

THE DIFFERENT STANCES OF AL-SHAHRASTĀNĪ

– A Study of the Sectarian Identity of Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Shahrastānī in Relation to his Qurʾānic Commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* –

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Abstract

Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn Abū l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) is a scholar best known in the academic and cultural Muslim world for his work, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*. He is considered to be a Sunnī scholar, particularly in relation to the theological views and conclusions that are given in his work, *Nibāyat al-iqdām/al-aqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām*, which are parallel to Ashʿarism. However, the contents of his Qurʾānic commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābiḥ al-abrār* recently edited by Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab, have brought up questions about the general acceptance of the sectarian identity of al-Shahrastānī. What is remarkable is that al-Shahrastānī displays different stances in different works, which has led to various claims and views being made about his sectarian identity. This article, which is based on *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, aims to bring clarity to the question of which sect al-Shahrastānī was closest to, at least according to the aforementioned work.

Keywords: Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*; secrets of the Qurʾān, Ismāʿīliyya, Bāṭinī interpretation.

Introduction

Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) is well-known as a historian of religions and sects due to his work *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*. *Nibāyat al-iqdām/al-aqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām*, another highly respected work which he compiled after *al-Milal*, established al-Shahrastānī as

an expert in the field of *kalām*. Additionally, his work *Muṣāra‘at al-falāsifa* demonstrates that he has a remarkable repertoire in philosophy. Thus, one can conclude from this that al-Shahrastānī is a versatile Muslim scholar and intellectual. An aspect of this versatility is apparent in the field of Qurʾānic commentary (*tafsīr*). In other words, al-Shahrastānī is not only an exegete (*mufasssīr*), but also a historian of religions and sects, a philosopher and a theologian (*mutakallim*). However, to date, he has not been widely accepted as an exegete, as there has been no mention of his commentary in the classical literature.

In this article, al-Shahrastānī’s understanding of the Qurʾān and his method of exegesis within the framework of his work, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-abrār*, will be discussed; at the same time we will try to clarify the matter of which sect he belonged to. The reason that there is a need to discuss this matter is that there are various claims that al-Shahrastānī was an Ash‘arī Sunnī, a Bāṭinī-Ismā‘īlī or an Imāmī Shī‘ī. Before citing each of these claims, it is important that we provide information about al-Shahrastānī’s life and works.

The Life and Works of al-Shahrastānī

Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Abī Bakr Aḥmad al-Shahrastānī was born in Shahrastān, which is on the border of the Karakum Desert of Turkmenistan, in the northwest of Khurāsān. It is uncertain when al-Shahrastānī, who was also known as *Tāj al-Dīn*, *Hujjat al-Ḥaqq* and *al-Afḍal*, was born. The biographical books (*ṭabaqāt*) give a date of birth of 467/1074, 469/1076 or 479/1086; the latter has been accepted as the most accurate date.¹

There is no information about al-Shahrastānī’s family, who lived during the time of the Seljuk dynasty (1040-1157) and no significant information about his childhood or youth. Nevertheless, it can be said that he received a good education, considering the contents of his works and the environment he flourished, which was an important center for knowledge. As far as it can be understood from the biographical books, al-Shahrastānī began his education in his hometown. As a young man, after studying instrumental/auxiliary sciences, such as Arabic language and literature, mathematics and logic, he

¹ For further information, see Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī fi kitābīhi l-Milal wa-l-niḥal* (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Waṭan, n.d.), 32-41.

went to Nīshāpūr to study other sciences from scholars renowned in their fields. It was here that he participated in the lessons of teachers who had been the students of Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085). He studied *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* from Abū Naṣr ‘Abd al-Raḥīm ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 514/1120) and Abū l-Muzaffar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Khwāfī (d. 500/1106), who was a Shāfi‘ī *faqīh* and the *qāḍī* of Ṭūs, as well as being a companion of al-Imām al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). He also received instruction in *ḥadīth* from Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Madīnī (d. 494/1101), and in Qur’ānic exegesis, *kalām* and metaphysical philosophy from Abū l-Qāsim Salmān (Sulaymān?) ibn Nāṣir ibn ‘Imrān al-Anṣārī (d. 512/1118). Among these scholars, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, who was renowned as an ascetic and a Sufi, had the greatest influence on al-Shahrestānī. In his work *Nibāyat al-iqdām*, al-Shahrestānī states: “Many times we would consult our master and imām, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī.”²

We can understand that al-Shahrestānī completed his education while he was in Nīshāpūr and then traveled to Khwārazm to instruct and preach. He left for the Ḥejāz in 510/1116 to perform the pilgrimage and to pursue his scholarly studies. On his return from pilgrimage, he stopped in Baghdād and, with the help of his good friend, As‘ad ibn Muḥammad al-Mihanī (d. 527/1132), had the opportunity to teach at the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa. He also gave sermons and preached; in particular his sermons were very popular and well received. After staying in Baghdād for almost three years he probably went to Khurāsān in 514/1120. He started to serve Abū l-Qāsim Naṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Muẓaffar al-Marwazī (d. 530/1135), the vizier of the Seljuk sultan Sanjar (r. 512-548/1118-1153). During this time he was part of the close circle of Sultan Sanjar and became his confidant. Al-Shahrestānī, who stayed about ten years in Khurāsān, wrote his famous work *al-Milal* here and dedicated it to the vizier, al-Marwazī. However, in 526/1132, when Sultan Sanjar took up a stance that was in opposition to that of al-Marwazī, al-Shahrestānī replaced the dedication in the preface with a new one.³ It is likely that after the afore-

² Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrestānī, *Nibāyat al-iqdām fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (ed. Alfred Guillaume; London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 38.

³ Toby Mayer, “Translator’s Introduction,” in al-Shahrestānī, *Keys to the Arcana: Shahrestānī’s Esoteric Commentary on the Qur’an* (trans. Toby Mayer; New

mentioned vizier was dismissed in 526/1132, al-Shahrastānī, who had gone to Tirmidh, served under the Alid sydnic (*Naqīb al-asbrāf*) Abū l-Qāsim ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far al-Mūsawī (d. 550/1155), who showed interest and respect towards scholars and philosophers; al-Shahrastānī presented a copy of both of his works, *al-Muṣāra‘a* and *al-Milal* to the latter.⁴

It is unknown how long al-Shahrastānī stayed in Tirmidh or when he returned to his fatherland, but the records of his death show that he lived his last years in Shahrastān. Two different dates are given for his death, but generally 548/1153 is accepted as the correct date. Although al-Shahrastānī is well-known in the scholarly world, only two of his students, Abū Sa‘d al-Sam‘ānī (d. 562/1166) and Mujir al-Dīn al-Baghdādī (d. 592/1196), made a name for themselves. The fact that al-Shahrastānī did not train a great many students, despite being renowned for his great knowledge, can be ascribed to the years he spent traveling and working with government dignitaries.

In keeping with his wide scope of scientific knowledge and his scholarly character, al-Shahrastānī produced quite a few works in various fields. Although his works are not many in number, his works, those on the history of religion and sects, *kalām* and philosophy are particularly important. The works which have reached us today can be listed as follows:

1. *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*: This work, which is considered to be al-Shahrastānī’s masterpiece, was compiled in 521/1127-1128. According to some authors, such as Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *al-Milal* is the most valuable work in the field of Islamic heresiography.⁵ Al-Shahrastānī’s objective method of citing the opinions of Islamic sects in a descriptive way has made this work very valuable. The book, which has

York: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009), 16.

⁴ In the introduction to al-Shahrastānī’s *Muṣāra‘at al-falāsifa* the editor quotes a statement from Mullā Ṣadrā’s (d. 1050/1641) *al-Aṣfār al-arba‘a* that *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* was written for *Naqīb al-asbrāf* Abū l-Qāsim Majd al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far al-Mūsawī. See Suhayr Muḥammad Mukhtār, “Muqaddima [Editor’s Introduction],” in al-Shahrastānī, *Muṣāra‘at al-falāsifa* (Cairo: n.p., 1976), 26.

⁵ Abū Naṣr Tāj al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ibn ‘Alī al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā* (eds. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw & Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī; Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964-1976), VI, 128.

been printed and translated into many languages, was translated into French at the encouragement of Ibrahim Madkour. The first volume was translated by Daniel Gimaret and Guy Monnot, with the second volume being translated by Jean Jolivet, again with Guy Monnot, under the title *Livre des religions et des sectes* (Paris & Leuven, 1986, 1993).

2. *Nibāyat al-iqdām/al-aqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām*: After *al-Milal*, al-Shahrastānī wrote this work on *kalām*. This work, which includes twenty fundamental subjects is based on the Ashʿarī creed, but criticizes it in some places as well as those of the Muʿtazila and some Shīʿī groups. The work was edited by Alfred Guillaume, with indexes (Oxford & London, 1934).

3. *Muṣāraʿat al-falāsifa*: This work was written in Tirmidh after *al-Milal* and dedicated to Naqīb al-ashrāf Abū l-Qāsim Majd al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Jaʿfar al-Mūsawī. The book, also known as *al-Muṣāraʿa*, is a refutation of Ibn Sīnā's (d. 428/1037) views on metaphysical subjects. This work was subsequently refuted in a treatise entitled *Muṣāriʿ al-muṣāriʿ*, written by the Imāmī Shīʿī philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭuṣī (d. 672/1274), and edited by Suhayr Muḥammad Mukhtār (Cairo, 1976).

4. *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-abrār*: This book, which constitutes the main subject and source for this article, is al-Shahrastānī's Qurʾānic commentary. An introduction to Qurʾānic sciences is followed by the exegesis of the first two *sūras* of the Qurʾān (*al-Fātiḥa* and *al-Baqara*); each verse is mostly interpreted in a classical Sunnī style and then esoteric interpretations are given under the sub-heading *Asrār* (secrets). This book, which is thought to have been written in 538-540/1143-1145, has been edited and published by Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab in two volumes (Tehran, 2008), from the only known manuscript copy of 433 folios, which is housed at the Library of Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Millī in Tehran.⁶ In addition, the introduction to the book, entitled *Mafātīḥ al-furqān*, and the interpretation of

⁶ Ādharshab points out that the handwritten copy consists of 864 folios (see Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab, "Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ/Editor's Introduction," in al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-abrār* (Tehran: Mirāth-i Maktūb, 2008), I, 60. However, the copy itself and the library documents state that the number 864 does not correspond to the number of folios, but to the number of pages.

Sūrat al-Fātiḥa have been translated into English by Toby Mayer under the title *Keys to the Arcana: Shabrastānī's Esoteric Commentary on the Qur'an*. This book, which includes the original Arabic text, was published in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London (Oxford & London, 2009).

5. *Risāla fī mawḍū' ʿilm wājib al-wujūd (Risāla ilā Muḥammad al-Īlāqī)*: This work, which was addressed to the physician and philosopher Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Īlāqī (d. 536/1141) – a contemporary of the author – was published as a facsimile in Muḥammad Riḍā Jalālī Nāʿinī's *Dū Maktūb*.

6. *Masʿala (Baḥṭh) fī itbbāt jawhar al-fard*: This work, which is concerned with the smallest indivisible particle of matter (*al-juzʿ al-ladbī lā yatajazzaʿ*), was published as an appendix to *Nibāyat al-iqdām* by Alfred Guillaume (Oxford & London, 1934).

