

CHAPTER 1

The Rasā'il of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' —*Their Identity and Content*

Having been hidden within the cloak of secrecy from its very inception, the *Rasā'il* have provided many points of contention and have been a constant source of dispute among both Muslim and Western scholars.¹ The identification of the authors, or possibly one author, the place and time of the writing and propagation of their works, the nature of the secret brotherhood the outer manifestation of which comprises the *Rasā'il*—these and many secondary questions have remained without any definitive historical answers.

Many early Muslim sources have given the name of a group of scholars from Baṣra as the authors of the *Rasā'il*. Ibn al-Qifṭī, in his *Akhhbār al-ḥukamā'*,² mentions that according to Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī the authors of the *Rasā'il* were Abū Sulaimān Muḥammad ibn Ma'shar al-Bastī, Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Hārūn al-Zanjānī, Abū Aḥmad al-Mihrjānī, 'Awfī and Zaid ibn al-Rifā'ī. Shahrāzūrī, on the other hand, in his *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, gives a somewhat different list of authors,³ consisting of Abū Sulaimān Muḥammad ibn Mas'ūd al-Bastī, known as al-Muqaddasī, Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Wahrūn al-Ṣābī, Abū Aḥmad al-Nahrjūrī, 'Awfī al-Baṣrī and Zaid ibn al-Rifā'ī. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī himself claims that the wazīr, Abū 'Abdallāh al-Sa'dān, who was killed in 375/985, had in his service a

¹ The name of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', the authors of the *Rasā'il*, is itself of interest. The word *ṣafā'* appears in the Quran (II, 153) and is used widely among the Ṣūfīs to denote the interior purity which makes gnosis (*ma'rifaḥ*) possible and which is the ultimate aim of *taṣawwuf*. Certain Ṣūfī masters have derived the word *ṣūfī* itself from *ṣafā'*. For example, Abū Ḥasan al-Qannād says:

«د الصّوّفي مأخوذ من الصفاء وهو القيام لله عز وجل في كل وقت بشرط الوفاء.»

Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-luma'* (London, 1914), p. 26.

² Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Akhhbār al-ḥukamā'* (Cairo, 1326 [1908]), pp. 58–63. See also Ḥāhir al-Dīn al-Baihaqī, *Tatimmat shiḥān al-ḥikmah* (Lahore, 1351 [1932]), p. 21.

³ From the manuscript of *Ta'rikh al-ḥukamā'* of Shahrāzūrī, quoted by Jalāl Homā'ī, *Ghazzālī-nāmah* (Tehran, 1936), p. 35.

group of scholars, including Ibn Zar'ah (331/942–398/1007), Mis-kawaih al-Rāzī (died 421/1029), Abu'l-Wafā' al-Buzjāni, Abu'l-Qāsim al-Ahwāzī, Abū Sa'id Bahrām, Ibn Shāhūyah, Ibn Bakr, Ibn Ḥajjāj al-Shā'ir, Shūkh Shi'i (died 391/1000), and Ibn 'Abīd al-Kātib whose sayings were compiled and collected to form the *Rasā'il*.⁴ Regarding one of the alleged authors, Zaid ibn Rifā'i, Abū Ḥayyān writes:

He stands in no definite relation with any one system. He knows how to form his school from all sides . . . If one could but unite Greek philosophy and the religious law of Islam, the perfection of the faith, they the Ikhwān thought, would be reached. With this design, they wrote fifty tracts on all branches of philosophy.⁵

Not only is there a difference of view as to the authors of the *Rasā'il*, but also regarding the part of the Islamic community from which they originated. The modern discussions find their echo among the medieval Muslim authors themselves. Ibn al-Qiftī, giving his own view, considers the Ikhwān as followers of the school of the Mu'tazilah, which was rationalistic in its approach.⁶ Ibn Taimiyah, the Ḥanbalī jurist, on the other hand, tends toward the other extreme in relating the Ikhwān to the Nuṣairis, who are as far removed from the rationalists as almost any group to be found in Islam.⁷ Between these two extremes there have been the views expressed over the centuries that the *Rasā'il* were written by 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, al-Ghazzālī, Ḥallāj, Imām Ja'far al-Şādiq, or various Ismā'īlī *dā'īs*, or "missionaries."⁸

Considering the great respect paid to the *Rasā'il* by the Ismā'īlīs,⁹ the extensive use of them, particularly in the Yemen, and the fact that

⁴ Al-Tawhīdī, *Risālah fi'l-şidāqah wa'l-şadiq* (Constantinople, 1301 [1883], pp. 31–33). Dates have been given in the case of those authors for whom they have been established with certainty.

⁵ S. Lane-Poole, *Studies in a Mosque*, 2nd ed. (London: Sydney, Eden, Remington, 1893), pp. 193–194.

⁶ 'A. 'Awā, *L'Esprit critique des 'Frères de la Pureté': Encyclopédistes arabes du IV^e/X^e siècle* (Beirut, 1948), p. 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For a general discussion of these opinions as well as those of the moderns, see A. L. Ṭibāwī, "Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā and their Rasā'il," *Islamic Quarterly*, 2:28–46 (1955).

⁹ Some Ismā'īlī scholars have even called it "a Quran after the Quran."

.. إن رسائل للاخوان هي التقرأت بعد قرأت اوهي قرأت العام كما ان التقرأت هو -
قرأت القرءى وهي قرأت الامامة وذلك قرأت النبوة..

A. Tāmir, *La Réalité des Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā' wa Ḥullān al-Wafā'* (Beirut, 1957), p. 17.

“the work is accepted by the Ismā‘ilis as belonging to their religion, and is still regarded as esoteric . . . ,”¹⁰ it is not surprising to find most modern scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, claiming Ismā‘ilī authorship for the work. A. Tāmīr, for example, has given a very detailed and convincing account of the Ismā‘ilī nature of the *Rasā‘il*, whose contents he calls “the Ismā‘ilī philosophy.”¹¹ It is interesting to note, however, that the well-known modern Ismā‘ilī scholar, H. F. al-Hamdānī, although emphasizing the importance of the *Rasā‘il* in the Ismā‘ilī mission in the Yemen, disclaims Ismā‘ilī authorship for the work and instead attributes the treatises to the ‘Alids.¹² And A. L. Ṭībāwī, basing his conclusion on the fact that the Ikhwān opposed the hereditary and concealed *imām*, claims that the connection between the *Rasā‘il* and the Ismā‘ilis is of later origin.¹³ He makes a more general association, stating that the “Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā’

¹⁰ V. A. Ivanov, *The Alleged Founder of Ismailism* (Bombay, 1946), p. 146.

