

In an untitled manuscript work from the late eighteenth century, a Sufi Muslim teacher from the Western Sahara Desert offers a piece of “advice” (*waṣiyya*) about the Sufi practice of retreat (*khalwa*). The author of the text, Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811), rose to prominence in the Saharan region of the Azawād (in present-day northern Mali) by consolidating the branches of his extended family; gaining control over crucial trade-routes; and developing a Sufi pedagogical network.<sup>1</sup> For the next hundred years, the leaders of Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s family influenced the thought, practice, and politics of Muslims across the region, from the Senegal to the Niger River deltas.<sup>2</sup> This short text represents only one small sample of a vast corpus of texts produced by Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his son and successor, Sīdī Muḥammad, who each left hundreds of works distributed throughout manuscript libraries across Western and Northern Africa. The untitled text in question is labelled “*Khalwa* [retreat]” in the manuscript catalogue and at the end of this article, I provide a complete Arabic transliteration of the text from two manuscript witnesses from the Boutilimit Manuscript Library in Mauritania, as well as a complete English translation.<sup>3</sup>

While “*Khalwa*” begins with the subject of retreat, the overall question animating the work is whether or not it is possible to have a vision (*ru’ya*) of God.

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<sup>1</sup> For the life and career of Sīdī al-Mukhtār see: ‘Abd Al-‘Azīz Baṭrān, “Sidi Al-Mukhtar al-Kunti and the Recrudescence of Islam in the Western Sahara and the Middle Niger, c. 1750--1811” (PhD Dissertation, England, University of Birmingham, 1971); ‘Abd Al-‘Azīz Baṭrān, *The Qadiriyya Brotherhood in West Africa and the Western Sahara: The Life and Times of Shaykh al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, (1729-1811)*, 1ère éd, Recherche et Études 10 (Rabat: Publications de l’Institut des études africaines, 2001); Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, “A Man of Letters in Timbuktu: Al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti,” in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, ed. Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (HSRC Press, 2004), 231–48; Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, “La généalogie et les capitaux flottant: al-Shaykh Sīd al-Mukhtār (c. 1750-1811) et les Kunta,” in *Emirs et présidents: figures de la parenté et du politique dans le monde arabe*, ed. Pierre Bonte, Edouard Conte, and Paul Dresch (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2001), 137–61; Charles C. Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania; a Case Study from the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 34–43; E. Ann McDougall, “The Economics of Islam in Western Sahara: The Rise of the Kunta Clan,” in *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Humphrey J. Fisher (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers, 1987), 39–54.

<sup>2</sup> For influences and interactions between the Kunta leaders and other regional Sufi communities and leaders see: Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*; Charles C. Stewart, “Frontier Disputes and Problems of Legitimation: Sokoto–Masina Relations 1817–1837,” *The Journal of African History* 17, no. 4 (1976): 497–514.

<sup>3</sup> This article is based on microfilm reproductions deposited in the archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the Charles C. Stewart papers. Witness A is filed under location number 61:10 and witness B under location number 61:6. Both witnesses are complete at four folios in length, but neither provides information concerning the date of copying or the name of the copyist. Some of the ink in manuscript B has faded but is still legible. The differences between the two witnesses are minor, and rarely affect the meaning of the text, although manuscript B does contain a longer, more elaborate preface.

In addressing this question, the text brings together two relevant Qur'anic passages, verses 7:142-143 in which Moses requests to see God, and the ambiguous visionary encounter depicted in the first eighteen verses of *Surat al-Najm*, the Star. Specifically, after advising his audience of the appropriate performance of the practice of retreat, the narrative voice of Sīdī al-Mukhtār uses a series of homiletic and Qur'anic references to argue that, while Moses failed to maintain the proper humility in the presence of the divine, Muḥammad embodied perfect etiquette and as a result did indeed receive a direct vision of God. Debates over the possibility of an oracular vision of God are recorded in Qur'anic commentaries as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, this discussion acquires its relevance within the Kunta community because of Sīdī al-Mukhtār's concern with experiences within the realm of the unseen (*'alam al-ghayb*), the vast invisible world that exists both above, alongside of, and within, the visible realm of the senses. The remainder of this article situates "*Khalwa*" within the life and work of Sīdī al-Mukhtār and then puts the text into conversation with other works by the same writer and his son. This intertextual reading demonstrates both how Sīdī al-Mukhtār linked the question of seeing God to legitimate knowledge acquired from the realm of the unseen and how he positioned privileged access to that realm as the source of his family's socio-religious authority.

This analysis relates to other scholarship which has identified the centrality of the two sections from the Qur'an brought together in "*Khalwa*" to Islamic conceptions of the afterlife (*al-akhira*). In particular, Pieter Coppens's work on the question of seeing God in early Sufi Qur'anic commentaries has situated these Qur'anic passages as central to Sufi articulations of visionary experiences and crossings-over between this world and the next.<sup>4</sup> Christian Lange's work on Muslim depictions of the afterlife in the early to medieval period has demonstrated that Islamic eschatological imagery often positioned this space in an "every-when" that existed, synchronically, alongside life in "this world" (*al-dunya*).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Lange argues that *al-akhira* should be best translated as "otherworld," to avoid the implication that one world follows temporally "after" the other.<sup>6</sup> These recent studies also relate to a large body of scholarship on visionary experiences of

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<sup>4</sup> Pieter Coppens, *Seeing God in Sufi Qur'an Commentaries: Crossings Between This World and the Otherworld* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Lange, 12.

other worlds in Islam and Sufism,<sup>7</sup> many of which focus on the elaboration of an intermediary, imaginal realm of pure forms between the material and spiritual worlds.<sup>8</sup> While such scholarship has done excellent work in tracing the early and medieval contours of these discussions, few works have focused on the ongoing effects and application of these debates in later historical periods, or in contexts outside of the Middle East and Iran.<sup>9</sup> This article addresses the theme of visionary experiences within another world as they emerge from the writings of one West African Sufi author. As I demonstrate, Sīdī al-Mukhtār, like his medieval predecessors, does use Qur'ān 7:142-143 and the opening of *Surat al-Najm* to advance a larger argument about visionary experiences in another world. However, the other world described by both Sīdī al-Mukhtār cannot be exclusively reduced to either the eschatological space of *al-akhira*, nor solely to the realm of ideas (*'ālam al-mithāl*). Rather, both *al-akhira* and the ideational pure forms each represent one aspect of a larger realm of the unseen (*'ālam al-ghayb*) that forms the central concern of “*Khalwa*.” According, I maintain the typical translation of *al-akhira* as “afterlife,” to avoid conceptual confusion with the “other world” represented by the realm of the unseen.

Finally, “*Khalwa*” does not fit firmly into any of the classical genres of Islamic literature that have formed the basis for most academic scholarship. Although the work comments on two passages from the Qur'ān, the text shares

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<sup>7</sup> For useful introductions to this body of work see: Nile Green, “The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 13, no. 3 (2003): 287–313; Marcia K. Hermansen, “Introduction to the Study of Dreams and Visions in Islam,” *Religion* 27, no. 1 (1997): 1–5; Amila Buturovic, “Vision,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington D.C: Brill Online, n.d.); and the contributors to Özgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh, eds., *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies* (SUNY Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The idea of the imaginal realm (*'ālam al-mithāl*) gained particular impetus from the work of the thirteenth century Sufi philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabī. See, in particular, the works of Henri Corbin and William Chittick: Henri Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); William C. Chittick, “Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn Al-'Arabī's Eschatology,” *The Muslim World* 78, no. 1 (January 1, 1988): 51–82; William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Some excellent exceptions include: Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010); Hermansen, “Introduction to the Study of Dreams and Visions in Islam.”

none of the characteristics of classical Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*).<sup>10</sup> “*Khalwa*” does not even draw on the related category of Sufi commentaries on the Qur'ān.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Sīdī al-Mukhtār refers to his short work as “a piece of advice (*waṣīyya*),” thus associating it with the genre of “advice literature” or “counsels.” Sometimes referred to as “mirrors for princes,” these texts were used either by Muslim scholars to offer advice and guidance to rulers or by a ruler or other paternal figure to provide advice or council to his heirs.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the boundaries of this category overlap with “*adab* literature,” or manuals of guidance for the proper comportment of Sufis.<sup>13</sup> By identifying “*Khalwa*” as “a piece of advice,” and beginning the text with guidelines for performing a specific ritual – in this case, a retreat – Sīdī al-Mukhtār associates his work with these two genres. However, Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s short text spends very little time discussing the corporeal aspects of retreat, and he never covers key details that would allow someone to perform the ritual. Thus, whereas an *adab* manual might address topics such as the location and length of the retreat, how secluded believers should occupy themselves over the course of the ritual, and what and when to eat or drink, “*Khalwa*” neglects these altogether. Instead, the text quickly departs from a focus on the attitudes and habits of the body and shifts into descriptions of visionary experiences within the realm of the unseen

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<sup>10</sup> The classical period of formal *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* is often said to begin with the emergence of al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 923) *Jāmi' al-bayān*. From this point until the eighteenth century a work considered to be a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān largely followed certain formal characteristics. These included following the text of the Qur'ān from beginning to end and providing a line-by-line or even a word-by-word interpretation as a running commentary. Rippin Andrew, “Tafsīr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill Online, 2012); Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181–210.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of the genre of Sufi Qur'ānic commentary see: Coppens, *Seeing God*, 16–19; 68–70; Kristin Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam* (Routledge, 2006); and Gerhard Böwering, “The Scriptural ‘Senses’ in Medieval Sufi Qur'ān Exegesis,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph Goering, 2003, 346–65; Jamal Elias has argued that “Sufi *tafsīr*” should not be considered as a separate genre. Jamal J. Elias, “Šūfī Tafsīr Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2010): 41–55.

<sup>12</sup> Louise Marlow singles out al-Ghazālī’s works as the pivotal moment that gave rise to a “loosely ‘Šūfī’ variant” of the genre, and Frenkel observes that Sufi advice literature increased in popularity in the thirteenth century, particularly in Mamlūk Syria and Egypt. Louise Marlow, “Advice and Advice Literature,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill Online, 2012); Yehoshua Frenkel, “Notes Regarding Sufism in Mamluk Bilad Aš-Šam,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, ed. Urbain Vermeien and Kristof D’Hulser (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 494; For a comprehensive account of the main themes and political rhetoric of this genre see: Negin Yavari, *Advice for the Sultan: Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Eve Feuillebois-Pierunek, “La Maîtrise Du Corps d’après Les Manuels de Soufisme (Xe-Xive Siècles),” *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans et de La Méditerranée*, no. 113–114 (2006): 91–107.

