

# Friends of God

ISLAMIC IMAGES OF PIETY, COMMITMENT,  
AND SERVANTHOOD



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# 1. Beginnings Both Humble and Spectacular

Among the various subgenres within the expansive category of Islamic hagiography, those that recount the births, infancies, and childhood years of God's Friends are among the most intriguing for both religious and literary reasons. From a religious perspective, whatever the specific faith tradition, these accounts underscore the mystery and marvelous nature of divine involvement in human affairs. As literary forms, the stories have remarkable similarities in content and narrative art. Not all biohagiographical sketches start with stories of beginnings. Those that do share some themes, symbols, and character types.<sup>1</sup> This chapter considers several nativity and infancy narratives, as well as some tales that follow youthful Friends as they emerge from childhood.

Except in stories of the early lives of the Friends themselves, children do not often appear as subjects of hagiographical narratives. Some famous Sufis report that talking with children is one of several actions (along with hobnobbing with one's enemies and befriending women) sure to erode one's spiritual life.<sup>2</sup> Other hints of a somewhat negative attitude toward children occur in various Islamicate literary strands, a topic that is a major study in its own right. Here I look at the more positive descriptions of how God uses aspects of the beginnings of the lives of his Friends as vehicles for communicating the message of divine providence and power.<sup>3</sup>

FIGURE 1. (*opposite*) After the infant Moses slaps Pharaoh, the ruler threatens to kill the child. Pharaoh's daughter intervenes, insisting that the baby was unaware. As proof, she places a pearl and a live ember before Moses. When the infant begins to reach for the pearl, Gabriel guides his hand to the ember, which he then raises to his lips. Juwayrī, *Qisas al-anbiya*, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, X 829.8 Q1/Q (1574-75), 75a.

## NATIVITY NARRATIVES

Nativity narratives appear in both major types of hagiographic accounts, those of prophets and those of Friends of God. "Birth" stories of both groups arguably represent a single literary form. However, because these two groups of personalities embody theologically distinct presuppositions, certain subtle thematic variations set them apart. I therefore begin here with prominent examples of the Islamic tradition's enshrinement of the origins of God's premier spokespersons, the prophets, and suggest some principal thematic differences from similar accounts of God's Friends. Although no clear formal distinction exists between nativity and infancy accounts, I treat them separately here purely for organizational purposes. Thus, in this chapter, the category of "nativity" story embraces occurrences before the holy person's conception, during gestation, and at birth.

*From the Tales of the Prophets*

Most of the major prophets are the subjects of Qur'ānic texts, although these scriptural accounts are typically brief and fragmentary, and appear sporadically in various contexts. Many of these briefer allusions function as moral examples, reminding listeners and readers of the consequences of rejecting God's messengers and the revelations they bring. In many instances, the works of Qur'ānic exegetes fill in details and expand context, and in the unique instance of Joseph (Yūsuf), the prophet's story unfolds in a single literary unit (sura 12). But the genre we call "tales of the prophets" provides extended coherent narratives that go well beyond the scriptural accounts. Tales of the prophets are in the category of hagiographical anthologies or "collected lives." Among the most famous and influential works in the genre are the Arabic works of Tha'labī and Kisā'ī. My goal here is to illustrate elements of genre and theme rather than to rehearse the traditional Islamic structure of revelation history. I therefore discuss the stories of the prophets by theme rather than in the order in which they typically occur in the major sources.

The story of the Arabian prophet Hūd features an important theme: the revelatory dream anticipating the blessed birth. In a dream, Khulūd, of the tribe of ʿĀd, sees a chain—a common metaphor for progeny or lineage—emerging from his loins that is as bright as the sun. A voice informs him that when he witnesses the chain in a dream again, he is to marry the young woman chosen for him. He is later instructed to marry a cousin, and when Hūd is conceived, all creation exults and the tribe's orchards overflow with fruit. The baby is born on a Friday. Another significant (and often-used)

metaphor in such dreams is that of the tree emanating brilliant light from its many limbs, as in the dream of Rebecca that she would bear Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau.<sup>4</sup>

Kanūh (called ʿUbayd in Thaʿlabī and other sources), the father of another distinctively Arabian prophet, Sālih, experiences similar revelatory signs. When the seed that would grow into the new prophet becomes mobile within the father-to-be, a blazing light emits from his body, and he hears a voice that identifies the light as that of Sālih. Significantly, Kanūh has heretofore served the idols of the tribe of Thamūd—a parallel to Abraham's father's making his living by carving idols. Kanūh, in his fright, has recourse to the chief idol, but just before it comes crashing down, the image concedes that the light is indeed that of a great prophet. Here, as in other tales, an evil king responds to the perceived threat to his rule by trying to assassinate the principal characters; but in this instance, the target is the father, Kanūh. God intervenes and spirits the man away to a remote valley, where he sleeps for a century. Back home a hundred years on, Kanūh's wife continues to grieve his presumed death, when a marvelous bird suddenly appears in her courtyard. It identifies itself as the raven that showed Cain how to bury his brother Abel. It then offers to lead the woman to her husband. The couple reunites and conceives Sālih; but God takes Kanūh to himself, and the bird leads his pregnant wife back home. There, on Friday, the tenth of Muharram (the first lunar month), she delivers the child, who immediately begins to praise God.<sup>5</sup> This detail of timing is also a common feature in nativity narratives in tales of the prophets, and the annual date continues to be important both to Sunnī and (especially) to Shīʿī Muslims.

Abraham's (Ibrāhīm's) story is among the most extensive in the genre. The tale begins well in advance of his birth, with anticipatory dreams in this instance coming to two wicked rulers in succession. Canaan dreams of his own destruction, and his astrologers inform him that a shepherdess has conceived a child that will threaten Canaan's rule. The infant, Nimrod, survives various attempts to exterminate him and grows up to overthrow Canaan and establish his own evil regime. These activities set the stage for a second round of revelatory events, which inform the tyrant that a child will soon be born who will overthrow him. This time, the newcomer is a prophet rather than a rival king. A pair of white birds, one of the East and one of the West, enter the scene to foreshadow a series of dreams and apparitions. As in other dream stories, Nimrod's dream features brilliant lights emanating from the father-to-be. As in other stories, too, the evil ruler learns that his destruction will come from within his own house. This time the nemesis will be Abraham, whose father, called Āzar in most Islamic sources, has long been a trusted servant of Nimrod.<sup>6</sup> Nimrod

immediately initiates a murderous seven-year hunt for all male children, only to find that Abraham has not yet been conceived. Āzar's wife is old and barren but reports to him that she has mysteriously begun to menstruate again. When the two conceive Abraham, a new star ascends in the heavens and sends the idols in the Ka'ba crashing down from their pedestals. As we shall see, rising stars and falling idols go with the territory.

Again Nimrod launches a slaughter of innocents, and another dream informs him that his nemesis is yet to be delivered. His agents go to Āzar's house, but God conceals the pregnancy from the visitors. And when the time for childbirth arrives, according to Kisāʿī's account, an angel leads the child's mother to the cave where the prophets Idrīs and Noah were born, and she delivers on Friday, the tenth of Muharram. She hides the baby in the cave, where wild animals protect him, and she visits him every three days. In an interesting variation, Thaʿlabī includes an account in which Abraham's mother bears him in a wadi, a seasonal riverbed that was then dry, and hides him in some rushes. Thereafter, his father takes the baby to a riverside and excavates a tunnel in which to hide him. Turning over a new generation, Abraham's own wife, Sarah, eventually conceives their son Isaac on the night on which God had destroyed Lot and his family. When the child is born, his forehead radiates light, and he immediately prostrates himself before God.<sup>7</sup>

