

The Poet as Exegete: An  
Analysis of a Panegyric for  
the Ahl al-Bayt by al-Sayyid  
al-Ḥimyarī

BY MEHREEN ZAHRA JIWAN



BERKELEY INSTITUTE  
FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES



## BERKELEY INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

The Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies (BLIIS) is a non-profit organization that was established in 2017 and is based in Berkeley, California. It was founded with the goal of promoting scholarship on Islam and Islamic cultures both historical and contemporary. The institute's academic research on Islam includes a broad range of academic disciplines from theology to law, and from anthropology to political science.

The institute encourages an interdisciplinary approach to the academic study of Islam. Within the Islamic tradition, the institute promotes research on those areas which have had relatively little attention devoted to them in Western academia to date. These include the intellectual and literary expressions of Islam in general, and Shi'ism in particular.

As a new kind of online academic institution, the Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies is aimed at a high-visibility context and its digital platform makes the institute cost-effective for high-value content compared to traditional academic departments.

The views and conclusions of any BLIIS publication are solely those of its author (s), and do not reflect the views and conclusions of the Institute, its board of directors, management, or its other researchers and scholars.

Copyright © 2019 Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies

2425 Channing Way Ste B #302 Berkeley, California 94704

[www.bliis.org](http://www.bliis.org)

## AUTHOR (S)

**M**ehreen Zahra Jiwan is currently an MA student at the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion. She obtained her Honours BA in Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations and Peace, Conflict & Justice Studies with the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. Her research is primarily concerned with the epistemological potential of the ziyāra ritual to articulate a collective Imāmī identity between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

# The Poet as Exegete: An Analysis of a Panegyric for the Ahl al-Bayt by al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī

Mehreen Zahra Jiwan

*Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies*

## Abstract

This article provides a detailed commentary on a poem attributed to al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī (d. between 173/789 and 179/795) in praise of the Ahl al-Bayt of Muḥammad. Through examining philological, aesthetic, and contextual elements of the piece, I argue that the exegetical nature of the poem acts as a site for theological and political arguments central to proto-Shī‘ism. It may be useful to study the works of literary artists such as al-Ḥimyarī as poetic models for early Shī‘i hermeneutics.

## Keywords

Theology, poetry, Sayyid al-Himyarī, Shia Islam

## INTRODUCTION

**A**bū Hāshim Ismā‘īl b. Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Rabī‘a b. Mufarrigh, known as al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī, grew up in Basra and died in Baghdad towards the end of the eighth century A.D. While it seems his parents belonged to the *Ibāḍiyya*<sup>1</sup>, al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī adhered to the early doctrine of the *Kaysāniyya*, believing in the imamate of Muḥammad b. Ḥanafīyyah, his occultation, and his return as the Mahḍī. Many of his poems in praise of Ibn Ḥanafīyya attest to these *Kaysāni* leanings.<sup>2</sup> Medieval Twelver Shī‘i sources however, consider al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī to have later converted to proto-Imāmī Shī‘ism and cite hagiographic reports of his conversion upon meeting Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). The *taja‘fur* (becoming a follower of al-Ṣādiq, and hence Ja‘farī) poem<sup>3</sup> attributed to al-Ḥimyarī (although deemed to perhaps be anachronistic and old forgeries by modern *ḥadīth* critics<sup>4</sup>) are considered proof of this widely held medieval and modern Twelver Shī‘i belief regarding al-Ḥimyarī’s religious identity.

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Ibāḍiyya* are one of the main and oldest branches of the *Khārijīyya*.

T. Lewicki, “al-Ibāḍiyya,” *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Wadad Kadi, “al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī,” *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Segments from this poem are widely cited in early sources including al-Mu‘tazz’ *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu‘arā’*, al-Nawbakhtī’s *Firāq al-Shī‘a*, Ibn Bābawayh’s *Kamāl al-Dīn*, al-Mufīd’s *Al-Fuṣūl al-Mukhtārah*, and Ibn Shahr Āshūb’s *al-Manāqib*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

Al-Ḥimyarī was a *muḥdath*<sup>5</sup> poet compared with those at the rank of Abu-l ‘Atāḥiyah and Bashshār b. Burd.<sup>6</sup> However, only 221 fragments or entire poems of his purported 2300 poems survived and were narrated through a number of individuals including four of his daughters.<sup>7</sup> The majority of al-Ḥimyarī’s later poems are in praise of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and the *Ahl al-Bayt*<sup>8</sup> more generally. Many of these poems are replete with reproachful expressions and vilifications of the first three caliphs, certain wives of Muḥammad, and the Umayyads –all of whom are remembered as hostile to the *Ahl al-Bayt* in early and later Shī‘ī works. According to Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. shortly after 360/971), much of al-Ḥimyarī’s work was shunned at quite an early stage precisely due to these hostile elements as well as the overt praises of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and the Banū Hāshim.<sup>9</sup>

## COMMENTARY

The current study examines a poem in praise of the Ahl al-Bayt in *Diwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī* edited by Shākīr Hādī Shakar.<sup>10</sup> Shakar extracts this poly-thematic poem from various sections of Ibn Shahr Āshūb’s (d.588/1192) *Manāqib Āl Abī-Ṭālib*<sup>11</sup> as well as more contemporary works such as Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn’s (d.1952) *A‘yān al-Shī‘a*<sup>12</sup>.

