

Divine Revelation:
An Islamic Perspective on Divine Guidance and Human
Understanding

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There is no doubt among all adherents of the Abrahamic faiths that God has communicated with certain people, known as the Prophets, so that they may guide mankind towards happiness. In what follows, I will try to refer briefly to the main elements of the Muslim understanding of this communication in general, and the divine communication to the Prophet Mohammad as embodied in the Qur'an in particular. The paper ends with a brief account of different attitudes towards the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Definition of wahy

To be more precise in understanding the Islamic perspective on divine revelation or word of God, it is necessary to become acquainted with the term “*wahy*”. In Arabic, the term “*wahy*” literally means giving a message quickly and secretly, whether by gesture, in a written form, or by inspiration.¹ The term has been used in this sense both before the advent of Islam (e.g. in pre-Islamic poetry) and after it. There is also a technical sense in which the term “*wahy*” is used to denote “communication of God to the Prophets”.

In the Qur'an, the term “*wahy*” or one of its cognates occurs seventy-eight times and is used in a broad sense. Except for five, all of these cases pertain to God as giver of the message.² Therefore, the first thing that comes to mind is that the concept is

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used primarily for divine revelation in the Qur'an, though there is also a more general sense of conveying any message. Reflecting on the verses in which the term or one of its cognates is used to refer to the divine act of giving messages, we can classify them according to who the recipients are into the following categories:

- a. The Prophet Mohammad: He is the paradigmatic recipient of wahy as mentioned in the Qur'an and nearly half of the cases in which the term wahy or its cognates are used in the Qur'an relate to him.
- b. The Prophets, of whom Moses is more frequently mentioned.
- c. The disciples of Jesus or mother of Moses
- d. Angels
- e. The bee
- f. The heavens.

As we see, wahy is not restricted to the Prophets. Rather it is used in a more general sense to refer to different sorts of guidance given by God to His creatures, and since divine guidance is all-inclusive, His wahy reaches out to all forms of creation. The Qur'an teaches that God, the Wise, has provided His creation with guidance so that they may achieve their proportionate perfection. The first form of Divine guidance is an inner and instinctive instruction, which is innate in all beings. It is from Him that each created thing derived its form and nature, including such free will and power as that of man. God has granted everything all the means and opportunities of development. The Qur'an says:

‘(Pharaoh) said: "Who then, O Moses, is the Lord of you two?" He said: "Our Lord is He Who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature and further gave (it) guidance.’ (20:49 & 50)
‘Glorify the name of thy Guardian-Lord Most High Who hath created and further given order and proportion; Who hath ordained laws. And granted guidance.’ (87:1-3)

The second form of Divine guidance is where God sends the Prophets and divine books for man to learn the purpose of his creation and how he can realise his true potentials. The Prophets inform man of what is outside the realms of his knowledge and experience, explain the consequences of his actions to him, confirm and support what man can understand by his reason and serve as a role model for him to follow. Thus, human beings enjoy two sorts of guidance: the general guidance (*al-hidāyat al-‘āmmah*), which is shared by all creatures and the special guidance (*al-hidāyat al-khāssah*), which is exclusive to those beings that have reason and free will. This is where God communicates to human beings through the Prophets and is called “*wahy*” by Muslim theologians.

Having understood this, the occurrences of divine wahy in the Qur’an can now be classified according to the nature of the messages, into the following categories:

- **Natural Instinct:** We always admire the wonderful achievements of small insects, such as the bees, the ants, the spiders and so forth.³ The same is true about the laws of nature, such as gravity, the movement of atoms, planets, etc. This is all due to a general guidance, provided by God.
- **Inspiration:** Sometimes God suggests certain ideas or courses of action to some people who are not necessarily prophets.⁴ For example, we read in the Qur’an that in order to protect Moses God inspired (*awhaynā*) his mother to put the baby in the river.⁵ This inspiration was not conveyed through an angel and the mother of Moses was not a prophet. Therefore, there is also a kind of general inspiration for all people. For example, the Qur’an tells us that God has inspired mankind with discernment between virtues and vices (91:8).
- **Prophetic revelation:** This is exclusive to the Prophets and this has been referred to in the Qur’an more than seventy times.⁶ For example:

‘Thus We have revealed to you an Arabic Qur’an
so that you may warn the Mother of Cities

(Mecca) and all around her and warn (them) of the Day of Assembly of which there is no doubt: (when) some will be in the Paradise and some in the Blazing Fire.’ (42:7)

‘We relate unto you, the most beautiful stories, in that We revealed to you this Qur'an: before this you too were among those who knew it not.’ (12:3)

