



THE QUR'AN IN ISLAM

**ITS IMPACT & INFLUENCE
ON THE LIFE OF MUSLIMS**

‘Allāmah Sayyid M.H. Ṭabāṭabā‘ī



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Book Description

From a general discussion of the Holy Qur'an's essential relevance to humanity, stressing God's guidance of all His creatures toward happiness and well-being, the author proceeds to show how the Qur'an contains the fundamental roots of Islam and the proof of prophethood as the Word of God. Copious quotations from the Qur'an are given to illustrate its teachings, its exoteric and esoteric dimensions and the meaning of exegesis. The eternal validity of Qur'anic revelation is examined in depth, together with the attitudes of both Muslim and non-Muslim writers to the questions of Revelation and Prophethood. The relationship of the Qur'an to the sciences shows to what extent it encourages us to study all manner of natural and physical sciences, as well as philosophy, literature and every available branch of knowledge. The book closes with a brief description of how the Qur'an has come down to us.

“THE QUR'AN IN ISLAM should be read now more than ever before because the current aberrations propagated in the name of Islam in general and Shi`ism in particular necessitate the uncompromising and clear statement of the traditional Islamic perspective as expounded by such masters as `Allamah Tabataba`i. Moreover, the present book marks an important addition to the literature in English on the central theophany of Islam, the Noble Qur'an.”

– From the [Foreword](#) by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

About `Allamah Sayyid M. H. Tabataba`i

`Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba`i – may God shower His blessings upon his soul – was one of the great masters of the traditional sciences in Iran during the 20th century. He was born in 1903 into a distinguished family of scholars in Tabriz, where he also carried out his earliest religious studies. Like many Shi`ite scholars, he pursued more advanced studies in Najaf and then returned to Tabriz. But in 1945, following the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, he came to Qum, where he settled until his death in 1982. From this centre of Shi`ite learning the light of his knowledge and presence began to disseminate, and continued to spread, among students not only of that city but also throughout Iran, and even beyond...

More in the [Foreword](#) of this book.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our thanks to all who contributed toward making this book possible: Assadullah ad-Dhaakir Yate, translation; David Elisha, editing; Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, indexing; and Blue Cliff, cover design. Special gratitude is expressed to Seyyed Hossein Nasr for his contribution of the foreword to this book.

Foreword

Over a quarter of a century has passed since this book was written by `Allamah Tabataba`i in Persian – with the express purpose of being translated into English, as part of a trilogy whose aim was to make Shi`ism better known in the Western world.¹ Commissioned originally by Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University in New York, who came to Iran with the aim of launching the project, this trilogy was written and assembled in a short period by `Allamah Tabataba`i in Persian and – in the case of the sayings of the Imams – Arabic. But it is only now, with the appearance of this translation, that the goal of the project is finally achieved, long after the author has left this abode of transience.

It was our task to collaborate with the `Allamah, to achieve the completion of the two works of this trilogy which he had set out to write himself, namely *Shi`ah dar Islam* and *Qur'an dar Islam*. Our role was to point out to this venerable master the questions which a Western audience needed to have treated and the types of discussion that such works needed to consider, while he himself set out to compose these books in his masterly and at the same time unassuming style. Only after the composition of these works did he begin to select the sayings of the Imams which were to be collected and translated in the anthology.

The completion of *Shi`ah dar Islam* – after many journeys made by us between Tehran and Qum, where the `Allamah resided, as well as meetings in the cool mountain retreats surrounding Tehran – turned out to be a major event for the study of Shi`ism, not only in the West but also within Iran itself. Even before we completed the edition and translation of the work in English, the Persian edition with our humble introduction appeared in Iran, and soon became one of the most widely read works on Shi`ism. It seems that a work written with a Western audience in mind also bore a message of great significance for Shi`ites themselves.

While we were translating and editing *Shi`ite Islam*, `Allamah Tabataba`i terminated *Qur'an dar Islam*; on his advice, it was decided to have this also published in Persian as soon as possible. This work, likewise, became instantly popular and, like *Shi`ah dar Islam*, has gone into

¹ The other two volumes in the trilogy, *Shi`ite Islam*, edited and translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, London, Allen & Unwin, and Albany, New York, SUNY Press, 1975; and *A Shi`ite Anthology*, selected and with a foreword by `Allamah Tabataba`i, translated with explanatory note by William Chittick and introduction by S. H. Nasr, London, Muhammadi Trust, and Albany, New York, SUNY Press, 1981, have already become well known as important sources in English for the study of Shi`ism.

numerous editions besides being translated into other Islamic languages. Meanwhile, we began the translation of *Qur'an dar Islam* as soon as the publication of *Shi'ite Islam* in both its English and American editions was accomplished. Many sessions were spent with the `Allamah over various questions of translation, and the work progressed slowly because of both the `Allamah's busy program and our own crowded schedule. Over half of the work was translated when our library – and with it the manuscript of the translation – was lost during the events of 1979. It is, therefore, particularly gratifying finally to see the appearance of the translation of this work in English and the realization of the goal which was intended from the beginning.

The author of this book, `Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i – may God shower His blessings upon his soul – was one of the great masters of the traditional sciences in Iran during this century [20th century].² He was born in 1903 into a distinguished family of scholars in Tabriz, where he also carried out his earliest religious studies. Like many Shi'ite scholars, he pursued more advanced studies in Najaf and then returned to Tabriz. But in 1945, following the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, he came to Qum, where he settled until his death in 1982. From this centre of Shi'ite learning the light of his knowledge and presence began to disseminate, and continued to spread, among students not only of that city but also throughout Iran, and even beyond.

From the 1950s onward, his journeys to Tehran became a weekly or bi-weekly event, and he taught and conducted intellectual discussions with a small group of students, of which we had the honor of being one. This activity complemented his teaching activities in Qum. The circle in Tehran, which included not only such well-known Shi'ite scholars as Murtada Mutahhari, but also (during the fall season) Henry Corbin, and occasionally other Western scholars of Islam, helped to spread the influence of the `Allamah's teachings further, and soon he became recognized as one of the major intellectual figures of Shi'ism, at once master of the religious sciences (especially Qur'anic commentary), Islamic philosophy and gnosis (*`irfan*).

Despite eye-problems which continued to hamper his activities to the very end, `Allamah Tabataba'i was an extremely prolific author. In addition to teaching throughout the week and training countless students, he wrote nearly every day, and important books and articles continued to flow from his pen. After writing such major philosophical works as *Usul-i*

² We have already dealt with his life in our preface to *Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 22-5.

Falsafay-i Ri'alism in five volumes, he edited the *Asfar* of Sadr al-Din Shirazi with his own commentary, and a selection of commentaries on other masters prior to Shirazi, in seven volumes. Later, at our request, he composed two masterly summaries of Islamic philosophy: the *Badayi' al-Hikam* and the *Nahayat al-Hikam*.

Meanwhile, parallel with all this activity in the domain of traditional philosophy and gnosis (about which he wrote less in a direct manner but alluded to frequently in his philosophical works and certain shorter treatises), `Allamah Tabataba`i continued to work indefatigably on his Qur'anic commentary, *Tafsir al-Mizan*, which he finally completed in his mid-seventies. This monumental commentary, consisting of some twenty-seven volumes (written in Arabic, but also translated into Persian), is one of the most important Qur'anic commentaries of this century and is a blinding witness to the remarkable mastery of its author in the domain of Qur'anic sciences. This commentary, based on the principle of having one part of the Qur'an interpret other parts (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba`dahu ba`dan*), is a *summa* of Islamic religious thought, in which the sciences of the Qur'an, theology, philosophy, gnosis, sacred history and the social teachings of Islam are all brought together.

