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# Chapter 2: Shi'ite commentators (Mufassirin) and their commentaries (Tafsirs)

The Sacred Text has been subject to interpretations (*tafsir*), hermeneutics (*ta'wil*) and mystical exegesis throughout Islamic history. The Shi'ite understanding of the Qur'an is founded on the doctrinal belief that the Shi'ite Imams possess the hidden, esoteric (*batin*) knowledge of the verses of the Qur'an.

# 2-1 The principles of Shi'i tafsir and the relation between the Imams and the Qur'an

*Tafsir* means "interpretation" in general but not always of the Qur'an. "The most significant usage of the word is its reference to the branch of Islamic learning concerned with the Qur'an.

A *tafsir* of the Qur'an is a work which provides an interpretation of the Arabic text of the scripture. In most cases, a work entitled *tafsir* will follow the text of the Qur'an from the beginning to the end and will provide an interpretation (*tafsir*) of segments of the text (word-by-word, phrase-by- phrase or verse-by-verse) as a running commentary.

The major exceptions to this fundamental characteristic are to be found in the formative and the contemporary periods of Islam. In the formative period, one finds works of *tafsir*, which cover only isolated segments of the text, and in the contemporary period, thematic *tafasir* (*mawdu'i*) have become quite popular.

Different *mufassirun* have different concerns and goals and this is reflected in the relative weight they put upon elements such as history, grammar, law, theology..." The commentaries of the Qur'an are useful for deciphering the message of the Qur'an. Many people who read the Sacred Book receive no more from it than the literal message.

It is in the commentaries, based on the clarification afforded by the *hadith* and written by those who are qualified in the true sense, that man comes to understand explicitly and in more extended form what is contained often implicitly and in a contracted form in the Qur'an.2

## a) The principles of Shi'i tafsir

• The exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Qur'an

Among the principles of the Shi'i *tafsir* is that the Qur'an has an outer dimension (*zahir*) and an inner dimension (*batin*) and the simple surface text of a verse unfolds multiple meanings and exemplifies a feature to be found throughout the Qur'an.3

Indeed the Qur'an is meant for men and women of any level of intellect and from any social background, 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.

The Qur'an reveals itself in a way suitable for different levels of comprehension so that each benefits according to his own capacity." Also certain verses contain metaphors which indicate divine gnosis far beyond the common man's understanding but which nevertheless become comprehensible through their metaphorical form.4

These exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Qur'an have also been identified with the principles of *tafsir* and *ta'wil* respectively, *Tafsir* being the explanation of the external aspect and the literal exegesis of the Qur'an using different fields like Arabic grammar, poetry, linguistic, jurisprudence or history as references to elucidate the difficulties of the literal text, and *Ta'wil* signifying "to take back or reconduct something to its origin and archetype (*asl*)".5

The basis in any case remains the corpus of teachings and *hadith* of the Imams who expounded the rules of the plurality of meanings in the Qur'an. 6 In other words, *Ta'wil* or symbolic and hermeneutic interpretation enables penetration into the inner meaning of the Sacred Text, which in fact entails a reaching back to its Origin.

The idea of penetrating into the inner meaning of things can be seen everywhere in Islam. But it is particularly in the case of the Qur'an that *ta'wil* is applied, especially by the Sufis and the Shi'as7.8

There is considerable disagreement as to the meaning of *ta'wil*, and it is possible to count more than ten different views. Tabatabai explains that *ta'wil* is not in opposition to the actual text but is used to extend the idea expressed to include a further meaning.9

Also, sufficient deliberation upon the Qur'anic verses and the *hadith* of the Imams will show that the Qur'an never uses enigmatic methods of explanation. "What has been rightly called *ta'wil* or hermeneutic interpretation of the Holy Qur'an is not concerned with certain truths and realities that transcend the

comprehension of the common run of men".

In fact, "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 Prophet and the pure among the saints can contemplate these meanings in this world. "On the Day of Resurrection, the *ta'wil* of the Qur'an will be revealed to everyone." 10

• The abrogating (nasikh) and the abrogated (mansukh) verses

Abrogating verses are those which are applicable and relevant at all times and abrogated verses are not relevant and have already been fulfilled. 11

• The explicit (muhkam) and the implicit (mutashabih) verses

The verse 7 in the *sura* 3 of the Qur'an divides the Qur'an into two parts: the explicit and the implicit, the clear and the allegorical, or the *muhkam* and the *mutashabih*. The verses, which are explicit and immediate in their message, are incapable of being misinterpreted.