¹¹ «وهذه الفلسفة هي بالتحقيق الفلسفة الإسماعيلية التي بذروها إخوان الصفاء»

Tāmīr, *La Réalité des Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā’* . . . , p. 8, and also in his Introduction to the edition of *Risālat jāmi‘ah al-jāmi‘ah* (Beirut, 1959), pp. 1–58, where he gives as the final reason for the Ismā‘ilī origin of the *Rasā‘il* the fact that their number is equivalent to the numerical value of the name of the man ‘Abdallāh ibn Muḥammad, who according to Ismā‘ilī authorities composed the work:

«و مما يمكن من امرنا دليل آخر يلقى نوراً ما طحا على الموضوع : وهو أن الأمام عبدالنور
بن محمد عندما وضع رسائل إخوان الصفاء جعل عددها (٥٢١) رسالة كما في فلسفته
وتأويله كان يقول بها وتضمن بان رسائل إخوان الصفاء حيازة علمية ناموسية حقيقية
ويجب ان يكون في الدائرة الثاموسية الدينية . صورة لما في الدائرة العلمية ،
و كما وان في الدائرة العلمية معرفتها في الدائرة الدينية الثاموسية ولهذا جعل
عدد الرسائل ٥٢١ مطابقاً لعدد كلمات الصلوات الخمس وهذا العدد نفسه جاء
مطابقاً لعدد حروف اسمها بحسب الجمل على هذه الصورة :

ع ب ح ا ل ه ب ن ح م ح = عبدالنور بن محمد
٥٢١ ٥٢١ ٥٢١ = ١٥٦٣

(pp. 17–18).

Zāki Pāshā, in his introduction to the 1928 Cairo edition of the *Rasā‘il*, also argues for the Ismā‘ilī origin of the work.

¹² H. F. al-Hamdānī, “*Rasā‘il Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā’* in the literature of the Ismā‘ilī Ṭayyibī Da‘wā,” *Der Islam* (Berlin), 20:291ff (1932).

¹³ “Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā’ and their *Rasā‘il*,” *Islamic Quarterly*, 2:33 (1955).

may be taken as symbolizing the Shī'a attempt, while al-Ghazālī represents the Sunni attempt at a synthesis."¹⁴

A somewhat different approach is considered by 'A. 'Awā in his analytical study of the *Rasā'il*. Rather than identifying the Ikhwān too closely with any group, 'Awā calls them by the vague name of post-Mu'tazilites.¹⁵ In this opinion he is in agreement, although in a somewhat vague fashion, with some of the early Western students of the Ikhwān.

Serious interest in the *Rasā'il* on the part of Western scholars was manifested in the nineteenth century with the translation made by Fr. Dieterici in a somewhat free and disorderly fashion over a period of thirty years, of most of the *Rasā'il*.¹⁶ He realized early in his studies on the Ikhwān their importance in bringing together in an encyclopedic manner a great deal of Islamic learning and in uniting the various sciences in a unified world view.¹⁷

Another early German study which was to have a considerable influence during the succeeding decades was G. Flügel's article on the Ikhwān.¹⁸ He emphasized there the rationalistic and Mu'tazilite nature of the *Rasā'il*. Considering the interests and particularly the rationalistic tendencies of the Mu'tazilites on the one hand and the cosmological and metaphysical views of the Ikhwān on the other, the assertion of Flügel is hardest of all to understand. Yet this view is supported again in the twentieth century by such scholars as E. G. Browne and R. A. Nicholson, while Miguel Asín Palacios considers the work to be a combination of Mu'tazilite and Shī'ite inspiration.¹⁹ In a somewhat similar fashion, S. Pines, referring to the role of the Prophet, claims that "the *Rasā'il Ikhwān as-Şafā'* are, in this point

¹⁴ "The idea of guidance in Islam," *Islamic Quarterly*, 3:148 (1956).

¹⁵ *L'Esprit critique* . . . , p. 49. Later in the work 'Awā states more specifically that "c'est avec les Frères de la Pureté que la scolastique dogmatique (*kalām*) nous paraît répondre véritablement à ses motifs les meilleurs, au monisme universel faisant de la vérité du savoir et de l'idéal de l'action un ensemble unique, un tout homogène et réconcilié" (p. 305). 'Awā follows Dieterici in considering Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī as being "incontestablement aussi un des propagateurs de l'association" (*Ibid.*, p. 309). Although al-Tawḥīdī's encounter with al-Muqaddasī is known, there is no proof that al-Tawḥīdī participated in the writing of the *Rasā'il*.

¹⁶ Fr. Dieterici, *Die Philosophie der Araber im X. Jahrhundert*, vol. II: *Die Naturschauung und Naturphilosophie der Araber im zehnten Jahrhundert aus den Schriften der lautern Brüder, Der Darwinismus im X. und XI. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1858-1891).

¹⁷ Dieterici, *Die Philosophie der Araber*, vol. III: *Makrokosmos* (1876). He considers the Ikhwān as an association of scholars which included al-Tawḥīdī (*ibid.*, pt. 1, pp. 145ff).

¹⁸ "Über Inhalt und Verfasser der arabischen Encyclopädie," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 13:1-43 (1859).

¹⁹ E. G. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, I (London, 1909), p. 292; R. A. Nicholson, *Literary History of the Arabs* (London, 1956), p. 370; M. Asín Palacios, *El original árabe de la disputa del asno contra Fr. Anselmo Turmeda* (Madrid, 1914), p. 11.

as in many others, an attempt to bridge the gap between the two currents of thought. They are, on one hand, imbued with Shī'ite—more especially Ismā'īlite—doctrines; on the other hand, they closely follow and indeed plagiarize the political theory of al-Fārābī.²⁰

The history of the rise of early Ismā'īlism, the Fāṭimid movement, the doctrinal and political relations between Ismā'īlis and Bāṭinis and Qarāmiṭah, are among the most obscure and difficult problems of Islamic history. But for our purpose here it is more suitable, if not exactly correct, to combine the foregoing movements and parties under one heading which we shall call Ismā'īli.²¹ With this generalization then, we can safely assert that the great majority of Western scholars consider the Ikhwān and their *Rasā'il* to be connected with the Ismā'īli movement. Casanova, in 1915, had already defended this position,²² to be followed in his stand by Goldziher,²³ MacDonald,²⁴ Lane-Poole,²⁵ Massignon,²⁶ and Ivanov,²⁷ just to mention some of the better-known authors in this field.