This is the highest and the most sophisticated form of divine communication. Since the advent of Islam, the Qur'an introduced itself, and Muslims have considered the Qur'an, as an instance of this phenomenon. According to Islamic beliefs, it is not just the Qur'an but other Divine books, such as the Torah, the Gospel and the Psalm of Prophet David, that are other examples of this connection between the Divinity and mankind.⁷

In what follows some aspects of prophetic revelation will be addressed:

1. To be able to be addressed directly by God and receive His message and revelation requires a very high capacity. God is the most pure and it is only the pure hearts that can fully grasp His message. It is narrated from Prophet Mohammad that:

“God has not sent any prophet (*nabiy*) or apostle (*rasul*) unless he has completed his intellect and his intellect is superior to the intellects of his entire nation”.⁸

Imam Hasan Askari, the 11th Imam of the Shi'a, is quoted to have said:

“Verily, God found the heart of Mohammad the best and with the greatest capacity so He chose him for prophethood.”⁹

2. The Prophets are fully aware of divine communication to them. The reception of wahy is of the kind that the Prophets never doubt about the veracity of what has been revealed to them. This is a very important aspect of Shi'i doctrine of revelation. There is no particular disagreement among Muslims about the meaning of the revelation. The main distinction to be found in the writings of the Shi'a scholars is ontological and epistemological. For example, here, based on rational and scriptural arguments, the Shi'as reject any story suggesting that the Prophet Mohammad or any other prophet has ever been in doubt about his mission. For a prophet to doubt whether he is a true prophet or not and then be reassured by someone else is totally inconsistent with their being divinely appointed guides for the people. If a prophet himself is in doubt about his mission and message how can people be expected to believe in him, follow him wholeheartedly and sacrifice their lives and possessions in the way that he asks them?

The Qur'an speaks of the revelation as a kind of vision, which accepts no illusion or error and cannot be disputed. For example, after talking about the incident of the ascension (*mi'raj*), the Qur'an goes on to say:

‘The heart did not deny what it saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?! Certainly he saw it yet another time, by the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary, near which is the Garden of the Abode, when there covered the Lote Tree what covered it. The gaze did not swerve, nor did it overstep the bounds. Certainly he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.’
(53:11-18)

Zurarah, a well-known and trusted companion of Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam, asked him how the Prophet became certain that it was a genuine revelation that he received and not a satanic temptation. Imam replied,

“Verily when God chooses a servant of His to become an apostle (*rasul*) He bestows upon that person confidence and tranquillity so what comes to him from God is like what he sees with his eyes.’¹⁰

Once Imam Sadiq was asked how the Apostles (*rusul*, pl. for *rasul*) knew that they were Apostles. Imam replied,

“The veil (*ghita*) was removed from them.”¹¹

Mohammad b. Muslim, another reliable narrator, says that he had a conversation with Imam Sadiq about *muhaddath* (literally meaning, the one to whom speech is made). Imam said: "He hears the voice and does not see." Mohammad b. Muslim asked Imam,

“[In that case,] how does he know that this was the speech of the angel?”

Imam replied,

“He will be bestowed with confidence and tranquillity so that he knows that it was the angel [that spoke to him].”¹²

Thus, one should not compare the knowledge that the prophets receive through revelation to the ordinary type of knowledge that human beings have, which is subject to change and doubt. Rumi has said the following in this regard:

‘Do not measure the actions of holy men by (the analogy of) yourself, though *shir* (lion) and *shir* (milk) are similar in writing.

‘On this account the whole world is gone astray: scarcely any one is cognisant of God's *Abdal* (Substitutes).¹³

‘They set up (a claim of) equality with the prophets; they supposed the saints to be like themselves.

“Behold,” they said, “we are men, they are men; both we and they are in bondage to sleep and food.”

‘In (their) blindness they did not perceive that there is an infinite difference between (them).

‘Both species of *zanbur* ate and drank from the (same) place, but from that one (the hornet) came a sting, and from this other (the bee) honey.

‘Both species of deer ate grass and drank water: from this one came dung, and from that one pure musk.’

3. Though receiving divine revelation is an extraordinary gift, it should by no means be taken as strange, dubious or suspicious phenomenon. The Qur’an says:

‘Is it a wonder for people that We have revealed to a man among them, saying: “Warn mankind and bring unto those who believe the good tidings that they have a sure footing with their Lord”? The disbelievers say: "This is indeed an evident sorcerer!"’ (10:2)

In the course of history of mankind there have been many prophets to whom God sent His wahy. The first prophet was Adam and the last was Muhammad, the Seal of the prophets (33:40). The Qur’an says:

‘We have revealed to you as We revealed to Noah and the Prophets after him; and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the Tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Apostles, We have already told you their story; of others We have not; and to Moses God spoke direct. [These are] Apostles who gave good news as well as warning that mankind after (the coming) of the Apostles should have no plea

against God: for God is exalted in power and wise.' (4:163-165)¹⁵

Altogether, the Qur'an mentions twenty-five of the prophets and states that there were many more (40:78). Through the indications of hadiths, Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 prophets. Among them, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are the most outstanding. These are called, "*Ulū al-'Azīm*" meaning those of great determination.

