



EXEGESIS VI. IN AĶBĀRĪ AND POST-SAFAVID ESOTERIC SHI'ISM

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AĶbārī exegesis of the Qur'ān, the style and content of which are much older than the Safavid period, became during that time a common method of interpreting Islamic scripture. Pre-Safavid or classical works of AĶbārī exegesis were not explicitly esoteric in nature in that they preserved both the exoteric and esoteric teachings of the Prophet and the Imams. The renewed emphasis on AĶbārī exegesis during the Safavid period, however, happened at a time when esoteric, theosophical (*hekmat-e elāhī*), speculation on the nature and function of the Prophet Moḥammad, Fāṭema, and the twelve Imams, i.e., the Čahārdah Ma'šūm (q.v., "Fourteen Infallible Ones"), had reached something of a peak as a result of the long and rich Islamic intellectual venture that is seen to begin its written life in the Qur'ān and to be cultivated in successive stages in intimate contact with Greek and Neoplatonic thought, Sufism, and poetry through the works of the masters of this tradition (e.g., Ḥosayn b. Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj, Avicenna, Šehāb-al-Dīn Sohravardī, Ebn 'Arabī, Rūmī, Ḥaydar Āmolī, Mīr-e Dāmād, and Mollā Šadrā; qq.v.). This coincidence contributed to the emergence later of a theoretical "esotericisation" of all the



teachings of the Čahārdah Ma'şūm in the works of the leaders of the Šaykī (q.v.) school.

What may be regarded as Aĳbārī exegesis developed out of a traditionist tendency within Shi'ism that is explicitly attested in sources as early as the 6th/12th century (Madelung, p. 21). This was probably a characteristic of all pre-Buyid Imami Shi'ite *tafsīr* works and represents the Shi'ite version of *tafsīr be'l-ma'tūr* (explanation of the Qur'ān on the basis of Hadith representing the understanding of early generations of the Muslims), of which the most famous example in Sunni Islam is *Jāme' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qor'ān* by Moĳammad b. Jarīr Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). Unlike that massive compendium, the exegetical traditions (*ķabar*, pl. *aķbār*) in the Shi'ite works of this period contain almost exclusively the words of the Čahārdah Ma'şūm, as distinct from information from the Companions (*şahāba*) or the Followers (*tābe'ūn*) of the Prophet. The best known extant examples of such pre-Buyid Shi'ite *tafsīrs* are those by Abū Naşr 'Ayyā@şī (d. 320/932, q.v.), Forāt b. Ebrāhīm Kūfī (d. 300/912, q.v.), and 'Alī b. Ebrāhīm Qomī (d. ca. 307/919-20). This utter reliance on the reports quoted from the bearers of absolute religious authority (*welāya*) in works of Imami Shi'ite exegesis came to a definitive halt during the Buyid period in the so-called "classical" works of Shi'ite exegesis beginning with the Mu'tazilite-influenced *Tafsīr al-tebyān* of Abū Ja'far Moĳammad Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), although even earlier Shi'ite exegetical works, like that of the Zaydī Ḥosayn b. Ḥakam Ḥebarī (d. 286/899), offer an interesting example and contrast. In the Buyid and post-Buyid works of exegesis there is a sustained attempt to neutralize one of the more troublesome aspects of early Aĳbārī exegesis, namely the agreement that the recension of the Qur'ān under the caliph 'Otmān is not identical to the Qur'ān that existed at the time of Moĳammad's death (Kohlberg 1972; Bar-Asher, pp. 291-92; Lawson 91-92). What might thus be called the proto-Aĳbārī enterprise culminated, not in a work of exegesis, but in the first grand Shi'ite compendium of traditions, namely the *Ketāb al-ķāfi* of Abū Ja'far Moĳammad Kolaynī (d. 328/939 or 329/940). The fact that this coincided with the time of the greater occultation (see ĠAYBA) symbolically draws attention to another important issue in what would become the Aĳbārī approach, namely the problem of maintaining contact with an otherwise hidden and inaccessible source of religious authority. In the absence of the Imam, his words (*aķbār*) and the words of the Čahārdah Ma'şūm would provide the best possible substitute for direct contact.

