The Concept of Knowledge According to al-Kirmānī  
(d. after 411/1021)

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I. Introduction

The concept of knowledge is one of the best known and most debated topics in religion and other fields of human enquiry. Its prime importance lies in the fact that a clear understanding of a system of thought depends on a clear understanding of its concept of knowledge. The concept of knowledge has a particular relationship with Ismailism as one of the appellations given to Ismailis is Ta’līmiyya or Aṣḥāb al-ta’līm. Contradictory views have been expressed by critics about the Ismaili concept of knowledge, mainly based on non Ismaili hostile sources. This article is an attempt to present the Ismaili concept of knowledge based on Ismaili sources. To this end, we will focus on Ḥāmid al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Kirmānī, as an outstanding Ismaili dāʿī and thinker who lived in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, a period extremely important for both philosophical and daʿwa activities, and whose important works are available, and in doing so it is hoped that it will be helpful in understanding an essential concept of Ismailism. This article mainly concentrates on the nature and source of knowledge according to al-Kirmānī, its relationship to the intellect and to authority.

In order to place al-Kirmānī’s position into a proper perspective, it would be helpful to examine the classification of Muslim schools of thought by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), a renowned figure in the history of Islamic thought, who claimed to have thoroughly studied all Islamic schools of thought, including Ismailism. Al-Ghazālī divided Muslims into five categories with respect to their attainment of true knowledge or truth: the Muqallidūn, the Mutakallimūn, the Bāṭiniyya or Ta’līmiyya, i.e., Ismāʿiliyya, the Falāṣifa and the Ṣūfīyya. Al-Ghazālī did not include the Muqallidūn among the seekers of knowledge but considered
them servile conformists. He said: ‘A prerequisite to being a Muqallid is that one
does not know himself to be such.’¹

Thus al-Ghazālī confined seekers of truth or knowledge to the remaining four
categories:

1. The Mutakallimūn or Theologians who claim that they are the people of opinion
(raʿy) and speculation (nazar) and who attain true knowledge through such
enquiry;
2. The Baṭiniyya or Esotericists who allege that they are the people of Teaching
(ašhāb al-taʿlīm) and that they acquire truth only from the infallible Imam;
3. The Falāsifa or Philosophers who allege that they are the people of logic (mantiq)
and demonstration (burhān) and who can reach true knowledge through this;
4. The Šūfiyya or Mystics who claim to be the privileged ones of the Divine pres-
ence and people of vision (mushāhada) and unveiling (mukāshafa) and thereby
they can attain true knowledge through a beatific vision and unveiling.²

The key points of the schools that al-Ghazālī has described enable us to assess the
Ismaili point of view in juxtaposition to the others.

Quite often, Ismailism is described by its critics in contradictory terms, as an
anti-authoritarian philosophical movement, or an anti-rationalistic authoritarian
movement.³ Al-Ghazālī accuses them of the latter and says that the basis of their
madhhab is the invalidation of the exercise of intellect and opinion because of their
invitation to the taʿlīm of the infallible Imam.⁴

Because al-Ghazālī occupies an important place among the critics of Ismailism
and as he claimed to have a thorough knowledge of their doctrine, it is relevant
to discuss his criticism of the doctrine of taʿlīm for this enables us to assess the
Ismaili point of view and the reliability of al-Ghazālī’s information on Ismailism.

Al-Ghazālī in his al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl says regarding the Ismaili doctrine of
.taʿlīm:

There is no substance to their views and no force in their argument. Indeed, had
it not been for the maladroit defence put forward by the ignorant friend of the
truth, that innovation, given its weakness, would never have attained its present
position. But intense fanaticism led the defenders of the truth to prolong the
debate with them over the premises of their argument and to contradict them in
everything they said. Thus they fought the Taʿlīmites (Taʿlimiyya) over their claim
that there must be authoritative teaching (taʿlim) and an authoritative teacher
(muʿallim) and also their claim that not every teacher is suitable and that there
must be an infallible teacher (muʿallim maʾşūm). Their argument proving the
need for authoritative teaching and an authoritative teacher was lucid and clear
and the counter arguments of their opponents were weak. Because of that, many
were seduced into thinking that it was due to the strength of the Taʿlimites’ doc-
trine and the weakness of their opponents doctrine, not understanding that it was

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really due to the dim-wittedness of the defender of the truth and his ignorance of
how to go about it. In fact, the right way to proceed is to acknowledge the need for
an authoritative teacher who must also be infallible. But our infallible teacher is
Muhammad – God’s blessing and peace be upon him! If they say: ‘Our teacher has
indeed taught his emissaries and scattered them throughout the countries and he
expects them to return to consult him if they disagree on some point or encounter
some difficulty’, we say: ‘Our teacher has taught his emissaries and scattered them
through the countries, and he has perfected this teaching, since God Most High
said: “Today I have perfected for you your religion and have accorded you My
full favour” (Qur’an 5:3). And once the teaching has been perfected, the death of
the teacher works no harm, just as his hiding works no harm.’

