

## The Origin of Esotericism: An Analysis of the Ismaili Esoteric Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation

*Asal Usul Esoterisme: Analisis terhadap Pendekatan Esoterik Ismaili dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an*

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### Abstract

This study examines the Ismaili method of interpreting Qur'anic verses, focusing on their esoteric hermeneutics. The Quran serves as a fundamental legislative source for various theological factions, each seeking to substantiate their claims by referencing its verses. It also stands as a principal source for muhaddithin, fuqahā (jurisprudents), and others, contributing to the emergence of tafsir, a discipline aimed at elucidating the Quran's meanings and intentions. Consequently, different schools of interpretation, or tafsir, have developed over time. One strand of interpretation adheres to the literal meaning of the text, known as Zāhir, while another explores mystical or esoteric meanings, termed Bātin, occasionally without strong support from Arabic language or Qur'anic and Hadith evidence. Among Shiite sects, the Ismailis distinguish themselves as one of the most enduring, recognizing Ismail bin Ja'far al-Sādiq as their Imam and establishing influential states in Islamic history, such as the Qarmatian state in Bahrain (899–1077) and the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa (909/1171). To thoroughly investigate this subject, a qualitative research approach is proposed. Given the historical and theological nature of the topic, qualitative methods, such as textual analysis and historical research, facilitate a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of complex phenomena. The findings of this research indicate that Ismailism has heavily relied on the esoteric interpretation of Qur'anic verses since its inception, aligning with Ismaili belief systems, with Qur'anic verses assuming a more significant role than Hadith in their doctrinal framework. The essence of this article lies in delving into the Ismaili approach to esoteric hermeneutics, predominantly drawing from the sect's primary sources..

**Keyword:** *Esoteric interpretation, Ismaili sect, Shiite sects, Imamate, Ismail bin Ja'far al-Sādiq, Imams, authority*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini memeriksa cara Ismaili dalam menafsirkan ayat-ayat Alquran, dengan fokus pada cara hermeneutika esoteris mereka. Alquran adalah sumber hukum utama bagi berbagai kelompok teologis, yang masing-masing mencoba membuktikan klaim mereka dengan merujuk pada ayat-ayatnya. Ini juga menjadi sumber utama bagi para pakar Hadis, ahli fikih, dan lainnya, yang berkontribusi pada perkembangan tafsir, sebuah disiplin untuk menjelaskan makna dan tujuan Alquran. Sebagai hasilnya, berbagai aliran tafsir telah muncul dari waktu ke waktu. Salah satu cara tafsir mengikuti makna harfiah teks, disebut Zāhir, sementara yang lain mencari makna mistis atau esoteris, disebut Bātin, kadang-kadang tanpa dukungan kuat dari bahasa Arab atau bukti Alquran dan Hadis. Di antara kelompok Syiah, Ismaili membedakan diri mereka sebagai salah satu yang paling bertahan lama, mengakui Ismail bin Ja'far al-Sādiq sebagai Imam mereka dan mendirikan negara-negara penting dalam sejarah



Islam, seperti negara Qarmatian di Bahrain (899–1077) dan Kekhalifahan Fatimiyah di Afrika Utara (909/1171). Untuk menyelidiki hal ini secara menyeluruh, digunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif. Mengingat sifat historis dan teologis topik ini, metode kualitatif seperti analisis teks dan penelitian historis membantu menjelajahi dan memahami fenomena yang kompleks. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Ismailiyah telah sangat mengandalkan interpretasi esoteris ayat-ayat Alquran sejak awal berdirinya, sejalan dengan sistem kepercayaan Ismaili, dengan ayat-ayat Alquran memiliki peran yang lebih besar daripada Hadis dalam kerangka doktrinal mereka. Pusat artikel ini adalah dalam memahami pendekatan Ismaili terhadap hermeneutika esoteris, yang banyak bersumber dari sumber-sumber utama kelompok tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** *Interpretasi Esoterik, Sekte Ismaili, Sekte Syiah, Imamah, Ismail bin Ja'far al-Sādiq, Imam, otoritas*

