

## MĪTHAM B. YAḤYĀ AL-TAMMĀR: AN IMPORTANT FIGURE IN EARLY SHĪ'ISM

### MĪTAM B. YAḤYĀ AL-TAMMĀR: UNA FIGURA IMPORTANTE EN EL ŠĪ'ISMO TEMPRANO

KHALID SINDAWI

Tel Aviv University

The present study provides an analysis of an important Shī'ite personality, Mītham b. Yaḥyā al-Tammār, a close follower and confidant of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, who played a significant role in the early history of Shī'ism but has been quite ignored by modern scholarship. We hope to redress the matter here, and provide insight into his biography, his relations with 'Alī, and how these relations enriched early Shī'ite thought and religious jurisprudence. In the following pages we shall discuss Mītham's origins, his personality, his descendants and the role they played in Shī'ite jurisprudence, his commentary on the Qur'ān and his other writings, his role as transmitter of traditions, his students, his mystical knowledge, and the events surrounding his death.

*Key words:* Shī'a; Early Shī'ism; Religious Jurisprudence; Commentary on the Qur'ān; transmission of *ḥadīth*; Mītham b. Yaḥyā al-Tammār; 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

Este artículo ofrece un análisis sobre un personaje importante en el ámbito šī'í, Mītam b. Yaḥyā al-Tammār, un seguidor cercano y de confianza de 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, que desempeñó un papel considerable durante los primeros tiempos del šī'ismo, pero que, sin embargo, ha sido completamente olvidado por los estudios modernos. El propósito de este trabajo es "recuperar" el personaje y proporcionar un nuevo punto de vista de su biografía y su relación con 'Alī analizando cómo esa relación enriquece el pensamiento šī'í y la jurisprudencia religiosa de los inicios en ese ámbito. Para ello, se analizarán los orígenes de Mītam, su personalidad, sus discípulos y el papel que éstos desempeñaron en la jurisprudencia šī'í. Estudiaremos también sus comentarios sobre el Corán y otros escritos, el papel que desempeñó como transmisor de tradiciones, su conocimiento sobre la mística y los principales acontecimientos en torno a su muerte.

*Palabras clave:* Šī'a; Šī'ismo temprano; jurisprudencia religiosa; comentarios sobre el Corán; transmisión de hadices; Mītam b. Yaḥyā al-Tammār; 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

## 1. A short biography

### *The origins of Mītham<sup>1</sup> al-Tammār*

Abū Sālīm, Mītham b. Yaḥyā al-Tammār al-Nahrawānī<sup>2</sup> was of Persian origin. We know neither the year of his birth nor when he arrived in Kūfa, although it is probable that he was taken prisoner as a child in Persia after the Battle of Qādisiyya (637 CE) and sold in the slave market of Kūfa to a woman of the Banū Asad tribe. After a certain period of time as her slave he was bought by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib<sup>3</sup> (d. 661 CE), who set him free.

Tradition relates that when ‘Alī asked him for his name he answered “Sālīm”, whereupon ‘Alī said: “The Messenger of God told me that your name was Mītham.” Mītham then answered: “God spoke the truth and so did His Prophet. That is indeed my name.” Then ‘Alī told him to return to his original name, by which the Prophet called him. This he did and from then was known as Mītham, surnamed Abū Sālīm.<sup>4</sup>

The tradition indicates that he possessed a non-Arab name first and thus, if reliable, provides evidence for his Persian origin.

<sup>1</sup> According to *Rawḍāt al-jannāt* the name written /m/y/th/m/ is to be pronounced with a long ī (i.e. “Mītham”) wherever it is found, except in the name “Maytham al-Bahrānī”. For more detail see: al-Khawānsārī Muḥammad Bāqir al-Mūsawī b. Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt fī aḥwāl al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-sādāt*, A.A. Ismā‘īliyyān (ed.), Teheran, 1390-1392/1970-1972, 752-754.

<sup>2</sup> It is not clear how Mītham came to possess the attribute “al-Nahrawānī”. He may perhaps have been born in the region of that name or moved there after having lived somewhere in Persia. Al-Nahrawān is a large district lying between Baghdad and Wāsīt and to the east; for more details see: Shihāb al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī al-Baghdādī, *Mu’jam al-buldān*, Beirut, 1979, 5, 324-327, s.v. “nahrawān”.

<sup>3</sup> The first Shī‘ite Imām, ‘Alī, ruled as Caliph between the years 656-666 CE. He was killed by a Khārijite named ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥjam al-Murādī; for more details see: Veccia Vaglieri, L., “‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib”, *EP*, I, 381-386.

<sup>4</sup> Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *al-Kharā‘ij wa-l-jarā‘ih*, Muḥsin Kūchebāghī Bāghī al-Tabrīzī (ed.), Qumm, 1404/1983, I, 203; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu‘mān (known as al-Shaykh Mufīd), *al-Irshād*, Qumm, 1992, I, 324; al-Ḥasan b. Abī al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī, *Irshād al-qulūb*, Qumm, 1991, 2, 226; Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *I‘lām al-warā*, Qumm, 1970, 172-173; ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Hibat Allāh b. Abī al-Ḥadīd (known as Ibn Ḥadīd the Mu‘tazilite), *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, M.A.F. Ibrāhīm (ed.), Cairo, 1967, 2, 291.

For his livelihood Mītham sold fruit in a stall, first watermelon and then dates; from the latter he received his epithet “al-Tammār”.

Although we possess no details of his early life, such as the year and place of his birth, when he arrived in Kūfa, or when he became a Muslim, it is possible that he was raised as a Muslim or, at any rate, that he adopted Islam before he met ‘Alī, since in his reply to the latter he said “God spoke the truth, and so did His Prophet and the Commander of the Faithful.” On the other hand, his wording may have been nothing more than a socially acceptable response in the city of Kūfa, which at the time was predominantly Muslim and pro-‘Alī.

### *Mītham's physical looks*

Shī'ite sources provide no detailed physical description, although a number of traditions mention certain attributes in passing. Thus one tradition relates that Ḥabīb b. Muẓāhir al-Asadī<sup>5</sup> (d. 680 CE) met Mītham at a gathering of the Banū Asad tribe<sup>6</sup> and prophesied the latter's death in the following words: “I saw an old, bald man with a large belly who sold watermelons at the Dār al-Rizq, crucified because of his love for members of his Prophet's family.”<sup>7</sup> The tradition speaks of Mītham's impending violent death, and also provides us with a physical description of sorts.

From another tradition we learn that he grew a beard. It is related that when he went on Pilgrimage in the year in which he was killed he came to the city of al-Madīna and visited Umm Salama (Hind bint Suhayl) (d. 679/680 CE). He introduced himself and asked to see Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, but was told that the latter was not there. Before he left Umm Salama called her slave girl and asked her to groom

<sup>5</sup> Known also as Ḥabīb b. Muẓāhir. He was among the seventy men killed with Ḥusayn at the battle of Karbalā' (680 CE). For more detail see: Taqī l-Dīn al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī Ibn Dāwūd, *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, Teheran, 1383/1963, 99, n.° 374; Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad, *Rijāl al-Barqī*, Teheran, 1963, 4, 7; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-shaykh al-Ṭūsī*, Teheran, 1995, 60, n.° 512-3, 93, n.° 925-1, 100, n.° 971-1; ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Alī Dukhkhayl, *Ḥabīb b. Muẓāhir al-Asadī*, Beirut, 1985, 15-56.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this tribe see: Kindermann, H., “Asad”, *EP*, I, 683-684.

<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Kashshī, *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, Ḥ. al-Muṣṭafawī (ed.), Mashhad, 1929, 78, n.° 133.