(*‘alam al-ghayb*). Finally, at the end of the work, Sīdī al-Mukhtār includes a brief, almost parenthetical, aside, directing his readers to one of his multi-volume treatises, *Nuzhat al-rāwī wa-bughyat al-hāwī*,<sup>14</sup> for a further discussion of the topic. This aside positions “*Khalwa*” as an abridgment, a condensed and summative text addressed to students.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, rather than occupying a defined genre, “*Khalwa*” pulls simultaneously from many different literary traditions, including *tafsīr*, advice and *adab* literature, descriptions of visionary encounters, and legal abridgments. “*Khalwa*” brings together the themes of these textual traditions to connect concerns with the comportment of the body, visionary encounters in the invisible world, and the limits of scriptural interpretation. Examining this text thus provides insight into how Sufi scholars communicated to their students and followers while simultaneously indicating the importance of reading outside of the genres that have served as the classical foci of Islamic Studies scholarship.

### **Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī and the Saharan Context**

Most of the historical information about the purported author of the text, Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, comes from the bio-hagiographical accounts produced by his son and successor, Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī.<sup>16</sup> These accounts position Sīdī al-Mukhtār as a Sufi friend of God (*walī*), whose particular proximity to God results in the appearance of divine gifts or *charismata* (*karamāt*) that alter the natural order of events. These accounts describe Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s development into a Sufi friend of God through standard hagiographical tropes, such as the peripatetic search for knowledge (*riḥla fī ṭalib al-‘ilm*), in which a young al-Mukhtār travels across the desert to study with various teachers before meeting his Sufi *shaykh*, Sīdī ‘Alī al-Najīb.<sup>17</sup> After inheriting the authority of Sīdī ‘Alī, the accounts chronicle Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s consolidation of the diffuse branches of the Kunta family, the establishment of his family’s control over important material resources, and his accumulation of wealth through the management of crucial Saharan trade routes.

<sup>14</sup> I have located only one witness for the first volume of this text: Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “*Nuzha al-rāwī wa bughya al-hāwī*, vol. 1” (Paris, 1857 1273), Manuscripts Orientale, Arabe 5365, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF).

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent analysis of the relationship between summative abridgements and longer commentaries within Islamic legal traditions see Brinkley Morris Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 15–36.

<sup>16</sup> The two main family chronicles used to reconstruct the life and career of Sīdī al-Mukhtār are: Muḥammad ibn al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, *Ṭarā’if wa’l-talā’id min karāmāt al-shaykhayn al-wālida wa’l-wālida*, ed. Yahyā Ould Sayyid Aḥmad, 4 vols. (Dār al-ma’rifa, 2013); Muḥammad ibn al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, *al-Risāla al-ghallāwiyya*, ed. Hamāhullah Ould al-Sālim (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Baṭrān, “Sīdī Al-Mukhtar,” 118–25; al-Kuntī, *al-Ṭarā’if wa’l-talā’id*, 2013, 1:222-228.

According to these accounts, Sīdī al-Mukhtār trained followers and managed his extended kinship and patronage network before dying in 1811 at the age of eighty-four.<sup>18</sup>

Scholarship on the history of the Sahara Desert during the late eighteenth century has focused on the development of social and political structures in the absence of an organizing state. Saharan society during this period was structured around patron-client networks that extended from “nobles” who offered protection, to tributary groups who claimed that protection in return for material resources, down to enslaved peoples. Various groups - Arabo-phone and Berbero-phone, settled and nomadic - competed for access to territory and material resources and for control over tribute-paying clients.<sup>19</sup> Scholarship has demonstrated how individuals navigated these categories and altered their socio-political identities in response to changing economic and environmental conditions.<sup>20</sup> However, the end of the seventeenth century marked a turning point in the region that saw increased cycles of violence and slave-raiding by Saharan and Sahelian elites against tributary populations.<sup>21</sup> As the violence increased, these elites came to articulate their superiority over other populations in terms of blackness and whiteness: racialized identities that equated free status with Arab lineages and Muslim identity while conflating blackness with non-Muslim status and enslavability.<sup>22</sup> In the Sahel, increased violence, instability, and slave-raiding contributed to a number of military movements by Muslim leaders across the greater region that sought to establish new states according to Islamic principles. These movements led to the establishment of the Almamate along the Senegal River, the Sokoto Caliphate in Hausaland, the state of Macina, and the short-lived ‘Umarian Caliphate in the Niger

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<sup>18</sup> al-Kuntī, *al-Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid*, 2013, 1: 283.

<sup>19</sup> Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure précoloniale (XI<sup>ème</sup> siècle-XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle): essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme” (1987); Pierre Bonte, *L’émirat de l’Adrar mauritanien? arim, compétition et protection dans une société tribale saharienne* (Karthala Editions, 2008); H. T. Norris, “Znāga Islam during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 32, no. 3 (January 1, 1969): 496–526; Philip D. Curtin, “Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relations in Mauritania and Senegal,” *The Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1971): 11–24.

<sup>20</sup> See, in particular: Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); and Paul E. Lovejoy and Stephen Baier, “The Desert-Side Economy of the Central Sudan,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 4 (1975): 551–581.

<sup>21</sup> James L.A. Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); and George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in West Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Webb, *Desert Frontier*; Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1960*, *African Studies* 115 (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Delta.<sup>23</sup> However, in the desert the rise of Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his network indicates an attempt at an alternative political model, in which voluntary submission to a Sufi friend of God replaced coercive military force as a unifying and protecting principle.<sup>24</sup> Although this model of socio-political organization lasted for only three generations, the Kunta scholars significantly influenced the development of Islamic social and intellectual traditions across West Africa. From the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century the leaders of the Kunta family negotiated and warred with other powers in the Sahara and Sahel,<sup>25</sup> their advanced students established Sufi communities following similar models,<sup>26</sup> and other Sufi scholars carefully traced their intellectual lineages back to Sīdī al-Mukhtār.<sup>27</sup>

The heart of the Kunta's model of involuntary submission was the argument, advanced by Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his son, Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī, that they wielded mastery over the realm of the unseen and could use that influence to protect their allies and punish their enemies. The Kunta scholars articulated their understanding of this invisible realm across a wide body of Arabic manuscript texts. Scholarship on these texts has generated some understanding of how Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad understood the realm of the unseen and the varied status of humans in relation to that realm. Specifically, the Kunta authors argued that all believing Muslims have some access to, and knowledge of, the unseen, but that only God's chosen friends will achieve complete mastery over that invisible world. In their role as Sufi *shaykhs*, the friends of God mediate between ordinary believing Muslims and the divine presence at the heart of the unseen, while also guiding their students through the realm of the unseen along the path to God.<sup>28</sup> When placed into its appropriate inter-textual context, "*Khalwa*" demonstrates how Sīdī al-Mukhtār presented the possibilities of contact with the realm of the unseen to his students and how he framed the possibilities and dangers of knowledge received from that realm.

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<sup>23</sup> See, respectively: Curtin, "Jihad in West Africa"; Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (Harlow: Longmans, 1967); William Allen Brown, "The Caliphate of Hamdullahi ca. 1818-1864: A Study in African History and Tradition" (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, 1969); David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Stewart, "Frontier Disputes."

<sup>26</sup> Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Brenner, "Histories of Religion in Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no. 2 (2000): 148–49.

<sup>28</sup> For the realm of the unseen in the writings of the Kunta family see: Ariela Marcus-Sells, "Realm of the Unseen: Devotional Practice and Sufi Authority in the Kunta Community" (Stanford University, 2015), 89–131.

## Invisible Encounters

The first section of “*Khalwa*” refers to a believing Muslim practicing a specific ritual often associated with Sufism – a retreat (*khalwa*). This particular work mentions that the retreat involves withdrawing from other people, and another work by Sīdī al-Mukhtār, the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayyidiyya* [*The Explanation of the Overflowing Poem*],<sup>29</sup> specifies a forty-day period of withdrawal.<sup>30</sup> The description begins with the intention (*niyya*) in the heart of the believer, with the narrator stressing the importance of entering the retreat “with God and for God.”<sup>31</sup> The narrator then clarifies that “with God and for God” refers first, to an attitude towards God - the desire to speak to and draw closer to Him; and second, to an understanding of the self in relation to the rest of creation – that the practitioner believes himself to be unworthy and that he retreats only to offer the rest of creation a respite from his personal moral failings. The opposite of entering the retreat “with God and for God” is to enter with the intention of achieving a personal goal: “whomever enters into it with God and for God exits from it with success from God and support from God; but whomever enters into it with a reason (*‘illa*) or for a reason exits it with a thousand defects (*‘illa*).”<sup>32</sup> This line plays on the dual meaning of the Arabic word *‘illa*, which means both “reason” and “defect” and thus indicates the interchangeability of personal goals and moral defects, both of which are multiplied when carried into the retreat. After addressing the interior aspects of the believer, the text moves to the external and visible body and surroundings, including the clothes and the site of the ritual. The believer must maintain “the purity of the site, the body, and the garments from impurities,”<sup>33</sup> making sure that his food is free from legal impurities and his thoughts from the “suggestions and whispers” of Satan.

After this brief description, the narrator ceases to treat the ritual itself and instead proceeds to locate the believing Muslim within the world of the unseen. Throughout this section, the text refers not only to the various entities that will

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<sup>29</sup> This passage traces the forty-day period of fasting during a retreat to Qur’ān 7:142, the same Qur’ānic narrative about Moses on Mount Sinai that is discussed at the end of “*Khalwa*.” Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “*Sharḥ al-Qaṣīda al-Fayyidiyya*” (Rabat, Morocco, n.d.), fol. 8a, 2573d, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc.

<sup>30</sup> For an introduction to the early development of this practice see H. Landolt, “*Khalwa*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill Online, 2012); for the use of retreat rituals in other West African Sufi contexts see Jean-Louis Triaud, “*Khalwa* and the Career of Sainthood: An Interpretative Essay,” in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Christian Coulon and Donald B. Cruise O’Brien, 1988, 53–66.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “*Khalwa*” (n.d.), fol. 1a, 61/10, Boutilimit Collection.

<sup>32</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 1a.

<sup>33</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 1a.



appear to the person in retreat, but also to specific forms of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge that stem from these encounters. The believer's encounters in the realm of the unseen begin with a series of visions in which his "spirit" (*rūḥ*) or "self" (*nafs*)<sup>34</sup> emerges from his body and takes on visible, permutating forms, such as a "blue curtain," "a shining star," and "a crescent moon" and "a cloudless sun."<sup>35</sup> After the emergence of the spirit or self, the vision returns to a transformed and illuminated body. First the believer sees that he has "wings of light" and then that his entire body is made of "diffuse light."<sup>36</sup> These opening visions end climatically with the revelation of "the Intellect," which appears as "a person of light [that] has blocked everything between the East and the West."<sup>37</sup> This episode marks a crucial juncture in the text as the narrator councils his audience not to mistake this figure for God, writing: "It is but the Intellect through which God shows regard for you ..."<sup>38</sup>

Sīdī al-Mukhtār's understanding of the Intellect also emerges from a section of the *Sharḥ al-qasīda al-fayyidiyya* that traces the ascent of a believer to the highest stage of the Sufi path, where he becomes the source for all of created existence. According to this treatise, the path begins with training the self until it is fully comprehended and understood. From this understanding of his self, the seeker then turns to his heart and then his spirit, acquiring perfect knowledge of both until his own intellect is bewildered and "he comprehends nothing (*la ya 'qilu shay*)" at all.<sup>39</sup> It is at this point on the Sufi path, when the believer's intellect is annihilated, that he comes to know the universal, original Intellect – who is described in terms very similar to those in "*Khalwa*": "Then God supports him by the light of the original Intellect (*al-'aql al-aṣṭī*) in the lights of certainty and he sees a being (*mawjūd*) with no border or limit ..."<sup>40</sup> The *Sharḥ al-qasīda* adds that a concealed speaker describes this being as "the Intellect (*'aql*) by means of which God takes and gives. It is the impetus (*al-sāqī*) and the created before any creation."<sup>41</sup> Later in the same text, Sīdī al-Mukhtār uses the specific term "the Active Intellect (*al-aql al-fa'aliyya*)" to describe this entity.<sup>42</sup> After making contact with the original, Active Intellect, the believer moves on to the state of "the lordly Spirit," where he

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<sup>34</sup> Both *rūḥ* and *nafs* are occasionally translated as "soul." I have chosen to render these as "spirit" and "self," respectively to avoid terminological confusion. Thomas Emil Homerin, "Soul," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington D.C: Brill Online, n.d.).

