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Classical *Naṣṣ* Doctrines in Imāmī Shī‘ism: On the Usage of an Expository Term

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Abstract

This article reexamines the use of the term *naṣṣ*, which since Marshall Hodgson has been used in modern historiography to refer to an indigenous Shī‘ī mechanism of succession to the imamate. An alternative thesis is proposed here which situates the origins of the term in Shī‘ī usage over the 8th to 11th centuries within the scholarly discourses of *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. From the perspective of theological hermeneutics, classical Imāmī *naṣṣ* doctrines valorized revelatory specification (*naṣṣ*) of authority to the exclusion of opinion and interpretive effort (*ijtihād*). As is shown here, the elaboration of these doctrines was historically predicated on an attempt to explain the Shī‘ī imamate as a solution to the problem of epistemological uncertainty in Islamic scholarship. This is illustrated with reference to Sunnī, Mu‘tazilite, Zaydī, Imāmī, and Ismā‘īlī literature, documenting the earliest usage of the term *naṣṣ* within a broader intellectual milieu than has hitherto been the case.

Keywords

Shī‘ism – Imamate – hermeneutics – epistemology – *uṣūl al-fiqh* – *kalām*

Within the historiography of Shī‘ism, the doctrine of *naṣṣ* has been a mainstay of scholarly discussion since Hodgson’s treatment of the topic in an influential 1955 article.¹ Hodgson argued there that belief in the imamate being “transferred from one to another by explicit designation, *naṣṣ*,”² had been adopted

1 Hodgson, “How Did the Early Shīa Become Sectarian,” pp. 10ff.

2 Hodgson, “How Did the Early Shīa Become Sectarian,” p. 10.

by Muḥammad Bāqir (d. 114/733) or Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) in the early 2nd/8th century and imbued Imāmī Shī'ism with its distinctive sectarian character. This view has since been adopted by a number of historians,³ and found widespread currency, despite the fact that no extant source is to be found for any of the Shī'ite imams using the term *naṣṣ* in this manner.⁴ Other historians of Shī'ism, though more circumspect about pinpointing the historical origins of the doctrine, still treat *naṣṣ* much the same: as a term denoting a mechanism of succession in broader Imāmī doctrine and sacred history.⁵ Thus within the purview of Shī'ite studies, *naṣṣ* has tended not to move beyond Hodgson's description of an idiosyncratic term native to early Shī'ism to describe the appointment of an imam.

Hodgson was likely induced to place the origin of *naṣṣ* as far back as al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq due to his observation that the belief in appointed succession had been widespread among a number of early Shī'ite sects claiming prophetic "inheritance" (*waṣṣiyya*), particularly from the line of Abū Hāshim (d. 98/717). From this perspective, *naṣṣ* was understood as referring to an early Shī'ite doctrine of designated succession that was codified in subsequent Imāmī tradition, and contrastable with early Zaydism, which advocated a scholar-activist model of authority instead. By the same token, *naṣṣ* served Hodgson as a convenient term for explaining the controversies surrounding the succession to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq at the heart of the proto-Twelvever-Ismā'īli schism.⁶ This historical framework was conveniently to be found in one of Hodgson's main sources,⁷ al-Ash'arī's *Maqālat al-Islāmiyyīn*, where *naṣṣ* is explicitly attributed to several other early Shī'ite sects contemporaneous to al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq.⁸

3 Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, pp. 16f.; Momen, *Introduction*, pp. 37, 39. Lalani, *Early Shī' Thought*, passim.

4 In fact, I have not found any *ḥadīth* attributed to any of the twelve Imams using the word *naṣṣ* except for a single narration attributed to 'Alī al-Riḍā in conversation with al-Ma'mūn about Zayd b. 'Alī (see Ibn Bābūya, *Uyūn*, vol. 1, p. 226). Another narration from the same source depicts its usage by two associates of al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī (ibid., vol. 1, p. 244). Even assuming the reliability of these reports, they do not change the substance of this article.

5 See Crone, *God's Rule*, pp. 110, 117; Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, index, s.v. "naṣṣ."; Haider, *Shī'ī Islam*, index, s.v. "naṣṣ."

6 Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shī'a Become Sectarian," pp. 10f. This view also informs Farhad Daftary's depiction of the genesis of Ismā'īlism; *The Ismā'īlis*, pp. 60, 64, 67, 73.

7 See Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shī'a Become Sectarian," p. 10, n. 58.

8 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālat*. In addition to the Imāmiyya (pp. 16-18, 30), al-Ash'arī mentions the term in association with the Kaysāniyya (pp. 18f.), the followers of Bayān b. Sam'ān (p. 6), the followers of Abū Manṣūr al-'Ijlī (p. 24), the Ṭāwūsiyya (p. 25), the Jārūdiyya (p. 67), the Rāwandīyya (p. 21) and the Qarāmiṭa (p. 26).

The following article wishes to explain both the absence and presence of the term “*naṣṣ*” in the abovementioned sources from a philological approach, offering a different starting point than has hitherto been proposed. On the basis of linguistic, contextual, and conceptual indications, it will be argued that this term should be extricated from the context of succession disputes, whether after Abū Hāshim or Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, for which there is no reliable textual evidence. Instead, we must seek its genesis in the elaboration of Imāmī theology within the discursive context of early ‘Abbāsīd era *kalām*,⁹ and in the terms of the incipient practice of *uṣūl al-fiqh* in particular.

The Imāmī usage of *naṣṣ* at its inception was intended as a hermeneutic reference to an articulated marker of a divine ruling and juxtaposed with juridical methods such as *ijtihād*. The necessity of a *naṣṣ*-based imamate, as the unique doctrinal claim of Imāmī Shī‘ism, thus stipulated that the legitimacy of that office depended on the premise of such a revelational marker, making it of divine institution, and not a human endeavor. This fact also highlights the function *naṣṣ* served for advocacy of Imāmism among the *mutakallimūn*. The historical and discursive factors which account for the elaboration of this doctrine will be made clear with reference to the earliest extant technical usages of *naṣṣ* in Islamic scholarly literature in sources both Shī‘ite and non-Shī‘ite.

Naṣṣ Among the *Mutakallimūn*: Resituating a Familiar Term

The most extensive dispute on record regarding Shī‘ite *naṣṣ* doctrines took place in the monumental back-and-forth between al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) of the Bahshamī Mu‘tazilite school and his student, the influential Imāmī *mutakallim* al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), as documented in their *al-Mughnī* and *al-Shāfi*, respectively. Although this remarkable exchange still deserves its own independent study, it contains a brief point of contention by ‘Abd al-Jabbār, which, though rarely discussed, is instructive for reorienting our approach to the subject:

In the midst of his argumentation, ‘Abd al-Jabbār claims that the paradigmatic Imāmī doctrine of *naṣṣ* only found its beginnings with renegade

9 The relationship of *naṣṣ* to Imāmī practitioners of *kalām* has been mentioned by Madelung (*Encyclopedia of Islam*. New Edition, s.v., “Imāma”). Likewise, the dependency of Shī‘ite *naṣṣ* doctrines on *kalām* is implicit in Haider’s largely *uṣūlī* presentation of Shī‘ doctrine (*Shī‘ī Islam*, index, s.v. “naṣṣ.”). Neither, however, provide a detailed explanation of the nature of that dependency.

Mu'tazilite theologians Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (fl. first half of 3/9th century)¹⁰ and Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 245/860),¹¹ and goes on to suggest that they only *possibly* found their predecessor for this doctrine in Imāmī *mutakallim* Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 199/815).¹² This claim, at which al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā took great umbrage, was refuted by that Imāmī *mutakallim* with the response that the Shī'ite belief in *naṣṣ* was so well-known that it was not in need of specific documentation in order to establish its early provenance.¹³ Al-Murtaḍā's view, in comparison with that of his counterpart, has certainly stood the test of posterity more successfully. But the claims of 'Abd al-Jabbār warrant further consideration.

That 'Abd al-Jabbār emphasized the name of Ibn al-Rāwandī was surely done for the sake of scandal, although the historical significance of this statement will be evaluated more fully below.¹⁴ The role of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam which he alluded to, on the other hand, has received more attention from contemporary scholars: Madelung, for example, has listed the belief of *naṣṣ* as one of his chief theological contributions for "the theory of the imamate."¹⁵ Van Ess, in contrast, while evaluating 'Abd al-Jabbār's claims in another work, took a position similar in spirit to that of Hodgson; the *naṣṣ* doctrine had not been created by Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, since the controversial successorship to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq suggested otherwise.¹⁶

10 On al-Warrāq and the sources on his period of Imāmism, see W. M. Watt, "Abū 'Īsā Warrāq," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 1/3, pp. 325f.