Mītham's beard; she also informed him that his beard would receive his blood and that he would be killed.<sup>8</sup>

If, again, this tradition is reliable, then it would seem that Mītham was physically quite similar to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) who, it is reported, "had a large belly and a huge beard which covered his chest, and was very bald."<sup>9</sup>

It can hardly be a coincidence that the physical traits of Mītham which are mentioned by Shī'ite sources are precisely those in which his similarity to 'Alī was the greatest. It is as if these sources wish to stress that the two were not only similar in their knowledge and mental make up, but also in their physical aspect, perhaps out of a desire to raise Mītham's status as a companion and disciple of 'Alī. In fact, these traditions may bear an even more far-sweeping message, to wit that the Imams of Shī'ism, their companions and disciples all bore a great many similarities to each other, external as well as internal.

### *Mītham's children*

Although Mītham was married we have no knowledge of when he married or who his wife was. He probably had five sons,<sup>10</sup> the

<sup>8</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 324; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 80-81, n.° 136.

<sup>9</sup> For more on 'Alī's physical looks see: Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Maqāt al-mu'minīn 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib*, M.B. al-Mahmūdī (ed.), Teheran, 1990, 67-68; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 5, 178; al-Majlisī, M.B., *Biḥār al-anwār*, Beirut, 1984, 35, 5. 'Alī was nicknamed "the bald man of Quraysh"; see: *al-Kharā'ij wal-jarā'ih*, 2, 553; Rashīd al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Shahrāshūb al-Māzandarānī, *al-Manāqib*, H.R. al-Maḥallātī (ed.), Mu'assasat al-'Allāma li-l-Nashr, 1959, 2, 264; and 3, 284; quoted also in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 99, 28, n.° 4; and 38, 55, n.° 6; 'Alī b. 'Īsā al-Irbillī, *Kashf al-ghumma fī ma'rifat al-a'imma*, Tabriz, 1962, 1, 77 and 1, 353; Ni'mat Allāh al-Jazā'irī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Qumm, 1984, 405; Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Ṭabarsī, *al-Iḥtijāj*, Mashhad, 1982, 1, 151; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Amālī li-l-Ṭūsī*, Qumm, 1993, 199, n.° 340-342; quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 33, 438, n.° 545; and 14; 211, n.° 7. Shī'ite sources explain that 'Alī became bald as a result of frequently wearing a helmet; see: *al-Manāqib*, 3, 112, quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 35, 61, n.° 11.

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-A'lamī al-Hā'irī in his *Dā'irat al-ma'ārif al-shī'iyya* (Beirut, 1413/1993, 17, 544-545) writes that Mītham had three sons: Ḥamza, Shu'ayb and Ṣāliḥ. Other sources, however, mention five sons, although none mention a son by the name of Ḥamza except al-A'lamī; this is probably a mistake on the latter's part, as pointed out by al-Kashshī in his *Rijāl*, 1, 82, n.° 137.

first-born Ṣāliḥ<sup>11</sup> and the latter's brothers Shu'ayb,<sup>12</sup> 'Imrān,<sup>13</sup> Ya'qūb,<sup>14</sup> 'Alī<sup>15</sup> (and Ḥamza).<sup>16</sup>

### *Mītham's grandsons*

The most prominent of Mītham's grandsons were the children of his son Shu'ayb, among them Ismā'īl,<sup>17</sup> Ya'qūb,<sup>18</sup> Ibrāhīm<sup>19</sup> and Ishāq.<sup>20</sup> They all played an important role in the transmission of traditions in the name of various Imāms.

### *Mītham's great-grandchildren*

Shī'ite biographical works mention the names of the sons of some of Mītham's grandchildren. The following are mentioned a number

<sup>11</sup> Abū Ḥakīm was in the habit of addressing Mītham as "Abū Ṣāliḥ"; it is the usual practice among Arabs to call a man by the name of his first-born son. See: *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 82, n.° 138; Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, Teheran, 1946, 7, 186, n.° 1; *Rijāl al-Barqī* 15, 16; Abī Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, al-Najaf, 1381/1961, 138, n.° 1457-2; al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-Ḥillī, *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, Qumm, 1991, 88, n.° 3. Ṣāliḥ b. Mītham was a companion of the Imām Mūsā al-Kāzīm (765-799 CE), of whom it is related that he once said to Ṣāliḥ: "I am very fond of both you and your father"; see: *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, 88, n.° 3.

<sup>12</sup> Transmitted in the name of Ibrāhīm b. Ishāq al-Madā'inī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 224, n.° 3007-9; *al-Kāfi*, 4, 31, n.° 3.

<sup>13</sup> He apparently worked as a corn measurer. See: *Bihār al-anwār*, 30, 203, n.° 67; Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, M.J. al-Nā'inī (ed.), Qumm, n.d., 292, n.° 785; *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 118, n.° 1197-29; *al-Kāfi*, 8, 200, n.° 241; *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, 125, n.° 6.

<sup>14</sup> He was a companion of 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn; for more details see: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-'Āmilī, *Wasā'il al-shī'a*, Qumm, 1987, 16, 182, n.° 21299; *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 149, n.° 1649-1; *Bihār al-anwār*, 65, 25, n.° 46.

<sup>15</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Nu'mān (known as al-Shaykh al-Mufīd), *al-Ikhtiṣāṣ*, 'A.A. al-Ghafārī (ed.), Qumm, 1992, 270.

<sup>16</sup> *Bihār al-anwār*, 42, 128, n.° 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Wasā'il al-shī'a*, 16, 301, n.° 21601.

<sup>18</sup> Transmitted from Abū 'Abd Allāh. For details about him see: *ibidem*, 15, 287, n.° 20537; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 379, n.° 1697; *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, 186, n.° 7; *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 323, n.° 4836-53; *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 450, n.° 1216.

<sup>19</sup> *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 157, n.° 1741-45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 162, n.° 1835-139.

of times: Ismā'īl b. Shu'ayb,<sup>21</sup> Ya'qūb b. Shu'ayb,<sup>22</sup> Ibrāhīm b. Shu'ayb,<sup>23</sup> Ishāq b. Shu'ayb<sup>24</sup> and 'Alī b. Ismā'īl.<sup>25</sup>

### *Mītham's rhetorical skills and eloquence*

As we mentioned above, Mītham was of Persian origin. However, he grew up in Arabic-speaking Kūfa where he learned much from 'Alī and became quite skilled and eloquent in Arabic. Thus, for example, it is related that he approached 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād<sup>26</sup> (d. 686 CE) at the head of a delegation of merchants from the local market in order to ask him to dismiss the market laborer and hire another in his stead. Ibn Ziyād listened to what Mītham said and admired his logic,<sup>27</sup> proof that the latter was quite eloquent in Arabic.

According to another tradition when Mītham arrived in Kūfa and it became known that he was a companion of 'Alī he was seized by Ibn Ziyād's men and brought before him. Ibn Ziyād was told: "Mītham is one of 'Alī's favorites." Ibn Ziyād replied: "Let us hear what this Persian has to say." He then asked Mītham: "Where is your Lord?" Mītham answered: "Lying in wait for all sinners, of which you are one." Whereupon Ibn Ziyād said: "Although you are a Persian, you are eloquent."<sup>28</sup> Once again we see that Ibn Ziyād praises Mītham's eloquence in connection with his Persian origins.

Yet a third tradition relates that when Mītham was crucified he began speaking of the virtues of the Hāshim clan<sup>29</sup> and the defects of

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 160, n.° 1790-94.

<sup>22</sup> *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 450, n.° 1216; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 379, n.° 1697; *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Hillī*, 186, n.° 7; *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 323, n.° 4836-53.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 157, n.° 1741-45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 162, n.° 1835-139.

<sup>25</sup> He is mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm, who says that he was the first to have spoken about the ideology of the Imāmate. 'Alī b. Ismā'īl wrote two books, *al-Imāma* and *al-Istihqāq*. For more details see: Ibn al-Nadīm (Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad b. Abī Ya'qūb Ishāq), *al-Fihrist*, Beirut, 1988, 223.

<sup>26</sup> For more details about him see: Robinson, C.F., "'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād", *EF*, X, 763-764.

