

RICHARD MCGREGOR
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Notes on the Literature of Sufi Prayer Commentaries

“The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; And yet ye understand not how they declare His glory!” (Q. 17:44) Yusuf Ali trans.

The interpretation of religious texts has a long and strange history. Although the practice itself is ancient, systematic reflection on its method and procedure has only become more complex over time. Parts of the Hebrew Bible recount narratives from earlier parts of the same book— an exegetical connection that ties both narratives nicely into a single scripture. Later, the Christian revelation would largely define itself against its Jewish roots. Interpretation, often with the sense of a “new” reading of the scriptures, was the basis here for a new religion, a messianic version of Judaism embodied in the hagiography of a minor Jewish preacher. The Islamic tradition too, one might say, found itself by rereading its Abrahamic antecedents. Central to its own self-image, the Quran repeatedly asserts corrective interpretations of these earlier “books.” Often the Islamic revelation calls upon its readers to take it as a rereading of the earlier Christian and Jewish books.

With all of this reading across epochs and traditions, along with the rereading taking place within texts themselves, where does interpretation start? Should we ask ourselves where “reading” ends and where “interpretation” begins? As modern thinkers we are necessarily, if often unconsciously, indebted to contemporary ideas and debates on the matter. But of course exegesis, like any other great cultural enterprise, has a history to it. The medieval Scholastics largely agreed upon a four-fold schema of textual interpretation, which located meaning in the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the esoteric senses of a text. In contrast, for us as moderns, one compelling idea is the widely held notion that reading and interpretation are not easily—if at all—disentangled. Whether we like it or not, for example, the idea of authorial intention (at least the most naïve versions of it) has been deeply shaken. Further, debates over reading communities and textual reception have greatly complicated our notion of “reading.” It was two generations ago in a famous essay that Rudolph Bultmann asked if it is possible to read

© The Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago.



©2013 by Richard McGregor.

DOI: [10.6082/M1TX3CJF](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1TX3CJF) (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1TX3CJF>)

DOI of Vol. XVII: [10.6082/M18050P5](https://doi.org/10.6082/M18050P5). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/5ZJ0-6548> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

at all without presuppositions.¹ His essay sought to nuance the subject-object model of reading, in favor of one that recognized the reader's contribution to the event of the text itself. This was not a reworking of the four-fold exegesis of the medievals, but rather a paradigm shift. No longer will decoding a text (or for that matter an image) fully illuminate its meaning; and besides, Bultmann's followers would add, no one has ever been mechanically, innocently, decoding texts anyway. So modern literary theory wants to say that reading and interpretation are indeed inextricably interwoven. The philosopher Arthur Danto now wagers his entire aesthetic theory on the "work and interpretation arising together in aesthetic consciousness"; and Stanley Fish's exploration of a "Text in this Classroom?" shakes loose the deterministic grasp of the interpretive community, yet remains committed to it as part of the complex equation that constitutes reading.²

I begin with these comments on reading and interpretation in the hope of sharpening our sensibilities to the ideas, assumptions, and interpretive dynamics at play when we encounter *sharḥ* or commentary literature. This is writing that is unrepentantly exegetical, and as such to our modern ears might sound inauthentic, derivative, or narrowly determined. As students of literature we are unlikely to ever point to a commentary as the apex of an author's creative genius. Even in the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldūn famously remarked on the harm that epitomes were doing to students. He conceded these works were intended to facilitate learning, but in reality they often produced overly dense summaries that nevertheless omitted many essential points.³ With these warnings in mind, I believe a balanced and discerning historical perspective on premodern *sharḥ* writing can allay both the medieval and modern anxieties around commentary. In fact, the literary record itself embraced exegesis in a profound way. Islamic philosophy took some of its most important steps through the commentary form. Whether this was by epitome, paraphrase, or line-by-line explanation, all of the great philosophical writers—Ibn Rushd surely being the most prominent—engaged closely with earlier Greek texts. Parallel to this tradition of philosophical writing, commentary is of yet greater significance in relation to the Quran. The *tafsīr* genre took many forms, and was reflected in a vast array of approaches and commitments.

The central text of the Islamic revelation has inspired innumerable commentaries, the production of which has not slowed in the modern period. While the

¹ R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in his *Existence and Faith* (London, 1964), 342–51.

² See A. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986), 45, and S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).

³ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), chapter 6, section 35.