The birth of Moses (Mūsā) is likewise foreshadowed by ominous dreams, in which Pharaoh gets a glimpse of his own ignominious end, through the auspices of a child born within his own household. Like Nimrod, the Egyptian ruler sets out to slaughter all male children. Amram (ʿImrām), Moses's father, has been accustomed to sleeping at the foot of Pharaoh's bed, but God now carries Amram's wife to the royal bedchamber on the wings of a bird so that the couple can conceive the prophet. When a new star arises, Pharaoh's astrologers deliver the bad news to his majesty, who again seeks the lives of all male children. But Moses's mother hides the baby in the stove. Unaware of this fact, her daughter lights the oven; and when guards come shortly thereafter in search of the baby, they look everywhere but the stove. There God has kept the baby safe, and when his mother returns and flies into a panic at her daughter's actions, the infant reassures her from within the stove that all is well. Thaʿlabī also includes a version of the oven incident but prefaces it with an account of the effect of the child's birth on the Egyptian midwife whom Pharaoh has sent to kill the baby. When the infant emerges, a light from between his eyes shines on the midwife, causing her to love him totally. In this version, Moses's mother is the one who casts the baby into the oven, to discover after the guards have left that the oven has cooled miraculously.<sup>8</sup>

Stories of a host of lesser figures, also of biblical fame, provide intriguing twists on the main thematic elements of the genre. Most prominent in Noah's (Nūh's) story, for example, is the idea that age is a barrier to the birth of the special child. Here, however, the initial problem is not age beyond fertility but a woman who is not yet marriageable, however old she may sound. According to Kisāʿī, Noah's father meets a woman to whom he is attracted, but when he inquires about her age, she initially claims that she is one hundred eighty years old—twenty years short of marital maturity. When he continues to express interest, she reveals that she is actually two hundred twenty years old, and they marry and have a son. As in the story of Abraham (among others), Noah's mother fears the evil king of the age and gives birth sequestered in a cave. But after the child's birth, she wants a way to emerge safely from hiding, so her infant speaks up (like the baby Jesus and others) and assures her that she need not worry because God will take care of him. She then leaves the baby in the cave (as Abraham's mother left hers) and returns to her family. After forty days, a cohort of angels retrieves the baby and brings him to his mother.<sup>9</sup> Other stories that feature an unlikely pregnancy are those in the "historical books" about Islamic prophetic figures or "former prophets" of the Bible. As in the biblical story of Samuel, Thaʿlabī's version highlights the pregnancy of the aged and barren wife of Samuel's father. Like Hanna of the biblical First Book of Samuel, the woman prays and the next day begins to menstruate again. Hearing of her pregnancy, the people conclude that the baby will be a prophet, for women otherwise incapable of bearing children give birth only to prophets; one need only witness the mothers of Isaac and John the Baptist.<sup>10</sup>

Tales of the prophets include stories of the conception and birth of Mary, mother of Jesus, with Thaʿlabī providing greater detail than Kisāʿī does. When the story starts, Mary's mother has been childless, and her husband has a dream that he is to have intercourse with her. She has prayed for a son and promised to dedicate him to the temple if her prayer is answered. Her husband takes her to task, however, for dedicating a child whom he knows will be (or thinks might be) a girl. While Mary's mother is still pregnant, her husband dies and she bears a girl, who later comes to be one of the four premier female models in Islamic tradition: Mary, ʿĀsiya, Khadija, and Fātima. Mary's mother takes her immediately to the temple for dedication, inciting a competitive stir among the priests, for they all want to claim the child. The priests cast lots, tossing their quills onto the water. That of Zakarīya, father of John, stands upright in the water, and Mary becomes his charge. Like other wonder children, Mary begins to grow much more rapidly than her peers.<sup>11</sup>

Nativity accounts of Jesus (ʿĪsā) and his cousin John the Baptizer, known in Arabic as Yahyā, are intimately linked. John is wondrously conceived by an elderly, infertile woman. Thaʿlabī notes that Zakarīya had faith that his wife might yet have a son and prayed accordingly. When his mother is carrying him, John bows to the still-unborn Jesus, and immediately at birth, John gains note as a precocious infant.<sup>12</sup>

Mary is likewise impregnated under improbable circumstances. Gabriel meets her on the “longest and hottest day of the year” as she seeks water in a cave. The angel breathes into an outer garment that Mary has laid aside, and when she again dons the robe, she conceives. In Thaʿlabī’s account, Joseph and Mary have an extended discussion of how this conception could have occurred. In Kisāʿī’s version, when Joseph interrogates Mary about her pregnancy, Jesus rebukes Mary’s husband-to-be from the womb. Mary explains to Joseph that Jesus, like Adam, is to be born without ordinary parentage. When Mary later encounters the expectant mother of John, the two prophets exchange gestures of greeting with an intrauterine bow. Variant traditions put the length of Mary’s pregnancy from the usual nine months to as little as one hour, the abbreviated terms underscoring the miraculous nature of the prophet’s genesis.

At the onset of labor, Mary takes hold of an unproductive date palm beneath which lie a livestock manger and a stream. According to Qurʾān 19:24–26, and Muhammad’s biographer Ibn Ishāq, Jesus speaks to her immediately upon birth (some variant traditions say that Gabriel speaks instead), telling her not to grieve, for God has placed a river under her.<sup>13</sup> He instructs her to shake the palm tree so that ripe fruit will rain down upon her.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after delivery, Jesus speaks to Joseph, announcing that he has come as a messenger from the darkness of the womb into the light. Idols across the world reportedly toppled at the time of the birth of Jesus as well as upon the birth of several other prophets, including Muhammad. Jesus caught the devil by surprise, for before Mary’s secret pregnancy, Iblīs had had foreknowledge of every human conceived.<sup>15</sup> This theme of frustrating the devil’s agenda and restoring joy and vitality to the earth is important, occurring in many stories. When Solomon (Sulaymān) was born, for example, all the world’s devils became comatose, and Satan sank into the ocean for seventy days. For the first time since Nimrod threw Abraham into his bonfire, the earth laughed again.<sup>16</sup>

Ibn Ishāq’s *Life of Muhammad* tells several intriguing stories about the conception of Muhammad. In each instance, the author is careful to note that he cannot vouch for the veracity of these “allegations” or “folktales.” Muhammad’s grandfather, ʿAbd al-Muttalib, prays to God and tells the

Almighty that if He will grant him ten sons, he will sacrifice one in gratitude. God fulfills the prayer for ten boys. ‘Abd al-Muttalib takes them all to the Ka‘ba to cast lots, and as they do so, he prays that ‘Abd Allāh, his youngest, might be spared. ‘Abd Allāh loses the lot. When his father takes him to the place where the ruling Quraysh tribe performs its sacrifices, the tribe members protest, saying that they will go to any length to redeem the young man from his father’s vow. The Quraysh insist that ‘Abd al-Muttalib take the youth to see a sorceress to get her verdict. She instructs him to return to Mecca and cast lots again, and every time the lots fall against his son, to add ten more camels to the blood money. The lots fall against ‘Abd Allāh over and over, until the blood money reaches one hundred camels. The Quraysh declare the deity will now be satisfied, but ‘Abd al-Muttalib insists that he must cast lots three more times. Each draw is in favor of his son, so he slaughters all the camels, and his son lives to become the father of Muhammad.

In another account, as the Prophet’s grandfather takes his son ‘Abd Allāh for betrothal to the woman destined to become Muhammad’s mother, another woman offers herself to the son. ‘Abd Allāh declines. After he has consummated his marriage to Āmina, he encounters the woman again. Now, however, she is no longer interested in him, and he asks her why she has changed her mind. She explains that her Christian brother, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, has informed her that his scriptures foretold the birth of a prophet among their folk. When ‘Abd Allāh had passed by before, she goes on, he had borne a light between his eyes, but that light was no longer there. She recognized instinctively that the Prophet had already been conceived, and her sole interest in ‘Abd Allāh vanished.

Muhammad was born after a very brief and painless labor, and he immediately lifted his head heavenward. Other signs heralded Muhammad’s anticipated arrival as well. A new star rose, and his pregnant mother saw a light emanating from her so bright that she could see castles as far as Syria. A voice explained that she would bear a leader of the people, instructing her to commend him to the protection of God and name him Muhammad. An important feature of his life story (and that of several other prophets) is that his father dies before he is born, emphasizing the centrality of divine protection for the child.<sup>17</sup>

Some stories report that Muhammad’s cousin and, later, son-in-law, ‘Alī, also had a wondrous gestation and delivery. In such stories, his pregnant mother is unable to pray before idols with ‘Alī in her womb. In a twist reminiscent of the relationship between Jesus and John, ‘Alī speaks to his older cousin Muhammad from the womb. ‘Alī’s mother experiences a protracted

and difficult labor until she enters the sacred precincts of the Ka'ba. There she bears the perfect child, beaming and oriented to the heavens.<sup>18</sup> And here begins the remarkable story of the Shī'ī imams.