All the prophets were recipients of divine revelation. The Qur'an says: "We did not send any before you except as men to whom We revealed..." (12:109) However, this does not mean that all the Prophets were given books. Other than itself, the Qur'an speaks of four Heavenly books: the Book of Abraham (87:19); the Psalms of David (4:163 and 17:55); the Torah of Moses (2:87, 3:3 & 4, 6:91 & 154) and the Gospel of Jesus (5:46). This does not necessarily mean that there were no other books, but certainly there were many prophets who were not given books and they were preaching the book of a previous prophet.

4. There is a consistency and homogeneity in the message given to the prophets. Muslims believe that the harmony and consistency in the divine creation extends to His revelations. Divine messages communicated to the people through His messengers are to be harmonious too. If they are revealed by the same God to the same recipients (human beings), who have the same nature and genuine needs in order to show them the path towards the maximum possible happiness and salvation they must be similar in nature. Of course, depending on varying conditions and factors some details may be changed.

Thus, Muslims confirm and believe in all the Prophets and consider all believers in God members of the same community of faith:

‘The Messenger believes in that which has been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in God and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers—“We make no distinction between any of His messengers” - and they say: “We hear, and we obey. (Grant us) Your forgiveness, our Lord. Unto You is the journeying”.’ (2:285)

5. Different ways in which the Prophets received divine communication can be understood from the following passage of the Qur'an:

‘It is not [possible] for any human that God should speak to him except through revelation [direct to his heart] or from behind a veil or by the sending of a messenger to reveal with God's permission what He wills. Indeed He is all-exalted, all-wise. Thus have We revealed to you [Muhammad] a Spirit of Our command. You did not know what the Book is, nor what is faith; but We made it a light that We may guide by its means whomever We wish of Our Servants.’ (42:51 & 52)

Based on these verses and Islamic narrations, Muslim scholars have distinguished between three different methods of divine communication to the Prophets:

- (a) Direct and immediate communication: This is interpreted to be of two kinds:
- i. A suggestion thrown by God into the heart or mind of a prophet, by which he understands the substance of the message, whether it is a command or prohibition, or an explanation of a great truth;
 - ii. Verbal or literal communication, by which the actual words of God are conveyed in human language.

- (b) From behind a veil: This is not of course a material veil, but the veil of Light.¹⁶ In this sort of communication, the prophet hears a voice, but does not see the one to whom the voice belongs. This has been likened to hearing voice of a person from behind a curtain. The prophet Moses received the revelation from God on the Mount Sinai in this way. So did the Prophet Mohammad in the Night of Mi‘raj.¹⁷
- (c) By sending a Messenger (*rasúl*). This Messenger was the angel Gabriel, through whom the revelations were given to the holy Prophet. The Prophet Mohammad usually received the revelation in this way. The Qur’an says:

‘And verily this is a Revelation from the Lord of the worlds which the trusted Spirit has brought down upon your heart...in plain Arabic language.’ (26:192-195)

‘Say [O Muhammad, to mankind]: Who is an enemy to Gabriel? For he it is who has brought down [this Scripture] to your heart by God’s will, confirming that which was [revealed] before it, and a guidance and glad tidings to believers.’ (2:97)

It has been suggested that revelation by sending a Messenger takes one of the following forms:

- I. The angel deposits the revelation in the spirit of the prophet, without appearing to him.
- II. The angel appears as a human being and speaks to the prophet. For example, there are historical reports that on occasions Gabriel appeared to the Prophet Muhammad in the form of Dehyah al-Kalbi who was the fostered brother of the Prophet.
- III. The angel calls in the ears of the prophet like a bell. This was the most difficult type of the revelation.

IV. Gabriel appears for the Prophet in the same form that God has created him.¹⁸

The above relate to the ways and styles of revelation to the Prophets. What was actually revealed to the Prophets i.e. the content of the revelations will be studied below (no. 8).