7. *Majlis-i maktūb-i Shabrastānī-i munʿaqid dar Khwārazm*: This work in Persian was included at the end of *Sharḥ-i ḥāl wa-āthār-i Ḥujjat al-Ḥaqq Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Shabrastānī* by Nāʿinī (Tehran, 1946). It was translated into French by Diane Steigerwald under the title *Majlis: Discours sur l'ordre et la création* and published along with the original (Quebec: Saint-Nicolas, 1998). Steigerwald also wrote an article contending that in this book al-Shahrastānī uses the concept of “divine word” in accordance with Ismāʿilī terminology.⁷

8. *Qiṣṣat sayyidinā Yūsuf ʿalayhi l-salām (Sharḥ/Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf)*: This work is an interpretation of *Sūrat Yūsuf* in the *Qurʾān*. According to the information given by Ādharshab, a manuscript copy of the work can be found at al-Azhar Library.⁸ According to Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), al-Shahrastānī wrote this commentary according to the Bāṭinī-Ismāʿilī perception (*alā madbḥab al-Ismāʿiliyyā*).⁹

Other works by al-Shahrastānī are listed in various sources, but it is not known whether these still exist today. Some of these can be listed as follows: (1) *al-Manābhij wa-l-āyāt (al-Manābhij wa-l-bayān)*,

⁷ Diane Steigerwald, “The Divine Word (*Kalimā*) in Shahrastānī's *Majlis*,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* XXV/3 (1996), 335-352.

⁸ Ādharshab, “Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ,” I, 23.

⁹ Abū l-ʿAbbās Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, *Darʿ taʿarūḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql* (ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim; 2nd ed., Riyāḍ: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Suʿūd al-Islāmiyya, 1991), V, 173.

(2) *Risāla ilā Muḥammad al-Sablānī*, (3) *Risāla ilā l-Qāḍī ‘Umar ibn Sablān fī l-radd ‘alā Ibn Sīnā* (‘Umar ibn Sahlān al-Sāwī wrote a treatise on this book entitled *Jawāb ‘alā l-Shahrastānī*), (4) *Talkhīṣ al-aqsām li-madbāhib al-anām*, (5) *al-‘Uyūn wa-l-anbār*, (6) *al-Irshād ilā ‘aqā’id al-‘ibād*, (7) *Risāla fī l-mabda’ wa-l-ma‘ād*, (8) *Daqā’iq al-awbām*, (9) *Qiṣṣat Mūsā wa-l-Khaḍr*, (10) *Tārīkh al-ḥukamā’*.¹⁰

al-Shahrastānī’s Sectarian Identity

It is generally accepted that al-Shahrastānī was a Shāfi‘ī in *fiqh* and an Ash‘arī in *kalām*. Many writers, such as Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 749/1349), Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), Abū l-Fidā’ (d. 732/1331) and Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349) mention al-Shahrastānī as an Ash‘arī;¹¹ it is also possible to come to the same conclusion through many statements found in works like *al-Milal* and *Nihāyat al-iqdām*.

Moreover, when some of the views and evaluations that are included in *al-Milal* under the titles *Ṣifātiyya*, *Ash‘ariyya* and *Mushabbiba* are taken into account, we can come to the conclusion that al-

¹⁰ For information about al-Shahrastānī’s life and personality see Abū l-Ḥasan Ḥaḥīr al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Zayd al-Bayhaqī, *Tatimmat Ṣiwān al-ḥikma (Tārīkh ḥukamā’ al-Islām)* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1994), 119-120; Abū Sa‘d ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sam‘ānī, *al-Taḥbīr fī l-mu‘jam al-kabīr* (ed. Munīra Nāji Sālim; Baghdād: Maṭba‘at al-Irshād, 1975), II, 160-161; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-buldān* (ed. Farīd ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jundī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1990), III, 427-428; Abū l-‘Abbās Shams al-Dīn Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a‘yān wa-anbā’ abnā’ al-zamān* (ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968-1972), IV, 273-275; Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt* (ed. Sven Dederling; 2nd ed., Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), III, 278-279; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, VI, 128-130; Abū l-Faḍl Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya* (ed. Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Khān; Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1987), I, 323-324; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Ṣiyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* (eds. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt et al.; 3rd ed., Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1985), XX, 286-288; ‘Atīf al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh ibn As‘ad ibn ‘Alī al-Yāfi‘ī, *Mir‘āt al-jinān wa-‘ibrat al-yaqẓān fī ma‘rifat mā yu‘tabar min ḥawādīth al-zamān* (annotated by Khalīl al-Manṣūr; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), III, 221-222; Abū l-Faḍl Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Lisān al-mizān* (Hyderabad: Maṭba‘at Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Nizāmiyya, 1329), V, 263-264; Ādharshab, “Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ,” I, 15-64; Mayer, “Translator’s Introduction,” 3-25; al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī*, 32-86.

¹¹ See al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī*, 54.

Shahrastānī perceives the *Şifātiyya (Abl al-ḥadīth)*, which according to the author was transformed into a Sunnī sect, Ash‘ariyya, by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, as the soundest belief system.¹² Even though there can be no dispute about al-Shahrastānī’s *fiqh* sect, many divergent views about his theological inclinations have been put forth. Some of these claims were made while al-Shahrastānī was alive; as far as can be discerned from the sources, the claims are as follows:

1. *Al-Shahrastānī has heretical tendencies.* This claim was made by Abū Sa‘d al-Sam‘ānī, known for his work, *al-Ansāb*, and Abū Muḥammad ibn Arslān al-Khwārazmī (d. 568/1172). However, it should be emphasized that al-Sam‘ānī only referred to claims of heresy about his teacher,¹³ whereas al-Khwārazmī made an open accusation. Al-Khwārazmī makes the following claims:

If al-Shahrastānī had not stumbled in the matter of creed and had not been inclined towards heresy, he could have been a leading figure (*imām*). Although he is a virtuous person and has an impeccable intellectual capability, his inclination towards unfounded ideas and views that have no rational or scriptural proof astonishes us. We seek refuge in Allah from divine abandonment (*kbidhlān*), and from being deprived of the light of faith (*īmān*). Al-Shahrastānī finds himself in this predicament because he turned his face away from the light of the *sharī‘a* and delved into the darkness of philosophy. We have had conversations and discussions with al-Shahrastānī. Yet, he has always taken sides with the ideas and views of philosophers and supports these. I have been to his sermons several times and I have never heard him say “Allah said” or “the Prophet said”, neither have I heard him provide an answer to legal (*fiqhī*) matters. Only Allah knows his true standing.¹⁴

Additionally, Ḥazīr al-Dīn al-Bayhaqī made the following statements in *Tatimmat Şiwān al-ḥikma*:

¹² See al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* (eds. Amīr ‘Alī Mahnā & ‘Alī Ḥasan Fā‘ūr; 3rd ed., Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, 1993), I, 106. According to al-Shahrastānī, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), Dāwūd al-Ḥāhirī (d. 270/884) and some other Salafī scholars followed the path of previous scholars of *Abl al-ḥadīth* like Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), and then had attained the path of safety. See al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, I, 118-119.

¹³ Al-Sam‘ānī, *al-Taḥbīr*; II, 161.

¹⁴ Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, III, 377.

Al-Shahrastānī has written a *tafsīr* but interpreted the verses sometimes according to the rules of *sbarī'a*, sometimes according to the rules of philosophy or other facts. Therefore, I said, "This type of interpretation is a deviation. An interpretation can only be made in the light of the narrations of the companions of the Prophet and the *tābi'ūn* (the second generation). There is no place for philosophy in the exegesis (*tafsīr*) and interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the Qur'ān. Moreover, there is no one who has brought together religion and philosophy (*sbarī'a* and *ḥikma*) better than al-Imām al-Ghazālī," however, al-Shahrastānī was incensed by this.¹⁵

2. *Al-Shahrastānī is a person who is inclined to Bāṭiniyya-(Nizārī) Ismā'īliyya*; he promotes this sect and consequently is at an extreme point in Shī'ism. This accusation is narrated by Abū Sa'd al-Sam'ānī.¹⁶ Although Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī said: "I do not know where al-Sam'ānī got this information from," and stated that "the ideas expressed in al-Shahrastānī's works entirely refute this accusation,"¹⁷ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, who spent thirty years of his life within the *Nizārī Ismā'īlī* movement and then adopted the Imāmī Shī'ī creed, mentions al-Shahrastānī, in one of his pamphlets, as *dā'ī l-du'āt*, which is an important status in the Bāṭinī-Ismā'īlī hierarchy.¹⁸

The general claim and accusation, based on a number of al-Shahrastānī's views and interpretations expressed in some of his

¹⁵ Al-Bayhaqī, *Tatimma*, 120.

¹⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, XX, 287.

¹⁷ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, VI, 130.

¹⁸ See Abū Ja'far Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī, *Majmū'at rasā'il* (Tehran: MS Library of Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Millī, no. 9480), fol. 3^a. Also see Mayer, "Translator's Introduction", 15; id., "Shahrastānī on the Arcana of the Qur'an: A Preliminary Evaluation", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* VII/2 (2005), 65. In the Ismā'īlī mission hierarchy, the *imām* chooses the most apt and knowledgeable among the *dā'īs*, and this *dā'ī* is known as *dā'ī l-du'āt*. Inspection of the mission in all regions is given to the head *dā'ī*. Furthermore, the head *dā'ī* is like a bridge that enables communication between the *imām* and the *dā'īs*. He also organizes meetings of philosophy (*ḥikma*) based on esoteric interpretation. This highest-ranking *dā'ī*, who is also known as the *dā'ī-yi akbar* and *bāb*, is responsible to the *ḥujja*, who represents a higher level. See Mustafa Öztürk, *Kur'an ve Aşırı Yorum: Tefsirde Bâtınlık ve Bâtini Te'vil Geleneği [The Qur'an and Overinterpretation: Esotericism in the Qur'anic Commentaries and Tradition of Esoteric Interpretation]* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2003), 98-99.

works, that al-Shahrastānī was a Shīʿī, or the more particular claim that he was a Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī, have been discussed by Muḥammad Riḍā Jalālī Nāʿinī and many other contemporary researchers, such as Muḥammad Taqī Dānish-pazhūh, Wilferd Madelung, Jean Jolivet and Guy Monnot. In this context, the impartial style of al-Shahrastānī (particularly in *al-Milal*), the fact that *Nibāyat al-iqdām* ends with a prayer from al-Imām Zayn al-ʿābidīn (d. 94/713), who is fourth in the Ithnā ʿAsharī Shīʿī chain,¹⁹ the deep reverence shown for *Ahl al-bayt* and the imāms, as well as his occasional usage of sympathetic statements towards the Shīʿa have generally been interpreted as an inclination to Shīʿism.²⁰ In addition, interpretations of an esoteric nature in his commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*; the use of concepts such as *mazḥbar*, *maṣḍar*, *taḍādd*, *tarattub*, which are quite common in the works of Ismāʿīlī philosophers, and in particular his esoteric interpretations of many Qurʾānic terms, such as *ḥajj*, *ʿumra*, *bayt al-ḥarām*, with reference to *Ahl al-bayt* and the imāms, have been cited as indications of his inclination towards Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī thought. Furthermore, al-Shahrastānī's usage of some concepts, such as *kalima*, in line with Ismāʿīlī terminology has led to him being considered an Ismāʿīlī.²¹

3. *Al-Shabrastānī is one of the severest opponents of the Imāmī Shīʿism.* This view belongs to the Imāmī Shīʿī writer Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325). However, this view is a direct juxtaposition of what Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) writes in *Minḥāj al-sunna*, a refutation of al-Ḥillī's *Minḥāj al-karāma*:

The truth is not as al-Ḥillī states. In fact, al-Shahrastānī is inclined to the views of Imāmī Shīʿism in many subjects. He has even sometimes restated the views of the Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī branch of the Shīʿa. For this

¹⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Nibāyat al-iqdām*, 504.

²⁰ See Steigerwald, "The Divine Word (*Kalima*)," 337-339. In addition, see Wilferd Madelung, "Aspects of Ismāʿīlī Theology: The Prophetic Chain and God Beyond Being," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.), *Ismāʿīlī Contributions to Islamic Culture* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 59-60; id., "Shiism: Ismāʿīliyah," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; London & New York: Macmillan, 1987), XIII, 255.