### *How the Imams Came into the World*

Among the accounts of the Shī'ī imams, Husayn's gestation and nativity have attracted more attention than most others. Traditional sources report that Gabriel three times announced to Muhammad the imminent birth of a grandson who would suffer martyrdom for his community. Twice Muhammad sends the angel away, insisting that the world has no need of such a child. On his third visit, Gabriel adds that the child's offspring will guard the imamate and divine authority. Muhammad immediately gives his approval to the arrangement. His daughter, Fātima, likewise balks initially at the announcement, until Muhammad explains that Husayn will stand at the head of the imams. According to at least one traditional source, the child is conceived the day his older brother, Hasan, is born, clearly suggesting a miraculous conception. Before his daughter conceives, Muhammad tells her he perceives a revelatory light from her countenance. According to one tradition, Husayn's gestation, like that of Jesus, lasted a mere six months, but the timing is less spectacular in other versions of the story.

During the pregnancy, Fātima is never hungry or thirsty and experiences peculiar signs. Like Mary in the Qur'ān, she goes into seclusion. At six months, she hears the fetus exalting God and finds that she sheds light wherever she goes. Early in the seventh month, three angels in succession visit her at night, causing her great consternation. When she visits her father and his wife Umm Salama the next day, a white dove enters her robe. The Prophet then identifies the angels as 'Izrā'īl (angel of death and guardian of the womb), Michael (guardian of the wombs of the women in the Prophet's family), and Gabriel (who will attend the child). Some popular hagiographies even suggest that Muhammad himself delivers his grandson, further emphasizing the baby's intimate relationship to the Prophet. In a feature reminiscent of the New Testament's acknowledgment of Mary's future loss of her son, Shī'ī traditions report that angels consoled Muhammad (not the boy's mother) in advance for Husayn's eventual martyrdom on the tenth of Muharram 61/680.<sup>19</sup>

### *Conceptions and Births of the Friends of God*

Friends of God, like their senior predecessors the prophets, often enter the world under most unusual circumstances. Though the settings are sometimes quite spectacular, accounts of the Friends typically lack the larger historic and cosmic dimensions that so often characterize the genesis of the prophets.

For example, a Friend's impending arrival rarely touches off astronomical pyrotechnics or bestirs potentates to scramble for their thrones and clutch at their crowns. Arresting effects in general tend to be more localized and may even be indiscernible except to those close to the special child. Stories of conception and gestation deal less with how the divine overcomes impossible obstacles (such as barrenness) than with remarkable ways in which the child communicates his divine message precociously. As often as not, the unusual concomitants seek to underscore the humility and piety, rather than the power and prerogatives, of the Friend. Conception and gestation stories are arguably less crucial to the tales of Friends than to those of prophets. A brief look at examples of the subgenre reveals some of its principal themes.

Accounts of the pregnancies of mothers of God's Friends often highlight the need for ritually pure (*halāl*) food. The story typically follows a formula. Every time the mother-to-be ingests something forbidden or even legally discouraged, the fetus in her womb becomes so agitated that the mother eventually realizes the problem and modifies her behavior. In some cases, the mother needs only one instance of intrauterine commotion to take the cue. ḤAttār says that Sufyān ath-Thawrī has been scrupulous from birth, but his abstemiousness seems to have earlier origins. The fetus reacts to his mother's eating a pickle and gets her attention by squirming. When Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī is in the womb, he becomes upset whenever his mother takes a bite of a food that is of questionable ritual purity. ḤAttār is careful to note that Bāyazīd himself later confirmed this story.<sup>20</sup>

At the birth of Rābī'a, her family is so poor her parents have no oil for her navel and no swaddling clothes, and her father goes to bed deeply distressed. The Prophet appears to the father in a dream and assures him that the child will have the authority to intercede for seventy thousand Muslims. Muhammad tells the baby's father to go to the emir of Basra and ask him for four hundred gold coins to make up for the fact that the governor has neglected his usual Friday wish for four hundred blessings on the man. Delighted that the Prophet has mentioned him by name, the governor not only gives the man four hundred gold pieces but gives an additional ten thousand in alms.<sup>21</sup> Ma'ṣrūf Karkhī's conception also occurs in a peculiarly marvelous way, in a story designed to aggrandize a Friend of God named Dawūd at-Tā'ī. Dawūd once gave a hungry Christian passerby a piece of his bread, for he always tried to be generous. That night the man's wife conceived Ma'ṣrūf.<sup>22</sup>

Aflākī's monumental hagiography of Rūmī's family and followers includes a remarkable set of reports about the conception and birth of Rūmī's grandson Chalabī Amīr ḤĀrif. The day after Rūmī's son Sultān Walad had intercourse with his wife, Fātima Khātūn, Sultān Walad encountered his

father. Rūmī asked Sultān Walad whether he had been searching for ʿĀrif in hope after he and his wife had lost twelve or thirteen children in their infancy. Thus does Aflākī set the scene for a marvelous offspring to arrive against great odds and amid intense longing. It was on that occasion that Sultān Walad and his wife had indeed conceived the child they would name Chalabī Amīr ʿĀrif. Apparently experiencing some sort of depression after so many losses, however, Fātima Khātūn tried unsuccessfully to end this new pregnancy. But she was at length persuaded that she would bear a healthy child. She began to take care of herself, and at last “ʿĀrif transferred his foot from the world of eternity to the plain of existence.”<sup>23</sup>

A variety of stories focus on the gestational life of later medieval great South Asian Friends as well. When Bībī Zulaykhā was pregnant with Nizām ad-Dīn Awliyā, a voice in a dream told her that she must choose between her unborn child and her husband. She preferred the clearly special child and widowhood, and her husband died when the Friend was an infant.<sup>24</sup> Before Shāh Mīnā was “born a saint,” his uncle foretold that the “candle of our household” would soon come forth to give luster to the family name. People could hear the sound of the fetus engaged in *dhikr* and Qurʾān recitation in his pregnant mother’s womb.<sup>25</sup> A later medieval Indian hagiography records extraordinary occurrences during the gestation and infancy of ʿAbd ar-Rahīm, the successor of a major Friend named Bābā Musāfir. In one story, ʿAbd ar-Rahīm’s mother, having borne five daughters, prays for a son. A mendicant visits her one day and after she makes a donation, he promises that she will have an important male child. After she becomes pregnant, the mother reports having a dream in which she embraces the sun. She recalls that during gestation, she experienced no need of food, drink, or sleep, and wanted only to pray continually.<sup>26</sup>

#### INFANCY NARRATIVES: PRODIGIES AND SIGNS

Tales of striking circumstances in the conceptions and gestations of God’s most extraordinary servants are only the beginning of their stories. Traditional sources also feature accounts of the conditions and manner in which prophets and Friends engaged the outer world. They detail not only the feats of these servants of God as infants and toddlers but also the responses of their families and larger constituencies. I begin with stories of prophets and continue with God’s tiniest Friends.

