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The Inner Qurʾān: Notes on the Sufi Hermeneutics, Self-Knowledge, and Divine Address

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Abstract

Sufi interpretation of the Qurʾān—often termed *taʾwīl* or esoteric exegesis—seeks to uncover the inner spiritual meanings of the Islamic scripture beyond its literal text. This paper revises and expands the discussion on Qurʾānic mysticism, situating it within both Sufi and Shiʿi traditions, and examines the epistemological foundations that enable such interpretations. Drawing on contemporary scholarship and classical sources, we explore how Sufi and Shiʿi thinkers conceptualize the Qurʾān as a multi-layered revelation with *ẓāhir* (outward) and *bāṭin* (inward) meanings. We analyze definitions of *taʾwīl*, historical debates over its legitimacy, and the methods by which mystics claim to "return" the verses to their divine origin. Special attention is given to the role of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence), *maʿrifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge), *fiṭra* (innate disposition), and *tawḥīd* (divine unity) as philosophical and mystical epistemologies underpinning esoteric hermeneutics. Balancing these insights, the study highlights that genuine mystical exegesis in Islam does not negate the exoteric meaning or the Sharīʿa; rather, it integrates outward and inward, reason and intuition. Through engagement with Sufi commentaries and Shiʿi mystical teachings—from early Sufi *tafsīrs* to modern seminarians—we demonstrate that mystical Qurʾān interpretation is a disciplined quest for deeper understanding of revelation, aiming at personal transformation and direct communion with the Ultimate Reality. The paper concludes that far from being a subjective or innovative reading, authentic mystical exegesis is grounded in the Islamic tradition's view of the Qurʾān as a "love-letter" from God to man, inviting the seeker to unveil divine secrets through purification, love, and inner realization.

Keywords: Qurʾān, Tafsīr, *Taʾwīl*, Mysticism, Sufism, Shiʿism, *ʿIrfān*, Self-Knowledge, *Fiṭra*, *ʿIlm Ḥuḍūrī.*

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Introduction

In Islamic thought, the Qurʾān has long been regarded not only as a book of law and guidance but also as a mystical scripture containing profound inner truths. From the earliest generations, Muslims approached the Qurʾān on multiple levels—some focusing on its legal and historical teachings, and others perceiving it as a gateway to metaphysical realities. As one classical metaphor suggests, the Qurʾānic text is like a mirror in which each reader sees his or her own reflection. A jurist finds law, a theologian finds doctrine, a philosopher finds rational argument—but a Sufi finds a love-letter from the Divine. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's mentor, Shams-i Tabrīzī, is quoted as saying: *"For the travelers and the wayfarers, each verse of the Koran is like a message and a love-letter (ʿishq-nāma). If for the wayfarer it is a love-letter, for the jurist it seems to be a source of law, or for the philosopher a book of arguments." (William C. Chittick et al., (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2012), 58-9.)* This poetic insight captures the essence of mystical Qurʾān interpretation: it is an experiential and heartfelt reading, treating revelation as an intimate communication between God and the soul.

According to the Sufi perspective, the entire creation and the Qurʾān itself are born of Divine love. A famous sacred tradition widely cited by Sufis has God declare, *"I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. Hence, I created the world so that I would be known."*[1] Creation, in this view, is an act of love, and the Qurʾān is fundamentally a love-letter from the Eternal Beloved to mankind, teaching the wayfarer how to return to the True Source. Thus, the purpose of Qurʾānic revelation is understood to be the spiritual education of the human being: guiding individuals to realize their potential perfections and their ultimate purpose of nearness to God. The Qurʾān, read with the eyes of love, becomes a map for the soul's journey, not merely a code of law or history. As one scholar of Sufism

1. This is very known hadith among the Sufi circles, however, scholars of jurisprudence or hadith do not include it inside their "sound" categorization. This notion is well rooted in Abrahamic traditions. For a jurist and theologian view see, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, al-Fatāwā al-Kubrā, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā and Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988), 5:88; idem, Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim and Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Qāsim, 37 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Wafāʾ; Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2011), 18:122, 376. Ibn Taymiyya states of the report "kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan…" that "this is not from the Prophet's words, and I do not know for it any chain—sound or weak."

summarizes, *"Sufi literature indicates that the Qurʾān has been revealed to educate man and show him the path of his/her perfection."*

Defining "mysticism" in the Islamic context helps frame this discussion. In religious studies, mysticism generally refers to hidden, inner dimensions of spirituality and to the direct experience of ultimate reality. William Chittick, discussing mysticism in Islam, observes that if we accept the idea that true religion entails communion with the Ultimate Reality (God), then *"the experience of communion with ultimate reality lies at the foundation of religio William C. Chittick, (meti.byu.edu/mysticism_chittick.html), also reproduced at New Age Islam, accessed August 2025.n, and the quest for such communion has always motivated the practice of religious people." ()* In this sense, *mysticism lies at the heart of religion*, and especially so in Islam, where the goal of revelation is not only to inform but to transform—to lead believers to an intimate gnosis (*maʿrifah*) of God. The term Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is often used to specify Islamic mysticism. Sufism can be described as the inner, experiential dimension of Islam that emphasizes asceticism, love, poverty (*faqr*), and direct knowledge of God through purification of the self. As one definition puts it, Sufism in Islam is a theoretical and practical path to Divine love and gnosis *"through self-knowledge."* It has developed a distinctive methodology over centuries, and with good reason its approach is called "mystical," insofar as it upholds the doctrine that *"direct knowledge of God or ultimate reality is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination."* In other words, Sufism posits that there are modes of knowing beyond the purely rational—modes that are visionary or experiential, by which the heart directly encounters divine truths. (Seyed Amir Hossein Asghari, 1. ed. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025), 3-4.)

Crucially, Sufi sages and the Shiʿi gnostics (ʿurafāʾ) influenced by them have applied these mystical principles to Qurʾān interpretation. They maintain that the sacred text has both an ẓāhir (outward, exoteric meaning) and a bāṭin (inward, esoteric meaning) . The Prophet Moḥammad and the Imams of his household (in Shiʿi belief) alluded to this multi-layered nature of the Qurʾān. For example, a well-known report states that *"the Qurʾān has an outward aspect and an inward aspect, and its inward aspect has an inward aspect (up to seven inner layers)…"* – underscoring that there are depths of meaning accessible only through spiritual insight. Thus, Sufi and Shiʿi interpreters have long stressed that one should not stop at the outward meaning but strive to "go from the outward to the inward aspects" of the verses. Since Sufism represents the inner aspect of Islam, *"its doctrine is*

in substance an esoteric commentary on the Qurʾān." (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1972)) Mystical exegesis, therefore, does not negate the literal meaning; rather, it builds upon it, seeking a deeper understanding that can transform the reader's soul.

