A BROADER PERSPECTIVE ON "HUMANS": ANALYSIS OF *INSĀN* IN TWELVER SHĪʿĪ PHILOSOPHY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ASTROTHEOLOGY

by Abdullah Ansar and Shahbaz Haider

Abstract. This article explores the essence of the human (*insān*) as it is understood in Twelver Shīʿī philosophy and mysticism. It presents a Shīʿī philosophical elucidation regarding the possible existence of extraterrestrial intelligent lifeforms and what their relationship with "humanhood" might be. This line of reasoning is presented with a general sketch of how, in Shīʿī Islamic thought, a "human being" is characterized by specific traits and the relationship of human beings with the archetype of the Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*). Following this is a review of Shīʿī Imāmī traditions regarding extraterrestrial intelligent life and the plurality of worlds. This sequence ultimately allows for a unique analysis of humanhood according to the Shīʿī philosophical viewpoint and helps determine if the term "human" can be used for other intelligent beings with similar ontological features and intelligence levels.

Keywords: *al-Insān al-Kāmil*; astrotheology; extraterrestrial intelligent life; human–extraterrestrial interaction (HEI); noncarbon-based lifeforms; Perfect Human; plurality of worlds; *Shīʿī Ḥadīth*

Introduction

This article presents a summary of the Shīʿī ontological and metaphysical views on the definition of "humanhood" and provides grounds to challenge existing materialist definitions. It argues that the Shīʿī definition can play an important role in establishing a universal definition not limited by materialist-reductionist assumptions and be used to create an astrotheological framework for human–extraterrestrial interactions (HEI) internally substantiated by Shīʿī Quranic hermeneutics and secondary sources about extraterrestrial life.

Shīʿīsm is one of the main branches of Islam and marked by distinct beliefs in Imāmah, the notion that God always appoints a divine representative for human guidance, and that in the post-prophetic period, this appointment belongs to the prophetic lineage. The Twelver school

Abdullah Ansar is a researcher majoring in Cognitive Science and Philosophy at Carleton College, Northfield, MN, USA; e-mail: ansara@carleton.edu. Shahbaz Haider is an independent researcher in Rawalpindi, Pakistan; e-mail: engr.shahbazhaider@gmail.com.

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(*Ithnā ʿAsharī*) of Shīʿī Islam posits that Imāmah belongs to 12 Imāms after the Prophet, the first of whom was Imām ʿAlī, the son-in-law of the Prophet, and the last of whom is Imām Mahdī. Over the last 1,200 years, some Twelvers have developed rigorous systems of philosophical analysis and rational sciences. The Twelver Shīʿī philosophical school(s) has(have) incorporated these analyses and been influenced by philosophers and mystics[1] like Sayyed Ḥaider Āmolī (d. 1385),[2] Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d. 1641),[3] Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1981),[4] and Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtīānī (d. 2005).[5] The school of Shīʿī Islamic Neoplatonism is broadly in line with the emanationist wisdom available in Greek Neoplatonism, Zoroastrianism, and other Illuminationist traditions (Rizvi 2005). This article primarily engages with the ideas of the aforementioned philosophers and mystics who hold primary importance in the Twelver Shīʿī (henceforth ʾ or Twelver) school of philosophy. All of these philosophers belong to the Islamic philosophical tradition known as *hikmah* (lit. wisdom) and generally agree on major philosophical doctrines such as Unity of Being,[6] Gradation of Existence,[7] Divine Simplicity,[8] Emanationism,[9] and Rule of One.[10] Given their importance and influence in fundamentally shaping the Twelver tradition, the contributions of these philosophers can be particularly useful to comment on the humanhood of extraterrestrial lifeforms and the content available about them in Shīʿī literature. Using their philosophical framework, this article argues that Twelver philosophy possibly allows for the predication of "humanhood" on extraterrestrial life. In addition, it argues that there is textual evidence in Shīʿī Ḥadīth literature that suggests an early belief by at least some (proto-)Twelvers in the existence of extraterrestrial life. This does not necessarily mean that every Shīʿī philosopher affirmed the existence of extraterrestrial life or even commented on it. What is relevant is that the Twelver philosophical framework can be used to incorporate extraterrestrial life coherently in a cosmological system and Shīʿī Ḥadīth literature can be used to substantiate any such argumentation from a perspective internal to Twelver Shīʿī philosophy and theology.

In the doctrines and texts of Islamic mystical philosophers, there is a great emphasis on the important cosmological status of human beings and their place in the ontotheological scheme (Sells 1988). They see the human as the centerpiece of material existence due to humans' distinctive rational capacity, which serves as their essential differentia (*faṣl*), making them unlike any other creation (Shahzad 2007). In Shīʿī theology and mysticism, the human (*insān*) is given a special rank, wherein they are argued to be the vicegerent of God (*khalīfat Allāh*) among all other creations and the channel to implement divine commandments in the material realm (Dakake 2017).[11] This high status in the gradation of existence is the outcome of human consciousness, which is produced as a result of the unique spirit (*rūh*) of humans and a direct corollary of their ability to comprehend reality—a necessary concomitant of being rational and possessing a

certain level of intelligence (Adamson 2004). Therefore, the placement of humans in the hierarchy of being corresponds with their ability and potential to comprehend existence, both objectively and subjectively, and is in accordance with the capacities required for undertaking the responsibilities that naturally come with such a phenomenological recognition (i.e., vicegerency).

This work attempts to synthesize discussions on astrotheology, metaphysics, mysticism, and Shīʿī textual sources to develop as comprehensive a view as possible of Shīʿī astrotheology and offer a theological, mystical, and metaphysical perspective on the broader definitions of human being (*insān*) and life (*ḥayāt*), how these definitions may be applied to extraterrestrial life, and the ethical frameworks that arise as entailments of such predications. The scientific worry about alternative biochemistries and noncarbon-based life is noted (Rinaldi 2007; Schulze-Makuch and Irwin 2008, 106–07). Given these possibilities, any definition of life that is particularly reducible to material interactions or exclusively related to carbon compositions is not beneficial in categorizing all possible lifeforms. Due to this, functional definitions of "life" and "human beings" based on characteristics, traits, and attributes rather than the material substrate are required. Therefore, the definitional thesis about life and humanity in this work is based on a broad, attribute-based conception and the cosmological analysis of human presented in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, wherein human teleology is essentially linked with cosmic teleology. It was generated by philosophically considering the phenomenon of the emergence of life in light of Shīʿī Islamic sources and defining "human" in the philosophical sense, which does not necessarily limit humanhood to Earth-based lifeforms. Furthermore, this article analyzes how human ontology is expounded in Shīʿī Islamic textual sources as a collection of certain traits and how the human purpose is regarded to be the manifestation of order in the material realm. In addition to the Qurʾān, it focuses primarily on Shīʿī *aḥādīth*, which are sayings of the Prophet and Imams. In the Twelver tradition, these sayings hold special epistemological and theological value, because the Prophet and the Imams are considered infallible and sources of divine knowledge.