<sup>35</sup> al-Kuntī, "'Khalwa,' Boutilimit 61/10," fol. 1a.

<sup>36</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 1a.

<sup>37</sup> al-Kuntī, fols. 1a–1b.

<sup>38</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 1b.

<sup>39</sup> al-Kuntī, "Sharḥ al-qasīda, BNRM 2573d," fol. 14a.

<sup>40</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 14a.

<sup>41</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 14b.

<sup>42</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 16b.

comes to know all the attributes of God and finds his own attributes “destroyed until he becomes as if he were nothing.”<sup>43</sup> The visionary experience described in the first section of “*Khalwa*” thus abridges the first stages of a believer’s ascent to God along the Sufi path as described in the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayyidiyya*. The vision begins with the externalization of the individual’s interior aspects, which increase in luminosity as the believer comes to know them. Once the secluded believer has fully comprehended and visualized his own body, in both its interior and its exterior, he reaches beyond his own microcosm to touch the macrocosm – which puts him in contact with the Active Intellect. However, while the ascent towards God continues past this point in the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda*, in “*Khalwa*” the visionary experience ends with the appearance of the Intellect.

The *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda* also demonstrates Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s use of an Aristotelian vocabulary, including the “Active Intellect,” “the first creation,” and “the mover,” that has been assimilated into a larger neo-Platonic cosmology.<sup>44</sup> However, although the Kunta writer draws on vocabulary and concepts stemming from Peripatetic philosophy, in his *Jidhwāt al-anwār fī dhab ‘an munāṣib awlīyā’ allāh al-khiyār* [*The Torch of Lights in Defending the Offices of the Friends of God, the Best of (Men)*], he denounces the Ash‘arī theologian Ibn Būnā for adhering too closely to Aristotelian rationalization.<sup>45</sup> But even though Sīdī al-Mukhtār criticized Ibn Būnā, his own understanding of God also draws heavily from Ash‘arī theology, which he discusses most thoroughly in his *Kitāb al-minna fī ‘itiqād ahl al-sunna* [*The Book of Grace Concerning the Belief of the People of the Sunna*]. This theological framework presents God’s essence (*dhāt*) as fundamentally unknowable, while positing that believers can know their creator through His attributes (*ṣifāt*) and acts (*af‘āl*).<sup>46</sup> Existence emanates outwards from God because he is the only one “for whom existence is necessary (*al-wajūd yujib lahu*).”<sup>47</sup> That is, the only entity whose existence itself is absolute, independent, and uncreated. It is from God’s real, essential existence, attributes, and actions that created beings

<sup>43</sup> al-Kuntī, 14b.

<sup>44</sup> For the relationship between Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophy in Islamic intellectual history see: Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’)* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “*Jidhwāt al-anwār fī dhab ‘an munāṣib awlīyā’ allāh al-khiyār*” (Rabat, Morocco, 1849), 2579k, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc.

<sup>46</sup> For an overview of these categories in Ash‘arī Sufi theology see: Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Rūzbihān Baqlī* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 55–68.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “*Kitāb al-minna fī ‘itiqād ahl al-sunna*” (Rabat, Morocco, n.d.), 14, 2573d, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc.

gain their own existence, attributes, and actions. Sīdī al-Mukhtār refers to these derivative, human components as “metaphorical” (*majāzī*).<sup>48</sup> Thus, people both exist and can be described as “powerful,” “willing,” “knowing,” and “alive,” only because they have been granted extensions of God’s own properties. Similarly, human perceptions, such as hearing, sight, and speech are merely metaphorical extensions of God’s own ways of knowing. Human perceptions, however, depend on physical properties, such as sensory organs and directionality, while God’s perceptions have no need of these corporeal limitations, and function only through his essence.<sup>49</sup> Or, as Sīdī al-Mukhtār puts in “*Khalwa*,” “God is above colors, states of being, and the features of temporal events.”<sup>50</sup>

The appearance of the Active Intellect signals two possibilities, that the secluded believer might correctly identify the “person of light,” or that he might mistake the figure for God. Both possibilities are accompanied by the acquisition of either legitimate or illegitimate knowledge, respectively. Thus, if the believer passes the test and avoids mistaking this figure for God, then he receives further disclosures that culminate in the acquisition of sciences directly from God (*‘ulūm al-ladunyya*). The narrator, however, cautions the believer to “compare the sciences that arrive ... with the book and the *sunna*,” for the sciences that lie outside of scripture represent the deceptive workings of Satan (*al-shayṭān*).<sup>51</sup> In other works, Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his son, Sīdī Muḥammad refer to these sciences specifically as the “sciences of the unseen” (*‘ulūm al-ghayb*). While the sciences of the unseen form a reoccurring theme within works by both these figures, Sīdī Muḥammad was especially concerned with articulating the relationship between the sciences and other forms of knowledge and practice. Accordingly, he devotes significant attention in *al-Ṭarā’if wa’l-talā’id min karāmāt al-shaykhayn al-wālida wa’l-wālid* [*Original and Inherited Knowledge Regarding the Miracles of the Two Shaykhs, My Mother and My Father*] to categorizing the sciences of the unseen and defending them from charges of sorcery. In both the introduction to the work, and then again in the third chapter, Sīdī Muḥammad distinguishes the sciences from the *charismata* of the friends of God, on one hand, and acts of sorcery, on the other.<sup>52</sup> According to this scholar, the difference between these three categories lies in both repeatability and legitimacy. The *charismata* of the friends, like the miracles of the

<sup>48</sup> al-Kuntī, 14–15.

<sup>49</sup> al-Kuntī, 15.

<sup>50</sup> al-Kuntī, “‘Khalwa,’ Boutilimit 61/10,” fol. 1b.

<sup>51</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 1b; For the figure of Satan see Andrew Rippin, “Devil,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington D.C: Brill Online, n.d.); Alford T. Welch, “Allah and Other Supernatural Beings: The Emergence of the Qur’anic Doctrine of Tawḥīd,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion (JAAR)* 47, no. 4 Thematic Issue S (December 1980): 733–58; and Peter J. Awn, *Satan’s Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

<sup>52</sup> al-Kuntī, *al-Ṭarā’if wa’l-talā’id*, 2013, 1:58-87; 2: 135-219.

prophets are “breakings-of-the-norm” (*khawāriq al-‘āda*), or events that run counter to the normal course of the world. As such, they occur only as gifts from God and can be neither requested nor repeated at will. In contrast, both the sciences of the unseen and sorcery depend on knowledge of the normal working of the cosmos. Individuals who know the special properties of existence can manipulate the invisible and visible worlds accordingly. Like the workings of the sciences, acts of sorcery are both predictable and repeatable. In this sense, the difference between the sciences and sorcery lies solely in their legitimacy and permissibility.<sup>53</sup> In “*Khalwa*,” Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s warning that secluded believers compare the sciences that arrive from their contact with the realm of the unseen to the Qur’ān and the *sunna* serves as a warning against falling into the illegitimate sciences of sorcery.

The voice of Sīdī al-Mukhtār then encapsulates the lessons of the first section of “*Khalwa*” with a narrative about a paradigmatic friend of God, the twelfth-century Sufi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlī or al-Jilānī (d. 1180) and a short poem.<sup>54</sup> According to the story, al-Jīlī reached the rank of *shaykh* after cutting through seventy of Satan’s snares, and “when he cut through the last of the snares [Satan] manifested to him and blocked the horizon (*sadda al-ufq*) ... Then he said, “O Jīlī, I am your Lord! I have made all forbidden [things] permissible for you and taken from you the burdens of obligations.” Then he said, “Silence accursed one! [I am not] one of those that you fool with!”<sup>55</sup> When al-Jīlī was asked how he recognized the figure as Satan, he replied that the figure he saw in the vision “had color and being, while God Most High is above colors, states of being, being related to a direction, or being located in a place.”<sup>56</sup> This story succinctly reiterates the theological position of God’s incomparability with created features such as temporality and form, the importance of accurately identifying visionary experiences, and the necessity of adhering to the Qur’ān and the *sunna*. The voice of Sīdī al-Mukhtār then reminds his audience that *charismata* occur only for those who follow Muḥammad’s example and encapsulates that teaching with two lines of poetry.

The episode featuring al-Jīlī’s encounter with Satan also introduces the theme of attack by invisible forces. The text identifies these assailants as “the ‘*afārīt*

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<sup>53</sup> Ariela Marcus-Sells, “Science, Sorcery, and Secrets in the Fawā’id Nūrāniyya of Sīdī Muḥammad Al-Kuntī,” *History of Religions* 58, no. 4 (2019): 432–64.

<sup>54</sup> Jacqueline Chabbi, “‘Abd Al-Qādir al-Jilānī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition* (Brill Online, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> al-Kuntī, “‘Khalwa,’ Boutilimit 61/10,” fol. 1b.

<sup>56</sup> al-Kuntī, fols. 1b–2a.

of the *jinn*”<sup>57</sup> who attempt to distract the secluded believer from conversing with God.<sup>58</sup> The narrator then focuses on one believer “whose heart is inhabited by remembrance.” Faced with steadfast devotion, the *jinn* change their approach to this worshiper. Instead of trying to frighten him they bring the believer information from the realm of the unseen, including “the folding up of the earth” during the eschaton, “the garden,” and “the fire.”<sup>59</sup> Importantly, “*Khalwa*” does not suggest that the *jinn* lie to the secluded believer. On the contrary, they bring him accurate information, including secret knowledge about other people in his community. The problem with this knowledge is not that it is inaccurate, but that it turns the believer away from his true goal of conversing with God. Here the narrator of the text presents two alternatives. If the secluded worshiper accepts the power offered by the *jinn*, he joins their number, becoming “a devil (*shayṭān*) ensnared, for the devils (*shayāṭīn*) have seduced him.”<sup>60</sup> However, if he holds fast and drives them away, then the *jinn* will first flee from him and then return, humbled, to pledge their allegiance to him. The *jinn* are mischievous, but not inherently malevolent. According to this text, if the *jinn* succeed and are confirmed in their evil actions, then both they and the human worshiper become devils (*shayāṭīn*). However, if they pledge allegiance to a righteous human worshiper, they may become not only good, but believing Muslims in their own right. At this moment, the *jinn*, the varied human communities of the earth, and even inanimate objects offer their allegiance to the steadfast believer.

