second is the fact that the Prophet likened ‘Ali to his own self here. He also mentions the debate over the question of Hasan and Husayn’s young age. In sum, although al-Tusi presented similar themes and conclusions as al-Radi, he showed no interest in the grammatical obscurity of the verse. A third comparison can be made with the commentary of a leading Sunni exegete of the time, al-Tha‘labi’s *al-Kashf al-Bayan*. Al-Tha‘labi’s discussion focuses on the dialogue between the Christians and the Prophet and makes a passing reference to the referent of “self,” acknowledging that “some say he intended themselves and others say (and this is doubtful) that he intended his wives.” He makes no mention of the specific individuals that accompanied the Prophet, nor the ambiguity in the grammatical construction. For al-Tha‘labi, the people who stood with the Prophet at the *mubahala* were mere performers in an incident that was important because of the victory it signified for the Prophet’s mission.

When al-Radi’s commentary is contrasted with the discussion of al-Qummi, al-Tusi, and al-Tha‘labi on this verse, what is striking is the way in which he uses literary arguments to uncover the meaning. This is a crucial point because by turning to literary arguments, al-Radi departs from previous traditions of Shi‘i Qur’an exegesis. Prior to al-Radi, Shi‘i exegetes had primarily relied on the authoritative tradition of sayings of the Prophet and his twelve appointed successors from his family. This meant that the intended meaning and application of any given verse was determined by identifying explicatory statements made by the Prophet or by his twelve appointed successors. Intervening in this ongoing tradition, al-Radi argued that in order to disentangle the literary and theological conundrums that populate the Qur’an, language was not *only* authoritative, but an indispensable tool.

The sources that al-Radi used to defend his position, namely, Qur'anic verses, Arabic speech and pre-Islamic poetry, all transcend sectarian, theological, and disciplinary lines precisely by relying on the overarching rules of *language*. The critical point to keep in mind here is that at the heart of al-Radi's exegetical discourse was the question of the authority of language over logic as a source of knowledge. During his time scholars were pushed to clearly articulate the role of language in mediating the relationship between revelation and history. It was within this context that al-Radi wrote his commentary on the Qur'an's ambiguous language and used literary arguments drawn from pre-Islamic poetry and the oral tradition to explain these ambiguities. And it was within this context, when the significance of a pre-Islamic poetic lexicon came to represent the authoritative source for a canonical Arabic language, that al-Radi made the self-confident assertions that his text was the hermeneutical key for interpreting the Qur'an. Thus al-Radi's hermeneutic worked to strengthen the relevance of grammar as a source of authority by attaching it to fixed body of literature, which simultaneously contributed to its canonization.

### **The Second Ambiguity: Qur'anic Incoherence**

The previous section explored al-Radi's treatment of a "grammatical" ambiguity in the Qur'anic text. In this section, I turn to the second most common meaning of ambiguity treated in the *Haqa'iq*, which identifies those verses that appear to be logically incoherent or historically inaccurate. Underlying this understanding of ambiguity was the theological assumption that the Qur'an is not only grammatically or linguistically sound, but also epistemologically. One example of an "incoherent" verse which al-Radi identifies is verse 3:96 in chapter nineteen of the *Haqa'iq*. The verse reads:

The first House established for the people was that at Bekka, a blessed place, and a guidance to all beings, full of clear messages. [It is] the place where Abraham

once stood; and whoever enters it finds inner peace. Hence, pilgrimage to the House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it. And as for those who deny the truth - indeed, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds.

(Qur'an 3:96-97)

As in each chapter, al-Radi's discussion of this verse begins with the dilemma or challenge, as articulated by a hypothetical interlocutor. How, asks the questioner, can this verse state that the first house to be established for mankind was in Mecca, which must refer to the construction of Abraham and Isma'il, when it is known that they were preceded by Adam, who also constructed a house? The question is simple yet, as al-Radi's enumeration of a host of different interpreters indicates, this question was the subject of intense debate. At the heart of the discussion was the desire to negate any possibility of a discrepancy in the factual knowledge of the Qur'an. Although the relevance of establishing the Qur'an's coherence would be applicable at all times, it is possible to probe why the theme of "coherence" and "factual veracity" of the Qur'an were of central importance to scholars at this particular juncture.

An important debate between scholars during this time period concerned the distinction and superiority of the Qur'an from Arabic poetry. Contrary to what this may suggest, the issue at stake was not so much that the poetic tradition was a threat to the Qur'an such that the Qur'an required a sustained defense against poetry in order to prove its excellence. Rather, the underlying objective was to secure a place for poetry at a time when its very function had come under threat due to the Qur'an – both as a legitimate source of knowledge, as well as a morally beneficial enterprise. One way out for scholars like al-Radi, a renowned poet who did not view the Qur'an as necessarily opposed to the poetic tradition, was to emphasize the formal aspects of poetry as opposed to its "meaning." As long as poetry was deemed an art with an altogether different purpose and aesthetic from the Qur'an, it was possible for it to at least survive in this

new environment where the view of the Qur'an as the ultimate source of knowledge dominated.

Al-Radi's attention to the historical veracity of the Qur'an can be understood from this context, in which discourse on the Qur'an as a repository of knowledge (compared to poetry as a source of aesthetic and linguistic form), had already gained traction. This discourse argued for a clean break between the Qur'an and poetry, and permitted the use of the structural aspects of the poetic tradition as an authoritative source for demonstrating the Qur'an's coherence. Poetry was thus rendered into a rational tool or a "proof text" capable of authorizing one meaning of the Qur'an over another, even as it was argued that the Qur'an was the ultimate source of knowledge.

In addition to these intra-Muslim polemics on the Qur'an as the primary source of knowledge, inter-religious encounters could also have animated the demand for establishing the Qur'an's "coherence." Not too much earlier, during the reign of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (d.833CE), Baghdad became the focal point for a historically unique moment marked by the interaction of multiple knowledge traditions due to the translation movement which entailed a surge of translations of Greek, Sanskrit and Persian works into Arabic and in a newly rendered Islamic idiom. In the face of these competing knowledge traditions, the discourse on establishing the Qur'an as the exemplar of *all* knowledge seems increasingly relevant.

Returning to al-Radi's discussion of verse 3:96, and the question about the apparent error of asserting the Ka'ba as the "first" house, the first explanation al-Radi cites is that of the earliest Shi'i Imam, 'Ali b. Abi Talib in which the Imam states that the construction in Mecca deserves the attribute of "firstness" on the basis of it being the first place for prayer, for hajj pilgrimage, and as a place of orientation (*qibla*). Even if other houses had existed in the past, none had these distinct attributes. Al-Radi does not opine on the authority of this *hadith* by 'Ali ibn Abi Talib,

he simply lists the report as one explanation amongst others. Hermeneutically, this is a critical shift from previous exegetical styles, particularly in the Shi‘i context. Where previously the sayings of the Imams were the most authoritative source for deciphering the meaning of the Qur’an, al-Radi strove to present an overview of explanations provided by various scholars. The viewpoints that al-Radi lists do not necessarily stand in opposition to each other, nor is any attempt made by al-Radi to put them in conversation as responses of one to the other. Instead, the tone and format of al-Radi’s discussion as he presents the views of different scholars is less of an argument than an overview.

Turning to the multiple viewpoints, al-Radi explains how “some say” (nameless) that this house is marked off as “first” because it is the first house established as a sanctuary from loneliness and unsteadiness, free from deceit and trickery. “Others” (also nameless) explain this verse through the occasion of its revelation, or the specific historical situation to which it responded: the Jews were claiming that the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (*bayt al-muqaddas*) is greater than the Ka‘ba because it is where the prophets emigrated and where truthful ones dwelt. The Qur’anic verse 3:96, by pointing to the earlier construction of the Holy sanctuary in Mecca (*bayt al-haram*) built by Abraham and Isma‘il, was a response to this claim. A third view was that this was the first house that was constructed by angels not humans, arguing that when Abraham and Isma‘il began its construction, its foundations had already been put in place by the angels. The fourth view is that of al-Radi’s Mu‘tazili teacher, ‘Abd al-Jabbar, who explains that it is the first house because it was the first place built for worship as opposed to residence (a reasoning that is in line with the report cited by the Imam, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib). ‘Abd al-Jabbar explains that the evidence for this is that “God articulated the relationship between the Ka‘ba and humans as a universal connection (*idafa mutlaqa*), and its universality (*itlaq*) necessitates that the

connection be through a rule (*hukm*) that allows all of humankind to participate in it.”<sup>134</sup> This was achieved by making it the direction of prayer (*qibla*) and place of pilgrimage. What is important to note here is how ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s interpretation is driven by a characteristically Mu‘tazili logic that ties human responsibility to human ability. Humans as accountable beings (*mukallafun*) can only justifiably be held responsible for their actions if they are given guidance that they can understand and the ability to follow that guidance. In other words, the principle of God’s justice mandates that with every command of God comes the capacity for it to be followed, and with every gift of God comes the ability for it to be accessed. In this verse it is decreed that the Ka‘ba is a place of worship, and the specific rituals mandated to be performed there become the means by which to benefit from its blessed power.

Al-Radi’s own position is subtle, and he is forthright about how it is a view no one else has offered, rather something that “occurred to him (and God knows best).” He explains that the meaning of this verse is that God wanted the Ka‘ba (*bayt al-haram*) to be a place where His remembrance will be a benefit for mankind. It is this feature of the Ka‘ba, as a place built for worship and God’s remembrance that justifies its “firstness.” While this position is similar to the saying of the Shi‘i Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and his Mu‘tazili teacher ‘Abd al-Jabbar, al-Radi does not seek to explain this position by invoking the authority of the Imams nor the theological principle of God’s justice. Instead, he turns to an etymological basis for this reading. He points to the term “*mubarakan*” (blessed) as it occurs in this verse, and argues that it can be read in two ways, either to describe the city of Mecca, or to describe the Ka‘ba.

The *first House* established for the people was that at *Bekka*, *a blessed place*, and a guidance to all beings.

Al-Radi supports the reading where the term “blessed place” goes back to the Ka‘ba and not

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<sup>134</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 178.

Mecca by explaining that it is the quality of blessedness that sets this house apart as the first. The next step for al-Radi is to tie the discussion together by offering a deeper linguistic meaning of the term “blessed,” as that which is firm in its benefit for mankind. He explains that the etymological root of *baraka* is taken from “firmness” and the state of being grounded. He justifies this connotation by referring to common expressions of speech such as “*tabarak* Allah,” or “Allah is Firm and Everlasting,” and “*al-bark*” as another term for “heart” since it is the place where things are protected and kept firm. With this etymological foundation in place, al-Radi argues that *mubarak* in this verse is not simply a reference to any blessed place, or any place of worship, rather a subtle reference to the firm quality of worship that will be established in this house, in terms of its quantity (continually during the nights and days) and quality. With this interpretation, al-Radi shifts the attention away from historical details of chronology (who built the first house, Adam or Abraham?) and onto the nature of blessedness that can be derived from the term *baraka*.

Al-Radi also demonstrates how the building of this house itself is an act of worship thus inaugurating its function as a place for God’s remembrance. He refers to an earlier Qur’anic verse which points to Abraham and Isma‘il’s proclamation as they laid the foundations of the Ka‘ba. They prayed, “Oh Lord, accept this from us!” (Qur’an, 2:127). Al-Radi argues that this statement reflects their desire to attain nearness to God and to obey His command thus linking the Divine injunction with a ritual act. It is possible to discern how this line of argument possibly draws from ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s interpretation, which argues for the coupling of any Divine command with the human capability to fulfill that command. However, al-Radi’s discussion is set up as a literary analysis of the grammatical features of the verse. The move of determining the meaning of the text by venturing beyond the text (through everyday speech), and then re-

inscribing it back onto the text (through etymology and grammar) is characteristic of al-Radi's approach. What it allows him to successfully achieve is to swing the site of the debate back to the text and uphold the linguistic form of the Qur'an as the most formidable argument for its meaning.

In the study of early Muslim writings on the linguistic form and perfection of the Qur'an, Euro-American scholars have often interpreted discourses as Muslim responses in defense of the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jaz*). This view assumes that discussions about the literary aspects of the Qur'an were primarily guided by the need to establish its miraculous and inimitable status. While certainly true in the case of some early Muslim scholars, this interpretation does not well explain what may have motivated writings of figures like al-Radi. This is because al-Radi's work on the Qur'an entails literary demonstrations of the Qur'an's eloquence, even as his theological position was to attribute the Qur'an inimitability not to its linguistic excellence but to a realm that fell outside what he considered "temporal" and "human" language.<sup>135</sup> By closely examining al-Radi's use of literary arguments to explain the specific type of ambiguity that led to an incoherence in the Qur'an, it is possible to extend the conversation beyond the defense of *i'jaz al-Qur'an* and onto the impact of multiple intellectual debates taking place in Baghdad at the time. The issue of poetic form as opposed to Qur'anic knowledge, as well as the presence of competing epistemological traditions after the translation movement, suggest other motivations for al-Radi's efforts to argue for the Qur'an's historical accuracy and linguistic coherence.

Scholars at the time of al-Radi differed on what rendered the Qur'an miraculous. Was it

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<sup>135</sup> Although it is difficult to find an explicit endorsement in al-Radi's own writings for the position that divine deterrence (*sarfa*) represents the source of the Qur'an's inimitability, his understanding of the relationship between language and revelation, especially on the question of human accessibility of language, certainly suggest that he, like his brother al-Sharif al-Murtada, also ascribed the Qur'an's inimitability to divine deterrence. See Travis Zadeh, "Fire Cannot Harm It': Mediation, Temptation and the Charismatic Power of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2008): 50-72.

the Qur'an's rhetorical excellence (*balagha*) or the fact that God had simply made everyone incapable of replicating it (*sarfa*)? This debate was deeply theological for at stake in it was the very integrity of divine sovereignty. But the debate over the nature of the Qur'an's inimitability was also inextricably tied to the theories of language. Al-Radi himself subscribed to the view that the inimitability of the Qur'an should not be based on its rhetorical excellence. In al-Radi's view, tying the transcendental quality of the Qur'an to the superior rhetorical quality of its language was theologically untenable. This is because al-Radi interpreted the doctrine of God's Justice to mean that a Just God would never communicate the guidance for human beings, which is the Qur'an, in a language that they could not understand - and then hold them accountable for it. As a result, al-Radi argued for an intimate connection between language and its temporal location in culture, specifically in the poetic tradition of early Arabs. In addition, he held the view that the language of the Qur'an had to be accessible through the rules of language, established by human convention. In this way, al-Radi preferred to keep separate the conversation about language, texts, and interpretation, from that of Divine sovereignty.

### Wad' Theory of Language

Bernard Weiss in his study of medieval debates on the origin of language points out that the main "debate" over this issue occurs between al-Jubba'i's son Abu Hashim (d.933CE) (conventionalist theory) and the eponymous founder of the Ash'ari school of theology, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d.936CE) (revelationist theory).<sup>136</sup> The "conventionalist" view of the origin of language is that language is a social convention (*istilah*), the product of a cooperative "naming"

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<sup>136</sup> Ibn Taymiyya (d.1348CE) in an attempt to discredit this theory holds that no one before Abu Hashim ever held the conventionalist theory. However, we do not have any evidence of the debate apart from Ibn Taymiyya's reference to it. Bernard Weiss, "Medieval Muslim Discussions of the Origin of Language," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlaändischen Gesellschaft* 124, (1974): 34.

of things, the choice of names being basically arbitrary. Eventually al-Baqillani (d.1013CE), al-Radi's contemporary and a leading exegete of Ash'ari disposition, made the pronouncement that there is no resolution to this issue, and for the most part it lost importance. The *wad'* position, by which language is understood to be "established by convention," fit with the Mu'tazili position and was also adopted by al-Radi's teacher 'Abd al-Jabbar. The contrary, where language was conceived as divinely ordained or revealed, could infringe on the notion of free will.<sup>137</sup> At the same time, as Weiss also observes, the debate between the revelationist vs. conventionalist theory was not divided on theological grounds. In fact, among the Mu'tazilites, there were several figures who held the revelationist theory despite arguing for the createdness of the Qur'an. Weiss argues that this points to their attachment to the tradition, particularly the Qur'anic verse of God teaching Adam all the names, which in early exegetical works like that of Ibn Abbas points to a revelationist view.

Other figures who accepted the revelationist view were the Persian grammarian al-Farisi (d.987CE) and the Mu'tazili grammarian and exegete Mahmud ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (d.1144CE). According to Weiss, the shift to the conventionalist view occurred in the next generation with 'Abd al-Jabbar and other Mu'tazilites associating themselves with it.

Al-Radi's intellectual genealogy links him to the conventionalist view of language since 'Abd al-Jabbar was his teacher. Al-Radi situated his literary arguments for metaphor, metonymy and etymology in what he regarded as an established literary convention. In *usul al-fiqh* works as well, features of the language such as ambiguity, synonymity, and figurative usage were defined in terms of *wad'* and thus seen as built into the basic language. For example, an ambiguous

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<sup>137</sup> Margaret Larkin, *The theology of meaning: 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's theory of discourse*, (New Haven, Conn: American Oriental Society, 1995), 31-38.

expression was considered a term that had been subjected to multiple establishments.<sup>138</sup> The view of language as “established by convention” was not considered contradictory to an essentialized view of knowledge, which could be ascribed to many scholars of this period including al-Radi. Bruce Fudge explains that this “tension” between linguistic convention and epistemological essentialism could exist partially because language as established by convention was viewed diachronically, i.e., as having a linear teleology that went from the Bedouins to pre-Islamic poets to the Qur’an to the language of the Arabs.<sup>139</sup> This same logic of teleology is also evident in al-Radi’s commentary. By deriving meaning of Qur’anic ambiguities from a fixed literary canon al-Radi argued for an unshakeable linguistic ontology. In this way, although al-Radi’s literary approach to the Qur’an argued for a non-literal interpretation of certain verses, the clearly defined sources for the figurative readings achieved a rhetorical lockdown on the text’s hermeneutical possibilities.

### **The Third Ambiguity: Rhetorical, Logical and Moral Conundrums**

In the previous two sections I presented al-Radi’s treatment of two verses from Sura Al ‘Imran to illustrate his understanding of ambiguity in two separate meanings: grammatical discrepancy and logical incoherency. I noted how these notions of ambiguity point to al-Radi’s underlying view of the Qur’an as a linguistically and epistemologically sound text. I want to now turn to the third form of ambiguity which al-Radi identifies in the Qur’anic text: the rhetorical/moral. The “moral” aspect of this ambiguity refers to verses that present ethical

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<sup>138</sup> B.G. Weiss, s.v. “Wad‘ al-Lugha,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Brill Online, 2012), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/wad-al-lugha-SIM\\_7797](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/wad-al-lugha-SIM_7797) (accessed September 30, 2012).

<sup>139</sup> Bruce Fudge, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: al-Tabrisi and the Craft of Commentary*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 73.

conundrums. Critical to al-Radi's assertion that the moral dilemmas presented by ambiguous verses demand reinterpretation, was the theological doctrine that the Qur'an's message was necessarily just. Let us turn to an example from the *Haqa'iq*, which al-Radi explains is an ambiguous verse due to the ethical implications of its apparent sense:

“You were longing for death before you met it; now you have seen it, while you were seeing.” (Qur'an, 3:143)

The historical occasion recorded by commentators for the context of this verse is the famous battle of Badr that took place in 624CE between the Prophet's newly formed Muslim community and the Meccan Arabs. This historical context however, is not the focus of al-Radi's discussion. For him, this verse can be broken down into three ambiguous components that require clarification. The first question that is raised is a logical-rational one: how is it possible for anyone to “see” death? This poses the problem of plausibility. The second question concerns the linguistic features of the verse, and how the phrase “now you have seen it, while you were seeing,” seems redundant. Although two different verbs for “seeing” are used in the Arabic (*ra'-a* and *na-za-ra*), the questioner argues that mention of just one of these terms would suffice. So the second question that emerges from this verse is how can any part of the Qur'an be without purpose? This would raise doubt about the Qur'an's rhetorical value. Finally the third issue that arises from this verse is a moral one since the clause “you were longing for death” refers to a group among the believers who were seeking their own martyrdom, and in doing so they were seeking their own death at the hands of the unbelievers. This results in the moral dilemma of the believers effectively wishing for a grave sin. The presence of these three pertinent questions, namely, the plausibility of a Qur'anic statement, the rhetorical value of a Qur'anic statement, and the moral implication of a Qur'anic statement, lead al-Radi to designate this verse as part of the “ambiguous” verses. To respond to these questions, al-Radi refers to the tripartite literary canon

he regards as the authoritative source for the Arabic language: the Qur'an, the poetic tradition, and the everyday speech of Arabs.

In response to the first question concerning the plausibility of seeing death, al-Radi shows that the term "death" in this verse is used metonymically to mean the causes of death. He explains that the trope of correspondence between death and its causes permits the substitution of one with the other. So what the verse really intends to say is that the believers saw the signs of death such as a lance or stone, and not death itself. For al-Radi, this metonymical use of the term death is authorized by a phrase from everyday speech: "I saw death with my own eyes!" which implies that the speaker is expressing how s/he was under extreme duress, hence the intended meaning is "I faced the causes of death like intense agony and severe hardship." Al-Radi also refers the lines of two poets. The first is unnamed:

Dreamers walk under their flag  
While death awaits under the flag of the family of Muhallim

The second poem is a reference to the verse by the Shi'i poet Kuthayyir (d.723CE):

If you see the fate of death as evident,  
Do not be a direct target for it, abandon its path

For evidence from the Qur'an, al-Radi refers to a verse about Abraham's sacrifice of Isma'il, in which God refers to Abraham's dream of the sacrifice as true (*musaddaq*), even though historically the sacrifice was never completed: "'You have already fulfilled the vision!' - thus indeed do We reward those who do right," (Qur'an 37:105). Al-Radi points out that because Abraham exhibited all the signs of the sacrifice, such as laying Isma'il down, taking the knife, and binding his legs, the grammatical rule at play in this verse is the same, which is the substitution of the *cause* of sacrifice with its *effect*.

To respond to the second question on the redundancy of the terms "*ru'ya*" and "*nazar*,"

where both seem to convey the same meaning of “seeing,” al-Radi draws on an interpretive strategy that can be described as his signature approach. This is to identify a “key term” through which he can attain some hermeneutical flexibility. The term he identifies for this verse on “seeing death” is *nazar*. He argues that the term *nazar* can have multiple meanings, one of which is to contemplate, or “to direct the eye to that which you wish to see.”<sup>140</sup> He points out that what is critical in the act of *nazar* is the individual’s *desire* to see. The poem that al-Radi selects to justify this distinction is from the early Islamic poet Dhu l-Rumma (d.735CE), and it visually captures this meaning of “desire to see” which he is trying to explain. The verse reads:

Oh Mayya, will I be compensated for my bitter tears,  
and my breaths that travel to you like zephyrs?  
And when will I be honored by the side that you are on,  
in the meantime I am the seeker of vision

Al-Radi explains that the last line where the poet self identifies as a *nazir* (seer) must communicate the meaning not of a seer but of the seeker of vision. This is because no lover who succeeds in gaining a glimpse of his beloved seeks compensation for it. Only the one who suffers from the *desire* for such a glimpse, the *nazir*, only he can claim a reward for his suffering.

The third conundrum with respect to verse 3:143 is the moral-ethical question: are believers who seek martyrdom effectively seeking the grave sin of being killed at the hands of the unbelievers? Al-Radi does not think so. Again, his argument hinges on language. He argues that an individual’s desire for death cannot be equated with his desire to be killed because the doer of the two actions is not the same. Death goes back to no one other than God, whereas the act of killing is a human act. This fundamental difference of human versus Divine authorship of an action prevents us from making an analogy between the desire to die at the hands of God and to be killed at the hands of the unbelievers.

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<sup>140</sup> “*Taqlid al-hadaqa al-sahiha fi jihat al-mar’i iltimasan li-ru’yatihi*,” Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 253.

## Conclusion

Many important insights can be gleaned from the three case studies discussed above: the Prophetic invitation of “ourselves” to the *mubahala*, the Ka‘ba as the “first” house, and the believer’s desire to “see” death. Although each of these ambiguities dealt with wide-ranging issues including linguistic eloquence, Qur’anic coherence, and ethical-moral actions, al-Radi’s hermeneutical energies were focused on how literary devices can illuminate their meaning. Al-Radi argued that the Prophetic invitation to “ourselves” was an allusion to ‘Ali. He resolved the dilemma of the Ka‘ba’s firstness by turning to the etymological root of the term “*baraka*.” And finally he overturned the implausibility of seeing death through a metonymical reading of “death” as “causes of death.” Critical to note is how al-Radi justified the use of each of these literary arguments by referring to Qur’anic verses, common utterances by the Arabs, and poetic verses by pre-Islamic poets, pointing to his understanding of an authoritative linguistic structure that was fixed and predetermined (*wad‘*).