In the commentary that follows, I have divided each section of the poem thematically while making special note of aesthetic, philological, and contextual elements of this highly inter-textual piece. The poem has been composed in the standard *Baḥr al-Kāmil* (meter).

### Lines 1-3: *Manqaba* account: Muḥammad’s miraculous prayer against ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib’s enemy from Banī Ḥaṣḥās

1 And ask the tribe of Ḥaṣḥās: inform us about one whose arrow aimed at the successor, was in its bow ready to shoot.

2 Muṣṭafā prayed against him and his people with a praiseworthy prayer; the prayer of one who is supported (by God).

3 So his right hand became impaired as a punishment and he returned to his tribe with a blackened face.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Muḥdath*, pl. *muḥdathūn*: ‘Modern’ poets of the ‘Abbāsīd period compared to the pre-Islamic and Umayyad Arabic poets. The most prominent characteristic of their poetry is the application of *badī‘*, or complex metaphors and figures of speech to their poetry.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> People of the House, in the Shī‘ī tradition, refers specifically to Muḥammad, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, and the nine Imams who descend from Ḥusayn.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Shākīr Hādī Shakar ed., *Diwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī* (Qom: al-Maktaba al-Ḥaydariyya, n.d), 185-192.

<sup>11</sup> This is a multi-volume book on the merits of the fourteen infallibles; a category commonly used in the Shī‘ī tradition to refer to Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve Imams.

Matthew Pierce, “Ibn Shahrāshūb,” *EI THREE*, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> This is a comprehensive dictionary of important Shī‘ī personalities, most of whom are scholars.

I have been unable to locate a historical reference for this *manqaba*<sup>13</sup>. Ibn Shahrāshūb simply states that al-Ḥimyarī composed these lines to describe one of the many assassination attempts on ‘Alī’s life whilst Muḥammad was alive.<sup>14</sup> The editor has collected the fragments of this poem from various disconnected sections and therefore it is unclear as to whether there are lines missing between line 3 and line 4.

#### Lines 4-7: Verse of *al-Nūr: Ahl al-Bayt* and the blessed olive tree

- 4 From the offspring/pith of Adam a date palm was planted, standing tall in dignity.  
\* And he (Adam) became delighted with pride over the ‘pure/blessed of birth’  
5 An olive tree rose that was neither cast to the East\* nor was it Western in origin.  
6 Its light continuously shines from its oil \* Over smooth plains and over hard, solid rocks.  
7 Its blazing lamp is Aḥmad and the one who\* guides to the peak of the ascetic path (‘Alī).

This section is framed around a parable in the twenty-fourth verse of *Sūra al-Nūr* (Chapter 35) in the Qur’ān. This verse has been given much attention in the early Shī‘ī *ḥadīth* corpus and has generally been interpreted as a parable for the *Ahl al-Bayt*. This paper is not concerned with evaluating the historicity of this poem (as truly being composed by Al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī) or the *aḥādīth* attributed to al-Ṣādiq and al-Bāqir (d. 117/733) that explain this Qur’ānic parable. However, this poem’s inclusion in Ibn Shahrāshūb’s *al-Manāqib* indicates that by the twelfth century at the very latest, these lines of poetry were attributed to al-Ḥimyarī and were understood to be directly related to the well-established Twelver Shī‘ī commentaries of the corresponding Qur’ānic verse.

Al-Ḥimyarī has taken a fragment of this parable, specifically employing the blessed olive tree as a *mathal* for Muḥammad’s family, the *Ahl al-Bayt*: “...*It (the brilliant star) is lit by a blessed olive tree not of the East or the West. The oil almost radiates with light even though fire has not touched it...*”<sup>15</sup> According to various *aḥādīth* recorded in tenth-century Shī‘ī works, al-Bāqir, al-Ṣādiq, and al-Riḍā (d. 203/818) attribute the blessed olive tree to Prophet Ibrāhīm (understood in the tradition as Muḥammad’s forefather) and/or ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d.40/661).<sup>16</sup> Being neither from the East nor the West has also been explained in a number of ways in the Shī‘ī *ḥadīth* tradition. However, particularly pertinent to this study is the neither East nor West understood as ‘Alī not having an unknown lineage and not having a questionable birth (was not born out of wedlock).<sup>17</sup> In the *abyāt* above, al-Ḥimyarī seems to be drawing on this image from the Qur’ān and perhaps the *aḥādīth* attributing it to ‘Alī and his pure lineage. This example of *taḍmīn* or *iqtibās*<sup>18</sup> uses the Qur’ānic parable of the blessed olive tree

<sup>13</sup> Manqaba, pl. manāqib: narratives that speak of an individual’s laudatory qualities. These are often hagiographical in nature.

<sup>14</sup> Shakar ed., *Dīwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī*, 186.

<sup>15</sup> Qur’ān 35:24.

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the *aḥādīth* in ninth and tenth-century sources that explain this verse, see al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Baḥrānī, *Al-Burhān Fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 5, (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-‘Ilmī li-l Maṭbū‘āt, 2006), 385-393.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 390. Al-Baḥrānī cites from *Tafsīr* of ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. early fourth/tenth century).