A few Western scholars—as, for example, Stern and Sarton—have accepted the opinions of early Muslim writers on the authorship of the *Rasā'il* and have attributed the work to a group of scholars probably from Baṣra. After abandoning this view, Stern once more returned to it after publication of the *Kitāb al-imtā'* of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī in which the group of scholars are mentioned.²⁸ Recently, in a profound study on the relation between the Ṣabaeans and the

²⁰ S. Pines, "Some Problems of Islamic Philosophy," *Islamic Culture*, 11:71 (1937).

²¹ Massignon defines the *Qarāmiṭah* as (1) the general movement of reform during the third century which ended with the establishment of the Fāṭimids in 297/910; and (2) groups of Arabs and Nabaṭaeans of southern Mesopotamia who assembled there after the war of Zanj. L. Massignon, "Esquisse d'une bibliographie ḵarmate," in *Essays Presented to E. G. Browne* (Cambridge, England, 1922), pp. 329ff.

²² P. Casanova, "Notice sur un manuscrit de la secte des Assassins," *Journal Asiatique* (1898), pp. 151–159.

²³ I. Goldziher, *Le Dogme et la loi de l'Islam* (Paris, 1920), p. 202. Goldziher believed that the *Rasā'il* were an important source for the Ismā'īlis from which they drew a great deal.

²⁴ D. MacDonald, *The Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* (New York, 1903), p. 188. MacDonald compares the Ikhwān to the lodges of the Masons and relates them to the *Qarāmiṭah*.

²⁵ Lane-Poole, *Studies in a Mosque*, p. 186.

²⁶ Massignon also relates the Ikhwān to the *Qarāmiṭah*. See his "Esquisse d'une bibliographie ḵarmate," p. 329.

²⁷ Ivanov rejects completely the existence of a Baṣra group of scholars. He writes, "I would be inclined to think that this was a kind of camouflage story circulated by the Ismailis to avoid the book being used as a proof of their orthodoxy." V. A. Ivanov, *The Alleged Founders of Ismailism*, pp. 146–147. He considers the *Rasā'il*, in fact, to have been written under Fāṭimid patronage "in connection with general work on the philosophy of Ismailism." *A Guide to Ismaili Literature* (London, 1933), p. 31.

²⁸ M. Stern, "The authorship of the Epistles of the Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'," *Islamic Culture*, 20:367–372 (1946).

Ismā'īlis, Corbin has identified the Ikhwān as a group or association of learned men who were at the same time the voice of the Ismā'īli movement.²⁹

Before forming a judgment on this difficult problem of the authorship of the *Rasā'il*, it is best to turn to the work itself for help. Since everyone agrees that the *Rasā'il* were written by the Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā', then whatever the Ikhwān tell us about themselves, their purpose, and the organization of their brotherhood, is at the same time information about the authors of the *Rasā'il*. They write, "The reason why the Brethren of Purity assemble is that each of them sees and knows that he cannot attain what he wishes concerning his well-being in this world and the attainment of success and salvation in the next world except through the cooperation of each one of them with his companion."³⁰ The aim of the Ikhwān is, therefore, neither the mere collection of facts nor a simple desire to create some sort of eclecticism as they have been accused by certain authors anxious to find in their writings originality and novelty above everything else.³¹

Rather, the purpose of the Ikhwān, according to their own definition, seems to be educational in the fullest sense of the word—that is, to bring to fruition and perfection the latent faculties of man so that he may gain salvation and spiritual freedom. Practically every chapter of their long work reminds the reader that in this world he is a prisoner who through knowledge must free himself from his earthly prison. All the sciences they consider—whether astronomy, angelology, or embryology—are discussed, not with the aim of a purely theoretical or intellectual interpretation or for their practical application, but to help untie the knots in the soul of the reader by making him aware, on the one hand, of the great harmony and beauty of the Universe and, on the other, of the necessity for man to go beyond material existence. And in order to reach this end they combine in their ideal education the virtues of many nations.

²⁹ "Au Xme siècle, une société de pensée qui s'est donnée le nom de 'Frères de la Pureté et Amis de la Fidélité,' a laissé en une vaste encyclopédie de 52 traités un mouvement de pensée ismaélienne." H. Corbin, "Rituel sabéen et exégèse ismaélienne du rituel," *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 19:187 (1950).

³⁰ « ويضيقون ان تعلمون ان العلة التي تجتمع بين اخوان الصفاء وهي ان يترى ويعلم كل واحد منهم ان لا يتم له ما يريد من صلاح معيشته الدنيا ونيل الغور والبقاة في الآخرة الا بما ونفذ كل واحد منهم لصاحبه. »

Rasā'il (henceforth referred to in the notes as *R*), Cairo, 1928, IV, 218.

³¹ Or, as M. von Horten has put it, "einen unschöpferischen Eklektizismus"; see his *Die Philosophie des Islam* (Munich, 1923), p. 261.

They define the ideal and morally perfect man as of

East Persian derivation, Arabic in faith, of 'Irāqī, that is, Babylonian, education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as a Syrian monk, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially, a Şūfī in his whole spiritual life.³²

If we consider the purpose rather than the sources of the *Rasā'il*, it is hard to explain the work away as being eclectic, because what may historically be drawn from diverse sources is brought together and unified with a single end in view. And since that end conforms almost completely to the spirit of the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, "the world is the prison of the faithful and the paradise of the unbelievers,"³³ it is more difficult to call it in any way un-Islamic if we accept the definition of "Islamic" given in the Prologue.

Not only do the Ikhwān identify themselves spiritually with *taşawwuf*, whose ultimate end is to awaken the initiate from the "dream of negligence" through spiritual education and spiritual training, but their account of their own organization corresponds—although on a plane that is more exterior and social—to that of the Şūfī brotherhoods. The Ikhwān divide themselves into four categories:

1. Those possessing purity of physical substance, excellence of conception and assimilation. Members must be at least fifteen years old. These brothers are called the pious and the compassionate (*al-abrār al-ruḥamā'*) and belong to the class of the masters of crafts.
2. Those possessing tenderness and compassion toward other men. Members must be at least thirty years of age. This grade corresponds to the philosophical faculty, and the members in it are called the brothers of religious and learned men (*akhyār* and *fuḍalā'*), the class of political chiefs.
3. Those possessing the ability to fight wars and insurrections in the spirit of calm and mildness which leads to salvation. They represent the power of Divine law which men receive at the age of forty. They are called the noble men of learning and virtue (*al-fuḍalā' al-kirām*) and are the kings and sultans.