²¹ Steigerwald, "The Divine Word (*Kalima*)," 351-352. Also see al-Suḥaybānī, *Manḥāj al-Shabrastānī*, 157-179. Toby Mayer, who describes al-Shahrastānī's system of thought as eclectic, believes that the dominant element is Ismāʿīlī belief. See Mayer, "Shahrastānī on the Arcana of the Qurʾan," 75-76.

reason some people have claimed that he belongs to the Ismāʿīliyya – although in reality he does not – and the same people use his views and conduct to produce evidence to support this claim. It is said that al-Shahrastānī is Shīʿī in one way and Ashʿarī in another, which is quite a common situation among those who specialize in *kalām* and the preachers. Hence, these groups use the supplications narrated from *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-sajjādiyya* of ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿābidīn. However, most of these are prayers that have been fabricated and attributed to ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn. In short, al-Shahrastānī has adopted an attitude that is inclined towards Shīʿism either sincerely or to appease them. Thus, he wrote *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* for someone who was one of the forerunners of Shīʿism and had influence in the government (here the author is referring to Naqīb al-ashrāf Abū l-Qāsim Majd al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Jaʿfar al-Mūsawī); al-Shahrastānī wrote this so that he would be included in the close circle of the aforementioned individual. Moreover, al-Shahrastānī wrote *al-Muṣāraʿa*, which was written to criticize Ibn Sīnā's views, because of his inclination towards Shīʿism and philosophy. Even if the person (ʿAlī ibn Jaʿfar al-Mūsawī) to whom these books were dedicated is not an Ismāʿīlī, he is at least a Shīʿī. Thus, al-Shahrastānī openly discloses his Shīʿism in this work.²²

4. The claims and accusations that al-Shahrastānī's creed is faulty and/or that he is a Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī appear in two books, *al-Tabḥīr* by al-Samʿānī and *Tārīkh* by al-Khwārazmī whose entry on al-Shahrastānī was narrated in *Muʿjam al-buldān* by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. In an environment where there was substantial rivalry, accusations were made to weaken the rival; in particular during the Seljuqī period, the way to denigrate someone was to claim that he was an Ismāʿīlī. Accusations of atheism in Baghdād or being an Ismāʿīlī in Marw or Nīshāpūr were two important tools for such incriminations. Both al-Khwārazmī and al-Samʿānī may have reflected this attitude in their writings. However, there may be some justification for those who accused al-Shahrastānī of such a stance, as his keenness for philosophy was seen by some as being far removed from the light of *sharīʿa*, and falling into the darkness of philosophy. Thus, what al-

²² Ibn Taymiyya, *Minbāj al-sunna al-nabawīyya* (ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim; Riyāḍ: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Suʿūd al-Islāmiyya, 1986), VI, 305-306.

Khwārazmī is criticizing is al-Shahrastānī's defense of philosophical ideas.²³

5. According to Daniel Gimaret, al-Shahrastānī did not perceive the two sources of knowledge, that is, divine revelation and philosophy, as being alternatives to one another. It is true that he was interested in philosophy and believed in freethinking, but this approach does not necessarily make him an Ismā'īlī. On the other hand, the way al-Shahrastānī demonstrates different stances in different subjects is something that is quite common amongst Muslim philosophers. A similar situation can be seen in al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). In truth, al-Shahrastānī was a distinctive Ash'arī *mutakalim*, as well as a Shī'ī, a philosopher and a Sufī. As far as being an Ismā'īlī is concerned, al-Shahrastānī might have been close to the Ismā'īlī circles at one point, but this does not change the fact that he was a Sunnī.²⁴

In this context, Muḥammad 'Alī Ādharshab's evaluations on this subject may be useful. According to Ādharshab, al-Shahrastānī was actually a Sunnī, but because of his vast knowledge, as displayed in *al-Milal*, he always approached each sect as a scholar, searching for the truth. In addition, al-Shahrastānī understood that Islam had become flesh and blood in the person of 'Alī and *Abl al-bayt*, and perceived that *Abl al-bayt* were the inheritors of the prophetic knowledge in creedal and legal issues. Essentially, it is not difficult for a Muslim from Ahl al-sunna to reach such a conclusion based on the authenticated sources. Al-Shahrastānī started to search for information on *Abl al-bayt* from various sources and openly stated that he had consulted Imāmī Shī'ī sources, such as al-Kulaynī's (d. 329/941) *al-Kāfī* and the Qur'ānic commentary of al-'Ayyāshī (d. 320/932?). It is also possible that he consulted Ismā'īlī sources and took information that he thought referred to *Abl al-bayt* from these sources. It is highly likely that Ismā'īlī sources played an important role in forming the views and comments that were conveyed in his Qur'ānic com-

²³ Ömer Faruk Harman, "Şehristânî [al-Shahrastānî]," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA) [Turkish Religious Foundation Encyclopedia of Islam]* (Istanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2010), XXXVIII, 467.

²⁴ Daniel Gimaret, "Introduction," in al-Shahrastānī, *Livre des religions et des sectes* (trans. Daniel Gimaret & G. Monnot; Paris & Leuven: UNESCO & Peeters, 1986), I, 9-10, 59-63, (quoted in Harman, "Şehristânî", XXXVIII, 467).

mentary, including the idea of the existence of secret knowledge that belonged to *Ahl al-bayt*.²⁵

6. *Al-Shahrastānī was a person who fully embraced the Sunnī Ash‘arī creed.* Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, who is of this opinion, finds the accusation made by al-Sam‘ānī to be strange; he indicates that the works of al-Shahrastānī refute these claims.²⁶ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) states that there is nothing in al-Shahrastānī’s books that can be used to raise doubts about his thought in terms of sound Islamic creed.²⁷ Similarly, Muḥammad Ṭanjī states:

Despite all the claims against him, al-Shahrastānī is in no doubt a full Sunnī in his creed and he follows Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī. He talks about al-Ash‘arī as his master (*ustādh*) on various occasions [in his work *Nibāyat al-iqdām*]. In controversial matters between Shī‘īs and Sunnīs, such as the matter of caliphate, the rank of the four caliphs both in succession and preference, the cursing of the companions by the Shī‘īs, their damnation, and even accusing them of blasphemy, al-Shahrastānī is in complete agreement with the views of Ahl al-sunna, and strongly refutes Shī‘ī arguments. His theological views are all in conformity with the views of Ahl al-sunna.²⁸

As can be seen, there are many various views and claims about al-Shahrastānī’s sectarian identity. No doubt, all these claims and views require further investigation if we are to understand which one is true, or indeed, closer to the truth. We hope that the following section of this work, which is concerned with *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, its analysis and critique, will shed light on al-Shahrastānī’s sectarian identity, allowing us to come to sound conclusions.

Does *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* Belong to al-Shahrastānī?

Before proceeding onto a content analysis of the commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, about which we have briefly mentioned some characteristics, it is necessary to elaborate on the matter of the attribution

²⁵ Ādharshab, “Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ,” I, 33-34.

²⁶ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, VI, 130.

²⁷ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Lisān al-mizān*, V, 462.

²⁸ Muḥammad Ṭanjī, “Şehristānī [al-Shahrastānī],” *İslām Ansiklopedisi (İA) [Encyclopedia of Islam]* (Istanbul: MEB Yayınları, 1993), XI, 396; Ādharshab, “Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ,” I, 33.

of this work to al-Shahrastānī. Some statements in the author's introduction, particularly those that support the claims of alterations being made to the Qurʾān and the esoteric interpretations that are found under the title of *Asrār*, raise questions about whether this work belongs to al-Shahrastānī. In addition, the fact that there is no mention of a Qurʾānic commentary known as *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* being written by al-Shahrastānī in the *ṭabaqāt* or the history of *tafsīr* literature increases this suspicion. However, some researchers who have studied al-Shahrastānī's books believe that *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is his work.

According to Ādharshab's evaluation and assessment, there is no mention of this commentary in the older sources that provide information about al-Shahrastānī's life and works, but his contemporary Zahir al-Din al-Bayhaqī mentions that al-Shahrastānī wrote a *tafsīr*. In biographical books, al-Shahrastānī's only book in the area of *tafsīr* that is mentioned is *Tafsīr/Sharḥ sūrat Yūsuf*. The reason that *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is not mentioned in the related sources is most probably because al-Shahrastānī wrote this piece in the latter part of his life, when he went into seclusion in his hometown. For this reason, writers such as al-Bayhaqī, al-Khwārazmī and al-Samʿānī, who lived during the same period, did not hear about this work, and consequently this work was not mentioned by any other writer who narrated information about al-Shahrastānī from the works of these three.²⁹

According to another finding of Ādharshab, the first book that mentions al-Shahrastānī's *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is *Bihār al-anwār*, the work of an Imāmī Shīʿī author, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1698[?]). In the volume that is concerned with the issue of *imāma*, which includes some verses that are believed to have been revealed about and/or indicating the imāms, he quotes a remark of al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/735) to the effect that *abl al-dbikr*, which are mentioned in Q 16:43 and Q 21:7, are the imāms of *Abl al-bayt*, referring to al-Shahrastānī's commentary with the expression "*rawā l-Shahrastānī fī tafsīrihī l-musammā bi-Mafātīḥ al-asrār*."³⁰ Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī (d. 1940), in his work *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*, quotes al-Shahrastānī's work on subjects such as *al-aḥruf al-*

²⁹ Ādharshab, "Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ," I, 33.

³⁰ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* (2nd ed., Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Wafāʾ, 1983), XXIII, 172.

sabʿa (the seven modes), the claim that the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* occupy a distinguished position in understanding the Qurʾān, and the order of the *sūras* in several copies of the Qurʾān that belonged to certain companions of the Prophet.³¹ According to our findings, while explaining Q 33:34 in his commentary, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) refers to al-Shahrastānī's interpretation of Q 2:129, when discussing the concept of wisdom (*ḥikma*) that corresponds to the Prophetic traditions (*sunna*), using the expression *ḥakābu Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī fī awāʾil tafsīrihī Mafātīḥ al-asrār*.³²

According to Ādharshab, who has no doubt that *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* belongs to al-Shahrastānī, this work is in harmony with al-Shahrastānī's other works in terms of style and content. Furthermore, the words and concepts, syntax, styles of expression and conclusions make it clear that the style used in this work is that of al-Shahrastānī.³³ After comparing several works, such as *al-Milal* and *Nibāyat al-iqdām*, and discovering a resemblance in expression and style, al-Suḥaybānī indicates that *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* was written by al-Shahrastānī and he gives examples from the latter and from *al-Milal* in support of this statement.³⁴

In addition to the above, another indicator that confirms the thesis that *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* was written by al-Shahrastānī is the references made by the author to other of his works in the interpretation of some of the verses. For example, in the interpretation of Q 2:36, he refers to *al-Tāriḫ* (he is probably referring to *Tāriḫ al-ḥukamāʾ*) and *al-ʿUyūn wa-l-anbār* for a more detailed explanation about the misdeed that caused the expulsion of Adam from Paradise and the wisdom behind Satan's fall from grace. After providing information about Ṣābiʾis in the interpretation of Q 2:62, he says: "This is the conviction of the Ṣābiʾis, but the explanation of this belief is lengthy. For

³¹ Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī, *Tāriḫ al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī li l-Maṭbūʿāt, 1969), 45, 54, 75, 85.

³² Abū l-Thanaʾ Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm wa-l-sabʿ al-maṭbānī* (ed. ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Bārī ʿAṭīyya; 2nd ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005), XI, 200.

³³ Ādharshab, "Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ," I, 35-36.

³⁴ Al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī*, 139-154.

further information on the subject, see *al-Milal*.³⁵ However, despite all this evidence that supports the supposition that the work belongs to al-Shahrastānī, it would be better not to arrive at a final conclusion, but to leave some room for doubt. This doubt must exist as this work was quoted for the first time by Imāmī Shī‘ī Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī; that is, no scholar quoted this work that was supposedly by al-Shahrastānī until five hundred years after his death. Nevertheless, the information, opinions and evaluations that appear below are based on the premise that this work was written by al-Shahrastānī and the conclusions will be drawn accordingly.

