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SULAMĪ'S TREATISE ON THE SCIENCE OF THE LETTERS
(*ʿILM AL-ḤURŪF*)

Gerhard Böwering

THE SCIENCE OF THE LETTERS (*ʿILM AL-ḤURŪF*) IN SUFISM

The terms, "Sufism" and "the Science of the Letters" (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*)¹ mentioned together frequently awaken associations with the most widely known work on magic in Islam, *Shams al-maʿārif wa-laṭāʾif al-ʿawārif* ("The Brilliance of Knowledge and the Subtleties of its Gift") of Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Būnī (d. 622/1225).² The author was a native of the town of Bone (i.e., ʿAnnāba) on the Mediterranean coast between Algiers and Tunis, an old Phoenician settlement that became known as the Roman city of Hippo, the bishopric of Saint Augustine (395–430), which passed into the hands of the Muslim conquerors in the beginning of the second/eighth century.³ The *Shams al-maʿārif*⁴ exists in three versions, a short one, the oldest (dated 618/1221), a middle-sized one, and a long one.⁵ The work may be best understood as a kind of encyclopedia of magical practices popularly known in North Africa,⁶ that relies on superstitions and insights into the supernatural world, covering a medley of topics, such

¹ Where the spelling of Arabic and Persian terms or place names is included in English dictionaries, I have adopted standard American usage. The exceptions to this rule are "Qurʾān" and "Qurʾānic" for Korān and Koranic. Personal names are written in long form when they appear for the first time in the text, thereafter they are quoted in their short form with the definite article "al-" dropped whenever I refer to personal names denoting descent or origin (*nisba*).

² A. Dietrich (2004: "al-Būnī"); D. A. M. Pielow (1995); M. Ullmann (1972: 390–1). For the relationship of Būnī's works to the *Kitāb al-jafʾ al-jāmiʿ* by Abū Sālim Muḥammad b. Ṭalḥa (d. 652/1254) and the *Miftāḥ al-jafʾ al-jāmiʿ* by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), see T. Fahd (1966: 228–30).

³ G. Marcals (1960: 1, 511–2).

⁴ The Arabic text is extant in a great number of manuscripts, see *GAL* I, 497; *GALS* I, 910. The short version (*al-ṣuḡhrā*) appeared in lithographs, Bombay 1237; 1296; 1298; and Cairo 1291; and was printed in Cairo 1319 and 1322; the middle-size version (*al-wusṭā*) is extant in MS. *Ahlwardt* 4125; and the long version (*al-kubrā*) appeared in lithograph in Bombay 1296 and was printed in 4 volumes in Cairo 1905 (al-Maṭbaʿa al-Ḥusayniyya); see also, T. Fahd (1966: 230–4).

⁵ H. A. Winkler (1930: 67–86); W. Ahrens (1922: 157–77).

⁶ D. Doutté, (1909); W. Ahrens (1922: 157–77 and 1925: 104–10); G. Bergsträsser (1923: 227–35).

as directions for the use of amulets, magical use of letters and numbers, letter-squares, qur'ānic verses and names of God. The author of the work is known as a Sufi (*al-Ṣūfī*) who was given the honorific name of Muḥyī l-Dīn, a name he shares with his famous contemporary Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240). The latter also employs "the science of the letters" at the very heart of his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* ("The Meccan Revelations"), a huge encyclopedia that offers a highly intellectual synthesis of mystico-philosophical Sufism.⁷

Having worked on it for some thirty years, Ibn al-'Arabī divides his work into six voluminous parts (*faṣl*), each subdivided into sections (*juz*) or chapters (*bāb*). The prologue, chapter 1, begins with a reflection on the reality of being (*al-ḥaqīqa l-wujūdiyya*), the Logos and its manifestations (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*) and the origin of the world (*nash'at al-kawn*), followed by an epistle to his master and *shaykh* 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Mahdawī of Tunis, disciple of Abū Madyan (d. 594/1197). Chapter 2 outlines the six parts of his work (*al-ma'ārif*, *al-mu'āmalāt*, *al-aḥwāl*, *al-manāzil*, *al-munāzalāt*, and *al-maqāmāt*). Chapter 3 offers the actual introduction (*muqaddimat al-kitāb*), where he presents his theory on the nature of knowledge and its modes, prophetic, mystical, philosophical and theological, the latter of which he criticizes severely. He ends this chapter with three types of the profession of faith, that of the ordinary believers, based on the teachings of Qur'ān and Sunna, that of the theologians, derived from intellectual reflection on the data of faith, and that of the philosophers rooted exclusively in rational reflection. Chapter 4 then details his own profession of faith, a declaration that is both mystical and metaphysical and is based, in theory and practice, on his religion, "the essential adoration" (*al-'ibāda al-dhātīyya*) uniting his own being with the absolute ground of existence (*wujūd*).

Upon this mystical and metaphysical core idea, Ibn al-'Arabī develops his hermeneutical method of "the science of the letters" (*ilm al-ḥurūf*), beginning in the second half of chapter 4 and ending with chapter 7. His in-depth study of the letters of the alphabet provides a key to his whole work, examining them against the background of his autobiographical experience and finding in them the building blocks of his spiritual metaphysics. Interpreting the letters one by one in chapter 6, he presents an idiosyncratic order of the alphabet that reminds the reader of his *Fuṣūṣ*

⁷ Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (1329) and (1392/1972ff); see also, W. C. Chittick (1995: "Ebn al-'Arabī").

al-ḥikam ("The Bezels of Wisdom"),⁸ the final synthesis of his long years of writing, which he develops along the lines of prophetic prototypes, also quoted in his idiosyncratic order. In chapters 8 to 10 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-'Arabī applies his hermeneutical method to the origin of the world, "the word" (*al-kalima*) that brought forth the universe through the command, "Be!" (*kun*). He completes his reflections with the interpretation of the word that embodies the revelation through the command, "Say!" (*qul*), as he focuses on the *Basmala*, the first verse of the Qur'ān, and *al-Fātiḥa*, its opening chapter. To illustrate the power, whether that of creation or revelation, that he sees hidden in the letters giving expression to speech, Ibn al-'Arabī refers to Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) who predicted the recapture of Jerusalem in 583/1187 through numerological manipulation of the letters.⁹ With the completion of these chapters in 599/1203 in Mecca, Ibn al-'Arabī set the stage for the development of a multifaceted application of the science of the letters by Sufi authors and movements in the centuries that followed.¹⁰

The two principal works of Būnī and Ibn al-'Arabī stand as beacons on the Sufi shore of "the science of the letters" (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) which, in Islam, is constituted by vast tracts of literature on the meaning of the letters that constitute the Arabic alphabet and function as the basis of numbers in Arabic arithmetic. By delving into the depths of the meaning of the letters, Muslim scholarship over the centuries has kept its focus on the sacred meaning of the Arabic language and found its fulcrum in the laws and elements that constitute its structure and composition, down to the first and last letter of its alphabet. Conceived as a constantly growing standard dictionary co-authored by Ramzi Baalbaki, the scholar whom we honor in these pages, the *Mawrid* has played a leading role in preserving and maintaining its sacredness.¹¹

In Western scholarship much research has also been conducted on the letters of the Arabic alphabet¹² as well as on the unconnected Arabic letters, found separately or in groups, that stand at the head of twenty-nine

⁸ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.

⁹ I. Goldziher (1914: 544); A. Faure (1971: "Ibn Barrajān").

¹⁰ The section on the science of the letters in Ibn al-'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* has been examined meticulously by D. Gril (2004: 2, 105–219).

¹¹ T. Fahd (1971a: "Ḥurūf").

¹² *Al-Mawrid al-ḥadīth*, authored by Munir Baalbaki and Ramzi Baalbaki, Beirut, numerous editions; see also, Ramzi Baalbaki (2007).

¹³ General and detailed information about the development of the Arabic alphabet and script can be found in B. Gruendler (2001: "Arabic Script").

suras of the Qur'an as "the openers of the suras" (*awā'il al-suwar*).¹⁴ Other studies have devoted particular attention to the magical interpretation of the letters by the means of geomantic (*khaṭṭ al-raml*)¹⁵ and divinatory techniques (*zā'irja*).¹⁶ In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 780/1378) treated this topic extensively and distinguished several basic approaches to the interpretation of the Arabic letters.¹⁷ Among these are the method of recording dates by chronograms (*ḥisāb al-jummal*),¹⁸ the method of determining the secret properties of the letters by analyzing their putative alchemical compositions (*'ilm al-khawāṣṣ*),¹⁹ and the method of drawing prognostications from their relation to astrological conjunctions, calculating portents and predicting religious and political change (*'ilm al-awfāq*),²⁰ often with the help of numerology.²¹ The letters of the alphabet were also used in the creation of talismans (*ṭilasm*)²² and amulets (*tamīma*)²³ that play a significant role in Muslim folklore. Most importantly, the letters of the Arabic alphabet were employed as numerals for commercial purposes,²⁴ deriving from the older Arab practice of expressing cardinal numbers through the position of the fingers (*'ilm al-aqd*).²⁵

The Sufis, for their part, cultivated the interpretation of the Arabic alphabet, known as "the science of the letters" (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*),²⁶ as a distinct hermeneutical approach to the sacredness of the Arabic language. They tried to discern the mystical meaning hidden in the letters of the Arabic

¹⁴ H. Hirschfeld (1902: 101–3); T. Nöldeke, F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl (1909; 1919; 1938: 2, 68–78); H. Bauer (1921); E. Goossens (1923); A. Jeffery (1924); M. S. Seale (1959); A. Jones (1962); P. J. E. Cachia (1968); J. Bellamy (1973); K. Massey (2003, "Mysterious Letters").

¹⁵ For geomancy (*khaṭṭ al-raml*) and the various terms used to define it, see, T. Fahd (1978: "Khaṭṭ"); the use of the term *raml* (*'ilm al-raml*) for divination refers originally to tracing lines in sand (*raml*); see also T. Fahd (1966: 195–203).

¹⁶ T. Fahd and A. Regourd (2002: "Zā'irja"); T. P. Hughes (1935: "Da'wah").

¹⁷ F. Rosenthal (1967: 3, 137–61; especially 3, 118–136; 156–245).

¹⁸ G. S. Colin (1971: "Ḥisāb al-djummal"). The chronograms, termed *ramz*, consist in a group of letters whose numerical equivalents, added together, interpret past or predict future events; see also W. Heinrichs and A. Knysh (1995: "Ramz").

¹⁹ T. Fahd (1971b, "Khawāṣṣ al-Ḳur'ān").

²⁰ D. Pingree (1986: "Kīrān"); D. Pingree (1986: "'ilm al-hay'a").

²¹ T. Fahd (1995: "Nudjūm"); P. Kunitzsch (1995: "Nudjūm").

²² J. Ruska and B. Carra De Vaux (2000: "Tilsam"); T. Fahd (1997: "Sīḥr"); the article, "Tilsam," *EP* 10, 500–2 spells the term in its popular form, *ṭilasm*, rather than in its technically correct form, *ṭilasm*, pl. *ṭalāsim*.

²³ T. Fahd (2000: "Tamīma").

²⁴ M. Souissi (1971: "Ḥisāb al-ghubār"); A. I. Sabra (1971: "'ilm al-ḥisāb"); M. Souissi (2004: "'ilm al-handasa").

²⁵ Ch. Pellat (1971: "Ḥisāb al-aqd").

²⁶ T. Fahd (1971a: "Ḥurūf").

alphabet (*ḥurūf al-hijā'*)²⁷ and to discover the symbolic significance of the mysterious unconnected letters of the Qur'an (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*).²⁸ In the course of its history Sufism produced a variegated literature on *'ilm al-ḥurūf* that culminated at the beginning of the seventh/thirteenth century in the popular and mystical *Shams al-ma'ārif* and the mystico-philosophical *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. These two works mark the great divide in Sufi literature on the "the science of the letters" (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*). In the period preceding these two encyclopedic works, many building blocks can be found that were used in the intellectual architecture of the period that followed them. Most of the scholarly attention, however, has been given to the Sufi treatises on "the science of the letters" in the period after Ibn al-'Arabī, especially with regard to the movement of the Ḥurūfiyya,²⁹ and, to some extent, the Nūrbakhshiyya.³⁰ More recently, P. Lory has examined the science of the letters with special emphasis on Shi'ism and Islamic philosophy,³¹ B. Aladdin edited a collection of papers on aspects of Ibn al-'Arabī's letter symbolism,³² and M. Melvin-Koushki has presented the first fruits of his research on the "scientific lettrism" of Ibn Turka al-Iṣfahānī (d. 835/1432).³³ Apart from the studies of L. Massignon and A. Schimmel, scholarly attention, has rarely been given to "the science of the letters" (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*) as found in early Sufi literature.³⁴

SULAMĪ AND THE AUTHORITATIVE BASIS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LETTERS

The present analytical examination of Sulamī's treatise, *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf* ("Explaining the Meaning of the Letters"), intends to shed light on the interpretation of the Arabic letters in the environment of early Sufism.³⁵

²⁷ H. Fleisch (1971: "Ḥurūf al-hidjā").

²⁸ A. T. Welch (1986: "Al-Ḳur'ān").

²⁹ The Sufi movement of the *Ḥurūfiyya*, traced back to Faḍlallāh al-Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), elaborated a system of numerological interpretations of the letters of the Arabic/Persian alphabet and correlated them to the human form in an incarnationist doctrine, see H. Algar (2004, "Horufism"), and the literature quoted in the article. See also, S. Bashir (2005).

³⁰ S. Bashir (2003).

³¹ P. Lory (2004).

³² B. Aladdin (2007).

³³ M. Melvin-Koushki (forthcoming).

³⁴ Occasional references to the early Sufi interpretations of the letters can be found in L. Massignon (1982); idem (1913); A. J. Arberry (1937); A. Schimmel (1975: 411–25).

³⁵ The Arabic text of the *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf* is included in al-Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 1–19. The text is based on MS. *Muḥammad Ibn Sa'ūd* 278 (ff. 2b–12a), which has 227 folios

The treatise, recently edited, was composed by Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, who died in 412/1021 in Nishapur, the city of his birth (in 325/937 or 330/942).³⁶ To date, Sulamī remains one of the most important authorities for the history of early Sufi literature, and many of his writings that have been preserved over the centuries have been published since the middle of the last century.³⁷ More than any other Sufi source, Sulamī's treatise on the explanation of the mystical meaning of the letters shows the way in which Sufis of the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries interpreted the letters of the Arabic alphabet and the letter groupings that are found at the head of Qur'ānic sūras.

As explicitly stated in his introduction, Sulamī conceived this short treatise (# 1–76) as an addendum and conclusion to *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, his major qur'ānic commentary.³⁸ In it he intended to collect and record early Sufi statements about the letters of the Arabic alphabet and their mystical meanings in a coherent document (# 2). Many Sufi statements are quoted anonymously (*qāla ba'dhum*) or, as it appears, are culled from a great variety of sources (*qīl*) and, in part, reported from memory. A number of

and was copied some sixty years after the author's death in 474/1081 at Samarqand by the copyist, 'Abd al-Sayyid b. Aḥmad b. Yāsīn al-Khaṭīb al-Maskhā'ī al-Asrūshānī. A description of the manuscript, which is the oldest known of Sulamī's writings, except for one short text, can be found in G. Böwering (2006: 219–230).

³⁶ Sulamī's life and work have been examined in G. Böwering (1991); see also, G. Böwering (1997, "al-Sulamī"); for a general survey of Sulamī's life and work see, L. Berger (1998); for a recent study of Sulamī's life and work see, J. J. Thibon (2009); for documentation from Arabic primary sources, see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 461/1073), *Ta'rikh Baghdād* 2, 248–9 (nr. 717); Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* 17, 247–55; idem, *Ta'rikh al-Islām* (yrs. 401–20), 304–7, with additional references.

³⁷ For a detailed examination of Sulamī's writings, see the English introduction to the Arabic text edition of select Sufi treatises of Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī by G. Böwering and B. Orfalli in al-Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*. In quoting the text of *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*, the sign # refers to the paragraphs in the Arabic text, independently from page numbers.

³⁸ The edition of the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, published by Sayyid 'Imrān under the title, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī wa-huwa Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, has been printed in two volumes, Beirut 1421/2001. Unfortunately, it is based on one single manuscript, MS. *Fatih* 261 (316ff.; 600 h) and is lacking a considerable part of the text, missing in the manuscript on folio 100a. Thus there is a large lacuna (volume 1, page 325–6) including the end of Sulamī's commentary on sūra 11 (*Hūd*), from verse 11:90 onward, all of his commentary on sūra 12 (*Yūsuf*), and the beginning of sūra 13 (*al-Ra'd*) until verse 13:2. In addition, there are many mistakes in the published text, often due to the state of the underlying manuscript, but often also due to the less than painstaking way this edition was produced. The *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* is known to exist in about sixty Arabic manuscripts found in libraries all over the world. Most of them are listed in GAS 1, 671–4, and G. Böwering (1996: 41–56). Two additional manuscript references should be added: MS. *St. Petersburg*, Nr. 9 (*ANC-9*), Nr. 60 (306ff., 7th c. h) and MS. *Medina* 16 (312ff., 704 h). When citing text portions that do not appear in the printed version of volume 1, page 235, I cite this page and add in parenthesis the Qur'ānic verse under which it is quoted in Ms. Br. Mus. Or.