This paper provides a scholarly overview of mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān in the Islamic tradition, with a focus on how Sufi and Shiʿi thinkers have articulated and defended *taʾwīl* (esoteric hermeneutics). We will first clarify the concept of *taʾwīl*—its definitions and usage in Qurʾānic sciences—and recount some historical debates surrounding mystical exegesis. Then we will examine Sufi approaches to interpreting the Qurʾān, highlighting classical examples and the thematic centrality of love, self-knowledge, and the journey of return to God in their commentaries. In parallel, we will consider Shīʿī mystical interpretations, noting how Shiʿa scholars integrated Sufi insights and how they linked Qurʾānic inner meanings to the doctrines of the Imams and *wilāyah* (spiritual authority). Subsequently, a key contribution of this paper is to explore the epistemological underpinnings of mystical exegesis: we discuss concepts like ʿilm ḥuḍūrī (knowledge by presence or direct experience), the role of fiṭra (the innate God-given nature of the human soul), and the emphasis on maʿrifat al-nafs (knowing one's self) as a bridge to knowing God. These ideas, developed by Muslim philosophers and mystics (notably in the school of Mullā Ṣadrā and in later Sufi-Shiʿi thought), provide a theoretical justification for how direct experiential knowledge can unlock Qurʾānic truths inaccessible to the merely literal or rational approach. Throughout, we will cite and integrate insights from contemporary scholarship and primary texts, including *Kernel of the Kernel* attributed to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, modern studies on natural law and fiṭra, and works on Sufism in Shiʿi seminaries, to show how the mystical reading of the Qurʾān remains a living and intellectually vibrant tradition. By adopting a neutral academic tone and avoiding first-person narrative, the discussion aims to be a cohesive analysis suitable for a peer-reviewed scholarly audience.

In sum, the mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān is presented here not as a fanciful or isolated endeavor of a few mystics, but as an integral part of Islamic hermeneutical heritage—a tradition that seeks a union of outward knowledge and inward realization. It is a tradition wherein, as one Shiʿi mystic put it, remaining with the external meanings alone is like *"stopping by the shore of the ocean"*. The true quest of *taʾwīl* is to plunge into the ocean of meaning, to *"discover the divine secrets"* hidden beneath the waves of the text, and ultimately to know oneself and one's Lord.

Taʾwīl: Concept and Debates in Qurʾānic Hermeneutics

Taʾwīl is the key term in Islamic discourse for deeper interpretation of scripture. Etymologically, *taʾwīl* comes from the root ʾ-*w*-*l*, meaning "to return to the origin". To perform *taʾwīl* of a Qurʾānic verse is thus to trace it back to its ultimate source and reality. In the classical sciences of the Qurʾān, the term has been understood in more than one way. In fact, ʿAllāmah Moḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1904–1981), the renowned Shiʿi exegete, notes that there have been over ten different definitions of *taʾwīl* posited by scholars. However, two primary views gained general acceptance:

- (1) Taʾwīl as Interpretation/Commentary (Early Usage): In the earliest generations of Muslims, *taʾwīl* was often used as a synonym for *tafsīr* (exegesis). According to this view, *taʾwīl* simply meant the explanation of a verse—its apparent meaning or the circumstances of its revelation . All verses of the Qurʾān could be said to have *taʾwīl* in the sense that they required understanding and commentary. Ṭabāṭabāʾī explains that in this view *"all Qurʾānic verses are open to taʾwīl"*, although proponents would cite the Qurʾān (3:7) which says *"none knows its interpretation (taʾwīl) except God"* as applying specifically to certain ambiguous verses . In other words, while human scholars may interpret all verses, the full reality of some statements (especially the mutashābihāt, the allegorical or ambiguous verses) might be known only to God. This first view treats *taʾwīl* as essentially equivalent to scholarly commentary that resolves ambiguity through rational explanation.
- (2) Taʾwīl as Esoteric Interpretation (Later Usage): Gradually, a second definition emerged: *taʾwīl* came to denote an *esoteric or inner interpretation* that yields a meaning not evident from the surface wording of the verse. In this sense, *taʾwīl* uncovers truths that lie beyond the *ẓāhir* (literal text), often by relating the verse to metaphysical principles, spiritual realities, or symbolic truths. As Ṭabāṭabāʾī describes, according to the second definition *"taʾwīl includes a meaning that the outer aspect of the verse does not mention and the interpreter deduces it from an external argument"*, and thus it is called bāṭinī (inner, esoteric) interpretation. The literal or apparent meaning is then termed ẓāhirī (outward). Importantly, in this view *taʾwīl* is not limited to ambiguous verses but in fact applies to *all* Qurʾānic verses. Every verse has an inner aspect that may be uncovered. Mystically inclined scholars seized upon this view, arguing that the Qurʾān, like the created world, consists of multiple layers of reality. They often quote the Qurʾān 57:3 – *"He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden"* – to suggest

> that God's Book, being a reflection of His wisdom, likewise has manifest (ẓāhir) and hidden (bāṭin) dimensions. The Sufis in particular systematized this idea: they posited that just as existence has levels (from corporeal to spiritual, from outward forms to inner meanings), so does revelation. *Taʾwīl*, in the Sufi usage, is the method of peeling back the outward shell of the verse to reveal its inner kernel of meaning

Both definitions of *taʾwīl* have their place in Islamic hermeneutics, but our concern is with the second, esoteric sense, as this is what is usually meant by "mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān." The legitimacy of such esoteric exegesis has been a matter of debate within Islamic scholarship for centuries. On one side, there were (and still are) critics who view mystical or allegorical readings with suspicion. These critics, including some medieval jurists and traditionalist scholars, argue that interpreting the Qurʾān in ways not directly supported by the explicit text or prophetic sayings opens the door to subjective speculation. For example, the 12th-century Andalusī jurist Ibn ʿĀṭiyya warned against "reading into" the text one's own ideas. More prominently, the Hanbalite scholars Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) and Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) outright condemned the concept of a hidden (*bāṭin*) knowledge of scripture as an illegitimate innovation (*bidʿa*). From their perspective, God's final revelation in the Qurʾān and the Prophet's teachings was clear and sufficient; seeking any *"secret"* meaning outside the obvious literal and legal instructions was seen as unwarranted. Ibn Taymiyyah, in particular, was fiercely opposed to the excesses of some batini sects and Sufi allegorists. In the *Shiʿi* world, we find a parallel in the influential Safavid-era scholar Moḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699). Majlisī, author of *Biḥār al-Anwār*, criticized philosophical and Sufi interpretations of scripture, accusing those who use philosophical concepts in exegesis of straying from the clear intent of revelation. He insisted that many allegorical interpretations (for example, interpreting the Qurʾānic term *ʿaql* – intellect – in a spiritually elevated way) were unjustified, preferring to stick to transmitted explanations. These scholars feared that *taʾwīl* could become a guise for importing foreign ideas (Neoplatonic philosophy, gnostic cosmologies, etc.) into Islam, thus diluting or distorting the faith's authentic message.

On the other side of the debate, defenders of mystical exegesis argue that the Qurʾān itself, as well as the teachings of the Prophet and Imams, validate the search for deeper meaning. They point out that the Qurʾān repeatedly encourages believers to reflect (tafakkur), contemplate (*tadabbur*), and not be content with superficial understanding. Prophetic traditions likewise state *"The search for knowledge is incumbent on every*

Muslim" and extol the virtues of understanding faith with wisdom (*fiqh*) rather than mere rote learning. Moreover, the idea that the Qurʾān has hidden meanings is supported by numerous *ḥadīth* in both Sunni and Shiʿi collections. Shiʿi Imams in particular emphasized *bāṭin*: Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said that every verse has an outward and an inward meaning, and every letter of the Qurʾān has a secret. Thus, major Shiʿi thinkers who were themselves Sufi-inclined, like Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 1385), claimed that true Imamī Shiʿism is inherently esoteric and aligned with Sufism. Āmulī argued that the *ẓāhirī* (legalistic, literal) approach to Islam and the *bāṭinī* (mystical) approach are not contradictory but complementary, just as body and soul are both essential to a living being. In his seminal commentary *Jāmiʿ al-Asrār*, Āmulī systematically interpreted Qurʾānic verses in light of Sufi metaphysics while also grounding them in Shiʿi doctrine. He and others like him saw *taʾwīl* as a way to unite the truths of *taṣawwuf* and *tashayyuʿ* (Shiʿism), contending that the Imams themselves were the inheritors of the Prophet's esoteric knowledge (ʿilm al-bāṭin). Āmulī he was *an early proponent of the thesis that Imami Shiʿism and Sufism share the same essence,"* thereby demonstrating a Shiʿi framework for mystical Qurʾān interpretation.[1] It should be mentioned that Hasan Ibn Hamza al-Shirazi al-Palasi was an earlier figure in this sense that we have studied him in other places. (Asghari, Sufism and philosophy in the contemporary Shia Seminary: scholars and mystics)

