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Zaydī Shī‘ism

Scott Lucas and Egbal Almahatwary

Zaydī Shī‘ism is a tradition of Islamic law and theology with deep historical roots in the Muslim world. This article provides a historical overview, beginning with Imām Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 122/740), and then tracing the movement’s development in Iraq, northern Iran, and Yemen through to the nineteenth century. Special attention is given to Yemeni Zaydī scholars from the twelfth through to the fifteenth centuries who composed significant writings that continue to be studied by Zaydīs to this day. A brief summary of Zaydī theological positions, most of which align with the Mu‘tazila schools of theology, is provided, including the identification of positions that distinguish Zaydīs from Sunnīs and Twelver Shī‘ites. The entry concludes with an introduction to the major Zaydī scholars of the twentieth century and to the Zaydī Ḥūthī movement that, arising in late 2001, has at the time of writing emerged as the strongest party in Yemen’s ongoing civil conflict.

Keywords: Zaydī Shī‘ism, Shī‘ī Islam, Mu‘tazilites, Yemen, Houthis, Ahl al-Bayt, Imāmate, Muḥammad al-Shawkānī

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1 Introduction

Zaydī Shī'ism is a tradition of Islamic law and theology. It is grounded in the claim that the Prophet Muḥammad bequeathed two significant guides to the Muslim community: the Qur'an and his progeny (*ahl al-bayt, al-ʿitra*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba*, 4: *Bāb min faḍā'il ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib*, 2408; Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ, al-manāqib*, 32: *Bāb manāqib Ahl bayt al-Nabī*, 3786, 3788). This teaching is understood by Zaydīs to restrict leadership (*imāma*) of the Muslim community to the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad's two grandsons, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, the sons of Imām ʿAlī and Fāṭima al-Zahrā'. Zaydīs assign religious authority to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muḥammad's teachings, Imām ʿAlī's teachings, and the consensus of the Prophet's descendants. Most Zaydīs prior to the modern period adhered to a theological system that aligned closely with the Muʿtazilī tradition on all major topics, save leadership of the community. Zaydīs distinguish themselves from the larger Twelver Shī'ī tradition through their extension of the Imāmate to descendants of both Imāms al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, their insistence that the imām lead an uprising against injustice, and their denial of the existence of a hidden imām whose life is miraculously long. They are considered Shī'ites on account of their belief that the Prophet Muḥammad subtly designated Imāms ʿAlī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn as his immediate successors and because of the special authority they accord to the Prophet's descendants.

2 Historical overview

The Zaydī tradition has deep historical roots in the Islamic community. Zaydī communities and religious leaders, called imāms, were found initially in Medina, central Iraq, and northern Iran. The first polities ruled by Zaydī imāms formed in the late ninth century, in the Caspian region of northern Iran and in northern Yemen, in the areas of Saʿda and Najran. During the eleventh century, the Zaydī communities of northern Iran produced highly sophisticated theology and law in conversation with rationalist theologians known as the Muʿtazila. This literature was brought to Yemen during the twelfth century, especially during the time of Imām Aḥmad b. Sulaymān (r. 532–566/1137–1170). The following three centuries witnessed a florescence of Zaydī law and theology that remains largely unstudied in the West. During the first Ottoman occupation of northern Yemen (945–1045/1538–1636), Zaydī scholars and imāms retreated to their impregnable mountain towns, where they continued to develop their theological and legal traditions. The strong Imāmate of al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (r. 1006–1029/1598–1620) and his sons, who repelled the Ottomans from Yemen, ushered in new theological writings that challenged those aspects of Zaydī theology that aligned closely with Bahshamī Muʿtazilī theology. The later Qāsimī Imāmate saw the rise of a small group of iconoclastic Zaydī scholars who went even further in their critiques of Zaydī theology and law, culminating in

the famous Chief Judge Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), whom many Zaydīs consider to have abandoned the Zaydī school in favour of Sunnism. Al-Shawkānī’s hermeneutics later found favour among the leadership of the Yemen Arab Republic, which in 1990 became the Republic of Yemen. With the rise of the populist Zaydī Ḥūthī movement and the civil wars in Yemen since the mid-2000s, Zaydism at present remains a living, contested expression of Islam.

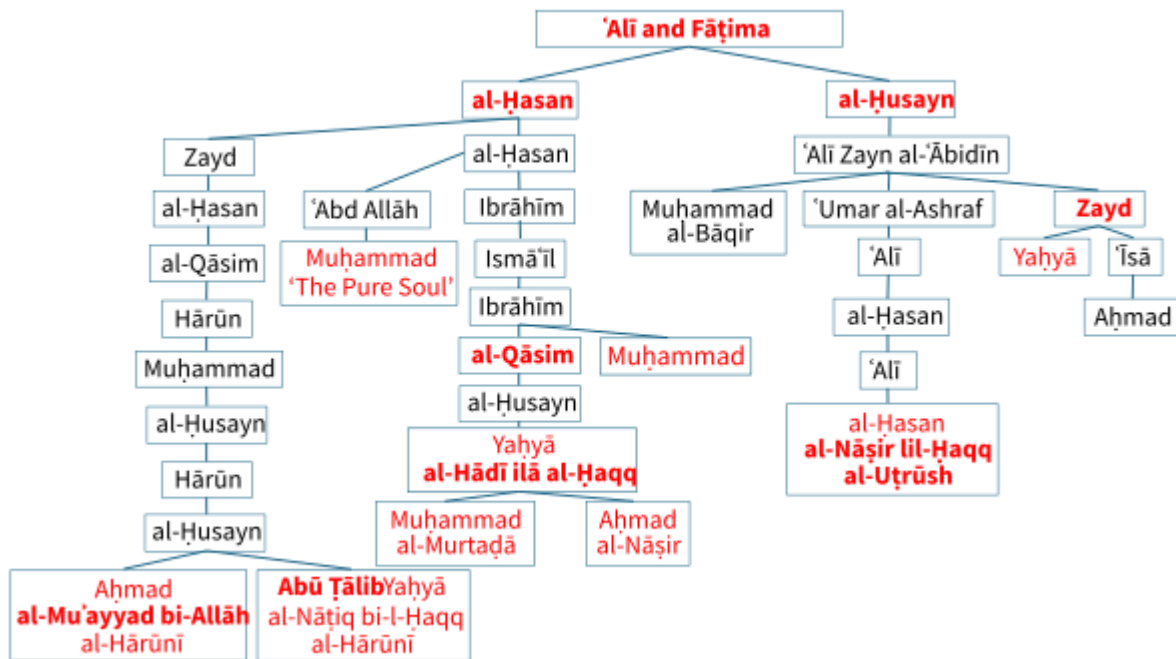


Figure 1. Diagram showing select early Zaydī imāms (marked in red).

2.1 Imām Zayd b. 'Alī

Zaydīs derive their name from Zayd b. 'Alī, who was a great-grandson of Imām 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and a great-great grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima. Zayd’s grandfather, al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, raised a famous revolt against the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd in 61/680 at Karbala, Iraq, that was crushed with great violence and ultimately climaxed with his martyrdom. Zayd’s father, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, was present at this revolt but fell ill and thus avoided being killed by the Umayyad army. He returned to Medina, where he was renowned for his piety and knowledge. His two most famous sons were Muḥammad, whom the Ismā'īlī and Twelver Shī'a consider to be their fifth imām, and Zayd, whom Zaydīs take as their imām, primarily because he raised a revolt against an unjust ruler. Imām Zayd’s revolt took place against the Umayyad Caliph Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 105–125/724–743) in Kufa in Ṣafar 122/January 740. Parallel to his grandfather’s experience, few Kufans joined Zayd in his revolt, which resulted in his death, crucifixion, and the casting of his remains into the Euphrates without a proper burial.