The implicit verses are not of this nature, but seem to express a meaning containing a further truer meaning whose interpretation is known only to God. This view is accepted by both the Sunnite and the Shi'ite scholars; however, the Shi'ites believe that the Prophet and the Imams of his family also understood the hidden meanings and maintain that the ordinary man must seek knowledge of the implicit verses from them (the Prophet and his family). 12

Tabatabai relates from the Imams that each verse, even if its meaning is not apparent or explicit, 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 and the assertion that no means exist for understanding the implicit verses is fallacious.

He also reports a prophetic *hadith* (reported by al-'Amili, in *al-Durr al-Manthur*, vol.2, p.8): "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. You understand what you can of it, then, act accordingly; and that which is unclear for you, simply believe in it."13

# b) The Imams and the Ahl al-Bayt in relation to the Qur'an

The Shi'ites have agreed that God revealed to Muhammad both the Qur'an and its exegesis and appointed him as the teacher of the Book, 14 while the Prophet appointed his progeny to carry on this work after him. In two places of the Qur'an, (33:33) and (56: 77–79), God has confirmed the Prophet's declaration that his progeny held real knowledge of the Book. 15

In a long and well-known tradition (hadith al-Thaqalayn) related by both Shi'i and Sunni traditionists, the Qur'an is presented as the 'greater weight' (al-thaqal al-akbar) and the Imams as the 'lesser weight' (al-

thagal al-asghar).

In the presence of many of his Companions, the Prophet declared: "I am soon about to be received..... I am telling you before I am taken up that I shall leave with you, as representatives after me, the Book of my Lord, and my progeny, the people of my household, the *ahl al-bayt* that the All-Gracious, All-Knowing, told me that they shall not be separated until they meet me on the day of Resurrection..... Do not precede them, for you would go astray, and do not fall behind them, for you would perish. Do not teach them, for they are of greater knowledge than you."16

Numerous traditions in several chapters describe the knowledge of the Imams, especially in the *hadith* collection of Kulayni. The Shi'ites consider the Imams as associates of the Qur'an. The Prophet and Imams are distinguished by the inheritance of divine knowledge and they alone know the full meaning of the Qur'an, since it was to them that it was primarily addressed and through them to the rest of humankind.

Also they possess all the revealed Books of the previous Prophets and knew their *tafsir* and *ta'wil* despite the number of languages in which they were written. Thus, the Imams have a unique relation to the Qur'an that gives Shi'i *tafsir* its unique character.

It is also believed that the Qur'an, which Ali wrote down from the dictation of Muhammad with its true exegesis (*ta'wil*), was passed down from one Imam to the next and is now with the hidden Imam who will disclose it and judge by it when he returns as the expected *Mahdi*. 17

# 2-2 The historical development and method of Shi'i tafsir

The interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) began right at the time of its revelation and is one of the earliest activities in Islamic sciences. The first exegetes among the Companions of the Prophet were Ibn 'Abbas, 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar, Ubay ibn Ka'b and others. 18 People used to ask the Prophet all sorts of questions as to the meaning of certain statements in the verses and the Prophet undertook the teaching and explanation of the Qur'an.

The Prophet's answers were stored up in the memory of his Companions. After the Prophet's death, a group of his Companions were occupied with the science of commentary and its transmission. Just as they had heard the Prophet explaining the meaning of the verses, they would transmit it orally to other trustworthy persons. 19

Exegesis in those days was confined to the explanation of literary aspects of the verse, the background of its revelation, and occasionally interpretation of one verse with the help of another. Sometimes a few of the Prophet's traditions were narrated.

Followers of these first Companions (*Tabi'un*), who lived in the first two centuries of *hijra*, used the same exegetic style. However, they relied more on traditions, and even Jewish sayings and dictums to explain

the verses containing details of the previous nations present in Genesis20 because the *tafsir* transmission from the Prophet through the Companions and the *Tabi'un* did not cover all the verses in the Qur'an.