Scholastics' four-fold reading of scripture grew into modern hermeneutics, Quran interpretation also evolved. In the early and medieval periods interpretive schemata were debated along the lines of exegesis from "tradition" (*bi-al-ma'thūr*), from "sound opinion" (*bi-al-dirāyah*), and by "allusion" (*bi-al-ishārah*). The Quran itself (Q. 3:7) seemed to contribute a framework for its own interpretation, distinguishing between its clear (*muḥkamāt*) and ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) verses. And the later history of *tafsīr* often struck out in new directions, some of which represented novel interpretive paradigms. The modern phenomena of scientific rationalism, psychology, and structuralism, all variously embraced by thinkers such as Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Mohammed Arkoun, have opened new horizons for Islamic exegesis.

While the focus of the present essay is more modest, it shares these concerns around reading and exegesis. The texts in question for our study are the "revealed" or inspired prayer compositions of the great Sufi saints of the Mamluk period. They are texts belonging to a genre called variously *du'ā'*, *ḥizb* (pl. *aḥzāb*), *wazīfah*, *ṣalāh* (pl. *ṣalawāt*), *tawaṣṣul*, *taṣliyah*, *dhikr* (pl. *adhkār*), or *wird* (pl. *awrād*).⁴ Although the terminology is inconsistent, with prayers referred to by more than one term, the genre as a whole is clearly identifiable as consisting of supererogatory petitionary prayer compositions. Making a strictly literary categorization more difficult however, is the fact that some of these terms can also refer to the course of spiritual training of which the prayers form only one part (e.g., *wazīfah* and *wird*), or Sufi devotional ritual in a much wider sense (e.g., *dhikr*). Additionally, the term *du'ā'* is used outside of Sufism to indicate part of the obligatory salat prayers, as well as referring generally to almost any informal petitionary private prayer, whether written or improvised *ad hoc*.⁵

Despite the difficulty in labeling this genre of writing, there are clear parameters and characteristics at play. For example, authorship is of central importance. An anonymous prayer composition, for reasons that will become clear below in our discussion of the content of such prayers, would typically not find a wide audience. The inspired nature of these compositions is inextricably associated with the saintly status recognized of their authors. In a less determined but related way, these texts are also typically located within clearly identifiable reading communities. Building on their association with a saintly figure, the *walī* (pl. *awliyā'*),⁶ these prayers are normally integrated into the rites and rituals of a Sufi order (*tariqah*, pl. *ṭuruq*). While not every composition finds such a positive

⁴ See C. Gilliot's "Dhikr" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., for a wider survey of this terminology.

⁵ For a survey of terminology relating to petitionary prayers see C. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London, 1961), 4–23, and J. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), 195–217.

⁶ For more on the conception of personal "sanctity" see R. McGregor, "Friend of God" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE.



reception, they are intended to serve such ritual and institutional purposes, and the subsequent renown of *awliyā'* often parallels the popularity of their inspired prayer compositions. Quite typical also is the content of these prayers. Beyond being petitionary in nature, they are strikingly intertextual. In this aspect their engagement with Quranic material is foundational; prophetic figures, tropes, and imagery are recycled into the prayers, often through direct textual borrowing. This appropriation and redeployment of Quranic text, as we shall explore below, on the one hand reinforces the theological and devotional functions of the prayers, while on the other hand the implications of such intertextuality—and the assumptions behind them relating to the inspired saintly “author”—complicate the notions of “scripture” and revelation.

While the focus of this paper is the Sufi context of the Mamluk era, it should be noted that the practice of supererogatory prayer—here meaning simply divine petitions outside of the *salat* ritual—goes back to the time of the Prophet. The Quran mentions several forms, including *ṣallā 'alā* and *ṣalawāt*, *dhikr*, *tabāraka*, and *du'ā'*.⁷ Not only were these forms of prayer common in pre-Islamic Arabia, but associated group rituals had apparently developed around them. The Quran mentions Muḥammad's night prayer vigils, and later devotional recitations of early sections of the revelation, taking place within groups apparently assembled specifically for that purpose. Although Islamic prayer revolves around *salat*, petitionary prayers, while not an obligation, are common and constitute a practice that is as old as the community itself. In the Quran Abraham requests that God strengthen him in his *salat*, and that He receive Abraham's petitionary prayer. “Lord, grant that I am steadfast in *salat*, and that my descendants are also. O Lord, hear too my petitions (*du'ā'*) to You” (Q. 14:42). Note that this request itself is made in the form of a petition. Collections of the petitionary prayers of the prophet Muḥammad are common. Al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) was only one of many writers to collect and comment on these. In the following generation, Abū al-Karam al-Andarāsfānī (d. after 564/1169) composed the *Brilliant Corpus of the Prayers of the Prophet*, which consists of 160 chapters containing 1530 prayers for various occasions, all said to have originally been composed by Muḥammad.⁸ The circulation of these prayers among the first generations of Muslims warrants a closer study of its own, not

⁷ See G. Böwering's “Prayer” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, gen. ed. J. McAuliffe (Leiden, 2001). On the prominent twelfth-century Maghribi prayers of Abū Madyan, see his *The Way of Abū Madyan*, trans. V. Cornell (Cambridge, 1996), 36–39.