## Introduction

The Ismaili sect, considered one of the most significant Shiite sects to persist to the present day, has acknowledged Ismail bin Ja'far al-Sādiq (d. 765)<sup>1</sup> as their Imam, establishing formidable states in Islamic history, notably the Qarmatian state in Bahrain (899–1077)<sup>2</sup> and the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa (909/1171)<sup>3</sup>. Their reliance on the esoteric interpretation of Qur'anic verses has been consistent with Ismaili belief since its inception. Their utilization of Qur'anic verses surpasses their use of Hadith in their sources significantly. The narratives of the Imams also serve as a primary source of legal and theological legislation for the Ismailis, primarily stemming from their perception and attachment to the issue of Imamate, as elaborated later in this article.

The influence of Ismaili thought has been a strong influence in Islamic history, as many Islamic sects have evolved from this thought, taking esoteric hermeneutics as their methodology. It is known that there are many sects that emerged from the Ismaili sect and developed historically due to the disagreement over the issue of imamate, we can mention here the Druze sect<sup>4</sup> that emerged during the era of The

1 The character of Ja'far al-Sadiq is considered a pivotal figure in Shiite thought in general, and many Shiite narratives revolve around him: Mustafa Öz, "Ca'fer Es-Sâdik" TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, (Ankara: TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi, 1993), 7:1-3.

2 François de Blois, "The 'Abu Sa'idis or So-Called 'Qarmatians' of Bahrain," Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 16, Proceedings of the Nineteenth SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES held at Oxford on 30th July - 1st August 1985 (1986): 13-21; Reza Rezazadeh Langroudi, "The Qarmatī Movement of 'Alī b. al-Faql in Yemen (268-303/881-915)," *Studia Islamica* 109, no. 2 (2014): 191-207.; Shainool Jiwa, "Fātimid-Būyid Diplomacy during the Reign of al-'Azīz Billāh (365/975—386/996)," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1992): 57-71.

3 Farhad Daftary, "Chapter 10: The Ismā'īlīs and Their Traditions," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (2021), 241.

4 Kais M. Firro, "The Druze Faith: Origin, Development and Interpretation," *Arabica* 58, no. 1/2 (2011): 76-99.

Fatimid Caliph al-Hākīm bi-Amr Allah (985-1021)<sup>5</sup> and has been able to survive to this day. In addition to this, two major sects emerged from Ismailism: the Nizāriyya, which evolved into the Agā Khāniyya, and the Musta'aliyya, from which the Bohra<sup>6</sup> evolved. Regardless of Shiite sects, it can be said that the esoteric influence reached many Sunni sects, especially the Sufi groups, starting in the third century Hijri, including al-Hussein bin Mansour al-Hallāj (858-922)<sup>7</sup>, al-Shibli (861–946), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240)<sup>8</sup> with many others.

The influence of Ismaili thought has profoundly shaped Islamic history, giving rise to numerous Islamic sects that adopt esoteric hermeneutics as their methodology. Many sects have emerged from Ismaili thought, historically evolving due to disagreements over the issue of imamate. One notable example is the Druze sect, which originated during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hākīm bi-Amr Allah (985-1021) and continues to exist today. Additionally, two major sects emerged from Ismailism: the Nizāriyya, which later developed into the Agā Khāniyya, and the Musta'aliyya, from which the Bohra sect emerged. Beyond Shiite sects, the esoteric influence has extended to numerous Sunni groups, particularly Sufi orders, beginning in the third century Hijri. Prominent figures associated with this influence include al-Hussein bin Mansour al-Hallāj (858-922), al-Shibli (861–946), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), and many others.

Researchers have categorized various types of tafsir, including those based on the Prophet's traditions and the narratives of the righteous salaf<sup>9</sup>, as well as tafsir by opinion, which encompasses theological viewpoints<sup>10</sup> and personal jurisprudence. In the twentieth century, a notable emergence was the Qur'anic interpretation of the Qur'an, coinciding with a renewal movement in the Islamic world focused on true religion and the Quran. Mohammed Al-Amin al-Shinqiti (1973) notably excelled in this interpretation in his book *Adwī' al-Bayān fī Idāh al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an* in the

5 Paul Walker, Caliph of Cairo: Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, 996–1021 (American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

6 Olly Akkerman, A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books: Arabic Manuscripts among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 45.

