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History of Shiite Esoteric Interpretation In the Fourth Century

Dr. Mohammad Reza Aram^a

^a Assistant Professor

Department of Quranic Sciences and Hadith
Islamic Azad University, (Central Tehran Branch - Iran)

Abstract

The term esoteric interpretation or ta'wil has an important place in Islamic tradition, especially in Qur'anic commentary and mysticism, but also in other religious disciplines, such as dogmatic theology, principles of jurisprudence, jurisprudence, and philosophy.

When esoteric interpretation is used in connection with the Quran, it is applied to all levels of meaning, from a simple, literal meaning to the hidden meanings. In the exegetical traditions, ta'wil is mostly applied to the hidden meanings and esoteric exemplars of Quranic words.

A major goal of this research on the history of esoteric interpretation is, to compare and contrast the methods employed in various texts belonging to the esoteric tradition of Qur'anic interpretation in the fourth century with a view to understand what, if anything, they all had in common. In order to do this, the study will document all major ta'wil works that were produced in Shi'i Islam in the fourth century, the century which has been known as the establishment of the traditional Shi'i school of exegesis.

Based on the above, the main topics of this research revolves around three axis: Definition of esoteric interpretation, methodology of Shiite Islam in esoteric interpretation of Quran and the examples of ta'wil in classical tafsir works of Twelver Shia in the fourth century including "Tafsir Ali Ibn ibrahim Al-Qummi", "Tafsir Furat Kufi", "Tafsir Nu'mani", and "The Commentary Attributed to Imam al-Askari".

Keywords: Qur'an, Esoteric Interpretation, Methodology of Ta'wil, Twelver Shia, Tafsir Al-Qummi, Tafsir Furat Kufi, Tafsir Nu'mani, Tafsir Imam al-Askari.

Introduction

The most Muslim scholars believe that many passages of the Qur'an have a hidden meaning not readily apparent to the reader. Esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an which includes attribution of esoteric or mystical meanings to the text by the interpreter is different from the conventional exegesis/commentary of the Qur'an, called Tafsir. Esoteric interpretations do not usually contradict the conventional (in this context called exoteric) interpretations; instead, they discuss the inner levels of meaning of the Qur'an. A Hadith from the Prophet states that the Qur'an has an inner meaning, and that this inner meaning conceals a yet deeper inner meaning, and so on (up to seven levels of meaning), has sometimes been used in support of this view. Amongst the hadiths concerning the Qur'an, we find both the exoteric and esoteric interpretation of the Quran.

Esoteric interpretations are found mainly in Sufism, and in the traditions (ahadith) of Twelver Shi'a Imams and the teachings of the Isma'ili sect. In Arabic, *batin* refers to the inner or esoteric meaning of a sacred text, and *zahir* to the apparent or exoteric meaning. Hence, the term *batiniyya* is sometimes applied to those who refer to an exclusively esoteric interpretation (especially among Isma'ilis).

Based on the above, we can say that this research's main aim is to answer the question of whether Twelver Shi'i authors had a particular method for deriving the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of particular Qur'anic verses. In order to do this, the study will document all major *ta'wil* works that were produced in Shi'i Islam in the fourth century, the century which has been known as the establishment of the traditional Shi'i school of exegesis; then, it will analyze the major works among these to see how the authors justify their use of *ta'wil*, and whether any of them provide an explicit methodology of how *ta'wil* is known.

Methodology of Ta'wil in the Twelver Shia

Twelver Shi'i authors had a particular method for deriving the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of particular Quranic verses. To do this, at first, the doctrine of the Imamate should be discussed. The doctrine of the Imamate however, leads to much deeper differences between the Shiites and Sunnis.

The Twelver Shia believes that the sayings of the imams are by nature as sacred as are those of the Prophet; indeed, they are even as holy as are the Words of God; this is explicitly expressed in a tradition that goes back to Jafar, a tradition the importance of which various commentators have emphasized.

Another important issue that should be discussed here is the position of esotericism and exotericism in the Twelver Shia. The doctrine of the imams revolves around two central, "polarized" axes. The first is "vertical"; it may be characterized by the two complementary poles defined by pairs such as *zahir/batin* (apparent/hidden; exoteric/esoteric), *nabi/wali* (Prophet/imam), *tanzil/ta'wil* (literal revelation/spiritual interpretation), *Mohammad/Ali* (the first whom represents lawgiving Prophecy, the exoteric part of religion, while the second represents the Imamate mission that consists in unveiling the esoteric part of the religion), *islam/iman* (submission to exoteric religion/initiation to esoteric religion), and so forth. It must be made specific here that, in contrast to certain Batinitic currents derived from Shiism, exotericism is presented as being equally as important as esotericism. It might be said, in effect, that if without esotericism exotericism loses its meaning, then in just the same way without exotericism, esotericism has no ground in which to reside.