⁸ A. H. al-Ghazzālī, “Al-Adhkār wa-al-Da'wāt,” book nine of *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. See also the translation by K. Nakamura (London, 1990). Al-Andarāsfānī, “Al-Jāmi' al-Bahī li-Da'wāt al-Nabī,” MS no. 1945 in P. Hitti et al., *Descriptive Catalog of the Garrett Collection of Arabic Manuscripts* (Princeton, 1938).



least because there is some evidence for disputes over the licitness of using extra-Quranic petitionary prayers.⁹

This *aḥzāb* and related prayer literature has a vast history that remains largely unexplored within our scholarly field. Robert Irwin and Thomas Bauer are the most recent experts to note the dearth of studies on Mamluk-era religious literature.¹⁰ Perhaps because in comparison with other genres of religious literature (Quran, hadith, *fiqh*, *adab*, *falsafah*) these works would be considered of lesser historical and literary value, they have received little attention from researchers. Nevertheless a quick look at any major Islamic manuscript collection will show that this material was produced, copied, and commented upon by many writers century after century. A recent study of a Mamluk-era library in Damascus, for example, observes that prayer books made up a great proportion of the collection.¹¹ This devotional literature also enjoyed a significant presence in public religious life. Rituals, including funerals and pilgrimages to shrines, were often occasions for recitation.¹²

Turning back to the texts, we must note first the peculiar conception of authorship that was at play behind the *aḥzāb* associated with saintly figures after the sixth/twelfth century. More specifically, the dynamic of divine inspiration, and the elevated status of the one receiving and representing it, strongly marks this textual production. In the early Mamluk sultanate and elsewhere in the central Islamic lands, the rise of the great Sufi orders engendered a new level of formalization and institutionalization of Islamic mysticism. The teachings, discipline, and rituals specific to each order were defined and anchored in the example of the eponymous founder. In Egypt many orders made their appearance in the Mamluk era, the most prominent being that of the Shādhiliyah, founded on the saintly

⁹ Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) is quoted on this in L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954), 189. The debate is over the proper use of *awrād*. Supplicatory texts (*duʿāʾ* and *adhkār*) became part of the Sufi literary canon from at least the fourth/tenth century. A. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh, 2007), 86.

¹⁰ See their comments in R. Irwin, “Mamluk Literature,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 1–30, and T. Bauer, “Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches,” *MSR* 9, no. 2 (2005): 105, 123.

¹¹ K. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands* (Edinburgh, 2012), 147–49. The reference is to the library of the Ashrafiyah Mausoleum established in the early seventh/thirteenth century.

¹² By the nineteenth century these public recitations were so common that an overseer (*shaykh qurrāʾ al-ḥizb al-Shādhili*) was appointed to organize reciters and assure proper conduct. Other devotional texts in the genre, such the *Burdah* of al-Buṣīri (d. 694/1294) and al-Jazūlī’s (d. 869/1465) *Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt*, were also widely recited. See F. De Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-linked Institutions* (Leiden, 1978), 112, n. 78. For a literary study of the *Burdah* see chapter two of Suzanne Stetkevych’s *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad* (Bloomington, 2010).



teachings and example of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258). Each Sufi order has its unique structure and history, but a number of elements remain common. These included the sanctity (*walāyah*) of the founding figure, his rule of spiritual discipline, the web of allegiances built upon the master-disciple (*murshid-murīd*) relationship, and the inspired petitionary prayer texts revealed to the saint. In accordance with predominant Sunni theology and prophetology, these prayers were transmitted by inspiration (*ilhām*), a lesser form of divine communication than that of the prophets' revelation (*wahy*). Recorded as part of the saint's hagiography, these prayers are typically received through a mystical vision in which the prophet Muḥammad, an angel, or the enigmatic figure al-Khaḍir transmit the text. Al-Khaḍir is generally identified as a prophet—appearing apparently in the *Quran* (18:65–82)—with a mystical capacity second only, in Sufi eyes, to the prophet Muḥammad. In the hagiography of al-Shādhilī his *aḥzāb* and *awrād* were received from al-Khaḍir and the Prophet.¹³ Thus, the status of a prayer composition was tied to the mystical reputation of its saintly “author.” This form of literary production then is as much about its author as it is about its own content.