There are several writings ascribed to Imām Zayd, including a short Qur’anic commentary, *Gharīb al-Qur’ān* (Rare Words in the Qur’an), which has been published, and a treatise

defending the claim of the Prophet Muḥammad's descendants to the Imāmate. His most influential writing, which has been published many times, is his collection of hadiths, called *al-Majmū' al-fiqhī* (The Legal Compilation), or sometimes *Musnad al-Imām Zayd*. It was compiled by his disciple, Abū Khālid al-Wāsiṭī (d. second/eighth century), and transmitted in Iraq, northern Iran, and Yemen down to the present. In this book, Imām Zayd claims to have received all of his reports from his father, 'Alī, who received them from his father, Imām al-Ḥusayn, who heard them from his father, Imām 'Alī. Most of the contents of this work are on legal topics, although there are several hadiths of a theological nature, such as the following in support of the general Shī'ī principle that 'Alī was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muḥammad:

'Alī said: The Messenger of God (ṣ) said to me, 'You are my brother and helper (*wazīr*), and the best person whom I will leave behind after me, O 'Alī. Believers will be recognized by their love for you, while hypocrites will be recognized by their hatred of you. Whoever loves you, from among my community, is absolved of hypocrisy, and whoever hates you will meet God (Mighty and majestic is He) as a hypocrite.' (Zayd b. 'Alī 2002: 267, no. 647)

2.2 'Alid revolts after Imām Zayd

Several descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad raised revolts against the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd caliphs. Imām Zayd's son, Yaḥyā, endeavoured to continue his father's revolt until he was captured and executed in 125/743. While Imāms Zayd and Yaḥyā were descendants of Imām al-Ḥusayn, most of the revolts against the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate were led by descendants of Imām al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn's elder brother. One of the most spectacular of these revolts was led by the brothers Muḥammad (known as the 'Pure Soul') and Ibrāhīm, sons of 'Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī, in Medina and Basra, Iraq, in 145/762. Like their predecessors, Imāms al-Ḥusayn and Zayd, Muḥammad and Ibrāhīm revolted in the name of justice and the principle that the leader of the Muslim community must be a scholarly descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, principles that are consistent with the Zaydī concept of the Imāmate.

2.3 Zaydīs in Iraq

The early Zaydī community in Iraq seems to have lived discreetly, due to their proximity to the 'Abbāsīd capital in Baghdad. Their leader was Aḥmad b. 'Īsā (d. 247/861), a grandson of Imām Zayd, whose teachings have been preserved in the book *Kitāb al-'Ulūm* (Book of Knowledge) by the Kufan Zaydī scholar, Muḥammad b. Manṣūr al-Murādī (d. c. 290/903). As Wilferd Madelung has observed, the theology of Aḥmad b. 'Īsā and his circle differed in many ways from that of later Zaydīs, whose positions aligned more closely with those of Mu'tazilī theologians. For example, the Zaydīs in the circle of Aḥmad b. 'Īsā upheld the doctrine of predestination, as opposed to free will, and that the Qur'an was uncreated rather than created (Madelung 2012).

Muslim heresiographies typically identify four or five sects of Zaydīs in this early period, each of which disagreed over the status of the companions of the Prophet, and especially the legitimacy of the first three caliphs in Sunnī Islam, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān. Zaydīs who considered the companions upright and accepted the legitimacy of the first three caliphs were labelled Batrīs, while those who were highly critical of the companions, particularly those who failed to support Imām ‘Alī immediately after the Prophet Muḥammad’s death, declared the first three caliphs to be disbelievers and were called Jārūdīs. Research by Najam Haider questions whether these groups actually existed, or whether these labels were used primarily by non-Zaydīs to indicate currents within the nascent Zaydī community (Haider 2011).

2.4 Zaydīs in northern Iran

The first successful Zaydī Imāmates were based in the northern Iranian provinces of Tabaristan (now Mazandaran) and Gilan. (These Imāmates are often called the Caspian Imāmates, due to their proximity to the Caspian Sea.) The most significant of these early imāms was al-Nāṣir lil-Ḥaqq al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Uṭrūsh (d. 304/917), who composed works of theology and law that were independent from what would become the dominant school of the Zaydīs in Yemen.

From an intellectual perspective, the sayyid Hārūnī brothers, Aḥmad and Abū Ṭālib, sons of the Twelver Shī‘ī al-Ḥusayn b. Hārūn, were peerless among the Iranian Zaydīs and later had a substantial impact on the trajectory of Zaydism in Yemen. Aḥmad, known as Imām al-Mu‘ayyad bi-Allāh (d. 411/1020), composed significant works in law, theology, Hadith, and asceticism. His younger brother Abū Ṭālib, known as Imām al-Nāṭiq bi-al-Ḥaqq (d. 424/1033), wrote books on law, legal theory, theology, history, and Hadith. Both imāms were descendants of Imām al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī and built upon the legal and theological writings of Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm and Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq (section 2.5). They also studied with scholars in the circle of the great Sunnī Mu‘tazilī theologian, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 415/1025), during the intellectually vibrant reign of the pro-Shī‘ī Buyids (Ansari 2016). Another prominent Zaydī student of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār was Mānkdīm Shashdīw (d. c. 425/1034), also known as Aḥmad b. Abī Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī, whose substantial revision (*ta‘līq*) of an important theological work on the ‘five principles’ of the Mu‘tazila by Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār became a central text among the Zaydīs of Yemen. It seems likely that many of the arguments in the thirty topics tradition of Zaydī theology (section 2.5.4) were adopted from Mānkdīm’s book, which has been published as *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa* (Commentary on the Five Principles) under the erroneous authorship of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (Gimaret 1979).

Two additional Zaydī imāms from the Caspian region who merit mention are Imām al-Muwaffaq bi-Allāh al-Ḥusayn b. Ismā‘īl al-Jurjānī (d. after 420/1029) and his son Imām

al-Murshad bi-llāh Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn al-Jurjānī (d. c. 479/1087). Both of these imāms were descendants of Imām al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī and composed books of hadith with complete chains of transmission. Like their co-religionists, Imām al-Mu’ayyad bi-Allāh and Imām Abū Ṭālib, they freely included hadiths from Sunnī scholars along with those from Zaydīs. This fact is important because some Sunnīs accuse Zaydīs of neglecting hadiths when, in reality, Zaydīs have been transmitting such literature from Sunnī authorities for over a millennium.

Little is known about the Zaydī communities of Iran after the great transfer of books to Yemen during the sixth/twelfth century. It appears that the Zaydīs who remained there were forced to convert to Twelver Shī‘ism by the Safavid Shahs in the tenth/sixteenth century.

2.5 Zaydīs in Medina and Yemen

Most descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad initially settled in Medina, the home of the Prophet during the second half of his mission and the city where he was buried. We have seen that Imām Zayd b. ‘Alī was a native of Medina, along with the brothers Muḥammad ‘The Pure Soul’ and Ibrāhīm, sons of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥasan, both of whom revolted in 145/762–763 against the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr. Three generations after Muḥammad ‘The Pure Soul’ revolted, a descendant of his uncle Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥasan, named Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 246/860), synthesized the legal and theological teachings of his ancestors in writings that circulated among the Zaydīs of Iraq and Iran. Imām al-Qāsim’s grandson, Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 298/911), who took the sobriquet Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq (The Guide to the Truth), composed additional legal and theological works that became so foundational to the Zaydī tradition that the legal school in Yemen is frequently called ‘Hādawī’ after him. Imām al-Hādī also established the first Zaydī Imāmate in Yemen in 284/897, thus inaugurating a tradition of Zaydī rule that would last, intermittently, in parts of northern Yemen until the 1962 revolution, and which currently persists under the Zaydī-inspired Ḥūthīs/Anṣār Allāh movement.

2.5.1 Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī

Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm was a direct descendant of Imām al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī and grew up in Medina. His brother Muḥammad was recognized as imām by the Iraqi Zaydīs and was involved in a revolt in 198–199/814–815, which may have been the impetus for Imām al-Qāsim to settle in Egypt for approximately a decade. During this time, as Madelung has shown, Imām al-Qāsim interacted with Christian theologians, which may have inspired him to write a refutation of Christianity (Madelung 1965). (He also wrote refutations of dualists, atheists, and extreme Shī‘ites.) Upon his return to western Arabia, Imām al-Qāsim wrote numerous treatises on law and theology that subsequently circulated among the Zaydī communities in northern Iran and Iraq.

There is considerable disagreement among Western scholars over whether Imām al-Qāsim can be classified as a Mu‘tazilī theologian. Madelung, whose groundbreaking study of Imām al-Qāsim was published in German (1965), argued that the transparently Mu‘tazilī texts ascribed to Imām al-Qāsim were all inauthentic, while Binyamin Abrahamov, who has edited and translated two of Imām al-Qāsim’s longer works, has argued that they are authentic (Abrahamov 1990; Madelung 1989). This latter position agrees with the traditional Zaydī view (al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm 2001). Regardless of which treatises are authentic, Imām al-Qāsim adopted a common-sense rationalist approach to argumentation that drew heavily upon Qur’anic verses, such that many of his writings could be considered partial Qur’anic commentaries. In his book, *Kitāb al-dalīl al-kabīr* (The Major Indicator [for God’s Existence]), nearly every page contains one or more Qur’anic citations, while there are virtually no references to Prophetic Hadith. While Imām al-Qāsim’s overall argument for the existence of God is a rational articulation of the ancient ‘argument from design’, his evidence is overwhelmingly drawn from Qur’anic stories of the prophets who preceded Muḥammad (Abrahamov 1990).

