Identifying Mysticism in Early Esoteric Scriptural Hermeneutics: Sahl al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) *Tafsīr* Reconsidered
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Abstract: Much has been written on the rise of Sufi Qurʾān exegesis (*tafsīr ṣūfī*) with an emphasis on the continuity of exegetical practices in mysticism across time. In a break with this analysis, some historians have called into question whether Sufi *tafsīr* constitutes a distinct genre of Qurʾān exegesis, particularly given the extent to which it shares analytical categories and conceptual tools with the *tafsīr* genre more broadly. This article sheds new light on this debate by asking a simple question: What makes Sufi *tafsīr* "mystical" at the level of hermeneutics? The current study uses Sahl al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) *tafsīr* as a case study to identify the intersection of three key elements that formed the foundation of an influential hermeneutical method for mystical experience in early Islam: (1) the use of an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic based on an exterior-interior (*ẓāhir-bāṭin*) interpretive framework; (2) the use of the supererogatory invocation (*dhikr*) of the Names of God (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*); and (3) the achievement of a state of "certainty" (*yaqīn*) that facilitates the acquisition of mystical perception (*baṣar*) of God's Oneness and the reception of knowledge (*maʿrifa*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*) from the unseen (*al-ghayb*). Tustarī's integration of a unique hermeneutical methodology with a methodology of mystical experience constitutes a major hallmark of the writings of mystics in early Islam, and his synthesis found adherents among later philosophically oriented Sufis in

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the generations of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. ca. 587/1191).[1] A key outcome of this study is the claim that there was an early tradition of mystical exegesis that was initiated by Sahl al-Tustarī and that transmitted in the writings of, among others, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), IbnMasarra (d. 319/931), and Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141).

Introduction

Mystical Qurʾān exegesis laid out a historically early methodology for identifying interior (*bāṭin*) and exterior (*ẓāhir*) meanings of Qurʾānic discourse. While much has been written on the history of this methodology, the question of what makes it "mystical" continues to be debated. The works of Kristen Sands and Martin Whittingham have shed light on the historical connections between the way self-identified practitioners of *taṣawwuf*, such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) among the early mystics of Iraq, expounded on the seemingly multivalent nature of the Qurʾānic text in the pursuit of mystical experience.[2] These mystics and practitioners of *taṣawwuf* often numbered among the scholars of Islam (ʿulamāʾ). By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries C.E., widespread debates emerged among scholars asking whether the hermeneutical methods of the Sufis adhered to scripture's divinely intended meanings. Critics such as the Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) went as far as lumping Sunnī Sufis together with the Ismāʿīlīs of Shiism as two types of "esotericists" (*al-bāṭiniyya*) because of their shared interest in the interior (*bāṭin*) meanings behind scripture's exterior (*ẓāhir*) words and phrases.[3] What remains elusive in modern historical analysis is the question of whether the continuity across time of the mystics' use of an exterior-interior hermeneutical method justifies the identification of a distinct genre of writing called "Sufi Qurʾān exegesis" or "Sufi *tafsīr*," particularly given the significant methodological differences between early and later authors in Islamic mysticism.

What indicates that both historians and doxographers may have oversimplified the concept of Sufi *tafsīr* is the fact that early mystics did not always apply distinguishing labels to their works of Qurʾān commentary. At the same time, however, many works of exegesis written by Sufis during the lifetime of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) were notable for common patterns of articulating conceptions of mystical experience using shared cosmological vocabularies, which often drew explicitly on speculative theology (*kalam*) and Greco-Arabic philosophy (*falsafa*). In this context, Mohammed Rustom has pointed to the rise of what can be identified as a specifically "philosophical" mysticism in Islam, though Vincent Cornell has highlighted how the pervasiveness of the philosophical orientation of later mysticism has been overemphasized in much of the research.[4] In the same context, Ahmet Karamustafa and Gerhard Böwering have shown that later philosophically oriented mystical exegesis contrasted

quite sharply with the earlier mystical hermeneutics of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) and his contemporaries in Iraq.[5] Given this contrast between early and later exegesis among authors in Islamic mysticism, to what extent can the early mystics' works of *tafsīr* be accurately described as specifically Sufi *tafsīr*, particularly in early periods of Islamic history when mystics did not necessarily call themselves Sufis or write works on *taṣawwuf*?

Jamal Elias has recently called into question more definitively whether Sufi exegesis can be identified as a separate genre of scriptural commentary, one that has existed in some distinct form across time.[6] While acknowledging, in agreement with Böwering, that self-identifying Sufis over the centuries have written Qurʾān commentaries that employed shared themes, Elias has asked whether Sufi *tafsīr* differs enough in its categories and hermeneutical methods from *tafsīr* more broadly to an extent that justifies its identification as unique tradition of *tafsīr*.[7] That is to say, his analysis suggests that what Christopher Melchert and Jacqueline Chabbi have attempted in identifying explicitly mystical elements in Sufi hagiography needs to be accomplished in the analysis of an ostensibly "Sufi" methodology in Qurʾān exegesis.[8]

