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History of Shiite Esoteric Interpretation in the Fourth Century

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Abstract

The term esoteric interpretation or *ta'wīl* has an important place in Islamic tradition, especially in Qur'anic commentary and mysticism, but also in other religious disciplines, such as dogmatic theology, principles of jurisprudence, jurisprudence, and philosophy. When esoteric interpretation is used in connection with the Qur'an, it is applied to all levels of meaning, from a simple, literal meaning to the hidden meanings. In the exegetical traditions, *ta'wīl* is mostly applied to the hidden meanings and esoteric exemplars of Qur'anic words. A major goal of this research on the history of esoteric interpretation is, to compare and contrast the methods employed in various texts belonging to the esoteric tradition of Qur'anic interpretation in the fourth century with a view to understand what, if anything, they all had in common. In order to do this, the study will document all major *ta'wīl* works that were produced in Shi'i Islam in the fourth century, the century which has been known as the establishment of the traditional Shi'i school of exegesis. Based on the above, the main topics of this research revolves around three axes: Definition of esoteric interpretation, methodology of Shiite Islam in esoteric interpretation of Qur'an and the examples of *ta'wīl* in classical *Tafsīr* works of Twelver Shia in the fourth century including *Tafsīr Ali ibn Ibrahim Al-Qomi*", *Tafsīr Furat Kufi*, *Tafsīr Nu'māni*, and *The Commentary Attributed to Imam al-'Askarī*.

Keywords: The Qur'an, Esoteric Interpretation, Methodology of *Ta'wīl*, Twelver Shia', *Tafsīr al-Qomi*, *Tafsīr Furāt Kūfi*, *Tafsīr Nu'māni*, *Tafsīr Imām al-'Askarī*.



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Definition and Objectives

The most Muslim scholars believe that many passages of the Qur'an have a hidden meaning not readily apparent to the reader.¹ Esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an which includes attribution of esoteric or mystical meanings to the text by the interpreter is different from the conventional exegesis/commentary of the Qur'an, called *Tafsīr*. Esoteric interpretations do not usually contradict the conventional (in this context called exoteric) interpretations; instead, they discuss the inner levels of meaning of the Qur'an. A Hadith (Kulayni, vol. 4, pp. 398-399; Majlisi, vol. 89, p. 78) from the Prophet states that the Qur'an has an inner meaning, and that this inner meaning conceals a yet deeper inner meaning, and so on (up to seven levels of meaning), has sometimes been used in support of this view. Amongst the hadiths concerning the Qur'an, we find both the exoteric and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an.

Esoteric interpretations are found mainly in Sufism, and in the traditions (*ahādith*) of Twelver Shi'a Imams and the teachings of the Isma'ili sect. In Arabic, *batin* refers to the inner or esoteric meaning of a sacred text, and *zahir* to the apparent or exoteric meaning. Hence, the term *batiniyya* is sometimes applied to those who refer to an exclusively esoteric interpretation (especially among Isma'ilis).

Based on the above, we can say that this research's main aim is to answer the question of whether Twelver Shi'i authors had a particular method for deriving the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of particular Qur'anic verses. In order to do this, the study will document all major *ta'wīl* works that were produced in Shi'i Islam in the fourth century, the century which has been known as the establishment of the traditional Shi'i school of exegesis; then, it will analyze the major works among these to see how the authors justify their use of *ta'wīl*, and whether any of them provide an explicit methodology of how *ta'wīl* is known.

Methodology of *Ta'wīl* in the Twelver Shi'a

Twelver Shi'i authors had a particular method for deriving the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of particular Qur'anic verses. To do this, at first, the

1. Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, p. 99: "The whole of the Qur'an possesses the sense of ta'wil, of esoteric meaning, which cannot be comprehended directly through human thought alone. Only the prophets and the pure among the saints of God who are free from the dross of human imperfection can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence."

doctrine of the Imamate should be discussed. The doctrine of the Imamate however, leads to much deeper differences between the Shiites and Sunnis.

