

THE MAN WHO BELIEVED IN THE MAHDI

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The following is a document in defence of the Sudanese Mahdi, written by one of his followers, Yūsuf Aḥmad Muḥammad °Awaḍ al-Sīd.¹ Entitled ‘The answers that silence’, it purports to be the report of a conversation he had with a Moroccan believer, one Aḥmad b. °Abd Allāh al-Fāsī in 1306/1888-9, that is four years after the death of the Mahdi while his *khalīfa* °Abdallāhi was reigning. The format of the debate is that the Sudanese raises a number of reservations and criticisms made against the Mahdi by his opponents,² while the Moroccan answers them. Al-Fāsī is thus the ‘man who believed in the Mahdi although he did not see him’.

We may assume that this is not the report of an actual debate, and that no ‘Aḥmad al-Fāsī’ ever existed. It is a literary device to discuss points raised by those who denied the Mahdi’s mission and refute them. Thus it refers to events that took place well after the purported time of composition, such as the fact that the three *khalīfas* did not succeed each other in office, and the destruction of the Mahdi’s tomb. It must thus have been written after the Mahdiyya had been defeated by the Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1898. At this time, belief in the Mahdi’s mission was evidently flagging, and it was important for the

1 The authors are grateful to John Hunwick for his comments on the translation of this text.

2 For a lengthy discussion of the reservations and criticisms, see Ḥasan Sa°d al-°Abādī, *al-Anwār al-saniyya*, and al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā, *al-Āyāt al-bayyināt*. Both were written in 1301/1883-4 and lithographed in Omdurman in 1305; and are due to be published by Dr. Abū Salīm.

movement and the family of the Mahdi to answer those who said that this could not have been the expected Mahdi.

One clue to the date of the composition may be the reference to Mawlāy °Abd al-Ḥafīz, the ‘sultan of Fez’. °Abd al-Ḥafīz b. Ḥasan was about 26 years old in 1888, a young prince who stayed in the Marrakesh region in the south of Morocco and had little political influence.³ He could certainly not have been seen as the sultan of Fez. However, twenty years later, Morocco was in turmoil. Prince °Abd al-Ḥafīz rose against his brother, Sultan °Abd al-°Azīz, who he claimed was too accommodating to the French. In 1908, °Abd al-°Azīz abdicated, and °Abd al-Ḥafīz moved north and indeed did become ‘the sultan in Fez’. His period of power was short, however. In 1912 he had to sign a protectorate agreement with France. He thus lost the credibility he had among his compatriots as an opponent of France and was soon deposed.⁴ Thus it was only in this period, 1908–1912, that °Abd al-Ḥafīz had the reputation of being a leading opponent of France that is reflected in this document. His appearance here may thus indicate that the treatise was originally composed around this period.

The author, Yūsuf Aḥmad Muḥammad °Awaḍ al-Sīd, was from the Gezira branch of the Fādniyya tribe. He was a companion of Sayyid °Abd al-Raḥmān, a son of the Mahdi, and wrote on the history of the Mahdiyya. He also wrote other works such as *Naṣīḥat al-ḥaqq al-muwāfiq li-hidāyat °Abd al-Raḥīm al-Šādiq*.

The points of criticism raised mainly discuss the signs of the Mahdi. Thus, the expected Mahdi is supposed to come from *al-Maghrib al-aqṣā*, i.e. Morocco. However, °Awaḍ points to the actual words, the ‘farthest west’, and claims that the meaning of ‘farthest’ must be taken from the Koran, where it is used to denote the distance from Mecca to Jerusalem (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*). And Abā Island in the Sudan, where the Mahdi manifested himself, is certainly farther away from

3 Jamil Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*, Cambridge 1987, 312-3 and Zirikli (6th), III, 277.

4 He was exiled to Europe, became a Tijānī and wrote a number of books after standing down from the throne.

Mecca or Medina than Jerusalem is. Similarly, while the traditions say that the Mahdi shall rule over the earth, there are many occasions where the word ‘earth’ is used in the Koran to designate only a single country or region; and as we know, the Mahdi did indeed rule over a region.

Further, the Mahdi should be proclaimed in Mecca, where Muḥammad b. °Abd Allāh never went. However, this must not be taken in the literal sense, °Awaḍ/al-Fāsī claims. In the spiritual sense, all saints may move through space without apparently leaving their place, and in any case, for the friends of God all events are really concluded in Mecca, whatever the physical location of the act. Thus, while the common people (*°awāmm*) may not have seen the Mahdi move, he may well have been in Mecca and received the homage of the saints in the appointed place. Similarly with the claim that he should have been announced by an angel. Such an event is not to be witnessed by the common man, but only by the spiritually privileged. And those who deny the Mahdi are clearly not on a level to realize such a favour.

