

“I am Sorry, Mr. White Man, These are Secrets that You are Not Permitted to Learn”: The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and Problem Book

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Abstract

This article examines the Supreme Wisdom Lessons, a neglected but foundational text in American Muslim histories. The Supreme Wisdom Lessons appear in Nation of Islam tradition as a series of question-and-answer examinations between Nation founder Fard Muhammad and his student, Elijah Muhammad. The Lessons were used as a process of initiation for new members, who committed excerpts to memory before receiving more of the text, eventually memorizing the entire document. As Nation tradition developed across the later twentieth century, the Lessons remained salient for diverse ends, including the “orthodox” reforms of Elijah’s son Warith Deen Mohammed, who relied on his personal mastery of the Lessons as authorization to lead the Nation away from his father’s teachings; Louis Farrakhan’s Nation revival, which broke from Warith Deen Mohammed and sought to preserve the Nation as conceived under Elijah’s forty years of leadership; and the Five Percenter community, whose members did not self-identity as Muslims but nonetheless maintained compelling investments in the Lessons for their own tradition.

The discussion that follows gives attention to the Lessons and a significant supplementary text, the Problem Book, within their context of 1930s U.S. esoteric movements, thinkers, and themes, demonstrating that these materials warrant more careful consideration not only within Islamic studies at large but also the study of Western esotericism.

When the RZA asks, “Can the Devil fool a Muslim nowadays?” in the Wu Tang Clan’s “A Better Tomorrow,” and “Who made the Holy Bible or Qur’an, how long ago?” in his solo work “The Birth,”¹ most listeners are probably unaware that his lyrical questions were drawn directly from a foundational text of American Islam, the Nation of Islam’s Supreme Wisdom Lessons. The former

1. The Wu Tang Clan, “A Better Tomorrow,” RZA, “The Birth.”

appears in the section designated “English Lesson C-1” as “Can the Devil fool a Muslim?” with the answer, “Not nowadays,” while the latter appears in the “Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2.”² Despite the Lessons’ significance for the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters, not to mention their citational salience in the American Islamic tradition of hip hop, the Lessons have received limited attention in academic literature.

The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and a companion text, often referred to as the Problem Book, operated as an extraordinarily important source for the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad’s leadership and remained salient as his son W.D. Muhammad (later Warith Deen Mohammed) later redirected the Nation towards greater conformity with a broader “Muslim world.” W.D. Muhammad did not simply announce in 1975 that the Lessons were no longer authoritative, but instead carefully located his reform project within the Lessons, claiming an esoteric mastery over the text—as an intuitively gifted imam, special son of the master teacher, and a prophetically foretold reformer—that supported his “Sunni turn.” The Lessons also underwent prolific citation in what has been termed “golden age” hip hop, which was profoundly informed by the Nation of Islam and Five Percenter traditions.³

While academic and popular conversations surrounding the Nation of Islam have often framed the community as a “political” rather than “religious” movement, an activist platform of “Black nationalism” disguised by a veneer of religion,⁴ early media representations dismissed the Nation with another troubled binary: the Nation was not a Muslim movement or even properly “religious,” but rather a “voodoo cult.”⁵ In 1932, when the movement faced charges of human sacrifice after a ritualized murder was linked to members of the commu-

2. The Supreme Wisdom Lessons are widely accessible via numerous online and print versions, not to mention the FBI files on figures such as Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad, aka W.D. Fard. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

3. Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*.

4. Curtis, *Black Muslim*, 6–14.

5. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

nity, newspapers and law enforcement gave focused attention to the “voodoo cult’s” alleged textual sources. Detroit police claimed to have obtained an “official” community text, *The Bible of Islamism*, during a raid of Nation founder Master Fard Muhammad’s residence, and quoted page 354 as declaring, “God is liar. Ignore Him and do away with those who advocate His cause.” The excerpt was said to have been one of Fard’s favorite and most frequently recited passages. Unfortunately for researchers of the early Nation, including the FBI and the Nation itself, we have no access to this *Bible of Islamism* or evidence beyond police claims in *The Detroit Free Press* that it ever existed.⁶

Examining this alleged passage as possibly a legitimate citation, Patrick D. Bowen suggests that the words have a “Crowley ring” and speculates that Fard could have encountered Aleister Crowley’s publications and followers.⁷ However, scholars attempting an intellectual genealogy for the Nation of Islam do not have the “smoking gun” evidence that would confidently put specific esotericist sources in the hands of Fard or Elijah Muhammad. Their collaborative text of initiation, popularly known as *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* or 120, nonetheless evinces a thriving marketplace of esotericist and occult thinkers that informed the movement’s early context. *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* speak to this world, often drawing on intellectual trends, familiar themes, and imagery accessible within a context such as 1930s Detroit. While the significance of esotericist currents such as New Thought, Freemasonry, and the popular magic revival for Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple of America has been thoroughly documented,⁸ and this treatment has extended to a lesser degree to the Nation of Islam, the Nation’s key texts could still benefit from a closer reading with concern for themes of Western esotericism: the appearance of God not as a transcendent spirit incarnated into a body but rather as a self-perfected human

6. As Patrick D. Bowen notes, no Nation member has claimed to see it (*A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2:251).

7. Ibid.

8. Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 238–50.

master (in this case, Master Fard Muhammad); a broader interest in self-deification and the limitless potential of the mind; the promise of uncovering secrets that had been concealed and suppressed by ruling elites and organized religion; privileged access to the hidden truths of scripture; and an archive of “rejected knowledge” intersecting with content such as Freemasonry,⁹ magic, the magnetic power of thought, racial mythologies, extraterrestrial civilizations, and notions of a mystical “East” as home to advanced metaphysical understanding. Master Fard Muhammad remains underexamined both in terms of American esotericism and American Islam. The discussion that follows examines the Lessons as a Muslim text that developed in conversation with American esotericist traditions, reflecting the complex milieu of 1930s Detroit as one in which transnational Muslim and esotericist networks intersected and overlapped.

The Lessons and Problem Book

The Lessons make for a relatively short text, consisting of brief statements and question-and-answer exchanges. The text is organized into five sections: the “Student Enrollment,” “English Lesson C-1,” two “Lost Found Muslim Lessons,” and “Actual Facts.” Each section’s statements or question-answer articles (popularly termed “degrees”) are numbered, totaling 120 items, for which reason the Five Percenters typically refer to the Lessons as “the 120.”

The Lessons are presented as Fard Muhammad’s examination of his student, Elijah Muhammad; while some sections are older than others, copies of Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 date the exam as February 20, 1934. Beynon had accessed the Lessons (as *Secret Ritual of the Nation of Islam*) during his study of the movement, providing limited citations and emphasizing the text’s oral transmission.¹⁰ Beynon’s brief discussion of *Secret Ritual* does not mention the Student

9. For “rejected knowledge” as a marker of esotericist discourse, as well as more on the challenge of defining “esotericism,” see Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 13–14.

10. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

Enrollment or English Lesson C1; nor does the FBI present these texts as parts of the “original” Lessons. The FBI obtained the Lessons during its search of Elijah Muhammad’s home on September 20, 1942, when he was arrested on charges of draft evasion, and reproduced them in their entirety in an internal 2/21/57 memo that offered a fifty-page report concerning the “Muslim Cult of Islam.”¹¹ The report distinguishes the 1942 seized documents from the Student Enrollment and English Lesson C1, which it obtained during its 1957 surveillance.¹²

With slight differences in wording and punctuation, the FBI’s 1942 copy matches Beynon’s quotations, as well as the excerpts cited in *Detroit Free Press* articles from 1932, which establish the Lessons’ existence in some form prior to Fard’s disappearance.¹³ A possible departure between Beynon’s 1938 citations and the 1942 version appears in the eleventh item of Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2, which Beynon quotes without the statement, “No relief came to us until the son of man came to our aid, by the name of our Prophet, W.D. Fard.” Whether the difference is attributable to an abbreviation on Beynon’s part or elaboration from Elijah Muhammad is unclear. While I have heard urban legends suggesting that earlier, “non-Elijah” editions of the Lessons remain extant today, the text of the Lessons reaches us exclusively through Elijah’s mediation.

Based on information gathered in January–February 1957, the 2/21/57 FBI memo explains that the Lessons operated as a process of initiation for new Nation members. After attending meetings, writing the required letter to request the replacement of his/her slave name with X, and receiving notice that the letter had been accepted, a convert was assigned the Student Enrollment with instructions “to learn and memorize the questions and answers as he would be called upon to recite them.”¹⁴ The Student Enrollment consists of ten short questions and answers, including major doctrinal points—the first

11. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2:252–53.

14. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

two questions ask, “Who is the original man?” and “Who is the colored man?,” establishing the Black Man as “God of the universe and father of civilization” and the Colored (white) Man as “Yacobs grafted devil, skunk of the Planet Earth”—as well as statistics concerning racial demographic and geographic data (“How much of the useful land is used by the original man?”). The short text concludes with questions regarding the “birth records” of the Nation of Islam and other nations: the Nation of Islam has “no birth record,” while Buddhism is 35,000 years old and Christianity is a mere 551 years old.¹⁵

The FBI report, drawing from a specific informant’s account, explains that after memorizing the Student Enrollment, the convert successfully recited the questions and answers and thereby became recognized as a full member of the Nation.¹⁶ The Student Enrollment was “the only printed material this individual was required to learn prior to becoming a member.”¹⁷ After successful mastery and recitation of the Student Enrollment, new members were “advanced to another class,” which required memorization of English Lesson C1.¹⁸

English Lesson C1, consisting of 36 numbered points, reads as a short monologue by Master Fard that an interlocutor (presumably Elijah) interrupts with questions for Fard to answer. Fard announces, “I came to North America by myself” and that his “uncle” had been brought here by “the Trader” 379 years ago. Fard explains, “My uncle can not talk his own language” and “does not know that he is my uncle.” His uncle likes the devil because “the devil gives him nothing,” “put fear in him when he was a little boy,” and “taught him to eat the wrong food,” which “makes him other than his ownself.” Fard’s interlocutor asks, “What is his ownself?” to which Fard answers, “His ownself is a Righteous Moslem.” The text goes on to explain that in North America, there are three million “Moslem Sons” and more than seventeen million “Original Moslems,” though

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

some of the Original Moslems—having been made “blind, deaf and dumb” by the devil—do not know that they are Moslems. Fard narrates that the devil fooled them 379 years ago when the Trader lured them away from their own country with promises of gold. The conclusion of the text depicts the predicament of a stranded, involuntary diaspora and the salvific promise of Master Fard’s arrival:

29. Then did they receive gold?
30. No, the Trader disappeared and there was no one that could speak their language.
31. Then what happened?
32. Well, they wanted to go to their own country, but they could not swim 9,000 miles.
33. Why didn’t their own people come and get them?
34. Because their own people did not know they were here.
35. When did their own people find out they were here?
36. Approximately sixty years ago.¹⁹

Speaking in the 1930s, the text’s reference to “approximately sixty years ago” would suggest that Fard’s birth (in Mecca in 1877, according to the Nation) was a strategic response by transcendent powers—unnamed in the Lessons, but later articulated as a council of scientists by Elijah Muhammad—to the plight of Black people in the Americas.

After memorization and recitation of English Lesson C1, the initiate moved on to the two Lost Found Muslim Lessons. The first lesson consists of fourteen questions and answers, ten of which focus on the devil and offer snapshots of the Nation’s demonology. The devil is settled on the “worst part” of the earth, rather than the “best part” (Arabia), because the original man, as “God and owner of the earth,” knows “every square inch” and kept the best part for himself; the original people expelled Yacob (Yakub) and “his made devil” from the “root of civilization” (Mecca) into the “cave of West Asia” (Europe); later, “half-original” prophet

19. Ibid.

Mossa (Moses) came to teach and civilize the devil; and roughly 750 years ago, original people took Jerusalem back from the devil because Jesus, “one of our righteous brothers,” was buried there. The devil uses the name of Jesus to “shield his dirty religion;” Jesus’s true message was not Christianity, but “Freedom, Justice and Equality.” Mohammed murders the devil because the devil “will not keep and obey the rules of Islam.” Every Moslem who brings four devils at one time will be rewarded with a lapel pin and “free transportation to the Holy City Mecca to see brother Mohammed.” Despite the requirement to murder the devil, the text also allows the devil to “clean himself up” by studying for thirty-five to fifty years “trying to learn and do like the original man;” after this process, the devil can call himself a “Moslem Son” and do trading among the original people.²⁰

Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 consists of forty questions and answers; roughly speaking, the first half of the section gives focused attention to the nature and true identity of God, while the second half provides more detail regarding the devil’s origin and the end of the devil’s rule. Five Percenters have often termed this section the “Meat” of the Lessons, due to its overall length and detail concerning important concepts such as the character of Yacob and his eugenics project, the nature of God, hints of Nation cosmology, and the conspiracy by the ruling class to conceal this secret knowledge from the masses. Despite its substantive content in comparison to the other sections of the Lessons, Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2 remains sparse, its questions answered within a few paragraphs at most and often with a single sentence. Gaps in these bare discourses would have been filled by the interpretive activity of Elijah Muhammad during his career as the designated Messenger of Allah from Fard’s 1934 disappearance to his death in 1975.