³² Tj. de Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, trans. E. R. Jones (London: Luzac & Co., 1933), p. 95. For us there can be nothing more convincing than this statement of the spiritual inclination and affiliation of the Ikhwān with *taşawwuf*. See also A. L. Ṭibāwī, "Jamā'ah Ikhwān as-Şafā'," *Journal of the American University of Beirut* (1930-1931), p. 14; and Dhabihallāh Şafā, *Ikhwān al-şafā'* (Tehran, 1330 [1951]), p. 13.

³³ «الدنيا سجن المؤمن وحنته الكافر.»

4. The highest degree, which is that of surrender, receiving of Divine help and direct vision of the Truth. This is the angelic period which one only reaches at the age of fifty,³⁴ and is the preparation for heavenly ascension. The prophets like Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, Muḥammad, and sages like Socrates and Pythagoras belong to this stage.³⁵

One can see in this classification the well-known division between craft, royal, and sacerdotal initiations which existed also in medieval Europe. The unity of the final goal through the hierarchy of the various grades is also evident. What has driven many people to accuse the Ikhwān of eclecticism, however, is not this unity but their mention of ancient sages along with the prophets. We have already explained in the Prologue, however, the validity of this procedure of integrating into Islam that which accepts the Unity of the Divine Principle. In fact, among many Muslims, especially the Şūfīs, the idea that God has revealed the Truth in some form to all peoples is an obvious consequence of the Quranic Revelation itself. Likewise, as Ṭibāwī says:

The Brethren of Purity believe that the Truth is one without it being the private work of anyone. God has sent His Spirit to all men, to Christians as to Muslims, to blacks as to whites.³⁶

In the opinion of the authors of the *Rasā'il*, individualism is the source of bewilderment and error. Seeing Greek or other ancient sages mentioned by the Ikhwān, then, in no way destroys their purpose of education through integration and toward that final aim, which is to free their disciples from the prison of this world; nor does it make them eclectic in other than a historical sense.

In a curious and significant passage, the Ikhwān identify themselves with the Primordial Tradition and the *philosophia perennis* which they seek to expound in its full blossoming only after the last of the prophets has brought his religion to the world.

Know oh my brother, that we are the society of the Brethren of Purity, pure and sincere beings with generous hearts. We have slept in the cavern of Adam, our father, during the lapse of time which has brought back to us the vicissitudes of time and the calamities of events until finally, after our dispersion across various nations, there comes the moment of our encounter in the realm of the Master of the Eternal Religion, the moment when we see our Spiritual City elevated in the air . . .³⁷

³⁴ These ages are not to be taken literally as corresponding to chronological years, for obviously according to the Ikhwān themselves some sages reached the highest stage before they were "biologically" fifty years old.

³⁵ *R.*, IV, 119ff; also, 'Awā, *L'Esprit critique* . . . , pp. 261-263.

³⁶ "Jamā'ah Ikhwān aş-Şafā'," p. 60.

³⁷ *R.*, IV, 85.

According to their own conception, then, the Ikhwān are expounding eternal wisdom, or what Suhrawardī later calls the *ḥikmah laduniyah*, which man has always possessed in some form but which now is expounded fully by the Ikhwān after having been hidden (in the cave) throughout the previous periods of the history of humanity. After their temporal appearance, if the Ikhwān claim to draw their doctrines from ancient sources it is not to collect a "museum" but to build a unified citadel and to guide their disciples to the single Truth which they believe underlies the many sources from which they draw their material and inspiration. The ultimate "grace," or *barakah*, for them, however, comes from Islam which is the final Revelation of the Truth in the present cycle of humanity.

The Ikhwān and Philosophy

While certain scholars have thought the purpose of the Ikhwān to have been the reversal of the contemporary political situation by the restoration of a philosophical system capable of serving as a basis for life,³⁸ the majority of those who have studied their doctrines believe that their aim was to combine religion and philosophy.³⁹ The Ikhwān themselves, in fact, often speak of the virtues of philosophy as a way of finding the Truth and their desire to combine it with the Divine law, or *nāmūs*, of the prophets.⁴⁰ Their aim, however, is not that of an Ibn Rushd or even a Thomas Aquinas, because here again the Ikhwān give a connotation to the word "philosophy" which differs greatly from the rationalistic, syllogistic meaning given to it by the Aristotelians. Instead, they identify philosophy with *ḥikmah*,⁴¹ in opposition to the great number of early Muslim writers who use philosophy as being almost synonymous with purely human wisdom and *ḥikmah* as a wisdom which has its ultimate source in the Revelations given to the ancient prophets. Philosophy for the Ikhwān is "the similitude as much as possible of man with God." It is "the means which again draws the elite of men or the angels on earth near to the Creator Most High."⁴² Its use is the "acquisition of the specific

³⁸ Taha Ḥusain, Introduction to the *Rasā'il*, p. viii.

³⁹ Jalāl Homā'ī considers their purpose to be twofold: (1) to cleanse the *Sharī'ah* of all impurities by combining it with philosophy; and (2) to give the essential truths of philosophy by going to its very sources. *Ghazzālī-nāmāh*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ This word, which comes from the Greek word *nomos*, meaning law or harmony governing some domain, and also possibly from the Arabic root *nms* meaning concealed, is used by the Ikhwān to specify the universal laws revealed through the prophets. See the article on *nāmūs* in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (first edition).

⁴¹ *R.*, III, 324.

