

“Hermeneutics of Pre-modern Islamic and Shi‘ite Exegesis,”
Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 12, pp. 235-39.

HERMENEUTICS of pre-modern Islamic and Shi‘ite exegesis, the principles and methods, or philosophy, of scriptural interpretation, as distinct from the act of interpretation (e.g., *tafsir*, *ta’wil*, for which see exegesis ii., iii., vi., and vii.). While the term hermeneutics began to rise to its current prominence in literary criticism and cultural studies in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) in the early 19th century, when it pertained to Biblical scholarship (in the first instance), it is nonetheless a useful concept with which to consider the history and development of scriptural exegesis in Islam. Every aspect of the highly-developed Koranic sciences (*‘olum al-Qor’ān*) may be seen as constituting an Islamic hermeneutic or art of interpretation. The later codifications of these sciences, such as Badr-al-Din Zarkaši’s (d. 794/1392) *al-Borhān fi ‘olum al-Qor’ān* (Cairo, 1957-58) and Jalāl-al-Din Soyūti’s (d. 911/1505) *al-Etqān fi ‘olum al-Qor’ān* (Osnabrück, 1980), may be classified as works on hermeneutics precisely because these works are more concerned with how one interprets rather than with the actual interpretation itself.

HERMENEUTICS OF ISLAMIC EXEGESIS The issue of scriptural interpretation was of major importance early in the history of Islam, as one of the first questions to preoccupy Muslim scholars was whether it was permissible at all to interpret the Koran (Birkeland, 1956). The majority deemed it not only permissible but unavoidable, and therefore began to regulate the methods by which it should proceed. How to understand, or interpret, the meaning of a given verse or phrase was very early on given more attention than

the actual act of interpretation itself in some respects, for not everything in the Koran was considered absolutely clear and unambiguous, including the all-important requirements of Islamic Law (*šari'a*). It became an axiom of Koranic hermeneutics that, since the Koran is the Word of God, the best explanation or interpretation must come from within it, one verse clarifying or explaining another. The next best explanation was provided directly by the Prophet Moḥammad, either verbally or through his behavior, and can be found in his normative example, or *sonna*. After this, for Sunni Muslims the best explanation was provided by the Companions of the Prophet (*ṣaḥā-ba*), via their teachings preserved in Hadith, then their successors, the Followers (*tābe'un*), then the Followers of the Followers (*atbā' al-tābe'in*), and through to the subsequent generations of religious scholars (cf. Ebn Taymiya, pp. 93-105).

Such hermeneutic principles were refined and elaborated through practice. For example, with regard to the Koran as its own best explicator, there are a number of key verses which provide further guidance, pre-eminent among which is Koran 3:7. This verse establishes the basic hermeneutic categories of clear, unambiguous verses (*moḥkamāt*), requiring no interpretation, as distinct from allegorical, figurative, or ambiguous verses (*motašābe-hāt*). There was a significant hermeneutical controversy over this classification due to the differences of opinion on how to read and punctuate the text of this particular verse of the Koran, which reads: "but those in whose hearts is doubt pursue forsooth that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it none knoweth its explanation save God and those who are of sound instruction say we believe therein the whole is from our Lord but only men of understanding really heed" (tr. Pickthall, 3:7, punctuation removed).

The controversy developed over how to read the last part, the two possibilities being: (1) "none knoweth the explanation save God and those of sound instruction (*al-rāseḱun fi'l-ʿelm*)"; or, (2) "none knoweth the explanation save God. And those of sound instruction (*al-rāseḱun fi'l-ʿelm*) . . ." Two basic hermeneutic issues were involved: firstly, deciding how to read the verse, and secondly, identifying "those of sound instruction" (See McAuliffe, pp. 46-62). For Shi'ites, in general, *al-rāseḱun fi'l-ʿelm* refers to the Prophet and the Imams (Amir-Moezzi, pp. 197-98). Another important distinction between the two sects is that, while for Sunni scholars the interpretation of the Prophet alone was binding, that offered by his Followers of the ensuing generations not having nearly the same authority and being subject to negotiation through Hadith criticism (e.g., Ṭabari, *Jāmeʿ al-bayān ʿan tāʾwil āy al-Qorʾān*), for Shi'ites, direct and unerring (*maṣṣum*) divine guidance continued even after the death of the Prophet through the divinely appointed Imams. As a result, in the contro-versy over how to read Koran 3:7, the prevailing interpretation amongst Shi'ites was the first possibility, with *al-rāseḱun fi'l-ʿelm* referring to the Imams, in addition to the Prophet, as bearers of knowledge of the true explanation of the Koran.