This study aims to shed new light on the question of whether Sufi exegesis or Sufi *tafsīr* constitutes its own genre by asking a simple question: What makes the exegeses of early Muslim mystics specifically "mystical" at the level of hermeneutical methodology? In this article, Sahl al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) *tafsīr* will be used as an early case study to answer this question. This article argues that the three scripturally oriented concepts form the foundation of Tustarī's method for defining and achieving mystical experience. The first element is Tustarī's articulation of an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic according to an exterior-interior (*ẓāhir-bāṭin*) interpretive framework. The second element is his use of the ritual of invocation (*dhikr*), oriented around the Names of God (*asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*), which he elaborates as part of this esoteric scriptural hermeneutic. What ties both elements together is the third element (the *tertium quid* of his method), which is the achievement of a state of epistemological certainty (*yaqīn*) that facilitates the mystical perception (*baṣar*) of the Oneness of God. Tustarī defines this state as super-sensory perception by the "eye of certainty" (*ʿayn al-yaqīn*) of the unseen (*al-ghayb*), a process that he defines as knowledge of the realities beyond the Divine Throne.

Tustarī's synthesis of an esoteric hermeneutical methodology with scripturally oriented ritual in the articulation of a path towards mystical experience became a hallmark of later Sufi hermeneutics, particularly in the writing of figures such as Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. ca. 587/1191) and Muḥyīddīn Ibn ʿArabī.[9] Suhrawardī considered Sahl al-Tustarī a foundational figure in the historical turn of Sufism toward philosophical mysticism, linking Tustarī with Dhū al-Nūn as important vectors of the Graeco-Arabic Pythagorean tradition.[10] What follows

in the next two sections of this study is a closer examination of Tustarī's mystical method. Section One examines the connection between esoteric scriptural hermeneutics and supererogatory ritual in Tustarī's concept of knowledge of the "unseen" (*al-ghayb*). Section Two examines how Tustarī portrays the possessor of this knowledge as a sage with "wisdom" (*ḥikma*); Tustarī's particular use of this term reveals the extent to which he saw his hermeneutic as a distinct epistemology within the sciences of Islam. His use of the word *ḥikma* notably contrasted with the Muslim philosophers' definition of *ḥikma* as Peripatetic or Neoplatonic philosophy (*falsafa*), and anticipated the later use of this term to designate a formally articulated mystical epistemology in the writings of philosophically oriented Sufis such as Ibn Barrajan, Suhrawardī, and Ibn ʿArabī.

I. Esoteric Hermeneutics and the Experiential Vision of the Unseen

The cornerstone of Sahl al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* methodology is an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic centered on the interior meanings of the Disconnected Letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa*) that open various Qurʾānic chapters.[11] In his *Book on the Special Properties of the [Disconnected] Letters (Kitāb Khawāṣṣ al-Ḥurūf)*, the Andalusian mystic Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931), who explicitly cited Tustarī as a model exegete, claimed that the scholars of his generation were in greater agreement about the interior meaning of the Qurʾān than its exterior meaning because of the diversity of ways that people understood the outward meanings of the Qurʾānic discourse.[12] In his own articulation of the interior meaning of the Qurʾān, Ibn Masarra referred multiple times to Tustarī, whom he identified as one of the "people of interior knowledge" (*ahl al-ʿilm bi-l-bāṭin*).[13] An examination of Sahl al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* shows that Tustarī himself made a similar claim about esoteric scriptural hermeneutics that anticipated Ibn Masarra's views. In stark contrast with Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 456/1064) and Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) later criticisms of all forms of esoteric hermeneutics, Tustarī argued that the semantic range of the interior (*bāṭin*) meaning of the Qurʾān's Disconnected Letters was narrower than the wide range of meanings proffered by commentators who focused solely on the Qurʾān's exterior meaning.

> [The Disconnected Letters] "*Alif Lām Mīm*"—the name of God, Most Exalted. In it are meanings and attributes that people of understanding (*ahl al-fahm*) can comprehend. For the people of exterior [or exoteric] knowledge (*ahl al-ẓāhir*), however, there are numerous meanings. If these letters are taken in isolation, *Alif* stands for God's formation (*taʾlīf*) of things as He wills. *Lām* is His pre-eternal (*qadīm*) Grace (*luṭf*), and *Mīm* is His magnificent Glory (*majd*).[14]

In this passage, Tustarī distinguishes his hermeneutical approach, which he associates with the "people of understanding" (*ahl al-fahm*), from the approach

of scholars whom he calls the "people of exterior [or exoteric] knowledge" (*ahl al-ẓāhir*). At first glance, this contrast between the "people of understanding" (*ahl al-fahm*) and the "people of exterior [or exoteric] knowledge" (*ahl al-ẓāhir*) is elusive. Who are these two groups? Upon closer examination of this dichotomy in its historical context, its meaning becomes clearer. In the history of Islamic mysticism, this contrast closely resembles the distinction between exterior or exoteric knowledge (ʿilm al-ẓāhir) and interior or esoteric knowledge (ʿilm al-bāṭin) that was elaborated controversially by some mystics in ninth-century Iraq who sought to develop a multivalent understanding of scriptural concepts.[15] As Abun-Nasr has discussed, the Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) criticized some early mystics for using the term "exterior [or exoteric] knowledge" (ʿilm al-ẓāhir) to describe the scholars' knowledge of jurisprudence in a way that might encourage the faithful to begin abandoning scripturally decreed rituals in the search for some elusive "interior [or esoteric] knowledge."[16] For Tustarī, the goal of interior knowledge was not to circumvent required rituals but to discover veiled scriptural meanings and achieve mystical experience. Building on the passage just cited, Tustarī indicates that the Disconnected Letters found at the beginning of certain Qurʾānic chapters refer in their interior meaning to the Names of God, and that the integration of these Names into ritual acts of remembrance (*dhikr*) facilitates the worshipper's two-way communication with God.[17]