11 Ibn al-Rāwandī is famous for being a Mu'tazilite turned religious skeptic (see chapter 2 of Stroumsa, *Freethinkers*), yet he is also recognized as having gone through a period of Imāmism; see the unflattering allusion by his contemporary al-Khayyāt, *al-Intiṣār*, p. 102. In fact, such influence may have begun with his taking up some of Hisām b. al-Ḥakam's attribute teachings (see Khayyāt, *al-Intiṣār*, pp. 123f.; Sayyid (ed.), *al-Fihrist*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 603f.). Al-Murtaḍā could still access Ibn al-Rāwandī's famous *Kitāb al-Imāma* (see *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, p. 310; vol. 2, p. 257), on which see al-Khayyāt, *al-Intiṣār*, p. 3; Sayyid (ed.), *Fihrist*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 603.

12 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, vol. 20, part 1, p. 118. For an examination of the 'Abd al-Jabbār's doubts on Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, see below.

13 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 119ff.

14 Cf. Sachedina's rendition of the Qāḍī's argumentation, to which he does not give much credence; *Just Ruler*, pp. 83f.

15 See Wilferd Madelung, *Encyclopedia of Islam*. New Edition, s.v. "Hishām b. al-Ḥakam."

16 See van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, pp. 378f. Van Ess based this on reports concerning the botched succession of 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far, none of which contain the term *naṣṣ*; *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 343. Again, this observation holds true if *naṣṣ* primarily refers to the appointment of a successor, and not a hermeneutic term of exposition.

Yet as a matter of fact, we also face textual problems in regards to Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s role; no extant Shī’ite material associates him with usage of the term. Our main non-Shī’ite testimonies to his role besides ‘Abd al-Jabbār come from al-Malaṭī and Ibn Ḥazm, whose works are inconsistent and unreliable.¹⁷ More useful, however, is what we read in the *Fihrist* concerning Abū Ja‘far al-Sakkāk (d. mid-3rd/9th century), “a *mutakallim* from the companions of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam,” who according to Ibn al-Nadīm faithfully upheld his teacher’s teachings on the imamate. He wrote a book entitled *Kitāb ‘alā man abā wujūb al-imāma bi-l-naṣṣ* (“Against Those Who Deny that the Imamate Must Necessarily be Established by *Naṣṣ*”).¹⁸ The title of al-Sakkāk’s book imparts to us a significant piece of information. It refers to the “necessity” of a particular means of instituting the imamate, similarly to how one might read of the imamate itself being necessary (*wājib*) by argument of the “intellect” (*‘aql*) or “scripture” (*sam’*), a topic which became a standard for 3rd/9th century Mu‘tazilism and subsequent *kalām* traditions.¹⁹ Ibn al-Sakkāk’s work thus accorded *naṣṣ* a definitive role for the theoretical underpinnings of the imamate; the theme of theological “necessity” would inform the classical Imāmī *naṣṣ*-doctrine for posterity.

Though al-Sakkākī’s work is no longer extant, we can reach an approximate understanding of its outlook with reference to the earliest extant Imāmī text containing an elaboration of the doctrine of *naṣṣ*: the *Fīraq al-Shī‘a* written by Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. between 300/912 and 310/923), the most prominent Imāmī *mutakallim* of his generation. This text would thus serve *prima facie* for valuable insight into the conceptualization of *naṣṣ* between Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s student al-Sakkāk and al-Nawbakhtī, drawing on common themes over a generation of *kalām* argumentation. To this it may be added that the pertinent section of the *Fīraq* for our inquiry has also been referred to by Madelung as a possible excerpt or reworking of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s *Ikhtilāf al-nās fī l-imāma*.²⁰ The internal evidence for this assumption are references to seemingly “contemporary” developments which can be placed in the late 2nd/8th century; to this one can add that the list of Mu‘tazilī theologians whose positions are discussed does not include any of al-Nawbakhtī’s peers. Although this hypothesis has been qualified by

17 Cited by Madelung; see note 15, and van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, p. 378.

18 Cf. Sayyid (ed.), *Fihrist*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 634.

19 See a survey of these positions; Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm*, p. 143.

20 Madelung identified such indications up to p. 57 of Ritter’s edition; see Madelung, “Bemerkungen,” pp. 40-46.

the possibility of editorial license on al-Nawbakhtī's part,²¹ the proper conditions are conceivable under which parts of its content might tentatively be attributed in part to Hishām b. al-Ḥakam himself, and thus reflect a century of composite Imāmī tradition on the subject.

The section of the *Firaq* in question is a doxography written as salvation history in which primordial political differences take center stage, and the Imāmī vision of Islam is privileged. Within this presentation, the necessity of *naṣṣ* for establishing the imamate is imagined as part and parcel of Islam's original teachings, playing not only a pivotal role in succession to the Prophet, but in classifying the early Muslim community as a whole, Shī'ite and non-Shī'ite alike.

The *Shī'at 'Alī* is characterized there as a group said to have existed "at the time of the Prophet."²² At the time of the Prophet's death, this group is described as forming the basis for three further sub-groupings (*firaq*).²³ Only one group (*firqa*) of these three—with which the author clearly identifies²⁴—is described as believing that the Prophet "explicitly designated" 'Alī (*naṣṣa 'alāyhi*),²⁵ and that "there must be" (*lā budd*) an infallible 'Alid imam who is "explicitly designated" (*manṣūṣ 'alayhi*) by the imam who precedes him.²⁶ In contrast, the other two primordial Shī'ite groups are imagined to be the forerunners of the Butriyya²⁷ and Jārūdiyya Zaydīs,²⁸ who merely affirm 'Alī's superiority and his unrivaled merit for the imamate. Naturally, if *naṣṣ*-based designation of the 'Alid imam is viewed as part of normative Islam by the author, then it is only natural that non-*naṣṣ* variations of Shī'ism are viewed as being among the first deviations from that mold to occur.

This doxographical origins story also characterizes non-Shī'ites in terms of a negative positionality to the doctrine of *naṣṣ*: the early Muslims who followed Abū Bakr as caliph are characterized as believing that "the Prophet *did not* perform *naṣṣ* of a particular successor (*lam yanuṣṣ 'alā khalīfa bi-'aynihi*) and that he left the matter to the *umma* to choose (*takhtār*) for itself the

21 See Bayhom-Daou, "Hishām B. Al-Ḥakam," p. 80. As an anachronism one could certainly point to usage of term "Imāmiyya" which is unattested for the 2nd/8th century; see al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 8.

22 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, pp. 2, 15.

23 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 16, lines 5-6.

24 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, pp. 16f.

25 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 16, line 13.

26 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 17, lines 5-8.

27 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 18.

28 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 19.

one whom it prefers.”²⁹ Accordingly, latter-day Muslims who find their “predecessors” (*awā’iluhim*) in this group are referred to as “people of neglect” (*ahl al-ihmāl*).³⁰ It should be understood that this is a theological critique wherein failing to affirm the existence of *naṣṣ* is characterized as attributing “neglect” to the Prophet for not assigning someone to take on his “role” (*maqām*) in the community.³¹

The reason for this negative characterization brings us closer to the intended meaning of the term in question, as *naṣṣ* is used to highlight a concrete prophetic injunction, which is valorized over other forms of religious knowledge: In contrast to the “adherents of *naṣṣ*” (*aṣḥāb al-naṣṣ*),³² whom the author clearly identifies with, the “people of neglect” believe in “exerting effort in speculation” (*ijtihād ārā’ihim*) not only to establish an imam, but also for “every newly occurring religious or secular matter” (*jamī’ ḥawādith al-dīn wa-l-dunyā*); others in this group even claim to appoint the imam with their sheer intellects (*bi-’uqūlihim*).³³ This dichotomy between *naṣṣ* and “neglect” thus establishes a juxtaposition of unimpeachable divine authority embodied in prophetic command against alternatively fallible or subjective methods of determining an imam. The practical results of the latter are negatively characterized by the author as Muslims “taking each other as imams,” deriving their own teachings not only with respect to the imamate, but theology and law as well.³⁴ Such negative positionality to *naṣṣ* thus informs a theodicean explanation of the problem of religious authority in Islam; if God or the Prophet “neglect” to designate an unimpeachable religious authority for the community, then believers are left to their own fallible devices, and dissension, error, and disbelief result.

The “necessity” of a *naṣṣ*-based imamate as suggested by al-Sakkākī’s book title has thus been given substantive meaning from al-Nawbakhtī’s exposition. These statements, the earliest of their type still extant in an Imāmī source, offer us an inkling of a theology in which *naṣṣ* of the imamate is not mere shorthand for “appointment of a successor” but interfaces directly with issues related to the conceptualization of authoritative knowledge in Islam. As can be seen, al-Nawbakhtī’s theological critique of “neglect,” which valorizes *naṣṣ*

29 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 3, line 2.3.

30 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, pp. 7f.

31 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 7, line 8.

32 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 8, line 10. The use of *aṣḥāb al-naṣṣ* indicates that *naṣṣ* was in fact viewed as a “doctrine” or “position” by the author of the text.

33 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 7, line 13; 8, line 1.

34 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 15, line 6 ff.

over *ijtihād* as the rightful basis of the imamate, unmistakably takes us directly to the terminology of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, where the juridical negotiation of religious normativity was articulated. The following section will provide a discussion of *naṣṣ* as it was conceptualized in early *uṣūl al-fiqh* terminology, and elaborate on the nature of its intersection with early theories of the imamate.