6. Muslims believe in the immunity of the Qur'an on historical grounds and on the basis of it being protected by God:

‘Verily We have sent down the Reminder (the Qur'an), and verily We unto it will certainly be the Guardian.’ (15:9)

‘...Verily it (the Qur'an) is a well-fortified Book. Falsehood cannot come to it from before it or behind it: a revelation from the All-Wise, the Most Praised One.’ (41:41&42)

7. The message originates from divine knowledge, so it must be true and completely pure:

‘But God bears witness that what He has sent unto you He has sent from His (Own) Knowledge and the angels bear witness: but enough is God for a Witness.’ (4:166)

The messenger who brings down the message, i.e. Gabriel is trusted. So is the recipient who acts as a messenger to human beings. The Prophet has a passive role in this regard, that is, he does not add anything of his personality to what has been revealed. He only acts as a pure and clean channel.¹⁹ The Qur'an clearly rejects any possibility of something being added to the Qur'an by the Prophet:

‘And if the apostle were to invent any sayings in Our name We should certainly seize him by his right hand. And We should certainly then cut off

the artery of his heart: Nor could any of you withhold him (from Our wrath). But verily this is a Message for the Allah-fearing. And We certainly know that there are amongst you those that reject (it). But truly (Revelation) is a cause of sorrow for the Unbelievers. But verily it is Truth of assured certainty. So glorify the name of your Lord Most High.’ (69:44-52)

8. In the case of the Qur’an, the revelation certainly included actual wording. In this regard, Allamah Tabataba’i writes:

“The general belief of Muslims concerning the revelation, based on the Qur’an, is that the text of the Qur’an is the actual speech of God transmitted to the Prophet by one of His chosen angels.

“The name of this angel, or heavenly being, is Gabriel or the Faithful Spirit. He transmitted the word of God over a period of twenty-three years to the Prophet. He would bring the divine instructions to the Prophet, who would relate them faithfully to the people using the same words in the form of a verse.”²⁰

As indicated above, the main reason for such belief is the Qur’an itself. What follows are different types of evidence from the Qur’an for this idea and various hadiths to further support it.

With respect to the Qur’anic verses, reference should predominantly be made to those verses in which the Qur’an is described, or to the verbs that indicate the way in which the Qur’an is or should be treated. Regarding the former, the following titles for the Qur’an may be referred to:

- The term “Qur’an” literally means “something which is readable”. Thus, it must consist of words. In the first instance

of divine revelation to the Prophet, he was asked: "Read! In the name of your Lord and Cherisher Who created.... Read! And your Lord is Most Bountiful He Who taught (the use of) the Pen. (96:1-4) This shows that what was revealed was a scripture that could be read. Though in Arabic "*qa-ra-'a*" includes reading or reciting by heart, it is only applicable when a text or script is involved.

- "*Kitāb*" (Book) or its cognates. For example, "Alif Lam Ra. (This is) a Book with verses of established meaning further explained in detail from One Who is Wise and Well-Acquainted (with all things)" (11:1) ²¹
- "*Suhuf*" (pages; scriptures). The Qur'an says: "A messenger from God, reciting purified pages". (98:2 & 3)
- "*Kalāmullāh*" (Word or Speech of God). For example: "And if anyone of the pagans seeks your protection then grant him protection – so that he may hear the Word of God – and then escort him to where he can be secure, that is because they are a people who know not". (9:6)
- "*Qawl*" (speech). The Qur'an says: "For we shall charge you with a speech of weight". (73:5)

Regarding the latter, that is the verbs that indicate the way, in which the Qur'an is or should be treated, the following verses can be referred to:

- "*Qiraa'ah*" and its cognates. For example, God says: "And when We read it, follow its reading!" (75:18)
- "*Tilāwah*" and its cognates. For example, God says in the Qur'an: "These are the signs of God which We recite for you in truth, and *you* are indeed one of the apostles". (2:252)
- "*Tartil*" and its cognates. The prophet was told: "... and recite the Qur'an in a measured tone". (73:4) Not only was the Prophet Muhammad supposed to recite the Qur'an in a measured tone, but also God, the Almighty, says that in the

first place He himself has recited the Qur'an to the Prophet in a measured tone: "The faithless say, 'Why has not the Qur'an been sent down to him all at once?' So it is, that We may strengthen *your* heart with it, and We have recited it [to you] in a measured tone". (25:32)

Furthermore, it is a recognised fact that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. If the revelation did not include the actual wordings of the Qur'an, there would be no place for discussions about its language. For example, the Qur'an says:

“And verily this is a Revelation from the Lord of the worlds which the trusted Spirit has brought down upon your heart...in plain Arabic language.” (26:192-195)

“And before this, was the Book of Moses as a guide and a mercy: And this Book confirms (it) in the Arabic tongue; to admonish the unjust, and as Glad Tidings to those who do right.” (46:12)

In addition to Qur'anic evidence, one may also refer to the endless number of hadiths, in which the same titles or verbs are used for the Qur'an. For example, Imam Ali says: "Verily, God... sent down to him [the Prophet Muhammad] the book with truth".²² This is why Muslims believe that translations of the Qur'an however accurate and perfect they may be are just translations and can by no means be considered the Qur'an itself. It should also be noted that the hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, despite their eloquence and profound meanings, are completely different and distinct from the Qur'anic verses and anyone familiar with the Arabic language can verify this. This, by itself, is another piece of evidence for the idea that the wording of the Qur'an is not from the Prophet.