⁴² *R.*, I, 221.

virtue of the human race, that of bringing to actualization all the sciences which man possesses potentially . . . By philosophy man realizes the virtual characteristics of his race. He attains the form of humanity and progresses in the hierarchy of beings until in crossing the straight way (bridge) and the correct path he becomes an angel . . . ”⁴³ One may easily see that there is a more intimate connection between this conception of philosophy and the Pythagorean-Socratic aim of the purification of the soul of man than there is with Peripatetic logic.⁴⁴

The Ikhwān are quite aware also of the characteristics of the type of philosophy which is not *ḥikmah*, and regard it in a manner similar to the religious authorities in Islam. In the discussion between man and the animals at the end of the section on zoology, the parrot in addressing man is made to say:

And as for your boast that you have philosophers and logicians among you, why, they are not the source of benefit to you, but lead you into error and unbelief . . . because they turn men aside from the path ordained by God, and, by their disagreements, make the ordinances of religion of no effect. The opinions and beliefs of all are at variance one with another. Some pronounce the Universe to be the most ancient; some believe matter to be so; some endeavour to establish the antiquity of forms . . .⁴⁵

The particularly noticeable feature of the treatment of philosophy, in its relation to Islam by the Ikhwān is their identification of *imān*, the interior aspect of *islām*, with the “divine service of the philosophers.”⁴⁶ This differentiation is similar to the distinction made by the Ṣūfīs between *islām*, *imān*, and *ihsān* as three degrees of the Tradition, the latter two being not only simple faith but also wisdom and gnosis (*maʿrifah*).⁴⁷ There is this difference, however: whereas the Ṣūfī practices connected with *imān* and *ihsān* derive completely from the Revelation of the Prophet Muḥammad—upon whom be peace—the liturgy described by the Ikhwān seems to be more closely related to the religion of the heirs of the prophet Idrīs, that is, the Ḥār-rānians who were the principal inheritors in the Middle East of what

⁴³ *Risālat al-jāmiʿah*, ed. Dj. Saliba (Damascus, 1949), I, 101. (Henceforth this work will be referred to in the notes as *Jāmiʿah*.)

⁴⁴ This conception of philosophy is echoed several centuries later in the writings of the Persian sages following Suhrawardī, among them Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, who call philosophy a doctrine whose totality comprises not only Aristotelian philosophy, but Illuminationist theosophy and gnosis as well.

⁴⁵ Ikhwān al-Şafāʾ, *Dispute between Man and the Animals*, trans. J. Platts (London: Allen, 1869), p. 202.

⁴⁶ *R.*, IV, 301–302. Corbin, “Rituel sabéen . . .,” *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 19:208 (1950).

⁴⁷ For an explanation of the Ṣūfī distinction between *islām*, *imān*, and *ihsān*, see F. Schuon, *L'Œil du cœur*, pp. 91ff.

has been called "Oriental Pythagoreanism" and who were the guardians and propagators of Hermeticism in the Islamic world. The philosophic liturgy of the Ikhwān took place three evenings each month, at the beginning, middle, and some time between the 25th and the end of the month. The liturgy of the first night consisted of personal oratory; that of the second of a *cosmic text* read under the starry heavens facing the polar star; and that of the third night of a philosophical hymn (implying a metaphysical or metacosmic theme) which was a "prayer of Plato," "supplication of Idris," or "the secret psalm of Aristotle." There were also three great philosophical feasts during the year, at the time of entry of the sun into the signs of the Ram, Cancer, and Balance. The Ikhwān correlated these feasts with the Islamic feasts of 'id al-*fiṭr* at the end of Ramaḍān, 'id al-*aqḥā*, the 10th of *Dhu'l-ḥijjah*, and the 'id al-*ghadir* on the 18th of the same month, the date of the investiture of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib by the Prophet as his successor at Ghadir Khumm, a major Shi'ite day of celebration which they made correspond to the fall feast. For the winter season, however, there was a long day of fasting instead, for the time when "the seven sleepers are sleeping in the cave."⁴⁸

The connection between philosophy and liturgy and *ḥikmah* leads us to place the Ikhwān more in the line of the heirs of Hermeticism and what has been called "Neo-Pythagoreanism," which through the Ḥarrānians and Nuṣairis entered into Shi'ah Islam early in its history. However partial or ill-defined such a relationship may seem historically, it is, from the nature of the doctrines, more plausible than the theory that the Ikhwān adopted simply "theoretical" and "academic" philosophy and added it to the *Shari'ah* without the ability to remain faithful to one or the other.

Identity and Significance of the Ikhwān

After this long search into the identity and significance of the Ikhwān we find ourselves confronted with many contradictory opinions among students of the subject. It can safely be asserted, however, that given the cosmological and symbolic rather than rationalistic tendency of the Ikhwān we must exclude them from the school of the Mu'tazilites as well as from the followers of Aristotle, namely the *Mashshā'iyūn* (or *Mashshā'ūn*). For the same reasons, and for additional ones to be discussed later in conjunction with the sources of the *Rasā'il*, the Ikhwān may be connected with Pythagorean-Hermetic doctrines, much of which was best known in Islam under the name of

⁴⁸ Corbin, "*Rituel sabéen . . .*," pp. 210-211.

the corpus of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān. Moreover, considering the extensive use made of the *Rasā'il* by the Ismā'ilis during later centuries and the presence of certain basic ideas such as *ta'wīl* in both groups, we may loosely connect the Ikhwān with Ismā'ilism, especially with what has been called "Ismā'ili gnosis." But it is perhaps more significant, especially with respect to their cosmological doctrines, to describe them as a Shī'ah group with Ṣūfī tendencies whose exposition of the cosmological sciences was to influence the whole Muslim community during the later centuries. The conception of Nature held by the Ikhwān was to have almost as great an influence among the Twelve-Imām Shī'ites as upon the Ismā'ilis. The similarity also between much of the *Rasā'il* and *taṣawwuf* must be especially emphasized with reference to cosmology, from which al-Ghazzālī and Ibn 'Arabī were to draw many formulations.

As an attempt at a synthesis⁴⁹ on the part of the Shī'ah during the fourth century⁵⁰ the *Rasā'il* soon gained wide popularity and great importance.

In effect, it is, by its own showing, a hand-encyclopaedia of Arabian philosophy in the tenth century . . . Its value lies in its completeness, in its systematizing of the results of Arabian study.⁵¹

The *Rasā'il* were widely read by most learned men of later periods, including Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazzālī,⁵² have continued to be read up to our own times, and have been translated into Persian, Turkish, and Hindustani. From the number of manuscripts present in various libraries in the Muslim world, it must be considered among the most popular of Islamic works on learning.⁵³ But the work is not just

⁴⁹ Ṭībāwī, "The Idea of guidance . . .," *Islamic Quarterly*, 3:148 (1956).

⁵⁰ Although it is hard to state the exact date of the composition of the *Rasā'il*, it is fairly safe to place them within the fourth century and even more precisely the latter half of that fruitful century. P. Casanova, in "Une date astronomique dans les Epîtres des Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā," in *Journal Asiatique*, 5:5-17 (1915), interpreted an astronomical passage from the fourth epistle to determine the date of the writing of the *Rasā'il* as lying between 418 and 427. Abū Ḥayyān, however, claims to have read them in 373/983.