Naṣṣ: The Juridical Dimension

If affirmation of *naṣṣ* is used in the *Firaq al-Shī'a* to explain a normative vision of Islamic doctrines, the text also contains two mentions of *naṣṣ* which the author considers illegitimate: He tells us that some “*ḥadīth* narrators” (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*) believed in prophetic *naṣṣ* of Abū Bakr, and that some Mu'tazilites argued that the Prophet performed *naṣṣ* of the “qualities” of an eligible imam, but not of a specific name or lineage.³⁵ Both views are characterized by the author as having no historical precedent—in contrast to the doctrines of the primordial Shī'a.

The use of the term *naṣṣ* to describe Abū Bakr's right to the caliphate remained relatively marginal in early Sunnī theological discussions; it is the Mu'tazilite usage of the term which is more significant for us here, pointing as it does to a usage within a framework that is not restricted to, or primarily informed by the concept of “appointment,” even as it overlaps with that topic. These two usages of *naṣṣ*, however, are one and the same, and are not distinguished in type by the author of the *Firaq*. They represent two instances of a term from the emerging discipline of *uṣūl al-fiqh* which informed the vocabulary of a *mutakallim* such as al-Nawbakhtī. Although the lexical overlap of *naṣṣ* in Shī'ite doctrine and juridical vocabulary has been cursorily noted,³⁶ the linguistic and conceptual dependency of Shī'ite usage on that basis has not been expressly articulated in the research, due to the prevalence of Hodgson's interpretation of the term.³⁷ However, all indications point to *naṣṣ* being a

35 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 8.

36 See A. J. Wansinck and J. Burton, *Encyclopedia of Islam*. New Edition, s.v. “Naṣṣ,” who write, “To be noted also is the labeling of the Shī'ī principle that the Prophet had designated 'Alī to be his successor as *naṣṣ wa-ta'yīn*.” Cf. the comment by van Ess below in note 56.

37 The presentation of this article operates on the following premises: If the schema argued by Hodgson and others were accurate, we would have to assume that the expression *naṣṣa 'alā* as “explicitly designate” to be 1) an expression in pre-Islamic Arabic, 2) an expression which both early Shī'ites and jurists arrived at independently, or 3) an expression used by early Shī'ites before the *mutakallimūn*. The first and third possibilities have no

neologism of the second half of the 2nd/8th century used in circles of early *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *kalām*.

The novelty of the term is demonstrated by an examination of the *Kitāb al-Ayn*, the earliest known dictionary of the Arabic language, written by al-Khalīl (d. 170/786), the renowned early linguist of Arabic. Not solely a compendium of literary or archaic forms, the work contains technical vocabulary of hermeneutic, grammatical, and theological nature.³⁸ The entry on the trilateral root *n-ṣ-ṣ*, however, contains no indication of the meaning we are looking for, whether as a description of explicit communication or the appointment of a successor. Instead, we find various usages which convey the elevation or intensity of both physical and non-physical characteristics: As a transitive verb it could describe one's increasing the speed of a camel or exhaustive petitioning of another individual,³⁹ referring to "maximization" (*istiḳṣā*) of intended effect. *Naṣṣ* as a verbal noun might also refer to the "utmost limit" (*muntahā*) of a given quality,⁴⁰ as quoted by al-Khalīl in a prophetic *ḥadīth*.⁴¹ A semantic overlap between "increasing" and "raising" (*r-f-*)⁴² implied physical elevation; the *minaṣṣa* was an elevated platform from which a bride was prominently displayed.⁴³ Building on this semantic extension, the expression *naṣṣa ilā* could metaphorically replace "to raise to" (*rafa'a ilā*) in the sense of "to attribute to."⁴⁴

For the earliest extant "technical" usage of the word in a manner with which we are familiar, we must look to the *Risāla* of early legal-theorist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), who uses it within his system of "divine communication" (*bayān*).⁴⁵ In that context he tells us that God has "communicated" (*abāna*) certain religious prescriptions to humanity "as a *naṣṣ*" (*naṣṣ^{an}*). In the case that God's book has no "*naṣṣ* of a ruling (*ḥukm*)" the *sunna* of the Prophet may contain one. When no *naṣṣ* is to be found of either type, including, but

evidence, and the second is highly improbable. The remaining, and more obvious possibility is that it was a term used in *kalām* adopted by Shī'ites for their own purposes.

38 See for example the terms *a-w-l*, *sh-b-h*, *s-n-d*, *w-ḥ-d*.

39 Al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, vol. 4, p. 228.

40 "*Naṣṣ kulli shay' muntahāhu*," al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, vol. 4, p. 228.

41 Incidentally reported by 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib; see Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim Ibn Sallām, *Gharīb al-ḥadīth*, vol. 4, p. 349. Cf. al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Umm*, vol. 8, p. 422.

42 Since *naṣṣa* in context of raising the speed of a camel was explained as *rafa'a*.

43 Al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, vol. 4, p. 228.

44 Al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-Ayn*, vol. 4, p. 228.

45 See Bernard, "Bayān"; Lowry, *Early Islamic Legal Theory*, chapter 1; Vishanoff, *Formation*, pp. 39ff.

not restricted to “new legal cases” (a *nāzila*), *ijtihād* is mandated, but not as productive of a *ḥukm*.⁴⁶

Yet despite the relationship of *naṣṣ* to “explicitness,” as critically examined by Vishanoff, it does not translate straightforwardly to the “unambiguous.”⁴⁷ This is made clear in the *Risāla*'s chapter on legal “difference of opinion” (*ikhtilāf*): We learn there that legal differences are proscribed (*muḥarram*) when God makes His “binding argument” (*ḥujja*) via the Qurʾān or an act of prophetic speech in a manner which is *manṣūṣ^{an} bayyin^{an}*.⁴⁸ The qualifier of *bayyin* or “manifest” for the passive participle of the “act” of *naṣṣ* here suggests a specific species of *naṣṣ* viewed as evident to the point of monosemy which does not preclude the attribution of polysemy. The validity of this inference is confirmed in the latter of al-Shāfiʿī's two avenues of acceptable difference of opinion; namely, verdicts reached by *qiyās/ijtihād* and “the *naṣṣ* of a ruling which can be interpreted (differently)” (*naṣṣ ḥukmⁱⁿ yaḥtamilu l-taʿwīl*).⁴⁹

Thus, the technical usage of the term *naṣṣ*, within al-Shāfiʿī's theory of *bayān*, practically functions to describe the manner in which the medium of a Qurʾānic or prophetic articulation makes a divine ruling (*ḥukm*) “manifest” or “apparent,”⁵⁰ with explicitness as a functionally related, but secondary consideration. It is from this theologically informed hermeneutic perspective that we can appreciate the reason on account of which it falls on the opposite side of the *bayān* spectrum from *ijtihād*: Every instance of *naṣṣ* can be conceptually contrasted with the act of *ijtihād* in that the latter, as based on the rational inference of the jurist, possesses no inherent theological authority as a divine articulation of a ruling.⁵¹ Hence the natural relationship of *ijtihād* to legitimate “difference of opinion” (*ikhtilāf*) within al-Shāfiʿī's system.

This is not only familiar to us from al-Nawbakhtī's *Firaq*, where *ijtihād* is described as a substitute for *naṣṣ*, and conceptually linked to difference of

46 Al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Risāla*, pp. 21f., 357f., 476, 479, 512.

47 As Vishanoff recognizes to an extent; see *Formation*, p. 54, n. 183.

48 Vishanoff, *Formation*, p. 560. Cf. another discussion (*ibid.*, p. 460) where al-Shāfiʿī refers to God's argument being conveyed by “the *naṣṣ* of a clear [verse of the] book or [*naṣṣ*] of a sunna which is agreed upon” (*naṣṣ kitābⁱⁿ bayyinⁱⁿ aw-sunnatⁱⁿ mujtamaʿ ʿalayhā*). Note the importance of the mode of transmission for the latter (cf. *ibid.*, p. 478).

49 Al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Risāla*, pp. 560f. Cf. al-Shāfiʿī, *Jimāʿ al-ʿilm*, p. 50. This reading differs considerably from Lowry's general approach to *naṣṣ*, who wishes to stress its self-sufficiency versus the category of *jumla*; see *Early Islamic Legal Theory*, pp. 105–8.

50 Here I take as instructive Bernard's definition of *naṣṣ* as “ce qui rend apparent, ce qui met en évidence” (“*Bayān*,” p. 54), which works quite well for explaining the semantic extension of the pre-technical usage of *naṣṣa* and *minaṣṣa* to account for the new term.