This section of the text thus presents two possibilities for acquiring knowledge from the realm of the unseen – in the first example, the believer receives this knowledge directly from God at the pinnacle of the visionary experience and in the second, a worshiper falls prey to the temptations of the *jinn* who then bring him knowledge of both the present and the future. In yet a third example, the next section of the text warns the audience that “if the tablets of specialness appear to the servant and he does not make himself gentle to all of creation and include them all in his compassion and his mercy, then that is a sign that he is a *mustadrij*.”<sup>61</sup> The reference to the “tablets of specialness” uses a term often applied to the friends of God – those who have been singled out and “made special,” through the

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<sup>57</sup> For the *jinn* in the context of the Qur’ān see: Jacqueline Chabbi, *Le Seigneur des tribus, l’islam de Mahomet*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 2013), 182–83; 190–95; 221; Jacqueline Chabbi, *Le Coran décrypté: figures bibliques en Arabie*, 2nd ed., Lexio (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2014), 77–80; Jacqueline Chabbi, “Jinn,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington D.C: Brill Online, n.d.); Welch, “Allah and Other Supernatural Beings,” 744–45.

<sup>58</sup> al-Kuntī, “‘Khalwa,’ Boutilimit 61/10,” fol. 2a.

<sup>59</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 2a.

<sup>60</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 2b.

<sup>61</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 2b.

appearance of the *charismata*.<sup>62</sup> Like the miracles of the prophets and the *charismata* of the friends, the *istidrāj* represent another category of “breakings-of-the-norm,” but in this case they appear “at the hands of the wretched like the anti-Christ and Pharaoh.”<sup>63</sup> A *mustadrij*, a performer of *istidrāj*, thus performs marvels akin to the miracles of the prophets and the *charismata* of the saints, but only because God desires to lead him further into disobedience and destruction. This passage thus implies that someone who appears to be one of the friends of God, and performs similar, extraordinary acts, might actually be wicked and doomed.

The first half of “*Khalwa*” focuses on guiding believers in seclusion through encounters with the realm of the unseen and emphasizes that those encounters are fraught with peril. The first danger involves misidentifying visions and failing to correctly locate them within a worldview governed by Ash‘arī theology and neo-Platonic cosmology. However, if a believer avoids confusing the Intellect with God then he continues to receive visionary disclosures until he acquires sciences of the unseen directly from God through the preserved tablet. The second danger stems from attacks by invisible forces, notably Satan and the *jinn*. In their attempts to mislead believers and distract them from their focus on God, the *jinn* will offer secluded Muslims another chance to access the sciences of the unseen. And while “*Khalwa*” does not directly discuss the different categories of knowledge from the unseen, these references locate the text within a constellation of works by Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī that are concerned with the apparent similarity between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge of the unseen. “*Khalwa*” thus describes a believer’s encounters with various unseen entities and the acquisition of sciences from the invisible realm, but also warns its audience to subject that knowledge to tests of legitimacy.

### **In the Presence of God**

The moment in which the *jinn* pledge their allegiance to the righteous believer inaugurates the second section of the text. This section focuses on the themes of compassion and humility, noting that the allegiance of the *jinn* only increases the submission of the believer before God. However, from this point on the narrator ceases to describe secluded believers and begins to move, in a homiletic fashion, through a series of stories drawn from sacred history. These narratives conclude with a juxtaposition of Moses and Muhammad, bringing together two passages

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<sup>62</sup> For example: al-Kuntī, *al-Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid*, 2013, 1: 23-24.

<sup>63</sup> al-Kuntī, 1:94; see also al-Kuntī, 1:99; and Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “Jidhwat al-anwār fī dhab ‘an munāṣib awliyā’ allāh al-khiyār” (1849), 6, 2579k, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc; This understanding of *istidrāj* adheres to Ash‘arī typologies of different kinds of breakings-of-the-norm as described in Jonathan AC Brown, “Faithful Dissenters: Sunni Skepticism about the Miracles of Saints,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 134.

from the Qurʾān: the episode where Moses asks to see God on Mount Sinai and the ambiguous visionary experiences described in the first eighteen verses of *Surat al-Najm*. The narrator uses these passages to argue that, while Moses failed to see God because of his lack of humility, Muḥammad was rewarded for his perfect etiquette in the presence of the divine.

Because this section of the text revolves around the theme of etiquette (*adab*), the opening narratives present a series of contrasting examples of figures who were either rewarded or punished for their humility or lack thereof. The first example is framed as a dialogue between God and Jesus, who asks why a man named Balʿām was bereft “of the abundance of friendship and gazing upon the preserved tablet”.<sup>64</sup> God responds by stating that Balʿām was punished for a lack of humility, but the text mentions little else about this enigmatic figure. Two early Muslim chroniclers, al-Thaʿlabī and al-Ṭabarī, briefly mention a figure named Balʿām ibn Bāʿurā, a Canaanite who was persuaded by the giants to use the greatest name of God to curse the Israelites. However, when he launched his curse he ended up cursing the giants instead, and God caused his tongue to fall from his mouth.<sup>65</sup> Sīdī al-Mukhtār does not refer to this story, but in a short devotional work called *Ḥizb Sīdī al-Mukhtār* he refers to Balʿām as someone whose “deeds turned upon him,” and whose “sciences only increased [him] in defects.”<sup>66</sup> Together these two references suggest an understanding of Balʿām as a corrupt user of the sciences of the unseen. In another example of a failure of humility, Noah is scolded by God after catching sight of a dead dog and exclaiming “what an ugly image!”<sup>67</sup> In contrast to Noah, the text mentions a friend of God named Ḥātim al-Aṣamm,<sup>68</sup> who provided shelter for a stray cat and thus found himself honored by God after his death. Another passage narrates Moses’s personal care for a sheep that strayed from

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<sup>64</sup> al-Kuntī, “‘Khalwa,’ Boutilimit 61/10,” 2b.

<sup>65</sup> Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 392–96; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Rusul Waʾl-Mulūk*, ed. E. Yar-Shater, trans. William M. Brinner, vol. 3: The Children of Israel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 91–95; This story about Balʿām ibn Bāʿurā shares many similarities with the story of Balaam from the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 22-23) and with pre-biblical, Near-Eastern Balaam traditions. Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–6.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār al-kuntī” (Rabat, Morocco, n.d.), 251, 1053, al-Muktaba al-Ḥassaniyya.

<sup>67</sup> al-Kuntī, “‘Khalwa,’ Boutilimit 61/10,” fol. 2b.

<sup>68</sup> There is a reference to Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/852) in al-Sulamī’s biographical dictionary, which describes him as one of the earliest generations of Sufī figures from Khorasan. However, al-Sulamī does not record the story described here. Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Sharība (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1969), 61, 91–97, 103.

Shu'ayb's flock.<sup>69</sup> In this story, it is because of Moses's humility and compassion for the sheep – kissing it and wiping its nose – that he is rewarded with the honor of speaking directly to God. In the next story, Sīdī al-Mukhtār holds up Mount Sinai as the most humble of all mountains, a humility that earns the mountain the reward of serving as the location for God's address to Moses.

Although the first story about Moses praises him for his humility, the next passage from the text turns to the narrative in Qur'ān 7:142-7:143 to demonstrate Moses's failure. In this passage, Moses asks God to reveal Himself and God replies by saying that He will reveal Himself to the mountain; but when He does so the mountain collapses, rendering Moses unconscious. Early exegetes debated this passage, asking whether or not the Qur'ān's specific phrasing (*...if it remains in its place then you will see me*) meant that seeing God was possible; if Moses's failure meant that *no one* could see God; and if Moses's failure to see God in this particular instance meant that no one would *ever* see God.<sup>70</sup> Some Sufi exegetes also interpreted this moment in the Qur'an as an example of the annihilation (*fanā*) of the individual self during a direct encounter with God.<sup>71</sup> From among these possibilities, Sīdī al-Mukhtār's interpretation suggests that Moses' failure to see God was a result of his own, personal lapse in humility, writing:

When he found God's speech agreeable, he longed for a vision of Him (*ru'yatīhi*), thinking that that was [something] granted with a request or attempted with a purpose ... So he ... was given speech [with God], because of his humility, but when he overstepped his place (*tawrihi*) he was denied the vision...<sup>72</sup>

Thus, although Moses was rewarded for his earlier humility with the privilege of speaking to God, he overstepped his bounds by *asking* to see God. This interpretation echoes the beginning of the text, when the narrator cautions believing

<sup>69</sup> Shu'ayb, another prophet mentioned in the Qur'ān, was associated with Moses' father-in-law by medieval commentators. Buhl F. and Bosworth C.E., "Madyān Shu'ayb," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill Online, 2012); for example: al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, 290–92.

<sup>70</sup> These debates have been preserved in: Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān fī tafsīr al-qur'ān* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2004), 3: 64-65; For scholarship on medieval debates over the possibility of seeing God see: Lutpi Ibrahim, "The Problem of the Vision of God in the Theology of Az-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī," *Die Welt Des Orients* 13 (1982): 108–11; G. Monnot, "Vision de Dieu et Bonheur de l'Homme dans le Commentaire de Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *Autour du regard: Mélanges Gimaret*, ed. Eric Chaumont (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 65; and Michel Chodkiewicz, "La vision de Dieu selon Ibn 'Arabi," in *Autour du regard: Mélanges Gimaret*, ed. Eric Chaumont (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 159; For a thorough discussion of how early Sufi commentators addressed this passage see Coppens, *Seeing God*, 201–26.

<sup>71</sup> For examples see Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, ed. Michael A. Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 80, 126.

<sup>72</sup> al-Kuntī, "'Khalwa,' Boutilimit 61/10," fol. 3b.