It is also claimed that the Mahdi should lead Jesus in prayer. This too is of course to be taken in the spiritual sense. We know, °Awaḍ/al-Fāsī says, that Jesus had already descended to Earth after his death several times during the lifetime of his mother Mary, so he may well have done so in later times. Indeed, al-Sha°rānī says in his autobiography that he himself led Jesus in prayer, so it is in no way unreasonable that the Mahdi should have done the same.

After the fall of the Mahdist state in 1898, the Mahdi’s tomb was broken open by the victors. However, a similar event also happened to Abraham’s tomb, and it does not detract from the status of the Mahdi any more than it did from that of Abraham.

So what about the four *khalīfas*, the critics ask. There were never more than three of them? No, says °Awaḍ/al-Fāsī, there were four, because Muḥammad al-Mahdī al-Sanūsī, although he never came to the Sudan, was a believer in the Mahdī and he was the fourth *khalīfa*. And in any case, the four were not *khalīfas* in the sense that they should rule after the Mahdī—only one of the three in the Sudan ever

did that.⁵ As they were only designated so as to follow spiritually in the footsteps of the Prophet, there is nothing untoward in one of the four staying in Cyrenaica throughout the time.

To document the Sanūsī leader's support for the Mahdi, °Awaḍ refers to a letter al-Sanūsī sent to the Khedive of Egypt, replying to a claim that al-Sanūsī had sent soldiers to the Mahdi. We have the text of this letter.⁶ Far from expressing support for the Mahdi, as al-°Awaḍ claims, the letter rejects the allegation that he had sent a son called Maḥmūd and 500 horsemen to the 'apostate of religion and renegade' in the Sudan. Al-Sanūsī further remarks that 'the man who claims that °Azrā'īl carries the banner of his victory, needs help from no man' ('nothing but idle yarns, fables and falsifications', he adds). Thus, while the letter from the Khedive that Awaḍ quotes seems to be genuine, the Sanūsī did not in fact support the Mahdi's movement, rejecting it both politically and on religious grounds. °Awaḍ evades the rejection and turns al-Sanūsī's irony to mean that he who has the support of the archangels—the Mahdi—does not need help from anyone, being ever victorious.

The treatise also refers to the Egyptian ruler Ismā'īl Pāshā having built a mosque for the Sanūsīs in Jidda. This is quite unknown from the Sanūsī sources. There was a Sanūsī lodge in Jidda, built in the lifetime of the founder of the order (before 1859), but there is no hint of Egyptian involvement in this. However, there were persistent reports that a later Khedive, °Abbās b. Ṭūsūn built a lodge for him in Cairo that was taken away from them by a later ruler.⁷ This may have happened, we are not certain, but no Sanūsī ever inhabited this lodge. Thus the reference to Jidda may be a confusion with this story.

5 This is also a statement that could only have been made after the Mahdiyya had failed, and it was clear no one would follow the *khalīfa* °Abdallāhi.

6 It is in Dar al-kutub al-Miṣriyya, Taymūriyya collection, and was printed together with the letter of the Khedive in *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya*, 12 Jumādā I 1301/10 March 1884. It will be published in M.I. Abū Salīm, *al-Khuṣūma bayn al-Mahdī wa-mu'arīḍihi*, forthcoming.

7 K.S. Vikør, *Sufi and Scholar on the Desert Edge*, Thesis, Bergen 1991, 151.

Manuscripts

There are two known manuscripts of ‘The Answers that Silence’, with only minor discrepancies. One is from the papers of °Alī al-Mahdī, brother of °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, here designated as A. The other, here called B, comes from the papers that were presented to al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī by some Fādniyya notables and is kept in the National Records Office, Khartoum.⁸ The following is an edited version of the two.

هذه الإجابة المسكتة

لسيدي احمد بن عبد الله
 الفاسي الذي آمن
 بالمهدي عليه السلام
 ولم يره⁹

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام
 علي سيدنا محمد وآله وصحبه وسلم¹⁰

8 The Arabic text of these letters will also be printed in Abū Salīm, *Khuṣūma*, forthcoming.

9 Only in B.

10 ... الحمد لله ... only in A.

فأقول¹¹ انا¹² العبد الفقير يوسف احمد محمد عوض انه
 بفضل الله قد جمعتنى الاوقات السعيدة سنه ١٣٠٦ فى المدينة
 المنورة برجل شريف من اهالى فاس اسمه احمد بن عبد الله ولما
 عرفنى انى من اهالى السودان قال لى هذا السيد الذى ظهر
 عندكم بالسودان هل هو المهدي¹³ المنتظر فقلت له نعم فقال
 لى¹⁴ رايت كتابته¹⁵ ودرر الفاظه عند مولاي عبد الحفيظ سلطان
 فاس وتلقاها بالقبول وترك الحرب مع الفرناسة¹⁶ فى الدار
 البيضاء بالبندق¹⁷ وصار يحارب بالسيف والحربة مثل المهدي
 عليه السلام¹⁸ فقلت له راينا فى بعض التاريخ ان كتابات المهدي
 عليه السلام لم تصل الى فاس¹⁹ فغضب وقال انا رايتها²⁰ بعينى

11 . أقول: A.