Al-Radi’s linguistic imaginary can be characterized by the marked tension between its definite structure that allow certain rules of grammar to be identified, recognized and verified, and by its subtle mysteries, the access to which is limited to an exclusive few. This accorded well with the scholarly ethos of Baghdad where the display of linguistic excellence was a way of showcasing one’s authority. Additionally, the language with which al-Radi describes traversing the subtleties inherent in Arabic and its mysteries is remarkably similar to the language used by some of his contemporaries who invoked the dialectic of concealing and revealing in disciplines including love treatises, ethical works, exegesis, and polythematic Arabic encyclopedias. In each of these genres, the dialectic between concealing and revealing constituted a central place in the

way the self was imagined and constructed.<sup>141</sup> Both require a level of regulation and discipline associated with the outer, the apparent, which corresponds to a set of predetermined rules, and are accompanied by the potential for an internal unveiling that invigorate it while opening it up to layers of possibility. Ultimately what the language and the human aspire towards is for every breath, or every letter, to carry a willful and determined purpose, which aligns with the Will of God.

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<sup>141</sup> I discuss the confluences between al-Radi's hermeneutic and the manifestations of this dialectic in more detail in chapter five, titled "Ambiguity, Metaphor, and the Hermeneutics of Concealing and Revealing."

CHAPTER 4: IS THE HAQA'IQ A MU'TAZILI-SHI'I TAFSIR?  
IMAMI-MU'TAZILI RELATIONS IN TENTH AND ELEVENTH CENTURY BAGHDAD

**Section 4.1**

**Narratives of Mu'tazili "Influence"**

In a famous polemical treatise aimed at discounting the beliefs of the Imami Shi'i school, thirteenth century Hanbali scholar Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328CE) writes,

As for their [Rafidi] reference to reasoning (*nazar*) and rationality (*'aqliyyat*), the later generation of Rafidis relied on (*a tamadu 'alayh*) the works of the Mu'tazila [for it] and agreed with them on the issues of [God's] Attributes and [human] capacity. In general the Mu'tazila are more intelligent and truthful...<sup>142</sup>

It is known that the Mu'tazilites are at the root of this thesis [of God's Justice and human freedom] and that the shaykhs of the Rafidites such as al-Mufid, al-Musawi, al-Karajaki and others merely took it (*akhadhu dhalika*) from the Mu'tazila. For the rest, none of this is found in the discussions of the early Shi'is.<sup>143</sup>

The underlying logic in Ibn Taymiyya's assertions can be summarized as follows: because the principles of reason and speculation in the work of later Shi'i scholars were borrowed from the Mu'tazilis, this confirms the inherent ineptitude of the *original* Shi'i belief framework.

Ibn Taymiyya was not the first to level such a charge against the later generation of Twelver Shi'i scholars. Even prior to Ibn Taymiyya, Imami Shi'i scholars were often pejoratively labeled as "takers" of what were deemed as originally Mu'tazili ideas. Writing in the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitab minhaj al-sunna al-nabawiyya fi naqd kalam al-Shi'a wa-al-Qadariyya*, vol. i, (Bulaq: al-Matba'a al-Kubra al-Amiriyya, 1904), 16.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

tenth century for example, the leading Imami scholar of this period, Shaykh al-Mufid (al-Radi's teacher), defended himself from a similar accusation. He urged that Mu'tazili teachings were *not* the inspiration for the rational basis of Imami theology. Rather, al-Mufid insisted, the sayings of the Shi'i Imams (*hadith*) endorsed and legitimized the importance of rational inquiry.<sup>144</sup> At stake in Ibn Taymiyya's charge of taking/borrowing and Shaykh al-Mufid's defense of ownership was the authority of the Twelver Shi'i Imams and the coherence of Imami theology as a whole. This is because according to Imami doctrine, the knowledge of the Imams was passed down through an uninterrupted chain, from God to the Prophet to the Imams. Thus, any suggestion of "external influence" from the Mu'tazili school effectively undermined the fundamental tenet of divinely designated and continual guidance.

### **The "Rationalization Thesis" in contemporary Euro-American scholarship**

The competing claims outlined above do not fall outside the bounds of characteristically polemical exchanges between different schools of thought in early Islam. My objective here is to point to the peculiar similarity that exists between writings of traditional pre-modern scholars like Ibn Taymiyya and Shaykh al-Mufid, and current Euro-American scholarship on the history of early Imami Shi'ism. More specifically, the language used in recent works to describe the relationship between Imami Shi'is and Mu'tazilis echoes Ibn Taymiyya's early contention that Imami scholars in the tenth and eleventh centuries were subject to Mu'tazili influence. Martin McDermott's remarks on Shaykh al-Mufid represent a case in point:

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<sup>144</sup> Wilferd Madelung, "Imamite and Mu'tazilite Theology," in *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran*, (Albany, N.Y.: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 18, note 2; Also Madelung notes that al-Mufid wrote a book on "the agreement of the Baghdadis of the Mu'tazila with what is related from the Imams." See "al-Mufid," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Brill Online, 2013), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mufid-SIM\\_5316](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mufid-SIM_5316) (accessed May 23, 2013).

When the full history of Imamite theology comes to be written, it will be a story of growth in successive dialogue and contact with a variety of voices from inside and outside the Shi‘ite community. For a brief moment in its development, Imamite *kalam* was strongly influenced by Baghdadi Mu‘tazili thought. That was during the few years when the leading Imamite thinker was Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Muhammad Ibn al-Nu‘man, Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1022).<sup>145</sup>

McDermott’s view reflects a prevailing assumption that governs studies on early Shi‘i history. This assumption can be termed as the “rationalization thesis.” Central to this thesis is the view that Imami Shi‘i scholars borrowed ideas and ways of reasoning from the Mu‘tazilis and supplemented them with what constituted an “original,” or “pre-Mu‘tazili-influenced,” Shi‘i theology. According to this narrative, the turning point in the tradition of Shi‘i thought allegedly occurred in the tenth century and signified an enduring paradigm shift in the school’s overarching epistemology. Scholars of this period are accordingly acknowledged as the chief architects of what was to become the normative Shi‘i stance on theological, hermeneutical, and juridical issues. The critical shift in their approach, namely that of explaining key Imami precepts through rational inquiry is characterized in contemporary scholarship as the “rationalization of Imami Shi‘i thought” under the “influence” of the Mu‘tazilites.<sup>146</sup> Robert Gleave, in his overview of studies on early Shi‘ism explains that the authors he surveys generally agree that there is a *disjuncture* between the theological system of the early Shi‘is and of their later counterparts. He points out that this acceptance “pre-supposes the notion of doctrinal

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<sup>145</sup> McDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh Al-Mufid*, 397.

<sup>146</sup> Gleave, “Recent Research into the History of Early Shi‘ism,” 1600.

development between the time of the Imams and the so-called rationalization of Imami Shi‘ism, which is often dated to the mid to late tenth century in Baghdad.”<sup>147</sup>

### **Objects of Rationalization**

Before delving into the arguments of specific proponents of the rationalization thesis, it is instructive to note what the *objects* were, which, according to the scholars Gleave surveys, underwent rationalization in Shi‘i thought. The first such object was the Shi‘i conception of the Imams and the nature of their religious authority. On this point, scholars argue that the Imams were first imagined as millennial figures with chiliastic themes, but then later rationalized or emasculated into more human characters.<sup>148</sup> The second *object* of rationalization is the Imami-Shi‘i hermeneutic, or the extent to which ‘*aql* (reason) was given equal or superior status to *sam‘* (revelation) as a source of knowledge. According to the rationalization thesis, this method of deriving meaning stood in contrast to an earlier tradition that privileged the transmitted tradition of the Qur’an and sayings of the Prophets and Imams (*naql*) as the only authoritative sources of knowledge.<sup>149</sup>

These two objects of rationalization, namely the Twelver school’s view of the Imams and their overarching epistemology, were closely connected. From early on, the Imams were synonymously referred to as the “speaking Qur’an;” a title that affirmed their pivotal role as

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 1602. Author’s reference is to the work of S.A. Arjomand, “The Consolation of Theology: The Shi‘ite Doctrine of Occultation and the Transition from Chiliasm to Law,” *The Journal of Religion*, 76.4 (1996): 548-571; idem, “Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi‘ism: A Sociohistorical Perspective,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28.4 (1996): 491-515. Idem. “*Imam absconditus* and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shi‘ism circa 280-90 A.H. /900A.D.,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 117.i (1997); 1-12.

<sup>149</sup> Gleave, “Recent Research into the History of Early Shi‘ism,” 1600.

interpreters of what was otherwise a “silent” Qur’anic text.<sup>150</sup> The underlying idea here was that the lives of the Imams mirrored the teachings of the textual canon. What the rationalization of a previous Shi‘i epistemology and hermeneutic hence entailed was a shift in the way to *access* Imami knowledge. Whereas the earlier approach had been to only cite the sayings of the Imams and let them speak for themselves, now their sayings had to be legitimized through human rational inquiry. Most importantly, according to the banner-bearers of the rationalization thesis, this emphasis on rational inquiry was a product of the Mu‘tazili influence on Shi‘i thought, an assumption that I interrogate further in the discussion that follows.

### **Interrogating the hyphen in the descriptor “Mu‘tazili – Shi‘i”**

The rationalization thesis is not limited to a small circle of scholars, but rather finds echoes in the work of multiple authors who otherwise take different positions on the history of early Shi‘i history. Three influential voices in this field are Etan Kohlberg, Wilferd Madelung, and Paul Sanders. It is helpful to note how the rationalization thesis is reinforced in each of their works, despite variations in their broader arguments.

In the study of early Imami history, the scholar whose theory of Mu‘tazili influence on Shi‘ism has arguably been the most influential is Etan Kohlberg.<sup>151</sup> As Robert Gleave has pointed out, the various writings of Etan Kohlberg involve a definitive examination of the doctrinal development between the time of the Imams and the so-called rationalization of Imami Shi‘ism, dated mid-to late-tenth century Baghdad.<sup>152</sup> Kohlberg’s writings on this question of

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<sup>150</sup> Ayoub, “The speaking Qur’an and the silent Qur’an.”

<sup>151</sup> Etan Kohlberg, *Belief and Law in Imami Shi‘ism*, (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Variorum, 1991).

<sup>152</sup> Gleave, “Recent Research into the History of Early Shi‘ism,” 1600.

rationalization focus on two main themes: the doctrine of occultation (of the twelfth Imam),<sup>153</sup> and the conception of the Imams as it evolved from viewing them as superhuman figures to ultra-rational guides. Kohlberg's chief goal is to demonstrate that the Imamite doctrine on the occultation of the twelfth Imam was a later development, one that was not present in early Shi'ī writings. It is in trying to trace the genealogy of this doctrine that Kohlberg argued that the eleventh century marked the onset of a large-scale rationalization movement that swept through the Imami scholarly community and culminated in the formulation of rational explanations for doctrines such as the occultation of the twelfth Imam.

### **Limits of Social Constructionism**

My objective in bringing attention to the framework of Kohlberg's study is not to deny an overall shift in the tone of Imami writings on certain doctrines like the occultation. Neither do I intend to undermine the value of studies that examine the sociopolitical context in which specific doctrinal elements emerged. Yet, I argue that the very task and ambition of unmasking the social underpinnings of religious dogma by revealing its chain of "influences" is conceptually unsound. As Ian Hacking points out in his provocative interrogation of "social constructionism," the exercise of demonstrating the construction of a certain idea is highly selective, thereby according certain ideas positions of importance – even if the objective is to illustrate how the same ideas are essentially social constructs.<sup>154</sup>

Kohlberg's study of the early history of Imami thought adopts precisely such a social constructionist approach that reinforces a conceptual history of select concepts without critically

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<sup>153</sup> According to Imami Shi'ī theology as it came to be canonized after the eleventh century, the twelfth Imam was not dead but in a state of occultation. This logic has secured the belief in God's continuous guidance for His community and the spiritual dominion of the Imams.

<sup>154</sup> Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19-20.

examining the value and politics of that selection.<sup>155</sup> For example, Kohlberg's theory of the rationalist turn in Imami thought hinges on the objectification of concepts like "occultation" and "Imamology" so their origins could be documented and traced. Apart from its uncritical historicism, Kohlberg's narrative of influence is also problematic in the way it is informed by a heresiographical framework. The very concepts he chooses to interrogate are ones that might distinguish Shi'ism from its Sunni "other." Thus Kohlberg's genealogical approach to mapping the history of these doctrines betrays an underlying attitude towards Imami thought as a phenomenon that stands external to the boundaries of a pre-determined "orthodoxy". His approach is symptomatic of a larger tendency in the study of early Islamic history to assume that the categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are readily available for disciplinary canonization. As a corollary, such studies perpetuate the unsound assumption that religious identities represent distinct, pre-determined, and closed-off entities. In the study of Shi'ism, this approach takes the form of replicating characteristically heresiographical framings of religious identities and their relationships, much like that of Ibn Taymiyya's theory of Mu'tazili "influence" on the Imami Shi'i school.

An attempt to modify Kohlberg's theory of Mu'tazili influence is found in the work of Wilferd Madelung, who despite claiming a bumpier start to the Mu'tazili-Imami relationship, continued to maintain the view that eventually, their relations stabilized and Mu'tazili influence prevailed. In making his case, Madelung invoked the work of Shi'is who had objected to the incorporation of Mu'tazili doctrines and to the Mu'tazili principle of championing reason above transmitted reports (*hadith*). Madelung argued that this initial resistance to Mu'tazilite thought

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<sup>155</sup> See Kohlberg's articles dedicated to terms "taqiyya" (forced dissimulation), "ithna 'ashariyya" (twelver), and "ghayba" in: "Taqiyya in Shi'i theology and religion" in Hans G. Kippenberg & Guy G. Stroumsa (Eds.), *Secrecy and concealment: studies in the history of Mediterranean and Near Eastern religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 345-80; "Early attestations of the term 'ithna 'ashariyya'" in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24, (2000): 343-57; "From Imamiyya to Ithna-'ashariyya."

on the part of Shi‘i scholars shows that the “rationalization of Imami Shi‘ism” was not a smooth and seamless process.<sup>156</sup> However, Madelung’s revisionary thesis did nonetheless embrace the fundamental assumption that Mu‘tazili ideas held considerable sway over those Imami Shi‘i scholars whose position would eventually come to represent the “orthodox” Shi‘i view. In assembling this argument, Madelung presented what might be termed as an “origin story” for Mu‘tazili influence over Shi‘ism. He observed that it was two members of the prestigious Imami Nawbakht family, Abu Sahl Isma‘il (d.923CE) and his nephew al-Hasan ibn Musa (d. between 912CE and 922CE), who emerged as the founders of the first doctrinal school that truly amalgamated Mu‘tazili theology with Imamite doctrine.<sup>157</sup> He further argued that evidence of this rationalizing trend confirms the early origins of the traditionist/rationalist (*akhbari/usuli*) divide among Imami scholars, a divide that resurfaces much later under the Safavid dynasty in the late sixteenth century. Implicit in this narrative is the assumption that religious doctrines and the identities invested in those doctrines represent objects whose origins and movement in time can be readily discovered, mapped, and empirically situated in a linear fashion. Therefore, following this logic, the rationalization of Shi‘i thought that began in the tenth century seamlessly resurfaced in sixteenth century Safavid Iran. While their specific arguments were varied, both Kohlberg and Madelung shared a common conceptual apparatus that viewed the development and maturation of Shi‘i doctrine through the prism of Mu‘tazili influence.

A third approach in recent studies of early Shi‘i history is captured in the work of Paul Sanders. He enters the debate of Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i relations by arguing for a different periodization

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<sup>156</sup> See Wilferd Madelung, “Imamism and Mu‘tazilite Theology” in Toufic Fahd, ed. *Le shi‘isme imamite: colloque de Strasbourg (6-9 mai, 1968)*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 13-30, 17.

<sup>157</sup> Although none of their dogmatical works have been preserved, their views have been fragmentarily established from statements of al-Mufid and the titles of their books. See Madelung, “Imamism and Mu‘tazilite Theology,” in *Le shi‘isme*, 15.

of the rationalizing trend in Imami Shi‘i thought. Sanders located the origin of a reason-centered theology in the period of the Imams - that is, much earlier than the tenth and eleventh centuries. In doing so, his objective was to present Imami Shi‘i thought as internally consistent, such that Shi‘i religious identity is not seen as a product of external (Mu‘tazili) influence. Although this approach does question the Mu‘tazili influence narrative, it does so by relying on similar assumptions about how religious identity is constituted. More specifically, Sanders refers to early *hadith* collections to assert that the Imams supported the chief principles of rational theology, such as the justice of God and freewill. Therefore, he argues, they provide us with ample evidence that Mu‘tazili ideas were thriving in an Imami environment well before the more sophisticated justifications of Imami doctrine put forward in the eleventh century. The main concern for Saunders is therefore not to question the dominant approach to the formations of Shi‘i identity in extant works but to argue for a well-defined Imami identity that originated with the Imams and did not undergo significant change. Sanders argues that the so-called “rationalist turn” in Twelver Shi‘ism was not a dramatic shift from an earlier Imami conservatism, but proposes that it was one of many possible theologies that continued to persist much after their origins. In arguing against a narrative of Mu‘tazili influence, Sanders overcompensates by positing an unchanging and static Shi‘i identity.

### **Rethinking Religious Identity**

The apparatus of Kohlberg, Madelung and Sanders to early Shi‘i history bring attention to the persistence of the “Mu‘tazili influence” thesis in contemporary scholarship. I have sought to argue that what is neglected in current approaches to the study of Imami Shi‘i history is a critical examination of the underlying theory of religious identity on which they rest. As we

have seen, both contemporary and pre-modern scholars have made competing claims about the continuity and coherence of Imami Shi‘i thought. Ibn Taymiyya, Kohlberg, and Madelung for example, all argue for a rupture in the history of Imami thought and emphasize how fundamental Imami doctrines changed over time, especially under the influence of Mu‘tazili scholars. On the other hand, Sanders, Shaykh al-Mufid and traditional Imami scholars today argue for a steady continuity in Imami thought that traces a firm and unbroken chain to its origin in the teachings of the Prophet and the Imams.

Yet, there is an important difference between these temporally distant discourses despite the similar rhetoric they employ in their arguments. The earlier characterization of Imami Shi‘i thought as “borrowed” sprung from a need to discredit the authenticity of the Imami school by exposing the limitations of Imami teachings. Crucial here is that the object borrowed, that is, “a rationalizing tendency,” was not in itself privileged as epistemologically superior in these polemical exchanges. Rather Shaykh al-Mufid’s motivation was to argue for the completeness, coherence and autonomy of Imami theology such that it had no need or demand for inspiration from outside the tradition of its own authorities. By contrast, I argue that what frames the Mu‘tazili thesis of contemporary scholars today are the twin binaries of orthodoxy/heterodoxy, and rational/irrational. In other words, the impulse to give credit to the more reasoned and rationalized elements of Imami Shi‘i thought to an external “other” that eventually subdued the more erratic and supernaturally inclined tendencies inherent to an “original” Imami-Shi‘ism perpetuates the orthodoxy/heterodoxy binary. In the process it also reinforces a post-Enlightenment equation of orthodox or authentic religion with rationalism and the eclipse of the supernatural. This approach is problematic not the least because it assumes a seamless correlation between the Mu‘tazili emphasis on speculative reason and post-Enlightenment

concerns for a moderated religiosity, erroneously assuming that the genealogies of “reason” in Mu‘tazili theology perfectly correspond with modern understandings of this concept.<sup>158</sup>

My concern in this discussion is not to argue for a particular *direction* or *chronology* of influence (from the Mu‘tazilis to the Shi‘is or vice versa). Moreover, I am also not arguing that crucial intellectual linkages between the Mu‘tazili and Imami scholars in the tenth and eleventh centuries did not exist. My contention rather is that contemporary narratives of Imami-Mu‘tazili relations are shaped by and indeed rooted in early debates surrounding the authenticity (or lack thereof) of the Imami-Shi‘i sect. In what follows, I move away from the stifling horizons of a theory that posits relations of “influence,” and instead probe the possibilities of how to interpret the hyphen that simultaneously connects yet disconnects the Mu‘tazili and Shi‘i schools of thought. In doing so, I seek to excavate those aspects of the relationship that the placement of a neat hyphen might conceal.

### **Heterological Classifications of al-Radi and the *Haqa’iq***

Having demonstrated the pervasiveness of the theory that posits an inextricable link between the Mu‘tazili and Imami scholars in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it is not surprising to note that current studies classify a scholar of al-Radi’s stripe as a “Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i” figure. Although there exists to date no sustained analysis of al-Radi’s exegetical work, the *Haqa’iq* has received mention in a few recent studies. Three authors who have referred to al-Radi’s *Haqa’iq* and made remarks on the classification of the genre to which it belongs are Andrew Rippin, Mahmoud Ayoub and Bruce Fudge.

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<sup>158</sup> David Vishanoff presents a compelling critique of the characterization of the Mu‘tazila as “the free thinkers of Islam,” as part of his treatment of ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s theory of revelation. See David R. Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law*, (New Haven, Conn: American Oriental Society, 2011), 149.

Andrew Rippin, in an encyclopedia entry on “*Tafsir*” (exegesis) briefly lists al-Radi’s *Haqai’q* under the group of works that take a “theological approach to the Qur’an.” He states that al-Radi’s work provides “a thorough-going emphasis on a certain theological perspective.”<sup>159</sup> In this short entry, Rippin does not explain if his assessment comes from the fact that al-Radi’s work was an isolated study of the *mutashabih al-Qur’an* (ambiguous verses) – an exegetical approach characteristic of Mu‘tazili scholars - or if it was based on the theological nature of the topics that concerned al-Radi in his work, such as the preservation of God’s Justice and Unity. It seems that by “theological” Rippin is referring to a concern for the fundamental principles of a formal theological school like that of the Mu‘tazila or Imami Shi‘is. It is useful to clarify what the term *kalam* comprises in this context in terms of the topics and themes it encompasses. This is particularly important because scholars argue that there is a difference between the term *kalam* and its English equivalent, “theology.” In a recent analysis of the cosmological framework of the Basran Mu‘tazili school, Alnoor Dhanani explains that “*kalam* does differ from theology (at least as theology is commonly understood) in several respects. One of these is its subject matter which includes several topics, for example logic, epistemology, cosmology, and anthropology which properly belong to philosophy (in its classic and broadly construed sense).” Moreover, he argues that because the *mutakallimun* (theologians) regarded their discipline to be a philosophical metaphysics, they were the intellectual rivals of the *falasifa* or representatives of the neoplatonized Aristotelian tradition. Dhanani argues that the disdain with which the *falasifa* saw the *mutakallimun*, as apologetics in the service of Islam, has unfortunately been adopted by several modern students of Islamic intellectual history. Dhanani is critical of this narrow understanding of the role and concern of the *mutakallimun*, as according to him it “fails to take

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<sup>159</sup> Andrew Rippin, s.v. “Tafsir,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Brill Online, 2012), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/tafsir-SIM\\_7294](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/tafsir-SIM_7294), (accessed September 30, 2012).

into account the actual historical context within which *kalam* was pursued. Moreover it disregards the perspective of *mutakallimun* themselves and ignores the non-theological aspects of their writings, which, in the early period were significant.”<sup>160</sup> It is unclear whether Rippin’s characterization of al-Radi’s work as a “theological approach” has taken into account this expanded definition of theology.

Bruce Fudge makes a reference to al-Radi’s *Haqa’iq* in his monograph on the Qur’anic hermeneutic of a later Shi’i scholar, al-Tabarsi (d.1073CE). In his discussion, Fudge classifies al-Radi’s work as part of a general body of literature on the ambiguous verses. He describes this group of works on the ambiguous verses as a sub-genre of exegetical writings that corresponded to the Mu‘tazili doctrine on *muhkam* (clear) and *mutashabih* (ambiguous) verses of the Qur’an.

Mahmoud Ayoub’s discussion of al-Radi is the most comprehensive, in the form of an article dedicated to al-Radi’s use of metaphor (*majaz*) as a literary tool and his general Qur’anic hermeneutic in the *Haqa’iq*. Ayoub’s discussion of al-Radi details his treatment of specific verses of the Qur’an, and concludes by referring to al-Radi as a “Mu‘tazili-Shi’i” scholar.<sup>161</sup> There is however, nothing in Ayoub’s preceding discussion on al-Radi’s exegetical style and literary overtures that sufficiently explains what Ayoub intends by the classification “Mu‘tazili-Shi’i.” The reader is left to infer that the link between these two schools of thought was but a natural one.

Although Ayoub’s reference is the most explicit, each one of these authors situates al-Radi and his *Haqa’iq* within an intellectual tradition that was linked to the Mu‘tazili school of thought while still maintaining his distinct identity as an Imami Shi’i scholar. Let us examine

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<sup>160</sup> Alnoor Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalam: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Mu‘tazili Cosmology*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>161</sup> Ayoub, “Literary Exegesis of the Qur’an,” 296.

more carefully possible reasons that would justify classifying al-Radi as a Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i scholar.

### **Al-Radi’s Mu‘tazili Links: Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar**

According to the biographical sources, al-Radi’s main teachers for Mu‘tazili ideas included the leading Imami theologian, Shaykh al-Mufid, with whom al-Radi’s mother entrusted both her sons for their education at an early age after the death of their father. Also crucial to al-Radi’s scholarly training was the prominent Shafi‘i Mu‘tazili theologian, Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar. Al-Mufid himself studied with the Baghdadi line of Mu‘tazili scholars and ‘Abd al-Jabbar with the Basran.<sup>162</sup> The main difference between these two schools is the degree to which scholars accorded “reason” a prominent place in the hermeneutical exercise.<sup>163</sup> Although there were still some cases where the Baghdad school upheld the necessary recourse to revelation, the Basran school accorded reason a much more autonomous and decisive role. So al-Mufid for example, “rejected the cardinal Mu‘tazili position that the basic truths of religion can and must be discovered by reason alone, and he insisted that transmitted revelation (*sam‘*) is indispensable for reason to gain religious knowledge.”<sup>164</sup> In al-Radi’s discussions on the Qur’an (in the *Haqa’iq*), there is no explicit mention of his teacher al-Mufid. Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar on the other hand, is cited frequently, as one among a host of scholarly opinions on any particular issue.