Therefore, the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an is that it was revealed by God to the Prophet with the exact wording that has always been there and that is still there today.²³

9- The Qur'an has been revealed in a clear and plain language so that the people can understand it and take benefit from it. In addition to the above verses, we read in the Qur'an:

“And We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to understand and remember...”

This verse is repeated four times in the same chapter (54:17, 22, 32 & 40). The Qur'an also says:

“Certainly, We have made this Qur'an easy in your tongue, in order that they may remember.”
(44:58)

“And indeed We have put forth for men, in this Qur'an every kind of similitude in order that they may remember. An Arabic Qur'an, without any crookedness (therein) in order that they may become pious.” (39:27 & 28)

10- There are deeper layers of the meaning of the Qur'an, for which extra guidance from the Qur'an or the Sunnah is required. This is where the process of “*tafsir*” is involved. Tafsir is a profound Arabic term. Literally it means to “uncover” or to “unveil”. Technically it means to clarify and explain the hidden or concealed aspects of a text. Sometimes a text may convey different possibilities or alternative meanings. Therefore it would need an act of interpretation, or tafsir, to define what is really meant by the speaker or the writer. Sometimes a text has a clear and apparent meaning, but there might be some more fundamental or underlying levels of meaning. Here tafsir would involve an act of unveiling and exposing those inner meanings.²⁴

A sound tafsir can never be in conflict with the outer meaning.²⁵ Moreover, a sound tafsir has to be able to show the relationship between the apparent or outer meaning and the underlying or inner meaning. In other words, an acceptable tafsir is the one,

which is able to show how the outer meaning refers to the inner meaning and the inner meaning, in turn, refers back to the outer meaning. This is why another title for tafsir among the early exegetes of the Qur'an like Abu Ja'far al-Tabari in *Jaami' al-Bayaan* was "*ta'wil*" which literally means 'to refer'.²⁶

11- The first person to interpret the Qur'an was the Prophet Muhammad. According to the Qur'an itself, the task of the Prophet was to recite the Qur'an for the people, teach and explain it to them, put it into practice so that he can be taken as an example for those who want to follow the Qur'an and to implement its teaching and value system in society.²⁷ Therefore, to teach and to explain the Qur'an involved more than just reciting the Qur'an to the Arabs who were themselves able to understand the literal meaning of it.

Suyuti mentions a series of the interpretation of the Qur'an by the Prophet chapter by chapter. For example, in the interpretation of "And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread..." (2:187), the Prophet explained "it is the darkness of the night and the whiteness of the day."²⁸

According to the well-known hadith of *thaqalayn* and other hadiths, the Prophet has given the responsibility of interpreting the Qur'an to his household.²⁹ Among the household of the Prophet the first to interpret the Qur'an and introduce the Qur'anic teachings to Muslims was Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son in law of the Prophet who was brought up in the house of the Prophet.

In addition to the Prophet and his household (who presented the most authentic and perfect interpretation of the Qur'an), throughout the history of Islam there have been many exegetes of the Qur'an. Amongst the companions of the Prophet Ibn Abbas (d. 68/687), without a doubt, had the highest position in interpreting the Qur'an.³⁰ He was very young at the time of the Prophet and received most of his knowledge of the Qur'an and the

Sunnah from Ali. Interpretations of the Qur'an by Ibn Abbas as cited in Tabari's tafsir of the Qur'an have been recently published separately in two volumes in Beirut as *Tanwir al-Miqbas fi Tafsir Ibn Abbas*. After Ibn Abbas, his outstanding disciple Mujahid became prominent in the field of tafsir. It has been said that he reviewed the Qur'an and its commentaries 30 times with Ibn Abbas. His interpretations of the Qur'an are published in two volumes.

Amongst the comprehensive commentaries of the Qur'an, the oldest one belongs to Tabari (d. 310) and is called *Jaami' al-Bayaan*. Recent editions of this work are published in 30 volumes. The most important early work on tafsir with a Mu'tazilite approach belongs to Zamakhshari (d. 538) and is called *Al-Kashshaaf*. The same with an Ash'arite approach belongs to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606) and is called *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir*. Amongst the Shi'a Muslims the oldest works on tafsir belongs to Ali b. Ibrahim from Qum and Furat from Kufa who lived in the third and early fourth century. The most comprehensive early Shi'a tafsir is *Majma' al-Bayan* by Tabarsi (d. 548) in 10 volumes.

The most recent outstanding contemporary tafsir for Sunni Muslims is *Al-Tafsir al-Munir* by Wahbah Zuhayli, published in 1991. Among the Shi'a, the most important contemporary works on tafsir *Al-Mizan* by 'Allamah S.H. Tabataba'i (d. 1983) in 20 volumes in Arabic (40 volumes in Farsi) and *Tafsir-e Nemuneh* by Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi in 27 volumes in Farsi.