12 . وانا: A.

13 . الامام المهدي: A.

14 . Only in B.

15 . كتاباته: A.

16 . فرنسا: A.

17 . Only in A. B also has البيضاء without *hamza*.

18 . عليه السلام only in B, this is generally dropped in A after the mention of the Mahdi's name.

19 . لفاس: A.

ثم قال لى توجهت لولد السنوسى بالبر ووصلته سنه ١٣٠٤ وانا عنده بلغنى انتقال المهدي عليه السلام وحضر رجل من وادي²¹ اي برقو²² وقال لولد السنوسى ان خليفة المهدي الخليفة²³ عبد الله ظالم فغضب ولد السنوسى غاية²⁴ الغضب وبكى غاية²⁵ البكى وقال كيف تقول فى خليفة المهدي عليه السلام هذا القول واخرج²⁶ الرجل من المجلس واهين فلما²⁷ عرف صدق ايمانى فى المهدي عليه السلام قال لي²⁸ يا يوسف صدقنى ولا تصدق غيرى ان ولد السنوسى مسلم للمهدي عليه السلام وقد²⁹ رايت كتابة³⁰ حضرة له من

20 B: دشى ورايته.

21 A: وداى (evidently a later correction). The intended is اودى B: وادي.

22 A: اي برقوا B: برق.

23 الخليفة in front of the names only in A.

24 B: غايت.

25 B: قايت.

26 B: خرج.

27 A: ثم لما.

28 Only in A.

29 Only in A.

30 B: كتابتا.

محمد توفيق باشا الخديوى يقول له³¹ فيها اذكر المودة التى كانت بين والدى اسماعيل باشا ووالدك محمد السنوسى وذكر له بناءه³² له الجامع³³ بجده³⁴ وغير ذلك من الانعامات عليه³⁵ وقال كيف تعاونوا علينا هذا³⁶ الرجل الذى ظهر بالسودان³⁷ بارسالك له رايات وجيش كما بلغنا فكتب له³⁸ جوابا مختصرا ان من³⁹ معه جبريل وعزرائيل لا⁴⁰ يحتاج الى عون امثالنا فقلت له استاذنك⁴¹ يا سيدى فى سؤالات⁴² فقال سل فقلت له راينا فى بعض الاحاديث ان المهدي عليه السلام يبايع بين الركن والمقام فقال لي⁴³ على البديهة ان بيعته بين الركن

31 Only in A.

32 B: بناه.

33 B: للجامع.

34 B: مع جده.

35 . وغيره من انعاماته عليه: A.

36 A: تعاون هذا.

37 A: في السودان علينا.

38 B: بارسالك له كما بلغنا مكتوب له.

39 من only in A.

40 لا not in either version, but must be the original; see note in translation.

41 Only in A.

42 B: السولات.

43 Only in A.

والمقام بيعة خاصة⁴⁴ بالخواص فان جميع الدنيا خطوة عند الاولياء وكلما يقع فى الوجود لا يعقد الا فى مكة محل الغوث فيكون بايع الخواص من اهل الله فى ذلك المكان واما بيعته⁴⁵ العامة ففى المغرب⁴⁶

فقلت له راينا فى بعض الكتب ان المهدي يملك الارض فقال لى⁴⁷ اي بعض الارض من اطلاق الكل على الجزء قال تعالى وكذلك مكنا ليوسف فى الارض اي ارض مصر وقال تعالى واورثنا القوم الذين كانوا يستضعفون مشارق الارض ومغاربها اي بنوا اسرائيل ومعلوم انهم لم يملكوا الا مصر والشام وقال ومما يويد هذا القول ما ذكره الفخر الرازى فى تفسيره الكبير المسمى بمفاتيح الغيب على قوله تعالى وان كادوا ليستفزونك من الارض ليخرجوك منها الاية وكثير⁴⁸ فى التنزيل ذكر الارض والمراد مكان مخصوص منها كقوله تعالى او ينفوا من الارض اى من مواضعهم وقوله تعالى فلن ابرح الارض يعنى الارض التى

44 . خاصية: B.

