



ṬABĀṬABĀ'Ī, MOḤAMMAD-ḤOSAYN

ṬABĀṬABĀ'Ī, Sayyed **MOḤAMMAD-ḤOSAYN** (b. Šādābād, a village near Tabriz, 29 Du'l-ḥejja 1321/17 March 1904; d. Qom, 18 Moḥarram 1402/16 Nov. 1981, EDUCATION v; [IRAQ xi SHI'ITE SEMINARIES](#)) curriculum in Tabriz, like many seminary students (*ṭollāb*) of the time, Ṭabāṭabā'ī went to Najaf to complete his religious education. There he studied advanced jurisprudence and its principles (*kārej-e feqh wa oṣul-e feqh*) with the leading scholars of the day, Āyatallāhs [Abu'l-Ḥasan Eṣfahāni](#) (d. 1946) and Mirzā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Nā'ini (d. 1936). Although Nā'ini granted him permission (*ejāza*) to practice *ejtehād* (Awwsi, p. 43), Ṭabāṭabā'ī only wrote one work dedicated to traditional jurisprudence, a book of glosses on a major text of legal theory, the *Kefāyat al-oṣul* by Ākund [Qorāsāni](#) (1839-1911).

In philosophy, the field in which Ṭabāṭabā'ī would spend most of his life formally teaching, he studied the works of eminent Islamic philosophers such as [Avicenna](#), [Shaikh Mollā Hādi Sabzavāri](#) (d. 1289/1873) and [Mollā Šadrā Širāzi](#) (d. ca 1045/1635-36) for six years with Sayyed Ḥasan Bādkubā'ī (d. 1358/1939), who made a strong impression on the young 'Allāma (Algar, p. 329; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1976, p. 9). The teacher who had the greatest impact on Ṭabāṭabā'ī's overall persona, however, was a relative, Sayyed 'Ali Qāzi Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1366/1947), popularly known as 'Allāma Qāzi. Ṭabāṭabā'ī always spoke of Qāzi with great reverence, and the two developed a relationship that could be characterized more as master and disciple than teacher and student



(Dabashi, pp. 290-92). Ṭabāṭabā'ī was known to say privately that everything we have is from Qāzi, and this very likely included Ṭabāṭabā'ī's enthusiasm for mystical poetry as well as his dedication to self-purification (*tahḍīb al-nafs*). Perhaps the most significant teaching Qāzi bequeathed to Ṭabāṭabā'ī was the method of using some verses of the Qur'an to interpret others, which Ṭabāṭabā'ī later made the basis of his own exegesis, *al-Mizān* (Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 26-32).

Because of financial difficulties, Ṭabāṭabā'ī left Najaf in 1935 and returned to his native Tabriz, where he mainly attended to the family farmland but also taught small classes. His written output of this period was rather meager, but noteworthy are a series of essays in theology and philosophical anthropology that were posthumously collected and published as *al-Rasā'el al-tawḥīdiyya* (Beirut, 1991). These essays are an early indication of 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī's pedagogical concern with “separating” subject matters. While he believed that it was senseless to study theology without the aid of philosophy, and that mysticism would never conflict with revelation, at the same time he was adamant that their methods should never intermingle (Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, p. 43).

Since his commitments to farming left him insufficient time for teaching and writing, Ṭabāṭabā'ī was very dissatisfied with life in Tabriz, later calling the period one of “spiritual loss” (*kosrān-e ruḥi*; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1976, pp. 9-10). When Soviet-backed forces took over the city in December 1945, he needed little incentive to leave Tabriz and relocate to Qom, then already secure under the directorship of [Āyatallāh Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī Borujerdi](#) (d. 1961) as the premiere seminary city in Iran. Aside from summer excursions to Mashhad, occasional trips to Tehran, and a journey to London for eye surgery, Ṭabāṭabā'ī remained in Qom from March 1946 until his death on 16 November 1981.

Once in Qom, Ṭabāṭabā'ī assessed the intellectual state of the *ḥawza* and concluded it was imperative to revive the comparatively neglected fields of philosophy and exegesis. When Ṭabāṭabā'ī started teaching Mollā Ṣadrā's *al-Asfār al-arba'a* in private, high demand forced him to make the class public, which in turn caused a stir among anti-rationalist seminarians. Āyatallāh Borujerdi personally did not object to the private teaching of philosophy, but agreed that its public teaching could prove harmful to unsophisticated students (*ṭollāb*) and consequently he suspended the monthly payment of stipends (*ṣahriya*) to Ṭabāṭabā'ī's students. Ṭabāṭabā'ī wrote Borujerdi a widely-quoted and insightful letter in which he explained that he came to Qom