This issue of religious authority remained central to the self-conception of Sufi institutions. One Sufi order deriving from the Shādhilīyah was that of the Wafā'īyah, based on the teachings and model of Muḥammad Wafā' (d. 765/1363) and his son 'Alī Wafā' (d. 807/1405).¹⁴ They maintained an ambivalent relationship with the memory of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, claiming to adhere to his teachings, and yet seeking to surpass his spiritual authority. Inspired prayers are not surprisingly brought to play in this conflict. In a heavenly vision 'Alī Wafā' learns that the *aḥzāb* and *wazīfah* of the Wafā'īyah are indeed superior to those of the Shādhilīyah.¹⁵ This challenge to the saintly authority of al-Shādhilī was again mounted when 'Alī elsewhere claimed that his father's sanctity had surpassed that of all others, and that he is thus exempted from the practice of reading any other *walī*'s prayers. Tellingly, in a bid to establish their own spiritual authority the Wafā' shaykhs composed and recommended their own *aḥzāb* prayers. In the primary hagiography of the order 'Alī provides the following details: “Whoever recites our *ḥizb* with presence of heart, is forgiven by what is between the two [Quran] verses found in the noble *ḥizb* of the *Great Opening*, that read, ‘Lord, we have wronged ourselves. If you do not forgive us, and show mercy, we will be lost’ [Q. 7:23] and ‘Lord, forgive and show mercy; You are the best of those who

¹³ Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh, *Durrat al-Asrār wa Tuḥfat al-Abrār* (Cairo, 1987), 17.

¹⁴ See R. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā' Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn 'Arabī* (Albany, 2004), 50–70.

¹⁵ 'Alī Wafā', “Mafātiḥ al-Khazā'in al-Āliyah,” Dār al Kutub MS 152 *taṣawwuf*, fol. 92b.



show mercy' [Q. 23:118].¹⁶ In his own hagiography, al-Shādhili had described the effectiveness of the recitation of his prayers (*awrād*), saying that they are steady vehicles conveying the pious to the doors that open onto the secrets of the unseen world.¹⁷ The power politics swirling around this and undoubtedly many other Sufi rivalries show that this literature was inextricably intertwined with claims of religious authority.

Regarding the structure and content of the prayer compositions themselves, we immediately note their petitionary tone, and their reuse of Quranic material. In the first section of al-Shādhili's "Al-Ḥizb al-Kabīr," entitled "Ḥizb al-Āyāt," Quran quotations make up almost the entire text.¹⁸ Typically, verses may be run together as follows: "Our Lord! Avert from us the Wrath of Hell, for its Wrath is indeed an affliction grievous. Evil indeed is it as an abode, and as a place to rest in [Q. 25:65–66]. Our Lord! Grant unto us wives and offspring who will be the comfort of our eyes [Q. 25:74]."¹⁹ The Quranic passages in these prayer texts vary in length and style, and they are also edited in order to preserve the voice and syntax of the prayer narrative. These emendations can be slight, changing a pronoun or the tense of a verb conjugation, so "We taught (him) knowledge from our own presence" [Q. 18:65] becomes, "So teach us knowledge from Your Own presence."²⁰ Used this way, the Quranic text is both an integral component of the prayer text, and yet is altered to serve in its new context. The reader has the sense that this is a familiar text, yet one that has been disarticulated and recombined in new ways. It would seem reasonable to assume that at some level this familiarity can also be understood as the intertextual communication of the *ḥizb*. My quick survey of the sixty-three Quranic passages quoted in this section indicates that nineteen of them treat eschatological themes, and fifteen evoke prophetic figures.

The petitionary material making up the *aḥzāb* of al-Shādhili varies widely in theme and content. Both mundane topics such as overcoming rivals and enemies, as well as devotional statements reflecting concepts of Sufi mystical theology, appear. On the practical level, for example, the petitioner might ask, "O Omnipotent Lord, for whom destruction of the tyrant and wayward ruler is easy, I ask that

¹⁶ Abū al-Laṭā'if, "Al-Minaḥ al-Ilāhīyah fī Manāqīb al-Sādāt al-Wafā'īyah," Dār al-Kutub MS 1151 *tārīkh*, fol. 7a. The hagiography also describes (fol. 29a) an episode in which a lesser rival shaykh tries to steal one of Muḥammad Wafā's *aḥzāb* in order to establish his own fame as a holy man. For a listing of the prayer texts attributed to Muḥammad and 'Alī Wafā' see McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism*, 219, 220.