> Each book that God the Exalted has sent down has a secret (*sirr*), and the secret of the Qurʾān lies in the letters at the beginnings of the chapters. They are Names and Attributes, such as when [God] says, "*Alif Lām Mīm*,"[18] "*Ṣād*,"[19] "*Alif Lām Mīm Rā*,"[20] "*Kāf Ḥā Yā ʿAyn Ṣād*,"[21] "*Ṭā Sīn Mīm*,"[22] "*Ḥā Mīm*,"[23] and *ʿAyn Sīn Qāf*."[24] When these letters are brought together they make up God's greatest Name— that is, if a letter is taken from each [group] of the opening letters of the chapters…*Alif Lām Rā*, and *Ḥā Mīm*, together with *Nūn*—they form the name *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful)…ʿAlī [b. Abī Ṭālib] said that these are [Divine] Names [in the form of] disconnected [letters]. [He also said that] if a letter is taken from each of the opening groups of letters, such that each letter is not the same as the one next to it [and thus without repetition], and [if the letters] are assembled together, they form [another] one of the Names of [God], the Merciful. If this name is known and used in invocation, [one will find that] it is the greatest name by which the prayer of the supplicant will be answered…In the words [of scripture] "*Alif Lām Mīm*. This book…"[25] *Alif* stands for God, *Lām* stands for the servant, and *Mīm* stands for Muḥammad. Therefore [through the letters] the servant can gain access to his Lord from the position of affirmation of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) and by following the example of His Prophet.[26]

Echoing Tustarī's interpretation, later treatises of Sufi metaphysics in the generation of Ibn ʿArabī similarly argued that the letters are either references to or constitutive of the Names of God.[27] Methods of achieving mystical

experience among Ibn ʿArabī's predecessors in al-Andalus, including that of the *ḥadīth* scholar and Qurʾān commentator Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141), relied on the notion that the ritual invocation of the Divine Names facilitates a two-way *dhikr* that includes God's invocation (*dhikr*) of the servant.[28] By itself, the notion that the invocation of God's Names can elicit a conversation-like divine response is no more mystical than other inherently mystical examples of ritual called for in the Qurʾān, from prayer to supplication. What points to Tustarī's interest in integrating remembrance or invocation (*dhikr*) of the Names into a method of achieving a special form of mystical experience is how he characterizes the ultimate goal of invocation. Specifically, when integrated into a method of ritual that begins with recitation of the Qurʾān, invocation of the Divine Names allows the worshipper to attain what he calls the light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*). For Tustarī, the acquisition of this higher form of knowledge (*maʿrifa*) is understood as a mystical event. He explains this event in more detail as an epistemic shift that constitutes the experiential awareness and witnessing of God's Oneness.

> Regarding God's saying, "And be in awe of Me," (Qurʾān 2:40) Sahl was asked: What is this awe (*rahba*) that He commanded them to feel? [Tustarī] replied: [God] meant locating the light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*) through the heart's perception (*baṣar*) as well as [attaining gnosis or] knowledge (*maʿrifa*) through the entirety of the heart (*kulliyyat al-qalb*). Endurance (*mukābada*) and struggle (*mujāhada*) are part of faith…when the heart ceases to have fear of all other than [God], the light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*) is unveiled (*inkashafa*)…and the servant who abides in faith for the sake of God…attains a resolute awareness of His Oneness (*tawḥīd*). I mean by this that his heart reaches a state of tranquility (*sukūn*) with his Master, and so the light of certainty unveils the knowledge of certainty (*ʿilm al-yaqin*), which is attainment (*wuṣūl*) to God, Exalted is He. This certainty, [which is achieved] through the light of certainty that leads to the eye of certainty, is not something that is brought into being (*mukawwan*), nor something created (*makhlūq*). Rather, it is a light from the light of the essence of the Real (*dhāt al-ḥaqq*) but not in the sense of an indwelling (*ḥulūl*), nor of conjoining (*jamʿ*), nor of the union of like to like (*ittiṣāl*). Rather, it means the servant's connection with his Master [specifically] in terms of (*ittiṣāl al-ʿabd bi-mawlāhi min mawḍiʿ*) the realization of divine Oneness and obedience to God and His Messenger.[29]