The Twelver Shi'a believes that the sayings of the imams are by nature as sacred as are those of the Prophet; indeed, they are even as holy as are the Words of God; this is explicitly expressed in a tradition that goes back to Jafar, a tradition the importance of which various commentators have emphasized. (Kulayni, vol. 1, pp. 65-66; Nu'māni, p. 127)

Another important issue that should be discussed here is the position of esotericism and exotericism in the Twelver Shi'a. The doctrine of the imams revolves around two centrals, "polarized" axes. The first is "vertical"; it may be characterized by the two complementary poles defined by pairs such as *ẓāhir/bāṭin* (apparent/hidden; exoteric/esoteric), *nabī/walī* (Prophet/imam), *tanzīl/ta'wīl* (literal revelation/spiritual interpretation), Mohammad/Ali (the first whom represents lawgiving Prophecy, the exoteric part of religion, while the second represents the Imamate mission that consists in unveiling the esoteric part of the religion), *islām/imān* (submission to exoteric religion/initiation to esoteric religion), and so forth. It must be made specific here that, in contrast to certain Batinite currents derived from Shiism, exotericism is presented as being equally as important as esotericism. It might be said, in effect, that if without esotericism exotericism loses its meaning, then in just the same way without exotericism, esotericism has no ground in which to reside.

The Establishment of the Traditional Shi'i School of exegesis in the fourth century

The fourth century is a period of growth and blossoming in Muslim learning. During this century, the intellectual activity grew considerably, especially in the domain of Islamic culture and religious sciences, and books and compilations on a wide variety of subjects were written. The social and political conflicts largely subsided and the Shi'a were generally freer to occupy themselves with scholarly work, and establish their distinct school. With the appearance of these favorable conditions, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt trained many students, whom they sent to different parts of the Muslim world. In this period, the disciples of the Imams wrote works in different religious disciplines, especially in the field of Qur'anic commentary. Before that time, the established method of commentary was more or less limited to traditionalist approaches. The Shi'ite scholars began

to compete seriously with representatives of other schools of thought, and they started producing valuable works in different fields of learning.

In certain parts of the Islamic world, the conditions were more favorable for the Shi'a to identify themselves openly and be known as a distinct religious group. The establishment of Fatimid dynasties in North Africa, the Hamadani dynasty in the north of Bayn al-Nahrayn, as well as the Buyid dynasty in Iraq and Khorasan (Fars, parts of Ray and Esfahan) created a flexible situation for the Shi'a, and the Shi'ite scholars possessed the freedom and security to produce scientific works. (Persian papers of the world congress on Shaykh Tusi, Dawani, Ali, no. 4/63)

Because of this, Shia commentators started recording and indexing their earlier works on different religious disciplines. Kulayni (d. 328 AH) and Saduq (d. 381 AH) compiled hadith works, just like the Sunni exegete and historian al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) gathered works on commentary, history, and hadith earlier. With the emergence of scientific centers and the establishment of libraries, the improvement of copying techniques, and the introduction of paper as a convenient tool for writing, the Muslims and were given the possibility of recording the texts of their tradition, and this made possible the survival of man works which would have otherwise been lost.

The most well-known Shi'ite commentaries of this period are: *Tafsīr Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qomi*, *Tafsīr Furāt Kufī*, *Tafsīr 'Ayyāshi*, *Tafsīr Nu'māni*, *Tafsīr Mohammad ibn Qasim Astarabadi* known as *Tafsīr al-Imam al-Hasan al-'Askarī*, and *Tafsīr Abd al-Azīz Juludi* (d. 332 AH). (Agha Bozorg Tehrani, vol. 4, p. 300) Unfortunately some of these commentaries have been completely destroyed, while others have been modified. Even a commentary like that of Ayyāshi has some missing parts.

