

Surrender and Realisation: Imam Ali on the Conditions for True Religious Understanding

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Do not seek to know the Truth (*al-Haqq*) according to other people. Rather first come to know the Truth—and only then will you recognize Its people.¹

One of the most striking characteristics about those surviving oral traditions that have come down to us from the earliest periods of each of the world-religions—as with the Gospels, the earliest Buddhist teachings, or the Prophetic hadith—is the distinctive directness, simplicity, and extreme concision of those original oral teachings. It is as though everything else that follows is only a kind of endlessly extended commentary on those few simple words. Certainly this is true of many of the surviving sayings attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 40/660)—including the short, but highly memorable passage that is the focus of this study, which has inspired repeated commentaries and elaborate theological and even dramatic interpretations down through the centuries.²

The wider significance of this particular passage is that it illustrates so perfectly Ali’s emblematic role as the fountainhead of virtually all the esoteric traditions of Islamic spirituality, both among the many branches of Shiite Islam (which revere him as their first Imam) and

¹ A well-known saying commonly attributed to Ali, here as cited by al-Ghazali at the beginning of his famous spiritual autobiography, the *Munqidh min al-Dai* 1.

² Many of these same points were later developed by the famous religious author Ghazali (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali) in the influential closing chapter of his *Mazan al-‘Amal* (‘The Scale of [Right] Action’), translated in our forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities*, from which this essay has also been adapted. And already a century before the actual collection of *Nahj al-Bal_gha*, this same story of Ali and Kumayl provided the architectonic framework for a highly creative dramatic reworking of these spiritual lessons in Ja‘far ibn Mansar’s *Kitab al-‘Alim wa’l-ghulam* (see our translation and Arabic edition, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2001).

throughout the even more numerous Sufi paths, where his name is almost always included as the initial transmitter of the Prophetic *baraka* in each order's chain of transmission. That central initiatic role is beautifully summarized in the famous Prophetic saying: 'I am the city of (divine) Knowing, and Ali is its doorway.' And perhaps the most important literary vehicle in the wider transmission of Ali's teachings, since it has been equally revered by both Sunni and Shiite audiences down to our own time, is the *Nahj al-Balagha* ('Pathway of Eloquence'), a wide-ranging collection of various sermons, letters, and wise sayings attributed to Ali, that was assembled several centuries later by the famous scholar and poet al-Sharíf al-Radí (d. 406/1016).³

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The famous saying of Ali placed as the epigraph for this study, with which al-Ghaz_lí begins his own spiritual autobiography, highlights the indispensable—if somewhat paradoxical—starting point for any well-grounded discussion of religious and spiritual understanding. For all problems of inter-religious understanding—and perhaps even more important, of that initial 'intra-religious' understanding on which all further dialogue depends—necessarily come back to this fundamental question of what is the ultimate divine Reality (*al-Haqq*), and how we can come to know and properly conform to what It requires of us ('the Right', which in Arabic is also an inseparable dimension of the divine *Haqq*)? Almost all the extensive sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Bal_gha* are devoted to one or another of the equally essential dimensions of this question—to that ongoing interaction between our purified actions and intentions (*'amal*), and our maturing spiritual understanding (*'ilm*), which together constitute each person's uniquely individual, spiralling process of spiritual realization (*tahq_íq*).

Now one of the most important keys to approaching this primordial question in the *Nahj al-Bal_gha* is the famous passage (translated in full in the Appendix at the end of this study) describing Ali's intimate advice to one of his closest companions and disciples, Kumayl ibn

³ To give some idea of the ongoing popular importance and relative familiarity of that text even today, I have seen beautifully calligraphed Arabic proverbs and epigrams drawn from the *Nahj al-Balagha* on the walls of homes in every part of the Muslim world, framed for sale in suqs and bazaars, and even being sold as postcards. Even more tellingly, the owners (or sellers) of that calligraphy would often explain that this or that saying was simply 'a hadith'.