Due to the inaccessibility of Ismaili literature, it has for a long time been ex-
tremely difficult for students of Ismailism to verify what has been said about it by
its critics – al-Ghazālī and others like him. As a result, whatever has been said by
them has been accepted at face value. However, the recent discovery and publica-
tion of Ismaili literature shows that – although there are particles of truth in what
has been said – because it is not usual for polemicists to present their opponent’s
views accurately such views are presented in a way that makes them vulnerable to
attack. Thus the way rationalism or authoritarianism is attributed to them shows
that reason and authority are mutually exclusive and contradictory to each other.
On the contrary, according to Ismailism, reason and authority together are nec-
essary otherwise they are not useful. One of the eminent dā’īs, al-Mu‘ayyad (d.
470/1078) says:

The Prophet is the lamp of insights (baṣāʾir) through which they understand,
just as the sun is the lamp of eyesight(s) (abṣār) through which they see. The
lamp is useless to the blind who has lost his eyesight and similarly the guidance
of prophethood is useless to the one who is blind of intellect and insight. And
just as the eye can see through the collectivity of the lamp and the sound eye,
the intellect understands through the collectivity of the prophethood and the
sound intellect.

Further, the very necessity of an authority is based on the testimony of the intel-
lect. As al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) says: ‘The intellect attests to the existence of
the most excellent and the best from every species according to its excellence and
nobility.’ Thus in Ismailism, there is no incompatibility or mutual exclusiveness
between authority and reason. In fact, the perfection of the intellect lies in follow-
ing and obeying the authority, the latter being the actual and perfect Intellect and
the former being the potential or imperfect intellect.

As for al-Ghazālī’s criticism that the basis of the madhhab of the Ta’limiyya is
the invalidation of the exercise of intellect and opinion, it is true that they reject the
exercise of personal opinion in matters of religion, on the basis of several Qur’anic
verses such as: ‘And who is more astray than one who follows his desire without guidance from God’ (Qur’an 28:50) and ‘They follow but a guess, and indeed, a guess never takes the place of the truth’ (Qur’an 53:28). However, as is clear from the above, to accuse them of not exercising the intellect does not accord with the way in which they view the intellect. It appears that al-Ghazālī attempts to depict Ismailis as *muqallids* or servile conformists, whom he treats with great contempt.

Al-Ghazālī’s information about Ismaili belief in an infallible Imam is basically true but in order to attack this, he has added certain accretions, such as the notion of the hidden Imam, which bears no relation to the Ismaili doctrine of Imamate. Because the Ismaili concept of knowledge depends on the *taʿlīm* of the infallible Imam or Teacher, it is pertinent to provide a summary of their arguments on the necessity for an infallible Imam. Numerous works on the necessity of Imamate written by Ismaili *dāʿī*s are now available. A detailed description of the necessity for the continuity of Imamate after the Prophet and thereby to continue his mission to guide people according to God’s command, is given in the *Kitāb al-wilāya/walāya* of the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* by al-Qâḍī al-Nuʿmān. Al-Kirmānī himself has written an entire book on the establishment, necessity, infallibility and other aspects of Imamate, called *al-Maṣābih fi ithbāt al-imāma*. Some of the arguments from *al-Iftikhār* of al-Sijistānī and from *al-Maṣābih* of al-Kirmānī are offered here. Al-Sijistānī in his *al-Iftikhār*, referring to the Qur’anic verses: ‘One day We shall summon all people with their Imam’ (Qur’an 17:71), ‘You are a warner only, and for every people is a guide’ (Qur’an 13:7), ‘And We appointed them Imams who guide by Our command’ (Qur’an 21:73), says that by these verses, God makes it clear that there is an Imam in every age, who guides by the command of God, to His religion and to His straight path. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be a guiding and guided Imam for people in every age, and the world is never devoid of such a guide. And the matter is not as ordinary people think, that God has neglected His creatures and left them without someone to invite, guide and command them.