The later Aĳbārī movement of the Safavid period (see AĶBĀRĪYA), the great



rival of the Oṣūlī school, may be said to have begun with a book by Mollā Moḥammad-Amīn Astarābādī (q.v.), who was attempting to remove what he considered Sunni contaminants in Shi'ite *feqh* (but cf. Newman). The term Aḵbārī thus refers primarily to an attitude on matters of jurisprudence, and it is because a work of *tafsīr* is by an author recognized as a proponent of this school that it would be classed as Aḵbārī exegesis. Nonetheless, in terms of the basic style and contents of such works, the distinguishing characteristic of such works is the degree to which the *aḵbār* (quotations) of the Čahārdah Ma'šūm is relied upon for the understanding of Koranic material, unsupplemented by attendant grammatical, theological, philosophical, or mystical digressions on the part of the author or compiler. Thus none of the numerous *tafsīr* works of Mollā Ṣadrā, for example, should be called Aḵbārī. His star pupil and son-in-law, Mollā Moḥsen-Moḥammad Fayz Kāšānī (d. 1091/1680; q.v.), could be described as a moderate Aḵbārī since he was appreciative of the work of Astarābādī but also criticized him and sought to correct or adjust his views (Kohlberg, 1987, pp. 136-37). In his exegesis, his use of traditions exceeds his own words to a considerable extent even though he frequently coaxes out further readings of the words of the Imams. The earliest example of clearly Aḵbārī exegesis was completed around 1065/1665 in Shiraz by 'Abd-al-'Alī Ḥowayzī (*Ketāb tafsīr nūr al-taqalayn*, ed. H. Rasūlī Maḥallatī, Qom, n.d.; see *al-Darī'a* XXIV, no. 1967, pp. 365-66; Brockelman, *GAL* S II, p. 582). A somewhat later and better-known work is *Ketāb al-borḥān fī tafsīr al-Qor'ān* by Hāšem Baḥrānī (d. 1107/1695 or 1109/1697; q.v.), finished in 1097/1686 and dedicated to the Safavid Shah Solaymān. Another work, *Mer'āt al-anwār wa meškāt al-asrār fī tafsīr al-Qor'ān* (Tehran, 1375/1955), is by Abu'l-Ḥasan Šarīf 'Āmelī Eṣfahānī (d. 1138/1726; q.v.), who was not an Aḵbārī but whose work nonetheless reflects faithfully, and in some ways to an unprecedented degree, the Aḵbārī attitude towards scripture. In reality, the published work is only an introduction to what would appear to have been a much larger project than any of the previous titles, the extant part of which goes only as far as the beginning of the fourth *sūra* and remains in manuscript (*al-Darī'a* XX, no. 2893, pp. 264-65). The first volume is a particularly useful dictionary of Koranic terms. The works of Fayz Kāšānī, Ḥowayzī, and Šarīf 'Āmelī all contain lengthy prolegomena which set out succinctly the concerns and methods of their respective commentaries (Lawson, 1993). It should be mentioned that Henry Corbin was the first European scholar to appreciate the importance of this style of commentary for an understanding of Shi'ite thought (Corbin, 1971-72, *passim*, esp. I, pp. 135-218 and notes).



In the hybrid Šaykī school contemplation of the words of the Imams produced an oeuvre of theosophical speculation in which alchemy, arithmomancy (*jafr*), and other forms of esotericism were to achieve a spiritual perspective, the main purpose of which was to provide absolute certainty (*yaqīn*) for the believer, a central question in the AḲbārī-Oṣūlī dispute. Even though the Šaykīs were not “official” AḲbārīs, the school represented an attempt at resolving the reason versus revelation debate that was certainly one of the major themes of the AḲbārī-Oṣūlī controversy. The Šaykīs produced no complete *tafsīr*, although fragmentary or partial commentaries on Koranic material do exist (Kermānī), and they appear to have gone a step beyond regarding the Qur’ān as the primary religious text by focusing hermeneutic attention on such works as *al-Ziāra al-jāme’a*, a visitation prayer of spiritual pilgrimage to all twelve Imams in 114 verses, ascribed to the Tenth Imam. In his very lengthy commentary on each of the verses of this prayer, the *Šarḥ al-zīāra*, Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā’ī (d. 1241/1826, q.v.) seems to have alluded to the possibility and desirability of a post-Koranic scriptural and revelatory event (cf. Corbin, 1993, pp. 107-8). This tendency would reach an apogee in the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsof*, also known as *Qayyūm al-asmā’*, a commentary written in the form of the Qur’ān, complete with *basmala*, *sūras*, and *āyās*, of Sayyed ‘Alī-Moḥammad Širāzī, the Bāb (d. 1267/1850; q.v.), where contemplation of the Holy Family reached such an intensity as to vanquish the interval between text and commentary altogether.

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