

# Introduction

## Scope, Method, and Sources

THE PURPOSE OF THIS WORK is to introduce the English reader to the Qur'an as Muslims have understood it. The Qur'an has been regarded by Muslims as the word of God, which He revealed (literally "sent down" *nazzala*) to His prophet Muhammad. This earthly Qur'an, however, is only the concrete revelation whose original archetype is with God in the Well-Guarded Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*) (See Q. 85:22.) This fact is of crucial importance for any consideration of the Qur'an within the context of Muslim history. As the divine word addressed to humankind, the Qur'an participates in our history but at the same time transcends it. Hence its true inner meaning is with God, for "no one knows its true exegesis [*ta'wil*] except God" (Q. 3:7).

The Qur'an has its own history. It was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, interiorized by the community, then shaped by it into an earthly book "contained between two covers." My concern in this work is not with the history of the Qur'an, but rather with the Qur'an as used in the community in its present order and form. Within less than two decades of the Prophet's death, when those who heard it directly from his mouth and had written it down were still alive, the Qur'an was collected and fixed into an official codex. It is this official collection which the community has accepted and which has come down to us with only minor adjustments, not in the text itself, but in the way it came to be written down. This recension has voiced the community's prayers and devotions, set its legal norms and moral standards, and occupied its best minds for more than thirteen hundred years.

The science of *tafsir* is primarily concerned with the interpretation and elucidation of the text of the Qur'an as a given entity. Thus the famous commentator Ibn Kathir placed the section dealing with

the history of the Qur'an at the end of his commentary, because he regarded *tafsir* proper to be more important than history. In this ordering, he followed the example of the well-known *hadith* compiler al-Bukhari. Therefore, I feel justified in concentrating my effort on the *tafsir* of the Qur'an.

This introduction presents the main principles and development of the science of *tafsir*. Following these methodological remarks, the sources used in this work are discussed. The Qur'an as cherished and interiorized by the community is then discussed. This latter section deals with that aspect of Qur'anic studies known technically as the "excellences" (*fada'il*) of the Qur'an and its reciters. Finally, the principles and development of *tafsir*—its different branches, early masters, and various schools—are discussed.

Aspects of *tafsir* dealing with the actual history of the Qur'an and its miraculous character and inimitable style are not included in this study. Before the Qur'an was fixed into its present form, it seems fairly certain that Qur'an reciters and scholars differed substantially in their readings of certain words, phrases, and even verses. To justify these differences, a number of prophetic *hadiths* were adduced in support of the idea that the Qur'an was sent down in seven different modes or dialects (*ahruf*). The official collection compiled during the caliphate of 'Uthman (23/644–35/656) eventually superseded all other recensions. Different readings that continue to be observed and that affect the meaning of the verse in any significant way are noted in my discussions.

The other major aspect which will not be discussed is that of the *i'jaz* or inimitability of the Qur'an. The Qur'an in many places challenges the Arabs of the Prophet's time to produce the like of it. Based on this challenge, which was never seriously taken up then or later, the community constructed an elaborate theory of the miraculous character of the Qur'an. This theory is for the most part argued on the basis of the linguistic qualities of the sacred Book: its eloquence and rhetorical beauty, and the precision, economy, and subtlety of its style. Such technical points of language usage can be meaningfully discussed only in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. Other aspects of *i'jaz al-Qur'an* such as the foretelling of future events, or revealing knowledge of the unknown, are discussed in their proper contexts.

Since the present work will consist of several volumes, a measure of consistency in approach and presentation of materials will be maintained. Three criteria were used in the selection of verses for

commentary. The first is the need to establish the historical context of a verse or passage in order to elucidate both its literal meaning and practical application. The second is to present when necessary the theological questions or controversies which a verse or passage has raised for commentators. The final criterion is the relationship of the Qur'an and its community of faith with other religious communities and their scriptures, which may be discerned in a verse or passage. My aim, however, is not to engage in polemics or apologetics, nor is it to argue for any position or interpretation in favor of another. It is, rather, to present different views and interpretations coherently and candidly. This work is to be a guide to the Qur'an as Muslims have understood it. The realization of this goal is the primary aim of this endeavor, as well as the guiding principle in the choice and presentation of the primary sources used.

I have carefully chosen my sources so as to represent the long and complex history of Qur'anic interpretation. Early *tafsir* began as an oral tradition of *hadith* transmission from the Prophet and subsequently the views and interpretations of his Companions, their Successors, and the Successors' disciples. Written commentaries on the Qur'an began to appear during the period of the successors and especially of their disciples. These early commentaries were, for the most part, straightforward *hadith* transmissions. In time, however, *tafsir* works began to reflect the training, religious affiliation, and interest of their writers. Grammarians, jurists, mystics, philosophers, and theologians wrote commentaries representing their points of view. The sources chosen represent these different stages, schools of thought, and approaches in Muslim history. The approach adopted in this work begins with *tafsir* by means of tradition and moves on to examples of juristic, Mu'tazili, philosophical, and mystical *tafsir*. Shi'i *tafsir* is treated fairly extensively. Finally, modern *tafsir* is represented from both the Sunni and Shi'i points of view. Although it is not possible to follow a strict historical chronology, a chronological framework is preserved as far as possible. Sources are used in the order in which they are discussed below.

