The treatise of Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī on the Shiītī graphical form of the Mightiest Name of God (al-ism al-aʿżam).

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ABSTRACT

Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī
(d. 1259 /1843).

The charismatic Persian Shiītī thinker Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (c. 1212/1798-1259/1843) was the second head of al-Shaykhiyya, the so-called Shaykhī school of Shiītī Islam which emerged during the early Qājār period. He succeeded the sage, philosopher and mystic thinker, the foundational figure for Shaykhism, Shaykh Aḥmad b. Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsāʾī (1166-1241 = 1753-1826 CE). Born in the eastern Arabian province of al-Aḥsāʾ (= Ḩasā ) he lived most of his life in the Shiītīte shrine cites of Iraq (1790s – early 1800s) and in Iran (1806-1826) and passed away in the Mecca-Medinan region whilst on Islamic pilgrimage.

Like Shaykh Aḥmad, Sayyid Kāẓim was a prolific and wide-ranging writer in both Persian and Arabic. The bibliographical Fihrist ("Index") of Ibrāhīmī lists around 166 of his writings which have been much less studied and published that his master Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī.
The graphical form of the al-ism al-a’żam (Mightiest Name) is specifically said to have the following şūrat (form) towards the beginning of the Risālah fi sharḥ wa tafsīr ism al-a’żam:

Though an extra initial as well as the final pentalpha (𬶨) (as above) is not always represented in the ten or more variant forms of the graphical representation of the Mightiest or Greatest Name of God, the seven (or more) sigla / components comprising it are collectively representative of the all-Powerful divine “Name”. They are largely if not wholly derived from their graphical depiction ascribed to the first Shi‘ī Imam, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ālī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40 / 661) to whom a good deal of esoteric knowledge and sometimes Isrā‘īliyyāt (loosely, “Israelitica”), Ismobilical and associated traditions are ascribed. Note for example, the al-Khuṭbah al-ṭutunjiyya [or taṭanjyya] (loosely, “Sermon of the Gulf”) contained in the Mashārīq anwār al-yaqīn fi asrār Amīr al-Mu’mīnīn (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1978, pp. 166-170) of al-Ḥāfiz Rajab, al-Bursī (d. c. 814/1411) and the unpublished marginally written Persian treatise on (3x3 type) ‘Magic squares and talismanic devices' attributed to this first Imam ‘Ālī which is held in the national Library of Medicine (mss. ‘On Magic Squares and Talismans’ MS P 29, marginal - item 15; refer http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/arabic/astrology3.html ).

Sayyid Kāẓim cites the following sevenfold Arabic description of the al-ism al-a’żam: it is,
[1] Three rods (‘usiyy) in a row [🪐🪐] after

[2] a seal (khātam = 🌊); above them the likeness of a straightened lance [-].


[4] then a ladder unto all that is hoped for, but which is not a ladder 🆔.

[5] Four things like fingers in a row, pointing to good deeds, but without a wrist [🪐🪐🪐]

[6] And a [letter] "H" (ḥā') which is cleft (shaqiq) [🪐]

[7] then an inverted [letter] wāw ڥ like the syphon of a phlebotomist (ka-anbūb ḥajjām, "tube of the cupper") though not a cupping glass (miḥjam):

This is [representative] of the Mighty Name (al-ism al- mu`azzim);
If you knew it not aforetime, then know it now!

O bearer of the Mighty Name (ṣāḥib al-ism al-`azīm), take
sufficiency in it, for you shall be preserved from misfortunes and kept safe
thereby. It is the Name of God (ism Allāh) -- exalted be His glory -- unto
all humankind whether pure Arab (faṣīḥ) or non-Arab (a'jam). ¹

Sayyid Kāzīm’s imamologically oriented commentary on the poetical and graphic
Isrā`tiliyāt rooted traditions regarding the symbol of the Mightiest Name cannot be
discussed in detail save to note that he also draws upon allegedly pre-Islamic
dimensions of traditions about the Mightiest Name of God. Rasḥī commences his
commentary by acknowledging his indebtedness to the upright, pious and sagacious