In addition to the Lessons, Nation of Islam members studied a document of thirty-four math word problems, *Teaching for the Lost Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way*, which has become known as the Problem Book. Beynon quotes from the text in his 1938 article, and Bowen convincingly demonstrates

20. Ibid.

that the Problem Book has remained unchanged through the decades.²¹ In his 1951 master's thesis on the Nation, Hatim A. Sahib describes the text as a "very small pamphlet of seven pages" titled simply "the Book of Thirty-Four Problems," and suggests that the title *Teaching for the Lost Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way* was Beynon's own invention.²² According to Sahib, the Book of Thirty-Four Problems could be accessed only after a student passed the first two sections of the Lessons, and never by white people or "non-Negro Moslems" due to Fard's personal warnings.²³ The text's problems read as a straightforward math quiz delivered with frequent references to the Nation's rhetorical universe: questions refer to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, various physical illnesses suffered by Fard's "uncle" (i.e., Black people) due to living "other than himself," and a caged lion that has sought a way out of the cage for "nearly four centuries."²⁴ The seventeenth question makes casual reference to the consistent Nation of Islam position regarding extraterrestrial life:

Mars, the inhabited Planet, is one hundred forty-one million, five hundred thousand miles from the Sun, and she travels thirty-seven and one-third miles per hour. Her diameter is four thousand two hundred miles.

Then Mr. Ali wants to know how many days will it take Mars to make one complete circumference around the Sun?²⁵

The notion of Mars as an "inhabited planet" appears in the later works of Elijah Muhammad, who asserts that Fard had taught him about Martian civilization. Fard could communicate directly with Martians, being fluent in their language, and informed Elijah that "the Original Black Man" possessed pictures of Martian people. Elijah thus scoffs at the white world's hopes of exploring space: "I am sorry, Mr. White Man, these are secrets that you are not permitted to learn. You may be

21. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 2–252.

22. Sahib, *The Nation of Islam*, 147.

23. Ibid.

24. Melchisedek Shabazz Allah, *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, 27–37.

25. Ibid.

able to send a camera over the planets, but I advise you to stay away from them.”²⁶

The next question in the Problem Book refers to Mercury as “also an inhabited planet.” The text mirrors the privileged positions for Mars and Mercury in Theosophical imaginaries, which present these planets in a “chain” with Earth as respectively past and future homes for human incarnations; Leadbeater writes in his *Textbook of Theosophy* that Mars and Mercury are still inhabited.²⁷ Without a reductionist diffusionism that would claim the Nation of Islam as a straightforward “offshoot” of Western esotericist traditions such as the Theosophical Society, or speculating as to what sources “influenced” Master Fard and Elijah Muhammad, I hope to shed light on numerous points in the Lessons and Problem Book that place the text in conversation with a milieu that remained deeply informed by esotericist discourses and communities.

“Moslem Sons:” Masonic Esotericism

Beyond their content, the Lessons echo Masonic practices in their function as lodge catechisms to be memorized as a series of “degrees” by the new initiate, who undergoes an examination on each degree before proceeding to the next.²⁸ Scholarship has acknowledged Black Freemasonry as an important conduit through which Islam entered into African American public discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly setting a stage for the Moorish Science Temple (which in turn is treated as a lineal forerunner to the Nation of Islam). Moorish Science leader Noble Drew Ali, who claimed to have undergone initiation at a pyramid in Egypt to become a prophet of what he termed “Islamism,” understood Islamic tradition through a lens informed significantly by the Shriners, a Masonic order that made playful use of Islam and pre-Islamic Egypt in its aesthetics.²⁹ Remaining largely unexamined in academic conversations, however, has been the specific imaginary of

26. Berg, *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*, 79.

27. Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy*, 127.

28. Halleran, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 197.

29. Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 238–50.

Islam that emerged from Black Freemasonry, particularly the conceptions of Islam and Black godhood as guarded Masonic secrets.

In newspaper coverage of the Shriners near the end of the nineteenth century, we find treatments of the Shriners' playful Orientalism and appropriation of Islamic imagery as markers of a genuine historical connection to Muslim civilizations. An 1889 *Washington Post* article, for example, describes the Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine as having been founded in the "Hegira" year 25 (erroneously presented as the Gregorian year 356 CE) by "Kaliff Alee" as a "vigilance committee, to dispense justice and execute punishment upon criminals who escaped their just deserts" (sic) as well as "promote religious toleration among cultured men of all nations." For the immediate task of efficiently apprehending criminals with "precaution as to secrecy and security," Kaliff Alee needed to "form a band of men of sterling worth." The contemporary order counts "the best cultured and educated classes" among its members. The article also notes that while the order remains ostensibly dedicated to "increase the faith and fidelity of all true believers in Allah" and requires testimony that there is no god but Allah, it also accepts members from all religions. Specifically, "The order in America does not advocate Mohammedanism as a sect, but inculcates the same respect to deity here as in Arabia and elsewhere."³⁰

The *Washington Post* piece asserts that American Shriners use a ritual text that has been translated from the Arabic original, which apparently remains in the order's Aleppo archives.³¹ The 1890s saw the emergence of "Black Shriner" movements, starting with accounts that Arab visitors to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago had granted African Americans the initiation that white Shriners denied them. While white Shriners had famously appropriated Islamic imagery and claimed ancient Muslim lineages as an Orientalist jest, Black media treated the linkage to premodern Eastern orders as genuine and serious. Freemasonry's claims of ancient Egyptian origins and the specific Shriner claims of lineage

30. "A Crescent and Scimitar." *Washington Post* (October 8, 1889), 21.

31. *Ibid.*

from “Kaliff Alee” offered new connections to a world in which Europe was not the center, and new ways of imagining Blackness.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Black Freemasonry offered the most powerful representation of Islam in Black media and public life. When Noble Drew Ali presented his construction of “Islamism” as the true religion of Black people (Moors), he framed his Islamism largely in the aesthetic vocabulary of Shriners.³² Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple did not appear as an aberration or “syncretism” or blending of disparate parts from otherwise unrelated traditions; elsewhere in the U.S., Black intellectuals perceived a natural link between the two. In 1927, Abdul Hamid, who identified himself as coming from “the city of Khartum, Sudan, Egypt, a Mohammadan by birth, Master of the Koran, having pilgrimaged to Mecca three times and thus become an Eminent High Priest and head of all Masonic degrees in Mecca, from the first to the ninety-sixth degree,” made headlines in New York newspapers for declaring, “There is not a legitimate or real Noble of the Mystic Shrine, black or white, affiliated with American masonry.” The issue, Abdul Hamid explained, was that there could be no genuine Shriner oath without conversion to Islam; to become true Masons, the Black Shriners would have to join the “Mecca-Medina Temple” in Arabia.³³

The Ahmadiyya missionary project in the U.S. also perceived a possible connection between Muslims and Masons. In 1921, Ahmadiyya preacher Muhammad Sadiq mailed hundreds of invitations to Islam to Masonic lodges across the country.³⁴ Among the sources that Fard Muhammad used for teaching his community, Beynon mentions a collection of books on “Freemasonry and its symbolism.”³⁵ While we do not have their titles or a clear sense of how Fard himself personally related Freemasonry to Islam, the two would already have been connected for many in his audience. For Elijah Muhammad—himself