The passage above confirms that his interest in an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic and related supererogatory ritual is oriented toward the attainment of mystical experience. The verse under consideration (Qurʾan 2:40), which is part of the same Quʾranic chapter that opens with the previously discussed Disconnected Letters, begins by calling upon the Children of Israel (*banū isrāʾīl*) to "call to mind my favor that I bestowed upon you" (*udhkurū niʿmatiya allatī anʿamtu ʿalaykum*). Tustarī's interpretation of this act of remembrance (*dhikr*) and state of awe (*rahba*) builds on his earlier discussion of the Disconnected Letters. In that discussion, he discovered some of the Names of God in the

Disconnected Letters' interior meanings, and he argued that the integration of these Names into ritual acts of remembrance (*dhikr*) facilitates the worshipper's two-way communication with God. In the above passage, he explains that this experience is epitomized by the notion of "certainty" (*yaqīn*).Tustari defines certainty as a resolute awareness and perception (*baṣar*) of God's Oneness that leads to a type of "attainment" (*wuṣūl*) to God. What illustrates the specifically mystical connotation of Tustarī's otherwise elusive reference to "attainment" is his acknowledgment that the use of the term "attainment" is potentially misleading because it evokes problematic terms, such as "indwelling" or "conjunction." In the above passage, he makes a point of explicitly distancing his use of "attainment" from these other concepts that compromise Islam's monotheistic emphasis on God's transcendence. By making this clarification, he achieves two goals simultaneously: first, he clarifies that he understands "attainment" as a form of mystical experience, in which the faithful aspirant attains proximity to the Divine intellectually and experientially rather than bodily; and second, he anticipates the argument of theological critics who might argue that his exegesis attempts to blur the line between divinity and humanity.[30] In sum, he defines "attainment" to God as a special kind of witnessing, characterized by the non-sensory beholding of God's Oneness through the "eye of certainty," which perceives God by means of the "light of certainty."

Tustarī thus redefines the Islamic ritual of divine invocation (*dhikr*) in a more explicitly mystical way that draws on both his esoteric scriptural hermeneutic and prescription for achieving two-way divine communication. According to this method, the synthesis of an interior or esoteric (*bāṭin*) understanding of the Qurʾān with the ritual of *dhikr* leads ultimately to the supra-sensory perception of God's Oneness through a process that he variously denotes by the terms "attainment" (*wuṣūl*), "gnosis" (*maʿrifa*), and "union" (*ittiṣāl*) in the qualified sense of a non-conjoining connection. The imagery of light in the concept of "the light of certainty" (*nūr al-yaqīn*) as the ultimate source of supra-sensory perception (*baṣar al-qalb*) indicates that for Tustarī, this mystical witnessing of God's Oneness is not simply the end result of the practice of *dhikr*, but rather a means to a greater end. What is this end? In a critical answer that illustrates how the methodology of his mystical exegesis foreshadowed articulations of mystical experiernce in later Sufi metaphysics, Tustarī suggests that the "eye of certainty" that perceives God with the supra-sensory "light of certainty" is a vehicle for the attainment of a higher level of knowledge and insight into the mysterious connection between the human and divine realms that he characterizes as part of the "unseen" (*al-ghayb*). As we shall see below, this higher level of knowledge constitutes the extension of this mystical experience into a form of epistemology unique to the mystical aspirant, one that he describes as the product of an "increase in certainty" (*ziyādat al-yaqīn*). In the following section of this study,

we shall see how Tustarī characterizes this "increase in certainty" as a bestowal of "moments of inspiration" (*khaṭarāt*) upon the heart, which fill the heart with knowledge from the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) beyond the Divine Throne (*al-ʿarsh*). In anticipation of later Sufi doctrines of philosophical mysticism, Tustarī calls this higher form of mystical knowledge "wisdom" (*ḥikma*).

II. The Vision of the Unseen and the Attainment of Wisdom

The mystical perception of God's Oneness, examined in the previous section, is not the culmination of Tustarī's mystically oriented methodology of *tafsīr*, but rather is the means to a further end – namely, the vision of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) and the acquisition of a form of inspired knowledge that he identifies as wisdom (*al-ḥikma*). In his description of the means by which the servant beholds God in the process of achieving certainty, Tustarī speaks of an uncreated (*ghayr makhlūq*) subtle element (*laṭīfa*), which he calls a "secret" (*sirr*). In his discussion of this "secret," he states that it is the key to the aspirant's understanding of the Divine attributes, and that it is perceived in "moments of inspiration" (*khaṭarāt*) upon the heart that have their source in the unseen (*al-ghayb*). His discussion of these concepts points to the fact that his mystical epistemology is ultimately based upon a supra-normal form of knowledge acquisition made possible by this "subtle element from the Real" (*laṭīfa min al ḥaqq*).