It is not only al-Radi’s teachers that connect him to the Mu‘tazili school of thought. The very task of focusing on the ambiguous verses for the purpose of explication has been described

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<sup>162</sup> Abu ‘l-Qasim al-Balkhi al-Ka’bi (d. after 962C.E.), the head of the Baghdad school of the Mu‘tazila was Shaykh Mufid’s main teacher in Mu‘tazili theology. See Wilferd Madelung, “al-Mufid.” ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s main teacher was Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Basri (d.980C.E.). See J. van Ess, s.v. “Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Basri,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Brill Online, 2013), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/abu-abd-allah-al-basri-SIM\\_8231](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/abu-abd-allah-al-basri-SIM_8231) (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>163</sup> McDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh Al-Mufid*, 396.

<sup>164</sup> Madelung, “Shaykh al-Mufid.”

as a characteristically Mu‘tazili enterprise motivated by the need to offer alternate explanations for Qur’anic statements which, when read literally, carried anthropomorphic connotations. While the Mu‘tazilites were not the first group to argue for a softening of the anthropomorphic expressions of God’s person, they were the first to develop a hermeneutic on the basis of that premise by applying it to all verses of the Qur’an.<sup>165</sup> As a result, this style developed into a genre where instead of explaining each and every verse in the Qur’an, it was common to elucidate only those verses that required clarification. As attested in the *Fihrist* (catalogue) of Ibn Nadim (d.998CE), several Mu‘tazili scholars had titles under the name, *mutashabih al-Qur’an*.<sup>166</sup> Most notably, al-Radi’s teacher Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar has also authored his own explication of the ambiguous verses of the Qur’an.<sup>167</sup>

Thus, al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar are two tenth century scholars connected not only through the bond of a teacher/disciple relationship, but also by virtue of their individual attempts to identify and explain the ambiguous verses of the Qur’an. However, that being said, it remains problematic to characterize al-Radi’s work as a product of “Mu‘tazili influence”. The presence of certain Mu‘tazili figures in his intellectual genealogy does not translate into a relationship of unfiltered influence with Mu‘tazili thought. While acknowledging the cross-pollination of Shi‘i and Mu‘tazili thought, it is critical to carefully unpack important points of commonality and disjuncture between these schools of thought in relation to Qur’an exegesis. The objective of such an exercise should be neither to establish Mu‘tazili influence over Shi‘i exegesis and nor to uncover an authentic Shi‘ism cleansed from external influences. Rather, what is required is a

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<sup>165</sup> Fudge, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics*, 115.

<sup>166</sup> Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Yusuf ‘Ali Tawil, and Ahmad Shams al-Din, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1996), 52-57.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*, ed. ‘Adnan Muhammad Zarzur, (Cairo: Dar al-Turath, 1969).

careful reading of how Shi‘i exegetes engaged and wrestled with important themes and questions brought into view by Mu‘tazili thought. That is precisely what I attempt in the following section by undertaking a comparative analysis of al-Radi’s Qur’an hermeneutics in the *Haqa’iq* with that of his Mu‘tazili teacher Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar. The juxtaposition of these two important works reveals important moments of overlap and dissonance between Shi‘i and Mu‘tazili traditions of Qur’an exegesis in early Islam.

Figure 4.1:

<b>Selection of Ambiguous Verses in al-Jabbar and al-Radi in Qur'an Sura 3, Al 'Imran</b>	
Note: shaded areas indicate those verses that both al-Radi and al-Jabbar discuss	
<b>al-Radi in <i>Haqa'iq</i></b>	<b>al-Jabbar in <i>Mutashabih al-Qura'n</i></b>
	Qur'an 3:3-3:4 - Descent points to the Qur'an as created ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:7 - Use of masculine pronoun he ( <i>huwa</i> ) for feminine womb/mother ( <i>'um</i> ) ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.1)	Qur'an 3:7 - Ambiguous verses ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:8 - God as cause of human deviation? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.2)	Qur'an 3:8- God as cause for human deviation ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:13 - God reduced the no. of Muslims in the eyes of polytheists? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.3)	Qur'an 3:13 - God gives victory to whom He wills ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:14 - God as beautifier of desires ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.4)	Qur'an 3:14 - God as cause for the beautification of desires ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:18 - God testifies on Himself? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.5)	Qur'an 3:18 - testification that God does not commit evil ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:26 - God gives power to the unjust? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.6)	Qur'an 3:19 - God as hastener of accounting points to humans as agents ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:28 - Taking unbelievers as allies ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.7)	Qur'an 3:26 - God gives power to the unjust ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:36 - The man is not like the woman ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.8)	Qur'an 3:33 - God "chose" the prophets ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:40 - Zachariah's doubt on having a son ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.9)	
Qur'an 3:45 - Jesus as the word of God, mismatched gender of pronoun ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.10)	Qur'an 3:42 - Mary as "chosen" by God ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:47 - If God wills something to be, he says to it be and it is
	Qur'an 3:54 - God as plotter ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:55 - confirms the return of all creation to God ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:55 - God exalts Jesus and raises him above others ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:55 - God raises the followers of Jesus above the unbelievers ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:60 - Prophetic doubt ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.11)	
Qur'an 3:61 - Mubahala verse; How can the Prophet invite himself? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.12)	
Qur'an 3:64 - People of the Book taking other gods? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.13)	
	Qur'an 3:71 - God cloaks truth with falsehood? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:73 - All guidance is God's guidance ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:75 - Unreliable cheaters from the People of the Book ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.14)	
	Qur'an 3:78 - People make false claims about what the Bible says, points to human agency ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:81 - Prophets must recognize earlier prophets? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.15)	
Qur'an 3:83 - Forced submission? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.16)	Qur'an 3:83 - Compulsion in submission? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:85 - the only religion that will be accepted from God is islam ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:86- God "prefers" the believers over the unjust? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:90 - Repentance of unbelievers not accepted? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.17)	Qur'an 3:90 - Repentance of unbelievers not accepted? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:91 - Superfluous letter 'waw' ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.18)	Qur'an 3:91- those who die as disbelievers will have no forgiveness? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:96 - Mecca as the first house? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.19)	
Qur'an 3:97 - Equating unbelievers with believers unable to perform Hajj ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.20)	Qur'an 3:97 - Pilgrimage as duty to God owed by all able people, points to ability before action ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:102 - Obeying God as He ought to be obeyed ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.21)	
	Qur'an 3:106 - those that are not unbelievers will not go to the fire ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:108 - God does not wish any wrong for His creation ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:109 - All actions must return to God - were they ever detached? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.22)	
Qur'an 3:110 - Repetition of God's name (in discussion ( <i>fasl</i> ) section) ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> , 3.23)	
Qur'an 3:110 - "Best <i>'umma</i> " as reference to the past community? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.23)	
Qur'an 3:111 - It won't hurt you except it will pain ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.24)	
	Qur'an 3:117 - It is not God that wrongs them but they wrong themselves ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:123 - God's aid in the battle of Badr? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:126 - No help except from God ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:128 - No actions are from you ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.25)	Qur'an 3:128 - No actions are from you ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:131 - Fire prepared only for the unbelievers? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:133 - Breadth of paradise equal to heaven & earth ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.26)	Qur'an 3:133 - Proof of human capability ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:134 Proof of human capability ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:135 Proof of human capability ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:138 - Proof for everyone, guidance for God consciuous ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:140 - ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:143 - Vision of death? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.27)	
Qur'an 3:145- Equivalence of reward seekers of this life & the Hereafter ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.28)	Qur'an 3:145 - verse suggests no sin on the killer ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:152 - verse points that events of Uhud were from God ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:153 - God as agent of defeat on Uhud ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:154 - What has been written down will happen ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.29)	Qur'an 3:154 - Humans are not agents; information about death doesn't impact its realization ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:159 - Human capability since Prophet affected by negative actions of community ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:160 - God's help and its implications for predestination ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:165 - ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:166 - ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:169 - ( <i>dalala</i> )
Qur'an 3:175 - Satan fears his allies? ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.30)	
	Qur'an 3:179 - ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
Qur'an 3:178 - Respite for unbelievers so they increase in sin ( <i>Haqa'iq</i> 3.31)	Qur'an 3:178 - God wants unbelievers to increase in sin? ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:179 - ( <i>mas'ala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:182 - ( <i>dalala</i> )
	Qur'an 3:192 - ( <i>dalala</i> )

## Structural differences between al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* and 'Abd al-Jabbar's *Mutashabih*

'Abd al-Jabbar's work, *Mutashabih al-Qur'an*, consists of two volumes, of which he devotes thirty-eight pages to the third Sura of the Qur'an, Al 'Imran. While only a single volume of what al-Radi's ten volume commentary, *Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil*, has survived, in it he devotes three hundred pages to Al 'Imran. For each verse examined, 'Abd al-Jabbar offers approximately three lines of discussion and al-Radi close to ten pages. To be sure, these numbers are in no way absolute not only because there is often cross referencing within a single text but also because their discussions on the same verses spill over into their other writings as well.<sup>168</sup>

Structurally, a major difference between 'Abd al-Jabbar and al-Radi's discussions is that 'Abd al-Jabbar singles out verses that fulfill two different conditions: ambiguous verses that raise questions or dilemmas (*mas'ala*), and verses that serve as doctrinal proofs (*dalala*). Of the two hundred verses in Sura Al 'Imran, 'Abd al-Jabbar identifies eighteen as proof verses and thirty-two as ambiguous. Al-Radi only discusses ambiguous verses, of which he identifies thirty-one. Between the thirty-two ambiguous verses in Sura Al 'Imran that 'Abd al-Jabbar selects and the thirty-one that al-Radi selects, only eleven are shared between both thinkers (see the shaded boxes in Figure 4.1). However, often, the discussion on these shared verses focuses on a completely different kind of ambiguity. A telling example of their diverging approaches is their discussion of verse 3:91:

Those who disbelieve and die disbelievers will not be saved even if they offer enough gold to fill the entire earth. Agonizing torment is in store for them, and there will be no one to help them.

(Qur'an 3:91, tr. 'Abd al-Haleem)

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<sup>168</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar also provides his interpretations of specific Qur'anic verses in *Tanzih al-Qur'an 'an al-mata'in*, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahdah al-Hadithah, 1966), and al-Radi in *Talkhis al-bayan fi majazat al-Qur'an*, (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyah, 1955).

For ‘Abd al-Jabbar, the ambiguity of this verse lies in the theological conundrum it raises; it suggests that the repentance of a disbeliever will not be accepted. This meaning had serious ramifications for the foremost principle of Mu‘tazili theology: God’s justice.<sup>169</sup> By contrast, for al-Radi, the ambiguity in this verse gives rise to an entirely different dilemma; he is puzzled by the seeming redundancy of the Arabic letter *waw* between the two clauses of this verse. Al-Radi felt it important to defend the authority of the Qur’an as a purposeful guidance from God by removing all possibilities of superfluity within it. With these different interests in mind, ‘Abd al-Jabbar seeks to explain that it is only under certain conditions that repentance is not accepted, while al-Radi presents a detailed analysis of the subtle operations of the letter *waw*.

Another moment where al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar diverge on the very nature of the ambiguity is in their discussion of the following verse:

Hurry towards your Lord’s forgiveness and a Garden as wide as the heavens and earth prepared for the righteous.

(Qur’an 3:133, tr. Abdel Haleem)

For al-Radi, the verse poses a logical problem: why is the width of the heavens the unit of measure and not its length? This dilemma leads al-Radi to address larger questions on the relation between space and temporality. Hypothetical interlocutors in al-Radi’s discussion raise the following questions: “if paradise is as wide as the heavens and the earth then where is the space for hell?” and “do heaven and hell already exist or will they be brought into existence after this world comes to an end?” Al-Radi presents his own views in response to each of these questions, providing evidence from the lexical canon including the Qur’an, Hadith, poetry, and speech of the Arabs. ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion, by contrast, is concerned with the categorical assertion in the clause, “heaven is prepared for the righteous,” and its opposite which appears in

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<sup>169</sup> U. Rudolph, s.v. “*al-Wa‘d wa ‘l-Wa‘id (The Promise and the Threat)*,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Second Edition, Brill Online, 2013), [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-wad-wa-l-waid-SIM\\_7796](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-wad-wa-l-waid-SIM_7796), (accessed on 23 May 2013).

the previous verse, “hell is prepared for the disbelievers.” How, he asks, can the inhabitants of hell be limited to the category of “disbelievers” when there are many degrees of disbelief? He argues that the fate of the grave sinners, who do not fall under the category “disbelievers,” cannot be left unexplained.<sup>170</sup> In order to account for this ambiguity ‘Abd al-Jabbar applies the logic of inference. He explains that since we know that there are not only believers in paradise, but also children and the wide-eyed virgins, we can infer that hell can also include the grave sinner.<sup>171</sup>

These examples clearly demonstrate that on several occasions, not only did al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar differ from one another on the question of which verses count as ambiguous in the Qur’an, they also held distinct views on why any given verse was labeled ambiguous. However, despite this variation, it should be noted that it would be incorrect to say that al-Radi’s explanations do not address theological questions. In fact, many of the ambiguous verses he identifies do pertain to theological conundrums in the sense that they threaten fundamental theological principles that al-Radi seeks to preserve, much like ‘Abd al-Jabbar. But how does he preserve them? What discursive and hermeneutical strategies did he mobilize and how were these strategies different from or similar to ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s? In the remainder of this chapter, I pursue these questions by studying al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussions on three themes pertaining to “theology” (when understood in its broader meaning of “philosophical metaphysics”): 1) agency of human beings, 2) the sovereignty of God and 3) prophetic intercession and infallibility. I have selected these themes because according to the existing

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<sup>170</sup> The fate of the grave sinner was a contentious question, and eventually became one of the doctrines by which the Mu‘tazili School distinguished themselves from others (including the Imami Shi‘i). Through the slogan “the Promise and the Threat,” one of the “Five Principles” considered characteristic of Mu‘tazili theology, the Mu‘tazila expressed their conviction that not only the unbelievers had to face damnation on the Day of Judgment, but that Muslims who had committed a grave sin without repentance were also threatened by eternal hellfire. See Rudolph, “*al-Wa‘d wa ‘l-Wa‘id*.”

<sup>171</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*, 160-161.

narrative of “Mu‘tazili influence,” it is in this context that the interpretations and positions of Imami and Mu‘tazili scholars ought to clearly converge (agency of human beings, sovereignty of God) or diverge (prophetic intercession and infallibility). However, a close examination of al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s individual concerns tells a different story. Their arguments and the normative sources on which those arguments were based alert us to moments that are difficult to plot onto a neatly demarcated map of distinct theological/sectarian identities. Let us begin our analysis by considering al-Radi’s and ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion on the theme of the interaction of human agency and submission to the divine sovereign.

## **Section 4.2**

### **Theme I: Agency of Human Beings**

#### **Ambiguity: Unwilling submission to God?**

Do they seek anything other than submission to God? Everyone in the heavens and earth submits to Him, willingly or unwillingly; they will all be returned to Him.

(Qur’an 3:83. tr. Abdel Haleem)

This verse raises some pressing theological questions. How, asks the questioner in al-Radi’s text, can the verse imply that submitting (*islam*) is through obedience (*taw‘*) and force (*karh*)? What does an unwilling or “forced” submission to God mean, particularly when read together with verse 2:256 which states, “there is no compulsion in religion”? What implications does “forced submission” have for free will and individual human agency? And if submission is forced then how can human beings be rewarded for their obedience or punished for their disobedience to the Will of God? In other words, does this not undermine the very foundation of the human condition as morally responsible agents (*mukallafun*)?<sup>172</sup> These are some of the

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<sup>172</sup> According to the Mu‘tazili framework of *taklif* (moral responsibility), justice works both ways. It is due to God’s Justice that humans are held accountable because they are responsible for their actions and have the ability

questions that arise due to the ambiguous construction of verse 3:83, and both al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar offer separate explanations as a way to resolve the apparent ambiguity.

‘Abd al-Jabbar addresses this ambiguity in his *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*. His clarification is brief and to the point. The term *islam* here, he argues, is used in the meaning of surrender (*istislam, khudu*). He notes,

When the term *islam* is used in relation to God, it does not convey the meaning of absolute submission (*al-islam al-mutlaq*). Similarly, when belief (*al-iman*) is used in the expression, “belief in God and His Prophet,” here too it is the linguistic meaning of belief (even if its application suggests otherwise). What God means by this verse is that a person is not able to resist what God carries out in regard to his affairs. This kind of unwilling surrender is not entitled to reward.<sup>173</sup>

Critical here is ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s distinction between the *types* of submission to the divine. His classification suggests that submission occurs in the form of a necessary state or condition (*istislam*), or it is a choice that a morally responsible individual (*mukallaf*) actively makes and receives reward for. He argues that the meaning of *islam* in verse 3:83, is that of *istislam*, which does not incur any reward.

‘Abd al-Jabbar reinforces the reading of “*islam*” as “*istislam*” in his treatment of the iconic verse 3:85. The verse reads:

If anyone seeks a religion (din) other than islam to God, it will not be accepted from him: he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter.  
(Qur’an 3:85)

‘Abd al-Jabbar argues the following:

This verse indicates that *Din* (religion) and Islam are synonymous, much like Islam and Belief (*Iman*) are synonymous. This is because it is necessary to say that one’s Belief (*Iman*) is accepted through Islam. So if *Din* and *Iman* were other than Islam, they would refer

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to act. It is also due to God’s Justice that it is incumbent on God to accept human repentance and prayer. Any beliefs that fell outside the rules of this justice-centered system were rejected, including intercession.

<sup>173</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*, 149-150.

to things that were not accepted through Islam. For this reason they must be the same as Islam, which includes all obligations and obedience, from actions of the limbs and the hearts. Thus the term Islam on this occasion is invoked in its normative meaning (*shar‘i*) not linguistic (*lughawi*). This is because if its meaning was *istislam* and *khudu‘* (generic surrender), then it would refer to those things that must be accepted like prayer<sup>174</sup> etc.”<sup>175</sup>

‘Abd al-Jabbar’s argument for reading *iman* and *islam* synonymously is supported by the Mu‘tazili principle that it is *incumbent* upon God to accept supplications and repentance of His Creation when they fulfill certain conditions. Also worth noting here is the distinction ‘Abd al-Jabbar draws between the general (*lughawi*) and the normative (*shar‘i*) connotations of a Qur’anic term. The earliest work where this division has been noted is in the famous lexicographer Ibn Faris’s (d.1004CE) *Sahibi*.<sup>176</sup> The idea of the evolution of terms into a technical meaning was perhaps first brought up by al-Zajjaji (d.950CE), but Ibn Faris introduced the categories of *ism lughawi* (linguistic meaning) and *ism shar‘i* (normative legal epithet) and argued it was normal for terms to carry both literal and technical (*sina‘i*) meanings.<sup>177</sup> Thus it is possible to trace through ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s invocation of the *islam/istislam* distinction, a multitude of theological and literary conversations taking place in Baghdad’s scholarly circles at the time.

Thus far, I have discussed ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s argument as it is presented in different parts of his commentary on the Qur’an’s ambiguous verses (*Mutashabih al-Qur’an*). Another important source for his views is al-Radi’s *Haqa’iq*, in which ‘Abd al-Jabbar is one of the most frequently cited figures.

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<sup>174</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s use of the term *salat* (prayer) here is in its general linguistic meaning, not the technical meaning of prayer as prescribed by Muhammad.

<sup>175</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*, 149-150.

<sup>176</sup> Michael Carter, “Language Control as People Control in Medieval Islam,” 69.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

According to al-Radi's presentation of 'Abd al-Jabbar's discussion of verse 3:83, 'Abd al-Jabbar's objective is not only to offer his own interpretation, but to also challenge existing interpretations of this verse.<sup>178</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar argues that in seeking to explain forced submission, some scholars present the following argument:

1. All human beings possess an awareness of God's sovereignty.
2. People who attest to this awareness through their actions submit in obedience.
3. People who do not attest to this awareness through their actions submit by force.

'Abd al-Jabbar rejects this logic since its very foundation, he argues, rests on a dubious premise: namely that all human beings possess knowledge of God's sovereignty *a priori*. He explains that this cannot be the case since among the morally responsible humans there are those who do not have any faith in God whatsoever. Here, 'Abd al-Jabbar seeks to reinforce the central tenet of Mu'tazili thought, that knowledge of God is not a given; it is acquired. 'Abd al-Jabbar did not want to reduce the supreme moral act of submission to a simple choice of acceptance/rejection, since this model of divine/human relations left no room for the critical importance of acquiring knowledge. Thus, he explained that the unreflective form of submission referred to in this verse carries the linguistic/ *lughawi* meaning of *istislam* or surrender as opposed to the normative or "*shar'i*" meaning of the term, which is submission. For 'Abd al-Jabbar then, the level of submission implied by the normative meaning of *islam* could only be achieved through sustained rational inquiry.

By arguing that *islam* in its normative meaning of active submission was only possible through sustained rational inquiry, 'Abd al-Jabbar was invoking the Mu'tazili view that acquiring knowledge is a *means* for gaining proximity to God. 'Abd al-Jabbar employed the

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<sup>178</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 156-157.

same line of reasoning to explain the presence of ambiguous verses in the Qur'an.<sup>179</sup> If the Qur'an was completely straightforward, he argues, it would deny its readers the privilege of struggling to acquire its meaning.<sup>180</sup> The responsibility of acquiring knowledge is thus a critical aspect of the Mu'tazili "*taklif*" (moral responsibility) framework, which determines how the Godhead, Creation, and the conditions of the relationship by which they are connected are imagined. By positing knowledge and its logical conclusion of submission as acquired acts, 'Abd al-Jabbar rejects the view that the fundamental relationship between God and Creation is inevitably one of duress or force. As for verse 3:83 and its reference to "forced submission," 'Abd al-Jabbar notes that it refers to the final moments before a person's death when they are on the brink of leaving the state of moral responsibility (*taklif*). In sum, according to 'Abd al-Jabbar's *taklif* framework, Islam (submission) mandates the freedom to choose. The phrasing of verse 3:83 obscures the cohesiveness of the *taklif* framework by threatening human agency, and is therefore an ambiguity that must be resolved. We have seen that for 'Abd al-Jabbar the answer to this ambiguity need not be derived from the text of the Qur'an itself but rather through the independent exertion of human inquiry.

Turning to al-Radi's treatment of this verse, it is helpful to highlight some important points of similarity and difference with 'Abd al-Jabbar's hermeneutic. The first thing that immediately grabs the reader's attention is the considerably lengthier discussion that he devotes to this topic as compared to 'Abd al-Jabbar. The main reason for this is that in the *Haqa'iq*, it is standard hermeneutical practice for al-Radi to preface his explanation of a Qur'anic verse with an overview of his predecessors' positions. An important benefit of this strategy, adopted by

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<sup>179</sup> For a detailed discussion of 'Abd al-Jabbar's position on the "purpose" of ambiguity, see chapter five, "Ambiguity, Metaphor, and the Hermeneutics of Concealing and Revealing."

<sup>180</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah al-'aqli fi al-tafsir: dirasah fi qadiyat al-majaz fi al-Qur'an 'inda al-Mu'tazilah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir lil-Tiba'ah wa-al-Nashr, 1982), 180-190.

several exegetes, was that it allowed the author to hone in on how his own perspective was unique. Although al-Radi employs this structural technique, for the most part, he does not engage with the multiple perspectives he enumerates. He neither accepts nor denies them; he simply adds his own reading at the end of the list. However, it is instructive to remain attentive to the multiple scholarly perspectives since they not only alert us to the multiple discursive currents operative in al-Radi's intellectual milieu, but in most cases also provide the framing or conceptual architecture on which al-Radi's own position rests.

In his discussion of verse 3:83, al-Radi lists eight different scholarly opinions, including that of 'Abd al-Jabbar, which I described above. It is interesting to notice how in al-Radi's discussion of this verse and other verses in the *Haqa'iq*, the majority of opinions that he lists remain anonymous *except* when they refer back to 'Abd al-Jabbar. This practice shows the importance al-Radi assigned to authoritatively connecting his arguments with those of his teacher, 'Abd al-Jabbar.

Like 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Radi tackled the ambiguity surrounding the notion of "forced submission," by reading the term "*islam*" (submission) in this verse as "*istislam*" (surrendering). However, he departed from 'Abd al-Jabbar by offering an alternate view of what qualifies as *istislam karihan* or forced surrender. In addition, and here was the most crucial difference, in meeting this objective, al-Radi relied almost exclusively on the linguistic canon to support his views.