The *tafsir* of Muhammad ibn, Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923), *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*, is the first major work in the development of traditional Qur'anic sciences. It presents the entire tradition of *tafsir* critically and with admirable skill and fidelity. As well as being an important source of tradition, Tabari presents his own views, criticisms, evaluations, and analyses of the various traditions. His commentary is a valuable landmark in the history of

this discipline. All those who came after Tabari have relied heavily on his work and acknowledged their debt to him. Tabari not only transmits and analyzes traditions but also discusses, whenever necessary, variant readings and grammatical points so as to elucidate the meaning and purport of a verse. Tabari describes his own work as follows: "It is a book containing all that people need [that is, concerning the interpretation of the Qur'an]. It is so comprehensive that with it there is no need to have recourse to other books. We shall relate in it arguments wherein agreement was achieved and where disagreement persisted. We shall present the reasons for every school of thought or opinion and elucidate what we consider to be the right view with utmost brevity" (Tabari, I, pp. 6-7).

My commentary on a verse or passage begins with the occasion of its revelation, where such information is important for a better understanding of it. In such instances, Wahidi will be used before Tabari.

Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi (d. 468/1076) was a famous commentator, grammarian, and man of letters. He wrote three short commentaries on the Qur'an besides the book used here. He was the student of the famous popular commentator and traditionist Abu Ishaq Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Tha'labi. Like his teacher, Wahidi was accused of having been a careless transmitter of tradition. Nonetheless, his book, *Asbab Nuzul al-Qur'an*, is one of the earliest extant works dealing with this subject.

Isma'il 'Imad al-Din Abu al-Fida' ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) was a famous Shafi'i jurist, traditionist, and historian. He was a student and staunch defender of Ibn Taymiyah and thus of the "conservative" trend in *tafsir*. Ibn Kathir presents traditions that rely in a critical manner on a variety of sources. In many ways, Ibn Kathir was a man of his time, aware of the vicissitudes of Muslim history, mildly polemical, but always fair and informative. Ibn Kathir appended to his commentary, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, a short treatise entitled *Fada'il al-Qur'an*, which is also used in this introduction. Although this author lived later than Zamakhshari, Qurtubi, or Razi, I have referred to his work immediately after Tabari's because his thought was based more on tradition than was that of the three exegetes named above.

Muhammad ibn Ahmad Abu 'Abdallah al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273), although belonging to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, presents different opinions without polemic and even at times disagrees with the Maliki school. His *tafsir*, *al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, is an

encyclopedic work combining *hadith* with popular piety, jurisprudence, and linguistic considerations. It is well organized and extremely usable.

Abu al-Qasim Jar Allah Mahmud ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1144) was a man of great learning, both in the religious and linguistic sciences. He was a subtle thinker whose *tafsir*, *al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq al-Tanzil wa 'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Ta'wil*, in spite of its evidence of his Mu'tazili persuasion, is regarded by Sunni 'ulama' as one of the most important works of *tafsir*. Zamakhshari uses *hadith* tradition analytically but often with little regard to either the chain of transmitters or fidelity to the actual transmitted text. He lays great stress on linguistic explanations, having been a great authority on the Arabic language. His Mu'tazili ideas are so subtle that a number of commentaries have been written to determine where and how his theological bias has influenced his work. The edition used here has two such commentaries in the margin. Zamakhshari lived in Mecca for so long that he was given the epithet Jar Allah (God's neighbor).

Among the philosophically oriented *tafsirs*, the most well known is that of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1209). Razi was one of the most learned and brilliant men in Muslim history. He was said to have been "one of those sent at the beginning of the seventh century to renew religion," thus making him a *mujaddid* (Dawudi, II, p. 214). It is generally believed that Razi died before completing his massive *tafsir*, sometimes known as *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, but more commonly as *Mafatih al-Ghayb*. The work was finished by one of his disciples who followed his master's methodology and idiom so faithfully that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the two styles. Hence scholars have differed as to where the master left off and the student began, or even whether it was one or two students who finally completed the work. Razi's *tafsir* is somewhat difficult for two reasons. Razi was a philosopher of high caliber and not primarily an exegete. He sets forth his opinions on verses in a complex and involved style with layer upon layer of arguments and counterarguments, although often without reaching any conclusion. He also digresses so far from his subject that one becomes lost in philosophical and theological arguments that are at best distantly related to *tafsir*. It is said of Razi's *Mafatih al-Ghayb* that "it has everything except *tafsir*" (Suyuti, II, p. 191). Nonetheless it is a unique and highly erudite work representing an important type of Qur'anic exegesis.

Two sources have been chosen to represent the Sufi understanding of the Qur'an. The first is *Ghara'ib al-Qur'an wa Ragha'ib al-Furqan* by Nizam al-Din al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Qummi al-Nisaburi (d. 728/1327). This *tafsir* is a popular work. It combines the philosophical approach of Razi, whose *tafsir* it partially summarizes, with Sufi exegesis presented in the framework of popular piety. Although Nisaburi's work cannot be said to be original, since it relies heavily on both Razi and Zamakhshari, it nonetheless contains a great deal of popular Sufi material which is worth considering. It has been chosen to represent not technical Sufism but popular Sufi piety.