Ziyad al-Nakha'i.⁴ The difficulty and intrinsic dangers of that unique lesson are emphasized already in its dramatic setting. Kumayl, who recounts the story, stresses the great pains that Ali takes to assure his privacy and solitude, leading his disciple out to the cemetery beyond the city wall of Kufa: that is, to the symbolic home of those who—like those rare true Knowers of God described in the rest of Ali's saying—are spiritually already at once 'alone with God' and 'dead to this world.' In addition, the wider historical setting at that particular moment in time—so full of religious intrigues, claims, betrayals, and prolonged bloody civil wars among the triumphant Arabs—only highlights the profound wealth of concrete earthly experience which underlies Ali's conclusions and intimate teachings summarized in this saying.

No other text of the *Nahj al-Balagha* is so pointedly set in the same kind of strictest privacy and intimacy. As a result, this famous testament to Kumayl constitutes the indispensable link between the more public, relatively exoteric teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha* and the wealth of more intimate, often esoteric spiritual teachings of Imam Ali that were eventually preserved—at first orally, and eventually often in writing—in both Shiite and Sufi Islamic traditions.

The contents of Ali's lesson to Kumayl are all presented as a clarification of his opening statement that:

There are three sorts of people (with regard to Religion, *al-Din*). A divinely inspired Knower ('*alim rabbani*); the person who is seeking (that true spiritual) Knowing (*muta'allim*) along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of (divine) Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid support.

In the remainder of his lesson, Ali goes on to explain some of the basic conditions for these three radically different levels of (and potentials for) true religious understanding. Each of his points here—as throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*—is of course profoundly rooted in the central

⁴ Saying number 147 in the final section of short maxims, corresponding to pages 600-601 in the complete English translation by Sayed Ali Reza (*Peak of Eloquence*, NY, 1978). (Details on the Arabic text in the Appendix below.)

teachings of the Qur'an. However here we can only summarize his most essential observations in the simplest possible terms.

First, and most importantly, it is human *Hearts* (the Qur'anic *qalb al-insan*) that are the locus of true spiritual 'Knowing' (*ilm*) and of our awareness of God and Truth: that is, it is not simply our mind or intellect or passion. Hence the decisive practical importance, throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*, of Ali's constant stress on the purification of our hearts, through inner surrender to the divine Will (*taslim*), as the underlying *spiritual* purpose of the many divine commandments. Divine, inspired 'Knowing,' however it is outwardly acquired, can only be perceived as such by the Heart that has been 'polished,' emptied of this world's distractions and attachments, and thereby opened up to the full significance and reality of the divine Word—and to the further rights and obligations (another dimension of the Arabic *al-Haqq*) flowing from that opening.

Second, the practically indispensable key to this human potential for religious Knowing is the real existence and efforts of a limited number of divinely guided individuals—again, not of particular books, rituals, doctrines or worldly institutions, none of which are even mentioned in this intimate, highly personal lesson. Ali refers here to those very special human doorways to true religious understanding by several profoundly significant Qur'anic expressions: the 'divine Knowers'; the 'Friends of God' (*awliya' Allah*); God's 'Proofs' or 'Clear Signs' on Earth (*hujja, bayyina*); God's 'True Servants' (*ibad Allah*); and finally as God's true earthly 'stand-ins' or 'Stewards' (*khalifat Allah*).

The Imam tells us several other very important things in his description of these true 'Friends of God:'

- They are *always* present on earth, 'whether openly or in secret.'⁵
- They are directly inspired by the divine 'Spirit of Certainty' (*ruh al-yaqin*).

⁵ It is perhaps important to note that this last qualification (*sirr^{am}*, 'secretly') can be understood to refer not simply to the outward modesty and relative social and historical 'invisibility' of the vast majority of the true 'Friends of God'—a point also strongly emphasised in the famous Prophetic hadith about the qualities of the *wali*—but also to their ongoing *spiritual* presence, actions and effects, even more visible and widespread long after their bodily sojourn on earth, which is of course central to the manifest spiritual role of the prophets and 'Friends' (*awliya' Allâh*) throughout every authentic religious tradition.

- Therefore they pre-eminently possess true spiritual Insight (*haqiqat al-basara*) into the deeper spiritual realities underlying earthly events and experiences, into the actual meanings of the infinite divine ‘Signs’ constituting our existence.
- Their spiritual task and mission on earth is to pass on this divine Knowing to those properly qualified souls who are truly ready for and receptive to their divinely inspired teachings.