Muslims against entering a retreat with a specific goal in mind. However, this interpretation also suggests that seeing God *is* possible, and that Moses's failure was a result of asking for something that must be offered freely.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, the end of the text concludes by comparing Moses's failure to Muḥammad's perfect etiquette, and adds that, while Moses was "denied the vision":

Our prophet, upon him be prayers and peace, obtained it because of the perfection of his etiquette (*adab*) and the intensity of his humility. So God praised him on that account and He said, his *gaze did not swerve* (53:17) by looking at something that he had not been ordered to look at. Instead, he practiced the most perfect etiquette in the place of proximity and his heart did not *transgress* by asking for what was not given (53:17) ... so not one obstacle impeded him from the vision (*al-ru'ya*)...<sup>74</sup>

This passage uses two quotes from Qur'ān 53:17 to link Muḥammad's perfect comportment specifically to the eyes and to the heart. Thus "his *gaze did not swerve* (53:17) by looking at something that he had not been ordered to look at ... and his heart did not *transgress* (53:17) by asking for what was not given." The end of the text thus mirrors the beginning, with its concern for both the exterior and the interior body, represented respectively by the eyes and the heart. Indeed, the next line of the text makes this link explicit, explaining that Muḥammad's "exterior (*ẓāhiruhu*) agreed with his interior (*bāṭinahu*)," and "his insight (*baṣīratahu*) with his sight (*baṣarahu*)."<sup>75</sup>

Though brief, these quotations connect the question of whether or not Muḥammad saw God to the visions described in the first eighteen verses of *Surat al-Najm*, the Star: and reveal those visions as another underlying theme of the text as a whole. The Qur'ānic passage reads:

By the star when it sets, your companion is not astray, nor does he err, nor does he speak out of caprice. It is indeed revelation revealed, taught to him by one mighty in power, very strong, he stood poised, on the higher horizon then drew near and hung suspended two bows' lengths away or nearer, then he revealed to his servant what he revealed. His heart did not lie concerning what he saw. Do you then dispute with him over what he saw? Indeed, he

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<sup>73</sup> A similar interpretation is attributed by al-Tha'labī to a nameless interpreter: "you shall not see me due to asking or supplicating, rather you will see me due to grace and gifting." For if He were to give it to him due to his asking (for it) then the vision would be the fulfillment of the request and it is permissible that an act of his be a fulfillment of an act of his servant, but it is not permissible that he, himself, be a fulfillment of an act of his servant." al-Tha'labī, 3: 65.

<sup>74</sup> al-Kuntī, "Khalwa," Boutilimit 61/10," fol. 3b.

<sup>75</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 3b.

saw him in another descent, at the Lote-tree of the Boundary. Near it is the Garden of Repose. When that which covers covered the Lote-tree, the gaze did not swerve, nor transgress. Certainly, he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord.<sup>76</sup>

The many ambiguities of this passage cluster around the identities of both the speaker and the person described, what exactly that person saw, and whether the vision occurred through the eyes or through the heart. While most interpreters understood “the companion” described by the passage as Muḥammad, some identified the one “who stood poised, on the higher horizon” as Jibrīl, while others identified this figure as God.<sup>77</sup> One early tradition cited by al-Tha‘labī describes how Jibrīl “shone forth upon [Muḥammad] from the East and blocked the horizon (*sadda al-ufq*) (all the way) to the West.”<sup>78</sup> This image recalls Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s descriptions of “the Intellect” as “a person of light” that “blocked everything between the East and the West (*sadda mā bayna’l-khāfiqayn*)” and of Satan manifesting to Ḥatim al-Asamm as a figure that “blocked the horizon (*sadda al-ufq*).” Many commentators connected these verses to narrative traditions about Muḥammad’s night journey (*isrā’*) and ascent to heaven (*mi’rāj*).<sup>79</sup> Eventually, these traditions passed into a general emerging consensus among Ash‘arī Sunnis that Muḥammad saw God, with his eyes, during his lifetime, and that believing Muslims will receive a similar vision on the day of Judgement.<sup>80</sup> Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s interpretation in “*Khalwa*” explicitly endorses this interpretation, stating that not one obstacle came between Muḥammad and the vision (*al-ru’ya*). Moreover, by warning his students not to confuse a glowing figure on the horizon with God, Sīdī al-Mukhtār adds an additional layer of interpretation to the Qur’anic verse. According to “*Khalwa*”, the practice of Sufi retreat will result in visions that might resemble those depicted in the Qur’ān. However, the Kunta scholar counsels his students not to confuse themselves with Muḥammad and expect to receive a vision

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<sup>76</sup> Qur’an 53:1-18

<sup>77</sup> Patricia Crone, “Problems in Sura 53,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78, no. 1 (2015): 15–23; Josef van Ess, “Vision and Ascension: Sūrat al-Najm and Its Relationship with Muḥammad’s Mi’rāj,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 47–62.

<sup>78</sup> al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*, 6: 6.

<sup>79</sup> Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 112–15; Coppens, *Seeing God*, 227–30; For the development of traditions of Muḥammad’s journey to heaven see: Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn’Abbas Ascension Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> For a thorough discussion of the emergence of the ‘Asharī Sunnī position on seeing God see: W. Wesley Williams, “Tajalli Wa-Ru’ya: A Study of Anthropomorphic Theophany and Visio Dei in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur’an and Early Sunni Islam.” (University of Michigan, 2008); Coppens demonstrates that most early Sufi commentators came to the same conclusion, with the notable exception of al-Qushayrī: Coppens, *Seeing God*, 227–55.

of God; rather, in such a moment, a believer must correctly identify the luminous figure on the horizon as the Active Intellect and continue to enact the correct etiquette of pious humility and submission. According to Sīdī al-Mukhtār, Muḥammad saw God, but his Saharan students should not expect the same.

Although Sīdī al-Mukhtār advises his students that they should not expect to receive a vision of God, he does not state that such a vision was reserved solely to Muḥammad. In fact, in the *Jidhwat al-anwār*, he claims that the friends of God inherit the visionary abilities of the prophets, including Muḥammad. This work constitutes Sīdī al-Mukhtār's longest defense of the friends of God, in he argues for the validity of the *charismata*, for their proximity to God, and for their social authority among Muslims. The primary argument of the text, rephrased throughout, is that "the friends are the heirs to the prophet and the inheritor has what the bequeather had."<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the opening to the work argues at length that this inheritance includes "the correct vision" (*al-ru'ya al-ṣāliḥa*) in both this life (*al-dunya*) and the next life (*al-akhīra*). Sīdī al-Mukhtār posits that God informed his friends about their inheritance through the Qur'ānic verse *For them is glad tidings in this world and in the afterlife* (10:64). The Kunta writer then quotes one *ḥadīth* to argue that "the glad-tidings" in this verse refer to "the correct vision that the believer sees or that is shown to him."<sup>82</sup> A second *ḥadīth* quotes a companion of the prophet as saying, "the prophet of God – prayers and peace be upon him - said, 'Nothing of prophethood will remain after me save the glad-tidings,' they asked, 'And what are the glad-tidings?' He said, 'the correct vision.'"<sup>83</sup> Altogether, this passage argues that God granted prophets "correct" or true visions and that the friends inherited this visionary capability after the death of Muḥammad. The *Jidhwat al-anwār* never states explicitly that "the correct vision" refers to seeing God. However, Sīdī al-Mukhtār insists that this vision occurs while waking and represents one of the forty parts of prophecy.<sup>84</sup> He also claims that anything that applies to the prophets applies to the friends of God, unless explicitly stated otherwise in the Qur'ān. Combined with his insistence, in "*Khalwa*," that Muḥammad saw God, this evidence indicates that Sīdī al-Mukhtār understood the friends of God to be capable of practicing the perfect etiquette of Muḥammad: of keeping their gaze from swerving and their hearts from transgressing, and thus seeing God themselves.

Moreover, the works of Sīdī al-Mukhtār associate such a level of proximity with God with complete mastery over the realm of the unseen. In his *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās wa-ṭard wasāwas al-khannās* [*The Book of Dispelling Confusion and Banishing the Whispering of the Slinking-One*] Sīdī al-Mukhtār explains that all

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<sup>81</sup> al-Kuntī, "Jidhwat al-anwār, BNRM 2579k," 54.

<sup>82</sup> al-Kuntī, 3.

<sup>83</sup> al-Kuntī, 3.

<sup>84</sup> al-Kuntī, 3–4.

believers have some knowledge of the unseen that God disclosed through revelation. However, “this is not from the category of knowledge of the unseen by which God singles [someone] out.”<sup>85</sup> Rather, according to the Kunta scholar’s hierarchy of believers, individuals attain progressive knowledge of the unseen according to the rank and purity of their hearts.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, while the ascent towards God depicted in the opening visionary experience of “*Khalwa*” ends shortly after encountering the Active Intellect, other works by Sīdī al-Mukhtār depict a process that continues much further. Thus, in the *Sharḥ al-qasīda*, the path towards God continues past contact with the Intellect until the believer’s own intellect and sense of self disappears. This stage marks not the end of the path, but rather the beginning of a process of re-creation, in which the entire realm of the unseen becomes manifest within the heart of the believer, and the created realm itself floods out from his now illuminated body.<sup>87</sup> Such a believer thus becomes the source of all created existence. Sīdī al-Mukhtar attributes this station and its accompanying mastery of the unseen primarily to the prophets, “who are acquainted with the unseen with their eyes.”<sup>88</sup> However, since the hearts of such believers serve as the location for the manifestation of created existence, they cannot disappear with Muḥammad’s death and the end of prophecy. Accordingly, Sīdī al-Mukhtār states explicitly that the hearts of the friends will achieve the same rank as the hearts of the prophets, writing:

Know that when He took the messenger of God – peace and prayers be upon him - the earth wept, so she said to Him, ‘O my master, I will remain without a prophet walking upon me until the day of resurrection!’ So God revealed to her, ‘I shall place upon your back from among this *umma* those whose hearts are according to the hearts of the prophets - upon them be peace - I shall not make you empty of them until the day of resurrection.’<sup>89</sup>

In this fashion, the friends of God inherit the rank of the prophets, their proximity to God, and their mastery over the realm of the unseen.

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<sup>85</sup> Al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, “Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās wa-ṭard wasāwas al-khanās” (Paris, April 12, 1830), fol. 79a, Manuscripts Orientales, Arabe 5452, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF).

<sup>86</sup> al-Kuntī, fol. 78b.

<sup>87</sup> al-Kuntī, “Sharḥ al-qasīda, BNRM 2573d,” fols. 14a–16b.

<sup>88</sup> al-Kuntī, “Zawāl al-ilbās, BNF 5452,” fol. 78b.

<sup>89</sup> al-Kuntī, “Jidhwat al-anwār, BNRM 2579k,” 8.

## Conclusion

In contradistinction to other eighteenth-century leaders in the West African Sahara and Sahel, Sīdī al-Mukhtār and the Kunta family based their claim to legitimate authority on the voluntary submission of followers in acknowledgment of their mastery over the realm of the unseen, rather than their monopoly over coercive military force. As such, a claim to superior knowledge of the unseen, as well as the ability to guide others through that invisible realm, was central to their worldview and their greater social project. This text, “*Khalwa*,” leads followers of Sīdī al-Mukhtār through the visionary encounters that they should expect when undertaking the ritual of spiritual retreat. And although the text begins by describing the Sufī ritual of retreat, the narrator quickly moves into a discussion of visionary encounters within the realm of the unseen, including the manifestation of the spirit or self of the believer, the transformation of his body, the appearance of the intellect, and attacks by the *jinn*. The final section of “*Khalwa*” then presents a series of homiletic narratives about prophets and friends of God that focus on the theme of humility and compassion, which the text presents as a matter of correct etiquette. These narratives end climactically with a story of Moses on Mount Sinai that brings together interpretations of two sections of the Qur’ān. First, Sīdī al-Mukhtār reads Qur’ān 7:142-143 to demonstrate that Moses ultimately failed to manifest the correct etiquette of humility before God and as a result was denied a vision of the divine. He then uses two short quotations from *Surat al-Najm* to contrast this failure with Muḥammad’s perfect etiquette.