The Establishment of the Traditional Shi'i School of exegesis in the fourth century

The fourth century is a period of growth and blossoming in Muslim learning. During this century, the intellectual activity grew considerably, especially in the domain of Islamic culture and religious sciences, and books and compilations on a wide variety of subjects were written. The social and political conflicts largely subsided and the Shi'a were generally more free to occupy themselves with scholarly work, and establish their distinct school. With the appearance of these favorable conditions, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt trained many students, whom they sent to different parts of the Muslim world. In this period, the disciples of the Imams wrote works in different religious disciplines, especially in the field of Qur'anic commentary. Before that time, the established method of commentary was more or less limited to traditionalist approaches. The Shi'ite scholars began to compete seriously with representatives of other schools of thought, and they started producing valuable works in different fields of learning.

In certain parts of the Islamic world, the conditions were more favorable for the Shi'a to identify themselves openly and be known as a distinct religious group. The establishment of Fatimid dynasties in North Africa, the Hamadani dynasty in the north of Bayn al-Nahrayn, as well as the Buyid dynasty in Iraq and Khorasan (Fars, parts of Ra'y and Isphahan) created a flexible situation for the Shi'a, and the Shi'ite scholars possessed the freedom and security to produce scientific works.

Because of this, Shia commentators started recording and indexing their earlier works on different religious disciplines. Al-Kulayni (d. 328 AH) and al-Saduq (d. 381 AH) compiled hadith works, just like the Sunni exegete and historian al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) gathered works on commentary, history, and hadith earlier. With the emergence of scientific centers and the establishment of libraries, the improvement of copying techniques, and the introduction of paper as a convenient tool for writing, the Muslims were given the possibility of recording the texts of their tradition, and this made possible the survival of many works which would have otherwise been lost.

The most well-known Shi'ite commentaries of this period are: Tafsir Ali Ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi, Tafsir Furat Kufi, Tafsir Ayyashi, Tafsir Nu'mani, Tafsir Muhammad Ibn Qasim Astarabadi known as Tafsir al-Imam al-Hasan al-Askari, and Tafsir Abd al-Aziz Juludi (d. 332 AH). Unfortunately some of these commentaries have been completely destroyed, while others have been modified. Even a commentary like that of al-Ayyashi has some missing parts.

It is worth noting that the members of the Ahl al-Bayt greatly influenced the commentators of the era of Sahaba and Tabi'un. Some commentators among the Companions such as Ibn Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud and Ubay Ibn Ka'b were influenced by Imam Ali, and several commentators from the era of the Followers were direct disciples of Imam al-Baqir and Imam al-Sadiq.

Since these books are the most important traditional exegeses of this century, we will only introduce the Shiite esoteric commentaries among them.

Tafsir Ali Ibn Ibrahim Al-Qummi

The Commentary of al-Qummi and Shi'ite Tradition

Al-Qummi was considered as one of the great Shi'a traditionalists and authors. The biographers have praised him highly, as he has been said to have met Imam Hasan al-Askari, whereas his father had met with two of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt. He is the first person to have spread narrations in Qum.

Shaykh al-Qummi is considered one of the most famous and prominent Shi'a narrators. 7140 Hadiths were narrated by him, a large part of which (6214) he related from his father Shaykh Ibrahim. He received increasing respect and special honor from the Shi'ite ulama. Shaykh al-Tabarsi writes the following about him in his *A'lam al-Wara'*: "He was among our trustworthy Companions." Shaykh Najashi said: "He is trustworthy in narrating, accurate and reliable, with a correct creed, and he has narrated many traditions".

The Tafsir of al-Qummi is one of the most famous references of Qur'anic commentary among the Shi'a. It has collected the relevant narrations with the method of traditional commentary and its title has been mentioned in the bibliographies of al-Kulayni, in his collection al-Kafi. Other hadith scholars have narrated from him, but according to modern research by Agha Buzurg Tehrani and his students, as well as another group of scholars, the Tafsir cannot be considered as belonging entirely to Ali bin Ibrahim al-Qummi.