Al-Sijistānī further argues:

By God sending Messengers to people and neglecting them after their departure without appointing … an Imam lies the main part of corruption which leads to disorder and perdition. The proof of this is the differences which appeared in the *umma* which led to the shedding of blood … and accusing each other of infidelity. The cause of this was nothing but diverting the Imamate from the one to whom God had granted it … When God has sent a learned and wise Messenger to unite the people by the purity of his soul and the subtlety of his mind with the power of revelation conferred upon him, (and) a noble *sharīʿa* and a sound and perfect Book (*tanzīl*) and then He does not appoint someone to guard and protect them in the ages (to come), it would be a mockery, futility and weakness from Him, but He is free from and above such things.
Al-Kirmānī in his *al-Maṣābiḥ* gives fourteen arguments on the establishment and necessity of an Imam after the Prophet, of which some are given here:

1. Because the Prophet had brought from God profound wisdom, it was incumbent upon him to convey it to those who were in his time and also to those who were yet to come until the Day of Resurrection. But those who were in his time were not capable of accepting the entirety of wisdom all at once, nor was it possible for those to come in future to be there in his time, nor was it ordained for the Prophet to remain in this world until the end of all people and so convey to them the trust of God, so it became necessary for him to appoint a successor to take his place and convey this trust and for his successor at the time of his own demise to designate someone else to continue to convey the trust of God to people.12

2. The Prophet brought the *tanzil* and the *sharīʿa* in Arabic, a language in which a single word, by its being a parable or allegory can lead to diverse and manifold meanings. It is therefore possible to interpret every Qurʾanic verse and every Prophetic Tradition according to the desire of the interpreter. But this possibility is rejected by the intellect and we see in the Islamic community that each sect argues for the validity of its own sect, interpreting a Qurʾanic verse and a prophetic tradition, in a sense different from the senses held by the others. For example, in the verse: ‘What hindered you from falling prostrate before that whom I have created with My two *yad*s’ (38:75), the Muʿtazila say that ‘two *yad*s’ mean power (*qudra*) and strength (*quwwa*), others interpret them as bounty (*niʿma*) and favour (*minna*), and the Mubīra interpret them as the two hands which form part of the body.

All these interpretations are correct and cannot be rejected, for the word ‘*yad*’ contains all these meanings. Therefore, either all these meanings which are the esoteric aspects that the word conveys are correct and therefore it is incumbent to know them all; or, only one or two are correct in which case it is necessary to know which ones so as to avoid the others; or, the meaning is other than any of these and the word is used as a simile or parable in which case it is necessary to know the object (*mamthūl*). If all the meanings of the word are correct, then wisdom necessitates that there should be someone in the community who knows the form of wisdom in all of them so that one is not left with only one meaning to the exclusion of the others. All this is necessary so that unity prevails in the community in the worship of God and any differences of opinion are resolved. If, however, only one or two of the meanings are correct, then wisdom necessitates for there to be someone to make such meanings known so that there is guidance and to prevent people from mistaken belief, for without a teacher one cannot distinguish which meaning is most worthy of belief. This, so that controversy and hatred vanishes and unity prevails in the worship of God. And if the purpose of the word is other than the apparent meaning and the word is a simile or symbol, then again wisdom necessitates that someone
in the community explain the object (mamthūl) of it so that people do not go astray or believe in that which is not correct. Thus all three possibilities require the existence of someone in the community to guide and teach.\(^{13}\)

3. God by the command ‘If you have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger’, (Qur’an 4:59) enjoins upon believers to have recourse to the Prophet in their disputes and indeed they did so on religious matters in his time. But as it was not possible nor was it ordained for the Prophet to remain in the midst of the community for all time so that people could continue to have recourse to him, it became necessary for someone to take his place to make such decisions so that the command of God would endure. He who stands in the place of the Prophet is the Imam.\(^{14}\)

4. God by the command: ‘O you who believe! Obey God, obey the Messenger and the ūlā al-amr from among you’, (Qur’an 4:59) has enjoined upon believers in one verse three acts of obedience, each linked with one another. It is obvious that obedience to the ūlā al-amr is other than obedience to the Messenger and that obedience to the Messenger is other than obedience to God and that one is not accepted without the second nor the second without the third. The address in this verse is to the generality of believers, to those in the time of the Prophet and to those after him, without any distinction. It is absurd to believe that God would enjoin upon His servants obedience to someone whom He has joined in this verse with Him and the Prophet if He had not made him infallible like the Messenger. Thus, due to the fact that the address is to the generality of believers, the existence of someone to whom obedience is obligatory upon the community is necessary so that they may fulfil this duty.\(^{15}\)

