

You outwit those who plot against me...and trick him who would double-cross me, by turning his malice back upon him. I ask You to bury him who prepares pit-falls for me. Lead him who prepares the snare of treachery for me, my Lord, to be caught in his own trap.”²¹ A central element of the *ḥizb* is supererogatory appeal for mercy and intercession. A typical petition is the following: “The sinners assemble, O God, anticipating your pardon. They hold out their hands to you, O God. They stand before you and implore by Muḥammad, O God. Forgive them their offences, O God; and consent to the mediation of Aḥmad (Muḥammad).”²² Several related devotional themes appear throughout the *aḥzāb* texts, although their treatment is rather cursory. Standard mystical concerns such as trusting in divine providence (*tawakkul*), as well as seeking union with the divine secret (*sirr al-jamʿ*), are mentioned in several places.²³

Academic interest has barely begun to survey this devotional literature, but perhaps equally significant are the commentaries written on them. With this material, as was the case for the prayers themselves, titles and terminology are inconsistent. Commentary may appear under several headings, including *tafsīr*, *taʿlīqah*, *tahdhīb*, *mukhtaṣar*, *ḥawāshī*, or *taṣḥīḥ*, among others.²⁴ In other contexts these descriptors are also applied variously to treatments of Quran interpretation, studies in grammar, *fiqh*, hadith studies, poetry, etc. Sorting out the terminology for both devotional prayers and the commentaries written on them is a challenge for the researcher. That said, for the purposes of our discussion, I will refer to all commentaries as *sharḥ*, which is the term well represented in the primary literature and appears in the title of most of the significant commentaries on the *aḥzāb* of the Sufi orders.

Considering that these small prayer texts are far simpler in style and language than perhaps any other genre of religious writing, one must wonder about the intention, strategy, and import behind the composition of their commentaries. We noted earlier the classical categories of Islamic exegesis, but difficulty in language could hardly account for the production of these prayer commentaries. Clearly some extra-textual considerations are at play. It seems that in addition to simply promoting the prayer text to a reading community, a *sharḥ* advances the religious profiles of the subject author and the commentator. In asserting and witnessing to the *walāyah* of the saint, the commentator in some sense claims a degree of charisma and authority. This would follow from the logic that the inspired prayers can only divulge their full esoteric wisdom to an elevated and discerning mysti-

²¹ Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Naṣr,” in *Nibrās al-Aṭṭiqiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anqiyāʾ*, 94.

²² Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Tawassul” in *Nibrās al-Aṭṭiqiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anqiyāʾ*, 81.

²³ Al-Shādhilī, “Ḥizb al-Tawḥīd” in *Nibrās al-Aṭṭiqiyāʾ wa-Dalīl al-Anqiyāʾ*, 91; and “Ḥizb al-Kabīr,” 17; “Ḥizb al-Ikhfāʾ,” 108.

²⁴ See C. Gilliot, “Sharḥ,” *EI2*.



cal sensibility. In unlocking the message of the saintly prayer, the commentator has demonstrated his own esoteric expertise. This hypothesis warrants further testing against data from the history of organized Sufism of the Mamluk era, but for our purposes here we can point to at least one supporting example. We saw above the Wafā'iyah presenting itself as a rival to the authority of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, but at the same time, in a parallel dynamic, 'Alī Wafā' was appropriating that same authority. As part of his hagiography of the Wafā' shaykhs, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī pointed to 'Alī's ability to interpret "Ḥizb al-Baḥr" as proof of his mystical insight and sanctity.²⁵

The most prominent and earliest commentary on the Shādhilī prayers is *Al-Laṭifah al-Marḍiyah bi-Sharḥ Du'ā' al-Shādhiliyah* [The profound allusion in the explanation of the prayer of the Shādhiliyah]²⁶ by Ibn Mākhillā (d. 733/1332). An inventory has yet to be made of this *sharḥ* literature, which has apparently been produced with regularity up into the contemporary period.²⁷ In his introduction Ibn Mākhillā outlines a number of basic Sufi concepts, including the levels of esoteric knowledge as they are related to the faculties of speaking and hearing, along with a discussion of variants of the hadith "Whoever attacks My saint (*walī*) has made war on Me" and "Whoever attacks the friend (*walī*) of God, it is as though he has torn down the Ka'bah seven times" (pp. 10-11). This opening section appears to be a defense of the foundations of religious authority (*walāyah*) upon which the prayer text was written, as well as a framing of the subsequent commentary within the mainstream of Sufi concepts and terminology of the period.