Sufis, however, are cited by name along with their statements, occasionally supported by chains of narrators (*isnād*) to authenticate a particular statement. Sulamī's most frequently quoted narrator of Sufi statements cited by name is Abū Naṣr Maṣṣūr b. 'Abdallāh al-Iṣfahānī, who is known to have played a pivotal role as a direct source in the compilation of the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* and *Ziyādāt al-ḥaqā'iq*, Sulamī's major and minor commentaries on the Qur'ān.³⁹

Sulamī begins the treatise with reference to a saying traced to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661),⁴⁰ confirmed by a statement transmitted on the Prophet's authority, which serves Sulamī as the justification for his discourse on the meanings of the letters: "Each verse of the Qur'ān has a "back" (*ẓahr*, i.e., a literal and outer meaning), and a "belly" (*baṭn*, i.e., a hidden and inner meaning), and each letter (*ḥarf*) has a horizon (*ḥadd*, i.e., a boundary, a definition) and a point of ascent (*maṭla'*, *muṭṭala'*, i.e., an allegory, a symbolism)." Sulamī adds explicitly, "this saying justifies the discourse on the letters and their meanings" (# 3). This tradition affirms the well-known distinction between the literal from the allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān (*ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*), the foundation of Sufi hermeneutics. Operating on two levels, it attributes to each Qur'ānic verse an outer or literal and an inner or metaphorical meaning. Furthermore, it discerns in each letter a specifically defined and a symbolically implied meaning.⁴¹ It would appear that by "letter (*ḥarf*)" the Arabic sources are referring generally to any discrete element of speech that can be pronounced, whether it be a sound, a consonant, a consonant and vowel, a particle, a word or even a phrase.⁴² In his *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*, however, Sulamī employs the term *ḥarf* as referring particularly to the mysterious letters of the Qur'ān (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*) found at the head of twenty-nine suras and, more generally, to each letter of the Arabic alphabet found in the Qur'ān. To further sanction the compilation of his treatise, Sulamī cites a tradition on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687),⁴³ in which the Prophet explains

³⁹ The importance of this narrator for the writings of Sulamī has been analyzed in G. Böwering (1996).

⁴⁰ 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) is regarded as the originator of the *jafr*, T. Fahd (1965: "Djafr"); G. Windfuhr (2008: "Jafr") and the select literature quoted in the article. Sulamī, however, does not raise the issue of the *jafr* in his *Sharḥ ma'ānī al-ḥurūf*, and his explanations of the letters do not coincide with the table of the *jafr* designed by L. Massignon (1968: 98–101).

⁴¹ Cf. G. Böwering (2003), in particular, 351, 360.

⁴² W. Fischer (1989); G. Böwering (2003: 360).

⁴³ Ibn 'Abbās, i.e. 'Abdallāh b. al-'Abbās (d. 68/687), is considered the father of Qur'ānic exegesis and the greatest scholar of the first generation of Muslims, L. Veccia Vaglieri (1960, "Abd Allāh b. al-'Abbās").

that the Arabic alphabet (Abū Jād) includes "all the marvels that exist" (*al-aʿjīb kulluhā*, #4). Sulamī uses these two Hadith statements as the foundation for his treatise—one arguing for the allegorical interpretation of the letters of the Qurʾān, and the other providing the basis for the metaphorical interpretation of the letters of the Arabic alphabet.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE *ABJAD*

Having based his work on traditions backed by the Prophet's authority, Sulamī develops his treatise in three stages. First, he offers his interpretation of the Arabic alphabet following the pattern of the *Abjad* (# 5–7). Second, he selects a small number of mystical interpretations of the letters by representatives of early Sufism (# 8–21). Third, in the bulk of the treatise (# 22–76), Sulamī follows the successive alphabetical order (*hurūf al-hijāʾ*) of the Arabic dictionary (*muʿjam*) or lexicon (*qāmūs*), listing interpretations of each of the twenty-eight consonants and adds the *Lām-Alif* in the penultimate position of the alphabet, comprising twenty-nine letters in all.⁴⁴ In the first stage of his treatise, Sulamī turns to the Arabic alphabet following the pattern of its traditional order of memorization, known as the *Abjad* and, in popular parlance, referred to as Abū Jād. The *Abjad* divides the twenty-eight consonants of the Arabic alphabet into eight pronounceable but meaningless groups of words, using them as a mnemonic device and giving them a numerical value from one to thousand: *abjad*, *hawwaz*, *ḥuṭṭy*, *kalamun*, *saʿfaṣ*, *qurishat*, *thakhadh*, *ḍaḡaḡh*.⁴⁵ Without regard to their numerology, Sulamī assigns an inner meaning to these letters, connecting a number of them with citations of Qurʾānic phrases (# 5). Interestingly, Sulamī offers a particular interpretation separately for each consonant of the first four mnemonic groups (*abjad*, *hawwaz*, *ḥuṭṭy*, *kalamun*), but presents only a cumulative interpretation for the next two groups (*saʿfaṣ*, *qurishat*), while neglecting the last two groups altogether (*thakhadh*, *ḍaḡaḡh*). In so doing, Sulamī seems to have an interpretation ready for the first six groups that faithfully preserve the order of the old Phoenician alphabet and correspond to the sequence of the Hebrew alphabet,⁴⁶ while he is silent about the six letters of the last

⁴⁴ The *Lām-Alif* is inserted as a twenty-ninth letter to distinguish the *Alif* as the long vowel "ā" from the *Alif* with *hamza*, known as the glottal stop or the *Alif* as *spiritus lenis*.

⁴⁵ G. Weil-[G. S. Colin] (1960: "Abjad"); G. Krotkoff, *Abjad* (1985: "Abjad"); W. Lane (1968: 1, 4).

⁴⁶ S. A. Horodezky (1972: 1, 747–9).

two groups that represent the supplementary consonants peculiar to the Arabic alphabet known as *rawādif* ("mounted on the hind quarters").⁴⁷ It may also be noted that Sulamī makes no reference to the legend that explains the origin of the Arabic alphabet through Murāmīr b. Murra as the inventor of the Arabic characters.⁴⁸

To reinforce the basis of his interpretation of the letters in this first stage of the treatise, Sulamī cites a tradition of the Prophet on the authority of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (d. 74/693) in which ʿĪsā b. Maryam explains the *Basmala*⁴⁹ in dialogue with a Jewish teacher and scribe (# 6). Furthermore, in a tradition traced back to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) and cited later in the text (# 27), ʿĪsā b. Maryam explains to a rabbinical teacher that the *Alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, symbolizes God (*al-Alif Allāh ʿazza wa-jalla*, # 27). Having based his treatise on the statements of the prophets, Muḥammad and ʿĪsā b. Maryam, Sulamī offers a second series of interpretations of each letter of the Arabic alphabet, following the order of the first six groups of the *Abjad* (# 7), but again without interpreting the six letters of the last two groups of this mnemonic device. One notices, however, that the pattern of both the fifth and sixth group is broken in the manuscript, because the interpretation of the *shīn* is omitted altogether and the *sīn* is wrongly replaced by doubling up on the *ṣād* (# 7). There appears to be no plausible explanation for these two flaws in the technical accuracy of the manuscript.

EARLY SUFI STATEMENTS ON THE MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE LETTERS

In the first stage of the treatise (# 5–7), formed by his statements on the *Abjad*, Sulamī interprets the letters of the Arabic alphabet with reference

⁴⁷ T. Noeldeke (1904: 124–39); H. Bauer (1913: 501).

⁴⁸ As the legend has it, Murāmīr b. Murra gave his sons the names of the eight groups of words that make up the *Abjad*; see T. P. Hughes (1935: 3). In general the Islamic historical sources refer only briefly to Murāmīr b. Murra and sometimes include a reference to him in the biography of the calligrapher Ibn Bawwāb (d. 413/1022; see, Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān* 3, 344 (under Ibn al-Bawwāb); Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* 17, 319 (under Ibn al-Bawwāb); idem, *Taʾrikh al-Islām*, yrs. 401–420, 329 (under Ibn al-Bawwāb), while the lexicographical sources record a memory of him under the root letters of his name; see, Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. after 400/1010), *al-Awāʾil* (in chapter *awwal man waḍaʿa l-khaṭṭ al-ʿarabī*); Firūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* 2, 132; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* 3, 171 and al-Zabīdī, *Taj al-ʿarūs* 14, 112–3.

⁴⁹ I. Goldziher, (1979: "Bismillah"); B. Carra de Vaux and L. Gardet (1960: "Basmala"); W. A. Graham (2001: "Basmala").

to their eternal origin in God, His blessings and His divine names, as well as in relation to the eschatological realities of life to come, the bliss of paradise, the damnation of hell, the resurrection, the remission of sins, the revelation of God's eternal word and His everlasting rule (# 5). In the second stage of his treatise (# 8–21), he introduces the statements of certain early Sufi masters that illustrate basic mystical explanations of "the science of the letters" (*ilm al-ḥurūf*). These Sufi masters are: Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857; # 8),⁵⁰ Abū Sa'īd Aḥmad b. 'Isā al-Kharrāz (d. 277/890–1; # 17),⁵¹ Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sahl b. 'Aṭā' al-Adamī (d. 309/921 or 311/923–4; # 9),⁵² al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922; # 11; 12; 15),⁵³ Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932; # 16), Abū Bakr Dulaf b. Jahdar al-Shiblī (d. 334/946; # 10),⁵⁴ Abū l-'Abbās al-Qāsim b. al-Qāsim al-Sayyārī (d. 342/953–4; # 14) and two anonymous Sufis (# 13, 19) followed by a general statement (# 20). Concluding this section by a statement of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Sulamī cites a report by Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Shādhān al-Rāzī, known as Ibn Shādhān (d. 376/986): "the science of the letters (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) belongs to the safely-kept sciences that are known only to the learned divines (*al-ulamā' al-rabbāniyyūn*). If I could find a place to put them, I would divulge them" (# 21).

Each of the sayings of the great Sufi masters illustrates an essential aspect of "the science of the letters" as it was understood in early Sufism. Muḥāsibī maintains the notion that God created the letters (*al-aḥruf*) at the dawn of creation, calling them to obedience and drawing their particular shape from the upright *Alif*, a letter that remained standing separately (# 8). Divinely entrusted to Adam, rather than to the angels, the secret of the letters was articulated by Adam, in Ibn 'Aṭā's view, after God had given each letter its particular shape (# 9). Each letter proclaimed

⁵⁰ Muḥāsibī's statement is also cited by Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq* 1, 326 (Q 131) and Baqlī, *Arā'is* 2, 216 (Q 131).

⁵¹ Kharrāz's statement is also cited by Sarrāj, *K. al-Luma'*, 45. A similar statement is attributed to Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Jurayrī (d. 312/924) in Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq* 1, 219 (Q 71) and Baqlī, *Arā'is* 1, 413 (Q 71).

⁵² This statement of Ibn 'Aṭā' is also cited by Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq* 1, 219 (Q 71) and 1, 326 (Q 131) and Baqlī, *Arā'is* 1, 413 (Q 71). It is also included in Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīyya*, 30. The statement can be traced back to Abū l-'Abbās b. 'Aṭā' al-Adamī rather than Abū 'Abdallāh Aḥmad b. 'Aṭā' al-Rūdhābārī (d. 369/980), as claimed by A. D. Knysh (2007: 13), following R. Gramlich (1989: 31).

⁵³ Ḥallāj's statement in # 11 is also cited by Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq* 1, 325 (Q 131) and Baqlī, *Arā'is* 1, 413 (Q 71); Ḥallāj's statement in # 15 is also cited by Baqlī, *Arā'is* 1, 413 (Q 71).

⁵⁴ Shiblī's statement is also cited by Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq* 1, 325 (Q 1190) and 1, 326 (Q 131) and Baqlī, *Arā'is* 2, 216 (Q 131).

the glory of God and revealed the secret it contained by articulating it on its tongue and in its particular language, as stated by Shiblī who adds, "this is the secret of God in His creation through which the richness of insights and the fullness of thoughts are made manifest" (# 10). Reserving the mystical experience of the letters for men endowed with pure souls, discerning eyes and enlightened hearts, Kharrāz compares the experience of each letter with a particular sensation, and states that each letter provides "a fountain of insight" (*mashrab fahm*), "a fresh flavor" (*ta'm 'adhb*) and "a pleasant taste" (*madhāq shahīyy*), different from all others (# 17). Commenting on the first and the last letter of the Arabic alphabet, an anonymous Sufi explains the *Alif*, the first letter, as a symbol for God's oneness and the *Yā'* the last letter, as a symbol for the human being as God's servant. When pronounced together, they result in the vocative, *yā'*, "O," in the invocation of God, "O Allāh! O Benefactor! O Merciful!" which gives expression to the mystic quest, whether in the sigh of the ascetic (*zāhid*) or the longing of the mystic (*'arīf*) (# 18).

Turning to the discussion of the number of the Arabic letters Sulamī cites Abū l-'Abbās al-Qāsim b. al-Qāsim al-Sayyārī (d. 342/953), who insists that there are thirty letters because God revealed twenty-nine of them (counting the *Alif* twice, as long vowel and glottal stop, or adding the *Alif-Lām* as a separate letter), while concealing one other ineffable letter that can be neither pronounced nor imagined but holds the key to the secret of the letters that God conveys to His friends (*awliyā'*) as He pleases (# 14). Wāsiṭī counts twenty-eight Arabic letters and sees in each of them an allusion to a particular divine attribute (# 16). By contrast, the lexicographer al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. between 160/777 and 175/791), from whom "the plan of the dictionary undoubtedly comes,"⁵⁵ argued that their number was twenty-nine, representing qualities (*ṣifāt*) of human beings and animals to which God referred in the Qur'ān (# 16).⁵⁶

Adopting the fundamental distinction between the literal sense of the letters (*zāhīr*) and their inner meaning (*bāṭin*), an anonymous Sufi states that God revealed the inner meanings (*ma'ānī*) of the letters so that His divine address (*khiṭāb*) of the Qur'ānic proclamation could be understood

⁵⁵ R. Sellheim (1978: "al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad"); see also S. Wild (1965).

⁵⁶ In his treatise on the letters, al-Khalīl enumerates 29 letters of the Arabic alphabet, adding the *Lām-Alif* in the penultimate position, and explains each letter with reference to qualities (*ṣifāt*) of human beings and animals (rather than with reference to divine attributes, as Sulamī's wording may be misunderstood); cf. Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *al-Ḥurūf*; idem. *K. al-Ḥurūf wa-l-adawāt*; Ramaḍān 'Abd al-Tawwāb (ed.), *Thalāth kutub fi l-ḥurūf li-l-Khalīl b. Aḥmad wa Ibn al-Sikkīt wa-l-Rāzī*, 33–48.

in depth (# 20). God entrusted this in-depth knowledge to the elite among His friends, so that they would be able to discourse about them offering spiritual advice, moral counsel, mystical insight and increasing faith. In this way their souls became intimately familiar with the meanings of the letters, their hearts delighted at the moral lessons they include, and their inner beings were enlightened by their contemplation. Each Sufi became aware of them according to his capacity while the realities of the letters remained under God's guard and are disclosed only by divine messengers and select prophets as evidenced in the Qur'an: "Knower of the Unseen, and He discloses not His Unseen to anyone, save only to such a Messenger as He is well-pleased with" (Q 72:67–8). A further anonymous Sufi statement distinguishes between three classes of mystics—the aspiring penitents (*tā'ibūn*), striving novices (*murīdūn*) and accomplished mystics (*'arīfūn*)—who actualize particular letters engraved in their inmost beings according to the extent of their mystical experience. The accomplished mystics achieve a deep awareness of being at peace before God, drawing near to Him and being intimately in communion with Him so that they are empowered to reveal the wisdom enshrined in the letters and able to communicate with all creatures, whether they are human beings, demonic beings (*jinn*), beasts of prey, birds or animals. The penitents only become acquainted with the recitation of the divine address while the novices are able to derive from their proclamation what God has decreed (# 19).

