HEKHAL · READER'S EDITION

مشكاة الأنوار

Mishkat al-Anwar

Mishkāt al-Anwār · The Niche of Lights

W. H. T. Gairdner (1924)

PUBLIC-DOMAIN TRANSLATION

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TRADITION	islamic-mysticism
LANGUAGE	Arabic
PERIOD	c. 1106-1111 · Tus / Khurasan
ATTRIBUTION	Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111)
TRANSLATION	W. H. T. Gairdner (1924)
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The *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, the Niche of Lights, is a short late treatise by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the most influential Islamic theologian of the medieval period, that takes the **Light Verse** of the Quran (24:35) as its organizing structure. In perhaps forty pages it produces one of the most concentrated statements of Islamic mystical epistemology in any language: a hierarchy of lights ascending from physical illumination through rational and prophetic light to **Nūr al-Anwār**, the Light of Lights, which is the unconditioned source of all illumination and is identified with God.

The text is structured in three parts. The first establishes the hierarchy of lights and the epistemological argument that light is not a metaphor for knowledge but the *condition* of knowledge. The second treats the symbolism of the Light Verse itself in interpretive detail. The third, the most demanding, treats the **veils** that stand between the human knower and the Light of Lights, veils of pure darkness (sensory and material preoccupation) and, more dangerously, **veils of light mixed with darkness** (the rational and religious certainties that feel like arrival but are in fact more refined obstructions).

The cross-tradition resonances are the richest of any single text in the corpus: the light hierarchy connects backward to Plotinus's *Enneads* (V.1, I.6), and forward to Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*, where the Good as source of all being is described in structurally identical terms. Three traditions, one structure, different theological implications at the terminal point. Ghazali knew the Neoplatonic tradition, he had written and critiqued it formally in the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, and the *Mishkāt*'s

achievement is to absorb that structure into a Quranic frame that changes its implications precisely where it most matters.

CROSS-REFERENCES

- Mystical Theology, the Christian apophatic node of the light-ontology triangle.
- Risala al-Ahadiyya, Ibn Arabi presses toward identity where Ghazali holds the distinction; the difference is itself a major Islamic intellectual history datum.
- Batin (باطن), the inner register the *Mishkāt*'s hermeneutic of the Light Verse inhabits.
- Apophasis (ἀπόφασις), the negation that the Light of Lights ultimately requires.

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Mishkat al-Anwar

THE NICHE OF LIGHTS

CANONICAL

ARABIC · C. 1106-1111 · GHAZALI

THE LIGHT VERSE · QURAN 24:35

آية النور

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial. Gairdner 1924 PD reference for verbatim sections pending verification.

Quran 24:35 In a mosque wall there is a niche. In the niche there is a lamp. The lamp is in glass. The glass is like a star. The oil that feeds it comes from a tree that is neither of the east nor of the west, and the oil would almost give light even if no fire touched it. *Light upon light. God guides to this light whom He wills.* This is the Light Verse, *Āyat al-Nūr*, and it is the most commented passage in the Islamic textual tradition.

§ 1 Ghazali takes the verse as the organizing structure of the entire treatise. The text *is* the niche; the lamp is the knowledge it contains; the glass is the form in which the knowledge is given. The reader who approaches correctly will find the glass between them gradually

آية النور

ۡهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ مَثَلُ

ِرِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ ۖ

مِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ ۖ الزُّجَاجَةُ

أَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ

ِقَدُ مِن شَجَرَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا

رْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ ۚ نُّورٌ عَلَىٰ نُورٍ ۗ

هْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. Th likeness of His light is as niche wherein is a lamp the lamp in glass; the glas as it were a glittering sta

clarifying. The hermeneutic move is itself the doctrine: the verse does not mean what it depicts; it depicts the means by which what it means becomes knowable.

§ 2 *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* This opening clause is read literally and metaphysically at once. *Nūr* (نور) is the term that names everything that has the property of making something else manifest. Physical light is *nūr*. The intellect is *nūr*. The Quran is *nūr*. Each of these manifests something. None of them, considered in itself, is the source.

1

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Tree, an olive that i

neither of the East nor c

the West… Light upo

light. God guides to Hi

”.light whom He wil

◆ ◆

Quran 24:35 · the hinge c

the entire treatis

2

THE HIERARCHY OF LIGHTS · NUR AL-ANWAR

مراتب الأنوار

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial.