¹Arab. text cited from al-Būnī, Shams, cited Winckler, 1930:69-71 with German trans.
1992:93-97 = App. XXIII. I have adapted MacEoin’s translation in the light of the other
translations and al-Būnī’s Shams.
master, named Shaykh Muhammad Aḥmad (= Shaykh Aḥmad?/ Al-Būnī?). Through him he was informed that "certain of the religious communities (al-milli) are aware of portions of the words (al-kalimāt) constituting the Mightiest Name (al-ism al-aʿẓam)". It is stated that they are evident in "fourteen temples" (hayākīl), apparently indicating the Shiʿite pleroma ("fullness") of Muhammad, Fāṭima and the 12 Imams. Differentiated or subdivided into thirteen "letters" after the thirteen individual elements constituting the seven graphic sigla which make up the mightiest Name of God (counting from the initial pentacle (كف ) to the inverted wāw ) eight portions out of the 13 were known to the pre-Islamic communities. Four elements ("letters") derive from the Tawrat, (the Torah, Hebrew Bible) and four from the Injīl ("Gospel"), the other five derive from the Q. (4+4+5 =13). Sayyid Kāzim's explanations of these components of the al-ism al-aʿẓam are distinctly imamological (Rashīfī, Sh-Ism, 271 aff.) .

The Sayyid further explains how it is that the Torah has four "letters" of the Mightiest Name. He explains that this is so in the light of the following well-known prophetic hadīth , "O ʿAlī you are to me after the manner of Aaron to Moses". A typological relationship is thus set up between Moses and Muhammad. Moses [= Muhammad], it is explained, is foundational (aṣīl an), the Reality (al-ḥaqīqa), while the Torah (al-tawrat) before him is his essential persona (aṣāla dhāt an). Moses the prophet (al-nabi) is essentially the Moses of the gate of reality upon reality (haqīqa). In a metaphorical sense the reality of the Torah which was revealed before him consists of four letters which are the four lettered personal name Muhammad (= M-H-M-D). The manifestation of the name Muhammad before Moses took place at the Sinaitic theophany (tajallī) of the Lord (= Q. 7:143). The agent of this theophany is again said to have been an individual from among the cherubim (rajal min al-karubīyyīn) evidently one associated with the name Muhammad (Rashīfī, Sh.Ism, 273b).

That four letters of the al-ism al-aʿẓam are found in "the Injīl of Jesus son of Mary" is also commented upon by Sayyid Kāzim. He states, "And he [Jesus] is the likeness (mithāl) of [Imām] ʿAlī." This typological equation also has to do with the letters of the mightiest Name being imamologically realized. That Imam ʿAlī is equated with Jesus finds echoes in the writings of the Bāb (see Persian Bāyan VIII:2). Five "letter" components of Mightiest Name are also allotted to the Q. They are imamologically understood as representing the pentad of the four twelver Imams, [1] Hasan, [2] Ḥusayn,

It is also interesting to note that Sayyid Kāẓim gives the seventh item, the inverted letter _wāw_ a messianic significance stating that it "alludes to the [messianic] Proof (al-_ḥujjat_), the son of Ḥasan [al-Askarī, the 11th Imam, d. c. 260/874]". The central (hidden) letter "A" (alif) of the three letters of _wāw_ when spelled out in full (= _wālāl_ ) (represents the Qā’im [messianic Ariser]) as one "stationed between the two gulfs (_tutuniyyn_), the isthmus (barzakh) between the two worlds". This mode of exegesis is also taken up in Bāb-Bāḥāʾi scripture, most notably in the _Qayyūm al-asma'_ of the Bāb and, for example, the _al-Kitāb al-aqdas_ ("Most Holy Book" c. 1873) and _Lawḥ-i Hīrīk_ of Bahāʾu’llāh.

In this paper the above and related themes and motifs will be succinctly developed and commented upon in the light of Islamic and Shaykhī, Bābī and Bahāʾī doctrines and practices.