This inquiry sets the premise for analyzing and broadening the definition of humanhood using the mystical and philosophical notion of Gradation of Being (*Tashkīk al-Wujūd*), an important idea in Shīʿī philosophy (Haq 1967). Building off this elucidation, the Islamic mystical notion of the Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) is explored. It is inquired how the archetype of the Perfect Human—the complete manifestation of the divine names and attributes—may be used to develop a universal definition of humanhood (Morrissey 2021, 52). This phase of analysis also examines how the reality of the Perfect Human, the first immaterial intellect emanated by God—the First Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Awwal*)—is the source

of the effusion of divine grace for all the contingent realms, particularly for all humans. This mystical and philosophical notion is then combined with an analytical and textual review of Shīʿī Imāmī *aḥādīth*—the sayings of the Prophet and Imams that serve as important epistemological Shīʿī sources—regarding extraterrestrial life and worlds. The focus is intelligent life in particular and how its presence is scattered throughout the cosmos. This analysis is then used to build the thesis, from a perspective internal to Shīʿī Islam, of the possibility and probability of manifestations of humanhood outside Earth and the connection of these manifestations with universal metaphysical realities such as the One and the First Intellect. Consequently, the predication of the term human being is considered with respect to all the forms of life that may possess certain levels of intelligence, and it is argued that in a mystical and philosophical sense, this predication is possible for a specific type of extraterrestrial life. This argument is made through the analysis of the common traits these lifeforms may share with terrestrial humans and their relationship with the reality of the Perfect Human. This analysis presents a universal definition of human being and shows how it may philosophically apply to multiple biologically distinct lifeforms.

The purpose of the study is to broaden the horizons of religious anthropological discussions and explore how they may serve as a ground for embracing other forms of life by presenting metaphysical and ethical accounts for their existence under the already-established theological and mystical literature in the Islamic tradition. This article also explores Shīʿī Imāmī traditions regarding extraterrestrial life, sources largely underexplored in religious and academic circles, in an attempt to provide a case study for how traditional religious sources can be used to develop theological, philosophical, and metaphysical accounts for a broader definition of humanhood that can include extraterrestrial existence and contribute genuinely to discussions of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) and astrotheology. This study has value for broader discussions in astrotheology, philosophical anthropology, SETI, and astrophilosophy, as it touches on some important questions relating to the definition of humanhood that have universal appeal beyond the scope of Shīʿī studies.

Interpretive and Epistemological Methodology of Shīʿī Philosophers and Mystics

For the Shīʿī philosophers and mystics, Islamic epistemological and textual sources employ metaphorical language and parables as figures of speech to universalize comprehension of their meaning.[12] They argue that the Qurʾān and other textual sources have multiple levels of depth for varying degrees of intellect. The metaphysical truths explained in these sources can be understood by those who ponder them. It is argued that since the

Qurʾān is for a wide spectrum of people with a variety of intellects, it uses this symbolic language to convey these metaphysical truths to the masses who do not share the same intellective powers as the philosophers (Averroes 2004, 33). This is the central thesis of the interpretive frameworks of Islamic philosophers and mystics.

They argue that the Qurʾān needs to go through a process of interpretation (*taʾwīl*) to uncover its hidden (*bāṭin*). It is also said that there are multiple hidden layers in the textual sources that can be discovered through the process of spiritual enlightenment and philosophical reasoning. The philosophers argue that this is why the Qurʾān emphasizes pondering the signs of God[13] and going beyond the text's outermost layers to unravel the esoteric meanings.[14] The philosophers argue that this process of interpretation itself signifies the uniqueness of humankind and the distinct nature of particular ipseities individual humans hold, as the meaning a person extracts from the text corresponds with their mystical and philosophical status. A famous saying of the Prophet is reported on this matter: "Do not say to people what is not according to their understanding" (al-Majlisī 1983, 2:77). This shows that humans have a vast diversity of intellectual capabilities. There are multiple reports from the Prophet and Imāms that narrate the importance of seeking knowledge, elevating spiritual status, and understanding esoteric meanings, as doing so enables a person to partake in the process of interpretation. The first volume of al-Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī*, one of the central Shīʿī Ḥadīth texts, has multiple *aḥādīth* encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and other spiritual virtues that make one capable of engaging in the process of interpretation (*taʾwīl*). This thesis, along with an analysis of the ontological and metaphysical views of Shīʿī philosophers, is very important to contextualize the following discussions on the origins and definition of life, as they are dependent on the interpretation of various Islamic sources, including the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, in a philosophical and mystical light.

Hierarchy of Being from a Twelver Shīʿī Philosophical Perspective

To understand the Shīʿī Islamic philosophical concept of life, one first needs to understand the ontotheological scheme posited by Islamic philosophers. For Islamic philosophers, the domain of existence is marked by two types of existents: contingent and necessary. Contingent existents are those who, in their essence, are equidistant from existence and nonexistence. Necessary Existence is that whose essence and existence are identical. Since existence qua existence cannot be contingent—because that would entail its dependence on nonexistence, which is impossible—the Necessary Existence must exist (al-Jāmī 1979, 33). Therefore, the Necessary Existence (*Wājib al-Wujūd*) in Islamic philosophy is one and

simple in all aspects, and something that possesses multiplicity cannot directly emanate from Him. That which is emanated directly from God is argued to be the First Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Awwal*), which only has one aspect of multiplicity and reflects the simplicity and unity of God in the best possible way a creation can. Unlike God, whose existence is identical to His essence, the First Intellect has an essence distinct from its existence; this is the only aspect of multiplicity in it (Soltani Ranani 2020). Emanating from the First Intellect is a series of other intellects known as vertical and horizontal intellects. These are often called angels. It is from this series, particularly from the last intellect, known as the Active Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Faʿāl*), that the corporeal world is emanated (Ṭabāṭabāʾī [1416 AH] 1996, 173–74).

