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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, his trilogy was written and assembled in a short period by Allamah Tabataba'i in Persian and – in the case of sayings of the Imams– in Arabic.

But it is now, with the appearance of this translation that the goal of the project is finally achieved, long after the author has left this adobe of transience.

It was our task to collaborate with the Allamah, to achieve the completion of the two works of this trilogy which 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 unassumingly 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 mountains 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 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 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 programme and our own crowded schedule. Over half of the work was translated when our library – and with 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. 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 in 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 journey 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 honour of being one.

This activity complemented his teaching activities in Qum. The circle in Tehran, which included not only such well–known scholars as Murtadha 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 majour 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, important books and articles continued to flow from his pen. After writing such majour philosophical works as *Usul-i Falsafay-i Ri'alism* in five volumes, he edited the *Asfar al-Arba'a* 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 in Persian), is one of the most important Qur'anic commentaries of this century and is a binding 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 thoughts, 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 sense the synthesis of the venerable master's life-long study of the Noble Qur'an.

Although the book is written in 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 significance of the Qur'an for the life of Muslims, the features of the sacred Text which seems enigmatic, the inner and outer levels of meaning of the Text and the sciences of the 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 it 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 honour 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 hundred students– never did he cease to remember God and invoke Him. His countenance always reflected a light that seemed to shine from the world beyond, while his gentle vice seemed to issue from the outer shores of existence. In his presence, one could not but think of God and the world of 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 out 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 al-'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 if 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 scholar (or 'alim) and to gain a taste of what traditional Islamic intellectual tradition was fully alive.

The Qur'an in Islam, as well as the other works by the Allamah, should be red 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 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

- 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 with a foreword by Allamah Tabataba'i translated with explanatory notes by William Chittick and introduction by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London, Muhammad Trust, and Albany, New York, SUNY Press, 1981) have already become well–known as important sources in English for the study of Shi'ism.
- 2. We have already dealt with his life in our preface to Shi'ite Islam, pp. 22-25.

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