¹⁷ J. Renard, *Ibn 'Abbād of Ronda* (New York, 1986), 176.

¹⁸ Al-Shādhili, "Ḥizb al-Kabīr" in *Nibrās al-Aṭqīyā' wa-Dalīl al-Anqīyā'* [The lamp of the pious and the guide of the pure] (Tunis, 1964), 11–24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27



You outwit those who plot against me...and trick him who would double-cross me, by turning his malice back upon him. I ask You to bury him who prepares pit-falls for me. Lead him who prepares the snare of treachery for me, my Lord, to be caught in his own trap.”²¹ A central element of the *ḥizb* is supererogatory appeal for mercy and intercession. A typical petition is the following: “The sinners assemble, O God, anticipating your pardon. They hold out their hands to you, O God. They stand before you and implore by Muḥammad, O God. Forgive them their offences, O God; and consent to the mediation of Aḥmad (Muḥammad).”²² Several related devotional themes appear throughout the *aḥzāb* texts, although their treatment is rather cursory. Standard mystical concerns such as trusting in divine providence (*tawakkul*), as well as seeking union with the divine secret (*sirr al-jamʿ*), are mentioned in several places.²³

Academic interest has barely begun to survey this devotional literature, but perhaps equally significant are the commentaries written on them. With this material, as was the case for the prayers themselves, titles and terminology are inconsistent. Commentary may appear under several headings, including *tafsīr*, *taʿlīqah*, *tahdhīb*, *mukhtaṣar*, *ḥawāshī*, or *taṣḥīḥ*, among others.²⁴ In other contexts these descriptors are also applied variously to treatments of Quran interpretation, studies in grammar, *fiqh*, hadith studies, poetry, etc. Sorting out the terminology for both devotional prayers and the commentaries written on them is a challenge for the researcher. That said, for the purposes of our discussion, I will refer to all commentaries as *sharḥ*, which is the term well represented in the primary literature and appears in the title of most of the significant commentaries on the *aḥzāb* of the Sufi orders.

Considering that these small prayer texts are far simpler in style and language than perhaps any other genre of religious writing, one must wonder about the intention, strategy, and import behind the composition of their commentaries. We noted earlier the classical categories of Islamic exegesis, but difficulty in language could hardly account for the production of these prayer commentaries. Clearly some extra-textual considerations are at play. It seems that in addition to simply promoting the prayer text to a reading community, a *sharḥ* advances the religious profiles of the subject author and the commentator. In asserting and witnessing to the *walāyah* of the saint, the commentator in some sense claims a degree of charisma and authority. This would follow from the logic that the inspired prayers can only divulge their full esoteric wisdom to an elevated and discerning mysti-

²¹ Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Naṣr,” in *Nibrās al-Aṭḥiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anḥiyāʾ*, 94.

²² Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Tawassul” in *Nibrās al-Aṭḥiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anḥiyāʾ*, 81.

²³ Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Tawḥīd” in *Nibrās al-Aṭḥiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anḥiyāʾ*, 91; and “Ḥizb al-Kabīr,” 17; “Ḥizb al-Ikhfāʾ,” 108.

²⁴ See C. Gilliot, “Sharḥ,” *EI2*.



cal sensibility. In unlocking the message of the saintly prayer, the commentator has demonstrated his own esoteric expertise. This hypothesis warrants further testing against data from the history of organized Sufism of the Mamluk era, but for our purposes here we can point to at least one supporting example. We saw above the Wafā'iyah presenting itself as a rival to the authority of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, but at the same time, in a parallel dynamic, 'Alī Wafā' was appropriating that same authority. As part of his hagiography of the Wafā' shaykhs, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī pointed to 'Alī's ability to interpret "Ḥizb al-Baḥr" as proof of his mystical insight and sanctity.²⁵

The most prominent and earliest commentary on the Shādhilī prayers is *Al-Laṭifah al-Marḍīyah bi-Sharḥ Du'ā' al-Shādhilīyah* [The profound allusion in the explanation of the prayer of the Shādhilīyah]²⁶ by Ibn Mākhillā (d. 733/1332). An inventory has yet to be made of this *sharḥ* literature, which has apparently been produced with regularity up into the contemporary period.²⁷ In his introduction Ibn Mākhillā outlines a number of basic Sufi concepts, including the levels of esoteric knowledge as they are related to the faculties of speaking and hearing, along with a discussion of variants of the hadith "Whoever attacks My saint (*walī*) has made war on Me" and "Whoever attacks the friend (*walī*) of God, it is as though he has torn down the Ka'bah seven times" (pp. 10-11). This opening section appears to be a defense of the foundations of religious authority (*walāyah*) upon which the prayer text was written, as well as a framing of the subsequent commentary within the mainstream of Sufi concepts and terminology of the period.