<sup>27</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 86, n.° 140.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 324.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, 325; *I'lām al-warā*, 174; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 87, n.° 140; Muḥammad b. al-Husayn b. Mūsā (also known as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī), *Khaṣā'is al-a'immā*, Mashhad, 1985, 55; *al-Ikhtiṣāṣ*, 76; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Fattāl al-Nishābūrī, *Rawḍat al-wā'izīn wa-baṣīrat al-mutta'azīn*, Qumm, 1966, 2, 288-289.

the Umayyad clan. He shouted at the top of his voice to the people and told them they should use the opportunity and come before he died in order to hear the divine secrets which 'Alī had taught him. He said: "By God, I will inform you about what will be until the Hour comes, and all the strife and discord to come." A great number of people gathered around him and wrote down what they heard from him, whereupon 'Amr b. Ḥurayth<sup>30</sup> hurried to Ibn Ziyād and said to him: "This slave has disgraced you." Ibn Ziyād then sent his guards with orders to cut off his tongue.<sup>31</sup> When they arrived and asked Mītham to hold out his tongue he said: "Did not the son of a whore declare that he would refute me and my master ['Alī]? Here is my tongue."<sup>32</sup> Then the guard cut off his tongue and his blood flowed. He died after three days. Clearly, Mītham's tongue was cut off because Ibn Ziyād feared that by his eloquence he would sway the people of Kūfa and make them rise up against the Umayyad rulers.

## 2. Mītham and al-Khiḍr

Shī'ite Imams associate with a number of legendary figures which supposedly do their bidding and help them perform miracles. One of these figures is al-Khiḍr,<sup>33</sup> who is said to have visited the Imam 'Alī more than once. Thus it is related that the latter when on pilgrimage<sup>34</sup> saw him circling the Ka'ba. On another occasion he appeared to 'Alī in a dream; when 'Alī asked him for advice al-Khiḍr showed him the palm of his hand on which the following verses were written in green letters:

<sup>30</sup> Shī'ite biographers describe him as an "enemy of God." For details see: *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 551; *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, 241, n.º 1.

<sup>31</sup> According to another tradition the guard put a bridle made of cord on his mouth, the first time such a thing had been done since the advent of Islam. For details see: *al-Irshād*, 1, 325; *I'lām al-warā*, 174; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 84-85.

<sup>32</sup> I.e., 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād, who was an illegitimate son of an unknown father. It is related that his mother Marjāna was a prostitute. See: *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 87, n.º 140.

<sup>33</sup> A legendary character, identified by some commentators on the Qur'ān with Moses' servant boy mentioned in Q 18:59-81. Al-Khiḍr appears in many legends. His name, which means "green", was given to him because he was immersed in the spring of life. He is reported to have met the Prophet and other personalities as well. For more details about him see: Omar, I., "Khiḍr in Islamic Tradition", *Muslim World*, 83 (1993), 279-291; Wensinck, A.J., "al-Khiḍr", *EP*, IV, 902-905.

<sup>34</sup> *Bihār al-anwār*, 3, 133-134, n.º 5, quoting Mufid's *al-Majālis*.

You were dead and came alive / and before long will be dead again  
So build a house in the everlasting abode / and leave the house of perdition.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Khiḍr visited ‘Alī again when the latter was praying at the seventh column of the mosque in al-Kūfa,<sup>36</sup> close to the Elephant Gate.<sup>37</sup> Al-Khiḍr appeared to him wearing two green outer garments, with two black locks of hair and a white beard. When ‘Alī finished

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 39, 133, n.° 4.

<sup>36</sup> The Kūfa mosque apparently had a number of columns, at some of which a prophet, angels or an Imām are variously reported to have prayed. Thus, for example, the third column was supposedly where Abraham prayed. For details see: *al-Kāfi*, 3, 493, n.° 8; Tāj al-Dīn b. Muḥammad al-Sha‘īrī, *Jāmi‘ al-akhbār*; Qumm, 1985, 70; Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Tūsī, *Tahdhīb al-aḥkām*, Teheran, 1945, 3, 251, n.° 10; *Wasā’il al-shī‘a*, 5, 264, chap. 47, n.° 6500; al-Mīrzā Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasā’il*, Qumm, 1988, 3, 411-412, n.° 3887-5. The fifth column was the station of the angel Gabriel and the place where Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī prayed (*Tahdhīb al-aḥkām*, 6, 33, n.° 8; Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Sa‘īd b. Hilāl al-Thaqafī, *al-Ghārāt aw al-istinfār wal-ghārāt*, S.‘A. al-Zahrā’ al-Ḥusaynī (ed.), Beirut, 1989, 2, 286). The seventh column was called “the column of Abraham and the prayer spot of the Imām ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.” A tradition maintains that praying there is a commendable deed and that every night sixty-thousand angels descend to pray there, none of whom will leave until the Day of Judgment (*al-Kāfi*, 3, 493, n.° 4 and 5; *Wasā’il al-shī‘a*, 5, 263, chap. 47, n.° 6497, 6498; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 516, n.° 993; *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 35, n.° 72; *Jāmi‘ al-akhbār*; 70; Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu‘mān (known as al-Shaykh al-Mufīd), *al-Mazār*, Qumm, 1993, 10-12, n.° 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> One of the gates of the Kūfa mosque (for details see: *Biḥār al-anwār*, 97, 407, n.° 65). The mosque had the following gates: The Gate of the Threshold (*bāb al-sudda*), through which ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib entered the mosque; the Gate of Kinda (*bāb Kinda*), on the mosque’s right side, facing west; the Gate of the *al-Anmāt* (*bāb al-anmāt*) facing the Gate of the Elephant; the Gate of the Elephant (*bāb al-fīl*), originally named the Gate of the Snake (*bāb al-thu‘bān*), opposite the direction of prayer (*qibla*), which is not used today. According to tradition it was named “Gate of the Snake” because when ‘Alī preached in the mosque a snake would enter through this gate, come up to the pulpit, put its mouth in ‘Alī’s ear, speak to him, and then leave by the same gate. When ‘Alī was asked about the snake he said: “The matter is not as you think. This snake is in fact a demon judge who had a case which baffled him and so he came to me for advice. After I advised him he thanked me and left.” This episode is known in Shī‘ism as the “*ḥadīth* of the snake” and is counted among ‘Alī’s miracles. For more details see: *al-Kāfi*, 1, 396, n.° 6; *al-Irshād*, 1, 348-349; *I‘lām al-warā*, 179; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Farrūkh al-Ṣaffār, *Baṣā’ir al-darajāt*, M. M. Kūtchebāghī al-Tabrīzī (ed.), Qumm, 1983, 97, n.° 7 (the author writes that the snake’s name was ‘Amr b. ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī’s deputy among the demons); Shādhān b. Jibra’īl al-Qummī, *al-Faḍā’il*, Qumm, 1943, 70 (this author states that the snake’s name was Darajān b. Mālik, ‘Alī’s deputy among Muslim demons). Tradition has it that when the Umayyad rulers heard about this wonder they took an elephant and tied it to the “Gate of the Snake” in order to make the people forget its association with ‘Alī’s snake, and so the gate became known as “Gate of the Elephant” to this day. For details see: Aḥmad al-Barāqī al-Najafī, *Ta’rīkh al-Kūfa*, Beirut, 1987, 54.



praying he bowed over him, kissed his head, took him by the hand and led him out through the Gate of Kinda. A crowd of people hurried after them and when they saw 'Alī returning they told him: "We did not think you were safe with this horseman," whereupon 'Alī told them: "That was my brother al-Khiḍr, who informed me that I was in a town which any thug who wants to attack it, God will strike him down. He asked me to warn everyone. After that I accompanied him on the way out, because he wanted to go to the rear side of Kūfa."<sup>38</sup>

According to yet another tradition al-Khiḍr came to visit 'Alī at the seventh column of the mosque in Kūfa and encountered Mītham al-Tammār there. Al-Khiḍr greeted him and said: "Oh master of the column, greet the master of the house<sup>39</sup> for me and tell him that I first came to him but found him asleep."<sup>40</sup>

The gist of this tradition is that al-Khiḍr came to visit 'Alī but found him asleep, whereupon he went to the mosque of Kūfa and had the reported conversation with Mītham. Since al-Khiḍr as an unearthly figure can according to Shī'ite belief be perceived only by a prophet or a true believer, this tradition aims at stressing Mītham's strong faith and his close association with 'Alī.<sup>41</sup> The epithet by

<sup>38</sup> *Al-Amālī li-l-Ṭūsī*, 51, n.° 67-36; quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 39, 130-131, n.° 1; 97, 392-393, n.° 23.