For the Shīʿī philosophers—particularly the Ṣadrians, who follow the doctrines of Shīʿī mystical philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1641)—existence (*wujūd*) is a singular reality that is gradational such that the ipseity of all existents is determined by the particular gradation of existence they belong to. In this scheme, God is conceptualized as the most fundamental reality, known as the reality of existence (*ḥaqīqah al-wujūd*), and everything else is said to be either a proximate or distant emanation from God. Therefore, it is argued that the whole material cosmos is a reflection of the reality of existence (God) and the names and attributes of God are manifested in creation (Kalın 2010, 101; Haq 1972). In this hierarchy of being, the lower the existents are, the more they are marked by distinction and multiplicity—attributes that indicate ontological imperfection and incompleteness. While God is argued to be the basis of all unity and pure existence, the last emanation, prime matter, is argued to be pure potentiality (Mousavi, Imanpour, Ahanghar et al. 2022). It is this prime matter that partially serves as the basis of the material realm. It is due to this ontological scheme that the Islamic philosophers argue that motion is something inseparable from matter, as matter is essentially in motion, and this motion reflects the metaphysical struggle of potentials to attain perfection and actuality. In the Ṣadrian school (one of the primary Shīʿī schools), the phenomenon of substantial motion (*ḥarkat al-jawhariyyah*), through which matter actualizes its potentialities, causes the emergence of consciousness in the material substrate (Haq 1972).

The Islamic philosophers and mystics argue that the inherent transient nature of the material world is symbolically expressed in the Qurʾān (27:88): "And you see the mountains, thinking them rigid, while they [will] pass as the passing of clouds." The "mountains" in this verse signify not only literal mountains but the whole material universe. While humans believe that the material world is established and present, in reality, it is passing away. Ṭabaṯabāʾī (n.d. 15/401) noted that this verse could refer to the actualization of the whole world towards its telos, which is unification with the One. For the philosophers, their divine-oriented

conception of the world is an effect of the realization of the principles that the universe was created with a wise purpose and the order of existence is primarily good and based on guiding and leading contingent beings to their corresponding perfection. Such a notion asserts the existence of only one center and leads to the conclusion that the whole universe derives its reality from that center (Muṭahhari 2000, 92). To argue that the final cause (purpose) of everything is God, mystics often cite the Qurʾān (2:156): "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return."

It is further posited that all creations are moving through the evolutionary stages toward one center. In that struggle lies their perfection (Mutahhari 2000, 92). The element of meaning behind existence adds the values of hope and happiness for intelligent beings like humans. This element develops self-sacrifice, a sense of responsibility, and other noble traits in intelligent beings by removing the fear of nonexistence and purposelessness (Haught 2001). The Qurʾān also mentions that humans were not created without a purpose or reason (3:191, 21:16, 23:115, 26:128, 38:27, 44:38).

Life and Human Beings through the Shīʿī Philosophical Lens

The Islamic concept of life is also based on the ontological primacy of consciousness, or the soul, over material reality such that the latter can be understood as a weaker reflection of the prior. The Necessary Being or God is argued to be the absolute consciousness, and everything else, including material reality, is considered an effect of the absolute reality that manifests His attributes as His signs (*āyaṯ*). The Qurʾān (42:29) explains this idea of signs: "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and what He has dispersed throughout them of creatures."

As explained, The Reality (*al-Ḥaqīqah*) is gradational for Islamic philosophers, and God is at the top of this hierarchy. Due to this, all the perfections of existence belong to Him, including the perfection of life (*al-hayaṯ*). Therefore, one of the divine names is The Living (*al-Ḥayy*) (Khalil 2006). Since creations are manifestations of His attributes, and in their essential reality, existence and life are synonymous, every existent has some gradation of life. It is impossible for something to be existent and not possess some grade of life, because life itself is one of the essential attributes of existence. In addition to the aforementioned philosophical argumentation, Islamic philosophers substantiate this doctrine with a Qurʾānic verse (17:44) that shows that everything praises God—an act that itself requires some form of manifested life: "The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts [Allah] by His praise" (Gril 1997). This view is related, if not identical, to the philosophical doctrine of panpsychism, which is "the view that the

basic physical constituents of the universe have mental [and in particular experiential] properties" (Strawson 2006).

Following this line of reasoning, Islamic philosophers argue that nothing in existence can be said to absolutely lack life. Mullā Ṣadrā similarly infers from this verse that "all bodies have life" (Ṣadrā 1981, 9:272). Closely related to this inference is another point Allāmeh Tabataba'ī (d. 1981) mentions in his commentary on Ṣadrā's *Asfār*:

> And know that just as life has two meanings, a life in the sense of awareness and action, as it is said, a living being is an active perceiver and the lowest level of perception is touch, and the lowest level of action is the movement by will, and this life is specific to animal souls and what is above them, and a life (in the sense) that corresponds to Being, is valid for everything, and circles with existence wherever it revolves, or rather, to say, is identical to it. (Ṣadrā 1981, 6:164)

Using these texts, Islamic philosophers argue that life can be attributed to everything and, like existence, is a gradational reality.

Therefore, it is critical to note that what actually differentiates varying grades of life is a struggle or striving to achieve a goal. The higher and more complex the lifeform, the more likely they are to have and recognize this struggle. Such a struggle is born from outside limitations that push a conscious life to move forward and continue its survival. Even the most basic lifeforms, such as cells, show a manifestation of this struggle to avoid the threat of extinction. Further, even in the most basic lifeforms, this struggle is not limited to the continued existence of a particular individual but rather the continued existence of the collective in which all members instantiate similar attributes (Mair 2010).

Lifeforms with higher consciousness also show a personal knowledge of this struggle to survive. The relatively nonliving existents do not hold substantial personal knowledge of this struggle. Therefore, the knowledge of failure and success generated vis-à-vis conscious struggle is a distinguishing feature of higher-level lifeforms. The desire for knowledge is also a feature of intelligent lifeforms; this desire can be felt universally and experientially by all humans (Haught 2001).