51 See below for reference to al-Shāfiʿī's discussion on *ijtihād* and uncertainty.

opinion (albeit problematized), it also corresponds precisely to another important source for discussions on the imamate, the *Masāʾil al-imāma* attributable to Nāshīʾ al-Akbar (d. 293/906) or Jaʿfar b. Ḥarb (d. 236/850).⁵² This text is particularly valuable because it imparts information on discussions contemporaneous to al-Shāfiʿī that is likely reliable. These are the reports on the 2nd/8th century Zaydī theologian Sulaymān b. Jarīr al-Raqqī, a prominent *mutakallim* otherwise known for debating Imāmī theologian Hishām b. al-Ḥakam in the circle of the Barmakids. His works circulated in later times, and al-Ashʿarī quoted them in his *Maqālāt*; thus it is entirely tenable that the author of the *Masāʾil* made reference to his writings, even if he only related them in abbreviation or paraphrase. The *Masāʾil* tells us that, like al-Shāfiʿī, Sulaymān b. Jarīr “had claimed that God religiously mandated (*taʿabbada*) mankind to exercise personal effort in their reasoning (*yajtahidū ārāʾihim*) concerning those matters regarding which He had not made an articulation (*fīmā lam yanuṣṣ ʿalayhi*).”⁵³ This hermeneutic reasoning found practical application with regards to the imamate in his view that “the Prophet did not articulate (*lam yanuṣṣ ʿalā*) the imamate of ʿAlī as he had articulated (*kamā naṣṣa ʿalā*) the *qibla* or the prayers;” thus the proper method of establishing ʿAlī’s imamate was “the avenue of *ijtihād*” (*sabīl al-ijtihād*).⁵⁴ As in al-Shāfiʿī’s discussions on *ikhtilāf*, *ijtihād* operates for Sulaymān b. Jarīr in a space where erroneous, and therefore multiple interpretations are theologically not reprobate; this he applied effectively to the Companions who put the first three caliphs in charge, absolving them of disbelief (*kufr*).⁵⁵

Van Ess, who first edited and published the *Masāʾil*, later noted the apparent intersection of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and the Shīʿite articulation of *naṣṣ* there but was dismissive of a deeper correlation⁵⁶—a view which this article aims to rectify. The semantic overlap between al-Shāfiʿī and Sulaymān b. Jarīr’s “*uṣūlī*” use of *naṣṣ*, corresponds precisely to that found in the *Firaq* of Imāmī *mutakallim* al-Nawbakhtī, our earliest extant source of Imāmī *naṣṣ* doctrines on the imamate. This juridico-hermeneutical aspect of *naṣṣ* within debates on the imamate demonstrates that, rather than mere “appointment of a successor,” *naṣṣ* as

52 See Madelung, “Frühe muʿtazilitische Häresiographie”. The author of this article retains a noncommittal position on this question.

53 Van Ess, *Frühe Muʿtazilitische Häresiographie*, p. 44.

54 Van Ess, *Frühe Muʿtazilitische Häresiographie*, p. 44.

55 Van Ess, *Frühe Muʿtazilitische Häresiographie*, p. 44.

56 Commenting on the passage, van Ess stated, “Das erinnert an die Begriffssprache der *uṣūl al-fiqh*; mit der Imamatslehre hat es nichts zu tun;” *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, p. 479.

utilized within early discussions of Shī'ism ought to be seen as the usage of a newly-coined *uṣūl* term to specify the precise mode and implications of 'Alī's designation. Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, as the most prominent Imāmī *mutakallim* active in the later 2nd/8th century would be a reasonable candidate to have first used it in this manner; certainly, Sulaymān b. Jarīr's rejection of *naṣṣ* with regards to the imamate seems to require a contemporary to have articulated it first.⁵⁷

Within the nascent discourse of *kalām* the term *naṣṣ* had a concrete role for distinguishing the soteriological status of non-Shī'ites, and determining the manifold forms of Shī'ite "sectarianism" which interested Hodgson. Hermeneutic discussion of "proof-texts" concerning 'Alī's status accounted for different doctrinal stances: Imāmī *mutakallimūn* such as Hishām b. al-Ḥakam characterized them as conveying a specific divine ruling concerning the imamate (viz. a *naṣṣ*); Zaydī *mutakallimūn* such as Sulaymān b. Jarīr disagreed, and viewed them as indications of 'Alī's merit. The former position tended to excommunication of non-Shī'ites, and the former tended to view non-Shī'ites as erring practitioners of *ijtihād*.

It must be admitted that these alternate views of Shī'ite proof-texts suggest, in agreement with Vishanoff and Lowry, that *naṣṣ* was used to describe an inherently unambiguous statement. Al-Nawbakhtī (or his source) noted with disapproval that Sulaymān b. Jarīr had viewed the early community's position as an error in "interpretation" (*ta'wīl*).⁵⁸ Al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869) also rejected Imāmī characterization of their proof-texts as a *naṣṣ* by claiming that they could be interpreted differently (*ta'wīl*) without necessitating disbelief.⁵⁹ These suggest that a claim of *naṣṣ* was simultaneously a claim of monosemy. Al-Jāhīz, however, like al-Shāfi'ī, did not understand the word *naṣṣ* as referring to something inherently unambiguous or obvious.⁶⁰ Even a later *uṣūlī* such as al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981), noting the etymological origins of the word *naṣṣ*,⁶¹ while stressing the dimension of its explicitness in conveying a ruling (*ḥukm*), acknowledged

57 This is not an argument from silence, but an attempt to account for Sulaymān b. Jarīr's apparent reaction to a position which is not his own. An argument from silence of the sources, in contrast, would state that Hishām b. al-Ḥakam or subsequent Imāmī theologians had adopted *naṣṣ* in their imamate doctrines after it had been rejected by Sulaymān b. Jarīr first.

58 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī'a*, p. 9.

59 Al-Jāhīz, *al-Uthmāniyya*, pp. 276f.

60 See, for example, that masses do not know the meaning of a *mansūṣ lam yazhar* in contradiction with the command to do pilgrimage or fasting; al-Jāhīz, *al-Uthmāniyya*, p. 258.

61 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *al-Fuṣūl*, vol. 1, pp. 60f.

in quotation of an earlier authority such as Abū l-Ḥasan al-Karkhī (d. 340/952) that monosemy was not a condition for application of the term.⁶² Even if a statement was evidently polysemous, if there existed sufficient connotation (*dalāla*), whether intrinsic or not, to determine “what was intended” (*al-murād*), it could be referred to as *naṣṣ*.⁶³ We do not know, in fact, whether Hishām b. al-Ḥakam supposed a *naṣṣ* to be inherently unambiguous; he might have merely proscribed the “wrong interpretation” of said proof-texts.⁶⁴ Both positions are entirely plausible, though the characterization of a text as a *naṣṣ* for a particular ruling is decidedly a semantic claim as well.

Precisely this semantic issue brings us back to the element of uncertainty in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s statement about Hishām b. al-Ḥakam in the *Mughnī*, concerning what he referred to as to “differing narrations” (*ikhtilāf al-riwāya*) on that theologian’s precedence over Ibn al-Rāwandī with regard to the Imāmī *naṣṣ*-doctrine. In fact, these doubts on the part of ‘Abd al-Jabbār concerned whether Hishām b. al-Ḥakam was the first to claim *naṣṣ* in a *particular* way.⁶⁵ The context of that discussion, as well as the testimony of another text by the Qadi clarifies what is meant: In the *Tathbīt dalā’il al-nubuwwa* that is attributed to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the author makes two claims: that Hishām b. al-Ḥakam was the first to claim that ‘Alī’s imamate was by *naṣṣ*,⁶⁶ and that Imāmī Shī’ites only began since Ibn al-Rāwandī to claim “a manifest *naṣṣ* that cannot be interpreted (otherwise)” (*naṣṣ^{an} makshūf^{an} lā yaḥtamil al-ta`wīl*).⁶⁷

This semantic qualification of *naṣṣ* in Imāmī doctrines would be reflected in the words of Ibn al-Rāwandī’s younger contemporary, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 303/915-6), who critiqued Imāmīs for believing in a “manifest *naṣṣ*” (*naṣṣ ḡāhir*).⁶⁸ His son Abū Hāshim (d. 321/933), eponym of the Bahshamiyya school of Mu’tazilism, claimed that earlier Imāmīs only used to argue for their position on the basis of reports which may or may not have been convincing to their interlocutors, but subsequently shifted to arguing that the Prophet did so in unambiguous terms which were later suppressed.⁶⁹ He then tells us that

62 In *uṣūl* terminology, the monosemous was referred to as *muḥkam*.

63 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *al-Fuṣūl*, vol. 1, p. 61.

64 See in the *Firaq al-shī’a* where the *ḥadīth* comparing ‘Alī to Aaron is explained as a proof-text because “there is no other meaning” (*lā ma’nā*) implied here than the imamate; al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī’a*, p. 16, line 17.

65 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, vol. 20, part 1, p. 118.

66 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt*, vol. 1, pp. 224f.

67 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt*, vol. 1, p. 222.

68 As quoted by ‘Abd al-Jabbār; *al-Mughnī*, vol. 20, part 1, p. 327.

69 ‘Abd al-Jabbār; *al-Mughnī*, vol. 20, part 1, pp. 130f.