<sup>39</sup> The word "the house" (*al-dār*) here refers to "House of the Emigration" (*dār al-hijra*), a Shī'ite epithet for the city of Kūfa which came into use after the "emigration" (*hijra*) of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to that city from the city of al-Madīna. 'Alī then became known as "master of the house" (*ṣāhib al-dār*) (for details see: *al-Kharā'ij wa-l-jarā'ih*, 1, 192, quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 41, 231, n.° 2; and 53, 58. It should be noted that the epithet *dār al-hijra* was originally given to the city of al-Madīna after Muḥammad had emigrated there from Mecca in 622 CE, and was only later applied by the Shī'ites to Kūfa. See *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 5, 117; 6, 127; 14, 6; and 17, 191; 'Alī b. Yūnis al-Nabā'ī, *al-Širā' al-mustaqīm ilā mustahiqqī al-taqdīm*, Najaf, 1964, 2, 216; Nūr al-Dīn al-Tustarī, *al-Šawārim al-muḥraqa fī naqd al-šawā'iq al-muḥriqa*, J.D. al-Ḥusaynī (ed.), Teheran, 1947, 329; Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān (known as al-Shaykh al-Mufid), *al-Jamal wa-l-nuṣra li-sayyid al-'itra fī ḥarb al-Baṣra*, Qumm, 1993, 263. This is part of a general Shī'ite tendency to equate 'Alī with the Prophet and Kūfa with al-Madīna. All Shī'ite Imāms are deemed to share a number of traits with the Prophet (for more details see: Bar Asher, M. M., *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shī'ism*, Leiden and Jerusalem, 1999, 140-141). The particular aspect of similarity between the Prophet and 'Alī which is promoted here is the fact that both emigrated to another city, and that both then settled in that city, lived out their lives in it, and were buried there.

<sup>40</sup> *Al-Manāqib*, 2, 246; quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 39, 131, n.° 2.

<sup>41</sup> 'Alī had four intimate disciples (*ḥawārī*): 'Amr b. al-Ḥamiq al-Khuzā'i, Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, Mītham al-Tammār and Uways al-Qaranī. The Prophet is said to have had three such intimate disciples: Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 36/656), al-Miqdād b.

which al-Khiḍr addressed Mītham, “master of the column,” probably alludes to the latter’s future death by crucifixion.

### 3. Mītham al-Tammār as exegetist

‘Alī is said to have taught Mītham the interpretation of the Qur’ān and the circumstances under which various verses and chapters were revealed (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The author of *al-Dharī’a* mentions a book called *Commentary of Mītham al-Tammār*<sup>42</sup> which, however, is not extant. According to Shī’ite sources Mītham taught Qur’ānic exegesis to ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 687 CE). A tradition states that Mītham met Ibn ‘Abbās<sup>43</sup> in al-Madīna and said to him: “Ask what you want about the meaning of the Qur’ān, for ‘Alī taught me the circumstances of Qur’ānic revelation as well as the interpretation of the Qur’ān.” Ibn ‘Abbās called his slave girl and told her to bring him an inkwell and a sheet of paper; he then began asking Mītham and writing down his answers.<sup>44</sup> If this tradition is reliable then Ibn ‘Abbās can be said to have possessed elements of Qur’ān exegesis going back to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

Al-Kashshī in his biography of Mītham quotes a tradition which relates that when Mītham had finished dictating his Qur’ān commentary to Ibn ‘Abbās he proceeded to tell him about his future murder at the hand of ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād. This revelation caused Ibn ‘Abbās to suspect Mītham of being a soothsayer and as a result he wanted to

‘Amr b. Tha‘laba (d. 33/653) and Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (Jundub b. Junāda b. Qays al-Ghifārī) (d. 32/652). The Imām Ḥasan had two: Sufyān b. Abī Laylā al-Hamdānī and Ḥudhayfa b. Usayd b. Khālid al-Ghifārī (d. 42/662). Every man killed with Ḥusayn at the battle of Karbalā’ (680 CE) is considered to have been a *ḥawārī* of the latter. His son ‘Alī (d. 713/1313) had three intimate disciples: Yaḥyā b. Umm Ṭawīl, Abū Khālid al-Kābulī and Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/713). According to Shī’ite tradition such *ḥawārī* will be the first to enter Heaven on the Day of Judgment, before the rest of the Shī’ite believers (for more detail see: *Rawḍat al-wā‘izīn*, 2, 282; *al-Ikhtisās*, 61).

<sup>42</sup> Āghā Buzurg al-Ṭahrānī, *al-Dharī’a ilā taṣānīf al-shī’a*, Teheran, 1941, 4, 317.

<sup>43</sup> His full name was ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās Ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib al-Qurashī al-Hāshimī (619-687 CE), a cousin of the Prophet from his father’s side. He was born in Mecca and, as an avid adherent of the Prophet, transmitted many traditions in his name. He participated together with ‘Alī in the battles of the Camel and Siffīn. He, too, is said to have written a commentary on the Qur’ān. See: Veccia Vaglieri, L., “‘Abd Allāh b. al-‘Abbās”, *EP*, I, 40-41.

<sup>44</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 81, n.° 137.

tear up the dictated commentary he had written down. But Mītham said to him: “Keep what you have heard from me. If what I told you turns out to be the truth, conceal it, and if it turns out to be false, tear it up.” A few days later what Mītham predicted did indeed come to pass.<sup>45</sup>

If this tradition is reliable it provides yet another indication that Ibn ‘Abbās possessed elements of a commentary by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Since according to this tradition Mītham had said to Ibn ‘Abbās: “Ask anything you want about the interpretation of the Qur’ān,” it also tells us that Mītham was familiar with the interpretation of the entire Qur’ān.

These traditions clearly show that Mītham was in possession of commentaries which Ibn ‘Abbās did not possess. Otherwise of course the latter would not have written down what Mītham dictated to him. Shī‘ite writings thus differentiate the two, both disciples of ‘Alī. Mītham was obviously the more senior of the two, a fact which is further supported by Ibn ‘Abbās’ agreeing without protest to write down what Mītham dictated to him.

#### 4. Mītham al-Tammār as author

A number of Shī‘ite sources relate that Mītham’s sons, in particular Ya‘qūb and Ṣāliḥ, kept copies of their father’s books and read in them on many occasions. Thus it is told that Ya‘qūb came into the presence of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir<sup>46</sup> (d. 732 CE) and said to him: “I read in my father’s books that ‘Alī had said to my father: ‘Oh Mītham, love him who loves the family of Muḥammad even if he is immoral and dissolute, and hate him who hates the family of Muḥammad even if he fasts, lives an upright life and says ‘For those who believe and perform good deeds are the best people of the land.’”<sup>47</sup> If this tradition is reliable, it points to the existence of a number of books composed by Mītham, in which he wrote down what ‘Alī had dictated to him over the years. In fact, since Mītham was a

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 81, n.º 137; *al-Dharī‘a ilā taṣānīf*, 4, 317.

<sup>46</sup> The fifth Imām of Twelver Shī‘ism. For more details on him see: Kohlberg, E., “Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn”, *EP*, VII, 397-400.

<sup>47</sup> *Wasā’il al-shī‘a*, 16, 182; *Bihār al-anwār*; 23, 390.

close associate of ‘Alī for a period of some five years (656-661 CE) he had ample time to record ‘Alī’s legal rulings, Qur’ānic commentaries, comments on the world beyond and more.<sup>48</sup> Ya‘qūb’s statement “I read in my father’s books” can only mean that Mītham had written more than one book.