²⁵ Al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut, 1988), 2:31. 'Alī Wafā' wrote no formal *sharḥ*, or at least none survives. He expounded orally and extemporaneously on such material.

²⁶ I am using the Cairo 1935 Muḥammad Rabī' edition. In 2011 a new edition by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Naṣṣār appeared, which includes a substantial new introduction and detailed footnote commentaries.

²⁷ The prayer itself, "Ḥizb al-Baḥr" or "Litany of the sea," was widely known. The famous world traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 770/1369) presents the full text in his *Travels*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, (Cambridge, 1958), 1:25–27. Perhaps Aḥmad Zarrūq's (d. 899/1493) "Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr" from *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Ḥizbay al-Shādhilī* (Cairo, 2011) is the most widely circulated commentary. For a historical overview of this Sufi thinker see S. Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Bloomington, 2006), 43–65. Other commentaries include Abū al-Hudā Muḥammad al-Rifā'ī's (d. 728/1328) *Qilādat al-Naḥr fī Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr* (Cairo, 1931); 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Fāsī's (d. 1035/1626) *Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Kabīr* (Cairo, 1998), which comments significantly on Ibn Mākhillā's commentary; Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Salām al-Bannānī's (d. 1163/1750) "Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Barr," Tunis Bibliothèque Nationale MS 'Abdalīyah 4755; Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1177/1763) *Hawāmi' Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr* (Delhi, 1890); Murtaḍā al-Zabidī's (d. 1205/1790) *Sharḥ Murtaḍā al-Zabidī 'alā Ḥizb al-Barr* (Cairo, 1913); and Abū al-Maḥāsīn al-Qāwuqjī's (d. 1304/1887) *Kitāb al-Badr al-Munīr 'alā Ḥizb al-Shādhilī al-Kabīr* (Alexandria, 1862). For more titles see S. 'Ammār, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī* (Cairo, 1951), 22–24, and Ḥājji Khalīfah's *Kashf al-Zunūn* (New York, 1964), 4:28.



In the first of three following sections making up the main body of the work, the author discusses the spiritual benefits of reciting this prayer. He also presents a number of hagiographical episodes from the life of al-Shādhilī.²⁸ The second section (pp. 27–37) presents the text of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” along with comments pointing out the Quranic sources for various phrases, and explaining certain vocabulary used. Ibn Mākhillā goes on to recount some of the miraculous stories of the power of this prayer, which include passengers on the Nile and the Indian Ocean being saved from storms, and travelers being saved from bandits. An interesting point is also taken up here; it centers on the question of how prophets, saints, the learned, and the commoner can all petition God for forgiveness or protection using the same formulae—recall the Quranic intertextuality at play here. More specifically, the question is: Can they be asking for the same thing? Ibn Mākhillā’s answer will be discussed in detail below. Accounting for the miraculous nature and power of the *ḥizb* is a concern for other commentators also. Aḥmad Zarrūq’s *sharḥ* draws parallels between the *ḥizb* and several instances of miracles in the Quran dealing with prophets and the theme of water travel and floods.²⁹ Another commentary, an explanation (*ta’līq*) of Aḥmad Zarrūq’s and Ibn Mākhillā’s commentaries, transmits reports on the miraculous powers of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” to calm storms at sea, protect against highway robbers along the hajj route, and divert the stings of scorpions.³⁰

In the final section (pp. 38–94) Ibn Mākhillā takes up the issue of the prayer’s use of Quranic phrases. In defending the intertextual nature of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” (and by implication, the legitimacy of the divine inspiration of saints like al-Shādhilī) Ibn Mākhillā makes use of a range of arguments. He draws on legal sources (Qadi ‘Ayyād’s discussion of Muḥammad’s use of Quranic phrases as supplication), theological arguments (al-Bāqillānī’s doctrine of *i’jāz*, or inimitability of the Quran, allows for the intertextual use, but insists that the quote loses its miraculous nature), and the principles of rhetoric (*iqtibās*, or adaptation, in composition preserves the integrity of the original Quranic or hadith source). Aḥmad Zarrūq is also sensitive to the intertextuality of the prayer. His treatment of the text follows even more closely the Quranic borrowings, and typically refers back

²⁸ Ibn Mākhillā’s source for these accounts appears to be *Latā’if al-Minan*—the hagiography of al-Shādhilī written by Ibn ‘Atā Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309).

