

Qurʾānic Hermeneutics

A thinker who wrote as widely and rapidly as Mullā Ṣadrā would naturally have drawn upon other authors' books, either by way of direct citation or indirect adaptation. Using the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-fātiḥa* as a case study, in the following chapter I will demonstrate just how indebted Ṣadrā's *tafsīr* is to the writings of his predecessors, amongst whom are some of the most important figures in Islamic thought. With respect to Ṣadrā's *Mafātīḥ*, which we encountered in the Introduction, we find many direct references to Ibn ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt* along with several references to Ghazālī's writings, particularly his *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* ("The Deliverer from Error"). S. J. Badakhchani, following the contemporary Iranian philosopher and seminarian Ḥasanzādah Āmuli, suggests that a later section of the *Mafātīḥ* is nothing more than a translation of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's (d. 672/1274) Ismāʿīlī Persian eschatological work, *Āghāz wa-anjām* ("The Beginning and the End").¹ Although upon closer inspection the section in question is reworked by Ṣadrā with more attention to detail, this may be the first indication that Ṭūsī's "influence" upon Ṣadrā's philosophical teachings is more a result of his familiarity with Ṭūsī's work as an Ismāʿīlī thinker rather than as a Twelver thinker.² With respect to Ṣadrā's theoretical understanding of scripture as laid out in the *Mafātīḥ*, however, it would be incorrect to say that it has been influenced by the work of Ṭūsī or Ghazālī. The only directly discernible influence on Ṣadrā's scriptural hermeneutics in terms of its theoretical articulation can be traced back to the work of Ibn ʿArabī, as will be discussed in the present chapter.

I have shown elsewhere how internal references within Ṣadrā's oeuvre can help us answer questions concerning the chronology of his compositions on the Qur'ān and its sciences.³ At times, however, such references can be misleading for the simple reason that Ṣadrā is known to have rewritten some of his earlier books, but which refer to texts that were definitively penned after the former works' completion (but before their revision). Although this kind of practice can often lead to a dead end with respect to dating particular texts within the Ṣadrian oeuvre, it is probably safe to assume that, on the whole, references to Ṣadrā's earlier writings in his later books are to be taken at face value. This is likely more true of later texts which noticeably modify or correct the positions and arguments mentioned in the earlier texts to which they refer.

It is with the above point in mind that we should seek to understand a remark in a fairly recent study by Sajjad Rizvi, who states that Ṣadrā's key theoretical works which deal with the Qur'ān, namely the *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān* ("The Ambiguous Verses of the Qur'ān"), the *Asrār al-āyat* ("The Secrets Behind the Qur'ān's Verses"), and the *Mafātīḥ* were written "as a preparation for his own incomplete mystical and philosophical commentary."⁴ This observation is surprising because we know, largely based on the dating provided by Rizvi himself, that these three books were written after Ṣadrā had completed most of his *tafsīrs*.⁵ With respect to the *Mutashābihāt* and *Asrār*, there is little in these two texts which would indicate that they were meant to function as preparations for Ṣadrā's *tafsīrs*. But with respect to the *Mafātīḥ*, Rizvi is not far from the mark.

The *Mafātīḥ*, like the *Mutashābihāt* and *Asrār*, was written toward the end of Ṣadrā's career. Unlike these two titles, the *Mafātīḥ*'s most significant discussions vis-à-vis the Qur'ān were originally a part of Ṣadrā's magnum opus, *al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fī l-asfār al-aqliyya al-arba'a* ("The Transcendent Philosophy: On the Four Intellectual Journeys"), commonly known as the *Asfār*.⁶ The section in question, namely Miḥtāḥ 1 of the *Mafātīḥ*'s twenty Miḥtāḥs or sections, deals with such topics as the nature of revelation and the different levels of the descent of God's Word and its correspondences to the inner layers of man's soul. Since the *Asfār* was written over a twenty-two year period (from roughly 1017/1608 to 1037/1628),⁷ it is difficult to determine when the theoretical sections on the Qur'ān (later to be incorporated into Miḥtāḥ 1 of the *Mafātīḥ*) were written. But we can be sure that these relevant sections were written concurrently with if not before most of Ṣadrā's *tafsīrs*. Miḥtāḥ 1 of the *Mafātīḥ*, therefore, occupies a special place amongst Ṣadrā's writings on the Qur'ān.