#### *Baby Prophets*

Stories of the early childhood years of prophets use various devices to describe the young heroes’ introduction to their world. In one of the more unusual

accounts, Hūd's mother reminisces with her son that shortly after he was born, she placed him on a black rock that immediately turned white. She soon encountered an enormous "man," who raised the child up to a group of white-faced persons in the heavens, and these figures in turn gave Hūd back to his mother with a green pearl on his arm and light on his head.<sup>27</sup> These events are among the more novel manifestations of a prophetic infant's inherent uniqueness and portentousness, including the striking image of the offering of the child to the heavenly court as a sign of his divinely sanctioned authority. Solomon's debut was much less spectacular but nonetheless remarkable. Baby Solomon fasted until he was three years old, at which time his father, David, initiated the boy in the study of Jewish scriptures. When the king read to the child, Solomon memorized the words immediately, and by the time the boy turned four, he had mastered the whole Torah. At that age, he began to perform a hundred cycles of ritual prayer daily. One day his mother instructed him to kill an ant crawling on his clothes, but he declined. The prospect of hearing the ant say on Judgment Day that it had died at Solomon's hand terrified the royal child.<sup>28</sup>

Abraham's first encounter with his larger environment is equally dramatic in its way, but it focuses on an extraordinary kind of conversion for one so young. When Abraham was a mere four years of age,<sup>29</sup> God sent Gabriel to instruct the boy to emerge at last from the cave in which he had been born. God then showed him signs in the heavens—star, moon, and sun, all of which set—that revealed to the child the transcendent oneness of the true deity (Qurʾān 6:76–79). Gabriel then took the child to his parents' home, where he confronted his father, who had been a carver of idols, with his true belief. Nimrod had Abraham brought before him and then instructed Abraham's father, Terah, that perhaps the boy could be returned to his senses with time and patience, so long as Terah taught the child to worship only Nimrod.<sup>30</sup>

Islamic sources elaborate on the biblical account of Moses, with which many readers are already familiar. These sources expand the network of persons involved in Moses's prophetic debut. Another telling feature is the irony in the child's thinly veiled hostility toward Pharaoh, which nearly unmasks the infant as the nemesis about whom the ruler has been warned. Not long after the newborn Moses is saved by being hidden in the oven, his mother has a carpenter build a tiny ark in which she plans to set the forty-day-old baby afloat on the Nile. (Moses's father dies at about this time, and early loss of the father has already emerged as an important theme.) According to one of Thaʿlabī's sources, the carpenter tries to tell her secret to Pharaoh, but God renders him mute. On each of two attempts, the carpenter is dismissed

as crazy and is driven away, until he vows that if God restores his speech, he will serve as Moses's faithful guard.

Once the baby is entrusted to the river, God causes the wind to blow the ark toward Pharaoh's palace. There the oldest of the king's seven diseased daughters finds the child glowing like the sun. Upon contact with the baby prophet, she is healed, as are all her sisters. When Pharaoh's wife, *Āsiya*, brings him the child, the king immediately suspects the baby is to be his downfall and resolves to kill him. *Āsiya* persuades him that he need not hurry because the child is now in his power, and he relents. As in the biblical accounts, Moses is returned to his mother for nursing, but some accounts suggest that he continued to spend considerable time in the palace. On one occasion when Pharaoh dandles the baby on his lap, the child suddenly grabs his beard and slaps the king so hard that his crown falls off. Again Pharaoh swears that he will kill the child, but *Āsiya* persuades him that the infant is without awareness and therefore blameless. As a test, she places a pearl and a hot coal before the child; when he reaches for the pearl, Gabriel guides his hand toward the coal, and the child raises his hand to his mouth in agony. Again Pharaoh relents (see Fig. 1).<sup>31</sup>

In the story of Jesus, themes of refuge in a cave, rapid growth, and escape from the evil intentions of a threatened monarch combine with overtly heroic deeds of power. This last element is more evident in this story than in many other tales of baby prophets. *Tha'labī* reports that Joseph took Mary and the child Jesus to a cave, where she recovered from childbirth for forty days. In only one day, Jesus showed a full month's development. Mary's family members are prepared to disown her when she brings the newborn Jesus to them. Spectacularly again, but not out of character for a prophet, the infant speaks in defense of his mother's virtue.<sup>32</sup> *Kisā'ī* includes a variety of episodes in Mary and Joseph's journey with the child to Egypt to escape the murderous designs of Herod. First, they encounter a lion. Jesus instructs them to put him down in front of the beast. When the baby asks the lion why he is there, the animal responds that he is waiting for an ox to eat. Jesus cautions the lion that perhaps the ox's owners are impoverished and suggests that the lion head to a place where he can find a camel to eat. The lion obeys. The family later comes to a town where a mob is forming around a home, evidently threatening its inhabitants. Jesus tells the people in the crowd that the owner is a believer and then tells them where they can find a stash of treasure that once belonged to a dead man with no descendants. Take that treasure, he orders them, and so they do.<sup>33</sup>

Muhammad's introduction to his social environment is through growing up in a kind of foster family and experiencing purification by mysterious

“angelic” figures when he is a child. After his birth, his grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, goes in search of a wet nurse for him. A woman named Halīma and her husband happen to have traveled to Mecca looking for more children for her to nurse, for they are destitute and have a new baby of their own. There the infant Prophet’s family offers him to every interested woman, but none want him when they hear that his father has died, making recompense for their service unlikely. In the end, all the women find a child to nurse except Halīma. She convinces her husband that they should accept the Prophet rather than return home unsuccessful. When she begins to nurse the baby, her breasts overflow with milk, as do the udders of their previously dry she-camel. These marvels prompt her husband to proclaim that his Halīma has been given a wondrous child. Even when others’ flocks graze on the same pasture as Halīma’s, they remain dry.

These features of Muhammad’s story recall important aspects of traditional accounts of Jonah (Yūnus). Jonah is conceived on the eve of the tenth of Muharram, and his father dies just after his birth. Unlike Muhammad, Jonah miraculously supplies his destitute mother with daily sustenance. Unable to nurse the baby, she takes him to shepherds and asks them to let him suckle the sheep.<sup>34</sup> The latter feature of the story is consistent with the Islamic tradition in which God takes every prophet from shepherding when the time comes for his new role, and the theme recurs in the stories of many youthful prophets and Friends of God.

After two years, Halīma brings Muhammad back to Āmina and begs her to let him stay longer with Halīma’s family; Muhammad’s mother agrees. Soon thereafter, Halīma’s own boy comes running to report that two men in white have laid his stepbrother (Muhammad) on the ground, opened his chest, and searched his innards. Terrified that the boy might be possessed by a jinn, Halīma returns him to his birth mother. After Halīma departs, the boy explains to playmates that he is the one whom the prophet Abraham has prayed for and the very message Jesus has brought. He explains that the two men in white extracted a black drop from his heart and cleansed it with snow.<sup>35</sup>

### *Infant Friends*

Stories of nonprophetic children with unusual abilities and preternatural powers appear as early as the hadith literature. Speaking precociously is a common feature in stories of the prophets, but it also occurs in other curious contexts. Both Hujwīrī and Qushayrī include in their handbooks of spirituality the “Hadīth of Jurayj,” in which Muhammad describes three infants who have spoken precociously. The first is the prophet Jesus (who spoke from the womb and later as a newborn to defend his mother). The second is

an infant who saved the reputation of a monk named Jurayj. In this story, the monk's mother pays her son a visit only to find him too engrossed in prayer to see her. When the same scene plays out the next day, the woman asks God to cause her son to lose his good name because the monk has mistreated her so. A woman of questionable virtue who lives nearby resolves at that moment to seduce the monk. But when she accosts Jurayj in his cell, he ignores her. Departing in anger, the woman spreads rumors about the monk and shortly thereafter sleeps with a shepherd. Nine months later, she bears the shepherd's son and claims that Jurayj is the boy's father. When the king hails the monk to court, Jurayj asks the infant to name his father. The infant discloses that his father is a shepherd and that the wicked woman has defamed Jurayj. In the third story, an otherwise unidentified infant speaks to contradict an adult's pronouncements. A woman sits at her front door and asks God to make her son like an attractive stranger she sees riding past, but the child insists he does not want to be like the stranger. Not long thereafter, a lighthearted (and therefore probably undignified) woman passes, and the mother prays that God will keep the child from becoming like her. Again the infant disagrees, insisting that he wants to be exactly like the woman. When his puzzled mother questions him about his responses, the baby explains that he discerned that the horseman was a tyrant whereas the woman was good-hearted and did not deserve her questionable reputation.<sup>36</sup> In general, however, precocious speech is reserved to prophets. Baby Friends of God have other wondrous ways of communicating.

