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Biography of the Author

'Allamah Muhammad Husayn Taba'taba'i was born in the village of Shadabad near Tabriz on 29th Dhil Hijjah 1321 ah / 16th March 1904 ce. He lost his father, Sayyid Muhammad Taba'taba'i at the age of five and his mother passed away four years later while giving birth to his brother, Sayyid Muhammad Hasan. The experience of being orphans increased the closeness between the brothers and bound them throughout their lives.

The guardianship of the two brothers fell on the shoulders by their paternal uncle Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Qadhi and it was under his guidance that 'Allamah Taba'taba'i began his primary education.

In accordance with the prevalent systems at the time, he first memorized the Qur'an, studied literary Persian texts and learnt calligraphy before moving on to a more detailed study of the 'Arabic language sciences – grammar, syntax and rhetoric, the essential pre-requisites for more advanced study of classical Islamic corpora.

The 'Allamah recounts his relatively late initiation into the world of scholarship and notes that he was initially averse to study and discouraged by his inability to fully understand what he was reading, a condition which continued for about 4 years. A turning point was finally reached when he failed a test on Suyuti's renowned treatise on grammar and his exasperated teacher told him: "Stop wasting my time and yours!"

Shamefaced, he left Tabriz for a while to engage in a special devotional practice that resulted in his gaining a Divine bestowal – the ability to master any subject he studied, and this ability remained with him till the end of his life. In keeping with his general reticence on personal matters, he never identified the devotional practice in question. He later recalled:

"I ceased entirely to associate with anyone not devoted to learning and began to content myself with a minimum of food, sleep and material necessities, devoting everything to my studies. It would often happen during the spring and summer that I would remain awake until dawn and I always prepared for the next day's class on the previous night. If I encountered a problem, I would solve whatever difficulty I encountered, however much effort it took. When I came to class, everything the teacher had to say was

already clear to me; I never had to ask for an explanation or for an error to be corrected."

After completing the *Sutuh* level of the hawzah curriculum in 1925, 'Allamah Taba'taba'i went with his brother to Najaf, a centre of Shi'a learning traditionally designated as Darul 'Ilm (the abode of knowledge). It was here that he spent many years studying the *Kharij* level of jurisprudence with such authorities as Mirza Husayn Na'ini (d. 1355 ce/1936 ah), Ayatullah Abul Hasan Isfahani (d. 1365 ah/1946 ce), Ayatullah Hajj Mirza 'Ali Irvani and Ayatullah Mirza 'Ali Asgher.

He attained the rank of Ijtehad while in Najaf, but never sought to become Marja' al–Taqlid.

It was Qur'anic exegesis along with philosophy that came to preoccupy him for most of his career. More influential on 'Allamah Taba'taba'i than any of his other teachers in Najaf was his cousin, Hajj Mirza 'Ali Qadhi Taba'taba'i (d. 1363 ah/1947 ce). It was he who, more than anyone else helped to mould his spiritual personality. Sayyid Qadhi's influence on him was profound. Under his guidance, he began to engage in gnostic practices, night vigils and various supererogatory acts of devotion.

In 1354 ah/1935 ce, 'Allamah Taba'taba'i returned from Najaf to Tabriz, again accompanied by his brother. The return to Tabriz occasioned something of a lull in his scholarly activities for a roughly a decade during which he devoted himself to farming the family lands. Despite the degree of erudition he had attained, he was almost entirely unknown in the city.

In 1946 ce, he left for Qum, where he remained for the rest of his life. The city of Qum had enjoyed prominence as a centre of learning since the early days of Shi'ism in Iran, and it was here that the scene of the most fruitful portion of the 'Allamah's career as a teacher and an author can be seen.

To all outward appearances, the very epitome of the ascetic and retiring scholar, 'Allamah Taba'taba'i was by no means negligent or unaware of the political sphere. Nonetheless he played little if any discernible role in the intense and prolonged struggle led by Imam Khomeini and his associates that culminated in the Islamic revolution of 1978–79 and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

By the time the revolution began, he was too physically frail to have participated even marginally. However, the leading role played by many of his students in the revolution indicates that the attitudes and teachings he had inculcated in them were at the very least compatible with support of the new Islamic order.