ḤALLĀJ'S ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE LETTERS

The fulcrum of Sulamī's *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf* is without doubt Ḥallāj, who stands out as the principal Sufi authority most frequently quoted by name in the treatise (# 11, 12, 15, 54, 74, 75). In his *K. al-Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995 or 388/998) attributes to Ḥallāj a treatise on the letters entitled *K. al-Aḥruf al-muḥdatha wa-l-azaliyya wa-l-asmā' al-kullīyya* ("The Book on the Created and Eternal Letters and the Universal Names"), and also mentions two other titles that indicate themes discussed in Sulamī's treatise, namely *K. al-Nuqṭa wa-bad' al-khalq* ("The Book of the [Primordial] Point and the Beginning of Creation") and a book known as *al-Alif al-maqtū' wa-l-alif al-ma'lūf* ("The Alif standing separately and the Alif that is connected").⁵⁷ These three works of Ḥallāj are no longer extant,

⁵⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, *K. al-Fihrist*, 241–2.

but Ḥallāj's *K. al-Ṭawāsīn*, studied by L. Massignon,⁵⁸ includes interpretations of the letters that resonate with statements found in Sulamī's *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*. Furthermore, in an autobiographical statement, Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) relates that he was sent by his master Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq (d. 405/1015) to Sulamī's library to look through a pile of books for a small red volume of four parts, including Ḥallāj's poetry, and bring it to him surreptitiously. Feeling embarrassed to remove the book by stealth, Qushayrī revealed his predicament to Sulamī. The latter handed him a volume of six parts, including the teaching of Ḥallāj (*min kalām Ḥusayn*), with the admission that he, Sulamī, had copied Ḥallāj's verses from it in his own writings.⁵⁹ Although the incident stresses Ḥallāj's poetry, the reference to the six-part volume as including Ḥallāj's words (*min kalām Ḥusayn*) suggests prose as well as poetry as its content. It also shows Sulamī's uninhibited use of Ḥallāj's writings.⁶⁰

In his treatise, *Dhikr miḥan al-mashāyikh al-ṣūfiyya* ("The Persecutions of the Sufi Masters"), Sulamī describes one way in which Ḥallāj was believed to have acquired his knowledge of the privileged sciences that included the science of the letters.⁶¹ Taking Sarrāj's *K. al-Luma'* as his source,⁶² Sulamī mentions an incident that occurred while Ḥallāj was a student of the great Sufi master Abū 'Abdallāh 'Amr b. 'Uthmān b. Kurayb b. Ghūṣaṣ al-Makkī (d. 291/904), stole a fascicle (*juz*) of his master's writings on the privileged sciences (*'ulūm al-khāṣṣa*) and fled with the book. Makkī cursed Ḥallāj because of this theft and predicted that he would suffer a violent death, with his hands and feet cut off—and this is what happened with Ḥallāj's brutal execution in 309/922. Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (d. 627/1230) embellishes the incident and describes the content of the stolen manuscript, entitled *Ganjnāma* (i.e., *K. al-Kanz*)⁶³ by 'Aṭṭār, as relating to Satan's damnation and mystical redemption.⁶⁴ The sources are in agreement that it came to a fall-out between Ḥallāj and 'Amr b. 'Uthmān al-Makkī whose disciple he was for about a year and a half, after having been the pupil of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) for two years from 260/873–

⁵⁸ Massignon (1913).

⁵⁹ Abū l-Qāsim Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 486–7.

⁶⁰ Cf. introduction to Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya* by G. Böwering and B. Orfali.

⁶¹ Sulamī, *Dhikr miḥan al-mashāyikh al-ṣūfiyya*.

⁶² Sarrāj, *K. al-Luma'* (*Pages from the Kitāb al-Luma'*), 9.

⁶³ L. Massignon (1982: 1, 73), where the title of 'Amr al-Makkī's manuscript stolen by Ḥallāj, is given as *K. al-Kanz*.

⁶⁴ Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'* 2, 37–8, who cites the title of the stolen manuscript as *Ganjnāma*, relating its content to the story of Iblīs, i.e., the secret of Satan's damnation and mystical redemption.

262/875 and before joining Junayd (d. 297/910) as a disciple for a short time.⁶⁵ Other than the theft, however, two alternate reasons are quoted in the sources for the falling out. Makkī is said either to have disapproved of Ḥallāj's claim that he was able to compose writings equal in wording to the Qur'ān or to have resented Ḥallāj's choice of the daughter of Abū Ya'qūb al-Aqtā' al-Baṣrī as his bride, a woman in whom his teacher also had an interest.⁶⁶

There is no doubt, however, that Ḥallāj was a master at interpreting the mystical meanings of the letters. The crux of Ḥallāj's explanation of the letters and the central image of his interpretation are the two vectors of the *Lām-Alif*, written in the Arabic script with a downward and upward stroke. These strokes are reversed in direction at their turning point, the "point" or "dot" (*nuqṭa*), thus representing the pattern of descent from and re-ascent to God. The term, *nuqṭa*, is ordinarily employed to denote the diacritical points (*nuqṭa*, pl. *nuqat*) that distinguish the Arabic letters, many of which are identical in their basic shape, from one another. The term is also used to denote the vowel points that indicate the pronunciation and division of syllables in Arabic. The *nuqṭa* as the dot underneath the first letter of the *Basmala*, the beginning verse of the Qur'ān, is understood in Sufism since early times as signifying God's manifestation of creation.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the term *nuqṭa* designated "earth" as the first of the four elements that are regarded as fundamental constituents of the universe in ancient and medieval cosmologies. In this doctrine, adopted by the Nuṣṭawīyya in the ninth/fifteenth century, "earth" was seen as the starting point (*nuqṭa*) of all things, from which the remaining three elements (air, water and fire) are derived.⁶⁸

Ḥallāj understands the "point" symbolically against the background of a mathematical point, a point that has location but no extension, such as the extremity of a line. In Ḥallāj's view, the knowledge of everything is discovered in the Qur'ān, where it is hidden in the mysterious letters introducing twenty-nine of its suras. The knowledge of these mysterious letters is encapsulated in the joined pattern of the two letters, *Lām-Alif* that intersect at their turning point and imply the meaning of negation expressed by "lā," "no!" Furthermore, the knowledge of the *Lām-Alif* is hidden in the *Alif*, the symbol of God, and its knowledge, in turn, is hidden

in the dot. To know this dot (*nuqṭa*) requires realizing one's primordial intuitive knowledge (*al-ma'rifa al-aṣliyya*) that conveys the knowledge of eternity *a parte ante* (*'ilm al-azal*). This conceals the divine will of God expressing the ineffable "He" (*hū*) that no one else knows but He, God (# 11)—"like Him there is naught" (Q 42:11). Developing further this idea of the primordial point, the "dot" (*nuqṭa*), Ḥallāj is cited later in the treatise describing the way in which the mystic arrives at this dot as the inmost point of his mystical experience: "The allusion of all the letters is hidden in the *Lām-Alif*, the allusion of the *Lām-Alif* is hidden in the *Alif*, the allusion of the *Alif* is hidden in the dot (*nuqṭa*), and the allusion of the dot is hidden in the complete passing away in the vision of God, the Everlasting" (# 75).

Sulamī may well have had a reason for quoting anonymously a Sufi saying that immediately follows Ḥallāj's reflection on the dot (*nuqṭa*), possibly intentionally concealing Ḥallāj as its author. The provocative saying is nothing short of the earliest testimony to the idea of the "Perfect Human Being" (*al-insān al-kāmil*), a concept that became a central idea of Islamic mysticism after its presentation in the first chapter in Ibn al-'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.⁶⁹ The statement goes to the core of Islamic monotheism because it explicitly challenges the gulf that exists between God and creation in the orthodox interpretation of Islam that leaves no room for associating anything with God (*shirk*). The nerve of *shirk* is touched by this statement because it perceives the dot (*nuqṭa*) as a spiritual figure mediating between the divine and the human realms. It says (# 13): "In each word (*kalima*) of God's speech (*kalām*) there is the entire speech, and the entire speech is (encased) in each word. The word is (encapsulated) in the letter (*ḥarf*), and the letter in the dot (*nuqṭa*). The dot is its rank (*miqdār*, lit. "measure, extent"), the rank of the kind, spiritual, perfect, upright, complete and universal servant (*al-'abd al-laṭīf al-rūḥānī al-kāmil al-muḥkam al-tāmm al-jāmi'*)." This perfect, universal and spiritual servant links the divine and the human realms at the point where they touch one another.⁷⁰ There is no Sufi statement in the sources prior to Ibn al-'Arabī that proclaims the idea of the "Perfect Human Being" more forcefully than this anonymous saying.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, chapter 1, 50.

⁷⁰ For an examination of the idea of the Perfect Human Being in early Sufism, see G. Böwering (1998: "Ensān-e kāmel").

⁷¹ The saying of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874–5) that a friend of God becomes a "totally perfect" mystic (*al-kāmil al-tāmm*), however, does not relate the idea with the primordial point (*nuqṭa*) of Ḥallāj; see Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīyya*, 523.

⁶⁵ G. Böwering (1980: 62).

⁶⁶ L. Massignon (1975: 38 (Arabic text), 118 (French translation)); G. Böwering (1980: 62).

⁶⁷ al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma'*, 88–9.

⁶⁸ See H. Algar (1995: "Nuṣṭawīyya").

A second statement of al-Ḥallāj combines the interpretation of the *Lām-Alif*, with the mysterious triune letter pattern, *Alif-Lām-Mīm*, found at the head of six *sūras* in the Qurʾān (2; 3; 29; 30; 31; 32), and is written in Arabic with the *Alif* standing separate while the *Mīm* is linked to the *Lām*. Seen from the dynamics of this triune letter pattern, the entirety of the letters is viewed by Ḥallāj as resembling a kingdom (*mulk*) and the king of the kingdom (*malik al-mulk*) is the *Alif*. The *Lām* is the counter image of the *Alif*, standing opposite to it. The *Alif* is the source infusing life into the *Lām* and thus becomes the soul, intellect or spirit (*rūḥ*) of the *Lām*. The knowledge of the *Lām* is rooted in the essence of the *Alif*, while the knowledge of the *Mīm*, which is the universe symbolized by the entirety of the letters, is anchored in the essence of the *Lām*. Hence the *Lām* is the soul (*nāfs*) that gives life and light to the *Mīm*, infusing the universe with the life-giving force it has received from the *Alif*. Or, in another image, both the *Alif* and the *Lām* are manifest (*ẓāhir*), but the *Mīm* is hidden (*bāṭin*) being linked to the *Lām* that enlivens and enlightens the universe (# 12).

A third statement of Ḥallāj's offers his interpretation of each Arabic consonant plus the *Lām-Alif*, giving each letter a fixed conceptual value and following an alternative order rather than the standard order of the long alphabet (# 15). Beginning with two patterns of three letters each, *Alif, Lām, Mīm* and *Ḥāʾ, ʿAyn, Dāl*, he lists the remaining letters in the successive alphabetical order, with the *Lām-Alif* coming in the penultimate position before the *Yāʾ* at the very end of the list (# 15). It may have been by intention or by scribal error that the *Qāf* is omitted and the *Nūn* placed out of order after the *Waw* and before the *Lām-Alif*, followed by the *Yāʾ* at the very end of the list. The pattern of the *Alif, Lām, Mīm* is interpreted as referring to God, symbolized by the vertical stroke of the letter *Alif*, standing in isolation and meaning the one and only God. The *Lām* symbolizes the divine gifts (*al-ālāʾ*) and the *Mīm* the divine kingdom (*mulk*) of the universe. The *Alif* is further described to be *al-alūf al-maʿlūf*, the Confidant (*al-alūf*) in whom one confides (*al-maʿlūf*), i.e., the subject and object of mystical intimacy.⁷² Another passage of Sulamī's treatise (# 26), attributed

⁷² It is possible that Ḥallāj developed Ibn ʿAṭā's statement, "the *Alif* is the Confidant one confides in" (*al-alūf al-maʿlūf*) to express God's primordial act of love in which God, the subject of His act of creation (*al-alūf*) makes Himself manifest in its object (*al-maʿlūf*), the world of His creation. This explanation, traced back to Massignon, is upheld by J. N. Bell in the introduction to his translation of Daylamī's treatise on mystical love; see J. N. Bell and H. M. Abdul Latif al-Shafie (2005: 56–8); see also, Daylamī, K. *ʿAtf al-alif al-maʿlūf ʿalā l-lām al-maʿlūf*.

to Ibn ʿAṭā (Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. ʿAṭā al-Adami), clarifies the somewhat enigmatic phrase of *al-alūf al-maʿlūf* by employing the word play, "The *Alif* symbolizes intimacy (*al-ulfa*) because it is the Confidant one confides in (*al-alūf al-maʿlūf*)."⁷³ He goes on to explain that God makes the spirits of the mystics, prophets and friends of God intimately familiar with Himself. In the second pattern, *Ḥāʾ* stands for the praise of God (*al-ḥamd*), the *ʿAyn* for the Knower and the known (*al-ʿālim wa-l-maʿlūm*), and the *Dāl* for the judgment and the turns of fortune (*al-dīn wa-l-dawl*). To each of the remaining letters, Ḥallāj assigns two particular mystical meanings, making use of alliteration and presenting them in tandem by hendiadys, except for the *Bāʾ, Tāʾ, Zāʾ, Ghayn* and *Hāʾ*, for which he cites only one mystical meaning.

Later in the treatise, Sulamī cites Ḥallāj's view on the creation of Adam and his spouse, depicted as figures of light and symbolized by the joined letters of *Lām-Alif*: "With regard to the *Lām-Alif* al-Ḥusayn (al-Ḥallāj) said: The *Alif* alludes to the upright posture of Adam's physique. His Lord created him with an erect bearing and a beautiful composition of shape. Then He revealed to him a light in the manner of the *Lām*. When Adam caught sight of it, he liked its company. So God said to him, 'Do you want to have her?' He replied, 'Yes, I do.' So God said, 'There she is,' and gave him the light, and Adam embraced her" (# 74). Reading the joint *Lām-Alif* as the Arabic particle of *lā* ("no"), so Ḥallāj continues, the *Lām-Alif* received the figurative shape expressing true monotheism by denying that God had any opponents and peers, as stated in the Qurʾān, "there is no god but God" (47:19; 37:35). "The *Lām-Alif*," so Ḥallāj concludes, is the shape of Adam in his embrace of the light, by which his heart was favored among all other creatures" (# 74).

SULAMĪ'S CATALOGUE OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LETTERS

Setting forth the main body of his treatise on the mystical interpretation of the letters, Sulamī examines each of the letters of the alphabet for their mystical meanings (# 22–76), including the joint letters of *Lām-Alif* (# 73–74) appearing in the penultimate position before the *Yāʾ* at the very end of the treatise. He begins this long section by citing the name of Abū Naṣr ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī al-Ṭūsī, i.e., Sarraj (# 22) and quotes him twice later on (# 28, 47) as a source for his explanation of the letters. The content and subject matter of Sulamī's *Sharḥ maʿānī l-ḥurūf* is not copied, however, from Sarraj's *K. al-Lumaʾ*. In fact, Sulamī quotes most of the content of his

treatise from sources that are cited anonymously and introduced simply by, "it has been said" (*qīl*). This makes it impossible to identify his specific source for the several hundred statements on particular letters included in the treatise. Some seven statements are introduced by named narrators other than Sarraj, such as Abū Naṣr Maṣṣūr b. 'Abdallāh al-Iṣfahānī (# 26, 30, 48), Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān b. Shāhīn al-Baghdādī (d. 385/995; # 27), Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Shādhān al-Rāzī (d. 376/986; # 40, 71), and Abū l-'Abbās Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Sa'īd b. al-Khashshāb al-Muḥarrimī al-Baghdādī (d. 361/971-2; # 51).

In Sulamī's treatise only ten prominent Sufis are quoted by name as authors of brief particular sayings. They are: Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/860; # 40), Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Warrāq al-Balkhī al-Tirmidhī al-Ḥakīm (d. 280/893; # 40, 46, 71), Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (# 72), Junayd (# 46), Abū 'Uthmān Sa'īd b. Ismā'il al-Ḥirī (d. 298/910; # 33), Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Jurayrī (d. 312/924; # 47), Ibn 'Aṭā' (# 26, 30, 48, 52, 65), Ḥallāj (# 54), Abū Bakr 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir al-Abharī (d. ca. 330/941-2; # 54), Muḥammad b. 'Isā al-Hāshimī (# 55) and Abū Muḥammad Ja'far b. Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Khulḍī (d. 348/959-60; # 51, 53). Sulamī also adds verses of the poet Abū l-Ḥasan Maṣṣūr b. Ismā'il al-Tamīmī al-Darīr al-Miṣrī, known as Maṣṣūr al-Faqīh (d. 306/918; # 56), and the Sufi Abū 'Alī al-Rūḍhabārī (d. 322/934; # 28, 56) to illustrate a point. He makes no effort, however, to present a comprehensive view about the science of the letters as expressed by any of these Sufis.