In contrast to these particular points of ‘Ali’s teaching here, it is surely essential to recall all those manifold dimensions of what we ordinarily, unthinkingly call or presume to be ‘religion’ which in fact are *not* central to the particular divine mission of these inspired individuals as it is described in this lesson.

Third, Ali describes the divine ‘Knowing’ that can be conveyed uniquely by these specially missioned individuals as having the following qualities:

- It is the ‘*Din* (true Religion/true Justice) by which God is truly worshipped and served.’
- It is the indispensable key to realising what the Qur’an constantly describes as our ultimate human purpose: i.e., to transforming the mortal biped or ‘human-animal’ (*bashar*) into the theomorphic, truly human being (*insan*), who alone can freely follow and truly obey God (the inner state of *ita‘a*), eventually becoming a pure manifestation of the divine Will.
- Their divinely inspired Knowing is the true ‘Judge’ or Criterion for rightly perceiving and employing all the illusory possessions (*mal*) of this world .

Fourth, the ‘true Seekers’ (*muta‘allimun*) of that divine Knowing have at least the following basic pre-requisites, each of which distinguishes them from the large majority of ordinary souls (*al-nas*). One might therefore say that each of these following five points mentioned by Ali here is in itself an essential pre-condition for acquiring true religious understanding:

- Those true religious Seekers have a rare natural spiritual capacity to recognize, absorb, and actualize the inspired teachings of the Friends of God.
- They know that they need the indispensable guidance of God’s Friends (the *awliya*’), and therefore actively seek it out. That is to say, they actually realize that they are spiritually ‘ignorant’ and needy.
- They are willing and able to submit to the guidance of those divine Knowers and Bearers of Truth, especially with regard to acknowledging the true, ultimate aims of this inspired spiritual Knowing. In other words, they have the indispensable humility to recognize their inner ignorance and to overcome the central spiritual obstacle of pride.
- They have the practical insight and active spiritual perspicacity (*basara*) to ‘see through’ the ongoing divine ‘private lessons’, the most essential divine ‘Signs’ (*ayat*) of each soul’s life. (This particular point is one that Ali especially stresses throughout all the sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha*.)
- They are not secretly governed by their desires for power and domination, qualities which Ali stresses (along with pride) as the particular psychic passions most likely to trip up the otherwise apt potential spiritual seekers of this group.

Finally, the rest of humanity are clearly—indeed even vehemently—said to lack, for the time being, the above-mentioned prerequisites for realized spiritual learning and illumination, because of the current domination of their hearts by their psychic passions of the *nafs*: for power, pleasure, possessions, and the attractions ‘this lower world’ (*al-dunya*) in general. In this particular context, Ali does not openly clarify whether or not ‘purification’ of our hearts from such worldly passions is in itself the only obstacle to deeper spiritual and religious realization, or whether some individuals are simply born with dramatically greater, relatively unique spiritual capacities and potential. However, his recurrent and insistent practical stress on the ethically purifying dimensions of Islamic ritual and devotional practice throughout much of the rest of the *Nahj al-Balagha* is a strong indication that revealed prescriptions for religious teaching and

practice can and should be understood as well as an indispensable preparatory discipline that can be used to move at least some individuals toward the receptive inner state of these true ‘seekers.’

Now the practical consequences of all of Ali’s observations briefly enumerated here are quite visible in the particular structure and emphases of almost all his longer sermons and discourses throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*. To put it in the simplest possible form, each longer text in that work typically stresses the dual religious dimensions of both *tasl_m* (‘surrender’) and *tahqiq* (‘realization’).⁶ That is, almost all of Imam Ali’s teachings are directed at the same time toward both (1) the essential purification of our own will—i.e., the discovery and gradual distillation of the true human/divine *irada* from the endless promptings of our domineering ego-self or *nafs*—through true inner conformity and surrender (*taslim*) to the authentic divine commandments; and (2) the subsequent stage of more active ‘realization’ (*tahqiq*) of the divinely inspired teachings that can only come about when an individual has developed enough humility and inner awareness of their spiritual ignorance to recognize their unavoidable need for a divine Guide and Knower, along with the many other essential qualities of the ‘seeker on the path of salvation’ that have just been summarized above. From this perspective, all of the *Nahj al-Balagha* constitutes an extended, lifelong example of the sort of essential spiritual teaching and guidance (*ta’lim*) alluded to here in Ali’s private advice to his close disciple.