It is worth noting that the members of the Ahl al-Bayt greatly influenced the commentators of the era of Sahaba and Tabi'un (for the further information see: *Dowr Ahl al-Bayt fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an*, al-Majma' A'lami li Ahl al-Bayt). Some commentators among the Companions such as ibn Abbas¹, Ibn Mas'ud and Ubay ibn Ka'b were influenced by Imam

1. Ibn 'Abbas: Abd Allah ibn Abbas (Arabic: عبد الله ابن عباس) was a paternal cousin of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. He is revered by Muslims for his knowledge and was an expert in *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an), as well as an authority on the Islamic *Sunnah*. Abdullah b. 'Abbas (d. 68/687) is considered to be the most knowledgeable of the



Ali, and several commentators from the era of the Followers were direct disciples of Imam Bāqir¹ and Imam Ṣādiq². Since these books are the most

Companions in *tafsir*. (A book entitled *Tanwir al-miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas* (Beirut, n.d.) is a complete *tafsir* of the Qur'an, all explanations of which are said to go back to Ibn 'Abbas. On the question of authenticity, see al-Sawwaf, op. cit., p. 140.) He has been called *tarjuman al-qur'an*, interpreter of the Qur'an. Since he was related to the Prophet, being his cousin, and his maternal aunt Maimuna being one of the Prophet's wives, he was very close to the Prophet and learnt much about the revelation. It is said that he saw the Angel Gabriel twice. Apart from his detailed knowledge of everything concerning *tafsir* which he has learned from Imam Ali, he is also given the credit for having emphasized one of the basic principles of *'ilm al-tafsir* which has remained important to this day, namely, that the meaning of words, especially of unusual words in the Qur'an ought to be traced back to their usage in the language of pre-Islamic poetry. Because he has learned most of his knowledge on *tafsir* from Imam Ali and has narrated so much *hadith* from him on the interpretation of Qur'an, we have introduced him as the second interpreter who narrated many exegetical traditions and esoteric *hadiths*. A long list of such explanations is quoted by Suyuti. (*al-Itqan*, vol. 1, pp. 120-33.)

Tafsir ibn Abbas: Attributed variously to the Companion Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687) and to Ibn Ya'qub al-Firuzabadi (d. 1414), *Tafsir Ibn Abbas* is one of the pivotal works for understanding the environment which influenced the development of Qur'anic exegesis. Despite its uncertain authorship and its reliance on controversial Isra'iliyat, *Tafsir Ibn Abbas* nevertheless offers valuable insight into the circulation and exchange of popular ideas between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity during the formative phase of Islamic exegesis. This commentary is unabridged and uncensored, like the other works in the Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an series. The traditions attributed to Ibn Abbas that are at the core of this work render it as a seminal work of exegesis. *Tafsir Ibn Abbas* is unencumbered with *isnads*, or chains of transmission, and does not contain elaborate theological or philosophical explanations or technical grammatical explanations, thus making the work accessible to the non-specialist. Muslim scholarship considers Ibn Abbas as the real father of *ilm al-tafsir*. The reports related from Ibn Abbas regarding the interpretation of the Qur'an are abundant. In fact, there is almost no interpretation of a Qur'anic verse for which one cannot find an interpretation from Ibn Abbas.

1. **Tafsir of Imam Baqir (as):** The only known *tafsir* of the fifth Imam is that transmitted by Abu al-Jarud, parts of which were incorporated in Ali Ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi's *Tafsir* (The *Tafsir al-Qummi* as we have it being a composite work consisting of elements of *Tafsir Abu al-Jarud* and *al-Qummi*). Only part of this material is cited in *Tafsir al-Qummi*. A tentative conclusion is that this material comprises either excerpts of Abul-Jarud's transmission not included in *al-Qummi*, or a different *tafsir* ascribed to al-Baqir which is not otherwise attested. (See also: *Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir* by Dr. Arzina R. Lalani (I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2000). Imam al-Baqir's approach to establishing a Qur'anic basis for the Imamate consists of commenting upon particular verses and providing an interpretation to support his claim. These interpretations eventually formed the basis of the articulation of the concept of Imamate by many later Shi'i writers such as the Ismaili jurist al-Qadi al-Numan (d. 363 AH) and the Twelver Shi'i scholar, al-Kulayni (d. 329 AH).