Introduction of the Commentary

As pointed out in the section concerned with al-Shahrastānī’s work, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* consists of a short foreword and an introduction entitled *Mafātīḥ al-furqān* (Keys to the Criterion) followed by the commentary on the first two chapters of the Qur’ān. As can be understood from the expressions in the foreword, al-Shahrastānī perceives the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* as being absolute authorities on the Qur’ān and its interpretation. He describes the imāms in a way that is similar to the narrations of al-Kulaynī in *al-Ḥujja* section of his work *al-Kāfī*, and says: “They are the inheritors of the Qur’ān”, “they are one of the two great trusts (*thaqalayn*)”, and “they have the knowledge of both worlds and both existences”. According to al-Shahrastānī, in the same way that the angels oversaw every aspect of the revelation (*tanzīl*) of the Qur’ān, the imāms, who are the true leaders of guidance, protect every aspect of its exegesis and interpretation. The protection of the revelation of *dhikr*/the Qur’ān, which is stated in Q 15:9 as: “Lo! We, even We, reveal the Reminder, and lo! We verily are its Guardian,” is administered by guardian angels. The protection of the *dhikr* itself is administered by scholars (imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*) who are aware of the revelation; this is done not through predictions or presumptions, but with absolute knowledge about the revelation and interpretation, *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*, *nāsikh* and *mansūkh*, *‘amm* and *khāṣṣ*, *mujmal* and *mufaṣṣal*, *muṭlaq* and *muqayyad*, *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, orders and prohibitions, *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, and *ḥudūd* and *ahkām*.

³⁵ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 291, 390.

Thus, according to al-Shahrastānī, the companions were in consensus that the knowledge of the Qurʾān belonged to *Ahl al-bayt*. A narration states that the companions came to ʿAlī and asked: “As a member of the household of the Prophet did you receive special knowledge other than the Qurʾān?” The statement, “other than the Qurʾān” shows that the companions were in agreement that the information about the revelation and interpretation of the Qurʾān belonged to *Ahl al-bayt*. In addition, even Ibn ʿAbbās was trained at ʿAlī’s side; the former was accepted as an authority by all scholars of Qurʾānic interpretation, and the Prophet recited the following prayer for him: “O Allah, give him depth and insight in religion and teach him *taʾwīl* (interpretation).”³⁶

Al-Shahrastānī explains how he was trained in the area of commentary as follows:

In my youth I just listened to my teachers about the Qurʾānic commentary; in time I gained an understanding in this area and took notes about what I had learnt on the matter of commentary from my teacher Nāṣir al-Sunna Abū l-Qāsim Salmān ibn Nāṣir al-Anṣārī (may Allah be pleased with him). Later, my teacher allowed me to acquire the hidden knowledge and the sound fundamentals of the Qurʾān which came to us from *Ahl al-bayt* and their close friends.³⁷ [On the other hand] someone [a Divine Being?] called to me from the direction of a blessed tree on the right side of the valley of that blessed place and said, “O ye who believe! Be careful of your duty to Allah, and be with the truthful!” [Q 9:119]. Thereupon, just like the narration about Prophet Moses and his young friend who traveled a long distance and found the person they were looking for, which is related in the Qurʾān as: “So they found one of Our slaves, on whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves, and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence” [Q 18:65], I also set off in accordance with the way of those who fall in love, looking for the faithful servants. At last I found one of the virtuous servants of Allah. From this faithful

³⁶ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 4-5.

³⁷ The sentence that starts with “later my teacher”, has been translated here in accordance with the grammatical discretion of both Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab, the editor of *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, and Toby Mayer, who translated some sections (the introduction and the commentary of *al-Fātīḥa*) into English. However, this sentence has been mistranslated. In the following section the reason and motives behind this mistranslation and other errors in the translation will be explained.

servant I learnt the ways of explanation about the matters of creation and command (*kbalq-amr*), the degrees of contrariety and hierarchy (*taḍādd-tarattub*), the two-dimensional matter of generality and particularity (*‘umūm-kbuṣūṣ*) and the two principles of the accomplished and inchoative (*mafrūgh-musta’naf*). In this way, I was nourished and sated from one source, unlike those who are confused and immured in ignorance due to feeding from various sources. I drank my fill from the fountain of submission, in which there is a combination of *tatbnīm*; at last I was proficient in the language of the Qur’ān, its composition and order, eloquence, fluency, articulateness and wonders.³⁸

Based on these statements, some researchers have claimed that al-Shahrastānī’s inclination to Shī‘ism (*tasbayyū’*) possibly comes from Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī’s interest in *kalām* and philosophy.³⁹ Toby Mayer, who worked on *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, also claims that al-Shahrastānī’s original contact with the Bāṭinī-Ismā‘īlī heritage was possibly made through this person.⁴⁰ According to this claim, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī is a secret Ismā‘īlī; however, as recorded by Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, al-Anṣārī, who is renowned for his Sufi identity, was one of the prominent figures of Ash‘ariyya.⁴¹ According to the findings of Ayman Shihadeh, which we find to be very accurate, Toby Mayer’s conclusion about Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī and al-Shahrastānī – that al-Shahrastānī honed his views and interpretive methods of *Ahl al-bayt* imāms with the Qur’ānic secrets that he learned from his teacher Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, that the latter was actually a secret Ismā‘īlī master, and that al-Shahrastānī made his first acquaintance with Ismā‘īlī thought through this master – are all based on the incorrect structuring and misinterpretation of a statement in the Arabic text in the passage quoted above.

Toby Mayer, who has translated the introduction of *Mafātīḥ* and the commentary of *al-Fātiḥa* into English, and Muḥammad ‘Alī Ādharshab, the editor of *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, identified Abū l-Qāsim as the subject of the verb in the statement *thumma aṭla’anī muṭāla‘āt kalimāt sharīfa ‘an Ahl al-bayt wa-awliyā’ibim ‘alā asrār dafīna wa-*

³⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 5.

³⁹ Al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī*, 66.

⁴⁰ Mayer, “Translator’s Introduction,” 6.

⁴¹ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, VII, 96-99.

uṣūl matīna fī ʿilm al-Qurʾān. Furthermore, a *min* was placed in a bracket before the word *muṭālaʿāt*. However, in Arabic, the subject of the verb *aṭlaʿa*, which is used with the preposition *ʿalā*, is not Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, but the phrase *muṭālaʿāt kalimātⁱⁿ*. Thus, the aforementioned statement means: “Afterwards, my studies on the precious statements and views that were narrated from *Ahl al-bayt* and their friends have revealed to me the secrets and the sound basics of the Qurʾān.” That Ādharshab and Mayer did not consider *muṭālaʿāt* to be the subject of the verb *aṭlaʿa* is possibly because of the incompatibility between the verb and the subject in terms of masculinity and femininity. However, using a masculine verb followed by a feminine subject was common in the Arabic texts of the Middle Ages.⁴² In fact, three points are emphasized in the passage above: (1) in his youth, al-Shahrestānī listened to the commentary of the Qurʾān from his teachers and in particular recorded the commentaries of his teacher, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, (2) al-Shahrestānī came to understand the secrets of the Qurʾān through the study of the statements and views of *Ahl al-bayt* and their friends, and (3) someone (a Divine Being?) called upon al-Shahrestānī to be with the faithful servants. Upon this call he went searching, finally finding that faithful servant.⁴³

According to Ayman Shihadeh, this mysterious faithful servant is either a contemporary of al-Shahrestānī or is symbolic, indicating a deep source of mystical knowledge.⁴⁴ However, according to Toby Mayer, this anonymous/nameless figure is someone other than Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, a person who introduced al-Shahrestānī to the heritage of Ismāʿīlī thought – probably a disciple of al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) or even the man himself.⁴⁵ Toby Mayer’s views seem to be an assumption; nevertheless, we can easily state that al-Shahrestānī attained philosophical wisdom through a mysterious spiritual mentor, a private source of knowledge or through his ex-

⁴² To this argument of Ayman Shihadeh we could add the fact that the word *muṭālaʿāt* is *ghayr ʿāqil* (non-human) and there is a rule that allows the usage of a masculine verb when there is a first person pronoun (*yāʾ*?) between such a subject and verb.

⁴³ Ayman Shihadeh, review of *Keys to the Arcana: Shahrestānī’s Esoteric Commentary on the Qurʾān*, trans. by Toby Mayer, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* XXI/2 (2010), 195.

⁴⁴ Shihadeh, review of *Keys to the Arcana*, 195.

⁴⁵ Mayer, “Translator’s Introduction,” 7.

amination of the views and commentary of the imāms of *Abl al-bayt*. Indeed, al-Shahrestānī first perceived linguistic specifications of the Qurʾān, such as composition, order, eloquence and articulateness in parallel to the knowledge that he had attained in religious sciences and philosophical wisdom. Later, he understood that the divine word was an endless ocean of meaning; again, in line with the fruit of his intellectual journey, al-Shahrestānī first related comments on subjects such as *qirāʾāt*, grammar, linguistics and semantics, and then laid out the deep and hidden meanings of each verse. However, he did not make up these meanings; on the contrary, al-Shahrestānī narrated what he had learned from the interpretations of prominent people, whom he describes as *abrār*.

In interpreting the Qurʾān, al-Shahrestānī sought refuge in Allah from doing exegesis based on his personal opinion, independent of narration and *isnād*;⁴⁶ this is something he emphasized many times. Nevertheless, he made very sophisticated comments, particularly under the subheading *Asrār*. According to the author, these comments are not the product of his personal thought, but, presumably, are the manifestations of the wisdom he attained through his master and/or through a deep source of knowledge. At the same time, these comments are the product of the spiritual power that emanated from this wisdom and the fruit of that which had been revealed to him (*futūḥāt*).

It is due to this wisdom that al-Shahrestānī referred to his commentary as *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābiḥ al-abrār*. As Ādharshab has pointed out, the *mafātīḥ* (the keys) in this title is that which enables one to attain secret and deep meanings; the use of this word indicates basic concepts and theories, such as *khalq-amr*, *taḍādd-tarattub*, *mafrūgh-mustaʿnaf*, which are derived from a private and secret source of knowledge, whereas *abrār* corresponds to *Abl al-bayt*. Indeed, according to the narrations from Shīʿī exegetes, Q 76:5, which starts with *inna l-abrār* and the following verses (5-22) were revealed when ʿAlī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn (may Allah be pleased with them) gave their own food to poor, orphaned or enslaved people.⁴⁷ When this point is taken into consideration, the

⁴⁶ Al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 5-6.

⁴⁷ Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qaṣr al-ʿĀmilī; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), X, 211; Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*

meaning of the word *abrār* in the phrase *maṣābiḥ al-abrār* can be better understood.⁴⁸

As far as the introduction of the commentary, which is entitled *Mafātīḥ al-furqān*, is concerned, there are twelve titles and subjects that are discussed in the following order: (1) the first and last revealed verses and the period of the revelation of the Qurʾān, (2) the matter of compilation of the Qurʾān, (3) the differences between narrators on the order of revelation of the chapters of the Qurʾān, (4) *Qirāʾas*, (5) matters that are recommended and matters that are disliked for people who read the Qurʾān (6) the number of chapters, verses, words and letters in the Qurʾān, (7) prominent exegetes from among the companions and other generations, and noteworthy works in the area of Qurʾānic commentary, (8) the meaning of *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl*, (9) *ʿumūm-kbuṣūṣ*, *muḥkam-mutashābih* and *nāsikh-mansūkh*, (10) divine rules that are *mafrūgh* and those that are *mustaʾnaf* according to the principles of *khalq* and *amr* and principles of *taqdād* and *ta-rattub*, (11) the miracle of the Qurʾān in terms of composition, articulation, eloquence, guidance (*bidāya*), etc., (12) prerequisites for commentating on the Qurʾān.

