The expression Akhbārī tafsīr refers, perhaps misleadingly, to a particular type of qur'anic interpretation which achieved its final form in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries at the hands of Shi'i scholars. The prime concern of the Akhbārīs and their ‘opponents’ the Uṣūlis was not scripture interpretation per se, but rather the more far-ranging discipline of law and its working out – fiqh. It is likely that inasmuch as this division or school seems to have come about largely as an alternative theory of jurisprudence, rather than the somewhat more narrow discipline of tafsīr, that the title of this paper is ill-conceived. However, the four works treated below do exhibit many similarities in approach and subject matter despite the fact that their authors appear to represent varying degrees of attachment to what might be called strict Akhbārī belief. Because these works appear not to have attracted much attention in the West, a brief survey of their authors and contents will be offered. It should be emphasized that these commentaries are extremely rich in content and that the following represents only the most preliminary sounding of their concerns. It is hoped, however, that by doing this the main purpose of this paper will have been achieved: to draw attention to these commentaries as representative of a more or less distinctive genre of tafsīr, one which, from the evidence of their dates of publication, appears to have an enduring place in Shi'i religious literature. Before turning to the works themselves, a brief characterization of the major doctrinal differences between the Uṣūlis and the Akhbārīs will provide something of an introduction.

The Akhbārī Uṣūlī debate

The Uṣūlis recognize four sources of the law: Qur'ān, ḥadīth, ‘aql, and ijmā‘. The Akhbārīs recognize only the first two, the Qur'ān and the hadīth. In some cases, we are told, certain scholars accept only hadīth as a proper source. Against the Uṣūlis, the Akhbāriyya consider the entire contents of the ‘four
books' of Shi'i tradition to be reliable and may even allow traditions from a much wider field, including traditions from Sunnī sources. Akhbārīs also recognize only two categories of hadīth: sound (ṣaḥīḥ) and weak (daʿīf). According to the Akhbārīs, naqţī legal rulings, decisions based squarely on the traditions, have precedence over aqīlī rulings, decisions based on reasoning and analogy (qiyās), tools the Usuliyya employ and require as part of the necessary ījtihād—or independent legal reasoning—that is to be applied to the Qurʾān and hadīth for arriving at a legal decision. The Akhbārī, in short, reject ījtihād. Where the Usuliyya allow decisions to be made on the basis of conjecture (zann), Akhbārīs allow a legal decision (fatwa) only in the case of certainty (yaqīn) derived from a tradition (khabar pl. akhbār). Where there is no clear text, caution (ikhtiyār) must be exercised. The Usuliyya divide humanity into two groups: mujtahid and muqallid. That is, between the Imam and the average believer is interposed an expert in religious matters to whom the believer must defer in matters of religion and law. The leading mujtahid of a given generation is called marja′ al-taqlīd (the object of emulation) and is the ultimate authority in religious matters. Obedience to the mujtahid for the Usuliyy is obedience to the Imam. Akhbārīs maintain that all men are muqallid to the Imam—that is all must emulate the Imam, and the Imam alone and directly in matters of religion which include law. Akhbārīs permit the use of the decisions of a dead jurist, the Usuliyya forbid this. This characterization should, however, be used with caution as it seems clear that there were varying degrees of attachment to these doctrines on both sides.

It is not possible, or necessary, to survey the history of this dispute; reference is made to a recent summary of the question. The point to keep in mind here is that the Akhbārī approach, which had apparently been dormant for five or so centuries, began to assert itself in Iran during the Safavid period, especially in the writings of Mullā Muhammad Amin Astarābādī (d.1623–24). It is after this time that a series of Qurʾān commentaries which may be characterized as Akhbārī, were produced. The usual story is that from about the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth, a battle raged between the two camps. At the end of the day, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Usuliyya emerged victorious. The exact nature of the debate, the dramatis personae, and the place where the debate occurred is still a subject for study.

While this particular struggle between the two groups was a fairly late event, traces of the argument can be found throughout the history of Qurʾān interpretation. For example, in the earliest Shi'i commentaries on Qurʾān 16.6 the bees, which are presented there as having been inspired by God to behave the way they do, are treated as a metaphor for the Imams whose divine knowledge, the honey of the verse, is that which provides this healing. However, by the time of al-Sharīf al-Rādī (d.1016), the explanation of the verse had changed considerably: 'This honey is with the muḥaqiqīn from among the `ulamā' and does not come from the bellies of the bees'.

Such a shift in exegesis supports Madelung’s view concerning the history of the Usuli′Akhbārī dispute. In his discussion of the relationship between Shi‘ism and Muʿtazilite theology, he cites a twelfth century work in which the author, one `Abd al-Jalīl al-Rāzī, describes his theological position as that of the Imāmiyya Usuliyya as opposed to the position of the Imāmiyya Akhbāriyya. Madelung’s conclusion is:

These statements show that the conflict between Usuliyya and Akhbāriyya in Imamism is not a phenomenon originating in . . . Safavid times, as is sometimes suggested. . . . The later conflict which centres on technical questions of the principles of the law (usūl al-fiqh) is rooted in the earlier broader conflict between supporters of speculative theology and traditionalist opponents of reasoning in religion.10

Types of Shi‘i tafsīr

The tafsīr which form the subject of this essay are most usefully contrasted with the standard tafsīr works of so-called classical Shi‘ism: the two famous commentaries by Tusi (d.1067) and Tabarsi (d.1144). Quite simply, they are worlds apart in style, structure and content. The classical works are interested in grammatical questions, avoid major controversies, and, contrary to the Akhbārī works, relate vast amounts of hadīth material from Sunnī sources and transmitters such as Tabari, Abū Ḥanifs, Ibn Mas‘ūd, and `Āʾisha. The works at hand appear to care almost nothing for stylistics, points of grammar and so on, except in so far as such concerns might impinge upon finding the true reading of the verse in question through metonymy or metaphor for the Imam or some related topic such as walāya. The Akhbārī approach is distinguished by the employment of vast numbers of oral reports, long since preserved in writing, that bear directly, and sometimes indirectly, on the meaning of the Qurʾān. These oral reports are structurally the same as hadīth reports but are distinguished from them in this case by the technical term khabar because virtually all of these reports are traced to one of the members of the holy family of Shi‘ism, the ahl al-bayt, namely one of the so-called Fourteen Most Pure Ones, the twelve Imams, Fāṭima and the prophet Muhammad. A typical Akhbārī commentary will cite a verse, or sequence of verses of the Qurʾān, and then list a number of these oral reports which in some way or another explain the scriptural material.

Structurally then, Akhbārī tafsīr is quite similar to a perhaps more familiar type of interpretation, namely tafsīr bi‘l-ma‘thīr. The classic example of this category of exegesis is the massive commentary of Tabari (d.923) known simply as Tafsir al-Tabari.11 In fact, the similarities appear at first to be so striking as to generate speculations on the cyclical recurrence of specific types of approaches to scripture. The works considered here are products of Šafavī times, a period when a definite world view was in the making and at stake, and
can therefore be compared with the above-mentioned Tafsir al-Tabari of the late ninth and early tenth centuries during which those materials had been gathered and sorted which would form the basis for another world view. Interestingly, both projects were mounted during periods of decline in their respective political milieus.

But there is another difference between the work of Tabari and the work of our authors: they show a radical disagreement as to the fundamental questions of Islamic religious authority. Many of the traditions cited are explicitly anti-Sunni in nature, and all either explicitly or implicitly uphold and promulgate the absolute authority of the Imams. The resurrection of such material began well before the rise of the most recent dispute in the eighteenth century between the Ushūlū and the Akhbarīs and is dated from the beginning of the Safavid period itself when traditions long laid to rest were collected and ultimately translated into Persian for the widest possible circulation. Their radicalism has been characterized as affecting three characteristic topics:

...the integrity of the Qurʾān, the status of the Companions, and the position of the Imams. Briefly put, the message contained in these traditions is that certain phrases of the Qurʾān which referred to ‘Ali’s rights had been deliberately omitted by ‘Uthmān and his accomplices; that the great majority of the Companions (including in particular the first three caliphs) were grave sinners or even unbelievers for usurping ‘Ali’s rights or acquiescing in his usurpation; that the Imams were superhuman, possessed knowledge of the ghayb and could perform miracles. This radicalism is expressed in a method of scripture interpretation most commonly designated by the word taʾwil. The word means ‘taking back to the beginning’ or ‘taking back to first principles’. For the authors presented below, this means reading the verses of the Qurʾān according to the interpretations of the Imams, who are, par excellence, the ‘first principles’ (mabādiʿ) of Shiʿism. But beyond this, taʾwil means an interpretation of many qur’anic verses which mention such things as ‘the Face of God’ (e.g. Qurʾān 2.115) as referring specifically to the Prophet and the Imams. So, for the present example:

In a long khabar, God addresses the Prophet and the Imams in the ‘ālam al-dharr (the world of the primordial covenant), thus: ‘I have appointed you intercessors for Me. All things are passing away except my face, and you are my face which never perishes, and he who turns toward you will likewise never perish.’

In contrast, the ‘Face of God’ is explained by Ṭūsī as follows:

To God belongs the east and the west. So wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. (Qurʾān 2.115)

First comes a long discussion of the meaning of mashriq and maghrib in which Ṭūsī cites many examples to prove that this refers to the places of the rising and the setting of the sun. This occupies almost three pages of his commentary. As for wajh Allāh he cites a hadith from Ibn ‘Abbās which the Mu’tazilite al-Jubbārī also used to bring out the familiar meaning of the expression: this verse was revealed to refute the Jews who objected to the changing of the qibla and the meaning is that God is not in one direction (jiha) to the exclusion of others. Another hadith from Qatāda says that the verse simply indicates the direction of prayer. It is also said, Ṭūsī tells us, that the verse was revealed for those who are unable to determine the correct direction of prayer because of darkness or other impediments. About the phrase there is general disagreement. He then quotes Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Mujāhid to the effect that wajh means the direction of the qibla, i.e., the Ka’ba. A final quotation from al-Rummānī and al-Jubbārī gives the possible equivalence: Face of God = good pleasure of God.

The works described below, quite apart from avoiding such authorities as Mujāhid, Qatāda, and al-Jubbārī, never delve into lexical questions with the attendant citation of literary shawāhid. As stated above, the commentary is offered in the form of statements from the Imams.