2. **Tafsir Attributed to Imam Sadiq (as)**



important traditional exegeses of this century, we will only introduce the Shiite esoteric commentaries among them.

***Tafsīr Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi* - The Commentary of Qomi and Shi'ite Tradition**

Qomi was considered as one of the great Shi'a traditionalists and authors. The biographers have praised him highly, as he has been said to have met Imam Hasan al-'Askarī, whereas his father had met with two of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (as). He is the first person to have spread narrations in Qom (Ardabili, vol. 1, p. 540).

This Commentary which is attributed to Imam Sadiq is a narration by Ibn A'ta, which was later collected and compiled by Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Sulami (d. 417 AH). In addition to the narrations that have been quoted from Imam Sadiq on various topics, particularly in the field of interpretation, and which have been included in the traditional books compiled by his disciples that have been lost, two works have survived that are attributed to the Imam, namely *Misbah al-Sharia'h* and *Tafsir Ja'far al-Sadiq fi Kitab Haqayiq al-Tafsir al-Qur'an*. (It should be mentioned that *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir* or *Tafsir al-Sulami* has been edited by Sayyid Imran, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiya, 1412 AH, two volumes.)

Regarding the *Misbah al-Sharia'h* which has been edited by Hasan Mustafawi in Iran and Ali Zi'ur in Beirut, it should be mentioned that like other traditional books which are attributed to al-Sadiq, the existence of praise at the beginning of each section seems to indicate that at least parts of this book have not been written by al-Sadiq. The majority of its content deals with ethics and beliefs, whereas *Kitab Haqa'iq al-Tafsir* of Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412 AH) contains *ta'wil* and esoteric interpretations by Imam al-Sadiq. In the edition of Paul Nwyia, the title of the book is *Tafsir Jafar al-Sadiq*, and it has apparently been compiled from the original version of *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*. Sulami writes: "It is said that this book has been quoted [directly] from Imam Sadiq."² This book consists of Shi'i esoteric interpretations and much of Shi'ite *Ta'wil* can be seen in this commentary, and some of the narrations have been mentioned in other Shi'ite sources. (For further information see: Qadi Zadeh, Kazem, J. *Bayyinat*, no. 8, p. 106.) The importance of this commentary was pointed out first by Louis Massignon, and later Paul Nwyia tried hard to attribute this commentary to Imam Sadiq. These two scholars sought to establish its authenticity and they wanted to provide a bridge between Shi'ism and Sufism. In his book *Quranic Exegesis and Mystical Language*, Nwyia has analyzed this commentary word by word and tries to prove that it is an inward, mystical interpretation. (Nasruallah, Pourjavadi, *The Collection of Abu Abd al-Rahman Sulami's Compilation*, Tr. Isma'il Sa'dat, Tehran: University Press, 1369 AHS, vol. 1, p. 14) Many things have been written about *Tafsir al-Haqa'iq* by of Paul Nwyia, Louis Massignon, and Ali Zi'ur, an Arabic researcher, in his two books: *Kitab al-Sadiq: Haqa'iq al-Tafsir al-Quran*, and *al-Tafsir al-Sufi li al-Qur'an ind al-Sadiq*. The last point is that some exegetical materials of this book belong to Sulami but Paul Nwyia has mistakenly attributed them to Imam al-Sadiq. Paul Nwyia's edition includes the commentary from Surah al-Fatiha to Sura al-Ikhlās, and the following is a selection of some of its parts. (Paul Nwyia, *Quranic Exegesis and Mystical Language*, 1st ed., Tehran: University Press, 1373, p. 132.)



Shaykh Qomi is considered one of the most famous and prominent shi'a narrators. 7140 Hadiths were narrated by him, a large part of which (6214) he related from his father Shaykh Ibrahim. He received increasing respect and special honor from the Shi'ite ulama. Shaykh Tabarsi writes the following about him in his *A'lām al-Warā'*: "He was among our trustworthy Companions." Shaykh Najāshi said: "He is trustworthy in narrating, accurate and reliable, with a correct creed, and he has narrated many traditions" (Najāshi, p. 250).