Lord of the Heart

Miftāḥ 1 is complemented by another brief text which is not to be found in the relevant sections of the *Asfār*, namely the introduction to the *Mafātīḥ* itself. Taken together, Miftāḥ 1 and the introduction to the *Mafātīḥ* can, generally speaking, be said to encapsulate Ṣadrā's esoteric hermeneutical vision of the nature of the Qur'ān.⁸ I will therefore turn my attention to Ṣadrā's pronouncements in the introduction to the *Mafātīḥ*, which will facilitate my analysis of Miftāḥ 1.

At the beginning of the *Mafātīḥ*, Ṣadrā tells his readers that he had been meaning to write this work for quite some time:

For some time now I have longed to bring forth the Qur'ān's meanings. [With] my previous reflections I attempted to walk its roads and [by means of] the way stations of the pious explore its paths. In order to attain this goal I would consult my soul [*nafs*], casting aside the arrows of my own opinion.⁹

Ṣadrā says that he was reluctant to carry out this endeavour because of the weight of the task itself.¹⁰ The passage above states explicitly that some preparatory work was required on the part of the author in order to undertake this task. These are the words of someone who had already written eleven independent commentaries upon various chapters and verses of the Qur'ān.¹¹ Shortly before this, Ṣadrā remarks that the work was written as the result of a spiritual experience which compelled him to bring forth what he knew of the Qur'ānic sciences. That this passage would precede the one cited above, where Ṣadrā expresses his wish to write the *Mafātīḥ*, may come as a surprise. It may come as even more of a surprise given that what follows the introduction, namely Miftāḥ 1, was written before the introduction to the *Mafātīḥ* itself, albeit in a much more condensed version. But the reasons for this are purely stylistic. The following lines are dramatic and compelling; they are written with vigour, a sense of urgency, and in mellifluous Arabic. They are, in effect, Ṣadrā's meditations after-the-fact, summarizing the end of his endeavours which he will go on to explicate in more or less straightforward fashion for the remainder of the introduction:

A command has issued from the Lord of my heart [*āmīr qalbī*], and a spiritual allusion has come forth from my innermost recesses [*waradat ishāra min sirr ghaybī*]. God's

judgment and decision have come to pass and He has decreed that some of the divine symbols [*al-rumūz al-ilāhiyya*] become manifest, and that the matters related to the Qur'ānic sciences, Prophetic allusions, secrets of faith, flashes of wisdom, esoteric glimmerings connected to the wonders of the glorious revelation, and the subtleties of Qur'ānic interpretation be brought forth.¹²

The wording here is very important. Ṣadrā was commanded by the Lord of his heart to bring forth the “divine symbols,” the “matters related to the Qur'ānic sciences,” and the “subtleties of Qur'ānic interpretation.” As it soon becomes apparent from the contents of Miiftāḥ 1, the fulfillment of this command was articulated in discussions dealing with such phenomena as the Qur'ān's use of allusory language and the senses of scripture.

Ṣadrā also notes in the introduction that the *Maḡātib* was an inspired work, since it was the result of an “opening” (*fath*):

The Master of the holy realm of the Divinity [*ṣāhib quds al-lāhūt*], the Owner of the Kingdom of the Dominion [*mālik mulk al-malakūt*], granted me a new opening [*fath jadīd*], made the sight of my insight piercing with His light, revealing to my heart an opening which drew me near¹³