The hierarch

§ 3 The hierarchy is built. Physical light makes visible objects visible to physical eyes. Rational light (*al-ʿaql*, the intellect) makes intelligible objects intelligible to rational minds. But rational light is itself visible only to a higher faculty, and that faculty to a higher one still. The ordering is not a hierarchy of better and worse but a precise ontological sequence: each level is the *condition* under which the level below it can function as light at all.

§ 4 The series ascends through the prophetic intellect (*al-ʿaql al-nabawī*), which receives knowledge by direct illumination rather than through discursive inference, and reaches a terminal point that cannot be exceeded. **Nūr al-Anwār**, the Light of Lights, is the unconditioned condition of all illumination. It is not itself illuminated by anything prior because there is nothing prior to it. Everything else that bears the name *light* is a borrowed luminosity,

نور الأنوار

Nūr al-Anwār: the Light of Lights, unconditioned

↑

العقل النبوي

al-ʿaql al-nabawī: prophetic intellect

↑

العقل

al-ʿaql: the rational intellect

↑

النور الحسي

al-nūr al-ḥissī: physical light

◆ ◆

a reflection of the one source that is not itself a reflection of anything.

§ 5 The Quranic move that Ghazali makes here is precise. The Light of Lights is not an impersonal metaphysical principle but **the God of revelation who guides to His light whom He wills**. The personal dimension that Plotinus's One lacks entirely is here the organizing theological commitment. The Neoplatonic structure is conscripted; it is not adopted as theology. The *Mishkāt* is in this sense as much a critique of pure Neoplatonism as it is an inheritance of it: a critique by absorption rather than by argument.

3

ـر على نور

"Light upon light

4

THE VEILS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

الحجب · من الظلمة ومن النور

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial. The most important

الحجاب

section of the text.

§ 6 The third part of the *Mishkāt* turns to the **veils** (*ḥijāb*) that stand between the human knower and the Light of Lights, preventing direct apprehension. The veils are of two kinds, and the second is more dangerous than the first.

§ 7 · Veils of pure darkness The first kind: the material and sensory preoccupations that keep the soul oriented entirely toward the lower end of the hierarchy. The unreflective attachment to pleasure, to social position, to the body, to wealth. These are the obvious veils. Their darkness is recognizable as darkness. The traveller who notices them can begin to address them.

§ 8 · Veils of light mixed with darkness

The second kind, and the more dangerous: the rational and religious certainties that *feel like arrival* but are in fact a more refined form of the

al-ḥijāb: the ve

First kin

حجاب الظلمة

ḥijāb al-ẓulma: veils c

pure darkness · th

obvious obstruction

More dangerou

حجاب نور وظلمة

ḥijāb nūr wa-ẓulma: veil

of light mixed wit

same fundamental obstruction. The scholar who has mastered theology and believes this mastery constitutes knowledge of God is **veiled by light**. The Sufi who has achieved states of illumination and believes these states are the ultimate reality is veiled by light. The danger is precisely that the veil glows: it does not look like obstruction; it looks like illumination.

§ 9 · The unveiled approach The veil of pure light, direct apprehension of the Light of Lights without any intervening screen, is what Ghazali calls the **station of the prophets** (*maqām al-nubuwwa*). Ghazali is precise about what he claims for the mystic's approach to it. He is not Ibn Arabi; he does not claim identity between the realized ground and the divine ground. He claims **witnessing**, *mushāhada*, a condition in which the Light of Lights is apprehended as directly as a created being can apprehend it. Not

darkness · the veils tha

glov

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مشاهدة

mushāhada: witnessing

not identit

مقام النبوة

maqām al-nubuwwa: th

station of the prophet

6

identity. Not the mediated knowledge of theology. Witnessing.

5

APPARATUS · THE LIGHT-ONTOLOGY TRIANGLE

Three traditions, one structure, different theological terminus.

Plotinus · Greek · 3rd century CE

The *Enneads* (V.1, I.6) build a hierarchy of illumination ascending to the **One**, the unconditioned source from which Intellect, Soul, and the material world emanate. The whole cascade is described in terms of light. The One has no personal dimension; it cannot be addressed, cannot be petitioned, cannot will or guide.