The present volume is in a sense the synthesis of the venerable master's life-long study of the Noble Qur'an. Although the book is written in a simple language and may appear to be introductory, it is a work of great depth and synthetic quality. It treats many questions concerning the sacred text which have rarely been discussed together in a single work. The book, although short, distils many volumes into its pages and is like the synopsis of a major commentary. It brings out the significances of the Qur'an for the life of Muslims, the features of the sacred text which seem enigmatic, the inner and outer levels of meaning of the Text and the sciences of Qur'anic exegesis. It also treats in a clear and direct manner the Shi`ite understanding of the Qur'an and the role of the Imams in its interpretation. It is a veritable prolegomenon to the study of the Sacred Book, and is perhaps the most accessible introduction available in English to the study of the Qur'an as traditionally understood by the mainstream of Shi`ite thought, in fact Islamic exegetical thought in general.

This book reflects, moreover, not only the learning of the author but also his spiritual qualities. `Allamah Tabataba`i was not only an outstanding scholar but also a person of great spiritual realization who lived constantly in the remembrance of God. During the twenty years during which we had the honor of being his student, and observing him in all kinds of

circumstances – from being alone with him in a room, to sitting at his feet in a mosque filled with hundreds of students – never did he cease to remember God and invoke Him. His countenance always reflected a light which seemed to shine from the world beyond, while his gentle voice seemed to issue from the other shore of existence. In his presence, one could not but think of God and the world of the Spirit. The reality of the Qur'an, which he had studied and written about for so many years, seemed to have penetrated into his very being, enabling him to speak of a knowledge that was always wed to spirituality and rooted in the sacred.

`Allamah Tabataba`i was at once one of the greatest of Qur'anic commentators, a leading contemporary Islamic philosopher in the tradition of Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, and a gnostic who was at home in both the metaphysical works of Ibn `Arabi and the inebriating poetry of Rumi and Hafiz. In him, intelligence, scholarship, piety and the love of God met in a union which is encountered rarely in any age, and especially this period of the eclipse of the Spirit. His soul was embellished with the virtues extolled by the Qur'an and the prophetic *Sunnah*, while his mind explored like a soaring eagle the vast expanses of Islamic thought. To have met him was to have met the veritable Islamic scholar (or *`alim*), and to gain a taste of what traditional Islamic learning must have been when the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition was fully alive.

The *Qur'an in Islam*, as well as the other works by the `Allamah, should be read now more than ever before, because the current aberrations propagated in the name of Islam in general, and Shi'ism in particular, necessitate an uncompromising and clear statement of the traditional Islamic perspective, as expounded by such masters as `Allamah Tabataba`i. Moreover, the present book marks an important addition to literature in English on the central theophany of Islam, the Noble Qur'an. May all those interested in the understanding of Islam be able to benefit from this book, and also come to gain some insight into the mind and soul of a great contemporary Muslim scholar who lived and died in constant awareness of God, and who saw in His Word as contained in the Noble Book at once a guide for life, the basic source of all knowledge, the sword of discernment between truth and falsehood and a "presence" whose experience makes possible here a taste of the realities of paradise.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Bethesda, Maryland

December, 1986

Introduction

We are placing before the reader a book which discusses the profoundest document of the sacred religion of Islam. Among the themes of this book are the following:

- The position of the Glorious Qur'an in the Islamic world
- What do we mean when we speak of "the Qur'an?"
- What value does the Qur'an hold for Muslims?
- The Qur'an as a book whose importance is global and eternal
- The Qur'an as a revelation from a divine, not a human, source
- The relationship between the Qur'an and the sciences
- The characteristics and features of the Qur'an

We are investigating the importance of a book which Muslims have never ceased to respect and venerate and whose validity they have never rejected. They are able to use it to support any claim made in the name of Islam, despite being troubled by inner conflicts and sectarian splintering, as are the other major world religions.

The purpose of this work is to define the position of the Qur'an in such a way that the Holy Book explains itself, rather than merely giving our own opinions concerning it. There is clearly a great difference between these two ways of approaching the matter.

In other words, the position we attribute to the Holy Qur'an, through reason or lack of it, if found to be contrary to the Qur'anic views, will not be valid. If it is something about which the Qur'an is silent, in view of the existing differences of opinion among the Muslims, a unanimous acceptance of such a view would not be possible. The only position which may be acceptable is what is denoted by the Holy Qur'an itself.

Therefore, in this inquiry and discussion, we must answer the question as to what the Holy Qur'an says in this connection, and not what we, who follow a certain school of Islamic law, say about the Holy Qur'an.

Chapter 1: The Value of the Qur'an in the Eyes of the Muslims

The Qur'an Contains a Pattern of a Complete Way of Life for Man

The religion of Islam is superior to any other in that it guarantees happiness in man's life. For Muslims, Islam is a belief system with moral and practical laws that have their source in the Qur'an.

God, may He be exalted, says, *"Indeed this Qur'an guides to the path which is clearer and straighter than any other"* [17:9]. He also says, *"We have revealed to you the book which clarifies every matter"* [16:89].

These references exemplify the numerous Qur'anic verses (*ayaat*) which mention the principles of religious belief, moral virtues and a general legal system governing all aspects of human behavior.

A consideration of the following topics will enable one to understand that the Qur'an provides a comprehensive program of activity for man's life.

Man has no other aim in life but the pursuit of happiness and pleasure, which manifests itself in much the same way as love of ease or wealth. Although some individuals seem to reject this happiness, for example, by ending their lives in suicide, or by turning away from a life of leisure, they too, in their own way, confirm this principle of happiness; for, in seeking an end to their life or of material pleasure, they are still asserting their own personal choice of what happiness means to them. Human actions, therefore, are directed largely by the prospects of happiness and prosperity offered by a certain idea, whether that idea be true or false.

Man's activity in life is guided by a specific plan or program. This fact is self-evident, even though it is sometimes concealed by its very apparentness. Man acts according to his will and desires; he also weighs the necessity of a task before undertaking it.

In this he is promoted by an inherent scientific law, which is to say that he performs a task for "himself" in fulfilling needs which he perceives are necessary. There is, therefore, a direct link between the objective of a task and its execution.

Any action undertaken by man, whether it be eating, sleeping or walking, occupies its own specific place and demands its own particular efforts. Yet an action is implemented according to an inherent law, the general concept of which is stored in man's perception and is recalled by motions associated with that action. This notion holds true whether or not one is obliged to undertake the action or whether or not the circumstances are favorable.

Every man, in respect of his own actions, is as the state in relation to its individual citizens, whose activity is controlled by specific laws, customs and behavior. Just as the active forces in a state are obliged to adapt their actions according to certain laws, so is the social activity of a community composed of the actions of each individual. If this were not the case, the different components of society would fall apart and be destroyed in anarchy in the shortest time imaginable.

If a society is religious, its government will reflect that religion; if it is secular, it will be regulated by a corresponding code of law. If a society is uncivilized and barbaric, a code of behavior imposed by a tyrant will appear; otherwise, the conflict of various belief-systems within such a society will produce lawlessness.

Thus man, as an individual element of society, has no option but to possess and pursue a goal. He is guided in the pursuit of his goal by the path which corresponds to it and by the rules which must necessarily accompany his program of activity. The Qur'an affirms this idea when it says that "*every man has a goal to which he is turning, so compete with each other in good action*" [2:148]. In the usage of the Qur'an, the word *deen*¹ is basically applied to a way, a pattern of living, and neither the believer nor the non-believer is without a path, be it prophetic or man-made.

God, may He be exalted, describes the enemies of the divine *deen* (religion) as those "*who prevent others from the path of God and would have it crooked*" [7:45]

This verse shows that the term *Sabil Allah* – the path of God – used in the verse refers to the *deen of fitrah* – the inherent pattern of life intended by God for man. It also indicates that even those who do not believe in God implement His *deen*, albeit in a deviated form; this deviation, which becomes their *deen*, is also encompassed in God's program.

¹ Usually translated to mean religion, the word strongly implies transaction between the Debtor (God) and the indebted (man). Hence, living the *deen* means repaying one's debt to the Creator.