Some scholars relied on their knowledge of the language and historical facts of the Prophet's epoch. 21 During the time of the Companions and the *Tabi'un*, the science of *tafsir* was part of the *hadith* and there was hardly any difference between *mufassirun* and *muhaddithun* (traditionists or narrators of *hadith*) until the complete separation of the two in the early third century, 22 when exegesis became an independent, autonomous science. 23

The activity of *tafsir* during the first two centuries is reflected by the *tafsir* of Ibn Jarir al–Tabari. His collections are said to have contained materials from various earlier works and his work is evidence of the general recognition of *tafsir* in early third century AH. It was the first attempt to comment on the whole of the Qur'an verse by verse.24

During the second century A.H., Muslim society split into four groups: the theologians, the philosophers, the Sufis, and the people of tradition. This divergence showed itself later in exegesis of the Qur'an. 25 Indeed, after Tabari, the development of *tafsir* came to be associated with different fields of knowledge, doctrines and thought, and scholars attempted to make their field of knowledge a basis for their commentary in order to support their views from the Qur'an.

Scholars working in the field of philosophy considered philosophy a basis for their commentaries while scholars in the legal field employ the *tafsir* to project the doctrine of their particular school of thought, and so on.26

For Tabatabai, all these ways of exegesis are defective because they superimpose their conclusions on the Qur'anic meanings, making the Qur'an conform with their ideas. Thus, explanation turns into adaptation. 27 Tabatabai stated that the only correct method of exegesis is that the exegete explains the verse with the help of other relevant verses, meditating on them together. The Prophet and the Imams descended from his progeny always used this method for explaining the Qur'an. 28

Similarly Mutahhari explains that the Qur'an constitutes a coherent unified structure and some verses need to be explained with the help of other verses in order to prevent any misunderstanding about certain problems. If a solitary verse is studied without placing it in its proper context, it will give a different meaning from when it is compared with other verses dealing with a similar subject. 29

Also, while Sunni commentators in the early period of *tafsir* relied primarily on prophetic traditions and those of the Companions and their successors, the Shi'ite commentators, in studying a verse of the Qur'an, viewed the explanation given by the Prophet as proof of the meaning of the verse, and did not accept the sayings of the Companions or their followers as indisputable proof that the tradition came from the Prophet.

The Shi'ite commentators only recognized as valid an unbroken chain of narration from the Prophet through members of his family. Accordingly, in using and transmitting the verses concerning Qur'anic commentary, they restricted themselves to the use of traditions transmitted by the Prophet and by the Imams belonging to the Prophet's family.30

The first generation of Shi'ite commentators and authorities on *tafsir* were disciples of the Imams and others close to the disciples, who learned the traditions directly from the Prophet and the Imams of the Prophet's family.

Among them were such scholars as Zurarah ibn A'yun and Muhammad ibn Muslim, Ma'ruf ibn Kharbudh and Jarir, who were Companions of the fifth and sixth Imams, or Abu Hamzah al– Thumali (a special Companion of the fourth and fifth Imams)31. Their traditions have been preserved in the works of the second generation of commentators and compilers of commentaries. These were consecutively:

- Furat Ibn Ibrahim al-Kufi, who lived during the Imamate of the ninth Imam, Muhammad al-Jawad, and might have lived until the first years of the tenth century A.D. He was one of the foremost authorities in Shi'ite traditions and one of the teachers of the famous traditionist al-Qummi.
- Muhammad al-'Ayyashi, a contemporary of Furat Ibn Ibrahim al-Kufi, was a Sunni scholar who accepted Shi'ism, and became a great Shi'a scholar.
- Ali Ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi (d. 307 AH/919-20 AD), who related traditions received from his father who had, in turn, learned them from many of the Imams' disciples.
- Muhammad al-Nu'mani, who survived into the tenth century AD. Al-Nu'mani (d.360 AH/971 AD) was one of al-Kulayni's students. He left an important tafsir that he related on the authority of the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. These two generations represent the pre-classical period of Shi'ite tafsir. 32 They avoided any kind of ijtihad or passing of judgement. The Imams were indeed living among Muslims and availabl for questioning for a period of almost three hundred years.