“it is said” the first to use this line of argumentation was Ibn al-Rāwandī.⁷⁰ Although this semantic qualification of *naṣṣ* is absent from what al-Jubbā'ī's student al-Ash'arī describes in the *Maqālāt*, it was evidently codified by Imāmī *mutakallimūn* via the term “self-evident *naṣṣ*” (*al-naṣṣ al-jalī*) in the same generation,⁷¹ and subsequently adopted in the writings of al-Mufīd⁷² and al-Murtaḍā⁷³ as a distinctive doctrine of the Imāmī school. Al-Murtaḍā would go on to make an important distinction between “self-evident *naṣṣ*” and a less-explicit variety of “subtle *naṣṣ*” (*al-naṣṣ al-khaḥfī*). He affirmed belief in both, while ascribing belief solely in the latter to the Zaydīs—a discursive streamlining of Sulaymān b. Jarīr's position. Otherwise, he claimed, only “aberrant” (*shudhdhādh*) Imāmīs sufficed with belief in “subtle *naṣṣ*.”⁷⁴ Such an assessment of his peers is hard to evaluate,⁷⁵ as the proof-texts listed in Nawbakhtī's *Fīraq al-shī'a*, including the *ḥadīth* of Ghadīr Khumm, are all characterized by al-Murtaḍā as examples of mere “subtle *naṣṣ*.”

Thus, in keeping with positions held by legal theorists going back to al-Shāfi'ī, claims of semantic monosemy could be part of, but not a necessary component to the concept of *naṣṣ*. What was intrinsic to the concept of *naṣṣ*, however, was the idea of a speech act containing a religious ruling—in contradistinction to the speculative methods of religious scholars such as *ijtihād*. This explains the doxographical attribution of *naṣṣ* even to the Jārūdiyya who are commonly mentioned as only affirming 'Alī's appointment “by description” and not by name.⁷⁶ It is likely that *naṣṣ* was attributed to the Jārūdiyya by *mutakallim* doxographers because of the soteriological role the former attributed to compliance with prophetic statements concerning 'Alī for the institution of the imamate—whether unambiguous or no.⁷⁷ Since *naṣṣ* was a common term among *mutakallimūn* it could be fluidly used by Imāmī theologians and non-Imāmīs alike to describe the theological underpinnings of the

70 'Abd al-Jabbār; *al-Mughnī*, vol. 20, part 1, p. 125.

71 Cf. 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-'Adawī al-Shimshā'ī (d.a. 322/933-4) in a treatise entitled *al-Burhān fī al-naṣṣ al-jalī 'alā Amīr al-Mu'minīn*; al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 253.

72 He dedicated a small treatise to it; al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 383. He lists it as one of the distinctive beliefs of the Imāmiyya; see al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-maqālāt*, p. 38.

73 See al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 67f.; also called “explicit *naṣṣ*” (*al-naṣṣ al-ṣarīh*); *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 111.

74 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 67f., 282.

75 Al-Murtaḍā did not shy from advancing his own unique *uṣūlī* positions as normative.

76 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 67.

77 Even if it was not “by name” one was expected to come to the correct conclusion.

act of designation—as reflective of God’s “ruling” issued from the “law-giver.”⁷⁸ Hishām b. al-Ḥakam likely deserves credit for this trend, not because he was the first to believe in the appointed succession of ‘Alī and others, but he was the first to describe it with this specific terminology.

This observation also clarifies the doxographers’ anachronistic attribution of *naṣṣ* to the 1st/7th century Kaysāniyya and others, and indirectly explains the facility by which it was anachronistically attributed to Muḥammad Bāqir or Ja’far al-Šādiq by Hodgson. Since *naṣṣ*, when used to describe the establishment of the Shī’ite imamate, conveys both the designation of a successor as well as a particular juridico-theological status of that action, Imāmī scholars, their *mutakallim* interlocutors, and modern historians, all thinking in terms of “religious law” have found it a convenient catch-all for describing the authoritative act of appointing a successor. Ultimately, in the diffuse nature of such common usage, one’s understanding of *naṣṣ* easily approaches such a non-theoretical notion, especially if the specifically juridical sensibilities are not explicitly highlighted.

More observations are to be made: Although *naṣṣ* is not used in the *ḥadīth* of the Imams we can now appreciate the discursive significance of its presence in the seminal works of Twelver and Ismā’īlī traditional self conception. The great Twelver *muḥaddith* al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941) conspicuously used the term for the chapter-headings of those sections of *al-Kāfi* concerning the appointment of the twelve Imams.⁷⁹ This is yet another testimonial to the documented relationship between the Imāmī *mutakallimūn* of Baghdad and Nishapur and the *muḥaddithūn* of Qumm which al-Kulaynī cultivated,⁸⁰ as well as Ibn Bābūya (d. 381/991) after him.⁸¹

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān (d. 364/974), chief systematizer of early Fatimid Ismā’īlī thought, also clearly incorporated the framework of *kalām* debates on the imamate in such works as his legal compendium *Da’ā’im al-Islām*⁸² and didactic poem *al-Urjūza al-mukhtāra*, to establish the usage of *naṣṣ* in Ismā’īlī

78 One might also add that the Jārūdiyya believing in *naṣṣ* of an individual without “naming,” is comparable to al-Nawbakhtī’s description of the Mu’tazilites believing in *naṣṣ* of the attributes of the imam.

79 Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 286ff.

80 Wilferd Madelung, *Encyclopedia of Islam*. New Edition, s.v. “al-Kulaynī.” See also Newman, *Formative Period*.

81 Ibn Bābūya wrote an independent treatise on the *naṣṣ* of ‘Alī and the *naṣṣ* of the subsequent imams; see al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 372. For more on Ibn Bābūya and *naṣṣ*, see below.

82 Al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān, *Da’ā’im al-Islām*, p. 38ff. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reference.

tradition. This accords perfectly with what we would expect on the basis of the above exposition, and complicates the uncritical facility with which the Ismā'īli split from early Imāmism has been specifically attributed to primordial 2nd/8th century contentions over *naṣṣ*.

In addition to the framing which *kalām* debates provided for articulating a Shī'ite doctrinal position in the terms of a broader intellectual debate, the transmission and naturalization of a term like *naṣṣ* additionally points to an important chapter in the history of the Arabic language, in that, contemporaneous to and at times in conversation with the Greek translation movement, the specialized vocabulary of the *mutakallimūn* shaped the language and conceptual frameworks of Islamicate literate classes to varying degrees as a generalized phenomenon traceable across different sects, schools, and literary genres.

***Naṣṣ* Between Juridical Hermeneutics and Theology**

Having established the indebtedness of Shī'ite usage of *naṣṣ* to the nascent discourse of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, we may explore the fuller discursive role it played within Imāmī *kalām*. Not only did *naṣṣ* specify the identity of the imam; it also served as part of a contention regarding God's relationship with humanity. *Naṣṣ* as a medium of a religious ruling was conceived as a divine proclamation and not a human convention, with broader theological implications for the institution of the imamate. To argue that the imamate must "necessarily" be instituted by *naṣṣ*, as early Imāmī *mutakallimūn* did, was thus part of a theological claim concerning a moral obligation for God to provide articulated evidence of the imam's identity. In effect, this amounted to a rearticulation of the imam's designation as a divine panacea to the scholarly problem of epistemological uncertainty, an issue of which *kalām* was acutely aware. In what follows, an attempt at delineating the role of *naṣṣ* for articulating this line of argumentation from Hishām b. al-Ḥakam to al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā will be attempted, including the various generational conceptual variations entailed, before and after Occultation.

Our investigations till now have focused on *naṣṣ* with regard to its hermeneutic function of describing the verbalized articulation of a religious ruling. This was contrasted with *ijtihād* and *qiyās*, terms used to describe the alternative process for inferring a religious duty when no articulated ruling was to be found. These latter terms, however, also intersected from their inception with considerations on the epistemic basis of religious authority: As early as the

writings of al-Shāfi‘ī, *ijtihād* had been noted as source of difference of opinion (*ikhtilāf*) due to the epistemic uncertainty (*ghayr iḥāṭa*) inherent to its method; one which, however, al-Shāfi‘ī believed to be sanctioned or permitted by God.⁸³ It will be argued here that the essential role of *naṣṣ*-doctrines within Imāmism aimed to problematize and resolve precisely this aspect of *ijtihād*, a theme which we have already seen in the critique of the “people of neglect” from al-Nawbakhtī’s *Firaq al-shī‘a*. In other words, the necessity of *naṣṣ* within Imāmī *kalām* was intended to advocate a divinely sanctioned medium of authority that excluded such speculative procedures which ensued from the juridical discretion that *ijtihād* entailed. This theological valorization of *naṣṣ* took the form of a critique of *ijtihād* or “choice” (*ikhtiyār*), as it was commonly referred to.