Sulamī's Letter by Letter Explanation

Commenting on the letters, one by one, Sulamī favors an explanation that focuses on alliteration. He prefers to view each letter first from the side of God and then from the side of the mystics. Offering a cross section of a great variety of brief Sufi definitions, Sulamī frequently selects divine names and Sufi hallmarks or virtues as the terms hidden behind particular letters. To illustrate, he sometimes first and last references a Qur'ānic verse, a Hadith statement, a general maxim and a poetical verse. Overall, he avoids provocative interpretations of the letters and supports instead a moderate explanation of their meanings. Sulamī gives no special attention to the mysterious letters that introduce twenty-nine suras of the Qur'ān, consistently omitting any reflection on their meaning. His predominant method of alliteration is quite different from the method of allegory employed by Ḥallāj. It reflects a general Sufi consensus that

the meaning of the letters can be uncovered by resemblance, principally, with the first consonant of a respective term and, occasionally, with a consonant hidden in the middle of a particular term. As such, Sulamī's explanation of the meanings of the letters is more or less reconcilable with mainline Islamic views. His analysis of the letters presents very much his own views culled from a vast quarry and amorphous treasury of Sufi opinions. Following the long Arabic alphabet with the *Lām-Alif* placed in the penultimate position, Sulamī takes up each letter in order and states as follows:

The *Alif* (# 22-27), the only letter standing upright among all the other letters of the alphabet, symbolizes God's singularity. It appears in the beginning and the end of the personal pronoun "I" (*anā*) which, spoken by God in self-affirmation, excludes any rival or partner and encases between the two *Alifs* the symbol for God as the light (*nūr*) of the heavens and the earth. The *Alif* also alludes to God's perfection and oneness, indicates His eternity (*azal* and *abad*), and means that God is the First (*al-awwal*) who has none prior to His being first. Furthermore, the *Alif* can symbolize God's power to unite the opposites, such as spirit and lower soul despite their disparity in origin and goal. Seen from the side of the human beings, the *Alif* can symbolize the human beings standing upright in performance of their religious duties, but it can also indicate, as Ibn 'Aṭā' maintains, the intimacy (*ulfa*) of the mystics in their communion with God.

The *Bā* (# 28-30) symbolizes that through God (*bihi*) all things are brought forth and made to perish. It can also indicate that God is the Eternal (*al-abadī*) for whom eternity *a parte ante* (*azal*) and *a parte post* (*abad*) has no reality. This thought is illustrated by a verse of Abū 'Alī al-Rūḍhabārī, "You are troubled because He conceals from Himself His affection for you, hides from you His affection for you, and hides from you your affection for Him. Like a beam that flashes up from a beacon, he wanders aimlessly about in passionate love for you, unless you yourself are the flash." The *Bā* can also signify the divine names that begin with the letter *Bā*. With regard to human beings, the *Bā* refers to them as God's servants who follow His commands with loyalty and zeal or, in the words of Ibn 'Aṭā', it manifests God's kindness (*birr*) toward the prophets.

The *Tā* (# 31-32) indicates the bewilderment (*tayhūhiyya*) of humans before God's essence and attributes and the imagination (*tawahhum*) with which they surmise about the divine realities. For the mystics the *Tā* intimates the virtues of repentance (*tawba*), abandoning indifference (*tark al-tawānī*) before God's commands, vigilance (*tayaqquṣ*) and trust in God

(*tawakkul*, *tafwīd*, *taslīm*), the reliance on being granted divine success (*tawfiq*) and true profession of God's oneness (*taṣḥīḥ al-tawḥīd*).

The *Thā'* (# 33-4) alludes to firmness (*thubūt*) in following the Holy Custom (*sunna*), trusting in God (*thiqa*) in all words, ridding one's actions from seeking God's reward for them (*thawāb*) and the realization of one's weakness to express God's praise (*thanā'*), as the Prophet did when he said, "I cannot recount the praises due to You."

The *Jīm* (# 35) expresses the mystic's desire to be close to God (*jāwara l-ḥaqq*) as stated by the Prophet, "Exalted is the one who seeks Your protection (*'azza jārukā*)!" It may allude to the maxim, "Give away this world and the next (*jud bi l-kawmāyn*) for the sake of God," inviting the mystics to relinquish (*mujāwaza*) all joy in transient things and to act according to God's omnipotence (*jabbāriyyatu l-ḥaqq*).

The *Hā'* (# 36-37) alludes to God's praise (*ḥamd*) and reminds humanity of God's word, "I gave praise to Myself by Myself when nobody had praise for Me as yet. Had I not praised Myself (*lawlā ḥamidtu nafsi*), no one would have known how to praise Me!" It refers to God's forbearance (*ḥilm*) and forgiveness and makes humanity aware that God holds the proof (*ḥujja*) of the divine trust, which He entrusted them to carry (*ḥamluhum al-amāna*, Q 72:33). Further, the *Hā'* alludes to the curtain (*ḥijāb*) that hides God from humanity, which is lifted for God's friends here and now and for the rest of the believers in the world to come. It also refers to the zeal (*ḥathth*) with which God's servants seek to do what is lawful (*ḥalāl*) and avoid what is unlawful (*ḥarām*). Further, it signifies that God's friends are God's proof (*ḥujjat Allāh*) for His servants and that the one who is the "proof" (*al-ḥujja*) among His friends is the leader of the people of divine friendship (*imām ahl al-wilāya*). Using the terminology of Sahl al-Tustarī anonymously, Sulamī describes this "proof" as, "the one who knows God and God's commandments and has assimilated the characteristics of God's Messenger" (#37).

The *Khā'* (# 38-39) alludes to eternal life (*khulūd*) either in paradise or in hellfire and to the fear of death (*khawf al-mawt*), the fear of God's wrath (*khawf ghaḍabihi*), punishment and justice, and all the other fears the mystics have about their sins and omissions. It also alludes to receiving one's share (*al-akhdh bi-ḥaqqika*) as allotted by God's command and being content with it without seeking any other reward than witnessing the One who gives the command. It also signifies purity of intention (*ikhlas*) in any state or at any time.

The *Dāl* (# 40-41) alludes to the everlastingness (*daymūmiyya*) and eternity of God (*dawām al-ḥaqq*), who has neither beginning nor end, and

to constancy (*mudāwama*) in one's preoccupation with life to come and one's incessant gratitude (*mudāwamat al-shukr*) and lasting joy (*dawām al-faraḥ*) in God's service. It also refers to personal prayer (*du'ā'*) and the call (*da'wa*) to follow God's precepts and perform the religious duties (Q 16:125).

The *Dhāl* (# 42-43) alludes to God's remembrance (*dhikr al-ḥaqq*) of His servants from all eternity and the blessings of His remembrance that inspires them to remember God (Q 2:152) and be grateful for His remembrance, so that He may remember them in times of need. For the mystic it signifies the passing away of the subject of recollection (*fanā' al-dhākir*) as one witnesses God, the object of recollection (*fi mushāhadat madhkūrihi*), and the practice of silent recollection (*al-dhikr al-khafī*), as favored by the Prophet, "The best recollection is the silent one." The *Dhāl* can refer to the reproach of the soul (*dhamm al-nafs*), the passions and this world because they obstruct the way to God for the mystic, but it can also allude to the passing away (*dhahāb*) of distractions and intentions and one's total turning to God.

The *Rā'* (# 44-45) alludes to beholding the divine grace (*ru'yat al-faḍl*) and eliminating separation from God (*ru'yat al-faṣl*). It is also a reference to the spirit (*rūḥ*) that abides in witness of the spiritual meaning (*ma'nā*) because it belongs to it but is not identical with it. It can also refer to God's compassion (*ra'fat al-ḥaqq*) for creation. When God harbors compassion toward someone, He makes him compassionate to others, as He enabled the Prophet to be "gentle to the believers, compassionate" (Q 9:128). The *Rā'* can also point to the desire of God which, if done for a selfish purpose, alienates the doer from God, if done for the sake of paradise, brings the doer its rewards, and if done for the sake of God, transforms a person into God's beacon for all to see. The *Rā'* alludes to God, the compassionate Benefactor (*al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*), for God spreads His mercy (*raḥma*) over creation so that they may show one of His hundred mercies toward others and look forward to enjoying the other ninety-nine on the Day of Resurrection, according to a saying of the Prophet (# 45).

The *Zā'* (# 46) alludes to seeking increase (*ziyāda*) in the mystical states and gradually drawing near to God, although if this is done for one's own sake, so Junayd observes, one remains abandoned in the deserts of distance from God. The *Zā'* can also refer to renunciation (*zuhd*) that belittles this world and the next, allowing ascetics to reach their Creator. It can signify that one refrains from being adorned (*tark al-tazyīn*) by conditions and actions or, as Abū Bakr al-Warrāq says, relinquishes the fame of this world (*tark zinat al-dunyā*) and the show of piety.

The *Sīn* (# 47–48) alludes to submission and surrender to God (*istislām*). As Jurayrī says, "To surrender when encountering God is to be courageous, to revel in the honor of being intimate with God is to be heedless." The *Sīn* also stands for extolling God as "Master" (*sayyid*) and for being made a master by God, so that the other creatures serve him like slaves serve their master. This is what is meant by the maxim, "the 'Master' is the one who leads the masters seeking to love His sovereignty." The *Sīn* is also understood as referring to the equality of one who is "master" (*istiwā'* *al-sayyid*) with God in that he brings about the precepts concerning pleasant and despicable things as well as blessings and misfortunes. The *Sīn* is also the key to God's name, Giver of peace (*al-salām*) because God honored His friends by calling them Muslims, making them dwell in the Abode of Peace (*dār al-salām*) and having them saluted by the angels' greeting of peace (Q 36:58). For Ibn 'Aṭā', the *Sīn* stands for the secret (*sirr*) God shares with the mystics, His friends, by granting them clairvoyance (*firāsa*) and intimacy with Him because they keep aloof from everything other than God.

The *Shīn* (# 49–50) alludes to the radiance of eternal light (*ishrāq anwār al-azal*) cast on those God wishes to enlighten, which fills them with illumination (*shumūl al-anwār*). It can signify divulging the state of mind of someone who turns away from God (*shītāt sirr man a'raḍa 'anhu*), being preoccupied with inappropriate things. It also refers to thanksgiving (*shukr*) for increased faith, graces that were foreordained, states enjoyed time after time, and the awareness that nothing can be returned to God through thanksgiving. The *Shīn* can also stand for the ambiguity of mystical states (*ishkāl aḥwāl al-'arīfin*) in the moment of mystical experience (*waqt*) because of the resemblance between their beginnings and ends. It can also mean giving up pleasures and comforts (*tark al-shahawāt wa-l-rāḥāt*) from the time they are first desired to the moment when the desire is fulfilled. It can also allude to the mystics witnessing (*mushāhada*) the signs of God (*shawāhid al-ḥaqq*) so that they see through illumination and insight what they know with their hearts, "like Him there is naught" (Q 42:11). It may also refer to the yearning (*shawq*) of those who are longing for God.

The *Ṣād* (# 51–52) alludes to scrutiny of the soul and sincerity (*sidq*) in word and action, by sincerely trusting in God and voicing true knowledge. It also indicates perseverance (*ṣabr*) as the appropriate response in misfortunes and as the key to blessings. For Ja'far al-Khuldī this perseverance has to be applied instantly in any adversity. The *Ṣād* also refers to the everlastingness of God (*ṣamadiyyat al-ḥaqq*) that makes it impossible for

Him to coexist with likenesses or adversaries and for humans to grasp or comprehend and compare Him. It can also mean the firm belief to be near to God and behold Him. In Ibn 'Aṭā's view, the *Ṣād* refers to cleansing the hearts (*taṣfiyat al-qulūb*) from turning to anyone other than God.

The *Dād* (# 53) alludes to the brilliance of God's illumination (*diyā' anwār al-ma'rūf*) spreading in the inmost beings of the mystics. In Ja'far al-Khuldī's view it refers to humanity's faithfully safeguarding (*damān*) the trust when the heavens and the earth failed to accept it.

The *Tā'* (# 54) alludes to one's spiritual and moral purification (*tahāra*). According to Abū Bakr 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir al-Abharī, it refers to the goodness of the lovers' hearts (*ḥib qulūb al-muḥibbīn*) before God, their Beloved, and according to Ḥallāj to God's unforeseen disclosures (*tawālī' al-ḥaqq*) that overcome the inmost beings of the elite of His friends and sweep them clean of any other than the Almighty.

The *Zā'* (# 55), according to Muḥammad b. 'Isā al-Hāshimī, alludes to the principle of thinking only the best of God (*ḥusn al-ẓann bi-llāh*) and thinking only the worst of the lower self (*sū' al-ẓann bi-l-naḥs*) and, according to one anonymous Sufi, to the thirst (*ẓama'*) the ascetics experience in the midday heat and, according to another, to God's name, "the Manifest" (*al-zāhir*), through whom moral and spiritual benefits become manifest to the mystics.

The *'Ayn* (# 56–58) refers to the immediate knowledge (*'ilm*) God has of all things and to God's help (*ma'ūna*) for His servants. It alludes to the quintessence of things (*'ayn al-ashyā'*) about which the poet Maṣṣūr al-Faḥrī had the following verse: "They said, 'Take the eye, the purest of all things!' I replied to them, 'There is an excellence in the eye, but the nerves of the eye are like two lines in a thousand neatly written scrolls, and often you may not find two fine lines in a thousand scrolls,'" while the Sufi Abū 'Alī al-Rūdhabārī (d. 322/934) illustrated it by the verse, "You are an eye to the eye when it sees you. It strives for you just as it aspires to see." The *'Ayn* also alludes to the various sciences of humanity (*'ulūm al-khalq*), their subdivisions and their source (*ma'dīn*). The source for the reality of knowledge of God is Muḥammad's heart (*qalb Muḥammad*) as intimated by Q 68:4 and 47:19. The *'Ayn* holds the key to God's names, "the Mighty" (*al-'azīz*) and "the Omniscient" (*al-'alīm*). It exemplifies the appropriate interaction (*mu'āmala*) with God and signifies one's constant life (*'aysh*) through and with God.

The *Ghayn* (# 59–60) points to "the Unseen" (*al-ghayb*) that is hidden from all creatures. It also refers to the "covering" (*ighāna*) the Prophet experienced on his heart when he passed from the state of witnessing to

that of proclamation. Some interpret this covering as the Prophet's permissible care for his family and children. A Sufi of Khurasan understood the *Ghayn* as a reference to casting down the eyes (*ghadd al-tarf*) before forbidden things with reference to Q 24:30, while a Sufi from Baghdad said, it means casting down the eyes before all things after one has obtained knowledge of God. Another Sufi understood the *Ghayn* as an allusion to the highest degree of divine love, when the lover is bereft of all awareness in encountering the Beloved.

The *Fā'* (# 61) refers to one who succeeds (*fāza*) in overcoming his wishes and following God's command, or to one who entrusts (*fawwaḍa*) all affairs to God. It alludes to fleeing from God to God (*al-firār minhu ilayhi*), to the absence of vain ideas in the pure thought (*ṣafā' al-fikr*) about God or to the liberation of the soul (*fakk al-naḥs*) from the fetters of physical nature by turning to God.

The *Qāf* (# 62) is the key to the divine names, "the Subsisting (*al-qayyūm*), the Strong (*al-qawī*), the Restrainer (*al-qābiḍ*) and the Holy (*al-quddūs*)," because God established all things with his omnipotence (*qudra*), set them straight with His power (*quwwa*), held them in His grip (*qabḍa*) and gave glory to Himself (*qaddasa naḥsahu*). The *Qāf* can also refer to performing (*qiyām*) God's commands, to the hearts of the mystics abiding in God presence (*qarār qulūb al-ʿarīfīn maʿa llāh*), and to the bewilderment of creation at the resurrection (*qiyāma*) and its terrors (Q 80:37).

The *Kāf* (# 63) refers to God's perfection (*kamāl al-ḥaqq*) in His essence and in His bringing forth creation with shortcomings. Among creation only the one from whom God has removed all blemish is perfect, as when He selected Moses, saying, "I have chosen you" (Q 7:144) for Myself, and when He took an oath by Muḥammad's life saying, "By your life" (Q 15:72). Manifest perfection belongs to the prophets and ritual perfection belongs to God's friends and the sincere mystics. A human being can only become perfect by being raised to God's perfection. The *Kāf* also refers to all being (*al-kawn*), the divine command, "Be!" (*al-kun*), and what came into being (*al-kān*). *Al-Kān* is God's speech, *al-Kun* God's command and *al-Kawn* God's creation. For others the *Kāf* is an allusion to God as "the Sufficer" (*al-Kāfi*); whoever is content with God is protected by Him (*man iktafā bihi kafāhu*) and led to the place of contentment (*maḥall al-kifāya*).