Reading “*Khalwa*” against other works by Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his son Sīdī Muḥammad reveals overarching concerns and interpretative possibilities not immediately apparent when reading the text in isolation. Specifically, several references in “*Khalwa*” indicate Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s concern with the possible misuse of the sciences obtained from contact with the realm of the unseen. And, while Sīdī al-Mukhtār follows the general Sunni consensus by interpreting the opening verses of *Surat al-Najm* and Qur’ān 7:172-173 to mean that Muḥammad received a vision of God while Moses did not, other texts by the same author indicate that he understood the friends of God as occupying the same role in the spiritual hierarchy as Muḥammad and the prophets. Read in this context, “*Khalwa*” suggests that the friends of God, and by implication Sīdī al-Mukhtār himself, might be able to follow Muḥammad’s perfect etiquette and see God with their own eyes. Achieving such a feat would amount to continuing on the path towards God past the point where the visionary ascent depicted in “*Khalwa*” ends and would result in perfect mastery of the sciences of the unseen.

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## "خلوة"١

[1a] بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد واله وصحبه تسليمًا الحمد لله والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله وبعد فهذه وصية مباركة اوصانا بها شيخنا واستاذنا ووسيلتنا الى ربنا السيد الزكي العلم المري الجامع بين الحقيقة والشريعة المحيي علوم الدين المجرد المبين طريقة سيد المرسلين الموضح لطرقات السالكين والمجنوبيين سيدنا المختار بن سيدنا باب احمد بن سيدنا ابي بكر الكنتي ثم الوافي انقذنا الله به من ارتباك النفس والهوى والشيطان انه القادر على ذلك الحنان المنان نصها بعد الخلوة من سنة المرسلين وديدن الصالحين وميدان السالكين فمن دخلها بالله والله خرجها بتوفيق الله ومدد الله ومن دخلها بعلة او لعة خرجها بألف علة ومعنى دخولها لله وبالله ان يكون دخولك فيها شوقا الى مناجات الله وطلب مرضات الله والتقرب اليه واحياء سنة انبيائه والانخراط في سلك اوليائه مع اعتقادك في نيتك انك شر الخلق وانما خلوت لتريحهم من شرك لا لتستريح من شرهم واما شروطها فطهارة البقعة والجسد والثياب من الاخبث وملازمة الطهارة من الحديث مع استمرارها وتخبر القوت من احل الحلال وقطع الهواجس والوسوس فان دخلت بهذه الشروط فليس للشيطان عليك سبيل لقوله تعالى ان عبادي ليس لك عليهم سلطان فأول شيء يراه دخان يخرج من جميع ذاته ثم يرى بعد ذلك نارا تتأجج ثم يرى بعد ذلك روحه او نفسه كأنها رواق ازرق شفاف ثم يراها بعد ذلك وكأنها كوكب ثاقب ثم يراها بعد ذلك وكأنها هلال ثم يراها بعد ذلك وكأنها قمر منير ثم يراها بعد ذلك وكأنها شمس صحو ثم تمتد دائرة الانوار فيرى لجسمه اجنحة من نور على قدر الأحوال ثم تتسع دائرة الانوار فيرى جسمه كله نورا ساطعا ثم يتجلى [1b] له العقل فيرى شخصا نورانيا قد سد ما بين الخافقين فيصيبه الدهش حتى يظن انه الرب سبحانه فتعلى فيسمع النداء ان اثبت ولا يستخفك الدهش فان الذي ظهر لك انما هو خلق من خلق الله فان الله منزه عن الألوان والاكوان وسمات الحوادث وانما هو العقل الذي اكرمك الله به ويميزك به من بين خلقه فاعتصم بالله الذي ليس كمثله شيء وهو السميع البصير فهذا اول قدم تضعه في ميزان الخصوصية ثم تتجلى عليك انوار الايمان فيتلاشى لديك كلما شاهدته قبل ذلك من الانوار بالنسبة اليه فتذوق طعمه لان المومن لا يتحقق بحقائق الايمان ما لم يشاهد انواره فتتشكل احوالا اشكالا كثيرة ويتصل نوره بنور العرش ويكتسب العلوم اللدنية من اللوح المحفوظ وذلك اول ورود الواردات الحقية التي هي احوال ايمانه فتخاطب العقل الكامل ويخاطبها ويسمى كبير الواردات بابي الانوار ويسمى العقل حينئذ بمدرِك الغواص لغوصه على الحقائق الربانية لكن يجب عليك حينئذ ان تعرض ما يرد عليك من العلوم على الكتاب والسنة فما وافقهما من ذلك فخذه فانه من الله وما خالفهما فاتركه فانه من القاء الشيطان قال الله تعالى وما ارسلنا من قبلك من رسول ولا نبي الا اذا تمنى القى الشيطان في امنيته فينسخ الله ما يلقي الشيطان لانه متسلط متجسس الا انه لا قدرة له على دفع الحق ولا على اثبات الباطل لعصمة حزب الله من

١ هذه النسخة طبقت من "Boutilimit 61:10" وهي مخطوطة ا. مخطوطة ب "6:61 Boutilimit" واشرت الى الفروق بينهما في الحواشي.

ب يحذف الهمزات من الألف في المخطوطتين.

ج مخطوطة ب عندها مقدمة مختلفة: وبعد فان هذه جذوة نورانية تبين للسالك ما يعرض اليه مما هو رباني او شيطاني لشيخنا ودليلنا ووسيلتنا الى ربنا محي الطريقة ومجرد رسم الشريعة البحر الفهامة الجامع بين الشريعة والحقيقة سيدنا ومولانا وطبيبنا وشفيعنا سيدي المختار بن احمد بن ابي بكر الوافي الكنتي حفظهم الله يوم الروع ورعا

د: ب: الخلوة سنة

ه: ب: وطلبا

و: ب: وتقربا

ز: ب: الخلق وأنتك انما

ح: ب: السميع العليم

ط: ب: فتتشكل عليه احواله اشكاله

ي: ب: بالمدرِك

ان يلبس عليهم روي ان سيدنا عبد القادر الجيلي<sup>ك</sup> قطع للشيطان سبعين حباله ولا ينبغي لاحد ان<sup>ل</sup> يتصدر للشيوخه حتى يقطع تلك الحبال كلها وآخر حباله من حباله قطعها ان تبدى اليه وقد سد الأفق وله انوار فيما يرى فقال أنا ربك يا جيلي وقد أبحث لك المحارم ووضعت عنك أعباء التكليف فقال اخساً يا لعين فلست ممن تتلاعب به فنودي بم علمت انه شيطان وانه ليس بربك فقال اما قوله قد أبحث لك المحارم فانه علمته من قوله تعالى ان الله لا يأمر بالفحشاء وقوله لنبيه واعبد ربك حتى يأتيك اليقين علمت منه انه تعالى لا يعفي أحدا من التكليف حتى يموت واما علمي انه ليس بربي فقد علمته من قوله تعالى ليس كمثله شيء وهو السميع البصير والمنادي رايت<sup>ص</sup> له لون وكون والله تعالى منزه عن [2a] الألوان والاكوان وعن ان ينسب الى جهة او يحل بمكان وعلمت انه ابليس لقوله تعالى الشيطان يعدكم الفقر ويأمركم بالفحشاء والله يعدكم مغفرة منه وفضلا فنودي عند ذلك اني جعلتك خير أوليائي واوجبت عليهم طاعتك ومدّ له سجلا<sup>ف</sup> فيه مدّ البصر فيه أسماء مريديه الى يوم القيامة وانه لا شقى فيهم فلنتحفظك من التشوق الى الكرامات فقل ما تشوق مريد الكرامة<sup>ر</sup> فسلم من الغواية وتلبس الشيطان عليه ولتين أساس سلوكك على سنة الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم فان الكرامات الحقية انما حصلت لأولياء الامة ببركة تشبثهم بأذيال سنته فلذلك امرهم من مدد معجزاته لان الاولياء انصار الأنبياء وورثة مقاماتهم ولذلك انشد - اذا رأيت رجلا يطير وفوق ماء البحر قد يسير ولم يقف عند حدود الشرع فانه مخادع وبدع واعلم ان عفاريت الجن يعتنون بأصحاب الخوات ليفسدوا عليهم ما هم بصدده من التبتل الى الله تعالى والشغل بمناجاته التي هي غاية السعادات فيقولون لهم ليفز عوهم حتى يصدو وجوههم عن هذا المقصد العظيم ووجه ابطال حيلهم وقطع حبالهم عدم المبالاة بهم مع ادمان الذكر والحضور معه واحتقار امرهم فاذا راوا ذلك ينسوا فتركوا ذلك واقبلوا على الوسوسة فان وجدوا قلبه عامرا بذكر الله احرقته انوار الذكر فيفر من سلم منهم وان وجدوه خاليا خرابا امكنتهم الفرصة فتمكنوا منه فلا يزالون به حتى يفسدوا عليه ما هنالك فاذا ينسوا من صاحب القلب العامر تحيلوا له بمجيئهم إياه في زي الصالحين ويتسمون له بأسمائهم ويخبرونه بالمغيبات ويرونه طي الأرض ويخيلون له البيت الحرام فلا يزالون به حتى يروه صفة الجنة والنار ويقولون له اذهب الى فلان واخبره انه من اهل الجنة بسبب عمله الفلاني الذي لم يطلع عليه غيره فيغتر بذلك المخبر والمخبر [2b] بفتح الباء الموحدة فيقبل عليه الناس يظنونه وليا وهو شيطان غوى قد استهوته الشياطين فيضل ويضل وان<sup>ش</sup> كان معصوما بعصمة الله إياه لم يلتفت الى شيء من ذلك بل ربما الهمة الله بما ايده به من نوره انهم مرده غواة فيخسئهم ويطردهم ويعينه على ذلك روحانية الأسماء والاذكار فلا يجدون اليه سبيلا حتى يبلغ الولاية الكبرى فيخضعون له ويدخلون في جملة الأمم المباعدة له كرها لعموم البيعة لجميع اجناس العالم لأنه ثبت وصح ان المومن اذا بلغ الولاية الكبرى بايعته أربعون امة اخرها الجن والانس وحتى تحببه الجمادات بالسلام ولا يزيده ذلك الا خضوعا وذلا وانكسارا وتواضعا واخاباتا لجلال الله تعالى روي ان عيسى عليه السلام قال اللهم لم سلبت بلعام<sup>ت</sup> بعد الولاية والنظر الى اللوح المحفوظ فقال الله له انه لم يخضع في الغرب تحت بساط الغرب ولذلك جوزي بالسلب ولو انه قال يوما واحدا اللهم لك الحمد على ما اوليتني مما لا استحقه لذاتي ولا لواجب صفاتي لما طردته عن

ك تغيب اسم "الجيلي" من مخطوطة ب

ل كلمة "ان" مكرر في مخطوطة ا.