Western scholars of Islam have also weighed in. In the early 20th century, Ignaz Goldziher dismissed Sufi Qurʾān interpretations as *"the reading of one's own ideas into a text."* He viewed mystical tafsīr as a later development, alien to the original message of Islam, effectively accusing Sufis of eisegesis (injecting meaning rather than extracting meaning).[2] However, later orientalists like Louis Massignon and Paul Nwyia took a more sympathetic view. (See al-Ṣādiq Jaʻfar et al., Spiritual gems: the mystical Qur'ān commentary ascribed to Jaʻfar al-Ṣādiq as contained in Sulamī's Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr from the text of Paul Nwyia (Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 2011). Their research showed how the mystical reading of the Qurʾān often arose from *"a dialogue between personal mystic experience and the text of the Qurʾān."* In other words, the Sufi does not simply impose whims on the scripture; rather, through intense spiritual practice, he

1. Seyed Amir Hossein Asghari, "Shiʿa mystical theology: Notes on Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's 'Jāmiʿ al-Asrār wa Manbaʿ al-Anwār'," *Kom: Časopis za Religijske Nauke* 9, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5937/kom2003065A. http://dx.doi.org/10.5937/kom2003065A. See, Ḥaydar ibn ʿAlī active th century Āmulī and Muḥammad Riẓā Jawzī, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār va manbaʿ al-anvār*, Chāp-i 1. ed., vol. Tihrān, ʿIrfān ; 10, (Tihrān: Ḥirmis, 2012, 2012).

experientially engages the text and finds his experiences reflected there. As Sarah Sands summarizes their position: *"Both Massignon and Nwyia insisted that the Qurʾānic text remains primary for the Sufi; the Muslim mystic does not impose his own ideas on the text, but rather discovers ideas in the course of his experiential dialogue with it."* From this perspective, mystical exegesis is discovery, not invention. The spiritual state of the interpreter acts like a key that unlocks certain meanings—meanings that were always potentially in the text, though not visible to the casual reader. This view aligns with the self-understanding of Sufi commentators themselves, who often claim that their insights are the result of divine inspiration (*ilhām*) or unveiling (*kashf*) granted in the course of devotion, rather than personal speculation.

In sum, *taʾwīl* in the mystical sense is a legitimate hermeneutical enterprise within Islam, albeit one that requires discernment and, according to its practitioners, purity of heart. The debates over it have never been fully settled: even in contemporary times, we find "scripturalist" movements wary of esoteric interpretations, while others argue that without recognizing the inner layer, one reduces the Qurʾān to a one-dimensional text. For the purposes of this study, we proceed with the understanding (shared by Sufi and certain Shiʿi scholars) that the Qurʾān does indeed contain multiple levels of meaning, and that uncovering its *bāṭin* is an endeavor supported by the tradition. Mystical commentators assert that the Qurʾān's verses serve as sign-posts (*āyāt*) toward spiritual realities: reading them merely at face value would be like *"stopping by the shore of the ocean"* and never venturing into its depths. The task of *taʾwīl* is to sail into the ocean of the Qurʾān under the guidance of spiritual insight, until one reaches the pearls of wisdom hidden beneath the surface.

Before turning to specific examples of Sufi and Shiʿi exegesis, it is helpful to note one more point stressed by moderate mystical scholars: the balance of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*. The Qurʾān's "hidden" meanings, they insist, do not abolish the outward duties and meanings, but rather complete them. This integrative approach combats two extremes: a purely literal approach that denies any deeper meaning, and a lawless esotericism that ignores the scripture's plain teachings. The next sections illustrate how Sufi and Shiʿi commentators navigated this, keeping one foot on the shore of the literal text and one foot in the sea of inner meaning.

Sufi Approaches to Qurʾānic Interpretation

Sufi *tafsīr* (commentary) is the genre of Qurʾān interpretation emerging from the Sufi mystical tradition. From the 2nd/8th century onward, Sufis produced commentaries or scattered interpretations that read the Qurʾān in light of the soul's inward journey. These works do not form a monolithic

method, but they share certain assumptions and themes. Chief among these is the conviction that every verse of the Qurʾān contains layers of meaning that speak to the state of the seeker. Historical evidence suggests that mystical interpretation appeared quite early. For instance, the Sufi master Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896) wrote one of the earliest Sufi commentaries. *Tustarī's tafsīr* is relatively brief but thoroughly esoteric; he explicitly stated that the Qurʾān *"contained several levels of meaning, including the outer (ẓāhir) and the inner (bāṭin)."* In Tustarī's interpretations, even simple verses were seen as allusions to spiritual truths—sometimes to the point that an outsider might not readily see the connection. Another important early work is the commentary of Abu'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1074), which included mystical allusions (*latāʾif*) alongside conventional exegesis, thereby legitimizing the esoteric approach within a scholarly format. (Al-Tustarī by Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh et al., Tafsīr al-Tustarī [*Tafsīr al-Tustarī*], Great commentaries on the Holy Qur'ān; v. 4, (Louisville, KY, Amman, Jordan: Fons Vitae; Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011)).

One of the most comprehensive Sufi commentaries is Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī's *Kashf al-Asrār* (12th century). Maybudī's work explicitly presents three tiers of interpretation for each verse: first the literal meaning and linguistic notes, second the ethical and theological lessons (what he calls *ishāra* or allusion), and third the mystical insights (*ḥaqīqa* or truth) for the verse. For example, in commenting on the Fātiḥa, Maybudī would start with a straightforward Persian translation and grammatical commentary; then discuss, say, the general moral teaching of the verse; and finally give a Sufi explanation, perhaps relating the verse to stages of the soul's wayfaring. This tripartite method acknowledges that the verse speaks on multiple levels simultaneously. Such multi-layered exegesis reflects the axiom that *"the Qurʾān addresses all people according to their capacity"*—the same verse nourishes the law-bound Muslim, the philosophical theologian, and the mystic each with its proper sustenance (Maybudī and William C. Chittick, The unveiling of the mysteries and the provision of the pious = *Kashf al-asrār wa ʿuddat al-abrār*, Great commentaries on the Holy Qur'ān; v. 5; Volume V, (Louisville, KY, Amman, Jordan: Fons Vitae ; Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2015).

What sorts of inner meanings do Sufi commentaries uncover? A dominant theme is Divine Love and the Primordial Covenant. Sufis often frame the entire human-divine relationship as a love story that began before creation. They cite Qurʾān 7:172, which describes God calling forth the souls of all human beings before they were born and asking them, *"Am I*

not your Lord?" to which the souls replied, *"Yes, indeed!"*. This is known as the Covenant of *Alast* (from *alastu bi-rabbikum*, "Am I not your Lord?"). Mystics interpret this verse to mean that every human soul affirmed God's lordship in pre-eternity, which is to say, every soul knew and loved God before entering the material world. In the Sufi reading, the shock of temporal existence veils us from that original knowledge, causing us to forget the primordial love (this state of forgetfulness is alluded to by the Qurʾānic term *ghafla*). The role of the Qurʾān and the prophets, then, is to remind us of that covenant and rekindle our innate love for God. Sufi interpretations of many verses will invoke this backdrop. For example, when the Qurʾān says "*Remember God's favor upon you and the covenant He made with you…*" or speaks of God's love and mercy, Sufis may relate it to the soul's pledge in pre-existence and its yearning to return to that state of intimacy.