2.5.2 Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq

Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq, or Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 298/911), was the grandson of Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm and founder of the Zaydī Imāmate in Yemen. A native of Medina, he travelled widely before responding to an invitation to resolve a tribal dispute in Yemen. His seminal work on law, *Kitāb al-Aḥkām* (Book of Laws), formed the foundation of the predominant school of Zaydī law and was expanded extensively by the Caspian Imāms al-Mu‘ayyad bi-Allāh and Abū Ṭālib ([section 2.4](#)). Western scholars consider Imām al-Hādī to be the first Zaydī imām to align entirely with the five principles of the Mu‘tazilī theologians, although he differed from them regarding the topic of the Imāmate. These five principles are the absolute oneness of God; God’s justice, which requires that all evil in the world derive from humans and jinn; the promise and the threat; the intermediary status of the grave sinner; and the obligation to command right and forbid wrong. Imām al-Hādī’s substantial collection of treatises has been published and covers a diverse range of topics beyond these five principles. Many of these treatises contain Qur’anic exegesis, such as on the figurative meaning of God’s Throne, and creative explanations for Qur’anic stories in which prophets appear, at first glance, to have erred or even sinned. In another treatise, Imām al-Hādī clarifies polyvalent expressions in the Qur’an whose meanings differ depending on their context. In two others, he provides lists and discussions of Qur’anic verses that support the preponderant Zaydī affirmation of human free will.

A good example of Imām al-Hādī’s theological method and position can be found in his lengthy refutation of the deterministic opinions and arguments of al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 100/718). The thirteenth topic of this treatise concerns the theological question of God sealing the hearts, eyes, and ears of disbelievers such that they are

incapable of benefitting from the Prophet Muḥammad's teachings. Al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanafīyya took this sealing of the hearts literally on the basis of verse 36:10 of the Qur'an. Imām al-Hādī could not accept this premise, however, because if God sealed the hearts and ears of non-Muslims such that they could not hear the revelation and embrace Islam, then He would be punishing people whom He had rendered incapable of becoming Muslim on account of their failure to convert to Islam. In other words, if God punished these people whom He had prevented from becoming Muslim, He would necessary be unjust. Therefore, Imām al-Hādī provides three alternative interpretations of God sealing the hearts of disbelievers (al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq 2001: 327–333):

- (1) The sealing (*ṭab'*) is in fact a simile; the meaning really is 'it is as if their hearts were sealed', like the Qur'anic verses that liken recalcitrant disbelievers to cattle (Q. 7:179; 25:44).
- (2) The sealing (here *khatm*) refers to God's perfect knowledge that the disbelievers will die in a state of disbelief, so the sealing means God knows the final choices of these disbelievers and is merely informing listeners of the Qur'an about them. Interestingly, Imām al-Hādī links this interpretation of sealing with the description of the Prophet Muḥammad as 'Seal of the Prophets' (Q. 33:40), saying that Muḥammad was called the seal because he was the final prophet.
- (3) 'Sealing' (again *ṭab'*) in the usage of the Arabs indicates a person's negative qualities, when they are spoken of in a group.

The common denominator of these three interpretations is that they all save the believer from adopting the (erroneous) belief that God literally seals some individuals' hearts, eyes, and ears while simultaneously obligating them to believe in God, a position Imām al-Hādī (and traditional Zaydīs) consider manifestly unjust.

2.5.3 Imām Aḥmad b. Sulaymān and Qāḍī Ja'far al-Buhlūlī

The eleventh century constituted a highwater mark for the Ismā'īlī Shī'ite dynasty of the Ṣulayḥids in Yemen. Led by one of the most famous queens in Islamic history, Queen Arwā (r. 467–532/1074–1138), the Ṣulayḥids and their tribal allies reduced the Zaydī community in northern Yemen to isolated mountain centres called *hijras* (Madelung 1991). However, in the twelfth century, a descendant of Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq (section 2.5.2) named Aḥmad b. Sulaymān (imām from 532/1137 to 566/1170) made the call to the Imāmate and reestablished Zaydī political authority in Yemen. In addition to his successes (and setbacks) on the battlefield, Imām Aḥmad b. Sulaymān, who took the honorific title al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh, composed seminal books on law and theology while also promoting the importation of Zaydī and Mu'tazilī literature from Iraq and Iran. His most significant work of theology, *Kitāb Ḥaqā'iq al-ma'rifa* (The Realities of Knowledge), covers a range of topics from arguments for the existence of God to the divine attributes to a defence of human free will, eschatology, prophethood, and the Imāmate. He also benefited from the

arrival of the erudite northeastern Persian, Zayd b. al-Ḥasan al-Bayhaqī (d. c. 551/1156), who, following his pilgrimage to Mecca, settled in Sa‘da, Yemen, where Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq was buried, and taught a range of rationalist works and hadiths that were otherwise inaccessible in Yemen at that time.

One of Imām Aḥmad Sulaymān’s most consequential decisions was to send Qāḍī Ja‘far b. Aḥmad al-Buhlūlī (d. 573/1177–1178 or 576/1180–1181) on a mission to collect Zaydī and Mu‘tazilī books from Iraq and Iran. This mission lasted from approximately 1151 to 1159 and resulted in an extraordinary transfer of religious books, all of which Qāḍī Ja‘far heard from scholars who had chains of transmission for them tracing back to their authors. As a result, most of the older books of the Zaydī canon that have been transmitted over the past 800 years passed through Qāḍī Ja‘far and his Iranian and Iraqi teachers.

Qāḍī Ja‘far also composed original works on law, theology, and Hadith. His most enduring original contribution to Zaydī theology was a thirty-topic framework, arranged into ten topics each on divine oneness, divine justice, and the promise and the threat, the final four of which were devoted to the Imāmate. The arguments in the first twenty-six topics aligned with the Bahshamī Mu‘tazilī positions found in Mānkḍīm’s *Ta‘līq* (Revision) of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, while the final four championed the Imāmates of Imāms ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn, and concluded with a defence of the unique Zaydī stipulations for a legitimate imām. This framework was adopted and developed in two highly influential books by the Zaydī theologian Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan al-Raṣṣāṣ (d. 621/1224): *Miṣbāḥ al-‘ulūm fī ma‘rifat al-ḥayy al-qayyūm* (The Lamp of the Sciences concerning knowledge of the Divine Living Sustainer) and *al-Khulāṣa al-nāfi‘a* (The Useful Epitome). Aḥmad al-Raṣṣāṣ was the son of al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Raṣṣāṣ (d. 584/1188), who was an exceptional theologian in his own right and a direct student of Qāḍī Ja‘far (Thiele 2010; 2013; 2018). Aḥmad al-Raṣṣāṣ’s two books attracted multiple commentaries and versifications over the following four centuries and continued to be copied by Zaydī scholars into the modern period (Lucas 2020).

2.5.4 Imām ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza and the thirteenth-century theologians

The massive transfer of Zaydī and Mu‘tazilī books to Yemen during the Imāmate of Aḥmad b. Sulaymān had an immediate impact on Zaydism. One of the most prolific imāms in Zaydī history, ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza, also known as al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh (r. 593–614/1197–1217), composed major works and didactic poems on law, theology, and even horses. His book *Sharḥ al-risāla al-nāṣiḥa* (Commentary on the Treatise of Advice) aligns with Bahshamī Mu‘tazilī positions on divine oneness and divine justice, up until the lengthy section on the Imāmate, in which Imām ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza exhaustively defends the Zaydī criteria for this leadership position. Another work, *al-‘Iqd al-thamīn* (The Precious

Necklace), consists of a thorough refutation of Twelver Shī'ism, with particular focus on their concept of the Imāmate (Jarrar 2012).

Another highly accomplished Yemeni theologian from the thirteenth century was 'Abd Allāh b. Zayd al-'Ansī (d. 667/1268). His most popular book, *al-Irshād ilā najāt al-'ibād* (Guidance for the Servants' Salvation), is devoted to ethical and spiritual topics, including details for how to perform a wide range of supererogatory prayers. Given that knowledge of God is necessary for salvation, al-'Ansī inserts a ten-part articulation of Zaydī theology that agrees frequently with the positions found in the thirty topics tradition. For example, he introduces his readers to the following ten attributes of God: God is eternal, unlike anything created, invisible, powerful, knowing, living, hearing, seeing, self-sufficient, singular, and unchanging (al-'Ansī 2014: 189–194). Likewise, he defines the Qur'an both as the Word of God and as an originated, created entity, a position which agrees with the eighteenth and nineteenth topics of the thirty topics template (2014: 204–205).