Very interesting and thought-provoking information, views and assessments are included under these twelve titles. For example, in the section that is concerned with the compilation of the Qurʾān, al-Shahrestānī first recounts the process of compiling and copying the Qurʾān respectively by Abū Bakr and ʿUthmān, referring to the narrations from *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/869). However, he later cites a narration which says: “Some people of knowledge said that there had been many verses in the Qurʾān about the virtue of *Abi al-bayt*, but they removed them.” Following this, al-Shahrestānī recounts nearly all the problematic narrations about the process of compilation of the Qurʾān; for example, he relates that some verses were only found with a companion called Khuzayma ibn Thābit and that private copies of the Qurʾān which were with some companions, such as Ibn

(Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997), X, 168; ʿAbd ʿAlī ibn Jumʿa al-Ḥuwayzī, *Tafsīr nūr al-tbaqalayn* (ed. ʿAlī ʿĀshūr; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Tārikh al-ʿArabī, 2001), VIII, 66; Fayḍ Mullā Muḥsin Muḥammad ibn Murtaḍā al-Kāshānī, *Tafsīr al-ṣāfi* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-ʿĀlamī li l-Maṭbūʿāt, 2008), III, 497; also see Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-l-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988), XIX, 85.

⁴⁸ Ādharshab, “Muqaddimat al-Muṣaḥḥiḥ,” I, 38-39.

Mas‘ūd or Ubayy ibn Ka‘b, had a different order and content from the copy of ‘Uthmān. He goes on to relate how there were some grammatical mistakes (*lahn*) in ‘Uthmān’s copy and that in the beginning some chapters were much longer than they were in this copy. The author also tells us how some verses, such as the verse about stoning to death (*rajm*), were excluded; however, in the end al-Shahrestānī tells us that there was a consensus that the ‘Uthmān’s copy was the standard Qur’ān.⁴⁹

Yet, according to al-Shahrestānī, there is no value in this consensus, as the ‘Uthmān’s copy was crippled by many linguistic mistakes, as mentioned in the aforementioned narrations. This means that the Qur’ān had been altered and distorted. At this point, al-Shahrestānī states that he is shocked and disappointed with that when the Qur’ān was being compiled and copied, ‘Alī and the copy of the Qur’ān which he had were ignored, although ‘Alī was a native Arab who was much closer to the Prophet and superior to everyone in the copy committee in his understanding of the Qur’ān and writing skills. However, Allah protected the Qur’ān through *Ahl al-bayt*, and thus the text of the Qur’ān has reached us today protected from all kinds of distortions, alterations, deficiencies or additions.⁵⁰

It is thought-provoking that these views were expressed by al-Shahrestānī, who was renowned as a Sunnī. His statement that the ‘Uthmān’s copy is rife with many grammatical mistakes and missing verses, followed up by his claim that “the text of the Qur’ān we have today has been protected from all kinds of alteration and distortion,” – attributing this protection to *Ahl al-bayt*, although not expressing how this could be – creates a problem. However, it is very hard to explain that the views that are put forward on this subject by al-Shahrestānī are parallel to some Shī‘ī groups that are even more extreme than the Ismā‘īlīs. For, as is known, the Ismā‘īlī sect has an orthodox understanding about the soundness of the text of the Qur’ān, although they delve deep in esoteric interpretations. On the other hand, in the works of ḥadīth scholars, such as al-Şaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/902) and al-Kulaynī, who both belonged to the Akhbārī (Ahl al-ḥadīth) school of Imāmiyya and exegetes like Abū I-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 307/919) and Abū Naşr al-‘Ayyāshī, there are

⁴⁹ Al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 9-12.

⁵⁰ Al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 13-15.

various narrations from the two imāms, Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Jaʿfar al-Šādiq about how the verses concerning *Abl al-bayt* and their virtues, as well as ʿAlī and his sainthood (*walāya*), have been removed or altered.⁵¹

Taking into consideration that the narrations of distortion which were narrated by al-Shahrestānī without citation of any sources have been attributed to al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Jaʿfar al-Šādiq in Shīʿī Imāmī sources, who he is referring to as “some people of knowledge” becomes clear. However, these narrations, which have been recounted by Akhbārī Imāmī scholars without criticism, have been recognized by Uṣūlī Imāmī scholars, such as al-Sheikh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044) or Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), as being unsound, particularly in terms of *sanad/thubūt*, as they are *kbabar wāḥid* (single narration) and narrated by extremist Shīʿī groups.⁵²

In light of all this information, it is possible to say that al-Shahrestānī considers the narrations about the Qurʾān and its distortion that were mentioned by Akhbārī scholars as being sound, and thus he adopted an approach that is refuted by most of the Imāmī scholars. This is supported by the fact that in the introduction of his commentary he first refers to al-Kulaynī’s *al-Kāfī* and that the superior features he attributes to *Abl al-bayt* exactly correlate with those mentioned in *al-Hujja* section of this book. Likewise, al-Shahrestānī’s view about the differences in the revelation order of the chapters of the Qurʾān confirms the same result; this is because, according to al-Shahrestānī, the true revelation order from God as it was revealed, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, is only known by a few select scholars. Although not precisely noted by al-Shahrestānī, these are the imāms of *Abl al-bayt*. Indeed, the following narration⁵³ by al-Kulaynī, taken from al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, indicates the same

⁵¹ For example, see Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī li l-Maṭbūʿāt, 1991), I, 22-23; Abū l-Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Masʿūd al-ʿAyyāshī, *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī li l-Maṭbūʿāt, 1991), I, 192-193.

⁵² For extensive information and an evaluation on the subject, see Öztürk, *Teḫsirde Ehl-i Sünnet & Şia Polemikleri [Sunnī & Shīʿī Debates in Qurʾānic Exegesis]* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2009), 173-191.

⁵³ Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī fi ʿilm al-dīn* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1365 HS), I, 228.

thing: “Whoever says that the entire Qurʾān was compiled as it was (revealed from Allah Almighty) is a liar. Because, those who have compiled and protected the Qurʾān as it was revealed from Allah Almighty are only ‘Alī and the imāms who came after him.”

Other information in this context that is given by al-Shahrastānī needs to be examined. In particular, the lists he provides about the order of revelation and compilation of chapters of the Qurʾān are significant. According to the statement of the author, while it is not likely that these lists can be found elsewhere, they are narrated from trustworthy narrators and respected books. The first of the five lists concerned with the revelation order of the Qurʾān is narrated by the narrators of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/167), while the second is from ‘Alī through Muqātil, the third is from Ibn ‘Abbās, the fourth is from Ibn Wāqid⁵⁴ and the fifth is from al-Imām Ja‘far al-Šādiq. As for the lists regarding the compilation order of the Qurʾān, the first is that of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, the second is the copy of Ibn Mas‘ūd, the third is the copy belonging to Ubayy ibn Ka‘b. The fourth one is based on a narration by Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Khālid al-Barqī (d. 274/887 or 280/893), who was a famous Shī‘ī ḥadīth scholar of the early period of the Imāmiyya and a companion of al-Imām Mūsā al-Kāzim (d. 183/799), and al-Imām Riḍā (d. 203/818), while the final one is based on a report by al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 292/905).⁵⁵

On the subject of readings (*qirā’āt*) of the Qurʾān, al-Shahrastānī displays, as it were, a different stance. Strictly speaking, the attitude adopted by al-Shahrastānī on the subject is completely orthodox; this is because, according to him, all of the seven or ten *qirā’as* that are renowned and accepted in the circles of Ahl al-sunna are based on Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) through sound narrations. Thus, there is no permission for individual preference in *qirā’āt*. None of the famous imāms of *qirā’a*, such as Ibn ‘Āmir (d. 118/736), ‘Āṣim ibn

⁵⁴ This person is most probably Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn Wāqid al-Qurashī al-Marwazī. According to the records of al-Dāwūdī (d. 945/1539), Ibn Wāqid, who died in 157/774 or 159/776, took lessons from scholars like ‘Abd Allāh ibn Burayda and ‘Ikrima. Many scholars of ḥadīth, except for al-Bukhārī, narrated from Ibn Wāqid, who wrote a commentary and two other works, *Wujūh al-Qurʾān* and *al-Nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssirin* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), I, 163-164.

⁵⁵ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 16-30.

Bahdala (d. 127/745), Abū ‘Amr (d. 154/771) or al-Nāfi‘ (d. 169/785) produced *qirā’āt* according to their own preferences. Similarly, no one from among the companions or their descendants produced any *qirā’a*, nor interpreted the Qur’ān, in line with their personal opinion. This is because the Prophet strictly forbade doing exegesis by personal opinion. On the other hand, the narrations that the Qur’ān was revealed in seven modes are sound.⁵⁶

All these views correspond exactly with the generally accepted views of Ahl al-sunna. Furthermore, al-Shahrestānī is of the same opinion as Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī (d. 444/1054), Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1267) and Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429) about *qirā’āt* and the seven modes, even though this style of thought is absolutely contrary to the general Shī‘ī views. The narrations about the revelation of the Qur’ān in seven modes are not approved of in the Imāmī Shī‘ī tradition, and the opinion that these different *qirā’as* are *mutawātir* (mass narrated report) is not accepted.⁵⁷

On the matter of commentating on the Qur’ān according to one’s personal opinion, al-Shahrestānī seems to accept a parallel view to that of Ahl al-ḥadīth. However, Ahl al-ḥadīth mentioned here is not that which is known as *Ahl al-sunna al-kbāṣṣa*, but rather is the Akhbāriyya, the equivalent of this school in the Imāmī Shī‘ī tradition. We are able to arrive at this conclusion because, after reporting the narration about the impermissibility of creating commentary according to one’s personal opinion, al-Shahrestānī refers to another narration that is narrated in the *tamrīd* mode (by the expression “*qīla* [it is said]”). This is attributed to al-Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq,⁵⁸ who is of the opinion that the interpretation of the Qur’ān according to one’s personal opinion is not permissible. Al-Shahrestānī points out how difficult it is for a person to do exegesis of the Qur’ān, except, he adds, “for one group”. In his own words, this group is none other than the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*, the spiritual pillars of the world, people who have inherited one of the great trusts, the inheritors of the prophets and people who are the most prominent in both worlds, as well as

⁵⁶ Al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 17, 37.

⁵⁷ Öztürk, *Tefsirde Ehl-i Sünnet & Şia Polemikleri*, 229-272.

⁵⁸ Al-‘Ayyāshī, *Tafsīr al-‘Ayyāshī*, I, 17-29.

being close and favorite subjects of Allah, the trustees of His secrets and mines of wisdom.⁵⁹

It should be stated here that the Ismā‘īliyya has a similar understanding about personal interpretation not being permissible for religion in general and the Qur’ān in particular, but it is ironic that while the same sect defends such an approach, they are also unparalleled in their production of esoteric interpretations. This seems also to be the case with al-Shahrastānī, which is as paradoxical as it is ironic. Although on the one hand, al-Shahrastānī says that it is not possible to do exegesis according to one’s personal opinion, on the other hand he tries to justify the esoteric interpretations he produced founded on personal opinion according to enlightenment from the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*. As researchers like Toby Mayer have pointed out, this explanation reminds the doctrine of *ta‘līm*⁶⁰ (learning religious truths under the mentorship of innocent imāms) of the Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs, however, it is not sufficient, at least for us, to solve the paradox in question.

Interestingly, al-Shahrastānī recommends a practice of religiosity that goes beyond the orthodox approach of a *faqīh* and is more specific to that of the ascetics and pious people on the subject of recommended and disliked actions for readers of the Qur’ān, and says:⁶¹ “A person who is *junub* or menstruating cannot read the Qur’ān. Thus, the person who reads the Qur’ān should be clean and have ablution. Even if there is no harm in reciting the Qur’ān without the lesser ablution (*wuḍū’*), as a sign of respect to the Qur’ān, one should read it with the lesser ablution and turn in the direction of the Ka‘ba, reading in a most somber voice, in a state of utmost calm and readiness of heart.” In the introduction he repeats common views on the section about exegesis and interpretation of the Qur’ān; similarly, he does not say anything that contradicts the conventional view on subjects, such as the miraculousness of the Qur’ān or the matter of *muḥkam-mutashābih*. However, he rejects the conventional understanding of *naskh* and puts forth interesting opinions on this subject; in addition

⁵⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 37.