The second source that represents Sufi thought at its highest level of esoteric exegesis is *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* of Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240). The editor of the work, Mustafa Ghalib, says in his introduction that Ibn 'Arabi wrote three *tafsirs*: one ordinary *tafsir* in twenty-four volumes, a shorter but more popular Sufi commentary, and the two-volume work used here. It is more commonly believed, however, that this work, the only extant one, was written by one of Ibn 'Arabi's disciples, the well-known 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani. Whoever the author may be, the work clearly represents the thought and style of Ibn 'Arabi. In justification of his method of exegesis, the author says: "It is said that whoever interprets [the Qur'an] according to his own opinion commits an act of blasphemy [*kufr*]. But as for *ta'wil* [esoteric exegesis], it neither preserves nor spares anything." (Ibn 'Arabi likens *ta'wil* here to the fire that consumes everything [Q. 74:28]). "It varies with the state of the listener, his moments in the stations of his mystical journey [*suluk*] and his different degrees [of attainment]. As he reaches higher stations, new doors are open to him through which he looks upon new and subtle meanings" (Ibn 'Arabi, I, p. 5).

'Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi (d. 328/939) was one of the important architects of Shi'i *hadith* tradition. He represents the formative and consequently isolated and somewhat extremist stage of Imami Shi'i *hadith* development. His *tafsir* is Shi'i in the fullest sense of the word. Qummi was a *hadith* transmitter who neither analyzed nor evaluated his materials. Thus his work, compared with later Shi'i comprehensive commentaries, is brief. It is, however, the most complete extant commentary of its time.

In contrast, *Majma' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, by Abu 'Ali al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan al-Tabarsi, is a comprehensive classical *tafsir*. Tabarsi (d. 548/1153) was a moderate scholar, and he presented the

views of all major commentators fairly and comprehensively. He gives special prominence to Shi'i *tafsir*, but his work is not, strictly speaking, a Shi'i commentary. Tabarsi was a man of great erudition. He was a master of Arabic and a noted theologian and jurist. Since Shi'i thought has much in common with Mu'tazili rational theology, Tabarsi gives a special place to Mu'tazili commentators. His is one of the most comprehensive *tafsirs*. The author begins his commentary on every verse with explanations of key or uncommon words, both their meaning and grammatical problems. He then presents the different views of commentators, traditionists, and theologians, fairly and accurately.

As will be observed, modern *tafsirs* have a great deal in common in spite of their peculiar point of view or the religious affiliations of their authors. *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i is meant to speak to the young intellectuals of the Shi'i Muslim community and often approaches the verses of the Qur'an from philosophical, sociological, and traditional viewpoints. It reflects the wide and profound learning of one of the most respected recent religious scholars of the Shi'i community. (The great jurist doctor died in November 1981.) Tabataba'i's *tafsir* is also firmly rooted in tradition. The author adds a large section to each verse or passage commented on, citing both Shi'i and Sunni *hadiths*.

The work of the Egyptian thinker and head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1386/1966), is the *tafsir* for today's Muslim youth, both Shi'i and Sunni. As the title, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (In the Shadow of the Qur'an), indicates, the author is careful not to depart from the Qur'an in interpreting it. Three elements distinguish the work. The first is, as has already been mentioned, a conscious effort to remain within the purview of the Qur'an. The second is the sparing use of tradition; all but the most widely accepted *hadiths* are rejected. The third and perhaps most important is Sayyid Qutb's own view of Islam as a religious system and its relationship to other systems and ideologies. Coupled with the author's amazing command of the Arabic language, the presentation is indeed powerful.

## The Qur'an and Its Bearers

The Qur'an has played two distinct but continuous roles in the lives of Muslims. It has been a guide along the weary way of this life and into the next, a source of blessing and honor for its bearers

here on earth and their intercessor with God on the day of judgment. It is related that the Prophet said, "The Qur'an is right guidance from error and a light against blindness. It is a support against stumbling . . . a source of illumination against sorrow and a protection against perdition. It is the criterion of truth against sedition and the best way leading from this world to the next. No one turns away from the Qur'an but that he turns toward the Fire" ('Ayyashi, I, p. 5). The Qur'an as a book of guidance will be considered in the following section of the introduction dealing with *tafsir*. I feel that it is not possible to fully appreciate the care, determination, and seriousness with which commentators have treated the Qur'an as an object of study without some appreciation of the place which the Qur'an and its bearers have occupied in Muslim piety.

The Qur'an in itself is a source of sanctity and blessing not only for those who occupy themselves in reciting and studying it, but also for the world and its history. Ibn Kathir observes, "The Qur'an began to be sent down in a noble place, the sacred city of Mecca, and also in a noble time, the month of Ramadan. Thus it combined the nobility of space and time" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 430). Yet the Qur'an possesses a numinous quality which renders its power beyond the capacity of hard mountains to bear. This idea is clearly stated in the Qur'an: "Were We to cause this Qur'an to descend upon a mountain, you would see it humbled, torn asunder in awe of God" (Q. 59:21). This numinous power, however, is not only a negative force of destruction; it is also a positive source of healing and tranquility.

A number of traditions tell how one of the companions of the Prophet, Usayd ibn Hudayr, witnessed unusual portents when he recited the Qur'an in the night. It is reported that he came to the Prophet one day saying, "As I was reciting a *surah* of the Qur'an last night, I heard when I came to its end a noise behind me, so that I thought that my horse was being spurred on in fright. . . . I then looked back and saw something like lamps between heaven and earth. . . . I could not go on [reciting]." The Prophet then said, "These were angels, descended to hear the recitation of the Qur'an. Had you gone on, you would have seen wonders" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 474). The *sakinah* (divine tranquility) is said to have descended upon a man, as he was reciting the *surah* of the Cave (Q. 18), as a white cloud (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 474). A well-known tradition tells that the Prophet said, "There are no people assembled in one of the houses of God to recite the Book of God and study it together



but that the *sakinah* descends upon them. Mercy covers them, angels draw near to them and God remembers them in the company of those who are with Him” (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 475).

