



## EXEGESIS II. IN SHI'ISM

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### EXEGESIS

#### ii. In Shi'ism

Shi'ite exegetes, perhaps even more than their Sunni counterparts, support their distinctive views by reference to Koranic proof-texts. A major distinction is that the Shi'ite exegetes attempt to find in the Qur'ān explicit references to such themes as the Imams' supernatural and mystical qualities, the Imams' authority in interpreting the Qur'ān and other religious scriptures, or the Shi'ite duty to obey the Imams and to dissociate from their enemies.

*Principles and methods of Shi'ite exegesis.* A fundamental principle of Shi'ite exegetical tradition is that the authority to interpret the Qur'ān is reserved for 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb (q.v.) and his descendants, the Imams. In a well-known Hadith, cited in both Sunni and Shi'ite sources, Moḥammad declares: "There is one among you who will fight for the [correct] interpretation of the Qur'ān just as I myself fought for its revelation, and he is 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb" (*enna fikom man yoqātelo 'alā ta'wīl al-Qor'ān kamā qātalto 'alā tanzīlehe wa howa 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb*; 'Ayyāšī, I, p. 15, cf. *ibid.*, p. 17; Šahrestānī, p. 144, tr., Gimaret and Monnot, I, p. 543, n. 531, where further sources are cited; Poonawala, 1988, pp. 209-10). This idea of 'Alī and (implicitly) also his descendants being presented by the Prophet himself as interpreters of the Qur'ān is also deduced from other traditions, the most famous of which is "the tradition about the two valuable things" (*ḥadīṭ al-taqalayn*), i.e., the two things that Moḥammad is reported to have bequeathed to his believers. There are significant differences between



the Sunni and the Shi'ite exegetical tradition regarding both the identity of these two things and the interpretation of the Hadith. According to one version, the two valuable things are the Book of God and the Prophet's practice (Ebn Eshāq, tr., p. 651). Other versions of this tradition, recorded in both Sunni and Shi'ite works, mention as the *taqalān* the Qur'ān and the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). The explanation given in Shi'ite sources as to the discrepancy between the two versions of this tradition is that while in Sunni exegesis the practice of the Prophet is considered a tool for the interpretation of the Qur'ān (and is therefore mentioned in conjunction with the Book itself), in Shi'ite tradition, the family of the Prophet plays the equivalent role: only through the mediation of the Imams, the descendants of the Prophet, both the esoteric and exoteric meaning of the koranic text are revealed to believers. The *taqalān* are further viewed as being forever intertwined with each other (*lan yaftareqā*) or, in the words of Abū Ja'far Moḥammad Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), one of the eminent Imami exegetes: "This tradition proves that [the Qur'ān] exists in every generation, since it is unlikely that [Moḥammad] would order us to keep something which we cannot keep, just as the family of the Prophet, and those we are ordered to follow, are present at all times" (Ṭūsī, I, pp. 3-4). From here to the creation of the metaphor describing the Imams as "the speaking book of God (*ketāb Allāh al-nāṭeq*)" the path is short indeed (Borsī, p. 135; Ayoub, p. 183, n. 17; Poonawala, 1988, p. 200).

Among Shi'ites, allegory and typology became favorite methods of interpreting the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, only heterodox factions such as the Noṣayrīs and the Druze went so far as to view the internal meaning of the Qur'ān as the exclusive binding authority, and consequently developed an antinomian attitude toward the religious laws of the Qur'ān.

An illustration of the allegorical approach of Shi'ite Qur'ān exegesis may be seen in the interpretation of the Night Journey of Moḥammad referred to in the Qur'ān (17:1). Although aware of the traditional interpretation of this verse as referring to an actual journey during which the Prophet was borne from Mecca to Jerusalem, Isma'ili as well as Noṣayrī authors interpreted this passage as a symbol of the spiritual progress of the Imams or of other persons within the divine realm (for the Isma'ili approach, see Qāzī No'mān Maḡrebī, p. 337; for the Noṣayrī interpretation, see the epistle of Abū 'Abd-Allāh Ḥosayn b. Hārūn Ṣā'eḡ in Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 243-50).

Shi'ite Qur'ān exegesis is further characterized by a radical anti-Sunni bias. Many Koranic verses whose apparent meaning (*ẓāher*) has a negative