Ṣadrā further remarks that this opening granted him new knowledge of the “treasures of the symbols of the divine realities [*kunūz rumūz al-ḡaḡā'iq*],”¹⁴ which, it will be recalled, he was commanded by the Lord of his heart to bring forth. This “opening” may be one reason why Ṣadrā would go on to incorporate the sections of the *Asḡar* having to do with the Qur'ān into Miiftāḥ 1. Yet this spiritual experience was also accompanied by a great burden of responsibility. Ṣadrā says, “I said [to myself] after this opening within myself [*fath li-naḡṣī*], ‘now is the time to begin mentioning the principles [*uṣūl*] from which the branches [of the Qur'ānic sciences] derive.’”¹⁵ This approach would be characterized by its sapiential perspective and would not delve too deeply into matters pertaining to exoteric exegesis, such as the fine points of Arabic grammar. He notes that excessive concern with language is characteristic of the approach of the exoteric scholars who “have the outward [*zāhir*] and the legal aspects [*ḡadd*],¹⁶ whereas we have the inward aspect [*bāṡin*] and the transcendent perspective [*maṡla'*]! It has been said, ‘He who comments [upon the Qur'ān] using his own opinion has concealed the truth [*fa-ḡad kaḡara*].’”¹⁷ Ṣadrā then provides us with a theoretical definition of *ta'wīl*:

As for *taʾwīl*, it does not spare nor leave anything out [*lā tubqī wa-lā tadhar*] [Q 74:28],¹⁸ for it comes—thanks be to God!—as a discourse [*kalām*] in which there is no crookedness, nor do doubt or confusion assail it.¹⁹

Before this definition of *taʾwīl*, Ṣadrā lists some of the spiritual prerequisites which are absolutely necessary in order for one to penetrate the Qurʾān's symbols.²⁰ The interpreter is expected to do the following:

- (1) Have patience and purity
- (2) Continuously profess the *shahāda* or statement of God's oneness
- (3) Undergo spiritual discipline
- (4) Spend time in solitary retreat
- (5) Abstain from the sciences and character traits of the common folk
- (6) Learn the "science of swimming in the Ocean (*baḥr*)"
- (7) Know the "language of the birds" (a reference to Q 27:16 and the allusive language of the Sufis)
- (8) Understand the "language of the Dominion" (*malakūt*)
- (9) Have access to the secrets of the "realms of the Divinity (*lāhūt*) and Invincibility (*jabarūt*)."

Although he does not elaborate at great length upon these conditions, nor is this exposition systematic, the point that Ṣadrā's wants to make is that without meeting these basic spiritual prerequisites, *taʾwīl* is impossible.

Yet he lays out another "condition" when it comes to interpreting the Qurʾān. He addresses his readers in the following manner:

O intelligent, discerning one! If you want to investigate the science of the Qurʾān, the wisdom of God and the principles of faith—that is, faith in God, His angels, books, messengers, and the Final Day [cf. Q 4:136]—then you need to return to the guardians [*ḥafaza*] of the secrets of the Qurʾān and its meanings, seek out its folk and those who bear it, and ask the "people of remembrance" about its contents. As He—exalted is His name—says, *Ask the people of remembrance if*

you do not know [Q 16:43], just as, with the rest of the arts and sciences, you would seek out their folk.²¹

It is the inner purity of the “people of remembrance” which makes them receptacles for the secrets of the divine book. They have died to themselves and live in God. To this effect, Ṣadrā cites an unnamed sage, and then, in the following order, Plato, Jesus, the Prophet, and ‘Alī. Commenting on ‘Alī’s saying, “God loves courage, even if it be in the slaying of a snake,” Ṣadrā says:

There is no snake like your soul, so slay it and purify it of the stain of its false beliefs and ugly opinions; or, subjugate it until it becomes a *muslim* in your hand. First cast it aside like the staff of Moses, then pick it up with your right hand after it has returned to its primordial nature [*sīratihā al-ūlā*, cf. Q 20:21] and original disposition [*fiṭratihā al-aṣliyya*]. It shall then live an intellectual life, striving for the Return [*al-ma‘ād*] and the final abode [*al-mathwā*].²²