Other hermeneutic principles and categories were also formed early on and had enduring effects. Controversies over exegesis frequently revolved around two general types of approaches: (1) *tafsir be'l-maṣṣur* and, (2) *tafsir be'l-raʾy*. The first refers to interpretations based on Hadith; the second refers to interpretations based on personal opinion, independent of the Hadith corpus and the preceding tradition. These two polarities can be regarded as characterizing the main tendencies in Sunni and Shi'ite exegesis. In Sunni Islam, the monument of and to *tafsir be'l-maṣṣur* is Abu Jaʿfar Ṭabari's (d. 923) *Jāmeʿ al-bayān ʿan tāʾwil āy al-Qorʾān*

(Cairo, 1981). Here, one of the important hermeneutical principles is that only an upright, honest, believing Muslim can have anything of value to say on the meaning of the Koran. Thus 'elm al-rejāl is a subsidiary hermeneutical science. But it is important to note that this exegete himself often indicates his preference for one explanatory Hadith over others due to a variety of reasons, the most frequent being grammatical. It is also instructive to note the wording of the title of this first major *tafsir* work. While *ta'wil* would eventually come to stand for (threatening) esoteric, mystical interpretation and *tafsir* in some respects for "orthodox" interpretation, this distinction developed due to more than mere lexical considerations.

Early in the exegetical tradition, it became commonplace to ascribe four areas of meaning to each verse or word of the Qorʾān: *zāher*, *bāṭen*, *ḥadd*, and *maṭlaʿ*. Thus, in a work of exegesis ascribed to the 6th Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq, and taken up amongst the early (Sunni) Sufi exegetes, Tostari (d. 283/896) and Solami (d. 412/1021), these categories represented the four senses to scripture. On the basis of prophetic Hadith, other divisions included "seven readings" (*aḥrof*) together with the foundational, standard hermeneutic pair: *zāher/bāṭen* (Böwering, pp. 138-42). This terminology continued to develop, multiply, and acquire new meanings throughout the long, unbroken, and vigorous history of Islamic scriptural hermeneutics.

A comparative study of the hermeneutics of Ṭabari (*tafsir be'l-maṭur*), Avicenna (d. 1037; philosophical *tafsir*), and Ebn 'Arabi (d. 1240; mystical exegesis) has pointed out that even the widely divergent methods represented by these three figures are but a mere sampling of the overall tradition (Heath, pp. 173-210). Nonetheless, they represent a very instructive sampling, in that they represent

three of the more influential hermeneutic stances in Sunni Islam. It is therefore no surprise that analogues of these exegetes can also be found in the Shi'ite tradition.

HERMENEUTICS OF SHI'ITE EXEGESIS

Shi'ite hermeneutics with its distinctive character and trajectory as a "minor tradition" was forged in the context of, and in conversation with, the larger tradition of tafsir represented by Sunni exegetes, such as Ṭabari, Zamak̄-šari (d. 1144), Faḳr-al-Din Rāzi (d. 1204), and Ebn Kaṭir (d. 1373). Methods of interpretation in Shi'ite exegesis themselves vary considerably, often according to the socio-political fortunes of the community, and it is also important to bear in mind that Shi'ism refers to several quite distinct traditions in the first place (Zaydi, Isma'ili, Twelver). The subsequent discussion is restricted to the hermeneutics of exegesis in the Twelver tradition.