The exegeses of this period whose works are considered below are, in the order of the dates of composition of their respective commentaries: ‘Abd ‘Alī al-Ḥuwayzi (d. before 1693), Muḥsin Fāyıld Kāshānī (d. 1689), Ḥāshim al-Bahrānī (d. ca. 1695), and Abū ʿl-Ḥasan al-Īṣfahānī, al-Sharīf al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1724). Each of these authors has written an introduction for his tafsir. The following examination is restricted for the most part to this introductory material. It will be helpful, as stated above, to bear in mind that even within the so-called Akhbarī school a spectrum of intensity may be discerned. Indeed, it will be seen that it may be doubtful whether Īṣfahānī can be considered an Akhbarī at all. But inasmuch as his tafsir expresses the same ‘radicalism’ shared by the other authors discussed here, his work has been included.

Nūr al-thaqalayn

The first work to be discussed was written by ‘Abd ‘Alī b. Jum’a al-ʿArūsī al-Ḥuwayzi, Kitāb tafsir nūr al-thaqalayn, hereafter Nūr. The title is taken from the famous hadith al-thaqalayn, which exists in many variants. Two of these have been combined in the following translation:

The Prophet said: ‘I am soon about to be received ... I am telling you before I am taken up that I shall leave with you as representatives after me the Book of my Lord, and my progeny, the people of my household. The all-Gracious, all-knowing told me that they [the two weights, al-thaqalayn] shall not be separated until they meet me [on the Day of Resurrection] ... Do not precede them, for you would go astray, and do...
The Imams are described as those who nourish the wretched, the orphan and the prisoner. (Similar dire circumstances are to be referred to again later.) Ḥuwayzī then explains that he undertook this project because of all the Qur'ān commentaries available, some are concerned with grammar, others with kalām, others with lexicography, and so on, and he thought it important to add the traditions of the Imams which are indispensable for an understanding of ‘the bright lights of the revelation and for revealing the mysteries of some of the ta'wil’. The language here indicates that he is singling out the work of Baydawi (d.1286) as being particularly deficient. He also says that some of what he relates runs contrary to the ījmā’ of the Shi’ī community (al-fā’īja al-muḥiqqa), he is not interested in this work in doctrine (i’tiqād) or (?’ judicial) practice (’amal). He has, nevertheless, included such material so that the enlightened reader will know ‘how and from whom’ it was transmitted. The book is meant to be helpful in arriving at basic disclosure (kashf) of the truth. Furthermore, Ḥuwayzī defends his taking material from other books besides Ṭuṣi and Qummi on the grounds that these two did not transmit hadith for many verses of the Qur'ān. He then cites a poem to the effect that what he is doing is out of love for the Shi’a. Since the author is described as a poet, it is possible that these lines are original, but I have not verified this. He closes the prologue by saying that despite numerous difficulties and calamities, his lack of resources – mental and physical, thanks to God’s grace he was able to produce the book and he named it Nūr al-thaqālatayn hoping for some correspondence between the meaning of the name and the value of the book so that by using it one might ultimately attain the ‘stations of the Independent’. He then invokes the idea of the ‘middle path’ once more and hopes for deliverance from sin and error.23 This preoccupation with correct belief and personal misfortune may indicate that our author was somewhat ‘marginalized’ in his milieu. In the very first hadith he cites, which is on the subject of the revelation of the Fāitha and the āyāt al-kursī, this possibility gains more strength.

The Prophet said: ‘When God desired to reveal the Fāitha, the āyat al-kursī, (Qur’ān 2.255) the šahīda ‘llāh (Qur’ān 3.18), and [the verses] Say: ‘Praised be God! Owner of Sovereignty! Thou givest sovereignty unto whom thou wilt... And thou givest sustenance unto whom thou choosest without stint’ (3.26–27), these passages were hanging from the Throne, and there was no veil between them and God. They said [these verses]: ‘O Lord! Thou art casting us down to the abode of sin and unto those who disobey you while we are dependent upon purity and holiness!’ Then God said: ‘By my power and glory! Any servant who recites you at the end of his şalāt I will cause to dwell in the haṣrāt al-qaḍi according to what is in him. And I will look to him seventy times each day with my hidden eye, and I will award him seventy needs every day, the meanest of which will be [mere] forgiveness. And I will assist him to victory over every enemy. And he will never be prevented from entering Paradise’.24
TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS

Al-Ṣaʿīḥ

The second work to be considered is the most famous, namely the commentary of Mulla Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshāʾi (d.1680), the student and son-in-law of Mulla Ṣadrā (d.1640). Muḥsin Fayḍ was a member of the so-called ʿIṣfāhān school, which was responsible for the elaboration of what became known as the Ḥikmat-i ʿilāhi movement in philosophy. He was also the author of one of the 'three books' of later Twelver Shiʿism, namely al-Wafī, a compilation of and commentary on the canonical hadīths of the original 'four books' of Shiʿī traditions. He was also a teacher of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d.1699), the compiler of the monumental collection of Imāmī lore, Bihār al-anwār, enemy of ʿṢūfīsm, most powerful religious figure of his time, and teacher of numerous prominent Shiʿī 'ulamā'.

It is because such a thinker as Muḥsin Fayḍ is counted among the Akhkārīs, that it is difficult to consider the movement as 'fundamentalist' pure and simple. Apart from his tafsīr, Muḥsin Fayḍ, as is well known, produced several other works expounding an intricate, ratified, and quite speculative, spiritual philosophy. The question to be asked, therefore, is how such so-called Akhkārī literalism can be associated with, or perhaps be productive of such an apparent incongruity.

In any case, Ṣaʿīḥ was completed in 1664, well into the period of ʿAṣmovīd decline and the full title of the commentary is al-Ṣaʿīḥ fi tafsīr kalām Allāh al-wafī. It is introduced with twelve 'prologues' (maqādīmāt), which contain the basic presuppositions informing the work. The titles of these introductions are listed here followed by page numbers which indicate the amount of space each topic takes up. Some material from these introductions will be translated as space allows.

1 On the prophetic injunction (waṣila) to cling to the Qurʾān and the virtue of this [15–18].

2 That the knowledge of the Qurʾān is all with the Ahl al-Bayt [19–23].

From ᾿Ali: No verse of the Qurʾān descended on the Prophet but that he recited it to me and dictated it to me so that I could write it in my own handwriting and he taught me its taʾwil and its tafsīr, its abrogating and abrogated verses (nāṣikh wa-mansūkh), its clear laws (muḥkam), its ambiguities (mutashābih), and he supplicated God on my behalf that he be able to teach me their full understanding (faḥm) and that I be able to memorize them and not forget a single verse from the Book of God. So there is no knowledge which he dictated to me but I wrote it, and there is nothing he left out neither of command nor prohibition, or of what was or what will be, nor was there any book which descended prior to Muḥammad but that he taught it to me and I memorized it and I have forgotten not a single letter.

AKHBĀR SHIʿĪ APPROACHES TO TAFSĪR

Al-Bāqir (the Fifth Imam, d.117/735 – disputed) said: 'None but a liar can claim to have collected (jamaʿa) all of the Qurʾān as it came down because none but ᾿Ali and the Imams after him collected it and memorized it as it came down'. [20]

Al-Ṣādiq (the Sixth Imam, d.148/765) said: We are the rāṣikhūn fiʾ-ʾilm (mentioned in Qurʾān 3.7: those who are firmly grounded in knowledge) and we know the taʾwil of the Qurʾān. [21]

3 That most of the Qurʾān came down about the Ahl al-Bayt and their friends and enemies and an explanation of the real meaning (ṣīr) of that. [24–28]

Al-Bāqir: 'The Qurʾān came down in four fourths: one fourth concerns us, one fourth concerns our enemies, one fourth is sunan and amthāl, and one fourth laws and regulations'. [24]

Al-Bāqir: 'The Qurʾān came down in thirds: one third concerns us, one third concerns our beloved friends, one third concerns our enemies'. [24]

Al-Bāqir: 'Whenever I hear God mention good people of the community it is us He means, and when bad people are mentioned it refers to our enemies'. [25]

4 Concerning the meanings of the aspects (wujūḥ) of the verses, and the establishing of the mutashābih and its taʾwil. [29–34] Here the familiar topics of zāhir, bāṭin, nasīḥ, muḥkam/mutashābih, hadd, and maṭla' are treated.

Al-Bāqir said: 'O Jābir, the Qurʾān has an inner meaning, and an inner meaning to that. It also has an outer meaning which has again an outer meaning. O Jābir, nothing is further from the minds of men than tafsīr al-qurʾān. The beginning of a given verse may be about one thing while its conclusion is about something else. It is a speech containing many aspects (wujūḥ). [29]

The Prophet said: 'The Qurʾān has an outer meaning, an inner meaning, a prescriptive meaning, and a spiritual meaning'. [30]

Al-Bāqir said: 'The Qurʾān came down in the mode of: “[Even though I appear to be speaking to someone else] I really mean you, so listen to me well O neighbour! (jzyki ʾanī waʾsma ʾī yā jāra)”. [30]

Muḥsin Fayḍ explains this last hadīth (which is a standard feature of the four commentaries studied in these pages) as follows: This is like the speaker who is addressing his speech to someone but really intends another. It is clearly seen in the case of the hadīth from al-Bāqir in answer to a query from a follower: 'God never reproved his Prophet but that he really intended the message for someone who is not mentioned explicitly in the Qurʾān, as for example in the verse: 'And had We not given thee strength thou wouldst nearly have inclined
to them a little.’ (Qur'án 17.74) That is, God means by this someone else. Perhaps the intention here is to those whose names have been removed from the Qur'án by the godless renegades (mulhidān). [30–31]

5 On the prohibition of tafsīr bi'l-ra'y. [35–39]

The Prophet said: ‘He who interprets the Qur'án according to his own opinion has scored a direct miss with regard to the truth.’ [35] The Prophet said: ‘He who interprets the Qur'án according to his own opinion will be seated in Hell’. [35] From the Prophet and the Imams: ‘It is not permitted to interpret the Qur'án except through sound traditions and and clear authority’. [35]

Muḥsin Fayd adds: ‘If someone claims that the Qur'án has only an exterior meaning, he speaks strictly from self and errs grievously . . . the Qur'án, the akhbār and the āthār all point to the inner meanings (ma‘ānī) of the Qur'án’. [31–32]

6 On the collection of the Qur'án and its corruption. [40–55]

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘The Prophet said to ‘Ali, “O ‘Ali, the Qur'án is under my pillow in separate sheets . . . take it and collect it together, and do not lose it like the Jews lost the Torah.” So ‘Ali rushed and collected it in a yellow garment, then he put a seal upon it in his house . . .’. [40] From Sālim b. Salma: ‘A man was reciting for al-Ṣādiq, and I heard words (ḥurūf) of the Qur'án which were not those that the people are reciting.