م ب: قطعها عبد القادر الجيلي

ن ثابتة كلمة "فلست" من مخطوطة ب وهي تغيب عن ا

ص ب: والذي رايت

ع ثابتة نقطة الجيم من مخطوطة ب وهي تعيب عن ا

ف ب: سجلا

ص ب: مدّ له سجلا فيه

ق ب: وللتحفظ

ر ب: وقلما تشوق مريد للكرامات

ش كلمة "وان" مكرر في مخطوطة ا

ت ب: بلعاما

حضرتي ولما أبعدته لكنه بطر نعمتي فحلت به نعمتي فان العزة ردائي والكبرياء ازاري فمن شاركني فيهما احرقته بناري وقد اجمع مشايخ السلف والخلف ان العبد اذا ظهرت عليه لوائح الخصوصية ولم يخفض جناحه لجميع الخلق ويعممهم بالشفعة عليهم والرحمة لهم فذلك دليل على انه مستدرج وروي ان نوحا عليه السلام مر على جيفة كلب فقال ما اقيح هذه الصورة فأوحى اليه اليه ان يا نوح تعارضني في صناعي فاخلق مثله ثم عارضني ورد علي ان قدرت فنزع رداءه وكفنه فيه توبة من تلك الكلمة وما زال ينوح على نفسه من شؤم تلك الكلمة ببقية عمره ولذلك لقب نوحا وحكى ان حاتما الاصح صلى الصبح بوضوء العنمة [3a] أربعين سنة وحج أربعين حجة منها عشرون ماشيا ولم يفطر الا في يوم عيد فلما توفي راه بعض الاولياء في النوم وعليه حلل من السندس فقال له اخبرني عن امرك وبما استوجبت ما أرى فقال اوقفني الله بين يديه فقال لي يا حاتم أتدرى بما غفرت لك واوجبت لك رحمتي فقلت بقيامي بين يديك في الدياجر قال لا قال قلت بصيامي لك في الهواجر قال لا قلت بحجتي وثجتي وعجتي قال لا قلت قيم غفرت لي ورحمتني قال اتذكر يوما مررت على هر يرعد من البرد بقارعة الطريق والبسته من فضل رداك حتى دفا قال فقلت اذكر ذلك ولم يكن مني على بال فقال لي بذلك استوجبت مني ما ترى فاني رحيم ارحم من رحم من خلقي من لا رحيم له غيري مع ما اطلعت عليه من تواضعك وذللك تحت جلالي وعظمتي وحكي ان الله تعالى قال لموسى عليه السلام في بعض مناجاته يا موسى اتدرى بما استوجبت مناجاتي وسماع كلامي قال لا يا رب قال الله أتذكر اليوم الذي ضلت عليك سخله من غنم شعيب فقصصت اثرها حتى وجدتها بعدما اتعبتك فمسحت الرغام عن انفها وقبالتها وقلت لها اتعبتني يا مسكينة واتعبت نفسك ولم تعنفها مكان ما اتعبتك فنظرت يومئذ الى قلوب العلمين فلم ار قلبا ارحم ولا اشد تواضعا من قلبك فجزيتك ان اصطفيتك على الناس برسالتي وبكلامي ولما أراد الله تعالى ان يكلم موسى عليه السلام أوحى الى جميع جبال الدنيا اني اريد ان اكلم موسى على احدكم فتناول كل جبل واشمخ رجاء ان يكون هو المقصود وتناصر جبل الطور وقال ما قدرني حتى أكون محلا لخطاب الله [3b] وتجليه فشكر الله له ذلك فأوحى الى موسى ان يصوم ثلاثين ليلة لا يأكل فيها ولا يشرب ولا يقرب النساء فلما اتمها وجد لغمه خلوا فاستاك وافطر فقالت له الملائكة كنا نجد لفيك رائحة ذكية فأزلتها بالاستيباك فأوحى الله اليه ان يا موسى صمت بأمرني وافطرت بغير امرني فأمره بصوم عشر ذي الحجة وذلك قوله تعالى وواعدنا موسى ثلاثين ليلة واتممناها بعشر فتم ميقات ربه أربعين ليلة فأمره بالتوجه الى طور سيناء فكلمه عليه وكان موسى عليه السلام محبا فلما استنطاب كلام الله اشتاق الى رؤيته ظنا منه انها تنال بالطلب او تحاول بالسبب فأجابته بقوله لن تراني ولكن انظر الى الجبل فان استقر مكانه فسوف تراني فلما تجلى ربه للجبل جعله دكا وخر موسى صعقا فأعطى الكلام عليه السلام من غير مسألة لتواضعه فلما تعدى طوره منع من الرؤية مع وجود الطلب وحظي بها نبينا عليه الصلاة والسلام لتمام ادبه وشدة تواضعه فأثنى الله عليه بذلك فقال ما زاغ البصر بالنظر الى غير ما أمر بالنظر اليه بل تأدب في محل القرب اتم الادب وما طغى قلبه بطلب غير ما اعطى فواظا ظاهره باطنه وبصيرته بصره وادبه سببه فما عاقه عن الرؤية والكفاح عائق وما فاقه في المكانة فائق بل سبق كل سابق وفائق كل فائق ومن أراد استيفاء الكلام على هذا المقام الشريف والمنصب المنيف فليطالع كتابنا المسمى بنزهة الراوي وبغية الحاوي فان فيه العجب العجاب ولما كان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم اتم المخلوقات ادبا واشدها تواضعا اعطى من رفع المكانة ما لم يعطه [4a] من العلمين دنيا وأخرى وفيما ذكر كفاية لمن نور الله بصيرته فان هذا مجال رحب لا تسعه الدفاتر ولا تحيط برقمه الأرقام

ث هكذا يكتب "مشايخ".

ح كلمة "اليه" مكرر في مخطوطة

د ب: اخبرني بامرک

ض ب: لك

ظ تغيب كلمة "فيها" من مخطوطة ب

ع ب: الملائكة

أ هكذا يكتب "مسائلة"

والمحابر وفقنا الله لاستعمال <sup>بب</sup> كتابه ولا طردنا واياكم عن بابه ولا اذلنا الله واياكم بحجابيه انه القادر على ذلك والميسر لما هنالك والصلاة والسلام على النبي الكريم المحبوب <sup>جج</sup> بالرؤية والتكليم <sup>ه</sup> بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد واله وصحبه تسليما  
ومما كتب به شيخنا السيد المختار بن احمد بن ابي بكر الكنتي رضي الله عنه ونفعنا به <sup>د</sup>

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<sup>بب</sup> ب: وفقنا الله واياكم لاستعمال

<sup>جج</sup> يحذف النون في المخطوطتين.

<sup>د</sup> مخطوطة ب عندها خاتمة مختلفة: ولا حول ولا قوة الا بالله العلي العظيم وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد وأله وصحبه وسلم <sup>ه</sup>

## “*Khalwa*”

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Caring; may the prayers and peace of God be upon Muḥammad and his family and his companions.

All praise belongs to God and may prayers and peace be upon the messenger of God. This is a blessed piece of advice with which our *shaykh*, our teacher, and our path to our lord - the pure *sayyid*<sup>1</sup>; the educating luminary; the one who joins the truth and the law; the one who revives the sciences of religion; the renewer; the one who clarifies the way of the master of the messengers; the one who explains the ways of those who walk or are drawn [along the path] - our master al-Mukhtār, the son of our master Bāb Aḥmad, the son of our master Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, then al-Wāfī – counseled us. May God guide us by means of him away from confusion of the self, of desire, and of Satan, for he has control over that and he is the All-Merciful (*al-ḥannān*), the All-Giving (*al-mannān*).

Retreat is from the *sunna* of the messengers, the practice of the righteous, and the field of the wayfarers. So whomever enters into it with God and for God exits from it with success from God and support from God; but whomever enters into it with a reason (*‘illa*) or for a reason exits it with a thousand defects (*‘illa*). ‘Entering it for God and with God’ means that you enter into it out of desire for intimate conversation with God; seeking to please God; to draw closer to him; to give life to the *sunna* of his prophets; and to embark upon the way of his friends; along with the belief in your heart (*niyya*) that you are the most evil of creation and that you are retreating only to spare them from your evil and not to be spared from their evil.

As for its conditions, they are: the purity of the site, the body, and the garments from impurities; maintaining purity from ritual impurities as [the retreat] continues; choosing the most lawful of foods; and curtailing suggestions and whispers. If you enter it according to these conditions, then Satan will have no path to you, according to God Most High's statement: *You shall have no power over my servants* (15:42).

The first thing one sees is smoke emerging from his entire being. Then, after that, he sees a raging fire. After that, he sees his spirit or his self as if it were a transparent, blue curtain. Then he sees it as if it were a shining star, then as if it were a crescent, then an illuminating moon, and then a cloudless sun.<sup>2</sup> Then the ring of lights expands, and he sees that his body has wings of light in proportion to the states. Then the ring of lights widens, and he sees that his whole body is diffuse light. Then the Intellect is revealed to him and he sees that a person of light has blocked everything between the East and the West and he is struck by such

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<sup>1</sup> A descendent of Muḥammad

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic repeats the phrase, “Then after that he see if as if it were...” before every noun. I have streamlined the translation to reduce repetition.

astonishment that he believes it to be the Lord - may He be glorified and exalted – and he hears the call. Be firm and do not let astonishment carry you away, for the one who appears to you is but a creation from among God's creations, for God is above colors, states of being, and the features of temporal events. It is but the Intellect through which God shows regard for you and by which he singles you out from among his creations. So, cling to God, for nothing is like Him. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing. And this is the first step that one places upon the field of specialness.

Then he discloses to you the lights of faith and all the lights that you had seen before become as nothing in comparison. Then you taste their flavor, for the believer does not realize the realities of faith without witnessing its lights. Then many forms and states alternate [upon him] and his light connects to the light of the throne and he acquires the direct sciences from the preserved tablet. And that is the first arriving of the true arrivers, which are the states of faith. Then the perfect Intellect addresses [him] and he addresses it. And the greatest of the arrivers is called the father of the lights and at that time the Intellect is called “the deep recognizer” because of its diving for the lordly realities. However, it is incumbent upon you, at that time, to compare the sciences that you receive with the book and the *sunna*. So whatever accords with the two of them from [the sciences], take it, for it is from God, but what differs from the two of them, leave it, for it is from Satan’s casting. God Most High said: *We never sent any messenger or prophet before you but, when he framed a desire, Satan cast (something) into his desire; but God annuls what Satan casts (22:52)* for he is overpowering and discerning, but he has no power to repel the truth or to establish falsehood because of the party of God’s protection from being deceived by him.