45 A: البيعة.

46 B: المقرب .

47 Only in A.

48 A: وكثير.

قصدها لطلب الميرة

فقلت له بلغنا من غير تحقيق ان المهدي عليه السلام قال
اصلى فى جميع المساجد فقال هذه لا⁴⁹ اشكال فيها اصلا فان
من لم يكن فى مقامه عليه السلام يتصور⁵⁰ بصور متعددة
ويصلى حيث اراد كما ذكر ذلك سيدى عبد الوهاب الشعراني
فى طبقاته فى مناقب سيدي عبد القادر الدشوطى ثم قلت له
ان بعض العلماء الذين فى قلوبهم مرض يقولون لنا ان المهدي
المنتظر يظهر⁵¹ من المغرب الاقصى واما التى ظهر بها هذا الامام
ليست من⁵² الاقصى فقال لفظ⁵³ الاقصى اى البعيد يطلق على
مسافة ثلاثين يوما⁵⁴ او اربعين يوما⁵⁵ بالسير المعتاد قال تعالى
سبحان الذى اسرى بعبده ليلا من المسجد الحرام الي المسجد
الاقصى وبينهما مسافة ثلاثين يوما او اربعين يوما فهذا الحديث
الذاكر ان المهدي يظهر من المغرب الاقصى فان تكلم به النبي

49 Only in A.

50 B: ينظر.

51 Only in A.

52 Only in A.

53 B: لفظت .

54 Only in A.

55 B: يوم .

صلى الله عليه وسلم فى المدينة فان من⁵⁶ المدينة الي ابا تزييد
على هذا المقدار وان تكلم به فى مكة فان من مكة الى ابا تزييد
على هذا المقدار⁵⁷ وعلى كل حال فهو مغرب اقصى ظهر به طبقا
للاحاديث وانما⁵⁸ من لم⁵⁹ يجعل الله له نورا فما له من نور
فقلت له خلفاء المهدي ثلاثة فاين الرابع فقال اربعة
ورابعهم⁶⁰ ولد السنوسى فان كان حضر هكذا الذى نقص⁶¹
ذلك فان المراد من خلفاء المهدي عليه السلام لكمال وراثته لجده
صلى الله عليه وسلم وليس المراد انهم يحكمون فان الخليفتين
الاثنين الخليفة علي ولد حلو والخليفة محمد⁶² شريف حامد لم
يحكما⁶³ مع الخليفة عبد الله كما هو معلوم كما قال سيدي
محيي الدين بن العربي فى الفتوحات وهم على اقدام رجال من
الصحابة صدقوا ما عاهدوا الله عليه الخ

56 Only in A.

57 لم تزييد علي هذا المقدار بشئ كثير: B

58 وان: B.

59 لا: B.

60 فقال اربعهم: B .

61 only in B. فان ...

62 الخليفتين علي حلو ومحمد: B .

63 يحكموا: B .

فقلت له ان بعض المنكرين يقولون لنا قبة المهدي تكسرت
وتهدمت فقال لى دعني⁶⁴ من كلام⁶⁵ المنكرين الجاهلين فان
اهالى السودان اتتهم نعمة فلم⁶⁶ يعرفوا قدرها ولم يودوا شكرها
فزالها الله منهم فان بختنصر لما خرب بيت المقدس وحرق
التوراة وهدم⁶⁷ قبة سيدنا ابراهيم الخليل فان الطين اذا تهدم لم
يتهدم مجد المهدي عليه السلام وما منحه⁶⁸ للناس من الشجاعة
والتوحيد وارشاد العبيد الي طاعة الرب المجيد⁶⁹ وما ادخلهم فيه
من⁷⁰ رتبة الشهادة التى هي فوق كل رتبة من رتب الصالحين⁷¹
كما قال تعالى مع الذين انعمت عليهم من النبيين والصديقين
والشهداء والصالحين كما ان سيدنا ابراهيم عليه الصلاة والسلام
لم يتهدم الثناء عليه على لسان الاخرين الى يوم القيامة وكل
الملل تحبه وتنسب اليه وكفاه فخرا قوله تعالى لنبيه صلى الله

64 B: دعوني.

65 A: وكلام.

66 A: ولم.

67 A: هدم.

68 A: وما مثله.

69 only in A. وارشاد ...

70 Only in A.

71 A: وهي فوق رتبة الصالحين.

عليه وسلم ثم اوحيا اليك ان اتبع ملة ابراهيم حنيفا الي آخره ثم قال⁷² وقد اشار تعالى الى الواقعتين التى حصلتا على بنى اسرائيل بقوله وقضينا الي بني اسرائيل فى الكتاب لتفسدن فى الارض مرتين ولتعلن علوا كبيرا فاذا جاء وعد اولاهما بعثنا عليكم عبادا لنا اولى باس شديد ثم قال فاذا جاء وعد الاخرة ليسئوا وجوهكم وليدخلوا المسجد كما دخلوه اول مرة وليتبروا ما علوا تتبيرا

فقلت له راينا فى بعض الاحاديث ان المهدي يصلى اماما⁷³ بعبسى فهل هذا الحديث صحيح ام لا فقال رايت فى بعض الاحاديث⁷⁴ ان غير المهدي عليه السلام من هذه الامة المحمدية من يصلى اماما بعبسى فيكون ناسخا لذلك الحديث او يكون يصلى به كما قال سيدى عبد الوهاب الشعراني فى المن صليت اماما بعبسى والهمت انه هو فانه مذكور فى كتاب مشارق الانوار ان عيسى نزل فى حياة امه فلا مانع من تعدد⁷⁵