As explained, Shīʿī philosophers argue that Islamic textual sources employ symbolic language to explain deeper realities. For example, these sources symbolically address the concepts of life and consciousness. The Qurʾān (21:30) states that every living thing was created from water. In addition, many narrations from the Shīʿī Imāms,[15] the epistemological authorities in Shīʿī Islam, mention that water holds an important role when it comes to life (al-Kulaynī 1983, 8:95, 153; al-Qummī [1404 AH] 1983, 69). While this could be interpreted as only referring to living beings that exist on Earth, a tradition narrated from Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765)[16] discusses the presence of seas (water) in the skies

(Ibn Bābawayh 1978, 281).[17] One interpretation of this Ḥadīth could be the presence of water on other celestial bodies in the cosmos. Some narrations also discuss the absence of water on Earth in the beginning—that it came later, and then life emerged from it (al-Kulayni¯ 1983, 8:95, 121). Mullā Ṣadrā interpreted water metaphorically and took it to be a symbolic signifier of God's mercy that encompasses everything according to the Qurʾān (7:156) (Ṣadrā 1981, 6:117). These sources provide a basis in Islamic discourse about the emergence of life and point towards the possibility of the existence of water, which may be a life-sustaining substrate, on non-Earth planets. These narrations, along with some other narrations in Shīʿī sources that point towards the existence of conscious extraterrestrial life, entail a requirement for a universal definition of humanity that includes the conscious lifeforms (including humans) of Earth as well as of other substrates and planets based upon their intellectual abilities and potentials.

As has been noted extensively in SETI discourse (Davila and McKay 2014), a material-specific definition of life (such as one that necessarily reduces life to carbon and oxygen-based compounds) might not necessarily apply universally. Therefore, universal attributes that can be applied regardless of any material substrate should be considered when defining life. Failure to do so would result in a definition of life that, by definition, cannot account for alternative biochemistry and varying gradations of life.

Given the aforementioned discussion, it can be argued that Islamic philosophers have particular insights that can be useful in presenting a nonmaterial-specific universal definition of life. In addition, the Islamic textual sources that arguably refer to extraterrestrial life also create the possibility of forming a religious and philosophical framework around not only the definition of life but also any possible future HEI. Such frameworks rooted in particular religious traditions are necessary given the current developments in astrobiology, SETI, and, consequently, astrotheology (Peters 2021).

In Islamic philosophy, as explained, life is a gradational reality that can be attributed to all things in some capacity. Although Islamic philosophers give a definition of human as "the speaking/rational animal" (*al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq*), it must be understood that "humanhood" itself is a gradational reality unified by particular perfections rather than a strict essence (McGinnis 2003). For many Shīʿī Islamic philosophers, particularly the Ṣadrians, essence is not distinct per se from existence, since they hold to the notion of the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*). For them, the essence is constructed in the human mind by observing similarities among particular ipseities (*hūwiyāt*). Therefore, the essence that is defined for material things should be seen as a Wittgensteinian familial category based on familial resemblance rather than a strict essence (Medin, Wattenmaker and Hampson 1987). Islamic philosopher Avempace

(d. 1138) similarly noted this familial resemblance in the case of species, writing:

> Nature did not transfer from one genus to another except through an intermediary and such a case will you find in all types of existing substances. Verily among existing things, there is an intermediate between inanimate objects and Regnum Vegetabile, and it is not in the capacity of a man to judge whether it is a plant or an inanimate object. Similarly, there is something between the Regnum Animale and the Regnum Vegetabile which is intermediate. It takes from each its share. (Avempace 1968, 95)

This also shows how Islamic philosophers conceptualize existence as a gradational reality in which the phenomenon of life emerges through intermediate stages. The categorization of humans as humans is not due to a strict definition of humanhood as such but rather a number of characteristics that many humans have in common. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to talk of existents as "participating" in the principle of humanhood. In this case, rather than being a complete binary, humanhood could be predicated on existents as a spectrum. This is closely related to the Islamic philosophical idea of the "Lords of the Species" (*Arbāb al-Anwāʿ*) elucidated primarily by Sheikh al-Ishrāq (d. 1191) (Benevich 2019). In this idea, material existents take existential illumination (*fayḍ*) from their Lord (*Rabb*) in the immaterial realm. Since reality itself is gradational, its reception is also gradational, and an existent can participate simultaneously in multiple principles/lords (*arbāb*) that are in accordance with their linear progression in the material world. In this linear progression, the human is considered to be the final cause (purpose), because they simultaneously manifest the vegetative, animalistic, and rational subprinciples of life (Griffith 2016). The gradation of humanhood is based upon having an ontological connection with the reality of the Perfect Human, who is the First Intellect. The more humanhood an existent instantiates, the greater their connection with the First Intellect (Suhrawardī 1999, 59). From this discussion, it follows that through an Islamic philosophical lens, humanhood can be defined in a way that does not necessarily reduce it to particular material formulations and does not exhibit "carbon chauvinism," which is the view that life is an emergent property only of carbon-based organic systems (Preston and Shin 2021). Furthermore, the nature of humanhood can be understood by analyzing the notion of the Perfect Human and the connection of humans with their reality. These elements must be considered because for Shīʿī Islamic philosophers, at any particular moment, the best manifestation of the First Intellect is the Perfect Human in the corporeal plane. This manifestation is also called an "Imām" and is someone who shares an intimate ontological connection with all material existents, particularly humans (Ali 2013, 240).

The Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*), Islamic Cosmology, and the Universal Definition of Humanity

For the Islamic philosophers, a deeper philosophical analysis of humanity can only be constructed by paying attention to the universal archetype of humans, that is, the First Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Awwal*) and the cosmology presented in Islamic philosophy. Since the First Intellect is an immaterial existent and a universal principle, a definition of humanhood based on humans' relationship with this principle would apply universally and help place the notions of life, universal humanity, and HEI in the Shīʿī philosophical framework without reducing them merely to material interactions. Islamic philosophers argue that humans have varying levels of perfection and manifest the reality of divine names (*ʿasmā Allah*) in diversified ways. They also argue that there is a Perfect Human (*Insān al-Kāmil*) that manifests these divine names in a complete manner (Lumbard 1994). According to Islamic philosophers, everything that lies within the realm of existence falls into the category of either necessary or contingent. These philosophers, particularly the philosophical mystics, call God the only Real Being (*Wujūd al-Haqīqī*) and argue that that which is other than God only exists because of God, similar to how light is luminous by its essence and illuminates everything else (Kaukua 2020). Created existents are nonexistent in themselves and present only as certain self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*) of the Real Being. This is much like a rainbow, wherein all the colors are not essentially distinct from white light but rather manifesting a particular mode of it (Chittick 2012, 77–78). The whole realm of multiplicity resembles scattered mirrors reflecting the one and only divine light in existence according to their respective capacities (Yazdī 2015, 120). Mystics often cite the following verse to substantiate this view: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Qurʾān 24:35). (Saheeh International 2010) Mullā Ṣadrā argued in his exegesis of this verse that "Light" is identical to being and is a gradational reality (Shīrāzī 2004, 56). Existence in its pure reality (*haqīqah al-wujūd*) encompasses all of being and emanates only one emanation directly. This view is expressed in the philosophical axiom of the Rule of One: "Nothing comes from the One but One (*al-wāhid lā yasduru ʿanhu illā al-wāhid*)" (Ṣadrā 1981, 2:332). It is argued that the Rule of One is a logical necessity given the thesis of absolute divine simplicity, which states that the attributes of God are identical to His essence (*Sifāt Allāh ʿaīn Dhātihi*) (Ṣadrā 1981, 6:145; Chittick 2012, 122; Ṭabāṭabāʾī [1416 AH] 1996, 173). The necessity and simplicity of God stand in contradiction with the composition and multiplicity of the material world, as being a composite entails the need of the parts, and that which is composite cannot be necessary in itself. Thus, absolute simplicity is an essential condition for absolute self-sufficiency (Ṭabāṭabāʾī [1416 AH] 1996, 157).

God, through the immediate knowledge of His essence, knows everything before (in ontological precedence as opposed to temporal precedence) its creation at the plane of His essence (Ṭabāṭabāʾī [1416 AH] 1996, 163). After this uncreated knowledge of God, there are three created worlds: the spiritual world, the world of imagination or images, and the corporeal world. Each world exists as a weaker reflection of the higher one. All of these levels exist collectively within the Perfect Human as the rational soul (spirit), animal soul, and body (Chittick 2012, 121).

Although the essence of God is undelimited and thus unknowable, He bestows His knowledge to humankind through revelations from the plane of divine names and attributes. Each attribute signifies a certain consideration of the divine essence. All the multiplicity in the created realm is because of these very attributes. For example, the process of creation is often attributed to divine names such as "Creator," "Light," "All-Merciful," or "Lover" (Chittick 2012, 120). In a Sufi saying explaining the process of creation, God is reported to have said: "I was a Hidden Treasure; I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order to be known" (Afnani 2011).

The first act of God, also known as the First Intellect among the Shīʾi philosophers, is the complete manifestation of the all-embracing attribute of God, "Allah," as well as the reality of the Perfect Human, as reported by the Prophet: "God created Adam in His own image" (Chittick 2012, 122; al-Kulaynī 1983, 1:134; Ibn Bābawayh 1978, 103, 152–53). The name Allah in this respect encompasses all the other divine names and represents their absolute unity in which no name has preference or precedence over another (Khomeinī 2014, 44).

In this perspective, the Perfect Human, being a complete manifestation of the divine name Allah, the all-embracing name, is described as the center of a circle that is equally close to all the divine names. This is why the Perfect Human is known as "the Pole" (*al-Quṭb*). Everything in existence revolves around this Pole and exists due to the existence of the Pole, as the Pole is spiritually identical to the First Intellect, which is the basis and principle of all contingent realities (Nasr 1970). Due to this, the Pole bestows upon everything what is their due without being removed from the epicenter or skewed towards one particular name that does not represent the totality of existence absolutely. The name Allah, which is also described as God's greatest name, acts as the Lord of the Perfect Human (Khomeinī 2014, 65). All the other attributes act in a similar way for their particular manifestations (Knysh 1992). In the *ʿirfānī* (Shīʿī mystical) cosmology, the Perfect Human is first present at the plane of divine knowledge as an immutable archetype and then, through the process of descent (*hubūd*), becomes manifest into lower levels of existence. From the first created disclosure of the Perfect Human at the plane of the First Intellect flows a series of intellectual emanations, all of whom contain their respective manifestations of the Perfect Human until the material world is reached, wherein

the Perfect Human manifests in a material body and acts as the perfect microcosm, which is the complete manifestation of the macrocosm, and embraces comprehensively all the particular manifestations of divine names and attributes (Chittick 2012, 129; Lory 2022, 234). This process of the descent of the Perfect Human is termed as "*hubūd*" or "*nuzūl*" and is indicated in the Qurʾānic verse: "And there is not a thing but that with Us are its depositories, and We do not send it down except according to a known measure" (15:21). This process of descent in general happens to all of creation, since the First Intellect is the principle (*aṣl*) of all creation. In particular, it happens only to the Perfect Human, since the Perfect Human, in its own nature, contains the totality of all being.

This descent is metaphysically necessary because the Perfect Human is considered the final cause (purpose) of the contingent realm. The corporeal Perfect Human—the manifestation of the reality of the Perfect Human (*haqīqah al-Insān al-Kāmil*) in the material world—is the manifestation of all unified perfections that existence possesses in an absolutely ordered manner. The corporeal Perfect Human, through ascension and mystical union, aims to reunite with its original source, the reality of the Perfect Human. In this process of return, the Perfect Human causes this return for other existents as well, since the return of the Perfect Human is only completed once all existents have returned to their original basis. This is because the Perfect Human is the lord and principle of all other contingent realities. This concept is explained in the following Qurʾānic verses (2:156, 36:12): "Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will [all] return" and "we have figured everything in a manifest Imām" (Qarai 2005).

All other existents lose the status of being perfect because of their affinity towards a particular name whose reality they embrace. In this way, they join the state of disequilibrium and skew away from the epicenter and the Pole (Chittick 2012, 123–24).