The third generation of Shi'ite commentators extended over a very long period, well into the sixteenth century AD. They included: al-Sharif al-Radhiy (d.405 AH/1015 AD) and his well-known brother al-Sayyed al-Murtadha (d.436 AH/1044 AD); Abu Ja'far al-Tusi (d.460AH/1067AD) who was a student of al-Murtadha and whose commentary, *al-Tybian fi tafsir al Qur'an*, represents an important approach in Shi'i *tafsir*; and his disciple Abu al-Fadl Ibn al-Hasan Ibn al-Fadl al-Tabarsi (d.548 AH/1153 AD).

They represent what may be considered as the classical period of Shi'i *tafsir*. These commentators took a broad approach to *tafsir* using Shi'i as well as Sunni traditions and also rejected Shi'i popular claims regarding the inauthenticity of the 'Uthmanic recension of the Qur'an.33

Included, too, were later commentators such as al-Maybudi al-Gunabadi (sixth century A.H) and his gnostic commentary, Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1050 AH/1640 AD), Hashim al-Bahrani (d. 1107 AH/1695

AD) who composed *al– Burhan*, 'Abd Ali al–Huwayzi (d.1112 AH/1700 AD) who composed the *Nur al–Thaqalayn*, and Mulla Muhsin Fayd al– Kashani (d.1191 AH/1777 AD) who compiled the work known as *al–Safi*.34

Other works of Shi'ite gnostics, such as the 8th AH/14th AD century figure Haydar Amuli, were also included.

The Qur'anic commentaries of Sadr al–Din al–Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra "are the most important by an Islamic philosopher or theosopher (*hakim*) and also the most voluminous by a representative of the Islamic philosophical tradition" until Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (d. 1983) wrote the *tafsir al–Mizan*. "In the same way that Mulla Sadra's "Transcendent Theosophy" marks the synthesis of the various schools of gnosis, theosophy, philosophy and theology within a Shi'ite intellectual climate, his Qur'anic commentaries mark the meeting point of four different traditions of Qur'anic commentary before him, the Sufi, the Shi'ite, the theological and the philosophical."35

The final stage of the development of Shi'i *tafsir* is the contemporary one. Among modern works, the most important are *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *al-Bayan fi tafsir al-Qur'an* by al-Sayyed Abul- Qasim al-Khui, and *Tafsir-e Nemune* by Nasser Makarem Shirazi, this last being oriented more towards youth readership.

# 2-3 Three mufassirin

# a) Shaykh Tabarsi

Shaykh Abu Ali Fadl al-Tabarsi was a Shi'ite theologian who produced a *tafsir* of the Qur'an which enjoys wide acceptance, even among non Shi'ite scholars. Al-Dhahabi describes Shaykh Tabarsi as a moderate Shi'i scholar, who does not indulge in exaggeration and refrains from cursing any of the Companions.36

Very little has been written about him and his works by modern scholars and nothing at all by Western scholars, and even the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is silent on his account. Musa O. A. Abdul seems to be the only author who has dedicated a book in English to Shaykh Tabarsi and his commentary.

Shaykh Tabarsi was born in 468 AH/1075 AD in Iran during the Seljuq period. He lived for many years in Mashad where he engaged himself in public teaching until the year 523 AH/1128–29 AD and wrote many valuable works concerned with the propagation and defense of the Shi'ite doctrine, the Imams, their qualities and sayings, theology, ethics, grammar, etc.

He then moved to Sabzawar where, at an advanced age, he wrote his famous commentary on the Qur'an *Majma' al-Bayan li 'ulum al-Qur'an*. He noted in the preface to *Majma' al-Bayan* that he began writing the book when he was over sixty.

He also produced two other minor *tafsir* works: *al-Kafi al- shafi* and *Jawami al-Jami*. In Sabzawar, he devoted twenty– five years to teaching and writing and died there in the year 548 AH/1153 AD.

Shaykh Tabarsi's fame both as a scholar and as a theologian rests on his *tafsir* works, the major one of which is *Majma' al*– *Bayan li*–'*ulum al*–*Qur'an*. In the preface to this work, Shaykh Tabarsi gives the reasons for his writing it and for his choice of title. He also describes the methodology used in the commentaries on every verse.