12- There have been different methods among Muslim exegetes in relation to the interpretation of the Qur'an. In what follows, first the major methods will be discussed and then the focus will move to the one that is, in my view, the most promising.

I Interpretation of the Qur'an by hadiths (*al-tafsir al-riwaa'i*)

This is certainly one of the oldest methods of tafsir. According to this method, the process of tafsir consists of clarification of the Qur'anic terms, if needed, and then reference to hadiths to find out the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses. People who adopt this method try to explain the meaning of the verse only when there are relevant hadiths. Therefore, whenever they find no hadith they may keep silent. Therefore, there might be many verses of the Qur'an on which they make no comment. *Jaami' al-Bayaan* by Tabari (224-310), *Bahr al-'Ulum* by Samarqandi (310-376) and *Al-Durr al-Manthur* by Suyuti (d. 911) are some of the most important works written by Sunni Scholars with this approach. Among the Shi'a, *Tafsir* by Ali b. Ibrahim (d. 307), *Al-Burhan* by S. Hashim Bahrani (d. 1107) and *Nur al-Thaqalayn* by A. Huwayzi (d. 1112) are some of the most well known works that use the same method.

II Mystical interpretation of the Qur'an

(al-tafsir al-'irfaani; al-tafsir al-baatini; al-tafsir al-ishaari)

Although there is no fixed pattern among those who have adopted this approach, the general assumption among them is that the most important aspect of the Qur'an is the inner or esoteric aspect, which can be understood only by those who are at a high level of spirituality and whose hearts are so pure that they can receive divine inspirations. Some of these exegetes have still been loyal to the literal or apparent meanings of the Qur'an, so they introduce the inner meanings in line with the outer meanings. However, there have been some exegetes who followed this approach and were not committed to present their interpretation in accordance with the outer meanings of the Qur'an. For example, "*Bayt*" (the house of God) is sometimes interpreted as heart and "*Maqam-e-Ibrahim*" (standpoint of Ibrahim) as spirit.³¹ In the verse: "and created the earth for people" the earth is taken to mean "body".³² Of course, as said before, this does not mean that all those who have adopted the mystical approach to

interpretation have disregarded the outer meanings of the Qur'an. In fact, in some cases, the same person might have different styles in different works, such as Ibn Arabi. Some of the important mystical works on tafsir are *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* by Ibn Arabi (d. 638 A.H.), *Lataa'if al-Isharaat* by Abul Qasim b. Hawazin (376-465 A.H.), *Kashf al-Asraar wa 'Uddat al-Abraar* by Meybudi (d. 520 A.H.) and *Bayan al-Sa'aadah* by Muhammad ibn Haydar Gunabadi (1251-1327 A.H).³³

III Scientific interpretation of the Qur'an (al-tafsir al-'ilmi)

Although this type of tafsir can be found among earlier works of tafsir it has become more popular in this century. In this type of tafsir, the Qur'an is interpreted according to scientific findings. Therefore, the emphasis is put on those verses of the Qur'an that pertain to nature or the physical world in general. People who adopt this method of tafsir hold that the modern science is the most certain knowledge and embodies a very fruitful (if not the most fruitful) achievement of mankind. Therefore, they take it to be a service to the Qur'an and Islam to show how the Qur'anic verse comply with the modern science. They think it makes the Qur'an more understandable and also more acceptable to the people of the modern age and since the Qur'an has preceded modern science in referring to those facts for centuries it proves that the Qur'an is a divine miracle and not a human book.

The most outstanding scientific tafsir of the Qur'an is *Al-Jawahir fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* by Sheykh Tantawi (1287-1359 A.H.). The other example is *Al-Manar* by Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (1266-1323 A.H.). 'Abduh interpreted the Qur'an from the beginning up to the middle of the Chapter of Women (al-Nisa') and then Rashid Reza (1282-1354) took over the job and continued up to the final verses of the

Chapter of Joseph (Yusuf). *Tafsir al-Maraghi* by Ahmad ibn Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1952 CE) is yet another example.