Ṣadrā then advises those seeking knowledge of the Qur’ān but who do not have access to any of the “people of remembrance”:

O you in pursuit of the Real and the science of the First and the Last! If none of the folk of this kind—whom you can ask concerning the goal of the Qur’ānic sciences—are destined for you, then you should study this book. It contains beneficial principles [*al-qawānīn al-nāfi‘a*] pertaining to the knowledge of revelation, [and] is comprehensive in its foundations which allude to the secrets of *ta’wīl* [*al-muḥīṭ bi-qawā‘idihī mushīra ilā asrār al-ta’wīl*]. . . .²³

The *Mafātīh*, therefore, does not introduce Ṣadrā’s individual *tafsīrs*. Rather, it introduces the basic esoteric principles underlying these commentaries themselves. In other words, the *Mafātīh*, in keeping with its title, provides the keys which will allow one to access the hermeneutical perspective Ṣadrā adopts in his Qur’ān commentaries. And, more specifically, this perspective is most clearly articulated in Miftāḥ 1.

Although the introduction to the *Mafātīh* prepares us to read Miftāḥ 1 of the book’s twenty Miftāḥs, we would need to look in every possible corner within the text to see how Ṣadrā’s statements in the introduction relate to the remaining Miftāḥs (especially Miftāḥs

3–20). When Ṣadrā deals with, for example, God's attributes much later in the *Mafātīḥ*, we may have some idea of how his introduction can inform such a discussion, namely that the secrets contained within the Qur'ān reveal to the one who looks closely enough—that is, has the ability to “see”—the knowledge appropriate to a true understanding of God's attributes. The first Miiftāḥ, on the other hand, follows quite smoothly from the *Mafātīḥ*'s introduction, and the implications of the discussions there are clearly discernable when juxtaposed with the stated intent in the text's introduction. It is, therefore, in the first Miiftāḥ's directness that Ṣadrā's theoretical hermeneutics is best displayed. Indeed, most of the other parts of the *Mafātīḥ*, like the *Asrār* and to some extent the *Mutashābihāt*, function as elucidations on the points raised in the *Mafātīḥ*'s first Miiftāḥ.

Etiquette and Understanding

I have thus far not discussed Miiftāḥ 2 of the *Mafātīḥ*, which ostensibly contains a good deal of material on the Qur'ān. But, upon closer inspection, this part of the *Mafātīḥ* does not help us come away with a clearer picture of Ṣadrā's theoretical scriptural hermeneutics. Rather, it can be said to complement Miiftāḥ 1, but even then only in derivative fashion. The first section of Miiftāḥ 2 seeks to offer “allusions” (*ishārāt*) to the Qur'ān's “merciful purposes” (*al-aghrād al-rahmāniyya*) and “divine intentions” (*al-maqāṣid al-ilāhiyya*).²⁴ We learn here that the Qur'ān is fundamentally concerned with three things: the Origin (*mabda'*), the Return (*ma'ād*), and the path that one must take to his place of Return (*tarīq*). Significant for our purposes is the fact that Ṣadrā relates these same three realities to the structure of the *Sūrat al-fātiḥa* itself. This is because, as we will see later in this study, the Fātiḥa has traditionally been regarded as containing or “being” the entire Qur'ān. Despite these parallels, however, this section of Miiftāḥ 2 is confined to a general discussion that highlights the major topics dealt with in the Qur'ān: theology, cosmology, psychology, anthropology, law, and eschatology.