Tafsīr of Qomi is one of the most famous references of Qur'anic commentary among the Shi'a. It has collected the relevant narrations with the method of traditional commentary and its title has been mentioned in the bibliographies of Kulayni, in his collection *Kāfī*. Other hadith scholars have narrated from him, but according to modern research by Agha Bozorg Tehrani and his students (Agha Bozorg Tehrani, vol. 4, p. 302), as well and another group of scholars (Ma'rifat, p. 187; Musawi, no. 32, p. 82; Milani, p. 110), the *Tafsīr* cannot be considered as belonging entirely to Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi.

Structure and Influence of *Tafsīr Qomi*

Qomi's commentary constituted the basis for many later Shi'ite commentaries, as most of its narrations has been quoted from Imam Bāqir (as) and Imam Ṣādiq (as), with a small number of intermediate transmitters going back to them. It has been published in two volumes, and Seyed ibn Tawus (d. 664 H.) has written the following in its description: "The whole book has four parts, in two volumes" (Seyed ibn Tāwūs, p. 87). One may normally understand from these words that the commentary is complete and that it includes all the chapters of the Qur'an. However, al-Qomi has interpreted selected verses in every Sura, and has left the rest without a commentary. The interpretations are usually based on authentic hadith, which is why *Tafsīr Qomi* has enjoyed an honored status among the traditional commentaries (Ma'rifat. 2/325; Uṣūl at-Tafsīr, p. 838). Nevertheless, due to the personal exertion of the author which is noticeable throughout the commentary, it can be called *Tafsīr ijtihādi-traditional*.

Tafsīr al-Qomi is one of the oldest Shi'ite commentaries and a traditional reference for their works in exegesis, such as *Tafsīr Burhan* and *Nūr al-Thaqalayn* and other *ijtihādi-traditional* commentaries like *Tafsīr Ṣāfi* and *Kanz al-Daqā'iq* as well as comprehensive Shi'ite commentaries

like *Tafsīr Majma' al-Bayān* and even other *ijtihādi* commentaries of the Qur'an like Tabataba'i's *Tafsīr al-Mizān*. This style of exegesis has been adopted in its wholeness in some commentaries like *Tafsīr Burhān*.

Qomi has quoted various narrations of Imam Ṣādiq (as) from his father, Ibrahim ibn Hashim, for the commentary of each Qur'anic verse in this book. His father has quoted those narrations from Ibn Umayr and some other famous narrators. But one of Qomi's students added other narrations of Imam Bāqir (as) for the explanation of the verses, thereby changing the structure of interpretation from Sura Āl-i 'Imrān onwards. In fact, the current version of the commentary which is known as *Tafsīr Qomi* contains the interpretations of Imam Bāqir (as) and Imam Ṣādiq (as). The method of this commentary consists in quoting *ahādith* from Imam Ṣādiq (as) and Imam Bāqir (as) for each verse, in order to explicate its meaning. This commentary has been separated from the commentary known as *Tafsīr Askari*. The hadiths from Imam Ṣādiq (as) have all been quoted through Ali Ibn Ibrahim, whereas the hadiths from Imam Bāqir (as) have been quoted through Abu al-Jārūd.

These narrations have been considered as very reliable in Shi'ite sources, and Fadl ibn Hasan al-Tabarsi (d. 548 H.), has quoted the narrations for his *Tafsīr Majma' al-Bayān* from Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi (Tabarsi, vol. 1, p. 200 following the verse 124 of Sura Baqarah, p. 207 following the verse 127; *Tafsīr Qomi*, vol. 1, pp. 59 and 60 following the same verses.). In several places, he writes that Ali Ibn Ibrahim has mentioned this Hadith in his commentary (Tabarsi, vol. 1, p. 200.).