> [This subtle element] is a secret (*sirr*) from a secret to a secret, an unseen (*ghayb*) from an unseen to an unseen. Thus, certainty (*yaqīn*) is through God [alone], and the servant is made certain through a means that comes to the servant from [God], according to the measure of the gift that God has apportioned to him and everything in the deepest recesses of his heart (*jumlat suwaydāʾ qalbihi*)…The light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*) [first] occurs [upon the heart] in the form of moments of inspiration (*khaṭarāt*) and when [the light of certainty] settles and remains, it becomes faith. Thereafter, certainty comes in the form of [further] moments of inspiration [upon the heart], and [the servant] continues in this manner indefinitely.[31]

Tustarī explains that the attainment of certainty is not just a mystical moment of perceiving God's Oneness, but rather is a two-step process that connects the "unseen" (*al-ghayb*) or mysterious aspect of the Divine realm with the "unseen" (*ghayb*) spiritual potential of the human being. His use of the term "unseen," as well as his notion of "moments of inspiration" (*khaṭarāt*) occurring in the heart (the seat of the eye of certainty in his framework) resonate with similar concepts discussed in the texts of other writers of Islamic mysticism. The concept of "flashes" (*lumaʿ*) in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī's (d. 370/980) *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* as well as later Sufi notions of "flashes" (*lawāmiḥ*) and "openings or revelations" (*futūḥāt*) are particularly notable.[32] All of these terms are references

to moments of inspired knowledge acquisition, and the concept of "the unseen" (*al-ghayb*) is used in these writings to refer in cosmological terms both to the created world's veiled or interior realities as well as to the realities that exist beyond the created world. What further informs us that Tustarī's discussion of these concepts is premised on the acquisition of a type of mystical knowledge is his discussion of Qurʾānic references to the Prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm). In a discussion of the story of Abraham's desire to be shown how God revives the dead, he explains that the "increase in certainty" (*ziyādat al-yaqīn*) in Abraham's heart allowed him to perceive the unlimited nature of God's agency and thus acquire a full understanding of Divine power (*al-qudra*).

> Sahl was asked about [God's] saying, "And when Abraham said, 'My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.'" He was asked: Was [Abraham] doubting his faith such that he asked God to let him see a sign or miracle to restore his faith? Sahl answered: [No.] His question was not out of doubt; rather, he was asking for an increase in certainty (*ziyādat al-yaqīn*) to [increase] the faith that he already had. Thus, He asked for the removal of that which impedes seeing [God's works] definitively (*ʿiyān*) with his own two eyes, such that he would increase in his faith (*yazdādu… yaqīnan*) in God's agency, as well as increase in his awareness (*wa-tamkīnan*) of God's creative power. Do you not see how when [God] asked, 'Why, do you not believe?' [Abraham] replied 'I do (*balā*)' If he had been in doubt he would not have said, 'I do.' Furthermore, if God were aware of any doubt in him as he gave Him the answer 'I do,' God would definitely have disclosed this, as matters cannot be concealed from Him. This confirms that the request for [his heart's] reassurance meant a request for an increase in his certainty.[33]

For Tustarī, Abraham's desire to witness the divine act of bringing the dead back to life was not only for the sake of witnessing this act visually, but rather to attain full knowledge of the modality of Divine agency. Although Abraham was already able to observe the act visually, he sought to understand its true nature by witnessing God's agency and power in his heart through the eye of certainty. In this perspective, the heart is something like an organ of a sixth sense, which has the ability to see and understand unseen realities that are invisible to the eyes. In Tustarī's framework, these unseen realities include greater dimensions of Divine agency.[34] Elsewhere in his *tafsīr*, Tustarī states that the Divine Throne is the site or medium through which the mystical aspirant acquires knowledge of the unseen. Tustarī says, "The intellects (*ʿuqūl*) of believers journey to the Throne, where they are preserved and filled with the finest subtleties of [God's] wisdom and diverse [manifestations] of His beneficence." [35] It is in his discussion of the intellect's ascent to the Divine Throne and the special knowledge that the aspirant finds there that Tustarī introduces the *telos* or ultimate end of his mystical hermeneutics: the attainment of wisdom (*ḥikma*). To make sure that this lesson is understood, he tells the reader that *ḥikma* is a special type of

all-comprehensive knowledge that is found in the unseen, and that he himself found this wisdom at the end of his mystical journey:

> Indeed, God willing, I have been granted wisdom (ḥikma) and [knowledge of] the unseen (al-ghayb), which I was taught from the mystery (ghayb) of [God's] secret; [by this means], He absolved me of the need for any other form of knowledge: "For the ultimate end is toward your Lord" (Qurʾān, 53:4).[36]

In his discussion of the moments of epistemic inspiration (khaṭarāt) that occur to the heart and give vision to the eye of certainty, Tustarī states that the "sagacity" or "wisdom" (ḥikma) of the sage is the fruit of these experiences. His use of this term to describe his mystically derived epistemology is significant. While the term ḥikma has long been associated in the history of Qurʾānic exegesis with scriptural references to God bestowing on humanity both "the Book" – that is, the Qurʾān – and "the Wisdom" (al-kitāb wa-l-ḥikma), certain authors in Islamic metaphysics used this term to connote extra-Qurʾānic epistemologies. For example, the Greco-Arabic philosophers (falāsifa) used ḥikma interchangeably with the term falsafa (from the Greek philosophía) to describe their approach to knowledge based on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources translated from Greek and Aramaic. For this reason, the major figures of the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition were known as both "philosophers" (falāsifa) and as "wisdom teachers" or "sages" (ḥukamāʾ). Similarly, Muslim mystics also used ḥikma in reference to wisdom transmitted from Hellenistic and other pre-Islamic sources. In this case, the term ḥikma sometimes referred more specifically to a kind of "perennial philosophy" (al-ḥikma al-qadīma) derived from Hermes Trismegistos, the "Thrice-Great Hermes" (Ar. hirmis al-harāmisa) whom the Graeco-Arabic philosophers and Sufis commonly identified with the Prophet Idrīs.[37] In contrast to these groups, later philosophically oriented Sufis such as Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī used the term ḥikma in a way that was more like Tustarī's unique application of the term. More specifically, despite Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī's acceptance of key doctrines in Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics, both writers used the term ḥikma to identify their mystical epistemologies as inherently distinct from the logical methods of the Greco-Arabic philosophers.[38]