A later section of Miiftāḥ 2 deals with the use of one's opinion (*ra'y*) in understanding and interpreting the Qur'ān, while another discusses the Qur'ān's “ambiguous” (*mutashābih*) verses.²⁵ With respect to the former, it seems that Ṣadrā simply wishes to emphasize the fact that the intellectual effort to understand the Qur'ān, as well as the use of unveiling (*kashf*) for those who have access to this mode of knowing, are legitimate means to understanding the Word. As for

the latter, nothing significant emerges here which cannot be found in Ṣadrā's other writings, particularly the *Mutashābihāt*.²⁶

Certainly the most important aspect of Miftāḥ 2 is a section that outlines what we can call Ṣadrā's "practical" understanding of how to benefit from the Qur'ān. The title of this relevant part of Miftāḥ 2 tells us that the discussion is devoted to simply "alluding to the etiquette" that one must observe when trying to understand the Qur'ān. As Ṣadrā himself says, these guidelines provided here are taken from Ghazālī's famous *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences"), and can ultimately be traced back to earlier Sufi sources, particularly the *Qūt al-qulūb* ("The Nourishment for Hearts") by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996). Furthermore, it can be noted that the one significant departure from Ghazālī in Ṣadrā's listing is reworked from Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt*.²⁷ As given by Ṣadrā, then, these guidelines can be paraphrased in this manner:

- (1) Understanding the gravity (*'aẓama*) of the Word
- (2) Purifying the heart from sins and false beliefs
- (3) Having presence of heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*) and abandoning internal chattering (*ḥadīth al-naḥs*)
- (4) Pondering over (*tadabbur*) what is being recited
- (5) Investigating the implications of the meanings of every verse
- (6) Ridding oneself of those things which hinder one's understanding of the Word (*mawānī 'al-fahm*), such as paying excessive attention to the correct written form and oral articulation of the letters of the Qur'ān, blindly adhering to the interpretations of Qur'ānic verses given by the scholars of one's own school of thought, being engulfed (*istighrāq*) in the niceties of the Arabic language, and rejecting those exegetical remarks which do not come solely by way of transmission (*naql*)
- (7) Realizing that in every prohibition, command, promise and threat, it is the reader himself who is being addressed
- (8) Feeling the impact of the message, which can be realized by making oneself feel insignificant before the

Qur'ān and even physically assuming a posture of meagerness and humility when one reads verses which speak of God's punishments or threats, and expressing joy and happiness when one reads verses where God's promises of forgiveness are mentioned

- (9) Ascending (*tarraqī*) in degrees until one hears the recitation of the Word as coming from God, and not the self. There are three levels of "hearing the Word" (*samā' al-kalām*). They are, in ascending order, when the servant feels that he is facing God while reciting the Word, which is for the heedless (*ghāfilūn*); when the servant witnesses with his heart that God is addressing him while reading the Qur'ān, which is for the righteous (*ṣālihūn*) and appears to be an internalization of rule #7; when the servant sees the Speaker in the Word itself, which is for the those brought near to God (*muqarrabūn*)
- (10) Understanding that those verses which condemn the wicked are being addressed to the reciter, but that those verses which praise the righteous do not include the reciter.

As is the case with Ṣadrā's aforementioned spiritual prerequisites for those who wish to do *ta'wīl*, he does not go into detail in his Qur'ānic writings on how these etiquette-related guidelines pertain to his work on *tafsīr* as a whole. In other words, we have no textual evidence to suggest that this was Ṣadrā's preferred method all or most of the time he approached the Qur'ān. Likewise, we cannot say that these guidelines amount in any concrete fashion to a set of rules that Ṣadrā lays down on how to interpret the Qur'ān. All that we can say with respect to these guidelines in Miftāḥ 2 is that they are informal rules of physical and spiritual conduct for those who wish to internalize the teachings of the Qur'ān.

More broadly speaking, we cannot even say that Ṣadrā's *tafsīr* compositions are guided by any kind of formal rules of interpretation, contrary to what some scholars have surmised.²⁸ As pointed out in the Introduction, each of his *tafsīr* writings is an independent work sufficient unto itself. And, by extension, each *tafsīr* assumes a different exegetical stance vis-à-vis the Qur'ān, as it is ultimately guided by the discussions Ṣadrā wishes to bring to light within the context of the *sūra* in question.