Weakened for many years by cardiac and neurological problems, 'Allamah Taba'taba'i withdrew from teaching activity and became increasingly absorbed in private devotion as the end of his life grew near. In 1405 ah/1981 ce, he stopped as usual in Damavand while returning to Qum from his annual summer visit to Mashhad. He fell seriously ill and was taken to hospital in Tehran. The prospects for recovery were little and he was therefore taken to his home in Qum, where he was rigorously secluded from all but his closest students.

Shortly after, on 18th Muharram 1402 ah/November 7th 1981 ce, he passed away and was laid to rest close to the tombs of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim Ha’iri and Ayatullah Khwansari; the funeral prayers were led by Ayatullah al-’Udhma Hajj Sayyid Muhammad Rid’a Gulpaygani.

One of the characteristic of this great personality as portrayed unanimously by his students was his extreme modesty and humility. The ‘Allamah was never heard to utter the pronoun “I” through out his life whether in Arabic or Persian. Unlike many if not most of the luminaries of Qum, he would never permit his hand to be kissed, withdrawing it into the sleeve if anyone made an attempt to do so. He always refused to lead anyone in congregational prayer, even his own students.

When teaching, he never permitted himself to assume the position of authority implied by leaning on a cushion or against the wall, preferring instead to sit upright on the ground, just like his students. He was patient and forbearing with the questions and objections raised by his students, giving generously of his time even to the immature among them.

Allamah Tabatabai’s material circumstances in Qum were in line with his utter lack of self-importance. He had no access to the funds reserved for the students and teachers of *fiqh*, and sometimes he lacked even the money to light a lamp in his modest home in the Yakhchal-i Qadhi district of Qum. The house was too small to accommodate the throngs of students that would come to visit him, and he would therefore sit on the steps in front of it to receive them. Unlike many scholars, he did not amass a vast personal library, although he did leave behind a small collection of manuscripts.

Notable, it was not only his students who benefited from his modest and unassuming nature. Such was his affection for his family that he would often rise to his feet when his wife or children entered the room, and when it became necessary to leave the home and buy essential items, the ‘Allamah himself would undertake the task instead of imposing it on his family.

Such was the outward demeanor of one who, in the view of his disciples, had become ‘a mirror for the spirits of the Infallibles’, who had attained a degree of detachment from this world that permitted him to observe directly that which is part of the unseen realm.

Some of the works which ‘Allamah Taba’taba’i was blessed to able to write during his short life includes the following works:

1. *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an Munzal*: The ‘Allamha’s most important single work, a monumental commentary upon the Qur’an written in twenty volumes in ‘Arabic. Its translation into English, carried out by the now deceased Sayyid Sa’id Akhtar Rizvi, has seen the first six volumes published (printed in 12 volumes).

2. *Usul-i-falsafah wa Rawish-i-ri’alism - The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism:* This has was written in five volumes and has been published with a commentary by the late Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari.

3. *Hashiyahi Kifayah – Glosses of al-Kifayah.* Glosses upon the new edition of *al-Asfar* of Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Mullah Sadra), compiled under the direction of 'Allamah Taba'taba'i, of which seven volumes have been published.

4. *Musabahat ba Ustad Kurban – Dialogues with Professor Corbin.* Two volumes based on conversations carried out between 'Allamah Taba'taba'i and Henry Corbin.

5. *Risalah dar Hukumat-i Islami – Treatise on Islamic Government*.

6. *Risalah dar Ithbat-i dha't – Treatise on the Proof of the Divine Essence*

7. *Risalah dar Sifat – Treatise on the Divine Attributes*

8. *Risalah dar Insan qabl Dunya – Treatise on Mankind before the* (*creation of the*) *World*

9. *Risalah dar Insan fil Dunya – Treatise on Mankind in the World*

10. *Risalah dar Insan ba'd Dunya – Treatise on Mankind after the World*

11. *Risalah dar Nubuwwat – Treatise on Prophecy*

12. *Qur'an dar Islam – The Qur'an in Islam.* The English translation has been published.

13. *Shi'ah dar Islam – Shi'ite Islam.* The English translation has been published.

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