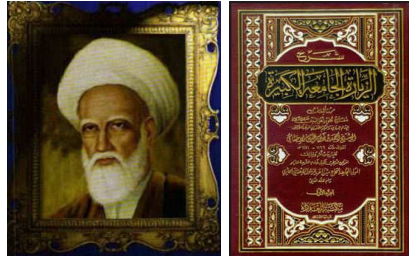


**Twin Shining Lights Pt.1 : Shaykh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Din al-Ahsa'i (d. Medina 1241/1826).**

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Shaykh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Din al-Ahsa'i was born in eastern Arabia (now Saudi Arabia) in the mid. 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the sacred seventh Islamic month of Rajab, in the year 1166 AH., or sometime during May, 1753 CE. His exact birthdate is unknown, though it is recorded that it occurred in an Imami Shi'i village named Matayrafi in the vicinity of a small settlement named al-Ahsa (or al-Hasa) within the Bahrayn region of Arabia. Shaykh Ahmad was born in a very largely Sunni Muslim country with its religious centre in the Mecca-Medina sacred region. For five or six generations, his forbears were twelver Shi'i Muslims, though prior to this they had been Sunni Muslims like the majority of Muslim believers in the Ottoman domains and in modern Saudi Arabia.

As a young man who, some decades after his passing, came to be viewed as the fountainhead of an innovative Shi'i movement later designated as al-Shaykhiyya (Shaykhism, so after **Shaykh** Ahmad), he came to experience dream-visions. In one such experience, his authoritative, elevated religious status was acknowledged through the bestowing of *ijaza* or a 'certificate of religious authorization to interpret and transmit knowledge' by each of the twelve Imams from `Ali ibn Abi Talib (d.40/661) through to the final twelfth messianic, occulted Imam, designated Muhammad al-Mahdi (the rightly guided) and al-Qa'im (the future "Ariser", d. 260/ 874 CE).

In the early 1770s (1186 AH), when about twenty years of age, Shaykh Ahmad left Arabia for the centers of Shi'i learning in Iraq, residing in certain sacred `arabat ("thresholds") shine cities such as Najaf (Imam `Ali is buried here) and Karbala (Imam Husayn is buried here). Resident there were supremely learned Shi'i religious

authorities of great reputation. He studied with several of them, and they came to acknowledge his erudition, insight, and authority to instruct.

After about a year at the abovementioned shrine cities, al-Ahsa'i returned for about twenty years to his place of origin and its surrounds, al-Ahsa and the Bahrain region. This until he returned to Najaf and Karbala for about a five year period (c. 1207-12 AH = c. 1792-7 CE). Then, for the next five or six years, he resided in various localities in southern Iraq, including Basra and such smaller villages as Dhuraq, Nashwah and Safawah.

In 1221/1806, Shaykh Ahmad went on pilgrimage to Mashhad in the Persian province of Khurasan, where the eighth Imam 'Ali al-Rida' (d. 201/818) is buried. His return journey to Arabia was halted when Shaykh Ahmad accepted an invitation to reside in Yazd. He remained there and in Persia or Iran for the next few decades, until his final Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina where he passed away in 1826, his tomb being located in the al-Baqi ("the Eternal") cemetery in Medina. Apart from Yazd, Shaykh Ahmad visited or resided in various Iranian localities including Tehran (1808-9, as guest of the Shah), Mashhad, Isfahan, Kirmanshah and Qazvin. He also went on a number of further pilgrimage visits to the shine cities of Iraq and to Kazimayn.

From around 1223/1808 the second Qajar Shah, Fath-'Alī Shah (1769-1834) began to correspond with the now famous and widely-esteemed Shaykh Ahmad. For this Shah he wrote several treatises, including his *Risala al-Khaqaniyya*, which contains, among many other things, discourse about the human afterlife and fate in terms of bodily and meta-bodily realms of existence. Many more than one hundred of Shaykh Ahmad's earlier and subsequent writings were written in response to the often complex theological and philosophical questions of his devotees and disciples. Several of the best-known works of Shaykh Ahmad are commentaries upon Qur'anic verses and motifs or on Prophetic and twelver Imam relayed hadith or traditions. The following texts should be noted in this respect :

- **Tafsir Surat al-Tawhid** (Commentary upon the Surah of the Divine Unity, Q. 112).

- **Sharh al-Ziyara al-Jami`a al-kabira**, a weighty and lengthy four volume commentary on an important visitation devotional text relayed through the tenth Imam, `Ali al-Hadi (d. 254/868).

Having written in excess of 150 largely Arabic works expressing a deep, inner, often imamological interpretation of Islamic thought and scripture, Shaykh Ahmad died during the course of his last pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the Islamic month of Dhul-Qada 1241 which corresponds with June 27<sup>th</sup> 1826.

For Baha'is, Shaykh Ahmad is a centrally important philosopher, theologian and interpreter of Shi`i Islam. In his Lawh-i Qina' (Tablet of the Veil) Baha'u'llah refers to him as "the most Glorious, most Gracious, the Midmost Day of Islam (zuhr al-islam), and the Ka`bah of the peoples (ka`bah al-anam)". Shaykh Ahmad is in fact viewed by Baha'is as a harbinger or forerunner of the Bab and Baha'u'llah, who both spoke very highly about him and his writings. While the Bab wrote an important Ziyarat-namah (Visitation Tablet) in honor and praise of Shaykh Ahmad, Baha'u'llah cited and interpreted certain of his writings and stated that He had heard from him and his successor Sayyid Kazim Rashti, "what hath not been realized by any except God, the Knowing, the Discerning" (cited Ishraq Khavari ed. Ma'ida-yi asmani, 4:134-5).

In this presentation, aspects of the biography of Shaykh Ahmad will be examined, along with some extracts from his writings of importance within Shaykhism and the Babi and Baha'i religions.