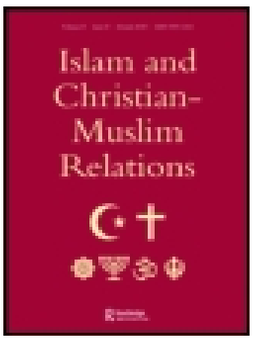

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Beyond the Qur'ān: Early Ismaʿīlī Taʾwīl and the Secrets of the Prophets

Khalil Andani

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BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Qur'ān: Early Ismaʿīlī Taʾwīl and the Secrets of the Prophets, by David Hollenberg, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2016, 192 pp., $44.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781611176780

Scholarship on the history and doctrines of Shiʿi Ismaili Muslims has progressed at a dizzying pace over the last few decades. Most publications in the field to date are historical studies of particular periods of Ismaili history analysing Ismailism's socio-political activities, such as the famed Fatimid era or the Nizari state of Alamut. Relatively speaking, the study of Ismaili doctrine – theology, cosmology, hermeneutics and soteriology – remains in the early stages. In this context, David Hollenberg's monograph is a penetrating study focused on the intellectual contributions of Ismaili thinkers, primarily Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. ca. 349/960), as well as a methodological intervention into the way Ismaili spiritual hermeneutics, known as *taʾwīl*, is studied. Hollenberg's main argument, based on his analysis of tenth-century Fatimid Ismaili texts, is that Ismaili *taʾwīl* is best conceptualized as a form of cognitive training and intellectual conditioning that brings about 'new habits of mind' among members of the Ismaili movement and engenders in them a sectarian sense of special identity.

The author presents this argument over six chapters and focuses his analysis upon the early Fatimid Ismaili *taʾwīl* attributed to Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman as a paradigmatic case to offer a new conceptualization of how *taʾwīl* functions in an Ismaili context. The first chapter provides an overview of the history of the Ismailis from the origins of the movement to the present day, with a major focus on early Ismaili *daʿwa* and the emergence of the Fatimid caliphate. While this chapter is meant to provide a historical context for the study of Ismaili hermeneutics, Hollenberg challenges some of the viewpoints in current scholarship with respect to the relationship between Ismaili *daʿwa* and the Fatimid state. First, he adopts a sociological approach, taking Ismailism as a socio-political 'sect' in accordance with the views of Max Weber – in apparent rejection of calls by earlier scholars such as Marshall Hodgson and Farhad Daftary to jettison sectarian frames when studying the Shiʿa. Second, Hollenberg calls for a separation between Ismaili *daʿwa* discourse and Fatimid state rhetoric, downplaying the influence of *daʿwa* upon the *dawla* and suggesting that the roles of Ismaili Imam and Fatimid Caliph were often in conflict. Against the views of Irene A. Bearman and Paula Sanders that Fatimid art, architecture and court ceremonial reflected the religious authority of the Fatimid Imam-Caliph and Ismaili doctrine, Hollenberg prefers to see Fatimid material culture as embodying a pan-ʿAlid or sometimes partisan Shiʿi message as opposed to representing distinctively Ismaili doctrines.

In the second chapter, Hollenberg introduces readers to the different genres of qur'anic commentary including *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl* in the Sunni and Twelver contexts and offers critical remarks on recent approaches to the study of Ismaili *taʾwīl*. He differentiates Ismaili *taʾwīl* from other forms of Islamic hermeneutics by stressing the activist and political nature of the former. He notes that Ismaili *taʾwīl* is not really Qur'an commentary but is more akin to divinely-inspired unveiling (*kashf*), whose esoteric referents include the Ismaili *daʿwa* itself. Hollenberg also parses the meaning of *taʾwīl* in an Ismaili context as referring to one of three things: a rhetorical claim to possess esoteric truth, *daʿwa* literature produced by Ismaili writers, and *daʿwa* knowledge – a cognitive orientation in the mind of the Ismaili believer that *taʾwīl* is supposed to induce. This chapter ends with a detailed description of the main Fatimid texts analysed throughout the rest of the book.