Love (*ʿishq*) thus becomes a key to Sufi exegesis. It is often said that *"the Qurʾān for the Sufis is a love-letter (ʿishq-nāma)"*, meaning that they approach it in a state of devotion and longing. (Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=830257, 1 online resource. See also, Chittick et al., In search of the lost heart: explorations in Islamic thought). Verses are read less as legal injunctions or historical narratives and more as *symbolic communications* from the Beloved. For instance, instructions about ritual purity might be interpreted as hints about purifying the heart; stories of the prophets are read as allegories of the seeker's journey, and Qur'ānic descriptions of paradise are seen as allusions to the bliss of proximity to God. Every narrative becomes personalized: the Moses of the Qurʾān represents the intellect seeking God, and his antagonist Pharaoh represents the ego; Abraham's breaking of the idols is the mystic shattering attachment to all save God; the cave of the Seven Sleepers becomes the heart in contemplative retreat, and so on. Sufi language and its interpretation of the Qurʾān is a universal language – anyone with spiritual insight, Muslim or not, can grasp the author's state. The main issue Sufis address is the mutual love between man and God. Sufi exegesis is thereby psychological and universalizing: it finds in the Qurʾānic text an articulation of the soul's inner states, which in principle any seeker of truth could resonate with.

To illustrate, consider how a Sufi commentator might handle a specific verse such as *"He loves them and they love Him"* (Qurʾān 5:54). The outward meaning is a statement about God's love for a group of believers and their love for Him. A Sufi would expand on this: the verse indicates

that God's love is prior – "whom He loves (*yuḥibbuhum*), and then they love Him (*wa yuḥibbūnahu*)" – thus God's attraction (jadhba) is what draws the seeker to seek Him. This ties into a fundamental Sufi principle that *God's love for man precedes man's love for God*, echoing a hadith that God says *"My Mercy outstrips My Wrath."* The Sufi exegete might then remind the reader that the entire movement of Islam (which means surrender in love) is based on responding to that initial divine attraction. Such an interpretation remains anchored in the verse but elevates it to a theological and experiential principle about love.

Another unifying motif in Sufi Qurʾān interpretation is the concept of the Two Arcs of the Circle of Existence: the arc of descent (from God to creation) and the arc of ascent (from creation back to God). This is a cosmological picture inherited from Neoplatonic and Hermetic ideas, but islamized by Sufis like Ibn ʿArabī. According to this view, all souls originate with God (descent), and their duty is to return to God (ascent). Sufis see this pattern reflected in the Qurʾān's narratives and laws. Creation and prophetic history trace the arc of descent (God's actions initiating relationship with man), and the religious path (Sharīʿa and ḥaqīqa) maps the arc of ascent (man's journey back to God). The Prophet Moḥammad is often portrayed in Sufi literature as the perfect wayfarer who completed the arc of ascent (hence his Miʿrāj, ascension to God) and thus can lead others on the same path. In mystical tafsīr, verses exhorting obedience to the Prophet or imitating his character are given special emphasis: to the Sufi, the Prophet is *"the symbol of the Perfect Man (al-insān al-kāmil) and the sure path to salvation"*. For example, Sufi commentators read the verse *"If you love God, follow me, and God will love you"* (Q 3:31) as a divine invitation to prophetic imitation as the quickest route to earning God's love . In a passage cited in the source text, Āyatullāh Rūḥullāh Khomeini (who authored mystical works in addition to being a jurist) expounds on a revelatory call: *"The call came from the Real: 'Whatever drink comes to you from the auspicious hand of Moḥammad the Arab… take it, for your life lies in that… The final goal of the traveling of the servants and the perfection of their states is My love, and My love lies in following the Sunnah of your prophet…'"*. Here the mystical path is explicitly tied to following the Prophet's example (the Sunnah) in all states, which leads one to the ultimate goal of divine love. This reflects a broader tendency in Sufi exegesis: the law (*Sharīʿa*) and the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*) are seen as one continuum, with the Prophet's outward teachings as the foundation and his inner reality as the pinnacle.

By the medieval period, Sufi Qurʾān commentaries had firmly established their credibility and widespread appeal, though not without

controversy. One significant work blending Sufi and Shiʿi perspectives was Ṣāfī's commentary by Ismāʿīl Ḥusaynī (d. 17th c.) which incorporated mystical insights while explicating verses according to Imāmī teachings. However, to many Sunni ulema, the most authoritative Sufi tafsīr became Ibn ʿArabī's school contributions. Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) himself did not write a full Qurʾān commentary, but his al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya and other works contain extensive verse expositions. His disciples, like ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (pseudo-Ibn ʿArabī commentary) and ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, penned commentaries that systematically interpret the Qurʾān through the lens of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (oneness of Being) metaphysics. These works read almost like metaphysical treatises keyed to Qur'ānic phrases. For instance, where the Qurʾān says *"God is the Light of the heavens and the earth…"* (24:35), Ibn ʿArabī's school would expound that all existence is the self-manifestation (*tajallī*) of that divine Light, and the "niche" and "lamp" mentioned in the verse symbolize levels of reality within the human heart. Such allegorical exegesis might seem far from the apparent meaning, yet to the mystic it unveils how the Qurʾān encodes the structure of reality.

It is important to note that Sufi exegetes often justified their interpretations by appealing to the concept of kashf (unveiling). They claimed an *experiential authority*: having undergone certain spiritual states, they *witnessed* correspondences between the text and higher realities. For example, a Sufi who experiences *fanā'* (ego-annihilation in God) might interpret Qurʾānic verses about death and resurrection as allusions to the death of the self and rebirth in divine subsistence (*baqā'*) within this life. These personal insights were cautiously expressed, often preceded by disclaimers such as "an allusion given to my heart is…". This mode of interpretation was bolstered by verses like *"We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves until it becomes clear to them that He is the Real"* (41:53). Sufis read this as God promising to reveal spiritual meanings both in the external world (*āfāq*) and the inner world of the self (*anfus*), meaning the Qurʾānic *āyāt* (signs) have inner counterparts in the soul. The well-known maxim "He who knows himself knows his Lord" is frequently cited in Sufi tafsīr circles to connect self-discovery with Qurʾān discovery. Indeed, a prominent contemporary heir of this tradition, Ḥasan ʿAlī Shāh (Sayyid Ḥasan Ḥasanzādah Āmulī), wrote *Lessons on Self-Knowledge* where he reinforces that *maʿrifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge) is the key to unlocking knowledge of God. When applied to the Qurʾān, this principle implies that as one purifies and understands one's soul, verses that were formerly opaque can suddenly convey profound meanings relevant to one's spiritual state.

To summarize, Sufi approaches to the Qurʾān are characterized by allegorical, symbolist, and experiential readings that complement the outward literal exegesis. They often require a reader already familiar with Sufi terminology and metaphysics (e.g., concepts like *fanāʾ wa baqāʾ*, *waḥdat al-wujūd*, *nūr Moḥammadī*, etc.) to fully appreciate them. Yet they remain anchored in a core conviction: *the Qurʾān is a living text with inexhaustible depths of wisdom, accessible in measure to the purity and receptivity of the reader's heart.* As later sections will show, Shiʿi mystics shared these convictions and even expanded upon them, integrating Sufi insights with Imamī theological themes. But before moving to the Shiʿi perspective, it is crucial to address how the philosophical notion of direct knowledge and innate disposition ties into mystical exegesis. The Sufis would say that to grasp the *bāṭin* of the Qurʾān, one must have a refined mode of knowing—what they call *dhawq* (tasting) or *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence). We now turn to these epistemological foundations which make mystical interpretation intelligible.