32. Nance, “Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple,” 123–66.

33. Bowen, “Abdul Hamid Suleiman and the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple.”

34. GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 200.

35. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

a former Freemason—it seems apparent that Islam and Freemasonry would not have been inherently separate histories and bodies of knowledge, but rather reflected a shared genealogy in the timeless knowledge of the Asiatic Black Man. Freemasonry’s presence would remain throughout his body of writings. As early as 1934, soon after Fard’s disappearance, Elijah’s editorials in *The Final Call to Islam* portrayed Freemasons as possessing true knowledge, though they controlled access to truth for their own financial gain:

They sell it to you after diluting and changing its name from Islam, Freedom, Justice and Equality to FREE MASONRY. . . . They changed the name Moslem to Mason and no one must be called Moslem under the Masonic law until he pays a great sum of money for the 32nd Degree. What would the price be for the 360th Degree, which is the whole circle?³⁶

Writing in later decades, Elijah declares, “A Mason cannot be a good Mason unless he knows the Holy Qur’an and follows its teaching. This book is the only book that will make a true Mason . . . I say, if you are a true Moslem friend, then alright, lets have it in the open and not in the secret.”³⁷ Elijah understood his assessment of Freemasonry to find support in the Lessons themselves, which describe the “Ten Percent” that actively conceals knowledge of God to maintain its control over the Eighty-Five Percent, the “slaves to mental death and power.”³⁸ Elijah’s commentary on Freemasons positions them as the Ten Percent. Shriners also appear in the Lessons, which describe the devil as capable of studying Islam from thirty-five to fifty years for the right to call himself a “Moslem Son;” upon reaching this stage, he must add a sword to the Flag of Islam (as seen in the Shriner emblem of a sword attached to the star and crescent) as symbolic of his oath to secrecy; he must protect his knowledge or lose his head.³⁹

36. Muhammad, *Final Call to Islam*, n.p.

37. Idem, *The Secrets of Freemasonry*, 3.

38. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

39. Ibid.

Theosophical Eugenics

The Lessons offer a narrative of racial difference (which undergoes elaboration in later works of Elijah Muhammad) that traces the origins of the white race—identified as “the Colored Man” in a reversal of U.S. racial vocabulary—to a eugenics regime led by the scientist Yacob (later spelled Yakub), whose name corresponds to the Arabic equivalent of Jacob. Yacob “manufactured the devil” on the island of Pelan, which the Lessons explain is Patmos, where John received the Book of Revelation. Yacob selected followers who were “healthy, strong and good breeders” and “gave his people the law on birth control to be enforced while manufacturing the devil.” This meant orders for his ministers to only allow marriage between his “unlike” (brown) followers, and for his doctors and nurses to save “unlike” babies while killing “alike” (black) babies. The nurses killed black babies by putting needles into their brains or feeding them to wild animals, after which they would tell the mothers that their “angel babies” had secured places for them in heaven. Yacob’s laws were followed, the Lessons tell us, under penalty of death.⁴⁰

Answering the question, “Tell us what and how the devil is made?,” the Lessons explain that a Black body contained two germs, one black and one brown. By privileging the brown germ for six hundred years, Yacob’s eugenic regime managed to create lighter skin with each generation until “the germ became white, and weak and was no more original.” This new devil possessed smaller brains, thinner blood, and weaker bones, and was beyond reform, even when the prophet Mossa (Moses) attempted to civilize him.⁴¹

At first glance, the Lessons express a basic logic of race and nation—that by controlled breeding, social engineers can determine the characteristics of a population for centuries to come—consistent with the discourse of eugenics. The connection between Jacob and projects of deliberate breeding would have been natural in

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

the early twentieth century, as contemporary eugenics literature made frequent reference to the biblical account in which Jacob manipulates his understanding of heredity to get the better of his father-in-law Laban. Having made a bargain with Laban that Jacob would receive the striped livestock, Jacob placed striped reeds in front of Laban's animals to ensure that Laban's next flock would be born with striped coats. The account is mentioned throughout eugenics literature,⁴² whether to affirm or dismiss ancient ideas of prenatal influence or to find a biblical precedent for eugenics with Jacob, "the first man that we have any account of, to take up the study of heredity in livestock breeding."⁴³ The prominence of Jacob as not only a controller of animal heredity but a selfish, scheming deceiver presents him as a natural candidate for the engineer of the white race, and Elijah Muhammad would make reference in his own later work to the Jacob and Laban story.⁴⁴ Nation newspapers from 1934, however, identify Yacob not as the biblical Jacob but rather as John, hence his location at Patmos. As a black man, Yacob was additionally a god in his own right. When God said, "Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness" in Genesis 1:26, Elijah Muhammad writes, "It was Mr. Yacob teaching his exiled followers." Genesis 6:6, which states, "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the Earth and it grieved him at his heart," similarly refers to Yacob repenting for his creation of white people.⁴⁵

In addition to the enormously popular and powerful ideology of eugenics, the Lessons' account of white origins also overlaps with Theosophical ideas about race and human evolution, while reading as an inversion of its trajectory. For Theosophists, humanity passed through a sequence of root races, each representing a stage of human advancement; from each root race, a sub-race would emerge to produce the next root race. While H.P. Blavatsky's narrative of racial

42. Schuster, *Eugenics*, 203–4; Jordan, *The Heredity of Richard Roe*, 39; Popenoe and Johnson, *Applied Eugenics*, 64; "The Bogey of Pre-Natal Influence," 466–68; Goldsmith, *The Laws of Life*, 359.

43. Cook, *Like Breeds Like*, 24–25.

44. Muhammad, *Yakub: the Father of Mankind*, 92.

45. "Dry Bones," 5.

origins privileges the Aryan race as the fifth—and presently highest—race in an evolutionary sequence that would conclude with the future sixth and seventh races, the Lessons present the emergence of white people as a mark of decline and decay. Humanity’s golden future is assured not with promise that another new race would come, but rather that the devils will be taken off the planet.⁴⁶

C.W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant elaborate on Blavatsky’s narrative of racial origins in their 1913 collaboration, *Man: Whence, How and Whither: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*, that readily enters into conversation with the Lessons.⁴⁷ According to Leadbeater and Besant, Manu, “Lord of the Moon,” embarked on a deliberate breeding project to “shape for His Race”⁴⁸ on earth, which would become the Aryan people. To this end, he chose followers “like looking over a flock of sheep, and choosing the most suitable.”⁴⁹ Leadbeater and Besant unfold a complex account of Manu’s generations of followers and their respective fortunes until reaching the particularly successful fifth Atlantean sub-race, which was “quite isolated from the world in general by a belt of sand, which could only be crossed by caravans carrying with them plenty of water, and there was only one way across it with grass and water, about where Mecca now stands.”⁵⁰ Manu exiled his “least desirable types” and “preserved unmixed within His belt of desert the most promising.”⁵¹ Ultimately this population dispersed across the globe.⁵² The Lessons flip the narrative: Yacob does not monitor and regulate his followers’ breeding to create progressively superior generations and assist human spiritual evolution, but to achieve a regression in consciousness with the production of a “weak and wicked” devil. These devils are not created “about where Mecca now stands” but rather in the Aegean Sea, later coming to Mecca to disrupt its harmonious society with their tactics of deception

46. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

47. Leadbeater and Besant, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*.

48. *Ibid.*, 225.