72 Only in A.

73 B: امام .

74 B: الاحديث .

75 B: تعديد.

نزوله

ثم قلت له ان بعض العلماء المجادلين لنا بالباطل يقولون لنا⁷⁶ ما تقولون فى هذا الحديث الذى يقول فيه⁷⁷ صلى الله عليه وسلم اذا ظهر المهدي نادى فوق عمامته ملك هذا خليفة الله فاتبعوه وقالوا⁷⁸ عند ظهوره لم يحصل⁷⁹ هذا النداء فقال ان⁸⁰ النداء فى القلوب اى قلوب السعداء فانه من المعلوم ان الملك لا ترى ذاته ولا يسمع⁸¹ صوته الا معجزة لنبي⁸² او كرامة لولي والمهدي⁸³ عليه السلام اتبعوه اغلب الخلق لما ظهر لا رغبة⁸⁴ فى مال كان عنده ولا خوفا من سطوته لانه من المعلوم ان الحكومة⁸⁵ فى ذلك الوقت اقوى منه سطوة فلم يخافوا سطوتها⁸⁶ واتبعوه بل

76 Only in A.

77 Only in A.

78 A: قالوا .

79 B: ما حصل .

80 Only in B.

81 B: سمع .

82 B: للنبي .

83 او كرامة للمهدي

84 B: رغبة لا رهبة .

85 B: سطوته فلم يخافوا سطوة الحكومة: this is probably a mistake in the copying.

86 only in A. سطوتها

[ما] هو الا اتباعا⁸⁷ لنداء الملك حتى باعوا ارواحهم معه ابتغاء مرضات الله وتشبيها من انفسهم قال تعالى⁸⁸ ما الفت بين قلوبهم ولكن الله الف بينهم انه عزيز حكيم وفي الحديث اذا احب الله عبدا نادي جبريل فى السماء ان الله يحب فلانا فاحبوه فيحبه⁸⁹ اهل السماء ثم يوضع له القبول فى الارض فيحبه قلوب السعداء⁹⁰

فقلت له العلماء قالوا⁹¹ لنا ما تقولون فى تفسير هذا الحديث الذى يقول فيه صلى الله عليه وسلم تتنعم امتى فى زمن المهدي نعمة لم يتنعموا مثلها حتى يتمنى الاموات الحياة⁹² لما يرون⁹³ لاهل الارض من خير فقال الخير هو الشهادة⁹⁴ وليس

87 B: هو الاتباع.

88 only in B. وتثبيتا ...

89 B: فيحبوه.

90 B: الارض فى قلوب السعداء.

91 B: تقول.

92 A: الاحياء مفعول معدم، then above line is written: يتمنى الحياء الاموات: .
الاموات فاعل .

93 B: يرونه .

94 A: الخير الشهادة.

المراد ما فهموا انه كثرة⁹⁵ الاكل والشرب والتنعيم الذى جاء به⁹⁶ المهدي عليه السلام ينهي عنه ويحبب الجوع وغيره⁹⁷ تبعا لجده صلى الله عليه وسلم واصحابه كما هو معلوم⁹⁸

ورايت فى فتاوى الشيخ محمد عlish رحمه الله فى باب الجهاد فى الجزء الاول نمرة ٣٣١ فما⁹⁹ من ميت يتمنى العودة¹⁰⁰ الي الدنيا الا الشهيد لما يرى من فضل الشهادة من ذى العرش المجيد فيطلبها ليزداد من الكرامة ما لا عين رات ولا اذن سمعت ولا خطر على قلب بشر كما قال صلى الله عليه وسلم فى الحديث¹⁰¹ فى الشهداء فى كتاب الموطا للامام مالك رضى الله عنه¹⁰² لوددت انى اقاتل فى سبيل الله فاقتل ثم احيا فاقتل ثم احيا فاقتل هذا والسلام سنة ١٣٥٩هـ / والحمد لله رب العالمين

95 Both mss. have كثر , which must be wrong.

96 Only in B.

97 A: السلام احب اليه الجوع فى الله; B: السلام ينهي عنه ويحبب الجوع وغيره، والشدائد وغيره.

98 B: كما معلوم.

99 B: ما .

100 A: العود.

101 Only in A.

102 Only in B.

وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه وسلم . انتهى
 رسمه يوم ١٢ من جمادى الثاني سنة ١٣٥٥

Translation

These are the answers that silence, of Sayyidi Aḥmad °Abd Allāh al-Fāsī who believed in the Mahdi although he did not see him.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Praise be to God, the Lord of all Being. Peace and blessing upon our Master Muḥammad and his family and Companions.