Although we face a dearth of knowledge concerning Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s mode of argumentation on the imamate, we do possess two useful reports concerning Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s debates with the *mutakallimūn* which are instructive in precisely this regard:

One of these reports, attributed to Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s student Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 208/823) mentions his arguing for the “invalidity of people choosing the imam” (*fasād ikhtiyār al-nās li-l-imām*).⁸⁴ The argument against “choice” (*ikhtiyār*) in juxtaposition with *naṣṣ* became paradigmatic: it is implicit in the sacred history narrative of the *Firaq al-shī‘a*,⁸⁵ and it was discussed by Imāmī *mutakallimūn* such as Ibn Qiba (d. before 319/931),⁸⁶ al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Nahāwandī (active 4th/10th century),⁸⁷ and Abū l-Qāsim ‘Alī b. Aḥmad (d. 352/953).⁸⁸ A few generations afterwards, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā could simply refer to his opponents as *ahl al-ikhtiyār*.⁸⁹ Such terminology also entered traditionist circles, and in a most remarkable manner in the *Kamāl al-Dīn* by Ibn Bābūya, supplementing an independent work he wrote on the topic:⁹⁰ There he began the opening encomium with reference to God’s

83 See al-Shāfi‘ī’s defense of the absence of certainty in *qiyās/ijtihād*; *al-Risāla*, pp. 477ff; idem., *Jimā‘ al-‘ilm*, pp. 42ff.

84 Al-Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār*, p. 223.

85 Those who didn’t believe in *naṣṣ* said the *umma* could “choose”; see the above presentation of the *Firaq*’s contents.

86 He believed “invalidity of choice” to be an important precept; Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 61.

87 He wrote a book called *al-Kāfi fī fasād al-ikhtiyār*; al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 49.

88 Wrote book against “advocates of *ijtihād*” and about *fasād al-ikhtiyār*; al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 255.

89 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi‘ī*, vol. 1, p. 110.

90 The *Ibtāl al-ikhtiyār wa-ithbāt al-naṣṣ* (no longer extant); al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, p. 375.

merciful sparing mankind of *ikhtiyār*,⁹¹ and later interpreted the Qur'ānic story of Adam and the angels not only as allegory for the establishment of the imamate, but for the merit of *ṣāhib al-naṣṣ* over *ṣāhib al-ikhtiyār*.⁹²

But why should *naṣṣ* be valorized over choice, particular in the domain of *kalām*? The theological argumentation for the incumbency of *naṣṣ* can be gleaned from the other, more detailed anecdote related about Hishām b. al-Ḥakam in the extant Imāmī sources, found in the *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni'ma* by Ibn Bābūyā⁹³ and the *Kitāb al-Burhān fī l-naṣṣ 'alā amīr al-mu'minīn* by 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Shimshāṭī.⁹⁴ Both authors were advocates of the *naṣṣ*-based imamate after much theological development had transpired, but the story's content merits our attention, due to a number of points of verisimilitude, including the conspicuous absence of the term *naṣṣ* there despite its undeniable conceptual connection to the *naṣṣ*-doctrine in discussion.

The anecdote depicts Hishām b. al-Ḥakam in the circle of the Barmakids debating with Mu'tazilite *mutakallim* Ḍirār b. 'Amr (d. 200/815) concerning the necessity of an infallible imam. Establishing with his interlocutor that it would be unjust for God to make humanity religiously responsible (*taklīf*) for that which they are incapable of doing, Hishām b. Ḥakam then asks his interlocutor if God made Muslims religiously responsible (*kallaḥa*) for having "a single religion with no difference in it" (*dīn^{an} wāḥid^{an} lā ikhtilāf fīhi*). When he answers in the affirmative, Hishām asks Ḍirār if God would then necessarily have to establish a guide (*dalīl*) for this purpose, lest He otherwise be unjust; Ḍirār again answers in the affirmative. Hishām concludes his argument by announcing to his interlocutor that they now are in conceptual agreement even if the latter refuses to affirm the infallible imam as a result.⁹⁵

The verisimilitude of the argumentation is striking, since Ḍirār was known for his skepticism towards reported knowledge, and emphasized consensus-based reports of the greater community in order to overcome the problem of contradictory interpretations and narrations of Islamic teachings.⁹⁶ Furthermore, as a proponent of Mu'tazilite divine moral objectivism, he would have upheld the tenant of divine justice (*'adl*) as a theological premise to be reckoned with; this was being developed into the theory of the "optimum" (*al-aṣṭaḥ*) at the

91 Ibn Bābūyā, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 1.

92 Ibn Bābūyā, *Kamāl al-dīn*, pp. 5f., 9, 15. This is a striking example of a *kalām*-informed exegesis which is easily nativized even according to traditionalist sensibilities.

93 Ibn Bābūyā, *Kamāl al-dīn*, pp. 362-68.

94 See the excerpt collected by Ansari, *al-Mutabaqqī min kutub mafqūda*, pp. 140-44.

95 Ibn Bābūyā, *Kamāl al-dīn*, pp. 364f.

96 See Ḍirār b. 'Amr, *al-Taḥrīsh*.

time.⁹⁷ According to this narrative, Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (without categorically espousing either of these two *kalām* principles) appeals to their logic by proposing the existence of an infallible imam as a solution to the problem of religious obligation in the post-Prophetic era. In this manner, he goes on to explain that the authoritative imam is the only way of preserving the religious obligation to unity conveyed by the Prophet.⁹⁸ The imamate, he argues, must, like prophethood, necessarily be “of God’s establishment” (*min ‘aql Allāh*); a divine obligation for the sake of preserving doctrinal integrity—and what we can recognize as an argument against “choice.”

Hishām b. al-Ḥakam goes on to describe eight characteristics which God needs to provide for the imam which, when combined, make his authority indisputable: Four are related to the imam’s “person” (*naḥsihi*): being the most knowledgeable in “subtle (*daqīq*)” and major (*jalīl*)” matters,⁹⁹ being protected (*maṣūm^{an}*) from sins major and minor,¹⁰⁰ being the most generous,¹⁰¹ and being the most courageous. Four other characteristics are related to his having a famous “lineage” (*nasabihi*),¹⁰² including “that there be an indication (*ishāra*) to him from the head of the religion and religious-call (*sāhib al-milla wa-l-da’wa*).” The reason for this “indication” is that, given the number of different contenders for the imamate within the famed household of the well-known Prophet of Islam, an indication ought to be made “of him in particular, by name and lineage” (*bi-‘aynihi wa-ismihi wa-nasabihi*).¹⁰³

This prophetic “indication” which Hishām b. al-Ḥakam deems necessary for God to provide is what we otherwise would recognize as *naṣṣ*. Its role here functions to specify the infallible imam’s identity in order to relieve Muslims of their own fallible attempts at identifying the proper basis of religious authority. This mode of argumentation aligns completely with the merits of *naṣṣ* over the “dissension” (*ikhtilāf*) of “the people of neglect” which we have seen from

97 See Brunschvig, “Mu‘tazilisme et Optimum”.

98 If the injunction to avoid difference of opinion was part of religious obligation during the Prophet’s life, then the means to ensure it must exist—or else one must say that a) the obligation has been lifted or 2) humans are prophetic—the idea that human obligation can change in the post-prophetic era is ruled out. Such reasoning also explains the claim to “authenticity” which we also see in the *Firaq al-shī‘a*. Note the difference between this and early Mu‘tazilite sensibilities, which very clearly has the ethos of a post-prophetic epistemic standard.

99 Cf Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī‘a*, p. 16, line 10.

100 Cf. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī‘a*, p. 17, line 5.

101 Cf. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī‘a*, p. 16, line 12.

102 Cf Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shī‘a*, p. 16, line 13; p. 17, line 7.

103 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, pp. 366f.

al-Nawbakhtī's *Firaq al-Shī'a*—which itself may be a quote from Hishām b. al-Ḥakam's *Ikhtilāf al-nās fi l-imāma*—and also demonstrates how argumentation for the *naṣṣ*-based imamate intersected with the concerns of *kalām*, particularly with regard to the epistemic issues underlying “difference of opinion.” “Imāmism” as a school of *kalām* now took on meta-significance in the *kalām*-based mission for epistemic certainty in matters of religion.