The best and firmest path in life for man is the one which is dictated by his innate being and not by the sentiments of any individual or society. A close examination of any part of creation reveals that, from its very inception, it is guided by an innate purpose towards fulfilling its nature along the most appropriate and shortest path; every aspect of each part of creation is equipped to do so, acting as a blueprint for defining the nature of its existence. Indeed all of creation, be it animate or inanimate, is made up in this manner.

As an example, we may say that a green-tipped shoot, emerging from a single grain in the earth, is “aware” of its future existence as a plant which will yield an ear of wheat. By means of its inherent characteristics, the shoot acquires various mineral elements for its growth from the soil and changes, day by day, in form and strength until it becomes a fully-matured grain-bearing plant – and so comes to the end of its natural cycle.

Similarly, if we investigate the life-cycle of the walnut tree, we observe that it too is “aware”, from the very beginning, of its own specific purpose in life, namely, to grow into a big walnut tree. It reaches this goal by developing according to its own distinct inherent characteristics; it does not, for example, follow the path of the wheat-plant in fulfilling its goal just as the wheat-plant does not follow the life pattern of the walnut tree.

Since every created object which makes up the visible world is subject to this same general law, there is no reason to doubt that man, as a species of creation, is not. Indeed his physical capabilities are the best proof of this rule; like the rest of creation, they allow him to realize his purpose, and ultimate happiness, in life.

Thus, we observe that man, in fact, guides himself to happiness and well-being merely by applying the fundamental laws inherent in his own nature.

This law is confirmed by God in the Qur'an, through His Prophet Moses, when he says, “*Our Lord is He who gave everything its nature, then guided it*” [20:50]. It is further explained in 87:2-3 as “*He who created and fashioned in balanced proportion and He who measures and guides*”.

As to the creation and the nature of man, the Qur'an says,

By the soul and Him who fashioned it and then inspired it with wrong action and fear of God; he is truly successful who causes it to grow and purifies it and he is a failure who corrupts and destroys it [91:7-10].

God enjoins upon man the duty to “*strive towards a sincere application of the deen,*” (that is, the *fitrah* of God, or the natural code of behavior upon which He has created mankind), since “*there is no changing (the laws of) the creation of God*” [30:30].

He also says that “*In truth, the only deen recognized by God is Islam*” [3:19]. Here, Islam means submission, the method of submission to these very laws. The Qur'an further warns that “*the actions of the man who chooses a deen other than Islam will not be accepted*” [3:85].

The gist of the above verses, and other references on the same subject, is that God has guided every creature – be it man, beast or vegetable – to a state of well-being and self-fulfillment appropriate to its individual make-up.

Thus the appropriate path for man lies in the adoption of personal and social laws particular to his own *fitrah* (or innate nature), and in avoiding people who have become “denaturalized” by following their own notions or passions. It is clearly underlined that *fitrah*, far from denying man's feelings and passions, accords each its proper due and allows man's conflicting spiritual and material needs to be fulfilled in a harmonious fashion.

Thus, we may conclude that the intellect, *`aql*, should rule man in matters pertaining to individual or personal decisions, rather than his feelings. Similarly, truth and justice should govern society and not the whim of a tyrant or even the will of a majority, if that be contrary to a society's true benefit.

From this we may conclude that only God is empowered to make laws, since the only laws useful to man are those which are made according to his inherent nature.

It also follows that man's needs, arising from his outward circumstance and his inner reality, are fulfilled only by obeying God's instructions (or laws). These needs may arise through events beyond man's control or as a result of the natural demands of his body.

Both are encompassed in the plan of life that God has designated for man. For, as the Qur'an says, the “*decision rests with God only,*” [12:40 and 67] which is to say that there is no governance (of man or society, of the inner or the outer) except that of God.

Without a specific creational plan, based on the innate disposition of man, life would be fruitless and without meaning. We may understand this only through belief in God and knowledge of his Unity, as explained in the Qur'an.

From here we may proceed to an understanding of the Day of Judgment, when man is rewarded or punished according to his deeds. Thereafter, we may arrive at knowledge of the prophets and of prophetic teachings, since man cannot be judged without being first instructed in the matter of obedience and disobedience. These three fundamental teachings are considered to be the roots of the Islamic way of life.

To these we may add the fundamentals of good character and morals which a true believer must possess, and which are a necessary extension of the three basic beliefs mentioned above. The laws governing daily activity not only guarantee man's happiness and moral character but, more importantly, increase his understanding of these beliefs and of the fundamentals of Islam.

It is clear that a thief, a traitor, a squanderer or a libertine do not possess the quality of innocence; nor can a miser, who hoards money, be called a generous person. Similarly, someone who never prays or remembers God cannot be called a believer in God and the Last Day, nor be described as His servant.

From this we may conclude that good character flourishes when joined to a pattern of correct actions; morals are to be found in the man whose beliefs are in harmony with these fundamentals. A proud man cannot be expected to believe in God nor be humble in respect to the Divine; nor can the man, who has never understood the meaning of humanity, justice, mercy or compassion, believe in the Day of Rising and the Judgment.

Chapter 35:10 speaks of the relationship between a sincere system of belief and a fitting character:

Pure speech rises up to Him and He raises up good deeds still further.

In chapter 30:10 we learn again of this relationship between belief and action:

Then evil was the consequence of those who do wrong action because they denied the signs of Allah and they made a mock of them.

To summarize, the Qur'an is composed of the following Islamic fundamentals which together form an interlocking whole: a primary system of belief in the Unity of God, Prophethood and the Day of Reckoning, accompanied by a second group of beliefs, namely, belief in the Tablet, the Pen (which delineates the sequence of cosmic events), the rule of destiny

and the decree (without implying pre-determination)², the angels, the throne of the Creator, and, finally, in the creation of the sky, the earth and everything between them.

Thereafter, we observe that man's well-being lies in his character being in harmony with these principles.

The *shari`ah*, namely the laws and code of behavior explained in the Qur'an and commented upon in every detail by the model of the Prophet's life, is the means whereby a man may practice these principles. At this point we should add that the Prophet's family are his chosen heirs and are entrusted with the task of exemplifying and explaining further the prophetic message and the *shari`ah* after the Prophet's death. The Prophet himself has shown that the tradition, *hadith*,³ known as the *hadith al-thaqalayn* which all sects of Islam accept, refers specifically to this matter of succession.

The Qur'an as a Document of Prophethood

The Qur'an refers on several occasions to the fact that it is the word of God, that it issues from a divine source in the very words in which the Prophet received them and which he later transmitted. The divine nature of the Qur'an is affirmed in several verses.

In 52:33-34 we read, "*or they say that (the Prophet) is inventing it. Indeed they do not believe. If they are truthful then let them produce words like it*". Likewise in 17:88 "*Say (O Muhammad), if all the jinn and mankind were to join forces to produce something like this Qur'an they could not produce it even if they were to help one another.*" Again, in 11:13 "*or they say he has invented it! Say: then produce ten verses like it which you have invented,*" and again in 10:38, "*or they say he has invented it. Say; produce a single chapter like it,*" we find further proof.

The following challenge is made in Chapter 2:23 "*and if you are in doubt concerning that which we have revealed to Our slave then produce a chapter like it.*"

² Please see our publication: *Decree & Destiny*.

³ A report of the words or deeds of the Prophet which has been transmitted to us intact by a chain, or numerous chains, of trustworthy narrators. The tradition in question here possesses an unbroken chain of transmission back to the Prophet himself; these verses confirm the miraculous quality of the book and state that it is beyond the power of man to produce such a work.

Here it should be noted that the Qur'an is addressing those who grew up with Muhammad, the man they knew to be unlettered and untutored in the matters spoken about in the Qur'an. Despite this knowledge, they still doubt.

Another challenge is issued, (to those who would find contradictions in the Qur'an, but obviously cannot):

Will they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from other than God, they would have found in it much incongruity [4:82].