The *Lām* (# 64) alludes to the blame (*malāma*) the novices put on themselves because they know that they fall short in their duties. But it also alludes to the bounty of "the Benevolent" (*al-laṭīf*) who shows His bounty (*luṭf*) to the mystic's heart so that one becomes graceful and friendly (*yaṭufu*).

The *Mīm* (# 65–66) alludes to God as the king (*malik*) who holds sway over the kings. Whoever seeks the kingdom (*mulk*), falls short of finding the king, but whoever seeks the king, is made the owner of the royal lands. Ibn 'Aṭā' held that the *Mīm* refers either to the meanings (*maʿānī*) of the divinely proclaimed command and interdiction or to the graces (*minan*) God accords the novices. Some held that the *Mīm* alludes to the inclination of the soul (*mayl al-naḥs*) to follow its passions and oppose those who prevent it from doing so, while others had the *Mīm* allude to the inclination of the mystics (*mayl al-ʿarīfīn*) to seek God's pleasure. Some said, the *Mīm* alludes to the disgust for the soul that seduces (*maqt al-naḥs al-musawwila*), while others said, it alludes to the desire of death (*hubb al-mamāt*) in longing for the almighty King (*al-malik al-jabbār*).

The *Nūn* (# 67–69) alludes to the light (*nūr*) that God casts into the hearts of His friends. The mystics see in this light the leader of God's friends (*imām al-awliyā*) who was made a sign of God's mercy for creation and, by virtue of this light, is able to perceive the invisible things with his own eyes. About him the Prophet said, "When that light was cast in the heart, it became wide and was opened." When the light of the servant's spirit (*nūr ruh al-ʿabd*) overwhelms the darkness of his body, the heart is widened and opened. When the darkness of the body overwhelms the light of his spirit, it darkens both spirit and body. There are many lights God reveals to human beings: in the head, the light of revelation, between the eyes, the light of intimate conversation, in the ear, the light of certitude, in the tongue, the light of explanation, in the chest, the light of faith and in the heart, the light of mystical knowledge. When any of these lights flares up somewhat, it overpowers one of the other lights and enters into its domain. When all lights are ablaze, they become light upon light, and "God guides to His light whom He wills" (Q 24:35). The key of the *Nūn* is derived from God's name, "the light" (*al-nūr*). God enlightens the heavens and the earth with visible lights and the bodies with invisible lights, such as their well-being. He illuminates the hearts of the prophets and the elite of His friends with His special light of mystical knowledge. The *Nūn* refers to God declaring Himself above (*tanzih al-ḥaqq*) all comprehension and description. "So declare Him above what He declared Himself to be above in reality, so that He may sanctify you with the lights of His compassion and mercy and make you reach the utmost limit of your quest, now and in the future" (# 69). God declared Himself above (*nazzaha naḥsahu*) anyone being brought near Him except through Him or truly giving thanks to Him for an instant of grace, because praise is the utterance of the divine Speaker and thanksgiving is the search for more grace.

The *Wāw* (# 70) may allude to the arrival (*wurūd*) of illuminations in the inmost being of the mystics, to God's love (*mawaddat al-ḥaqq*) for His friends from the very moment of creation, or to the revelation (*waḥy*) that God grants His servants, such as the direct revelation (*waḥy al-mushāfaha*) granted to Moses and Muḥammad, the mediated revelation (*waḥy al-wasā'it*) granted to the rest of the prophets, the inspiration of the bee (*waḥy al-ilhām li-l-naḥl*, Q 16:68), the revelation (*waḥy al-qadhif wa-l-ilqā'*) cast into the hearts of Jesus' disciples (Q 5:11) and infused into the heart of Moses' mother (Q 68:7). The *Wāw* also alludes to rendering respect to the Prophet (*tawqīr al-muṣṭafā*), acknowledging the friendship of God's friends (*wilāyat al-awliyā'*), and upholding God's oneness and singularity (*al-wāḥidiyya wa-l-waḥdāniyya*).

The *Hā'* (# 71–72) signifies the end of the allusions (*ghāyat al-ishārāt*). Its reality is God Himself, encompassing all things (*Allāh 'azza wa-jalla l-muḥīṭ*), as stated in Q 6:103, 65:12 and 20:110. The *Hā'* indicates God's guidance (*hidāya*). In Abū Bakr al-Warrāq's view, it alludes to abandoning the passions (*tark al-hawā*) and all the lusts of this world, while in Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz's view, the *Hā'* stands for the He-ness of God (*huwīyyat al-ḥaqq*) and the forlornness of creation (*tayhūhiyyat al-khalq*) in His He-ness. For others the *Hā'* signifies the disdain for the existent beings in Muḥammad's inmost being and for Abū 'Uthmān al-Ḥīrī it signifies that the souls are yoked together (*muqāranat al-humūm*) in the vale of tears to that they may reach gladness on the Day of Judgment (Q 52:26).

The *Lām-Alif* (# 73–75) represents the *Alif* giving witness, standing up straight, and the *Lām* being humbled by standing crooked in front of the *Alif*. The *Alif* is the only letter standing separately and upright and thus gives witness to God's oneness and singularity, "like Him there is naught" (Q 42:11). The *Alif* has the strength to carry the crooked *Lām* when it expresses the negation in the combination of the two letters, meaning "No!" (*lā*). When a second *Alif* is added in front of the "lā," the result is the particle of exception, *illā*, which is the most intense way of affirmation. The *Lām-Alif* alludes to the reproaching of the soul (*malāmat al-naḥs*) and misleading censure (*lawmat al-lā'im*).⁷³

The *Yā'* (# 76) alludes to God educating you (*yu'addibuka*), strengthening you (*yuqawwimuka*) and assisting you (*yūtinuka*) to fulfill His commands. The letter *Yā'* causes you (*yūrithuka*) sadness in the vale of tears

⁷³ A curious way of interpreting the *Lām-Alif* is represented by A. J. Arberry (1937).

and joy in the nearness to God, and draws you near (*yudnīka*) to what you hope for.

Interpretations of the Letters Omitted in Sulamī's Treatise

Looking back on the third part of Sulamī's treatise, *Sharḥ ma'ānī al-ḥurūf*, in which he explains the letters of the alphabet one by one in mystical terms, it appears to have been Sulamī's intention to provide a moderate interpretation of the letters. In certain instances, he aligned a particular letter of the Arabic alphabet with the initial letter of a divine name or attribute, but in most cases, he arranged it to coincide with the first or middle letter of a crucial term for Sufi ideals and values. In this process, the allusion (*ishāra*) evoked by Sulamī is usually obvious rather than deeply hidden and symbolic. It points to a method of alliteration rather than allegory and substitutes the similarity of words or sounds for the symbolism of esoteric interpretation. Except for the second part of his *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*, in which Ḥallāj stands out for his deeply symbolical interpretation of the letters, there is hardly any Sufi cited by name in Sulamī's treatise who could be considered as offering an allegorical or symbolical interpretation of the letters. Sulamī's interest in recording moderate Sufi explanations of the science of the letters, rather than more esoteric or allegorical interpretations, also explains his omission of references to early Sufi authorities known for more daring interpretations of the meaning of the Arabic letters. That this was an intentional rather than an inadvertent omission on Sulamī's part is proven by the absence of interpretations of the letters attributed to Sahl al-Tustarī, Ibn Masarra and Ja'far al-Šādiq.

It is striking that Sulamī does not refer by name to Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), an early Sufi who is credited with a treatise on the letters (*Risāla fī l-ḥurūf*).⁷⁴ In his *Dhikr miḥan al-mashāyikh al-ṣūfiyya* Sulamī documents, however, that he was aware of two incidents reported in Sarrāj's *K. al-Luma'* about Sahl al-Tustarī's expulsion from his hometown to Basra and his association with Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abdallāh b. Bakr al-Šubayḥī (d. ca. 315/927).⁷⁵ Šubayḥī taught the interpretation of the letters (*ḥurūf*) at Basra and was bolstered in this by Sahl al-Tustarī's moral support, "we have opened the bag of asafetida (*jirāb*

⁷⁴ MS. *Chester Beatty* 3168/3 (ff. 83–87, 686 h); M. K. Ja'far (1974: 366–75).

⁷⁵ Sulamī, *Miḥan al-mashāyikh al-ṣūfiyya*, MS. *Muḥammad Ibn Sa'ūd* 218 (ff. 79a–88b).

al-hiltit) for the people.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, there is one anonymous saying in Sulamī's treatise on the explanation of the letters (# 37) when he comments on the meaning of "the proof of God" (*ḥujjat Allāh*), stating that he is "the leader of divine friendship" (*imām al-wilāya*). Sulamī's citation of this statement resembles a controversial saying about the qualities of the religious leader attributed to Sahl al-Tustarī in other Sufi sources⁷⁷ and, in all likelihood, is a saying of Sahl al-Tustarī that has been cited anonymously.

Sulamī also reveals no awareness of the *Risālat al-i'tibār* and the *K. Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, both treatises of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Masarra b. Najīh al-Jabalī al-Andalusī (d. 319/931) focused on the interpretation of the opening letters of the suras.⁷⁸ Furthermore, there is no indication that Sulamī used the *K. 'Atf al-alif al-mālūf 'alā l-lām al-ma'ūf* of his contemporary, Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Daylamī, who was a disciple of Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Khafīf b. Isfakshād al-Ḍabbī al-Shīrāzī (d. 371/981).⁷⁹ Obviously, it would have gone far beyond the limits Sulamī imposed on his field of vision, had he drawn on Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's *K. al-Ḥurūf*.⁸⁰ Most surprisingly, however, Sulamī does not name Ja'far al-Šādiq a single time in his treatise on the meaning of the letters, although in his major Qur'ān commentary he attributes to him a number of interpretations of the letters.

In his introduction to *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, Sulamī expresses scepticism about the authenticity of the Sufi statements attributed to Ja'far al-Šādiq by noting that these statements were ascribed to Ja'far al-Šādiq without any order.⁸¹ Nevertheless he included them in this Qur'ān commentary under Ja'far al-Šādiq's name, quoting them from oral or written sources without identifying their specific provenance or citing them on the basis of

⁷⁶ Sarrāj, *K. al-Luma'* (*Pages from the Kitāb al-Luma'*), 9; *hiltit* is a gum resin extracted from the plant *asafetida* that is used as a medical remedy and has a sulphur like smell.

⁷⁷ G. Böwering (1980: 64–5).

⁷⁸ *Risālat al-i'tibār*, MS. Chester Beatty 3168/4 (ff. 88–95, 686 h) and *K. Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, MS. Chester Beatty 3168/2 (ff. 65a–83, 686 h); M. K. Ja'far, *Mīm al-turāth al-falsafī*; Ibn Masarra, *al-Ḥurūf*; M. Asin Palacios (1914); Engl. tr. E. H. Douglas and H. W. Yoder (1978); M. N. Bardakçı (1999); R. Arnaldez (1971: "Ibn Masarra").

⁷⁹ Daylamī, *K. 'Atf al-alif al-ma'ūf*.

⁸⁰ Fārābī, *K. al-Ḥurūf*. Sulamī could hardly have consulted the (*Risāla fī*) *Asbāb ḥudūth al-ḥurūf* of Ibn Sīnā (370/980–428/1037). It is not known, however, whether Ibn Sīnā completed this treatise before or after Sulamī's death in 412/1021. Ibn Sīnā's *Asbāb ḥudūth al-ḥurūf*; cf. M. Bravmann (1934); P. N. Khānlari (1333sh/1963); K. I. Semaan (1963); N. Radhouane (2002).

⁸¹ Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, 19–20.

two chains of transmitters that are intertwined with the *isnād* of the Shī'a family (*ahl al-bayt*).⁸² In the introductions to his major and minor Qur'ān commentaries, Sulamī also refers to various criteria of Ja'far al-Šādiq's method of Qur'ān interpretation.⁸³ The specimens of the interpretation of the letters that Sulamī actually quotes on Ja'far al-Šādiq's authority, however, belong to the category of alliteration and suggest little in the way of symbolical or allegorical modes of interpretation.

For example, Sulamī states the following interpretations on Ja'far al-Šādiq's authority in his *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*: With regard to *bismi*, ("in the name of"), the beginning of the *Basmala*, the *Bā'* alludes to God's subsistence (*baqā'*), the *Sīn* to God's names (*asmā'*) and the *Mīm* to God's reign (*mulk*).⁸⁴ or in other terms, the *Bā'* refers to God's beauty (*bahā'*), the *Sīn* to God's splendor (*sanā'*) and the *Mīm* to God's magnificence (*majd*).⁸⁵ or by way of yet another alliteration, the *Bā'* refers to the door of prophecy (*bāb al-nubuwwa*), the *Sīn* to the secret of prophecy (*sirr al-nubuwwa*) and the *Mīm* to God's rule on the Day of Judgment (*mamlakat al-dīn*).⁸⁶ The name of God, "Allāh," is analyzed by Ja'far al-Šādiq as a tetragram, the *Alif* meaning the pillar of divine oneness (*'amūd al-tawḥīd*), the first *Lām* the tablet of understanding (*lawḥ al-fahm*), the second *Lām* the tablet of prophecy (*lawḥ al-nubuwwa*), and the *Hā'* infinity (*nihāya*) by way of allusion.⁸⁷ The word *al-ḥamd* (the "praise" belonging to God) in the first *sūra* of the Qur'ān (1:2), is disassembled by Ja'far al-Šādiq in such a way that the *Hā'* alludes to God's singularity (*waḥdāniyya*), the *Mīm* to God's reign (*mulk*) and the *Dāl* to God's everlastingness (*daymūmiyya*)⁸⁸ or, in other terms, *al-ḥamd* including the definite article has the *Alif* referring to God's gifts (*ālā'*), the *Lām* to God's grace (*lutf*), the *Hā'* to God's praise of Himself (*ḥamd nafsihi*), the *Mīm* to God's magnificence (*majd*), and the *Dāl* to the religion of Islam (*dīn al-Islām*).⁸⁹ The five Arabic consonants constituting God's name, "the Impenetrable" (*al-ṣamad*, Q 112:2), are

⁸² G. Böwering (1996: 35–56). It is not entirely clear why certain Sufis appropriated the name of Ja'far al-Šādiq to cover their own Qur'ān interpretations, but one can surmise that this may have been done during the early Būyid rule in Baghdad after 334/945.

⁸³ Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 1, 22, and *Ziyādāt ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, 2.

⁸⁴ Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 1, 22 (ad Q 1:1); Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, 1, 15.

⁸⁵ Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 1, 22 (ad Q 1:1).

⁸⁶ Ibid. 1, 26 (ad Q 1:1).

⁸⁷ Ibid. 1, 31 (ad Q 1:1).

⁸⁸ Ibid. 1, 33 (ad Q 1:2); Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, 1, 19–20.

⁸⁹ Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 1, 35 (ad Q 1:2).

taken by Ja'far al-Šādiq to signify the proof of God's oneness (*aḥadiyya*) for the *Alif*, the proof of God's divine nature (*ulūhiyya*) for the *Lām*, the proof of God keeping His promises (*šadaqa fimā wa'ada*) for the *Šād*, the proof of God's absolute reign (*mulkuḥu wa-huwa l-malik 'alā l-ḥaqīqa*) for the *Mīm*, and the sign of God's everlastingness (*dawāmuḥu fī abadiyyatihi wa-azaliyyatihi*) for the *Dāl*.⁹⁰

To sum up, Sulamī's treatise on the meaning of the Arabic letters integrates three hermeneutical stages. In the first stage, he offers an interpretation of the Arabic alphabet (*abjad*) along traditional lines and justifies his assigning of inner and hidden meanings to each of the Arabic letters. In the second stage, he presents a cluster of sayings by Sufis of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries that attest to the emergence of a mystical, allegorical and symbolic interpretation of the letters of the alphabet and the mysterious letters at the head of twenty-nine suras of the Qur'ān. His application of the emerging "science of the letters" (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) in this early Sufi environment is scattered and disjointed, without pattern or order. Moreover, it reveals his inattention to the interpretation of the letters by a number of Sufis known in his time but neglected in his treatise. He draws special attention, however, to two aspects of the letters. Most importantly, he endorses the Qur'ānic view that the Arabic letters, created by God in their particular shape at the very dawn of creation, were entrusted to Adam, the first human being. Adam then articulated them and applied them to the multiplicity of objects found in the universe of all created things. For their part, the Sufi mystics discover the inner sense hidden in each of the letters of the Qur'ānic proclamation and disclose the treasure of their multifarious meanings. In this stage of the treatise, Sulamī focuses in particular on Ḥallāj's allegorical interpretation of the Arabic letter pattern, *Alif-Lām-Mīm*, and Ḥallāj's vision of the combined letters of *Lām-Alif* as the symbol for the process of creation. This process of creation combines God and the universe at the point (*nuqṭa*) where the two strokes of the *Lām-Alif* intersect and divine eternity and human temporality meet. In the third stage, Sulamī offers a catalogue of the interpretation of the Arabic letters, explaining them letter by letter with the method of alliteration and attesting to a panorama of meaning that the Sufis discovered behind each of the Arabic letters. As a whole, Sulamī's

⁹⁰ Ibid. 2,429 (ad Q 112:2).

treatise on the "science of the letters" collects a great variety of interpretations offered by early Sufism in its hermeneutics of the Arabic alphabet and the mysterious Qur'ānic letters, a variety that cannot be found elsewhere in such a rich and concentrated form. The treatise maintains the sacredness of the Arabic language, as the only language suitable in structure, form and style to contain God's self-communication to humanity in the Qur'ān.