Keeping to the Ismaili argument of the necessity for an infallible Imam, it is interesting to juxtapose this to al-Ghazālī’s argument. Al-Ghazālī, unlike his predecessors, realised the necessity for an infallible Imam and labelled his predecessors ignorant for their failure to realise this. However, his own arguments ‘Our infallible teacher is Muḥammad(s)’ or ‘Your teacher is hidden (ghāʾib)’ do not seem to refute in any way the necessity of the Imam. The Ismaili doctrine of the necessity of the Imam is based on the belief that the nature of human intellect is imperfect or potential and that it requires a perfect or actual Intellect to attain perfection or actuality. Further, al-Ghazālī cannot in any sense justify that Muḥammad(s) belongs only to him and his party, for the Ismailis too, as is clear from the above, claim that the perpetual necessity of an infallible Imam is to accomplish the Prophet’s mission, which due to the spatial and temporal hindrances and limitations of human intellect, it was not possible to complete in the lifetime of the Prophet. Similarly, the concept of a hidden Imam is not an Ismaili concept, for as al-Sijistānī has pointed out, the Imam according to Ismailis is either manifest (ẓāhir) or is concealed (mastūr). However, mastūr does not mean that he is unavailable to his dāʿīs but that
he is concealed only from his enemies and ordinary members of the community to whom the dāʿīs convey the guidance of the living Imam.

The Ismaili interpretation of the completion of religion also differs from al-Ghazālī’s in the sense that this verse was revealed after the appointment of the successor or the waṣī or asās who through his progeny, continues the taʾwil of the Qurʾan by the command of God. If completion of religion is understood as the Prophet having completed the teaching of the Qurʾan and the Sunna, then any attempt to solve problems using sources other than the Qurʾan or Sunna would be futile and superfluous. Thus, according to Ismailis, religion is only complete with the Qurʾan and the teacher of the Qurʾan, the īlāh al-amr (Qurʾan 4:59), who has to be as infallible as the Prophet by virtue of his being linked in obedience to God and the Prophet.

It is due to such interaction that the different schools of thought have developed and expounded most of their concepts. The study of the concept of knowledge propounded by al-Kirmānī, an eminent exponent of Ismailism, will be examined in the context of such interaction.

II. Definition of Knowledge and its Relation to Existence

Al-Kirmānī defined knowledge or ʿilm in both concise and elaborate expressions. In his epistle al-Ḥawiyya, he defines ʿilm as ‘to find out things according to their form’. In his Rāḥa he defines it as ‘the conception of the Divine signs, which is the comprehension of what has preceded the human soul in existence, such as the archetypes of the ibdāʾi and inbiʿāthi intellects and the higher and lower bodies’. It is obvious from al-Kirmānī’s definition that it is closely linked with forms, archetypes or realities of things or existents, therefore in order to have a clear concept of knowledge, it is necessary first to have a clear understanding of the concept of existence in al-Kirmānī’s schema of the existents.

In al-Kirmānī’s schema of existence, there are many grades from the First Intellect as the first end to mankind as the second end. But basically he divides it into two categories: the physical and the non-physical. By the physical, he means this world with its heaven, earth, planets, stars, elements and generated beings and by non-physical, intellects, souls, Paradise, Hell, resurrection, reward, punishment, reckoning, and so on. The essential difference between the two is that the former kind of existents are ẓāhir, or manifest, by their nature and are perceptible by the senses. In the perception of the perceptibles, there is no difference between participants with sound senses. That is to say that in the perception of such things there is no difference between a learned man and an illiterate person.

The non-physical existents by their nature are bāṭin, or hidden, and they cannot be perceived by the senses, rather their knowledge is acquired through the intellect and therefore, they are intelligibles. Since their grasp or comprehension does
not depend on perception which is common among people, but on the intellectual
capacity of people in which they differ according to their individual acquisition of
knowledge, therefore, there is a difference between people in their grasp of knowl-
edge. Al-Kirmānī thus stresses that in the comprehension of the physical or external
things, people are equal in their means, but in non-physical or internal things, they
differ according to their acquisition.20

Al-Kirmānī, in order to illustrate this, uses the example of the utterance ‘Bism
Allāh al-Rahmān al-Raḥīm’. He says that when the uvulae and tongues are moved
to pronounce it and the voice is raised, because the voice is perceptible, all those
who have sound senses can participate equally in hearing it, but as for its meaning,
i.e. the exegesis and taʾwil, because it is imperceptible, it cannot be participated in
equally by all those who have sound senses, since the comprehension of the mean-
ing is the prerogative of those who have acquired knowledge or the hidden aspect
of things.21

The preceding description of the nature of things leads to the conclusion that,
just as there are two kinds of existents, with their distinctive characteristics of being
zāhir and bāṭin, or perceptible and imperceptible, accordingly, there are two kinds
of comprehension. Al-Kirmānī in keeping with the classification of existents, clas-
sifies knowledge into two kinds: the first knowledge and the second knowledge.