Al-'Ansī has received attention from Western scholars in large part because he engaged with the teachings of the Mu'tazilī school of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), whose positions often challenged those of the Bahshamī Mu'tazila promoted by Imām 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza and Aḥmad al-Raṣṣāṣ. While al-'Ansī does not follow Abū al-Ḥusayn in all matters, his writings, most of which remain in manuscript form, demonstrate the dynamic intellectual culture of thirteenth-century Zaydism (Ansari and Schmidtke 2022).

Not all Zaydī theologians from this time welcomed engagement with Mu'tazilī literature. Sayyid Ḥumaydān b. al-Qāsim (d. seventh/thirteenth century) wrote a series of treatises in which he argued that early Zaydī imāms, like Imām al-Qāsim and Imām al-Hādī, were not in agreement with the Bahshamī Mu'tazilī school and would have rejected its wholesale adoption by his contemporaries. While Ḥumaydān's passionate writings elicited little support in his day, they found greater traction during the seventeenth-century Imāmate of al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (section 2.5.6) and remain popular among Zaydīs who have rejected both the Mu'tazilī style of arguing and many of their theological positions.

A final theologian from this period who merits mention is al-Amīr al-Ḥusayn b. Badr al-Dīn (d. 663/1265). A direct descendant of Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq, al-Ḥusayn composed significant books on law, hadith, and theology. His multi-volume book on legal Hadith, *Shifā' al-uwām* (The Healing for those Dying of Thirst), remains a core book within the Zaydī curriculum to this day. His primary theological work, *Yanābī' al-naṣīḥa fī al-'aqā'id al-ṣaḥīḥa* (The Wellsprings of Advice Concerning the Sound Creeds), illustrates the depth of the Zaydī alignment with the Bahshamī Mu'tazilī tradition on the topics of God's attributes, human free will, and the promise and the threat. These theological topics are followed by hagiographies of approximately a dozen Zaydi imāms, along with numerous

transmitted reports concerning the special status of the Prophet's descendants in the Muslim community (al-Ḥusayn b. Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad 1999). In short, *Yanābī' al-naṣīḥa* testifies to the dual commitment of most premodern Zaydīs to rationalist Qur'an-based theology and fidelity to the Prophet Muḥammad's descendants.

2.5.5 Imām Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza

Numerous scholars built upon the impressive intellectual accomplishments of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Zaydīs. One who distinguished himself by the breadth and depth of his erudition was Imām al-Mu'ayyad bi-Allāh Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza (d. 749/1348–1349), who is unrelated to the Imām 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza of the previous section. This scholar was one of three contenders for the Zaydī Imāmate in Yemen during the first half of the fourteenth century and appears to have devoted most of his time to scholarship in his hometown of Dhamar, then the southern border of the Yemeni Zaydī community. He wrote a massive, multi-volume work of comparative Islamic law, *al-Intiṣār* (The Victory), which was abridged in the following century by Imām Ibn al-Murtaḍā (section 2.5.6) as *al-Baḥr al-zakhkhār* (The Raging Sea), along with three books on legal theory, a multi-volume work on Arabic rhetoric, and an extensive commentary on the famous collection of Imām 'Alī's sermons, letters, and aphorisms, *Nahj al-balāgha* (The Path of Eloquence), titled *al-Dībāj al-waḍī fī al-kashf 'an asrār kalām al-waṣī* (The Neat Brocade that Explains the Secrets of the Legatee's Speech). He also wrote an important ethical work, *Taṣfiyat al-qulūb* (Purification of the Hearts), that drew extensively from the Sunnī Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's famous book on Sufism, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences).

Imām Yaḥyā is among those Zaydīs who held the most favourable opinion of the companions of the Prophet. Zaydīs have historically positioned themselves between Sunnism's veneration of the Prophet's companions and the Twelver Shī'ites uncompromising criticism and excommunication (*takfīr*) of those individuals. Most Zaydīs consider the majority of Muḥammad's companions to have been pious and merely to have erred (rather than sinned) by not recognizing Imām 'Alī during the reigns of the first three caliphs. Their harshest criticism is restricted to those companions who failed to support Imām 'Alī in the first civil war (656–661) or who actively fought against him, such as Mu'āwiya and 'Amr b. al-'Ās. Here, Imām Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza breaks with most Zaydīs by claiming that even those companions who fought against Imām 'Alī did not commit a major sin ('Azzān 2013).

2.5.6 Ibn al-Murtaḍā and Ibn al-Wazīr

Two Yemeni scholars who lived during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and had a profound impact on the Zaydī intellectual tradition were Ibn al-Murtaḍā and Ibn al-Wazīr. Also known as Imām al-Mahdī li-Dīn Allāh, Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. al-Murtaḍā (henceforth Ibn al-Murtaḍā) composed legal and theological works that became canonical

within Zaydī Islam. Born in 764/1363 in the Dhamar region of Yemen, Ibn al-Murtaḍā grew up in a scholarly family of sayyids and received the oath of allegiance for the Imāmate in Sanaa in 793/1391 (Wilmers 2018). However, scholars in the northern city of Sa‘da favoured the previous imām’s young son, which resulted in civil strife culminating in the arrest of Ibn al-Murtaḍā. After seven years in prison, he retired to the northern fortress town of Thula, where he was supported by the scholar and legal exegete Yūsuf ‘the Jurist’ b. Aḥmad (d. 832/1429). Later, he lived in multiple towns in the northern highlands, where he ultimately succumbed to plague in 840/1436.

Ibn al-Murtaḍā’s legal handbook, *Kitāb al-azhār* (The Book of Flowers), became the standard law book for Zaydīs and has, as a result, attracted numerous commentaries and glosses. His legal encyclopaedia, *Kitāb al-baḥr al-zakḥkhār* (The Raging Sea) was based on Imām Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza’s previously mentioned *al-Intiṣār*, which surveyed Zaydī, Sunnī, and occasionally Twelver Shī‘ī positions on all major legal topics in Islam. Ibn al-Murtaḍā wrote an influential introductory volume to *Kitāb al-baḥr al-zakḥkhār* comprising a series of short treatises on Islamic sects, theology, natural philosophy, legal theory, the lives of the Prophet Muḥammad and of the imāms, and the five hundred legal passages of the Qur’an that every master jurist must know. The first three treatises derive almost entirely from al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī’s (d. 494/1101) commentary on his own *Kitāb ‘uyūn al-masā’il* (Book of Major Topics), which remains in manuscript form (Ansari, Schmidtke and Thiele 2016). Ibn al-Murtaḍā wrote an extremely long commentary on these treatises, although a medium length commentary by Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh al-Najrī (d. 877/1473) on his second treatise on theology served as the standard Zaydī work on that subject from 1500 to 1700, with more than seventy manuscript versions of it being extant (Schwarb 2015). This treatise, which Ibn al-Murtaḍā titled *Kitāb al-qalā'id fī taṣḥīḥ al-'aqā'id* (Book of Necklaces for Correcting the Creeds), addresses approximately three hundred topics on divine oneness, divine justice, prophethood, the promise and the threat, disbelief and grave sins, and the Imāmate. It contains a rich array of early Mu‘tazilī opinions, along with Ibn al-Murtaḍā’s personal assessments of the correct positions for each subject.

Ibn al-Murtaḍā’s treatise on natural theology within the introduction to *Kitāb al-baḥr al-zakḥkhār*, titled *Riyāḍat al-afḥām fī laṭīf al-kalām* (Exercising Minds concerning the Subtleties of Theology), provides a valuable guide to premodern Zaydī views of the universe. Like the earlier Mu‘tazila, Ibn al-Murtaḍā considered the world to consist of atoms (*jawāhir*) and accidents (*a'rād*), properties that can only exist in substances (Dhanani 1994). Following al-Jishumī’s *Kitāb ‘uyūn al-masā'il*, he elaborates upon numerous accidents, such as colour, taste, odour, force, life, capacity, conviction, will, and perception. In the case of capacities (*maqḍūrāt*), for example, Ibn al-Murtaḍā identifies ten types that are unique to humans and thirteen that are unique to God. Finally, he also briefly explains the mechanics of Satan and causality more broadly.