In one of the earliest *surahs* of the Qur’an the Prophet is addressed with the words, “We shall surely lay upon you weighty speech” (Q. 73:5). The Qur’an has therefore been regarded as a great burden, and those who recite, study, and teach it are known as the bearers (*hamalah*) of the Qur’an. This charge is, however, equal to the honor and the reward of its bearers. Qurtubi describes them as follows: “They are the bearers of the hidden mysteries of God and keepers of His treasured knowledge. They are the successors [*khulafa*] of His prophets and His trustees. They are His people and the elect of His creatures.” Qurtubi then cites a tradition in which the Prophet declares the people of the Qur’an to be the people of God and His elect (Qurtubi, I, p. 1). Their occupation is considered to be more excellent in the eyes of God than any other form of devotion. Thus in a *hadith qudsi* (divine utterance) related from the Prophet on the authority of Abu Sa’id al-Khudri, God is said to have declared: “He who is occupied with the Qur’an and with remembrance of me from prayers to me for his needs, to him will I give the best of that which I grant to those who pray” (Qurtubi, I, p. 4; see also Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 510).

The Prophet’s life, sayings, and actions (*sunnah*) have served as a model of moral conduct and devotion for Muslims of all times because the Prophet’s moral and spiritual character was formed by the Qur’an. This prophetic character remains the ideal goal for the pious, but it is one in which the “people of the Qur’an” (that is, those who occupy themselves in reciting and studying it), have a special share. It is related on the authority of Abu Umamah that the Prophet said, “He who is given one-third of the Qur’an is given one-third of prophethood. He who is given two-thirds of the Qur’an is given two-thirds of prophethood, and he who can recite [from memory] the entire Qur’an is given complete prophethood, except that no revelation is sent down to him.” The tradition then describes the status of such a person with God on the day of resurrection. “It shall be said to him . . . ‘Recite and rise up!’ He shall thus recite one verse and rise up one station until he recites all that he knows of the Qur’an. It shall then be said to him, ‘Come forth! . . . Do you know what is in your hands?’ He shall have in his right hand everlasting life and in his left the bliss [*na’im*] of Paradise” (Qurtubi, I, p. 8).

Muslim piety has endued the Qur'an with a living and dynamic personality. The Qur'an is a power against the arrogant tyrants of this world, a guide and protection for the pious, and their intercessor on the day of judgment. Perhaps in no other area of Muslim piety are such ideas and the traditions supporting them shared by Sunni and Shi'i Muslims alike. In a widely accepted tradition related by both Shi'i and Sunni traditionists on the authority of 'Ali, we are told that the Prophet said, "There shall be a great sedition after me." 'Ali asked how such calamity could be averted. The Prophet answered, "By means of the Book of God! In it is the report concerning those who were before you, the narrative of what is to come after you, and the criterion of judgment among you. . . . Whoever seeks guidance in anything other than it, God shall cause him to go astray. It is the rope of God; it is the 'wise remembrance' [Q. 3:58] and 'the straight way.' With it, hearts shall not swerve nor tongues utter confusion. The learned shall never be sated of it. It shall not wear out from constant use, nor will its marvels ever be exhausted. . . . Whoever utters it speaks truth, and whoever abides by it shall have his rich reward. Whoever judges by it shall judge justly, and whoever calls others to it shall be guided to the straight way" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 434; see also Majlisi, XCII, p. 24). Shi'i piety has been especially dramatic, unhampered in its portrayal of rich and fantastic imageries. In a long colloquy between the Prophet and Salman the Persian, who has been regarded as the father of Shi'i piety, the Prophet enjoins Salman to "recite the Qur'an, for its recitation is an expiation of sins . . . and security against punishment." He continues, "He who recites it shall have the reward of a thousand martyrs, and for every *surah* the reward of a prophet. Mercy shall descend upon the bearer of the Qur'an. Angels shall beg God's forgiveness for him; Paradise longs for him and the Lord shall be pleased with him." The tradition asserts further that any person of faith reciting the Qur'an will, at its conclusion, be granted the reward of 313 apostles. This is the number of apostles who are said, according to popular tradition, to have been sent to humankind. Such a person shall, moreover, receive the reward of having recited every book which God revealed to his prophets. Even before such a person rises from his seat, God will forgive all his sins and the sins of his parents. The tradition then describes in fantastic terms the riches of palaces and cities which are in store for him in Paradise. The Prophet finally concludes by saying, "Blessed is the seeker of knowledge and the bearer of the Qur'an" (Majlisi, XCII, pp. 17-19).

The Qur'an is for Muslims what Christ the Logos is for Christians. This analogy is carried even further in another tradition in which the Prophet is reported to have said, "The Qur'an is most excellent after God. Thus he who reverences the Qur'an reverences God, and he who does not reverence the Qur'an has taken lightly the sanctity [*hurmah*] of God. This is because the sanctity of the Qur'an with God is like the sanctity of a son in the eyes of his father" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 19).