For Shi'ites, God revealed not only the Koran (*tanzil*) to Moḥammad, but also its interpretation and explanation (*ta'wil/tafsir*). This knowledge was passed on through the line of Imams who succeeded him, along with the many other symbols of their authority (*walāya*). Although the Imams are never seen as recipients of prophetic inspiration (*waḥī*) the way Moḥammad is, they are nonetheless recognized as having been given information and having received communications (*moḥaddat*) from angels. This means that, for the entire period between the death of the Prophet and the beginning of the Greater Occultation of the twelfth Imam (941 C.E.), there was a hermeneutics of authority: that is to say, by

virtue of the Imamate, unerring guidance, including the proper interpretation of the Koran, was available to the community. This is why the Shi'ite tradition refers to the Silent Book (*al-keṭāb al-ṣāmet*), meaning the text of the Koran itself, and the Speaking Book (*al-keṭāb al-nāṭeq*), meaning the Prophet or the Imam of the age (Ayoub, pp. 177-98). Such hermeneutic principles were established during the various periods of civil strife (*fetna*) of the first three centuries of Islam, when the role of the Imam in Shi'ism became defined as that of a divine guide (Amir-Moezzi). Several early works of Shi'i exegesis bear witness to this absolute acceptance of the words of the Imams in explanation of the text of the Koran (e.g., al-Kufi, *Tafsir Forāt al-Kufi*, Najaf, 1354/1935). In addition to works of tafsir which uphold such a hermeneutic, one finds it also axiomatic in Hadith works, such as Kolayni's *Oṣul men al-kāfi* (Tehran, 1388/1968). Among the predominant themes of this earliest stratum of exegesis are the establishment of the authority of 'Ali, as the first Imam, the subsequent usurpation of his authority, the friends and enemies of God, the sinlessness (*ʿeṣma*) of the holy family, the covenant, and the return of the Hidden Imam, who will bring justice to the world. Statements affirming the incompleteness of the Koran were also recurrent during this period, on the basis of the belief that the so-called Uthmanic codex had been tampered with (*tahrif*) by the enemies of the holy family. The true Koran is believed to have been safeguarded by the Imams and is now in the possession of the Hidden Imam, to be reinstated at the time of his return. Another important hermeneutic postulate is that of the disappearance of other sacred texts or "scrolls" that had been entrusted to the Imams. Chief amongst these would be the so-called *Moṣḥaf Fāṭema*, a book said to have been revealed to Fāṭema through Gabriel as consolation during her mourning the death of her father. In this book the names and terms of the following eleven Imams are fixed. (This and other such books are discussed in Kohlberg, pp. 295-312.)

Significant developments were made in Shi'ite hermeneutics during the late 10th century, when scholars such as al-Šarīf al-Rāzi (d. 405/1015), his brother, al-Sayyid al-Mortaẓā (d. 436/1044) and the most well-known Shi'ite exegete of the period, Abu Ja'far Ṭusi (d. 460/1067), began to modulate the radicalism of the earlier exegetes mentioned above. In a detailed study of the *Tafsir Forāt al-Kufi*, the *Tafsir al-Qommi*, and the *Tafsir al-‘Ayyāshi*, Meir Bar-Asher (Jerusalem, 1999) has shown how these works may be taken to represent a pre-Buwayhid "school," and has outlined the way the tenor of the earlier exegeses was transformed into something much less "isolationist" with a more moderate and perhaps conciliatory attitude towards Sunnism. This stage may therefore be characterized as a hermeneutics of compromise (in relation to the greater Muslim community), in which such earlier polemical themes as the usurpation of ‘Ali’s rights and the incompleteness of the Koran were no longer emphasized, and often not mentioned at all, in Koranic exegesis. Many of the earlier radical positions were even dismissed by the leading Shi'ite scholars as extremism, or *ḡoloww* (see *ḠOLĀT*) and incarnationism, or *ḥolul*. In addition, the new hermeneutic of compromise encouraged the citation of Hadith from Sunni sources and, with far-reaching implications for the future of Shi'ite jurisprudence (*feqh*, q.v.) and theology (*kalām*), the absorption and cultivation of Mu'tazilite thought. The overall result of these hermeneutic changes was the acquisition by Shi'ite exegetes of a kind of precedence over the Imam in matters of scriptural interpretation. This was an epoch-making shift, as a result of which the Shi'ites of Baghdad at this time became forever differentiated from the Fatimid Shi'ites who had been threatening the status quo of the Islamic heartlands. It is also during this period that inter-Shi'ite debates between Oṣulis and Aḵbāris (see *AḴBĀRIYA*) were first reported (Madelung, pp. 13-30.), although