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘Cease that recitation! Recite as the people recite until the Qā'im arises. For when he arises he will recite the Book of God properly (‘alā hadīthi). And he will take out the mushaf which ‘Ali wrote.’ Then he said: ‘When ‘Ali had finished writing it, he went out to the people and said to them: “This is the Book of God as it was sent down upon Muhammad. I have gathered it together between two covers (lawḥayn).” They said: “Look! We have a complete mushaf of the Qur'án. We do not need [your mushaf]!” Then ‘Ali said: “You will not see it after today. Never. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon me to tell you about it after I have collected it so that you may [eventually] recite it.”’ [40–41]

Al-Bāqir: ‘If the Book of God had not been added to and subtracted from, our right (haqqunā) would not be obscure to anyone with understanding. When the Qā'im arises, he will correctly read the Qur'án’. [41]

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘If the Qur'án were read as it was revealed you would find us named in it’. [39] [41]

7 That the Qur'án explains everything. [56–58]

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘God revealed in the Qur'án the explanation of everything and God did not leave out anything the servant might need so that a servant might not say “If only this had been revealed in the Qur'án . . .”. Indeed, God has revealed it in it’.

Mūsā al-Kāẓim (the Seventh Imam, d.183/799) said: ‘Everything is in the Book of God and the sunna of His Prophet’.

8 On the divisions of verses and their contents with regard to inner meaning and ta'wil and the types of language and the qirā‘āt, and what we can gather from this. [59–63]

The Prophet: ‘The Qur'án came down in seven abruf, all of them sufficient and wholesome’.

Muḥsin Fayd says the meaning of this is disputed but the accepted opinion appears to be that the seven abruf refer to seven types of verse: command (amr), rebuke (zajr), attraction (targhib), intimidation (tarhib), argument (jadal), story (qiṣṣa) and similitudes (amthāl) (or: zajr, amr, ḥalāl, harām, muḥkam, mutashābīh, amthāl). Another tradition says that the Qur'án has seven levels of inner meaning. It is this interpretation that Muḥsin Fayd thinks is the most useful. As for actual variants in reading the text, Muḥsin Fayd says the best tradition is the easiest to pronounce and the clearest in meaning based on the akhbār of the Imams (ma‘āmūn). He is in any case interested in the meaning (ma‘nā), quite apart from matters of grammar. [62]

9 Concerning the actual period when the Qur'án came down. [64–66] It is established here that the Qur'án came down in the month of Ramadān, just like other holy books.

10 On the Qur'án as intercessor at the Day of Resurrection and the rewards for memorizing it and reciting it. [67–69]

Al-Bāqir said: ‘Recite the Qur'án and elevate yourself, for when a verse is chanted, degree is elevated’.

‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn (the Fourth Imam, also known as Ẓayn al-‘Ābidīn, d. 94/712) said: ‘He who listens to a single letter of the book of God from any reading, God ordains for him by means of this a good and erases on his behalf a sin and raises his degree. And he who recites the book, no matter how it sounds, God decrees for him for every letter he pronounces a good and erases a sin and raises his station . . .’. [67]

The Prophet said: ‘Illumine your houses with the recitation of the Qur'án and do not make them tombs like the Jews and the Christians
did. They pray in their churches and synagogues but their houses are empty [of prayer] . . . '. [69]

11 On recitation and proper behaviour with the Qur'ān. [70–74].

Muḥsin Fāyḍ: ‘He who recites the Qur'ān and is not humble nor filled with tender feelings, nor cultivates sadness and fear in his soul (sīrū), then he has badly misjudged the wond of God and incurred great loss. As for the reciter, he needs three things: a humble heart, a pure body, and an empty place. For when his heart is humble towards God, Satan flees from him; and when his body is free of extraneous things, his heart is purified for the recitation. If not, the impediment will keep him from the light of the Qur'ān and its good effects. When he betakes himself to a mosque alone and withdraws from the masses after he has acquired the first two qualities and communes in his spirit and soul with God, then he experiences the sweetness of converse with God, and the knowledge of His grace and His station through the [resultant] receptivity for His blessings and the wondrousness of His allusions. And when he drinks of this chalice, he will not choose any state (hād) over this state, nor any moment (waqī) over this moment. 40 Nay rather, he will forego all other acts of obedience and worship because in him is conversation (muna'āt) with his Lord without intermediary. So heed how you recite the book of your Lord and the sharing of your [newfound] friendship [with him] and how its ordainances and prohibitions are incumbent upon you, and how you must appropriate the laws. It is a mighty book. Defile it not with any falseness – it is a wise revelation, praised, so recite it in “slow-measured rhythmic tones” [Qur'ān 73.4] and heed its promise and threat, and meditate on its similitudes and preachings and beware that you put the sounds in their proper place.’ [73].

From al-Ṣādiq: ‘By God! Indeed God has manifested (ta'jallā) himself to his creatures in His speech but they do not see’. [73]

12 Explanation of the technical aspects of this taṣfīr. [75–78] 41

Muṣā al-Kāẓim said: ‘When two hadiths which contradict each other come to you, compare them (fī-qiṣṣumā) to the Book of God and to the hadiths from us. Then the one that resembles these is true (haqq), and if it does not resemble them, it is false (bājil).’

Muḥsin Fāyḍ closes his introduction with the following words:

‘Sometimes, in order to disclose the desired goal, it is necessary to take something from al-Asrār (the Taṣfīr of al-Bayḍawi), even though I am not one of its people. But do not over-react to this because every people, even those, have a knowledge which may be useful . . . and hidden in the essence of their expressions is that which we have discovered through sincere love . . . And to God belongs praise’. 45

He then lists the abbreviations of the standard Shi'i works he cites and closes his introduction explaining that sometimes he has left out the isnād but that he verifies the akhbār through ‘a method other than isnād’ 45:

O my brothers, take what I give you with divine power, for an exhortation and healing for what is in the breasts has come from your Lord. God guides it to those who follow his good pleasure to the paths of Islam, and leads them out of darkness into light. 45

It has been pointed out that Muḥsin Fāyḍ claims that the first transmitters of the exegetical tradition were limited in what they related by tāǰīyya (‘pious dissimulation’), with the result that much of the true tradition might have been lost. ‘This, of course, left great scope for new ideas in taṣfīr in the name of recovering the tradition’. 46 Elsewhere in this recent study, Muḥsin Fāyḍ along with Muhammad Bāqir al-Majlisi, are described as ‘extremists’ for claiming that the Qur'ān which we have has been altered. 47 This idea of an altered Qur'ān is shared by the authors of the other works to be described. However, Šafi is sufficiently ambiguous on the question to enable another author to cite it in support of his own argument that the Shi'a do not hold that the present Qur'ān is somehow defective. 48 The relevant passages in Šafi are as follows:

The Qur'ān which is in our hands is not the entire Qur'ān sent down by God to Muhammad. Rather, there is in it that which contradicts that which God had sent down. There is, moreover, in it that which was altered and changed. There were many things deleted from it, such as the name of ‘All in many places and the phrase Āl Muhammad (the family of Muhammad), as well as the names of the ‘hypocrites’, where they occur . . . . The Qur'ān, furthermore, was not arranged in accordance with the pleasure of God and his apostle. 49

In a later passage, Muḥsin Fāyḍ offers a more or less standard practical solution to the problem. 48 This is explained as follows: Muḥsin Fāyḍ was bound by tradition, as represented by such venerated Shi'i scholars as Tūsī and Tabārānī, who had insisted on the authenticity of the text. Ayoub explains, paraphrasing Šafi:

The Qur'ān as it now stands is the word of God which, if interpreted correctly, contains all that the community now needs in the way of legal sanctions and prohibitions, as well as the necessary proofs of the
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Imam’s high office as its guardians and sole authorities on its exegesis. The Qur’ān which is in our hands must, [Muḥṣin Fayd] argues, be followed during the occultation (ghayba) of the twelfth Imam. It must be assumed that the true Qur’ān is with him.49

Apart from these considerations, this work is distinguished from others by the use of Sūfī terminology (e.g. hāl, waqt, munājāt) and an emphasis on the ‘spiritual discipline’ of reading the Qur’ān as a means of approaching God ‘without an intermediary’. We also see a rather liberal attitude to such sources as Baydawī and, in the course of the tafsīr proper, there is more direct commentary from the author than is the case with either the previous work or the one immediately following.

Al-Burhān

It might be thought that Sāfī directly influenced the larger tafsīr by Sayyid Hāshim al-Bahrānī (1695 or 1697), completed in 1683 during the reign of the Ṣafavīd Shāh Sulaymān (d.1694) to whom the work is duly dedicated. It contains similarly arranged introductory material and repeats many of the same traditions at corresponding verses. However, its author neither cites Sāfī directly, nor mentions the work in the long list of sources included in his introduction.50

Indeed, Bahrānī explicitly states that he is the first to gather the exegetical akhbār of the Imams in such number and that he was preceded in this only by ‘Ayyāshī and Ibn al-Hajjām.51 Apparently the earliest source for his life is Lu’ū’at al-Bahrānī by the Akhbārī scholar Yūsuf al-Bahrānī (d.1772),52 Sayyid Hāshim was born in the village of Tawbālī, in one of the districts of Bahrānī. His father’s name was Sayyid ‘Abd al-Jawād al-Kattakānī. His birth date is unknown. He died in the small town of al-Nu‘aym, whence his remains were returned to Tawbālī for interment in a tomb which subsequently became a well-known place of visitation. Our source says that Bahrānī gathered hadiths to a degree matched only by Majlīs and that he wrote a number of books demonstrating his strength in this. He also says that one writer mentions having met Bahrānī’s son in Isfahān and at that time was shown seventy-five works by our author.53 The title of the work at hand is Kitāb al-burhān fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān, and it is in four volumes.54