I have already cited several traditions proclaiming the salvific role of the Qur'an. This role may be seen in two different ways. The first is through the interiorization of the Qur'an by the pious, and the second is through the direct intercession of the Qur'an with God on the day of resurrection on behalf of those who in this world had memorized it and lived by its precepts. Thus it is related that the Prophet said, "God shall never torment a heart which contains the Qur'an" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 178). The second way the salvific role of the Qur'an may be discerned is best illustrated in a dramatic dialogue between God and the Qur'an, related on the authority of Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Shi'i imam. The tradition is meant to extol the reciters of the Qur'an and especially one who dedicates his life to this vocation from a young age. The Qur'an, we are told, shall intercede on behalf of such a person, saying, "O Lord, every laborer has received the wages of his labors except my laborer! Bestow therefore upon him of your generous bounties." God will then clothe him with two of the garments of Paradise, and the crown of honor shall be placed upon his head. Then the Qur'an shall be asked, "Are you pleased with this for him?" The Qur'an will answer, "My Lord, I had wished for him something more excellent still!" Then the man shall be given security in his right hand and eternal life in his left; he will be made to enter Paradise. There, he shall be told, "Recite one verse and attain a higher station." It shall then be said to the Qur'an, "Thus have we bestowed upon him such favors that you may be pleased with him." The Qur'an will affirm its pleasure, saying, "Yes, Lord, I am pleased" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 188).

We have already observed that the reciter of the Qur'an shares in the status of prophets, those who have been favored with the reception of the divine word. The reciter does not receive the Qur'an as revelation, yet he assimilates it into his entire being so that he lives in the Qur'an. Again the parallel with the idea of the person of faith living in Christ, who becomes infused into the person's body through communion, is striking. The tradition just cited begins with

the assertion that "a person of faith who recites the Qur'an when yet a youth, the Qur'an shall be mingled with his flesh and blood" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 188).

Muslim piety has constructed a strict code of conduct for the bearers of the Qur'an. Those among them who possess purity of faith, moral integrity, and true piety are a blessing for the world. Their very existence is necessary for the well-being of the rest of humanity and the maintenance of order in nature. The fifth imam Muhammad al-Baqir distinguishes three varieties of reciters. The first uses the Qur'an as though it were a commodity of trade, seeking by his profession the rewards of kings and other men of wealth and power. The second learns the words of the Qur'an but neglects its precepts and admonitions. The third "recites the Qur'an employing its healing power as a cure for his ailments. He spends his nights with it and with it he thirsts during his days [that is, in fasting]. He spends his time with it in his places of worship and because of it abandons his bed." For the sake of such men, the imam went on, "God wards off calamities. For their sake, he protects men from their enemies. For the sake of such men, God sends down rain from heaven" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 178). In yet another tradition related on the authority of 'Ali, we see that the reciters of the Qur'an play a direct intercessory role on behalf of humankind. "God shall resolve to punish all the inhabitants of the earth for their acts of disobedience, not sparing a single one of them . . . but when he shall look upon gray-haired people moving their feet in prayers and youths learning the Qur'an, he shall show mercy toward them and mitigate their punishment" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 185).

Because of their high status with God, the bearers of the Qur'an deserve the love and respect of other men. As the Prophet shares with God and the Qur'an a special place in the hearts of Muslims, so, too, the bearers of the Qur'an share in this privilege because of their special relationship to the Qur'an. Thus the Prophet is said to have declared, as related on the authority of 'Ali, "The bearers of the Qur'an are they who are favored with the mercy of God. They are clothed with the light of God, instructed with the speech of God, and brought near to God. He who befriends them, befriends God and he who shows enmity toward them, shows enmity toward God" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 182). The bearers of the Qur'an must earn this great privilege. Before God their lives must be spent in prayer and thanksgiving. If misfortune befalls them they must turn to God in sincere repentance. As their reward shall be greater than that of other

men, so also shall be their responsibility. In short, they must be true bearers of the Qur'an in word and deed. Ibn Mas'ud, one of the first bearers of the Qur'an, said: "The bearer of the Qur'an must be distinguished by night when people sleep and by day when they are awake. He must be distinguished by his weeping when people laugh and by his silence when they clamor. He must be distinguished by his meekness when people are haughty and by his sorrow when people rejoice" (Qurtubi, I, p. 21). Still other characteristics distinguishing the bearer of the Qur'an are given in the following prophetic *hadith*: "It is not proper for the bearer of the Qur'an to be foolish like those who are foolish, to be angry like those who are angry, or to lose his temper. Rather he should forgive and pardon by means of the virtue of the Qur'an" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 516).

One of the most controversial points in the relationship of the Qur'an to its reciters has been the way in which the Qur'an must be recited. The principle behind this long controversy is to guard against the recitation of the Qur'an becoming a show of vocal excellence or musical virtuosity. Qur'an scholars have been divided on this issue. Some have adduced *hadiths* extolling musical chanting (*taghanni*) of the Qur'an, and others have cited equally accepted traditions enjoining a simple chant (*tartil*). Two modes of Qur'anic recitations came to be accepted: *tajwid* (making good, that is, musically beautiful) and *tartil* (a slow and deliberate, simple chant). Scholars, however, are unanimous in forbidding the use of musical techniques and rhythms commonly used in profane singing. Dignity of demeanor, softness of voice, and a sorrowful tone are among the qualities required of a good Qur'an reciter. It is related that the Prophet was asked, "Who would have the best voice for chanting the Qur'an?" He answered, "It is he who, when you hear him, you see that he fears God" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 482).