Seyed ibn Tawus has repeatedly referred to the *Tafsīr* of Ali ibn Ibrahim in his *Sa'd al-So'ud* (Ibn Tawus, pp. 83-87) which differs very little from the method of al-Qomi (Qomi, vol. 1, pp. 59 and 277 and 378; *ibid*, vol. 2, p. 146). Faiḍ Kashāni has quoted a great deal from Qomi in his *Tafsīr Safi* (Fayḍ Kashāni, vol.1, p. 77)

Majlisi has mentioned this commentary in his *Biḥār al-Anwār*, under the title *Kitāb al-Tafsīr lil Shaykh al-Jalil al-Thiqat Ali ibn Ibrahim ibn Hashim Qomi*, and has stated the following on its reliability: "the commentary of Ali Ibn Ibrahim is the most famous book [on exegesis], and Tabarsi and others have quoted from it" (Majlisi, vol.1, p. 8 and 27).

Tafsīr al-Qomi was also one of the very reliable references of Shaikh Hurr Āmili, who has quoted extensively from it in his collection *Wasā'il*

al-Shi'a, calling it a “trustworthy book” in the fourth section (Fā’idah) at the end of *Wasā’il* (Hurr Āmili, 20/ 36-43). He has also mentioned its narrators, saying that there is no doubt in the accuracy of that commentary (Ibid, vol. 43, pp 43 and 49-55). Āmili writes in the fourth Fa’idah: “Ali Ibn Ibrahim was very precise and serious in the Hadith used in his commentary, and he has quoted them from authoritative individuals” (Ibid, p. 68). In addition to the fact that in Āmili’s view the attribution of this commentary to Ali Ibn Ibrahim was obvious, Shaikh Ansari too believed that it belonged to Ali Ibn Ibrahim.

The Interpretative Approach of Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi

Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi confined his interpretation to the quoting of Hadith that explain the meaning of the verses. It can be deduced from his method in quoting Hadith that he was very trustful of the hadith literature. For instance, he has started many hadith with the phrase “*fa innahu*» «فإنه» (Qomi, vol. 1, pp. 61, 64, 71, 72, 74, 94, 110, 111, 113, 117). One such example is in the commentary of the verse:

و اذ قلتم يا موسى لن نؤمن لك حتى نرى الله جهرة فاخذتكم الساعة. (Al-Baqarat, 55)

“This verse is a proof for the *raj’ah* (return) of the followers of Mohammad. The Prophet has said: There was nothing among the Bani Isrāiel the like of which would not happen in my nation” (Qomi, vol. 1, p. 76).

Many of the hadith quoted in the commentary point to the esoteric meaning of verses, such as the hadith from surah Ḥamd which interprets «المغضوب عليهم» as the enemies Ahl al-Bayt. He also interprets the «الضالين» as those who are skeptics and do not recognize the Imam (Qomi, vol. 1, p. 58). Another example is the narration which interprets the Heaven of Adam and Eve to be the gardens of this world (Ibid, p. 71). Some hadiths deal with the hidden and esoteric meaning of verses. For example, the term «الكتاب» is said to refer to Imam Ali (Ibid, p. 59).

What has been said is a number of issues regarding the introduction of *Tafsīr Qomi*, with the assumption that the author is Ali Ibn Ibrahim. However, when one looks at the research on the subject, one notices certain skepticism in the attribution of this introduction to Ali ibn Ibrahim.

There are Two Positions on This Issue:

I: The attribution of this introduction to Ali ibn Ibrahim, and the consequent acceptance of Ali ibn Ibrahim’s words about the reliability of

his narrators in his book, because he is the one of trusted Shi'a scholars and his words are reliable. In this case, only a limited part of narration documents covered by the present book will be reliable.

II: The attribution of this introduction to an author who is certainly other than Ali Ibn Ibrahim, in which case the reliability of the contents is debatable, let alone the reliability of narrators who are mentioned only in this book.

According to the available evidence, the second opinion seems more plausible because the terminology used in the introduction demonstrates that it has been written by someone other than Ali Ibn Ibrahim. Another reason which supports this view is the fact that the introduction contains arguments about the Ali ibn Ibrahim's words. Therefore, the current commentary cannot belong entirely to Ali bin Ibrahim al-Qomi, and, like the interpretation which is attributed to Imam Hasan al-Askari, it has another author.