The first knowledge is related to the physical world and the world of nature and
the protection of its bodies, which al-Kirmānī calls the first perfection. This kind of
knowledge in nature can be seen in the mineral, vegetative and animal souls. An ex-
ample of the knowledge of the mineral soul is that minerals mingle only with min-
erals which protect them and avoid those which harm them. For example, mercury
mingles with gold but does not mingle with iron. An example of the knowledge of
the vegetative soul is that roots of plants move in the direction of moisture, which
protects them, but when they reach a stone or other obstruction, turn away. An
example of the knowledge of the animal soul is that animals eat that which is useful
for their bodies and avoid that which is harmful. Al-Kirmānī concludes that had
this knowledge not been in minerals, plants and animals, they would not have been
able to protect their bodies, and that therefore the Wise Creator has granted them
the first knowledge to protect the first existence or the first perfection.

The second knowledge, according to al-Kirmānī, is the second perfection, of
which the soul is initially devoid. Al-Kirmānī basing his argument on the verse:
‘Surely, God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew
nothing’ (Qurʾan 16:78), says that in this verse by ‘you knew nothing’ is meant the
second perfection which is the second knowledge, which is related to religions and
beliefs by which the soul becomes perfect and turns into an intellect. Al-Kirmānī
says that the nature of these two kinds of knowledge is different. The first is given
to every soul innately and for this it does not require a teacher, while the second
which is related to religions and beliefs can be obtained only from a teacher.22
It is obvious that since the first kind of knowledge is given to every soul innately, it is not necessary to seek this kind of knowledge. What is useful now is to investigate what al-Kirmānī says about the necessity of the second knowledge and its source, upon which depends the second perfection of the soul. We have seen al-Kirmānī’s division of the existents into ẓāhir and bāṭin and how the second knowledge is related to the bāṭin. The establishment of the bāṭin and belief in it has been one of the most essential and important issues in Ismailism. We have also seen in al-Ghazālī’s classification of Muslim schools of thought that one of the names given to Ismailis by their opponents is the Bāṭiniyya, due to their belief in the bāṭin of the Book and the sharīʿa. In fact, in al-Kirmānī’s own time, Ismailis were attacked by the Zaydī Imam, who was asked for a fatwā about their belief in the bāṭin vis-à-vis the ẓāhir of all religious practices, such as ṣalāt, zakāt, etc. and about their belief that the ẓāhir cannot be complete without the knowledge of the bāṭin. Al-Kirmānī wrote his epistle al-Kāfīyya in response to the Zaydī Imam on the establishment of the bāṭin. In addition, al-Kirmānī deals with the necessity of bāṭin or taʾwīl in al-Maṣābiḥ, al-Wādiʿa fī maʿālim al-dīn, Tanbīh al-hādī waʾl-mustahdī and particularly in the Rāḥa. He produced numerous proofs on the necessity of the bāṭin or taʾwil some of which are presented here. Al-Kirmānī uses the words bāṭin, taʾwil, bayān, tafsīr, sharḥ, maʿnā, and ʿilm interchangeably.

1. Intellects and souls have no way to recognise the Return (maʿād) and that which is invisible to the senses, except through perceptible examples drawn by the Messengers and the practices laid down by them. The Prophet taught perceptible examples, which are profound wisdom, and it became necessary that in order to accept these examples, wisdom should be implied in them. But the ẓāhir or exoteric aspect of the Qurʾan and the sharīʿa, which the Prophet brought, conflicts with the rules of the intellect, such as the verse ‘And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes verily’ (Qurʾan 7:172). The impossibility of bringing forth the children of Adam as particles and to take covenant of His Lordship from them, has created difficulties in explanation of this for the people of the ẓāhir for elsewhere He commands that one cannot accept the testimony of children, let alone babies or seed, because they are not yet of an age where they are obliged to observe the requirements of religion. Similarly, there is the Prophetic Tradition: ‘Between my grave and my pulpit there is a garden from among the gardens of Paradise’. The absurdity of the exoteric aspect of this Tradition lies in the fact that at that particular place there is nothing that can remotely be described as a garden. But as the Prophet is a sage and free from ignorance, it becomes necessary to look beyond the exoteric aspect of what the Prophet has brought so that it is not devoid of meanings with which the intellect can agree and the revelation can be established as true and full of wisdom. These meanings are called taʾwil.
2. According to the Divine command ‘Invite unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good exhortation’ (Qur’an 16:125), the Prophet invited people unto God with wisdom, and whoever does not believe this is an unbeliever. But according to the ṣāḥīr, he invited the people unto God and His worship with certain actions, which if they are repeated by a human being at a place other than where they have been commanded, would be considered mad or a joke, such as the strange actions and rites of pilgrimage. No wisdom is attached to the ṣāḥīr of such acts, such as conversations with stones, walking fast on tiptoe, abstinence from paring nails and shaving the hair on the head and pelting the ġamras with pebbles. However, because the Prophet invited with wisdom, it is necessary for these actions not to be devoid of the meanings with which wisdom agrees and the intellect accepts as knowledge, for salvation lies in such behaviour. Those meanings are called the ta’wil.25