Elsewhere Mītham’s son Ṣāliḥ is quoted as having found the following statement in “a book by Mītham”: “We spent a night with the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (may he rest in peace).”

### 5. Mītham as a transmitter of *ḥadīth*

Mītham played an important role in the life of the Imām ‘Alī, and was an important source of Shī‘ite traditions. His reports are quoted very frequently in Shī‘ite books of *ḥadīth*.

Proof of this is provided by the following tradition. Mītham’s son Ṣāliḥ once said to the Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir: “Tell me this *ḥadīth*.” Al-Bāqir replied: “Did you not hear *ḥadīths* from your father?,” to which Ṣāliḥ said: “No, I was a child.”<sup>49</sup> This tradition shows that al-Bāqir considered Mītham’s *ḥadīths* trustworthy.

Mītham transmitted a great many sayings of ‘Alī, including answers to questions which Mītham had posed to him. However, it is impossible to know whether every *ḥadīth* in his name which purports to report something which ‘Alī had said actually does so or whether some or even most of these were written later and falsely attributed to him.

Mītham also reported the utterances of others beside ‘Alī.<sup>50</sup> Among them are Sa‘d al-Khaffāf<sup>51</sup> and Ibn ‘Abbās.<sup>52</sup> Many also transmitted what Mītham said. The most important of these were his

<sup>48</sup> For details see: *ibidem*, 27, 83, n.° 24; 27, 130, n.° 121; 27, 220, n.° 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 81, n.° 136.

<sup>50</sup> For details see: *Kashf al-ghumma*, 1, 385; and 1, 396; *al-Ghārāt*, 2, 286; *Biḥār al-anwār*, 14, 444; and 40, 276.

<sup>51</sup> For details see: *Mustadrak*, 16, 170. His full name was Sa‘d b. Ṭarīf al-Hanzālī al-Iskāf, a client of the Banū Tamīm, al-Kūfī or, according to others, al-Du‘alī. For more details about him see: *Rijāl al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī*, 115, n.° 1147-17; Aḥmad b. al-Husayn al-Ghaḍā‘irī, *Rijāl Ibn al-Ghaḍā‘irī*, Qumm, 1944, 3, 104; *Rijāl al-‘allāma al-Hillī*, 226, n.° 1; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 215, n.° 384; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 456, n.° 200.

<sup>52</sup> For details see: *Biḥār al-anwār*, 39, 293.

own children and the Imams<sup>53</sup> ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Šādiq.

## 6. The Prophet Muḥammad’s prophecies about Mītham

The Prophet Muḥammad lived several decades before Mītham and never met him. Nevertheless, Shī‘ite tradition insists that the Prophet spoke about Mītham’s origins and character traits, as well as about the role he would play in support of ‘Alī.

As we mentioned at the beginning of section 1 above, according to one tradition when ‘Alī asked Mītham for his name he answered “Sālim”, whereupon ‘Alī said: “The Messenger of God told me that your name was Mītham.” Mītham then answered: “God spoke the truth and so did His Prophet. That is indeed my name.”<sup>54</sup>

According to another tradition, also mentioned in section 1 above, the Prophet’s wife Umm Salama (Hind bint Suhayl,<sup>55</sup> d. 679/680 CE; see above, section 1) said that the Prophet recommended Mītham to ‘Alī numerous times. This tradition relates that Mītham performed the pilgrimage in the year of his death (60/671). During his trip to Arabia he also visited the city of al-Madīna and went to the Prophet’s house looking for Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī<sup>56</sup> (d. 680 CE). He did not find him, but encountered the Prophet’s wife. When he introduced himself to her she said to him: “I heard the Prophet more than once urge ‘Alī to take good care of you.”<sup>57</sup>

In these Shī‘ite traditions we can discern a double purpose: one, to demonstrate that the Prophet knew of Mītham although he never met

<sup>53</sup> For details see: Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, Najaf, 1977, 135, n.° 2, and 269, n.° 9; *al-Mazār*, 48, n.° 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Al-Kharā‘ij wal-jarā‘ih*, 1, 203; *al-Irshād*, 1, 324; *Irshād al-qulūb*, 2, 226; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 2, 291.

<sup>55</sup> Her full name was Hind bint Suhayl (the latter known also as Abū Umayya) al-Qurashiyya al-Makhzūmiyya; the Prophet married her in the year 14/625. She reached old age and died in Madīna. The exact year of her death is in doubt. For more details on her see: Roded, R., “Umm Salama Hind”, *EP*, X, 856; Stern, G. H., *Marriage in Early Islam*, London, 1939, 76, 79, 90, 107, 121.

<sup>56</sup> The son of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and the third Shī‘ite Imām. For details about him see: Veccia Vaglieri, L., “al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib”, *EP*, III, 607-615.

<sup>57</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 324; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 80-81, n.° 136; Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyiz al-ṣaḥāba*, ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Jāwī (ed.), Beirut, 1992, 6, 316-318, n.° 8478.

him, and that the Prophet informed ‘Alī that Mītham would one day be a disciple and supporter of his; second, to show that Mītham did not join ‘Alī because of the objective political circumstances in Kūfa at the time, but that his career was predestined by God and told to His Prophet. In short, the traditions reflect a Shī‘ite claim that God Himself chose ‘Alī’s companions and supporters.

## 7. ‘Alī prophesies Mītham’s death and informs him of it

A Shī‘ite Imām is not only considered to be wiser and more knowledgeable than other mortals; he is also believed to possess knowledge of the occult.<sup>58</sup> An Imām’s wisdom at least equals that of angels and prophets.<sup>59</sup> Imāms are in fact said to possess certain kinds of knowledge denied to the former.<sup>60</sup> Imams can renew and add to their knowledge,<sup>61</sup> so that nothing stays hidden from them.<sup>62</sup> The sources of an Imām’s knowledge are various; he is a “receiver” of inspiration, who can hear the speech of the angels.<sup>63</sup> He is in possession of certain books of occult knowledge: *al-Ṣaḥīfā* (literally: page),<sup>64</sup> which teaches what is permitted and what is forbidden; *Muṣḥaf Fāṭima* (literally: the codex of Fāṭima), containing revelations of the Angel Gabriel to Fāṭima after the Prophet’s death; and *al-Jafr* (literally: divination), consisting of several compositions (in the manner of the Pentateuch and the Gospels), and others.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (known as al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq), *‘Uyūn akhbār al-riḍā*, M.Ḥ. al-Lājūrdī (ed.), Teheran, 1958, 1, 213, n.° 1; *idem*, *al-Khiṣāl*, ‘A.A. al-Ghifārī (ed.), Qumm, 1982, 2, 428, n.° 5, quoted in *Bihār al-anwār*, 25, 116, n.° 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Baṣā’ir al-darajāt*, 109, n.° 2.

<sup>60</sup> Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 145.

<sup>61</sup> Amir-Moezzi, M. A., *The Divine Guide in Early Shī‘ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, D. Streight (transl.), New York, 1994, 71-72.

<sup>62</sup> *Bihār al-anwār*, 26, 109, chap. 6: “Knowledge of the heavens, the earth, Paradise, the Fire [...] are not concealed from them.”

<sup>63</sup> According to Shī‘ite belief Imāms are “receivers” (*muḥaddath*) of what angels say; unlike the prophets they can hear the angels but not see them, and the knowledge they receive this way is not “revelation” (*waḥy*) but only “inspiration” (*ilhām*). See: Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, 70-71.

<sup>64</sup> Also called *al-muṣḥaf*, *al-ṣaḥīfā al-jāmi‘a* and *al-jāmi‘a*.