Shiʿi Mystical Exegesis and Convergence with Sufism

Shiʿi Islam, especially in its Imāmī (Twelver) branch, has its own rich heritage of esoteric interpretation, much of which converges with Sufi perspectives. From the earliest period, the Shiʿi Imams taught that the Qurʾān has multiple layers of meaning. Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq is attributed a saying: *"The Book of God comprises four things: the statement set down (ʿibāra), the allusion (ishāra), the hidden meanings relating to the supra-sensible worlds (laṭāʾif), and the exalted spiritual doctrines (ḥaqāʾiq). The literal expression is for the common folk (ʿawāmm); the allusive indication is for the elite (khawāṣṣ); the subtle hidden meanings are for the friends of God (awliyāʾ); and the highest truths are for the prophets (anbiyāʾ)."* Such narrations (whether their chains are sound or not) reflect a normative Shiʿi view that the Qurʾān contains teachings for every level of spiritual maturity. The Imams were seen as the guardians of both the exoteric and esoteric understanding of the Qurʾān. In Shiʿi history, groups like the Ismāʿīlīs became famous for *bāṭinī* exegesis, sometimes to extremes of symbolization.

One of the monumental figures that bridge Shiʿi and Sufi exegesis is the aforementioned Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī. A Shiʿi mystic of 14th-century Iran, Āmulī explicitly argued that *Shiʿism in its essence is nothing other than the esoteric aspect of Islam, of which Sufism is the methodology*. He wrote works to reconcile the two, famously stating *"Sufism and Shiʿism are two terms for the same truth, like two sides of one coin."* In his Qurʾān commentary (which unfortunately only covers part of the Qurʾān), he

interprets verses in a way that affirms both the role of the Imams and the spiritual verities of Sufism.

In the later Safavid period, a tension grew in the Shiʿi scholarly community between the Akhbārīs (traditionists who were wary of ijtihād and philosophical interpretations) and the ʿirfānī or Ḥikmat-inclined scholars (who embraced philosophy and mysticism). The peak of Shiʿi mystical philosophy is seen in Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1640), who wrote not only works of philosophy (*al-Asfār al-Arbaʿa*) but also Qurʾān commentaries (he commented on surahs like al-Fātiḥa, al-Baqara, Yāsīn, etc.) and hadith. Mullā Ṣadrā's approach to exegesis was deeply philosophical yet suffused with mysticism. He believed in the unity of knowledge and existence, and thus he often interprets Qurʾānic narratives as allegories of the journey of the intellect/soul. For example, in Sūrat al-Kahf (18), the story of Moses meeting Khiḍr is taken by Ṣadrā as symbolic: Moses represents exoteric knowledge, Khiḍr esoteric insight. Moses' inability to be patient with Khiḍr's disturbing actions (scuttling a boat, killing a youth) illustrates how the outward law alone cannot comprehend the deeper wisdom of divine actions that mystics understand through inspiration. Mullā Ṣadrā explicitly theorized *taʾwīl* in his works, noting that the true meaning (*taʾwīl*) of a verse is in fact the *ontological reality* to which the verse points, not a subjective fancy. In his view, every Qurʾānic statement corresponds to a truth in the higher world of being. The process of *taʾwīl* is to raise the mind from the world of words to the world of realities. This matches the root meaning "to return to the origin": the origin of the Qurʾān is God's knowledge, and *taʾwīl* seeks to return the interpreter to that divine knowledge by lifting the veil of ordinary language.

An illustrative case from Shiʿi mystical tafsīr is the commentary of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Lāhījī (17th c.), a student of Ṣadrā (Sharīf Lāhījī, ʻIlmī, 2011). In his commentary on the Verse of Light (24:35), Lāhījī provides a multi-layered interpretation: on one level, a metaphysical interpretation where the verse speaks of the emanation of Divine Light through the celestial and spiritual realms; on another level, a theophanic interpretation where the "Light" is the light of the Moḥammadan Reality present in the Imams; and on a mystical level, how the light shines in the heart of the true believer. Such commentaries show the fusion of philosophy (*hikma*), theology, and Sufism characteristic of the School of Isfahan.

By the 20th century, we see a revival and continuation of mystical exegesis in the Shiʿi seminaries, especially in *Najaf* and *Qom*. A prominent example is ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī himself. While his magnum opus *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* is a rational-textual commentary that doesn't overtly delve into speculative mysticism, (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān, 1983).) Ṭabāṭabāʾī wrote

separate treatises like *Risālat al-Wilāya* (Ṭabāṭabā·ī, Risālat al-wilāya, 1987). and reportedly taught esoteric doctrines privately (the notes of which became *Kernel of the Kernel*). In *al-Mīzān*, he sometimes hints at deeper meanings. For example, when commenting on verses about the soul or about *Ūlū l-albāb* ("people of inner intellect"), he might cite a ḥadīth from the Imams that "the Qurʾān has an inner meaning appropriate to each level of heaven" and gently guide the reader to think beyond the immediate context. Ṭabāṭabāʾī's disciples in Iran, such as Ayatollah Ḥasanzāda Āmulī and Ayatollah Javādī Āmulī, carried this synthesis forward. As mentioned earlier, Ḥasanzāda wrote on self-knowledge and the microcosmic reading of scripture. Javādī Āmulī authored a work *Qurʾān, ʿIrfān and Burhān are Inseparable* (Ḥasanzāde Āmulī, Qur'ān va ʻirfān, 1995). responding to those who wanted to "separate" philosophy and mysticism from Qurʾānic studies (notably, the Tafkīk school in Mashhad). Javādī Āmulī argues that *"dīn (religion) is what God has revealed (waḥy), and ʿaql (intellect) is what God has inspired"* —thus both are complementary means to understand truth. In his view, a mature exegete must use both the transmitted knowledge and the inner intellect. He contends that the apparent conflicts between reason and revelation are due to shallow understanding; in reality, *"the development of the intellect leads to a deeper comprehension of religious content"*, showing potential harmony. This defense of using philosophical reasoning and mystical insight in exegesis has been vital in contemporary discussions, as it counters accusations (like those from the Tafkīk school or Salafi literalists) that mystical interpretation is an alien intrusion.

Sayyid Moḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Tehrānī (d. 1995), a prominent contemporary Shiʿi mystic, authored numerous works advocating for the integration of Sufism/ʿirfān within orthodox religious frameworks. In his works, he often cites the Qurʾān and *taʾwīl*. For example, Tehrānī's compiled notes from Ṭabāṭabāʾī's lectures, published as *Lubb al-Lubāb* (Kernel of the Kernels), begin by emphasizing the innate human attraction to God and the need to transcend the outer forms of religion toward inner realities. He reminds readers that focusing solely on external ritual without inner devotion leaves one *"foregoing the kernel and the essence"*; conversely, seeking spirituality without the Sharia is equally astray *"content with metaphorical, having abandoned the literal"*. This reflects a lesson often stressed by Shiʿi mystics: the exoteric and esoteric must go hand in hand. The "straight path" (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) in their view is the median between neglecting the law and neglecting the spirit. They invoke the Qurʾān's own description of the Muslim community as *"ummatan wasaṭan"* (a middle community) and apply it to the individual's approach:

"those who combine within themselves the outward and the inward… mingling them as sugar and milk. To them, the outward is the means for attaining the inward, and an inward devoid of the outward is like 'dust scattered' (25:23).". In other words, the *bāṭin* without the *ẓāhir* is insubstantial, and the *ẓāhir* without the bāṭin is hollow. This golden principle has guided responsible mystical exegesis in both Shiʿi and Sunni contexts.