TRANSLATION OF SULAMĪ, *SHARḤ MA'ĀNĪ AL-ḤURŪF*

- 1 Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being in the beginning and in the end. May God bless Muḥammad and grant him salvation.⁹¹
Praise belongs to God who enlightened the hearts of His friends and the elite among His servants with understanding of His word (i.e. the Qur'ānic revelation). He gave them the capacity to understand the difficult and obscure passages by turning them to Him and making them mystics who possess knowledge of Him and know His names and attributes. He caused them to transcend their ordinary ability to comprehend His Proclamation and the subtle meanings of the letters of His Book. He instilled in them a profound knowledge of each letter of his proclamations through understanding its meanings and, through their vision and insight, made them ponder their hidden meanings. In every letter He placed for them an increment of explanation and a special understanding and proof. "And God singles out for His mercy whom He wills" (Q 2:105).
- 2 Now then, I say: After having completed the book of "The Realities of Interpretation" (*Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*), I was asked to write something about the meaning of the letters (*ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*) and what the wise men among the mystics said about them so as to append it to "The Realities of Interpretation" and conclude the book with it. I did as I had been asked and begged God for help in compiling it, after disavowing my own power and strength to do so and turning to the One in whose hand are all blessings. May God grant success to its completion through His grace and abundance of His mercy.
- 3 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is reported to have said, as is the Prophet, supported by a chain of transmitters: "Each verse of the Qur'ān has a 'back' (*ḡahr*, i.e., a literal and outer meaning), and a 'belly' (*baṭn*, i.e., a hidden and inner meaning), and each letter (*ḡarf*) has a horizon (*ḡadd*, i.e., a boundary, a definition) and a point of ascent (*maṭla'*, *muṭṭala'*, i.e., an allegory, a

⁹¹ I have made the following emendations to the Arabic text of *Sharḥ ma'ānī l-ḥurūf*: # 23, line 1, read *annā* rather than *innā*; # 25, line 5, read *al-qalam biḡā* rather than *al-qalam biḡi*; # 27, line 4, read *a-lā* rather than *lā*; # 35, line 2, read *fi qalbiḡi* rather than *fā-qalbuḡi*; # 35, line 3, read *'azza* rather than *'izz*; # 49, lines 2-3, read *bimā lā yaliqu biḡi*, rather than *bimā yaliqu biḡi*; # 63, lines 3 and 4, spell *bi-ḡayāṭiḡi* with long *alif*, rather than *wāw* (*alif al-tafkīm*); # 69, lines 5-6, delete *wa-ḡila nazzaha naḡsahu* as redundant due to a scribal error.

- symbolism)." This report justifies the discourse on the letters and their meanings.
- 4 What further substantiates the teachings about the letters is the statement of God's Messenger, about which Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Quraysh told me: al-ḡasan b. Sa'īd told me that Aḡmad b. Naṡr reported Dāwūd b. Sulaymān al-'Aṭṭār to have reported on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ziyād – al-Furāt b. Sulaymān – Abān b. Abī 'Ayyāsh – Ibn 'Abbās that the God's Messenger said: "Learn the alphabet (Abū Jād) and its interpretation! Woe unto the scholar who ignores its interpretation!" They replied, "O Messenger of God, what is it about the alphabet?" He replied, "In it are all the wondrous things that there are."
 - 5 With regard to *abjad*, the *Alif* is God and the gifts of God. The *Alif* is a letter drawn from God's names, the *Bā'* is God's beauty, the *Jīm* God's paradise and the *Dāl* God's Judgment. With regard to *hawwaz*, the *Hā'* is the bottomless pit of Hell and the agony of those fallen into it, the *Waw* are the woes of the people of Hell, and the *Zā'* is the corner (of Hell) and God save us from what lurks in the corner. With regard to *ḡuṭṭi*, the *Hā'* refers to the remission of sins for those who seek forgiveness in the Night of Power and the news Gabriel brought down together with the angels at the rise of dawn in the Night of Power; the *Ṭā'* refers to, "Theirs is blessedness and a fair resort" (Q 13:29), a tree implanted before Him by His own hand, whose branches can be seen reaching out from behind the walls of paradise laden with ornamentation and clothing flowing over its inhabitants; and the *Yā'* refers to God's hand above His creation, "Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above that they associate with Him!" (Q 10:18; 16:1; 30:40; 39:67). With regard to *kalamun*, the *Kāf* is God's speech, "No man can change His words; apart from Him you will find no refuge" (Q 18:27); the *Lām* is the respectful greeting of one another by the inhabitants of paradise with words of peace, welcome and visitation; the *Mīm* is God's rule that will never end; and the *Nūn* is, "Nūn, By the Pen, and what they inscribe" (Q 68:1), a book of light and a pen of light "in a parchment unrolled" (Q 52:3) in "a book inscribed" (Q 52:2). With regard to *sa'afas*, it means, He gives tit for tat and an eye for an eye, that is He returns in equal measure "and God desires not wrong for His servants" (Q 40:31). With regard to *qurishat*, the *Qāf* is the goal of humanity and God gathers them for the Day of Resurrection, "and justly the issues shall be decided between them, and they not wronged" (Q 39:69).

- 6 Ismā'il b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Khallālī informed us, Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. Yaḥyā b. Razīn told us in Homs that Ibrāhīm b. al-'Alā' Zabīrī reported on the authority of Ismā'il b. 'Ayyāsh, Ismā'il b. Yaḥyā said that Ibn Abī Mulayka had it from whomever informed him on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd and Mis'ar from 'Aṭīyya who had it from Abū Sa'id al-Khudrī that the Messenger of God said: "The mother of Jesus sent him to school to be taught. The teacher told him, 'Write!' Jesus asked, 'What shall I write?' He replied, 'In the name of God' (*bism*). Jesus asked him, 'What does 'in the name' mean?' The teacher answered, 'I do not know.' So Jesus replied to him, 'The *Bā'* is God's beauty, the *Sīn* God's exaltedness and the *Mīm* God's kingdom. God (*Allāh*) is the god of the gods. He is the Benefactor (*al-Raḥmān*), merciful in the world to come and in this world, and the Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*), compassionate in the world to come.'"
- 7 As to the *Abjad*: The *Alif* signifies God's gifts, the *Bā'* God's beauty, the *Jim* God's majesty, the *Dāl* the everlasting God. *Hawwaz*: The *Hā'* signifies the pit of Hell—woe to the people of hellfire, the *Wāw* refers to a valley in Hell, the *Zā'* refers to the garb of the unbelievers among the people of this world. *Ḥuṭṭīy*: The *Hā'* signifies God's forbearance, the *Ṭā'* refers to God claiming every right so as to return it to whom it is due, the *Yā'* are the marks of the people of hellfire, namely suffering pains. *Kalamun*: *Kāf* signifies God, the Self-Sufficient; *Lām* God, the Omniscient, *Mīm* God, the Ruler, *Nūn*, leviathan. *Sa'afas*: *Ṣād* is God, the Truthful, *'Ayn* God, the Omniscient, *Fā'* God, the Understanding, *Ṣād* God, the Everlasting. *Qurīshat*: *Qāf* is the mountain range encircling this world, infusing the sky with green, *Rā'* is the hypocrisy of the people about that which God expounds, *Sīn* is the hell God has made, *Tā'* is fulfilled forever.
- 8 I heard Manṣūr b. 'Abdallāh al-Iṣfahānī say, Abū 'Alī al-'Aṭṭār told him on the authority of Abū Sa'id al-Anṣārī that Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī said: "When God created the letters, He called them to obedience. They answered according to the manner in which the divine proclamation adorned and clothed them. The shape of all letters was drawn from the *Alif* except the *Alif* itself, which remained in the shape and adornment with which it had been brought into being."
- 9 I heard Manṣūr (b. 'Abdallāh al-Iṣfahānī) say, Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān told him that Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "When God created the letters, He made them a secret unto Himself. When He created Adam, He divulged this secret through him, but did not make it known to any of His angels. So, the letters flowed from Adam's tongue in all kinds of ways and all sorts of words, and God made for each of them a particular shape."

- 10 I heard Manṣūr (b. 'Abdallāh al-Iṣfahānī) say, I heard al-Shiblī say: "There is not a single letter of the alphabet that does not exalt God with a tongue and remember Him with its own language. Each tongue has a letter and each letter has a tongue. This is the secret of God in His creation in which lies the richness of insights and the fullness of thoughts."
- 11 Al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "In the Qur'ān there is the knowledge of everything and the knowledge of the Qur'ān is hidden in the letters which stand at the beginning of the *sūras*. The knowledge of the letters is hidden in the *Lām-Alif*, the knowledge of the *Lām-Alif* in the *Alif*, the knowledge of the *Alif* in the point, the knowledge of the point in the primordial knowledge, the primordial knowledge in the knowledge of pre-eternity, the knowledge of pre-eternity in the divine will, and the knowledge of the divine will in the unseen of the 'He' (*huwa*) of 'like Him there is naught' (Q 42:11), which no one else knows but He."
- 12 Al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "The entirety of the letters is a kingdom, and the king of the kingdom (*malik al-mulk*) is the *Alif*. The *Lām* is its outer form (*ṣūra*) and the *Alif* is the soul (*rūḥ*) of the *Lām*. The knowledge of the *Lām* is in the essence of the *Alif* and the knowledge of the *Mīm* is in the essence of the *Lām*. The *Lām* is the soul (*nafs*) and light of the *Mīm*. The *Alif* is manifest with respect to the *Mīm* that is hidden (behind it), while the *Mīm* is linked to the manifest *Lām* (before it)."
- 13 A certain Sufi said: "In each word (*kalima*) of God's speech (*kalām Allāh*) there is the entire speech, and the entire speech is (encased) in each word. The word is (encapsulated) in the letter (*ḥarf*), and the letter in the point (*nugṭa*). The point is its rank (*miqdār*, lit. "measure, extent"), the rank of the kind, spiritual, perfect, upright, complete and universal servant (*al-'abd al-laṭīf al-rūḥānī al-kāmil al-muḥkam al-tāmm al-jāmī*)."
- 14 Al-Qāsim said: "There are thirty letters. God revealed twenty-nine of them but concealed one. He made it the key to the secret of (God's) friends, revealing it to whomever He wished among them." It has been said: "It is something that can neither be expressed by a word nor intuited by imagination."
- 15 Al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "Are you not aware that the *Alif* is the Confidant in whom one confides (*al-alūf al-ma'lūf*), the *Lām* the divine gifts, and the *Mīm* the kingdom. The *Hā'* refers to the praise, the 'Ayn to the Knower and the known, and the *Dāl* to the judgment and the turns of fortune. The *Bā'* is the praise, the *Tā'* the perfection and

penitence, the *Thā'* the commendation and constancy, the *Jim* the (divine) glory and beauty, the *Khā'* good demeanor and character, the *Dhāl* personality and responsibility, the *Rā'* gentleness (*rawḥ*) and kindness, the *Zā'* increment and adornment, the *Sīn*, splendor and secret, the *Shīn* circumstances and will, the *Ṣād* sincerity and purity, the *Ḍād* brightness and forenoon, the *Ṭā'* purification, the *Zā'* protection (*zill*), the *Ghayn* the Unseen, the *Fā'* dawn and insight, the *Kāf* capacity and generosity, the *Waw* friendship and affection, the *Hā'* spiritual guidance, the *Nūn* illumination and enlightenment (*niwāl*), the *Lām-Alif* rejoicing in union with the divine (*tahlil*) and the *Yā'* support and confirmation."

- 16 Wāsiṭī said: "There are twenty-eight letters that were brought into being." Al-Khalīl (i.e., Abū 'Amr Khalīl b. Aḥmad b. 'Amr b. Tamīm al-Farāhīdī, d. between 160/777 and 175/791) said: "there are twenty-nine letters, which are all attributes (*ṣifāt*) when the Distinguisher distinguished them by saying, 'not a thing, fresh or withered' (Q 6:59) and, 'We have neglected nothing in the Book' (Q 6:38). For anyone who can differentiate or reflect, each letter points to an attribute. And each one can reflect about what is appropriate to it and what is its definition, locus and condition."
- 17 Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz said: "To each letter there is a fountain of insight different from any other, a fresh flavor different from any other and a pleasant taste different from any other. Only men endowed with pure souls, discerning eyes and enlightened hearts are aware of them."
- 18 A certain Sufi said: "(God) made the *Alif* the first and the *Yā'* the last of the letters. The *Alif* signifies the divine oneness and singularity, the *Yā'* signifies human pride (poverty?), worship and obedience. When you link the two letters, the first that is the *Alif* and the last that is the *Yā'*, and reverse them, they become an interjection that is the manifestation of worship by the servants before their Master by calling out: 'O God, O Benefactor, O Merciful!' (*yā Allāh, yā Raḥmān, yā Raḥīm*). In this consists the goal of the quest of all ascetics and mystics, when the needs of the ascetics are fulfilled and the exclamations of the mystics answered."
- 19 A certain Sufi said: "(God) made engravings of the letters in the inmost beings of the mystics, the aspirants and the penitents. Each one of them turns in his inmost being to a particular letter, becomes familiar with it and feels at ease with it according to the degree of his state. When the mystics have completely achieved the station of knowledge, are at peace before the Object of their knowledge and stand upright

in His presence on the carpet of power, close to Him and in conversation with Him, they transcend the secret meanings of the letters. So they become fully acquainted with the various aspects of wisdom that God has entrusted to each of the letters. Then all creatures, whether they are human beings, jinn, beasts of prey, birds or animals, become familiar and at ease with them. They speak with the mystics and the latter understand them and, vice versa, the mystics speak to them and are understood by them. This is a mighty station. The aspirants become aware of the letters as utterances of the divine proclamation while the penitents merely become familiar with listening to their articulation without reaching the understanding the mystics and aspirants possess."

- 20 It has been said: "God manifested the letters and the meanings associated with them for the ordinary understanding of the divine proclamation, but He entrusted the elite of His friends with the knowledge of their inner meanings. So they discoursed about them with discerning minds and spiritual allusions, offering moral counsel, mystical insight and increasing faith. Their souls became familiar with the meanings of the letters, their hearts delighted at the moral lessons they include, and their inner beings became enlightened by their visualization. Each of them perceives according to their capacity, whereas the realities of the letters, well-protected in God's presence, can only be discovered by God's messengers and the elite of His prophets. This is what is meant by the Qur'ānic verse, 'Knower He of the Unseen, and He discloses not His Unseen to anyone, save only to such a messenger as He is well-pleased with' (Q 72:26-7)."
- 21 Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Rāzī said, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Ḥatīm reported 'Iṣām to have reported on the authority of Ādam b. Abī Iyās that Abū Ja'far al-Rāzī had it from al-Rabī' on the authority of Abū l-Āliya that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, said, "The knowledge of the letters belongs to the occult sciences that are only known to the learned divines. If I had found a place to put them, I would have divulged them."

[Listing the letters of the Arabic alphabet, one by one, Sulamī explains]:

The Letter *Alif*.

