

THE APPARENT AND HIDDEN IMAM: COMPARING TEACHINGS OF ISMAILI PHILOSOPHERS

By Yoni Dabas
Yale University

The Ismaili doctrine is built around the centrality and appreciation of the Imam as the eminent spiritual leader and teacher of the Muslim community. In this paper, I explore the importance of the role of both the Apparent and the Hidden Imam according to Ismaili philosophy by examining *Master of the Age* and *Paradise of Submission* by Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d.1020) and Nasir al-Din Tusi (d.1274) respectively.³ I will also review both al-Kirmani's and Tusi's backgrounds and the way in which their philosophical positions about the idea of Imam aligned with the political and historical circumstances they experienced during the writing of these books. The questions that guided my research are: what is the necessity of the leadership of the Ismaili Imam over communities? What are the attributes

the Ismaili Imam possesses that enable him to be superior above all other humans?

The origins of Ismaili Islam can be traced back to the death of the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in the year 765. After al-Sadiq's death, his followers split, resulting in the formation of two different groups. The first group recognized al-Sadiq's son—Musa al-Kazim (d.799)—as the rightful new Imam, while the second group recognized another son of al-Sadiq—Ismail ibn-Ja'far (d. circa 762 or went into hiding according to Ismaili sources)—as the next Imam. Since Ismail ibn-Ja'far was not present when his father passed away, a group of followers believed that his son Muhammad ibn Ismail (d.795), the grandson of al-Sadiq, is the seventh Imam. The followers of Ismail ibn-Ja'far became known as the Ismaili

“He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time, dies the death of an ignoramus”

- Nasir al-Din Tusi¹

movement, or the Seveners, due to their belief in the seventh Imam.

After the death of Muhammad ibn Ismail, his followers divided into two different groups: one believed that Ismail ibn-Ja'far was the last Imam that would return from hiding as Mahdiin the end of times while the other group believed that his offspring should continue his rule. The latter group secretly organized themselves as a revolutionary movement against the Abbasid rule by using dais, a network of missionaries that spread the Ismaili message around the Middle East. This particular development in the Ismaili movement had a political mission to crown their Imam as the leader of the Muslim community. With time, their message spread to southern Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, Sind, and parts of North Africa. Soon, the Ismaili movement gained formal political power in the form of the Fatimid Caliphate and unified the different Ismaili groups under one Imam. This did not last long, however, and the Ismaili movement separated into two groups yet again on the question of the rightful Imam: Ismailis who



supported the Imam of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, and those who believed that the community should wait for the *Mahdi* Muhammad ibn Ismail without choosing an Imam in the meantime.³

The period of the Fatimid Caliphate is known as the golden age of the Ismaili movement. During this period, the Fatimid Caliphate transformed its *dais* system of propaganda into a public one, supporting philosophers to produce Ismaili doctrine and the idea of the Imamate. One of these philosophers was Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani—not much is known about al-Kirmani as he did not include many personal details in his literature. Nevertheless, from the evidence that does appear in his books, we know that he comes from the province of Kirman in Persia and that he moved back and forth between Iraq and Egypt later in his life, where he worked under the chief of *dai*. All of al-Kirmani's surviving literature is dedicated to the visible Apparent Fatimid Imam of his time and was meant to challenge the legitimization of the Abbasid Caliphate. Al-Kirmani's piece, *Master of the Age*, was composed in Iraq and provides a clear message of the necessity of the Ismaili Imamate and the Imam's virtues. The goal of *Master of the Age* is to establish the authenticity of the Fatimid Caliphate and to prove that it is the one and only valid Imamate.²

During the Fatimid reign, another major schism occurred in the Ismaili movement, resulting in the formation of a new Ismaili faction called Nizari. Nizari Ismailism promotes the centrality of the overthrown Fatimid Imam Nizar ibn al-Mustansir (d.1095). This movement and its ambitious leader, Hassan Al-Sabah (d.1124), created their own state—"Nizari Ismaili State of Persia and Syria"—using Alamut as a stronghold. Two centuries after the death of al-Kirmani, the prominent Ismaili philosopher, Nasir al-Din Tusi continued to propagate the necessity of the Imamate. Unlike al-Kirmani, there is much more information regarding Tusi's life; he was born in the city of Tus and learned in Nishapur and Baghdad, where he received an Ismaili education.

