“Hermeneutics of Pre-modern Islamic and Shi‘ite Exegesis,”

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 (*‘ulum al-Qur‘an*) 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 ‘ulum al-Qur‘ān* (Cairo, 1957-58) and Jalāl-al-Din Soyuţi’s (d. 911/1505) *al-Etqān fi ‘ulum al-Qur‘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 (ṣariʿa). 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 (tābeʿun), then the
Followers of the Followers (atbāʿ al-tābeʿin), 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 (mohkamāt), 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-rāṣekun fī'l-ʿelm)"; or, (2) "none knoweth the explanation save God. And those of sound instruction (al-rāṣekun fī'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 Shiʿites, in general, al-rāṣekun fī'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-Qorān), for Shiʿites, direct and unerring (maṣūm) divine guidance continued even after the death of the Prophet through the divinely appointed Imams. As a result, in the controversy over how to read Koran 3:7, the prevailing interpretation amongst Shiʿites was the first possibility, with al-rāṣekun fī'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) tafsīr beʿl-maʿṭur and, (2) tafsīr beʿl-raʿy. 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 Shiʿite exegesis. In Sunni Islam, the monument of and to tafsīr beʿl-maʿṭur is Abu Jaʿfar Ṭabariʾs (d. 923) Jāmeʿ al-bayān ʿan tāʾwil āy al-Qorān.
(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 ʿelm 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 taʿwil 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 Qorān: zāher, bāṭen, ḥadd, and matlaʿ. 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” (ahārof) 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 Ṭabarī (tafsir beʾl-maṭur), Avicenna (d. 1037; philosophical tafsir), and Ebn ʿArabi (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 Ṭabarî, Zamâk-šari (d. 1144), Fâkr-al-Dîn Râzi (d. 1204), and Ebn Kaṭîr (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 (*tanzîl*) to Moḥammad, but also its interpretation and explanation (*ta’wil*/*tafsîr*). This knowledge was passed on through the line of Imams who succeeded him, along with the many other symbols of their authority (*walâya*). Although the Imams are never seen as recipients of prophetic inspiration (*wahi*) 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-ketāb al-
šāmet), meaning the text of the Koran itself, and the Speaking
Book (al-ketāb 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-kāfī (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 (‘eṣma) 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-Šarif al-Rāzi (d. 405/1015), his brother, al-Sayyed al-Mortažā (d. 436/1044) and the most well-known Shi‘ite exegete of the period, Abu Ja‘far Ṭūsī (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 *goloww* (see ĞOLÂT) 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 Yahyā Sohrawardi (d. 1191), through whom a mystical or anagogical approach to texts was introduced which included philosophical speculation about “the world of images” (‘ālam al-metāl). Major Shi‘ite scholars, such as Maytām Baḥrānī (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 bāteni 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 ʿAlā‘-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, Shiʿite 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 Shiʿites, 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 (āḵbār) of the Shiʿite 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 Shiʿite tradition of philosophy (ḥekmat) and the corpus of Shiʿite āḵbār 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 (meʿrāj) of the Prophet. For example, in addition to works of exegesis on a few Koranic suras, Mollā Șadrā (d. 1640) wrote a vast commentary on Kolayni’s al-Kāfī, 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 Shiʿite 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-meţāl, 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 Šadrā.

This hermeneutic stage is best illustrated in the diverse works of Mollā Moḥsen-Fayż Kāšāni (d. 1680), outstanding pupil and son-in-law of Mollā Šadrā. Kāšāni wrote one of the best accounts of the ālam al-meţāl 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 tafsir kalām-Allāh al-wāfi (Beirut, 1979). This resembles in form the classical Hadith-based (beʿl-maʿtūr; see above) works, since the author selects several aḵbār 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 (wojuḥ) of the verses, such as establishing which are motashābeh, and their taʿwil; in addition, validation is provided for the categories of ūher, bāṭen, ḥadd, and maṭlāʿ, and an explanation of the problem of abrogation (naskh).

Here, reference is made to a frequently encountered Shiʿite
hermeneutic device which helps to uphold the absolute infallibility (‘esma) 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 āṯār (transmitted reports about the Prophet) all point to the inner meanings (maʿāni) 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 taʾwil and the types of language and the different ways of reciting the text (gerāʾāt). 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 Ramažān 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 Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq, 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-Bayżawī’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 Akbārī 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 Šī‘a."

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


(B. Todd Lawson)