solely to teach philosophy and thereby unpack “the few suitcases of [intellectual] objections and problems” that the seminary students brought with them to the *ḥawza*; accordingly he would not stop unless Borujerdi gave a religious order (*ḥokm-e šar'i*) to do so (Dabashi, pp. 281-84; Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 103-6). While the standard version of the incident concludes with Borujerdi deferring to Ṭabāṭabā'ī and allowing him to continue teaching the *Asfār*, an alternate version provided by Ḥosayn-'Ali Montazeri, a common student of the two scholars, reports that Montazeri intervened and persuaded Ṭabāṭabā'ī (who apparently was considering leaving Qom over the issue) to compromise and instead teach the *Šefā'* of Avicenna, which was relatively less objectionable (Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2008, III, pp. 351-53).

Another issue highlighting the challenges Ṭabāṭabā'ī faced in Qom was his scholia (*ta'liqāt*) in a new edition of the *Behār al-anwār* of Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1699 or 1700). Ṭabāṭabā'ī admired Majlesi as an eminent transmitter of *Hadith* (*moḥaddet*) and appreciated his care in organizing the *Behār al-anwār*, yet he diverged sharply from the Safavid-era scholar on a number of points. He rejected Majlesi's facile interpretations of theological hadith, in particular the meaning and nature of *'aql* (intellect). He also opposed Majlesi's unwarranted suspicion (*su' al-zann*) of the philosophers and his contempt for philosophizing. When Ṭabāṭabā'ī castigated Majlesi on these points (Majlesi, I, p. 100, n. 1, p. 104, n. 1), it again upset some seminarians, and the publishers of the new edition pressured Ṭabāṭabā'ī to tone down his criticisms. Ṭabāṭabā'ī replied defiantly, “in Shi'ism [Imam] Ja'far b. Moḥammad al-Šādeq is more esteemed than 'Allāma Majlesi... I will not change one word” and stopped writing glosses with the seventh volume of the new edition (Alawi; Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 55-56).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's magnum opus is *al-Mizān fī tafsir al-Qor'ān*, a twenty-volume exegesis written in Arabic between 1955 and 1972. *Tafsir al-Mizān*, as it is commonly known, is not only Ṭabāṭabā'ī's masterpiece, but arguably also the most significant Shi'ite exegesis authored in modern times (see Awsī; Medoff). It was written partly in response to the commentary of Moḥammad 'Abdoh (d. 1905) and Rašid Rezā (d. 1935), commonly known as *Tafsir al-manār*, an influential exegesis that Ṭabāṭabā'ī found objectionable in its hasty rejection of miracles and other modernist tendencies. Each section of the *Tafsir al-Mizān* begins with a series of verses followed by the exegesis proper (*bayān*), in which Ṭabāṭabā'ī comments on how the pericope is related to the previous one, if at all, then elucidates each verse of the pericope starting with its key



words (using Rāḡeb Eṣfahānī's lexicon *Mofradāt al-Qor'ān*), and finally presents his view of the most likely meaning of the verses. Following the exegesis proper is a number of excursions (*boḡuṭ*, lit. "discussions"), starting with one on the relevant Hadith followed by others on pertinent historical, philosophical, or social issues. *Tafsir al-Mizān*'s fame lies both in the encyclopedic breadth of its topics, in particular those covered in the excursions, as well as its distinctive hermeneutics, interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an (*tafsir al-Qor'ān be'l Qor'ān*). Since the Qur'an declares itself a light and guidance to the world it should be expected to be a light and guide to itself and act as its own interpreter, especially in its foundational teachings (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān* I, p. 14). A corollary of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's hermeneutics is his special understanding of the controversial topic of exegesis by personal opinion (*tafsir be'l ra'y*). In opposition to the literalist understanding of *tafsir be'l ra'y* as commentary that does not regard Hadith as the foremost exegetical source, Ṭabāṭabā'ī interprets it to mean commentary that fails to rely primarily on the Qur'an. Qur'anic intertextuality does not mean that each and every verse possesses a corresponding explanatory verse; rather, the exegete relies on prominent verses (*āyāt al-ḡorra*) that have wide scope in the manner they capture the spirit of the Qur'anic teachings. One important prominent verse is "Nothing is like him [God]" (42:11), which illuminates many Qur'anic teachings about God and his nature. Ṭabāṭabā'ī believed that his hermeneutics had important antecedents in the history of exegesis but that its implementation in the *Tafsir al-Mizān* was "unprecedented" (*raveš-e bi-sābeqa*; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1976, p. 12).