- 22 I heard Abū Naṣr al-Ṭūsī say, I heard al-Ḥuṣrī say: "The *Alif* is an allusion to the singularity of God with regard to the divine will and wish

- that are His alone. It also is an allusion to whoever is solitary and alone before God and stands upright before Him performing the religious duties, just as the *Alif* stands upright among the letters."
- 23 It has been said: "God saying, 'I am' (*Anā*), signifies that, by virtue of the two *Alifs* (in *Anā*), He affirms His 'I-ness' and obliterates any affirmation of other than Him. The letter 'n' (in *Anā*) symbolizes God's light by which He transcends the heavens and the earths and what is within them." It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Alif* is, He is the First who has none prior to Him, being first because He exists before anyone being first." With regard to the *Alif*, it has been said: "It means, 'I am alone, I have no partner!'" It has been said: "Through the revelation of the *Alif* among the letters, creation got accustomed (*alifa*) to worship and thus, by virtue of the *Alif*, creation became united (*ta'allafū*) in faith (*dīn*). God said, 'Had you expended all that is in the earth, you would not have brought their hearts together' (Q 8:63)."
- 24 It has been said: "The allusion included in the *Alif* is an indication of God's perfection and oneness because, by the might of His omnipotence, He possesses the power to unite the opposites, uniting them in the same way as He unites the lower soul and the spirit despite their disparity in origin and goal." It has been said: "The *Alif* is a symbol for the coming about of what God has decreed and for the express divine will existing since pre-eternity." It has been said: "The *Alif* is a symbol for being first (*awwalīyya*) which is eternity because, in reality, it has neither a first nor a last but points to eternity by being without beginning and end." It has been said: "The allusion included in the *Alif* indicates the greatest name (of God). Outwardly, it is the One uniting the souls, and, inwardly, the One uniting the hearts."
- 25 A certain Sufi said: "The *Alif* is the key to the divine names of being the One and Only, because the *Alif* alludes to the solitariness of the pre-eternal singularity which subsists by itself, for the *Alif* stands upright by itself without being joined to anything else. When standing at the beginning of words and nothing joined with it, the *Alif* is a symbol for pre-eternity and sempiternity, and for beginning and end." It has been said: "The *Alif* is an allusion to affection and intimacy." It has been said: "The first thing God created was the *Alif*; then He created the *Lām*, then the *Qāf* and then the *Mīm*—and it was called the Pen (*al-qalam*). So He made it a pen and had it write what He wished to

- make manifest until eternity what the world would be and of what it would consist."
- 26 I heard Manṣūr b. 'Abdallāh say, I heard Abū l-Qāsim al-Bazzāz in Egypt say that Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "The *Alif* indicates intimacy because it is the Confidant one confides in (*al-alūf al-ma'lūf*). God makes the spirits of the mystics intimately familiar by having them dwell with Him. He makes the spirits of the prophets intimately familiar through friendship, prophecy and message. He makes the hearts of the friends intimately familiar through love and assistance." Ibn 'Aṭā' also said: "The *Alif* has six directions: right, the works of obedience; left, the acts of disobedience; above, opposing God's command; below being a loyal servant; back, His manifest gifts; and front, His blessings granted one after another."
- 27 I heard 'Umar b. Aḥmad b. Shāhīn in Baghdad say, al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim al-'Askarī said that 'Alī b. Ḥusayn and Zayd b. Ḥubāb told him on the authority of Ḥusayn that Yazīd al-Nahwī reported 'Ikrima saying, Ibn 'Abbās said: "Jesus was sent to the scribes. One of them said to him, 'Say, *Alif*!' which he did. Then he said to him, 'Say, *Bā*?' Jesus replied, 'Can you not tell me what the *Alif* stands for?' The scribe answered, 'I do not know what it means.' Jesus replied, 'The *Alif* is God, Mighty and Exalted is He.'"

The Letter *Bā*'

- 28 The *Bā*' is the symbol that the things are brought forth by God and made to pass away. By His self-disclosure they become beautiful and by His remaining concealed they become ugly. So, whoever has a pure intention before God, God belongs to him in reality. 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī al-Sarrāj said al-Wajihī had this verse of Abū 'Alī al-Rudhabārī: "You are troubled because He conceals from Himself His affection for you, hides from you his affection for you, and hides from you your affection for Him. When a beam flashes up like from a beacon, it wanders aimlessly about in passionate love for you, unless you yourself are the flash."
- 29 With regard to the *Bā*', it has been said: "God brought forth the existent beings through His express will and volition." It has been said: "The *Bā*' indicates eternity because God is the Eternal, even if in reality there was neither sempiternity nor pre-eternity." It has been said: "The *Bā*' is an allusion to lasting worship, outwardly and inwardly. Outwardly, it expresses following the divine command and abiding

by the rules of the law with great zeal, and inwardly, it expresses bearing up under forebodings and being patient in afflictions."

- 30 It has been said: "The *Bā'* alludes to the sound beginning according to the Holy Custom so that the final stages will be sound with regard to the experiences of unveiling and witnessing." It has been said: "The *Bā'* is an allusion to God's names, the Everlasting, the Reviver, the Originator, the Beneficent, the Inward and the Dispenser. It is an allusion to God's everlastingness and His permanence without end, limit, or time." I heard Maṣṣūr b. 'Abdallāh al-Ḥafṣhānī say, I heard Abū l-Qāsim al-Bazzāz in Egypt say that Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "The *Bā'* is God's kindness to the spirits of the prophets through the inspiration of prophecy and messengership."

The Letter *Tā'*.

- 31 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Tā'* signifies that the servants are bewildered by God's essence and attributes, because they only know Him by names and adhere to Him by regulations." It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Tā'* signifies that the minds are perplexed by the reality of God's truth. Nobody can reach Him on the level of reality and nobody can dissociate from Him on the level of regulations." With regard to the *Tā'*, it has been said: "Creation associates with God by way of imagination and assumption, imagining that they reach some grasp of the divine realities, but they are only imagining to do so in their surmising. God said: 'And the most of them follow only surmise' (Q 10:36)."
- 32 It has been said: "The *Tā'* indicates the path of the penitents to God; it is turning away from all that there is to the One who owns all that there is." With regard to the letter *Tā'*, it has been said: "It signifies abandoning indifference toward the divine commandments." It has been said: "It signifies the pursuit of vigilance with regard to spiritual premonitions." It has been said: "The *Tā'* alludes to the path of genuine trust in God." It has been said: "It signifies perseverance in the stations of entrusting and surrendering oneself to God." It has been said: "It signifies depending on success granted by God and divine grace without relying on one's actions and acts of worship." It has been said: "The *Tā'* signifies the end of the allusions because it signifies the firm profession of God's oneness, which includes the soundness of all mystical stations." It has been said: "It indicates genuine repentance,

which is to be remorseful for your omissions, so that God may forgive you the sins you have committed."

The Letter *Thā'*.

- 33 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Thā'* signifies the station of steadfastness before God with complete sincerity and steady character, based on the rule of religious law (*sharī'a*), its regulations and rules of behavior. This steadfastness is by virtue of knowledge, the steadfast knowledge is by virtue of the Prophet, and the Prophet's steadfastness is by virtue of God. God said: 'Had We not confirmed you, surely you were near to inclining unto them a very little' (Q 17:74)."
- 34 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Thā'* signifies being unshakeable in following the Holy Custom of the Prophet." It has been said: "It alludes to trust in God in all you say." It has been said: "It signifies the weakness to stand firm in the duty of giving praise to God, just as the Prophet said returning from the path of praise to the path of weakness, 'I cannot count the praises that are due to You.'" It has been said: "It alludes to divesting your actions of the search for God's reward because when one seeks a reward for God's service, one comes near to the border of greed."

The Letter *Jīm*.

- 35 The allusion hidden in the *Jīm* is seeking refuge with God and fleeing all others. Whoever seeks refuge with God in his heart, has all things and all others slip his memory. Thus one becomes strong, is strengthened, and invigorates everyone else. This is why the Prophet said in his prayer: "Exalted is the one who seeks your protection!" It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Jīm* signifies, 'Give away this world and the next for the search of Us, because nobody reaches Us in whose heart there is a stake in other people or entities.'" It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Jīm* is to surpass the joys ordinary people seek in transient delights and to relinquish relying on something that has no permanence." It has been said: "The *Jīm* alludes to the omnipotence of God who compels everyone to act as He wishes for the sake of what He wishes, invariably and unchangeably. God said: 'He is the All-mighty, the All-compeller' (Q 59:23)."

The Letter *Hā'*.

- 36 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Hā'* is, 'I gave praise to Myself by Myself when nobody had praise for Me as yet. Then I directed My servants to praise Me. Had I not praised Myself, nobody would know how to praise Me!'" It has been said: "The *Hā'* is an allusion to God's forbearance and His forgiveness toward His servants. He did not eradicate them for their perpetration of transgressions. Had He eradicated them for their transgressions, none would have survived." It has been said: "The *Hā'* alludes to the proof God holds over His servants by offering them to carry the divine trust, demanding them to attest it. God said, 'We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it' (Q 33:72)."
- 37 It has been said: "The *Hā'* alludes to the veil that makes humanity incapable of perceiving God and keeps God concealed from His servants. God raises the veils now only for His friends and in the next world for the rest of the believers." It has been said: "It alludes to the zeal with which the servants seek to do what is lawful. Lawful action in reality pertains to actions in which there is no doubt, unlawful action are actions that God has specified by His interdiction. Doubtful actions are the licenses of the learned by virtue of subterfuges." It has been said: "The *Hā'* alludes to God's friends because they are the proof of God for His servants. The proof among God's friends is the leader of the people of divine friendship, and he is the learned man who knows God and His commandments and has been molded by the ethical conduct of the Prophet."

The Letter *Khā'*.

- 38 It has been said: "The *Khā'* alludes to the concerns about eternal life in either paradise or hell, on account of what the Prophet is reported to have said: 'Death barks on the bridge over hell.' Then the call is heard, 'O people of paradise, yours is eternal life without death!' and, 'O people of hellfire, yours is eternal life without death!'" It has been said: "The *Khā'* alludes to the prompting of anxieties. The greatest anxiety is the fear of passing away, namely that God may leave one behind; after that, the fear of God's wrath and punishment; after that, the fear of God's justice; after that, the fear of falling short of His service and obedience; after that, the fear of negligence in the commandments of the Prophet; after that, the fear of squandering mysti-

cal moments; after that, the fear of having hardly any fear; after that, the fear of lacking sincerity in fearing God; and after that, the fear of hypocrisy in fearing God; and from here on to what can no longer be described by stations of fear."

- 39 It has been said: "The *Khā'* alludes to putting into practice your share of the divine commands under the supervision of the One who gives the command, until you see for yourself no further place to perform it nor seek for yourself a stake in it, neither a recompense nor a reward. Because one who gains control of his soul with joy about what he is commanded to do, is distracted from seeking a reward for it, and is set free to witness the One who gives the command." It has been said: "It alludes to purity of intention in every moment and state and at every time and breath."

The letter *Dāl*.

- 40 It has been said: "The *Dāl* alludes to the everlastingness, sempiternity and perpetual existence of God into all eternity and from all eternity because in reality there is neither pre-eternity nor sempiternity." I heard Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Rāzī say, Abū Bakr al-Khawāshī reported Abū Bakr al-Warrāq to have said: "The *Dāl* alludes to abandoning this world and turning away from it and being preoccupied with life to come and drawing near to it." Dhū l-Nūn said: "It alludes to continuous service (of God) in full conformity with the conditions of the Holy Custom, incessant gratitude for what God has enabled you to do with regard to His service, and the lasting joy that He has assigned you a station to act according to His commands and prohibitions."
- 41 It has been said: "The *Dāl* alludes to incessant gratitude toward God for the abiding blessing He granted you. So, do not let up giving thanks to Him just as you are not deprived of blessings you are given by Him again and again." It has been said: "It alludes to the prayer of those who implore God when disaster strikes." It has been said: "The *Dāl* alludes to the summons to God, His decrees and precepts. God said to His prophet: 'Call you to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good admonition' (Q 16:125)."

The Letter *Dhāl*.

- 42 It has been said: "The *Dhāl* alludes to God's remembrance of His servants in pre-eternity. He saw to it that the blessing of His

remembrance reached them so that they recollected Him. God said: 'So remember Me, and I will remember you' (Q 2:152), that is to say, 'Remember My remembrance of you in pre-eternity and give thanks to Me for it, I will remember you in moments of need and want.' A certain Sufi said: "The *Dhāl* signifies the one who is recollecting (God) as he passes away in the act of witnessing the One who is recollected. He holds his tongue preventing the recollection to be revealed and resumes the silent recollection. This means that there remains no place for anything else in him except that he is recollecting God. God's Messenger said: 'The best recollection is the silent one.'"

- 43 It has been said: "The *Dhāl* alludes to reproaching egotism, passion and this world because of their many evils and their cutting the servants from the path of access to the divine realities for, together and individually, they are a place of misfortunes." It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Dhāl* is to vanish from your qualities, pass away from the thoughts and intentions that preoccupy you, and return to God totally until there remains no share in you for egotism, nor any space in you for other people, this world, lust and passion."

The Letter *Rā'*.

- 44 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the letter *Rā'* refers to seeing divine grace as one eliminates seeing separation." It has been said: "The letter *Rā'* alludes to the constancy of the spirit in witnessing the meaning, because the spirit belongs to the meaning but it is not all the meaning." It has been said: "The letter *Rā'* alludes to God's compassion toward creation. When God harbors affection for someone through His compassion, He makes him compassionate toward His servants. Consider, when the Prophet's share in compassion increased, God referred to him, saying, 'Gentle to the believers, compassionate' (Q 9:128)."
- 45 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Rā'* signifies the desire for God on the part of the aspirants. Anyone who desires God for his own sake, increases in distance, being preoccupied with serving his own self, and hence not free to serve God. Anyone who desires God for the sake of paradise and its blessings, God grants him their possession. Anyone who desires God for the sake of God, God makes him pass away from any desire other than God and appoints him to be a landmark among His servants and God's beacon in his lands." It has been said: "The letter *Rā'* alludes to God's names, 'the Merciful'

and 'the Compassionate.' God spreads His mercy among His creation, now and in the future. He revives them with His refreshing protection and illuminates their hearts with the lights of His knowledge. In this world, they are shown traces of mercy and, in the world to come, its reality. God's Messenger said: 'God has a hundred acts of mercy; from their number He accords one mercy to His servants, by virtue of which the creatures show mercy to one another, and He keeps ninety-nine mercies in store for the Day of Resurrection.'

The Letter *Zā'*.

- 46 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Zā'* signifies the search for more in the mystical states, nearness to the One who grants more, and expectation of more step by step. For this reason al-Junayd said: 'Whoever seeks to obtain more from his own self and his capacities, is kept waiting in the desert of remoteness.'"

It has been said: "The *Zā'* alludes to renunciation. God induces you to renounce this world and the next, seeking to make you reach the One who created them." It has been said: "It signifies refraining from being adorned with capacities and actions." It has been said: "It alludes to the search for more from God by standing on the platform of doing good works, which is divesting oneself of everything in witnessing God." I heard Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Rāzī say, Abū Bakr al-Khawāshī reported Abū Bakr al-Warrāq to have said: "The *Zā'* signifies refraining from the adornment of this world and being adorned with the ornament of piety."

The Letter *Sīn*.

- 47 It has been said: "The *Sīn* signifies submission and surrender to God." I heard 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī say, Abū l-Ṭayyib al-'Akkī narrated that al-Jurayrī said: "To surrender when encountering God is to be courageous, to revel in the honor of being intimate with God is to be heedless." It has been said: "The *Sīn* alludes to God's name, 'Master' (*al-sayyid*). He is Master in reality. Whosoever extols someone else than Him or puts his hope in or has fear of someone other than Him, does not know this name. Whosoever extols Him in truth, is made by God a 'master' among His servants—they will serve him as slaves serve their master. The 'Master' is the one who leads the masters seeking the love of His sovereignty."

- 48 It has been said: "The *Sîn* signifies that the master (*al-sayyid*) is equal to God in bringing about the precepts concerning pleasant and despicable things, as well as blessings and misfortunes." It has been said: "The *Sîn* is the key to God's name, 'Giver of peace' (*al-salām*). There is no giver of peace other than Him, because He honored His friends by calling them Muslims. He made them dwell in the house of peace, honored them with the angels' greeting of peace, and saluted them without any intermediary. God said: 'Peace, such is the greeting, from a Lord All-compassionate' (Q 36:58)." I heard Manṣūr b. 'Abdallāh say, I heard Abū l-Qāsim al-Bazzāz in Egypt say that Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "The *Sîn* signifies the secret God has with the people of His friendship among the mystics by inspiring clairvoyance and familiarity with Him through alienation from everything that is other than Him." It has been said: "The *Sîn* alludes to the servant blocking himself from entering the door of transgressions."

The letter *Shīn*.

- 49 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Shīn* is the radiance of the eternal lights God casts on those whom He wishes to enlighten." It has been said: "The *Shīn* signifies bathing in light those who are endowed with knowledge." It has been said: "It means divulging the state of mind of someone who turns away from God and being pre-occupied with inappropriate things." It has been said: "It refers to truly giving thanks for seeking to receive more, obtaining the graces that were foreordained, and being in the state in which one finds oneself time after time. One knows that the person giving thanks for God's blessings performs but the duties of his soul, without in reality returning anything to the One to whom thanks are given."
- 50 It has been said: "The *Shīn* signifies the ambiguity of the mystical states in the mystical moment and the similarity of their beginnings to their ends." It has been said: "It signifies to abandon the pleasures and comforts from the moment when they are desired to the point when the desire is fulfilled, so that one may be brought back to the state of ease and comfort." It has been said: "It alludes to witnessing the evident signs of God that appear to the mystics when God manifests Himself to the elite of His friends so that they witness Him through their illuminations and secret communications in the same way as they know Him with their hearts—'like Him there is naught' (Q 42:11)." It has been said: "It alludes to the yearning of those who are longing for God."