The theme of early rearing under striking circumstances, though rather common in tales of the prophets, occurs infrequently in stories of Friends. When it does appear, it signals the storyteller's intent to connect the Friend with the prophets. When Hasan al-Basrī was born, he received his name from no less a luminary than the Companion and caliph-to-be ʿUmar ibn al-Khattāb, who declared him "handsome" (*hasan*). Hasan grew up in the home of Muhammad's wife Umm Salama, for whom the child's mother worked. If the baby cried because his mother was otherwise occupied, Umm Salama gave him her breast. She prayed that God would make the child an exemplar for all, thus bestowing countless blessings on the boy. Once when the Prophet visited Umm Salama's house while the baby was there, he prayed for little Hasan and again bestowed blessings. On one occasion, the child drank water from the Prophet's water jug. Noticing some water missing, the Prophet learned that the child had drunk it. Muhammad declared that the boy would receive knowledge from him in proportion to the water he had imbibed.<sup>37</sup>

Like their prophetic counterparts, God's Friends are often dedicated to or presented for the exclusive service of God. According to legendary accounts

about Hallāj's beginnings, for example, the mystic's mother promised during her pregnancy to dedicate the child to a life of service to the spiritually poor. Tradition holds that the baby had foreknowledge of this dedication and that his mother made good on her promise when he reached the age of seven.<sup>38</sup>

When a follower asked the adult Bāyazīd how he had arrived at his advanced spiritual condition, he recounted a story about his childhood that brings to mind Hūd's presentation at the heavenly court. One night, he recalled, he walked to the outskirts of his hometown of Bistām. There in the tranquil moonlight, he envisioned a "presence" that rendered the rest of creation meaningless. Transported into an ecstatic state, the awestruck boy humbly expressed to God his surprise that the "court" he had seen was so deserted. A heavenly "voice" responded that the divine court was deserted only because God is choosy about whom to invite. At that point, he reported, he felt the desire to intercede so that all creation might receive an invitation. He stopped short when he realized that only the Prophet Muhammad enjoyed the prerogative of intercession. In honor of that precocious and most appropriate reticence, God told the boy that he would henceforth be called the "Sultan of Mystics."<sup>39</sup>

In an important variant on presentation and initiation themes, the Friend's father brings the child to a prayer gathering, only to have the tyke steal the show. Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l-Khayr was born on a Sunday, the first day of Muharram (an exception to the more common day of Friday and the more usual date of the tenth). His mother asks her husband to take the infant along with him to a regular *samāʿ* meeting of dervishes so that they might look upon the child. The baby's presence prompts the repeated recitation of a quatrain, which the child memorizes. Returning home, the child asks his father about the meaning of the ecstasy-inducing verses. His father rebukes the little boy, saying that such mystical things are not meant for him. Later, when his father is building the family a house in Mayhana, the child asks his father to build a room where none but Abū Saʿīd can go. So his father adds a room on the roof just for the boy, and the child requests that the name of God be inscribed repeatedly on every surface. When his father asks the boy the meaning of this request, his son responds that he wants only to do what his father has done in the rest of the house: to instruct the workers to decorate it with the name and image of the sultan and his kingdom. After the child explains that everyone inscribes on his walls the name of the object of his devotion, the father experiences a conversion and removes all signs of homage to the earthly sultan.<sup>40</sup>

Abū Saʿīd himself reported that when his father took him to the mosque one Friday, a famous mystic and Traditionist asked whose child he might be.

The old scholar—whose function in the story is much like that of Simeon in the New Testament—bent down and rubbed his cheek against the child's.<sup>41</sup> He wept as he explained that he could now die in peace, content that the child assured the future leadership of the spiritual quest. A sign reinforced the old Sufi's conviction shortly thereafter: Abū Sa'īd's father brought the boy into the shaykh's room, and the old man instructed the father to lift the child so that the boy could reach a loaf of bread from a niche in the wall. Breaking the loaf in half, the old man shared it with the child only. He explained to the father that he had put the loaf there thirty years earlier upon receiving a promise that the one whose touch warmed the loaf as though it had just been baked would be a long-awaited spiritual leader, the "seal" of the Friends of God.<sup>42</sup> The old man, Pir Abū 'l-Qāsim Bishr-i Yāsīn, continued as the boy's shaykh for several more years. Abū Sa'īd's main biographer, Ibn-i Munawwar, records a number of anecdotes about the boy's spiritual formation. Ibn 'Arabī tells an analogous story of the infant daughter of Mawrūrī, one of his shaykhs. The little girl was so in touch with the spiritual condition of her father that during sessions at the shaykh's house, the infant used to slide off her mother's lap and stand in their midst. There she manifested ecstatic experience, and even before she was weaned, God took her from this life.<sup>43</sup>

Mentoring of a younger Friend by an elder saint is an important related theme. When Rūmī's new grandchild, 'Ārif Chalabī, was born, the grandfather visited the mother and asked to take the baby with him. He breathed into the child the gifts of light (i.e., of knowledge) and the ability to open hearts and then returned the baby to his mother and her attendants. Rūmī declared that he saw the light of seven Friends of God (three of Rūmī's family members and four of his intimate personal friends) in the child. He told the boy's father to give him the honorific title Farīdūn, the name of the great Iranian national epic hero. In another account, a woman brings 'Ārif's crib to Rūmī in the courtyard of his madrasa. Grandfather instructs the six-month-old child to say "Allāh, Allāh," and, like the precociously articulate Jesus, the child does so. Rūmī dies when Fātima Khātūn is still nursing the new grandson, but the mother is so distraught that she can no longer nurse him. More ominously, the child will not (following the example of Moses) take milk from other nurses either. One night Rūmī appears to Fātima in a dream and consoles her. She awakes and finds herself able to nurse again. But the light of Rūmī shines so effulgently in the boy's eyes that she experiences ecstasy and becomes a disciple of her own child.<sup>44</sup>

In a story about the infancy of an Egyptian Friend of God named Muhammad Wafā', an important mystic and religious leader comes to visit.

Seeing the child, the visiting Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī kisses him and declares (Simeon-like) that the infant is already endowed with full knowledge of the highest realities. He reports that the baby will compose numerous mystical works before he is ten years old. When Muhammad Wafā’ himself becomes a father, he passes along to his six-year-old son, ‘Alī, the gift of composing poetry, by investing the boy with his own belt just before he himself dies.<sup>45</sup>

In another tale of infancy, a contemporary of Abū Sa‘īd, Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī, manifests signs of extraordinary altruism even as a nursling. He refuses his mother’s breast until she allows another child to nurse before him. When he is still very small, his Qur’ān tutor asks whether the boy’s family can supply him a bit of wheat, for the land is suffering a shortage. Kāzarūnī’s family is too poor to help. On the following day, when the child goes to the barn to scrape up a few grains, he finds it overflowing with wheat.<sup>46</sup>

As an infant, fifteenth-century Chishtī shaykh Shāh Mīnā refuses to nurse both during Ramadan and at other times, the story goes, until his mother purifies herself ritually. When his mother awakes at night, she invariably notices the infant prostrate in prayer beneath his cover. When he is only two or three, the child’s grandfather instructs sparrows to flock to Shāh Mīnā. They do so and remain until the infant releases them. At the age of five, the boy is a challenge to his teachers. Already endowed with greater knowledge than the instructor can impart, the boy spends the day in *dhikr*. When he is just ten, the boy reads Suhrawardī’s major manual of spirituality, *The Benefits of Intimate Knowledge*, and rises to the rank of Pole of the universe.<sup>47</sup>

In another story, the newborn Indian Friend ‘Abd ar-Rahīm always nurses from his mother’s right breast, and as a child, he refuses to wear fancy clothes. At two and a half years, the toddler dresses as an ascetic and recites Qur’ān in secret; and by four, he has read the entire sacred book.<sup>48</sup> Amadou Bamba of Senegal is similarly possessed of astonishing self-control as an infant. He does not cry, insists on remaining only in rooms devoted to prayer, and becomes seriously agitated if anyone in his presence acts in any way contrary to Islamic law.<sup>49</sup> When ‘Ārif Chalabī is eight months old, a tumor in his throat prevents him from taking nourishment for a week, causing his mother great anxiety. The baby’s father takes him to the roof of the madrasa and has a vision of his own father, Rūmī, pacing anxiously. Rūmī responds to his son’s anguish by assuring him that the boy will not perish. The grandfather takes a pen and inscribes seven lines on the baby’s throat, causing the tumor to burst and restoring him to health. ‘Ārif’s beauty is such that people consider him a second Joseph, and one glance at his face is all anyone can bear without losing control.<sup>50</sup>