²⁵ Al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut, 1988), 2:31. 'Alī Wafā' wrote no formal *sharḥ*, or at least none survives. He expounded orally and extemporaneously on such material.

²⁶ I am using the Cairo 1935 Muḥammad Rabī' edition. In 2011 a new edition by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Naṣṣār appeared, which includes a substantial new introduction and detailed footnote commentaries.

²⁷ The prayer itself, "Ḥizb al-Baḥr" or "Litany of the sea," was widely known. The famous world traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 770/1369) presents the full text in his *Travels*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, (Cambridge, 1958), 1:25–27. Perhaps Aḥmad Zarrūq's (d. 899/1493) "Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr" from *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Hizbay al-Shādhilī* (Cairo, 2011) is the most widely circulated commentary. For a historical overview of this Sufi thinker see S. Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Bloomington, 2006), 43–65. Other commentaries include Abū al-Hudā Muḥammad al-Rifā'ī's (d. 728/1328) *Qilādat al-Naḥr fī Sharḥ Hizb al-Baḥr* (Cairo, 1931); 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Fāsi's (d. 1035/1626) *Sharḥ Hizb al-Kabīr* (Cairo, 1998), which comments significantly on Ibn Mākhillā's commentary; Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Salām al-Bannānī's (d. 1163/1750) "Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Barr," Tunis Bibliothèque Nationale MS 'Abdaliyah 4755; Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1177/1763) *Hawāmi' Sharḥ Hizb al-Baḥr* (Delhi, 1890); Murtaḍā al-Zabidī's (d. 1205/1790) *Sharḥ Murtaḍā al-Zabidī 'alā Hizb al-Barr* (Cairo, 1913); and Abū al-Maḥāsin al-Qāwuqjī's (d. 1304/1887) *Kitāb al-Badr al-Munīr 'alā Hizb al-Shādhilī al-Kabīr* (Alexandria, 1862). For more titles see S. 'Ammār, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī* (Cairo, 1951), 22–24, and Ḥājji Khalifah's *Kashf al-Zunūn* (New York, 1964), 4:28.



In the first of three following sections making up the main body of the work, the author discusses the spiritual benefits of reciting this prayer. He also presents a number of hagiographical episodes from the life of al-Shādhilī.²⁸ The second section (pp. 27–37) presents the text of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” along with comments pointing out the Quranic sources for various phrases, and explaining certain vocabulary used. Ibn Mākhillā goes on to recount some of the miraculous stories of the power of this prayer, which include passengers on the Nile and the Indian Ocean being saved from storms, and travelers being saved from bandits. An interesting point is also taken up here; it centers on the question of how prophets, saints, the learned, and the commoner can all petition God for forgiveness or protection using the same formulae—recall the Quranic intertextuality at play here. More specifically, the question is: Can they be asking for the same thing? Ibn Mākhillā’s answer will be discussed in detail below. Accounting for the miraculous nature and power of the *ḥizb* is a concern for other commentators also. Aḥmad Zarrūq’s *sharḥ* draws parallels between the *ḥizb* and several instances of miracles in the Quran dealing with prophets and the theme of water travel and floods.²⁹ Another commentary, an explanation (*ta’līq*) of Aḥmad Zarrūq’s and Ibn Mākhillā’s commentaries, transmits reports on the miraculous powers of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” to calm storms at sea, protect against highway robbers along the hajj route, and divert the stings of scorpions.³⁰

In the final section (pp. 38–94) Ibn Mākhillā takes up the issue of the prayer’s use of Quranic phrases. In defending the intertextual nature of “Ḥizb al-Baḥr” (and by implication, the legitimacy of the divine inspiration of saints like al-Shādhilī) Ibn Mākhillā makes use of a range of arguments. He draws on legal sources (Qadi ‘Ayyād’s discussion of Muḥammad’s use of Quranic phrases as supplication), theological arguments (al-Bāqillānī’s doctrine of *i’jāz*, or inimitability of the Quran, allows for the intertextual use, but insists that the quote loses its miraculous nature), and the principles of rhetoric (*iqtibās*, or adaptation, in composition preserves the integrity of the original Quranic or hadith source). Aḥmad Zarrūq is also sensitive to the intertextuality of the prayer. His treatment of the text follows even more closely the Quranic borrowings, and typically refers back

²⁸ Ibn Mākhillā’s source for these accounts appears to be *Latā’if al-Minan*—the hagiography of al-Shādhilī written by Ibn ‘Atā Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309).