In 1233, after finishing his studies, Tusi found an Ismaili governor in Kuhistan who supported him financially; under his guidance, Tusi produced works on ethics, Ismaili philosophy, and a spiritual autobiography. In the early 1240s, Tusi joined the Nizari Ismaili state and moved to the fortress of Alamut, where he resided for twenty years, learning and teaching Ismaili Nizari Islam. His lectures in the Alamut fortress were compiled into 27 chapters of the book *Paradise of Submission* by his students. This book's main purpose is to explain Nazari philoso-

phy regarding "the people of unity," which are the Ismaili Hidden Imam and his followers. Regarding imam-ate, this book gives a philosophical perspective about the Hidden Imam and his role in resurrection, his divine essence, and his spiritual knowledge. *Paradise of Submission* is the last important Ismaili Nizari book before Alamut surrendered and was captured by the Mongols, marking the end of the rule of the Nizari Ismaili imamate.¹

In *Master of the Age*, al-Kirmani dedicates a hefty part of his book to the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (d.1021) as the rightful successor of the Imamate. As suitable for an Ismaili book, al-Kirmani gives seven different demonstrations for his argument. In his first demonstrations, he explains that the imamate was passed on both by succession and appointment directly from Ali to Ja'far al Sadiq and then to his son Ismail. Since Ja'far al Sadiq had more than one son, he elected his successor; according to al-Kirmani, since Ja'far al Sadiq was a true Imam and a true Imam is infallible, the choice of his son Ismail could not have been wrong. In his next demonstrations, al-Kirmani refutes non-Ismaili claims to the throne of the Imamate and asserts that the rightful future Imams have to come from Ismaili lineage. In his sixth and seventh demonstrations, al-Kirmani argues that the Imam role has to

pass on to the son of the Fatimid Caliph, bi-Amr Allah. Al-Kirmani explains that it is important to keep the tradition of the rightful guided community that bi-Amr Allah led and that the only way to preserve this tradition is by enabling his progeny to be the next Imams.²

The succession of the Imamate is also mentioned by Tusi. He does not dedicate as much attention in his piece *Paradise of Submission* to the genealogy of the Ismaili Imam. Unlike al-Kirmani, Tusi's text regarding the legitimacy of the Ismaili Imam is somewhat convoluted. Tusi argues that the Imamate of Ali descent is the only right one: "the formula of the profession of Divine Unity is the [exclusive] heritage to be transmitted and inherited through the sacred progeny and holy descendants, in one line of descent an essence." Nevertheless, Tusi does not mention names other than the early Imams through to Imam Hassan ibn Ali. After writing about Imam Hassan ibn Ali, Tusi describes the history of the "physical Imams" in a couple of sentences without explicitly referring to names. He claims that the Imamate was carried by the sons of the Imams during the period in which the Imamate had political authority.

Furthermore, he argues that because humans have sinned and stopped believing in the true Imam, the true Imam and his successors went into concealment: "the imams

confined them in the [phenomenal] realm of justice and punishment." Here, Tusi does not explain whether he is referring to the period of the Imamate of Ali's sons or the period of the Fatimid Caliphate. He emphasizes the rule of the Hidden Imam above all others and does not dabble with who the Apparent rightful Imam was after Ali and his sons, as al-Kirmani does.¹ Tusi's nameless description of the succession of the Imamates aligns with the political agenda of the Nizari state and its founder Hassan al-Sabbah (d.1124), who was not of Ismaili progeny. The situation in Alamut required an establishment of philosophy that would justify an Ismaili ruler who was not of Ismaili progeny. In order to deal with this problem, Tusi emphasizes the centrality of the Hidden Imam. In other chapters, Tusi elaborates more on this problem by discussing a temporary replacement for the Hidden Imam.

Tusi and al-Kirmani hold different opinions regarding the hierarchy of the Imam. According to Tusi, there are seven different spiritual roles in the Nizari Ismaili structure. The different roles are meant to create a chain that will enable the passage of knowledge from the Hidden Imam to the community. The roles are: Imam, *hujjat*, pupils, teachers, missionaries, gates of esoteric meaning, and tongues of knowledge. In this pyramid, the different roles are divided by level of intelligence and

knowledge and in this structure, the Hidden Imam is the one that is beyond learning or unlearning. He is the source of illumination and he is the one that obtains the most perfect intellect, which is manifested in the supreme *hujjat*, the proof. This means that the *hujjat*'s level of reasoning cannot be attained through any type of learning or by a physical teacher, giving the *hujjat* a spiritual unquestionable authority.