For each verse or group of verses, the author lists a series of pertinent akhbār from the Prophet or the Imams. As mentioned, the introductory material appears to be modelled after Šāfī, but this is doubtless not the case.55 A more likely model would be Muḥammad Bāṣīr al-Majlīsī.56 Inasmuch as Muḥṣin Fayd was one of Majlīs’s teachers, the influence may be indirect. But this is only speculation, as Majlīs is not named by our author either. A brief prologue to the following sixteen chapters begins with a number of reports against tafsīr bi‘l-ra‘y, and other reports which assert that only the Prophet and the Imams were able to interpret the Qur’ān. ‘God taught the Prophet the literal text (tanzil) and He taught ‘Ali its interpretation (ta‘wīl)’.57

The author of this work laments that notwithstanding such a statement, he finds the people of his time persistent in interpreting the Qur’ān according to their selfish needs to uphold their various sects and doctrines, without referring to the Imams, and cites the works of al-Zamakhšārī (d.1144) and al-Baydawī as examples of current tafsīr authorities.58 This statement might also be tacitly directed to such scholars as Mullā Ṣadrā (d.1640), who engaged in a style of exegesis quite different from that of Muḥṣin Fayd, his student, and the other Akhbārī commentators. Mullā Ṣadrā’s commentaries, by comparison with these other works which ceaselessly refer to the Ahl al-Bayt, appear to ignore the Imams and the Prophet, even though his entire philosophy may be said to revolve around the institution of Imāma; rather, he is concerned with elaborating his Hikmat-i ilāhī philosophy. But his style is so strikingly different that it could generate doubts as to his orthodoxy (from the Akhbārī point of view) because the all-important akhbār are not explicitly marshaled to the task of interpretation. Obviously, the mere fact that Mullā Ṣadrā composed a massive (if unfinished) commentary on the Uṣūl al-kāfī demonstrates his devotion to the material. This style of commentary could have rankled men like Bahrānī, not necessarily because of any displeasure with this philosophy itself, but because what was perceived as the true meaning of the Qur’ān, viz., the Imamate, as represented by the akhbār, had been subordinated to it.59 Bahrānī’s prologue closes with an apology for quoting such authorities as Ibn ‘Abbās (‘a little’) ‘since he was after all, a student of the Commander of the Faithful’.

Whereas Muḥṣin Fayd’s introduction was divided according to the number of Imams revered by the Shī‘a, Bahrānī’s work is introduced by sixteen chapters (sing. bāb) which provide a useful summary of the major themes of his tafsīr.60 A list of these will further illustrate the concerns of this work.

Chapter 1: on the pursuit of knowledge (‘ilm)51 [5–7]

‘Ali said: ‘I heard the Prophet say: “The search for knowledge is a religious duty for every Muslim, so seek it at those places where you may expect it to be found (maṣāmih), and acquire it from its people”’. [5]

The Prophet said: ‘If a believer dies and leaves behind one page upon which knowledge is written, this single page will be interposed between him and hell until the Day of Resurrection. Then God will give him for each letter on it a city seven times larger than the earth.’ [6]

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Chapter 2: on the Excellence (fadl) of the Qur‘ān. [7–9]

The Prophet: ‘God will never punish the heart that contains the Qur‘ān’.

The Prophet: ‘The best of you are those who study and teach the Qur‘ān’.

Al-Bāqir said about the Qur‘ān: ‘It is neither creator nor created, rather it is the speech of the creator’. [8]

‘Ali said: ‘In the Qur‘ān is information about what came before you, and tidings about what will come after you, and judgement on what concerns you now’. [9]

Chapter 3: concerning the ‘two weights’. This refers to the Ḥadīth al-thaqalayn, related from the Prophet. [9–14]. A version of this hadīth has been given above. This chapter lists no less than thirty-two variants of this report. The importance in this context is that it establishes the Imams as the sole interpreters of the Qur‘ān. This tradition, and its variants, provides support for the basic Shi‘ī notion of the ‘Speaking Qur‘ān’ (i.e., the Prophet and the Imams) and the ‘Silent Qur‘ān’ (i.e., the Qur‘ān itself).

Chapter 4: on the hadīth al-thaqalayn from the opposing point of view. [14–15] This view is summarized by Bahrānī as ‘whatever the believer needs is in the Qur‘ān,’ the implication being that there is no need to consult the akhbār, and he lists eighteen akhbār to this effect from the Imams.62 From the heading, however, it is obvious that our author does not agree with this doctrine.

Chapter 5: that no one but the Imams collected (jama‘a) the Qur‘ān as it was revealed and that the ta‘wil of the Qur‘ān is with the Imams. [15–17]

Al-Bāqir said: ‘None but the awṣiyā’ (the Imams) can claim to have collected all of the Qur‘ān, its zahr and batr’. [15]

Al-Ṣādiq: ‘By God, I know the Qur‘ān from first to last as if it were in the palm of my hand. In it is information about heaven and earth, what was and what will be, as God himself has said about it: “It is an explanation of all things” (Qur‘ān 12.89)’. [15]

Al-Ṣādiq was asked if some of the Imams were more knowledgeable than others. He replied: ‘Yes, but with regard to commands, prohibitions and tafsīr, they are one’. [17]

Al-Ṣādiq: ‘Ali was the master of commands and prohibitions and the knowledge of the Qur‘ān. And we are the same’. [17]

The Prophet said: ‘Among you is one who will fight for the ta‘wil of the Qur‘ān as I have fought for its tanzīl. That one is ‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib’.63 [17]

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‘Ali said: ‘Whatever is between the two covers (lawḥayn), indeed I know it’. [17]

‘Ali said: ‘No verse came down but that I know about whom it was revealed, and where it was revealed, and upon what subject it was revealed. My Lord has given me a knowing heart and a speaking tongue’. [17]

Chapter 6: on the prohibition of tafsīr bi‘l-ra‘y and the prohibition of disputation (jidāl).64 [17–19]

The Prophet said: ‘God cursed those who dispute in matters of religion through the tongues of seventy prophets. He who argues about the verses of God has committed kufr, as stated in the verse: “None can dispute about the verses of God but the unbelievers. Let not their strutting about the land deceive you.” (Qur‘ān 30.4) He who explains the Qur‘ān according to his own opinion has insulted God. And he who gives a fatwā without knowledge, the angels of heaven and earth curse. Any innovation (bid‘a) is an error, and error is the path to hell’. The Prophet was asked: ‘O Prophet direct me to salvation’. The Prophet replied: ‘When opinions differ, you should consult ‘Ali. He is the Imam of my community and the Caliph over them after me. He is the distinguisher between truth and falsehood. Whoever asks of him is answered. Whoever seeks guidance from him is guided. Whoever seeks the truth from him finds it... All who object to him are destroyed... Indeed ‘Ali is of me. His spirit is my spirit. His clay is my clay. He is my brother and I am his brother. He married my daughter Fāṭima, the queen of the women of paradise. And from him issue the two Imams of my community, and my two sons, the two princes of the youths of paradise, Ḥasan and Husayn, and nine others of the progeny of Husayn. The ninth one is the Qā‘im of my community who will fill the earth with justice as it is now filled with iniquity and oppression’. [18]

Al-Bāqir said: ‘Nothing is more remote from the minds of men than the explanation (tafsīr) of the Qur‘ān. The first part of a verse may be about one thing, the middle about another and the end about yet another...’. [19]

Al-Bāqir said: ‘None interprets one part of the Qur‘ān with another part but that he commits kufr’. [19]

Chapter 7: that the Qur‘ān has an external and an internal meaning, and a general and particular application, and clear verses (muḥkam) and ambiguous verses (muthashābih), and abrogating (nāṣihk) and abrogated (mansūkh) verses, and that the Prophet and the people of his House know these and they are ‘those who are firmly rooted in knowledge’ (Qur‘ān 3.7, al-rāṣikhān fi l-ilm). [19–21]65
Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘We are the people obedience to whom God has made obligatory. To us belongs the booty and to us belongs the best property, and we are the rāsikhān fi 'l-'ilm and we are the objects of envy alluded to in the verse: “Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of his bounty?” (Qur’ān 4:54)’ [21]

Fudayl b. Yasār said to al-Ṣādiq: ‘The people are saying that the Qur’ān came down in seven abraṭ. Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘The enemies of God lie. The Qur’ān came down in one kārf from the One’. [21]

An appendix to this chapter entitled ‘And from the jāriq al-jumhūr’, offers a single hadith from the Kitāb hilyat al-awliyāʾ which goes back to ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd who said: ‘The Qur’ān came down in seven abraṭ. There is not a single letter but it has an exterior and an interior meaning and with ‘Ali is the knowledge of these’. [21]

Chapter 8: that the Qur’ān came down in [several] parts (aqsām) [21]66

‘Ali: ‘It came down in three parts: one third concerning us and our enemies, one third concerning sunna and one third concerning obligations and laws’.

Al-Ṣādiq: ‘The Qur’ān came down in fourths, one fourth about the permitted things, one fourth about the forbidden things, one fourth about the sunna and laws and one fourth concerned the stories of the past and prophecies about the future’.

Al-Bāqir: ‘[The Qur’ān came down] in fourths, one fourth about us and one fourth about our enemies and one fourth about sunna and examples and one fourth about obligations and laws. And to us pertain the most important parts’.67

In addition to these akhūbār (also quoted by Muḥsin Fawd), Baḥrānī adds another appendix entitled Min jāriq al-jumhūr. He quotes from Ibn al-Mughāzī and a hadith transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās according to whom the Prophet said: ‘The Qur’ān is in fourths: one fourth concerns us specifically, the ahl al-bayt; one fourth on halāl; one fourth on harām; and one fourth on farā’id and akhām. By God, the most valuable parts of the Qur’ān are about us’. [21]

Chapter 9: this chapter deals with the principle that some verses in the Qur’ān were revealed in the mode of iyākī a’rī wa’sma’tī yā jāra. [22]

Whereas Muḥsin Fawd sought to explain this topic in his own words, Baḥrānī merely cites three hadiths which mention it, e.g.:

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘Indeed the Qur’ān came down in the mode of iyākī a’rī wa’sma’tī yā jāra. . . .