<sup>18</sup> *Taḍmīn*: ‘inclusion’ or ‘enjambment’. This term is used for quoting or incorporating a line or section of another poet into the poem. *Iqtibās* generally refers to the same phenomena with regards to verses of the Qur’ān and *aḥādīth*.

(*zaytūna*) as a figure for a pure, honourable lineage, which confers many benefits and produces much fruit (offspring)<sup>19</sup> to praise the *Ahl al-Bayt*. This comparison is made clear in the phrase ‘*sulālati Ādam*’ since *sulāla* refers both to the pith (of a plant) and offspring. By attributing *sulāla* to Ādam, it is clear that the tree imagery in the lines that follow describes the *Ahl al-Bayt* as Ādam’s honourable offspring.

In line 5, there is a certain ambiguity in the description of the olive tree such that we might assume al-Ḥimyarī is intentionally producing a *tawriya*<sup>20</sup> that is not completely solved until line 7. The verb *ṭala‘a* denotes both the meaning of a plant growing out or sprouting and the rising of the sun/moon. On the surface, the first hemistich of line 5 describes the growth of the olive tree. However, in what follows, the olive tree is not cast to the East nor is it Western in origin - as the rising (from the West) and setting (towards the East) of the sun. At the same time, the Eastern and Western references could be elaborating on the *ṭib al-mawlid* in line 4. In this case, the olive tree image reiterates the *tafsīr* discussed above, in which ‘Alī or the *Ahl al-Bayt* more generally (as the olive tree) was ‘born’ without unknown or merely attributive lineage (*muḥtidī*).

In line 6, the olive tree and its oil (both of which are referenced in the Qur’ānic verse) are continuously radiating, as does the Sun. The *ṭibāq*<sup>21</sup> produced by pairing *suḥūla* with *ṣumm al-jalmaidī* communicates the endless and encompassing extent to which the light shines by combining opposites or two extremes; the light of the olive tree shines over everything. It might also be possible that this relates to the fact that olives grow on top of the flat areas of mountains tops this is only a tentative hypothesis as I have not gathered enough evidence for such a reading.

The final line of this section (line 7) begins with an example of *iqtibās*, wherein al-Ḥimyarī directly quotes a verse in the Qur’ān to describe the sun as *sirājan wahhājā*<sup>22</sup> (an intensely blazing lamp/fire). This Qur’ānic reference to the sun is juxtaposed with the next section of the original verse that al-Ḥimyarī is drawing on. In the Qur’ānic verse, the oil of the lamp radiates with light even though *fire* has not touched it<sup>23</sup>; it is, in its very nature, the source of light. Al-Ḥimyarī reproduces this message but uses *sirājuha al-wahhāju* (the olive tree’s blazing lamp or the sun which is the source of its light) as a substitute for *al-nār* (fire) in the verse. This lamp however is not the Sun or a flame, but rather Aḥmad (Muḥammad) and ‘Alī (who is often identified as the iconic ascetic in the Islamic tradition). This is where the *tamthīl*<sup>24</sup> discussed thus far embeds a *tashbīh*<sup>25</sup> within it that in fact solves the *tawriya* produced by the olive tree and sun imagery. The olive tree is the *Ahl al-Bayt*, which is lit by Muḥammad and ‘Alī (the blazing lamp), who are the ‘fathers’ of the Twelver Shī‘ī Imāms (According to the Islamic tradition, Muḥammad’s daughter Fāṭima married ‘Alī and the Imams descended from their offspring). Muḥammad and ‘Alī are thus a singular light (the singular blazing lamp) which may plausibly also be a reference to the *Nūr Muḥammadī*<sup>26</sup> trope in early Shī‘ī sources that describe Muḥammad and ‘Alī being created as one light.

<sup>19</sup> Penelope C. Johnstone and D.M. Varisco, “Zaytūn”, *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> *Tawriya*: loosely understood as ‘double entendre’, often producing a riddle-like quality.

<sup>21</sup> *Ṭibāq/Muṭābaqa*: ‘Antithesis’, the pairing of words of opposite or comparative meanings in a verse(s).

<sup>22</sup> Qur’ān 78:13.

<sup>23</sup> Qur’ān 35:24.

<sup>24</sup> *Tamthīl*: sentence-based similes or metaphors based on analogies.

<sup>25</sup> *Tashbīh*: simile, ‘explicit comparison’.

<sup>26</sup> U. Rubin “Nūr Muḥammadī”, *EI2*, 2012.

There are a number of comparisons in this section:

- *sharqiyya/gharbiyya*: to point to the pure origins of the tree (Ahl al-Bayt), who are not from a ‘Sun’, but rather Muḥammad
- *suhūl/ṣumm al-jalmaidī*: the vastness and extent to which the light of the tree (Ahl al-Bayt) is known, is praised, and guides?
- *nakhīl/zaytūna*: \*I have not found a satisfactory explanation for this comparison as of yet.\*
- *Ādam/Aḥmad*: This entire section is framed with the pairing of two proper nouns Ādam, who is the first human and prophet and thus appears at the beginning of the section and Aḥmad, (a name of Muḥammad) who is the last prophet and appears at the end.