And it is narrated that our master, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlī, cut through seventy of Satan’s snares, for it wasn’t possible for someone to emerge into shaykhhood until he cut through all of those snares. And when he cut through the last of the snares [Satan] manifested to him and blocked the horizon (*sadda al-ufq*) and there were lights in what he saw. Then he said, “O Jīlī, I am your Lord! I have made all forbidden [things] permissible for you and taken from you the burdens of obligations.” Then he said, “Silence accursed one! [I am not] one of those that you fool with!” Then it was proclaimed, “how did you know that it was Satan and that it was not your lord?” So he said, “As for his statement, ‘I have made all forbidden [things] permissible for you,’ I knew him from the statement of the Most High, *God does not command indecency (7:28)*. And from His statement to His prophet, *Serve your lord until certainty comes to you (15:99)*, I learned that the Most High does not exempt anyone from the obligations until he dies. And as for my knowledge that he was not my lord, I knew it from the Most High’s statement, *there is nothing like me and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing (42:11)* and the one that I saw had color and being and God Most High is above colors, states of being, being related



to a direction, or being located in a place. And I knew that it was Iblīs because of the Most High's statement, *Satan threatens you with poverty and commands you to indecency, while God promises you his forgiveness and his bounty* (2:268). And with that it was proclaimed, "Indeed I have made you the best of my friends and I have made obedience to you incumbent on them." Then he laid out for him a register and let his eyes gaze upon it and in it were the names of his disciples until the Day of Judgment and there was not one wretched among them. "So be aware of longing for the *charismata*, for it is rare for a seeker (*murid*) who desires the *charismata* to be saved from Satan's seduction and deception."

So build the foundation of your course upon the *sunna* of the messenger, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him. The true *charisma* only happens for the friends of the *umma* through the blessings of their clinging to the hem of his *sunna* and for that reason their authority is from the support of his miracles, because the friends are the helpers (*anṣār*) of the prophets and the inheritors of their stations. And for that reason, they would sing:

If you were to see a man fly  
Or walk upon the water of the sea  
And he would not stop at the limits of the law  
Then indeed he is an imposter and innovator

Know that the *'afārīt* of the *jinn* take an interest in those who practice seclusion in order to spoil their current occupation - turning to God Most High and preoccupation with intimate conversations with him - which are the utmost limit of happiness. So they speak to them, in order to frighten them such that they turn their faces from this great goal. And the means of nullifying their cunning and cutting [through] their tricks is to not pay attention to them while cleaving to remembrance and being present with Him and scorning their commands. So when they see that, they despair and they abandon that [effort] and bring forth evil whisperings [instead]. But if they find his heart inhabited by remembrance of God then the lights of the remembrance burn them, and they flee out of self-preservation. But if they find it empty and corrupted then the opportunity strengthens them, and they grow strong from it. Then they do not stop until they have corrupted what is there for him.

But if they lose hope for the one whose heart is inhabited [with remembrance] then they change their approach to him and glorify him as one of the righteous and they tell him their names and bring him news about unseen things (*al-maghībāt*) and they show him the folding up of the earth and they make him imagine the holy house. And they do not leave off until they show him the description of the garden and the fire, and they say to him: "Go to so-and-so and tell him that he is one of the people of the garden because of such-and-such deed,"

which no one but he knew about. And then the informer and the informed will be deceived by that information<sup>3</sup> and people come to him, thinking that he is a friend, but he is a devil, ensnared. The devils have seduced him. Thus he leads and is led astray.

But if he is inviolable (*ma'ṣūm*), because God protects him, then he does not turn to any of that. Rather, God might inspire him, by means of the light with which He supports him [with the knowledge] that they are rejected seducers. Thus, he banishes them and drives them away, and the spirit of the names (*rūḥāniyya al-asmā'*) and the *dhikrs* helps him with that. Then they find no path to him, until he reaches the greatest friendship. Then they humble themselves before him and enter into the group of communities that pledge allegiance to him, forced into the general allegiance. For it is established and true that the believer, when he reaches the greatest friendship, then forty communities pledge allegiance to him, the last of which are the *jinn* and humans – even the solid bodies come to him with greetings. But that does not increase him except in submission, abasement, brokenness, meekness, and humility to the glory of God Most High.

And it is narrated that Jesus, upon him be peace, said, “O God, why did you bereave Bal‘ām of the abundance of friendship and gazing upon the preserved tablet?” So God said, “He did not humble himself<sup>4</sup> and for that he was repaid with bereavement. If he had said one day, ‘O God! All praise belongs to you for what you have conferred upon me, which I have not deserved, neither for my essence nor for my necessary attributes,’ then I would not have expelled him from my presence, nor distanced him. But he undervalued my favors, so my wrath descended on him. Indeed, might is my cloak and greatness my mantel and I burn with fire whomever would share these two things with me.” The *shaykhs* of the pious forbearers and ancestors have agreed that if the tablets of specialness appear to the servant and he does not make himself gentle to all of creation and include them all in his compassion and his mercy, then that is a sign that he is a deceiver (*mustadrij*).

It is narrated that Noah, peace be upon him, passed by a dog’s corpse and said: “What an ugly image!” So Allah revealed to him, “O Noah! You protest to me over what I have made, so create it’s like and then protest to me, and respond to me if you can.” Then he took off his cloak and shrouded himself in it out of repentance for those words. And for the rest of his life he continued to weep (*yanūḥ*) for himself from the misfortune of those words and for that reason he was called Noah (*Nūḥ*).

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<sup>3</sup> The Arabic text includes the statement: “and *makhbar* has a *fatha* on the *ba'*,” which I have chosen to omit in the translation.

<sup>4</sup> The text literally reads, “he did not set in the West beneath the expanse of the West.” The author appears to be playing with the verb *khaḍ'a*, which means both “to be humble” and “to set,” as in, “the sun sets in the West.”

And it is recounted that Ḥātim al-Aṣamm prayed in the morning with the ablutions of the night prayer for forty years, and made forty *hajjs*, twenty of them walking, and he would not break his fast except on a holy day (*īd*). Then, after he died, one of the friends of God saw him in his sleep, wearing garments of silk-brocade. So he said to him, “Tell me about yourself and what you did to deserve what I see?” So he replied, “Allah stood me in His presence and said to me, ‘O Ḥātim! Do you realize what you have done to earn my forgiveness and obligate my compassion for you?’ So I said, ‘By standing in your presence in darkness?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘By fasting for you in the heat of mid-day?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘By undertaking pilgrimage, offering sacrifices,<sup>5</sup> and raising my voice in *labayyaka*?’<sup>6</sup> He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘So why have you forgiven me and taken mercy on me?’ He said, ‘Do you remember a day when you passed by a cat, shivering from the cold, in the middle of the road?’<sup>7</sup> And you took pity on it, and covered it with the excess [material] of your robe until it warmed?’ Then I said, ‘I remember that, but it wasn’t on my mind.’ Then he said, ‘with that you claimed from me what you see. For I am merciful (*raḥīm*). I took mercy on you for taking mercy on that creation of mine to whom no one had shown compassion save me, and for the humility and abasement beneath my glory and my might that you demonstrated.’”

It is also narrated that God Most High said to Moses, peace be upon him, during one of their intimate conversations, “O Moses! Do you realize what you did to merit holding intimate conversations with me and hearing my speech?” He said, “No, O Lord!” Allah said, “Do you remember the day in which a lamb from Shu‘ayb’s flock strayed from you? Then you followed its tracks until you found it, which exhausted you? Then you wiped the dirt from its nose, and you kissed it and said to it, ‘you exhausted me, you poor thing, and you exhausted yourself,’ and you did not treat it harshly in the place where it exhausted you? On that day, I examined the hearts of the two realms, but I saw not one heart more compassionate, nor humbler than yours. So I rewarded you by choosing you over the people with my message and my speech.”

And when God wanted to speak to Moses, upon him be peace, he revealed to all the mountains of the world, “I want to speak to Moses upon one of you,” and so each mountain stretched out and raised itself up out of hope that it was the intended one; but Mount Sinai curled itself up, saying, “I’m not able to be the location of God’s address and manifestation,” and so God thanked it for that.

Then He revealed to Moses that he should fast for thirty nights without eating or drinking or approaching women. But when he had completed [the thirty nights] he found that the inside of his mouth had a bad taste, so he brushed and

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<sup>5</sup> *Al-thajj*, literally the flowing of the blood of the sacrifice offered at the end of the *hajj*.

<sup>6</sup> *Al-‘ajj*, literally the crying out of “*labayyaka*” (I am at your service) by pilgrims as they enter Mecca.

<sup>7</sup> *Bi’l-qāri‘at al-ṭarīq*, the highest, beaten part of the road on which travelers walk.

broke his fast. Then the angels said to him, “we used to find your breath sweet and pure and then you made it go away by brushing.” So God revealed to him, “O Moses! You fasted by my command, but you broke your fast without my command,” and he commanded him to fast for ten [nights] in the month of Dhū al-Ḥijjah and thus his Most High’s statement: *We appointed for Moses thirty nights and completed them with ten, and thus the term with his Lord was completed in forty nights* (7:142). Then He ordered him to face Mount Sinai and he spoke to him upon it, and Moses, upon him be peace, was in love. So when he found God’s speech agreeable he longed for a vision of Him, thinking that that was [something] granted with a request or attempted with a purpose. Then He replied to him, “*You shall not see me, but look upon the mountain and if it remains in its place then you will see me. But when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain He turned it to dust, and Moses fell unconscious* (7:143). So without having asked, he was given speech [with God], upon him be peace, because of his humility, but when he overstepped his place (*tawrihi*) he was denied the vision with the existence of the request.

But our prophet, upon him be prayers and peace, obtained it because of the perfection of his etiquette and the intensity of his humility. So God praised him on that account and He said, his *gaze did not swerve* (53:17) by looking at something that he had not been ordered to look at. Instead, he practiced the most perfect etiquette in the place of proximity and his heart did not *transgress* by asking for what was not given (53:17). Thus his exterior agreed with his interior and his insight with his sight and his etiquette with his reasoning, so not one obstacle impeded him from the vision (and struggling is an obstacle), and not one thing rose above him in status; rather, he exceeded all precedents and surpassed all excellence. (And whomever would receive the full discussion of this noble station and lofty position then let him examine our book called *Nuzhat al-rāwī wa-bughyat al-ḥāwī [The Narrator’s Pleasure and Collector’s Desire]* for within it are amazing wonders.) And when the messenger of God, may peace and prayers be upon him, became the most perfect of creations in terms of etiquette and the most intense of them in terms of humility he was given an increase in status that had never been given to anyone from the two realms – this world and the next.

In what we have mentioned is a sufficiency for one whose insight has been illuminated by God. Indeed, this subject is extensive, because of the range of books that it covers – pens and inkwells cannot encompass their number. May God grant us success in applying or implementing His book and may He not expel us, nor you, from His door and may He not weaken us, nor you, with His veil, for He is capable of that and the facilitator of all that.

May prayers and peace be upon the noble, beloved prophet of the vision (*al-ru’ya*) and the speech (*al-taklīm*). In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful. May the peace and prayers of God be upon our master Muḥammad, his

family, and his companions. [This is] from the writings of our *shaykh*, the *sayyid* al-Mukhtār ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, may God be pleased with him and benefit us by means of him.