The example given is the same as in Šafiʿ: ‘and had we not confirmed thee, surely thou wert near to inclining unto them a very little’ (Qur’ān 17.74)69 [22]

Chapter 10: what pertains to the Imams in the Qur’ān [22–23]70

In addition to hadīths quoted by Muḥsin Fawd in his sixth chapter (see above) ‘On the collection of the Qur’ān and its corruption’, Baḥrānī quotes the following:

From Dāwūd b. Farqād: ‘I said to al-Ṣādiq, “Are you the salātī in the Book and are you the zakātī and are you the ḥajjī?” He said: “We are these as well as the fast and the sacred month and the sanctuary (balad al-haram) and the Ka’ba and the qibla and the face of God (wajh Allāh) and the verses (aṣā’il) and the clear verses (bayyinā’il) are our enemies are designated in the Qur’ān as indecency (al-fahshāʾ and al-munkar), insolence (al-baghy) and wine (al-khamr) and gambling (al-maysir) [etc.] . . . .”’ [22]

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘We are the source of every righteousness and our enemies the source of all evil . . .’71

Chapter 11: entitled simply ‘Another chapter’. [23–26]

The purpose here is to nuance the ideas introduced in the previous chapter. Baḥrānī quotes a long hadith to the effect that it is not correct to imagine that such words and topics in the Qur’ān as wine, prayer, and so on refer to people (the Imams and their opponents) if such a belief causes one to neglect the actual carrying out of the obligations of religion. This danger must be avoided at all costs. In addition, the following is offered:

Al-Ṣādiq wrote to Abū ‘l-Khaṭṭāb (founder of the extremist group bearing his name, executed 135/755): ‘It has reached me that you allege that wine is a man, that fornication is a man, that salāt is a man, that fasting is a man, but it is not like that. We are the root of good and its branches are obedience to God. Those who show enmity towards us are the root of evil and its branches are rebellion against God’. Then he wrote: ‘How can one obey what (man) he does not know and how can one know what he does not obey?’

This chapter closes with a statement from the Prophet which says that he who observes the laws without knowledge (ma’rifah) of the Prophet, this observance is void. [26]

Chapter 12: on the meaning of al-thaqalayn and al-khalīfatayn according to the jāriq al-muḥāṣifīn. [26–28]

This chapter lists sixteen reports from such works as the Musnad of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ḥanbal, the Sahīh of Muslim, and the Taṣfīr of al-Tha‘lībilī, which support
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the above-mentioned idea of the ‘two weights’ bequeathed by the Prophet for the guidance of his community.

Chapter 13: on the reason that the Qurʾān was revealed in Arabic and that its miraculousness is in its arrangement (naẓm) and that its meaning is newly applicable through the course of time. It contains, among others, the following ḥadīth:

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘God did not make the Qurʾān for one time to the exclusion of others, or for one people to the exclusion of others. Thus it is new for each time, and fresh for each succeeding generation until the Day of Resurrection’. [28]

Chapter 14: any ḥadīth which does not agree with the Qurʾān is rejected (mardūd). [28–29]

Chapter 15: on the first and the last sūras sent down. [29]

Chapter 16: the books from which material for this book was taken. [30–31] After listing a bibliography of over fifty works, he reproduces, verbatim, most of the introduction to al-Qummi’s Tafsīr. [31–41] The problems treated here include those of abrogation (naskh wa-mansūkh, including the question of taqādim and ta’khir), clear and ambiguous verses (muhkam wa-mutashabih), verses which fall into the category of generalities with specific applications (laṣf ʾāmm wa-maʾnā khāṣṣ, and specific statements which have a general application (laṣf khāṣṣ wa-maʾnā ʾāmm). Verses are cited which show that they were interrupted in the course of their revelation and continued later (al-mungata’a wa-l-maʾṭīf), and which employ one word and another is intended (harf makān harf) as Qurʾān 2.150, where ilā alladhīnā zalāmī minhum should be read as wa-lā alladhīnā . . . [32–33]

The problem of contradiction in the Qurʾān (mā huwa ʾalā khilāf mā anzalah ʿllāh) is also treated. Here, an example is made of Qurʾān 3.10 ‘You are the best nation ever brought forth to men, bidding to honour, and forbidding dishonour, and believing in God’. Al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said to the reciter of this verse: ‘How is it that the best community killed ‘Ali, Hasan and Husayn?’ The anonymous reciter then asked, ‘How was it really sent down then, 0 son of the Messenger?’ Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘Like this: “You are the best Imams (aʾimma replaces umma) ever brought forth to men . . . ‘ . . .’ ” Qummi, quoted by Bahrānī, then lists several other similar cases. [34]

Another sub-section deals specifically with corruption (muḥarraf) of the text, perhaps implying that the above category describes verses which were accidentally misread. The example given here is Qurʾān 4.166: ‘But God bears witness to that which He has sent down to thee; He has sent it down with his knowledge; and the angels also bear witness; and God suffices for a witness’. This verse was originally revealed as: ‘God testifieth to that which He has sent down about ‘Ali’. Then came ‘He revealed to Him his knowledge and the angels testify to this’. [34]

Qummi then treats the subject of qur’anic words which appear to be in the plural, but whose meaning is singular (laṣf jamʿ/maʾnā wāḥid), and vice versa (laṣf wāḥid/maʾnā jamʿ). In addition, the problem of verbs in the past tense which actually refer to the future (laṣf mādū wa-huwa mustaqbal) is discussed, citing Qurʾān 39.68 as an example, in which wa-nufikha fi ʾl-sūr is to be read as ‘For the trumpet shall be blown’. [34]

Qummi says also that the verses in one sūra may be completed in another sūra; or, that in the case of abrogation, one half of a verse may be affected while another is not. In other cases, it is possible to derive the interpretation (aʾwil) of a verse from the text of the Qurʾān itself (taṣnīḥ), or by reference to this text. Elsewhere, the Qurʾān has verses which indicate that its interpretation was already apparent in the common usage of the Arabs before the revelation codified this usage, while some verses show that the meaning of a particular verse came as something new after the revelation. [34–35]

Various other principles of exegesis are thus described by the author of this commentary, and the introduction is concluded by a series of refutations (radd) of various groups which include the Zanādiqa, by which astrologers are intended; the idol-worshippers; the Dāhriyya, ‘materialists’; those who deny divine reward and punishment; those who deny the ascension and night journey and the beatific vision of the Prophet; those who deny the existence of heaven and hell; those who deny the efficacy of man’s will (al-muḥirāb); the Muʿtazila; those who deny the Return (al-rajʿa); and those who describe God. [36–40]

Arwār

Al-Mawla al-Sharif al-ʿAdī Abū ʿl-Hasan b. al-Shaykh Muhammad Tāhir b. al-Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Mūsā b. ʿAlī b. Maʿtīq b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Fatūnī al-Nahāfī al-ʿAmīlī al-Īṣḥāḥānī al-Ghawārī was the author of the fourth and final work to be treated here. He is known as Abū ʿl-Hasan al-Sharif al-ʿAmīlī al-Īṣḥāḥānī, and his works is entitled Miʿrāj al-anwār wa-mishkāt al-asrār fi ʾṣafīr al-Qurʾān. He was the son of the sister of al-Amīr Muhammad Sāliḥ al-Khāṭānī, one of the more prominent scholars of the late Ṣafavid period, and who himself was a student and son-in-law of Majlisi. This excete was also a student of Muhammad Bāqir al-Majlisi, from whom he had two iḥāzāt,76 and al-Ḥurr al-ʿAmīlī.77 In addition, Isfahānī had iḥāzāt from several other notable ʿulāmāʾ of his time,77 and was the teacher of students who would later influence the minds of such seminal figures as Sayyid Mahdi Bahr al-Ulam (d. 1797).

He lived for many years in Najaf, where he died.78 According to the author of Luʿbat, he was a subtle scholar, trustworthy and just (muḥaqiq, muḥadjīq, tiqā, saḥḥ, ʿadl). Apparently, Isfahānī and his father (who had come to visit his son in Najaf sometime after 1688) were known as something of a scholarly
team, hosting meetings of the friends (ruṣaqāʾ).\textsuperscript{79} In short, his reputation as a scholar is firmly established.\textsuperscript{80}

Apart from the book at hand, he wrote a Kitāb al-fuʾād al-gharawiyya ‘nothing of which remains except a portion on uṣūl al-fiqḥ’ (it is described as treating the laws which derive from the akhbār),\textsuperscript{81} and a Kitāb diyāʾ al-ʾālmīn fī ‘l-imām.\textsuperscript{82} He also wrote on furūʿ wa-uṣūl,\textsuperscript{83} and a risāla on foster relationship in which there are some statements on the revelation (al-tanzil). He begins it by quoting al-Muhaddiq al-Dāmād.\textsuperscript{84} In addition to a sharḥ on Al-Kifāya, he wrote also a Kitāb sharīʿat al-shīʿa wa-dalāʾil al-sharīʿa which is a commentary on Mubsin Fayd’s Al-Maṣāʾib al-sharīʿi.\textsuperscript{85} Such titles suggest a stronger interest in fiqh than one might expect from an Akhbar. Iṣfahānī is in fact compared with one Sayyid Muḥammad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Ḥaydar al-Muṣawwī al-ʿĀmilī al-Makkī known as Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥaydar (d.1726),\textsuperscript{86} who wrote a tafsīr of the Qurʾān dealing with uṣūl and furūʿ,\textsuperscript{87} and was the student of our author from whom he received an ijtīḥād, or teacher’s licence.

According to Dhārī’a, one manuscript of the work comments on verses up to the middle of the Sūrat al-baqara while another takes the commentary up to 4.4.\textsuperscript{88} The first volume, of over 20,000 lines, was published in Iran in 1303/1885, but was, ‘due to the lack of information on the part of the publisher’, attributed to one Shakh ‘Abd al-Laḥf al-Kāzarūnī, about whom nothing else is said. According to Tibrānī ‘in what concerns the Quranic sciences nothing like it has been written’.\textsuperscript{89}

This work is often referred to by Corbin in his magisterial study of Shīʿa Qurʾān interpretation.\textsuperscript{90} Corbin, either contrary to Dhārī’a or perhaps speaking of another edition, says that the work was lithographed in 1878 in Tehran, but agrees with Dhārī’a that its authorship was wrongly ascribed. Thanks to the ‘vigilance bibliographique’ of Nūr Tabarsī, the work was re-edited and printed in Tehran in 1955, under the correct name of Iṣfahānī. This edition, according to Corbin, continued the tradition of treating the work as an introduction to Burhān, but Iṣfahānī was apparently unaware of the tafsīr by Bahārī.\textsuperscript{91}

At some point, this later edition was published in an independent volume; its title page says that the work is ‘like the introduction to the Tafsīr of al-Bahārī’. In it, the editor promises to publish a second volume which would contain the balance of Iṣfahānī’s work, but this second volume has not yet appeared. It is this edition, containing only a lengthy introduction to the tafsīr proper that is treated below.