To begin, al-Radi explains that "they submit unwillingly" (*aslamu karahan*) here is only applicable to beings of this world because the angels, or inhabitants of the heavens, cannot be attributed with forced submission. Second, al-Radi seeks to clarify who or what would fit this

description. Unlike ‘Abd al-Jabbar, who held that it applied to those on the throes of death since it is at this time that they must submit out of necessity, al-Radi presents a different scheme.

He argues that “it is possible [to argue] that submission (*islam*) of earthly beings - if it [submission] is read here as surrender (*istislam*) - refers to [the surrender of] nonrational beings from among children and beasts.” Next, al-Radi argues that it is the surrender of these nonrational beings that counts as “unwilling surrender.” He further explains that this is because nonrational beings are incapable of warding off the afflictions that God brings down upon them, including pain, severity and striving - despite the fact that these are abominable to them. This condition, which renders them incapable of resisting these affairs, is what warrants describing them as surrendering unwillingly.

However, another ambiguity is still left answered. In order to ensure that his interpretation of “unwilling surrender” as a reference to “nonrational beings” can apply, al-Radi must also explain why the verse uses a certain form of the pronoun “those” (*man*) in this verse, which typically only applies to intelligent or rational beings. It is in his effort to defend this point of linguistic detail that al-Radi devotes the majority of his discussion. He produces lines of poetry by Farazdaq and Labid as well as other reinforcing verses from the Qur’an as his primary evidence.

To recap, the resolution to the ambiguity in verse 3:83, which in its apparent meaning threatened the free will of human beings by its reference to “forced submission,” is resolved by al-Radi by means of two critical clarifications. Al-Radi’s first clarification is that *islam* here is not used in its normative meaning of active adherence to the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet. Rather, it is used in the meaning of *istislam* or *sallama* – both of which imply “the surrendering of oneself over to.” Al-Radi’s second clarification is that included in this linguistic

meaning of “surrendering oneself over to,” are both rational and nonrational beings, thus the term “unwilling surrender” in this verse refers to nonrational beings of this world. I have noted above that the majority of al-Radi’s discussion is devoted to providing textual evidence for the second clarification. And it is possible to argue that al-Radi expects that his enumeration of other scholarly opinions suffices as justification for the first clarification, namely, the use of *islam* in this verse as *istislam*. It is to these scholarly opinions that I now turn.

According to some (unnamed) scholars, the meaning of *islam* as *istislam* is illustrated through reference to the Qur’anic verse in which the satanic figure Iblis states, “Then, O my Sustainer, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be raised from the dead!”<sup>181</sup> According to this view, the verse shows that Iblis’ request for respite is indicative of his essential condition of surrendering to God’s will, and the acknowledgment that he is a slave ruled by God whose order he cannot escape. So despite his deviance from the straight path, Iblis is counted as among those who surrender (*mustaslimun*). This novel construal of Iblis is significant in the way it situates the transgression of the ultimate source of human error within a larger scheme of natural and necessary submission. In addition, by counting Iblis from among the *mustaslimun*, this position highlights the critical difference between the linguistic meaning of *islam* or “*istislam*,” which even a figure like Iblis participates in, and the normative meaning of *islam*, which is the active surrender to God’s Will and the exclusive result of human deliberation and each individual’s choosing.

A second example that al-Radi cites from among the scholarly opinions to justify the use of the verb “*aslama*” in the meaning of *istislam* is a commentary on another Qur’anic verse that reads:

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<sup>181</sup> Qur’an 15:36.

The Bedouins say, “We believe.” Say: ‘You do not believe; rather say, “We submit.”’

(Qur’an, 49:14)

The apparent meaning of this verse suggests that there is a difference between the condition of belief and the condition of submission such that the state of submission is understood to *precede* belief. It is for this reason that the Bedouins are corrected, or even scolded, not to presume that they have already attained the stage of belief. An important message in this verse according to the above reading is the human potential for spiritual growth. It conjures for the reader the image of an underlying hierarchy of spiritual conditions whereby an individual moves or progresses from one stage to the next. This idea was emphasized and further developed in mystical commentaries that sought to describe the journey of the human soul in its quest to know God.<sup>182</sup> Many of al-Radi’s predecessors and contemporaries, such as al-Tabari (d.923CE), al-Qushayri (d.1072CE), and al-Tha‘alabi (d.1035CE), also invoked this meaning. What is interesting to note here is that al-Radi’s unnamed scholar presented a distinct exegesis of this verse, according to which the distinction between *belief* and *submission*, which was posited in the above-mentioned works, is overturned. According to this view, belief and submission are one and the same, and the way to understand this verse is to grasp that there are multiple applications of the term *islam*, “to submit.” Specifically, according to this view, “*aslama*” was read here as “*istaslama*” or to surrender, so that the verse insinuates that the Bedouins had not attained a state of active submission such that praise was due to them. Rather, they remained in the necessary condition of surrendering to the Will of God. Once faith entered their hearts, only then could they claim active submission and/or belief. One of al-Radi’s sources for this argument for the

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<sup>182</sup> For example, al-Qushayri (d.1072CE) argues that *islam* is *istislam* or external surrender, and not everyone who surrenders on the outside is pure (*mukhlis*) inside (*sirran*). Similarly al-Tha‘alabi (d.1035CE) explains that “*islam* is *istislam*. As for *al-iman*, it is affirmation with the heart. Attestations of the tongue and body do not count as *iman* without purity (*ikhlas*), which occurs in the heart. Thus *iman* is not the same as *islam*.” See [altafsir.com](http://altafsir.com) (accessed on 16 June 2012).

interchangeability of *islam* and *iman* may have been ‘Abd al-Jabbar, although al-Radi does not refer to him in his discussion. However, ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s view, which I have outlined above, can be found in his commentary and it is possible to assume that al-Radi was familiar with it.

In sum, even as al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar sought to guarantee human agency and freedom of choice by arguing for different levels of submission, their reading of verse 3:83 differed in critical ways. For instance, whereas ‘Abd al-Jabbar turned to external sources, namely the logic of Mu‘tazili theological principles, al-Radi pointed to the internal Qur’anic evidence of linguistic form. By “linguistic form,” I mean to say that al-Radi’s explanations are supported by multiple etymologies and connotations of specific terms. In turn, the etymologies he uncovers are themselves bolstered by proof texts (*shawahid*) drawn from the Qur’an, the poetic tradition, and everyday expressions of the Arabs. Language and its underlying normative authority, was at the centerpiece of al-Radi’s analytical apparatus.

Also worth noting is that al-Radi’s attempt to argue for the rationality of theological principles rested precisely on the authority of language. Thus on the one hand, al-Radi’s explanations of the Qur’anic text moved away from a characteristically logocentric approach that privileges the hadith or sayings of the Prophet and the Imams as the only authoritative source for interpretation. On the other hand, his deferral of meaning to the rules of a linguistic canon reinscribed a logocentrism even as it ultimately sought to defend the inherently “rational” principles shared between the Mu‘tazili and the Shi‘i Imami schools. Careful consideration of these differences between ‘Abd al-Jabbar and al-Radi’s reasoning, in particular the varied projects for which they employed rational principles, is a critical step for the task of reimagining the relationship of “influence” currently employed to describe Mu‘tazili-Shi‘i interactions. This is because al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s varied interpretive strategies point to a much more

dynamic relationship, of convergence and divergence, than the predictable outcomes implied by the reductive language of “influence.” In further illustrating an alternative conceptual approach that closely navigates the hermeneutical moves and logics on pressing theological and moral questions, I now turn to an analysis of al-Radi and ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion on the theme of divine sovereignty and justice.

## **Theme II: Sovereignty of God**

### **Ambiguity: God gives dominion to the unjust?**

Say, ‘God, holder of all control, You give control to whoever You will and remove it from whoever You will; You elevate whoever You will and humble whoever You will. All that is good lies in Your hand: You have power over everything.

(Qur’an 3:26, tr. Abdel Haleem)

The apparent meaning of this verse suggests that God is all-powerful and it is within His power to elevate anyone (just or unjust), and to humble anyone (just or unjust). In al-Radi’s discussion, a hypothetical interlocutor thus raises the following question: “your school claims that the dominion of the oppressor is acquired unjustly and counts as an act of usurpation. So how is it that this verse states that God gives dominion, which means that the oppressor’s dominion is granted by God?” Theologically, the ambiguity this verse raises is that it proposes a relationship between God and His Creation that is not governed by the fundamental principle of God’s justice.

Instead, it depicts an impulsive God who acts indiscriminately towards His creatures. Moreover, it challenges the view that human actions determine what God will decree for them. Both ‘Abd al-Jabbar and al-Radi identify this verse as ambiguous because of the challenge it poses to the unconditional applicability of God’s justice. However, al-Radi’s interpretive strategy in tackling this verse operates on a different conceptual register than that of ‘Abd al-Jabbar.

Al-Radi proposes a meaning of “sovereignty” as “capacity,” which contrasts with a meta-

theory of Muslim political power, and instead shifts the discourse to individual capacity. I argue that al-Radi's emphasis on the individual was informed by his personal experiences with the distribution of power under the Buyid dynasty. In this way, instead of reading the Qur'an as a commentary of Muslim imperial politics, al-Radi's interpretation lends more weight to the ethical teachings embedded in this verse. Most crucially, the evidence he offers to support his position, constitute arguments on etymological nuance.

'Abd al-Jabbar, on the other hand, dissected the possible meanings of this verse by raising a theological question: what are the *terms* of a divine act of bestowal? He inquires if the dominion that God grants is a "gift" with no further expectations of being returned, or if it is a "loan," which denotes an element of finality to the act of lending. Thus, unlike al-Radi's turn to the linguistic canon, 'Abd al-Jabbar draws extensively from the legal tradition to frame and provide proofs of his explanations. Let us consider each of these lines of argument in greater detail.

As I have shown in previous examples, al-Radi deemed it necessary to include the views of other scholars on the same question, and his own position was often woven into the overview of opinions. Yet, he adopted a distinctly subtler tone quite unlike the disputatious style of typical theological treatises in which the author leads the reader through the inadequacies of multiple perspectives only to eventually champion his own view. Instead, al-Radi walks his reader through an arcade of opinions on a given question before revealing his own. His language is not confrontational; he gently adds his "two cents" to an issue without attempting to negate or overturn the views of his fellow colleagues. What is most striking about the spectrum of opinions that al-Radi mentioned in this discussion and others, is that the main source of difference between the various authors is not motivated solely by theological or sectarian "beliefs."

For example, in his discussion of verse 3:26, al-Radi listed eight different views before presenting his own. Among these is an interpretation in which the unnamed exegete offers a simple explanation for the ambiguity verse. According to this view, God's giving dominion (*mulk*) refers only to that which is just and truthful (*halal*), and not power that has been seized unjustly. As for the clause where God takes power away from anyone he wills (just or unjust), this refers only to the removal of power due to death or due to a change of circumstance. Or it applies to the withdrawal of power from the unjust oppressor. In addition, the same view posits that the verse's reference to God's elevation of whom he wills refers to elevation through wealth, strength and posterity for those who are on the way of Truth. His humbling whom he wills, refers to his enemies in this world and the hereafter, because God doesn't disgrace anyone of his devotees even if they are made poor or sick since these are ways for him to elevate them in the afterlife and help them in that realm.

Another perspective (unnamed), outlined by al-Radi, offers a remarkably specific interpretation of this verse. According to this view, the term dominion in this verse invokes a meaning of dominion as a form of "entitled power," which goes beyond a description of the apparent conditions of people to that which cannot be measured by the finite vision of this world. It extends its reach to the realm of the hereafter, and in so doing argues that temporal appearances of power do not reflect "true" domination. Hence power that is currently not in the hands of the community of Islam is still their right, even as it currently lies in someone else's possession. So the dominion of believers can take the quality of a condition whereby unbelievers possess temporal power and push Muslims away from their possessions, and believers continue to demand this power until they are successful in obtaining it. Put differently, according to this reading dominion is understood as a condition in which religion/normative practice (*al-din*) and

conquest/subjugation (*al-ghalba*) are manifest. What is crucial to note here is that this interpretation comes closest to making a case for Muslim political power and can therefore more appropriately be understood as a discourse on political theology and the sovereignty of the Muslim community at large.

Al-Radi does not indicate his agreement or disagreement with this position but he does clarify the point further, through what can be speculated is his own additional explanation. He notes that this meaning of dominion is understood when *mulk* is situated as a necessary rule (*hukm*) in God's normative arrangement of the world:

God made *mulk* his decree, in the same way that he made the *sunna* of his Prophet for those who are firm in their religion, who fulfill the commandments of religion, and who are steadfast in their obedience to the prophets. And in the same way, God decreed that the male be apportioned double the wealth to that of a female, and that the guardian of the deceased be given authority over the killer. Even though the unjust refute this, and exceed it, and give to the women the same they give to the man, and don't accord to the killer retribution. So those that God has given *mulk* to and elevated, are the believers, even as they are dominated. And those that have not been given a share in *mulk* and are disgraced are the unjust, even as they dominate. This is because the elevation of the unbeliever over the believers is not an elevation in religion (*din*), and not the fruit of their actions, which is ultimately disgrace and calamity. So the humiliation of believers at the hands of unbelievers is not disgrace in reality, because it results in deserving respect and permanent reward. And how can this be called disgrace when God has commanded it for his prophets, who were attacked by the unbelievers?<sup>183</sup>

Critical to note here are the various kinds of normative rules that this perspective provides as being put in place by God. According to this reasoning, the tradition of the Prophet as guidance for human beings is a normative rule in much the same way that apportioning half of one's wealth to women is. This reading is further justified by means of a distinction between two kinds of divine statements: a normative rule (*hukm*) and an imperative command/description

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<sup>183</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 64-65.

(*amr/khabar*). It is maintained that when a statement is a rule (*hukm*), it expresses a meta-reality or normative ideal. In contrast to normative rules or *ahkam*, the objects of imperative commands/descriptions or *umur* are necessarily reflected in the temporal world. Verse 3:97 is cited as evidence, which states, “he who enters it will be in peace.” The verse refers to the Ka‘aba, and it is argued that this statement must carry the weight of a rule or ideal (*hukm*), since it is well known that many people took refuge in the Ka‘aba and were subsequently killed.

A third position that al-Radi mentioned transfers the relevance of verse 3:26 to the hereafter, by arguing that it refers to God’s granting entry to heaven to whomever he pleases and withholding entry from whomever he desires. In a rare moment of intervention, al-Radi critiqued this position and characterized it as highly unsatisfactory and regretful. Why? Because according to al-Radi, the next verse clearly indicates that the reference of verse 3:26 is to this world since it points to a series of events relevant to this world (the night being extended into the day and so on). I argued above that it was characteristic for al-Radi not to comment on any of the opinions he lists. Therefore, this particular instance raises the question of whether al-Radi’s silence can be interpreted as his tacit approval of the other views as *possible* but not preferable readings.

Whatever the case may be, juxtaposing al-Radi’s approach with the other perspectives he lists allows us to better understand the possible hermeneutical objectives behind his interpretation to which I now turn. The first thing that captures our attention when reading al-Radi’s position on this verse (which appears at the end), is that he sought to refute the view that verse 3:26 legitimizes Muslim political power, such that those whom God elevates could be understood to refer to the present ruling dynasty. The way in which al-Radi moved away from this reading was by interpreting *mulk* or dominion not as the subjugation of an external object, but rather as “*qudra*” or capacity. Crucial to this alternate reading was the distinction between

*possibility* of dominion and its *realization*. As a way to authorize his reading of this verse, al-Radi invoked the iconic verse from the opening chapter of the Qur'an: "*malik yawm al-din*." Although this verse has typically been read as "Master of the Day of Judgment," al-Radi reads it as: "God is the one who is capable of *bringing about* the Day of Judgment."<sup>184</sup> Al-Radi explained that *mulk* in the meaning of dominion refers to existing things whereas *qudra* or capacity is not limited in this way. Since the Day of Judgment does not yet exist, he argues, the meaning here is *qudra*. By showing that the same meaning is invoked in verse 3:26, al-Radi argues that it reads as, "God is capable of giving dominion to whomever he wills, and of taking it away from whomever he wills." For al-Radi then, the realization of the divine promise could be deferred to a different (possibly later) historical moment.

Now one should note in passing that al-Radi's hermeneutical program was intimately connected to the political context in which he wrote. His interpretive framework aligned well with his individual efforts to gain political prestige under the Buyids. This is because al-Radi's interpretation of *mulk* as *qudra* (capacity) left open the possibility that *real* power did not necessarily correspond to power in the temporal world. This view can be connected to his own aspirations for the seat of the caliphate, aspirations that were never realized during his life, but had explicitly been aired in his writings.<sup>185</sup> Of course, it is also possible to interpret al-Radi's reading of this verse as an implicit defense of the Imamate, which would align well with the Shi'i discourse of denouncing any leadership other than of the Imams as illegitimate. But the critical point I wish to emphasize is that rather than reducing al-Radi's viewpoint to a representation of the typically "Imami-Shi'i" or "Mu'tazili-Shi'i" response, it is important to consider the ways in

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<sup>184</sup> He gives credit for this reading of *malik yawm al-din* to an earlier Mu'tazili teacher Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i. See al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 69.

<sup>185</sup> See chapter two, titled "Buyid Baghdad and al-Radi's Hermeneutical Identity."

which al-Radi's arguments may well have been embedded in his individual struggle for power in the complex imperial network of the Buyid dynasty.

Al-Radi's positing of this overarching normative outlook was only the beginning of his discussion. His main objective was to present a semiotic map of the term *mulk*, one that could demonstrate how the normative arrangement he described, corresponded to and was affirmed by the language of the Qur'an. Thus he drew on the linguistic canon to authorize his reading of *mulk* as capacity. He argued that the metaphorical link between the two terms, dominion and capacity (*mulk* and *qudra*), is in the form of a relationship. Each person has power over the thing in which s/he is capable of affecting change. Thus the term for God as "Possessor of Dominion" (*malik al mulk*) implies that only in God does the ultimate power for making and changing things reside. Al-Radi further reinforces this point by references to the following aphorisms "well-being (*'afiya*) is hidden power" and "endurance is an immediate strength." Both statements, he argues, refer to faculties (well being, endurance) over which we have control and power, and the statements imply that effecting change in them is a form of strength or power.

Al-Radi further reinforced his argument by interrogating the etymology of the term. He maintained that the term *mulk* also carries the meaning of "severity" (*shidda*) and "connection" (*rabt*) as in the saying, "to knead with strength" (*mallaka al-'ajayn*). Similarly, the fourth grammatical form of the tri-letter root (*ma-la-ka*) from which *mulk* is derived, *imlak*, carries the meaning of "marriage" since a covenant requires a strong bond. So, al-Radi argued, the term *imlak* is used since it is as if the woman were attached to the man. In the same vein, al-Radi continued, is the poet's<sup>186</sup> verse about a "bow:"

[The bow] was strengthened (*mallaka*) by the skin that lay below it  
The egg was concealed by the lining that was above it

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<sup>186</sup> The editor identifies the poet as Aws ibn Hajar (d. 600's CE).

Al-Radi argued that this verse illustrates the subtle meaning of *ma-la-ka* as strong attachment. This meaning is evoked through the imagery of a bow that has not, as was typical, had its skin removed. However, al-Radi explains that this has the positive effect of strengthening the bow. Similarly, the poet describes the lining or membrane above the egg as a protection for it.<sup>187</sup> Al-Radi's analysis of this poetic verse serves to support the meaning of *mulk* as "strong connection," and further bolsters his argument that *mulk* is to be interpreted as capability (*qudra*) or unrealized power.

It is only after his interrogation of the linguistic possibilities of the Qur'anic verse that al-Radi turned to his final point, the inspiration for which he drew from 'Abd al-Jabbar.<sup>188</sup> Al-Radi posed the following hypothetical challenge: how can God take away *mulk* since it is like the taking away of a gift, which is unjust. He explained that ownership (*tamlīk*) can be of two kinds: permanent or temporary. Hence, it is perfectly just for God to give power for a specific purpose and time. When that time expires, the *mulk* is taken away, much like the way a lender interacts with a borrower. The other perspective, al-Radi argued, is that if God made good the revocation of a gift, it is for the sake of a greater compensation (in the hereafter). Another perspective is that God is aware that if *mulk* remains with that person, it will harm his religion (*din*), and so he takes it away.

An examination of 'Abd al-Jabbar's discussion of verse 3:26 in his two works, *Mutashabih al-Qur'an* and *Tanzih al-Qur'an*, and also as he is represented by al-Radi in the *Haqai'q*, makes it clear that al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar's hermeneutical framework shared few

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<sup>187</sup> At this juncture, al-Radi digressed to provide a more subtle interpretation of the same verse. He explained that the poet painted a picture where, the skin, when left attached to the bow, had the additional effect of *shaping* the bow. This meaning, al-Radi argues, reflects the "extension of language" (*ittisa' al-lughā*) and the depths of linguistic possibilities found in the Arabic language.

<sup>188</sup> Al-Radi does not mention 'Abd al-Jabbar in his discussion even though 'Abd al-Jabbar advanced the same argument in his *Mutashabih al-Qur'an*, as I will show.

similarities. ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s drew support for his explanation of this verse from legal discourse whereas al-Radi relied indefatigably on the linguistic canon. But their differences are not limited to the sources to which they turn to support their arguments.

‘Abd al-Jabbar’s primary concern in his discussions of verse 3:26 was to offer a classification of the different types of ownership as well as the terms of the relationship between human and divine dominion. His underlying goal was to preserve the notion of independent human agency, while at the same time upholding God’s ultimate dominion over all things. There are two ambiguous elements in verse 3:26 around which he framed his discussion: “how can God give dominion to the unjust?” This question raises ethical concerns and shows that human agency is under threat. The second ambiguity is “how can God take away dominion from the just?” This question again raises ethical concerns and threatens God’s justice. In response to the first ambiguity, or the question of how God can give *mulk* to the unjust, ‘Abd al-Jabbar explained that “in reality in all *mulk* there is a bond (*‘aqda*), intellect (*al-‘aql*), and investiture (*tamkin*) and this only comes from God. Apart from these basic elements, he argued, the condition of dominion differs such that it includes those who commit types of injustice.”<sup>189</sup> In this way ‘Abd al-Jabbar posited a clear distinction between the *mulk* that God grants, and the injustice that humans commit.

‘Abd al-Jabbar’s response to the second ambiguity, or the question of how could God take away dominion from the unjust, is most clearly articulated in his discussion in the *Mutashabih al-Qur’an*. Here we see that ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s explanation is the same as al-Radi’s own final discussion point in the *Haqa’iq*. He argued that ownership of any kind is either perpetual and absolute or temporary, as jurists have explicated in the case of gifts, loans,

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<sup>189</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Tanzih*, 62-63.

donations in perpetuity, and temporary donations. Thus it is perfectly just for God to take back a gift in the same manner as lenders and donors.

But crucially, unlike al-Radi, ‘Abd al-Jabbar directed this explanation as a challenge to those who seek to respond to the same question by relying solely on the revealed tradition (*sam‘*). He argued that they refer to the revealed sources of knowledge (Qur’an and Hadith) to show that they permit the revocation of a gift from a stranger or a father. He critiques this explanation as insufficient from a rational point of view since the gift becomes like all the other possessions of a person and it is not permissible to take those without mutual consent. Although ‘Abd al-Jabbar does not say so explicitly, with this direct rejoinder to the tradition-centered exegetical explanation, he makes the case for a hermeneutical framework that corresponds to rational normative expectations.

Interestingly, al-Radi cited an entirely different facet of ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s explanation in the *Haqa’iq*, which is not found in ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s commentary of this verse in the *Mutashabih* or *Tanzih*. In this excerpt, ‘Abd al-Jabbar explains that the *mulk* that God grants is divided into *mulk* in religion (*din*), such as prophethood and imamate and what branches out from those, and the *mulk* of material wealth. That which God bestows from the permissible (*mubahat*), like excessive wealth, lofty gifts, resoluteness, strength, endurance, and other types of material wealth, are all multiplied by God, because they are in the category of the permissible. The following question is then raised: “is it ever correct to say there is *mulk* which God has not granted?”

‘Abd al-Jabbar began his answer to this question with the premise that God has created things for the benefit of others. And *mulk* is one such thing. If God did not grant *mulk* to some of his servants, the benefit of it would be lost. Therefore he must grant it to some of his servants.

After establishing this premise, ‘Abd al-Jabbar continued with the following reasoning: *Mulk* that does not lose its benefit if not given to anyone can occur in two situations: 1) that God makes *mulk* from the permissible (*mubahat*), and 2) that God distributes *mulk* among his servants, but not to the extent that we can call their relationship to it *mulk*.<sup>190</sup> Here, ‘Abd al-Jabbar was drawing from the legal division of goods into two categories: *mubahat* and *mulk*. *Mubahat* refers to that which is permissible to everyone but is not owned by anyone (such as a river). As for *mulk*, it is distributed among the servants in such a way that it does not count as ownership per se (such as a road). In other words, there must be several conditions in place for a single individual to have *mulk* over a thing.

In sum, ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion relied on legal distinctions, like owned goods versus accessible goods, and gifts versus loans, to argue that the overarching category “*mulk*” must not be understood to mean a single homogenous thing. This provided ‘Abd al-Jabbar the hermeneutical leverage to balance God’s ultimate sovereignty and justice, and human agency and responsibility.