7 M. Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Hallāj: Ideas of an Ecstatic," *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 291-320; Andrew Wilcox, "The Dual Mystical Concepts of Fanā' and Baqā' in Early Sūfism," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (April 2011): 95-118.

8 Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ibn 'Arabī: The Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 149-192.

9 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an*, ed. Abdul Mohsin al-Turki, (Riyadh: Dar Hajar, 2001), p. 47.

10 Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), 1/20.

interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the attention to esoteric interpretations within the Ismaili sect's Qur'anic approach has been highlighted in various research studies. For example, Straface's work (1970) examines how the tenth-century Ismaili missionary, Abū Ya'qūb al-Siġistānī, interpreted ritual ablution and cultic purity, revealing their inner meanings and significance for salvation through the tradition of ta'wil.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Mahmoud's study (2021) delves into Ismailism's adoption of an esoteric approach to understanding the Sunnah, emphasizing its role in authenticating Sunnah and ensuring its consistent application.<sup>13</sup> Kerwanto's research (2020) reveals the diversity of theories surrounding esoteric Qur'anic interpretation within the Ismaili tradition, highlighting both commonalities and differences in interpretation methods.<sup>14</sup> However, it's crucial to note that previous studies have not fully explored the historical and comprehensive utilization of esoteric interpretations within Ismaili sect interpretations.

In Ismaili thought<sup>15</sup>, the issue of hermeneutics has taken a broader scope, encompassing not only the names and attributes of God but all religious matters, with interpretations of Qur'anic verses contrary to their apparent meanings forming a foundational aspect of Ismaili sect.<sup>16</sup> This expansive approach distinguishes the

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- 11 Mohammed Al-Amin al-Shinqiti, *Adwi' al-Bayān fī Idāh al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an*, ed. by Bakr ibn Abdullah Abu Zaid, (Jeddah: Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islami bi Jeddah, no date), p. 25; Mohammad Hussein al-Dhahabi, *Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1976), p. 104; Muhammad Luthfi Dhulkifli, "To What Extent Can the Diversity of Qur'anic Tafsir Be Described as 'Traditions of Reason'," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Hadis* Vol. 24, No. 1 (January 2023), 80; Muhammad Alwi HS, Siti Robikah, Iin Parninsih, "Reinterpretation of the Term Al-Nas (QS. Al-Hujurat 13) in Relation to the Social Aspects of Human and Homo Sapiens," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Hadis*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2021), 486.
- 12 Antonella Straface, "(I) Ritual Ablution and Cultic Purity in an Ismaili Context: The Siġistānian View," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 17 (2017): 268–79, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.6118>.
- 13 Ramy Mahmoud, "The Definition Of The Sunnah According To Ismailism: A Critical Reading," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 22, no. 1 (January 30, 2021): 185–204, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2021.2201-09>.
- 14 Kerwanto Kerwanto, "EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION OF THE QUR'AN (Study about Ta'wil al-Qur'ān)," *Mumtaz: Jurnal Studi Al-Quran Dan Keislaman* 4, no. 01 (June 30, 2020): 103–24, <https://doi.org/10.36671/mumtaz.v4i01.90>.
- 15 Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb Al-Milal wa Al-Nihal*, (Cairo: Mu'assasat Al-Halabi, n.d.)1/191; al-Nadim, Al-Fihrist, ed. Ayman Fuad Sayed, (London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2009, 2/666; Ferhad Deftary, *The Ismāīlis: Their History And Doctrines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 8.
- 16 It should be noted here that the issue of *tawil* among the sunni theological sects such as the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites and Mataridites did not take an esoteric form. Rather, their method of *tawil*, especially in the matter of the names and attributes of God, was to change the apparent meaning of the word to another meaning that is compatible with the Arabic language. The main reason for this is to purify God from imperfections. However, in the later centuries, when Maturidism and Ash'ari intertwined with Sufism, esoteric hermeneutics came to the fore.