The use of *iqtibās* to directly cite the nouns used in the Qur’ānic verse (*sharqiyyah, gharbiyyah, nūr, zaytūna, and zayt*), and sentence structure (*lā sharqiyyatan wa lā gharbiyya*) works inter-textually. The poem constructs a number of metaphors to refer to a single verse, which is itself, a *tamthīl* in the Qur’ān. These references simultaneously force a specific Qur’ānic interpretation of the poem, and a Shī‘ī interpretation (mediated through the poem) of the Qur’ān. Al-Ḥimyarī could be arguing that the *Ahl al-Bayt* reveal the meaning of the Qur’ān whilst the Qur’ān reveals the merits of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and considers the poem to be the site of this reciprocity. As such, the poem enters a dialogic space with the Qur’ān and the Shī‘ī exegetical tradition (based on *aḥādīth* from the Shī‘ī Imāms). The figurative exchange between the images in this section is thus supported by bringing these three genres (Qur’ān, *Ḥadīth*, and Poetry) into the same line, or even the same word. In doing so, the poem achieves a certain hermeneutic force that reinforces the proto-Shī‘ī loyalty to the *Ahl al-Bayt* through *tafsīr*. This style of argumentation continues throughout this poem and many of al-Ḥimyarī’s other poems and forms (even if loosely) a motif within and across early Shī‘ī panegyrics entrenched in bringing the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* traditions into conversation with one another.

### Lines 8-9: *Takhallus*

- 8 If you connect with the rope of Muḥammad’s progeny, \* then extend from yourself  
the rope of love and seek (to connect with)
- 9 the purifier of the purified fathers\* who attained exaltedness and noble traits that  
never deplete.

These two lines seem to serve as a *takhalluṣ*<sup>27</sup> - shifting from the olive tree in the previous section towards the series of extolments of the *Ahl al-Bayt* in the next section. This is expressly marked by the *iltifāṭ*<sup>28</sup>; that is, the shift from the third person to the second person using the conditional sentence (*idhā...fā + fi’l al-amr*). However in order to make this transition, the exegetical exercise in the previous section continues, again forming a *taḍmīn* of sorts with three verses from the Qur’ān understood in the early Shī‘ī tradition to refer specifically to the *Ahl al-Bayt* of Muḥammad.

<sup>27</sup> *Takhalluṣ*: the transition from one section of the polythematic qaṣīdah to another section or theme.

<sup>28</sup> *Iltifāṭ*: reference-switching. This can take the form of switches in tense, number, gender, and case. In this context, I refer to switching personal references.



- Regarding *ḥabl* (rope): The early Shī‘ī tradition attributes *aḥādīth* to al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq wherein the command to hold fast to the rope of Allāh in the Qur’ān<sup>29</sup> is explained as a command to hold fast to ‘Alī and the progeny of Muḥammad.<sup>30</sup>
- Regarding *mawadda* (love): This is likely a reference to the *Āyat al-Mawadda*<sup>31</sup> commanding the believers to have love exclusively for Muḥammad’s *qurba* (close relatives) as recompense for him guiding them.
- Regarding *muṭahhir* and *mutahharīn* (purifier and purified): This is a reference to the verse of *Taḥhīr* (Indeed Allāh will only to keep any impurity away from you, the *Ahl al-Bayt* and to purify you with a thorough purification ‘*wa yuṭahhirhum taḥhīrā*’)<sup>32</sup>

These two lines are crafted in a way that cleverly adopts the exhortative tone of the *Ḥablillāh* verse (3:103) and the verse of *Mawadda*. It seems that the *Ḥablillāh* verse acts as a skeleton that forms the general model of these lines whereby the command to hold fast to the rope of God is reflected in connecting with the rope of *Āl Muḥammad* in the first hemistich of line 8 (perhaps here forming an *idāfa bayāniyya*; explaining that the rope is *Āl Muḥammad*). In the second hemistich of line 8, the command to extend and increase the rope of love continues into the next *bayt* where the object of the love is the ‘*muṭahhir*’ of the *muṭahharīn*. This is likely an explicit reference to the verse of *taḥhīr* in which Allāh is the *fā‘il* of ‘*yuṭahhir*’<sup>33</sup> and is therefore referred to as *al-Muṭahhir* in the poem. In other words, the lines seem to be communicating that if one connects to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, then s/he will reach and increase in their love for *al-Muṭahhir* (Allāh) because the *Ahl al-Bayt* are the rope of Allāh (i.e. *al-Muṭahhir*.” This is yet another instance of the overt exegetical project underpinning this poem. The Qur’ānic verses, which are all understood in relation to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, are interpreting each other.

Line 9 introduces the lyrical section that follows (lines 10-14) through the introduction of the *Ahl al-Bayt* as *Muṭahharīn*; the first of a number of positive titles which all bear the *majrūr* case by virtue of the shared preposition ‘*li*’ with *Muṭahharīn*. The end of line 9 speaks of the *Ahl al-Bayt*’s unending (*lam tanfadi*) noble and exalted traits, reiterating perhaps in the form of a *muṭābaqa*, the ‘*azdadī*’ ending in line 8. The ‘*lam tanfadi*’ ending also semantically ushers in the following section which flows like an unending string of extolments both in its sonorous quality and internal rhyme scheme as will be discussed next.