²⁹ *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Ḥizbay al-Shādhilī*, 28–33. The pagination I am citing for this text, which refers to an online version, may not accurately reflect that of the printed edition.

³⁰ Ibn Duqmāq, “Qaṭf al-Zahr min Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr,” al-Azhar MS 936382, fols. 2b, 4a. This manuscript cannot have been authored by Ibn Duqmāq the famous Egyptian chronicler, since it quotes from Ahmad Zarrūq, who died some ninety years later than the historian. I have not been able to identify this later Ibn Duqmāq, or find any other copies. The manuscript, marked as part of the Azhari *waqfiyah* of the *riwāq al-Maghāribah*, is damaged and illegible in several places.



to the structure and content of the original surah in order to elucidate the meaning of a borrowed passage appearing in the *ḥizb*.

Ibn Mākhillā's *sharḥ* also takes up the status of saints and prophets. In this context, the primary concern is to explain how the "inspired" prayer of a saint can contain quotations from the revelation (Quran) to a prophet. The question is not simply whether it is appropriate to quote and paraphrase the Quran, but rather, how the saint (and his common followers) can petition for what should be reserved only for prophets. Ibn Mākhillā's answers to these questions shine an indirect light on his notion of *walāyah*. In his comments on al-Shādhilī's petition, *nas'aluka al-ʿiṣmah* (we ask you for protection/inerrancy), he notes that *ʿiṣmah*, as generally understood, is restricted to prophets, who are protected from committing grave sins. The central distinction in the discussion here is his qualifier "according to their level." For Ibn Mākhillā this also allows him to account for other apparent paradoxes. On the issue of how both the common believer and the saint—and a prophet for that matter—may make the identical supplication, for example for forgiveness, in "Ḥizb al-Baḥr," Ibn Mākhillā points out that since the petitioners are at different spiritual levels, the meaning and status of their petitions is different. Essentially, he resolves the issue by appealing to the semantic context (i.e., the status of the person who is speaking) in order to draw distinctions between various speech events that employ apparently identical locutions. Zarrūq's commentary addresses the infallibility passages also, lending them roughly the same interpretation. He distinguishes prophets as the only individuals whose station requires them to be incapable of sin; however, providence may extend this status to saints and even common believers. Hence the petition of the prayer, Zarrūq says, is not for the necessary *ʿiṣmah* of a prophet, but rather for a state of preservation (*ḥifẓ*) from sin. In their intermediary position, the saints apparently enjoy this preserved state, while they are not accorded *ʿiṣmah*. This preservation is thus accessible, but far from guaranteed, for the common petitioner. Zarrūq quotes two Quranic passages (11:43, 3:101) where *ʿaṣima*, here meaning protection, is granted by God according to his will. Thus, "when the prayer runs 'We petition You for infallibility' it means we request that You shield us from sin; that it be made inaccessible and distant from us."³¹ On this same question of infallibility Ibn Duqmāq summarizes much of what Aḥmad Zarrūq proposed, and adds that the prophets' position can be called absolute (*muṭlaqah*) infallibility. Also, each petitioner is asking from his/her own spiritual rank (*ḥāl*), which determines the kind of *ʿiṣmah* they are eligible to receive.³²

Ibn Mākhillā applies the same type of argument to the meaning of the phrase "[Lord,] subjugate to us this sea as You subjugated the sea to Moses." He remarks

³¹ *Sharḥ Ghawāmiḍ Ḥizbay al-Shādhilī*, 34.

³² Ibn Duqmāq, "Qaṭf al-Zahr min Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr," fol. 6b.