⁶⁰ Mayer, “Shahrastānī on the Arcana of the Qur’an,” 75-76. For further information on the *ta‘līm* doctrine of Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs see Öztürk, *Kur’an ve Aşırı Yorum*, 283-296.

⁶¹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 40.

to this, he makes compelling statements in matters of *‘umūm* (generality) and *khushūṣ* (particularity).

According to al-Shahrastānī, the subject of *‘umūm* and *khushūṣ* has dimensions that differ from the content in the methodology of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Many scholars, however, have failed to determine indicators of specific words and concepts in the Qur’ān that refer to certain person/people (*tashkībīṣ al-makhṣūṣāt*). Al-Shahrastānī says: “There is no *‘āmm* (general) wording in the Qur’ān that is not specified and there is no specification that is not personalized” (*mā min lafẓⁱⁿ ‘āmmⁱⁿ fī l-Qur’ān illā wa-qad dakbalahū l-takbībīṣ wa-mā min takbībīṣⁱⁿ illā wa-qad qāranahū l-tashkībīṣ*); he then goes on to give the following examples in support of this thesis:

The word *al-nās* as a general term does not include children or insane people, but only the *mukallaḥ* (religiously responsible person). From this aspect, *al-nās* is an *‘āmm* (general) term that has not been specified. This term can also be personalized in reference to a specific group. For example, in the verse: “Then hasten onward from the place whence the multitude hasteneth onward” (Q 2:199), the order “*afīdū*/hasten onward” applies to specific persons (the *mukallaḥ*), while the word *al-nās* in the statement “*min ḥaythu afāḍa l-nās*” indicates more specific people, rather than the *mukallaḥ* in question. (Although not explicitly stated by al-Shahrastānī, these people are none other than the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*.)

In other verses, the word *al-nās* is used to refer to a specific person among the imāms. For example, in the verse: “Or are they jealous of mankind...” the term *al-nās* refers to the Prophet, as is stated in some commentaries. This is the personalization of a *khushūṣ* (specific) term.⁶²

Both these views and his remarks that are in keeping with them have been accepted by some researchers as the greatest indication of al-Shahrastānī’s inclination to esoteric interpretation.⁶³ We find this evaluation and assessment valid up to a point, as this kind of interpretation can be found in the commentaries of Shī‘ī Imāmī exegetes, such as al-Qummī, al-‘Ayyāshī and Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, as well as in extreme Shī‘ī sects, such as Kaysāniyya, Mughiriyya, Mansūriyya,

⁶² Al-Shahrastānī, *Maḥāṣin al-asrār*, I, 50.

⁶³ See al-Suḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī*, 172-179.

Khaṭṭābiyya and Ismāʿiliyya.⁶⁴ Therefore, when examining his interpretations, it can be said that al-Shahrastānī displays an approach that is Shīʿī in general, while being Ismāʿilī-Bāṭinī in particular.

Sources and Characteristics of the Commentary

The sources used in al-Shahrastānī's commentary can be divided into two categories, as the commentary consists of two dimensions. This double dimension is based on the division between *tanzīl* and *taʿwīl*, and between *zābir* and *bāṭin*. Indeed, the principle of *taḍādd-tarattub*, which al-Shahrastānī sees as one of the keys to the secrets of the Qurʾān, represents this double dimension. According to this, everything that has either a concrete or abstract quality has two poles and dimensions; for example, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, night and day, long and short, or black and white. As a matter of fact, everything in the Qurʾān is mentioned as having two sides, for example, belief and non-belief, believer and non-believer, and sin and good deeds. This double dimension is true for the Qurʾān itself, which has aspects of both *tanzīl* and *taʿwīl*. Again, the Qurʾān also has a *zābirī* and a *bāṭinī* facet. Al-Shahrastānī, who frequently states narrations of *zābir-bāṭin* about the Qurʾān, also frequently mentions the distinction of *tanzīl-taʿwīl* in the interpretation of many verses; according to him, *tanzīl* corresponds to the wording (*lafẓ*) of the Qurʾān, while *taʿwīl* corresponds to the deeper meaning. Again, according to this distinction, *tanzīl* is the subject of the science of Qurʾānic commentary that is concerned with the *zābirī* dimension, which includes language, grammar, eloquence, linguistics, semantics, readings, and legal rulings. *Taʿwīl* is concerned with the deeper meanings and exploring the secrets of the Qurʾān.

Based on this categorical distinction, al-Shahrastānī first explains a verse from a *zābirī* dimension and then goes onto the *bāṭinī* dimension, using different sources in accordance with the two different styles of explanation. He gives the sources he uses for the *zābirī* dimensions. Among the sources of linguistics to which al-Shahrastānī refers are names like al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 175/791), Sībawayh (d. 180/796), al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830), al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 216/831), Abū ʿAbd Allāh Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 231/846), Thaʿlab (d. 291/904), al-Azharī (d. 370/980) and al-Jawharī (d. 400/1009). He also gives the

⁶⁴ See Öztürk, *Kurʾan ve Aşırı Yorum*, 164-192, 418-431.

opinions of exegetes, such as al-Farrāʿ (d. 207/822), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934) and al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (d. 365/976). Al-Shahrestānī also narrates from scholars among the companions and the *tābiʿūn*, as well as the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* in the interpretation of many verses, but he records the narrations without *sanad* (chain of narrators). He attributes a special importance to the opinions of al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī among the sources of Qurʾānic interpretation that are mentioned, especially for the correlation between verses.

According to the statement of the author himself, the main source of the views and interpretations that comprise the distinctive section of *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, that is, *Asrār*, are the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*. It is more likely that al-Shahrestānī, who bases his esoteric interpretations on the latter, took these interpretations from sources that are claimed to have belonged to al-Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq and which are respected in the Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī tradition; these include *Khawāṣṣ al-Qurʾān*, *Miṣbāḥ al-sharīʿa wa-miftāḥ al-ḥaqīqa*, *Asrār al-wahy*, *al-Khāfiya fī ʿilm al-ḥurūf* and *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-tadbīr*, which were reported from Mufaḍḍal ibn ʿUmar al-Juʿfī (d. 128/745[?]). In fact, the narrations he reports from al-Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq in the twelfth chapter of the introduction confirm this. According to one of the statements in these narrations, al-Imām Jaʿfar responds to a person called Sudayr al-Ṣayrafī, who asks if the claims that the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* had qualities, such as receiving revelation, were true or not, saying: “Do not honor those who talk nonsense about us. We are the proofs of Allah and His agents over human beings. Whatever we say is *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām* comes from the book of Allah.”⁶⁵

According to another narration, a person named al-Fayḍ ibn al-Mukhtār complained and said: “Each one of your supporters says something different. What is this for God’s sake?! I go to their circle in Kūfa and fall into almost total doubt, and then I go to Mufaḍḍal ibn ʿUmar al-Juʿfī, I find what he says to be acceptable.” Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq replied: “Yes, people close to us have made up many lies about us. It is to such extent that I narrate a ḥadīth to one of them and when that person leaves my side, he interprets it inappropriately.” According to another narration, there was a claim in a letter written to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq that some of his supporters interpreted the orders and prohibi-

⁶⁵ Al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 65.

tions in the Qurʾān only in the esoteric style. They said: “a certain person was intended for prayer, while another person was intended for fasting, another for *zakāt*, another for *ḥajj*; all of these people refer to the imāms. Whoever learns about these people will have prayed, fasted, given *zakāt* and performed *ḥajj*.” They also understood that the prohibitions stood for certain people. al-Imām Jaʿfar al-Şādiq strongly denied all such interpretations.⁶⁶

It is significant that all these narrations come from Jaʿfar al-Şādiq, because some people close to him attributed him with some miraculous features, even while he was still alive. It was claimed that he was interested in secret sciences, such as *jifr* and talismans, and even many works about these sciences were attributed to him.⁶⁷ Furthermore, all the sects in the history of Islamic thought which have esoteric tendencies, most importantly the *Gbulāt* (extreme Shīʿī sects) and the Ismāʿīlīs, have all shown great interest in Jaʿfar al-Şādiq and the works that have been attributed to him. When this point is taken into consideration, it can be said that al-Shahraṣṭānī also used sources that were attributed to Jaʿfar al-Şādiq in the interpretations he included under the title of *Asrār*; however, he tried to explain that although he has narrated these statements he does not adopt a stance that disregards the external (*ẓāhirī*) meaning, and thus he is not to be included among the extreme followers of Jaʿfar al-Şādiq.

As a result, it seems that the reason for including the aforementioned statements in the introduction is to indicate that a great number of the esoteric interpretations which have been attributed to the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* are based on the authority of Jaʿfar al-Şādiq and that these interpretations differ from the esotericism of those who ignore the *ẓāhir*. Another indicator that demonstrates which sources are used when narrating the esoteric interpretations of al-Shahraṣṭānī is that most of the narrations of commentary from the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* in Shīʿī literature come from al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir and al-Imām Jaʿfar al-Şādiq. The narrations from al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir about the interpretations of Qurʾānic verses were recorded in the commentary of Abū l-Jārūd Ziyād ibn Mundhir (d. 150/767); this

⁶⁶ Al-Shahraṣṭānī, *Maḥāṭib al-asrār*, I, 65-66.

⁶⁷ See Mehmet Atalan, *Şiʿiğin Farklılaşma Sürecinde Caʿfer es-Sâdıḳ'ın Yeri [The Place of Jaʿfar al-Şādiq in the Evolution Process of Shīʿa]* (Ankara: Araştırma Yayınları, 2005), 117-149.

commentary has in part reached us today through *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, which has been attributed to al-Qummī.⁶⁸ However, the content of the narrations from Muḥammad al-Bāqir do not correspond with the esoteric interpretations that al-Shahrastānī gives under the title *Asrār*, thus increasing the possibility that the aforementioned interpretations could have been quoted from works that are attributed to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq.⁶⁹

Features of Method and Contents of the Commentary

Mafātīḥ al-asrār is a very interesting commentary in terms of method and content. It is interesting in method because it is a commentary of *dirāya* (based on *raʿy*) by a scholar who claims that the interpretation by *raʿy* is forbidden. To state this paradox more clearly, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is a commentary that is based on traditions and narrations according to the author, but in truth, the facet of *raʿy* outweighs the former. This seems to present a significant paradox. While al-Shahrastānī seeks refuge in Allah from interpreting the Qurʾān according to his own *raʿy*, he also mentions that he was the recipient of a prayer to receive knowledge for the sake of the prominent servants of Allah, saying: “I found the strength to reach the words of prophecy within myself (*bidāya*) and was familiar with the language of prophethood; in this way, I reached the secrets of the words of the glorious Qurʾān.” However, in the end he adds: “without interpreting the Qurʾān according to my own *raʿy*.”⁷⁰

According to these statements, the interpretations given by al-Shahrastānī under the title of *Asrār* do not belong to him. In the seventh section of the introduction, he says that the true owners of the opinions stated under the section *Asrār* belong to those who are known as *ahl al-Qurʾān*, *aṣḥāb al-asrār*: “Those upon whom Allah

⁶⁸ See Öztürk, “Şii-İmami Tefsir Kültürünün Genel Karakteristikleri [Characteristics of İmami Şiʿī Tafsīr Literature],” *Taribten Günümüze Kurʾan’a Yaklaşımlar [Approaches to the Qurʾān from the Beginning to the Present Day]* (eds. Bilal Gökür et al.; Istanbul: İlim Yayma Vakfı, 2010), 250.