While Ibn al-Murtaḍā was harmonizing Zaydī and earlier Muʿtazilī positions in multiple disciplines, a contemporary sayyid named Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Wazīr (henceforth Ibn al-Wazīr) was charting a very different path. Ibn al-Wazīr's formative education took place in Sa'da, after which he travelled to Sanaa, the largest city in northern Yemen, where he studied with the Zaydī Sufi ʿAlī b. Abī al-Khayr (d. 792/1390–1391), while also engaging in fierce debates with the Zaydī sayyid ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Abī al-Qāsim (d. 837/1433–1434). It was probably during this time in Sanaa that Ibn al-Wazīr became convinced that the Sunnī Hadith canon accurately preserved the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad, a conviction that challenged many theological and legal positions of the Zaydī school. Ibn al-Wazīr next spent several years studying Sunnī Hadith literature in the city of Ta'izz, an overwhelmingly Sunnī Yemeni city, before living his later years in isolation prior to dying of the plague in 840/1436 (Wilmers 2018).

Like his contemporary Ibn al-Murtaḍā, Ibn al-Wazīr proved to be a highly productive scholar. His magnum opus was a multivolume work titled *al-ʿAwāṣim wa al-qawāṣim fī dhabb ʿan sunnat Abī al-Qāsim* (Defenders and Crushing Arguments in Defence of the Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad). It addresses a vast range of theological topics, including the visibility of God, free will, createdness of the Qur'an, and the Imāmate, while drawing on Ibn al-Wazīr's extraordinary knowledge of diverse Zaydī opinions and Sunnī hadiths. According to Damaris Wilmers (Wilmers 2018), Ibn al-Wazīr promoted an iconoclastic 'epistemology of ambiguity' in which he argued that most theological topics could not be proven rationally and with certainty. In other words, it was possible to be certain that God exists, but nothing about God can be known with certainty save through scriptural sources, rather than through rational arguments. While Ibn al-Wazīr's radical break with mainstream Zaydī positions did not find many adherents in his lifetime, he emerged as a hero among later Zaydīs, like Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (section 2.5.8), who shared his conviction that the Sunnī Hadith canon was far more reliable than any rational argument on theological issues, exhibiting a profound dislike for the entire rationalist theological tradition in general.

2.5.7 The Qāsimī Imāmate

In 1538, the Ottomans began bringing territory within Yemen into their dominion. Due to its mountainous terrain, they were at a grave disadvantage compared to the local Yemenis, who knew the territory and travelled in small groups. Ultimately the Ottomans prevailed, however, capturing Sanaa in about 1547 and holding it as their provincial capital until 1629. While many Yemenis, primarily Sunnīs, welcomed the Ottoman governors, most Zaydīs and independent tribesmen of the northern provinces were eager to see them depart (Grohmann et al. 2012).

In the remote city of Shahara in northern Yemen, a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad named al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (d. 1029/1620) developed his scholarly and martial skills so that, in 1006/1598, he could proclaim himself Imām al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh and lead a Yemeni tribal army against the Ottoman forces. This effort bore fruit when his son, Imām al-Mu'ayyad bi-Allāh Muḥammad (r. 1029–1054/1620–1644), succeeded in conquering Sanaa and expelling the Ottomans from Yemen in 1636. Imām al-Mu'ayyad bi-Allāh was then succeeded by his brother, al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh Ismā'īl (r. 1054–1087/1644–1676), who also combined scholarly and martial abilities. However, by the time of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad, known as Ṣāhib al-Mawāhib (r. 1097–1130/1686–1718), the Imāmate had been transformed into a kingship led by descendants of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh who generally lacked the requisite qualities demanded of an imām in Zaydī law books (Haykel 2003: 48). What this Imāmate lacked in scholarship and piety it made up for in political acumen, however, as it was capable of weathering a second Ottoman occupation (1872–1914) and subsequently acquired control over all northern Yemen after the First World War (lasting until the 1962 revolution).

Imām al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad authored numerous works, several of which highlight his expertise in Sunnī Hadith literature. His most widely disseminated work was a theological treatise titled *al-Asās li-'aqā'id al-akyās* (The Foundation for the Beliefs of the Intelligent). Despite its brevity, this book covers a full range of theological topics: divine oneness, divine justice, prophethood, Imāmate, the intermediate station of grave sinners, and the promise and the threat. Like Imām al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq, whose positions he emphasizes, Imām al-Manṣūr rejected the possibility that God arbitrarily seals disbelievers' hearts, rendering them incapable of belief. However, his interpretation of how God seals hearts diverged significantly from that of Imām al-Hādī. His initial move was to reject the linguistic meanings of 'seal' as a 'covering' or a 'mark' distinguishing the disbelievers from the believers because God's justice prevents Him from covering people's hearts from the truth and His omniscience makes it unnecessary for Him to mark the disbelievers in order to recognize them. Imām al-Manṣūr's original proposition was that God's sealing of hearts constituted His refusal to provide disbelievers with the guiding illumination (*tanwīr*) that He bestows upon believers, as mentioned in Qur'anic verses 8:29, 47:17, and 64:11. All sane human beings have sufficient reason to discern the existence of God because God is just, but those disbelievers whose hearts are 'sealed' by God are deprived of any added illumination beyond this basic rational capacity to believe in God (al-Manṣūr bi-llāh n.d.: 87–88). This elegant solution preserves both human free will and the Qur'anic declaration that God seals the hearts of disbelievers.

While Imām al-Manṣūr has a reputation for challenging many of the Zaydī positions that align with the Bahshamī Mu'tazilī school, it is important not to overstate his opposition. For example, on the topic of the Prophet Muḥammad's intercession on Judgment Day,

he agreed (in common with most early Zaydī imāms) that such was reserved exclusively for Muslims who had earned admission to Paradise and not for Muslim sinners who deserve Hellfire. He marshalled multiple Qur'anic verses in defence of this position, while rejecting those hadiths Sunnīs cite in support of the Prophet Muḥammad's intercession on behalf of Muslims who have committed major sins with a novel argument: given that (1) companions of the Prophet rejected hadiths that contradict the Qur'an, and that (2) the Qur'an threatens everyone who enters Hell with eternal damnation, Sunnī hadiths which report that Muslims will be removed from Hell by means of Muḥammad's intercession contradict the Qur'an and must be false (al-Manṣūr bi-llāh n.d.: 175–176).

2.5.8 The impact of al-Shawkānī

The Zaydī tradition faced an unprecedented challenge with scholar and judge Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī (d. 1834). Despite the fact that he was employed as chief judge by three successive Zaydī imāms, al-Shawkānī launched a blistering attack on the Zaydī scholarly tradition from which it has never fully recovered. Although al-Shawkānī had been trained in the core Zaydī disciplines, at a certain time early in his life, like Ibn al-Wazīr (section 2.5.6) and Muḥammad ibn al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 1768), he became a fervent believer in the authenticity of the Sunnī Hadith literature, essentially rejecting the entire enterprise of rationalist theology (*kalām*). He wrote a book-length refutation of Ibn al-Murtaḍā's canonical Zaydī legal manual, cleverly titled *al-Sayl al-jarrār al-mutadaffiq 'alā ḥadā'iq al-azhār* (The Rushing Torrential Flood over the Gardens of the Flowers). Al-Shawkānī claimed for himself the theologically significant title Absolute Independent Jurist (*mujtahid muṭlaq*) on account of his expertise in the scriptural sources of Sunnī Islam, the Qur'an (on which he wrote a famous commentary, *Fath al-Qadīr*, or 'Victory of the Omnipotent'), and the canonical Sunnī Hadith books. He also composed an influential multivolume commentary on legal hadith, titled *Nayl al-awṭār* (The Attainment of Desires), that remains popular today in Sunnī seminaries across the globe. Despite his rejection of Mu'tazilī theology and general unwillingness to accord the Prophet's descendants a special status, he wrote a short treatise in defence of the Prophet Muḥammad's designation of Imām 'Alī as his legatee (*waṣī*), a position generally unacceptable to orthodox Sunnīs (al-Shawkānī 1929).

Al-Shawkānī's teachings were promoted both by the later Qāsimī imāms, whose practice of hereditary succession was contrary to traditional Zaydī doctrine, and by the secular Arab Republic of Yemen, which overthrew the Zaydī Imāmate in 1962. As Bernard Haykel has shown, the government of Yemen, which was dominated by Zaydīs, advanced al-Shawkānī as a model Zaydī while suppressing most expressions of traditional Zaydī theology through a regime of censorship and imprisonment (Haykel 2003). The unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, along with the arrival of personal computers, led to a relaxation in official censorship and the rise of multiple Zaydī publishing houses. The fruits

of these efforts can be observed in the online Zaydī libraries that have emerged recently, such as al-Maktaba al-Zaydiyya (ziydia.com).