Ismailis as Esotericisms or al-Bātiniyya<sup>17</sup>, renowned for their esoteric interpretation, which contrasts with the apparent interpretation known as Zāhir. This unique interpretation sets them apart from other Islamic sects. This expansion has significantly influenced other Islamic sects, notably Ishrāqī or philosophical mysticism<sup>18</sup>, which draws heavily from esoteric thought. The methods of interpreting Qur'anic verses or Hadiths in these sects resemble esoteric methods, lacking clear and strict rules accessible to all. However, Ismaili interpretation primarily relies on endorsement from the spiritual world, with interpretations deriving from the infallible imams. This concept of endorsement holds significant importance in Ismaili thought, serving as the strongest guarantee and primary argument for their interpretations. Denying esoteric interpretation deprives one of the imams' approval and the associated blessings, emphasizing the centrality of endorsement in Ismaili doctrine. In contrast, interpretation among Sufis often eliminates the intermediary between the interpreter and God, with interpretation occurring through direct inspiration from God in many cases.<sup>19</sup>

This article focuses on the Ismaili method of interpreting Qur'anic verses, beginning with an exploration of the origins of Ismaili esotericism and its connection to the Fatimid caliphs, integral to Ismaili activities. The article proceeds to examine the fundamental framework of Ismaili conceptualization of the prophets and its correlation with esoteric interpretation, illustrating with examples of Qur'anic verse interpretation. Various aspects of Qur'anic interpretation are also discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the article's focal point. To ensure a thorough investigation, a qualitative research approach is proposed, leveraging methods such as textual analysis and historical research due to the historical and theological nature of the topic. Employing multiple qualitative techniques, including archival studies, and participant observation, is recommended to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the Ismaili method of esoteric hermeneutics. Furthermore, adopting a comparative approach, juxtaposing Ismaili interpretations with those of other Islamic sects or theological traditions, could enrich the analysis. Ultimately, the chosen research methodology should be rigorous, interdisciplinary, and sensitive to the complexities of religious discourse and interpretation.

17 Al-Ghazālī, *Fadā'ih al-Bātiniyya*, ed. Abdul Rahman Badawi, (Kuwait: Dar al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, n.d.), p. 38; Shakib Saleh, "The Use of Bāṭinī, Fidā'i and Hashishī," *Studia Islamica* 82 (1995): 35-43.

18 See: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna-Suhrawardi-Ibn Arabi*, (New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1997), p.53; Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993.);

19 Abu Nasr al-Sarrāj, *Al-Luma' fi al-Tasawwuf*, ed. Abdul Halim Mahmoud and Abdul Baqi Sorour, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1964), p. 34,44.

## The Origins of Ismaili Hermeneutics

The concept of imamate holds central significance in Shiite thought, constituting one of the foundational pillars of the Shiite faith.<sup>20</sup> The Shiite community has historically witnessed significant divergence due to disagreements over the appointment of the imam.<sup>21</sup> Whenever disputes arose over the imamate, new sects within Shiism emerged. For instance, the Ismaili sect originated from such disputes, as they chose Ismail bin Ja'far as the imam following the death of the sixth Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt, Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq (d. 765).<sup>22</sup>

The issue of Imamate holds significant importance for many Ismaili Dai's, such as Hamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d.1021), who wrote a treatise on proving the Imamate, starting with the proof of the existence of God, as God's existence necessitates the sending of prophets and imams.<sup>23</sup> The concept of Imamate extends beyond the Ismaili community; Al-Nadim noted that Hisham ibn al-Hakam al-Kufi (d. 2nd century AH) contributed to the development of the issue of imamate.<sup>24</sup> For Ismailis, the Imam occupies a central position in belief and serves as the key to the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an. He is considered infallible by the Godhead, ensuring he cannot err. Moreover, not just anyone can be an Imam, but an Imam must meet certain conditions, and these conditions are as follows: *First*, complete infallibility from sins, mistakes, doubts and forgetfulness. *Second*, full knowledge of all religious knowledge and rulings related to religion in various fields of worldly and eschatological life, and this knowledge is not acquired but must be a revelation from God, either directly or indirectly. *Third*, being characterized by all human virtues and perfection.<sup>25</sup>

In Ismaili belief, the Imamate is hereditary and appointed by the previous Imam, representing an appointment in the name of God, a practice shared across all Shiite sects and a significant factor in the emergence of the Ismaili sect. The Fatimid

20 Shi'a traditions have many narrations that show how important it is to know the Imam, including a narration attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq that states: "Those who recognize us are believers, and those who deny us are disbelievers" and "The Imam is a flag between God Almighty and His creatures; whoever recognizes him is a believer, and whoever denies him is a disbeliever". Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *al-Kāfi*, (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyyah, 1963 1/187.