Tafsīr Furāt Kufī

This commentary is a compilation of Abu al-Qasim Furāt ibn Ibrahim ibn Furāt kufī (d. 300 AH). The commentator was one of the virtuous scholars of the minor occultation period and master of narrations in his era, a contemporary of Kulaini (d. 328 AH) and Hafīz ibn Uqdah (d. 332 AH) and was center pole of the science of Hadith. From a look at his life and his Hadith teachers, it is clear that he was of Zaydi persuasion, although he quoted narrations from Imam Bāqir (as) and Imam Ṣādiq (as). *Tafsīr Furāt* is a narration-based commentary, similar to *Tafsīr 'Ayyāshī* and *Tafsīr Qomi*, in which the majority of the subjects are about the infallible Imams of Ahl-al Bayt (as).

The narrations of *Tafsīr Furāt* are divided according to chapters and verses. Before modern editions, narrations were not grouped or classified. The commentator's method in quoting the names of narrators is summary and reference. No explanation and analysis have been provided, except quoting hadith by the author. The book begins with an introduction about the status and virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), then the author proceeds with *Tafsīr* narrations and esoteric interpretations which are mostly about the Ahl al-Bayt. The first printing of *Tafsīr Furāt*, with an introduction by Shaykh Mohammad Ali Gharawi Urdubadi was published in Najaf by Haydariyah Press, in 1354 AH. Another edition with footnotes, narration

indexes, and hadith sources by Shaykh Mohammad Kazem Mahmud, was printed by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in Tehran.

Tafsīr Nu'māni

This commentary was written by Ja'far Mohammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Nu'māni, known as ibn Zainab (d. after 324 AH). Nu'māni was the scribe and disciple of Shaykh Kulayni and lived in the minor occultation era. He is the first to have written a book on Occultation (Nu'māni, p. 45). His commentary is one of the main Shi'ite works on Tafsīr during the early centuries.

The author has divided and classified his work in fifty-eight discussions, in which he quotes exclusively from Imam Ali. The text has been quoted in its entirety in the book *Muḥkam and Mutashābih* and it has been attributed to Seyed Murtaḍā. Majlisi has mentioned it in his *Bihār al-Anwār*, under the title *ma warida an Amir al-Mu'minin fi asnāf Āyāt al-Qur'an wa anwā'ihā bi riwāyāt al-Nu'māni* (Majlisi, vol. 90, vol. 93).

However, the commentary of Nu'māni is not a proper *Tafsīr*, as it does not start from the beginning of Qur'an and end with the last Chapter. Rather, it addresses the important issues of the Qur'an in a thematic approach, by grouping the exegetical topics in categories and collecting hadith for each topic. For example, the book contains the categories of *al-nāsikh wa al-mansūkh*, *āyāt al-muḥkam wa al-mutashābih*, *qaḍā wa qadar*, as well as theological discussions in rejecting the pagans, the heretics and the materialists, etc. Al-Nu'māni has also presented enlightening explanations on idolatry, oppression, and commandments. Therefore, his commentary may be called an important reference on the sciences of Qur'an. It should be noted that Ali Akbar Ghaffari has said that this interpretation is likely an introduction to a complete interpretation by the author (Nu'māni, p. 13).

Tafsīr al-Nu'māni was published in a lithographed edition in Tehran in 1312 AH with the title *Muḥkam wa mutashābih*, edited by Seyed Murtaḍā (d. 435 AH) (*Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif Tashayū'*, vol. 4, p. 498). Also, Hasan Farid Gulpaygani has referred to this book as *Bayyināt al-Farīd* in 1399 AH.

The Commentary Attributed to Imam al-Askari (as)

This is a book which has been circulating in Shi'a centers of learning from the middle of the fourth century, and it has been attributed to the eleventh Imam, Hasan Askari (as) (d. 254 AH). According to the narration of Mohammad bin Qasim Astarabadi (lived in the first half of the fourth

century), Abu Ya‘qūb Yusef ibn Mohammad ibn Ziyad and Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Mohammad ibn Sayyār, who was one of Imam Askari students, has dictated it by order of the Imam, and Astarabadi has quoted it. According to the introduction of this commentary, Imam Askari dictated it to the scribes during a period of seven years.