Since everything in the world is in a state of growth and self-perfection, then the Qur'an would of necessity lack harmony since it was revealed over a period of twenty-three years; it would lack harmony that is if we were to suppose that it was the work of a man rather than of a prophet. The Qur'an, whose messages announce and confirm that it is the work of God, also teaches us that Muhammad is a messenger, sent by God, thus confirming the authenticity of the Prophet. In chapter 13:43 God speaks Himself, as on many occasions, confirming that He is witness and testimony to the prophecy of Muhammad: *"Say God is sufficient witness between you and me."* The verse refers to disbelievers and defies their disbelief.

In another verse, the testimony of angels is added to that of God's:

"But God testifies concerning that which He has revealed to you; He has revealed it in His knowledge; and the Angels also testify. And God is sufficient witness [4:166].

Chapter 2: The Teachings of the Qur'an

The Universal Import of the Qur'an

The Qur'an is not directed towards any one particular nation, such as the Arabs, or to a particular sect of Muslims, but to non-Islamic societies as well as the Muslim nation as a whole. There are numerous references to non-believers and idol-worshippers, to the People of the Book (namely, the Jews, or the Tribe of Israel, and the Christians), exhorting each one to strive towards a true understanding of the Qur'an and of Islam.

The Qur'an calls each group to Islam by providing proofs and never stipulates that they be of Arab stock. Referring to idol-worshippers, God says, "*if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then they are your brothers in religion*" [9:11].

Likewise, God talks about the People of the Book, (Jews, Christians and we include here the Zoroastrians), without referring to them as Arabs:

Say O People of the Book come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God and that we shall ascribe no partners to Him and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God [3:64].

It is true that before Islam spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Qur'anic injunctions were obviously directed towards the Arab nation. From the sixth year after the *hijrah* (the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina), when the *deen* of Islam was being propagated beyond the peninsula, there are references which demonstrate that the Qur'an is addressing itself to mankind in general; for example, in 6:19, "*this Qur'an has been revealed to me that I may warn you and whomever it may reach,*" and in 68:52 God says, "*it is nothing else but a reminder to the worlds.*"

We read too in 74:35-36, "*In truth this is one of the greatest signs, being a warning unto men.*"

History has amply demonstrated that Islam has been embraced by a number of leading members of other religions, including the idol-worshippers of Mecca, Jews, Christians and by people from diverse communities, such as Salman of Persia, Suhayb from the Roman people, and Bilal of Ethiopia.

The Perfection of the Qur'an

The Qur'an shows man the way to a realization of his goal on earth; it describes this path in the most complete terms. It is a way of correctly viewing the reality of things; a vision – personal, social and cosmic – based on a correct manner of behavior and a precise method of interaction between men.

In 46: 30 we read that the Qur'an "*guides to the truth and a right road,*" meaning the road of right belief and correct action. On another occasion, mentioning the Torah and the New Testament, God says, "*We have revealed this Book to you with the Truth, confirming whatever Book was before it, and We keep watch over it* [5:48].

The Qur'an thus affirms the truth of the ways of guidance taught by the earlier prophets. In chapter 42:13, "*He has ordained for you that religion which He commended to Noah and that which We reveal to you (Muhammad) and that We commended to Abraham, Moses and Jesus,*" and in chapter 16:89, "*And We revealed the book to you as an exposition of all things.*"

Thus we understand from these verses that the Qur'an not only encompasses the meanings and teachings of all divine books revealed before it, but also adds to and completes them. Every thing which a man needs, both in terms of his spiritual and his social life, is contained and explained in the Qur'an.

The Eternal Quality of the Qur'an

The perfection and completeness of the Qur'an prove that its validity is not restricted to a particular time or place, since anything perfect is in need of nothing to complete it.

In chapter 86:13-14 God confirms that the Qur'an is "*a conclusive word*" and not a mere "*pleasantry.*" It contains the purest of teachings concerning belief in life-after-death, together with an exposition of the realities of existence, while, at the same time, encompassing the fundamentals of correct human behavior.

Since laws governing transactions between men are directly linked to their beliefs, such a book can obviously not be annulled or changed with the passage of time. As He says in 17:105, "*We have revealed the Qur'an with Truth and it has descended with the Truth,*" meaning that the revelations and their ongoing validity are inseparable from the Truth.

Thus in 10:32, *“After the Truth what is there except error,”* and in 41:41-42, *“In truth it is an unpenetrable book, error may not enter in it from before it or behind it.”*

In other words the Qur'an repulses, by its own perfection and completeness, any attempt to alter it; and neither now nor later can it be annulled or superseded. Many studies have been made of the permanence of the validity of the laws given in the Qur'an.

The reader is advised to consult them if he requires additional knowledge of the subject; to pursue the matter here, (namely, the position of the Qur'an in the lives of Muslims and the manner in which it demonstrates this), would be outside the scope of this book.

The Qur'an as a Self-Contained Proof

The Qur'an, being composed of words and meanings like any other book, explains itself. It does not remain silent when the situation of the text demands proof. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that Qur'anic terms mean anything other than the actual words being used. This means that every man, possessing a certain knowledge of the Arabic language, may clearly understand the meaning of the Qur'an just as he understands any other words written in Arabic.

There are many verses which are directed towards a specific group, such as the Tribe of Israel, or the Believers, or the non-believers and, sometimes, man in general; (they are addressed in phrases such as *“O you who disbelieve”* or *“O people of the Book”* or *“O tribe of Israel”* or *“O Mankind”*). The Qur'an discourses with them, offering them proof of its validity or challenging them to produce a book similar to it if they doubt it to be the Word of God.

Obviously it makes no sense to address people in terms which they do not understand or to demand that they produce something similar to that which has no meaning for them. In chapter 47:24 we read, *“Why do they not reflect upon the Qur'an,”* implying that if it was from other than God, people would have found in it many inconsistencies.

It is clearly indicated in the Qur'an that verses which have a subtlety or particularity of meaning demand that the reader reflect upon them to remove any seeming differences of interpretation or incongruities that may appear at first inspection.

It also follows that if the verses themselves contained no apparent meaning, there would be no point in reflecting upon them in order to clarify the apparent problem of their interpretation.

There are no indications from other sources, (such as the traditions of the Prophet), that demand a rejection of the outwardly manifest meaning of the Qur'an.

Some have argued that one should only refer to the commentaries of the Prophet in elucidating the meanings of the Qur'an. This argument is unacceptable, however, since the basis of the Prophet's commentary and of the Imams of his family must be sought for in the Qur'an.

It is difficult to imagine that the validity of the Qur'an is dependent on the commentaries of the Prophet or the Imams of his family. Rather, affirmation of prophecy and imamate must be contained in the Qur'an, which itself is the authentic proof and document of prophecy. This does not, however, contradict the fact that the Prophet and the Imams of his family were responsible for clarifying those details of the *shari`ah* law (Divinely revealed law) which were not apparent from the actual text of the Qur'an.

They were, likewise, entrusted with teaching the knowledge contained in the Book, as seen in the following verse:

And We have revealed to you the Remembrance so that you may explain to mankind that which has been revealed for them [16:44].

A similar reflection occurs in chapter 59:7 where, in reference to the code of practice and law brought by the Prophet to mankind, it states, "*And take whatever the messenger gives you. And abstain from whatever he forbids.*"

In chapter 4:64 it says, "*We sent no messenger save that he should be obeyed by God's leave*" and, again, in chapter 62:2, "*He it is who has sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite to them His revelations and to make them grow and to teach them the Book and Wisdom.*" According to these verses, the Prophet is the appointed explainer of the details of the *shari`ah* law as well as the teacher of the Qur'an.

Moreover, according to the tradition known as *thaqalayn*, which was authenticated by an uninterrupted chain of narrators, the Prophet has appointed the Imams of his own family as his successors. This is not to deny that others also, by correctly applying the learnings of sincere teachers, may understand the meaning of the Qur'an.