In some of these works, the authors deny supernatural facts such as angels or jinn, or miracles of the prophets such as the revival of the dead. For example, sometimes Satan is interpreted as some infective germs that cause problems in the neurotic system of our body.³⁴ On the topic of the miracles of Jesus such as curing the ill and giving life to the clay statue of birds, it has been suggested that these verses are just a description of what Jesus claimed and the Qur'an does not tell us that Jesus actually performed these acts.³⁵

A very materialistic tafsir is *Al-Qur'an Huwa al-Huda wa al-Furqan* by Sir Ahmad Khan (1232-1315) from India. For example, he interprets *wahy* (revelation) as an echo of an internal voice from one's heart.³⁶ On the miracle of Moses who opened a dry passage for the Israilite trip inside the Nile, he says that it was not a miracle rather, it was just an effect of the moon's gravity.³⁷

IV Interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an (Tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an)

The best method of tafsir is interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an (*tafsir al-Qur'an bil Qur'an*). In this type of tafsir, the most important source of understanding the Qur'an is the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an is revealed to be a "clear book", a "reminder" and a clear account of whatever human beings need for their happiness. Human beings are asked to reflect on the Qur'an and blamed if they fail to do so (e.g. in 4:82 and 38:29), something that presupposes their ability of understanding the Qur'an. Many people believed in Islam after listening to the Qur'an and finding it very convincing. In many hadiths, the Prophet, his household and companions all asked Muslims to refer to the Qur'an and benefit from its guidance.

The most outstanding example of this type of commentary of the Qur'an is *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* by 'Allamah Sayyed Muhammad Hussayn Tabataba'i (1892-1981). In the preface to *Al-Mizan* and in *The Qur'an in Islam* he explains this method of tafsir and he himself follows the same pattern throughout 20 volumes of *Al-Mizan*. This method was also adopted by some of the previous exegetes of the Qur'an, but what has made *Al-Mizan* so important and in a sense unique, is its clear and consistent methodology, the author's exceptional familiarity with the Qur'an and his unquestioned knowledge of hadiths, theology, mysticism and philosophy. He was also a very spiritual man. Due to the importance of *Al-Mizan*, I would like to end this paper by quoting the following passage from *An Introduction to al-Mizan* by the martyr Abu al-Qasim Razzaqi:

“In his commentary on the Qur'an, 'Allamah Tabataba'i shows his great originality in pointing out, firstly, the close interrelatedness of the verses of the Qur'an with one another, and then he proves that due to this inherent coordination, the Qur'anic verses explain and interpret one another. In other words, 'Allamah Tabataba'i brought to light the fact that: some parts of the Qur'an interpret some other parts. For the understanding of the verses and their interpretation, we should seek help from the Qur'an itself. He has discussed the problem of the interpretation of the Qur'an in his book *Qur'an dar Islam* (meaning the place of the Qur'an in Islam). After a lucid exposition in this regard, 'Allamah Tabataba'i says that a true exegesis of the Qur'an is possible only through profound contemplation of the verses and a reference for guidance to all the other related Qur'anic verses... This is the same method that was employed by the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A), as we learn from their teachings. The Prophet (S) said: “*Some of the*

verses are revealed to verify some other verses.”
Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) said: “*Some of the verses speak about some other verses and some of them testify some others.*” ”

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Endnote:

¹ For example, see *Mufradaat Alfaz al-Qur'an*, p. 858; *Al-Sihaah*, Vol. 6, p. 2519; *Al-Qaamus al-Muhit*, Vol. 4, p. 399.

² One of those exceptions is related to Zachariah. When he received the good news of having a child, he asked God for a sign. The sign was not being able to talk for three nights. So when he went out of the temple instead of talking to the people he “*awha*”, that is he *signalled* to the people to glorify God morning and evening. (19:11)

³ The Qur'an says: “And thy Lord taught the Bee to build its cells in hills on trees and in (men's) habitations; Then to eat of all the produce (of the earth) and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord: there issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colors wherein is healing for men: verily in this is a Sign for those who give thought”. (16:68 & 69) Wahy here consists in divine instructions about where to live, what to eat and what sort of behaviour to have.

⁴ The Qur'an tells us that Satan and his followers also have a counter-inspiration and that is to suggest and instruct the evil to the hearts of some people. For example, the verse (6:121) reads as follows: “...But the evil ones inspire their friends to contend with you; if you were to obey them you would indeed be pagans”.

⁵ For example, the Qur'an says: "So we sent this inspiration to the mother of Musa: "Suckle the child, but when you have fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not, nor grieve; for We shall restore him to you, and We shall make him one of the messengers." (28:7) See also the verses (20:37-40).

⁶ In addition to using the term ‘wahy’ to refer to prophetic revelation, the Qur'an frequently (more than 200 times) uses cognates with the root (*nuzul*) meaning “descending”. In its transitive form, the term means “to send down”.

⁷ Commenting on the phrase, "We revealed to them [the prophets] the performance of good deeds" in the verse (21:73), 'Allamah Tabataba'i asserts that one type of wahy is what he calls "*tasdidiy*" i.e. the protective revelation which is identical with the infallibility. This involves practical divine support for the person in order to perform good deeds. See *Al-Mizan*, Vol. 1, pp. 274 & 284; Vol. 5, p. 80; Vol. 6, p. 261; Vol. 10, p. 223; Vol. 14, p. 305 and Vol. 15, p. 286.