In a widely quoted *hadith*, the Prophet is said to have enjoined the Muslims, saying, "Adorn the Qur'an with your voices!" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 481). Those, however, who preferred a simple mode of recitation have turned this injunction around to read, "Adorn your voices with the Qur'an" (Qurtubi, I, pp. 11-12). In this case the emphasis is on the beauty of the sacred word rather than the voice of the reciter. Nevertheless, the human voice as a vehicle of transmitting the divine word could not be underestimated. Therefore *taghanni*, or musical chanting of the Qur'an, has become both a great virtue, highly praised by tradition, and a technical skill of the reciter, greatly valued by his audience. Yet the emotion to be evoked

is not one of joyful ecstasy (*tarab*) but rather of subdued sadness. The Prophet is reported to have said, "This Qur'an was sent down in sorrow. Weep, therefore, when you recite it. If you cannot weep, then pretend to weep. Chant it, for whoever does not chant it is not one of us" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 481). The relationship of chanting the Qur'an and profane singing (*ghina'*) could not be totally extirpated. A well-known prophetic *hadith* relates, "God listens more attentively to a man with a beautiful voice chanting the Qur'an than would a man to his singing girl" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 479).

The Qur'an is divided into 114 *surahs*, varying in length from 3 to 286 verses. But because one of the most meritorious acts of a Muslim is to recite the Qur'an in its entirety over a specified period of time, the Qur'an has been conveniently divided into thirty equal parts (*ajza'*) for that purpose. Tradition asserts that the Prophet recited the Qur'an in the presence of Gabriel every year during the month of Ramadan. The thirty-part division, therefore, is meant for the thirty days of that month. Other subdivisions of the thirty-part structure have also been constructed for the purpose of recitation over a longer or shorter period of time. In fact, a portion of the Qur'an is usually recited for every important occasion in the life of the Muslim individual and his immediate family as well as that of society at large.

The Qur'an has been regarded by Muslims not simply as a book in the usual sense but as a living and dynamic personality. It is the faithful companion of the Muslim throughout his journey from this world to the hereafter. Indeed, a Muslim journeys through this life in the Qur'an. The bearer of the Qur'an who completes a recitation and begins anew is therefore called the sojourning traveler (*al-hall al-murtahil*). Many traditions from the Prophet and the Shi'i imams declare such a person to be the best of men (see Majlisi, XCII, pp. 204-205; Qurtubi, I, p. 30 and many other places; and Ibn Kathir, VII, pp. 517ff.). Completing a recitation (*khatm*) of the Qur'an has been for Muslims a time of celebration and rejoicing. This event is best observed in traditional societies when a child completes the Qur'an under the tutelage of a Qur'an reciter. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, a famous reciter and scholar who lived during the rule of 'Ali, would lay his hand on the head of a student after completing a Qur'an recitation, bless him, and say, "Fear God, for I know no one better than you if you abide by what you know" (Qurtubi, I, p. 6).

Scholars have differed as to whether it is more meritorious to recite the Qur'an from memory or from a written text (*mushaf*). To learn the entire Qur'an by heart has been the goal of many Muslims. Hence tradition has laid great stress on the merit of teaching and learning the Qur'an. Likewise one of the greatest sins is to neglect the Qur'an so as to forget it (see Ibn Kathir, VII, pp. 488-489). Nonetheless, the majority of scholars have recommended that a reciter should look at a written text so that he may have the reward of recitation and sight or the blessing of the voice and vision (see Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 488-491). It is related on the authority of the sixth imam that "he who recites the Qur'an looking at a *mushaf* shall be granted good sight to enjoy for a long time . . . for there is nothing of greater hurt to Satan than the recitation of the Qur'an from a written text" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 204).

Reciting the Qur'an has been for Muslims a total experience, an act in which the entire person and even his environment share. Thus while it is regarded as a great blessing for a home to contain a copy of the Qur'an, it is an equally great sin to let the Book lie neglected. The fifth imam is said to have told his followers, "It is pleasing to me that a *mushaf* be kept in the house, for by means of it God drives away satans." His son Ja'far al-Sadiq, on whose authority this tradition was related, warned, "Three shall complain to God on the day of resurrection: a mosque in ruins whose people did not use it for prayers, a learned man among fools, and a *mushaf* left hanging in the house on which dust accumulated because no one took it up for recitation" (Majlisi, XCII, pp. 195-196). As for the blessing (*barakah*) of a Qur'an in a house, Anas ibn Malik, a close companion of the Prophet, related that the Prophet said, "The provisions of a house in which the Qur'an is recited shall be increased, and the provisions of a house in which the Qur'an is not recited shall diminish" (Ibn Kathir, VII, p. 511; and Majlisi, XCII, p. 200).

Popular Muslim piety has regarded the Qur'an as a mediator between man and God. It is the vehicle through which prayers are offered to God with the hope that they will be answered. We are told that a man complained to the Prophet of a sharp pain in his breast and was advised to "seek healing in the Qur'an, for God the Exalted says, 'It is healing of what is in the breast'" (Q. 10:57; Majlisi, XCII, p. 176). Shi'i piety in particular has emphasized this point because for Shi'is the imams and the Qur'an occupy a similar position of intercession and favor with God. Hence in many traditions the faithful are advised to perform prayers during which specific

verses of the Qur'an should be recited. Afterward, they should invoke God in the name of the Qur'an, the Prophet, and his descendants, the twelve imams (see Majlisi, XCII, pp. 113–114). I shall conclude this section with a prayer which the Prophet is said to have taught 'Ali and commanded him to recite after completing a full recitation of the Qur'an: "O God, I beg you for the modesty of those who are modest and the sincerity of those who are certain in their faith; for the companionship of the righteous and the worthiness of the truths of faith; for the riches of righteousness and safety from transgression; for worthiness of your mercy and the powers of your pardon; for the attainment of Paradise and salvation from the Fire" (Majlisi, XCII, p. 206).