21 Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, *Maqalāt al-Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilāf al-Musallin*, ed. Helmut Ritter, (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, n.d.), p. 5.

22 Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, ed. Bashir Awwad Ma'ruf, (Beirut: Dar al-Risalah, 1985), 6/ 255.

23 Al-Kirmānī, Hamid al-Din Ahmad, *Al-Mesābih fi Ithbāt al-Imamah*, ed. Mustafa Ghaleb, (Dar al-Muntazar, Beirut, 1996), p. 27.

24 Al-Nadim, *Al-Fihrist*, 1/632.

25 Ibrahim al-Amini, *Manārāt al-Hudā: Dirāsah Marwdbi'yyah li-Mas'alah al-Imāmah wa al-Hayat*, (Qom : Ansarian Foundation for Printing and Publishing, , 2006), p. 7.

state in North Africa was founded on this principle, with the Fatimid caliphs tracing their lineage to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. However, this lineage was a subject of historical controversy and served as a political tool to critique the Fatimid state and challenge the legitimacy of its caliphate.<sup>26</sup> An important source on Ismaili Dāi's is written by Al-Qādi Al-Nu'mān<sup>27</sup>, which describes the Fatimid caliphs and their knowledge of the Zāhir and the Bātin. He indicates that the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (931-975) emphasizes belief in both the Zāhir and the Bātin, asserting that nothing is without either. He emphasizes belief in the Zāhir and said that there is nothing without the Zāhir, and the same is true in the matter of the Batin, there is nothing without the Bātin, so it is necessary to believe in both the Zāhir and the Bātin. Furthermore, Caliph Al-Mansur Billah (914-953) gave Al-Mu'izz a book in the handwriting of the Fatimid caliph Al-Mahdi (874-934), the founder of the Fatimid caliphate. This book contains Arabic letters, seemingly used as a dictionary by Al-Mahdi and sent to Ismaili Dāi's in the East and West. Al-Mu'izz diligently sought to understand this explanation, eventually decoding the letters in a dream after days of distress upon receiving a similar book he couldn't comprehend.<sup>28</sup>

The narrative alludes to the utilization of cryptic writing by the Fatimid Imams in their communications, presenting two plausible interpretations. Firstly, it suggests that such encrypted messages could have functioned as a tactical measure employed by political figures to ensure the secrecy of entrusted endeavors. Secondly, it raises the possibility that these enigmatic writings might reflect a penchant for esoteric interpretation, hinting at potential origins and guidelines for such practices within the Fatimid Imams' realm. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the latter supposition lacks substantial substantiation.

### ***The issue of enunciation in Ismaili thought in relation to esoteric hermeneutics***

The designation of the Spokesman/Nātik holds a significant position in Ismaili thought, equating his role to that of the Prophet in Islam, implying that the Spokesman can only convey truth with support from the spiritual upper world/ *Al-'Alam al-'Uluwī al-Ruhānī*. Al-Sijistānī (d.971) offers several explanations for this term. Firstly, he interprets it as referring to the abilities of the soul, particularly

26 Ayman Fuad Al-Sayyid, *Al-Dawlah Al-Fātimīyah Tafsīr Jadīd*, (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah Al-'Āmmah lil-Kutub, 2007), pp. 100-108.

27 Rami Mahmoud, "The Definition of the Sunnah According to Ismailism: A Critical Reading," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Hadis*, 2021, 198.