3 Zaydī theology

The previous section outlined the diversity of Zaydī thought over its long history. What follows is a brief summary of Zaydī theology, with preference being given to the positions taught within the thirty topics tradition ([section 2.5.3](#)), which aligns for the most part with Bahshamī Mu‘tazilī teachings. A key summary of these teachings, one still used today in Yemen, can be found in Aḥmad al-Raṣṣāṣ’ aforementioned *Miṣbāḥ al-‘ulūm* (2003).

3.1 Divine oneness

Zaydīs define the singular God as being totally transcendent and free of any resemblance to created things. They describe God positively as powerful, knowing, living, seeing, hearing, and eternal, and negatively as being unlike any created thing, self-sufficient, invisible, and singular. They reject the Sunnī concept of eternal attributes conceived of as entities and do not accept Sunnī hadiths that claim God will be seen by means of the eyes in the Hereafter, preferring instead the Qur’anic verse, ‘The eyes do not grasp Him, while He grasps what eyes see; He is the Subtle, the Informed’ (Q. 6:103). They also reject Sunnī hadiths that imply God is in a restricted space or moves from one place to another because these reports imply that God has a finite body, like a created being. They also consider God’s speech, the Qur’an, to be originated because it consists of created words and sounds, which is in opposition to Sunnīs, who consider it eternal and uncreated. This position is also reinforced by their interpretation of the Qur’anic verse ‘No originated (*muḥdath*) reminder is brought to them save they hear it while playing heedlessly’ (Q. 21:2) as being a reference to the Qur’an, because one of the widely recognized names for the Qur’an is ‘the Reminder’ (*dhikr*).

3.2 Divine justice

Zaydīs, like the Mu‘tazila and Twelver Shī‘ites, are robust champions of human free will, teaching that God neither decrees, creates, nor wills evil acts. Rather, evil acts come from legally responsible humans (*mukallafūn*) who fail to obey God’s commands and do not observe God’s prohibitions. God’s omnipotence is not compromised by human free will because God remains all-powerful, despite the fact that people are habitually disobedient. Were God to decree, create, or will human acts, then humans could not be held accountable for those actions on Judgment Day because God would have been their actual creator. This premise, that God creates all human acts, is unjust according to Zaydīs because it would result in God punishing humans with Hellfire for acts they were not responsible for. Furthermore, it contradicts the Qur’an, which explicitly teaches that ‘God does not will any wrongdoing for the servants’ (Q. 40:31) and ‘Never will I (God) be unjust

to the servants' (Q. 50:29). Zaydīs eliminate the possibility of God punishing humans for acts they neither willed nor originated by teaching that we are the true authors of our own acts and that God does not play a direct role in bringing them into being.

Another significant passage in the Qur'an that supports the Zaydī and Mu'tazilī position on human free will is the following:

And when they do a vile act they say: We found our fathers doing it and God has commanded us to do it. Say: God, verily, does not command vile acts. Do you ascribe to God that which you do not know? Say: My Lord commands justice. And set your faces upright (toward Him) at every place of worship and call upon Him, making religion pure, solely for Him. As He brought you into being, so you return to Him. (Q. 7:28–29)

This passage directly addresses those polytheists who tried to blame God for their sinful actions, explicitly stating that God did not will their vile acts, which aligns perfectly with Zaydī, Mu'tazilī, and Twelver Shī'ī teachings on this topic.

Zaydīs also address the issue of God's creation of natural disasters that cause mass casualties, such as earthquakes and floods. Most of them teach that God compensates all creatures who suffer harm during these events, either by means of a reward or in the form of a lesson learned. The reward can occur in either this world or in the Hereafter and constitutes part of His justice. God also sends prophets, the last of whom is Muḥammad, to teach humans correct conduct because He is just – it would be unjust to punish people in the Hereafter who were uninformed of God's commands and prohibitions.

3.3 The promise and the threat

Zaydīs, like all Muslims, believe in the veracity of both God's promise to reward believing Muslims with eternal paradise and His threat to punish disbelievers with eternal hellfire. They differ from nearly all other Muslims, however, in their insistence that Muslims who commit major sins (*fussāq*) and fail to repent prior to their deaths will also be in Hell for eternity. They accept that the Prophet Muḥammad has the power to intercede on Judgment Day, but they understand his intercession to be limited to pious Muslims who are bound for Heaven, rather than sinful Muslims who are condemned to Hell. The primary scriptural evidence for these Zaydī positions lies in the Qur'anic verses 'and whoever disobeys God and His Messenger, lo – his abode is Hell, wherein such dwell forever' (Q. 72:23) and 'Warn them of the Day of the approaching doom, when the hearts will be choking the throats, when there will be no friend for the wrong-doers, nor any intercessor who will be heard' (Q. 40:18). By contrast, Sunnī and Twelver Shī'ī theologians teach that the Prophet Muḥammad's intercession is capable of delivering sinful Muslims from eternal punishment.

3.4 Leadership (the Imāmate)

Zaydīs are classified as Shīʿites primarily because of their belief that the rightful leader of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muḥammad was his cousin and son-in-law, Imām ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Their evidence for this position includes two famous prophetic hadiths found in Sunnī as well as Shīʿī collections. The first of these was uttered at Ghadīr Khumm, a pool midway between Mecca and Medina, and has the Prophet say, ‘To whosoever I was master, ʿAlī is his master’ (al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, *al-manāqib*, 20: *Bāb manāqib ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib*, 3713; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan, al-muqaddima*, 121), while the second took place near the end of Muḥammad’s life, when he said to ʿAlī, ‘Are you not pleased that you are in relation to me like Aaron was in relation to Moses, save there are no prophets after me?’ (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, faḍāʿil aṣḥāb al-Nabī*, 9: *Bāb manāqib ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib*, 3706; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, faḍāʿil al-ṣaḥāba*, 4: *Bāb min faḍāʿil ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib*, 2404). Zaydīs also believe that the Prophet Muḥammad indicated that his grandsons, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, were the rightful successors to Imām ʿAlī, a position supported by a hadith that is only found in Zaydī books: ‘al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn are imāms, whether they stand or sit, and their father is better than both of them’ (al-Raṣṣāṣ 2003: 77).

Zaydīs differ from Ismāʿīlī and Twelver Shīʿites in rejecting designation (*naṣṣ*) as a valid form of transmitting the Imāmate from one imām to the next following the Imāmate of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī. Rather, since 680, each Zaydī imām must make a public claim to being the imām that involves an armed uprising against an unjust ruler, following the examples of Imāms al-Ḥusayn and Zayd. Furthermore, the ideal Zaydī imām must have the following qualities: superior (but not infallible) religious and worldly knowledge; scrupulousness in avoiding religiously forbidden matters; sincerity in practising Islam; liberality; courage on the battlefield; and administrative skills to manage a state. Finally, the imām must be a male descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad through either al-Ḥasan or al-Ḥusayn. (Later Zaydī works identified fourteen necessary qualities for the imām.) Zaydīs historically exhibited a degree of pragmatism regarding the Imāmate, accepting that there would not always be a male descendant of the Prophet who met these rigorous criteria, with many imāms excelling more at politics than scholarship. This pragmatism allowed Zaydism to thrive during times when there were no qualified imāms, while also allowing them to avoid Twelver Shīʿī belief in a miraculously long-lived imām living in an inaccessible state of occultation.

3.5 Distinctive qualities of Zaydī Shīʿism

Zaydī Shīʿism is a unique articulation of Islam. Theologically, it espouses a rigorous doctrine of God’s absolute transcendence and invisibility, both in this world and in the Hereafter. God’s speech, the Qur’an, must be originated or created because it is composed of finite letters and words; were it eternal, it would be co-eternal with God,

which violates the fundamental principle of God's absolute singularity. The vast majority of Zaydīs are champions of human free will, assigning full responsibility and agency to legally responsible people for their actions. All evil in the world comes from humans and not by the decree or will of God. God wills and causes natural disasters, which afflict many people, but Zaydīs teach that He will compensate those who suffer these calamities on account of His wisdom and justice. Zaydīs restrict the Prophet Muḥammad's power of intercession to righteous Muslims who have earned a place in heaven, arguing that Muslims who deserve Hell on account of their sinful acts and failure to repent cannot receive it. They adopt a moderate position towards the companions of the Prophet, accepting most of them and reserving their harshest criticism for those who waged war against Imām 'Alī.