Shiʿi mystical exegesis advocates the same core idea as Sufi exegesis—that the Qurʾān has interior meanings accessible through spiritual realization—while often linking those interior meanings to Shiʿi theological constructs like the authority of the Imams, the concept of walāyah (intimate guardianship of the saints), and the expectation of the Mahdi. Shiʿi mystics find in verses indications of the Perfect Human who fully embodies the Qurʾān (identified as Prophet Moḥammad and, by extension, the Imam). For example, where Sufis might say the verse *"Guide us to the straight path"* (1:6) alludes to the path of love and gnosis, Shiʿi exegesis might add that "the straight path" in its highest sense is the Prophet and the Imams themselves, as living Qurʾāns. Both perspectives enrich the tapestry of meaning without contradiction: one focuses on personal mystical experience, the other on the human exemplars of that experience.

Epistemological Foundations: ʿIlm Ḥuḍūrī, Fiṭra, and Self-Knowledge

Underpinning mystical approaches to the Qurʾān is a distinctive epistemology—a theory of how humans can know truth. Unlike the purely textual or rational-empirical epistemology of exoteric scholarship, mystics posit that the deepest truths are known by presence and direct witnessing (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* or *ʿirfān* in Persian/Arabic, often translated as "immediate knowledge" or "knowledge by presence"). This concept, systematically developed by Islamic philosophers such as Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā, and embraced by Sufis, holds that certain knowledge is not obtained by logical deduction (*ḥuṣūlī*, acquired knowledge) but by an *immediate unveiling of the object to the knower*.

Mullā Ṣadrā, in particular, made *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* the cornerstone of his epistemology. He argued that at its root, being (wujūd) and consciousness are identical or at least inseparable. In a famous formulation, Ṣadrā asserted the *"unity of being and knowledge"* (*wuḥdat al-wujūd wa'l-ʿilm*) . The Arabic term *wujūd*, according to William Chittick, conveys the meanings of both "existence" and "finding" (William C. Chittick, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 7). To exist is implicitly to be a locus of awareness; thus, all knowledge is a mode of being. From this perspective, knowing something truly means *to be it or to have it present in one's being*. Abstract or discursive knowledge (like reading a description

of a place) is a shadow compared to immediate knowledge (actually seeing the place). Ṣadrā stated: *"Being can only be known by visionary presential knowledge (al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī al-shuhūdī), and the inner reality of light can only be perceived through an immediate illuminative connection… If something is known only by formal knowledge, the very reality of the thing is altered."* (Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and İbrahim Kalın, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2014), 11-13) This suggests that the comprehensive reality of an entity—particularly metaphysical entities such as the soul, the divine, or spiritual significance—is accessible solely through direct experiential witnessing, rather than through detached intellectual reasoning.

How does this relate to Qurʾānic interpretation? A Sufi would say that the true meanings of the Qurʾān are ultimately realities to be witnessed, not just propositions to be analyzed. For example, the Qurʾān speaks of *Nūr* (Light), *Rūḥ* (Spirit), *Jannah* (Paradise, literally "Garden"), *Malakūt* (spiritual realm), etc. While theologians may debate definitions of these and commentators give lexical explanations, the mystic seeks to *actually perceive* the Light, to *experience* the Spirit, to *taste* a breeze of Paradise in prayer, and to *glimpse* the Malakūt with the inner eye. In doing so, they believe they are coming to know the *taʾwīl* (inner reality) of those Qurʾānic terms. This highlights a saying attributed to Imam ʿAlī: *"The Qurʾān is not (truly) understood by mere learning; rather, the Qurʾān is understood by a divine light cast into the heart."* (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, London: Zahra, 1987)

Another crucial epistemological concept here is fiṭra. Fiṭra is defined in the Qurʾān (30:30) as the original nature or disposition upon which God created mankind. It implies an innate orientation toward truth and goodness. Islamic philosophers and Sufis elaborated fiṭra as the human's primordial memory of God and innate capacity to recognize Him. William Chittick interprets fiṭra as the *"innate capacity for humans to know God and adhere to divine truth,"* essentially the inborn disposition toward tawḥīd (recognizing God's unity). Every child is born with this pure fitra, which includes an intuitive moral compass and a direct, if latent, consciousness of God (this idea resonates with the famous hadith, *"Every child is born upon the fiṭra; it is only parents (environment) that make him a Jew, Christian, or Magian."*). This concept has direct implications for mystical epistemology: it suggests that the human soul naturally knows or can know Divine realities without external instruction, provided it can recover or awaken its original state.

Mullā Ṣadrā established a significant link between fiṭra and *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*. He characterized *fiṭra* as *""*, describing it as an *active ontological reality* through which truth is revealed via direct awareness. (Zailan Moris, ,

London: Routledge Curzon, 2003) In simpler terms, the *fitra* is not just a blank slate; it is *"the soul's innate, presential awareness of God and of moral truth that precedes discursive thought."* Because our very existence (*wujūd*) is a mode of finding (*wujūd* as finding) according to Ṣadrā, to *be* is already to have a kind of knowledge by presence. Thus, the human soul by virtue of existing has *present within it* a knowledge of God (since we are *from* God and *upon* the mold of His intent). *Fiṭra*, in his metaphysics, is an ontologically active predisposition wherein *"the acts of being and knowing coincide"* (İbrahim Kalın, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). We know God not through conceptual reasoning alone, but by awakening to our own deepest being, which is always in connection with God. This is why self-knowledge (*maʿrifat al-nafs*) is continually emphasized: *"He who knows himself knows his Lord."* The soul's journey of perfection can be seen as an unfolding or actualizing of this latent innate knowledge. As Ṣadrā argues, humans are not born as completely blank slates; rather, the soul is imbued with *"innate knowledge from the outset,"* which gradually unfolds as one traverses the spiritual path. This innate knowledge by presence is like a seed that grows under the right conditions of spiritual practice, eventually yielding the fruits of direct insight (*kashf*).

In the context of Qurʾānic interpretation, this means that understanding the deepest meanings of the Qurʾān is less about acquiring information and more about awakening certain knowledge within. Verses of the Qurʾān often function as reminders (*dhikr*) that activate the fiṭra's memory. An interesting point is made in a contemporary study on *fiṭra*: the Qurʾān calls itself *"dhikr for the ʿālamīn"* (a reminder for the worlds). It suggests that revelation doesn't so much *introduce* totally novel concepts as it *reminds* souls of truths they already deep down know (by virtue of *fiṭra* and the primordial covenant). For instance, when the Qurʾān speaks of God's Oneness and Lordship, the message resonates with the soul's innate testimony on the Day of Alast (7:172). That is why people often describe an inner echo or recognition upon reading the Qurʾān sincerely. Sufis take this further: through exercises of remembrance (dhikr Allah), meditation (muraqaba), and love of God, they seek to strip away the rust from the heart so that the *fiṭra's* light shines forth, illuminating the meanings of revelation from within (See, Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam). In essence, the Qurʾān is written in the soul as well – a concept alluded to in some Sufi writings that the real Qurʾān is an eternal reality (*umm al-kitāb*) inscribed in the guarded tablet and reflected in the human heart, and the printed *mushaf* is a reflection of that higher reality (For the Qurʾān as an Eternal Reality in the Soul, See Henry Corbin, Temple and contemplation, Islamic

texts and contexts, (London: KPI in association with Islamic Publications, London, 1986)

Now, how do these epistemologies justify or inform Sufi *taʾwīl*? They do so by asserting that *textual meaning is not exhausted by the outward linguistic expression; there are inner connections and realities that can be grasped through non-discursive means.* For example, when a Sufi says "this verse means XYZ in the inner sense," from a rationalist perspective he might be making a tenuous connection. But from the perspective of knowledge by presence, that *meaning* might have been directly witnessed by the Sufi in a spiritual vision or state.