28 Al-Qādi al-Nu'mān, *Al-Majālis wa al-Musāyarāt*, ed. Al-Habib Al-Faqī, Ibrahim Shabouh, and Muhammad al-Ya'lavi, (Dar al-Muntazar Edition, 1996), pp. 105, 130, 131; see also: Rami Mahmud, *Fatimiler Döneminde Siyasî Ve İdeolojik Bir Yapılanma: Kelamî Açından İsmailî İnanç Sistemi*, (Istanbul: Post yayınları, 2019), p. 195.

speech, which distinguishes humans from animals. Thus, the Prophet earns the title of Spokesman due to his superior ability in speech rather than physical attributes like courage or strength. Additionally, Al-Sijistānī provides another interpretation, suggesting that the true speech is what Gabriel imparts into the Prophet's heart, devoid of falsehood or contradiction. This speech represents knowledge without falsehood or contradiction, distinguishing the Prophet as speaking with correct knowledge rather than false or contradictory knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Sijistānī also defends the name of the spokesman -during his pride in the Ismaili doctrine- by saying that this name is a good and honorable name, because the spokesman/*Nātik* is not separated from the truth and does not contradict it, and it is mentioned in the Qur'anic verses, as in God's saying: "Nor does he speak of his own whims." [Al-Najm: 3], and he said: "This, our record, speaks about you in truth. Indeed, we were having transcribed whatever you used to do." [Al-Jāthiyah: 29]. This means that speech is a companion of truth. If speech were not a companion of truth, God would not have added it to His Book. This also means that speech itself is honorable and holy, so God has forbidden it from the disbelievers on the Day of Judgment, as stated in the verse about them: (This is a day when they will not speak) [Al-Mursalāt: 35].<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting here that what is meant by speaking is the utterance of the esoteric interpretation, and if the spokesman is infallible, then his interpretation is also infallible.

One of the most important works that have reached us in esoteric hermeneutics is Al-Qādi al-Nu'mān's "Basis of Hermeneutics/*Asās al-Ta'wīl*" book. Al-Qadi Al-Nu'man<sup>31</sup> divided the book into six chapters and made these chapters consistent with the Ismaili belief in each of these chapters. His reliance in most of these chapters was on Qur'anic verses, which is the method of Al-Qādi al-Nu'mān in his various writings and the Ismaili method in general is to mention Qur'anic verses more often, compared to the Hadith evidence, as their reasoning with Hadiths is rare. As for the book, it is known that the temporal division in the Ismaili belief until the Day of Judgment is seven roles that begin with Adam, as the first speaker according to the Ismaili belief, and end with the coming of the last awaited Qāi'm, who concludes these roles and on whom the Day of Judgment falls and holds people accountable for believing in the Imams. This is why the book was divided into six chapters, each chapter containing the spokesmen and what followed them. The seventh and final

29 Al-Sijistānī, *Tuhfat al-Mustajibin: Thalāth Rasail Ismailiyya*, ed. Arif Tamer, (Beirut: Dar al-Afāk al-Jadida, 1983), pp. 16, 17.

30 Al-Sijistānī, *Al-Ifitkhār*, ed. Ismail Poonawala, (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islāmi, 2000), p. 146; Al-Qādi al-Nu'mān, *Asas al-Ta'wīl*, ed. Arif Tamer, (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa), p. 52.

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chapter had no place in the book because the awaited Qa'im<sup>32</sup> has not yet come, so Qādi al-Nu'mān did not give him a place in his book.

In the works of Ismaili Dāi's, esoteric interpretations, analogies, and approaches concerning the six prophets are commonly found, highlighting their significance and pivotal role in Ismaili belief. For instance, some Ismailis liken the first of the six prophets to the fundamental acts of worship in Islam, as articulated by Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Hussein Al-Bāqir: "Islam is built on seven pillars: Wilayah is the best of them, and through it and through the wali it ends in knowledge, purity, zakāt, fasting, pilgrimage, and jihad." In this analogy, Wilāyah is likened to Adam, peace be upon him, as Adam was the first wali of Allah who commanded the angels to prostrate to him, implicitly recognizing his Wilāyah. Additionally, Iblis' trial stemmed from his refusal to recognize Adam's Wilāyah, leading to his expulsion from the mercy of Allah, which serves as a lesson for all humankind.<sup>33</sup>