Ibn Masarra, the previously mentioned Andalusian mystic and follower of Sahl al- Tustarī, likewise used the term ḥikma in a way that provides a link between Tustarī's use of the term and its use among later philosophically oriented Sufis. On the one hand, Ibn Masarra incorporated Neoplatonic doctrines such as the Universal Intellect (al-aql al-kulli) and the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kulliyya) in his metaphysics and discussed their concordance with scriptural concepts such as the Pen (al-qalam). On the other hand, he explicitly criticized the Greco-Arabic philosophers (falāsifa) for imprecise language and

a neglect of prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and he described his own more precise followers as both scholars" (ʿ*ulamāʾ*) and, critically, "sages" (*ḥukamāʾ*).[39] While the surviving evidence of Tustarī's writings does not definitively demonstrate that Tustarī had an interest in Neoplatonic metaphysics to the same degree as Ibn Masarra, Tustarī's use of the term *ḥikma* nonetheless anticipates that of Ibn Masarra and later philosophical Sufis. Both Tustarī and Ibn Masarra, like the later Sufis of Ibn ʿArabī's lifetime, sought to formulate an epistemology that was oriented around elaborating the connection between an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic and an unseen (*ghayb*) realm of phenomenological reality.[40] In a later period, Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī would agree with the implications of Ibn Masarra's citation of Tustarī, simultaneously elaborating mysticism-based cosmologies using selected philosophical doctrines in psychology while criticizing the philosophers' methods and conclusions. Even more, Suhrawardī described Tustarī as a key figure in the use of philosophical language to articulate mystical experience.[41]

In sum, Tustarī's and the later Sufis' mystically oriented esoteric hermeneutic was based on the individual practice of piety— namely, the ritual of remembrance of God through His Names (*dhikr Allāh* and *dhikr asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*)— and was oriented toward the goal of "witnessing" the divine realm of *al-ghayb* and the acquisition of inspired wisdom. This process, as described in the previous sections of this article, was based on the notion that spiritual witnessing occurs through the perception (*baṣar*) of the "eye of certainty" (ʿ*ayn al-yaqīn*) and the reception of "moments of (divine) inspiration" (*khaṭarāt*) in the heart from the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*). This mystical epistemology would be used by the Sufis of later generations to expand the mystical exegesis of the Qurʾān into more extended treatises on Sufi metaphysics. Like Sahl al-Tustarī, these later Sufis conceived of the mystical path as a synthesis of esoteric scriptural hermeneutics and the supererogatory ritual of *dhikr Allāh* and called it "wisdom" (*al-ḥikma*) in contradistinction to the Greco-Arabic philosophers' use of this term.

Conclusion

This article began by asking what makes the Qurʾānic exegesis of early Sufis "mystical" at the level of hermeneutical methodology. Sahl al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* offers an early example of a method for achieving mystical knowledge that became foundational to the writings of later philosophically oriented Sufis, such as Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī. At the heart of Tustarī's mysticism was an esoteric scriptural hermeneutic combined with the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Names of God in a framework that contrasted outer (*ẓāhir*) forms of knowledge and practice with inner (*bāṭin*) forms that added new layers of meaning and experience. This mystical methodology culminated in the achievement of a state

of "certainty" (*yaqīn*). Tustarī defined this certainty as the mystical perception (*baṣar*) of God's Oneness through a special "vision" of the eye of certainty (ʿ*ayn al-yaqīn*) that led to the progressive acquisition of knowledge (*maʿrifa*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*) from the unseen (*al-ghayb*). In sum, the mysticism of Tustarī and the later Sufis who drew on his work employed a common set of exegetical methods and interpretive meanings, which they articulated through rituals meant to bring about an epistemic shift in the perception of the phenomenological and ultimate realities of the world.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on research conducted at Bates College and New York University. I wish to thank Professor Marion Katz at New York University for encouraging me to engage the question of what constitutes "mysticism" as a discursive category. I also wish to thank the Editor-in-Chief of JIMS, Professor Vincent J. Cornell, as well as the reviewers for their insights and feedback on this article.

2. Kristen Sands and Martin Whittingham have provided insightful studies of the hermeneutical approach of mystical exegesis in Islam. Kristen Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 35–46; Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qurʾān: One Book, Many Meanings* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 2–13; For a closer look at the impact of al-Makki's writings on the various intersections of mystical exegesis and theological writing, see Rkia Cornell, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Vrije Universiteit, 2013), pp. 107–151.

3. Sands, *Sufi Commentaries*, pp. 47–64; Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qurʾān and Its Interpreters* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), pp. 16–40.