⁵¹ Lane-Poole, *Studies in a Mosque*, p. 191.

⁵² Muḥammad Taqī Dānīshpazhūh, "Ikhwān-i ṣafā," *Mihr*, 8:610 (1331 [1952]). For a detailed discussion of the influence of the Ikhwān see also Ṭībāwī, *Jamā'ah Ikhwān aṣ-Şafā'*, chap. VI.

⁵³ The organization of the Ikhwān had already expanded considerably in the fourth century, as shown, for example, by the fact that Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī met a branch of them in Baghdad between 393 and 400. Their *Rasā'il* were read and made use of by al-Ghazzālī and Ibn al-Haitham, and its orthodoxy debated by Ibn Taimīyah. The Druzes and Assassins certainly read the *Rasā'il* extensively, and, as we have already seen, the Yemeni Ismā'ilis held it in great veneration. Introduced into Spain by al-Majrīṭī and al-Kirmānī, they were also to influence two of the most celebrated authors from the Maghrib, Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn. See Lane-Poole, *Studies in a Mosque*, p. 192, and 'Awā, *L'Esprit critique* . . ., pp. 314ff.

“popular” in the sense of being for everybody, as has often been said. The *Rasā'il* contain many profound metaphysical and cosmological ideas, mostly stated in a symbolic and, in a way, simple language which, from the point of view of a mind accustomed to long-drawn-out discussions, seems “popular” and “naïve.” Besides, in the *Risālat al-jāmi'ah* and the very rare *Jāmi'at al-jāmi'ah*,⁵⁴ the Ikhwān present their doctrines in a more compact, hidden, and esoteric manner, although usually not departing from the general subject matter of the *Rasā'il*.

Taken as a whole, the writings of the Ikhwān present us with the conception of the Universe under which a large segment of the Shi'ah as well as the Sunni world has lived for a thousand years. Although they do not contain explicitly the esoteric science of a Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī or Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Būnī, they do explain in simple language, and often with great beauty, the main outlines of the conception of Nature which is to be found in many later Muslim works throughout the centuries.

The Sources of the Rasā'il

The lack of historical evidence for the lives and doctrines of what Proclus calls the “Golden Chain of the Pythagorean philosophers”⁵⁵ and what in the Islamic world is called the Jābirian corpus, makes the tracing of the sources of the *Rasā'il* a very difficult task. There can be little doubt, however, that the *Rasā'il*, in their cosmological aspects, draw most of all upon Pythagorean and Jābirian sources. The Ikhwān claim again and again that they are the followers of the tradition of Pythagoras and Nicomachus,⁵⁶ especially in their treatment of numbers as the key to the understanding of Nature and the symbolic and metaphysical interpretation of arithmetic and geometry. Moreover, they identify Pythagoras with the Ḥarrānians with

⁵⁴ See V. A. Ivanov, *A Guide to Ismaili literature*, p. 31. The *Risālat al-jāmi'ah* has also been attributed to al-Majrīṭī although this attribution is completely rejected by Tāmīr and other Ismā'īlī authorities. As for the *Jāmi'at al-jāmi'ah*, whose text has recently been edited and made known for the first time by Tāmīr, it is concerned to a great extent with the question of death, the afterlife, and resurrection while following the general metaphysical and cosmological pattern of the *Rasā'il*.

⁵⁵ For a general description of the Pythagorean doctrines of number and harmony, see K. S. Guthrie, *Pythagoras Sourcebook and Library. The Four Biographies and all the Surviving Fragments of the Pythagorean School* (Yonkers, New York, 1920).

⁵⁶ R., I, 24.

« والاشترى ما طمى هو معرفة خراس العدد وما يلما بها من معاني الموجودات التي ذكرها

في أغورس وتقوم أحسن .»

whom, as has already been pointed out, the Ikhwān have many affinities.⁵⁷

As for the relation of the Ikhwān to Jābir, it has been said that the *Rasā'il* are an "encyclopédie scientifique dont le caractère pythagorissant et la tendance ismaélito-bāṭinite présentent plus d'une analogie avec les écrits jābiriens."⁵⁸ Jābir himself claimed not only to have possessed the knowledge of the Greek sages, especially Pythagoras and Apollonius of Tyana (Bālinās),⁵⁹ but also to have known the wisdom of the ancient Yemenites, which Jābir is said to have learned from Ḥarbī the Ḥimyarite,⁶⁰ and to have been acquainted with the sciences of the Hindus. Whatever the significance of these references may be, there can be no doubt that the Jābirian corpus contains many elements from Pythagorean and Hermetic sources, as well as certain ideas from Persia, India, and even China.

The intimate relation existing between the *Rasā'il* and the Jābirian corpus⁶¹ naturally makes the sources of Jābir those of the Ikhwān as well.⁶² In fact the *Rasā'il* in their content affirm the same general

⁵⁷ R., III, 201. « وَاِنَّ فِىْ غُرْسِ كَانٍ جِبَالًا حَلِيمًا مَوْجِدًا مِنْ اَهْلِ حِرَانَ . . . »

⁵⁸ P. Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, Introduction to vol. I, p. lxiv.

⁵⁹ See the translation by de Sacy of "Le Livre du secret de la créature par le sage Bélinous," *Notices et extraits des manuscrits*, 4:107-168 (1798). This book, called in Arabic *Kitāb sirr al-khalīqah li Bālinūs*, contains many of the fundamental cosmological doctrines of Jābir. The doctrines of Apollonius are presented in a more complete manner in *The Book of Treasures of Job of Edessa* (Cambridge, England, 1936). An important difference between the Ikhwān on the one hand and Jābir and Job of Edessa on the other is that for the Ikhwān, fire, air, and so forth, are simple elements, whereas for the latter two, heat, cold, wetness and dryness are simple substances from which the elements have come into being.

⁶⁰ Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, Introduction to vol. I, p. xxxvii. It is significant to see the reference to Yemen which is to be found again in later centuries in the writings of the *Ishraqī* school.

⁶¹ This close relation is partially indicated by the numbers used by Jābir and the Ikhwān. Jābir makes the number 17 in the sequence of 1:3:5:8 the key to the understanding of all of Nature. This number, which was also central to the Pythagoreans because of its equivalence to the number of consonants of the Greek alphabet and also related to the harmonic ratio 9:8, is found in Nuṣairī and Ḥarrānīan as well as the common Islamic sources, where 17 is the number of daily units (*rak'ah*) of prayer. Among the Shi'ah, $51 = 3 \times 17$ is particularly important since it is considered as the number of the *rak'ah* of prayer performed daily by 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Now, aside from the last treatise on talismans and magic which was added later, the *Rasā'il* consists of 51 treatises, which of course again is a product of 3 and 17. Particularly, the section dealing with the sciences of Nature or physical treatises consists of 17 *Rasā'il*, 17 being the key to the interpretation of the physical world according to Jābir. See Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, II, 199ff.