This interplay of reason and direct insight was addressed by ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī's pupils when responding to the anti-Sufi Tafkīk school. They noted that both reason (*ʿaql*) and revelation (*naql*) come from God. The intellect in its pure, God-given function (sometimes called *al-ʿaql al-nūrānī*, the luminous intellect) does not contradict revelation; instead, it penetrates to the harmony between the rational truths of *tawḥīd* and the experiential truths of ʿirfān. Thus, scholars like Javādī Āmulī emphasize *integrating the inward intellect (ʿaql bāṭinī) with the outward, discursive intellect (ʿaql ẓāhirī)*. True knowledge, he notes (echoing Mullā Ṣadrā), arises from their integration. In practice, this means the *tafsīr* scholar can and should use analytical tools—language, context, grammar—and be receptive to flashes of intuitive insight or inspiration that do not violate the sharʿī principles. The greatest commentators, like al-Ghazālī or Mawlānā (Rūmī) or in Shiʿism someone like ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, combined rigorous knowledge of the outer sciences with inner spiritual refinement (Asghari, Sufism and philosophy in the contemporary Shia Seminary: scholars and mystics).

We should mention an example that encapsulates these epistemologies in interpreting a verse. Consider the Qur'ānic verse *"Allah taught Adam all the Names"* (2:31). Exoterically, this is about Adam's knowledge. Philosophically, one might say it signifies man's capacity for abstract concepts (naming). Mystically, especially in Ibn ʿArabī's school, this verse means that Adam was given knowledge of the realities of all things (*asmāʾ* here meaning the archetypes of existents), effectively a direct insight into creation. They relate this to the idea of Perfect Man containing the Names of God. This interpretation is not obvious from grammar alone; it stems from unveiling and deep contemplation on what it means to be taught "all names." A philosopher-mystic like Ṣadrā would argue Adam's *fiṭra* was pure and thus he had *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* of those realities (he "found" them present in himself as God taught him). A scriptural literalist might balk, but the mystical epistemology gives a coherent framework: Adam's example

foreshadows that the fully realized human (like prophets and saints) can directly apprehend divine truths without intermediary, and the Qurʾān hints at such possibilities.

Finally, we return to *tawḥīd*, the doctrine of Divine Unity, which is the ultimate truth mystics seek to know by presence. All mystical exegesis is oriented toward illuminating tawḥīd. For the gnostic, *tawḥīd* is not just the propositional statement *"There is no god but God"*, but an existential realization that *"There is nothing but God"* (in Sufi terms, *lā mawjūda illā Allāh*, or the doctrine of Oneness of Being properly understood as all things being divine self-disclosures). The Qurʾān's inner message is one of *tawḥīd* in multiple facets: metaphysical (only God truly exists), spiritual (one's heart should love only God), ethical (to see God's hand in all happenings), and social (to worship none but God, etc.). Through *taʾwīl*, mystics interpret verses to guide seekers toward that unitary vision. For example, when the Qurʾān says *"Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God"* (2:115), a Sufi takes it as a direct indication of God's omnipresence and the need to perceive Him in every direction—an idea that supports Oneness of being. A philosopher might caution this means God's knowledge/power is everywhere, not His essence; but the mystic (often the philosopher-mystic like Ṣadrā or Qūnawī) would respond that all multiplicity is pervaded by the light of the One, and only one who has *knowledge by presence* of that reality can fully grasp the verse's import. Indeed, *Kernel of the Kernel* emphasizes that solely philosophical (*burhānī*) proofs of *tawḥīd*, while logically airtight, *"do not satisfy the heart and spirit"*. True contentment of the soul comes from *shuhūd* (direct witnessing) of *tawḥīd*. And *that* is the ultimate mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān: not an intellectual construct, but the lived, tasted knowledge that *"La ilaha illa'Llah"* is absolute reality (Kernel of the Kernel: Concerning the Wayfaring and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect (*Risāla-yi Lubb al-Lubāb dar Sayr wa Sulūk-i Ulu'l Albāb*) A Shiʿi Approach to Sufism, SUNY Press, Albany).

Integration of Outward and Inward Hermeneutics

A key feature of the genuine mystical approach—underscored throughout but deserving its own emphasis—is the integration of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, of outward exegesis and inward interpretation. The Qurʾān itself repeatedly enjoins believers to use their reason and follow the Sharia, even as it alludes to profound mysteries. Thus, mystical commentators insist that any *taʾwīl* must not violate the established *ẓāhir* (the plain meaning and law). Rather, *taʾwīl* is built upon *tafsīr*. They often quote the maxim: *"al-ẓāhir ṭarīq ilā l-bāṭin"* – "the outward is the road to the inward." In practice, this means a Sufi or *ʿārif* will first acknowledge the literal meaning of a verse and its legal or theological implications as valid, then supplement it

with an inner meaning that does not nullify the outer. For instance, when interpreting the ritual prayer, the outer meaning concerns the physical acts and recitations that are obligatory. The Sufi accepts that (and indeed performs the prayer meticulously), but additionally he interprets *standing* as standing before God in awe, *bowing* as the submission of the intellect, *prostration* as annihilation of the ego before the Real. These inner interpretations enrich the act; they do not cancel the obligation to actually stand, bow, and prostrate physically.

In the Shiʿi context, one finds that mystical interpretation is often tied to recognition of the Imam. The exoteric duty is to follow the Imam; the esoteric aspect is to see the Imam as a channel to God and to see God's attributes reflected in the Imam (the Perfect Human). For example, some Shiʿi hadiths interpret the Qurʾānic term "*dhikr*" (remembrance) as specifically referring to the Imam or the Prophet. Outwardly, *dhikr* means remembering God by tongue or heart; esoterically, it can mean the living reminder of God, the Imam, who "reminds" people of God by his very being.

Thus, the integration of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* also safeguards mystical exegesis from becoming an arbitrary free-for-all. It imposes a discipline: one cannot claim an inner meaning that blatantly contradicts the letter of the Qurʾān or the fundamental tenets of Islam. The inward sense must be "harmonious with the meaning" (to use Ṭabāṭabāʾī's term) of the verse, even if not derived by ordinary syntax. This is akin to what in hermeneutics is called the *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning) of scripture: it doesn't negate the sensus literalis (literal meaning) but adds depth. Sufi commentators typically present their insights modestly, as a meaning (*iḥtimāl*) or a *laṭīfa* (subtle point), after explaining or at least referencing the literal meaning. When al-Qushayrī or al-Niffarī or other Sufi authors write their commentaries, one sees a pattern: they will quote a verse and then say *"ishāra"* or *"fahm"* or *"inward note"*, and give the Sufi meaning. By marking it as an allusion, they implicitly say: this is not the only meaning, but it is a valid lesson we can take (See, Kristin Zahra Sands, Ṣūfī commentaries on the Qurān in classical Islam (London: Routledge, 2006), 29-31, http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=261318, 1 online resource (viii, 196 pages). As a concrete example from the provided sources: in the conclusion of the base paper, it was stated that *remaining in the ẓawāhir (outer forms) of the Qurʾān is like stopping at the shore of an ocean.* This metaphor acknowledges the shore (outer forms) exists and is the starting point, but urges one to set sail to the ocean (inner meanings). However, one must sail properly—with a boat. The "boat" is the Sharia and proper methodology. If one dives without a boat or safety, one might drown

in fantasy. Conversely, one who refuses to leave the shore never experiences the depth. The balance, again, is evident. Therefore, in our unified academic perspective, we maintain that mystical interpretation in Islam is not an anti-nomian or purely subjective endeavor; it is a disciplined extension of classical exegesis, requiring its own qualifications (spiritual as well as intellectual). The mystic commentator is often at pains to establish credentials in the outward sciences (many wrote conventional commentaries too – e.g., Ṣadrā wrote a regular *tafsīr* on Sūrat al-Baqara aside from his theosophical glosses). This bridging of outward and inward ensures that mystical commentary remains anchored in the Qurʾān's actual text and the religion's praxis, thereby enriching the scripture's relevance rather than reading something foreign into it.