Pseudo-Dionysius · Greek Christian · c. 500 CE

PLOTINUS → DIONYSIUS ⇔ GHAZALI

Greek philosophical

τὸ Ἕν

to Hen: the One · Plotinus

↓

Christian apophatic

τὸ Ἀγαθόν

to Agathon: the Good · Pseudo-Dionysius

↕

Islamic Quranic

نور الأنوار

The *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* together transmit the Plotinian light hierarchy into Christian theology, with the **Good** as the source of all being replacing the One, and, through the apophatic move of the *Mystical Theology*, with even *Good* and *Being* eventually denied of the source as inadequate to its transcendence.

Ghazali · Arabic Islamic · c. 1106 CE

The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* takes the same hierarchical structure, Ghazali knew the Neoplatonic tradition formally and had critiqued it in the *Tahāfut*, and absorbs it into a Quranic frame in which the **Light of Lights** is identical with the personal God who *guides to His light whom He wills*. The structure is shared. The theological terminus is different.

The Hekhal editorial position: the structure recurs because it is what

Nūr al-Anwār: Light of Lights · Ghazali

One structure · three terminuses

8

the territory actually looks like when pressed far enough into from any direction. The differences at the terminal point are what each tradition specifically contributes.

7

Al-Ghazali · An orientation

In a mosque wall there is a niche. In the niche there is a lamp. The lamp is in glass. The glass is like a star. The oil that feeds it comes from a tree that is neither of the east nor of the west, and the oil would almost give light even if no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides to this light whom He wills.

This is Quran 24:35, the Light Verse, *Āyat al-Nūr*, and it is among the most commented passages in the Islamic textual tradition, generating more sustained metaphysical reflection across more centuries than almost any other verse in the scripture. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the most influential Islamic theologian of the medieval period, wrote a short treatise in the last years of his life that took the Light Verse as its organizing structure and produced, in the space of perhaps forty pages, one of the most concentrated statements of Islamic mystical epistemology available in any language. He called it the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, the Niche of Lights, and he meant the title precisely: the text is the niche, the lamp is the knowledge it contains, and the reader who approaches it correctly will find the glass between them gradually clarifying.

Ghazali's position in Islamic intellectual history is unusual in a way that matters for reading this text. He was trained as a theologian and jurist, appointed to the most prestigious teaching position in Baghdad at thirty-three, and then at the height of his career underwent a crisis of certainty so complete that he lost the ability to teach, nearly lost the ability to speak, and eventually left Baghdad for a decade of

wandering, study, and Sufi practice that produced his masterwork, the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, the Revival of the Religious Sciences, a vast synthesis of Islamic law, theology, and mystical psychology that remains among the most read works in the Islamic world. The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is a late text, written after the *Iḥyā'*, addressed to a specific student, and concerned with a specific problem: what does the Light Verse actually mean, and what does its meaning reveal about the structure of reality and the conditions under which human beings can know that structure.

The answer Ghazali builds is a hierarchy. Not a simple hierarchy of better and worse but a precise ontological ordering in which light is not a metaphor for knowledge but the *condition* of knowledge, the medium without which the relationship between knower and known cannot occur at all. Physical light makes visible objects visible to physical eyes. Rational light makes intelligible objects intelligible to rational minds. But rational light is itself visible only to a higher faculty, and that faculty to a higher one still, ascending through a series of degrees until the hierarchy reaches what Ghazali calls the Light of Lights, *Nūr al-Anwār*, which is not itself illuminated by anything prior because there is nothing

prior to it. It is the condition of all illumination, itself unconditioned. Everything that has the property of making things manifest is, in Ghazali's precise usage, a light. The Prophet is a light. The intellect is a light. The Quran is a light. God is the Light, but not in the sense of being one light among others, even the brightest: God is the only true light, and everything else that bears the name is a borrowed luminosity, a reflection of the one source that is not itself a reflection of anything.

This is where the text's Neoplatonic resonance becomes impossible to miss and important to characterize correctly. The structure Ghazali is deploying, a hierarchy of illumination ascending to an unconditioned source that is the condition of all lower light, is the structure Plotinus builds in the *Enneads*, where the One is the source of Intellect, Intellect the source of Soul, Soul the source of the material world, and the whole cascade is described in terms of light and emanation. Ghazali knew the Neoplatonic tradition. He had written a precise summary of the positions of Farabi and Ibn Sina, both of whom had absorbed and transmitted Neoplatonic metaphysics into Islamic philosophy, specifically in order to subject those positions to

rigorous critique in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, the Incoherence of the Philosophers. He was not naive about where the light hierarchy came from intellectually. What the *Mishkāt* does is not borrow the Neoplatonic structure uncritically but absorb it into a Quranic frame that changes its implications at the crucial point: the Light of Lights is not an impersonal metaphysical principle but the God of Islamic revelation who guides to the light whom He wills. The personal dimension that Neoplatonism's One lacks entirely is here the organizing theological commitment that the Neoplatonic structure is conscripted to serve.