3. According to Divine justice nobody will be punished for the sins of others, as God says: ‘No bearer of burden bears the burden of another’ (Qur’an 6:164). But it is in the law of the Prophet to punish the uncle for the sin of the nephew, when he kills someone by mistake. That is against God’s justice and what He has commanded, and it is inconceivable that the Prophet can do something against His justice and mercy, or that he commands something which is contradictory to His command. It is therefore necessary that this and commands like this have certain meanings and wisdom compatible with His justice and mercy and which can be understood by the intellect. That meaning which is compatible with God’s justice and mercy and understood as such by the intellect is the ta’wil.26

4. It is absurd for a wise human being, let alone God, to talk to an inanimate thing which has no life, no reward, no punishment, nor is it possible for an organ to accept a command or prohibition and to respond to it. But the Prophet, by the verse ‘Then He turned to the heaven when it was smoke and said unto it and the earth: Come both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They said: We come, obedient’. Qur’an 41:11 informs us that He spoke to the heaven and the earth, which are both inanimate and have no intellect, nor do they have any organs of speech. The absurdity of this conversation of God, the Wise, with the inanimate necessitates that His conversation with heaven and earth and their response, have a meaning which establishes the speech of God to be true and which the intellect accepts. That meaning is called ta’wil.27

5. God says: ‘When He made the slumber fall upon you as a reassurance from Him and sent down water from the sky upon you, and thereby He might purify you and remove from you the dirt of Satan, and make stronger your hearts and firm your feet thereby’ (Qur’an 8:11). It is known that the dirt of Satan is disbelief, doubt, confusion, hypocrisy, ignorance, deviation, etc. which is in hearts, intellects and souls and as such it is unimaginable that they can be purified by the water which comes from the visible sky. Had the water mentioned in the verse
been natural water than everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, would have been purified and accordingly it is necessary for water to have a different meaning without which it would have been absurd for God to say this. That meaning we call taʾwil.28

6. God by his command says: ‘He it is Who has revealed unto you (Muḥammad) the Book wherein are clear verses. They are the foundation of the Book and others are allegorical. But those in whose heart is perversity, pursue the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its taʾwil, but no one knows its taʾwil except Allāh and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (al-rāsikhūn fiʾl-ʿilm) saying: ‘We believe in it (Book); the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.’ (Qurʾan 3:7). This verse has made the taʾwil of what the Prophet has brought necessary. If someone raises an objection and says that the taʾwil of it no one knows except God, and that rāsikhun fiʾl-ʿilm is the subject, not the predicate of the preceding sentence, his objection is absurd in the context of many examples in the Arabic idiom of brevity. For instance, ‘Lā yusallimu ʿalayka fulānun wa-fulānun yaʿtadhir (No one sends you greetings except so and so, and so and so apologises)’. That is, both of them send greetings and one of them apologises. Thus in addition to God the rāsikhūn fiʾl-ʿilm also know the taʾwil and hence it is necessary.29

7. It is not possible to recognise the invisible and imperceptible things except by designating them by visible and perceptible things. Therefore the Prophet has informed us about the invisible things, such as Allāh, Paradise and its felicity, Hell and its torture, through visible and perceptible things. He informed us about Paradise, which is the next world and is invisible and imperceptible, by using such descriptions as gardens, trees, fruits and all kinds of physical bounties etc., and Hell by the fire and all kinds of physical tortures. Therefore it is necessary for whatever the Prophet has said, done and invited us to, about the life hereafter, to be like symbols and allegories (amthāl) of their true realities (mumaththalāt). The symbolised realities are called taʾwil. Thus it is necessary for there to be the taʾwil of what the Prophet has brought from God and what he has invited us to, such as the Book and the shariʿa.30

Al-Kirmānī in his al-Kāfiyya cites as evidence and asserts that, not only do the allegorical teachings of the Prophets have taʾwil, but also that everything that they have brought and that everything that they have commanded us to do has a taʾwil and a knowledge which is other than the apparent and perceptible.31 The core of his argument is that the purpose of religion cannot be achieved without the taʾwil, which enables the human soul to attain the second perfection, become an intellect and return to its original abode, the world of intellects.
III Source of Knowledge