I say, I am the needy [of God] servant Yūsuf Aḥmad Muḥammad °Awaḍ. By the grace of God, I met during some happy times in Medina, the radiant, in 1306 [1888-9] a noble man from Fez by the name of Aḥmad b. °Abd Allāh. When he learned that I was from the Sudan, he said to me, 'This noble man who appeared among you in the Sudan, is he the expected Mahdi?' I answered 'Yes', and he said, 'I saw a letter of his and the pearls of its words with Mawlā °Abd al-Ḥafīz, the sultan of Fez,¹⁰³ who received it with acceptance and stopped fighting the French in Casablancawith guns and started to fight with swords and spears as the Mahdi (peace be upon him) did'.

103 °Abd al-Ḥafīz b. al-Ḥasan al-°Alawī, al-Mawlā (1280-1356/1863-1936), son of the Sultan of Morocco, see introduction above.

And I said to him, ‘We have seen in some history¹⁰⁴ that the letters of the Mahdi (peace be upon him) did not reach Fez’. Then he grew angry and said, ‘Indeed, I saw it with my eyes’. Then he said, ‘I went to Walad al-Sanūsī by land, and reached him in 1304 [1886-7]. While I was with him, the death of the Mahdi (peace be upon him) reached me,¹⁰⁵ and a man from Waday, that is Borqū, said to Walad al-Sanūsī that the *khalīfa* of the Mahdi, the Khalīfa °Abdallāhi, is an oppressor. Then Walad al-Sanūsī became violently angry and started to cry violently, and said, “How can you say this of the *khalīfa* of the Mahdi, peace be upon him?” and he expelled the man from the assembly with disdain.’

And when he [al-Fāsī] learned of the sincerity of my faith in the Mahdi, peace be upon him, he said to me, ‘O Yūsuf, trust me and no other, Walad al-Sanūsī acknowledges the Mahdi, peace be upon him. I have seen a letter that came to him [al-Sanūsī] from the Khedive Muḥammad Tawfīq Pāshā, where he said to him, “I remind you of the love that was between my father Ismā’īl Pāshā and your father Muḥammad al-Sanūsī”, and reminded him that he had built the mosque for him in Jidda, and other favours for him, and said, “How can you support this man who has appeared in the Sudan against us, by sending him banners and an army, as we have heard”. And he [al-Sanūsī] wrote to him a reply, saying in brief that the one who has Gabriel and °Azrā’īl on his side, does not need help from the likes of us.’¹⁰⁶

104 To be found in Na°ūm Shuqayr, *Ta’rikh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa ’l-ḥadīth wa-jughrāfiyyatuhu*, Cairo 1903, III, 354.

105 The Mahdi died on 9 Ramaḍān 1302/22 June 1885. Thus if this is correct, the news came to the Sanūsī more than a year after the event, which seems unlikely. Also, it would be impossible for the *khalīfa* to be called ‘an oppressor’ at the same time as the Mahdi’s death was reported, i.e. before the *khalīfa* had succeeded to power. Both indicate that the story is fictitious and was created at a later date.

106 The ms. does not have the *lā*, thus it says lit. ‘must be helped...’, but al-Sanūsī’s letter original letter says °*alā annahu lā yahtāj ilā ’l-bashar man yaḥmal Azrā’īl* °*alayhi al-salām rāyatahu* (above, note 4).

And I said to him, ‘Do you allow, Sir, some questions?’, and he said, ‘Ask’. I said, ‘We have seen in some Traditions that homage (*bay‘a*) is paid to the Mahdi (peace be upon him) between the corner [of the Ka‘ba] and Abraham’s *maqām*’ and he said to me at once, ‘The homage paid to him between the corner and the *maqām* is a special homage made by the privileged, but indeed all the world is but a step for the saints and none of what occurs in this world is concluded elsewhere than in Mecca, the place of the *ghawth*. So the homage of the privileged of the people of God took place there, and as for the homage of the common people, that should be in the Maghreb’.

I said to him, ‘We have seen in some books that the Mahdi will own the earth’, and he said, ‘That is, *some* of the earth, using the part [rhetorically] to stand for the whole. It is in the saying of God, Most High, “So We established Joseph in the land” [xii, 21],¹⁰⁷ that is, the land of Egypt; and in the saying of God, Most High, “And We bequeathed upon the people that were abased all the east and the west of the land” [vii, 137], that is the Children of Israel. And it is known that they only owned the lands of Egypt and Syria’. He said, ‘And this saying is supported by what al-Fakhr al-Rāzī said in his large *tafsīr* called *Mafātīh al-ghayb* about the saying of God, Most High, “Indeed, they were near to startling thee from the land, to expel thee from it [and then they would have tarried after thee only a little—the wont of those We sent before thee of Our Messengers; thou wilt find no change to Our wont]” [xvii, 76]. The Revelation mentions the word “land” many times, and the meaning is a special place in it, as in the saying of God, Most High, “or they shall be banished from the land. [This is the recompense of those who fight against God and His Messenger, and hasten about the earth, to do corruption there: they shall be slaughtered, or crucified, or their hands and feet shall alternately be struck off, or...]” [v, 33], that is, from their places, and the saying of God, Most High, “Neither will I leave this” [xii, 80], meaning the land that He made for asking for provisions.’