### Lines 10-14: Noble Characteristics of the Imāms of the *Ahl al-Bayt*

10 (the purifier of) The people of piety, the owners of deep understanding, the ones imbued with \* exaltedness, **and the ones who speak based on the traditions (directly) transmitted (from Muḥammad).**

<sup>29</sup> Qur’ān 3:103.

<sup>30</sup> See al-Baḥrānī, *al-Burhān*, vol. 2, 83-87. He cites *Tafsīr* of ‘Āyyāshī (d.320/932-3), *Tafsīr* of al-Qummī (d. early fourth/tenth century), And *Kitāb Al-Ghayba* of al-Nu‘mānī (d.360/971), among other sources.

<sup>31</sup> Qur’ān 42:23.

<sup>32</sup> Qur’ān 33:33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

11 (the purifier of) The ones who fast, the ones who stand firm (in prayer?), the obedient to God, the ones who are above all others, \* **the children of astute thought and prestige.**

12 (the purifier of) The ones who perform rukūʿ, the ones who prostrate, the ones who praise God, \* the **foremost in (leading) the mosque's prayers.**

13 (the purifier of) The renders and menders (rulers<sup>34</sup>), the devout pilgrims, \* **the worshipers of their God with intense love.**

14 (the purifier of) The granters, the defenders, the powerful, \* **the victorious over the extremely jealous.**

In line 10, *ahl*, *dhawī*, and *ūlī* function synonymously with each other to attribute the adjectives (which also share an internal rhyme) to the *Ahl al-Bayt* in a way that highlights their exclusive ownership of these qualities. The second hemistich begins the pattern, which governs the rest of the lines in this section. In each *bayt*, four titles are listed in the same *ism al-fāʿil* form of the *wazn fāʿala* thereby creating the same internal rhyme. With the exception of line 11, the ending of the last hemistich in each *bayt* is the *mafʿūl bihi* for the closest *fāʿil* mentioned in the line. For example in line 13, the *Ahl al-Bayt* are *al-ʿābidīn* (worshippers) of their Lord (*Ilāhahum*) with intense love. The *mumāthala*, achieved with the consistent *wazn* throughout in these lines keeps them stylistically connected and coherent. This repetition, with no other semantic material between each *ism al-fāʿil*, makes the lines flow quite easily and conveys the sense of continuity and ‘unending’ merit introduced in the *takhalluṣ*. At the same time, it places emphasis on the ending of each *bayt*, which maintain the *qāfiya* or rhyme of the poem, but sharply cut off each line and distinguish the highly resembling *abyāt* from each other within this set.

It is also worth noting that use of *muṭābaqa* is also evident in the types of adjectives used and they way they are paired together. Characteristics of humility (*al-rākiʿīn*, *al-sājidīn* in line 12) and worship (*al-ṣāʿimīn* in line 11, *al-ḥāmidīn* in line 12, *al-sāʾihīn* in line 13) are placed in close proximity and also contrasted with those of power, superiority, and dominion, many of which are considered in the Islamic tradition to be names of Allāh (i.e.; *al-Qāʾim* in line 11, *al-Fātiq*, *al-Rātiq* in line 13, *al-Wahhāb*, *al-Māniʿ*, *al-Qādir*, *al-Qāhir* in line 14). This juxtaposition and comparison presents an ideal of the *Ahl al-Bayt* as manifestations of God’s characteristics whilst still being His slaves. This image of *the Ahl al-Bayt* is ubiquitous in the Shīʿī *ḥadīth* tradition, including texts attributed to the proto-Shīʿī community. Therefore, these lines might be formulating an implicit theological argument about the Shīʿī understanding of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and their relationship with God and the rest of creation.

### Lines 15-18: Paradisiacal Wedding of Fāṭima b. Muḥammad and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib

15 The Sublime (God) erected a pulpit for Jibrāʾīl \* under the shade of Ṭūbā which sprung from grounds of peridot.

<sup>34</sup> Hava notes that *fātiq* and *rātiq* are often placed together to describe supreme rule.

J.G. Hava, *Arabic English Dictionary for Advanced Learners: Al-Farāʿid al-Durayya* (Chennai: Goodword Books, 2015), 240. Under r-t-q.

As per Shakar’s notes, these lines describe the wedding of Fāṭima b. Muḥammad (d.11/632) and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in Paradise.<sup>35</sup> God ordered Jibrā’īl to erect a pulpit from which he recited marriage sermon. Yet another tree is introduced in the poem. In this case, the paradisiacal tree of *Ṭūbā* seems to occupy a central role in the wedding narrative. Al-Ḥimyarī describes the pure origins/lineage of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (perhaps the twelve Imāms) by narrating the union of Fāṭima and ‘Alī; the parents of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the latter from whom the Twelver Shi‘a consider the nine Imams to have descended.

The intended meaning from *mutūni zabarjadī* is unclear. *Mutūn* may refer to the middle of a road or the surface of the ground.<sup>36</sup>

16 The noble angels and their Lord were all present (as witnesses) \* and they and their Lord are sufficient as witnesses.