Zaydīs believe that Imām 'Alī was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muḥammad, rather than the first three caliphs of Sunnī Islam. They have an expansive view of the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) and, therefore, of who is eligible to be imām, extending that privilege to all the descendants of both al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. This differentiates them from other Shī'ites, who limit the imāms to certain of Imām al-Ḥusayn's descendants. Zaydīs demand that their imāms be righteous military leaders and scholars from among the descendants of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, while considering them fallible and fully human. Unlike Sunnīs and other Shī'ites, Zaydīs endorse rebellion against an unjust ruler, so long as the leader of that rebellion has the requisite qualities of a Zaydī imām.

At the level of practice, Zaydīs are distinguished from most Sunnīs by their recitation of 'Come to the Best of Deeds' in the call to prayer, a line which they believe the Caliph 'Umar removed during the Muslim conquests. They also pray with their arms by their sides, instead of crossed, and do not say *amīn* after the first *sūra* has been recited. During Ramaḍān, Zaydīs generally perform the *tarāwīḥ* prayer individually rather than in congregation because it is a voluntary rather than obligatory prayer. It is unusual for them to join Sufi orders or visit Sufi shrines (Madelung 1999). If a hadith appears to contradict the clear meaning of the Qur'an, they usually reject that hadith, even if it has an acceptable chain of transmitters, because in their epistemological framework the Qur'an is superior to individual sound hadiths.

Zaydīs are theologically distinct from Twelver Shī'ites in several respects, including with regards to their insistence that the imām summon Muslims to resist injustice while also composing scholarly works, and in their denial of the concepts of designation (*naṣṣ*), infallibility (*iṣma*), and occultation (*ghayba*). In practice, recognition of an imām was generally determined by the Zaydī scholarly elites in the cities of Sa'da or Sanaa, especially when multiple Zaydī sayyids made the call to the Imāmate simultaneously. They differ from Twelvers at the level of practice by their rejection of the line 'Alī is the Friend of God' in the call to prayer, reticence to combine daily prayers unless travelling,

and prohibition of temporary marriage (*mutʿa*). Zaydīs do not have an annual *khums* tax (twenty percent) or a hierarchy of scholars at the head of which are a small number of ‘sources of emulation’ (*marjaʿ al-taqlīd*) from whom laypeople must select a leader. Finally, Imām Khomeini’s concept of ‘Guardian of the Jurist’ (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) resembles the concept of the Zaydī imām more than it resembles anything in the Twelver Shīʿī tradition.

4 Contemporary Zaydīs

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Zaydīs were found exclusively in the northern mountainous highlands of Yemen living under a second Ottoman occupation. In 1904, Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn became the Zaydī imām and devoted much of his efforts to opposing the Ottoman regime, which withdrew following the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Imām Yaḥyā took the title al-Mutawakkil ‘alā Allāh and called his Imāmate the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen. He was murdered in February 1948 and succeeded by his son, Aḥmad Ḥamīd al-Dīn, who moved the capital to Taʿizz, where he had served as governor for three decades. Imām Aḥmad maintained the Imāmate until his death on 19 September 1962, a week prior to the uprising led by Yemeni revolutionaries in Sanaa, who proclaimed the secular Yemen Arab Republic. The revolutionaries blamed the political system of the Imāmate for preventing northern Yemen from embracing modernity (al-Zubayrī 2004: 7–9). Although the revolutionaries controlled most of northern Yemen, some remote northern provinces, such as Saʿda, were not integrated into the new republican state until 1970.

As a result of the 1962 revolution, some prominent Zaydī scholars were executed and others were imprisoned (al-Iryānī 2013: 21–23). The imām’s school for training Zaydī scholars, called the *Madrasa ʿilmīya*, was closed and only partially replaced with a modern educational system. The new curricula focused on teaching modern sciences and Sunnī traditions while eliminating Zaydī teachings and stigmatizing the overthrown Imāmate.

In the aftermath of the abolition of the Imāmate, the republican government sought to weaken and neutralize the Zaydī tradition by creating a ‘unified’ Islam based primarily on the Qurʾan and Sunnī Hadith collections. Their promotion of what can be called Salafī ideology, which aligned with the teachings of the nineteenth-century al-Shawkānī ([section 2.5.8](#)), also took place in rural provinces like Dhamar, Hajja, and Saʿda. Many Zaydīs felt increasingly marginalized and alienated, blaming the republican state for undermining their traditional school by sponsoring Salafī scholars and curricula (Von Bruck 2010: 189).

4.1 Contemporary Zaydī scholars

The intellectual lives of Zaydī scholars did not cease amid the political challenges imposed by the new republican regime. In addition to copying and later publishing premodern Zaydī texts, some scholars expanded existing Zaydī biographical dictionaries. An excellent

example is ‘Abd al-Salām al-Wajīh’s (d. 2022) indispensable biblio-biographical work, *A‘lām al-mu‘allifīn al-Zaydīya* (Notable Zaydī Authors; al-Wajīh 1999, second edition 2018). Among the most important examples of Zaydī prosopography, this text collected the scattered biographies and bibliographies of Zaydī authors from the time of Imām Zayd until the present. In 2001, al-Wajīh also edited one of the most significant of the premodern Zaydī biographical dictionaries, part three of *Ṭabaqāt al-Zaydīya al-kubrā* (The Large Collection of Zaydī Generations).

Sayyid Majd al-Dīn al-Mu‘ayyadī (d. 2007), also known as Imām Majd al-Dīn, was one of the most prominent of the Zaydī Hādawī scholars. He held the position of *muffī* (an authorized legal expert who can issue new religious laws) in both northern Yemen and the Hijaz during the reign of Imām Aḥmad Ḥamīd al-Dīn (*A‘lām*, 806–808). Al-Mu‘ayyadī devoted his life to preserving the extensive Zaydī intellectual traditions he had received from his teachers. The book *Lawāmi‘ al-anwār* (Flashes of Lights) exemplifies his approach to studying Islam through the lenses of the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). He devotes much effort to the authentication of the Zaydī chains of transmission (*isnāds*) and often enriches his discussions by listing both Zaydī and Sunnī sources alongside each other.

In order to define who could be considered Zaydī today, al-Mu‘ayyadī referred to Imām al-Manṣūr bi-Allāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza’s definition ([section 2.5.5](#)), while setting two stipulations. First, the affiliation of Zaydī can be given to any Muslim who believes in divine justice, the oneness of God, the promise and threat, the prophethood of Muḥammad, and the Imāmates of ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and their descendants. Second, Zaydīs are supporters of Imām ‘Alī and Imām Zayd who uphold the principle of fighting against the oppressors of their time. Anyone who agrees to these principles can be considered a Zaydī (al-Mu‘ayyadī 2019: 786 [vol. 1]). Interestingly, al-Mu‘ayyadī considered the Sunnī master jurist al-Shāfi‘ī to be a Zaydī in his book *al-Tuḥaf al-Fāṭimīya sharḥ al-zulaf al-imāmīya* (The Fatimid Masterpieces: A Commentary on the High Ranks of the Imams; al-Mu‘ayyadī 2020: 135). He also considered the four Sunnī imāms who established legal schools to be supporters of the Prophet’s descendants (*‘itrah*; al-Mu‘ayyadī 2019).

Al-Mu‘ayyadī granted *ijāzas* – authorizations to transmit specific texts – to many prominent Zaydī scholars, such as Sayyid Muḥammad al-Mansūr (d. 2017), Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī (d. 2010), Ḥamūd ‘Abbās al-Mu‘ayyad (d. 2018), al-Murtadā al-Maḥaṭwarī (d. 2015), and ‘Abd al-Salām al-Wajīh. These scholars taught the current generation of Zaydī authorities and published numerous classical Zaydī texts through their local publishing houses.

Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī was the father of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī (d. 2004), the founder of the influential Ḥūthī movement. His book *al-Taysīr fī al-tafsīr* (The Facilitator of Qur’anic Commentary) is an accessible commentary on the Qur’an characterized by a mixed

approach of *tafsīr bi-ra'y* (reasoned interpretation) and *tafsīr bi-riwāya* (transmitted interpretation within hadith, particularly those transmitted by the Family of the Prophet). Much of his scholarship was focused on refuting the claims of Salafī scholars against Zaydīs, primarily the claims of Muqbil al-Wādī'ī (d. 2001). Al-Wādī'ī was a Yemeni scholar who studied in Saudi Arabia and started the Salafī school of Dār al-Ḥadīth near Sa'da in the late 1970s, confronting Zaydī scholars and targeting their beliefs. Al-Ḥūthī's *Taḥrīr al-afkār* (Corrected Thoughts) refutes al-Wādī'ī's claims by challenging al-Wādī'ī's over-reliance on questionable Sunnī hadiths (al-Ḥūthī 2016).