⁶² The Ikhwān were quite conscious of the long tradition of science and wisdom which had existed before them. In the dialogue between the animals and man, the enterpriser (the interlocutor) addresses a Greek who had been boasting of the scientific achievement of his people, saying: "You boast most unreasonably of these sciences; for you did not

sources. One sees in these treatises the Pythagorean-Hermetic influence closely tied to the doctrines and practices of the Ḥarrānians, and, in certain subjects, the influence of Peripatetic philosophy as well, but usually not considered solely from a syllogistic point of view. There is, moreover, much Persian and Indian influence in the sections dealing with geography, ecology, music, and linguistics—following the tradition of Ibn Muqaffa' and al-Jāhiz. Finally, there is the influence of the Quran which pervades the whole perspective of the Ikhwān. They interpret certain parts of ancient cosmology in terms of the Quranic terminology of the pedestal (*kursī*) and throne ('*arsh*'),⁶³ and make constant reference to Islamic angelology based on the Quran.

The sources of the Ikhwān should not, however, be considered solely as historical texts. In a long passage they themselves inform the reader of the universality of their sources, which include Revelation and Nature in addition to written texts. They write:

We have drawn our knowledge from four books. The first is composed of the mathematical and natural sciences established by the sages and philosophers. The second consists of the revealed books of the Torah, the Gospels and the Quran and the other Tablets brought by the prophets through angelic Revelation. The third is the books of Nature which are the ideas (*ṣuwar*) in the Platonic sense of the forms (*ashkāl*) of creatures actually existing, from the composition of the celestial spheres, the division of the Zodiac, the movement of the stars, and so on . . . to the transformation of the elements, the production of the members of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and the rich variety of human industry . . . The fourth consists of the Divine books which touch only the purified men and which are the angels who are in intimacy with the chosen beings, the noble and the purified souls . . .⁶⁴

There are, then, four "books" from which their knowledge derives: the mathematical and scientific works written before them; the

discover them by your own penetration, but obtained them from the scientific men among the Jews of Ptolemy's times [reference must be to the Hermetic and sacred sciences traditionally associated with the Hebrew prophets]; and some sciences you took from the Egyptians in the days of Psammetichus, and then introduced them into your own land, and now you claim to have discovered them." The king asked the Greek philosopher: "Can it be as this (jinn) says?" He replied, saying, "It is true: we obtained most of the sciences from the preceding philosophers, as others now receive them from us. Such is the way of the world—for one people to derive benefit from another. Thus it is that Persian sages obtained their astrology and the sciences of observation (of the heavenly bodies) from the sages of India. Similarly, the Israelites got their knowledge of magic and talisman from Solomon, the son of David." Ikhwān, *Dispute between Man and the Animals*, pp. 133–134.

⁶³ 'Awā, *L'Esprit critique* . . . , pp. 306ff. From another point of view the terms *kursī* and '*arsh*' can also be translated as throne and firmament respectively.

⁶⁴ R., IV, 106.

Scriptures; the archetypes, or Platonic "ideas," of the forms of Nature; and the angelic, or what in contemporary terms may be called intellectual intuition. This intertwining of domains, now considered as quite separate and distinct, is itself the key to the understanding of the *Rasā'il*, as it is one more consequence of the existence of the one Truth which according to the Ikhwān underlies all things. And if Scripture or angelic vision can be here a source of the knowledge of the cosmos, it is because as yet the distinction between Nature and Supernature has not been made absolute. One may say that for the Ikhwān the supernatural has a "natural" aspect, just as the natural has a "supernatural" aspect. Moreover, the use of Revelation and intellectual intuition, in addition to the observation of Nature and the reading of more ancient books about Nature, stems from the ultimate purpose of the Ikhwān, which is to "see" and realize the unicity of Nature.⁶⁵ To demonstrate this unicity they have to appeal constantly to those powers and faculties in man which themselves possess the power of synthesis and unification so that they can integrate the peripheral and multiple activity of the observational faculties into the central and unifying vision of the Intellect.⁶⁶

The Organization of the Rasā'il

Despite the repetitious character of certain of the ideas of the *Rasā'il*, the order of presentation of the subject matter follows the Ikhwān's philosophy and reflects the importance which they attach to the study of Nature in comparison with theology on the one hand and mathematics and logic on the other. In their classification of the sciences they divide them into three categories:

- I. The primary [propaedeutic] sciences (*riyāḍīyah*)
- II. Religious sciences (*al-sharī'at al-waḍ'īyah*)
- III. Philosophical sciences (*al-falsafīyat al-ḥaqīqīyah*)

⁶⁵ The spirit of the Ikhwān in studying natural sciences in a religious manner and treating Nature as a domain inseparable from Revelation was followed universally during the Middle Ages and Antiquity. "On oublie trop que dans l'antiquité et au moyen âge l'expérience religieuse est constamment liée à l'expérience scientifique et, faute de se souvenir de ce fait, on se heurte, dans l'examen des textes, à d'incessantes contradictions. Qu'il s'agisse de la physique grecque, de la kabale hébraïque, de l'astrologie chaldéenne, de la science extrême-orientale des mutations ou de l'alchimie occidentale, toutes ces techniques, tous ces systèmes reposent sur un fait universel et commun: l'initiation à des mystères." R. Alleau, *Aspects de l'alchimie traditionnelle* (Paris, 1955), p. 29.

⁶⁶ Throughout this treatise the word Intellect will be used not as the equivalent of reason, as is done currently, but as the universal and supra-individual faculty which as Aristotle said "is the object of its own knowledge."