The first hemistich in this *bayt* continues as an *iqtibās* referring to the same *ḥadīth* about the wedding of Fāṭima and ‘Alī being referred in the lines above. According to this tradition, the witnesses of the sacred union were all of the angels of the heavens and earths (*wa-l-shuhūdu malā’ ikatu al-samāwāti wa-l aradīn*).<sup>37</sup> The second hemistich is another *iqtibās* that incorporates a Qur’ānic verse “*Wa kafā billāhi shahīdā*”<sup>38</sup> and employs its same sentence structure. These two hemistiches are tightly connected through the repetition of *sh-h-d* at the beginning and end of the *bayt* (*radd al-a’jāz ‘alā mā taqaddamahā*<sup>39</sup>). In the first hemistich the initial verb ‘*shahīdā*’ begins the reference to the wedding *ḥadīth* while in the second hemistich, the ending ‘*shuhhadī*’ connects the *ḥadīth* reference to the Qur’ānic verse to the *ḥadīth*. These rhetorical devices imbue the poem with an exegetical function, connecting the *ḥadīth* tradition about the merits of the *Ahl al-Bayt* to the meaning of the Qur’ān.

17 And Ṭūbā shed down upon them pearls \* and emeralds one after the other in numbers that cannot be counted on fingers.

As Shakar notes, this line is also forming an *iqtibās* by directly citing the same wedding *ḥadīth*, which states that the tree of *Ṭūbā* was ordered to shed white crystals, red rubies, green emeralds, and fresh pearls upon the inhabitants of Paradise.<sup>40</sup> The jewel imagery to describe the luxuries of paradise is a trope across Islamic traditions.

18 There was no like for the wedding<sup>41</sup> of Fātima \* in the Tihāma lowlands of the East nor in the uplands of the Najd.

<sup>35</sup> Shakar ed., *Dīwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī*, 188-190.

<sup>36</sup> Hava, *Arabic English Dictionary*, 707. Under m-t-n.

<sup>37</sup> Shakar ed., *Dīwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Qur’ān 17:96.

<sup>39</sup> *Radd al-a’jāz ‘alā mā taqaddamahā* or *radd al-kalām ‘alā mā taqaddamahā*: Epanalepsis, the repetition of words in different places within/across lines.

<sup>40</sup> Shakar ed., *Dīwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī*, 188.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Ṭurayḥī identifies *milāk* as “*al-tazwīj wa-l ‘aqd al-nikāḥ*.”

Fakhr al-Dīn b. Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ṭurayḥī (d. 1085/1674), *Majma’ al-Baḥrayn wa Maṭla’ al-Nayyirayn*, vol. 4, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Ādil (Cairo: Maktab al-Nashr al-Thiqāfiyya al-Islāmiyya, 1407/1986), 231.

Line 18 serves as a *takhalluṣ* by concluding the paradisiac wedding descriptions and summarizing the message of the lines that precede it. Clearly, the wedding is unmatched in every way. This message is conveyed through the contrast of two opposite (*ṭibāq*) geographic regions and topographies. *Mutham* and *Munjad* (both *ism al-maf'ūl*) describe the direction in which one travels from these places. Najd quite literally however means elevated land or uplands, which is why the region to the East of the Hijāz is known as the Najd for its mountainous topography. Tihāma is literally hot, arid land that lowers into the sea, and is thus the name of the Western coastlands of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>42</sup> On this level, the reader gets the general sense that there is nothing on earth, from the East to the West, from the uplands to the lowlands, that match the wedding thus far described.

However on a second level, this *takhalluṣ* reorients the reader from a paradisiac wedding to the earthly one that took place in Medina. According to al-Ṭurayḥī's sources, (the city of) Medina is neither in Tihāma nor in the Najd (*lā Tihāmiyya wa lā Najdiyya*),<sup>43</sup> which echoes (and consequently establishes a sense of continuity with) the *lā sharqiyyatan wa lā gharbiyyah* reference in line 5. With this in mind, in the second hemistich of line 18, '*mut-him sharqan wa lā fī munjadi*' can be substituted with "al-Medina". In this case, the entire *bayt* would read, "And the wedding of Fāṭima which had no like (was) in Medina." By creating this *tawriya*, the wedding of Fāṭima and 'Alī becomes situated in a historical moment, thereby shifting the setting of the poem from a very abstract, out-of-time-and-place event, to a very specific temporal and geographic one. This shift not only concludes the paradisiac wedding, but also introduces the remaining lines of the poem, which concern the event of *mubāhala* (mutual imprecation).<sup>44</sup> According to the Islamic historical tradition, this event took place in Medina.<sup>45</sup> By linking the city of Fāṭima's earthly wedding to the city in which the *mubāhala* took place, al-Ḥimyarī transitions the reader into the next section of the poem in an ever-so-delicate way (by not explicitly mentioning the proper noun Medina).

### Lines 19-22: The event of *Mubāhala* (3:61)

19 In the morning, the group of Christian dignitaries hastened to leave after insisting insolently on their questions. \* As did the arrogant one entangle himself in his own dilemma

20 When he said, return with your sons \* and your women so that we can pray for God's curse (against the liars) tomorrow.