107 The translation of Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran interpreted* (Oxford 1964), is used.

And I said to him, ‘It has reached us without confirmation¹⁰⁸ that the Mahdi (peace be upon him) has said, “I will pray in all mosques”¹⁰⁹. He also said, ‘There is no doubt about this at all. Even one who is not of his rank (peace be upon him) sees through multiplied likenesses, and prays where he wants, as °Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha°rānī mentions in his *Ṭabaqāt* on the virtues of Sayyidī °Abd al-Qādir al-Daštūfī’.¹¹⁰ Then I said, ‘Some scholars who have a sickness in their hearts, say to us that the expected Mahdi will appear in the farthest west (*al-maghrib al-aqṣā*),¹¹¹ and Abā,¹¹² where this imam appeared, is not in the farthest [west]’. He said, ‘The expression “the farthest”, that is far away, applies to a distance of thirty or forty days normal travel. God, Most High, says “Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque” [xvii, 1] and the distance between the two is the distance of thirty or forty days. And this Tradition mentioning that the Mahdi will appear in the farthest west, if the Prophet (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) spoke of it in Medina, then from Medina to Abā exceeds this distance, and if he talked about it in Mecca, then from Mecca to Abā exceeds this distance. And in any case, this is a “farthest west” that he appeared in, in conformity with the Traditions. And indeed, he upon whom God did not bestow light will have no light.’

And I said to him, ‘The *khalīfas* of the Mahdi are three, so where is the fourth?’ He said, ‘There are four, and the fourth of them is Walad al-Sanūsī. And if he had come, he would have been the missing one. Indeed the point of the *khalīfas* of the Mahdi (peace be upon

108 This probably indicates an event that did not take place, and refers to its not being mentioned by the Mahdi in his writings, and thus being uncertain.

109 Cf. P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881-1898* (2nd edn., Oxford 1970), 112, for a declaration of the Mahdi to this effect.

110 °Abd al-Qādir b. Muhammad al-Daštūfī (d. 924/1518), Sufī author; al-Sha°rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut, n.d. (reprint of Cairo 1954 edition), II, 138-9 and Kaḥḥāla, v, 299.

111 *Al-maghrib al-aqṣā* normally means Morocco, but °Awaḍ uses the literal meaning of ‘farthest west’ to argue his point.

112 Abā Island on the White Nile, the early centre of the Mahdi.

him) was the completion of his inheritance from his ancestor (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) and the intention was not that they should reign. Indeed the two *khalifas*, the Khalifa °Alī Walad Ḥilū and the Khalifa Muḥammad al-Sharīf Ḥāmid did not rule with the Khalifa °Abdallāhi, as is known. Thus Sayyidī Muḥyī 'l-Dīn b. al-°Arabī said in the *Futuḥāt*, “And they are coming in the footsteps of the Companions, ‘They fulfil the covenant they made with God’ [Koran, xxxiii, 23]”, etc.’

I said to him, ‘Some of those who deny [the Mahdi] tell us that the tomb of the Mahdi has been broken and destroyed’.¹¹³ He said to me, ‘Spare me the words of the ignorant rejectors. There came to the peoples of the Sudan an ease whose extent they were unaware of, and they did not want to give God thanks for it. So God took it away from them. Indeed Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Torah and destroyed the tomb of our lord Abraham the friend [of God]. Surely if the earth¹¹⁴ is destroyed, the glory of the Mahdi (peace be upon him) is not destroyed, nor the valour and the [message] of unity of God and guidance of God’s servants to be obedient to the Glorious Lord, nor the rank of martyrdom which is above every rank of the righteous in which he placed them, as in the saying of God, Most High, “those whom God has blessed, Prophets, just men, martyrs, the righteous” [iv, 69]. Similarly, the praise for our master Abraham (peace and blessings be upon him) from the tongues of others to the day of resurrection is not destroyed, and all religions love him and trace their origin to him. And sufficient as praise of him are the words of God, Most High, to His prophet (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him), “Then We revealed to thee, ‘Follow thou the creed of Abraham, a man of pure faith [and no idolater]’” [xvi, 123].’ Then he said, ‘God, Most High, has indicated the two events that happened to the Children of Israel through His saying “And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the Book; ‘You shall do corruption

113 This could clearly not have been said in 1888, when this letter is purported to have been written – the grave was only demolished in 1898, after the defeat of the Mahdists; Holt, *Mahdist State*, 241.

114 Or clay soil of the *qubba*.

in the earth twice, and you shall ascend exceeding high'. So when the promise of the first of these came to pass, We sent against you servants of Ours, men of great might, [and they went through the habitations, and it was a promise performed]" [xvii, 4]. Then He said, "Then, when the promise of the second came to pass, We sent against you Our servants to discountenance you, and to enter the Temple, as they entered it the first time, and to destroy utterly that which they ascended to"[xvii, 7].'