such debates would increase in substance and intensity during the future Safavid period, when Shi'ite hermeneutics were once again transformed and codified.

New hermeneutic principles continued to be developed in Shi'ism and cultivated, especially from the time of Yaḥyā Sohrawardi (d. 1191), through whom a mystical or anagogical approach to texts was introduced which included philosophical speculation about "the world of images" (*ʿālam al-metāl*). Major Shi'ite scholars, such as Mayṭam Baḥrāni (q.v.; d. ca. 1290), Ḥaydar Āmoli (q.v.; d. after 1385), and Ebn Abi Jomhur (q.v.; d. after 1499), to name only three, were deeply influenced by the eminent Andalusian Sufi Ebn ʿArabi (q.v.; d. 1240), in whose work they saw the reality of Shi'ism elaborated and explicated. Thus, whereas in the earlier literature a term like *bāṭeni* would refer to someone who saw in the Koran references to a secret code which explained the status quo and at the same time validated rival claims for religious authority, the same term now began to acquire a different meaning; the interior of the actual reader, rather than, or perhaps even in addition to, the interior of the text, was now indicated by the term. Shi'ite theological and philosophical speculation thus became, along with Sufism, one of the major traditions in which such a hermeneutic continued to be evolved. On this basis, for example, "hermeneutic deafness" is used by the French scholar of mysticism Henry Corbin (I, p. 148) to refer to the inability to hear the music of the encounter between scripture and reader that occurs over several hermeneutic levels as the spiritual growth of the individual proceeds.

The Persian Sufi ʿAlāʾ-al-Dawla Semnāni (q.v.; d. 1336) was an influential representative of this mystical tradition of exegesis. Although he was not himself a Shi'ite, his hermeneutics exerted considerable influence on Shi'ite exegetes, especially his method of

reading the Koran according to the "seven prophets of one's being." According to this method, the continuum from Adam to Moḥammad is understood to represent a hermeneutical ascent, requiring the reader to apply and reapply all his efforts to meditate on the divine verses with the aid of his own private and interior prophetic powers. Influenced by Semnāni, Shi'ite exegetes started to use such forms of scales and hierarchies to represent the same message, namely that scripture contains more than one level of meaning. For the Shi'ites, only God and the holy family know the true meaning, while everyone else must struggle according to this hierarchical principle in order to discover the meanings that make the most existential sense for themselves, in addition, of course, to following the directives in the exegetical transmitted reports (*akbār*) of the Shi'ite tradition.

During the Safavid period many of the aforementioned hermeneutical methods became consolidated and started to receive support from two very different directions, namely the Shi'ite tradition of philosophy (*ḥekmat*) and the corpus of Shi'ite *akbār* that were studiously collated, consolidated, and classified during this period. Philosophy, as it was cultivated and practiced within this milieu, served to make sense of the more supra-rational elements found in the Koran and the Hadith, such as bodily resurrection, the return of the Hidden Imam, and the ascent (*me'rāj*) of the Prophet. For example, in addition to works of exegesis on a few Koranic suras, Mollā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) wrote a vast commentary on Kolayni's *al-Kāfi*, in which he sought to find the inner philosophic meaning behind apparently irrational beliefs. This resulted in a kind of revivification of much of the pre-Bowayhid exegetical presuppositions through *ḥekmat*, with a consequent redefinition of the identity of the Twelver Shi'ite community. The earlier, once dismissed or vilified hermeneutic now reassumed pride