Next to the *Tafsir al-Mizān*, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's most famous work is the *Oṣul-e falsafa wa raveš-e re'ālism*, which was the result of biweekly classes held in the 1950s and 1960s concerning the challenge that Islam faced from Western philosophy prevalent at the time, in particular dialectical materialism. Based on the discussions, Ṭabāṭabā'ī wrote fourteen essays in defense of philosophical theism, and his close student Mortazā Moṭahhari (d. 1979) provided an introduction and detailed notes (Dabashi, pp. 313-14; Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 61-62). Salient features of the work include the authors' categorization of certain forms of idealism and materialism as non-philosophy, or "sophism" (the first and second essays), the necessity of identifying mental constructs (*e'tebāriyāt*) and separating them from extra-mental realities (*ḥaqā'eq*; the sixth essay), and the exposition of a novel formulation (*taqrir*) of the "demonstration of the veracious" (*borhān al-ṣeddiqin*), a celebrated proof for the existence of God (the fourteenth essay; also Mollā Ṣadrā Širāzi, VI, pp.



14-15, n. 3). The *Oṣul-e falsafa* is significant as it is the first work written by traditional Iranian philosophers engaging extensively with topics of modern Western philosophy; it has also been an important catalyst for increased interest in comparative philosophy in Iran in recent times. Other well-known works by Ṭabāṭabā'ī in philosophy include *Bedāyat al-ḥekma* and *Nehāyat al-ḥekma*, a two-part summary of Islamic (mostly Sadrian) philosophy intended to serve as a textbook for aspiring seminarians, and his scholia on Mollā Ṣadrā's *Asfār al-arba'a*. Ṭabāṭabā'ī was a staunch but not uncritical supporter of Mollā Ṣadrā's metaphysical system, called *Ḥekmat* (lit, wisdom) in the Iranian seminaries, deeming it "closest to the truth" (Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 43-45).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī was one of the first seminarians who actively fostered relations with European and American professors of Islamic studies, most notably the French orientalist [Henry Corbin](#) (1903-78). For nineteen years, Ṭabāṭabā'ī went to considerable trouble to meet Corbin in Tehran and discuss diverse historical, theological, and philosophical questions related to Shi'ism. Some of the transcripts of these meetings were edited with notes and published as *Šī'a: majmu'a-ye moḏākarāt bā Prof. Hānri Korban* and *Resālat-e tašayyo' dar donyā-ye emruz* (Algar, pp. 341-45; Ḥosayni Tehrāni, 2004, pp. 74-78). Ṭabāṭabā'ī also accepted a proposal from the American professor Kenneth W. Morgan (1908-2011) to write introductory texts on Islam for the purpose of translation. The result of this project was the widely-read works *Šī'a dar Eslām* (tr. by Sayyed Hossein Nasr with extensive notes as *Shi'ite Islam*) and *Qor'ān dar Eslām*.

As appropriate for an *ostād* (master-teacher), Ṭabāṭabā'ī was known not only for his vast knowledge but also his exemplary behavior. He was very mindful of the sanctities of Shi'ite Islam, showed courtesy to all regardless of one's personal belief and opinion, and lived a modest life in small quarters (Bidhendi, pp. 62-77; Dabashi, pp. 301-02). Ṭabāṭabā'ī was typical of the seminary culture in terms of his general quietism; he had no noteworthy participation in the events leading up to the Islamic Revolution, and he apparently regarded a religious scholar's involvement in political affairs as an unwelcome distraction. He exhibited a certain amount of interest in various socio-political questions, however, as both the *Tafsir al-Mizān* and his collected essays (*Barrasihā-ye eslāmi*) attest (Algar, pp. 345-46). Noteworthy in this regard is "Welāyat wa za'āmat dar Eslām," an essay written around the time of the death of Āyatallāh Borujerdi, in which he draws the broad outlines of a



Shi'ite political theory. Written in his characteristic philosophical-theological style, Ṭabāṭabā'ī identifies *welāya* (charismatic authority and the allegiance owed to it) as the supreme principle of Islamic government. He is rather noncommittal regarding the contentious question of precisely who should be the political leader in the absence of an infallible Imam, but he stipulates that the leader should be religiously observant (*taqwā-ye dīni*), possess effective administration skills (*ḥosn-e tadbīr*), and be aware of current events (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1976, p. 192).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's contribution to modern Shi'ism, particularly its Iranian dimension, lies squarely in the revival of philosophy and exegesis. His legacy has been secured through his numerous students, many of whom are well-known figures in the contemporary *ḥawza* scene, and quite a few of whom have had significant involvement in the post-Revolution order (Bidhendi, pp. 81-82). Whether it is possible to call the largely apolitical Ṭabāṭabā'ī one of the intellectual architects of the Islamic Republic, however, is a debatable matter (Algar, pp. 347-48; Dabashi, pp. 276-77).

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