The work is divided in three prologues (muqaddimāt), two of which will be described in detail. The corresponding maqālāt into which they are divided are designated by Arabic numerals. Finally, the fuṣūl into which these maqālāt are further sub-divided, are designated by lower case Roman numerals.

### Prologue I

All of the esoteric content of the Qurʾān concerns the notion of walāya and the Imamate, just as its esoteric content concerns tawḥīd and nubuwwa. This pro-

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### Akhbārī Shīʿī Approaches to Tafsīr

The prologue contains three maqālāt, the first maqāla has five fuṣūl, the second also has five, and the third has none. [4–36]

#### Maqāla 1: that which is proven by the akhbār adduced in this prologue:

i. The Qurʾān has esoteric dimensions, the verses are susceptible of taʿwil, and that meaning of the Qurʾān is not restricted to only one era, but continues at all times for all people. [4]

ii. Several reports to the effect that the inner meaning of the Qurʾān is related to the Imams, their walāya, and their followers. [4–6]

iii. On the task of harmonizing (iṣhāṣub) the exoteric with the esoteric, and the similarity (tashābuh) between the esotericists (ahl al-taʿwil) and the exotericists (ahl al-tanzil). [6–8]

iv. The imperative (wuṣūl) of belief in both the exoteric and esoteric content of the Qurʾān. This is similar to the necessity of belief in both the clear (muhkam) and ambiguous (mutashābih) verses. [8–12]

v. That the knowledge of the taʾwil of the Qurʾān, or rather the complete knowledge of it, is with the Aḥl al-Bayt. Also included here is the citation of akhbār forbidding tafsīr al-Qurʾān through personal opinion (al-raʿy), or without heeding the Imams. [12–15]

#### Maqāla 2: the second essay deals with the doctrine that the general meaning of the word of God pertains to tawḥīd and nubuwwa on the surface (sāriṭan watanzilān), and to walāya and imāma in its inner meaning (baṭūn wa-kināyatan wa-taʾwilān) according to the akhbār.

i. Some of what our ‘ulamāʾ have written about the greatness of the Imams and their walāya, and the disbelieve (kufr) of their rejecters. [19–21]

ii. A few of the akhbār concerning the imperative of the walāya of the Aḥl al-Bayt, and of their love (mahābba), and obedience to them. This is the anchor of imāma and the condition for God’s acceptance of all deeds and for one’s leaving (truly) the domain of kufr and shirk. Also included is a condemnation of the rejection (inḵūr) of walāya and doubt about the Imams. [21–23]

iii. Confessing the imāma of the Imams and their love and walāya comes after the confession of the nubuwwa of the Prophet in the course of correct religion and faith, just as the confession of nubuwwa comes after the confession of tawḥīd. [23–25]

iv. Walāya, together with tawḥīd, was presented to all creation, and the covenant implying it was imposed upon all creation, and all the prophets were sent with it for all creation, and that walāya was sent down in all the holy books and imposed upon all nations. [25–28]

v. That the Prophet and the Imams were the first to be created and that their walāya is the cause in the process of creation (al-ʿilla fī ʿl-jāhād) and the principle in obedience. [28–33]
Maqāla 3: the third maqāla [which contains no subsections] says that the esoteric content of the Qurʾān pertains to walāya and the Imamate, according to the akhbar which indicate that this community follows the practices (sunan) of previous religious communities in all their deeds. [33–36]

The object of this lengthy segment is to establish the recurring nature of the breaking of the covenant. Just as the Calf was worshipped in the time of Moses, so have the Muslims erred in misplacing their allegiances. A number of hadith are marshalled to explain two verses of the Qurʾān: ‘That ye shall journey on from stage to stage’ (Qurʾān 84.19) and ‘That was the way of God in the case of those who have passed away of old — thou wilt find for the way of God aught of power of change’ (33.62, cf. 35.43, 48.23).

‘Ali said: ‘This means that you will travel the road of the previous communities in perfidy (ghadr) towards the awṣafīya’ after the anbiyā’. Al-Bāqir said: ‘This community travelled after its Prophet stage by stage in the cause of fulān and fulān and fulān’. Al-Sādiq, in answer to a letter from al-Muḥātīḍ on some problems raised by the malāḥiḍa and the ghulāt, wrote: ‘As for what you mention towards the end of your letter, that they claim that God, the Lord of the worlds, is the Prophet, and your comparison with this belief and the belief of those who say about Jesus what they say, indeed, the ways (sunan) of the past are here and now repeated, just like sheep following sheep.’ So know that this community will err like the community before them, etc.’ [34]

A number of reports from kutub al-ʿummā (Sunni books: the Sahih, Musnad, and so on), are then presented to support this idea.

**Prologue II**

This prologue has no maqāla and seeks to establish that there are some alterations (taghyr) in the Qurʾān, ‘and this explains why guidance is placed in the divine command (amr) of walāya and imāma, and is also an allusion to the virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt, and the obligation of obedience to the Imams according to the esoteric content of the Qurʾān and its ṭawīl. In the absence of explicit statements in the Qurʾān on this matter, one arrives at this conclusion through metaphor and symbols and allusions in its literal text (tanzil).’ It comprises four fuṣūl: [36–51]

i Concerning the collection of the Qurʾān, its incompleteness and alteration from reports which our friends (i.e. the Shīʿa) related. [36–39]

ii Concerning the collection of the Qurʾān, its incompleteness and alteration, and the disagreement about this in the reports of the Sunnīs (mukhālisfīn). [39–43]

iii The report of the zindiq who brought ‘Ali proof of the alteration of the Qurʾān and the misdeeds of the hypocrites regarding the word of God. This report is long, containing many things which were deleted from the Qurʾān. [43–48]

iv A resumé of the statements of our ulamāʿ concerning the absence of alteration of the Qurʾān and its non-existence and the falseness of the argument of those who deny alteration. [49–51]

**Prologue III**

Prologue III [52–348] is composed of two maqāla, the first divided into seven fuṣūl:

Maqāla 1: certain verses in the Qurʾān are explained by akhbar which offer a ṭawīl through metonymy and allusion. These require al-majāz al-ʿaqīya, others are self-evident through al-majāz al-lughawī:

i What God means to be interpreted as bājin. [52]

ii Al-Ṣādiq: ‘Whatever is good in the Qurʾān pertains to us or our Shīʿa’. [52]

iii What is to be interpreted reference to the past. [53]

iv Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘The “people of Moses” in the Qurʾān means the people of Islam’. [53]

v Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘The Qurʾān came down in (the mode of) iyyāk aʿnī...’ [53–54]

Here Ṣafahān repeats the words of Muhṣin Fayḍ (unscribed): ‘It is like a man who addresses a statement to one person and means another addressee’. Then the example of Qurʾān 17.74 given by both Muhṣin Fayḍ and Bahrawi, adding that the khabar of the Zindiq supports this. He adds:

Perhaps the meaning is in what ‘Alī al-Ridā (the eighth Imam, d.203/818) wrote to the Byzantine that al-Ṣādiq said. Sometimes something is said about someone which is not applicable to him, but turns out to be applicable to that one’s son. Following this reasoning, if we see the Ummā in the station of the son of the Prophet and the Imam and there is something good or bad about it, then we turn to what has been related to the Prophet or the Imam. By contrast, what is ascribed to God about Himself by majāz is related to his near servants, and an expression of God’s about rejection of walāya may be taken as referring to rejection of the prophethood of the Prophet. Therefore, because ‘Alī, by relation to the Prophet, may be considered his son, it pertains to him as well. [53]

The Prophet said about the verse: ‘Do you cast anyone into hell every rebel ingrate’ (Qurʾān 50.24) ‘I and ‘Ali cast into hell each of our enemies’.

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Al-Ṣādiq said about the verse: ‘Say: we believe in God and that which was revealed to us’ [Qur’ān 2.136] ‘The speakers are the people of Muḥammad’. And about ‘And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then they are rightly guided’ [Qur’ān 2.137] ‘these are the rest of humanity’.

In al-Kāfi from al-Bāqir (about the above two verses): ‘He means by “Say: we believe”, ‘Ali and Ḥasan and Ḥusayn and Ṣa’dīma and the rest of the Imams. And “if they believe” means humanity [in general] “in the like of that which ye believe”, that is ‘Ali and Ṣa’dīma and Ḥasan and Ḥusayn and the Imams after them. And “then they are rightly guided. But if they turn away then they are in schism”’. (Qur’ān 2.137)

And “there hath come unto you a Messenger, (one) of yourselves” (Qur’ān 9.128) the addressee here is the Imams in general. Likewise, “Yet ye will not unless God willeth” (Qur’ān 76.30) the addressee is the Imams. There are many such examples in the Qur’ān. “Give thanks unto me and unto thy parents. Unto me is the journeying” (Qur’ān 31.14). The two parents are the parents of knowledge and the bequeathers of laws, and mankind is commanded to obey them. “The journeying” is the journeying of the servants to God. He then quotes his teacher Majlīs, “author of the Bihār” to the effect that the two parents are the Prophet and ‘Ali.

Īṣfahānī invites us to think strenuously about the difference between this doctrine and the previous one. [54]

iv That many pronouns refer, according to ta’wil, to something which is not explicitly mentioned such as wālīya, ‘Ali and the like. [54–55]

v Whatever God has knowledge of, past or future, He informs us about, even if it is by means of past events which we must interpret. [55]

vi That many things which God says of Himself in the Qur’ān actually refer to the Prophet and the Imams. (E.g. Qur’ān 43.25 and 88.26) [55–57].

Al-Ṣādiq said: ‘God does not become angry as we do, but he created the awwādā’ for himself to become angry (in his stead). They are his creation and vassals (marbūbūn). He also made their good pleasure represent His good pleasure’.

vii That many statements in the Qur’ān which employ the words īlāh and al-rabb refer to the Imams. [57–59]

This long section mentions several hadīth to support this doctrine. One example: al-Ṣādiq said about the verse: ‘Choose not two gods, there is only one God’ (Qur’ān 16.51), that it means ‘take not two Imams, there is only one Imam’.