49. *Ibid.*, 225.

50. *Ibid.*, 230.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 230–33.

and division; it is then that the devils are exiled from Mecca, forced to walk across the desert.⁵³ The devil cannot be reformed by any means other than a reversal of Yacob’s breeding project—“graft him back to the original man”—but because this process would take six hundred years, it has been decided that after the expiration of “the Devil’s civilization” in 1914, he would be taken off the planet.⁵⁴

Read in the context of 1930s Detroit, the Lessons reflect a setting in which the fundamental argument of eugenics discourses—that a nation’s intellectual and physical health could (and must) be protected through a rigorous vetting and regulation of its breeders—had enjoyed the privilege of mainstream science and presidential endorsement. While Yacob’s biblical identity could appear fluid for Elijah Muhammad, Fard Muhammad (claiming mastery of Arabic and the Qur’an) is likely to have named the ancient eugenicist after the biblical Jacob, who frequently appeared in eugenics literature. The Lessons speak to their era’s prominent assumptions about human societies as breeding labs. Moreover, these ideas of racial hygiene also informed esotericist discourses. Theosophist intellectuals such as Blavatsky, Besant, and Leadbeater integrated contemporary ideas about race and civilizational progress into their trajectories of human metaphysical advancement. The Lessons share Theosophical assumptions of meaningful linkages between racial essences, regulated breeding, and metaphysical destinies, while engaging these linkages from a starting point of Black godhood and Islam as a nation with no “birth record.”⁵⁵

Prophets and Scientists: Yacob, Mossa, and Jesus

In the short question-answer exchanges of the Lessons, Yacob does not receive a detailed biography. The fourth question in *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1* asks, “Why did we run Yacob and his made devil from the root of civilization,

53. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

over the hot desert, into the cave of West Asia, as they now call it Europe?” The answer explains that Yacob was “an original black man, and the father of the devil.” Yacob taught the devils how to “do this devilishment,” which included “making trouble among the righteous people,” “telling lies,” and causing the righteous people to “fight and kill one another.” The text explains that “we ran the devils over the Arabian Desert,” making the devils walk every step of the way and taking everything from them except their language. Mossa came to the caves of Europe two thousand years later to teach the devils “how to live a respectful life, how to build a home for himself” and also “tricknollegy,” which was knowledge from Yacob—“the devilishment, telling lies, stealing, and how to master the original man.”⁵⁶

In *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2*, questions 21–40 deal with the origins, nature, and promised end of Yacob’s grafted devil. This section includes the bulk of the Lessons’ content regarding Yacob, explaining the policies of his eugenics regime on the island of Pelan/Patmos. The text identifies Yacob as “an original man who was a scientist . . . born twenty miles from the holy city Mecca, in the year eight thousand four hundred” as an answer to the question, “Who was the founder of unlike attract and like repel?” The next question asks, “How old was the founder?” to which the text answers:

When Yacob was six years old, while playing with two pieces of steel, he discovered one piece had magnetic in it and the other piece did not. Then he learned that the piece with magnetic attracted the piece that did not have magnetic in it; then he told his people when he was old enough to make a nation that would be unlike and he would teach them tricknolledge and they would rule for six thousand years.⁵⁷

The Lessons state that in accordance with what was predicted for him 8,400 years before his birth, Yacob was born with “a determined idea to make a people to rule.”⁵⁸ His force of will reflects the superior mental power of Original people, as *Final Call to Islam* writer Ocier Zarrieff explains in 1934:

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

We find that the first telephone was known to the white man in 1861. But, my friends, this is not the beginning of distant communication. Your brother, Assia, whom you call Jesus, was able to receive messages from long distances without wires. How do you think he knew just when to run when he was dodging about in Herod's Government? Every Asiatic Scientist, or one Moslem out of every hundred is equipped with Wisdom in his head and he can receive messages anywhere on the Planet Earth. In fact, the radio, telephone, as well as all known inventions, came from the Original man's head, which first appeared as a thought.⁵⁹

What was the relationship between Yacob's "determined idea," his later vow at the age of six that he will someday create a devil, and his discovery of "alike attract and unlike repel?" By the early twentieth century, mesmerist ideas of the healing properties in magnets had informed esotericist thinkers who theorized the magnetic power of thought, as well as a thriving market for "lodestones" that promised good luck to their possessors. The Magnetic Mineral Company advertised "loadstones" (sic) in newspapers from 1911 to 1914, when proprietor Frederick Nugent—who doubled as head of the Irridescent Order of Iris and the Occult School of Sciences (with as many as 1,800 dues-paying members)—was arrested for mail fraud with charges that he sold twelve-cent stones for as much as twenty-five dollars a piece.⁶⁰ In addition to the stones themselves, Nugent promoted a book, *The Loadstone, Mother of Magnetism*, which provided ancient and modern philosophical and scientific knowledge concerning the stones' powers as well as their applications:

IS IT your desire to have that strange, mysterious power that charms and fascinates men and women, shape their thoughts, control their destinies, and make you supreme master of every situation? Do you wish to know the secrets of Magnetism? Learn how to win the friendship and love of others, gratify your ambitions, increase your income, dispense worry and trouble, banish domestic unhappiness, and develop a wonderful magnetic will-power that will enable you to overcome all obstacles to your success?⁶¹

59. Zarrieff, "Devil's Civilization Young," 6.

60. "One Born Every Minute," 28.

61. *The Freeman*, March 30, 1912, 2.

According to Nugent’s advertisements, *The Loadstone* reveals a long-guarded “dying message” from Toussaint L’Ouvverture, “noblest type of the African race,” “greatest general of history,” and leader of the 1791 Haitian revolution.⁶² A 1913 advertisement in *The Freeman*, presented as an article by a “special correspondent,” asserts that L’Ouvverture “rose from obscurity to the heights of fame” and defeated 30,000 European soldiers with the help of a stone that he always carried. The ad also locates knowledge of magnetic stones among Moses and the Israelites, Greek philosophers, and settings such as China, Bengal, and Ethiopia. In particular resonance with the Lessons, the ad explains that “there should be two stones, one positive and one negative, or two that attract each other. The idea is that the minerals will give to the person that personal magnetism, which is of such great importance to success in this world.”⁶³ While the Magnetic Mineral Company’s ad claims, “No one knows who discovered the lodestone,” the Lessons answer the question: magnetic attraction was discovered by six-year old Yacob, who then vowed that he would manifest his thought in reality.