⁶⁹ The esoteric interpretations of al-Shahrastānī and the works attributed to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq need to be compared if this is to be brought to the surface; however, this would require a separate study.

⁷⁰ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 85-86.

guided to the right path” and “those who have been given knowledge of the secrets of the Qurʾān.”⁷¹

Al-Shahrastānī is not content merely with narrations; he also records his own views and opinions about the secrets of the Qurʾān; however, he does not consider this to be his own *raʿy*. This is because, as we have indicated above, through his mysterious sage and/or his source of wisdom and through his contemplations of the statements of the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* he earned a spiritual aptitude that helped him to discover the deep layers of meaning of the Qurʾān. Al-Shahrastānī believes that his understanding and commentary of the Qurʾān is correct because of this spiritual aptitude. On the other hand, the Qadariyya/Muʿtazila, Jabriyya, Mushabbiha and other sects did commentaries on the *mutashābih* verses according to their personal opinions, particularly those concerned with matters like divine attributes, preordination and fate. In this way they misinterpreted the Qurʾān and came to incorrect conclusions. In the same way, in the same subjects the Ashʿarīs also misinterpreted the Qurʾān.⁷²

It is very interesting how al-Shahrastānī marginalizes Ashʿariyya⁷³ and describes all these sects as being confused and bewildered in terms of their understanding and interpretation of the Qurʾān. He goes on to explain that the main reason for this is their inability to acquire knowledge from the true source and gate of knowledge, that is, ʿAlī and his sons (the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*). After discussing this matter, al-Shahrastānī reports various narrations about the virtues of ʿAlī and his absolute authority in understanding the Qurʾān, and then provides a number of narrations from Jaʿfar al-Šādiq.⁷⁴

Al-Shahrastānī then goes on to examine the matter of the keys that open the gate to the secrets of the Qurʾān; these keys are acquired through the guidance and wisdom that come from the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* and are expressed with concepts and theories that al-Shahrastānī calls *ʿumūm-khuṣūṣ*, *taḍādd-tarattub*, *mafrūgh-mustaʿnaf* and *kbalq-amr*. For example, according to the explanation

⁷¹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 64-65.

⁷² Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 45.

⁷³ For mention of the Ashʿariyya with other groups, such as the Muʿtazila, Qadariyya, Mushabbiha, Karrāmiyya and Falāsifa, see *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 147-148, 423, 549-550; II, 867.

⁷⁴ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 65-66.

of the author about *‘umūm-kbuṣūṣ*, there is no general concept in the Qurʾān that has not been assigned a specific expression, and there is no specification that does not fall under personalization. According to this, the attributes of those who are praised or criticized in the Qurʾān can be ascribed to certain people who lived during the period of Qurʾānic revelation, as well as to other people who lived after this period through personalization. In order to explain this, it would be helpful to cite the explanation of the author about the Israelites worshipping the calf, which is related in Q 2:54.

In the commentary of the aforementioned verse, al-Shahrastānī starts with the statement: “Those who take heed of the stories in the Qurʾān said ...” and briefly records the following:

Each parable of the Qurʾān has an equivalent in the Muslim community. A discord (*fitna*) similar to that which existed among the Israelites who were worshipping the calf after Prophet Moses went up Mount Sinai has fallen upon the Muslim community. In other words, the Muslim community has become slaves of the ostensible caliphates in a way that is similar to the Israelites who worshipped the calf. These caliphs are the Umayyads, whom the Prophet described as, “in my dream I saw some men trampling over my pulpit like donkeys.” Indeed, some of the Umayyads seized the right of the caliphate from *Abl al-bayt*, friends and allies of Allah, and some slaughtered them. As Allah ordered the Israelites to kill one another because of their worship of the calf, He brought down his wrath against those who worshipped the calf in this community, meaning those who martyred Ḥusayn and became the vanguards of hell, that is, the followers of Yazīd. This happened to such an extent that seventy thousand followers of Yazīd – may Allah increase their torment in Hell – were killed in a short period of time.⁷⁵

In essence, this comment is strictly in keeping with the Imāmī concept of *tawallī-tabarrī*; to love the Prophet and those who have descended from his lineage and not to love those who do not love the Prophet or his lineage. The Imāmiyya believes that every Muslim must be lovingly devoted to *Abl al-bayt*, because in Q 42:23 – according to the Shīʿī interpretation – Allah commands Muslims to love *Abl al-bayt*. Also, Prophet Muḥammad declared that feeling affection for *Abl al-bayt* is a sign of faith and also pointed out that loving *Abl al-*

⁷⁵ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 355-356.

bayt is the equivalent of loving Allah and His Messenger. For this reason, loving *Abl al-bayt* is equal to loving Allah and His Messenger, and is thus compulsory. A person who denies this truth is the same as someone who denies the obligation of *ṣalāt* (prayer) or *zakāt*, or even the prophethood.⁷⁶

From the commentary of Q 2:165-167, which are concerned with how some people take (for worship) others than Allah and love them with a love that should be for Allah alone, it is possible to perceive the concept of *ʿumūm-kbuṣūṣ* and the personalization of specific words which al-Shahrastānī utilizes as one of the keys for discovering the secrets of the Qurʾān; this is done in an attempt to establish a foundation for the *tawallī-tabarrī* concept of the Imāmiyya. In the commentary of these verses, al-Shahrastānī uses an expression that we can summarize here as: “According to these verses, to love Allah is to love one of His friends, while to attribute partners to Him is either to build idols and worship them or to adhere to the views of some people who are considered absolute authorities.” Then al-Shahrastānī records some Prophetic traditions, for example: “Whoever loves my *Abl al-bayt* loves me, and whoever loves me loves Allah,” “On the Day of Judgment all forms of relations and lineage will be severed and will not be of any benefit, except my relation and lineage,” “I am leaving you two great trusts. One is the book of Allah and the other is my *Abl al-bayt*. If you faithfully hold on to these with you will never go astray.”⁷⁷

It is possible to make a connection with the Imāmiyya through the concepts of *mafrūgh-mustaʿnaf*, which al-Shahrastānī perceives as another important key to the secrets of the Qurʾān. The following explains the basic content of these concepts: There are two different worlds and two different divine edicts in the plane of existence. *Mafrūgh* signifies the completed world that has reached the point of perfection; the divine edict concerned with this world is final. No change in the *mafrūgh* world is possible. The *mustaʿnaf* world and edict have not yet reached perfection and so have not been finalized. For this reason, divine edicts about the *mustaʿnaf* world are open-ended. If this distinction is not taken into consideration, if the entire

⁷⁶ Sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Mūsawī al-Zanjānī, *ʿAqāʿid al-Imāmiyya al-Itbnā ʿAshariyya* (5th ed., Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Wafāʿ, 1982), III, 180.

⁷⁷ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, II, 707-708. Also, see *ibid.*, I, 436.

world is accepted as being *mafrūgh* and all divine edicts are deemed absolute and unchangeable, the idea of *jabr* (predestination) becomes inevitable while the opposite is accepted, then it is inevitable that *tafwīd* (complete freedom) will be adopted. Both of these approaches are incorrect; the correct way is to hold a path between these two, a path that finds its expression in the distinction between *mafrūgh* and *musta'naf*.⁷⁸

Al-Shahrastānī thinks that matters such as predestination (*qadar*), human actions, divine will and the freedom of the human being, as well as *bidāya* and *dalāla*, which are among the most debated subjects of Islamic *kalām*, can only be solved with this distinction; for instance Q 2:26 states that Allah has led most people astray by using similitudes of a gnat and such-like creatures, but at the end of the same verse it is stated that only those who have deviated have been led astray. Both of these divine statements are surely true; but the first one is a *mafrūgh* decree, and the second one is a *musta'naf* decree. There is a dialectic relationship between these two decrees that reminds us of the relationship between the chicken and the egg. Furthermore, when it is understood that the *mafrūgh*, which is the final decree, occurs because of the *musta'naf* and that the *musta'naf* decree is derived from *mafrūgh*, it becomes clear that the idea of predestination and the denial of fate are both incorrect. About being led astray we can state the following: Allah led people astray, thus they went astray from the true path; however, at the same time, these people already went astray from the true path, thus Allah led them astray. This means that deviation (*fisq*) occurs with Allah's leading people astray and Allah leads people astray because they have willingly gone astray from the true path.⁷⁹

This approach to divine edict and human actions reminds one of the idea that Ahl al-sunna is a middle way between the Jabriyya and Mu'tazila and even evokes the *kasb* theory of the Ash'ariyya, but strongly resembles the *badā* theory of the Imāmiyya. According to the *mafrūgh-musta'naf* distinction that is mentioned above, Allah has two edicts, for the world of creation in general, and for human actions in particular. The first one is of a nature that is permanent and unchangeable (*makbtūm*). The second one comes under *musta'naf*

⁷⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 54-55, 456.

⁷⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 229.

and can change.⁸⁰ For us, this understanding substantially overlaps with the *badā* theory of the Imāmiyya. According to a narration that has been attributed to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq, which is concerned with the *badā* theory that is connected to the subject of *imāma* and has caused great dispute among Imāmī Shīʿī scholars, it is said that with Allah all actions are divided into two: that is, *al-umūr al-makbtūma* and *al-umūr al-mawqūfa*. *Al-umūr al-makbtūma* is concerned with things that are final and closed to change, while *al-umūr al-mawqūfa* is concerned with things that are open to change in keeping with divine will and intention.⁸¹ Moreover, as stated by some Shīʿī scholars, *badā* has been described as a secret knowledge that belongs to the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*.⁸² This description is closely related to the idea presented in a series of narrations in the basic Shīʿī ḥadīth and tafsīr sources that Allah has two kinds of knowledge. The first one is *al-ʿilm al-maknūn* and/or *al-ʿilm al-makbzūn*, which is only for Allah. *Badā* actualizes within this knowledge that is described as *umm al-kitāb* in the Qurʾān. The second type of divine knowledge is that which is known to the angels, Prophets and their trustees/saints, *al-ʿilm al-makbtūm*; it is closed to *badā*, namely, is closed to change.⁸³ In a narration reported by al-Šaffār al-Qummī, it is said that the imāms are able to perceive when *badā* occurs in the knowledge that is unique to Allah.⁸⁴

Parallel to this division, Shīʿī scholars claim that there are two tablets of fate/predestination with Allah. The first one is *al-lawḥ al-makfūz*. That which is written on this tablet is absolute and permanent. The second tablet is called *lawḥ al-maḥw wa-l-itbbāt*. As expressed by the contemporary Shīʿī exegete al-Khūʿī (d. 1992), *badā* actualizes within the suspended (*mawqūf*) divine edict that has been recorded on this tablet. In this sense, saying that *badā* is permissible does not imply attributing ignorance to Allah. Again, such an idea of

⁸⁰ Al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 507, 767; II, 653.

⁸¹ Al-ʿAyyāshī, *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, II, 232.

⁸² Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, *Aṣl al-Sbīʿa wa-uṣūlubā* (Qum: Muʿassasat al-Imām ʿAlī, 1415), 313.

⁸³ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, I, 147; al-ʿAyyāshī, *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, II, 232-233.