According to mystics, the epicenter of divine names defines the perfection of the true potential of humans, and proximity or remoteness from this epicenter creates all the levels of heaven and hell relatively, such that being close to the epicenter is heaven while being away from it is hell (Chittick 2012, 126).

It is argued that the manifestation of the Perfect Human on the material plane acts as the vicegerent of God and the cosmic force that ties together the arcs of ascent and descent that constitute the complete circle of existence (Knysh 1992). There are multiple narrations from the Prophet and the Imāms that the material world would not exist if there was no proof of Allah (*hujjat Allāh*) in it.[18] Islamic philosophers describe the Perfect Human as the divine Logos (*Kalimāt Allah*) and all the prophetic missions as the manifestations of the station that the Perfect Human is bestowed with and the outcomes of his atemporal vicegerency (Knysh 1992). Thus, the divine plan for creation is executed through the Perfect Human when

they act as the ruler of the cosmos to channel the divine will. The Perfect Human accomplishes this through the possession of both transcendence and materiality, wherein their one dimension faces the lord, and the other faces the creation (Knysh 1992). Therefore, in terms of their reality, the Perfect Human is nothing but a brief sketch of God's attributes, and all the things in the contingent world are their dispersed expositions. This is why the Perfect Human is understood to be "the door" (*bāb*) or "the rope of Allah" (*habal Allāh*); they act as a connective agent between the immaterial and material realities (Knysh 1992). This is indicated in the Qurʾānic verse that states: "And hold firmly to the rope of Allah" (3:103).

From this discussion, it follows that the most complete particular manifestation of the divine names is the Perfect Human and the most complete manifestation of the divine names amongst all genera is the genus *Homo*. It is the most complete genus, because it simultaneously manifests the rational soul, the animalistic soul, and the vegetative soul. Therefore, any existent who has an intellectual capacity comparable and ontologically parallel to that of human beings on Earth would also be considered to be from the universal human genus, even if their physical structure or biological attributes are different from earthly human beings. Consequently, they would also have an ontological connection with the Perfect Human and their reality. As such, an adequate definition of humanhood can be constructed using Shīʿī philosophical and theological discourse that does not solely rely upon biological assumptions and carbon chauvinism. This philosophical discourse is further substantiated by the sayings about extraterrestrial life by Shīʿī infallible authorities—such as the Prophet and the Imāms, who act as proofs (*hujaj*) of Allah in the material world—mentioned in the Ḥadīth corpus. This analysis of humanhood, therefore, demonstrates how religious and philosophical frameworks about extraterrestrial life and HEI can be created using a traditional religious framework and hold original analytical value for discourses, particularly philosophical and ethical, in SETI.

Summary of Shīʿī Textual Sources on Extraterrestrial Life

The inquiry into the nature of extraterrestrial life is not unique to Shīʿī literature, although the density of such material is indeed a distinguishing factor. Certain major thinkers who argued in favor of the possibility of the existence of extraterrestrial life include Plato, Democritus, Epicurus, and Origen (Wilkinson 2016, 16–20). These thinkers, in different ways, shaped the discourse around extraterrestrial life prior to Islam. After explaining Shīʿī philosophical and mystical frameworks regarding existence, life, and cosmology, it is also necessary to point towards the textual sources in the Shīʿī corpus that elucidate this conception of the existence

of extraterrestrial life. The authorities of Shīʿī Islam—the Prophet and the Imāms—have pointed out the abundance of different forms of creation in the cosmos and the existence of many or infinite other worlds. The Qurʾān discusses the creation of heavens and Earth and the dispersion of creatures throughout them (Determann 2021, 11): "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and what He has dispersed throughout them of creatures. And He, for gathering them when He wills, is competent" (42:29).

The Qurʾānic passage (1:2) translates as "praise to God, lord of the worlds." In total, the expression "lord of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*) is used 42 times in the scripture. The word "worlds" is mentioned 73 times, while the singular "world" is not used once (Determann 2021, 10). The Qurʾān also mentions the creation of seven earths and seven skies (2:29, 17:44, 23:86, 41:12, 65:12, 67:3, 71:15). It talks about the children of Adam being given superiority over much of creation (17:70). This might indicate the possibility of other forms of sophisticated life. If these verses are read in light of the *aḥādīth* (narrations), as is the method of Shīʿī exegesis, the matter becomes clearer. The sixth Shīʿī Imām, Imām al-Ṣādiq, reports: "The Honorable and the Exalted God has created 12,000 worlds; each of which is more extensive than the seven heavens and the seven earths. None of these worlds know that God, the Honorable, and the Exalted, has any other worlds except their own world. And, I am the proof (*hujjah*) for all of them" (Ibn Bābawayh [1362 AH] 1943, 639). In this Hadīth, the sentence "I am the proof (*hujjah*) for all of them," might refer to the reality of the Perfect Human, which can manifest in multiple different persons, rather than the individual ipseity of Imām Jaʾfar al-Ṣādiq. As such, it can be argued that other intelligent lifeforms may have their own proofs (*hujaj*) who will reflect the reality of the Perfect Human. In this case, a lack of proof (*hujjah*) on our Earth would not entail an absolute lack of proof in the material cosmos as a whole. This understanding is further supported by the existence of narrations on seven Adams on seven earths. Even though the same name is used (i.e., Adam) in these narrations, the signifieds are different. However, they are all united under the archetype of the Perfect Human. For example, the early Shīʿī text *Kitāb al-Ashbāh wa al-Azilla* says: "The seven Adams are like our [first] Adam in [their] veil, birthplace, and kin. All of their names during this Adam are like the names of the veils during the prior Adams" (Asatryan 2015). Here as well, the name "Adam" is the same, although the Adams on each earth are different. There is another closely related narration found in a Sunni source that likely has its origins in the early Shīʿī milieu (due to philological and historical considerations such as an appropriate semantic field and a chain from Kufa, a Shīʿī center). Al-Ḥākim (1990, 535) notes: "Ibn ʿAbbas said: 'There are seven earths, and in every earth, there is a prophet like your prophet [Muhammad], Adam like your Adam, Noah like your Noah,

Abraham like your Abraham, and Jesus like your Jesus." Another tradition from Imām al-Ṣādiq says: "Verily, beyond this are 40 suns. Between one sun and another is a distance of 40 years. In them are many creations that do not know whether Allah created Adam or not. And indeed, beyond your moon, there are 40 moons with a distance of 40 days between each of them and a great creation in them that people do not know whether Allāh created Adam or not" (al-Ṣaffār [1404 AH] 1983, 510–13). The mention of such numbers as seven, 40, and 12,000 signifies the abundance, not necessarily the exact quantity as is the convention in Arabic rhetoric (Ansariyan [1382 AH] 1963, 110–11). Furthermore, a tradition narrated from the Prophet Muhammad says: "God created 100,000 lanterns, then hung them from the empyrean (*ʿarsh*). All the heavens and the earths and everything within them are in one lantern, even the paradise, and the hell. Other than God, no one knows what lies in the other lanterns" (Ansariyan [1382 AH] 1963, 110; al-Ālūsī [1415 AH] 1994, 82).