These in turn are divided in the following manner:

- I. Primary sciences:
 1. Reading and writing
 2. Lexicography and grammar
 3. Accounting and business transactions
 4. Prosody and metrics
 5. Doctrines of good and evil omens
 6. Doctrines of magic, amulets, alchemy, stratagems, and so on
 7. Business and handicraft
 8. Commerce, agriculture, and so on
 9. Stories and biographies

- II. Religious sciences:
 1. Science of Revelation
 2. Exegesis
 3. Tradition (*ḥadīth*)
 4. Jurisprudence and law
 5. Asceticism and *taṣawwuf*
 6. Interpretation of dreams

- III. Philosophical sciences:
 1. Mathematics (*riyāḍīyāt*) consisting of the *Quadrivium*
 2. Logic
 3. Natural sciences, which in turn are divided into seven parts:
 - (a) Principles governing bodies, consisting of knowledge of *hylé*, form, time, space, and motion ('*ilm al-mabāḍī al-jismānīyah*)
 - (b) The heavens, consisting of the sciences of the stars, the motion of the planets, reasons for the stationary character of the earth, and so on ('*ilm al-samā'*)
 - (c) Generation and corruption, consisting of knowledge of the four elements, their change into each other, and the minerals, plants, and animals coming into being from them ('*ilm al-kawn wa'l-fasād*)
 - (d) Meteorology, consisting of the knowledge of the change of weather due to the effect of the stars, winds, thunder, lightning, and so on ('*ilm al-ḥawādith al-jawwīyah*)
 - (e) Mineralogy ('*ilm al-ma'ādin*)
 - (f) Botany ('*ilm al-nabāt*)
 - (g) Zoology ('*ilm al-ḥayawān*)

4. Theology (*al-'ulūm al-ilāhīyah*)
 - (a) Knowledge of God and His Attributes
 - (b) Knowledge of the spiritual world (*'ilm al-rūḥānīyāt*)
 - (c) Knowledge of souls (*'ilm al-nafsānīyāt*)
 - (d) Politics (*'ilm al-siyāsah*), consisting of the knowledge of prophethood, kingship, the common people, the elite, and man considered in himself⁶⁷

Using this division of the sciences as their base, the Ikhwān have organized their *Rasā'il* so as to include all fields of knowledge from the mathematical and logical sciences to the natural and corporeal, and from there to the psychological, and finally the theological. With this purpose in mind, the fifty-two *Rasā'il*, not including the *Risālat al-jāmi'ah* which comes at the end as a summary, are divided into four books in the following manner:

I. Mathematical and educational treatises:

1. Properties of numbers
2. Geometry
3. Astronomy
4. Geography
5. Music
6. Educational values of these subjects
- 7–8. Various scientific disciplines
9. Actions and sayings of the prophets and sages
- 10–14. Logic (including the Isagoge, the Ten Categories, Perihemenias, Prior and Posterior Analytics)

II. Sciences of natural bodies:

1. Explanation of the notions of matter, form, movement, time, space, and so forth
2. The sky and the Universe
3. Generation and corruption
4. Meteorology
5. Formation of minerals
6. Essence of Nature
7. Species of plants
8. Explanation of the generation of animals and their species
9. Composition of the human body
10. Perception of the senses and their object
11. Embryology

⁶⁷ R., I, 202–208. The comprehensive nature of this classification is due to the connection of the Ikhwān with the craft guilds in addition to “academic” education.

12. Man as a microcosm
 13. Development of particular souls in the human body
 14. Limits of human knowledge and science
 15. Maxims of life and death
 16. Characters pertaining to pleasure
 17. Cause of the diversity of languages, their system of transcription and calligraphy
- III. Psychological and rational sciences:
1. Intellectual principles according to Pythagoras
 2. Intellectual principles according to the Ikhwān
 3. That the Universe is a macrocosm
 4. Intelligence and the intelligible
 5. Periods and epochs
 6. Essence of passion
 7. Resurrection
 8. Species of movement
 9. Cause and effect
 10. Definitions and descriptions
- IV. Theological sciences—on the *nāmūs* and the *sharī'ah*
1. Doctrines and religions
 2. The character of the path leading to God
 3. Explanation of the doctrine of the Ikhwān
 4. Ways of life of the Ikhwān
 5. Essence of faith and the virtues of the believing initiates
 6. Essence of the Divine *nāmūs*, conditions and virtues of the prophets
 7. The manner of appealing to God
 8. State of spiritual beings
 9. Politics
 10. Hierarchy inherent in the Universe
 11. Magic and talisman

Following the Ikhwān as closely as possible in their study of the cosmos, and considering for the most part the second book, we shall begin our research into the cosmological views of the Ikhwān with the principles governing Nature, then the hierarchy in the Universe, to be followed by a study of various parts of the Universe beginning with the heavens and then descending to the sublunary world. Then making a study of meteorology, geography, mineralogy, botany and zoology, we shall terminate our exposition with the study of man as the terminal link in the chain of terrestrial beings as well as the microcosm in whom multiplicity returns once again to Unity.

CHAPTER 2

The Principles of the Study of the Cosmos and the Hierarchy of the Universe

The universe described in the *Rasā'il* is a unified whole whose various parts are held together by the analogy which exists between them. As the Ikhwān write, "The whole world is one as a city is one, or as an animal is one, or as man is one."¹ Its parts are held together like the organs of a living body which derives its being and sustenance from the Divine Word.² The language with which this interrelation is expounded is that of symbolism, particularly numerical symbolism. Everywhere within the Universe the key to the understanding of things is numbers, which, like the morning sun, disperse the fog of the unintelligibility of things considered only in their terrestrial opaqueness.

The Ikhwān emphasize the symbolic character of this world in many passages, as, for example, when they write:

He made these His works manifest, to the end that the intelligent might contemplate them; and He brought into view all that was in His invisible world, that the observant might behold it and acknowledge His Skill and Peerlessness, and Omnipotence, and Soleness, and not stand in need of proof and demonstration. Further, these forms, which are perceived in the material world, are the similitudes of those which exist in the world of spirits save that the latter are composed of light and are subtle; whereas the former are dark and dense. And, as a picture corresponds in every limb

« وابتدأ خلقها عالم واحد . كمدنية واحدة ، أو كبحير أو كإسكان واحد . »¹

Jāmi'ah, I, 386.

« إن العالم كلمة بافلاكه العاليه وسماواته الساميه وما فيه من الانوار الروحانيه والانفس المتحركه والقوى الساريه في اركان الجسديه . والاجسام الطبيعيه وجميع الموجودات و ساير المخلوقات ، مما حوتها السماوات والارض ، من اعلى عليين الى اسفل مسافلين كلمه جسم واحد ، منتهي بقبول الفيض الكلي من بارئيه سبحانه ، وان كلمه الله تعالى متصله بذيّه تمدّه بالافاضه والجرح . لئيم ويستقى في الجرح . »

Jāmi'ah, I, 635-636.