The Inner and Outer Dimensions of the Qur'an

In chapter 4:36 God says, “*And serve God and ascribe nothing as a partner to Him.*” The verse prohibits pre-Islamic Arabs from their worship of idols, just as chapter 22:30 urges them to “*shun the filth of idols, and shun lying speech.*” On reflection it becomes clear that an idol may exist in any form; therefore, idol-worship is forbidden because it involves submission to an entity other than God.

In chapter 36:60 God treats the devil as an idol when He says, “*Did I not charge you, O you sons of Adam, that you do not worship the devil.*” It also becomes clear that another form of idol-worship is submission to one's desires or to the will of others, over and above the will of God; this is indicated in 45:23 which refers to “*him who makes his desire his God.*”

Thus it becomes apparent that one should turn to none other for help than God Himself and not forget Him in any circumstances, since to do otherwise would be to direct one's attention away from God. To submit to others is to belittle Him and this is the very essence of idol-worship. Thus, in chapter 7:179 God says of those who refused to worship Him, “*Already We have urged into hell many of the jinn and humankind, . . . These are the neglectful.*” The verse, “*ascribe nothing to Him,*” clearly forbids worships of idols; that is to say, man may not, without God's permission, submit himself to others including his own desires, since any such submission would render him neglectful of God.

In this way, the simple, apparent text of the verse unfolds multiple meanings and exemplifies a feature to be found throughout the Qur'an. Thus the saying of the Prophet, (related in the books of hadith and commentary), become clear:

In truth the Qur'an possesses an inner and outer, and the inner contains seven dimensions.¹

The Wisdom Contained in the Two Facets of the Qur'an: The Inner and the Outer

Man's primary life, namely, the temporal life of this world, is as a bubble on the immense sea of the material; and since all his transactions concern the material, he is throughout his life, at the mercy of the moving waves. All his senses are occupied with the material and his thoughts

¹ See al-Fayd al-Kashani, *al-Safi fi tafsir al-Qur'an*, pp. 38-41; `Abbas al-Qummi, *Safinat al-bihar*, s.v. “Batn”.

influenced by sensory information. Eating, drinking, standing, speaking, listening, like all other human actions, take place in the sphere of the material and not in the sphere of thought.

Moreover, in reflecting upon such concepts as love, enmity, ambition and nobility, one comes to better understand them by translating them into language derived from the senses or from actual material objects; for example, the magnetic attraction of lovers, a burning ambition, or a man's being a mine of wisdom.

Capacity to comprehend the world of meaning, which is vaster than that of the material, varies from man to man. For one person it may be almost impossible to imagine the world of meanings; another may perceive it only in the most superficial terms and, yet another, may comprehend with ease the most profound of spiritual concepts.

One may say that the greater a man's capacity to understand meanings, the lesser he is attached to the world of the material and its alluring, deceiving appearance. By his very nature, each person possesses a potential for understanding meanings and, provided that he does not deny this capacity, it may be cultivated and increased further.

It is not a simple matter to reduce meaning from one level of understanding to another without losing its sense. This is particularly true for meanings possessing great subtlety which cannot be transmitted, especially to ordinary people, without adequate explanation. As one example, we may mention the Hindu religion: anyone reflecting deeply upon the Vedic scriptures of India and studying the different aspects of its message will ultimately see that its basic aim is the worship of one God.

Unfortunately this aim is explained in such a complicated manner that the concept of oneness reaches the minds of ordinary people in the form of idol-worship and the recognition of many gods. To avoid such problems, it becomes necessary to communicate meanings hidden beyond the material world in a language which is rooted in the material and readily comprehensible world.

Indeed some religions deprive their adherents of rights accorded to them by the religion itself; women, for example, in Hinduism; Jews and Christians who, in general, are denied access to knowledge of their holy books. Islam does not deprive anyone of their rights in the *deen*, and both man and woman, scholar and layman, black and white are equal in being accorded access to their religion.

God affirms this in chapter 3:195, *“Indeed I do not allow the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost,”* and, again, in chapter 49:13, *“O mankind! Truly we have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the best in conduct.”*

In this manner the Qur'an addresses its teachings to mankind at large and affirms that every man may increase himself in knowledge and, thereby, perfect his own behavior. In fact, the Qur'an addresses its teachings specifically to the world of man. Since, as mentioned earlier, each man has a different capacity of understanding and since the expounding of subtle knowledge is not without danger of misinterpretation, the Qur'an directs its teachings primarily at the level of the common man.

In this manner, the subtlest of meanings can be explained and multiple meanings and ideas expressed, to the ordinary person, by co-relating them to concrete sensory meanings; meaning, therefore, is always inherent in the letter of the words.

The Qur'an reveals itself in a way suitable for different levels of comprehension so that each benefits according to his own capacity. In chapter 43:3-4 God emphasizes this idea:

Truly we have appointed it a lecture in Arabic so that you may perhaps understand and indeed in the source of the Book, which we possess, it is sublime, decisive.

God describes the different capacities of man's comprehension in the following metaphor in chapter 13:17:

He sends down water from the sky, so that valleys flow according to their measure;

and the Prophet, in a famous tradition² says; *“We prophets talk to the people according to the capacity of their intellects.”*

Another result of the multiple meanings within the Qur'an is that the verses take on a significance beyond their immediate text. Certain verses contain metaphors which indicate divine gnosis far beyond the common man's understanding but which, nevertheless, become comprehensible through their metaphorical form.

² Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, vol. 1, p. 37.

God says in chapter 17:89, *“And indeed We have displayed for mankind in this Qur'an all kind of similitudes, but most of mankind refuse everything except disbelief.”* And again in chapter 29:43 God talks of metaphors as a means of expression, *“As for these similitudes, We coin them for mankind, but none will grasp their meanings except those of knowledge.”*

Consequently, we must conclude that all Qur'anic teachings which deal with subtle profound knowledge, are in the form of similitudes.

The Two Kinds of Qur'anic Verses: The Explicit and the Implicit

In chapter 11:1 God says of the Qur'an, *“This is a book whose meanings are secure.”* From this we may draw the meaning to read *“whose meanings are perfected, expanded, firm and strong.”* In chapter 39:23, it reads,

God has revealed the fairest of statements (consistent with and in relation to each other) and arranged in pairs (according to meaning) which cause the flesh of those who fear their Lord to creep.

In chapter 3:7 He says, *“He it is who has revealed to you the Book in which are clear revelations,* (that is, verses whose meaning is immediately clear and which Muslims use for guidance).

They are the substance of the Book and others which are allegorical. But those in whose heart is doubt indeed follow the allegorical seeking dissension by seeking to explain it. None knowest its explanation except God and those who are of sound instruction say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord.

The first of the verses describes those sections of the Qur'an whose meaning is explicit, clear and unambiguous, and safe from misinterpretation. The second verse refers to all those verses whose meanings are implicit, and which are considered allegorical. It then proceeds to indicate that both types of verses, (the explicit, or clear and the implicit, or allegorical), share certain common qualities: beauty and sweetness of language, and a miraculous power of expression which are present in the entire Qur'an.

The third verse under consideration divides the Qur'an into two parts: the explicit and the implicit, the clear and the allegorical, or, in Qur'anic terms, the *muhkam* and the *mutashabih*.

The *muhkam* and those verses which are explicit, clear and immediate in their message and, therefore, incapable of being misinterpreted; the *mutashabih* verses are not of this nature. It is the duty of every firm believer to believe in and act according to the verses which are *muhkam*.

It is also his duty to believe in the verses which are *mutashabih*, but he must abstain from acting upon them; this injunction is based on the premise that only those whose heart is corrupt and whose belief is false follow the implicit, *mutashabih*, verses, fabricating interpretations and, thereby, deceiving common people.

The Meanings of the Explicit and the Implicit Verses, According to the Commentators and Scholars

There is much difference of opinion amongst the Islamic scholars concerning the meaning of explicit and implicit verses, with almost twenty different views on the matter. We can, however, conclude from the views of commentators, ranging from the time of the Prophet to the present day, that the explicit verses are clear and unambiguous, and that one is obliged to believe in and act according to them.