And I said, 'We saw in some Traditions that the Mahdi (peace be upon him) leads Jesus in prayer, and is this Tradition sound or not?' He said, 'I saw in some Traditions that some one other than the Mahdi (peace be upon him) of this Muḥammadan community is the one who leads Jesus in prayer—and this cancels that Tradition—or that he leads him in prayer in the way Sayyidī °Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha°rānī tells in the *Minan*,¹¹⁵ "I led Jesus in prayer and it was communicated to me by inspiration that it was him". And it is mentioned in the book, *Mashāriq al-anwār* that Jesus descended in the lifetime of his mother, so there was no impediment to his descending several times.'

Then I said to him, 'Some of the falsely disputing scholars say to us: "What do you say in explanation of this Tradition, where it says that the Prophet (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) says concerning him, "When the Mahdi appears, an angel will cry out above his turban "This is the *khalīfa* of God, so follow him""', and they say that at the time he appeared, this cry did not occur.' He said, 'The cry is in the hearts, that is the hearts of the blissful. Indeed, it is known about the angel that his body is not visible nor is his voice audible except as a miracle of a prophet or a mark of honour for a saint. The Mahdi (peace be upon him) was followed by most people when he appeared, not out of desire for any property that was with him, nor out of fear of his strength, for it was known that the strength of the government of that time was greater than his, but they did not

115 Probably his autobiography *Laṭā'if al-minan wa 'l-akhlāq fī bayān wujūb al-taḥadduth bi-ni°mat Allāh °alā 'l-°ilāq*, GAL, S, II, 444. For *Mashāriq al-anwār al-qudsiyya fī bayān al-°uhūd al-Muḥammadiyya*, see *ibid.*, 443.

fear its strength and followed him.¹¹⁶ Indeed this was only following the angel's cry,¹¹⁷ to the extent that they, in accompanying him, sold their souls out of desire for pleasing God, and confirming what they had in themselves. God, Most High, said, "[Hadst thou expended all that is in the earth], thou couldst not have brought their hearts together; but God brought their hearts together, surely He is All-mighty, All-wise" [viii, 63]. And it is said in the Tradition, "If God loves a believer, Gabriel cries in Heaven that 'God loves So-and-so, so love him' and the people of Heaven love him. Then he arranges for him an acceptance on Earth and the hearts of the blissful love him".¹¹⁸

I said to him, 'The scholars say to us, "What do you say in explanation of this Tradition, in which he (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) said, 'My community will in the time of the Mahdi find favour, a favour whose like has not been found, so that the communities of the dead will desire life because of the goodness they see the people of Earth enjoying'"?' And he said, 'The goodness is martyrdom and the meaning is not what they understand in terms of abundance of food and drink. Indeed the favour that the Mahdi (peace be upon him) brings forbids this and puts in hearts the love of hunger and the like, in keeping with his ancestor (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) and his Companions as is known. And I saw in the *fatāwā* of Shaykh °Illaysh (may God give him mercy) in the chapter of *jihād*, in the first part, nr. 331: "There is no dead person who desires to return to the world, except a martyr when he sees the blessings of martyrdom coming from the Owner of the Glorious Throne, and he seeks it so that it may increase the honour of what no eye has seen and ear heard and has not occurred to the heart of any man".¹¹⁸ And as he (may the blessings and peace of God be

116 This refers to the attacks later made by scholars and government sources that people followed the Mahdi to gain property or because they were afraid of his sword, rather than out of belief.

117 Or, for God's desire (*li-nidā' al-Malik*).

118 Muḥammad Aḥmad °Illaysh, *Fatḥ al-°alī al-mālik fī 'l-fatāwā °alā madhhab al-imām Mālik*, 2 vols., Cairo, n.d., 1, 390. The Cairo edition has *fa-mā min mayyit illā yatamannā*, and also *li-yuzāda la-hu*, 'so that honour ... is increased for him'. The phrase at the end is a *ḥadīth qudsī* and is commonly used in

upon him) said in the Tradition about martyrdom in the *Muwattaʿ* of Imām Mālik (may God be pleased with him), “Indeed I wish that I was fighting for the sake of God and I was killed then brought to life then killed and brought to life then killed”.¹¹⁹

Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being. Peace and blessing upon our Master Muḥammad and his family and Companions. The copying of this ended on the 12 Jumādā II 1355 [30 August 1936].¹²⁰

letters from contemporary Sufis like Aḥmad b. Idrīs and Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī. It was also used by al-Ghazālī and is found in several Traditions; Vikør, *Sufi and Scholar*, 305 n.22.

119 Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwattaʿ*, ed. Fārūq Saʿd, Beirut 1403/1983, 40 [27]; *Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas, The first formulation of Islamic Law*, translated by Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley, London 1989, 180.

120 B: ‘Thus, and peace, Year 1359 [1940-1].’