<sup>65</sup> Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, 73-75. For more details on the written sources said to have been in possession of the Imāms, see: Kohlberg, E., “Authoritative Scrip-

Furthermore, Imāms are said to know the future, and to be able to prophesy the death of any man,<sup>66</sup> when and where he will die, and who will kill him, if he is to die a violent death. In fact, Imāms are credited with knowing a person's fate in the afterworld and can intercede on someone's behalf to enable him to enter Heaven.<sup>67</sup> Many a man has had his fear of death removed after an Imām informed him that he, the Imām, would see to it that the dying man would be admitted to Heaven.<sup>68</sup>

However, these powers are ascribed to deceased Imāms. The type of intercession in the *ḥadīth* in question here, however, is different: the Imām is said to have interceded in this world, while still alive. The ability to perform such an intercession is usually ascribed only to the

tures in Early Imami Shī'ism", in E. Patlagean and A. Le Boulluec (eds.), *Les Retours aux Écritures: Fondamentalismes Presents et Passés*, Paris, 1991, 295-307.

<sup>66</sup> It is an article of faith in Islam that there are things which only God can know; one of these is when and under what circumstances a man will die. Supposed proof of this is the following Qur'ānic verse (Q 31:34): "No soul can know on what soil you shall die." The interpretation of this verse is in dispute. Some regard it as referring to the place of death (see, for example: Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, Cairo, 1373/1954), 21, 87-89), while others interpret it as referring to the time of death (see: Abū 'Alī al-Faḍl b. al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, 1995, 8, 96). At any rate, the knowledge ascribed to Imāms in this matter certainly contradicts the accepted creed according to which only God knows a person's ultimate fate. The Shī'ite explanation for this supposed contradiction is that their Imām cannot change the fate decreed by God, and can know this fate only if God deigns to inform him of it. We should point out as well that according to some opinions fate can be changed. Thus, in the view of the ancient Mu'tazilites, a man who dies a violent death will not live the life that he was destined to live. See: I.W. Montgomery-Watt, "Adjal", *EP*<sup>2</sup>, I, 204.

<sup>67</sup> Promises of a place in Heaven are reported to have been made by a number of Imāms. For example, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765/1363) made such a promise to Zayd al-Shahḥām. See: *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 264, n.° 8; and 265, n.° 5; *Bihār al-anwār*, 47, 78, n.° 56. Zayd al-Shahḥām, whose epithets were Abū Usāma al-Azdī and Abū Usāma al-Shahḥām, was a Kūfan who transmitted traditions in the names of the Imāms Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and Mūsā al-Kāẓim. For more details on him see: *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 1, 396, n.° 460.

<sup>68</sup> In Sunnī Islam such intercession is usually ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad, of whom it is said that on the Day of Judgment he would intercede in favor of Muslims who have sinned. Angels, martyrs and true believers have been deemed to possess the power of intercession as well, after the Prophet's death. Shī'ism extends such abilities to its Imāms as well. For more details on the Shī'ite view on intercession see: Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān al-'Ukburī al-Baghdādī, *Awā'il al-maqālāt fī l-madhāhib wal-mukhtārāt*, Mahdī Muḥaqqiq (ed.), Teheran, 1992, 29. Muṭṭahar al-Ḥillī represents the opinion of a minority which believes that Imāms do not possess the power of intercession. For details see: Schmidtke, S., *The Theology of al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī*, Berlin, 1991, 238.

Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>69</sup> But as we pointed out above, Shī'ism wishes to ascribe to its Imāms powers equal to those of the prophets. We should therefore not wonder that according to Shī'ite tradition 'Alī informed Mītham that he would be killed, that his hands and feet would be cut off and that he would be crucified in Kūfa, at a place called *Raḥbat al-ṣayārīf*, on a beam taken from a date palm cut down in *Kunāsa*.<sup>70</sup> He added that the trunk of the palm would be cut into four pieces and that Mītham would be crucified on one of them. 'Alī also named three others who would be crucified on the three remaining pieces of the trunk: Ḥujr b. 'Adī al-Kindī<sup>71</sup> (d. 671), Muḥammad b. Aktham<sup>72</sup> and Khālid b. Mas'ūd.<sup>73</sup> Mītham, who wanted to be certain that 'Alī's prophecy came true, asked his son Ṣalīḥ to carve his name on the trunk of the date palm and to drive a nail into it. Tradition further has it that when Mītham was eventually crucified on the fourth part of the date trunk he did indeed find his inscribed name and the nail.<sup>74</sup>

Shī'ite tradition goes on to relate that 'Alī went with Mītham and showed him where he would be crucified and also pointed out the date palm. Mītham would then visit the palm, pray next to it and say to it: "I am blessed by a date palm, which will in future possess a great importance."<sup>75</sup> He would strike the palm with his hand and say: "Oh date palm, you have not been nourished except for my sake, and I have not been nourished except for your sake."<sup>76</sup> Mītham also vis-

<sup>69</sup> For more details on this topic and on intercession in general see: Wensinck, A.J. and Gimaret, D., "Shafā'a", *EP*, IX, 177-179.

<sup>70</sup> The name of a rubbish dump in Kūfa. For details see: *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 4, 481, s.v. *Kunāsa*.

<sup>71</sup> His full name was Ḥujr b. 'Adī b. Jabala al-Kindī, a Companion of the Prophet known for his bravery. He accompanied the Prophet and fought with him in the battle of Qādisiyya. Then he attached himself to 'Alī and fought with him in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. He resided in Kūfa and rebelled against the Umayyads, whereupon he was killed on the orders of Mu'āwiya at Marj 'Adhrā' together with a number of his associates. For more details on him see: Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, Beirut, 1986, 2, 169.

<sup>72</sup> This name does not appear in the Shī'ite biographical literature.

<sup>73</sup> This name does not appear either in the Shī'ite biographical literature.

<sup>74</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 85-86, n.° 140, quoted in *Biḥār al-anwār*, 42, 131, n.° 14; *al-Ikhtisās*, 76; *Rawḍat al-wā'izīn*, 2, 288; *al-Irshād*, 1, 323-324; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 2, 292; *Kashf al-ghumma*, 1, 277; al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-Hillī, *Kashf al-yaqīn fī faḍā'il amīr al-mu'minīn*, Ḥ. al-Darkāhī (ed.), Qumm, 1990, 77; *al-Manāqib*, 2, 271; al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-Hillī, *Nahj al-ḥaq wa-kashf al-ṣidq*, Qumm, 1986, 242.

<sup>75</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 323-324; *Khaṣā'is al-a'imma*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 84; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 357, n.° 1593; *Khaṣā'is al-a'imma*, 54; *al-Faḍā'il*, 103; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 2, 293.



ited the spot where he was fated to be crucified; there he informed 'Amr b. Ḥurayth <sup>77</sup> (d. 704 CE) who lived nearby that he, Mītham, would soon be his neighbor. 'Amr thought that by this Mītham meant that he intended to buy the house of one of his neighbors, Ibn Mas'ūd or Ibn Ḥakīm. <sup>78</sup> When Mītham was duly crucified 'Amr saw him and quoted the Qur'ānic verse: "We belong to God, and to him we return." <sup>79</sup> 'Amr spread the story of Mītham and what he had told him. He regularly visited the spot where he was crucified and ordered his slave girl to wash and sweep the ground underneath the beam. He would pray there and ask God to have mercy on Mītham. <sup>80</sup> Mītham had asked 'Alī for the identity of his killer. 'Alī told him that he would be killed by 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād <sup>81</sup> (d. 686 CE), son of Marjāna, <sup>82</sup> son of a brazen slave girl, "an infidel and a bastard." <sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup> According to another tradition his name was 'Amr b. Khurayq. See: *Khaṣā'is al-a'imma*, 54. His full name was 'Amr b. Ḥurayth b. 'Amr b. 'Uthmān b. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Amr al-Makhzūmī al-Qurashī Abū Sa'id. He was born two years before the *hijra* and became a leading Companion. He ruled Kūfa for Ziyād and later for his son 'Ubayd Allāh. For more details about him see: Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyiz al-Ṣahāba*, 'A.M. al-Bajāwī (ed.), Beirut, 1992, 4, 616, n.° 5812; Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Muṣ'ab b. 'Abd Allāh b. al-Muṣ'ab al-Zubayrī, *Kitāb nasab Quraysh*, E. Lévi-Provençal (ed.), Cairo, 1982, 333; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-I'lām*, Beirut, 1986, 5, 76; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-Islām*, 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (ed.), Beirut, 1990 (events and deaths in the years 61-80 AH), 492-493; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-ta'rikh*, Beirut, 2004, 21, 23, 192, 399, 520, 3:70, 78, 143, 228, 236, 252, 256, 257, 294, 300, 384, 413, 530.