The implicit verses, on the other hand, are those which outwardly seem to express a meaning, but which contain a further truer meaning whose interpretation is known only to God; man has no access to it. However, he is enjoined to believe in them but to avoid acting upon them.

This view is held amongst the Sunni scholars. It is also maintained by the Shi`ite scholars except they believe that the Prophet and the Imams of his family also understood the hidden meanings. They also maintain that the ordinary man must seek knowledge of the implicit verses from God, the Prophet and the Imams.

This view, although held by most commentators, is in several aspects not in accord with the text of the verse beginning,

He it is who has revealed to you the Book in which are explicit verses (whose meanings are immediately clear) . . .

The Method of Guidance and Explanation Used in the Rest of the Qur'an

This we may attribute, firstly, to the fact that there is no verse whose meaning is totally obscure since the Qur'an describes itself as a light, as a guidance and as an explanation. Thus it is not befitting that there be verses which fail to reveal their meaning, or to illuminate the Qur'an as a whole.

We should examine again the verse,

Will they not ponder on the Qur'an? If it had been from other than God they would have found much inconsistency in it [4:82].

Thus reflection on the Qur'an would remove all kinds of seeming inconsistencies making it unacceptable to say, as do most of the scholars, that the implicit verses cannot be totally understood and that apparent inconsistencies cannot be resolved.

Other scholars say that what is meant by the implicit verses are the letters found at the beginning of certain chapters. (These are known as the *muqatta`ah*-letters, like *Alif, Lam, Mim, Alif, Lam Ra', Ha, Mim*, whose real meaning is unknown).

We must, however, remember that the implicit verses are so-called when read in relation to the explicit verses. This denotes that, accompanying the hidden meaning of the implicit, there is a surface (or literal) meaning whereby the real and the apparent meanings come together in intricate relationship with one another.

It should be understood that the letters at the opening of certain chapters do not have any literal meaning. It seems that a group of misguided men use the implicit verses to mislead people, but never in Islam has one heard of anyone trying to use the *muqatta`ah*-letters to do so.

Some commentators say that the meaning of the word *mutashabih*, (in the verse), refers to the famous story³ of the Jews who wanted to find an indication of the duration of Islam within the order of the letters, but the Prophet used to read the letters one after the other and so confuse their calculations.

This view is also without substance since, even if the story is true, it is neither of sufficient impact nor conviction to be considered as an interpretation of the implicit verses. Whatever the

³ Al-`Ayyashi, *Kitab al-tafsir*, vol. 1, p. 16; al-Qummi, *Tafsir*, beginning of the commentary on *Surat al-Baqarah*; al-Huwayzi, *Tafsir nur al-thaqalayn*, vol. 1, p. 22.

Jews talked, it contained no malice because, even if the religion, *deen*, of Islam was for a limited period of time (and, thus, subject to abrogation), their remarks would in no way be a criticism of the purity and reality of Islam considering that all religions revealed by God prior to Islam were for a specific period and open to abrogation.

Secondly, this view implies that the word *ta'wil* (which may be translated as "interpretation") in the verse refers to a meaning other than the apparent literal meaning and that it is used only as a reference to the implicit verses. This is incorrect, as we shall see in a later chapter dealing with exegesis *ta'wil*, and revelation, *tanzil* (the actual text or letter of the verse) how exegesis in Qur'anic terminology does not refer to one meaning but to several, encompassing such terms as realization, fulfillment, interpretation and explanation.

We shall also discuss how all Qur'anic verses have a specific interpretation, *ta'wil* and not just their explicit and implicit definitions. On examination, the words of the explicit verses (*ayat muhkamah*), are seen to describe the phrase "They are the source of the Book," meaning that the explicit verses include the most important subjects of the Book, and the theme of the rest of the verses is secondary and dependent upon them.

This implies that the real point intended to be conveyed by the implicit verses refers back to the explicit verses. Thus, the meanings of the implicit are illuminated by referring back to the source (or explicit) verses.

Thus we are left with no verses which have no obvious indication as to their true meaning; they are either immediately clear by virtue of their being in the class of explicit verses or, in the case of the implicit, made clear by the other explicit verses. As for the *muqatta'ah*-letters at the beginning of the *chapters*, they do not have any apparent meaning since they are not words in the normal sense and possess no meaning comprehensible to man; thus, they are outside of the classification of explicit and implicit.

Again, we would refer the reader to an examination of the following verse in order to emphasize the truth of our view: "*And so why do they not reflect upon the Qur'an or are there locks upon their hearts.*" And, likewise, the verse, "*and why do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, if it were from other than God they would have found much inconsistency in it.*"

The Commentary of the Imams of the Prophet's Family Concerning the Explicit and the Implicit Verses

It is made clear from the different commentaries of the Imams that there is always a way to discover the real meaning and aim of the implicit verses. Each verse, even if its meaning is not apparent, can be explained by reference to other verses. Thus the real meaning of the implicit verses can be found in relation to the explicit verses.

For instance, the verse "*The Beneficent, One who is established on the throne,*" [20:5] and again the verse, "*And your Lord came,*" [89:22] appear to ascribe bodily characteristics to God, but when compared with the verse, "*Nothing is as His likeness,*" [42:11] it becomes clear that the "sitting" on the throne or the "coming" of God has a meaning other than a physical one. The Prophet, describing the Qur'an, says:

*In truth the Qur'an was not revealed so that one part may contradict the other but rather was revealed so that one part may verify the other. So that what you understand of it then act accordingly and that which is unclear for you then simply believe in it.*⁴

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, said that one part of the Qur'an bears witness to another and one part clarifies the other.⁵ The sixth Imam said the explicit verse is that which one acts in accordance with, and the implicit is that which is unclear only for the man who is ignorant of its real meaning.⁶

From these narrations, we may conclude that the question of explicit and implicit is relative; it is possible that a verse may seem explicit to one person and implicit to another. It is said of the eighth Imam that he considered, "*the person who refers to the implicit mutashabih, verses in the Qur'an to the corresponding clarifying explicit verses,*" as having "*found guidance to the right path.*"

He is also reported to have said that,

⁴ Al-`Amili, *al-Durr al-manthur*, vol. 2, p. 8.

⁵ Al-Sharif al-Radi, *Nahj al-balaghah*, Discourse no. 131.

⁶ Al-`Ayyashi, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 162.

*In truth in our traditions are recorded implicit verses like the explicit of the Qur'an, so refer the implicit to its corresponding explicit verse, or tradition, and do not follow the implicit and go astray.*⁷

Thus it is clear from the traditions and, in particular, the last tradition, that the implicit verse is one which does not contain a clear meaning without reference to the explicit verse, and not that there exists no means to understand it.

The Qur'an Possesses Revelation and Exegesis

We shall discuss the word, exegesis, *ta'wil*, in relation to three Qur'anic verses. Firstly, in the verses concerning the implicit *mutashabih* and the explicit verses:

But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, in truth, that which is allegorical talking dissension by seeking to explain it. None knows its explanation except God [3:7].

Secondly, the verses,

In truth we have brought them a scripture which we expound with knowledge, a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe. Do they await anything but the fulfillment of it? [7:52-53]

(Here the word *ta'wil* is used connoting the appearance or clarification of meaning).

On the day when the fulfillment of it comes, those who are forgetful of it will say: the messenger of our Lord brought the truth. [7:53].

Thirdly, the verse:

And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be invented . . . but they denied that, the knowledge of which they could not encompass and the interpretation (ta'wil) of which had not yet come to them. Even so it was that those before them deny. Then see what was the consequence in the wrongdoers. [10:37,39].

In conclusion, we should note that the word exegesis *ta'wil* comes from the word *awl*, meaning a return. As such, *ta'wil* indicates that particular meaning towards which the verse is directed. The

⁷ Ibn Babuyah, *Uyun akhbar al-Rida*, vol. 1, p. 290.

meaning of revelation *tanzil*, as opposed to *ta'wil*, is clear or according to the obvious meaning of the words as they were revealed.