A long appendix (tadhīyīl) to the first maqāla of this prologue is concerned with the repudiation (daṣ) of ghulūw and tafwīd (immoderate attitudes toward the Imamate). [59–69] The gist of this section is perhaps best summed up by the support it draws from the famous hadīth that underscores the difficulty of true belief, since it is obvious that there is a fine line between ghulūw and the beliefs so far enumerated. This hadīth is as follows:

The Prophet said: ‘Indeed the knowledge (ilm; ḥadīth in other variants) of the People of Muhammad is overwhelming and exceedingly abstruse (ṣā’bun mustas’abun). None may be given to have true faith in it except the angels who have been brought near, or the sent prophets, or the faithful servant whose heart God has tested to be able to have faith. So whatever comes to you of knowledge of the People of Muhammad, your hearts must become supple for it. And whatever your hearts recoil at, then take it to God, the Prophet, and to the Sage of the People of Muhammad’. [61]

This section also affirms that the Imams are indeed created by God and that nothing in the world resembles God. [68]

Maqāla 2: the second maqāla of the third prologue is what Corbin calls a clavis hermeneutica. [69–348] In many respects, this is the most impressive portion of the volume. It is actually a ‘dictionary’ of over 1300 Qur’ānic words that are explained by the hadīth of the Imams. It shows an almost incredible erudition and ability for systemization, complete with cross references to both other dictionary entries and the introductory material. It is an invaluable aid in the study of Shi’ism.

Khātima (348–362): this contains two fasḥ:

i On the ta’wil of the disconnected letters. [348–353]

ii On some of the lessons (fa’ida) to be drawn [from all this]. This contains eight separate lessons that summarize the foregoing, the last of which is on the Return (al-raja‘a), and quotes the famous ḥadīth of al-Mufaḍḍal on the events surrounding the return of the Mahdi. [358–362].

Conclusion

Enough has been offered of these commentaries to permit a few general observations. First, whatever else Akhbari scholars might have been, the results of their exegesis of the Qur’ān cannot really be classified as ‘literalist’ in the usual sense of the word. That is to say, their so-called literalism must be seen to pertain to a veneration for the statements of the Imams on a given verse of the Qur’ān. Many of these statements are concerned precisely with the ‘inner meaning’ of the text, and for that are usually not what one would describe as straightforward interpretations of the literal text. Insofar as these interpretations by the Imams themselves are rigorously adhered to, the Akhbari project may be seen to be ‘fundamentalist’. However, at this stage in the exegetic process the act of interpretation has already gone beyond the ipsissima verba of the Qur’ān itself.

The concern with systematizing the material, evident in three of the four works is noteworthy in itself. The elaboration of such structures lends credi
to the actual arguments presented by presenting them in a measured (rational) form. The ‘harmony’ of the structure is meant to mirror and uphold the truth of the claims it conveys. The edifice thus constructed is convincing, even if many of the arguments presented are judged non-rational. Most interestingly, it is clear that the length and complexity (and therefore the ‘rhetorical value’) of these introductions grew as the fortunes of the ruling power, the Safavids, declined.

Further, these structures address what was obviously felt to be a need of the times, namely, to enhance both the authority of the Qur’ān text and the authority of the Imams. The exegetical project outlined above has attempted to fuse permanently these two elements so that, for example, the Qur’ān could no longer be read without summoning forth the presence (walāya, mababba) of the Imam. It has been argued that the act of reading/interpretation is in any case a process of making present ‘what otherwise remains absent’:

Effective symbols allow the hidden to shine forth or to emerge from concealment into ‘the open’… This presencing is the eventuation of truth or the occurrence of αιτιωσε. Αιτιωσε unites the interpreting subject and the symbolized object.94

Obviously such an insight is especially compelling in the context of Twelver Shi'i Qur'ān interpretation which in some sense may be thought to have as its raison d'être a compensation for the absence of its most important element—the Imam. As far as uniting the subject and the symbolized object is concerned, we have but to recall the words of Muḥsin Fayd—admittedly perhaps the most mystically inclined of our authors—when he speaks above of unmediated access. Insofar as reading may be considered ‘participation in a text’ then the reading of the Qur’ān for our authors becomes also a participation in the charisma of the Imams. Put another way, if it is true that a text is not only read by the reader, but also in some way ‘reads’ the reader, then we have with the Shi'i Qur'ān and its encounter, a situation in which the binder is ‘read’ not only by the text, but also by the Imam. The bond thus established is an expression of what may be called, in this case, the intimacy of reading and constitutes the prime religious fact of Shi'ism, a fact which is, in Corbin's words, en acte. Speaking of the commentaries of Bahrami and Isfahani, he has written.95

Par tous les textes mis ainsi en œuvre, le shi'isme se fait entendre essentiellement comme une religion d'amour spirituel, à tel point, les textes y insistent, qu'en l'absence de cette dévotion d'amour, il ne saurait être question de la validité d'aucune œuvre pieuse, ni même de satisfaire aux obligations de la shari'at. Or, tout cela est dit sans qu'il soit même question de soufisme; c'est un élève de Majlisī qui parle, ou bien laisse la parole aux hadith des Imams dont il a une connaissance extraordinairement approfondie. Cette constatation aura une grande importance pour le prolongement de ces recherches.96

Because of the fusion of Imam and text, the Qur'ān then is also experienced as a charismatic text. Or more properly, its already considerable charisma is greatly enhanced. The act of reading then obviously involves, to some degree, an appropriation of this charisma by the reader. We see the ‘logical’ culmination of this process in the Qur’ān commentaries of the Bāb (d.1850), who depended heavily on the akhbar in his early tafsir, but appears to have abandoned their explicit use in later similar works. In this latter phase of commentary, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between commentary, text, reader, God, Prophet, and Imam. In short, the exegetical act became scripture.97

The Akhbari enterprise may be thought to have issued in another religious movement that apparently sought to bridge the gap between the literalists and the traditionalists. Although the early leaders of the Shaykhī school do not appear to have composed major commentaries on the Qur’ān, they did write commentaries on well-known prayers and sermons of the Imams.98 Indeed, one of these, the Commentary by Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʾAbsāʾ (d.1825), a native of Bahrayn, on the Grand prayer of visitation ascribed to the Fourth Imam, ‘Ali b. al-Ḥasayn, Zayn al-ʾAbidīn is interesting here for the appearance in it of many of the doctrines and attitudes about the Qur'ān found in the works above. It is significant that the Prayer may have had during Shaykh Aḥmad’s time something of the status of an alternative Qur’ān, being arranged in 114 verses.99

This points to one of the most remarkable results of the Akhbari project, namely the transformation of the Qur’ān text into another Qur’ān. That is, the Qur’ān of the Akhbaris becomes something of a New Testament for Islam. Such a phenomenon is surely not peculiar to the Akhbari approach, but it does give a most instructive example of tendencies found not only in Qur’ān interpretation in general, but in any act of interpretation.

Another result of this type of interpretation may be seen in the writings of the second leader of the Shaykhis, Sayyid Kāzin Raḍī (d.1843). This has to do with the basic notion of religious authority that may be thought the foundation of the Akhbari method, namely, that the only final authority is the Imam, and that this can permit a certain hermeneutical freedom otherwise nonexistent. This is seen expressed in the following statement:

O my brother! Read the Qur'an and never abandon it. It is more valuable for you than anything else. If you persevere you will see the truth (sirr) of what I have said. After you have understood all this, you will have understood a certain portion of the knowledge of the Qur'an. But you will also have understood that it is not possible to read it as it is in itself, because this is impossible for us, the muslimin and mu'minin. This kind of reading is only possible for prophets and Imams ... The relatively small understanding which you have should never be confused with the knowledge of the Qur'an. This is why you must never oppose someone who affirms something and who seeks to prove his statement by reading the Qur'an differently to the way you read it ...
When you have understood that the true meaning, the spiritual idea (haqīqa) of the Qur'ān is a code (ramz) which only God Most High, the Prophet and the members of his House understand, and that it is the members of this House who teach this code to whoever resides in their House... then it will be clear that our understanding of this code varies according to the diversity of our faculties of understanding. 100

Finally, it may be said with some justification that due to the vicissitudes experienced by the Muslim world community today—the challenges posed to it both from within and without, the uncertainty of the political situation, the problem of various Islamic nations within a community that longs for unity—that in some sense there exists a spiritual diaspora. The Muslim Holy Land is obviously geographically defined in the narrow sense as the Haramayn and al-Quds. But speaking broadly, Islam suggests that wherever the community exists, there too exists the Holy Land. It is precisely because of the stresses and dislocations brought about by ‘various Muslim communities’ instead of the ideal one, that such a Holy Land does exist but elsewhere than in the geo-political realm. The tradition, and pre-eminently the Qur'ān itself, function as the major features of this holy landscape, this imaginaire. 101 With this examination of Shi'i tafsir, we are permitted an insight into the statement that the Imam himself is the balad al-ḥaram. This hermeneutical landscape, with all its distinctiveness, provides for the reader not only a home but a true paradise.

Notes
2 These two books are: Al-Kāfī fi ‘ilm al-dīn by Kulaynī (d. 939 or 940); Man la yahdaru hu al-faqih, by ibn Bīnawayh (d. 991); Tahdhib al-akhbār and al-istibsār both by Tūsī (d. 1067).
7 See for example Juan Cole, ‘Shi‘i clerics in Iraq and Iran, 1722–1780: The Akhbāri–Usūlī conflict reconsidered’, Iran Studies, XVIII (1985) pp. 3–34. The author argues convincingly that the Akhbāris were never strong in major Iranian centres,