<sup>78</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 324; *al-Faḍā'il*, 103; *I'lām al-warā*, 173.

<sup>79</sup> Q 2:156; this verse is often recited by people who are in trouble.

<sup>80</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 325; *al-Faḍā'il*, 104; *Bihār al-anwār*, 42, 138, n.° 19; *Irshād al-qulūb*, 2, 225; *Khaṣā'is al-a'imma*, 54-55.

<sup>81</sup> The ruler (*amīr*) of Iraq, his full name was 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād b. 'Ubayd, known as Ibn Ziyād, Abū Sufyān and Abū Ḥafṣ. After the death of his father Ziyād (672-3 CE) he was appointed ruler of Nisābūr and Khurāsān (672 CE), then of Baṣra (674 CE) and later of both Kūfa and Baṣra (679-680 CE), by the Caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya. For more details on him see: Robinson, C.F., "'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād", *EP*, VI, 548-556.

<sup>82</sup> Marjāna is the name of the mother of 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād and the wife of Ziyād b. Abīh, also known as Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān (d. 673 CE). She was a well-known slave girl, and the tradition in question mentions her origins as a mark of contempt. For more on Marjāna see: Sindawi, Kh., *The maqātil in Shī'ite Literature*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Ramat Gan, 2000) 226, note 2 (Hebrew).

<sup>83</sup> The two words here translated as "infidel" (*utull*) and "bastard" (*zanīm*) appear in Q 68:13. For more details see: Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (known as al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq), *Ma'āni al-akhbār*; 'A.A. al-Ghifārī (ed.), Qumm, 1982, 149; 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, Qumm, 1983, 20, 381; Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Astarābādī, *Ta'wīl al-āyāt al-Zāhira fī faḍl al-'itra al-ṭāhira*, Qumm, 1988,

Historical sources report that when ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād become ruler of Kūfa he heard what ‘Alī had said to Mītham about the date palm in Kunāsa. Ibn Ziyād mistrusted the palm and ordered it cut down. A carpenter bought it and cut it into four pieces.

## 8. Mītham’s death

Three days after being crucified Mītham was stabbed with a spear; blood then flowed from his nose and mouth, and at the end of the day he died. According to Shī‘ite sources he died ten days before Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī<sup>84</sup> (d. 680) arrived in Iraq.<sup>85</sup> From other sources we know that Ḥusayn came to Karbalā’ on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Muḥarram in the year 61 AH.<sup>86</sup> Mītham’s death thus occurred on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Dhū l-Ḥijja in the year 61 AH (23.9.679 CE).

## 9. Mītham’s burial

Mītham died, as mentioned above, three days after his crucifixion. ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād posted guards next to the body in order to prevent it being taken and buried. To further ensure that no one would take the body and bury it fires were lit around it. Nevertheless, seven sellers of dates (*tammārīn*)<sup>87</sup> decided to steal the body at night and carry it away on a plank of wood. They carried out their plan and succeeded in removing the body without attracting the notice of the guards. The body was taken to a stream in the territory of the Murād

687; Zayn al-Dīn b. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad (known as “the second martyr”), *Kashf al-rayba ‘an aḥkām al-ghayba*, Najaf, 1970, 40. Here these harsh descriptions refer to ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād; see: *al-Irshād*, 1, 322; *al-Kharā’ij wal-jarā’ih*, 1, 202-203; *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 85, n.<sup>o</sup> 140; *Rawḍat al-wā’izīn*, 2, 288; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 2, 290.

<sup>84</sup> Ḥusayn was the third Shī‘ite Imām, after his father ‘Alī and his brother Ḥasan. He died at Karbalā’ in the year 680 CE. For more details see: Veccia Vaglieri, L., “al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib”, *EP*, III, 607-615.

<sup>85</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1, 325; *I’lām al-warā*, 174; *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha*, 2, 294.

<sup>86</sup> Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā al-Azdī al-Ghāmīdī al-Kūfī Abū Mikhnaf, *Waq‘at al-Ṭaff*, M. H. al-Yūsufī al-Gharawī (ed.), Qumm, 1367/1947, 180; ‘Alī b. Mūsā Ibn Ja‘far b. Ṭāwūs, *al-Malḥūf ‘alā qatl al-ṭufūf*, S. F. Tabrīziyān “al-Ḥassūn” (ed.), Teheran, 1414/1993, 139.

<sup>87</sup> These were quite likely colleagues of Mītham, who had a shop for selling dates in Kūfa.

tribe,<sup>88</sup> and there it was buried. The plank on which the body was carried was thrown away elsewhere in order not to disclose the burial site. In the morning the guards were surprised to find the body gone; they looked for it, but in vain.<sup>89</sup>

The burial site remained hidden for some time, in order to prevent the desecration of the grave by the rulers of the Umayyad dynasty<sup>90</sup> (661-750 CE). We do not know when its location became known, perhaps during the 'Abbāsīd period, in the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (ruled 786-809 CE) who discovered 'Alī's tomb while on a hunt<sup>91</sup> (in 791 CE). He built a dome over the tomb, perhaps in order to placate the Shī'ites and present to the world an image of tolerance. Today the grave is shown on the south side of the house of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, near the Kūfa mosque, next to the main road from Kūfa to Najaf. The tomb, with a sanctuary in the middle, was covered by a medium-sized white dome. The tomb was rebuilt by Muḥammad Rashād Mirza al-Najafī in 1968, who enlarged the dome and added galleries for the pilgrims and a large courtyard.<sup>92</sup>

#### 10. Why did Mītham refrain from the Shī'ite practice of dissimulation?

“Dissimulation” (*taqiyya*) is a well-established and approved mode of behavior among Shī'ites.<sup>93</sup> One accepted definition is the following: “Concealment of the truth and hiding one's belief in it from the sinners, and refusing their help, if any harm can otherwise

<sup>88</sup> The Banū Murād was an Arabian tribe belonging to the Madhḥij group of tribes, originally from southern Arabia, who later moved to the north of the peninsula. For more details on them see: 'Alī, A.A., “Banū Murād”, *EF*, VII, 591-592.

<sup>89</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 83, n.º 138.

<sup>90</sup> The Umayyad rulers were known to disinter and mutilate the bodies of their dead enemies. Thus, for example, the Umayyad commander al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī (d. 714 CE) attempted, without success, to locate the body of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in order to mutilate it. For more details see Sindawi, Kh., “The Two Ghariyy Towers in Kūfa and the Tomb of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in Shī'ite Literature”, *al-Karmel*, 23-24 (2002-2003), 125.

<sup>91</sup> For detail on this incident see: *al-Karmel*, 130-131.

<sup>92</sup> *Tārīkh al-Kūfa*, 86; [www.refed.net/towns/kufa.html](http://www.refed.net/towns/kufa.html) (06-04-06); [www.wadyalgary.com](http://www.wadyalgary.com) (06-04-06).

<sup>93</sup> For more on the doctrine of dissimulation see: Kohlberg, E., “Some Imāmī Shī'ī Views on *Taqiyya*”, *JAOS*, 95 (1975), 395-402; Meyer, E., “Anlass und Anwendungsbereich der *Taqiyya*”, *Der Islam*, 57 (1980), 246-280.

ensue to religion and to life in this world.”<sup>94</sup> Such “dissimulation” is a religious duty for Twelver Shī‘ites in case of necessity, and permitted under more favorable circumstances. According to Shaykh Mufid: “It is permissible with respect to [the commandments of] religion in case of fear for one’s life, but also in lesser cases, of fear for one’s possessions and to arrange various matters.”<sup>95</sup> It is also permissible to dissimulate in speech in case of necessity.