The Meaning of Exegesis, According to the Commentators and Scholars

There is considerable disagreement as to the meaning of exegesis, *ta'wil*, and it is possible to count more than ten different views. There are, however, two views which have gained general acceptance. The first is that of the early generation of scholars who used the word exegesis, *ta'wil*, as a synonym for commentary, or *tafsir*.

According to this view, all Qur'anic verses are open to *ta'wil* although according to the verse, "*nobody knows its interpretation (ta'wil) except God*," it is the implicit verses whose interpretation (*ta'wil*) is known only to God. For this reason, a number of the early scholars said that the implicit verses are those with *muqatta`ah*-letters at the beginning of the chapter since they are the only verses in the Qur'an whose meaning is not known to everyone.

This interpretation has been demonstrated in the previous section as being incorrect, a view which is shared by certain of the late scholars. They argued that since there is a way of finding out the meaning of any verse, particularly since the *muqatta`ah*-letters are obviously not in the same classification as the implicit verses then the distinction between the two (*muqatta`ah* and implicit, *mutashabih*) is clear.

Secondly, the view of the later scholars is that exegesis refers to the meaning of a verse beyond its literal meaning and that not all verses have exegesis; rather only the implicit, whose ultimate meaning is known only to God. The verses in question here are those which refer to the human qualities of coming, going, sitting, satisfaction, anger and sorrow apparently attributed to God and, also, those verses which apparently ascribe faults to the messengers and Prophets of God (when in reality they are infallible).

The view that the word exegesis refers to a meaning other than the apparent one has become quite accepted. Moreover, within the divergence of opinion amongst scholars, exegesis has come

to mean "to transfer" the apparent meaning of a verse to a different meaning by means of a proof called *ta'wil*; this method is not without obvious inconsistencies.⁸

Although this view has gained considerable acceptance, it is incorrect and cannot be applied to the Qur'anic verses for the following reasons. Firstly, the verses,

Do they await anything but the fulfillment of it? [7:53]

and,

but they denied that, the knowledge of which they could not encompass and the interpretation of which had not yet come to them. [10:39]

indicate that the whole Qur'an has exegesis, not just the implicit verses as claimed by this group of scholars.

Secondly, implied in this view is that there are Qur'anic verses whose real meaning is ambiguous and hidden from the people, only God knowing their real meaning. However, a book which declares itself as challenging and excelling in its linguistic brilliance could hardly be described as eloquent if it failed to transmit the meaning of its own words.

Thirdly, if we accept this view, then the validity of the Qur'an comes under question since, according to the verse,

Why do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, if it were from other than God they would have found in it many inconsistencies. [4:82]

one of the proofs that the Qur'an is not the speech of man is that, despite having been revealed in widely varying and difficult circumstances, there is no inconsistency in it, neither in its literal meaning nor in its inner meaning, and any initial inconsistency disappears upon reflection.

If it is believed that a number of the implicit verses disagree with the sound, or *muhkam*, or explicit, verses this disagreement may be resolved by explaining that what is intended is not the literal meaning but rather another meaning known only to God. However, this explanation will never prove that the Qur'an is "not the speech of man." If by exegesis we change any

⁸ Since explaining the meaning of exegesis (*ta'wil*), and at the same time, recognizing that no one but God knows that *ta'wil* meaning is self-contradictory, the scholars in question have put forward this view as a hypothesis rather than as a truth.

inconsistency in the explicit, or sound (*muhkam*), verses to another meaning beyond the literal, it is clear that we may also do this for the speech and writing of man.

Fourthly, there is no proof that exegesis indicates a meaning other than the literal one and that, in the Qur'anic verses which mention the word exegesis, the literal meaning is not intended.

On three occasions in the story of Joseph, the interpretation of his dream⁹ is called *ta'wil* (exegesis). It is clear that the interpretation of a dream is not fundamentally different from the actual appearance of the dream; rather, it is the interpretation of what is portrayed in a particular form in the dream. Thus Joseph saw his father, mother and brother falling to the ground in the form of the sun, the moon and the stars.

Likewise, the king of Egypt saw the seven-year drought in the form of seven lean cows eating the seven fat cows and also, the seven green ears of corn and the seven dry ears. Similarly, the dreams of Joseph's two fellow-inmates in the prison; one saw himself pouring wine for the king (in the form of the first pressing of wine), while the second saw himself crucified (in the form of birds eating from the bread basket on his head).

The dream of the king of Egypt is related in the same chapter (12), verse 43 and its interpretation, from Joseph, in verses 47-49 when he says,

...you will sow seven years as usual, but whatever you reap leave it in the ear, all except a little which you will eat. Then after that will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have prepared for them, save a little of that which you have stored. Then after that will come a year when people will have plenteous crops and then they will press (meaning wine and oil).

The dream of Joseph's fellow-inmates in the prison occurs in verse 36 of the same chapter. One of the two young men says to Joseph, *"I dreamt that I was carrying upon my head bread which the birds were eating."*

The interpretation of the dream is related by Joseph in verse 41,

⁹ Joseph's dream is mentioned in the third verse of chapter 12, "Joseph", (when he says to his father in verse 4: *"O father I saw in a dream eleven stars, the Sun and the Moon making prostration to me"*) and its interpretation is related by Joseph in verse 100: *"[Joseph] placed his parents on the dais [when they arrived from Egypt after years of separation and then his parents and his brother] fell down before him prostrate and he said: O my father! This is the interpretation of my dream."*

O my two fellow-prisoners! As for one of you he will pour out wine for his Lord to drink and as for the other, he will be crucified so that the birds will eat from his head.

In a similar fashion, God relates the story of Moses and Khidr in the chapter "The Cave" [18:71-82]. Khidr made a hole in the boats; thereafter, killed a boy and, finally, straightened a leaning wall. After each event, Moses protested and Khidr explained the meaning and reality of each action which he had carried out on the orders of God; this he referred to as *ta'wil*.

Thus it is clear that the reality of the event and the dream-picture which portrayed the event-to-be are basically the same: the *ta'wil*, or interpretation, does not have a meaning other than the apparent one.

Likewise God says, talking about weights and measures, "*Fill the measure when you measure and weigh with a right balance, that is proper and better in the end,*" (that is, more fitting in the final determination of the Day of Reckoning) [17:35].

It is clear that the word *ta'wil* used here in respect to the measuring and weighing refers to fair dealing in business practices. Thus the *ta'wil* used in this way is not different from the literal meaning of the words "measuring" and "weighing"; it merely deepens and extends the significance of the mundane to include a spiritual dimension.

This spiritual dimension is of significance for the believer who has in mind the reckoning of the final day together with his own day-to-day reckoning in the affairs of trade.

In another verse God again uses the word *ta'wil*,

and if you have any dispute concerning any matter, refer it to God and the messenger . . . that is better and more fitting in the end [4:59].

It is clear that the meaning of *ta'wil* and the referring of the dispute to God and His messenger is to establish the unity of society and to show how each action or event in a community has a spiritual significance.

Thus, the *ta'wil* refers to a tangible ordinary reality and is not in opposition to the actual text in the verses which refers to the dispute.

In all, there are sixteen occasions in the Qur'an in which the word *ta'wil* is used but on no occasion does it have a meaning other than the literal text. We may say, therefore, that the word

ta'wil is used to extend the idea expressed to include a further meaning which, (as will be made clear in the next section), is still in accordance with the actual word *ta'wil* occurring in the verse.

Thus, in the light of these examples, there is no reason why we should take the word *ta'wil* in the verse about the explicit *muhkam*, and implicit, *mutashabih*, meanings to indicate “*a meaning basically other than the apparent meaning.*”

The Meaning of Exegesis in the Tradition of the Qur'anic Sciences

What is apparent from the verses in which the word *ta'wil* occurs is that *ta'wil* does not indicate a literal meaning. It is clear that the actual words of the dream described in chapter 12, “Joseph”, do not in themselves contain the literal interpretation of the dream; the meaning of the dream becomes clear from the interpretation.