At the time of the work's preparation, there were already some *tafsir* works in circulation, written by both Sunnite and Shi'ite scholars. The *Jami' al–Bayan* by Tabari and *al–Tibyan* by al–Tusi had impressed him most. Shaykh Tabarsi combined these two titles, both having the same meaning, and entitled his own *tafsir Majma' al–Bayan*.

The *tafsir* was completed in 534 AH/1139 AD but was not published for the first time until 1268 AH/1851 AD. Tabarsi divides his commentary on every passage into five sections: introductory discourse, reading guide, language discourse, revelation and circumstances surrounding it, and meaning. He employs *ta'wil* in many cases to deduce the inner or implied meaning of a verse.

When a passage relates to a theological, jurisprudential or philosophical issue, Tabarsi gives the views of all sides and then gives his own judgement and standpoint when it differs from that of his school of thought. Indeed, the originality of Tabarsi's commentary is that he gives his readers an opportunity to see the varying opinions on different issues mentioned in the Qur'an. He then discusses these views and declares his own stand.

Al-Dhahabi says that his *tafsir*, apart from what it contains of his Shi'ite and Mu'tazilite views, indicates the deep penetration of its author into different branches of knowledge. He draws upon the statements from his predecessors among the *mufassirin* and declares his choice among them. 37 His *tafsir* has a wide coverage of historical facts, of the statements and opinions of philologists, traditionists, commentators and poets.

There is also a good coverage of the various schools of thought. It contains many philological studies and references to ancient poetry. This *tafsir* is a compendium of all sciences connected with the studies of Islam and to which specialists from any field of Islamic sciences can refer.

Shaykh Tabarsi's affiliation to Shi'i school of thought can be traced in his commentaries but he has also shown on many issues that he is an independent thinker and sometimes holds different conclusions from that of the Shi'ites.

This commentary is unanimously accepted by Muslim scholars, Sunnite and Shi'ite, and some scholars consider it as a leading work on tafsir even up to the present day due to the richness and variety of its contents. It is one of the very few works which have enjoyed such wide acceptance.

Shaykh Tabarsi has shown interest in many theological issues in his commentary, such as the issue concerning the *Imamate* of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the practice of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation of one's faith), the infallibility of the Imams, God's Justice etc. He also discusses the issue of the *Mahdi*, his advent at the End of Time, the purpose of his coming and his rule.

### b) Banu Amin

Banu-ye mujtahedeh sayyedeh Nusrat Begum Amin al- Tujjar Isfahani, 38 known as Banu Amin, was born in 1256 Sh/1877 AD in Isfahan and is said to be descended from Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib through both her parents. She first went to school at five and started to learn Arabic language and literature at twelve because of her early interest in Islamic studies.

At fifteen, she married her cousin, Haj seyyed Muhammad Amin al-Tujjar, who was a famous businessman in Isfahan. Banu Amin had nine children but eight of them died very young from diseases like diphtheria, smallpox, typhoid fever, pneumonia or through miscarriage.

A few years after her wedding, at the age of twenty, she started to study Islamic sciences, such as *Fiqh*, *Usul, tafsir, hadith* and *hikma*, with a private teacher, Ayatollah Mir Muhammad Najaf Abadi, who tutored her at home.

She was a strong follower of Molla Sadra Shirazi's philosophy and was qualified to gain a profound understanding of Molla Sadra's *Kitab al-Asfar al-arba'a al-'aqliya* (*The Book of the Four Journeys*), her favourite subject of study.

Among Islamic works, after the *Asfar*, she was much interested in compilations of traditions (*hadith*) and *tafsir*, particularly the *tafsir* work *Majma' al–Bayan* by Shaykh Tabarsi. She later followed Shaykh Tabarsi's method in her own *tafsir* (*Makhzan al–'Irfan fi Tafsir al–Qur'an*) of the Qur'an. She was, and still is, the first woman *Mufassir* (commentator) of the entire Qur'an.

The originality of her *tafsir* was based on the fact that it was a mixture of exoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and spiritual teachings of a gnostic journey and pilgrimage (*sayr-o- suluk-e 'irfani*). Banu Amin is said to be the founder of this new method of interpretation.