This commentary has been compiled in a traditional style, and it is not a complete commentary of the Qur’an, but only includes the interpretation of *Isti’adhá*, the *Bismilah*, surah Fātiḥah, and parts of surah Baqarah. However, Muhaddith Nuri has claimed at the end of *Mustadrak al-Wasā’il* (in the biography of Faqīh Mohammad ibn Qasim) that the original book contains more than the current version (Mohaddith Nūri, vol. 23, p. 186).

There have been many discussions about this commentary. Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 381 AH) in his books *man lā yahḍoroḥo al-faqīh*, *Tawḥīd*, and *‘Uyūn Akhbār al-Riḍā*; Ibn Shahrāshūb in his *Manāqib*; Shahid Thāni in *Munyat al-Murīd*; and Hurr Āmili in *Wasā’il al-Shi‘a* (Hurr Āmili, vol. 20, p. 59; Noori, vol. 23, p. 186;) have confirmed the attribution of this book to the eleventh Imam and that is why many commentators and traditionalists have had a special trust in this book. On the other hand, although Imam Hasan Askari was martyred in the second half of the third century, the name of this commentary was not known until about a century later. In the fourth century, there was a large number of Shi‘ite scholars in the field of Hadith, jurisprudence, exegesis, and theology, such as Ahmad Barqī (d. 274 AH), Ali ibn Ibrahim Qomi (d. 328 AH), Mohammad ibn Ya‘qūb Kulayni (d. 329 AH), Ibn Quluwayh (d. 369 AH) and hundreds of others who have written significant academic works, but none of them has not only not quoted any hadith from this book, they have even not mentioned the book under any name, or its narrators (Keyhan Andishe, no. 28, p. 123). Shaykh Ṭūsi also has not quoted any hadith from this book. Ahmad ibn Hussein Ghazāyeri declares Mohammad ibn Qasim as unacceptable and says that his book is not known. Allamah Ḥilli in his *Rijāl* repeats the words of ibn Ghazāyeri exactly. According to these opinions it follows that this interpretation is not entirely reliable. On the other hand, it cannot be completely rejected either, but like other narration-based commentaries, it must be examined with the evidences of historical research and the criteria of hadith evaluation. This commentary has been published many times. The first lithographed edition was published in

Tehran in 1268 AH. In recent years, it has been published with a description of Ustādī, by the Imam Mahdi Institute in Qom, in 1409 AH.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should again back to our discussion to summarize that the most Shia scholars believe that every passages of the Qur'an have a hidden meaning not readily apparent to the reader and the whole of the Qur'an possesses the sense of *ta'wīl*, of esoteric meaning, which cannot be comprehended directly through human thought alone. Only the prophets and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge (*rāsikhūn fil-'Ilm*) can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence. In the second part of the research, since the fourth century is a period of the traditional Shi'ite school of exegesis, so, we introduced some of the Shiite esoteric commentaries among them. In a large number of traditions in Shiite esoteric exegesis such as Tafsīr Qomi, esoteric interpretation is used in the exemplars (*maṣādiq*) of Qur'anic words, rather than to their concepts (literal meanings). These traditions in which there is a meaning or exemplar that are not included in the superficial and general concept of the word concerned are called "interior traditions". The difference between "Hadiths explaining some applications" and "Hadiths explaining esoteric meaning" is that the first only include applications of words as their superficial and general meaning. But, in some cases, there are words in traditions that Qur'anic words do not have such a clear indication to them (Shaker, (2009), vol. 16 (1): (143-166). And finally, research on the Qur'anic thoughts of Shiite in the esoteric interpretation, provides a platform for the represent of the Shia Qur'anic thoughts and reviewing the impact of these perspectives on the development and depth of the esoteric interpretation and its comparison with the achievements of other Islamic denominations.

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