### **Theme III: Prophetic Intercession and Infallibility** **Ambiguity: The Prophet has no authority?**

A crucial doctrine, on which the Mu‘tazili theologians differed from Imami and Sunni Ash‘ari scholars, was prophethood. Specifically, the Mu‘tazili scholars had a distinct conception of the extent and limits of prophetic power. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, discussions about the prophet were also the precursor to discussions about the Qur’an. This is so because according to the Qur’an, past prophets were attributed with a miracle, which led scholars to assert that the Qur’an was Muhammad’s miracle. Yet, even as Mu‘tazili theologians argued in favor of

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<sup>190</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 68-69.

prophetic miracles, they stopped short of attributing prophets with any intercessory powers. This unwillingness to grant prophets the power to intercede on behalf of their followers was tied to the *taklif* framework, which privileged the principle of God's justice, above all other principles. The notion of intercession disrupted the logic of how justice was accorded, and for this reason was ruled out. The issue was not so much about granting the prophet "supernatural" powers as it was about ensuring the robustness and cohesiveness of their justice-centered theological system.

One of the verses in which al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar discuss their views on this thorny issue of prophetic power is 3:128:

Whether God relents towards them or punishes them, you  
[Muhammad] have no authority (*al-amr*) in the matter: they are  
wrongdoers.

(Qur'an, 3:128)

Al-Radi's hypothetical interlocutor highlights a specific phrase within this verse as objectionable: specifically, "You have no authority (*al-amr*) in the matter (*al-shay'*)." The interlocutor assumes that the verse refers to the Prophet having no say in *any* matter. Consequently, he argues, the verse points to God as the ultimate agent of all human affairs and actions. Challenging al-Radi, he adds that this is clearly not in line with what al-Radi's school (*madhab*) has claimed. In reply, al-Radi presents a scholarly opinion (unnamed) that lashes out against what is characterized as the interlocutor's inane suggestion that this verse undermines the all-important and well-supported principle of human free will. He asserts that the questioner is well aware that God commanded His prophet to invite the unbelievers to God, to repeatedly urge them to listen to his invitation, to be a guide on the path of belief and illumination, to be a warner and informer, and to be a protection for them from the torments of fire. So when God has designated these tasks for the Prophet, how can the questioner assert

that this verse robs the Prophet of his authority? Al-Radi further elaborates on this position, explaining that the meaning of this verse should be understood as follows:<sup>191</sup>

The Prophet has no power over the salvation of the people, or over their reward, destruction, or reform. He does not possess the capacity to manage their affairs at designated times, or to hasten or delay their end. He also has no knowledge of what will improve their conditions in God's normative order (*din*), or of the decay of their subsistence due to disbelief.

When the Prophet witnessed the grave extremity of people's disbelief in him, and their exaggerated attempts to extinguish his light, he asked God for permission to pray for their destruction and for the hastening of their end just like the prophets had done in the past. To this request, God replied with this verse to pacify the Prophet, and to fortify his heart and explain to him that God is all-Knowing of their affairs and their consequences. It is for this reason that God does not give the Prophet permission to pray against them, due to His Knowledge of who among them repents and believes....

God is aware of the place where trees are planted, the point of the ascent of fruits, the beginnings of cross pollination and fertilization, and of the results of births and ends. Thus, God oversees the order for improvement and the rules of this order. He has provided proofs of recompense and witnesses of it. And it is according to this order that God has established the resource of prophets and contiguous alternations of fortune, and made the happiness of a people be followed by misery, and the misery of a people unveil as happiness, on the basis of their betterment and decay, and the knowledge of outcomes.

What reaffirms this is what God says before this [you have no authority in the matter] statement: "Whether God relents towards them or punishes them." This clarifies that the consequence for he who disbelieves is one of two things: either he repents and God accepts his repentance and forgives his error, or he dies persisting [in disbelief]. God's punishment for him in the Afterlife is greater than His punishment for him in this world. Hence the Prophet is not given permission to pray against them, as it would break off

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<sup>191</sup> From the text, it is not entirely clear whether al-Radi is still citing the opinion of the unnamed scholar, or whether he is now providing his own commentary on the position. Based on the lyrical style, rhyme and poetic language (which is not captured in the English translation), I would argue that it is al-Radi's commentary on the commentary.

repentance with the punishment of destruction, and cut off the appointed duration of time.<sup>192</sup>

Critical to note from this discussion is that according to this view, the reason the Prophet ought not to intercede or pray for the destruction of the disbeliever was not because the Prophet was not capable of doing so, rather, because it would interrupt the Divine plan. In other words, the argument that the Prophet has not been given permission to pray for the destruction of disbelievers was based on the assumption that the Prophet's prayers would necessarily be answered by God.

Following this perspective, al-Radi highlighted how other exegetes (among them the Mu'tazili Abu Muslim ibn Bahr (d.934CE), the early exegete Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d.767CE), and the grammarian al-Zujjaj (d.949CE)), approached the ambiguity in verse 3:128. The main question that occupied the attention of the exegetes he lists was this: "what was the context that occasioned this revelation?" Some argued that this verse was revealed after the Battle of Uhud – a regretful event for the early Muslim community since on this day the Prophet sustained several injuries due to the ineptitude of his own followers. The disgracefulness of the event led the Prophet to exclaim, "How can a community that treats its Messenger this way, while he invites them to worship their Lord, ever succeed?" And it was in response to this statement that the verse "You have no say in the matter" was revealed. A different occasion of revelation cited by exegetes for this verse is the moment when the Prophet prayed against his enemies for forty days when they killed one of his envoys from the early community of helpers (*al-'ansar*), ('Amir ibn al-Tufayl), who had been sent to teach them the Qur'an. Other exegetes argue that the verse indicates that the Prophet had power

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<sup>192</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 233-234.

over smaller affairs of his community, but not over larger issues such as whether they would be forgiven or punished on the Day of Judgment.

After laying out the views of different scholars (except ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s, whom he lists at the very end), al-Radi proposes his own reading of the verse, so as to shift the issue away from the debate over its occasion of revelation. He does this by locating the “solution” to the ambiguity in another meaning of the term *al-amr* (authority). He explains that *al-amr* is used in the meaning of “sovereignty” (*al-sultan*), and sovereignty in its real meaning is only for God, even if the Prophet does have some power over the affairs of his community. With this explanation, al-Radi suggests that the Qur’an is making a claim about power in its absolute sense, which cannot be ascribed to anyone other than God. In this way he divests the verse from meaning that the Prophet has no authority over his community and devotes the rest of his discussion to linguistic evidence for using the term *al-amr* in this meaning. He refers to the Qur’anic verse 27:33 in which the people of Bilquis, Queen of Sheba, answered her request for advice on how to respond to Solomon’s invitation to submit. They replied, “you are in command (*al-amr*), so consider what orders to give us.” Al-Radi explained that this means, “authority is with you so command what you will; your command will be followed.” He then turns to another source for the same use of *al-amr* in its absolute meaning. In the speech of Arabs, it is said: “this happened after so and so took power (*taqallada al-amr*) as caliph or so and so as amir.” Al-Radi argued that this expression means, “after he commanded power (*malaka al-sultan*) and regulated the affairs of time (*dabbara al-zaman*).” Similar to this is their saying: “the power (*al-amr*) shifted from so and so to so and so.” In al-Radi’s view, here too *al-amr* is used in the meaning of authority and direction. With these three examples from the Qur’an and speech of the Arabs, al-Radi concluded:

The meaning of the verse is that you [Prophet] have no power or dominion over anything, indeed this is only for God and no one else from His creation, even if the Prophet has authority over the managing of the community in categories other than real dominion and power, both of which cannot be ascribed to anyone except God. And whoever describes human beings with these traits, employs them metaphorically (*majazan*) and by extension (*bi l-ittisa*).<sup>193</sup>

In sum, in his discussion of verse 3:128, al-Radi made two critical points. First, according to al-Radi, the Prophet is denied permission to ask for a community's destruction because he does not possess knowledge of their possible change of heart in the future. Second, the verse does not pose a challenge to prophetic authority because in this context the term *al-amr* refers to sovereignty in the more absolute sense. Noteworthy here is how al-Radi's puts on display the flexible semantic potential of the Qur'an and the Arabic language more generally. In addition, he remains chiefly concerned with preserving the authority of prophetic power rather than entertaining what he deems as a ludicrous assertion by his interlocutor: that this verse could in any way detract from the authority and charisma of the Prophet.

Turning to 'Abd al-Jabbar, his interpretation of this verse can be found in three different sources: in his treatise on ambiguous verses of the Qur'an (*Mutashabih al-Qur'an*), in his monograph on the transcendence of the Qur'an from error (*al-Tanzih al-Qur'an min al-Mata'in*), and through al-Radi's report of 'Abd al-Jabbar's view in the *Haqa'iq*. The first source, 'Abd al-Jabbar's exposition in his work on ambiguous verses, reads very similar to al-Radi's position:

The apparent meaning of this verse points to what no Muslim would say because God has firmly established that he designated the Prophet for the task of warning and preaching and inviting [people] to the path of God with wisdom. And God says in 39:65: "If you ascribe any partner to God, all your work will come to nothing," and all of this necessitates that he [the Prophet] had many powers, for if it weren't for this he would not be deserving of elevation, and would not be distinguished with virtue, and it would

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 234.

not be obligatory to follow what he commands and forbids. So the apparent meaning [of the verse] does not give weight to the community's relationship to him.

So the meaning of the verse is that the welfare of the followers and the betterment of their conditions in God's normative order is not the Prophet's responsibility because he, peace and blessings upon him, does not know these things. So when he saw someone from among the unbelievers being severe in their disbelief and rejection of him, he asked God to give him permission to pray for that person's destruction, as all the prophets before him had done. Hence with this verse God fortifies him and explains that He is the All-Knowing when it concerns their welfare. It is for this reason that God said after [the verse, "you have no authority in the matter"], "whether God relents towards them or punishes them, they are wrongdoers." In this way God explained that either He would relent towards them and they would be among the believers, or he punishes them in the Hereafter with what is greater than the punishment of this world.

If the Prophet didn't have any authority then why would he deserve elevation and praise? And why has he been exclusively selected for the jurisdiction of mandatory obedience? And why has it been required that he be followed? If all his actions were of the type that he could exert no authority, then why would he be given this exclusivity and be deserving of praise? If in reality *al-amr* is as if one were to say, "do this," then the apparent meaning of the verse is that the Prophet didn't have the authority to command or forbid, and this is something no Muslim would say!<sup>194</sup>

From this discussion, it is possible to note that al-Radi agreed with 'Abd al-Jabbar on the purpose and intention behind this verse. The main idea in both their explanations is a rejection of the view that this verse points to God as the sole determiner of human actions. Also central to both authors' concern is to preserve the notion of prophetic authority over the community of followers. At the same time, both al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar seek to define what responsibilities come under the jurisdiction of the Prophet. What should be noted is that their discussion shifts the question from "what are the *powers* of the Prophet" to "what are the prophetic *responsibilities*?" This point is made most clearly in their emphasis on the Prophet's asking for

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<sup>194</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Mutashabih al-Qur'an*, 159-160.

Divine permission before making his supplication, since it suggests that the Prophet too was aware that his supplication would necessarily be answered if he were to make it. ‘Abd al-Jabbar makes this very point in the excerpt of his view as stated in al-Radi’s *Haqa’iq*. He states:

The apparent meaning of God’s words, “you have no authority in the matter” determines that these words were a response and prohibition of something the Prophet did. Therefore there is difference [among exegetes] over the occasion of its revelation. Whatever the Prophet did in this instance has to have been good: the supplication against a specific people deserving of punishment. But the supplication of prophets for hastened destruction and sending of punishment necessitates a positive answer. If it didn’t, it would result in the condition of turning away from them. So the Prophet, on him be peace, is not prevented from intending it, and setting his mind to it, and asking permission for it. Hence God revealed this verse to explain that the right thing to do would be to withhold this supplication due to the outcome of an action through reform, and that is something God knows about: the repentance by some of them. This is the reason for their being rescued; their subsistence in the world is due to the possibility of betterment.<sup>195</sup>

These additional comments of ‘Abd al-Jabbar underscore the fundamental principle at play in his discussion on prophetic power, namely, that supplication of the prophets must be answered. Implicit here is the idea that if prophets’ prayers were not answered, this would undermine God’s justice. In addition, ‘Abd al-Jabbar asserts that the prophetic act of requesting divine permission is not in itself bad. Thus, God’s Justice is preserved since the possibility of repentance of individual humans at any time is maintained, and prophetic authority is preserved because the matter from which the Prophet is excluded falls outside the bounds of his responsibilities (not power). The crucial point here is that in trying to understand the operations of a reason-centered logic in Mu‘tazili thought, it must be noted that the goal of authorizing a justice-based system was not tied to the *devaluation* of prophetic power.

‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion makes another important point on this issue in the work,

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<sup>195</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 234.

*Transcendence of the Qur'an from Errors:*<sup>196</sup>

God's saying afterwards, "whether God relents towards them or punishes them," proves that the meaning of this is what we have said, because this makes it clear that their betterment is attained by their repentance; not by their love of the Prophet.<sup>197</sup>

In this note, 'Abd al-Jabbar shifts the significance of the verse from prophetic authority and responsibility to the community's *relationship* with the Prophet. Seeking to underscore individual human action as the determiner of reward or punishment as opposed to intercession of any kind, he reiterates that hope for salvation does not lie in the people's love for the Prophet, but rather in their repentance to God.

At this juncture, let us return to the question of how al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar's independent approaches to verse 3:128 on prophetic authority converge, as well as how they differ. The underlying principle that guides both their arguments is a belief in the necessity of divine response to prophetic supplication. It is for this reason, they argued, that the Prophet seeks God's permission before making his request. Since this verse stands in for a response, and in it God does not grant permission to the Prophet, the purpose of this verse is to define the limits of prophetic responsibility. More importantly, according to this reading, what this verse does not do is limit the realm of prophetic power; and on this point, both al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar agreed.

However, the hermeneutical roots and routes of their respective arguments varied in important ways. Al-Radi defended his argument by positing an overarching normative arrangement of the world governed by God's knowledge of cause and effect, and the operations of time. Hence, a prophetic demand for retribution would alter the natural order of this normative arrangement. However, al-Radi's positing of this outlook was only the beginning of his

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<sup>196</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Tanzih al-Qur'an*, 77.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

discussion. His main objective was to present a semiotic map of the term *al-amr*, one that could demonstrate how the normative arrangement he described, corresponds to and was affirmed by the language of the Qur'an. In contrast, 'Abd al-Jabbar steered the discussion to a different conclusion. He used the reasoning of this verse to argue against the idea that a person's love for the Prophet has any salvific value.

In the first section of this chapter I noted that current scholars justify the "rationalization thesis" by pointing to a shift in the Imami community's understanding of the Imam as it evolved from seeing the Imam as a supernatural hero to an ultra-rational guide. What becomes increasingly evident when the rationalizing tendency in Imami thought is examined together with Mu'tazili arguments for God's Justice, is that "rationalization" did not necessarily equate to a puncturing of the prophet's extraordinary qualities. For Imami and Mu'tazili scholars writing in the eleventh century, a more "rational" outlook was not necessarily opposed to religious excess. The category of rationality (*'aql*) was not hostage to modern binaries such as "rational/mystical" or "religion/reason."

In sum, we have to remind ourselves that "rationalization," as it operated during this time was not bound to a modern conceptual grammar. Therefore, it is at once anachronistic and conceptually wanting to assume that the supposed "emasculatation" of the Imams resulted from the efflorescence of a rational theology in Shi'ism. Instead, I would argue that rather than search for a Mu'tazili inspired rationalization of prophetic and Imami authority in Shi'i thought, it would be more profitable to think carefully about the general episteme that dominated the social and intellectual currents at this time. This task is even more crucial when we consider the possibility that not all Imami scholars who moved in Mu'tazili circles during this era had a more rational stance towards the figure of the Imam. A case in point is Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Radi's

main teacher of Imami theology. On this issue, Martin McDermott makes some arresting observations:

Eccentric exaggerations aside, the supernatural stature of the Imams seems to have been steadily growing during the fourth century. Thus while the Nawbakhtis had denied that the Imams worked miracles and that their bodies were transported to the Garden after death, al-Mufid affirmed both these theses. And whereas Ibn Babuya in common with the traditionist school of Qumm allowed the possibility of the Prophet - and a fortiori the Imams - making mistakes through distraction during religious duties, al-Mufid chided them for minimizing and lack of respect.<sup>198</sup>

McDermott's observations do not come as a surprise, despite the fact that in current scholarship, Shaykh al-Mufid is regarded as the founder of a rational Imami theology. The significance of McDermott's statement, I would argue, is the very fact that it seems to be an aberration to the claims of the "rationalization thesis." This shows the conceptual dominance that the rationalization thesis has come to have over studies on Shi'i thought in early Islam. Even attempts to undermine it invariably tend to be organized through binaries such as rational/supernatural that form the foundational logic of this thesis.

### **Section 4.3:**

#### **Conclusion: Situating al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* in the ethical-rhetorical turn**

In this chapter I have argued that any attempt to understand al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* demands a critical rethinking of our approach to religious identity and the categories of analysis that our approach employs. I have shown that conventional classifications of al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* as "Shi'i" or "Mu'tazili-influenced" betrays a reliance on heresiographical literature and attitudes towards the boundaries of religious identity in early Islam. Indeed, the very genre of heresiography is governed by the construction of reified notions of identity. As a result, the use of such categories in our inquiry of al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* does little to capture and conceptualize al-Radi's

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<sup>198</sup> McDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh Al-Mufid*, 396.

hermeneutical moves and maneuvers in the *Haqa'iq*. By engaging al-Radi's arguments contrapuntally with those of 'Abd al-Jabbar, I have argued that the kinds of questions that animated al-Radi's examination of what would otherwise be characterized as "theological" issues participate in a host of varying discourses that populated the discursive force-field of tenth and eleventh centuries Baghdad. Crucially, such discourses were not limited to the scholastic exchanges of the *mutakallimun* (theologians in the broader meaning of the term). Julie Scott Meisami, who has studied the shifting of attitudes in this period through developments in scholarly approaches to history, notes the following:

The tenth and eleventh centuries saw the development of a new attitude towards history, predominantly ethical and rhetorical, reflecting the interests and culture of the secretaries and court officials to whom the writing of history was more and more entrusted.<sup>199</sup>

I would argue that a similar tone and ambition, one that combined ethics and rhetoric can be discerned in al-Radi's treatment of ostensibly theological questions that arise from the Qur'an ambiguous verses. This shift is most evident in his discussion of those verses that touch on sensitive political questions, such as 3:26, which asks how God can grant dominion to the unjust. Al-Radi's attempt to turn the attention away from dynastic authority to individual agency by referring to the rhetorical features of the verse is significant. In addition, al-Radi's citations of early Islamic poetry and everyday speech to demonstrate grammatical nuance often play the crucial function of directing meaning towards a particular ideological trajectory. In other words, al-Radi mobilized the idiom of literary expressions to invoke important ethical norms and values. Similarly, Meisami brings to our attention the close relationship between rhetoric and ethics in the medieval Persian historian al-Bayhaqi's work. She argued:

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<sup>199</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, "Dynastic History and Ideals of Kingship in Bayhaqi's *Tarikh-i Mas'udi*," *Edebiyat*, NS 3 (1989): 71.

The rhetorical approach to the writing of history cannot, therefore, be dismissed merely as a literarization of historical topics, but must be understood in its broader context. Bayhaqi's history of Mas'ud, in which we witness a deliberate effort to marry history with ethics and with rhetoric, represents the culmination of this tendency in Arabo-Persian historiography.<sup>200</sup>

The marrying of history with rhetoric and ethics as a development of the tenth and eleventh centuries therefore presents a helpful avenue through which to examine al-Radi's Qur'an commentary and its literarization of exegetical topics.

Conceptually, in this chapter I have sought to question an approach towards the study of early Shi'i and Mu'tazili thought that uncritically accepts a narrative of influence and external borrowing. The problem with such an approach is that it replicates sectarian divisions and boundaries that are a product of heresiographical discursive frameworks and contexts. Moreover, a narrative of Mu'tazili influence over Shi'ism perpetuates an essentialist attitude towards religion that views religious identities as if they were like "billiard balls, bouncing off each other on a table, but remaining indivisible wholes all the while."<sup>201</sup> In moving away from such an essentialist reading of Shi'i identity, in this chapter I have tried to present a detailed account of the hermeneutical strategies and logics through which two prominent early Muslim scholars, al-Radi and 'Abd al-Jabbar, articulated and presented their religious authority. Through a close navigation of their exegetical approaches towards certain important questions of theological and ethical significance, I have presented one example of the commonalities and departures between Shi'i and Mu'tazili approaches to Qur'an exegesis in early Islam. What emerges is a picture of Shi'i-Mu'tazili relations whereby the hyphen in this construction signifies an encounter of

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>201</sup> Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 7.

dynamic and often unpredictable intellectual cross-pollination rather than a static and predetermined relationship of influence and borrowing.

## CHAPTER 5: AMBIGUITY, METAPHOR, AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF CONCEALING AND REVEALING

### **Al-Radi's Interpretive Method**

The commanding voice of al-Radi in the *Haqa'iq*, which points to riddle after riddle in the Qur'anic text only to masterfully "resolve" them one by one, reads like the fulfillment of a promise he may have made to the reader at the start of the book. He might have stated, "the book between your hands consists of the most correct interpretive method through which the perplexing puzzles of the Qur'an are unraveled." Although the opening pages of the *Haqa'iq* in which al-Radi laid out his perceived "hermeneutical method" are no longer extant, it is probable that his introductory words would have captured and communicated to the reader, in his typically grandiose lyrical style, the undertaking we see him engaged in throughout the rest of his work. The authorial tone in the text's later pages certainly attests to al-Radi's unwavering confidence in his hermeneutical proposals. His project affirms that the Qur'an can be a puzzling text for the uninitiated, but also assures the reader that with the right tools, reasoning, and guidance, it is most certainly penetrable. In chapter three, I outlined the main features of al-Radi's hermeneutical paradigm; I pointed out the pivotal place that grammar, poetry, and an overarching linguistic canon occupy in his larger epistemological framework. This chapter revisits the theme of al-Radi's "hermeneutic," but from a different angle: it is concerned primarily with how al-Radi himself described and conceived of his interpretive method.

In order to discern how al-Radi imagined the interpretive process at work in his exegesis, I begin with an assessment of the governing concepts that he employed to describe this process. I concentrate on instances in the *Haqa'iq* when he gestured towards the hermeneutical principles underlying his work. Included in the passages I select for analysis is al-Radi's discussion of the important verse 3:7, which from an early stage in Qur'an interpretation had become the accepted verse in commentaries through which exegetes expressly outlined their hermeneutical stance. I show that an examination of al-Radi's interpretive method in this and other verses points to the critical importance that literary motifs like ambiguity (*mutashabih*) and metaphor (*majaz*) had for his overall hermeneutical project. Additionally, I inquire how al-Radi's emphasis on literary concepts is tied to his views on the inextricable relationship between language, law, and revelation. In doing this, I propose to analyze al-Radi's interpretive scheme from the context of his historically specific engagements with certain themes and questions.

With this approach to understanding al-Radi's interpretive framework, I seek to bring into question the temptation to preemptively ascribe al-Radi's attention to literary devices, which point to a different register of meaning, as reflections of a "characteristically Shi'i" inclination towards *batini* (hidden) meanings in the text.<sup>202</sup> Instead, I focus my efforts on inquiring what al-Radi's hermeneutical choices tell us about the ways in which different scholars articulated and contested their respective positions on the relationship between language, law, and revelation. I show that al-Radi's distinct hermeneutical posturing alerts us to the multiple intellectual disciplines from which he drew his positions. My objective here, as it has been throughout this dissertation, is to move away from simply situating al-Radi's arguments within any given sect, discipline or school. Rather, my aim is to interrogate the questions that led him to privilege one

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<sup>202</sup> As noted in the introduction, in a recent article, Abu Deeb draws a connection between al-Radi's Shi'i background and his focus on Qur'anic metaphors. See Abu Deeb, "Studies in the Majaz and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'an: Abu 'Ubayda and al-Sharif al-Radi," 316.

argument over another, and to understand the critical purchase of these arguments at the specific historical juncture during which he was writing. Finally, by connecting al-Radi's position on these issues to the wider intellectual debates taking place at this time, I point to instances of epistemological cross-pollination between the exegetical, philological, theological, legal, and mystical discursive traditions in late tenth and early eleventh century Baghdad.