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In conclusion, we cannot help but notice that Ali’s remarks to Kumayl ibn Ziyad here provide a radical contrast to many prevailing modern-day assumptions about ‘religious understanding’ and religious teaching, whether our focus happens to be on ‘inter-’ or ‘intra-’religious concerns. Here I can mention only a few of the most salient points of contrast between popular contemporary conceptions of inter-religious understanding and Imam Ali’s own teachings on this subject, without entering into a more detailed discussion of the deeper philosophic underpinnings and presuppositions on either side.

To begin with, the primary focus of most modern attempts at inter-religious understanding is either intellectual and theological, where formal doctrines and religious symbols

⁶ See the more adequate discussion of this key polyvalent term in our Introduction to *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype, 2004).

are concerned; or else on ‘social ethics,’ where certain historically accumulated external practical precepts and rituals of two religious traditions are being compared. In either case, the particular comparison (or ‘understanding’) of the religious traditions concerned is typically carried out in an external, reductive social, historical or political way that supposedly reveals the ‘real,’ common meanings and functions of the religious phenomena in question. In this widespread approach, the aims of those particular practical or theological dimensions of a given religion are usually reduced, explicitly or implicitly, to a given, presumably familiar and universally accessible set of historical, this-worldly (*dunyawa*) social, political, or even psychic ends.

What is key in each such case, of course, is the reductive, socio-political emphasis and assumptions shared by virtually all such modern approaches. Now no rational observer would deny that every historical religion does indeed ‘function’ in such ways in this world—in ways that are in fact so poignantly illustrated by the endless ‘religious’ polemics, strife, and open civil warfare of early Islamic history during Ali’s own lifetime, seminal events that are recorded in such thorough detail throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*. But modern writers unfortunately too often tend to ignore the equally obvious limits of such reductive forms of interpretation and understanding: what is it, one might ask all the same, that also differentiates, for example, a genuine Sufi *tariqa* from a social club, real spiritual guidance from psychiatry, or transformative spiritual music (*dhikr* and *sama* ‘ in their primordial sense) from any other concert performance?

In dramatic contrast to such popular contemporary approaches to ‘religious understanding’, Ali’s remarks in this passage focus on radically different, spiritually distinctive and difficultly attainable—but nonetheless fundamental—aspects of religious life and understanding, whatever the particular historical traditions in question:

First, for Imam Ali, true inter-religious understanding—at any of the three levels he distinguishes here—is always *between individuals*, growing out of each soul’s individual encounter with the ‘other’ and their common spiritual reality and relationship with *al-Haqq* (God, Reality, and Truth). From this perspective, therefore, true religious understanding is always the ultimate fruit of a sort of ‘*tri-ologue*’—not a worldly dialogue—in which both the human parties, the Knower and the properly prepared disciple, share and gradually discover their common divine Ground of reality and true being.

Secondly, the possibilities of religious understanding (again whether inter- or intra-religious) are essentially limited above all by the intrinsic barrier of the specific spiritual capacities, shortcomings and level of realization of each individual. As in the familiar imagery of so many hadith and later Islamic writings, souls here are indeed revealed as *mirrors*, who can only see in the ‘other’—whether that be a religious phenomenon or anything else—their own reflection. Therefore the basharic ‘rabble’ of whom Ali speaks so painfully here—whatever their particular religion or historical situation—are necessarily and unavoidably in the position so aptly described in Rumi’s famous tale of the blind men and the elephant.

Thirdly, for Ali, even the first beginnings of our approach to a true, immediate awareness of God and the divine Religion (*din*) are necessarily grounded above all in humility, in an awareness of one’s own essential spiritual ignorance and limitations—and therefore not in the acquisition of some further external form of knowledge, ritual, or belief. In other words, the greatest, primordial obstacle to any serious religious understanding—as Socrates and so many other inspired teachers have repeatedly reminded us down through the ages—is our own ‘compound ignorance’ (*jahl murakkab*), our own illusion that we truly ‘know’ so much that we in fact only believe or imagine.