Al-Murtaḍā al-Maḥaṭṭarī (d. 2015) was a student of Sayyid Muḥammad al-Manṣūr and received *ijāzas* from Majd al-Dīn al-Mu'ayyadī and Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī. In addition to his traditional religious teachings, al-Maḥaṭṭarī was a college professor at Sanaa University. His published doctoral dissertation, *'Adālat al-ruwāh wa al-shuhūd wa-taṭbīqatuhā fī al-ḥayāt al-mu'āṣira* (The Probity of Narrators and Witnesses, and its Application for Contemporary Life; al-Maḥaṭṭarī 1997), critically analysed the traditional Sunnī methods of evaluating hadith transmitters. His study was divided into two sections. The first discussed the theoretical background of the term *'adāla* (probity), or the quality of those qualified to testify in various Islamic traditions. He criticizes Sunnī hadith scholars for disparaging qualified Shī'ī transmitters. The second section then discussed the applications of the concept of *'adāla* in contemporary life, investigating whether the testimony of non-Muslims can be accepted if their testimonies are related to daily life rather than religious issues. He highlights the evidence in support of accepting non-Muslim testimony from the Qur'an and Hadith, providing a progressive stance on a modern legal issue (al-Maḥaṭṭarī 1997).

In addition, al-Maḥaṭṭarī authored other works, such as *al-Sīra al-Nabawīya* (The Prophet's Biography), a detailed account of the Prophet's life from a Zaydī perspective, and *al-Zaydiyya* (The Zaydīs), which provides a beneficial insider's guide to the Zaydī tradition. He also established the Badr Center in Sanaa, comprising a mosque, school, public library, and publishing house for editing and printing manuscripts.

4.2 Contemporary religious occasions

Like all Muslims, Zaydīs celebrate Eid al-Fiṭr and Eid al-Aḍḥā, and observe the Ramaḍān fast. During Ramaḍān, people gather in their local mosques to break fast after sunset, pray, recite the Qur'an, and study in small groups. They also celebrate the Prophet Muḥammad's birthday (Mawlid), when they recite poems in his honour. In addition, Zaydīs have some special celebrations. They celebrate Eid al-Ghadīr on the eighteenth day of the Islamic month of Dhū al-Ḥijja, commemorating the Prophet's designation of Imām 'Alī as his successor. Eid al-Ghadīr is also known as Eid al-Wilāya, or the affirmation of allegiance to the Family of the Prophet, and is a significant occasion for most Shī'ites. Over the past

decade, Mawlid and Eid al-Ghadīr have been celebrated in massive gatherings in Sanaa and other cities, in which thousands of people collectively observe these rituals.

Another occasion that Zaydīs celebrate, along with some Yemeni Sunnīs, is Jumu‘at Rajab, or the first Friday of the Islamic month of Rajab, when Yemen first converted to Islam in the year 628. This occasion is usually celebrated by wearing new attire, visiting families, distributing sweets, and attending gatherings (Saba Net 2023).

4.3 The Ḥūthīs/Anṣār Allāh

The unification of Yemen in 1990 caused a major shift in the country’s political system. The establishment of a new multiparty democratic system allowed divergent groups, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the southern Communists, to start their own political parties. Some Zaydīs participated in the political realm and established Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq (Party of the Truth), the first Zaydī party. Despite the fact that Zaydīs make up thirty-four percent of Yemen’s population according to the US Department of State, Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq only received two seats (three percent) in the Yemeni Parliament.

The Yemeni government promoted Zaydī scholars with Sunnī tendencies. Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-‘Amrānī (d. 2021), for example, was known for his inclination towards al-Shawkānī’s teachings. He was appointed as a *muftī* during the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh (r. 1978–2012). Simultaneously, traditional Zaydī scholars were suppressed and threatened. Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī was banished from the country because of his opposition to the 1994 war against the breakaway Republic of South Yemen. Also, al-Maḥaṭwarī was imprisoned several times for criticizing the Yemeni regime during Friday sermons. These incidents exacerbated tensions between the regime and the traditional Zaydīs.

The Ḥūthī movement started in 2001, a few months after the September 11 attacks on the United States of America and the latter’s subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. The founder of the movement, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, was a Zaydī scholar, activist, and descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad. He studied under his father, Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī ([section 4.1](#)). Ḥusayn was part of the scholarly community in the 1990s and participated in the establishment of the youth educational forum, al-Shabāb al-Mu‘min (The Believing Youth), in Sa‘da city. From 1993 to 1997, he was the representative of the aforementioned Zaydī political party, Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq, in the Yemeni Parliament, after which he briefly pursued graduate study in Sudan (Lux 2009).

Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī is most famous for his politicized form of religion, in which he rejected US foreign policies and military interventions in the Middle East. In opposition to these policies, he started lecturing within his teaching circles, which included hundreds of students and followers. To fulfil what he viewed as the Islamic principle of disassociation (*barā’a*), he initiated the slogan of the Ḥūthīs known as ‘the Shout’ (*ṣarkhah*): ‘God is the

Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, a Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam'. Dozens of his lectures and lessons were recorded and transcribed into PDF documents known as the *Malāzim* (Lecture Notes; singular: *malzama*; see al-Ḥūthī [n.d.]). Al-Ḥūthī considered the act of performing the Shout to be an exercise in freedom of speech, permissible according to the Yemeni constitution (Haykel 2022).

Bernard Haykel claims that the ideology of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī can be attributed to a number of ideological streams, including Khomeinism, Muslim Brotherhood Islamism, and Global South anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism (Haykel 2022). However, in his *Malāzim*, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī aligns himself with the Zaydī tradition in many instances. Given the nature of the *Malāzim* as oral lessons for teaching and preaching rather than any academic purpose, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī rarely mentions the names of the books to which he alludes, although he refers to the opinions and actions of many Zaydī imāms. In addition, he tends to present himself first and foremost as a member of the Muslim community (*umma*) rather than as a Zaydī or Shi'ite, specifically.

From the *Malāzim*, it is apparent that Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī engaged in two discourses: Zaydī reformism and political activism. As a Zaydī reformist, he considered Zaydī influence to be negligible globally, despite their vast scholarly heritage. He also criticized the curricula of the traditional religious schools, particularly the disciplines of theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) and jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). He argued that the teaching of theology neither makes students more faithful nor more spiritual. He asserted that students should eschew the old, complex terminology found in traditional textbooks when studying the Qur'an and approach it in a dynamic, holistic manner.

Abdullah Lux observes that, despite Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī's hostility to rational theology, that discipline's impact is noticeable throughout the *Malāzim*, with traces of the 'five principles' (sections 3.1–3.3) being particularly evident (Lux 2009). It seems that Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī used accessible language to target laypeople and avoid theoretical discussions. He transformed a rationalist topic like the 'five principles' into easier to understand concepts designed to promote a believer's spirituality by focusing on relevant Qur'anic verses while connecting them to the current lived reality of Muslims.

Today, the *Malāzim* are widely quoted and discussed among the Zaydī communities of northern Yemen. Although the Ḥūthī movement, which took the name Anṣār Allāh (Helpers of God) in the year 2011 (Brandt 2017), is still in its formative stages, there are two important precepts in its ideology. One is the centrality and guidance of the Qur'an, while the other is submission to the chosen members of the Prophet's descendants (*ahl al-bayt*), referred to as 'the leaders of guidance' (*a'lām al-hudā*). The first war of Sa'da marked a new shift in how Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī was perceived among his followers, who grew from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands over the course of two decades. Today in

northern Yemen, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī is portrayed as a saint, a martyr, a spoken Qur'an, and as a leader of guidance (Haykel 2022).

In 2014, the economic situation in Yemen deteriorated rapidly, with the interim Yemeni regime, led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, hiking the price of gasoline, leading to massive public demonstrations. This escalation led to an armed confrontation that ended with the Ḥūthīs/Anṣār Allāh, under the leadership of 'Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī, capturing Sanaa in September 2014. As the Ḥūthīs consolidated their control of northern Yemen and pushed into the southern governates, a US-backed Saudi-UAE led coalition intervened on behalf of the anti-Ḥūthī Yemeni forces in a civil war that, at the time of writing, continues unabated.

Attributions

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