In the third chapter, Hollenberg employs his unique methodology of analysing Ismaili *daʿwa* literature in order to reveal the 'habits of mind' or cognitive transformation that *taʾwīl* engenders in Ismaili initiates. His method involves evoking the metaphor of 'rearing' – used by Ismaili authors to describe the *daʿwa* initiation process, drawing on Tanya Luhrmann's ethnographical study of the Vineyard Church, *When God Talks Back* (2012), and referring to Ernst Cassirer's notion of mythical consciousness. Focusing on the *taʾwīl* literature of Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974) and Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman, Hollenberg argues that the purpose of the repetition of the same stock of symbols (*amthāl*; sing: *mathal*), patterns (*tarākīb*; sing: *tarkīb*), and signified meanings (*mamāthīl*; sing: *mamthūl*) throughout the *taʾwīl* literature is to condition and train the Ismaili initiate to be able to find these symbolic arrangements and esoteric meanings everywhere. Accordingly, Ismaili *taʾwīl*, through its unconventional logic of interpretation, induces within the initiate a certain mythical consciousness as opposed to a rational or scientific outlook, with the overall goal of binding and perpetuating the sectarian identity of the Ismaili movement.

Through the fourth and fifth chapters, Hollenberg focuses on the *taʾwīl* composed by Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman to show the epistemic and sectarian reasons why Ismaili authors tried to interpret non-Islamic scriptures and symbols such as the Torah, the Cross and the Eucharist. He argues that the Ismaili view of revelation affirmed the presence of hidden meanings in the religious symbols stemming from earlier prophets but also emphasizes that the Ismaili propensity to use exotic and controversial non-Islamic symbols was to create sectarian tension and otherness between Ismailis and non-Ismailis. Hollenberg also reads within Ismaili interpretations of earlier prophets' missions a hidden Fatimid polemic against the Eastern Ismaili *dāʿī*s or certain apostates who forsook the Fatimids as the rightful Imams. Accordingly, the Fatimid employment of Neoplatonic cosmology, Hollenberg maintains, is not an accommodation to the Eastern *dāʿī*s' adherence to Neoplatonism, but rather, a Fatimid *daʿwa* riposte and demonstration that only the Imam and his authorized *dāʿī*s can truly master such knowledge.

As the first monograph dedicated to the topic, Hollenberg's cognitive analysis of Ismaili *taʾwīl* certainly reveals new insights about this genre of Islamic thought and engages dimensions of Ismaili literature neglected till now. Another strength of the book is its very detailed engagement with Ismaili texts and the way it makes this specialized esoteric material accessible to the non-specialist reader. At the same time, some of Hollenberg's methods and claims can be questioned. His use of Weber's sectarian framework to define the Ismaili movement risks reviving outdated and long contentious frames of sectarianism. The problem arises when Ismaili *taʾwīl* is called 'sectarian' while discourses such as Sunni law and *tafsīr* are not – despite the fact that scholars have described the sectarian purposes of these Sunni discourses. For example, Walid Saleh (2015, 1652) has argued that '*Tafsīr* was thus from early on the medium through which Sunnism built its intellectual defenses against its adversaries', and Ahmed El Shamsy (2008) has pointed out that Sunni learning in the form of legal knowledge, Qur'an commentary, and so on contributed to the construction and perpetuation of orthodoxy. The claim that the Ismaili Imam's role as Fatimid Caliph conflicted with his Imamate roles so as to diminish the *daʿwa*'s appeal in the Fatimid capital is based on scant evidence and can be validly questioned in light of contemporaneous Fatimid literature by al-Nuʿmān, Ustad Jawdhar (d. 363/973), Kirmānī (d. after 411/1021), and Naysābūrī (fl. fifth/eleventh century), all of whom present the Ismaili Imam as the ideal Caliph. Hollenberg's methodological incorporation of the insights of Tanya Luhrmann and Ernst Cassirer may be an overreach: Ismaili *dāʿī*s and initiates were certainly not carrying out 'pretend' conversations with God as their 'best friend' like the Vineyard Church members featured in Luhrmann's ethnography – such an idea amounts to sheer anthropomorphism (*tashbīḥ*) for the Ismailis. Cassirer's

distinction between mythical consciousness and rational consciousness relies on modern post-Enlightenment theories of epistemology and seems wholly inapplicable to tenth-century Ismaili literature. On the contrary, one can reasonably argue that rationality is the very spirit of Ismaili *taʾwīl* in practice, as evidenced by the arguments on the necessity of *taʾwīl* marshalled by Sijistānī, Kirmānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw. In general, Hollenberg's approach to Ismaili *taʾwīl* risks reducing it to a tool of social engineering for Ismaili sectarian identity.

Despite the above reservations, Hollenberg has published a pioneering study of Ismaili *taʾwīl* that is extensive in both methodology and primary source analysis. His incorporation of new methodological considerations into the study of Ismaili thought is a noteworthy development in the field. The accessibility of the author's writing style and explanations make this a useful text for specialists and non-specialists alike.

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Khalil Andani
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA
kha505@mail.harvard.edu

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