Without *Miftāḥ* 1, therefore, we are left with very little concrete information on how Ṣadrā actually understands the Qur'ān as such. Thus, for the remainder of this chapter, my discussion will be limited to *Miftāḥ* 1, except for instances in which relevant texts from Ṣadrā's other writings (such as the *Asrār*) help complete the picture of his scriptural hermeneutics as outlined in *Miftāḥ* 1. But before turning to *Miftāḥ* 1, an overview of Ṣadrā's ontology is in order, since its basic principles inform the entire argument of this section of the *Mafātīḥ*. Without taking this preparatory step, it will be difficult to appreciate the text's discussions concerning the intimate relationship shared between the Qur'ān and being. As will be seen shortly, Ṣadrā only makes this connection in relatively vague terms, and this is because he assumes that his readers will be able to relate his theoretical pronouncements on the nature of the Qur'ān to his ontology.

Concept and Reality

Ṣadrā distinguishes between two senses of being (*wujūd*): there is its concept (*mafḥūm*), and then there is its reality (*ḥaqīqa*).²⁹ The reality of being, he says, is completely simple and indefinable, and is the most hidden thing. Following Aristotle's *Topics*,³⁰ Avicenna explains in his *Kitāb al-ḥudūd* ("The Book of Definitions") that in order for a thing to be defined, it must have a genus (*jins*) and differentia (*faṣl*):

An essential definition [*ḥadd*]³¹ is a statement which denotes the quiddity of a thing, namely the perfection of its essential existence, which is what is actualized for it in terms of its proximate genus and its differentia.³²

What is communicated in an essential definition, that is, when we know a thing's genus and differentia, is the quiddity (*māhiyya*) or the "what-it-is-ness" (that by virtue of which the thing is what it is) of its species.³³ Thus, when we bring together "animal" (genus) and "rational" (differentia), we are given the descriptive expression "rational animal." "Rational animal" conveys to us the quiddity of a particular species, namely "man," which is subsumed under the wider category "animal." By defining the species "man" as a "rational animal," man's quiddity or that by virtue of which man is a man (and not a horse, for example) is conveyed.

Being, however, has neither genus nor differentia, and thus is not susceptible to any form of definition. In other words, it cannot be defined since its quiddity cannot be conveyed.³⁴ Put differently, the

reality of being cannot be got at since there is nothing about being which allows it to be subsumed into any general category (genus), let alone a more particularized category of the genus (differentia). Yet if the reality of being is indefinable and hidden, its essence or *anniyya*,³⁵ Ṣadrā tells us,

is the most manifest of things in presence and unveiling,³⁶ and its quiddity the most hidden of them in conception and comprehension [*taṣawwur wa-iktināh*]. Its concept [*maḥṣūm*] is, of all things, the least in need of definition³⁷ and the most general of them in encompassment; its ipseity, in entification [*ta'ayyun*] and individuation [*tashakḥḥuṣ*],³⁸ is the most reified of all things that are reified since through it all things that are individuated are individuated, all things that come about come about, and all things that are entified and specified are entified, for it is individuated in its essence and entified in itself.³⁹

Describing the reality of being in rhymed form, Sabziwārī famously puts it like this:

Its concept is one of the most recognizable of things,
but its reality lies in utter hiddenness.⁴⁰

Being, Ṣadrā tells us, is actually “self-evident” (*badīhī*) in two respects: (1) by virtue of its simple givenness to us, which is tantamount to saying that the very fact or reality of being is itself self-evident;⁴¹ and (2) its notion or concept. Turning our attention to the first of these two, we notice that being is the very ground of our experience of reality, and is therefore the most general and comprehensive of things, since it applies to all things. This explains why any predicate with which we can qualify being is itself subsumed under being. Indeed, Ṣadrā tells us that “it is not possible to perceive being through that which is more evident and more well-known than it.”⁴² Since being is so all-pervasive, any attempt to define its reality will end up in error, since one can only define being through what is more obscure than it.⁴³ If, for example, we speak of “horses” or “books,” we can only do so with reference to existent entities, that is, entities that participate in some mode of being, even if these entities do not exist extra-mentally. In other words, the being of horses and books is what allows us to talk about them.⁴⁴

Yet being’s self-evidentiary nature is, in the final analysis, what veils it from us. It is the most proximate of things to us, and by

the same token it is the most distant of them as well. This order of being's self-evidentiary nature is concerned with its reality as it is self-evident by virtue of its very givenness, although it cannot be defined because of its fundamental hiddenness, which obtains because of its all-pervasiveness and manifestness.