Allameh Shahrestani (d. 1967),[19] in his explanation of this Ḥadīth, related the lanterns to galaxies, providing the rationale that both have similar elliptical shapes. He further substantiated his point by arguing that the source of the light of a lantern is at its center and the rest of it is illuminated by that source. Galaxies also have their source of illumination at their center (Ansariyan [1382 AH] 1963, 110–11).

It is also narrated that the first Shīʿī Imām, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, said: "For these stars in the sky, there are cities like the cities on earth; each city tied to a column of light" (al-Qummī [1404 AH] 1983, 219). This tells us about not only the presence of extraterrestrial life but intelligent life capable of founding cities (Taqi¯ Falsafi¯ 2002, 49). In the interpreting the Qurʾānic verse (5:15) "Did We fail in the first creation? But they are in confusion over a new creation," the fifth Shīʿī Imām, Imām al-Bāqir (d. 733), states:

> God will create another world (after the destruction of this one) with a new set of monotheist people without the distinction of male or female to worship Him. God will create another Earth for them to live in and will create another sky to cast a shadow upon their heads. Maybe you believe that the Honorable and the Exalted God has not created any other world and has not created any other humans than you? Indeed, I swear by God the Honorable and the Exalted that He has created a million worlds and a million breeds of humans, and you are in the very end of these worlds and of the last (or latest) breed of human beings. (Ibn Bābawayh 1978, 277; [1362 AH] 1943, 652)

There are also narrations that mention creations who are unaware of Satan: monotheists obedient to God who have escaped many means of death and will live until judgment day (al-Rāwandī [1409 AH] 1988, 41). Judgment day, in this context, could refer to the material destruction of their habitat. There are other narrations in Shīʿī literature that relate to a similar meaning (al-Majlisī 1983, 55:97). For the sake of brevity, all such

narrations need not be mentioned; however, the existence of life on other planets and in a multiplicity of worlds is a recurring motif. For a nonexhaustive compilation, one may refer to the relevant section of Mukhtaṣar *Baṣāʾir al-Darajāt*, an early Shīʿī Ḥadīth compilation (Ibn ʿAbd Allāh [1430 AH] 2008, 90–110). From these narrations, it becomes clear that in the Shīʿī Islamic framework, not only is there a possibility of belief in extraterrestrial life but such a belief is perhaps necessary if traditional exegetical and hermeneutical frameworks of belief formation are to be followed. Such views about extraterrestrial life are also in line with the Shīʿī philosophical and mystical view that God is an infinite reality; therefore, when God manifests His divine names in the material world, they also have infinite disclosures in reality (Chittick 2012, 145). In this way, there is a synthesis of Shīʿī philosophical views and textual sources on the existence of extraterrestrial life. It is from this very real possibility of the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life that the need for a unified definition of humanhood emerges.

Human Beings in a Broader Perspective

From this discussion, it follows that in the Shīʿī tradition, the notion of life, in particular intelligent life, cannot be reduced to some certain biological configurations or formulations. Such a definition of life or intelligence would be bottom up, wherein the higher-order emergent properties would be necessarily reduced to prior ones. In opposition to this, the Shīʿī mystical view, particularly when considered along with the textual sources on the existence of extraterrestrial life, has to be top down and universal, wherein intelligence or life would not necessarily be reducible to some particular biological substrate. However, there might still be material similarities amongst all living or intelligent beings, either due to a shared concomitant or similar external conditions. For the Shīʿī philosophers, this universal definition of humanhood is grounded in their gradational cosmogony, wherein individual intellect is argued to be the direct and modulated instantiation of the Active Intellect (the direct metaphysical instantiator of the material universe and the indirect instantiation of the First Intellect). Following this cosmogony, humanhood would be defined primarily in terms of level of consciousness and the being's relationship with the First Intellect. Therefore, if any being holds the same level of consciousness as humans in potency, they must also be characterized as humans regardless of their material substrate. While the material substrate of different beings can affect their pace of actualizing their potential, material substance itself does not completely determine the potencies of any being vis-a-vis consciousness. All intelligent lifeforms are unified by their struggles and their implicit recognition of their substantiating principle. Due to the very nature of consciousness, which has the innate capacity

to recognize its own limits, all beings, in some sense, must collectively actualize their potential, similar to how homo sapiens have throughout their history. This is due to the fact that there appear to be some innate effects of cognitive limitations (Hertwig and Todd 2003). This process of conscious and collective actualization and organization is another defining factor of humanhood and not necessarily contingent upon particular material substrates. Though material substrate does not essentially matter with regard to defining humanhood, the possibility of common material attributes among all conscious beings cannot be ruled out, because possession of a certain level of consciousness entails certain types of actions. These certain genera of actions, in turn, can affect physical and formal features (Foley 2016). This is similar to the phenomenon of convergent evolution, wherein similar traits, qualities, or attributes develop in species independently due to similar behavioral patterns or ecological conditions or a combination of the two (Muschick, Indermaur and Salzburger 2012). From this analysis, a universal definition of humanhood can be created that applies not only internally in the Shīʿī tradition but also externally in a broader philosophical and mystical context, wherein frameworks regarding SETI and HEI are becoming increasingly important due to technological developments and human interest in finding extraterrestrial life. Therefore, a demonstration of how a religious philosophical framework can be constructed while staying grounded in traditional religious discourse is beneficial not only for Shīʿī Islam or Islam in general but for all religions. It shows how a religious tradition can interact with its sources to devise similar ethical, definitional and philosophical frameworks that contribute to SETI and HEI.