The structure and influence of Tafsir al-Qummi

Al-Qummi's commentary constituted the basis for many later Shi'ite commentaries, as most of its narrations has been quoted from Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq, with a small number of intermediate transmitters going back to them. It has been published in two volumes, and Sayyid Ibn Tawus (d. 664 H.) has written the following in its description: "The whole book has four parts, in two volumes." One may normally understand from these words that the commentary is complete and that it includes all the chapters of the Qur'an. However, al-Qummi has interpreted selected verses in every Sura, and has left the rest without a commentary. The interpretations are usually based on authentic hadith, which is why Tafsir al-Qummi has enjoyed an honored status among the traditional commentaries. Nevertheless, due to the personal exertion of the author which is noticeable throughout the commentary, it can be called tafsir ijthadi-traditional.

Tafsir al-Qummi is one of the oldest Shi'ite commentaries and a traditional reference for their works in exegesis, such as Tafsir Burhan and Nur al-Thaqalayn and other ijthadi-traditional commentaries like Tafsir Safi and Kanz al-Daqa'iq as well as comprehensive Shi'ite commentaries like Tafsir Majma' al-Bayan and even other ijthadi commentaries of the Qur'an like Tabataba'i's Tafsir al-Mizan. This style of exegesis has been adopted in its wholeness in some commentaries like Tafsir Burhan.

Al-Qummi has quoted various narrations of Imam al-Sadiq from his father, Ibrahim ibn Hashim, for the commentary of each Qur'anic verse in this book. His father has quoted those narrations from Ibn Umayr and some other famous narrators. But one of al-Qummi's students added other narrations of Imam al-Baqir for the explanation of the verses, thereby changing the structure of interpretation from Sura Al Imran onwards. In fact, the current version of the commentary which is known as Tafsir Qummi contains the interpretations of Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq. The method of this commentary consists in quoting ahadith from al-Sadiq and al-Baqir for each verse, in order to explicate its meaning. This commentary has been separated from the commentary known as Tafsir Askari. The

hadiths from Imam al-Sadiq have all been quoted through Ali Ibn Ibrahim, whereas the hadiths from Imam Baqir have been quoted through Abu al-Jarud.

These narrations have been considered as very reliable in Shi'ite sources, and Fadl ibn Hasan al-Tabarsi (d. 548 H.), has quoted the narrations for his Tafsir Majma' al-Bayan from Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi. In several places, he writes that Ali Ibn Ibrahim has mentioned this Hadith in his commentary.

Sayyid Ibn Tawus has repeatedly referred to the Tafsir of Ali Ibn Ibrahim in his Sa'd al-So'ud which differs very little from the method of al-Qummi. Fa'id Kashani has quoted a great deal from al-Qummi in his Tafsir Safi.

Majlisi has mentioned this commentary in his Bihar al-anwar, under the title Kitab al-Tafsir lil Shaykh al-Jalil al-Thiqat Ali Ibn Ibrahim Ibn Hashim Qummi, and has stated the following on its reliability: "The commentary of Ali Ibn Ibrahim is the most famous book [on exegesis], and Tabarsi and others have quoted from it."

Tafsir al-Qummi was also one of the very reliable references of Shaikh Hurr al-'Amili, who has quoted extensively from it in his collection Wasa'il al-Shia, calling it a "trustworthy book" in the fourth section (fa'idah) at the end of Wasa'il. He has also mentioned its narrators, saying that there is no doubt in the accuracy of that commentary. Al-Amili writes in the fourth Fa'idah: "Ali Ibn Ibrahim was very precise and serious in the Hadith used in his commentary, and he has quoted them from authoritative individuals." In addition to the fact that in al-Amili's view the attribution of this commentary to Ali Ibn Ibrahim was obvious, Shaikh Ansari too believed that it belonged to Ali Ibn Ibrahim.

The Interpretative approach of Ali Ibn Ibrahim Qummi

Ali ibn Ibrahim Qummi confined his interpretation to the quoting of Hadith that explain the meaning of the verses. It can be deduced from his method in quoting Hadith that he was very trustful of the Hadith literature. For instance, he has started many hadith with the phrase "Fa Innahu" «فإنه».

One such example is in the commentary of the verse:

و اذ قلتم يا موسى لن نؤمن لك حتى نرى الله جهرة فاخذتكم الصاعقة»

"This verse is a proof for the raj'ah (return) of the followers of Muhammad. The Prophet has said: There was nothing among the Bani Israiel the like of which would not happen in my nation."