4. Mohammed Rustom, The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in *Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); Michael Ebstein, Mysticism and Philosophy in *al-Andalus: Ibn Masarrra, Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Ismāʿīlī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 3–31; idem, "Faqīh versus Faqīr in Marinid Morocco: Epistemological Dimensions of a Polemic," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested,* Eds. Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 207–24.

5. Ahmet Karamustafa has contrasted the views of Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. ca. 380/990), who followed Ḥanafī jurisprudence, with those of Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), who followed Shāfiʿī jurisprudence. While Kalābādhī drew on speculative theology (*kalām*) in his articulation of mysticism, Sulamī drew more singularly on Hadith. Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 83–113.

6. Jamal J. Elias, "Sufi *tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 12 (2010): pp. 41–55.

7. Gerhard Böwering, "The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, Eds. W.B. Hallaq and D.B. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 41–56.

8. See, for example, Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century CE," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): pp. 51–70; Jacqueline Chabbi, "Remarques sur les développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurâsân," *Studia Islamica* 46 (1977): pp. 5–72.

9. For an overview of their respective approaches to mysticism, see the following: William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY

Press), pp. 191–252; Roxeanne D. Marcotte, "Reason and Direct Intuition in the works of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. ca. 587/1191)," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam*, Eds. Hermann Landolt, Todd Lawson (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 221–34; John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the heritage of the Greeks* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 27–35; idem, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 42–50.

10.   Suhrawardī portrayed Tustarī as a formative figure in the intersection of philosophy and mysticism by describing him as a transmitter of the teachings of Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī, whom Suhrawardī described as the "leaven of the Pythagoreans." These comments can be found in Suhrawardī, *Kitāb Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques*, Ed. Henri Corbin (Paris and Tehran: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1952) 2:255; 2:305; idem, *Kitāb al-mashārīʿ wa-l-muṭāharāt*, in *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, Ed. Henri Corbin (Istanbul: Maârif Matbaası, 1945), 1:502ff. Gerhard Böwering has contextualized these comments in idem, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 44–57.

11.   Emilio Tornero's succinct analysis of Ibn Masarra's extant treatises remains a useful starting point for understanding his hermeneutics. Emilio Tornero, "Noticia sobre la publicación de obras inéditas de Ibn Masarra," *al-Qantara* 14 (1993): pp. 47–64.

12.   According to Ibn Masarra, in a statement that echoes Tustarī's analysis, "The scholars (ʿulamāʾ) are closer than everyone in knowledge of God Most High and of His Book, and they are the rightful custodians of this knowledge out of their closeness to prophecy and to the model community. They, God have mercy on them, elaborated [knowledge] to people to the extent that [their] understanding could grasp, since matters must reach everyone. For this reason, their [scholarly] differences increased and agreement became impossible in the exterior level (ẓāhir) of the word, while they agreed on the interior level (bāṭin) of it." Pilar Garrido, "Edicion critica de *K. jawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* de Ibn Masarra," *Al-Andalus Magreb: Estudios árabes e islámicos* 14 (2007): pp. 51–89, here p. 62.

13.   Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ed. Garrido, pp. 62–63. See also Ali Humayun Akhtar, *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs: Politics and Authority from Cordoba to Cairo and Baghdad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 51–76.

14.   *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 2:1–2:2. The current study relies on the following edition: Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, Ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ʿUyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2002).

15.   Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, pp. 158ff.

16.   Jamil Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Faith: The Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 40–45.

17.   Tustarī's characterization of *dhikr* as a mode of ritual that facilitates two-way communication with God both within and outside of prayer is very similar to the discussion of *dhikr* found in the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Barrajān's writings. In his *tafsīr*, Ibn Barrajān interprets the scriptural phrase, "And the invocation of God is greater," [Qurʾān 29:45] as referring to God's response to the supplicant. *Tafsīr Ibn Barrajān*, Yusuf Ağa Kütüphanesi, MS Yusuf Ağa 4744 fol. 7r; cf. Akhtar, *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs*, pp. 155ff. Marion Katz provides an overview of the ways in which various types of *dhikr*, including theories of two-way *dhikr*, relate to other forms of ritual piety in Islam. Marion Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 10–43, pp. 75–120.

18.   Qurʾān 2:1, 3:1, 29:1, 31:1.

19.   Qurʾān 38:1.

20.   Qurʾān 10:1; 11:1; 13:1; 14:1 and 15:1.

21. Qurʾān 19:1.

22. Qurʾān 26:1 and 28:1.

23. Qurʾān 42:1.

24. Qurʾān 42:2.

25. Qurʾān 2:2.

26. *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 2:1–2:2.

27. Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) described the Sufis of al-Andalus as philosophically oriented mystics who interpreted scriptural references to the Pen, the Tablet, the divine Names, the Throne, and the Pedestal in terms of Greco-Arabic philosophy. See Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabī in the Later Islamic Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 180–85.

28. See n. 17 above.

29. Tafsīr al-Tustarī, 2:40. Keeler and Keeler have compared extant manuscripts and have offered a translation that departs from both this edition and that, in certain cases, agrees with Böwering's reading of Tustarī's tafsīr. This article relies on the previously mentioned Arabic edition and, in one case, agrees with Böwering's and Keeler and Keeler's departure from it. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler, *Tafsīr Al-Tustarī*. (Louisville: Fons Vitae; Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011).