Conclusion

This article first presented the hermeneutic and exegetical framework of Shīʿī philosophical Islam, which is based primarily on necessary dictates of reason and interpretation (*ta'wīl*). It then presented a general overview of Shīʿī philosophical and mystical cosmogony, which sees God as a simple and fundamental reality and the rest of the contingent realities as His manifestations and reflections. Then, it explained the philosophical and mystical notion of the Perfect Human, which is the form and unifying principle of all humans and the most complete reflection of the divine names and attributes. Following this, it touched on the inadequacy of a purely materialist-reductionist definition of humanhood and how it exhibits, amongst other things, carbon chauvinism. In accordance with the aforementioned philosophical framework, this article has attempted to present a more general definition of humanhood that can apply to extraterrestrial life regardless of its material composition. It also presented a brief summary of Shīʿī textual sources that posit the existence of such

extraterrestrial realities. From this exposition, it aimed to present a synthesis of scientific, philosophical, and mystical reasoning, all of which hold great importance for the Shīʿī philosophical mystics, who see all three domains as closely linked with one another and interrelated attempts to understand the manifestations of the One.

Notes

1. For the sake of reducing redundancy, in this article, the terms "mystics" and "philosophers" refer particularly to Twelver Shīʿī Islamic Neoplatonic philosophers and mystics (primarily those who belonged to the tradition of *falsafa* and *ʿirfān*) unless otherwise stated. *ʿIrfān* is a mystical philosophical tradition particular to Twelver Shīʿīs that is affected by teachings of Mullā Ṣadrā.
2. Sayyed Ḥaider Āmolī (1319–1385) was a Shīʿī mystic, philosopher, and exegete famous for his commentaries and explanations on the works of Islamic theosophist Ibn ʿArabī. His explanation of Shīʿī mystical positions served as the basis for subsequent developments in Shīʿī philosophy and mysticism (*ʿirfān*). Some of his works include *Jāmeʿal-Asrār wa Manbaʿ al-Anwār* and *Naṣṣ Al-nuṣūṣ Fī Sharh Fuṣūṣ*.
3. Ṣadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, famously called Mullā Sadrā, (1571–1636), is oftentimes referred to as the most prominent Islamic philosopher after Avicenna. He is called Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn (Master of the theosists) for his contributions that combined mysticism, philosophy, and textual traditions. Some of his most famous works include *Asfār al-arbaʿa* (*The Four Journeys*) and *Kitāb al-Mashā'ir* (*The Book of Metaphysical Prehensions*).
4. Ḥoṣein Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1904–1981) was a Shīʿī philosopher, mystic, jurist, and exegete. He was an interpreter of Mullā Sadrā's works and distinguishedly wrote a substantial 27-volume exegesis of the Qurʾān titled Tafsīr al-Mīzān. He was also the mentor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and held sittings with French philosopher Henry Corbin.
5. Sayyed Jalāl-ed-Dīn Āashtīānī (1925–2005) was a prominent disciple of Ḥoṣein Ṭabāṭabā'ī, a mystic and philosopher in his own right. He taught philosophy and mysticism to contemporary experts of mysticism, including William C. Chittick. His major works include explanations, notes, and commentaries on the works of Mullā Sadrā, Qaisarī ibn ʿArabī, a refutation of Ghazālī, and an anthology of works of Iranian philosophers (which he collected with French philosopher Henry Corbin).
6. Unity of Being (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd*) is the doctrine that existence is a singular, gradational reality. The pure mode of existence is God, whereas the particular modes that exist relatively are creations.
7. Gradation of Existence (*Tashkīk al-Wujūd*) refers to the doctrine of the modulation of being that posits that the single reality of being is modulated in multiple modes that give rise to distinct and particular ipseities of things.
8. Divine Simplicity posits that the attributes of God are identical to His essence and that there is no ontological complexity within God.
9. Emanationism refers to the doctrine that the process of creation is, in essence, a process of emanation in which the singular Monad emanates other existents through an external overflow.
10. Rule of One states that from the One comes nothing but one. It refers to the doctrine that the Monad can directly emanate only one reality and multiple distinct realities cannot emanate from the Monad.
11. The Qurʾān also supports this narrative. For example, see: "Lo! I (God) am about to place a vicegerent on earth" (Qurʾān 2:30).
12. There is mention of this notion in the Qurʾān (29:43), where parables are said to be comprehensible for only the learned and wise.
13. For example, verses like (10:101) in the Qurʾān, where careful observation of the signs of God is commanded.
14. There are multiple narrations that mention the Qurʾān having many layers. A Hadīth states that the Prophet said, "Every verse of the Qurʾān has an exoteric and esoteric meaning"

(Reyshahrī 2001, 2532). Another report from the fourth Imām, ʻAli ibn al-Husayn, states that "the Qurʾān has four layers and the truths are for the Prophets" (al-Majlisi¯ 1983 89:20).

15. In Shīʿī theology, Imāms are believed to be divinely appointed guides for the people on Earth. An Imām is to be present at all times and in all eras for guidance and correct interpretation of Islam. In the Twelver tradition, 12 infallible Imāms from the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad are considered the successors of the Prophet to carry forward his message. For further details on Shīʿī Imāms, refer to Momen's *An Introduction to Shīʿī Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shīʿī sm*, Pierce's *Twelve Infallible Men: The Imāms and the Making of Shīʿī sm*, and other similar works.

16. Imām Jaʾfar al-Ṣādiq was the sixth Shīʿī Imam and an influential figure in the eighth century CE.

17. This meaning can be found in multiple reports where the sky is mentioned as containing oceans and seas of waters.

18. This is a very early Shīʿī belief. For some examples of these *aḥādīth*, see al-Kulayni¯ 1983, 1:178–80; al-Ṣaffār [1404 AH] 1983, 508–09; and other sources.

19. Allameh Hibatuddi¯n Shahrestani (1884–1967) was a jurist and philosopher from Iraq. Some of his notable works are *Sira¯j al-Maiʾra¯j*, a treatise on ascension of the Prophet, and *Al-Riwa¯ya¯t*.

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