⁸ *Usul al-Kafi*, Vol. 1, p. 13.

⁹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 18, p. 205.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 262 & *Tafsiral-‘Ayyashi*, Vol. 2, p. 201.

¹¹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 2, p. 205 & Vol. 11, p. 56.

¹² Ibid., Vol. 26, p. 68.

¹³ The saints next in rank to the *Qutb*, who is the head of the spiritual hierarchy. (Nicholson)

¹⁵ Commenting on these verses, A Yusuf Ali says:

The list here given is in three groups. (1) The first group, Abraham's family, is the same as in ii. 136, (where see the note) and in iii. 84. (2) Then we have the prophets Jesus, Job and Jonah, who symbolise patience and perseverance. (3) Then we have Aaron the priest and Solomon the King, both great figures, but each subordinate to another primary figure, viz., Moses (mentioned in the next verse) and David (mentioned at the end of this verse). David's distinction was the Psalms, some of which are still extant.

¹⁶ Muslim narrates a tradition that the Prophet said: "His veil is Light: were He to withdraw it, then would the august splendours of His countenance surely consume everything that comes within His Sight."

¹⁷ *'Ulum-e Qur'ani* by Ayatollah M H Ma'rifat, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Al-Mizan*, Vol. 18, p. 74; *Tafsir Nemuneh*, Vol. 20, p. 488.

¹⁹ This idea is also clearly mentioned in the hadiths of the Prophet and his household. For example, arguing for the need for the prophethood and revelation from God, Imam Rida argues that there was a need to appoint infallible (*ma'sum*) apostles to convey divine commands and prohibitions and etiquettes to the people and inform them about what benefits them or harms them, since they could not understand these by themselves (*Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 11, p. 40).

²⁰ *The Qur'an in Islam*, Part III.

²¹ See also the verses 32:2 & 3 and 40:2.

The revelation of this Book is from God Exalted in Power
Full of Knowledge. (40:2)

²² *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 92, p. 81.

²³ For the statements of the Shi'a scholars in this regard, see *Shi'i Islam: Origins, Faith & Practices*, pp. 32 – 35.

²⁴ Therefore, the real task of tafsir starts just after defining the following:

- The lexical meaning: This is deduced from the root of the word.
- The morphological meaning: This is deduced from the structure of the word.

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- The grammatical meaning: This is deduced from the function and position of the word with respect to the whole speech.

²⁵ In his Preface to *Al-Mizan*, Allamah Tabataba'i writes: "As a direct result of this method, we have never felt any need to interpret a verse against its apparent meaning. As we have said earlier, this type of interpretation is in fact misinterpretation".

²⁶ It has to be noted that ta'wil is used in different ways. For a comprehensive discussion on this issue, see *Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, Vol. 1. Allamah Tabataba'i has a special idea about ta'wil, in which he basically takes the ta'wil to mean the reality to which the text refers. For his view on ta'wil, see e.g. *Al-Mizan*, Vol. 2, p. 14; Vol. 3, p. 49 - 53; Vol. 13, p. 376.

²⁷ For example, refer to the beginning of the Chapter Friday and the verse 44 of the Chapter the Bee.

²⁸ *Al-Itqan*, II. pp. 205

²⁹ The hadith of *Thaqalayn* has been narrated in major sources of all schools of Islam. This tradition was uttered by the Prophet on different occasions, including the day of 'Arafah in his last pilgrimage and the 18th of *Dhu'l-Hijjah* in Ghadir Khum. Despite minor differences in the wording the essence remains the same in all versions of the tradition. For example, in one version of the hadith the Prophet is quoted as saying:

"Oh people! I leave among you two precious things: the Book of God and my household. As long as you hold on to them you will not go astray."

For different versions of this hadith and its sources and interpretation, see M. A Shomali, *Shi'i Islam: Origins, Faith & Practices* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies, 2001).

³⁰ For example, see Denffer, p. 126. It has been also mentioned there that Ibn Abbas was titled "tarjuman al-Qur'an" the one who interprets or presents the Qur'an.

³¹ *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim*, Vol. 1, p. ٨٦.

³² *Ibid*, Vol. 2, p. 571.

³³ For a very detailed discussion about this type of tafsir and its assessment, see *Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, Vol. 2.

³⁴ For example, see *Al-Manar*, Vol. 3, p. 96 on the phrase:

(يُخَبِّطُهُ الشَّيْطَانُ مِنَ الْمَسِّ).

³⁵ *Ibid*, Vol. 3, p. 311.

³⁶ *Al-Qur'an Huwa'l-Hudaa wa'l-Furqaan*, Vol. 1, p. 60.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 132