### **Key Concepts in al-Radi's Interpretive Method**

For the task of discerning al-Radi's meta-hermeneutical plan, an important place to begin is the title of his Qur'an commentary, "*Haqa'iq al-Ta'wil fi Mutashabih al-Tanzil*," or "Hermeneutical Realities [for uncovering] the Ambiguities of Revelation." This title invokes three critical concepts: "*Haqa'iq*" (Realities), "*Ta'wil*" (Interpretation), and "*Mutashabih*" (Ambiguity). The meaning of each of these terms developed and evolved during different historical periods and among distinct intellectual groups, and it is important to identify the specific connotations in which al-Radi was employing these terms. The literary orientation of al-Radi's discussions suggests that by the term "*haqa'iq*" or "truths, realities," al-Radi intended "proper" or "correct" (interpretation). This is to say that he was using the term without any ontological implications, which, as I will explain later in this chapter, was commonplace for some of his contemporaries. As for *ta'wil*, it is quite clear that at the time that al-Radi composed this work in the late tenth century the term *ta'wil* had acquired the technical meaning of "interpretation."<sup>203</sup> In this sense, *ta'wil* was contrasted with *tafsir* (commentarial explanation) and generally applied to passages in the Qur'an that demanded a deeper than plain-sense explication. Finally, concerning the term *mutashabih* (ambiguous), which is the pivot around

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<sup>203</sup> C. H. M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'anic Exegesis in Early Islam*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 64; John E. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.

which al-Radi's Qur'an commentary is structurally and substantively organized, I argue that al-Radi's specific application of this term, and the meaning that he proposes for it is altogether new. In order to understand how al-Radi's deployment of *mutashabih* differed from that of his predecessors and contemporaries it is important to briefly examine the trajectory of its development.

The term *mutashabih* is derived from the iconic Qur'anic verse in Sura Al 'Imran (3:7), which for centuries has been the starting point for scholarly discussions on interpretive authority. The verse describes scripture as a composition of two kinds of verses: the *muhkam* (definite, clear) and the *mutashabih* (ambiguous):

It is He who revealed to you the scripture, part of which is definite (*muhkam*) verses; these are the mother of the book. Other (verses) are ambiguous (*mutashabih*). Those with deviation in their hearts are the ones who follow the ambiguous parts of it, desiring seduction and desiring its interpretation. But none knows its interpretation except God and those who are rooted in knowledge. (Others) say, "We believe in it, all is from our Lord." But only those who understand take notice.<sup>204</sup>

According to this verse, the *muhkamat* verses are distinguished from the *mutashabihat* verses due to their definite quality, a point that is further reinforced by their being named the "mother of the Book." An important clause in this verse, especially for exegetes seeking to explicate it, is the explicit warning for those who falsely claim to have knowledge of the *mutashabihat*. The verse clearly states that the authority to interpret is limited to a privileged few. However, the vague syntactic structure of the final part of the verse accommodates two possible answers to the question of to *whom* authority is limited to. The first reading, which is reflected in the above translation, states that God *and* those elevated in knowledge can interpret the *mutashabihat*. By contrast, the second reading holds that God alone can interpret the

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<sup>204</sup> Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an: A New Guide, with Select Translations*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 175.

*mutashabihat*. In this case, the final sentence would be translated as: “But none knows its interpretation except God. Those who are rooted in knowledge say, “We believe in it, all is from our Lord.” But only those who understand take notice.”<sup>205</sup>

Early scholars differed not only on which reading was correct, or the question of interpretive authority, but also on *what* they considered to count as the *mutashabihat*. Although the term is now commonly rendered as “ambiguous” verses of the Qur’an in contrast to its “clear” verses, this was not always the case.<sup>206</sup> Ibn ‘Abbas (d.688CE) for example, the Prophet’s cousin, and the “father of exegesis”<sup>207</sup> to whom many exegetical dicta are attributed, had understood *mutashabih* as a reference to that which one believes but does not act upon, such as oaths and abrogated verses.<sup>208</sup> Meanwhile, other scholars distinguished the *muhkam* and *mutashabih* verses on the basis of their content; the *muhkam* were thought to concern definitive issues of law, punishments, or proofs of the Prophet’s message, and the *mutashabih* with ‘the rest’ of the verses.<sup>209</sup> Or the *mutashabih* were associated with the isolated letters that precede some chapters of the Qur’an,<sup>210</sup> and repeated stories about past peoples and prophets.<sup>211</sup>

It was only when the text came to be regarded as an unchanging given that the

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Leah Kinberg, “Muhkamat and mutashabihat (Koran 3/7): implications of a Koranic pair of terms in medieval exegesis,” in *The Qur’an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999).

<sup>207</sup> Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, Vol. 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 99.

<sup>208</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 17.

<sup>209</sup> According to al-Farra for example, the *muhkamat* are verses that clarify what is allowed (*halal*) and what is prohibited (*haram*), verses that are not abrogated. See Abu Zakariyya al-Farra, *Ma‘ani al-Qur’an*, (Cairo: 1955), 1/190, cited in Kinberg, “Muhkamat and mutashabihat,” 149.

<sup>210</sup> Al-Farra and al-Tabari are two exegetes amongst others who discuss the opening letters (*fawatih*) within the framework of the *mutashabihat*. Cited in Kinberg, “Muhkamat and mutashabihat,” 156.

<sup>211</sup> See Abu al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari, *Maqalat*, vol. 1, ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din ‘Abd al-Hamid, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, 1969), 293-294; Abu Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarrir al-Tabari *Jami al-bayan ‘an ta‘wil ay al-Qur’an*, vol. iii, ed. Sidqi Jamil al-‘Attar, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2001), 211-215. Cited in Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 17.

*mutashabih* began to carry the meaning of ambiguity. This is because understanding the *mutashabihat* as an intentional and inherently ambiguous quality of the text carried the theological consequence of ascribing what may be understood as a degree of confusion to a divine text. This could only be deemed defensible after the text acquired the status of a fixed and closed entity. In this way, some of the verses that had previously been approached as textual discrepancies and explained through alternate readings came to be conceived in terms of ambiguities. It was therefore with this altered attitude towards the Qur'anic text as an unchanging entity that the reference in verse 3:7 to the Qur'an's *mutashabihat* came to be associated with the text's rhetorical ambiguities. Scholars note that this shift first occurred in the work of the Baghdadi Mu'tazili theologian, Abu Ja'far al-Iskafi (d.854CE).<sup>212</sup> Al-Iskafi defined the *muhkam* as verses with only one possible apparent meaning while the *mutashabih* admitted more than one meaning. After al-Iskafi, other influential scholars affirmed this association between *mutashabih* and textual ambiguity including the theologian Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d.935CE) and the legal theorist Abu al-Hasan al-Karkhi (d.952CE). Consequently, verse 3:7 came to be regarded as an affirmation of ambiguity in the Qur'an.<sup>213</sup>

Al-Iskafi is remembered for making the critical link between verse 3:7's reference to *mutashabih* and textual ambiguities. However, well before al-Iskafi, scholars had already been scrutinizing the text's ambiguities from a philological standpoint, as part of a genre that concentrated on the "difficulties in the Qur'an" (*mushkil al-Qur'an*). As I noted above, prior to the ninth century, textual difficulties were seen as discrepancies and scholars sought to "correct"

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<sup>212</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 17.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

them by offering alternative linguistic readings.<sup>214</sup> By the turn of the ninth century, the text had come to be regarded as an unchanging given and scholars were wary of making claims against its accuracy. Under these conditions, to ascribe the Qur'an with discrepancies no longer signified the need to gather information correctly; it now signified committing the much graver act of threatening divine sovereignty. In this setting, discrepancies had to be explained and justified rather than "corrected." The grammarian and exegete Abu Zakariyya al-Farra (d.822CE), for example, stated that he did not wish to differ from the Book, and that he preferred to justify a grammatical irregularity rather than accept a proposed correction.<sup>215</sup> Crucial here is that with the works of al-Farra and several others like him, a significant body of literature was generated which was dedicated to explaining the problematic passages in the Qur'an.<sup>216</sup> The chief architects of this emerging genre at the turn of the ninth century were al-Farra, Abu 'Ubayda (d.825CE), and Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d.837CE).<sup>217</sup> Of central concern for these scholars was the effort to provide more sophisticated explanations of semantic puzzles in the Qur'an by turning to a more nuanced analysis of the Arabic language. Abu 'Ubayd and later, the famous scholar Ibn Qutayba (d.889CE), also extended this effort to the hadith literature by composing separate works dealing with linguistic difficulties in the collected sayings of the Prophet.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> For example Ibn Qutayba in his *Mushkil al-Qur'an* and al-Farra in his *Ma'ani al-Qur'an*.

<sup>215</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 16.

<sup>216</sup> The *Fihrist* of Ibn Nadim, for example, lists the works of scholars under three relevant genres: *Ma'ani al-Qur'an*, *Gharib al-Qur'an*, *Mutashabih al-Qur'an*, See Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, 52-57; Also see Wansbrough *Qur'anic Studies*, 208-226.

<sup>217</sup> Abu 'Ubayda authored the *Majaz al-Qur'an*, Abu 'Ubayd is credited with works on *Gharib al-Qur'an* and *Ma'ani al-Qur'an*, and al-Farra with *Ma'ani al-Qur'an*.

<sup>218</sup> Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam, *Gharib al-Hadith*, and Ibn Qutayba, *Gharib al-Hadith*.

In addition to specific works on the *mushkil al-Qur'an* (difficulties in the Qur'an), other congruent genres of writing that dealt with ambiguities included works that represented an acknowledgement of the problem of homonymous or polysemous verbal forms, such as the treatise authored by Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d.767CE), in which he listed words that occur in the Qur'an with more than one meaning, defined each meaning, and cited passages where the word occurred with each meaning.<sup>219</sup> In doing this, Ibn Sulayman was following a pattern set by Ibn 'Abbas and his pupil 'Ikrima.<sup>220</sup> Up until Ibn Sulayman's time however, the task remained limited to the identification and explanation of polysemous terms, and did not entail as much of a theoretical treatment of these elements. Other literature relevant to Qur'anic ambiguity included the compilation of lists enumerating the variety of linguistic phenomena to be taken into account in interpreting the Qur'an. One such early list is attributed to Ibn 'Abbas and includes the *muhkam/mutashabih* verses. The most important of such lists is again ascribed to Ibn Sulayman and includes an enumeration of thirty-two Qur'anic speech phenomena.<sup>221</sup>

What is critical to note is that these and other writings marked the emergence of the ancillary disciplines of lexicography and grammar,<sup>222</sup> and also included the sustained effort to explain

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<sup>219</sup> *Al-Ashbah wa'l-naza'ir*, also called *al-wujuh wa-l-naza'ir*; Vishanoff notes that meanings were called *wujuh*, occurrences with different meanings were called *ashbah*, and occurrences with the same meaning were called *naza'ir*. See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 18. Muqatil ibn Sulayman also has a work titled *Mutashabih al-Qur'an*, but Nabia Abbott suggests that references to it may be mistitled copies of the same *al-Wujuh wa-l-Naza'ir*. See Abbott, *Studies*, 2:96.

<sup>220</sup> Abbott, *Studies*, 2:100; Other early figures reported to have written on the topic are Ibn Abi Talha (d.741CE), al-Husayn ibn Waqid (d.776CE) and 'Abbas al-Ansari (d.802CE), see Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 19, note 27.

<sup>221</sup> Muqatil ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi, *Tafsir Muqatil ibn Sulayman*, ed. 'Abd Allah Mahmud Shihatah, (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tarikh al-'Arabi, 2002), 1:5.2-8.

<sup>222</sup> Abbott, *Studies*, 2:100

Qur'anic language through an Arabic lexicography based on Arabic poetry.<sup>223</sup> With grammarians like al-Sibawayhi (d.796CE) and al-Mubarrad (d.898CE), Arabic grammar as a formal discipline was given a major impetus as they sought to account theoretically for the grammatical peculiarities of the Qur'an, rather than correct those peculiarities as their predecessors had done.<sup>224</sup> These linguistic developments formed the critical backdrop for the fashioning of al-Radi's hermeneutical vocabulary, in which homonymy, poetry, and textual ambiguities were constant refrains.

### **Al-Radi and the Philological Tradition**

The philological tradition of approaching the Qur'an's difficult passages represents a critical discursive tradition in which al-Radi's commentary on the *mutashabih* verses is embedded. Al-Radi's *Haqa'iq* is part of this broader intellectual effort to linguistically determine the meaning of the text. As I illustrated in chapters three and four, al-Radi's hermeneutic relies heavily on the discipline of homonymy/polysemy (*ishtirak*) – which reflects his training with the influential thinker on this topic, Uthman ibn Jinni,<sup>225</sup> who is also remembered as a leading inspiration for al-Radi's decision to become a poet.<sup>226</sup> Ibn Jinni occupied a middle position between the Kufan and Basran schools of grammar, and it is possible to identify elements of both schools in al-Radi's exegetical choices. For example, as was common to the Basran tradition, al-

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<sup>223</sup> Vishanoff notes that appeals to Arab poetry are characteristic of the works of Abu 'Ubayda and al-Farra', but not of commentaries from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century such as Muqatil ibn Sulayman. See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 20; Wansborough *Qur'anic Studies*, 216-217.

<sup>224</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 20; Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 39.

<sup>225</sup> Ibn Jinni wrote a founding work on etymology (*ishtiqaq*). In addition, he argued that prepositions, nouns and verbs have more than one meaning. See Abu al-Fath Ibn Jinni, *Khasa'is*, vol. iii, (Beirut: Dar al-Huda li-al-Tiba'a wa-al-Nasr, 1952), 110-111.

<sup>226</sup> Jebli, "al-Sharif al-Radi."

Radi adhered to the view that language was a mirror for reality, a point that I will return to shortly. Al-Radi also employed as an authoritative source the different Qur'anic readings by al-Kisa'i al-Kufi (d.904CE) and Hamza ibn Habib (d.772CE), a tool that was more freely used by Kufan grammarians.

Another feature in al-Radi's commentary that is situated in the philological exegetical tradition is the important place he assigned to pre-Islamic poetry in his interpretive lexicon, and on the basis of which he postulated various linguistic arguments. This move was part of a wider acknowledgment among grammarians that the poetic lexicon was an authoritative source. Of the many linguistic arguments al-Radi employed to explain the ambiguities he identified, the most common included ellipsis, pleonasm, reversal of normal grammatical or logical order, indirect reference, lack of grammatical agreement, and figurative language.

To this extent, a striking similarity exists between al-Radi's work on the ambiguities in the Qur'an and Abu 'Ubayda's *Majaz al-Qur'an*, written a century earlier.<sup>227</sup> In this work, Abu 'Ubayda explained that certain ways of "transgressing"<sup>228</sup> the boundaries of normal expression are legitimate, and he explained these by translating them into equivalent normalized expressions.<sup>229</sup> Al-Radi employs a similar approach in the *Haqa'iq*; he locates the linguistic variations found in the ambiguous verses in what he regarded as an authoritative linguistic

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<sup>227</sup> John Wansbrough, who has closely examined Abu 'Ubayda's work, has also observed its parallels with what would later come to be called a discussion on the *mutashabih* verses. See Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 220. Kamal Abu Deeb also gestures towards the overlaps between al-Radi and Abu 'Ubayda in his comparative analysis of their works, see Abu Deeb, "Studies in the Majaz and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'an: Abu 'Ubayda and al-Sharif al-Radi."

<sup>228</sup> I take this translation of *majaz* from David Vishanoff. As he explains, "*majaz* is often translated "figurative" or "metaphorical," but this suggests a much narrower concept than is usually in view, so I will most often translate the word in its most basic sense of crossing over or passing beyond, using the terms "transgression" and "transgressive," which should be understood without the strong negative connotation they have in English." See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 21.

<sup>229</sup> Abu 'Ubayda's work on Qur'an and grammar is regarded by some to be a turning point in its philological analysis and departing from a previous tradition of "naive" exegesis. See Claude Gilliot, 1990, "Les debuts de l'exegese coranique," REMMM 58.82-100, cited in Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 47.

canon, and in so doing incorporates them into the accepted Arabic lexicon. Abu ‘Ubayda and al-Radi also shared the exegetical strategy of taking recourse for grammatical explanations in the poetic lexicon.<sup>230</sup>

However, an important difference between the two works is the specific terminology employed by the authors. Abu ‘Ubayda, writing at a much earlier time, used *majaz* as a collective category to refer to a wide range of linguistic transgressions,<sup>231</sup> whereas al-Radi placed the range of linguistic transgressions under the broader Qur’anic category, *mutashabih*. This is an instructive contrast as it shows ways in which the category of *majaz* represented an important component in the intellectual genealogy of the concept of *mutashabih*.

At this juncture, it is important to point out that philological approaches to interpreting the Qur’an were not restricted to an exclusively Sunni tradition of exegesis which al-Radi can be described to have “borrowed” from or “conceded” to. To frame it this way would fall prey to an exclusively sectarian reading of al-Radi’s work as well as that of his contemporaries. In addition, such a framing reinforces a majoritarian reading of Muslim intellectual history. It should be noted, for example, that the Shi‘i Imams were on occasion also attributed with the ability to employ their knowledge of Arabic grammar in Qur’anic exegesis.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, it would be inaccurate to conclude that al-Radi’s thought was subsumed by an orthodox Sunni approach or

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<sup>230</sup> Recent studies have argued for a clear distinction between the work of al-Radi and Abu ‘Ubayda, with regard to their respective uses of the term *majaz*: al-Radi’s two treatises on *majaz* are specific treatments of metaphors in the Qur’an and the Hadith, as compared to the work of Abu ‘Ubayda which, although also working with the term *majaz*, intended it in a much wider meaning of “interpretation.” See ‘Abd al-Ghani Hasan *al-Sharif al-Radi*. To be clear, the similarity I wish to draw is between al-Radi’s use of *mutashabih* (ambiguity) and Abu ‘Ubayda use of *majaz* (interpretation).

<sup>231</sup> Wolfhart Heinrichs interprets Abu ‘Ubayda’s use of *majaz* as “explanatory reading.” See Wolfhart Heinrichs, “On the Genesis of the Ḥaqīqa-Majaz Dichotomy,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 59 (1984): 129.

<sup>232</sup> Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 138-139.

that his recourse to linguistic authority (as opposed to Imami) somehow validates this compromising attitude.

The fact is that al-Radi did not draw connections to early Imami precedents of attributing grammatical explanations for Qur'anic ambiguities. In fact, it is evident throughout the *Haqa'iq* that al-Radi did not consider it necessary to rest his hermeneutical decisions on the authority of what is now regarded as an exclusively Imami tradition of interpretation. But, on the other hand, to treat this citational absence as evidence of his defection to an orthodox Sunni view uncritically accepts that identity in tenth century Baghdad entailed an interaction of self-conscious "majority" and "minority" groups. This strictly majority/minority driven framework assumes that the structure of identity is inherently dichotomous, such that any diversions from a minority position must entail an act of being subsumed by the dominant majority.<sup>233</sup>

I challenge this assimilative narrative of identity formation. Instead, I argue that the way in which al-Radi on the one hand affirms Imami authority and on the other hand appears to undermine it suggests that for him there was no contradiction in doing so. I interpret al-Radi's ambivalent attitude as a reflection of his intellectual climate, in which sectarian identities did not operate according to a modern logic of accountability. While al-Radi was no doubt a Shi'i, his identity as a scholar was not bound to any predetermined or a priori assumptions on what being a Shi'i scholar entailed.

### **The Relationship between Ambiguity and Metaphor**

Above, I have argued that in understanding al-Radi's hermeneutic an important place to begin is the title of the *Haqa'iq*, which points to his application of key conceptual terms, most importantly "ambiguity" (*mutashabih*). I have shown that historically, the category

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<sup>233</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 137-162.

“*mutashabih*” had important connections to the philological tradition of interpreting the difficulties in the Qur’an.<sup>234</sup> I also pointed out that al-Radi’s use of the term *mutashabih* was similar to Abu ‘Ubayda’s use of the term *majaz*, as they both denote the broader meaning of “linguistic transgression” from normative expression. To further elucidate al-Radi’s understanding of *mutashabih*, I now turn to the way in which al-Radi imagined the relationship between *mutashabih* (ambiguity) and *majaz* (linguistic transgression), and show how al-Radi interpreted *majaz* as one specific type of linguistic transgression, the metaphor.<sup>235</sup>

In al-Radi’s treatment of *majaz* and *mutashabih*, what is immediately striking is that he dedicated separate treatises to these two literary themes and did not examine them in the same work. The *Haqa’iq* text is exclusively concerned with the *mutashabih* verses of the Qur’an. As for *majaz*, al-Radi authored two works on *majaz*: the first was dedicated to the metaphors (*majazat*) in the Qur’an, *Talkhis al-Bayan fi Majazat al-Qur’an (Economy of Eloquence in the Metaphors of the Qur’an)*; the second was dedicated to the *majazat* in the prophetic Hadith, *Majazat al-Nabawiya (Prophetic Metaphors)*.<sup>236</sup>

Recent scholars have traced the practice of interpreting *majaz* in its narrow meaning of “metaphor” as compared to its general meaning of “linguistic transgression” to the Mu‘tazili

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<sup>234</sup> This classification of “philological approaches” was in use in the tenth century as well. Our best evidence of this is the catalogue of Ibn Nadim. He lists books that come under four related categories: “Meaning, difficulties, and *majaz* of the Qur’an,” “Strange (*gharib*) [passages/words] in the Qur’an,” “Language of the Qur’an,” and “*Mutashabih* of the Qur’an.” Between these four groups, the largest number of works came under “Language of the Qur’an.” See Ibn Nadim, *Fihrist*, 52-57.

<sup>235</sup> Al-Radi is using the Arabic terms *majaz* (to transgress) and *isti‘ara* (to borrow) interchangeably to mean metaphor. It was only later, in the theoretical treatment by ‘Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani (d.1078CE), that an effort was made to systematically differentiate between simile (*tashbih*), analogy (*tamthil*), metaphor (*isti‘ara*), and trope (*majaz*).

<sup>236</sup> Al-Radi’s treatise on Prophetic metaphors is unusual and the only one of its kind that we know of. Earlier works on this topic sought to highlight not just metaphors but a range of linguistic transgressions. These works came under titles like *Gharib al-Hadith (Strange [Language] in the Hadith)* and sought to address the problematic passages in the Hadith literature, such as Ibn Qutayba’s *Gharib fi-l Hadith*. By contrast, al-Radi’s work on the *majazat*, was concerned exclusively with metaphors in the Prophetic statements, not all linguistic transgressions.

tradition.<sup>237</sup> As we saw in chapter four, the “theological dilemmas” that concerned Mu‘tazili scholars like ‘Abd al-Jabbar included verses that described God in anthropomorphic terms, and verses that undermined the principles of divine justice and its corollary themes such as the agency of human beings and the sovereignty of God. These concerns led Mu‘tazili scholars to focus their use of the term *majaz* to one special type of linguistic transgression: figurative language, especially metaphor.<sup>238</sup> By the end of the ninth century, scholars had instituted a clear binary opposition between literal (*haqiqa*) and figurative (*majaz*) usage, around which they developed theoretical discourse.<sup>239</sup> The Basran Mu‘tazili masters Abu ‘Ali al-Jubba‘i (d.915CE) and Abu Hashim (d.933CE), for example, disputed whether a word can have both literal and figurative meanings at the same time.

Scholars have argued that the exegetical practice of focusing on the *mutashabih* verses of the Qur’an emerged from this same tradition of figurative readings of anthropomorphic verses by Mu‘tazili scholars. This interpretive method therefore posited an important relationship between these two literary themes whereby the *mutashabih* described the ambiguous quality of the verse and *majaz* was the literary tool through which to resolve its ambiguity. ‘Abd al-Jabbar, for example, argued that *ta’wil* (interpretation) is the operation through which we can unveil the hidden aspects of the *mutashabih* by returning them to the *muhkam*, and that *majaz* is the main tool for this operation of *ta’wil*. By connecting *majaz* and *mutashabih* with the operation of *ta’wil*, ‘Abd al-Jabbar posited that linguistic reasoning (*istidlal lughawi*) went hand in hand with

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<sup>237</sup> Heinrichs traces the narrowing of *majaz* to the specific meaning of metaphor to the Mu‘tazili scholars particularly the works of al-Jahiz. See Heinrichs, *On the Genesis*, 134-135, 138-139.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 135-37.

rational reasoning (*istidlal 'aqli*).<sup>240</sup> Moreover, he affirmed the central place of *majaz* in the broader category of *mutashabih*.

Al-Radi's emphasis on the metaphorical aspects of the revelatory texts and his interpretation of *majaz* as metaphor in place of its broader meaning of "linguistic transgression" can be traced to the Mu'tazili tradition. This is because at the time that al-Radi was writing other scholars argued for a differentiation between *majaz* and *isti'ara*, such that *isti'ara* referred to analogy-based metaphor, and *majaz* encompassed a wide range of idiomatic expressions.<sup>241</sup> These multiple applications of *majaz* were possible since the systematization of Arabic literary theory as a formal and fully theorized discipline had not yet gained prominence. An example of this attitude towards literary themes is reflected in the work of Abu Hilal al-'Askari (d.1004CE), who simply lists the various opinions on *majaz* without contesting them. Hence al-Radi, like some of his Mu'tazili contemporaries, employed the term *majaz* interchangeably with *isti'ara*. However, unlike his Mu'tazili contemporaries, he chose to keep his discussion of what was classified as metaphorical verses separate from his discussion of what counted as ambiguous verses. The following figure depicts al-Radi's classification of the verses in the third Qur'anic chapter, Sura Al 'Imran, according to their metaphors and ambiguities.

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<sup>240</sup> Abu Zayd, *al-Ittihad*, 184.