30. Criticisms leveled against the Sufis, like those written against the philosophers and the Ismāʿīlīs, sometimes included accusations of belief in the concept divine indwelling. Various philosophers and philosophical Sufis, especially in al-Andalus, were also accused of Incarnationism (*ḥulūl*). For example, Ibn Taymiyya accused Ibn ʿArabī of promoting *ḥulūl* through the concept of the oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). The philosophers were also accused of this doctrine because of their language of "arrival" (*ittiṣāl)* and "union" (*ittiḥād)* in the intellectual ascent of human knowledge to the higher intellects. See Lourdes M. Alvarez, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: Songs of Love and Devotion* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009), pp. 15–20; William Chittick, "Waḥdat al-Wujūd/Waḥdat al-Shuhūd," *EI*2; and Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "Ghulāt," EI2. See also Calero Sacall's discussion of this accusation in María Isabel Calero Secall, "El proceso de Ibn al-Jaṭīb," *al-Qantara* 22 (2001): pp. 421–61.

31. *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 2:42.

32. According to Makkī's characterization of knowledge acquisition in *Qūt al-Qulūb*, "[The Sufis] have not acquired this knowledge through the study of books, nor have they received it from one another by word of mouth." Karamustafa contextualizes this comment in terms of Makkī's interest in expanding the scope of scholarly knowledge. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, p. 88ff.

33. *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 2:260.

34. Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141), the previously mentioned Qurʾānic exegete and influential Sufi of al-Andalus, articulated this concept using very similar language. He argued that contemplation of the interior meaning of scripture, together with scriptural recitation and the invocation of the Divine Names, brings about a level of faith that enables the intellect to see what the other fives senses cannot perceive. Specifically, the "lower intellect" (*al-ʿaql al-adnā*) develops into the "higher intellect" (*al-ʿaql al-aʿlā*), enabling perception of the hidden realities (*bawāṭin al-ashyāʾ*) that are veiled by the manifest realities of the world (*ẓawāhir al-ashyāʾ*). He illustrates this through the example of one's ability to perceive the Divine agency that allows birds to fly, in accordance with the scriptural verse that characterizes the flight of birds as a sign of God: "[Qurʾān 67:19] 'Have they not observed the birds above them spreading their wings and folding them in…' so only the vision of flying is described, but then the report is raised to the level of faith when He

says, '…nothing holds them except God, the Merciful.'" *Tafsīr Ibn Barrajān*, MS Yusuf Ağa 4744 fol. 19r. Two recent analyses of Ibn Barrajān's discussion of contemplation and the ascent of the intellect can be found in the following: Akhtar, *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs*, p. 146–62; Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 269–79.

35. *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* 4:142. Ibn Ḥazm similarly interpreted the Divine Throne in terms of the outer limits of both corporeal existence and knowledge. He stated that only the Prophets possess knowledge of what exists beyond the Throne, which he also defines as al-ghayb. He states, "The truth is that beyond the Throne there is no creation, and [the Throne] is the end of the corporeality (jaram) of created things beyond which there is neither void nor expanse [as the philosophers claim]." Ibn Ḥazm, al-Fiṣal fī-l-milal wa-l-ahwāʾ wa-l-niḥal, Eds. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Umayra (Beirut: Dār al-Jayl, 1995), 2:290.

36. *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, 2:3.

37. See, for example, Vincent J. Cornell, "The Way of the Axial Intellect: The Islamic Hermetism of Ibn Sabʿīn," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society*, 23 (1997): pp. 41–79; Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

38. So-called "Platonizing" or philosophically oriented Sufis often blended Qurʾānic theology with an eclectic approach to Greco-Arabic philosophical doctrines and identified the result as ḥikma, sometimes criticizing the *falsafa* tradition in the very same works. On this notion of wisdom, see Karamustafa, *Sufism*, pp. 44–54; Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp. 164–233; and Bernd Radtke, "Theosophie (Ḥikma) und Philosophie (Falsafa): Ein Beitrag zur Frage der ḥikmat al-mashriq/al-ishraq," *Asiatische Studien* 42 (1988): pp. 156–74.

39. Garrido, *"K. jawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf de Ibn Masarra,"* pp. 72–73.

40. This point challenges the arguments of Michael Ebstein and Sara Sviri, whose efforts to distance Ibn Masarra from Tustari's mysticism overlooks the strong parallelism connecting these latter two writers' approaches to esoteric scriptural hermeneutics. Michael Ebstein and Sara Sviri, "The so-called *Risalat al-ḥurūf* (*Epistle on Letters*) ascribed to Sahl al-Tustarī and Letter Mysticism in al-Andalus," *Journal Asiatique*, 299 (2011): pp. 213–270. For a contrasting view, see Akhtar, *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs*, pp. 51–76.

41. Suhrawardī's discussion of Tustarī as a transitional figure in the integration of philosophical doctrines into Sufism is mentioned in the following works: Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence*, pp. 44–57; Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*, pp. 27–35; idem, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, pp. 42–50.