Finally, if Ali teaches us—as this story itself so dramatically illustrates—that the keys to the deepest and most profound forms of religious understanding are to be found in seeking out God’s true ‘Knowers’ and Guides and our own intimate spiritual relation to them, then the corresponding area of human religious life and experience most likely to lead to genuine inter-religious understanding is that of our particular individual devotional life and prayer, of each soul’s unique, ongoing inner relationship with its Guide and source of Light, in what has traditionally been termed ‘practical spirituality’ (*irfan-i ‘amala*). Not surprisingly, this domain of our personal spiritual experience and practice, where God is so obviously and unavoidably the ultimate ‘Actor’ and Creator, in reality exhibits an extraordinary phenomenological similarity across all external historical and credal boundaries and socio-political divisions....

These brief reflections on some of the central teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha* cannot help but remind us of one of the most remarkable Qur’anic verses on the subject of humankind’s recurrent religious *misunderstandings* and their ultimate resolution in and by the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*). Not surprisingly, this verse also serves well as a remarkable symbolic allusion to the

strife-torn historical events and conflicts among the early Muslims, those critical, paradigmatic ‘tests’ (*fitan*) that are so vividly illustrated and evoked throughout the remainder of the *Nahj al-Balagha*—and which continue to recur, with such poignancy, in our own and every age.

The verse in question (*al-Baqara*, 213) begins with the reminder that ‘*all people were one religious community,*’ but then:

God sent prophets bearing good news and warning, and He revealed through them the Scripture with Truth (Haqq), so that He might judge among the people concerning that about which they differed. And only those differed concerning It to whom (the Scripture) was brought, after the Clear Proofs came to them, out of strife and rebellion among themselves. But then God guided those who had faith to the Truth about which they had differed, through His permission. For God guides whoever He wishes to a Straight Path!

Appendix: Ali's Speech to Kumayl ibn Ziyad al-Nakha'i⁷

Kumayl ibn Ziyad said: The Commander of the Faithful—Peace be upon him!—took my hand and brought me out to the cemetery (beyond the city walls). So when he had entered the desert he let out a great sigh, and then he said:

O Kumayl ibn Ziyad, these Hearts are containers: the best of them is the one that holds the most. So remember well what I am going to say to you!

The people are (divided into) three groups: a lordly (divinely inspired) Knower⁸; one seeking Knowing along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid Support.

O Kumayl, Knowing is better than possessions: Knowing protects you, but you must guard possessions. Possessions are diminished as they're spent, but Knowing multiplies (or 'purifies') as it is shared. But whoever makes the possessions disappears as they do!

O Kumayl ibn Ziyad, the awareness/recognition (*ma'rifa*) of Knowing is a Religion (*din*) by which (God) is worshipped and served: through it the truly human being (*insan*) acquires willing obedience (to God) during their life

⁷ This particular well-known passage from *Nahj al-Balagha*, the famous later compilation (by al-Sharif al-Radi, 359/970-406/1016) of the many letters, teachings, sermons and proverbs attributed to Ali ibn Abu Talib, is also included in almost identical form in a number of earlier extant Shiite works, in both the Imami and the Ismaili traditions. The text translated here is from a popular Beirut edition of *Nahj al-Balagha* (Dar al-Andalus, 1980), pp. 593-595, numbered 147 in the long later section of 'Wise Sayings' (*hikam*). The setting of this particular lesson is apparently outside the new Arab settlement of Kufa (on the edge of the desert in southern Iraq), during one of the drawn-out, bloody civil wars that divided the nascent Muslim community throughout the period of Ali's Imamate.

⁸ *'Alim rabbani*: 'Knower' here is used in the strong and inclusive Qur'anic sense, to refer to profound, God-given spiritual Knowing (*'ilm*). The qualifier recalls the Qur'anic term *rabbaniyun* and apparently is related both to the Arabic root referring to God as 'Lord' (*rabb*, hence 'divine' or 'god-like'), and to another Arabic root referring to spiritual *teaching* and education in the very broadest sense (*r-b-y*). The latter meaning is emphasized at Qur'an 3:79, which probably underlies the special usage here: ...*Be rabbaniyun through your teaching the Book and through your studying (It)*.