First-person nativity and infancy accounts are, not surprisingly, rare. ‘Abd al-Qādir ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Aydarūs, whose family had migrated from South Arabia to the Indian region of Gujarat, records in an autobiography several unusual occurrences in his earliest life. He notes that two weeks before his birth, his father dreamt of two Friends of God and decided to name the boy after them. One was his namesake, the great ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. ‘Aydarūs claims that the ancient Friend had appeared in the dream to ask his father for a favor—clearly including this feature to add stature and religious legitimacy to the author’s family. ‘Aydarūs then narrates an event passed on to him by “a reliable source.” When a prominent politician came to ask baby ‘Abd al-Qādir’s father to pray for him, the infant recited Qur’ān 61:113, indicating that the visitor would be granted blessing and rapid success. The infant’s father added that the visitor could consider this pronouncement virtually a message from God!<sup>51</sup>

In modern times, too, Muslim authors have left such rare autobiographical works. Ibn ‘Ajība, a major Moroccan Sufi shaykh, composed the *Fahrasa*, or *Chronicle*, to document his mother’s recollections of his childhood. As an infant, he had an innate sense of the prescribed time for ritual prayer and frequently pestered his mother until she decided to perform the proper *salāt*. As a child, he never missed the appointed prayer times, performing ritual ablution so enthusiastically that his clothes became soaked. His mother, worried that he might ruin his clothes, insisted that he perform the waterless ablution allowed in Islamic Law when water is unavailable. Eventually his mother allowed him to return to ablution with water.<sup>52</sup>

## YOUTHFUL PROPHETS AND FRIENDS

One last category of narratives offers details of the prepubescent and adolescent lives of the great ones, beginning with Abraham. Many stories feature the prophet’s inauguration into an active prophetic ministry, including his struggle with the unbelief of the people to whom God has sent him.

### *Preadolescent Prophets*

Divining the revelatory signs in the heavens was not quite enough to free Abraham from associating with idolaters. His father forced him to spend some years peddling his father’s carved images alongside his somewhat less reluctant brother Aaron. Abraham spoke against the idol trade with every would-be customer, but at length a turning point occurred. An old woman came to the shop looking for a replacement idol, for hers had been stolen in a package of clothes. Assuring her that no authentic deity could be stolen,

Abraham miraculously produced her clothes, and she became a believer.<sup>53</sup> At the age of seven, Abraham's son Isaac was due to become Abraham's sacrificial victim, but the son was miraculously delivered by further divine intervention (see Fig. 2).<sup>54</sup>

Revelatory dreams attended the nativity and infancy of many prophets, but Joseph became most famous as a dreamer in his own right. Joseph had the first of his many revelatory dreams when he was only four, thus establishing the emblematic feature of his story. The youthful prophet was twelve when he had the most significant dream of his life, in which he saw eleven stars, sun and moon, doing him homage. This dream was the harbinger of things to come in his relationship with his brothers. Joseph's suffering as a result of sibling jealousy is surely the most famous element in his story. He is arguably unique among the prophets in that the "people" who rejected him were his own kin. Like Moses and Abraham, Joseph became an honorary member of the household of the ruler who would become his bitterest enemy—in this instance, one of the pharaohs.<sup>55</sup>

The insights that Joseph gained in dreams, others acquired through either assiduous study or infused knowledge. Some prophets reportedly received significant forms of higher religious insight when they were still very young children. Elijah (Ilyās) plays a relatively minor role in Islamic lore, but Kisāʿī notes that when Elijah was born, he was much like Moses in both physical characteristics and fiery temperament. More important, the child had memorized the entire Torah by age seven without the aid of a teacher.<sup>56</sup> At the tender age of seven, the prophet Jonah began his life of asceticism and scholarship, marking the story of even this relatively minor prophetic figure with widespread themes. Holiness in extraordinary personages is often signaled by this combination of spiritual and intellectual discipline.<sup>57</sup>

Moses's godly struggle with unbelief was embodied from the outset in his stormy relationship with Pharaoh. Even as a lap child, Moses was a handful for his adoptive father. Throughout his childhood, Moses continued to test Pharaoh's patience, each time raising the ante with a more spectacular sign of the true God. At the age of five, the boy interpreted the crowing of a rooster as a recommendation to praise God. Pharaoh said the boy was merely putting words in the rooster's mouth, whereupon the prophet instructed the bird to speak intelligibly. After exacting Moses's promise of protection, the rooster repeated itself in Egyptian; the king slaughtered the bird only to have God raise it back to life. At nine years old, Moses kicked over the king's chair, causing Pharaoh to break his nose. Again Pharaoh was on the point of killing the boy, when Āsiya persuaded him of the value of having a son so strong to fight his foes for him. At twelve, the boy brought

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back to life a camel that had been destined for the evening's entrée, and Āsiya again pointed out the wonder of having a son who could do such marvels. A year later, a man spotted Moses performing his ritual ablutions in the river and asked if the youth worshipped other than Pharaoh. When the boy vilified the king, the man vowed to inform on Moses. Moses caused the earth to half-swallow the man until he swore not to tell, but he turned the child in nonetheless. When Pharaoh asked Moses whom he worshipped, the boy said it was the Master who reared him, and Pharaoh was sure that Moses was referring to him. The king then executed the accuser.<sup>58</sup>

Not all prophetic prodigies have such direct confrontation with the nemesis. Solomon was empowered with wonders as a young boy. His gifts included bestowing fertility on a bereft turtledove that sought his assistance—and every dove since then has been this one's descendant. He was particularly talented in communicating to all the animal kingdoms, and his positive relationship with his father stands out as especially formative and symbolic. In one story, a cow makes its way to David's (Solomon's father's) door with a request. There, in the presence of Solomon, she asks the king to save her from certain slaughter, but he declines, saying that she was made to be slaughtered. Solomon intervenes, allowing the cow to guide him to her owner's house, where the boy asks to buy the animal to save it from slaughter. When the owner asks how Solomon knows he had planned to kill her, Solomon replies that the cow has informed him. At that statement, the owner gives him the cow, for a voice had announced the day before that when such a lad appeared, his whole tribe would meet its end.<sup>59</sup>

Jesus's knowledge was infused, but he nevertheless went to school, where his influence on his teachers and peers alike took center stage. According to Kisāʿī, when Jesus was about nine, Mary sent him off to study. He proved quite precocious, for he knew before being instructed what his teacher was about to teach him. One day while among his schoolmates, Jesus fashioned a bird from a lump of clay, and by God's permission, breathed upon it and caused it to take wing. In Thaʿlabī's account, the tiny prophet is even more remarkable. In this story, when Jesus is a mere nine months old, Mary enrolls him in school. There Jesus reveals to his astonished teacher the mystical

FIGURE 2. (*opposite*) In a dual-image page, Abraham sits in the comfortable garden into which God has converted the flames of Nimrod's fire (with Nimrod in the tower at right and the catapult above). Below, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his child Isaac/Ishmael (Ishāq/Ismāʿīl), and the sacrificial ram appears in the bush at right. Ottoman Turkish; ©The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, T414:68.

meanings of the Arabic alphabet. Tha'labī also includes a number of other stories not found in Kisā'ī, such as those recounting events in Jesus's twelve years in Egypt. Among the young prophet's powers are clairvoyance—a gift for which he is much reviled as a dangerous magician—healing, the ability to provide food and drink (including the transformation of pots and jars of water into meat and wine), the power to make a single dyer's vat produce multicolored garments, and the ability to restore life to the dead. The boy's knowledge was legendary: lessons that took others a day, a month, or a year to learn, he absorbed in an hour, a day, or a month.<sup>60</sup>