### **The Principles and Development of Tafsir**

It has already been observed that the Qur'an has occupied some of the best minds of the Muslim community since the beginning of Islamic history. This profound interest in the Qur'an resulted in the science of *tafsir* broadly understood, whose various branches and development will be the subject of our present discussion. The place of the Qur'an in the community has received scant attention from Western scholars. The science of *tafsir* has, in contrast, been the object of much concern and study by Western Islamicists. A selected bibliography of Western sources on this subject appears at the end of this volume. In accordance with the primary aim of this work, we shall let Muslims speak about *tafsir* as they did about their devotion to the Qur'an.

Before discussing the nature of the Qur'an and the need that it be interpreted and understood, it may be wise to consider briefly some of the names and epithets by which it is known. This description will shed some light on the nature of the Qur'an and its function in the life of the Muslim community.

The most widely used name for the Qur'an is, of course, simply "Qur'an," which may best be translated as "the recital." (For the Qur'anic use of this word, see Q. 12:3; 27:76; and 75:17–18. For a discussion, see Tabari, I, pp. 94ff.) The word Qur'an is an intensive form of the verbal root *qara'a* meaning to read or recite and may be used to designate the entire book or a single verse or passage. Another general designation is *kitab*, meaning book, or, more specifically, recited collection of revelations. The word *kitab* is also used



to designate previous scriptures such as the Torah and Gospel. (For the Qur'anic use of this word see Q. 18:1 and for a discussion Tabari, I, p. 95.)

The Qur'an is also called *al-dhikr* (the remembrance) (see Q. 15:9 and 3:58). Tabari notes two meanings of the word *dhikr*. The first is "reminder," that is, from God "with which He reminded His servants, giving them knowledge of his *hudud* [bounds or limits], *fara'id* [obligations of prayers, fasting, and the like] and *ahkam* [moral and legal precepts]." The second meaning of *dhikr* is remembrance or honor for those who accept faith in it and in what it contains (see Q. 43:44; and Tabari, I, p. 99). The Qur'an has also been called *al-furqan* (the criterion distinguishing truth from falsehood or error; see Q. 3:3). This term has other meanings and uses which will be discussed in their proper contexts (see below, Q. 2:53).

These names and epithets are designations of the Qur'an as a whole. Its various parts have also been given particular designations. Thus the longest *surahs* (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10) are known as the seven long ones (*al-sab' al-tuwal*). The *surahs* that consist of one hundred or more verses are known as *al-mi'un* (the one hundreds). The seven longest *surahs* are also called *al-sab' al-mathani* (the seven *surahs* in which the number hundred is doubled). The word *mathani* has been interpreted as well to refer specifically to the opening *surah* (*al-Fatihah*), which consists of seven verses, as will be seen later. Some commentators, such as Ibn 'Abbas, interpreted the word *mathani* to mean repetition, hence designating those *surahs* in which parables or precepts are repeated more than once. Based on this view, some have regarded the entire Qur'an as *mathani* (see Q. 39:23; and Tabari, I, p. 103). Finally, the shorter *surahs* in which the dividing invocation, "In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate," is frequently used, are known as *al-mufassal* (that which is elaborately divided). It is related that the Prophet said, "I was given instead of the Torah the Seven Long Ones, instead of the Psalms the One Hundreds and instead of the Gospel *al-mathani*. I was specially favored with the *mufassal*" (Tabari, I, p. 100).

Western scholars have generally considered such words as Qur'an, *furqan*, *surah*, and so on as loan words (see, for instance, Arthur Jefferey, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*). Muslim scholars have generally, however, insisted that the Qur'an is all Arabic and that any foreign words in it are either words on which Arabs and non-Arabs agree or which were fully Arabicized before they came into the Qur'an. This assertion is based largely on the Qur'anic verses

declaring the Qur'an to have been sent down in Arabic (see, for example, Q. 12:2 and 39:28; see also Tabari, I, pp. 13–21). Tabari derived the word *surah*, for example, from the word *sur* meaning high enclosure or wall such as the wall of an ancient city. Tabari observes further that some have read the word *surah* as *su'rah* (with a *hamzah*), which means the better portion of a thing or separate sections, that is, a chapter. Thus the word signifies a distinct section of the Qur'an separated from what is before and after it (see Tabari, I, pp. 104–105).

The first prayer with which the Qur'an opens is a prayer for guidance, "Guide us on the straight way" (Q. 1:6). It is perhaps not an accident that this prayer is immediately followed in the second *surah* with the declaration: "This is the book in which there is no doubt, a guidance to the God-fearing" (Q. 2:2). The primary function of the Qur'an is therefore to guide the faithful to God. Hence it must be understood, pondered, and lived by. Yet the Qur'an is more than a moral or legal code; it is the transcendent Divine Word which became human speech. It thus entered into human history, sharing in its mundane ephemerality but also linking it to the transcendent.

The Qur'an has two dimensions, a human dimension as a source of moral guidance, which is termed *zahir* (exoteric or outer dimension), and an inner dimension (*batin*), which is free from the limitations of time and history. The Qur'an must therefore be understood on two levels, a concrete or exoteric level, which I shall call interpretation, and an abstract or esoteric level, which I shall call exegesis. These terms are somewhat arbitrarily used to denote *tafsir* and *ta'wil* respectively, as these came to be distinguished by Muslim commentators.