that the conflict began after the migration of large numbers of Usūlī scholars from Iran to the Shi‘i shrine cities in Iraq as a result of the Zand invasion.
8 Fūrāt ibn ‘Abdīhīm. Fūrāt al-Kūfī (d. c. 912), Tafsīr Fūrāt al-Kūfī, Najaf 1353/1934, p. 84.
11 But a more instructive type is that of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī’s al-Durr al-manbarī written in the seventeenth century. My thanks to Norman Calder for pointing this out.
12 Kohler, op. cit., pp. 147–8.
13 Kohler, op. cit., p. 148.
14 Anwar, p. 324.
16 Apart from the commentaries of these authors, we know of another tafsir project which has not yet been published but which is perhaps an even better example of the type under discussion here. Corbin draws attention to the work by Shāhī Husayn Yazzī, still in manuscript in Kirmān, which comprises eight volumes in-folio but which covers no more than the Sūrat al-baqara. Corbin’s interest in such works was restricted to the purely spiritual or ṣināfī motifs which they contain. He seems to have been thoroughly uninterested in the question of the ‘alteration of the Qur’ān’, or other highly polemical aspects. Corbin, Annaire de l’École pratique des Hautes Études: section des sciences religieuses, Paris 1965–6, pp. 107–8.
22 Rīyād al-‘alāmā, III, pp. 149–150.
23 Ibid., p. 147, n. 1. See, in fact, n. 9, p. ii.
24 Nūr, I, p. ii.
27 Ibid.
29 Nūr, I, pp. 2–3.
30 Nūr, I, p. 3.
31 The ‘three books’ are al-Wāfī, Waṣṣ‘il al-shī‘a by al-Hurr al-‘Ammī (d.1104/1692), and Bihār al-anwār by Majłīṣī (d.1111/1699).
32 He is explicitly characterized by no less an Akhbāri source than Yūsuf al-Bardhānī (d.1772), Lu’lu‘at al-Bayram, Beirut 1986, p. 121. See Corbin, En Islam iranien, IV p. 250. See the reference to ‘the stagnant and narrow-minded attitude of the Akhbāris’ by Murtada Mutahhari in Shi‘ism: doctrines, thought, spirituality, eds Nast, Dabashi, Nast, Albay N. Y. 1988, p. 32.
33 E.g., Kālimāt-i ma'nahih; etc. See also the condemnation of him in Lu‘lu‘at, p. 121 for holding to the belief in wasdat al-wujūd, which he picked up from Ibn al-‘Arabī, the zindiq, and about which Muḥṣin Fāyż wrote a 'clearly loathsome' treatise against which Yūsuf al-Bahlānī apparently wrote a rebuttal. The sources vary on his output, putting the total figure between 80 and 200 works. See now the translation of one of his political treatises: Two Seventeenth-Century Persian Tracts on Kingship and Rulers, translated by William C.C. Chittick in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), Authority and political culture in Shi‘ism, Albany N.Y. 1988, pp.269–284. As Kohlberg has pointed out, this figure needs to be studied more. Apart from the brief article in Encyclopaedia Iranica, see also Jane I. Smith, An historical and semantic study of the term ‘Islam’ as seen in a series of Quran commentaries, Missoula 1975, pp. 146–159. Smith says that tafsīr is less sectarian than other forms of religious writing (p. 42).


35 Al-Sāfī fī tafsīr kālūm Allāh al-wujūd, 5 vols edited by Husayn al-A‘lamī, Beirut [1399/1979]. In addition to this, there is also a bibliography dated 1283 [1866]. This edition is in folio and runs to 495 pages of 37 lines to the page. It contains no indexes or divisions in the text (apart from those which occur at the beginning of a new sūrah) and is therefore somewhat difficult to use.

36 N. B. here the possible semantic equivalence between biji and jam’. On this see Wansbrough, Quranic studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation, Oxford 1977, p.46.

37 Quoted by Ayoub, ‘Speaking’, p. 188.

38 Zahr, boj, ḫud, majāla’. Three variants of this follow, one from the Prophet, one from ‘Ali and one from al-Sādīq. The report from ‘Ali is virtually identical to the statement of Sahīh Tustarī (d.896), quoted in Wansbrough, Quranic studies, p. 242. Cf. Tustari’s Tafsīr, pp. 2–3 where this statement is introduced with ‘Ṣahīh sa‘d. . . ‘. . . The variant from al-Sādīq changes the elements completely; ibāra, istišāra, la‘ā if, and ṣadq‘ iq. Each of the four is appropriate to a group of people: ‘awwām, khawāṣṣ, awliyā’, and anbiyā’.”

39 Quoted in Ayoub, ‘Speaking’, p. 183.

40 Both ḫud and waqīt are technical terms from Sūfism.

41 Sāfī, 1, pp. 15–79.

42 Cf. below the possibly similar ‘methodology’ of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā‘i.

43 Sāfī, 1, 78. Cf. Kohlberg, p. 142 for the use elsewhere by Muḥṣin Fāyż of the idea of ‘holy power’ as a distinguishing feature of the true scholar.

44 Ayoub, ‘Speaking’, p. 186.


47 Sāfī, p. 13, translated in Ayoub, p. 190.

48 Sāfī, p. 15.

49 Ayoub, op. cit., p. 190.

50 Burhān, I, pp. 30–1.

51 Burhān, I, pp. 4.


53 Lu‘lu‘at, p. 64, see also Burhān, IV, p. 552. For a discussion of some of these works see ibid. pp. 552–556.


Akhbārī Shi‘i approaches to tafsīr

Marhūm Mīrāz ‘Ali Akbar, an Iraqi muṣallih. The third edition, containing marginal corrections to the second by Muḥammad ibn al-Husayn al-Tafarushī Darūdī was published at Qum by al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Imāmī, 1349/1974]. Bahlānī wrote another work of tafsīr, also in several volumes, entitled Kitāb al-Hādī wa-diyya‘ al-nādī fī tafsīr al-Qur‘ān. This work is unpublished.

55 Burhān, I, pp. 2–40.

56 Bihār, XCI and XCII, pp. 1–145 = Kitāb al-Qur‘ān. This material is a source for the author of the last work to be discussed below. It is arranged in 30 chapters of basic hermetic principles followed by separate chapters on the special virtues of each of the sūras. Volume 93, mentioned by Ayoub, p. 185, contains a long treatise on interpretation ascribed to ‘Allī (pp. 1–97) followed by the lengthy report of the Zindiq mentioned above, p.25 (pp. 98–142) and closes with a chapter entitled ‘Miscellaneies’ (pp. 142–145). This material awaits detailed analysis.

57 Ibid., p. 3.

58 Ibid.


60 Burhān, I, pp. 5–40.

61 Cf. the equivalence ‘ilm = ḥadīth (akhbār).


63 A similar tradition is quoted in Richtungen, p. 278.

64 Burhān, I, pp. 17–19.

65 Ibid., pp. 19–21.

66 Ibid., p. 21.

67 All three ḥadīths are from ibid.


69 Ibid., p. 22. This subject does not appear to have been discussed by al-Suyūṭī, al-Taqī. It may be peculiar to Shi‘i tafsīr. See also Sharḥ Ziyārah, (n.94 below) p. 123.

70 Burhān, I, pp. 22–3.

71 All five statements from ibid. pp. 22–3, nos. 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10.


73 Quoted by Richtungen, p. 282–283.


75 The first dated 1096 [1684], the second 1107[1695] (Dhāri‘a, 1, 149.).

76 Lu‘lu‘at, p. 107.

77 See Anwar, pp. 2–3. He was apparently survived by a son of some reknown, al-Muwll Abī Tālib ibn al-Sharīf Abī al-Iṣḥāṣ al-Ghawrā (Lu‘lu‘at, n. 84, 44), who is mentioned by al-Jasā‘irī in al-İfża‘a al-kabīra.

78 Corbin says he spent most of his life in İsfahān, Annuaria, 1965–6, p. 107.

79 Lu‘lu‘at, p. 108.

80 ‘My father was asked one day: “Who is the best scholar of Najaf, Abī al-Iṣḥāṣ or al-Sayyid Sulaymān (d. 1120/1708)?” As for al-Sharīf Abī al-Iṣḥāṣ, I have quizzed him several times in İsfahān and in Mashhad and in our town whenever we met, and he remained with us a long time, I consider him very learned’. Quoted in Lu‘lu‘at p. 107 from the al-İfża‘a al-kabīra of al-Jasā‘irī."
TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS

81 Bahārānī, Lu’lu’ at al-Bahlāwī, ‘It exists in our library in manuscript with two prologues: 1. “On us̱āl al-dīn” was written in the year 1111 in Najaf al-As'fāf. 2. “On us̱āl al-fa&q̱ī” dated 1112, Najaf.”
82 Lu’lu’ at, p. 107, n.43.
83 Lu’lu’ at, p. 107, and I have this book. It was completed in 1112.
84 Doubtless the famous Mir Dāmād (d.1631), the teacher and father-in-law of Mullā  Ṣadrā. The author of Lu’lu’ at says that he has written a refutation of this particular resāla (p. 108).
86 Dharī’a mentions him, II, p. 517.
87 ‘It is a big volume, its like has not been written, on us̱āl furu’ al-fa&q̱īhya. It is found in the library in Isfahān of Shāykh Ḥusayn al-Mādī, a student and later biographer of Shīrāzī. He also wrote a Tafsīr surat Tāhā. He inclined to the belief that the three caliphs were good Muslims in the time of the Prophet and not mutaḥaddisīn, but they apostatized after the Prophet died’. Ibhā.
88 Dharī’a, XX, p. 264.
92 The first three caliphs.
93 Shāh bar shāhī, a rare lapse into Persian.
96 Corbin, Annuaire, 1965–6, p. 108.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Volume IV

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:


Edinburgh University Press for permission to reprint Neal Robinson, ‘The
IS THE QUR’ĀN TRANSLATABLE?

Early Muslim opinion*

A. L. Tibawi


Every translation of the Qur’ān proclaims its own inadequacy. For it must necessarily include those verses which are clear in their emphasis that the Word of God was revealed to Muhammad in the Arabic tongue. “Verily, We have made it an Arabic Qur’ān, haply ye will comprehend it.”1 Every translation in any language, classical or modern, foreign or Islamic, includes a score or so verses in different chapters which enshrine the same or similar pronouncement.2 Their total import is that any translation, like any commentary in Arabic or in any other language, is no more than an approximation of the meaning of the Qur’ān, but not the Qur’ān itself.

Our examination of the subject starts from this point. We have to discuss questions at once historical, juristical, theological and rhetorical. Some of these questions were raised, in a preliminary form, even in the days of the Prophet and his immediate successors. But their formulation and development came with the jurists, traditionalists, commentators, theologians and philologists later on. As regards the days of the Prophet, there are certain reports of a historical nature which deserve to be considered first. But since some of them do not occur in the early sources, the historian who considers also their content may be tempted to question their authenticity.

The belief that the Qur’ān is a literal transcript of the Word of God from a safely preserved tablet (la‘âh makhfūṣ) in heaven revealed to Muḥammad in Arabic must be squared with the other belief that Muḥammad’s mission is to mankind as a whole and not only to the Arabs. How in practice did the Prophet or his immediate successors face the problem – if or when they had to face it – of preaching the divine message to those non-Arabs who were unable to comprehend it in Arabic? Historically the problem did not become very pressing till the Muslim conquerors came in close contact with non-Arabs, notably Persians, after the death of Muḥammad.