21 So the Prophet came with Fāṭima, and her guardian ('Alī) \* and Ḥusayn and Ḥasan, the one of noble station.

This section describes the event of *mubāhala* mentioned in the Qur'ān<sup>46</sup> in which a delegation of forty Christians from Najrān came to Medina to debate with Muḥammad. The subject of the debate was about Jesus being the Son of God. During the debate, the leader of the delegation named Asqaf<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> al-Ṭurayḥī (d. 1085/1674), *Majma' al-Baḥrayn*, vol. 2, 299.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 270.

<sup>44</sup> W. Schmucker, "mubāhala", *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Irfan Shahīd "Nadjrān", *EI2*, 2012

<sup>46</sup> Qur'ān 3:61.

<sup>47</sup> Shakar ed., *Dīwān al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī*, 191.

decided to call a *mubāhala* in which both parties would bring themselves, their women, and their children to pray to God asking Him to destroy the liars. According the Islamic tradition, Muḥammad brought his daughter Fāṭima as his women, his grandsons; Ḥasan and Ḥusayn as his sons, and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as himself. Upon witnessing the glory of Muḥammad’s family, the Christian delegation backed out of the imprecation in fear of being destroyed.<sup>48</sup>

The fact that ‘Alī is the only one who is not mentioned by name in line 21, but rather as Fāṭima’s *Walī* (guardian) is significant here. Perhaps al-Ḥimyarī is trying to reproduce the verse of *mubāhala*, which is understood in the Islamic tradition to describe ‘Alī as the *nafs* of Muḥammad. Interestingly, ‘Alī is never mentioned explicitly in this poem. In line 1 he is *al-Waṣī*, in line 7 he is the guide to the ascetic path, and here in line 21, he is *the Walī* of Fāṭima. These descriptions are again making an argument about ‘Alī’s leadership or imamate that was central to proto-Shī‘ī identity. Al-Ḥimyarī effectively rejects any possible doubt about ‘Alī’s position by naming him with titles that treat his succession of Muḥammad as the first Imam for the Muslims as a given fact.

22 Jibrīl was the sixth of them and how noble is the sixth! \* And the best one chosen to witness the best of sights.

There exist a number of traditions about the *Ahl al-Bayt* being the *Ahl al-Kisā’* (the people of the cloak).<sup>49</sup> This is largely in relation to the *aḥādīth* about Muḥammad wrapping his family in a cloak and praying for them. Some of these traditions suggest that this took place as Muḥammad brought his family to the Christian delegation for the *mubāhala*.<sup>50</sup> Others suggest that a similar event took place when Muḥammad’s family gathered under a Yemeni cloak in Umm Salama’s (one of his wives) house. In these traditions, Jibrā’īl joins this group of five and makes them six.<sup>51</sup> The repetition of *sādīsa* in this line and the related report about the cloak of *mubāhala* may support reading this line as a reference to these traditions of the *Ahl al-Kisā’*.

## CONCLUSION

This commentary has examined the various sections of this poly-thematic poem and has identified a number of methods that al-Ḥimyarī uses to establish a sense of coherence across these sections. The entire poem articulates a certain ‘Shī‘ī’ hermeneutics that relies on the Qur’ān and *aḥādīth* from the Imams as sources of knowledge and evidence for the ‘orthodoxy’ of Shī‘ī loyalties to the *Ahl al-Bayt*. The poem is itself a site for the organization of this knowledge into theological and political arguments central to proto-Shī‘ism and became definitive for Imāmī Shī‘ism’s crystallization by the time of Ibn Shahr Āshūb. By forcing the reader to engage in an exegetical activity throughout the poem, al-Ḥimyarī assumes that his audience is already familiar with the Qur’ān and the *aḥādīth*. It is also possible that the traditions, which he refers to through his extensive use of *taḍmīn* and *iqtibās*, had a ubiquitous presence in the circles that al-Ḥimyarī participated in.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> A.S. Tritton, “Ahl al-Kisā’”, *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> W. Schmucker “mubāhala” *EI2*, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Abu Ja‘far b. Muḥammad Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummi (al-Ṣadūq), *Kitāb al-Khiṣāl*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghafārī (Qum: al-Ḥawza al-‘Ilmiyya, 1983), 403.

A number of questions remain regarding the first three lines of this poem and its relation to the rest of the text. However as a closing remark, I suggest (although this is still very preliminary) that the entire poem is encased between two historical events that, although very different in content, have a similar proverbial nature. In the first three lines, Muḥammad's prayer against the man from the Banī Ḥaṣḥās led to his arm being impaired and disgraced by his tribe. Similarly, the Christian delegation fled from the *mubāhala* because of the imminent doom they saw from becoming subject of Muḥammad's curse. In short, the initial and final narratives of this poem explain the consequence of being opposed to Muḥammad, 'Alī, and the rest of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. This is in itself praising the *Ahl al-Bayt* and their Shi'a as those who are loyal to them would, based on the logic of these two sections, be safe from destruction.