The question of knowledge or ta’wil, which is imperceptible, leads to the question of its source and whether it is available to all humans equally or whether it is a prerogative of a particular group. We have already seen that al-Kirmānī differentiates between perceptible cognisance and imperceptible knowledge, the former being related to those things which are perceptible by their nature and the latter to the things that are imperceptible by their nature. Al-Kirmānī emphasises the point that, with respect to the former, there is no distinction between human beings, but with respect to the latter, there are grades and differences among them. This means that true knowledge or ta’wil is not equally available to or attainable by people, and accordingly there are different views about the possibility and attainability of it.

As far as these views are concerned, we have noticed in the sixth argument of al-Kirmānī the necessity of ta’wil in Qur’an 3:7, and that there is a difference in the reading and punctuation of this verse. Those who maintain that the ta’wil of the Qur’an and the sharīʿa is not possible, place a full stop (or waqf lāẓim) after ‘Allāh’ and confine the knowledge of ta’wil to Allāh only and consider al-rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm a new subject. These are the Literalists or ahl al-ẓāhir who do not seek deeper meanings beyond the apparent wording of the parables and allegories of the Qur’an and the Prophetic Traditions.

There are others, such as Ibn Qutayba (213–276/828–889), who argue that since God has mentioned the rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm in an honorific and distinctive sense, this honour lies in their knowledge of ta’wil and in the light of this knowledge they say: ‘We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord’. Had this knowledge not been possessed by them, then as Ibn Qutayba says: ‘They would have no superiority over the learners, or over all ignorant Muslims. For all of them say: “We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord.”’ Those who maintain that the rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm know the ta’wil are also divided into two groups: those who allege to reach the truth by opinion and speculation, logic and demonstration or vision and unveiling. For them the status of the rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm is open to anyone who struggles through these means. For those who claim to attain the truth or ta’wil from the infallible Imam or Teacher, for them the rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm are only the rightful Imams from the ahl al-bayt of the Prophet, i.e. Imām ‘Ali and his designated descendants to the office of Imamate. The former group includes the Falāsifa, the Şūfiyya and the Mutakallimūn as a whole, the latter group comprises Shiʿi Islam in general and Ismailis in particular who are known as the Taʿlīmiyya. Al-Kirmānī obviously belongs to the latter group and firmly adheres to the Ismaili doctrine of the source of taʿlim and ta’wil.

According to the Ismailis, ta’wil and tanzil are correlative. Thus they argue that just as the tanzil cannot be attained by effort, neither can the ta’wil which is the hidden meaning of tanzil. They argue that as God had chosen the Prophets to convey the tanzil, so He has appointed the Imams to impart the ta’wil of it after
the Prophets. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān says: ‘God … has made the zāhir (= tanzīl) of the Book, the miracle of the Prophet; and the bāṭin (= ta’wil), the miracle of the Imams from his ahl al-bayt … As nobody except Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, can bring the zāhir of the Book, so also, nobody except the Imams from his progeny, can bring the bāṭin of it.’

Al-Kirmānī, following the same line, asserts in his al-Waḍiʿa, that it has been a Divine Sunna (law) to appoint an asās with every nāṭiq. Al-Kirmānī says that it has been a Divine Sunna to assign the tanzil to the nāṭiqs and the ta’wil to their asāsāt who continue the mission through their descendants. According to this sunna, Ādam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ‘Īsā appointed as their asāsāt or waṣīs, Shīth, Sām, Ismāʿīl, Hārūn and Shamʿūn al-Ṣafā, respectively and that the Prophet received a Divine command to reveal the position of his asās: ‘O Messenger! Convey that which has been revealed unto you from your Lord. If you did not, you would not have conveyed His message.’ (Qurʾān 5:67) As a result of this the Prophet appointed Imām ʿAlī to continue the ta’wil or al-ʿibāda al-ʿilmiyya. Al-Kirmānī commenting on ‘If you did not, you would not have conveyed His message’, says that by this God means that had there not been the one who establishes the ta’wil or al-ʿibādat al-ʿilmiyya then al-ʿibāda al-ʿamaliyya would have been useless and futile. For one ‘ibāda cannot be acceptable and complete without the other, and the form of the ‘ibāda and the attainment of bliss is impossible except by knowledge and action, i.e. ta’wil and tanzil together. Thus, according to Ismailis the rāsikhūn fī’l-ʿilm are the Prophet, his asās and the Imams from their progeny and hence that the ta’wil is confined only to them. They further substantiate this doctrine by citing the Prophetic Tradition that records: ‘Anā šāhib al-tanzil wa-ʿAliyyun šāhib al-ta’wil’ (‘I am the master of the tanzil and ‘Ali is the Master of the ta’wil’).