²⁹ *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Ḥizbay al-Shādhilī*, 28–33. The pagination I am citing for this text, which refers to an online version, may not accurately reflect that of the printed edition.

³⁰ Ibn Duqmāq, “Qaṭf al-Zahr min Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr,” al-Azhar MS 936382, fols. 2b, 4a. This manuscript cannot have been authored by Ibn Duqmāq the famous Egyptian chronicler, since it quotes from Ahmad Zarrūq, who died some ninety years later than the historian. I have not been able to identify this later Ibn Duqmāq, or find any other copies. The manuscript, marked as part of the Azhari *waqfiyah* of the *riwāq al-Maghāribah*, is damaged and illegible in several places.



to the structure and content of the original surah in order to elucidate the meaning of a borrowed passage appearing in the *ḥizb*.

Ibn Mākhillā's *sharḥ* also takes up the status of saints and prophets. In this context, the primary concern is to explain how the "inspired" prayer of a saint can contain quotations from the revelation (Quran) to a prophet. The question is not simply whether it is appropriate to quote and paraphrase the Quran, but rather, how the saint (and his common followers) can petition for what should be reserved only for prophets. Ibn Mākhillā's answers to these questions shine an indirect light on his notion of *walāyah*. In his comments on al-Shādhilī's petition, *nas'aluka al-ʿiṣmah* (we ask you for protection/inerrancy), he notes that *ʿiṣmah*, as generally understood, is restricted to prophets, who are protected from committing grave sins. The central distinction in the discussion here is his qualifier "according to their level." For Ibn Mākhillā this also allows him to account for other apparent paradoxes. On the issue of how both the common believer and the saint—and a prophet for that matter—may make the identical supplication, for example for forgiveness, in "Ḥizb al-Baḥr," Ibn Mākhillā points out that since the petitioners are at different spiritual levels, the meaning and status of their petitions is different. Essentially, he resolves the issue by appealing to the semantic context (i.e., the status of the person who is speaking) in order to draw distinctions between various speech events that employ apparently identical locutions. Zarrūq's commentary addresses the infallibility passages also, lending them roughly the same interpretation. He distinguishes prophets as the only individuals whose station requires them to be incapable of sin; however, providence may extend this status to saints and even common believers. Hence the petition of the prayer, Zarrūq says, is not for the necessary *ʿiṣmah* of a prophet, but rather for a state of preservation (*ḥifẓ*) from sin. In their intermediary position, the saints apparently enjoy this preserved state, while they are not accorded *ʿiṣmah*. This preservation is thus accessible, but far from guaranteed, for the common petitioner. Zarrūq quotes two Quranic passages (11:43, 3:101) where *ʿaṣima*, here meaning protection, is granted by God according to his will. Thus, "when the prayer runs 'We petition You for infallibility' it means we request that You shield us from sin; that it be made inaccessible and distant from us."³¹ On this same question of infallibility Ibn Duqmāq summarizes much of what Aḥmad Zarrūq proposed, and adds that the prophets' position can be called absolute (*muṭlaqah*) infallibility. Also, each petitioner is asking from his/her own spiritual rank (*ḥāl*), which determines the kind of *ʿiṣmah* they are eligible to receive.³²

Ibn Mākhillā applies the same type of argument to the meaning of the phrase "[Lord,] subjugate to us this sea as You subjugated the sea to Moses." He remarks

³¹ *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Ḥizbay al-Shādhilī*, 34.

³² Ibn Duqmāq, "Qaṭf al-Zahr min Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr," fol. 6b.