The *Mishkāt* is structured in three parts and the third is the most demanding and the most revealing. After establishing the hierarchy of lights and the epistemological argument that follows from it, Ghazali turns to what he calls the **veils**, the screens that stand between the human knower and the Light of Lights, preventing direct apprehension. The veils are of two kinds: veils of pure darkness, which are the material and sensory preoccupations that keep the soul oriented entirely toward the lower end of the hierarchy; and veils of light mixed with darkness, which are more dangerous precisely because they are more subtle, the rational and religious

certainties that feel like arrival but are in fact a more refined form of the same fundamental obstruction. The scholar who has mastered theology and believes this mastery constitutes knowledge of God is veiled by light. The Sufi who has achieved states of illumination and believes these states are the ultimate reality is veiled by light. The veil of pure light, the direct apprehension of the Light of Lights without any intervening screen, is what Ghazali calls the station of the prophets, and he is careful about what he claims for the mystic's approach to it.

This carefulness is characteristic and important. Ghazali is not Ibn Arabi. He does not claim identity between the mystic's realized ground and the divine ground. He does not develop a doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* or anything structurally equivalent. What he claims is more modest and in some ways more precise: that the Sufi who has undergone genuine purification and passed through the stages of the path approaches a condition of witnessing, *mushāhada*, in which the Light of Lights is apprehended as directly as a created being can apprehend it, which is not identity but is also not the mediated knowledge of theology or philosophy. The distinction matters and the *Mishkāt* maintains it with

the precision of a theologian who has spent his career defining the boundaries of legitimate Islamic metaphysical claim.

The cross-tradition resonances in the *Mishkāt* are the richest of any single text in the corpus accumulated here so far. The light hierarchy ascending to an unconditioned source connects directly backward to Plotinus's *Enneads*, specifically the treatise *On Beauty* and the treatise *On the Three Primal Hypostases*, and forward to Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*, where the Good as the source of all being is described in terms that are structurally identical to Ghazali's Light of Lights. The three texts form a triangle: Greek philosophical theology, Christian mystical theology, Islamic mystical epistemology, each building a hierarchy of illumination that terminates in a condition that exceeds its own category. None of them is simply translating the others. Each is making a specific move within a specific theological tradition that happens to produce the same structure because, the Hekhal editorial position would suggest, the structure is what the territory actually looks like when you press far enough into it from any direction.

Ghazali died in 1111 in Tus, in what is now northeastern Iran, at fifty-two or fifty-three, having returned from his decade of wandering to teach again briefly before withdrawing once more. The story of his crisis and return, told in his autobiographical *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, the Deliverance from Error, a document whose candor about intellectual and spiritual collapse is almost without parallel in medieval religious literature, is one of the most important intellectual biographies in the Islamic tradition. The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is the distilled metaphysical vision of the man who came through that crisis. It does not read like a document written by someone who has resolved his questions. It reads like a document written by someone who has found the right questions and learned to inhabit them without requiring resolution. The lamp in the niche does not illuminate everything. It illuminates enough to see by. That, Ghazali seems to suggest, is what lamps are for.

The *Mishkat al-Anwar* sits within Ghazali's larger corpus and is best read against the *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (the four-volume *Revival of the*

Religious Sciences, his magnum opus) and the autobiographical *Munqidh min al-Dalal*. The Sufi commentary tradition received the *Mishkat* as a hermeneutic treatise on the Light Verse (Quran 24:35) and on the divine names; Akbarian readers from Qunawi forward took it as a precursor of their own metaphysics of disclosure.

The standard critical Arabic edition is **Abu al-ʻAla al-ʻAfifi**'s 1964 Cairo edition, which establishes the textual tradition for modern scholarship. **David Buchman**'s 1998 Brigham Young University Press translation (under copyright) is the most accessible modern English edition with parallel Arabic. **W. H. T. Gairdner**'s 1924 translation, the public-domain version Hekhal hosts, was the first complete English translation and remains a faithful representation of the received Arabic text. **Frank Griffel**'s *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (2009) is the standard contemporary academic orientation to Ghazali's intellectual context.

Colophon

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