This challenge to Mu'tazilism, and with particular regard to the latter's emphasis on providential “divine justice” is clearly displayed in al-Jāhīz's discussion and refutation of Imāmī *naṣṣ*-doctrines in his *al-Uthmāniyya*. There he critiques the Imāmī providentialism implicit to the claim that articulated designation is “more unifying of the collective (*ajma' li-l-shaml*),” “more preventative of wrong” (*amna' li-l-fasād*), and “farther from error” (*ab'ad min al-ghalaṭ*),¹⁰⁴ which he sees as undermined by the distinctly theodicean view of early Islamic history which Imāmism maintains. But he also shows us that this mode of argumentation had apparently influenced certain advocates of Abū Bakr's caliphate as well, who while not affirming *naṣṣ*, believed that a specific connotation (*dalāla*) had been provided for the community to choose him as a leader—as a proof that God would not “neglect” the community.¹⁰⁵ Although al-Jāhīz intends to refute Shī'ite *naṣṣ* doctrines specifically, he takes a non-committal position on the underlying moral argument underpinning both positions, saying:

If the Prophet *had* chosen [the imam] for them it would be better for them than their choosing for themselves. But since he did not choose for them, then his not choosing for them is better for them . . . because the Prophet would never choose to refrain from *naṣṣ* and naming (*al-tasmiya*) except if refraining from *naṣṣ* and naming was *better* than *naṣṣ* and naming.¹⁰⁶

Without making it explicit, al-Jāhīz's position here reflects his own noncommittal view of God's performance of the “optimum” (*aṣlah*),¹⁰⁷ a position

104 Al-Jāhīz, *al-Uthmāniyya*, p. 276.

105 Al-Jāhīz, *al-Uthmāniyya*, p. 277.

106 Al-Jāhīz, *al-Uthmāniyya*, p. 278.

107 Al-Ash'arī transmits of al-Jāhīz and his students the position that “God is not described with the capability to do injustice, lie, or refrain from the most optimal (*al-aṣlah*) of actions for that which is not optimal, but He is capable of *refraining from it* to do the likes of it which have no limit (*ilā anthāl lahu lā nihāya lahā*) which may take its place.” *Maqālāt*, p. 555.

destined to lose out among Baghdad Mu‘tazilites of subsequent generations. His own reasoning posited no intelligible limit which humans can assert as the highest moral obligation for God to perform; the duty for God to establish a *naṣṣ* for the imam in particular can be characterized as no more optimal than the duty for God to clarify the rest of the religion, as he states:

This is tantamount to the one who says to us, “Have you pondered [the issue] of interpretation (*al-taʿwīl*) and how multitudes have gone astray from it, as well as the [issue of] “the promise and the threat,” predestination, and the names and rulings by which men have anathemized and fought each other? It would have been better for them to know it, and to be informed of its reality (*wa-an yunaṣṣū ʿalā ḥaḳīqatihi*), and be spared the trouble of it, so that there would be no difference of opinion (*khilāf*), and no harm would spread, and people wouldn’t exhaust themselves or be left to their own speculation (*yutrakū wa-naẓarahum*), or abandoned to their own choices (*yukhallāw wa-ikhtiyārahum*).”

We say [in response]: “Goodness (*al-khīra*) is summed up in that which God has [actually] done. So if God clarified it by designation and explanation (*bi-l-naṣṣ wa-l-tafsīr*), and not [simply] meanings and establishment of signs (*al-dalāla wa-waḳʿ al-ʿalāma*), then we know that God does not do other than that which is best. But if He did not do that, and he did not designate him (*lam yanuṣṣ ʿalayhi*), then His leaving our situation as it is is better and more excellent for us. Otherwise, how can you mandate and decree [that] for God?”

The question of why divine justice dictates that God must necessarily send a prophet but not send imams to clarify the former’s message has remained a fault-line in the intersection between Mu‘tazilism and Imāmī *kalām* for posterity; this early discussion of *naṣṣ* by al-Jāḥiẓ is the earliest extant document of that fact.

Yet the Nawbakhtīs went on to develop the Imāmī *naṣṣ*-doctrine from a position characterized by greater affinity with the eventually dominant theory of Baghdad Mu‘tazilite moral objectivism, within which the optimal was prescribed for God’s actions in both “religious and worldly matters” (*fī l-dīn wa-l-dunyā*).¹⁰⁸ This is how we are to interpret the statement of Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī (d. 311/923), for example, who wrote in his *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* that knowledge of “whether it is permissible for [the Prophet] *not* to appoint a successor (*yastakhlif*) and explicitly designate (*yanuṣṣ ʿalā*) an imam,” is a purely

108 Brunschvig, “Mu‘tazilisme et Optimum,” p. 11.

intellectual matter (*mā tūjibuhu al-ʿuqūl*), to be determined before discussion of extant reports.¹⁰⁹ This is a position which we can assume his nephew al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā (author of the *Firaq*) to have adopted as well. Such rational apriorism in one's approach to the imamate is also attributed by ʿAbd al-Jabbār to Ibn al-Rāwandī, and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā described it as a point of agreement between Ibn al-Rāwandī and the Nawbakhtīs.¹¹⁰ Their detailed argumentation is not available to us, yet the presentation of the *Firaq* gives us some idea of a practical implementation of the doctrine.¹¹¹

More instructive details are to be found in a response by Imāmī *mutakallim* Ibn Qiba—a former Muʿtazilite himself—to the probing questions of his Muʿtazilite interlocutors concerning the meaning of *naṣṣ* being “rationally necessary” (*wājib ʿaql^{an}*). He explains that he and his associates do not believe that this premise can be known before existence of the religion (*qabl majrʾ al-rusul wa-sharʿ al-sharāʿi*).¹¹² Rather, it is predicated on the presumption of Islam and the Prophet's teachings and the postulated necessity of there being an individual whose “statements” (*khabar*) “are not contradictory” (*lā yakhtalif*)¹¹³—ostensibly concerning the teachings of Islam. Such a person, who must therefore be infallible, must be singled out by *naṣṣ*, however, for the chief reason that “there is nothing in his outward created form which demonstrates his infallibility” (*laysa fī zāhir khilqatihi mā yadullu ʿalā ʿiṣmatihī*).¹¹⁴ In other words, *naṣṣ* must be provided by God to enable humanity to discern infallibility which would otherwise be beyond the purview of what is knowable.

But there was a standard way of knowing infallibility in *kalām*: miracles. Their performance by the imams was thus defended by Ibn Qiba as well.¹¹⁵ Although the Nawbakhtīs denied miracle-working by the imams (in accordance with the Muʿtazilite restriction of miracles to prophets), the majority of

109 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 89.

110 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, p. 98.

111 Given the notion of an imam as a resolution to epistemic doubt, we can also infer why such a famous “skeptic” as Ibn al-Rāwandī may have left Muʿtazilism for Imāmism.

112 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 60.

113 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 61. The imamate is only valid, Ibn Qiba tells us, for a figure singled out by *naṣṣ*, who in addition to their knowledge and excellence, rejects *ijtihād* and *qiyās* (ibid., 109)—reducing the qualifications to *uṣūl* terminology which highlights the epistemologically certainty underlying the imamate's institution and function.

114 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 61. Haider does mention this argument without sourcing it; see *Shīʿī Islam*, p. 42. Sachedina mentioned this argument in citation of al-Murtaḍā and al-Ḥillī; *Islamic Messianism*, p. 137.

115 Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, p. 62.

Imāmīs affirmed them by al-Mufid's time.¹¹⁶ Consequently, al-Murtaḍā would go on to say in his *al-Shāfi*, if one *must* follow an infallible imam, and there exists no way to sense or prove infallibility, then God must provide *either* a *naṣṣ* or a miracle (*mu'jiza*) to establish it, otherwise it would be a "religious responsibility for something which was not possible" (*taklīf mā lā yutāq*).¹¹⁷ But he goes even further than Ibn Qiba: Even the ascertainment of whether an individual is merely the most virtuous or knowledgeable of their times is not possible without *naṣṣ*, as such things cannot be *definitively* known by one's own *ijtihād*¹¹⁸—which as we know, is subject to uncertainty and difference of opinion.

Yet even as al-Murtaḍā thusly epitomized over two centuries of argumentation in development since Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, change was in the air. True, he tells us, "most" Imāmīs in his time still used difference of opinion (*ikhtilāf*) of religious scholars to argue for the necessity of an infallible imam, a solution to the fact that not every religious teaching Muslims follow has been conveyed by a binding proof (*ḥujja qāṭi'a*), which thus dictates the commonplace use of *ijtihād* and speculation (*ẓann*).¹¹⁹ But the objection by theologians such as 'Abd al-Jabbār that practical difference of opinion had not actually been eliminated—whether among the scholarly followers of the imams or as a consequence of the disappearance of the twelfth imam¹²⁰—was non-trivial. Al-Murtaḍā, in a move which also bears consequence for our inquiry, responded by explaining that the preservation of the *shar'ā* and elimination of difference of opinion was not the definitive factor in mandating the existence of an imam.¹²¹

Indeed, the logic of explaining the imam as an infallible preserver of the Prophet's message had diminished somewhat not only since the occultation, as noted by Arjomand,¹²² but also in the rise of an alternative method to establishing the necessity of the imamate. Distinct from what we have seen in Ibn Qiba's argumentation, which reflects Hishām b. al-Ḥakam's argumentation

116 Al-Mufid, *Awā'il al-maqālāt*, p. 68. Such miracles, from a Mu'tazilite perspective, would have been viewed as threatening the integrity of the proof of prophethood, which likely informed the view of the Nawbakhtīs.

117 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 4f.

118 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 7-9.

119 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 168f.

120 This had troubled Ibn Qiba; see Ibn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn*, pp. 108ff. See 'Abd al-Jabbār's contentions as well; al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 173f., 307.

121 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 307f.