of place. While the power, wealth, and self-sufficiency of the Safavid dynasty provided a safe realm for the propagation of such radical ideas, the attendant philosophical developments were also of key importance in this rehabilitation, chief amongst which was the recognition of an *‘ālam al-meṭāl*, a true realm of the soul more real than the ordinary world of phenomena, in which supra-rational events, such as the continued life of the Hidden Imam and the ascension of the Prophet, were no longer the furniture of mere piety. These beliefs were now provided with an unassailable rational basis through ḥekmat, the greatest practitioner of which was the above-mentioned Mollā Ṣadrā.

This hermeneutic stage is best illustrated in the diverse works of Mollā Moḥsen-Fayḏ Kāšāni (d. 1680), outstanding pupil and son-in-law of Mollā Ṣadrā. Kāšāni wrote one of the best accounts of the *‘ālam al-meṭāl* in his philosophical handbook *Kalemāt-e maknuna*, (pp. 70-73). However, of greater relevance in the present context is his work of Koranic exegesis, entitled *al-Ṣāfi fi tafsīr kalām-Allāh al-wāfi* (Beirut, 1979). This resembles in form the classical Hadith-based (*be’l-maṭur*, see above) works, since the author selects several *aḳbār* to elucidate each given verse, with the support of his own occasional comments. The most significant part of this work for an understanding of hermeneutics is the introduction, for it sets out the following of his methodological principles: (1) the need to cling to the Koran; (2) the belief that all the knowledge of the Koran is held by the holy family; (3) the belief that most of the Koran came down about the holy family and their friends and enemies; (4) the meanings of the aspects (*wojuh*) of the verses, such as establishing which are *motashābeh*, and their *ta’wil*; in addition, validation is provided for the categories of *zāher*, *bāṭen*, *ḥadd*, and *maṭlā’*, and an explanation of the problem of abrogation (*naskh*). Here, reference is made to a frequently encountered Shi‘ite

hermeneutic device which helps to uphold the absolute infallibility (*‘eṣma*) of the holy family, namely that several verses which appear to chastise or criticize the Prophet have actually been revealed in the mode of “Even though I appear to be speaking to someone else (i.e., the Prophet), I really mean you who also hear” (e.g., 17:74); (5) the prohibition of tafsir be’l-ra’y. Here Kāšāni adds: “If someone claims that the Koran has only an exterior meaning, he speaks strictly from self and errs grievously . . . the Koran, the *aḵbār* and the *āṭār* (transmitted reports about the Prophet) all point to the inner meanings (*ma‘āni*) of the Koran” (Lawson, p. 183, citing Kāšāni, 1979, I, pp. 35-36); (6) the collection and corruption of the text of the Koran; (7) the belief that the Koran explains everything; (8) the types of verses, their inner meaning and *ta’wil* and the types of language and the different ways of reciting the text (*qerā’āt*). Kāšāni also discusses here the idea that the Koran was sent down in seven possible readings (*aḥrof*), referring either to types of verses (e.g., commands, rebukes, narratives, etc.), or to seven inner levels of meaning to the Koran; (9) the belief that the Koran came down in Ramaḡān just like all other holy scriptures; (10) the role of the Koran as an intercessor on the Day of Resurrection, as well as the rewards for memorizing it and reciting it; (11) the recitation of the Koran and the proper behavior with respect to the Koran, explaining that true reading can only occur when the reciter has “a humble heart, a pure body, and a quiet empty place, for then he experiences the sweetness of converse with God, and the knowledge of His grace and His station through the receptivity of His blessings and the wondrousness of His allusions. And when he drinks of this chalice, he will not choose any state (*ḥāl*) over this state, nor any moment (*waqt*) over this moment. Nay, rather, he will forego all [other] acts of obedience and worship because in him is intimate conversation (*monājāt*) with his Lord without intermediary” (p. 73). He then cites Imam Ja‘far al-Šādeq, as declaring, “By God! Indeed God has manifested (*tajallā*) himself to