In order to explain the relationship between the *hujjat* and the Hidden Imam, Tusi writes: "his position [*hujjat*] has been likened to the moon. For just as the body of the Moon is in itself dark but illuminated by the sun, taking the Sun's place in its absence, and lighting up the earth." Tusi claims that the *hujjat* is the mediator between humans on earth and the Hidden Imam in the sublime world. He argues that the *hujjat* shares his thoughts and obligations with the Hidden Imam and by manifesting the most perfect intellect of the Hidden Imam, the *hujjat* teaches the other ranks under him. In his book, when Tusi refers to the *hujjat*, he refers to Hassan al-Sabbah, the former grand master of Alamut. After his death, al-Sabbah was not only regarded as a political organizer of the Nizari Ismaili state, but also acquired spiritual significance in the eyes of the students in Alamut.¹

Tusi's position regarding the *hujjat* as the representative of the

Hidden Imam is a new addition to Ismaili thought that diverts from al-Kirmani's. Al-Kirmani explains that the Fatimid Imam, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, is the successor of former Imams, writing that "his [Ismail b. Ja'far] successor who has been designated exists and he is al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, the Commander of the Faithful." Al-Kirmani mentions Ismail b. Ja'far to be an Imam, arguing that he was a true Imam. With that said, unlike Tusi, al-Kirmani emphasizes the point that there is no essential difference between Ismail b. Ja'far and the existent Apparent Imam. He claims that the importance of Ismail b. Ja'far and his attributes are equal to those of the Apparent Imam. Moreover, in his piece, al-Kirmani does not mention the idea of the *hujjat*; according to him, someone that is not of the progeny of the earlier Imams cannot hold a spiritual position similar to the Imam.²

I argue that the difference between the two thinkers regarding Ismaili spiritual hierarchy is borne of political circumstances. Whereas al-Kirmani wrote under the Fatimid Caliphate that was ruled by progeny of earlier Imams, Tusi did not; the latter wrote his piece in Alamut, an isolated Ismaili stronghold that was founded by Ismaili *dais* who did not have any blood relationship to the Imamate. Tusi's argument regarding the importance of the *hujjat* comes as a solution to the problem of Niz-

ari Ismaili doctrine—legitimacy of an Ismaili entity to rule over a Muslim community without having any biological connection to the early Imams.

The two philosophers also discuss the roles of the Apparent and Hidden Imam. Al-Kirmani argues that after the death of Prophet Muhammad, humans needed the Imam to prevent modifications of revelations. Moreover, he explains that the revelations that were brought by the prophets are interpreted differently by various Islamic schools of law. Al-Kirmani expands on that, claiming that human beings cannot fully distinguish between metaphoric and literal verses in the Quran. The only one who can appropriately distinguish between the meanings is their teacher, the Imam, whose guidance will produce the rightful interpretation of the Quran to Islamic law: "wisdom requires there to be in the community someone who explains to them what those metaphors and similes refers to, lest they fall into error." Furthermore, the Imam is the preserver of order who encourages individuals to pray for God and ask for his forgiveness. By keeping individuals adherent to Islamic law, the Imam can protect the community upon judgment day and warn them before the day comes.²

Similarly to al-Kirmani, Tusi also believes that there is a special role for the Imam upon judgment day. Unlike al-Kirmani, Tusi focus-

es on the role of the Hidden Imam and not the Apparent Imam. Tusi claims that before he passed away, the prophet Muhammad declared the Hidden Imam as the lord of resurrection, saying that "no prophet ever announced the sublimity and majesty of the Imam more openly than the seal of prophets." From Tusi's point of view, the Hidden Imam, the one that will rule the day of judgment, should be summoned by a human being. Here, he does not refer to an Apparent Imam, but rather to the *hujjat* Hassan al-Sabbah: "our master [Hasan-I Sabbah] –may God sanctify his soul –who was the supreme *Hujjat* of our lord the Resurrector of the Resurrection, the Messiah of the Cycle of Resurrection."¹

Both philosophers agree on the necessity of the Imam and his succession, infallibility, and perfect knowledge. Nevertheless, the two dispute over the Imam's identity, his role on the day of judgment, and the role of the *hujjat*. The idea that there is only one rightful leader to the Muslim community threatened other political entities, which fought over authority and power, eventually defeating both the Fatimid Caliphate and the Nizari Ismaili state. That being said, even with time and changing political circumstances, the Ismaili movement has always believed in the necessity and the role of the Imam despite persecution and inner struggles.