After having spent twenty years of her life studying Islamic sciences, at the age of forty she produced her first work, *Arba'in Hashemiya* (*Forty Hashemi Traditions*). This work reached the *howza al-'ilmiyah* (traditional religious education centre) of Najaf in Iraq, and was warmly approved by the *'Ulama*. Banu Amin thus became famous for the first time among the *'ulama* and reached the degree of *Ijtihad*.

Indeed after several written examinations from the greatest '*ulama* of Najaf in Islamic sciences such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *hadith* (traditions), or Qur'an, she was given permission of *ljtihad* (the application of reason to the solution of legal issues) and *Istenbat–e ahkam–e shar'i* (deduction of the main rules of conduct). She was then the only *mujtahedeh* of her time.

After that, Banu Amin devoted herself to writing, teaching and doing research in the field of the Islamic sciences. Her works, with a brief description, are as follows in chronological order:

1. Arba'in Hashemiya (Forty Hashemi traditions) in Arabic:

According to 'ulama custom, whenever a religious scholar collected forty authentic and documented hadith and was able to teach Usul and Ahkam to believers through these hadith, he then earned the permission of Ijtihad.

Banu Amin was the first woman to collect and provide a commentary on forty *hadith* in the field of *Tawhid* and other attributes of God, *Akhlaq*, *Ahkam*, with the expression of philosophy, mysticism and jurisprudence. She published them under the title of *Arba'in Hashemiya*.

2. Makhzan al-laali fi Manaqeb Mawla al- Mawali:

This work is dedicated to Ali ibn Abi Talib and his virtues.

3. Seyr-o-suluk dar ravesh-e awliyah va tariq-e seyr-e So'ada:

This work explains the method and stages of the gnostic in his spiritual ascent toward God.

4. Ma'ad ya akharin seyr-e bashar (The resurrection or the last journey of the Human):

This work is about life after death.

- 5. Ravesh-e khushbakhti va towsiye be kh,haran-e imani (The road to happiness and recommendation to the sisters in Faith)
- 6. Akhlaq va rahe Sa'adat (Ethics and the way to happiness):

This work is Banu Amin's translation, with notes and commentary, of the work of Shaykh Ahmad ibn Maskuyeh, *Tahdhib al–Akhlaq wa Tat–hir al–A'raq*.

7. Makhzan al-ëlrfan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an (A wealth of Gnosis in the Interpretation of the Qur'an):

This tafsir consists of fifteen volumes.

8. Jami' al-Shatat in Arabic:

This work is a collection of all the examination questions of the *ëulama* and Banu Amin's replies after becoming *mujtahedeh*.

9. Al-Nafahat al-Rahmaniyah fi al-waridat al- qalbiyah in Arabic:

This work concerns Banu Amin's personal spiritual and mystical experience, her visions and dreams.

Her works cover a large part of the Islamic sciences such as Fiqh (jurisprudence), Usul (fundamentals of religion), Falsafe (philosophy), Hikma (wisdom), 'Irfan (Gnosticism), Hadith (Prophetic traditions,) Tafsir (interpretation) and Akhlaq (ethics).

Apart from her intellectual activities, Banu Amin also founded a high school for girls (*Dabiristan–e Amin*) and a religious education centre (*Maktab–e Fatemeh*).

A great number of *'ulama* used to visit Banu Amin for the purpose of discussing scientific and spiritual subjects. They came from Isfahan, Tehran, Qum, and Najaf, and included Allama 'Abd al-Husayn Amini (*Kitab al-ghadir*), Ayatollah Haeri Shirazi, Ayatollah Safavi Qummi, Allama Tabataba'i (*al-Mizan*), etc. Banu Amin died in Isfahan on June 16, 1983 (1362 Sh/1403 AH).

### c) Allama Tabatabai

Allama Sayyed Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i was one of the great masters of the traditional sciences in Iran during this century. He was born in 1321 AH/1904 AD into a distinguished family of scholars in Tabriz where he also undertook his earliest religious studies.

He pursued more advanced studies in Najaf and then returned to Tabriz in 1353 AH/1934 AD. In 1945, following the Soviet Occupation of Azerbaijan, he migrated to Qum where he settled until his death in 1402 AH/1981 AD.

From this centre of religious learning, his knowledge began to spread throughout Iran and even beyond. He soon became recognized as one of the major intellectual figures of Shi'ism.