The Letter *Ṣād*.

- 51 Ja'far b. Muḥammad said: "The *Ṣād* alludes to the servant's scrutiny of his soul, the sincerity in his intentions, deeds and states, the high degree of sincerity in putting trust in God, and his way of expressing authentic knowledge. God said: 'Men who were true to their covenant with God' (Q 33:23), none of their actions and states were lacking sincerity. Thus the servant is content because sincerity is the scale weighing the actions and states." It has been said: "The *Ṣād* refers to perseverance in misfortunes and unpleasant situations and to perseverance under the divine command and interdiction. Perseverance is the key to blessings." On this point I heard Abū l-'Abbās b. al-Khashshāb al-Baghdādī say that Ja'far al-Khuldī said: "The good of this world and the hereafter lies in persevering instantly. This is to say, when an adversity happens upon you in a work of obedience, you persevere in it at once. When your lower self challenges you to give in to a passion and a work of disobedience, you abstain from these immediately."
- 52 It has been said: "The *Ṣād* alludes to the everlastingness of God and that all good works go back to Him. Because of His impenetrable nature, God cannot accept likenesses, opponents and peers, nor accept being grasped and comprehended." It has been said: "It alludes to the firm belief in the pleasure, proximity and vision that God promised His friends." Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "The *Ṣād* alludes to the purification of the heart from falsehoods and the purification of the inmost being from turning toward others than God."

The Letter *Ḍād*.

- 53 It has been said: "The *Ḍād* alludes to the bright illuminations that God, the Object of knowledge, casts on the inmost beings of the mystics, the 'knowers'."
- Ja'far b. Muḥammad al-Khuldī said: "The *Ḍād* alludes to faithfully safeguarding the trust laid on humanity when the heavens and the earth and all that they include shirked from carrying it."

The Letter *Ṭā'*.

- 54 A certain Sufi said: "The allusion hidden in the *Ṭā'* is the purification of the inmost beings from everything other than God and the purification of the limbs from all transgressions." Abū Bakr b. Ṭāhīr

said: "It refers to the goodness of the hearts of the lovers by virtue of their Beloved." Al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "It alludes to God's unforeseen appearances suddenly coming upon the inmost beings of the elite of His friends, sweeping them clean of all kinds of other things that dwell there and making them pure before the One, the Almighty, because nobody dwells together with the Almighty and alights in His abode. Rather, God subdues everyone who enters His dwelling and alights in His abode, being at ease."

The Letter *Zā*.

- 55 Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā (al-Hāshimī) said: "The *Zā*' alludes to having good thoughts about God and bad thoughts about the lower self." A certain Sufi said: "The *Zā*' alludes to being on one's guard about harboring evil thoughts about people, because it has been said that the evil thought by one who speaks evil reveals evil thought about your own self rather than others." A certain Sufi said: "The *Zā* alludes to the thirst the ascetics endure in the high midday heat." Another Sufi said: "The *Zā*' alludes to God's name 'the Manifest'. Through Him moral lessons and spiritual benefits become manifest to the mystics' inmost beings."

The Letter *ʿAyn*.

- 56 A certain Sufi said: "The *ʿAyn* signifies the knowledge God has of the things in reality not by way of study or discovery. It alludes to God's help for a servant He loves so as to lead him to be obedient to Him." It has been said: "The *ʿAyn* alludes to the quintessence of things, which is God's special property that is brought to completion only by Him." In this sense Maṣṣūr al-Faḥr had the following verse:
 "They said, 'Take the eye, the purest of all things!' I replied to them, 'There is an excellence in the eye, but the nerves of the eye are like two lines in a thousand neatly written scrolls, and often you cannot find two fine lines in a thousand scrolls.'" Or as (Abū ʿAlī) al-Rūdhawārī, writing to to Abū ʿUmar (al-Dimashqī), composed: "You are an eye to the eye when it sees you. It strives for you just as it aspires to see."
- 57 It has been said: "The *ʿAyn* alludes to the different sciences of humanity that have subdivisions. The reality of the sciences belonging to humanity is based on the Sharīʿa. This science, when the servant has seriously ascertained it, hands down to him the knowledge of the realities. The knowledge of the divine throne has the angels as its

source. The knowledge of the tablet has the archangels as its source. The mystical knowledge has the friends of God as its source. The knowledge of the divine essence has the prophets as its source. The real knowledge of God has Muḥammad's heart as its source and no one else. This is why God said: 'Surely you are possessed of a mighty character' (Q 68:4) because you were able to bear the realities of the sciences that none other than you were able to endure. This is why God addressed Muḥammad with the words, 'Know you therefore that there is no god but God' (Q 47:19)."

- 58 It has been said: "The *ʿAyn* is the key to God's name 'the Mighty.' He is mighty in His majesty and loftiness above comparison and comprehension." It has been said: "It is the key to God's name, 'the Omniscient' because He knows the human beings that He happened to create and what they will make manifest in the passage of time and destiny." It has been said: "The *ʿAyn* alludes to the appropriate way of interacting with God and the proper perception of God interacting with humanity by becoming oblivious to perceiving one's interaction." A certain Sufi said: "The *ʿAyn* signifies living constantly by virtue of God and with God."

The Letter *Ghayn*.

- 59 A certain Sufi said: "The *Ghayn* alludes to the Unseen that is hidden from all of God's creatures, although their beginning and end are in the Unseen, so that nobody may rely on any of his circumstances and thus feel secure in them." It has been said: "The *Ghayn* alludes to the 'covering' of which the Prophet spoke when he said, 'It covers my heart.' This refers to his transition from the state of witnessing to the state of proclamation. In this state he experienced a 'covering' until he returned to the state of witnessing." Someone commented on this 'covering,' saying, "It refers to the delight the Prophet took in the permissible actions of this world such as living together with family and children and the care he had to give to their concerns."
- 60 A Sufi of Khurasan said: "The *Ghayn* alludes to the radical turning away from forbidden things, because God says: 'Say to the believers that they cast down their eyes' (Q 24:30)." A Sufi of Baghdad said: "The *Ghayn* refers to casting down the eyes before all things after one has witnessed God and obtained knowledge of Him." A certain Sufi said: "The *Ghayn* is an allusion to the highest feeling in love when the lover no longer has any sensation or awareness in the encounter with the beloved."

The Letter *Fā'*.

- 61 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Fā'* refers to one who succeeds in being free of all his wishes and follows the divine command." It has been said: "The *Fā'* alludes to entrusting oneself to God. Whoever entrusts his affairs to God, will remain unharmed by oncoming trials and the apprehension of evil." It has been said: "The *Fā'* alludes to escaping from God to God." It has been said: "It alludes to the absence of vain ideas in the pure thought about God." It has been said: "It refers to the liberation of the soul from the fetters of physical nature by turning to God, knowing that He is the real Giver and Withholder."

The Letter *Qāf*.

- 62 A certain Sufi said: "The allusion hidden in the *Qāf* is that it is the key to God's names, "the Subsisting," "the Strong," "the Restrainer" and "the Holy." God established all things with His omnipotence, set them straight with His strength, held them in His grip, and glorified Himself by stripping Himself from everything that does not pertain to Him." It has been said: "The *Qāf* alludes to performing the divine commands with proper conduct." It has been said: "It signifies that the mystics' hearts abide in the presence of God without turning from Him to anything of the world and what it includes." It has been said: "It signifies standing within the limits of knowledge and refraining from crossing its boundaries." It has been said: "It refers to the resurrection, its terrors, and the bewilderment of creation when it happens—'every man that day shall have business to suffice Him' (Q 80:37)."

The Letter *Kāf*.

- 63 It has been said: The allusion hidden in the *Kāf* is the perfection of God in His essence and in His bringing creation into being with manifest shortcomings. Only such a one, whom God has perfected by removing any blemish from him, is a perfect being among creation. This is so because God chose Moses for His own sake when He said, 'I have chosen you' (Q 7:144) for Myself, and when He took an oath by Muḥammad's life saying, 'By your life' (Q 15:72). The complete degree of perfection pertains to the Messenger because He brought

him to life with it and took an oath by his life. The manifest perfection belongs to the messengers and the incipient perfection belongs to the friends of God and the sincere mystics. Any human being who becomes perfect, becomes perfect by being raised to God's perfection and witnessing it." It has been said: "It is an allusion to existence, Be! and being. Being is God's speech, Be! is God's command, and existence is God's creation." It has been said: "It refers to God as the 'Sufficer.' Whoever is content with Him, God suffices him in the face of anxiety about this world and the next, and makes him reach the place of sufficiency."

The Letter *Lām*.

- 64 It has been said: The allusion hidden in the *Lām* is the blame the novices put on themselves in all their states, whether it is a good deed or a bad deed, because they know that they fall short with regard to their duties." It has been said: "The *Lām* alludes to the bounties of the 'Benevolent' arriving in the heart and inmost being so that one becomes sensitive about knowing them and being aware of them."

The Letter *Mīm*.

- 65 It has been said: "The allusion hidden in the *Mīm* is, 'I am king, I hold sway over the kings!' Whoever desires kingship, shall seek it from Me. Whoever seeks kingship, misses the king. Whoever seeks the king, is granted by him the kingly possessions." I heard Maṣṣūr b. 'Abdallāh say, I heard Abū l-Qāsim al-Bazzāz say that Ibn 'Aṭā' said: "The *Mīm* refers to the meanings of the commands and interdictions proclaimed by God." Ibn 'Aṭā' also said: "The *Mīm* signifies God's graces for the novices in that He grants them His attention and guides them to the designs of His sovereignty."
- 66 It has been said: "The *Mīm* alludes to the inclination of the lower self to follow its passions and to oppose people who prosper in following their passions." It has been said: "It refers to the inclination of the mystics to seek the pleasure of the Lord Most High." It has been said: "It signifies the aversion of the soul that seduces." It has been said: "It signifies wishing death to come in longing for the King, the 'Omnipotent.'"

The Letter *Nūn*.

- 67 It has been said: The allusion hidden in the *Nūn* is the light that God casts in the hearts of His friends. So they see it behind and before them, to their right and to their left, and perceive the (divine) kingdom and all it includes. This light (i.e. Muḥammad) signifies the leader of God's friends who was made a mercy for creation and, by virtue of that light, sees the invisible things, seeing them with his own eyes like one who sees them as present before him. (This light) is such as the Prophet, describing their hearts, said, 'When this light was cast in the heart, it became wide and was opened.'
- 68 It has been said: "When the light of the servant's spirit overwhelms the darkness of his body, then the heart is widened and opened on account of this. When the darkness of man's body overwhelms the light of his spirit, it darkens both the spirit and the body. The lights which God makes manifest for creation are manifold: in the head, the light of revelation, between the eyes, the light of intimate conversation with God, in the hearing, the light of certitude, on the tongue, the light of explanation, in the chest, the light of faith and in the heart, the light of mystical knowledge. When any of these lights flares up a little, it overcomes one of the other lights and enters into its domain. When it enters all the other lights it becomes light upon light—'God guides to His light whom He will' (Q 24:35), that is to say, to one of these lights."
- 69 It has been said: "The key of the *Nūn* belongs to God's name, 'the light.' It is God who illuminates the heavens and the earth with the visible lights, endows the bodies with his hidden lights, that is (their) well-being, and enlightens the hearts of the prophets and the elite of the friends of God with his special light which is mystical knowledge." It has been said: "The *Nūn* refers to God declaring Himself above being grasped and comprehended by humans and above descriptions that are inappropriate for Him. So declare Him above what He declared Himself above in reality, so that He may sanctify you with the lights of His compassion and mercy, and bring you to the utmost limit of your quest, now and in the future." It has been said: "God declared Himself to be transcendent, so that anyone drawing near Him would do so only through Him and anyone reaching the reality of giving thanks for any of God's gifts would do so only through Him, because praise is the word of the one who says it and thanksgiving is the search for more, and God grants success."

The Letter *Wāw*.

- 70 It has been said: "The *Wāw* alludes to the subtle benefits, illuminations and marvels of grace granted by the Omnipotent that reach the inmost beings." It has been said: "It refers to God's love for His friends since the dawn of creation." It has been said: "It alludes to God implanting the revelation He revealed to His servants. To it belongs the direct revelation, mouth to mouth, by which God favored the lofty envoy (*al-safir al-a'lā*) and the Beloved drawn near (i.e., Muḥammad) and the Spokesman (i.e., Moses), the revelation by means of mediators granted to the rest of the prophets, the revelation by inspiring the bee (Q 16:68), the revelation by casting and infusing it into the hearts of the disciples (i.e., of Jesus, *al-ḥawāriyyīn*), as God said, "When I inspired the disciples" (Q 5:111), and (the revelation) of what was infused into the heart of Moses' mother, when God said, 'We revealed to Moses' mother' (Q 28:7)." It has been said: "The *Wāw* alludes to respect for the Prophet, upholding of the Sharī'a, acknowledging the friendship of the friends of God and abandoning disavowing them." It has been said: "The *Wāw* signifies divine singularity and oneness and only that."

The Letter *Hā'*.

- 71 It has been said: "The *Hā'* is the symbol for the end of the allusions. Their reality is God who encompasses and comprehends all things, and there is no one who encompasses Him or comprehends His true nature. 'The eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes' (Q 6:103), 'God encompasses everything in knowledge' (Q 65:12), 'and they comprehend Him not in knowledge' (Q 20:110)." It has been said: "The *Hā'* refers to the guidance that God will guide to Him or cut off from Him whomsoever He wills." I heard Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Rāzī say, Abū Bakr al-Khawāshī reported Abū Bakr al-Warrāq to have said: "The *Hā'* signifies abandoning all passions and lusts of this world."
- 72 Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz said: "The *Hā'* alludes to the He-ness of God and the forlornness of creation in His He-ness, because this is the ultimate extent to which they can make allusions." It has been said: "The *Hā'* refers humanity (*al-akwān*) having little esteem for Your secret when they boast about the absolute Real (*ḥaqq al-ḥaqq*) in Your presence." Abū 'Uthmān (al-Ḥirī) said: "The *Hā'* signifies the souls being yoked together in the vale of tears which is the prison of the believers so

that they may reach gladness on the Day of Judgment; God said, 'We were before among our people, ever going in fear' (Q 52:26)."

The Letters *Lām-Alif*.

- 73 It has been said with regard to the *Lām-Alif*: "The *Alif* gave witness by standing up straight and the *Lām* was humbled by standing crooked in front of the *Alif* that stood alone—'like Him there is naught' (Q 42:11). Because of its strength, the *Alif* carried the weakness and deficiency of the *Lām*, and clothed it in the attribute of negation, and so it denied opponents, other lords and likenesses by saying, 'No!' (*lā*)." It has been said: "The *Alif* alludes to the divine singularity and solitariness. When the *Lām* is joined to it, it clothes it with the qualifier of negation. When another *Alif* is added to it, it becomes the particle of exception and of affirmation after negation, which is the most intense way of affirmation."
- 74 With regard to the *Lām-Alif* al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "The *Alif* alludes to the upright posture of Adam's physique. His Lord created him with an erect bearing and a beautiful composition of shape. Then He revealed to him a light in the likeness of the *Lām*. When Adam caught sight of it, he liked its company. So God said to him, 'Do you want to have her?' He replied, 'Yes, I do.' So God said, 'Here she is,' and gave him the light, and Adam embraced her. Then God revealed from it a form in the likeness of the *Lām-Alif* and assigned to it a shape that would deny that He had any opponents and peers, saying, 'There is no god but God' (Q 47:19; 37:35). The *Lām-Alif* is the shape of Adam and his embrace of the light, by which he was favored among all other creatures prior to him."
- 75 Al-Ḥusayn (Ḥallāj) said: "The allusion of all the letters is hidden in the *Lām-Alif*, the allusion of the *Lām-Alif* is hidden in the *Alif*, the allusion of the *Alif* is hidden in the dot (*nuqṭa*), and the allusion of the dot is hidden in completely passing away in the vision of God, the Enduring." It has been said: "The *Lām-Alif* refers to reproaching the lower self and having little satisfaction with it." It has been said: "The *Lām-Alif* signifies that an accuser's censure should not bother you in striving for God."

The Letter *Yā*'.

- 76 It has been said: "The *Yā*' alludes to God educating you to be close to Him, strengthening you for good conduct in His service, and

designating you to fulfill His commands." It has been said: "The *Yā*' is the letter that bequeathes you sadness in the vale of tears and joy and delight in the closeness to the 'Merciful.'" It has been said: "The *Yā*' brings you near to the Object of your desire."

Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, and blessings upon His Messenger Muḥammad and His virtuous family.

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