Although we cannot ascertain if al-Ḥimyarī did indeed compose this poem, the fact that he is remembered by later scholars to author such a work is significant. Many early Shī'ī loyalists and students of the Imāms are remembered for the *aḥādīth* that they narrate in support of Shī'ī political and theological claims. It seems that this can be extended to personalities famed for their literary and artistic skills, whose productions may in some cases, serve as evidence for their own religious and political loyalties whilst articulating a poetic model for Shī'ī hermeneutics.

## Translation

- 1 Ask the tribe of Ḥaṣḥās: inform us about the one whose arrow, aimed at the Waṣī was in its bow ready to shoot.
- 2 Muṣṭafā prayed against him and his people with a praiseworthy prayer; the prayer of one who is supported (by God).
- 3 So his right hand became impaired as a punishment and he returned to his tribe with a darkened face.
- 4 From the offspring of Adam a date palm was planted, standing high in dignity.  
\* And he (Adam) became delighted with pride over the 'pure birth'.
- 5 An olive tree rose that was neither cast to the East\* nor was it Western in origin.
- 6 Its light continuously shines from its oil \* Over smooth plains and over hard, solid rocks.
- 7 Its blazing lamp is Aḥmad and the one who\* guides to the peak of the ascetic path (is 'Alī).
- 8 If you connect with the rope of the Muḥammad's progeny, \* then extend from yourself the rope of love and seek
- 9 the purifier of the purified fathers\* who attained exaltedness and noble traits that never deplete.
- 10 (the purifier of) The people of piety, the owners of deep understanding, the ones imbued with \* exaltedness, and the ones who speak based on the traditions (directly) transmitted (from Muḥammad).
- 11 (the purifier of) The ones who fast, the ones who stand firm, the obedient to God, the ones who are above all others, \* the children of astute thought and prestige.
- 12 (the purifier of) The ones who bow, the ones who prostrate, the ones who praise God, \* the foremost in (leading) the mosque's prayers.
- 13 (the purifier of) The renders and menders, the devout pilgrims, \* the worshippers of their God with intense love.
- 14 (the purifier of) The granters, the defenders, the powerful, \* the victorious over the extremely envious.

- 15 The Sublime (God) erected a pulpit for Jibrā'īl \* under the shade of Ṭūbā which sprung from grounds of peridot.
- 16 The noble angels and their Lord were all present (as witnesses) \* and they and their Lord are sufficient as witnesses.
- 17 And Ṭūbā shed down upon them pearls \* and emeralds one after the other in numbers that cannot be counted on fingers.
- 18 There was no like for the wedding of Fātima \* in the Tihāma lowlands of the East nor in the uplands of the Najd.
- 19 In the morning, the group of Christian dignitaries hastened to leave after insisting insolently on their questions. \* As did the arrogant one entangle himself in his own dilemma
- 20 When he said, 'return with your sons \* and your women so that we can pray for God's curse (against the liars) tomorrow.'
- 21 So the Prophet came with Fātima, and her guardian ('Alī) \* and Ḥusayn and Ḥasan, the one of noble station.
- 22 Jibrīl was the sixth of them. How honored is the sixth! \*(For he is) the best one chosen to witness the best of sights.



Arabic text

واسأل بني الحسحاس تخبر أنه  
كاد الوصي برشق سهم مقصد ...

فدعا عليه المصطفى في قومه  
بدعاء محمود الدعاء مؤيد ...

فتعطلت يمنى يديه عقوبة  
وأنى عشيرته بوجه أسود ...

غرس نخل من سلالة آدم  
شرفا فطاب بفخر طيب المولد ...

زيتونة طلعت فلا شرقية  
تلقى ولا غربية في المحتد ...

ما زال يشرق نورها من زيتها  
فوق السهول وفوق صم الجلمد ...

وسراجها الوهاج أحمدو الذي  
يهدي إلى نهج الطريق الأزهد ...

وإذا وصلت بحبل آل محمد  
حبل المودة منك فأبلغ وازدد ...

بمطهر لمطهرين أبوة  
نالوا العلي ومكارما لم تنفد ...

أهل التقى وذوي النهي وأولى العلي  
والناطقين عن الحديث المسند ...

الصائمين القائمين القانتين  
الفائقين بني الحجى والسؤدد ...

الراكعين الساجدين الحامدين  
والسابقين إلى صلاة المسجد ...

الفائقين الراتقين السائحين  
العابدين إلههم بتودد ...

الواهبين المانعين القادرين  
القاهرين لحاسد متحسد ...

نصب الجليل لجبرئيل منبرا

في ظل طوبى من متون زبرجد ...

شهد الملائكة الكرام وربهم  
وكفى بهم وربهم من شهد ...

وتناثرت طوبى عليهم لؤلؤا  
وزمردا متتابعا لم يعقد ...

وملاك فاطمة الذي ما مثله  
في متهم شرقا ولا في منجد ...

وبكرن علقمة النصارى إذ عنت  
في عزها والبادخ المتعقد ...

إذ قال كرر هاتم أبناءكم  
ونساءكم حتى نباهل في غد ...

فأتى النبي بفاطم ووليها  
وحسين والحسن الكريم المصع ...

د جبريل سادسهم فأكرم سادس  
وأخير منتجب لا فضل مشهد ...