And, likewise, in the story of Moses and Khidr, the actual words of the story are not the same as the interpretation which Khidr gave Moses. Moreover, in the verse,

fill the measure when you measure and weigh with a right balance,

the language does not in itself indicate the particular economic conditions which we are intended to understand. Again, in the verse,

And if you have a dispute concerning any matter then refer it to God and the messenger,

there is no immediate literal indication that what is meant is the Unity of Islam.

Thus, although the words indicate something not essentially different from their literal meaning, there is, nevertheless, in all the verses the same shifting of perspective, namely, from the actual words to the intended meaning.

Moreover, all the meanings are based on a real situation, an actual physical event. In the case of the dream, the interpretation has an external reality which appears before its actual occurrence in a special form to the dreamer. Likewise, in the story of Moses and Khidr, the interpretation that the latter gives is, in fact, a reality which is to take place as a result of his action.

Therefore, the interpretation of the event is rooted in the event. In the verse which orders man to fair dealing and measuring, the aspect of the verse is a reality which appears as a social benefit. Thus the order is connected to the effect it is supposed to have in the raising up of

society and, in particular, of trade. In the verse concerning referral of the dispute to God and His messenger, the meaning is again fixed to reality, namely, the spiritualization of the life of the community.

To conclude, we may say that interpretation of each verse springs from a reality; the interpretation looks forward to or, in a subtle way, actually brings into being the reality it is talking about. Thus its meaning both contains and springs from a future or ulterior event. Just as the interpreter makes the interpretation meaningful, so the manifestation of the interpretation is already a reality for the interpreter.

The idea is also present in the form of the Qur'an since this sacred book has as its source realities and meanings other than the material and physical or, we may say, beyond the sensory level. Thus it expresses meanings which are more expansive than those contained in the words and phrases used by man in the material world. Although these realities and meanings are not contained in the literal explanation of man, the Qur'an uses the same language to inform man of the unseen and to produce correct belief and good action.

Thus, through belief in the unseen, in the last day and in the meeting with God, man adopts a system of morals and a quality of character which allows him to achieve happiness and well-being. In this way the Qur'an produces a spiritual effect which, in turn, produces a physical social change, the importance of which will become clear on the Day of Resurrection and the meeting with God.

There is further reference to this same theme when God says in chapter 43:2-4,

By the Book which makes plain. Take heed, we have appointed it a lecture in Arabic that perhaps you will understand. And indeed the source of the Book which we possess, it is indeed sublime, decisive.

It is sublime, in that the ordinary understanding cannot fully comprehend it, and decisive in that it cannot be faulted.

The relationship of the last part of the verse to the meaning of exegesis *ta'wil*, (as we have discussed above) is clear. It says, in particular, that "*perhaps you will understand*," implying that one may or may not understand it; it does not imply that one will understand the book fully, merely by studying it.

As we have seen in the verse concerning the explicit *muhkam*, and the implicit *mutashabih*, knowledge of exegesis *ta'wil*, is particular to God; moreover, when in this same verse corrupt men are blamed for following the implicit *mutashabih*, verses and for intending to sow dissension and conflict by searching for an exegesis, *ta'wil*, or special interpretation, it does not state that they necessarily find it.

The exegesis of the Qur'an is a reality, or several realities, which are to be found in the Source Book, the Book of Decrees with God; the Source Book is part of the unseen and far from the reach of corrupters. The same idea is treated again in chapter 56:75-80 when God says,

Indeed I swear by the places of the Stars – And truly that is surely a tremendous oath if you but knew – that this is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a book kept hidden, which none touch except the purified, a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.

It is clear that these verses establish for the Qur'an two aspects, namely the position of the hidden book protected from being touched and the aspect of revelation which is understandable by the people. What is of particular interest to us in this verse is the phrase of exception, “*except the purified.*” According to this phrase, we can arrive at an understanding of the reality of the exegesis of the Qur'an.

This positive view of man's capability to understand the Qur'an does not conflict with the negation of the verse, “*And no one knows its ta'wil except God.*” Since the comparison of the two verses produces a whole which is independent and harmonious. Thus we understand that God is alone in understanding these realities, yet one may come to know these truths by His leave and teaching.

Knowledge of the unseen is, according to many verses, the special domain of God but in chapter 72:26-27, those who are worthy are excepted from this: “*He is the knower of the unseen and He reveals to no one His secret, except to every messenger whom He has chosen.*” Again we conclude that knowledge of the unseen is particular to God and that it is fitting for no one except Him and for those he gives leave to.

Thus the purified amongst men take the verse concerning the “purified ones” as leave to enter into contact with the reality of the Qur'an. In a similar way we read in chapter 33:33, “*God's wish is but to remove uncleanness from you, O people of the Household, and clean you*

with a thorough cleaning." This verse was revealed, (according to a sound tradition with an unbroken chain of transmission), specifically with regard to the family of the Prophet.

The Existence of Abrogating and Abrogated Verses in the Qur'an

Among the verses in the Qur'an containing orders or laws, there are verses that abrogate verses previously revealed and acted upon. These abrogating verses are called *nasikh* and those whose validity they terminate are called *mansukh*.

For example, at the beginning of the Prophet's mission, Muslims were ordered to cultivate peace and friendship with the people of the Book, "*Forgive and be indulgent (towards them) until God gives command,*" [2:109]. Some time later, fighting was allowed and the order to establish peace was abrogated:

Fight against such as those who have been given the Book but who believe not in God nor the last day, and do not forbid that which God has forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth... [9:29].

The common notion of abrogation, that is, a cancelling of one law or code by another, is based on the idea that a new law is needed because of a mistake or shortcoming in the previous one. It is clearly inappropriate to ascribe a mistake in law-making to God, Who is perfect, and whose creation admits of no flaws.

However, in the Qur'an, the abrogating verses mark the end of the validity of the abrogated verses because their heed and effect was of a temporary or limited nature. In time the new law appears and announces the end of the validity of the earlier law. Considering that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years in ever-changing circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine the necessity of such laws.

It is in this light that we should regard the wisdom of abrogation within the Qur'an:

And when we put a revelation in place of (another) revelation and God knows best what He reveals – they say: you are just inventing it. Most of them do not know. Say: The Holy Spirit (Gabriel) has revealed it from your hand with truth and as a guidance and good news for those who have surrendered (to God) [16:101-102].

Applicability and Validity of the Qur'an

Bearing in mind that the Qur'an is valid for all times, the verses revealed in special circumstances informing Muslims of their specific duties are also valid for those who, in future, experience the same circumstances. Similarly, those verses which praise or reproach certain qualities, and promise reward or threaten punishment accordingly, are applicable to all ages and places. Thus the meaning of a verse is not limited to the circumstances or the times of its revelation.

Similar circumstances occurring subsequent to the revelation of a verse are to be followed; this is known in Qur'anic Science as *jary*, or applicability. The fifth Imam said, "*were a verse after its revelation to pass away with the passing away of that people, then nothing would have remained of the Qur'an.*" As long as the heavens and the earth exist, there are verses for every people, wherever they be, which they may read and act upon for the benefit or reject at their loss.¹⁰

Qur'anic Commentary: Its Advent and Development

Commentary on the words and expressions used in the Qur'an began at the time of the first revelation. The Prophet himself undertook the teaching of the Qur'an and the explanation of its meanings and intent.

Thus in chapter 16:44 God says, "*And we have revealed to you the Remembrance that you may explain to mankind that which has been revealed for them.*" And He says in 62:2, "*He it is Who has sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite to them His revelations and to make them grow and to teach them the Scripture and wisdom.*"

At the time of the Prophet a group of men, on his orders, were instructed to read, record and learn the Qur'an by heart. When the Prophet's companions passed away, other Muslims took over the responsibility of learning and teaching the Qur'an; and so it has continued until the present day.

¹⁰ Al-`Ayyashi, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 10.

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