Muhammad's childhood accounts include elements common to many other tales of prophets. Even as a very small child, Muhammad considered himself a shepherd, thereby linking himself with all the previous shepherding prophets. Muhammad's mother died when he was six, leaving the boy in the care of his grandfather; but only two years later, 'Abd al-Muttalib died too, and Muhammad's uncle Abū Tālib took custody of the orphan. When Abū Tālib heard that an important seer resided in Mecca, he took Muhammad to see him. The seer discerned something special about the child and insisted that his grandfather bring the boy back immediately, but Abū Tālib spirited him away. Some time later, the Prophet's uncle had to mount a caravan to Syria and agreed to let the boy go with him. Arriving at Busrā (whose castles the child's mother, Āmina, had seen by the light of her wondrous pregnancy), the caravan passed by the cell of a monk named Bahīra. He had seen a cloud sheltering the boy as he went along, so the monk spread a feast for the travelers, hoping to get a closer look at the youngster. This hospitality surprised the caravaners, for Bahīra had never been so kind to them before. When the monk failed to see the boy in the crowd gathered to eat, he asked to see him. The travelers brought the boy, who had been left to guard the baggage, and the monk examined him closely for signs of which his scriptures had spoken. He detected a mark between Muhammad's shoulder blades and questioned the boy. Muhammad responded with the answers that Bahīra knew signaled a special child. He warned Abū Tālib to protect the Prophet from the Jews, who might do him harm.<sup>61</sup> In this story, Bahīra plays a role not unlike that of sage figures in traditions like Christianity and Buddhism, in that he possesses the knowledge requisite to identify a person of great promise. In this instance, the impact of his perspicacity is all the greater because he is a Christian validating the Muslim prophet.

### *Early Years of the Shī'ī Imams*

Like so many of the prophets, the imams enjoyed the bestowal of a pedigree early in life, along with exemplary knowledge. Muhammad's cousin and son-

in-law, ʿAlī, was among the most prominent of the Prophet's Companions. More importantly for the world's Shīʿī communities, ʿAlī was the first imam in the line of familial and spiritual descendants of Muhammad to represent distinctively Shīʿī tradition. In that tradition, ʿAlī was an unsurpassed exemplar of devotion and heroism and a living embodiment of God's power in the post-Prophetic age. He thus possessed extraordinary qualities that made him "equal to two of the prophets, apostles and proofs of God." This statement is remarkable, and many Muslims would reject it outright, for it elevates ʿAlī to the level of the prophets. As a boy, ʿAlī possessed an exceptional wisdom that was related to his call, reportedly at between seven and ten years of age, to the Muslim faith. His spiritual and intellectual precociousness likened him to the young Jesus and John the Baptist, for Muhammad saw fit to entrust him with esoteric knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

ʿAlī's sons by Muhammad's daughter Fātima, Hasan and Husayn, were the second and third imams. According to tradition, Hasan's mother took the seven-day-old child to Muhammad swaddled in a silken wrap that Gabriel had brought down to the Prophet. When Husayn was a year old, a group of twelve angels descended on Muhammad to console him for the inevitable loss of this portentous child, destined to become the protomartyr. The angels assumed mysterious guises, four of them resembling the angelic symbols of the Christian evangelists and the others entirely in animal shapes. When, on one occasion, Fātima later brought her boys to visit Muhammad, the Prophet acknowledged her sons' advanced spiritual states and announced that they carried his authority. Hagiographer Shaykh al-Mufīd observes that Muhammad's entrusting so lofty a commission to the two boys is the equivalent of Jesus's possessing the gift of speech as a newborn (see Fig. 3).

Shaykh al-Mufīd makes similar statements about the youthful wisdom and authority of later imams as well. He recounts, for example, a lengthy episode in which religious authorities examined the nine-year-old fifth imam Abū Jaʿfar al-Jawād (i.e., Muhammad al-Bāqir), concluding that the boy was indeed wise beyond his years. Several accounts of Hasan and Husayn tell of their being lost. An anguished Muhammad discovers them under the care of an animal, who surrenders the boys after speaking to the Prophet. When the tykes wrestled, Muhammad rooted for Hasan, but because Gabriel cheered on Husayn, the result was naturally a draw.<sup>63</sup>

### *Youthful Friends of God*

Numerous stories refer to conditions or qualities that distinguished individual Friends from their peers from childhood on. Stories of God's Friends at this stage of life have more in common thematically with those of prophets

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FIGURE 3. Khwāja Yahyā ibn ‘Ammār ash-Shaybānī of Nishapur, in upper right, is saying that he will have a successor even as the Prophet had four caliphs (as he gestures to the left to reveal Muhammad preaching before ‘Alī and his two young sons, Hasan and Husayn). The painter uses an intriguing device to join two moments far separated in time. Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns* (Ottoman, 1003/1595), ©The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, T474:177v.

than do nativity and infancy stories. According to ʿAttār, Sufyān ath-Thawrī was hunchbacked from his early youth. People wondered at this condition and enjoined him to straighten up. He explained that fear of ending his life in unbelief or rejection by God had run up his spine and broken it.<sup>64</sup> Sahl at-Tustarī recalled that when he was only three, he kept night vigils, to his uncle's consternation. At the age of seven, he knew the Qurʾān fully and engaged in continual fasting, eating only bread, until he was twelve. When he turned thirteen, Sahl struggled with a spiritual question, and his family sent him to consult religious scholars in Basra, but these learned men were unable to satisfy his concern. He soon traveled to ʿAbbādān and studied for a time with Abū Habīb Hamza and then returned to Tustar.<sup>65</sup>

Junayd, one of the great second-/ninth-century Friends, experienced the chronic pain of spiritual longing, had wisdom beyond his years, and demonstrated the power of clairvoyance. One story told by ʿAttār (among others) has the boy traveling to Mecca for the hajj with his uncle Sarī as-Saqatī. There four hundred religious scholars debated the meaning of gratitude, and when his uncle prompted the boy, he weighed in with his opinion: gratitude means not using God's favor as a pretext for disobedience. As all the shaykhs shouted their approbation, Junayd's uncle said, to the boy's dismay, that Junayd's tongue was God's preeminent gift to him. This uncle was the one who had also declared that Junayd had outstripped him in spiritual rank. In turn, the nephew acknowledged that his uncle enjoyed divine disclosure but lacked heart, and was angelic but lacked the experience of suffering that had made Adam such a kindly man.<sup>66</sup>

Many stories outline the origins of a saintly child's sacred trajectory. The parents of Abū ʿAbd Allāh ibn Jallāʾ, for example, dedicated the boy to God from his youth.<sup>67</sup> One of the more engaging stories of the parents' early purposeful detachment from their child is that of Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī. As a very young student in Qurʾān school, Bāyazīd asks his teacher about the meaning of the verse, "Give thanks to me [God] and to your parents" (31:14) in the sura of Luqmān. The boy is troubled by this divine command that he divide his loyalties, so he goes home early to talk to his mother. Experiencing his first ethical-spiritual dilemma, the boy explains to her that he has come home unexpectedly to ask her to resolve it for him. His view is that she must either surrender him totally to God or request that God give him unre-servedly to her. Without hesitating, she tells the child that he will henceforth belong entirely to God, for she will make no further claim on her son. The hagiographer, ʿAttār, indicates that the son then departed from his mother for thirty years of ascetical rigor, wandering from town to town.<sup>68</sup>

Sālih al-Kharrāz of Seville, a childhood companion of Ibn ʿArabī, began his life of divine service at seven, avoiding games and companionship with his peers. Even as a young boy, he earned his livelihood as a cobbler and studied assiduously.<sup>69</sup> Ahmad ash-Sharīshī (from Jerez in Andalusia) was likewise dedicated to God as a child. When he was barely ten years old, a state of ecstasy caused him to fall into a fire, but God protected him from harm. Ibn ʿArabī reports that such things happened to him often and that the Friend was never aware of what was occurring in those moments.<sup>70</sup> As a young girl, Rābīʿa became an orphan, and a stranger made her his slave. Abū ʿUthmān al-Hīrī, in contrast, was a child of relative wealth and privilege and had four slaves travel with him to school. Passing the ruins of a caravanserai on one occasion, he spied therein a bedraggled donkey and a crow pecking at the poor beast's wounded back. He removed his fine garment to cover the donkey and wrapped its wounds with his turban, and the animal experienced communion with God.<sup>71</sup>