Purity is symbolized by Noah, who was the first envoy sent by Allah to cleanse people from sins, serving as the initial spokesman after Adam. Prayer is likened to Ibrahim, who constructed the first qiblah for Muslims to pray towards, as referenced in the Quran: "I set my face towards the One who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not of the polytheist" (Al-An'ām: 79). Zakat finds its parallel in Moses, who was the first to advocate for zakat, as depicted in the Qur'anic verse: "Did you hear the story of Moses when his Lord called him to the sacred valley. Go to Pharaoh, for he has become arrogant and say, 'Do you want to be zakat?'" (Al-Naza'at: 15-18). Fasting is exemplified by Jesus, who instructed his mother to inform anyone she encountered that he was fasting, as narrated in the saying: "Eat, drink, and rest your eyes, and if you see any human being, say, 'I have made a vow of fasting to the Merciful, so I will not speak to a human being today'" (Maryam: 26). Lastly, Muhammad instituted the rituals of Hajj and elucidated them correctly, as the Arabs in the pre-Islamic era engaged in improper practices during Hajj, such as circumambulating the Kaaba naked and clapping.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Examples of Esoteric Hermeneutics in Ismailism***

This process of transmitting esoteric interpretation begins with the spokesmen/ *Al-Nutāqa'a*, followed by the *Al-Usus wal-Lawāhiq*, and then reaches the imams before finally reaching ordinary believers who receive this esoteric knowledge.

32 Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Jesus, the Qā'im and the End of the World," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 75, no. 1/4 (2001): p. 86.

33 Al-Nu'mān, *Ta'wīl al-D'ā'im*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-A'zamī, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 1/51.

34 Al-Nu'mān, *Ta'wīl al-D'ā'im*, 2/52.

However, believers in the Ismaili faith must undergo stages of spiritual development before attaining esoteric interpretation. They are likened to infants who initially require their mother's milk and gradually transition to solid foods. Consuming solid foods prematurely can be harmful to their spiritual growth. Ismailis highlight that the term al-Bātin is frequently used in the Quran, and God often presents parables with esoteric meanings beyond their apparent interpretations. For instance, Ismailis offer an esoteric interpretation of the famous Shahada, "There is no deity but God." According to them, this declaration comprises two parts: the affirmative part signifies the celestial realm where God resides, surrounded by the Imams, while the negative part represents the terrestrial world encompassing the physical realm, including our own world.<sup>35</sup>

The Ismailis offer an interpretation of the Qur'anic verse stating, "O Messenger, report what has been sent to you from your Lord, and if you do not do so, you have not delivered His message." According to their interpretation, this verse signifies God's command to the Messenger to inform people that Ali ibn Abi Talib is the Imam appointed after him<sup>36</sup>, equating the message with the designation of Ali ibn Abi Talib as the Imam. Furthermore, in his defense of the authority of the Imams, al-Qādi al-Nu'mān interprets the Qur'anic verse, "And We made the night and the day two signs." He explains that God's signs are His arguments to His creatures, specifically referring to the Imams whom He has mandated obedience to and made it obligatory to follow.<sup>37</sup>

### *A critical analysis of the Ismaili esoteric hermeneutic approach*

As highlighted earlier, esoteric hermeneutics is a distinct form of interpretation primarily associated with the Ismailis, but it has also influenced other Islamic sects, particularly within the realm of mysticism. However, researchers pose a valid question regarding the control mechanisms for this type of hermeneutics. Is there an absolute rule governing it, enabling those who adhere to the Ismaili perspective to comprehend it, or does such a rule not exist? This question delves into the intricacies of esoteric interpretation within the Ismaili tradition. While there may not be a single, universally applicable rule governing this type of hermeneutics, adherents to the Ismaili faith likely rely on a combination of factors. These may include the teachings of their religious leaders, the guidance provided in their sacred texts, and personal spiritual experiences. Ultimately, the control mechanisms for esoteric hermeneutics within the Ismaili tradition may vary among individuals and communities, shaped by

<sup>35</sup> Al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-Tā'wil*, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-Tā'wil*, p. 354.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Nu'mān, *Asās al-Tā'wil*, p. 52.

their understanding of their faith, the teachings they receive, and their interpretation of sacred texts.