that this should not necessarily be taken as a request to God each time to part the seas, but instead should be understood as a petition for the “miracle” of divine beneficence in the lives of lowly petitioners—establishing within them righteousness, godliness, and wisdom. He says, “Know that the manifestation of omnipotence (*qudrah*) is sometimes by grace and miracle, and the breaking of the anticipated norms; or it is by the miracle of fixing norms and engendering wisdom... The second kind [of miracle] is destined for the generality of creation, while the first kind is only for the elite of the prophets and the saints” (p. 75). Thus Ibn Mākhillā’s discussions in *Al-Laṭīfah al-Marḍīyah*—relying on his discussions of sanctity elsewhere—serve to blur the hard lines between prophets and saints (not unlike the effort to nuance the dividing lines between the *Qurān* and the *ḥizb* prayer). This is done by extending to the saints the attributes previously reserved for the prophets. The same blurring of lines occurs in Ibn Mākhillā’s resolution of the apparent paradox of a prophet asking for forgiveness in the same manner as a common believer; or that common believer asking for the same divine favor a saint or a prophet might petition for. Zarrūq interprets the request to “subdue the seas” much along the general lines of a petition for equanimity and balance in the face of life’s tribulations. The comments from Ibn Duqmāq on this passage are more substantial, but run in much the same direction, taking the turbulent seas as a metaphor for both the worldly and metaphysical challenges that confront the believer. In a typically Sufi approach, he also distinguishes between the exoteric meaning, which here reads drowning as losing God’s help, and the esoteric meaning, which takes the “sea” (*bahr*) to be a “sea of knowledge” that God makes calm, allowing the seeker to dive into it and to emerge erudite (*mutabaḥḥir*).³³

The continued production of *aḥzāb* commentaries is evidence of the active reflection upon, and ritual use of, these saintly inspired devotional prayers. While a *sharḥ* can function as a textual intermediary, it might itself become a contested statement, eliciting its own responses both positive and negative. Commentaries and epitomes of Ibn Mākhillā’s *sharḥ* await closer inspection, and apparently even refutations of this *ḥizb* have been written.³⁴ A wider context of competition and polemics, which we saw above beginning early in the history of the Shādhiliyah, clearly continued throughout the Mamluk era and beyond. The history of these debates around the authority, efficacy, and licitness of *aḥzāb* literature has yet to be written, but starting points have already appeared. Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 953/1546) notes the heated public discussions that arose around al-Shādhilī’s “Ḥizb al-Nūr,” pointing out the prominent role one of al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) students, al-Dirīnī,

³³ Ibid., fols. 9b, 10b.

³⁴ A. al-Būtījī (seventeenth cent.?), “Mukhtaṣar al-Laṭīfah al-Marḍīyah,” Budeiri Library Jerusalem MS *taṣawwuf* 32/29/b; and anonymous, “Al-Radd ‘alā Abī al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī fī Ḥizbihi,” *Fihris al-Makḥṭūṭāt al-Muṣawwarah* (Cairo, 1954), entries no. 103, no. 161.



played in its defense. These polemics apparently did not divide neatly along Sufi/non-Sufi interests; and in more than one instance the *aḥzāb* of the Shādhiliyah are attacked by leaders of rival Sufi orders.³⁵

This contested history aside, allow me to conclude with a few remarks on the literary qualities of these prayers. Jaroslav Stetkevych has characterized the typical *sharḥ* on poetry of this period as one that treats the poem word for word on its morphological, syntactic, and lexical levels, following with a brief summary paraphrase. The commentaries on mystical poems (e.g., Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* or Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Dīwān*) adopted much the same approach, but added equivalencies for the symbols presented in the text, and concluded with paraphrases of content that were largely "...a recapitulation of the mystic intention."³⁶ Stetkevych is talking about mystical poetry, with its classical form, style, and symbolism. This material is not interchangeable with our *aḥzāb*, but much of his characterization applies. In brief, Stetkevych's criticism is that Sufi interpretations were burdened with an overconfidence in the dichotomy of form and meaning that held the meaning to be easily identified, isolated, and spoken for. The limitations of this simplistic approach meant that the commentaries could not make room for the aesthetics and polysemy at play in the poems.³⁷ Our quick survey above of a handful of exegetes might not allow for a definitive characterization of this entire genre of religious writing, but it does seem that the limitations Stetkevych has identified in relation to poetry are at play in our literature. Our three commentaries above showed a concern to anchor the original text in its Qurānic progenitor, with no attention paid to the poetic strength of the original, and how that would subsequently resonate in the *aḥzāb*. The interpretations limit themselves to identifying intertextual borrowings, to allegorical, symbolic, and theological reductions of the prayer texts. That said, this small literature of prayer commentary does not deserve the obscure fate it has suffered to date. It is clear that at least some of these commentators draw on wide learning in the Islamic sciences, and often in creative ways, to respond to the *aḥzāb*. The best of this literature should be included in our history of Islamic religious literature, and should be integrated into our accounts of the history of Sufism and Islamic devotional practices more generally.

³⁵ On both points see E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie à l'époque mamlouke* (Damascus, 1995), 155, 277.

³⁶ J. Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago, 1993), 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