<sup>241</sup> This was characteristic in the work of Ibn Qutayba who also states that he begins his discussion with *isti'ara* since it is the most common type of *majaz*. See Heinrichs, *On the Genesis*, 131. Al-Radi does not cite Ibn Qutayba in the *Haqa'iq* so it is not clear if he was familiar with this work. However, another figure who uses *majaz* in the broader sense of linguistic transgression and *isti'ara* or metaphor as one specific type of *majaz* is al-Rummani (d.994). For al-Rummani's use of metaphor see Wolfhart Heinrichs, *The hand of the northwind: Opinions on metaphor and the early meaning of isti'ara in arabic poetics*, (Mainz; Wiesbaden: Deutsche Morgenländische Ges.; Steiner, 1977). Some biographers list al-Rummani as al-Radi's teacher, hence it is safe to assume that al-Radi was at the very least aware of the different interpretations of *majaz*, and his decision to regard *majaz* as interchangeable with *isti'ara* was not due to his lack of awareness of alternate theories.

## Figure 5.1: Al-Radi's Identification of Ambiguous and Metaphorical Verses in Sura 3, Al 'Imran

Note: shaded areas indicate those verses that overlap in the two works

### Ambiguities (in *Haqa'iq*)

Qur'an 3:7 - Use of feminine pronoun they (*hunna*) for singular noun "mother" ('*um*) (*Haqa'iq* 3.1)

Qur'an 3:8 - God as cause of human of deviation? (*Haqa'iq* 3.2)

Qur'an 3:13 - God reduced the no. of Muslims in the eyes of polytheists? (*Haqa'iq* 3.3)

Qur'an 3:14 - God as beautifier of desires (*Haqa'iq* 3.4)

Qur'an 3:18 - God testifies on Himself? (*Haqa'iq* 3.5)

Qur'an 3:26 - God gives power to the unjust? (*Haqa'iq* 3.6)

Qur'an 3:28 - Taking unbelievers as allies (*Haqa'iq* 3.7)

Qur'an 3:36 - The man is not like the woman (*Haqa'iq* 3.8)

Qur'an 3:40 - Zachariah's doubt on having a son (*Haqa'iq* 3.9)

Qur'an 3:45 - Jesus as the word of God, mismatched gender of pronoun (*Haqa'iq* 3.10)

Qur'an 3:60 - Prophetic doubt (*Haqa'iq* 3.11)

Qur'an 3:61 - Mubahala verse; How can the Prophet invite himself? (*Haqa'iq* 3.12)

Qur'an 3:64 - People of the Book taking other gods? (*Haqa'iq* 3.13)

Qur'an 3:75 - Unreliable cheaters from the People of the Book (*Haqa'iq* 3.14)

Qur'an 3:81 - Prophets must recognize earlier prophets? (*Haqa'iq* 3.15)

Qur'an 3:83 - Forced submission? (*Haqa'iq* 3.16)

Qur'an 3:90 - Repentance of unbelievers not accepted? (*Haqa'iq* 3.17)

Qur'an 3:91 - Superfluous letter 'waw' (*Haqa'iq* 3.18)

Qur'an 3:96 - Mecca as the first house? (*Haqa'iq* 3.19)

Qur'an 3:97 - Equating unbelievers with believers unable to perform Hajj (*Haqa'iq* 3.20)

Qur'an 3:102 - Obeying God as He ought to be obeyed (*Haqa'iq* 3.21)

Qur'an 3:109 - All actions must return to God - were they ever detached? (*Haqa'iq* 3.22)

Qur'an 3:110 - Repetition of God's name (in discussion (fasl) section) (*Haqa'iq*, 3.23)

Qur'an 3:110 - "Best 'umma" as reference to the past community? (*Haqa'iq* 3.23)

Qur'an 3:111 - It won't hurt you except it will pain (*Haqa'iq* 3.24)

Qur'an 3:128 - No actions are from you (*Haqa'iq* 3.25)

Qur'an 3:133 - Breadth of paradise equal to heaven & earth (*Haqa'iq* 3.26)

Qur'an 3:143 - Vision of death? (*Haqa'iq* 3.27)

Qur'an 3:145- Equivalence of reward seekers of this life & the Hereafter (*Haqa'iq* 3.28)

Qur'an 3:154 - What has been written down will happen (*Haqa'iq* 3.29)

Qur'an 3:175 - Satan fears his allies? (*Haqa'iq* 3.30)

Qur'an 3:178 - Respite for unbelievers so they increase in sin (*Haqa'iq* 3.31)

### Metaphors (in *Talkhis*)

Qur'an 3:7 - '*Um* (mother) of the Book is metaphor for the main part (asl) of the Book

Qur'an 3:7- *Rasikhun* is a metaphor for the firm in knowledge

Qur'an 3:12 - *al-Mihad* (bed) is metaphor for what you prepare

Qur'an 3:22 - *al-Habt* (disease that rots the insides) is a metaphor for wasted deeds

Qur'an 3:27 - *al-Ilaj* is a metaphor for the entering of day into the night and night into the day

Qur'an 3:27 - "The dead" are a metaphor for the unbelievers and "the living" are a metaphor for the believers; bringing to life refers to a rejuvenated religiosity

Qur'an 3:39 - Jesus as Word of God is metaphor for Jesus as bearer of good news

Qur'an 3:54 - Plotting of God is metaphor for God's bringing down punishment

Qur'an 3:72 - "*Wajh al-Nahar*" is metaphor for first part of the day

Qur'an 3:73 - God is expansive/wide is metaphor for God's expansive giving, or for the wide routes through which to gain knowledge of him, or for the width of his dominion

Qur'an 3: 77 - "they will not see God" is a metaphor, and its *haqiqqa* (true meaning) is that God will not have mercy on them

Qur'an 3:103 - *Habl* Allah (God's rope) is a metaphor for God's commands

Qur'an 3:103 - "on the brink of a fiery abyss" is a metaphor for person on the brink of death due to bad deeds since here too his fall is from the slipping of the foot

Qur'an 3:109 - To God return all things, "return" here is a metaphor for the transfer of ownership of all things to God

Qur'an 3:112 - refers to his discussion of verse 2:61: "*duribat*" is a metaphor for a tent that surrounds and spreads over its people

Qur'an 3:118 - "Do not take for your intimates outsiders to devotion"; the term "*bitana*" (lining of cloth, 'thing put beneath' on a camel) is a metaphor for intimate friend

Qur'an 3:127 - "*li-yaqta'a tarfan*" (to cut the sides) is used metaphorically for reducing their number by cutting a number of them and weakening them

Qur'an 3:143 - vision of death is metaphor for vision of its signs

Qur'an 3:144: "turn back on your heels" is a metaphor for reverting to doubt in the Prophet's message

Qur'an 3:156 - "*darabu fi-l-ard*" is a metaphor for journeying to far off places; the similarity is between the wanderer of the earth and the swimmer in the sea since he slaps with his hands and legs (*atrafih*) to combat the depth of the sea

Qur'an 3:163 - "they are degrees/levels"; "*darajat*" is a metaphor for possessors of levels

Qur'an 3:185 - "*mata-ul-ghurur*" illusory pleasure is a metaphor for the pleasure of this world as a fleeting shadow and fading dye

Qur'an 3:185 - "taste death" is used metaphorically to refer to human proximity to death

Qur'an 3:186 - "'*azm al-umur*" determination of actions Is used metaphorically for strength of actions

Qur'an 3:187 - "*nabadhahu wara'a zuhurihim*" (tossed it behind their backs) is a metaphor for their neglecting from remembering it and busying themselves from understanding it

Qur'an 3:188 - "*bi-mafazatin min-al-adhab*" is metaphor for place that is far from punishment; "*mafaza*" is a remote desert

Qur'an 3:196 - "*taqallub fi-l-bilad*"; *taqallub* here is used metaphorically for journeying, and movement from one condition to another

As Figure 5.1 above illustrates, al-Radi's separate treatment of the literary themes of *mutashabih* and *majaz* is evident from the fact that the verses he identified as *majaz* in the *Talkhis* text were not the same verses he identified as *mutashabih* in the *Haqa'iq* text. In addition, even if there was an occasional overlap between the verses discussed in the two books, the element of ambiguity that al-Radi identified in a verse was different from its metaphorical quality.

An excellent example that illustrates this point is al-Radi's treatment of verse 3:7. In the *Haqa'iq*, al-Radi identified the ambiguity in this verse as a lack of agreement in the plural pronoun used to describe the singular, "mother of the Book." By contrast, in the *Talkhis*, he identified the *majaz* with the term "mother," which he argues is a metaphor for "foundation" or "root" (of the Book). Examples such as this suggest that the two treatises dealt with entirely separate subjects. However, there are some exceptions. Very rarely, al-Radi did identify metaphor as the quality that makes a verse ambiguous (like his Mu'tazili contemporaries had done). One example is the verse: "You were longing for death before you met it; now you have seen it, while you were seeing." (Qur'an, 3:143). As we saw in chapter three, al-Radi explains the ambiguity in this verse through the metonymical use of the term "death," for "the causes of death," and in an unusual case of overlapping, he cites the same explanation in the *Talkhis*, where death is used in its metaphorical meaning for causes of death.

Thus the exact relationship between the two texts is not easily explained. Based on al-Radi's organization of the material, and the distinct selection of Qur'anic verses discussed in each text, I suggest two possible interpretations for how al-Radi imagined the relationship between *majaz* and *mutashabih*. One possibility is that al-Radi regarded *majazat* and *mutashabihat* as two separate literary categories, whereby neither one was a sub-category of the

other. The second possibility is that al-Radi regarded *majazat* as a sub-category of the *mutashabihat*, but chose to allocate a separate treatise to them since they were numerous and shared a single literary function. Whichever the case might be, his separate treatment of these two categories clearly suggests that al-Radi was attuned to the varied yet overlapping hermeneutical registers connected to the tropes of *majaz* and *mutashabih*.

### **Theological and Legal Values of Literary Concepts**

The discussion thus far has established that for al-Radi, *mutashabih* and *majaz* were the primary hermeneutical principles through which he analyzed and interpreted the Qur'anic text. It is therefore helpful to shift our attention at this juncture to the important issue I raised at the start of this chapter: what were the dominant questions that undergirded al-Radi's interpretive framework such that they led him to give primacy to these literary themes? More specifically, to what extent were al-Radi's views on the relationship between language, law and revelation closely connected to the way in which he formulated the operations of ambiguity and metaphor in the Qur'anic text?

Revelation, mediated as it is by language, necessitated that theories about language developed in consonance with theological discussions on revelation. Moreover, since by the turn of the ninth century scholars approached divine speech or revelation not only as a form of guidance but also as the fundamental source of law,<sup>242</sup> discourses on language and revelation went hand in hand with emerging theories on law and jurisprudence.<sup>243</sup> In general, the overlap

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<sup>242</sup> This was most systematically authorized by al-Shafi'i and his canonization of the Qur'an and Prophetic Hadith as the fundamental sources of law.

<sup>243</sup> The first chapter of all legal manuals, for example, was dedicated to hermeneutics. In addition, both disciplines drew from the terminology and theories of the other. For example, al-Sibawayhi (d.796CE) found legal reasoning to be the most useful for his description of grammar. Although he may not have been making a case for the parity of language and law, his work was eventually used for this purpose. (See Michael Carter, s.v.

between legal and grammatical traditions was extremely important and many treatises attest to this relationship. Al-Radi's approach to these three important concepts, namely, language, law, and revelation, is critical for an understanding of the hermeneutical tropes of ambiguity and metaphor that he employs. An important theological principle that governed his application of these literary devices was the "principle of clarity." This notion was most comprehensively formulated by al-Radi's Mu'tazili teacher, Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar. As I demonstrated in chapter four, the theological system articulated by 'Abd al-Jabbar centered on the principle of God's justice. Accordingly, within this justice-centered system, the pairing of revelation with law led 'Abd al-Jabbar to assign to revelation the necessary property of absolute clarity.<sup>244</sup> In other words, 'Abd al-Jabbar argued that if God's revelation is to be understood as God's law, and God is just, then revelation must be expressed in a communicable language.

The "principle of clarity" thus came to define the very nature of revelatory language for 'Abd al-Jabbar and his followers. But if from a theological perspective the Qur'an was argued to be absolutely clear, then how was this clarity achieved in language? In other words, how did scholars engaged in these tenth century debates understand and measure "clarity?" For 'Abd al-Jabbar, the principle of clarity was mainly expressed as a denial of deferred clarification (*ta'khir al-bayan*). In other words, he argued that whenever God uses a word non-literally or transgressively in his revelation, he must provide rational or revealed evidence of what it means,

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"Sibawayhi," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012. Accessed on 7/8/13 at <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sibawayhi-COM\\_1068](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sibawayhi-COM_1068)>

In another example, the very edifice of al-Shafi'i's effort to canonize the Prophetic hadith literature as a source for interpreting the Qur'an had echoes with Muqatil ibn Sulayman's theories of polysemy (see Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 34-65).

<sup>244</sup> This was not the only way to imagine revelation as a source of law, as is seen in al-Baqillani, 'Abd al-Jabbar's Ash'ari contemporary, who imagined the words of the Qur'an as "dim and partial expressions of God's inscrutable command," and Hanbali Abu Ya'ala ibn al-Farra, who "treated revelation as a single eternal speech act by which God brings about obligations performatively in the hearts of his servants." See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 125.

and this evidence must accompany the transgressively used expression; it cannot be revealed at some later time.<sup>245</sup> Therefore, although ‘Abd al-Jabbar recognized the category of transgressive usage, which on the one hand suggests the opening up of a space for ambiguity and reinterpretation, he also insisted that the clarifying text must be revealed at the same time as the transgressive one. In this way, his theory of transgressive usage remained under the firm control of his principle of clarity.<sup>246</sup> What is of critical concern here is the way in which ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s emphasis on the principle of clarity had important ramifications for his understanding of the operations of literary devices such as metaphor and ambiguity. In summary, in order for ‘Abd al-Jabbar to assign absolute clarity to language and also maintain that language is composed of literary features like ambiguity and metaphor, he had to firmly establish and regulate the operations of these literary devices.

According to al-Radi’s theory of language, the literary motifs of ambiguity and metaphor are upheld as rhetorically powerful devices, and similar to ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s position, the extent to which they can defer meaning is also determined and limited by the overarching principle of clarity. As I illustrated in chapter three, al-Radi’s literary arguments were both bolstered and limited by what he upheld as a fixed linguistic canon since for al-Radi, language was fixed and predetermined (*wad‘*). Hence, on the one hand al-Radi’s literary approach to the Qur’an argued for a transgressive reading of certain verses, while on the other hand he relied on clearly defined sources for the alternative readings, thus achieving a rhetorical lockdown on the text’s hermeneutical possibilities. In summary, for al-Radi, the principle of clarity demanded that all literary operations were part of the *sam‘*, or the received transmission of the language, meaning that literary hermeneutical devices were lexicalized and could not be freely formed by

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<sup>245</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 125.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

analogy.<sup>247</sup> In al-Radi's own words, the fundamental principle that authorized and governed his tightly sealed interpretive method was the inextricable relationship between the *muhkam* and *mutashabih* verses. It is to al-Radi's understanding and articulation of this fundamental *muhkam/mutashabih* principle that I now turn.

### **The Hermeneutical Principle of *Muhkam-Mutashabih***

Al-Radi best laid out the critical relationship between the *mutashabih* and the *muhkam* verses in his discussion of verse 3:7. As I noted earlier, this verse had assumed a critical function in the exegetical tradition. Its specific references to revelation, interpretation and authority created an important conceptual space through which exegetes could convey their hermeneutical positions. Unlike the commentaries of many of al-Radi's predecessors, his discussion of this verse was not framed around the obscure language with which the Book is described, as a composite of clear and ambiguous verses. Instead, the conundrum that this verse presented for al-Radi is that the plural feminine pronoun (*hunna*) is used to refer to the single feminine noun, "mother of the Book" (*umm-ul kitab*). This lack of grammatical agreement in the sentence represented al-Radi's main concern.<sup>248</sup> However, in responding to this dilemma, he offered some important insights on his understanding of the relationship between the *muhkam* and the *mutashabih*:

The pronoun (*hunna*) refers to the entirety of the verses, and the joining of some of them to others in their revelation is what the "mother of the Book" (*umm al-*

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<sup>247</sup> This same view was held by the head of the Hanafis in Baghdad, Ahmad ibn 'Ali Abu Bakr al-Razi al-Jassas (d.981CE), and was a central tenet in his work on legal theory, further reinforcing the important overlaps between the legal, exegetical, and philological traditions. See Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Contacts between Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory in Islam: The Case of Majaz," *Zeitschrift Für Geschichte Der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991): 253–284.

<sup>248</sup> Al-Radi engages the issue of interpretive authority in the "discussion" (*fasl*) section of this chapter. He adheres to a reading of verse 3:7, which accords interpretive authority not only to God but also to "those rooted in knowledge." In addition, al-Radi argues that "those rooted in knowledge" refers to the *'ulama* or scholars.

*kitab*) refers to. Each verse in the Book does not count as the *umm* (mother/foundation) on its own. Describing the singular with the plural is permissible when they are deeply connected to each other and when their meanings are conjoined. Because if God had said, “they are the mothers of the Book” the listener would have understood that every single verse is the *umm* for the entire Book. This is not the meaning, rather the meaning is what I have said about the essence of the verses in their entirety being the “mother of the Book” not just some [of the verses]; the meaning of their essence as the mother of the Book is that from it one learns what is intended by the Book with respect to the clarification of the markers of religion (*min bayan ma‘alim al-din*). So the expression “mother of the Book” does not refer back to each and every [*muhkam*] verse, rather to all the [*muhkam*] verses in their totality. Therefore *umm* here takes the meaning of “the foundation” (*al-asl*) to which [meaning] returns and rests on. *Muhkam* is the foundation for the *mutashabih*, it is illuminated by it (*yuqaddihu bihi*) such that it makes clear what is hidden in it and extracts what is buried in it. And this is why a mother of a human is called *umm* because she is his/her root (*asl*) from which a human is born and then grows.<sup>249</sup>

There are a few points worthy of highlighting here. First, note how al-Radi insisted that the foundational character of the *muhkam* verses is a feature that describes the verses when they are taken as a collective whole, and not when they are examined individually. What is critical to observe in this assertion is al-Radi’s refusal to accept any difference between the verses on the basis of their epistemological value. Therefore, while on the one hand al-Radi’s commentary on this verse preserved the Qur’anic text from the charge of being grammatically flawed, it also challenged a hierarchical reading of the *muhkam/mutashabih* division that threatened the instructive value of the *mutashabih* verses in the Qur’anic text. This position aligns well with al-Radi’s broader effort to preserve the “principle of clarity” and its application to all parts of the Qur’an. Al-Radi clearly articulated this all-important goal in several sections of the *Haqa’iq*. He also frequently argued that the purposefulness of each part of the Qur’an contrasts with the work of poets. The poet, for al-Radi, freely employs the device of superfluity in order to bring balance

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<sup>249</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 2.

to his verses. But in the revelatory text, no word or letter is without meaning.<sup>250</sup> In fact, al-Radi's hermeneutical project of resolving the Qur'anic "ambiguities" can be interpreted as his challenge to the view that ambiguity in the Qur'an undermines its clarity. In other words, al-Radi's focus on the ambiguous verses was not only directed at removing doubt or confusion about their meaning. Much more than that, by positioning ambiguous verses at the heart of his hermeneutical enterprise, he valorized these verses as repositories of the most subtle secrets of the Qur'an that were only accessible through the equally subtle mysteries of the Arabic language.

The second important point highlighted in al-Radi's passage above is his explicit reference to the principle of referring the ambiguous verses back to the clear verses to determine their meaning. Several exegetes apart from al-Radi adopted a similar approach to interpreting the *mutashabih* verses.<sup>251</sup> However, scholars differed on the details of how this principle was to be applied. An important discussion occurs in chapter thirty-one of the *Haqa'iq*, where al-Radi explicitly walked the reader through his application of the fundamental hermeneutical principle of *muhkam/mutashabih* and explained the steps through which the *muhkam* illuminates the meaning of the *mutashabih*. The subject of this discussion is the following verse:

The disbelievers should not think that it is better for them that We give them respite: We give them respite **so that** they become more sinful— a shameful torment awaits them.

(Qur'an, 3:178)

The dilemma posed by the imagined interlocutor is that the apparent sense of this verse makes the absurd suggestion that God actually desires disbelief from the disbelievers. This is evident from the causal relation between God's granting respite to the disbelievers and them increasing in sin. The function of the letter *lam* (so that, in order to) in this verse, argues the interlocutor, is

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<sup>250</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 166.

<sup>251</sup> Leah Kinberg has noted in her survey of exegetical approaches to the *muhkam/mutashabih* verses that the same principle was applied by scholars of al-Radi's generation such as al-Maturidi (d.944CE) and al-Jassas (d.981CE), as well as by many later scholars. See Kinberg, "Muhkamat and mutashabihat (Koran 3/7)," 161-162.

the same as it is in the verse: “I created jinn and mankind so that they worship me” (Qur’an, 51:56). Therefore, concludes the interlocutor, in the same way that this verse indicates that God wants obedience from his servants, the previous verse must also indicate that he wants disobedience from the disbelievers. Al-Radi begins his response to the interlocutor’s argument by reiterating the centerpiece of his hermeneutic: the *muhkam/mutashabih* rule. He then explains how the rule applies to this verse:

In the beginning of this book while discussing the principles of *muhkam* and *mutashabih*, I presented a rule (*qa’ida*), which must serve as the foundation (*al-bina’*) and underlying point of reference [for problems of interpretation]. This rule is that the *mutashabih* verses must revert (*wajaba raddaha*) back to the *muhkam* verses. The verse, which is the subject of [this] discussion, is *mutashabih*; its root (*asluha*), according to which it must be interpreted, is the *muhkam* verse with which we responded to the questioner. The verse states: “I created jinn and mankind so that they worship me.”<sup>252</sup> Clearly, this verse counts as a *muhkam* verse, which is compatible with rational proof since the letter *lam* in “*li ya’buduni*” (so that they worship me) occurs in a way which reflects its intended meaning, (the worship of jinn and mankind). The earlier verse [3:178] is counted as *mutashabih*, which opposes rational proof because the *lam* in the phrase “so that they increase in sin” occurs in a way that does not reflect its intended meaning (the increase in sin). Therefore we argued that its interpretation should be carried out in a way that is compatible with rational proofs and principles of justice. This is the foundational principle of religion (*asl min usul al-din*) that must be applied and relied upon.<sup>253</sup>

In this section, al-Radi reiterated that the key to interpreting the ambiguous verses is to refer them back to the clear verses. The clear verses guide the exegete by displaying linguistic structures that convey meanings in line with the principles of reason and justice. Put differently, the structural soundness of the *muhkam* verses is coupled with the balanced and rational logic of their message. These qualities invest these verses with a power of referential authority, in the sense that an exegete can refer to them as model statements that fulfill the criteria that are necessary for their apparent sense to count as the intended meaning.

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<sup>252</sup> Qur’an 51:56

<sup>253</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 277-278.

Further, the *muhkam* verses, by virtue of being structurally and logically ordered, provide the exegete with a sample “normative verse,” by means of which the *mutashabih* or ambiguous verses can then be identified. Once the *muhkam* is used to identify the *mutashabih*, the exegete is then able to argue for an alternate grammatical reading of the word or sentence. For example, al-Radi uses the *muhkam* verse “so that they worship me” to show how the letter *lam* is functioning in its causal meaning of “so that.” He argues that in the *muhkam* verse, this statement is both grammatically and rationally sound. Therefore, it can be used to recognize that interpreting the *lam* in its causal meaning in the *mutashabih* verse such that it reads, “so that they become sinful,” is incorrect. With this identification in place, al-Radi went on to argue that even though *lam*, in the language of the Arabs, can carry the meaning of “in order to,” it can also carry the meaning of “recompense.” He pointed to another *muhkam* verse to illustrate this meaning of *lam*: “They set up [false deities] as God’s equals which lead people astray from His path. Say, ‘Take your pleasure now, for your destination is the Fire.’”<sup>254</sup> Al-Radi argued that the people described in this verse set up false gods in the hope that they would bring them closer to God. When this led them astray and left them in a state of loss, it becomes permissible to describe the gods as the *cause* for their misguidance. Al-Radi further bolstered this reading of *lam* with sample verses from the poetic lexicon.

We gather our wealth so that (*li*) it can be passed on as inheritance  
 We build our houses so that (*li*) they decay with time

For (*li*) imminent death does every wet nurse raise [the child]  
 For (*li*) ultimate destruction do humans build civilizations anew

Al-Radi showed that the causal meaning of *lam* in these verses is not rationally sound, since human beings raise children for life not for death, and they build houses to last not to decay, and they collect wealth to benefit from it, not to transfer it to someone else. But when this is the

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<sup>254</sup> Qur’an, 14:30.

ultimate fate of these actions, then it is more eloquent for the poet to use the *lam* in the way that he does, al-Radi contended.<sup>255</sup>

Crucial in these discussions is the way in which al-Radi's application of the *muhkam/mutashabih* rule invested the *muhkam* verse with a definite quality not only from the perspective of the message that it conveys (promise of reward or punishment, rule of permissibility or prohibition) but also with respect to its definitive literary form. In the above verse for example, al-Radi argued that the distinction between the *muhkam* and *mutashabih* verses is determined by the measure of their literary and logical coherence combined. However, the instrumental value of a *mutashabih* verse is no different from that of the *muhkam* verse. In this way, al-Radi made the case for the epistemological function of the *mutashabihat*, which was in no way less than that of the *muhkam*. Still, even as al-Radi defended the ambiguities from the charge that they diminished meaning, another question loomed large: if every element of the Qur'an was infused with meaning, then what *additional* purpose did the property of ambiguity serve? It is to al-Radi's response to this conundrum that I now turn.