The Qur'an, broadly speaking, consists of moral and legal precepts, commands and prohibitions with regard to lawful (*halal*) and unlawful (*haram*) actions, promise (*wa'd*) of Paradise for the pious and threat (*wa'id*) of punishment in Hell for the wicked. It also contains reports of bygone prophets and their peoples, parables, similes and metaphors, and admonitions. Finally, it sets forth for the pious obligations (*fara'id*) of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, the rites of pilgrimage, and struggle (*jihad*) in the way of God. It is therefore deeply involved with the daily life of Muslim society. For this reason, in some way it had to reflect the problems of society directly and concretely. This it does in its very structure and history.

According to tradition, many of the verses of the Qur'an were revealed in answer to a specific personal or social problem. Hence

there are in the Qur'an verses which are clear in meaning, specific in reference, and thus liable to only one literal sense or interpretation. These constitute the *muhkam* (unambiguous) verses. There are, on the other hand, verses which are liable to more than one interpretation and so closely resemble one another in idiom and expression that they could lead those who are not firm in faith and knowledge to confusion and error. These are the *mutashabih* (ambiguous) verses, which constitute a major portion of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an describes itself variously as all *muhkam*, as all *mutashabih*, and as consisting of both *muhkam* and *mutashabih* verses. The Qur'an explains the first designation by declaring that it is "a book whose verses are precisely, clearly, or unambiguously set forth" (*uhkimat*). (See Q. 11:1.) Here the purpose of the *muhkam* is to provide clear guidance. With regard to the second designation the Qur'an says, "God has sent down the best speech, a *mutashabih* book," that is, one whose various parts resemble one another (see Q. 39:23). The word *mutashabih* here means resembling one another in verbal expression, not in meaning. The reference is thus to the linguistic excellence of the Qur'an and not to its precepts, commands, and prohibitions.

The third and most controversial statement is that asserting that the Qur'an is both *muhkam* and *mutashabih* (Q. 3:7). The *muhkam* verses here refer to those which are clear and precise in their meaning and must therefore be followed, whereas the *mutashabih* verses cannot be readily understood and must therefore be accepted in faith but not followed. This verse will be discussed at some length in its proper place. To conclude, it may be said that *muhkam* refers to verses whose meaning is apparent and are therefore in need of no interpretation. *Mutashabih*, on the other hand, is, in the view of the famous scholar of *tafsir* Badr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Zarkashi, "*mushkil* [problematic] because it . . . enters into the form [*shakl*] of something else whose form it assumes" (Zarkashi, II, p. 69). *Mutashabih* verses include references to the unknown of future events such as the day of resurrection, to the hand, face, and side of God, which are referred to in the Qur'an, and to precepts that have been suppressed or abrogated by other verses (see Zarkashi, II, pp. 69ff.)

An even closer expression of the Qur'an's involvement in the daily life and problems of human society is the principle of *naskh* (abrogation or suppression) of one verse by another. Abrogation may take one of several forms. The most common occurs when a legal

precept is superseded by a later one. In this case, the verse remains and is recited, but its command or prohibition is suppressed.

Another form occurs when a verse is suppressed altogether in both its precepts and recitation. This is a rare and controversial form. Finally, there are a few cases where the text of a verse is superseded or abrogated but its precept remains operative. We can clearly see from all this that the Qur'an has had to meet the exigencies of the daily life of the community even in its formation and final structure. Yet, among Muslim scholars there is no general agreement as to what verses are abrogated and by what verses. We shall have many occasions to return to this problem in this and subsequent volumes (see in this volume *surah* 2, verse 106). Some scholars have identified the abrogating verses with the *muhkam* verses and the abrogated verses with the *mutashabih* ones.

A final example of the Qur'an's involvement in human history, which also illustrates its timeless and transcendent dimension, is that of *zahr* and *batn* (outer and inner dimensions). This principle will be discussed more fully later in consideration of the principles of *tafsir* and *ta'wil* (interpretation and exegesis). Suffice it to say that the outer dimension of the Qur'an is that apparent or public meaning suggested by the literal sense of a verse. Its inner dimension is the level or levels of meaning known partially to the elect few but ultimately to God alone. These two dimensions have also been identified with the *muhkam* and *mutashabih* of the Qur'an. Having so far examined the nature and structure of the Qur'an, we shall now turn to the principles and development of its interpretation.

Early commentators such as Tabari used the terms *tafsir* and *ta'wil* interchangeably. In time, however, the two terms came to designate two distinct branches of the general science (*'ilm*) of the Qur'an. *Tafsir* means uncovering or unveiling, as when a woman unveils her face or when dawn unveils the sky of the darkness of night. *Tafsir* is therefore the illumination of the various meanings or designations of a Qur'anic verse or passage. It includes the elucidation of the occasion or reason for the revelation of a verse, its place in the *surah* to which it belongs, and its story or historical reference. *Tafsir* must also determine whether a verse or passage belongs to the Meccan or Medinan period of revelation, whether it is *muhkam* or *mutashabih*, abrogating or abrogated, and whether it has a general or specific reference or purport (see Zarkashi, II, pp. 146-148).

*Ta'wil* means the final end (*'aqibah*) of a matter, as the Qur'an says: "On a day when its [the Qur'an's] *ta'wil* [that is, fulfillment]