(here), and a beautiful, wonderful state after their passing away. For Knowing is the Judge, and possessions are what is adjudged!

O Kumayl, those who accumulate possessions have perished, even while they are still alive. But the Knowers endure for all eternity: their particular-instances⁹ are lost, but their likenesses are found in the Hearts. O what Knowledge abounding there is *right here!*—and he pointed with his hand to his breast¹⁰—if only I could reach those who are its (rightful) bearers.

True, I've reached a quick-learner who couldn't be trusted with It, who would seek to use the instrument of Religion for this world—who would try to use God's blessings to dominate His (true) servants and His proofs to overcome His Friends.¹¹ Or someone submissive to the bearers of the divine Truth (*al-Haqq*), but without any true Insight (*basara*) into Its twists and curves, whose Heart is consumed by doubt at the first onset of some difficulty. But alas, neither this one nor that (can truly bear the Truth)! Or someone greedy for pleasures, easily led by their passions? Or someone engrossed in acquiring and accumulating (worldly possessions)? Those two are not among the guardians¹² of Religion in any respect—the closest semblance to that sort are the grazing cattle! Thus Knowing dies with the death of those who bear it.

Yet indeed, O my God, the world is never without one upholding the Evidence¹³ for God, either outwardly and known to all, or secretly and in

⁹ *A'yan* (pl. of *'ayn*): that is, their individual, temporal earthly manifestation, as opposed to their 'images' or 'likenesses' (*amthal*, or 'symbols') in the Hearts of other human individuals after them. Here we can see how Ali's perspective parallels—and at the same time embodies—the Qur'anic understanding of the relationship between the archetypal divine 'Names' (which ultimately constitute this Knowing) and their infinitely re-created individual manifestations.

¹⁰ Here, as in the Qur'an, the term 'breast' or 'chest' (*sadr*) is virtually synonymous with the 'Heart' (*qalb*) as the locus of *all* true perception, selfhood, etc.

¹¹ *Awliya' Allah*: see the Qur'anic use of this key term (10:62).

¹² Or 'shepherds', 'pastors': *ru'at*.

¹³ Or 'Proof' (*al-Hujja*)—but in the sense of the indisputable living human *Manifestation*, not any sort of logical or rhetorical 'argument'; this is another central Qur'anic concept (4:165, 6:149) frequently alluded to in other teachings

obscurity,¹⁴ so that God's Evidences and His illuminating-manifestations may not come to nought. But how many are these, and where are they!?

By God, these (true Knowers) are the fewest in number, but the greatest of all in their rank with God! Through them God preserves His Evidences and His Illuminating-manifestations, so that these (Knowers) may entrust them to their (true) peers and sow them in the Hearts of those like them. Through (those Knowers) Knowing penetrates to the inner reality of true Insight (*haqiqat al-basara*). They are in touch with the Spirit of Certainty (*ruh al-yaqin*). They make clear what the lovers of comfort had obscured. They are at home with what distresses the ignorant. And their bodies keep company with this world, while their spirits are connected to the Loftiest Station.

Those are the ones who are (truly) *God's Stewards*¹⁵ on the earth, who are calling (the people) to *His Religion*. Oh, how I long to see them! Go on now, Kumayl, if you want.

of Imam 'Ali in the *Nahj al-Bahagha*. The Qur'anic expression *bayyinat* ('Illuminating-manifestations') used several times in the immediately following passage seems to refer to the same key spiritual figures in this context.

¹⁴ Literally, '*in fear*' (used in the Qur'an, for example, of the young Moses fleeing Egypt for Midian) and '*submerged*' (by the power of earthly tyranny).

¹⁵ This famous Qur'anic phrase (*khalifat Allah*) is variously applied to prophets (Adam, at 2:30; David, at 38:27) and to 'you-all' (= all of humanity), at 6:165, 10:14 and 73; 35:39; 27:62; etc. Within a short time after the death of the Prophet—and certainly by the time of this story—it had taken on a highly charged and disputed political significance in the long and violent decades of protracted civil wars over the worldly leadership of the nascent Arab-Muslim political community.