122 Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology," pp. 562f.

based on solving scholarly *ikhtilāf*, Imāmī *kalām* on the imamate had continued to develop in conversation with Baghdad Mu'tazilism's rational apriorism to take on universalistic implications not explicitly contingent on the particularities of early Islamic history: Though still based on the necessity of an impeccable leader who remained above the weakness and fallibility of the populace, it was now combined with a more generalized theory of legitimate human governance. Though *naṣṣ* or a miracle was necessary to distinguish the proper occupant of this office, this was universalized as a distinguishing characteristic to rationally determine the existence of an infallible authority imagined to exist in every age of humanity in a manner encompassing prophethood as well.¹²³ The role of the imam in preservation of Islamic scholarly knowledge from epistemic uncertainty thus took a secondary consideration.

This change in emphasis brings up an equally important issue in Imāmī scholarship, embodied in the problem of scholarly fallibility among Imāmī scholars themselves. The Nawbakhtīs seem to have found a solution for this by making “representatives” (*wulāt*) of the imam—legal scholars and perhaps *wakīls*—dependent on *naṣṣ* from the imam.¹²⁴ Others, unmentioned by our sources, seem to have argued that such representatives themselves needed to be infallible. These solutions were undoubtedly meant to mitigate the fallibility of non-imams. This, however, was rejected by al-Mufīd, who, speaking in terms we now recognize from discussion on the imamate, said the imams could choose (*ikhtiyār*) from among those deemed to have sufficient knowledge.¹²⁵ What it means for an infallible to choose is perhaps clarified by al-Mufīd's subsequent claim that an imam's judgments are only issued on the basis of apparent knowledge (*bi-l-ẓahāwir*),¹²⁶ which would account for practical fallibility on the part of their representatives. Whatever the case, one can assume the implications to be that a fallible authority such as an Imāmī scholar did not have to be categorically obeyed as was the case with the *naṣṣ*-based imam. Such prickly issues, ultimately were avoided by al-Murtaḍā, who when confronted with the problem of Imāmī scholarly fallibility responded by essentially reducing the problem to one of adhering to the properly authoritative source of legislation embodied in the imam,¹²⁷ and not formally eliminating

123 See al-Murtaḍā, *al-Dhakhīra*, pp. 409ff.

124 Al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-maḡālāt*, p. 65.

125 Such a representative could also not be inferior (*mafdūl*) to those he was responsible for, which is likewise terminology taken from discussions of the imamate.

126 Al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-maḡālāt*, p. 66.

127 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi'*, vol. 1, pp. 172f.

inherent epistemic uncertainty. Even when an Imāmī follows a merely fallible authority, he actually *intends* to follow an infallible one.¹²⁸

This solution for Imāmī scholarship was not a foregone conclusion, as it was the very principle of *naṣṣ* over *ikhtiyār* which had inspired Ibn Bābūya to argue against scholastic methods of jurisprudence,¹²⁹ and in a way not completely foreign to the concerns of Imāmī *mutakallimūn*.¹³⁰ His older contemporary al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, in an Ismā‘īlī context, used the same Imāmī principles to argue conclusively against any framework of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *kalām*, lest that challenge the infallible legislation of the imams.¹³¹ He himself mentioned his diploma of investiture by the Fatimid imam al-Mu‘izz (d. 365/975) with pride¹³²—without calling it *naṣṣ*—though it undoubtedly played the role that the Imāmī *mutakallimūn* had mulled over by that name, to mark an authorized conduit of the imam’s pristine teachings uncontaminated by scholarly fallibility. Many generations later, the *dā‘īs* of Ṭayyibī Ismā‘īlism would claim *naṣṣ* to unambiguously define the imam’s singular representative on earth during a period of occultation.¹³³ The scholars of Uṣūlī Twelver-Shī‘ism, however, had apparently moved beyond such concerns at the foundation of the original *naṣṣ* doctrine.

128 Al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 308ff.

129 Commenting on the story of Moses’s seventy followers who disobey him he says, “So if Moses was not suitable for choice (*ikhtiyār*) despite his virtue and rank, then how can the *umma* be suited to choose its imam with its opinions and how can they be suited to derive and extract rulings (*istinbāt al-aḥkām wa-istikhrājihā*) with their deficient intellects, divergent opinions, varying capacities, and different desires? May God be greatly exalted above satisfaction with their choice (*ikhtiyārihim*);” Ibn Bābūya, *ʿItāl al-sharāʿi*, vol. 1, pp. 63, 68.

130 “We have been made religiously responsible for resorting back to the sayings of the imams who are made successors after the Prophet, and for this reason we find the ruling in everything we need concerning newly arising matters (*hawādīth*) in what the Shī‘a transmit from their imams (upon them be peace). Everything for which our opponents have erroneously taken on analogy and *ijtihād* and pathways of speculation (*ẓann*), the Shī‘a have a *naṣṣ* concerning it, whether it be in need of interpretation (*muḥmal*) or set out in detail (*mufaṣṣal*);” al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi*, vol. 1, p. 172.

131 See now Devin Stewart’s excellent translation: al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Disagreements of the Jurists*.

132 Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Disagreements*, chapter 4.

133 Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*, p. 275.

Conclusion

The term *naṣṣ* in discussions of Shī'ism has traditionally been treated as an idiosyncratic expression of sectarianism. In what has preceded, the term's origins in *uṣūl al-fiqh* has been highlighted within a narrative elucidating early Imāmī *kalām*'s attempt to explain the doctrine of the imamate in juridico-theological terminology intelligible to a broader scholarly discourse. *Naṣṣ* not only refers to a statement conveying God's ruling, it is to be contrasted with *ijtihād* or *qiyās*, scholarly methods which depend on the subjective and thus fallible perceptions of the individual who undertake them. Whereas al-Shāfi'ī viewed *ijtihād* as a legitimate source of difference of opinion, early Imāmī *mutakallimūn* problematized difference of opinion as emerging from fallible scholarship which found its roots in rejecting the designation of infallible imams. They found their solution in the divine designation of infallible imams via *naṣṣ*, eliminating the need for *ijtihād*, or *ikhtiyār* when applied to appointing an imam at one's discretion.

Whereas the predominant view of modern scholarship is that *naṣṣ* within Imāmism is an extrapolation or back-projection of the principle of succession found in 1st-2nd/7th-8th century Shī'ism,¹³⁴ we may ask ourselves whether it should be characterized instead as the back-projection of debates in *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *kalām*. But this too is overly cavalier and dismissive of what *uṣūl* sought to do in the first place; namely, translate the implications of traditional tenets or practices into hermeneutically and epistemologically sensitive terms. *Uṣūl al-fiqh* could be used in a variety of ways to mediate the authoritative past; other examples include describing the earliest Muslims as practicing *ijtihād* or *qiyās* when confronted with novel situations, accepting or rejecting *āḥād ḥadīth* from one another, or practicing *ikhtiyār* as an explanation of the principle of *shūrā*. The use of *naṣṣ* in Imāmī Shī'ism is but one notable example of this trend in Islamic scholarship.

In turn, however, the paradigmatic *naṣṣ*-doctrine in early Imāmism also demonstrates how traditional doctrines took on new discursive significance when translated into *uṣūl* terminology. The problem of scholarly fallibility and "conjecture" (*ẓann*) is one which early Imāmism claimed to solve with its articulation of the imamate on the basis of *naṣṣ*. The weight accorded here to revelation was paradoxically argued in terms meant to appeal to a skeptical point of view; a revelatory act of God was viewed as necessary to satisfy the concerns about contingency in the transmission or interpretation of knowledge. This

134 See references at the beginning of article, and cf. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, p. 378.

was naturalized via a growing rapport with Mu‘tazilite objectivist ethics; God was obligated to provide maximal revelatory guidance so as to save mankind from its own epistemic shortcomings. The Imāmī *naṣṣ*-doctrine is a testimony to the transformative meeting place of sectarian commitments with broader inter-Islamic discursive trends.

Post-occultation, however, the initial reasoning behind the *naṣṣ*-based imamate was parted with, due in part to the inherent hybridity in the *kalām*-tradition that articulated it. A more fully-fledged Mu‘tazilite rationalist apriorism adopted by later *uṣūlī* Twelver theologians streamlined both *naṣṣ*-based appointment and miracles into the theological trappings of a universalist sacred history conveniently similar to those well-known Imāmī *ḥadīth* narrations on the perennial role of *waṣīyya*.¹³⁵ To a certain extent, our own uncritical notion of *naṣṣ* as mere “appointment of a successor” is owed to the success of this synthesis, and Twelver Imāmism’s own distance from the conceptual considerations behind its first usage.

To conclude: The *uṣūl al-fiqh* origins of the word *naṣṣ* are in fact patently obvious; one can only speculate as to why this has not been discussed before. It may have to do with the prevalent disciplinary separation of legal-studies from theology or history—and the banal notion that *uṣūl al-fiqh* is merely “Islamic jurisprudence.” Another reason may be the sequestering of Shī‘ite studies from the broader field of Islamic studies, including the presupposition of a distinctive Shī‘ite epistemology which divorces it from other discursive developments in Islam. A lackadaisical or suspicious attitude towards philological investigation is also certainly to blame. Proper philological study of Islamic scholarly terminology, however, will never cease to be instructive for highlighting the interrelationality of discursive trends at hand in the expository terms which we take for granted. The difference, as has been demonstrated here, is never purely semantic.

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