⁸⁴ Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Šaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt* (Qum: Manshūrāt-i Maktaba-i Āyat Allāh Marʿashī, 1404), 394.

badā does not impair Allah's greatness or sublimity.⁸⁵ In truth, through *badā*, Allah discloses secrets that are recorded on the tablets of *al-maḥw wa-l-ithbāt*. Allah can inform some of the angels or Prophets who are close to Him about this secret. The angels notify the Messengers about it and the Prophets inform their *umma*. However, after a while, a situation that contradicts this information arises. This is absolutely normal because Allah has erased everything that was connected to the first instance and has instead made something else in the outer world. All of this knowledge exists in the eternal knowledge of Allah. This is what is being described in Q 13:39, "Allah doth blot out or confirm what He pleaseth: with Him is the Mother of the Book."⁸⁶

In *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, in addition to many basic views and interpretations about *imāma*, *waṣāya*, *imām*, *waṣī*, etc., which correspond with the views of the Imāmiyya, al-Shahrestānī uses the *bāṭinī* and *ḥurūfī* interpretations, such as *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a*, the number of seven, *mann* and *salwā* (manna and quail), the staff of Prophet Moses and the twelve springs that emitted from a rock,⁸⁷ all of which are used to a large extent in the books of Ismā'īlī philosophers and Sufīs with a *bāṭinī* inclination, including Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1335). He also uses various concepts, such as *al-ʿaql al-kullī*, *al-naḥs al-kullī*, *lawḥ*, pen, *abdāl*, *awṭād*. These are all characteristics that document al-Shahrestānī's usage of *bāṭinī* and philosophical sources in the most general terms.

General Review and Conclusion

The Qurʾānic commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, which has been attributed to al-Shahrestānī, has the characteristics of works that were written within the frame of Shīʿī thought. However, the information about the external explanations of verses provided under titles such as *naẓm*, *nuzūl*, *tafsīr*, *lugha* and *maʿānī*, are mostly descriptive and correspond exactly with the classical commentaries of *dirāya* in the

⁸⁵ Abū l-Qāsim ibn ʿAlī Akbar al-Khūʿī, *al-Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Qum: Muʾassasat Iḥyāʾ Āthār al-Imām al-Khūʿī, n.d.), 390.

⁸⁶ Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, *Aṣl al-Shīʿa*, 314.

⁸⁷ See al-Shahrestānī, *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, I, 119-125, 375, 383, 446-448; II, 655, 800, 822.

Sunnī tradition as far as terms of expression and content are concerned. This correspondence is not the primary feature, but rather a secondary one, due to the unique and original stance of *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* not being the section on the explanation of external meaning, but rather the section of interpretation related to the secrets (*asrār*). Moreover, most of the commentaries in the *Asrār* section, which can be found under the commentary of almost every verse, have an esoteric nature. On the other hand, it is possible to describe *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, in its most general terms, as an eclectic commentary; the verses are first explained according to their external meaning and then according to the more esoteric aspects, with the two explanations being presented under separate titles (except in a few places); this acts as a clear indication of the work's eclectic structure. The various commentaries can sometimes be described as philosophical or mystical, in a way that is sometimes very close to Gnosticism, or as having a political or sectarian content; each commentary, differentiated under subtitles as *sirr ākbar* (another secret), can be evaluated as characteristics that are particular to the eclectic structure.

Although the commentaries concerning the secrets of the Qurʾān are esoteric in style, this esotericism is not one that disregards the external meaning of the Qurʾān. Again, this esotericism cannot be identified with the Ismāʿīlī esotericism, although there is a shared usage of certain terms and concepts. It seems that al-Shahrastānī's esoteric interpretations are expansions of the concepts of *bāṭin* and *taʾwīl* of the Imāmiyya, especially the early period Akhbārī scholars, such as al-Kulaynī, al-ʿAyyāshī and al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī; all of the above frequently repeated the narration: "The Qurʾān has an external and an esoteric dimension" in their works, although what they are alluding to here is not clearly disclosed. This is because in the Akhbārī-Salafī school of the Imāmiyya there is a frequent emphasis on the double dimension of the Qurʾān, utilizing the concepts of *ẓāhir-bāṭin* and *tanzīl-taʾwīl*; however, suitable elucidation to allow us to comprehend the deep meaning that has been attributed to the concepts of *bāṭin* and *taʾwīl* is not provided. In the commentary it is emphasized that the only authority in the exegesis and interpretation of the Qurʾān is the imāms. Furthermore, esoteric interpretations have rarely been reported from the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt* in the Imāmī Shīʿī sources. To put it more accurately, the Imāmī Shīʿī literature gives clear and comprehensible reports from the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*. In addition, because doing exegesis of the Qurʾān based on personal

opinions was forbidden in the Akhbārī school of the Imāmiyya, the scholars of this school refrained from *ta'wīl*. Al-Shahrastānī took his place alongside the Akhbārīyya in the matter of doing exegesis of the Qur'ān with personal opinions, but also stated that being acquainted with the imāms' views and interpretations regarding the Qur'ān brought him a wisdom and spiritual power, thus enabled him to produce personal interpretations. Thus, al-Shahrastānī combined the traditionalist/scripturalist line of the Imāmiyya with Shī'ī wisdom and insight, or he gave an esoteric coloring to the Imāmiyya's externalist approach in Qur'ānic exegesis with interpretations based on philosophical insight. In this way, al-Shahrastānī continuously referred to the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*, most frequently referring to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq; more accurately, he used various works that were attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, and also well-respected in the Ismā'īlī tradition.

Al-Shahrastānī's esoteric and *ḥurūfī* interpretations in some verses (especially those concerned with *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'ā* and the number of seven), his attribution of some Qur'ānic concepts to certain people, assigning symbolic meanings to them, and the utilization of concepts such as *kbalq-amr*, *taḍādd-tarattub*, and the divine word in parallel with the Ismā'īlī terminology should not be taken as an indication that he was a Bāṭinī-Ismā'īlī. Rather, he only used Ismā'īlī terms as an instrument to introduce a philosophical depth to the thought of the Akhbārī school of the Imāmiyya, as the identity put forth by al-Shahrastānī in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* is an Akhbārī Imāmī Shī'ī identity rather than a Bāṭinī-Ismā'īlī one. Indeed, the fact that he does not mention the Uṣūlī school of the Imāmiyya, one that was mostly formed and developed under the effect of the Mu'tazila and which not only gave importance to personal opinion in Qur'ānic exegesis, but also implemented it, and even he frequently criticizes the Mu'tazila, which the Uṣūlīs saw as a reference frame in theology, indicates the same association. In addition, his alienation of the Jabriyya, Murjī'a, Karrāmiyya and even the Ash'ariyya, and his accusations that they misunderstood and misinterpreted verses that are concerned with divine attributes, fate and predestination, and human actions, is an important evidence about the identity that is being put forth, particularly in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, is far removed from the Sunnī identity.

In light of all this information, we can say that the opinion which is closest to the truth about al-Shahrastānī's sectarian identity is that put

forward by Ibn Taymiyya, who stated that al-Shahrastānī adopted the views of the Imāmiyya in many subjects, while sometimes putting forth opinions that were in line with Ismā‘īlī views. At this point, it can be said that al-Shahrastānī’s Ash‘arī identity emerges, particularly in *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, and thus he displays different stances in different works. However, this can be seen to be a characteristic of his search for the truth rather than a hypocritical, sycophantic or opportunistic stance. Moreover, a similar situation can be found in the life of al-Imām al-Ghazālī. Indeed, al-Ghazālī comes across as a Sunnī methodologist and a *faqīh* in some of his works, while in others as the fiercest enemy of the Bāṭinī school and esotericism, a stern opponent of philosophers, a Sunnī Sufi, and at other times as having *bāṭinī* tendencies.

In conclusion, the fact that al-Shahrastānī takes up different stances in different works reminds us of the search for truth that al-Ghazālī describes in *al-Munqidh*. It is significant that both Zāhīr al-Dīn al-Bayhaqī and Ibn Taymiyya found a similarity between al-Shahrastānī and al-Ghazālī, and that both mentioned⁸⁸ these names in the same context. While al-Ghazālī concluded his journey in search of the truth with a rich Sunnī Sufi wisdom, al-Shahrastānī, as can be seen from *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, which he wrote during his last years, completed the same journey by reaching philosophical insight within the Imāmī Shī‘ī matrix. In fact, al-Shahrastānī displayed his inclination towards Shī‘ism by dedicating *al-Milal* and *al-Muṣāra‘a* to Naqīb al-ashrāf ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far al-Mūsawī, and he then reinforced his Shī‘ī inclination in his Qur’ānic commentary. Nevertheless, al-Shahrastānī put forth opinions that were parallel to the views of Ahl al-sunna when necessary, for example, in matters such as *qirā’as* and the seven modes. Thus, we can see that he was not bound by one sect; on the contrary, he was a free scholar who defended the opinion he deemed to be correct without giving importance to which sect it belonged to. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the identity reflected in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* points strongly to an inclination to *tashayyu‘* (Shī‘ism).

At this point, we can say that al-Shahrastānī tried to establish an interesting paradigm in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār*, one that is reminiscent of the process of Ahl al-ḥadīth line in the Sunnī tradition that evolved first

⁸⁸ Al-Bayhaqī, *Tatimma*, 120; Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar’ ta‘arud*, V, 173.

into Ashʿarism and eventually led to the penetration of the Ashʿarī Sunnī belief into Sufism. More clearly, the paradigm that al-Shahrestānī attempts to establish in *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* can be described as one that adds depth to the *Akbbārī/ẓābirī* understanding of the Imāmiyya on the basis of philosophical insight. In doing this, he refers to the imāms of *Ahl al-bayt*, while also employing the terminology of Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī philosophy. A similar version of this paradigm which al-Shahrestānī tried to structure on his own, in the body of a single work, has formed over time in the Sunnī tradition with the contributions of various scholars. In the early period, *Ahl al-ḥadīth* (*Ahl al-sunna al-kbāṣṣa*), which was represented by names such as al-Awzāʿī (d. 157/774), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777), Layth ibn Saʿd (d. 175/791), Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), Ishāq ibn Rāḥawayh (d. 238/853), Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and Abū Saʿīd al-Dārimī (d. 280/894), evolved into Sunnī Islamic theology with al-Imām al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/936), who stated in his work *al-Ibāna* that the leading figures of *Ahl al-ḥadīth* specifically followed the path of al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal in theological matters.⁸⁹ After this evolution, Sufis, such as Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), al-Kalābādhī (d. 385/995) and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) wrote works that blended the Sunnī approach and Sufism; this process culminated in its ultimate aspect with al-Imām al-Ghazālī's work *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*.⁹⁰

After this discussion, it is necessary to once again state that it does not seem possible to arrive at a definite conclusion that al-Shahrestānī was a Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī. However, some researchers, such as Toby Mayer, associate al-Shahrestānī's emphasis of the teacher-student relationship with the *taʿlīm* doctrine, a doctrine that holds a very important place in the Nizārī-Ismāʿīlī tradition, and associate the concepts of *taḍādd-tarattub* with the hierarchical structure of Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* organization.⁹¹ Despite this, such similarities are not enough to prove that al-Shahrestānī was a Bāṭinī-Ismāʿīlī. In a similar vein, al-Shahrestānī's open references to Sunnī exegetes under the titles of

⁸⁹ Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibāna ʿan uṣūl al-diyāna* (Medina: al-Jāmiʿat al-Islāmiyya, 1975), 8.

⁹⁰ For the stages and the main purpose of this project, see Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Takwīn al-ʿaql al-ʿArabī* (4th ed., Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1991), 276-281.

⁹¹ Mayer, "Shahrestānī on the Arcana of the Qurʾan," 75-76.

nazm, *tafsir*, *nuzul*, *ma‘ānī*, etc., do not prove that he is a Sunnī scholar. However, al-Shahrastānī’s open references to the Imāmī Shī‘ī sources, such as al-Kulaynī’s *al-Kāfī* and al-‘Ayyāshī’s *Tafsir*, as well as his emphasis on the impermissibility of doing exegesis of the Qur’ān by personal opinion, his perception of *Ahl al-bayt*, the nature of the compilation of the Qur’ān and its distortion, *tawallī-tabarrī*, *imāma* and many other subjects all exhibit a deep affection and inclination to the Imāmī Shī‘ī tradition, while not demonstrating an allegiance. This deep affection and inclination is either fundamental and sincere, as stated by Ibn Taymiyya,⁹² or was donned to gain sympathy from Shī‘ī circles.

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⁹² Ibn Taymiyya, *Minbāj al-sunna*, VI, 305-306.

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