He was an extremely prolific author in addition to teaching throughout the week. He wrote a profusion of books and articles of major intellectual import. His fame rests on his various works, the most significant being his great exeges of the Qur'an *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*.

He wrote several major philosophical works, such as *Usul–e Falasafah va Ravesh–e Rialism* (*The Fundamentals of Philosophy and the Doctrine of Realism*) in five volumes, a comparative study of Islamic philosophy and various modern schools of thought, especially Marxism.

He edited the *Asfar* of Sadr al–Din al– Shirazi with his own commentary, and a selection of commentaries on other masters antecedent to Shirazi, these last collected in seven volumes. Later he composed two masterly summaries of Islamic philosophy: the *Bidayat al– Hikam* and the *Nihayat al–Hikam*.

Meanwhile, Allama Tabataba'i continued to work on his Qur'anic commentary, *Tafsir al-Mizan*, which he finally completed in his mid-seventies. This monumental commentary consisting of more than twenty volumes (written in Arabic and translated into Persian) is one of the most important Qur'anic commentaries of this century and bears witness to its author's mastery in the domain of the 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'duhu 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. He describes the method he adopted in the preface to his *tafsir* of the Qur'an.

Allama Tabataba'i was not only an outstanding scholar but also a person of great spiritual realization who lived constantly in the remembrance of God. Allama Tabataba'i was, at one and the same time, one of the greatest 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.

- 1. A. Rippin, "Tafsir", EIH, p.83-84
- 2. H. Nasr, Ideals and Realities in Islam, p.58
- 3. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p.29
- 4. Ibid, p.31-32
- 5. H. Corbin, En Islam Iranien, vol. 1, p.212
- 6. Ibid, vol. 1, p.214
- 7. H. Nasr, Ideals and Realities in Islam, p.58-59
- 8. In the tafsir of the Qur'an, the Sunni have mainly depended on the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic verses, whereas the Shia have depended on the apparent meaning and the inner meaning of the verses understood from other verses (for the Qur'anic verses explain each other) and from the traditions of the Prophet (s.a) and the infallible Imams (a.s) that explained the qur'an. But as for the Sufis, they have depended on their personal understanding of the Qur'an, and therefore, most of their tafsirs (interpretations) are not accepted by other Muslims, especially the Shia.
- 9. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p.41
- 10. Tabataba'i in H. Nasr, Shilism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality, p.24
- 11. M. Ayoub, "The speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an", p. 189
- 12. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p. 33-34
- 13. Ibid, p. 36
- 14. Qur'an: 62:2
- 15. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, p. 12
- 16. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, Bab 7, vol.23, p. 108
- 17. Majlisi, Kitab Fadl al-Qur'an, Bab al-Nawadir, vol. 6, p.474
- 18. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, p.3
- 19. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p.47
- 20. Al-Mizan, p.4
- 21. M. Abdul, The Qur'an: Shaykh Tabarsi's commentary, p.47
- 22. Ahmad Amin, Duha al-Islam, II, p. 140
- 23. Ibid, p. 137
- 24. M. Abdul, The Qur'an: Shaykh Tabarsi's commentary, p. 52-53
- 25. Al-Mizan, p.5
- 26. M. Abdul, The Qur'an: Shaykh Tabarsi's commentary, p.55
- 27. Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, p.9
- 28. Ibid, p. 12
- 29. Mutahhari, in H. Nasr, Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality, p. 27
- 30. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p.50

- 31. Ibid, p.50
- 32. M. Ayoub, "The speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an", p. 184
- 33. M. Ayoub, "The speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an", p. 185
- 34. Tabataba'i, The Qur'an in Islam, p.51
- 35. H. Nasr, "The Quranic Commentaries of Mulla Sadra", p.45
- 36. Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, al-Tafsir wal-Mufassirun, II, P.142
- 37. Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, al-Tafsir wal-Mufassirun, II, P. 104
- 38. I made a summary of these three works for the life of Banu Amin: 1- Tayyebi N., Banu-ye Irani, 2- Khalili, Marjan Amu
- : Kuwkab-e durri, 3- Bidhandi, Naser Baqiri, Banu-ye Nemune

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