Many of the hadith quoted in the commentary point to the esoteric meaning of verses, such as the hadith from Sura al-Hamd which interprets the «المغضوب عليهم» as the enemies Ahl al-Bayt. He also interprets the «الضالين» as those who are skeptics and do not recognize the Imam. Another example is the narration which interprets the Heaven of Adam and Eve to be the gardens of this world. Some hadiths deal with the the hidden and esoteric meaning of verses. For example, the term «الكتاب» is said to refer to Imam Ali.

What has been said is a number of issues regarding the introduction of Tafsir al-Qummi, with the assumption that the author is Ali Ibn Ibrahim. However, when one looks at the research on the subject, one notices certain skepticism in the attribution of this introduction to Ali ibn Ibrahim.

There are two positions on this issue:

I: The attribution of this introduction to Ali Ibn Ibrahim, and the consequent acceptance of Ali Ibn Ibrahim's words about the reliability of his narrators in his book, because he is the one of trusted Shi'a scholars and his words are reliable. In this case, only a limited part of narration documents covered by the present book will be reliable.

II: The attribution of this introduction to an author who is certainly other than Ali Ibn Ibrahim, in which case the reliability of the contents is debatable, let alone the reliability of narrators who are mentioned only in this book.

According to the available evidence, the second opinion seems more plausible because the terminology used in the introduction demonstrates that it has been written by someone other than Ali Ibn Ibrahim. Another reason which supports this view is the fact that the introduction contains arguments about the Ali ibn Ibrahim's words. Therefore the current commentary cannot belong entirely to Ali bin Ibrahim al-Qummi, and, like the interpretation which is attributed to Imam Hasan al-Askari, it has another author.

Tafsir Furat Kufi

This commentary is a compilation of Abu al-Qasim Furat ibn Ibrahim ibn Furat kufi (d. 300 AH). The commentator was one of the virtuous scholars of the minor occultation period and master of narrations in his era, a contemporary of al-Kulaini (d. 328 AH) and Hafiz ibn Uqdah (d. 332 AH) and was centre pole of the science of Hadith. From a

look at his life and his Hadith teachers, it is clear that he was of Zaydi persuasion, although he quoted narrations from Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq. Tafsir Furat is a narration-based commentary, similar to Tafsir Ayyashi and Tafsir Qummi, in which the majority of the subjects are about the Imams of Ahl-al Bayt.

The narrations of Tafsir Furat are divided according to chapters and verses. Before modern editions, narrations were not grouped or classified. The commentator's method in quoting the names of narrators is summary and reference. No explanation and analysis have been provided, except quoting hadith by the author. The book begins with an introduction about the status and virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt, then the author proceeds with tafsir narrations and esoteric interpretations which are mostly about the Ahl al-Bayt. The first printing of Tafsir Furat, with an introduction by Shaykh Muhammad Ali Gharawi Urdubadi was published in Najaf by Haydariyah Press, in 1354 AH. Another edition with footnotes, narration indexes, and hadith sources by Shaykh Muhammad Kazem Mahmud, was printed by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in Tehran.

Tafsir Nu'mani

This commentary was written by Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Nu'mani, known as Ibn Zainab (d. after 324 AH). Nu'mani was the scribe and disciple of Shaykh Kulayni and lived in the minor occultation era. He is the first to have written a book on Occultation. His commentary is one of the main Shi'ite works on tafsir during the early centuries.

The author has divided and classified his work in fifty eight discussions, in which he quotes exclusively from Imam Ali. The text has been quoted in its entirety in the book Muhkam and Mutashabeh and it has been attributed to Sayyid Murtada. Majlisi has mentioned it in his Bihar al-anwar, under the title Ma warida an Amir al-mu'minin fi asnaf ayat al-Qur'an wa anwa'iha bi riwayat al-Nu'mani.

However, the commentary of Nu'mani is not a proper Tafsir, as it does not start from the beginning of Qur'an and end with the last Chapter. Rather, it addresses the important issues of the Qur'an in a thematic approach, by grouping the exegetical topics in categories and collecting hadith for each topic. For example, the book contains the categories of al-nasikh wa al-mansukh, ayat al-muhkam wa al-mutashabih, qada wa qadar, as well as theological discussions in rejecting the pagans, the heretics and the materialists, etc. Al-Nu'mani has also presented enlightening explanations on idolatry, oppression, and commandments. Therefore his commentary may be called an important reference on the sciences of Qur'an. It should be noted that Ali Akbar Ghaffari has said that this interpretation is likely an introduction to a complete interpretation by the author.