that this should not necessarily be taken as a request to God each time to part the seas, but instead should be understood as a petition for the “miracle” of divine beneficence in the lives of lowly petitioners—establishing within them righteousness, godliness, and wisdom. He says, “Know that the manifestation of omnipotence (*qudrah*) is sometimes by grace and miracle, and the breaking of the anticipated norms; or it is by the miracle of fixing norms and engendering wisdom... The second kind [of miracle] is destined for the generality of creation, while the first kind is only for the elite of the prophets and the saints” (p. 75). Thus Ibn Mākhillā’s discussions in *Al-Laṭīfah al-Marḍīyah*—relying on his discussions of sanctity elsewhere—serve to blur the hard lines between prophets and saints (not unlike the effort to nuance the dividing lines between the Quran and the *ḥizb* prayer). This is done by extending to the saints the attributes previously reserved for the prophets. The same blurring of lines occurs in Ibn Mākhillā’s resolution of the apparent paradox of a prophet asking for forgiveness in the same manner as a common believer; or that common believer asking for the same divine favor a saint or a prophet might petition for. Zarrūq interprets the request to “subdue the seas” much along the general lines of a petition for equanimity and balance in the face of life’s tribulations. The comments from Ibn Duqmāq on this passage are more substantial, but run in much the same direction, taking the turbulent seas as a metaphor for both the worldly and metaphysical challenges that confront the believer. In a typically Sufi approach, he also distinguishes between the exoteric meaning, which here reads drowning as losing God’s help, and the esoteric meaning, which takes the “sea” (*bahr*) to be a “sea of knowledge” that God makes calm, allowing the seeker to dive into it and to emerge erudite (*mutabaḥḥir*).³³

The continued production of *aḥzāb* commentaries is evidence of the active reflection upon, and ritual use of, these saintly inspired devotional prayers. While a *sharḥ* can function as a textual intermediary, it might itself become a contested statement, eliciting its own responses both positive and negative. Commentaries and epitomes of Ibn Mākhillā’s *sharḥ* await closer inspection, and apparently even refutations of this *ḥizb* have been written.³⁴ A wider context of competition and polemics, which we saw above beginning early in the history of the Shādhiliyah, clearly continued throughout the Mamluk era and beyond. The history of these debates around the authority, efficacy, and licitness of *aḥzāb* literature has yet to be written, but starting points have already appeared. Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 953/1546) notes the heated public discussions that arose around al-Shādhilī’s “Ḥizb al-Nūr,” pointing out the prominent role one of al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) students, al-Dirīnī,

³³ Ibid., fols. 9b, 10b.

³⁴ A. al-Būtījī (seventeenth cent.?), “Mukhtaṣar al-Laṭīfah al-Marḍīyah,” Budeiri Library Jerusalem MS *taṣawwuf* 32/29/b; and anonymous, “Al-Radd ‘alā Abī al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī fī Ḥizbihi,” *Fihris al-Makhtūṭāt al-Muṣawwarah* (Cairo, 1954), entries no. 103, no. 161.



played in its defense. These polemics apparently did not divide neatly along Sufi/non-Sufi interests; and in more than one instance the *aḥzāb* of the Shādhiliyah are attacked by leaders of rival Sufi orders.³⁵

This contested history aside, allow me to conclude with a few remarks on the literary qualities of these prayers. Jaroslav Stetkevych has characterized the typical *sharḥ* on poetry of this period as one that treats the poem word for word on its morphological, syntactic, and lexical levels, following with a brief summary paraphrase. The commentaries on mystical poems (e.g., Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* or Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Dīwān*) adopted much the same approach, but added equivalencies for the symbols presented in the text, and concluded with paraphrases of content that were largely "...a recapitulation of the mystic intention."³⁶ Stetkevych is talking about mystical poetry, with its classical form, style, and symbolism. This material is not interchangeable with our *aḥzāb*, but much of his characterization applies. In brief, Stetkevych's criticism is that Sufi interpretations were burdened with an overconfidence in the dichotomy of form and meaning that held the meaning to be easily identified, isolated, and spoken for. The limitations of this simplistic approach meant that the commentaries could not make room for the aesthetics and polysemy at play in the poems.³⁷ Our quick survey above of a handful of exegetes might not allow for a definitive characterization of this entire genre of religious writing, but it does seem that the limitations Stetkevych has identified in relation to poetry are at play in our literature. Our three commentaries above showed a concern to anchor the original text in its Quranic progenitor, with no attention paid to the poetic strength of the original, and how that would subsequently resonate in the *aḥzāb*. The interpretations limit themselves to identifying intertextual borrowings, to allegorical, symbolic, and theological reductions of the prayer texts. That said, this small literature of prayer commentary does not deserve the obscure fate it has suffered to date. It is clear that at least some of these commentators draw on wide learning in the Islamic sciences, and often in creative ways, to respond to the *aḥzāb*. The best of this literature should be included in our history of Islamic religious literature, and should be integrated into our accounts of the history of Sufism and Islamic devotional practices more generally.

³⁵ On both points see E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie à l'époque mamlouke* (Damascus, 1995), 155, 277.

³⁶ J. Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago, 1993), 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