connotation or refers generally and vaguely to evil or to evildoers are taken, through allegorical interpretation (*bāṭen*), to refer to specific historical figures among the outstanding personages of Sunni Islam. Frequently repeated negative Koranic expressions such as *baġy* (insolence), *faḥṣā'* (indecent), *monkar* (dishonor), *al-fojjār* (the wicked), *al-mofsedūn fi'l-arḏ* (corrupters on earth), *al-ṣayṭān* (Satan), *al-maġzūb 'alayhem* (those against whom [God] is wrathful), *al-żāllūn* (those who are astray), and the like are interpreted as referring to the enemies of the Shi'ites in general or to specific persons among them, particularly the first three caliphs, two of Moḥammad's wives (Ā'eša and Ḥafṣa, the daughters of the first and second caliphs, respectively), the Omayyads, and the 'Abbasids. In an utterance attributed to the Imam Moḥammad al-Bāqer, he goes so far as to state that "every occurrence in the Qur'ān of the words 'Satan says' is [to be understood as referring to] 'the second' [namely the caliph 'Omar b. al-Ḳaṭṭāb]" (*laysa fi l-Qor'ān [ṣay] 'wa qāla al-ṣayṭānḍ ellā wa howa al-tānī*; Ayyāšī, II, p. 223). In another tradition, cited in the same source, a more general formulation of this idea is also attributed to this Imam: "Whenever you hear God [in the Qur'ān] mentioning one of this community [i.e., the Muslims] in a positive way it is we [i.e., the Shi'ites who are meant], while when you hear God mentioning a people of the past negatively, He is referring to our enemies" (Ayyāšī, I, p. 13).

In other cases Shi'ite exegesis is designed to support the Shi'ite doctrine of the imamate and concepts derived from it, examples being *eṣma* (impeccancy of prophets and Imams), *ṣafā'a* (intercession of prophets and Imams on behalf of their communities), *badā'* (appearance of new circumstances that cause a change in earlier divine ruling, q.v.), and *barā'a* (dissociation from the enemies of the Shi'ites, q.v.); and in the case of the Isma'ili, Druze, and Noṣayrī factions, also the concept of the cyclical creation of the world and the transmigration of souls.

Another current characteristic of early, primarily Akbārī, Shi'ite exegesis is the use of variant readings (*qerā'āt*) of the Koranic text or, in certain cases, the addition of words believed to have been omitted from the Qur'ān. Such textual alterations are based on the assumption that the Koranic text is flawed and incomplete. Those scholars who held the view that the Koranic was corrupt believed that the Mahdi will reveal the true text and uncover the original intention. It is worthwhile emphasizing, however, that very rarely one comes across such alterations in *tafsīr* works of proto-*oṣūlī* commentators (like those of Ṭūsī and Ṭabresī). Examples of these alterations are the common textual



variants *a'emma* (Imams) for *omma* (nation or community), or readings in which slight changes are made in the word imam itself. The implication of these variants is that the institution of the imamate (*emāma*) and other principles associated with it originate in the Qur'ān. For example, most early Shi'ite exegetes read *a'emmatan* (leaders) rather than *ommatan* (nation) in the verse 3:110: "You are the best leaders ever brought forth to mankind" (*kontom kayra a'emmaten okrejat le'l-nās*; cf. Qomī, I, p. 110; 'Ayyāšī, I, p. 195); or in the verse 2:143: "Thus We appointed you midmost leaders" (*wa kadāleka ja'alnākom a'emmatan wasaṭan*; cf. Qomī, I, p. 63), etc.

Prominent among the other type of alterations is the insertion of certain words that are generally proclaimed to be missing from the 'Othmanic Codex of the Qur'ān. These are primarily the words a) *fī 'Alī* (concerning 'Alī) in various Koranic verses, such as 2:91: "Believe in what God has revealed to you [concerning 'Alī]" (*āmenū bemā anzala Allāh [fī 'Alī]*); or verse 4:166: "But God bears witness to what He has related to you [concerning 'Alī]" (*lākenna Allāh yašhado bemā anzala elayka [fī 'Alī]*); or b) the words *āl Moḥammad* (the family of Moḥammad) or occasionally *āl Moḥammad ḥaqqahom* (the rights of Moḥammad's family) as the object of a verb from the root *zlm* (to do an injustice to, to usurp), which appear often in the Qur'ān. Shi'ite commentators believe that this addition stresses that the injustice referred to by words and verbs derived from the root *zlm* alludes specifically to the injustice perpetrated against the family of the Prophet and his offspring. The same method is applied with regard to other doctrines. The insertion of the words *fī walāyat 'Alī* (concerning the [duty of] loyalty to the house of 'Alī) in several places in the Qur'ān is intended to provide scriptural authority to the doctrine of *walāya*, as the addition of the words *elā ajalēn mosamman* (for a given time) to the so-called *mot'a* verse (4:24), is meant to emphasize the temporary nature of *mot'a* marriage.

Other methods of Shi'ite Qur'ān exegesis are based on the word and letter order and calculations of the numerical value of letters. In his interpretation of sura 108 ("al-Kawṭar") the Isma'ili *dā'ī* Abū Ya'qūb Sejestānī (d. ca. 361/971) presents a transposition of the words and letters of the sura, thus reading into it the Shi'ite tenet of *waṣāya*, the rank of plenipotentiary among the Imams (Poonawala, 1988, pp. 218-19). The technique of numerical calculation of letters is primarily applied to the mysterious letters (*fawāteḥ*) appearing at the head of twenty-nine suras. Thus, for example, the letters *alef, lām, mīm, ṣād* (the numerical value of which is 161) at the head of sura 7 ("al-A'rāf") allude,



according to an account attributed to the Imam Moḥammad al-Bāqer, to the year 161 of the Hejrī calendar (=777 C.E.), in which the Omayyad dynasty was predicted to fall (‘Ayyāšī, II, p. 2).