Tafsir al-Nu'mani was published in a lithographed edition in Tehran in 1312 AH with the title Muhkam wa mutashabih, edited by Sayyid Murtada (d. 435 AH). Also, Hasan Farid Gulpaygani has referred to this book as Bayyinat al-Farid in 1399 AH.

The Commentary Attributed to Imam al-Askari

This is a book which has been circulating in Shi'a centers of learning from the middle of the fourth century, and it has been attributed to the eleventh Imam, Hasan Askari (d. 254 AH). According to the narration of Muhammad bin Qasim Astarabadi (lived in the first half of the fourth century), Abu Ya'qub Yousef bin Muhammad bin Ziyad and Abu al-Hasan Ali bin Muhammad bin Sayyar, who was one of Imam Askari students, has dictated it by order of the Imam, and Astarabadi has quoted it. According to the introduction of this commentary, Imam Askari dictated it to the scribes during a period of seven years.

This commentary has been compiled in a traditional style, and it is not a complete commentary of the Qur'an, but only includes the interpretation of Isti'adha, the Bismilah, Chapter al-Fatihah, and parts of Chapter al-Baqarah. However, Muhaddith Nuri has claimed at the end of Mustadrak al-Wasa'il (in the biography of Faqih Muhammad Ibn Qasim) that the original book contains more than the current version.

There have been many discussions about this commentary. Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 381 AH) in his books Man la yahzoroho al-faqih, Tawhid, and Uyun Akhbar al-Rida; Ibn Shahrashub in his Manaqib; Shahid al-Thani in Munyat al-murid; and Hurr Amili in Wasa'il al-shi'a have confirmed the attribution of this book to the eleventh Imam and that is why many commentators and traditionalists have had a special trust in this book. On the other hand, although Imam Hasan Askari was martyred in the second half of the third century, the name of this commentary was not known until about a century later. In the fourth century, there was a large number of Shi'ite scholars in the field of Hadith, jurisprudence, exegesis, and theology, such as Ahmad Barqi (d. 274 AH), Ali bin Ibrahim al-Qummi (d. 328

AH), Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Kulayni (d. 329 AH), Ibn Qulawayh (d. 369 AH) and hundreds of others who have written significant academic works, but none of them has not only not quoted any hadith from this book, they have even not mentioned the book under any name, or its narrators. Shaykh Tusi also has not quoted any hadith from this book. Ahmad ibn Hussein Ghazayeri declares Muhammad ibn Qasim as unacceptable and says that his book is not known. Allamah Hilli in his Rijal repeats the words of ibn Ghazayeri exactly. According to these opinions it follows that this interpretation is not entirely reliable. On the other hand, it cannot be completely rejected either, but like other narration-based commentaries, it must be examined with the evidences of historical research and the criteria of hadith evaluation. This commentary has been published many times. The first lithographed edition was published in Tehran in 1268 AH. In recent years, it has been published with a description of Ustadi, by the Imam Mahdi Institute in Qum, in 1409 AH.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should again back to our discussion to summarize that the most Shia scholars believe that every passages of the Qur'an have a hidden meaning not readily apparent to the reader and the whole of the Qur'an possesses the sense of ta'wil, of esoteric meaning, which cannot be comprehended directly through human thought alone. Only the prophets and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge (raasikhun fil-Ilm) can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence.

In the second part of the research, since the fourth century is a period of the traditional Shi'i school of exegesis, so, we introduced some of the Shiite esoteric commentaries among them. In a large number of traditions in Shiite esoteric exegesis such as Tafsir al-Qummi, esoteric interpretation is used in the exemplars (masadiq) of Qur'anic words, rather than to their concepts (literal meanings). These traditions in which there is a meaning or exemplar that are not included in the superficial and general concept of the word concerned are called "interior traditions". The difference between "Hadiths explaining some applications" and "Hadiths explaining esoteric meaning" is that the first only include applications of words as their superficial and general meaning. But, in some cases, there are words in traditions that Qur'anic words do not have such a clear indication to them.

And finally, research on the Quranic thoughts of Shiite in the esoteric interpretation, provides a platform for the represent of the Shia Quranic thoughts and reviewing the impact of these perspectives on the development and depth of the esoteric interpretation and its comparison with the achievements of other Islamic denominations.

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