Indeed, the answer to this question lies in comparing the Ismailis' interpretations of Qur'anic verses. When scrutinizing their esoteric interpretations, we observe that a significant portion relies on factors such as word proportions or the resemblance between letters within words and sentences. Additionally, some interpretations draw from Shiite beliefs without providing additional evidence from the Arabic language. When challenged, Ismailis often assert that these interpretations originate from the infallible Imams and thus cannot be contested. To comprehend the Qur'anic words logically, one typically refers to the Arabic language itself. However, it's essential to acknowledge the significant spiritual aspect involved, meaning that interpretations may extend beyond literal word limits to extract deeper meanings. Nevertheless, without clear rules, interpretations may stray beyond rational bounds.

This approach clarifies the Ismaili treatment of their sources, which they guard as sacred secrets. Sharing these sources could lead to disputes over their interpretations. Al-Shātibi (1388) mentioned conditions for accepting a meaning other than that required by the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text, one of which is that it has a side that is recognized in the Arabic language and is in accordance with the Arabic purposes. If there is an interpretation other than what is required by the language of the Arabs, we cannot characterize it, as Al-Shatibi believes, as Arabic. The second condition is that it has a proof from another text that testifies to the validity of this interpretation without opposition.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Fakhr al-Rāzi (1209) provided examples of esoteric interpretations, such as interpreting the verse "Take off your slippers" as immersion in the service of God without envisioning a physical action. Similarly, he interpreted the verse "Fire, be cold and peaceful to Ibrahim" as symbolizing Ibrahim's deliverance from oppressors without an actual fire. Rāzi argued that opening the door to such interpretations could lead to endless possibilities. Instead, he advocated for understanding every word in the Quran according to its apparent meaning unless there is a definite and unquestionable mental indication necessitating a different interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion:

This study concludes that esoteric thought, prevalent throughout Islamic intellectual history, entails interpreting Qur'anic verses in a manner distinct from

38 Al-Shātibi, *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, ed. Abu Ubaydah Mashhur ibn Hasan Al Salmān, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Affan, 1997), 4/232.

39 Al-Fakhr al-Rāzi, *Mafātih al-Ghayb*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981) 22/10.

their apparent meanings. Such interpretation categorizes verses into their *Zāhir*, or surface meanings, and their *Bātin*, or hidden meanings, which may pose challenges for ordinary Muslim readers to grasp. Historically, esoteric thought has been associated with the Ismaili Shiite sect, often referred to as *al-Bātinism* or *al-Bātinīyya*. This ideological stance permeates various aspects of life within Ismaili communities, including politics and religion.

The Ismaili esoteric interpretation of Qur'anic verses is primarily rooted in their conception of the Imamate. Like other Shiite sects, Ismailis recognize Ali ibn Abi Tālib as the rightful Imam after the Prophet's demise. The Ismaili lineage traces back to Ismail ibn Ja'far al-Sādiq, the seventh Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt. Unlike mainstream Islamic belief, Ismailis regard prophets as spokesmen (*Al-Nutāqa'a*), such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who transmit divine interpretation from the celestial realm. However, discrepancies exist among Ismailis regarding the number and identities of these spokesmen.

The esoteric interpretation of Qur'anic verses by Ismailis aligns with their theological framework, particularly concerning the Imamate. Additionally, Ismailis interpret numerous verses related to creation and the afterlife esoterically, guided by their distinct doctrinal perspectives. However, this interpretative approach lacks a universal guideline, contributing to the preservation of Ismaili teachings within the community and limited accessibility to outsiders. Furthermore, the influence of Ismailism extends beyond Shiite sects, impacting various Sunni groups, notably Sufism. Therefore, a comprehensive study of esoteric hermeneutics is essential within this broader context. Comparative analyses among theological groups, encompassing figures like Ibn Arabi, al-Hallāj, and Ibn al-Fārid, offer valuable insights into the complexities of esoteric interpretation. Such studies should account for doctrinal variances and socio-political contexts, fostering a deeper comprehension of esoteric hermeneutics in Islamic intellectual history.

## **Supplementary Materials**

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## **Authors' contributions**

I did this research by myself, from preparing the materials, writing the paper, reviewing, and revising.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Conflicts of Interest

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