Magnetism informed esoteric discussions of humans’ mental power in which thought itself became magnetic. Chicago-based occult publisher and entrepreneur William de Laurence, whose resonance with the Nation’s particular theology and Christology will be seen below, also writes in *The Immanence of God—Know Thyself*, “There is inherent in the human soul a certain magnetic virtue which is natural and proper, which acts in a very peculiar manner, i.e., magnetically or spiritually in a person or an object at a remote distance and that more effectively and powerful than by any corporal assistance” and turns to the story of Jacob and Laban for biblical evidence.⁶⁴ The successful manifestation of Yacob’s “determined idea” to create a race that, while physically and mentally weaker than original peoples, manages to rule the world becomes evidenced in modern white supremacy. Answering the question, “Then, why did God make devil?,” the Lessons explain that

62. Ibid.

63. “What are the Powers of the Loadstone?,” 2.

64. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 35.

the devil’s creation, rise to power, and final annihilation all fulfill a divine plan to “show and prove that Allah is the God; always has been and always will be.”⁶⁵

De Laurence writes of Jacob as a “deceitful, selfish, crouching brother, and an unworthy man” who “succeeded by fraud and lying” and was “better versed in trickery and psychology than Godly affairs: and is he not represented as a *diviner* or *magician*?”⁶⁶ In the Lessons, Yacob’s grafted devils become masters of the world through tricknollegy, a science of power which apparently consists of using deception to create internal discord within communities, stealing, and an unexplained knowledge of “how to master the original man.” The science originates with Yacob himself, for which Yacob and his devils are exiled from Mecca and sent to Europe. Over the course of two thousand years spent in European exile, the devils “went savage and lived in the caves,” requiring the intervention of Mossa, who was “half-original” and a prophet that had been predicted in the year one, 15,019 years ago. Mossa came to the white devil and “taught him how to live a respectful life, how to build a home for himself and some of the tricknollegy that Yacob taught him.”⁶⁷ Sharing “the forgotten Tricknollegy,” Mossa revives the Yacobi-an archive and endows Yacob’s devils with the science that will enable them to enslave the world. Mossa’s own status as “half-original,” however, impaired his project. Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1 also asks, “Why did Mossa have a hard time to civilize the devil 2000 B.C.?” and gives the answer:

Because he was a savage. Savage means a person that has lost the knowledge of himself and who is living a beast life. Mossa was an half original man and a prophet. Two thousand B.C. means before Christ. In the Asiatic world it was in the eleven thousand year. Civilize means to teach the knowledge and wisdom of the human family of the planet Earth.⁶⁸

This image of Moses as a hybrid figure equipped with special knowledge would resonate with his depiction in popular occult representations. *The Sixth and*

65. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

66. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, lxvi-lxix.

67. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

68. *Ibid.*

Seventh Books of Moses, an English translation of a nineteenth-century German text, titled for its claim to offer a previously lost supplement to Moses's canonical five books in the Bible, had grown enormously popular among African American occultists by the early decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁹ *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* characterizes Moses as a figure of contradictions who struggles to become the self-perfected occult master:

We find in Moses the emotions of an inward psychological struggle with hopes and fears, with extreme weakness and supernatural strength of will; of submission, reverence and obedience; of confidence, and finally of an enthusiasm, that, regarding all earthly obstacles as nought, he overcame all things. While he was thus equipped with god-like powers, he subdued the elements of nature and compelled them to testify to the greatness and glory of God by the marvellous wonders which he performed.⁷⁰

The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses also describes Moses's powers and feats in terms of “magnetic occurrences,” particularly calling attention to Moses's use of the rod and highlighting magnetism among the later Israelite prophets such as Elisha.⁷¹ As a “remarkable instance of the magnetic influence in changing the nature and complexion of living objects,” the text points to the story of Jacob and Laban, attributing Jacob's influence over the animals' colors as “an application of the mysterious doctrine of magnetism.”⁷² Imprinting images on the cognition of Laban's livestock, Jacob causes them to transmit the same images upon their young, resulting in their striped coats; with his superior comprehension of the laws of attraction, he gets the upper hand over his father-in-law. De Laurence, who published his own edition of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, plagiarizes directly from this section of the text in his own theological work, *The Immanence of God*, to argue for Jacob's superior understanding of the ways in which the human mind can generate signs and images and imprint them upon

69. Polk, “Other Books, Other Powers.”

70. *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, 37–38.

71. *Ibid*, 37–44.

72. *Ibid*, 35.

material reality to make change in the world.⁷³ The story of Jacob using laws of attraction to manipulate the livestock's color, commonly referenced in eugenics literature to present Jacob as an ancient geneticist, appears in these prominent esoteric works to present Jacob as a master of occult magnetism.

The Lessons also make a claim on Jesus, arguing that one can reject Christianity without losing Jesus on the grounds that Jesus himself had no connection to the tradition that developed in his name. The fifth item in Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1, asking “Why did we take Jerusalem from the devil? How long ago?,” accuses the devil of exploiting Jesus and distorting his message to invent a false religion:

Because one of our righteous brothers, who was a prophet by the name of Jesus was buried there, and he uses his name to shield his dirty religion, which is called Christianity, also to deceive the people so they will believe in him. Jesus' teaching was not Christianity, it was Freedom, Justice and Equality.⁷⁴

The Student Enrollment supports this position by asserting that Christianity is only 551 years old, which would date its origins to roughly 1383 CE, less than two centuries prior to the start of the transatlantic slave trade (which the Nation dates to 379 years from the time of the Lessons, meaning roughly 1525). The Lessons' rejection of Christianity and denial of an unseen “mystery god” place the early Nation in conversation with esoteric Christologies popular in the period's occult marketplace. Of particular salience, de Laurence advocates an immanationist theology in which the notion of God as absolutely transcendent and separate from humanity—what de Laurence rejects as “an imaginary or a man-made God”⁷⁵ and the Lessons term a “mystery god”—represents an artificial construction and betrayal of the true teachings from “Master Jesus.” De Laurence draws from biblical citations to argue that the Master Jesus taught men and women “a knowledge of self,”⁷⁶ which meant the belief in themselves

73. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 36.

74. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25–20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

75. De Laurence, *The Immanence of God*, 41.

76. *Ibid*, 40.

as gods, rather than devotion to a being perceived as outside themselves.⁷⁷ According to de Laurence, Jesus “knew that the man who has no knowledge of self (God) can never be a Master of self, or the events of life; that he will be the sport and prey of the forces and conditions surrounding him.”⁷⁸ Jesus was such a “Master” because he had been trained by masters, which de Laurence compares to popular ideas of “Mystics” and “Adepts.” Jesus had “trodden the path and received the instruction of the Masters in India and the Orient,” de Laurence explains. “This is a fact that is well known. It is also a matter of record that Christ did belong to the Ancient School of India, “The Wise Men of the East.”⁷⁹

De Laurence writes of a departure from the true teachings of the Master Jesus, centered upon a god immanent to the self, into historical Christian tradition as the work of corrupt and self-serving priests who deceive the masses for their own gain. “The history of priestism in all ages,” de Laurence writes, is to “flatter the prosperous, to support the powerful,” and get a share of the plunder.⁸⁰ These priests “distorted, counterfeited and destroyed the original teachings of ‘The Master Jesus’” to deny the location of God’s kingdom within the self and instead emphasize God’s transcendence in order to enforce their own control over the masses.⁸¹ As part of his polemic against Christian “priestism,” de Laurence also quotes the Qur’an’s account of Jesus as “no more than an apostle,” names Muḥammad as founder of an empire that “spread itself over a greater part of the world than the Romans were ever master of,” and gives a generally innocuous treatment of “Mohammedanism” in comparison to Christianity.⁸² Though the Bible provides a compelling resource for de Laurence, it remains an imperfect one, vulnerable to the subjectivities of human authorship as well as later ed-

77. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

78. *Ibid.*, 134.

79. *Ibid.*, 42.

80. *Ibid.*, xlvii.

81. *Ibid.*, 13.

82. *Ibid.*, 92–93.

itorial corruptions, thereby containing “errors of almost every description.”⁸³ De Laurence specifically devotes an appendix of *The Immanence of God—Know Thyself* to inconsistencies in biblical accounts of Christ’s resurrection, which is also denied in the Lessons’ assertion that “All the history of Islam never reveals anything that no man had ever been able to come back from a physical death.”⁸⁴

The critique of Christianity as fraudulent priestcraft, criticisms of the Bible, demythologization of Christ, denial of otherworldly resurrection, and reconstruction of God as inherent to the individual rather than an absolutely transcendent other, all prominent themes of esotericist discourses in the early twentieth century, appear in the Lessons as timeless truths of Islam. Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, all locatable in the Qur’an as Islamic prophets, appear in the Lessons’ construction of Islam with their unique esotericist representations as respectively a gifted discoverer of magnetism and eugenics, a master occultist-prophet, and an initiate of mystery schools.

Conclusions

While the significance of the Supreme Wisdom Lessons as a foundational text of American Islam has gone critically underexamined, the Problem Book’s importance for Five Percenter tradition remains even more neglected. Sahib’s 1951 thesis notes that while the Problem Book’s questions “do not make much sense,” its reader “tries ‘to get to the deep meanings of these problems’ because he believes that these ‘are symbols having great meanings and therefore their meanings have to be worked out.’”⁸⁵ There is more to Fard’s question of how many atoms exist in fifty square miles than simply teaching his disciples how to solve word problems: the Problem Book operated as an esoteric text that housed secrets from the Master. To properly understand the Problem Book could open

83. *Ibid.*, vi.

84. Wallace D. Fard, FBI file (25-20607), Chicago, 2/21/1957.

85. Sahib, *The Nation of Islam*, 147.

one to new comprehension of the Lessons, which themselves offer insights to its advanced students in terms of Master Fard Muhammad's teachings.

Esotericist engagements of the Problem Book provoked the rise of the Five Percenter movement, which originated after John 37X Brooks, an attritioned Nation of Islam member in 1960s Harlem, became preoccupied with the Problem Book's thirteenth problem:

After learning Mathematics, which is Islam, and Islam is Mathematics, it stands true. You can always prove it at no limit of time. Then you must learn to use it and secure some benefit while you are living, that is—luxury, money, good homes, friendship in all walks of life.

Sit yourself in Heaven at once! That is the greatest Desire of your Brother and Teachers.

Now you must speak the Language so you can use your Mathematical Theology in the proper term—otherwise you will not be successful unless you do speak well, for she knows all about you.

The Secretary of Islam offers a reward to the best and neatest worker of this Problem.

There are twenty-six letters in the Language and if a Student learns one letter per day, then how long will it take him to learn the twenty-six letters?

There are ten numbers in the Mathematic Language. Then how long will it take a Student to learn the whole ten numbers (at the above rate)?

The average man speaks four hundred words—considered well.⁸⁶

“Caught up in its science,” John 37X embarked on a project to decipher the Problem Book's thirteenth problem, master the relationships between letters and numbers, and learn the “Mathematic language.” His friend Clarence 13X Smith joined his project and sought to decode the text, leading to the construction of the Five Percenters' alpha-numeric systems of Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets. Though John 37X had initiated the endeavor, Clarence 13X appeared to take a more authoritative position, and began to share the

86. Melchisedek Shabazz Allah, *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, 30–31.

Lessons and his tools for mastering them with young men at Harlem’s underground gambling spots. “Dropping their Xs” to reflect their new status outside the Nation, Clarence 13X and John 37X took new names: Clarence 13X became Allah, expressing his station as the master knower; John 37X, bearing witness to Clarence’s position as Allah, became Shahid (“Witness”) and later Abu Shahid upon the birth of his son “Little Shahid.”⁸⁷

The Five Percenter tradition—so named for the former Clarence 13X’s identification with intellectual freedom fighters mentioned in the Lessons, who teach the masses (society’s “eighty-five percent”) and liberate their minds from the elite rulers (“ten percent”) who manipulate them with false religions—could be regarded as a *bātini* treatment of the Nation’s initiatory text. For the former Clarence 13X, the thirteenth problem became a key by which one could unlock the Lessons and recover their meanings. Teaching the Lessons to young men who had not registered as Muslims with Mosque No. 7, he presented his alpha-numeric codes as a means by which they could interpret the text. The number 1, for example, signifies the attribute of Knowledge; the first letter of the alphabet corresponds to Allah; the first question in the Student Enrollment asks, “Who is the Original Man?” To interpret this “degree” in the Lessons, a Five Percenter exegete could thus reflect on the Original Man, the Asiatic Black Man, as Allah, the doctrinal point critical to one’s “knowledge of self.” The seemingly endless possibilities for making connections between numbered degrees in the Lessons and their corresponding letters and numbers—especially considering the expansion of these possibilities by digit-summing—render the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets a dynamic technology through which readers of the Lessons explore layers of meanings to each question and answer.