### **Intersections of Language and Ontology**

The debate over the value of Qur'anic ambiguity was thriving among al-Radi's contemporaries, and scholars presented a variety of explanations in response to this issue. Some argued that the function of the ambiguous verses was to distinguish the learned from the masses. Others held that the presence of ambiguity in the Qur'an had been generative in enabling the emergence of numerous disciplines dedicated to deciphering meaning. Finally, some maintained that the ambiguous verses were a means through which exegetes could expend intellectual effort as they wrestled with the challenges the verses posed; overcoming these challenges served as

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<sup>255</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 279.

opportunities through which they could hone not only their interpretive skills but also their relationship to the text.<sup>256</sup> It was along the lines of this third justification that ‘Abd al-Jabbar, who as we saw previously was a critical figure in al-Radi’s intellectual training, argued that the *mutashabih* verses were part of “acquired knowledge” as opposed to “necessary knowledge.” Accordingly, his reasoning for why the *mutashabih* are beneficial was closely tied to the logic of the benefit of God’s division of knowledge into two types: acquired and necessary. Thus ‘Abd al-Jabbar emphasized that the value of ambiguity lay in the intellectual effort required in elucidating it.<sup>257</sup>

Al-Radi did not explicitly address the issue of the edifying character of ambiguous verses, but it is possible to infer his position from various sections of the *Haqa’iq*. As I argued earlier, central to al-Radi’s hermeneutical project was the argument that because of their rhetorically superior constructions ambiguous verses conveyed meaning in ways that simple constructions did not. Another important way in which al-Radi sought to explain the instructive purpose of Qur’anic ambiguity was through the view that language was a reflection of ontological reality, such that subtleties of linguistic expression represented the key through which realities of the world could subsequently be accessed and validated. The idea of such correspondence between language and ontological reality profoundly impacted the way in which early Muslim custodians of language imagined the scope of their authority and the issues that came under their jurisdiction.

Approaching language as a mirror of the social world accorded well with the intellectual ethos in Baghdad and other major centers in the Buyid Empire. For example, the grammarians of Basra, whose school came to dominate the discipline of grammar, posited a direct correlation

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<sup>256</sup> Kinberg, “Muhkamat and mutashabihat,” 162-163.

<sup>257</sup> Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah*, 180-190.

between the words and structures of Arabic on the one hand, and the realities that they expressed on the other.<sup>258</sup> As a corollary to this theory, it was necessary to account for speech that departed from normative expressions. Grammatical theorizing offered a way to explain the Qur'an's many violations of the mirror character of language including techniques such as concealment, ellipsis, indirect reference, non-apparent meaning, redundancy, repetition, inversion of word order, and figurative language. The notion of a transgressive language (*majaz*), more specifically, represented therefore a corollary to the grammarian's concept of a natural correlation between language and reality.<sup>259</sup>

Traces of this underlying idea, which posits an intimate connection between language and the reality it represents, arose in a variety of genres. For example, the literary term *majaz* and its counterpart *haqiqa* were applied in their linguistic and ontological meanings. One instance of this coalescence of the linguistic and ontological dimensions of the *haqiqa/majaz* dichotomy occurs in the work of al-Nashi' al-Akbar (d.906CE), who made the claim that certain descriptive terms such as "living" and "hearing" apply literally to God but only figuratively to humans.<sup>260</sup> Wolfhart Heinrichs situated this intermingling of language and ontological conditions by al-Nashi' (d.906CE) to the Basran cultural milieu, which was the headquarters for many prominent mystics.<sup>261</sup> Although Heinrichs, in his remarks about al-Nashi's application of the *haqiqa-majaz* dichotomy, does hint at the pervasive effect of ideas across boundaries set by discipline, school and sect, he does not pursue this possibility any further. I would argue that it is important to keep in mind that Sufis were not merely mystics who based their teachings on sublime experience but

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<sup>258</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 20; Heinrichs "On the Genesis," 122-123.

<sup>259</sup> Heinrichs, "On the Genesis," 129-140.

<sup>260</sup> Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 22; Heinrichs, "On the Genesis," 136.

<sup>261</sup> See Heinrichs, "On the Genesis," 136.

moreover, they were also public intellectuals participating in the leading debates of the day. In fact, the written records of early Sufis were discursive productions shaped by their participation in spoken debates and their borrowings from written authorities. Indeed, the Sufis were very much part of the circles of Qur'anic, Hadith and even legal expertise.<sup>262</sup> Thus my exploration of the issue of the *haqiqa/majaz* dichotomy in al-Radi's work, in terms of how it was applied both as a measure of a term's literality and its ontological reality, is directed at how this approach formed part of a larger cultural and hermeneutical episteme.

A particularly fascinating example of the intimacy of language and ontology in al-Radi's hermeneutics is found in chapter eight of the *Haqa'iq*. In this discussion, al-Radi sought to explain part of a verse, which according to the imagined interlocutor presented a theological dilemma. The verse states: "the female is not like the male."<sup>263</sup> The interlocutor claims that this statement seems to have no instructive purpose since it indicates the obvious. Al-Radi's discussion is framed as a response to this charge that the revelatory text is redundant. During the course of his explanation, al-Radi drew on his understanding of language and its relationship to the realities it represents. He asserted that the name of a thing (in the language of the Arabs) can represent that which the thing aspires towards and desires to become. To paraphrase, al-Radi posits that language does not only reflect fixed essences or substances, it can also convey the process of becoming. For al-Radi, this aspect is one of the subtle mysteries of language, available only to the exclusive few endowed with the ability to traverse its multiple layers of meaning. An examination of the verse in question is helpful for an illustration of this critical point:

But when she gave birth, she said, 'My Lord! I have given birth to a girl'— God knew best what she had given birth to: **the male is not like the female**—<sup>6</sup> I name

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<sup>262</sup> Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 24-44.

<sup>263</sup> Qur'an 3:36.

her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the rejected Satan.’ (Qur’an 3:36)

Al-Radi argued that this verse refers to Mary’s mother, who, when pregnant, vowed to offer her child to the service of the Lord as a servant of the House of God, *Bayt al-Muqaddas*. However, only men were permitted to serve there. So when she gave birth to a daughter, she was anxious that her offer would not be accepted. At this point in the discussion al-Radi proceeds to list the reasons why women were barred from serving at the House of the Lord. He argued, “What is fitting for a man is not fitting for a woman, due to menstruation and childbirth and the need for her to protect her adornments from the people, and because if she were to mix with men, they would be seduced by her (*iftatanu biha*) and her status would attract them.” Al-Radi further explained, “God accepted the vow from Mary’s mother and entrusted her with the responsibility of a man by bringing her child near to him and by purifying him [the child] for service of the house. He did not do this for any woman other than her, and thus distinguished her from her equals.” In this discussion, it is evident that al-Radi’s reasoning, according to which women were regarded as a source of temptation whose reproductive roles were a hindrance to their competence in the realm of religious service, was very much in line with the social norms of the period.

Al-Radi explained that some scholars (unnamed) argue that the statement “the female is not like the male” is an instance in which God refers to the condition in which different rules are in place for women than for men. In other words, it does not intend to describe an essential difference in their traits. According to this view (of the unnamed scholars), when the mother of Mary was certain that she was pregnant with a daughter, she took refuge in God’s protection to fulfill the duty of her religion (*din*). The idea here is that Mary’s mother needed God’s protection because as implied by the concise phrase, the female is not like the male, “women are more

feeble than men when it comes to contracts, and intellectually weaker, and Satan has a greater impact on them. Don't you see how many of the rulings of punishment for men are due to the feebleness of women and a result of their breaking of contracts?" Clearly, the irony of reading this verse as a reflection of women as incomplete or imperfect as compared to men was lost on early commentators, given that the context of the verse makes a strong case for a non-patriarchal narrative of Mary.<sup>264</sup>

Until this point in the discussion, al-Radi was paraphrasing the views of "other scholars," and had not expressed his own position on the matter. However it can be inferred from his discussion that he did not disagree with this view. With the next sentence, he entered into the conversation by explaining that it is for this reason that the jurists do not accept the testimony of a woman in the marriage contract; and say, "the proper marriage is the one which occurs with the testimony of men and no women." Al-Radi recounted a debate on this question between the towering early Muslim jurists Abu Hanifa and al-Shafi'i, in which al-Shafi'i argued in favor of the above position, and Abu Hanifa disagreed with him and permitted marriages performed with the testimony of one man and two women. It is in the course of making this tangential point about the testimony of women in the courts that al-Radi made his remarks on the "secret subtleties of language." He first explained that on this question, he follows his teacher, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarazmi (d.1012CE),<sup>265</sup> who challenged al-Shafi'i's view and argued that the Qu'ranic verse 2:282 is evidence for the acceptance of two men as equivalent to

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<sup>264</sup> Carl Ernst, in his discussion of this Qur'anic chapter, brings our attention to the several ways in which gendered language is employed in the verses relating to the interpretation of scripture. He shows that this is tied to the non-patriarchal narrative centering on Mary. In addition he argues that the use of gendered language is used to emphasize the virtues of religious loyalty (believers adhere to the mother text rather than seductive interpretations of ambiguous verses). See Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an*, 175.

<sup>265</sup> Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi was a leading Sunni theologian, and one of al-Radi's teachers in theology.

one man and two women.<sup>266</sup> Next, in an important digression, al-Radi added that Abu al-Hasan al-Akhfash (d.825-835CE)<sup>267</sup> stated that Arabs say for women, “this is a witness (*shahidi*) (with a masculine construction)” even though they mean a woman.<sup>268</sup> Crucial here is that al-Radi asserted that by using a male label for a female, or by employing the term witness (*shahidi*) in its masculine construction in place of *shahidati* (the feminine construction), there is a subtle secret of the Arabic language. The secret is that through this label the Arabs seek to complete the deficiency in the woman’s meaning by attaching a male descriptor to her. In al-Radi’s view, the similarity drawn between “her” and “him” in this verse was akin to how the Arabs named a person who was stung (*ladigh*) as healthy (*salim*), and referred to the person who was destroyed (*mahlaka*) as victorious (*mafaza*).<sup>269</sup>

Several important points can be gleaned from this passage. First, al-Radi imagined the rules of language (of the Arabs) as a repository for subtle social realities. Moreover, he regarded the subtle references of language to have been perfected in the revelatory text, which, for him, demonstrated a harmonious relationship between grammatical literality and ontological reality. Each element of language, including conjunctions, prepositions, particles and other grammatical operations was imbued with ontologically manifested meaning. Underlying al-Radi’s appreciation for these epistemological connections was the idea that language ultimately mirrored both ontological realities (incomplete female aspiring towards the complete male) as well as social realities (legal equivalence of one man with two women).

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<sup>266</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqa’iq*, 86.

<sup>267</sup> Abu al-Hasan al-Akhfash was a pupil of the esteemed grammarian al-Sibawayhi. It was al-Akhfash who taught al-Sibawayhi’s *Kitab* and made it widely known.

<sup>268</sup> Al-Radi mentions that al-Akhfash discusses this in his treatise known as, *al-Awsat*.

<sup>269</sup> Al-Radi, *Haqai’q*, 87.

Al-Radi's linguistic imaginary can therefore be characterized by the marked tension between its tightly sealed and definite structure that only permits the rules of grammar to decode it, and by its subtle mysteries, the access to which is limited to an exclusive few. Therefore, for al-Radi, the linguistic authority of grammar as the key to unlocking the secrets of language symmetrically corresponded with the religious authority of the exegete as the exclusive custodian and interpreter of revealed knowledge. This accorded well with a prevailing cultural dialectic dominated by the competing forces of concealing and revealing. Ruqayya Khan in her compelling study, *Self and Secrecy in Early Islam*, observes the multiple manifestations of this dialectic in different types of literature: love treatises, the Qur'an, ethical works, and polythematic Arabic encyclopedias. She argued that in each of these, albeit in distinctive ways, the dialectic between concealing and revealing constitutes a central place in the way the self is imagined and constructed. In her examination of the multiple sources through which this notion was constituted, Khan argued that the revelatory text postulates the human ideal of a "transparent self" in its depiction of ideal God-human relations. She makes the arresting observation that this emphasis in the Qur'anic text may have contributed to the awareness and cultivation of a hermeneutics of concealing and revealing in extra-Qur'anic literature.

In a similar fashion, Al-Radi also conceptualized Arabic language according to this trope of concealing and revealing, pointing to the lifting of veils to uncover its meaning, and to its subtle layers and nuances as it playfully gestures towards meaning. In selecting *majaz* and *mutashabih* as the primary hermeneutical devices through which to interpret the Qur'an, the dynamic of concealing and revealing was, for al-Radi, best exemplified in the character of the Arabic language. Of course, he did not go as far as the later literary theorist 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d.1078CE), who focused on the psychological effects of metaphors and the degree of

perplexity they were able to cause. Nor was al-Radi preoccupied, like al-Jurjani, with the mental and psychological processes that occur in the creator's psyche (*al-nafs*), and the features that determine the emotional and aesthetic effect on the recipient.<sup>270</sup> However, al-Radi did nonetheless privilege Qur'anic ambiguity and metaphor as rhetorical feats that required intellectual effort to be deciphered. Moreover, he also emphasized the singular importance of expending intellectual energy in attaining an understanding of the Qur'an's linguistic puzzles and secrets.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that al-Radi's interpretive method represented a confluence of multiple intellectual currents and positions, mediated by the intellectual and social milieu of Buyid Baghdad. Through an interrogation of the term *mutashabih* in al-Radi's Qur'an commentary, I have demonstrated the interconnections between his work and the philological tradition of interpreting grammatical difficulties in a text. These discourses exemplified the fundamental concern of early Muslim scholars to establish the relationship between language and revelation on theological grounds. The theological demands on the text meant that al-Radi's challenge was to explain what *work* ambiguity performed, since as a rhetorical feature adopted in the revelatory text, it had to be purposeful. At the same time, al-Radi's discourse of ambiguity was mediated by the fundamental theological principle of clarity, according to which it was impossible for the Qur'an to be inaccessible. Thus the literary devices of metaphor and ambiguity in al-Radi's interpretive framework were regulated by an overarching linguistic canon, which limited the possibilities of meaning to an identifiable reference. Crucial to such a

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<sup>270</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-Jurjani's Classification of Isti'ara with Special Reference to Aristotle's Classification of Metaphor," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 2 (1971): 48-75.

hermeneutical operation was the philosophical premise that language represented a mirror for reality, that language and ontology were inexorably bound. In sum, al-Radi's hermeneutic vacillated between what can be termed an "etymological essentialism" and a transgressive use of language. Al-Radi's movement between these two interpretive methods to constitute meaning reflected his embeddedness in a scholarly environment whereby a hermeneutics of concealing and revealing, authorized by the Qur'an and its ancillary disciplines, held considerable sway.

## CONCLUSION

In the opening pages of the widely circulated and authoritative English-language resource for classical Arabic today, titled, *Arabic-English Lexicon: Derived from the Best and Most Copious Eastern Sources*, the author, Edward Lane, lists the main authorities he consulted in order to compile this monumental work. Lane's lexicon, which was published in 1863, is still the most important tool for serious students, researchers, and anyone who wishes to understand the etymological basis of words in their classical meaning. Through Lane's meticulous and detailed discussions, we are given a rare glimpse of how the sociopolitical and cultural milieus of the early centuries of Islam, during which lexical works were compiled, had a constituting effect on the meaning and application of words. But aside from tracing the outlines of how language developed, and the multitude of interrelated polysemous meanings that words possess, what Lane's work offers to the reader is a canon of Arabic lexicology.

It is this function of the book that accords immense value to the opening pages, in which Lane lists the figures that constitute his authorities for the Arabic language. The list includes many names that would have been familiar to al-Radi, featuring as it does not only his contemporaries but also some of his teachers, including Ibn Jinni, al-Farisi, and al-Sirafi. Al-Radi himself, however, is not included in Lane's list of selected authorities. This is unfortunate, since in my estimation, al-Radi's discussion in the *Haqa'iq* is very relevant to the discipline of determining the etymological basis of words and their homonymous properties through examples from the speech of Arabs, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and the revelatory sources. Indeed, not only did al-

Radi draw on these sources in his work, he also played a critical role in their subsequent canonization. Perhaps it is the classification of the *Haqa'iq* as a Qur'anic exegesis that led Lane to overlook its critical contribution. Yet, in light of the heavily Sunni bent of the selected figures, I would speculate that al-Radi's label as a Shi'i scholar may in itself have cautioned Lane against including his views. But my concern here is not with Lane's choices. I want to instead point to a critical issue that Lane's work brings to light: the exceedingly extensive reach of sectarian understandings of difference - understandings that are derived from heresiological writings - and the often unnoticeable ways in which the basis of those divisions can permeate not only the conceptual frameworks we employ, but also the very language we use to build our arguments.

In an apt analogy, Daniel Boyarin begins his monograph *Border Lines* on the artificial nature of the borders separating Judaism and early Christianity with the following story:

Everyday for thirty years a man drove a wheelbarrow full of sand over the Tijuana border crossing. The customs inspector dug through the sand each morning but could not discover any contraband. He remained, of course, convinced that he was dealing with a smuggler. On the day of his retirement from the service, he asked the smuggler to reveal what it was that he was smuggling and how he had been doing so. "Wheelbarrows; I've been smuggling wheelbarrows, of course."

Boyarin employs this humorous anecdote for multiple purposes. Most relevant here is how he explains that customs inspectors, in their zeal to prevent any contraband from crossing the borders that they sought to enforce by fiat, were, themselves, the agents of illicit interchange of some of the most important contraband, the wheelbarrows – in this case, the very ideas of heresiology themselves.<sup>271</sup> Similarly, Lane's example points to how we, as users of a canonical Arabic language authorized by Lane's lexicon, might also participate in the persistence of

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<sup>271</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1-2.

heresiological frameworks which imagine sectarian identity as stable, unchanging entities that differ from their competing “others” in neatly defined and identifiable ways.

In this dissertation, I have sought to highlight such unsuspecting places where our vigilance, like that of the customs inspectors, escapes us, and we become complicit, through the language and methodologies we employ, in creating a new passage for the very categories we may set out to carefully scrutinize and critique – in this case, the perpetuation of frameworks that privilege self-ascribed orthodoxies. I have questioned the pervasive assumption in Euro-American studies on Qur’anic exegesis that there exists a clear correspondence between an author’s sectarian identity and his hermeneutical aesthetic.

Using al-Radi as one example, I have demonstrated that to approach Qur’an commentaries as works in which authors make claims on the text’s meaning solely on the basis of their sectarian identity has had a severely narrowing effect on the kinds of questions that get asked in contemporary examinations of Muslim engagements with scripture. Moreover, I have argued that in addition to diminishing the very scope of our analysis, exclusively sectarian readings of Qur’an commentaries reinforces a conceptually unsound understanding of the formation and operations of religious identity.

Identities are approached as predetermined bounded entities; a view that does not account for the specific historical conditions in which identities are constituted, nor the processes through which they are constantly reinvented. Consequently, in order to explain an author’s hermeneutical decisions, language philosophy, political theory, and other intellectual arguments and dispositions, an uncritical emphasis on sectarian identity perpetuates explanations based on such binaries as assimilation and resistance, borrowing and influence, majority and minority.

Instead of such a binary framing, I have argued that what is needed is a conceptual approach that resists a reified approach to identity formation. It is precisely such an approach that I have sought to employ and showcase in the preceding pages, through a close reading of al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic in the *Haqa'iq*.

In this study I have sought to advance a non-sectarian interrogation of al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic. Beginning with an assemblage of competing narratives about al-Radi in the biographical and historical literature, I argued that he was most consistently remembered as a gifted poet with an exceptional command over the Arabic language. I noted the dual significance of his poetic leanings in the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. First, central to his hermeneutic was the view that language was the fundamental source of authority for interpreting the Qur'anic text. Second, as a renowned poet he belonged to an influential and emergent class of scholars who saw themselves as the custodians of a pure Arabic language.

In chapter two I illustrated the way in which political defragmentation under the Buyids, the diminishing role of the caliph, and the resultant opening of multiple networks of patronage paved the way for new forms of authority to be articulated, like that of the guardians of a pure Arabic language. Al-Radi was a powerful player and stakeholder in these debates where the authority of language over logic was championed. He interpreted his own position as a *sayyid* and leader of the Shi'i community as a testament to his linguistic authority, and saw his sacred lineage as intimately connected to his knowledge of a pure Arabic language.

In the second part of this dissertation (chapters three to five) I presented select examples from the *Haqa'iq* to show that al-Radi's Qur'an commentary is the site through which he most vividly *performed* language. I showed ways in which al-Radi provides the reader an insider's view on words' *other* meanings, which he derived by combing the literary canon to identify

authoritative proofs for his novel arguments. Citing examples from Qur'anic verses, poetry, and the oral speech tradition, al-Radi demonstrated the authority of what he would cast a word, a particle, or phrase to signify. It is no exaggeration to state that in the *Haqa'iq* text al-Radi evinced a distinct literary swagger, all the while giving the reader an insight into an array of pertinent questions that captured the imagination of the scholars of his period. In this way, al-Radi's commentary opens up an intellectual horizon where the critical relationship between language and revelation was both being formulated and hotly debated. Theological premises on the Qur'an's absolute clarity and instructive value played a determining role in the theorization of literary tools like ambiguity and metaphor.

A comparison of al-Radi and his teacher, the leading Mu'tazili theologian, 'Abd al-Jabbar's treatment of the Qur'an's ambiguous verses demonstrated how their reason-oriented approach to issues of theological importance (prophetic infallibility, God's sovereignty, and human agency) was applied in divergent ways. In short, I showed that 'Abd al-Jabbar mobilized the discussion of Qur'anic ambiguity to defend the cohesiveness of his justice-centered theological system, whereas al-Radi proffered literary arguments to posit the all-important authority of language. Through this discussion, I tried to challenge a narrative of early Shi'i exegesis as the product of Mu'tazili influence. Rather than casting al-Radi's hermeneutic as having come under the "influence" of 'Abd al-Jabbar's Mu'tazili teachings, I instead sought to argue for an approach focused on specifying particular points of convergence and divergence found in their respective arguments.

Finally, chapter five situated al-Radi's overarching hermeneutical principle Qur'anic ambiguity/clarity in the philological traditions of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, while also arguing how his approach aligned well with the cultural dialectic of concealing/revealing, which held

considerable intellectual currency in tenth century Baghdad. Taken together, through these illustrations and arguments, I have strived to make centrally visible a discursive archive that had thus far escaped the interpretive radar of Western Scholarship on Shi‘ism and early Islam. In building a hermeneutical space for al-Radi’s Qur’an commentary, I have also labored to push for a conceptual approach that closely navigates and describes the internal logics and interpretive moves that govern a particular exegetical project.

The trans-sectarian approach that I have sought to illustrate in this dissertation makes the case for two important directions that I propose are critical for future projects in Shi‘i studies and in Islamic studies more broadly. First, too often, scholarly explorations of general Islamicate themes and topics such as exegesis, legal theory, and hadith, to name a few, have refrained from extending the scope of their analysis to the “Shi‘i” context. The justification for this neglect is couched in the language of humility, where the author admits his/her own limits as a scholar and argues that s/he must draw the line somewhere. But this strategy of epistemological humility has important implications that are often left unexamined.

It promotes the view that the study of Shi‘i subjects, be they texts, individuals, themes, or theories, quite naturally fall outside the scope of the otherwise separate field of Sunni Islam. As I have tried to show in this dissertation, not only is this view historically inaccurate, it also yields a limited understanding of the overarching episteme within which ideas and identities are constituted. As anthropologist and religion theorist Talal Asad has succinctly argued, “If the adherents of a religion enter the public sphere, can their entry leave the pre-existing discursive structure intact? The public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates. It is constituted by the sensibilities – memories, aspirations, fears and hopes – of speakers and

listeners.”<sup>272</sup> Building on Asad’s point, one may argue that to relegate “Shi‘i studies” to a separate field altogether is to reinforce the view that the rituals, practices, texts, and sensibilities of Shi‘i Muslims can be carved out for individual study without causing a dent on the conclusions about the discourse from which they have been taken. Quite to the contrary, what is needed is a method that, without being restrictively ambitious, accounts for the multiple memories, aspirations, and anxieties that play a constituting role in the subjects we study.

The same can be argued for studies that come under the classification of “Shi‘i’ism,” which devote an exclusive focus to what are uncritically taken to represent characteristically Shi‘i themes. What is most troubling about this approach is the analytical foreclosure it effects on the study of topics that are embedded in multiple intellectual traditions.

This dissertation has examined only one genre, that of Qur’anic exegesis, to point to the limitations of imagining a corresponding relationship between an author’s sectarian identity and interpretive method. Even within this single genre of the Muslim exegetical tradition, several other commentaries remain unexplored, primarily because they are identified as Shi‘i texts, and conclusions about what they will say have already been made. Clearly much work still remains to be done to develop a more comprehensive picture of the interaction of Shi‘ism and Qur’anic exegesis in early Islam that moves past sectarian and methodological binaries. This dissertation has been a modest contribution to this larger intellectual cum theoretical enterprise.

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<sup>272</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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