his creatures in His speech, but they do not see.” (12) explanation of technical aspects of this tafsir, how to judge between conflicting Hadith, and explanation of why the author will occasionally refer to al-Bayzāwi’s tafsir, even though he was not a member of his own sect; Kāšāni cautions the reader not to be shocked by this, because “every sect—even theirs—has a knowledge which may be useful . . . hidden inside their expressions is that which we have discovered through sincere love” (adapted from Lawson, pp. 180-86).

A theological perspective centered on the figure of the Imam (together with such controversial themes as the corrupted nature of “the Koran that is among us”) was in this way restored to Shi‘ite hermeneutics in addition to some other more individualistic aspects implied in the multiple readings of the book, the incomparability of which is believed to make each reader feel that the Koran was revealed for them personally. This work by the Philosopher and Ak̄bāri Twelver Shi‘ite Kāšāni exerted such a huge influence on the following generations of Shi‘ite scholars (though not all of them would agree with everything that he said) that he became known as “the Ġazāli of the Ši‘a.”

See EXEGESIS ii., iii., vi., and vii.

Bibliography: A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le Guide Divin dans le Shi‘isme Originel*, Paris, 1992, pp. 197-98. M. Ayoub, “The Speaking Qurʾān and the Silent Qurʾān: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi‘i *tafsir*,” in A. Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 177-98. M. M. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism*, Leiden and Jerusalem, 1999. H. Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition*

against Interpretation of the Koran, Uppsala, 1956. H. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4 vols., Paris, 1971-72. G. Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, Berlin and New York, 1980, pp. 138-42. N. Calder, "Tafsir from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre," in G. R. Hawting and A. K. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, London, 1993, pp. 101-40. Ebn Taymiya, *al-Moqaddema fi oṣul al-tafsir*, Beirut, 1399/1979, pp. 93-105. P. Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics: A Comparative Analysis of Three Islamic Approaches," *Arabica* 36, 1989, pp. 173-210. Mollā Moḥsen-Fayz Kāšāni, *al-Ṣāfi fi tafsir kalām-Allāh al-wāfi*, 5 vols., Beirut, 1979. Idem, *Kalemāt-e maknuna*, n. p., 1365/1945, pp. 70-73. E. Kohlberg, "Authoritative Scriptures in early Emāmi Shiʿism," in E. Patlagean and A. Boulluec, eds., *Les Retours aux Écritures, Fundamentalismes Présents et Passés*, Louvain, 1993, pp. 295-312. Kolayni, *Oṣul men al-kāfi*, ed. ʿA.-A. Ġaffāri, 2 Vols., Tehran, 1388/1968. Forāt al-Kufi, *Tafsir Forāt al-Kufi*, Najaf, 1354/1935. B. T. Lawson, "Akhbāri Shiʿi approaches to *tafsir*," in G. R. Hawting and A. K. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, London, 1993, pp. 180-86. J. D. McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ebn Kathīr," in A. Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 46-62. W. Madelung, "Imāmism and Muʿtazilite Theology," in *Le Shiʿisme Imamite: Colloque de Strasbourg (6-9 mai 1968)*, Paris, 1970 pp. 13-30. A. Rippin, "Tafsīr," *ET* X, pp. 83-88. Jalāl-al-Din Soyutī, *al-Etqān fi ʿolum al-Qorʾān*, Osnabrück, 1980. Abu Jaʿfar Ṭabarī, *Jāmeʿ al-bayān ʿan tāʾwil āy al-Qorʾān*, Cairo, 1981. Badr-al-Din Zarkaši, *al-Borhān fi ʿolum al-Qorʾān*, 4 vols., Cairo, 1957-58.

(B. Todd Lawson)