Scholarship on the Five Percenter tradition has attempted to treat Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets as directly inspired or informed by premod-

87. Knight, *The Five Percenters*, 49–54.

ern Muslim science of letters.⁸⁸ Arguments for locating Five Percenters' alpha-numeric tools in the "classical" tradition can claim no support other than the fact that the Five Percenters care about esoteric meanings of letters and numbers and have terms like Allah, Islam, and Mecca in their vocabulary. There is absolutely no evidence that Allah (the former Clarence 13X) had studied Arabic science of letters, though Five Percenter oral traditions report that Allah appreciated Yusuf Ali's Qur'an commentary for Ali's attention to the revelation's "mystery letters." Rather than trace genealogies to premodern traditions as source material for the Five Percenters' alpha-numerics, we must first look to the text that provoked the Five Percenter project, the Nation of Islam's Problem Book. Numerology had been significant in Elijah Muhammad's writings, as well as for Malcolm X, who recalls in his *Autobiography* that he predicted the future Muhammad Ali's victory over Sonny Liston due to his seat in the audience; because his seat was numbered 34, he digit-summed 3+4 to get the auspicious number 7, revealing a triumph for the Nation.⁸⁹ Examining what we can of Master Fard Muhammad's ideas and methods, we still find no evidence of an interest in "classical" Arabic science of letters or numerology. It would be more intuitive to examine contemporary American engagements of numerology for a sense of the resources that proved meaningful for Fard and his student representative.

Nation of Islam intellectuals have also argued for connections between the Nation of Islam and Muslim traditions that more prominently claim the gravitas of "orthodoxy." Wesley Muhammad, for example, has argued for the Islamic authenticity of Nation theology, which holds that Fard Muhammad was Allah, through

88. Miyakawa writes, "The Supreme Alphabet takes as its model the spiritual science *Hurūfa-ī-jay-Hurūfa-Ab-jay*, an Arabic science of interpreting mystical meanings from each letter of the Arabic alphabet; the Five Percent Nation's version simply uses the Roman alphabet" (*Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, 29). Miyakawa supports these claims with a citation of Yusuf Nuruddin, "The Five Percenters: A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths." In *Muslim Communities in North America*, 109–32, Nuruddin describes Five Percenter alpha-numerics as a "creative adaptation of Tasawwuf or Sufism" and the Kabbala, but provides no evidence whatsoever to establish a Sufi origin for the Supreme Alphabets or Supreme Mathematics.

89. Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 314.

reading premodern masters such Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal to demonstrate that a corporeally anthropomorphic god was not always as threatening to Islamic monotheism as modern sensibilities might assume.⁹⁰ While this approach can serve as a theological apologetics for the Nation, the problem for Wesley Muhammad’s “Nation Salafism” is that we have no evidence that Elijah Muhammad or Fard Muhammad themselves engaged those sources. Though Fard Muhammad did apparently boast fluency in Arabic and teach from an all Arabic Qur’an, performing as an embodied link of access between the revelation and his audience, the textual traces that his teachings have left behind are essentially devoid of Arabic vocabulary or references that could locate him within a particular interpretive genealogy. The Lessons refer to four biblical passages (Ezekiel 3:18, Luke 12:47, and Revelation 1:9 and 19:40) but make no references to the Qur’an, hadith literature, or any Muslim institutions or sources. The Lessons’ claim that the Devil’s civilization expired in 1914 could make reference to that year’s declaration of jihad by the Ottoman Empire,⁹¹ but is at least as likely a reference to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ belief in 1914 as the start of the end times; Fard had, after all, prescribed Jehovah’s Witnesses radio programs as required listening for his followers.⁹² That the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive—that Fard could very well have intertextually linked the Ottoman declaration of jihad and Jehovah’s Witnesses eschatology—serves as an illustrative example of the ways that local and transnational resources intersected within the Nation’s archive.

Though the Lessons do not come with a bibliography of named sources, they offer a number of thematic portals into currents of alternative religiosity available in 1930s Detroit: magnetism and the power of thought, rejections of a transcendent “mystery god” in favor of reconstructing divinity as limitless human potential, emphasis on a vegetarian diet as critical to building one’s personal

90. Williams, *Tajalli na-Ru’ya*. Also “Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse,” 441–63.

91. Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, 99.

92. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit.”

divinity, Jesus redefined as a student of Eastern mysteries, the existence of civilizations on Mars and Mercury, communication with the dead, the development of distinct races as breeding projects by superior intellects, narratives of Moses as a master occultist, and portrayals of the Freemasons as a powerful ruling elite that withholds true knowledge from the masses. It is easy and perhaps intuitive to argue for the Lessons as an artifact of African American esotericism, reflecting the discursive field in which Fard and Elijah Muhammad operated to have been informed chiefly by movements such as Theosophy, New Thought, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and speculative Freemasonry. There is a price, however, to this treatment of the text in terms of sources, “influences,” and “borrowings,” in part for its question of authenticity. The study of African American Islam remains troubled by uncritical references to “orthodoxy,” as though orthodoxy is an historically stable and universally coherent entity that represents a unified “Muslim world” in clear distinction from local Black heterodoxies. Movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam have been frequently termed “quasi-Islamic” and “pseudo-Islamic” in scholarly literature. Sherman Jackson’s use of “proto-Islamic” in reference to these communities, while registering to some readers as an acknowledgment of historical significance, nonetheless retains the notion of authentic or complete Islam as occupying a higher rung on an evolutionary ladder. In Jackson’s language of “proto-Islam,” the Nation becomes historically valuable only insofar as it enables members to “graduate” and move up towards “classical” Islamic tradition.⁹³

In his discussion of the Moorish Science Temple, Edward E. Curtis IV resists the critical dangers of pronouncing judgment, due to Noble Drew Ali’s likely sources, that “the MST is not really Islamic and that Noble Drew was not a Muslim.”⁹⁴ Such treatments, Curtis argues, usually derive from a simplistic measurement of Moorish Science against what he calls “Textbook Islam,”

93. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*.

94. Curtis IV, “Debating the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple,” 70–90.

which would disqualify not only Moorish Science but also “folk Islam, antinomian Islam, and women’s Islam.”⁹⁵ In other words, Textbook Islam imagines a “universal” or “mainstream” Islam that denies the local and thereby excludes a substantial portion—even a majority—of historical Muslims. My intention in considering the Lessons’ likely non-Muslim sources and absence of references to “classical” materials or Arabic terms is not to deny the text’s Islamic credentials. To judge the Nation of Islam as insufficiently Islamic because it represents a “mixture” of Islamic and non-Islamic materials would provoke the critical problem of finding an unmixed Islam that stands outside history, unchanged by its local conversation partners. As Curtis notes in his discussion of Moorish Science, such an “imperious” approach would also require informing “literally millions of Muslims around the world . . . that they are not real Muslims” because their ideas of what counts as Islamic tradition don’t line up with Textbook Islam.⁹⁶ While the Lessons can and should be engaged as an artifact of twentieth-century U.S. esotericism, the text also merits attention in the study of Islamic esotericism, a subfield that itself struggles against the privilege accorded to “Textbook Islam” for inclusion in Islamic studies.

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95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

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