*Major Shi‘ite exegetes and their works.* The earliest Imami-Shi‘ite Qur’ān commentaries known to us are from the end of the 3rd/9th century. These include the works of Forāt b. Forāt Kūfī (q.v.), Abu’l-Naẓr Moḥammad ‘Ayyāšī (q.v.), and ‘Alī b. Ebrāhīm Qomī, all of whom flourished in the last decades of the 3rd/9th century and beginning of the 4th/10th century, that is, prior to the Great Occultation (*al-ḡayba al-kobrā*; see ĠAYBA), which occurred in the year 329/941. Somewhat later is Moḥammad b. Ebrāhīm No‘mānī (d. ca. 360/971), to whom is ascribed a treatise constituting a sort of introduction to the Qur’ān (Majlesī, XIX, pp. 94-131). Other compositions are *Ḥaqā’eq al-tafsīr al-qor’ānī*, a small exegetical treatise of Sufī character attributed to Imam Ja‘far al-Šādeq (d. 148/765), and *Tafsīr al-‘Askarī*, a comprehensive *haggadic* commentary on the first two suras of the Qur’ān, attributed to Imam Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (d. 260/874). The most outstanding *tafsīrs* of the post-Occultation period are *al-Tebyān* by Abū Ja‘far Moḥammad Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), the *Majma‘ al-bayān* by Abū ‘Alī Ṭabresī (d. 548/1153), which is clearly dependent on the *al-Tebyān*, and the Persian *Rawż al-jenān* by Abu’l-Fotūḥ Rāzī (fl. the first half of the 6/12 century, q.v.). Some very comprehensive Imami-Shi‘ite *tafsīr* works, which are mainly compilations of early sources, were composed in Persia under the Safavids. Among these the most prominent are *Ta’wīl al-āyāt* by Šaraf-al-Dīn ‘Alī Ḥosaynī Estrābādī (fl. 10th/16th century), *Ketāb al-šāfi* by Moḥammad b. Mortazā Kāšānī (d. 1091/1680), and *Ketāb al-borhān* by Hāšem b. Solaymān Baḥrānī (d. 1107/1695 or 1109/1697). Representatives of modern Imami Qur’ān exegesis include *al-Mizān* by Moḥammad b. Ḥosayn Ṭabātabā’ī and *Men waḥy al-Qor’ān* by Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Faẓl-Allāh. Needless to say, exegetical material other than Qur’ān commentaries *per se* proliferates in all genres of Imami literature (for a detailed survey of Shi‘ite *tafsīr* works, see *al-Darī’a* III, pp. 302-7, IV, pp. 231-346).

Isma‘ili doctrinal writings include a vast amount of exegetical material, but little is known of specific Isma‘ili exegetical compositions. Among the few exegetical works that have come down to us are *Asās al-ta’wīl* of the *dā’ī* No‘mān b. Ḥayyūn Maḡrebī (d. 363/973-74) and *Ketāb al-kašf* ascribed to the *dā’ī* Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr Yaman (fl. the first half of the 4th/10th century; for other Isma‘ili *tafsīr* works, see Poonawala, 1977, index, s.vv. *tafsīr*, *ta’wīl*).

The Zaydī exegetical tradition remains largely unexplored, and most Zaydī



works of *tafsīr* are still in manuscript form. The Zaydī Imams Qāsem b. Ebrāhīm Rassī (d. 240/860), al-Nāṣer le'l-Ḥaqq Oṭruš (d. 304/917), and Abu'l-Faṭḥ Nāṣer b. Ḥosayn Daylamī (d. 444/1052) are among those credited with a *tafsīr* (*al-Darī'a* IV, pp. 255, 261; Abrahamov, pp. 17-43). A Qur'ān commentary is also ascribed to Abu'l-Jārūd Zīād b. Monḍer, the founder of the Zaydī-Jārūdī sub-sect named after him Jārūdīya (*al-Darī'a* IV p. 251). The work is not preserved; however, excerpts of it are incorporated in the afore-mentioned *tafsīr* of 'Alī b. Ebrāhīm Qomī (Bar-Asher, 1991, pp. 50-56). Another outstanding Jārūdī scholar who is credited with writing a *tafsīr* is Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Hamaḍānī, better known as Ebn 'Oqda (d. 333/946; *al-Darī'a* IV, p. 251). Finally it is worth mentioning the *Faṭḥ al-qadīr* of Moḥammad b. 'Alī Šawkānī (d. 1250/1834), one of the best-known and most prolific authors of the late Zaydīya.

As for the exegesis of *@golāt* (q.v.), such as the Druze and the Noṣayrīs, although the Qur'ān is widely cited and often commented on in their sacred writings, there is no evidence of Qur'ān commentaries as such penned by these groups.

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