As a young boy, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and some playmates were once walking behind a cow as it plowed a field when the cow suddenly spoke up to assure the boy that he was meant for bigger things than sleeping and playing with his mates.<sup>72</sup> This account is an evident variation on the earlier-told story of an ox that insisted it was meant for higher purposes than plowing. Some young Friends enjoyed very extroverted powers. As a boy, the founder-to-be of a major Central Asian Sufi order, Ahmad Yasawī, fed a crowd of thousands from just one bit of bread when a local ruler put him to the test. The youngster later stirred up a tempest and cleared land for his future home and tomb by disposing of an entire mountain.<sup>73</sup>

Stories told by Aflākī and Jāmī, for example, recount emblematic events of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī's childhood. At a very early age, Rūmī was already habituated to fasting for up to seven days at a stretch. Just five years old, he received visits from the recording angels in human guise. One Friday when the boy was six and was sitting on the roof of his home reciting Qurʾān, some other neighborhood children drifted over to join him. One challenged his buddies to bet on who could jump from one roof to another. Jalāl ad-Dīn responded that if the boys really wanted to act in accord with their higher natures, they should rather aspire to fly to the heavens. He then disappeared, to the considerable alarm of his companions. When they yelled for help, Rūmī reappeared, and the other boys humbly acknowledged that they would be his followers. Rūmī then explained to his friends that a group of figures dressed in green had accompanied him through the many levels of the cosmos, offering him a glimpse of the marvels of the universe.<sup>74</sup>

Every morning, Rūmī tearfully recited sura 108, recalling that in that text, God granted the Prophet all good things, telling Muhammad to perform his devotions and that anyone who was inimical to him would have no progeny. The thought of such divine protection was overwhelming to the boy. When God appeared to the boy, he passed out and soon heard a voice inform him that by God's *jalāl* (majesty), he would no longer engage in jihad with himself but would henceforth enjoy immediate vision of God. This experience prompted the boy to dedicate himself wholly to God's service.<sup>75</sup> A story that underscores the importance of special knowledge in the young Rūmī's life notes that people with spiritual insight often saw Khidr visiting the boy when he was in Damascus.<sup>76</sup>

Another account describes Rūmī's frequent trips to the Tigris to bring water to his father when the family lived in Baghdad. As the boy walked through the city, every locked gate opened miraculously before him. Stories of his youth also say that while he was a student in Aleppo, he often left his room at midnight, raising suspicions that he was up to no good. Other students who were jealous of the attention his teacher gave him as the son of a great scholar (Bahā' ad-Dīn Walad) made sure the city's administrator knew of this odd behavior. The mayor hid by the gate of the school and followed the youth as he headed out through the city, with every door and gate miraculously unlocking and opening before him. Rūmī continued all the way to Hebron, to the tomb of Abraham, where a group of green-clad figures welcomed him. The mayor became totally disoriented, and after his staff found him, he immediately became a follower of the young Rūmī.<sup>77</sup>

A story about Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī 'l-Khayr has a similar ingredient and offers a fine example of the use of formulaic material. Ibn-i Munawwar relates that the boy's father would lock the door and wait till the youngster had fallen asleep before retiring for the night. One night, the father awoke around twelve and was concerned when he noticed that his son was not in bed. Near dawn, the boy returned and fell asleep. But when the father noticed that this behavior continued for several more nights, he decided to follow the lad on his nightly adventure. Shadowing Abū Sa'īd, the father saw him enter a mosque within a *ribāt*, in which there was a pit. As the father watched through a window, the youngster took a piece of wood, tied a rope to it, placed it across the opening of the pit, and lowered himself. He remained suspended by his foot while he recited the whole Qur'ān. His astonished father continued to observe this disciplined behavior for the next few nights.<sup>78</sup>

At the tender age of five, Rūmī's grandchild, Chalabī 'Arif could foresee the deaths of others. He could read minds and unveil secrets of all kinds. He once

took a bowl of food from another child and returned the bowl empty. He told the other boy to cover the bowl and go along, but when the other boy looked into the bowl, he saw that it had miraculously refilled with food. The boy returned to become ʿĀrif's servant. When ʿĀrif was six, he studied the Qurʾān. His father often paid him homage, to the surprise of others. Sultān Walad explained that he did so because he experienced the presence of his own father whenever his boy entered the room, so dramatically did the child copy every mannerism of his sanctified grandfather.<sup>79</sup>

Many of the Friends of God had particularly strong bonds with their mothers and struggled with filial piety and responsibility in their youth. Al-Hakīm at-Tirmidhī, for example, planned to leave home in search of knowledge with two fellow students. His mother, however, was frail and alone and besought him to stay and look after her. Tirmidhī gave up the opportunity to travel and regretted that he had missed out on a life of learning. As he sat one day grieving in a graveyard, a shaykh appeared to him and after hearing the cause of the young man's sadness, offered to teach him daily. The youth gladly accepted the offer, and three years later, he recognized the teacher as Khidr. Tirmidhī realized that his devotion to duty had been the key to this extraordinary good fortune. After some time, Khidr offered to bring his student with him on a privileged journey. The two travelers came to a barren desert where a gold throne sat in an oasis. The person seated there arose and yielded his place to Tirmidhī, as forty people gathered. At the group's gesture, food materialized. There ensued a discussion of esoteric topics in a foreign tongue with the one who had been sitting on the throne. The story explains that the place was the desert in which the Israelites had wandered and that the person on the throne was the cosmic axis (*qutb*) surrounded by the forty substitutes (*abdāl*).<sup>80</sup>

Famous Friends of God have only occasionally left us first-person accounts of the spiritual experiences of their younger days, whether in the form of autobiographical narrative or briefer diary entries. Rūzbihān Baqlī recorded the following in a "memoir":

I reached the age of seven, and in my heart there occurred a love of remembering and obeying him, and I sought my conscience and I learned what it was. Then passionate love occurred in my heart; my heart melted in passionate love. I was mad with love in that time, and my heart was at that time a diver in the ocean of pre-eternal remembrance and in the scent of the perfumes of sanctity. . . . And at that time I was seeing all of existence as though it was beautiful faces, and during this period I grew fond of seclusions, prayers, devotions, and pilgrimage to the great shaykhs.<sup>81</sup>

He reports further that when he was just fifteen, a message from the Unseen Realm informed him, to his shock, that he was a prophet. He protested that he surely could not be so, because no prophet could follow Muhammad and because he himself had too many obvious shortcomings and human foibles. Taking to the desert in fear, he exchanged his life as a shopkeeper for a life of bewilderment and ecstatic experience.<sup>82</sup>

According to the autobiography of the eighteenth-century Moroccan Friend Ahmad ibn ‘Ajība, the author attended Qur’ān school from an early age and frequently arose at midnight to hurry to the mosque, so great was the love of solitude that God had bestowed on him. He ignored the reproaches of the mothers of the other children, who told him he should not hold himself aloof from his peers, and memorized the entire Qur’ān at a very young age. Ibn ‘Ajība recalls that he soon took up pasturing sheep for two important reasons. Shepherding not only gave him time to read, but, following the saying of Muhammad that “every prophet began as a shepherd,” instilled in him a certain political savvy as well as the compassion and goodness required of an authentic spiritual leader. Throughout his youth and adolescence, he reports, God preserved him in chastity, though more than a few women tried to seduce him.<sup>83</sup>

Many Friends are born saintly; some (like Rūzbihān and Ibn ‘Ajība) seem to experience a youthful conversion.<sup>84</sup> Others undergo major transformations later in life, and to their stories we now turn.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 4. Two disciples consult Naqshbandī shaykh Khwāja ‘Ubayd Allāh Ahrār (d. 896/1490) in a cave. Depicted here as an ascetic, the shaykh was noted for his extensive founding of institutions. Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns* (Ottoman, 1003/1595), ©The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, T474:219v.