As Nasr has pointed out, the Qurʾān's miraculous quality (*iʿjāz*) lies in its ability to address multiple levels of reality simultaneously . A single verse can guide a child at the literal level, a jurist at the legal level, a philosopher at a metaphysical level, and a mystic at a transcendental level—all without contradiction. It is precisely this multi-valence that mystical exegesis celebrates. By integrating outward and inward, one doe's justice to the fullness of the Qurʾānic revelation, which emanates from the One who encompasses both the outward and the inward (Q.57:3) (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The study Qur'ān: a new translation and commentary, First edition. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015)).

Conclusion

The mystical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of the Qurʾān, as practiced in Sufi and Shiʿi traditions, emerges as a profound testament to the Qurʾān's depth, elasticity, and enduring power to reveal meaning to those who seek God with both intellect and heart. Far from being a modern imposition or a heterodox whim, the esoteric hermeneutic has roots in the Qurʾān's own ethos and the teachings of early Islamic authorities. This study has shown that mystical exegesis is undergirded by a coherent epistemology—one that valorizes direct spiritual insight (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*) and the soul's innate disposition (*fiṭra*) toward recognizing God's truth. Armed with these principles, mystics approach the Qurʾān not just as a text to be deciphered, but as a mirror in which timeless realities are reflected according to the purity of the seeker's soul. We explored how Sufi commentators, through metaphor and allegory, read the Qurʾān as a *love-letter* from the Divine Beloved, addressing the heart's longing for the Absolute. They employed *taʾwīl* to bridge the gap between the human and the Divine, discovering in Scripture the traces of a primordial covenant of love (Q.7:172) and mapping the soul's journey back to God through the arc of ascent. Shiʿi mystics,

meanwhile, complemented this perspective by highlighting the role of the Imams and the Prophetic Light in unveiling the Qurʾān's inner layers, positing that the fullness of Qurʾānic wisdom is realized in the Perfect Human who embodies its truths. Both traditions converge on the insight that the Qurʾān's verses have layered significations (*ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*) and that understanding the *bāṭin* requires not only scholarly effort but also spiritual refinement and illumination. A recurring theme in our study is that mystical exegesis does not abolish the outward meaning; it fulfills it. We saw how authoritative voices, from ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī to contemporary scholars like Javādī Āmulī, insist on integrating reason, scripture, and inner experience into a harmonious approach. The *tafkīk* (separatist) tendency to divorce mystical insight from Qurʾān commentary was met with strong rebuttals: intellect (*ʿaql*) and revelation (*waḥy*) are two wings of a bird, both given by God. Authentic Sufi commentary, therefore, operates within the bounds of orthodox belief and practice, using the Sharīʿa as its foundation and *taqwā* (God-consciousness) as its guiding light. As the *Kernel of the Kernel* counsels, the traveler on the path summons all dimensions of his being – body, mind, and spirit – in devotion. The body observes the outward rites (prayer, fasting, etc.), the mind contemplates divine signs, and the spirit seeks annihilation in God's presence. In exegetical terms, this means the sound mystical interpreter prays like a jurist, reasons like a theologian, and intuits like a lover of God. The role of epistemic humility also emerged in our discussion. Mystical authors often frame their insights as *dhawq* (taste) or *ishāra* (allusion), acknowledging that no single interpretation can exhaust the divine speech. The Qurʾān's nature as an infinite ocean of meaning is a common analogy. *Taʾwīl* is not about reading one's whims into the text (the Goldziheresque accusation), but about *discovering* layers through disciplined spiritual labor. In this regard, the mystical approach can be seen as an extension of the classical hermeneutical principle that the Qurʾān's verses can have multiple valid interpretations (wujūh). It simply extends that to include interpretations accessed via spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) – provided they do not contradict the Qurʾān or established doctrine. In the contemporary context, our exploration underscores that mystical interpretation remains relevant and vibrant. In an age of increased interreligious engagement and philosophical inquiry, concepts like *fiṭra* and natural law are finding renewed attention. The idea that all humans share an innate moral and spiritual sense resonates with modern discussions on human nature and ethics. Sufi literature and Shiʿi *ʿirfān* offer rich resources for a spiritual humanism grounded in the Qurʾān. They present a vision of Islam that speaks to the "heart of the matter" – the transformative experience of the Divine – which can be especially meaningful in a time

when mere formalism or externalism often leaves the youth uninspired. Mystical exegesis shows how the Qurʾān can be *"spirit and life"* (to borrow a biblical phrase), not just law and lore. In conclusion, the mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān is a scholarly and spiritual endeavor that *strives to be true to the letter and the spirit* of the Islamic revelation. It invites the believer to engage the Qurʾān with the entirety of one's being to recite with the tongue, understand with the mind, and respond with the soul. The outcome of such engagement is not merely theoretical knowledge, but a kind of *knowing that is being* – a knowledge by presence that, as Mullā Ṣadrā taught, is united with existence. When the Qurʾān speaks of those who *"believe and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of God"* (13:28), the mystics interpret that at the deepest level: true peace of heart comes when one *experiences* the reality behind the words. In the final analysis, mystical exegesis is justified by its fruits: increased God-consciousness (*taqwá*), love of the Prophet and Imams, purification of the self, and unity of the community on the essentials of faith even as we celebrate diverse understandings. It is, as the conclusion of the base paper noted, *"nothing but discovering the Divine secrets through contemplation, intuition and mystical experience,"* a path of *"realizing the self"* and ascending the ladder of spiritual perfection. Such realization, far from being a "reading of one's own ideas" into the Qurʾān, is viewed as the Qurʾān reading itself into one's soul, thereby actualizing the promise of God's Word as "a guidance and healing for those who believe" (41:44). In bridging the exoteric and esoteric, the mystical approach contributes to the "unity of knowledge" in Islam—affirming that rational inquiry (*burhān*), scriptural testimony (*naql*), and spiritual illumination (*ʿirfān*) ultimately converge on the One Truth. Each mode corrects and completes the others: reason keeps inspiration grounded, scripture keeps reason humble, and inspiration keeps scripture alive. As a unified academic article, this study has integrated materials from Sufi and Shiʿi sources, classical and contemporary, to present a cohesive picture of Qurʾānic mysticism. It stands as a scholarly contribution that upholds a scholarly tone while not shying away from the poetic and transcendent dimensions of its subject. The legacy of mystical interpretation affirms that Islam's sacred scripture is not a static code but a living dialogue between God and the human soul. In the words of Rūmī addressing the Qurʾān: *"O Ocean of Knowledge, we are thirsting fishes. By the drops of wisdom, you have rained upon us, we swim back to your endless sea."* The mystics, in their commentaries, simply chart the secret currents of that sea, so that earnest seekers may navigate towards the Divine shore.

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