The political repression suffered by Shī‘ites made dissimulation a necessary part of their creed, vital for believers’ personal survival. Shī‘ite sources quote Imāms’ utterances in favor of dissimulation. Thus the Imām al-Bāqir is quoted as saying: “Dissimulation is Paradise for the believer,”<sup>96</sup> and al-Şādiq is said to have proclaimed: “Whoever lacks dissimulation lacks religion.”<sup>97</sup>

The question now arises, if dissimulation is permitted in order to survive, why did not Mītham avail himself of this stratagem? Muḥammad al-Muẓaffarī gives a number of possible reasons why Mītham did not dissimulate:<sup>98</sup>

A. Mītham may have thought that by sacrificing himself he was protecting ‘Alī’s reputation. He thus chose not to dissimulate because of his great love and respect for his former patron.

B. It is related that ‘Alī had warned Mītham that ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād would demand that he repudiate ‘Alī in return for sparing his life and the ‘Alī forbade him to do so.<sup>99</sup> So when Mītham was caught he preferred death to saving his life by means of dissimulation.

C. Shī‘ite dissimulation is only permitted if certain conditions apply. Thus the Imām al-Bāqir is quoted as saying: “Dissimulation should only be used to prevent bloodshed but when bloodshed is inevitable, no dissimulation is required.”<sup>100</sup> Mītham thus may have re-

<sup>94</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu‘mān (known as al-Shaykh al-Mufid), *Sharḥ ‘aqā’id al-şadūq aw taşḥīḥ al-i’tiqād*, Tabrīz, 1371/1951, 66.

<sup>95</sup> *Awā’il al-maqālāt*, 55.

<sup>96</sup> *Biḥār al-anwār*, 72, 432, n.° 94, quoting *al-Kāfi*.

<sup>97</sup> Abū al-Faḍl ‘Alī al-Ṭabarsī, *Mishkāt al-anwār fī ghurar al-akhbār*; Najaf, 1951, 39ff.

<sup>98</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Muẓaffarī, *Mītham al-Tammār*; Najaf, 1944, 58-62.

<sup>99</sup> For more details see also: *al-Kharā’ij wal-jarā’iḥ*, 1, 229; *Khaṣā’iṣ al-a’imma*, 54; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 357, n.° 1593.

<sup>100</sup> *Al-Kāfi*, 2, 220, n.° 15; Muḥammad b. Mas’ūd al-‘Ayyāshī, *Tafsīr al-‘Ayyāshī*, H.R. al-Maḥallātī (ed.), Teheran, 1960, 2, 271, n.° 72.

fused to use dissimulation because the conditions for its use were not met.

D. Mītham may have preferred his religion to his own life.

E. 'Alī is reported to have repeatedly told Mītham about his impending fate and the great reward he would receive in Heaven because of his martyr's death. Mītham may therefore have decided not to dissimulate in order not to put in danger his future reward.<sup>101</sup>

Mītham would seem to have been resigned to his fate, as shown by the following tradition: As Mītham was being taken to be executed on the orders of 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād he encountered a man who said to him: "You could have extricated yourself from this, Mītham," to which Mītham replied: "By God, this date palm was taken down just for me, and I was nourished just for it."<sup>102</sup>

But in fact the doctrine of dissimulation did not yet exist in Mītham's times, but developed only later, although Shī'ite sources date its roots to the lifetime of the Prophet himself. It is therefore quite likely that the various traditions involving Mītham's knowledge of the principles of this doctrine were formulated much later for the express purpose of showing its antiquity.

## 11. What others wrote about Mītham

Al-Najāshī mentions a book by Hisham b. Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī<sup>103</sup> (d. 819 CE) entitled *The Deaths of Rushayd, Mītham and Juwayriyya (Maqatal Rushayd wa-Mītham wa-Juwayriyya)*.<sup>104</sup> From its title the book, which has not survived, would appear to have described the deaths of three of 'Alī's close associates,<sup>105</sup> Rushayd

<sup>101</sup> For details see: *al-Kharā'ij wal-jarā'ih*, 1, 229; *Khaṣā'is al-a'imma*, 54; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 257, n.° 1593.

<sup>102</sup> *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 80, n.° 134; *al-Irshād*, 1, 325.

<sup>103</sup> A Shī'ite historian and resident of Kūfa, deemed to be an expert on pre-Islamic Arab history. Most of his many works are lost. For more details about him see: *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 425, n.° 1166; *Rijāl Ibn Dāwūd*, 368, n.° 1646; *Rijāl al-'allāma al-Ḥillī*, 179, n.° 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 435, n.° 1166.

<sup>105</sup> Shī'ite sources mention a number of 'Alī's close associates: Uways b. 'Āmir b. Anīs al-Qaranī, 'Amr b. al-Ḥamiq al-Khuzā'i, Rushayd al-Hajarī, Mītham al-Tammār, Kumayl b. Ziyād al-Nakha'i, Qanbar the servant of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd Allāh b. Yaḥyā, Jundub b. Zuhayr al-'Āmirī, Banū 'Āmir the followers of 'Alī, Ḥabīb b. Maḥzar

al-Hajarī,<sup>106</sup> Mītham al-Tammār and Juwayriyya b. Mushir al-‘Abdī,<sup>107</sup> all of whom died in the year 679.

In modern times Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Muẓaffarī appears to have been the first to have focused renewed attention on the figure of Mītham al-Tammār. Some sixty years ago (1364/1944) the Ḥaydariyya Press of the Murtaḍawiyya Library published his eighty-eight-page monograph, *Mītham al-Tammār* in which al-Muẓaffarī analyzed Mītham’s character from a Shī‘ite point of view and collected all the various traditions about his life and death.

Another book which exists for the moment in manuscript form only,<sup>108</sup> also entitled *Mītham al-Tammār*, is a translation from Persian by ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Muqarram<sup>109</sup> (d. 1971). Although we have not been able to obtain a copy of the manuscript, its contents would appear to be quite similar to the afore-mentioned book by al-Muẓaffarī.

Ten years ago a short play in verse entitled “Mītham al-Tammār, Revolutionary on the Cross” (*Mītham al-Tammār ... thā’ir fawqa l-ṣalīb*) was published by Muḥammad Taqīyy Jamāl al-Dīn<sup>110</sup> in the journal *al-Fikr al-jadīd* (13-14, June 1996). The play takes up twenty-five pages of average size. The published play opens with a biographical sketch of the hero. The play itself takes place in the year 60 AH and describes the events surrounding Mītham’s death from a Shī‘ite religious point of view.

al-Asadī, al-Hārith b. ‘Abd Allāh al-A‘war al-Hamdhānī, Mālik b. al-Hārith al-Ashtar, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Jadalī, and Juwayriyya b. Mushir al-‘Abdī. For more details see: *al-Ikhtisās*, 6-7.

<sup>106</sup> He is another close associate of ‘Alī to whom he foretold the circumstances of his death. ‘Alī nicknamed him Rushayd the Forecaster, because he had taught him the art of forecasting fates. Rushayd was in the habit of telling people how they would die, and his forecasts did indeed come to pass. For more details about him see: *Rijāl al-Kashshī*, 75-78, n.° 131; *Rijāl al-Barqī*, 4, 8; *Rijāl al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī*, 63, n.° 556-1; 94, n.° 931-1; 100, n.° 978-1; and 114, n.° 1122-3.

<sup>107</sup> A resident of Kūfa of Arabian origins, who fought with ‘Alī at the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. For more details see: *Rijāl al-Barqī*, 5; *Rijāl al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī*, 193; *Rijāl al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī*, 59, n.° 499-4.

<sup>108</sup> The manuscript is mentioned in the introduction to ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Muqarram’s book, *Maqatal al-Ḥusayn*, Beirut, 1979, 17.

<sup>109</sup> For details on him see: *ibidem*, 8-21.

<sup>110</sup> He is a little-known contemporary Shī‘ite playwright, a native of Iraq and currently living in Denmark.