Having established, according to al-Kirmānī, that true knowledge is the ta’wil and its source is the asās of the nāṭiq and after him, the Imam of the time in his respective age, the question arises: What is the nature of the ta’wil and how can it be obtained?

From al-Kirmānī’s works and also from other Ismaili sources, it appears that the ta’wil in the case of the Prophets and Imams, is not something acquired but is given or taught by God Himself. Hence this is perfect and complete knowledge, which comprises the knowledge of those that have passed away and of those who are to come or the events that have already taken place and those that are to take place in the future (ʿilm al-awwalīn wa-l-ākhirīn). However, since people do not have the capacity to accept this knowledge, it gradually continues to be revealed through the chain of Imams, until the Day of Resurrection. It is because of this perfect and firm knowledge, that the Prophet and the Imams are called the rāsikhun fī’l-ʿilm. In Qur’anic language this is called the ta’yid bi’l-ruḥ al-quadus or Divine help with the Holy Spirit. The Prophets and Imams – ‘mu’ayyad’ or ‘assisted souls’ – in the
physical world are the actual Intellects, who make souls or the potential intellects actual.

As far as the non-\textit{mu’\addition{a}}yyad souls are concerned, they have to acquire this knowledge from the \textit{mu’\addition{a}}yyad souls or actual Intellects. As for its acquisition, it is not only through the speculative exercise of the mind, it also requires the element of action. That is to say, that in order to attain this kind of knowledge, one has to obey the Prophet and the Imams, leading to the attainment of \textit{ta’wil}. In the case of the Prophets and Imams, because they are both in the position of the Single Soul (\textit{nafs wāhida}), it is the same thing. In the case of the \textit{umma} or followers, because they have not attained the position of the Single Soul, their \textit{ta’wil} is on different levels. In the case of both the \textit{ifāda}, giving of knowledge by the Prophets and the Imams and \textit{istifāda} or the receiving of it, it depends on the capacity and receptivity of the followers. Al-Kirmānī says: ‘It is possible for one \textit{ta’wil} to be clearer and more evident than another depending on the purity of the nature of the \textit{mu’awwil} (one who does \textit{ta’wil}) and his power in knowledge and in deduction.’

Al-Kirmānī also implies that the meanings of \textit{ta’wil} cannot be confined to some expressions or words. They can be expressed in different words, provided that they do not elevate or degrade the position of the \textit{hudūd}. Al-Kirmānī says: ‘The words in conveying the meanings of the \textit{ta’wil} are different, but their meanings, despite the difference in words, are in agreement. Every \textit{ta’wil} is adequate and satisfactory so long as it does not raise a \textit{ḥadd} above its limit or lower another below its rank.’

To sum up, knowledge according to al-Kirmānī, in its ultimate form is in the higher \textit{hudūd} in the world of Intellect or in the First or Universal Intellect, which is reflected in the \textit{nāṭiq}, \textit{asās} and in the Imam of the time, in their respective ages and below them, through \textit{Hujjas} and \textit{dā’is} until the \textit{mustajibin} for it descends through different stages and forms. It descends through the ladder of the \textit{hudūd} and the \textit{mustajibs} ascend gradually up this ladder, according to their acquisition of this knowledge. This knowledge is the spiritual life which is granted by the Prophets and Imams on acceptance of their \textit{da’wa}.

\textbf{IV Conclusion}

Al-Kirmānī’s concept of knowledge is in line with the Ismaili doctrine of \textit{ta’lim} from the infallible Imam or Teacher, the pre-requisite for which is to obey his commands and follow his guidance. This, however, does not mean not exercising one’s own rational faculties. In fact, the very concept of the infallible Imam is based on the sound intellect in the sense that in the physical world the intellects are in a potential state and cannot be actualised except by an actual Intellect, namely the Prophet or the Imam of the time. Thus al-Kirmānī’s concept of knowledge presents a balanced approach to the realities of the world of the intellect and helps to identify oneself with them to attain eternal bliss.
Notes

2. Ibid.
8. Ḥāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, Rāḥat al-ʿaql (Cairo, 1952), p. 84.
11. Ibid., p. 71.
13. Ibid., pp. 82–85.
15. Ibid., pp. 91–92.
18. Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥat, p. 15.
22. Ibid., p. 165.
25. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
26. Ibid., p. 69.
27. Ibid., pp. 69–70.
28. Ibid., pp. 70–71.