With respect to the other sense in which being is self-evident, namely its concept, we can make concrete judgments about its structure. As a concept, in other words, being is not entirely hidden from us. When, for example, we are presented with the statement, "This is a horse," the notion "horse"—which is an existent in one form or another—immediately occurs to the mind. This understanding of being is what Izutsu refers to as the "preconceptual" notion of being,⁴⁵ since it forms the basis through which we understand the world. In a sense, the preconceptual notion of being resembles the reality or givenness of being, although, as we have just seen, the givenness of being refers to the very fact of its apparentness in its hiddenness and its hiddenness in its apparentness. The preconceptual understanding of being, insofar as individual existents are conceived by the mind, is simply a preparatory stage in which the concept of being is self-evident to the mind based on the apprehension of a term or concept, such as "horse." The concept of being, on the other hand, again mediated by a concept such as "horse," is what Izutsu refers to as a "secondary elaboration" of the conceived object, which is to say that the image is "a step removed from the concrete and intimate kind of presence in the consciousness"⁴⁶ afforded to the mind by the self-evidentiary nature of being through the concept encountered by the mind.

Izutsu's distinction between the preconceptual notion of being and the concept of being does not, technically speaking, affect one important point: the concept of being, however conceived, is intimately linked to the existence of quiddities.⁴⁷ Thus, however we conceive of being, when we attempt to understand it conceptually, we must posit a quiddity, since being as the most self-evident concept can only be known through particular quiddities.⁴⁸ These quiddities "emerge" by virtue of being's gradational nature as particularizations, or what are known as specifications (*takhaṣṣuṣāt*),⁴⁹ individuations (*tashakhkhuṣāt*),⁵⁰ and modes (*anḥā'*) of being.⁵¹

Hence the reality of being is unknown, although its concept is self-evident. In other words, the self-evidentiary nature of the concept of being is itself a given. Applied to things, which is that to which the concept of being must necessarily attach, the only way being can be conceptualized is through its quiddity since quiddity is what allows for the "concept" of being to arise in our minds in the first place.

That is to say, the concept of being cannot arise out of a vacuum, but rather through being itself. If we were to attempt to conceptualize being without particular references, we would be inquiring into the reality of being, to which we have no access. The reality of being, therefore, is indefinable and inaccessible, although its concept—which is signalled in the first instance by quiddities—can be accessed and, from this perspective, “defined.”

The Command's Descent

Early on in *Miftāḥ* 1, Ṣadrā employs several images to convey the significance of the Qur'ān. Some key points are made here which, when read in the context of Ṣadrā's treatment of the modes of descent of the Word, allow us to walk away with a clearer picture of his understanding of the nature of the Qur'ān. Alluding to an observation made in his introduction to the *Maḥāṭih*, Ṣadrā tells his readers that the Qur'ān, by its very nature, is meant to make human beings ascend. He notes that each of the Qur'ān's letters contains a thousand allusions and symbols, which is a fairly common trope in Sufi Qur'ānic exegesis. Ṣadrā likens the Qur'ān's letters to hunting nets which are outspread with meanings in order to capture the birds that are in the sky. The image used here, which Ṣadrā draws on in at least one of his *tafsīrs*,⁵² is quite telling. Every bird (i.e., “human soul”) finds its “sustenance” (*riḥq*) in the Qur'ān, but very few of them will be captured by the Qur'ān's hunting nets. Most birds are contented with taking what little sustenance they need in order to get by, like those human beings who read the Qur'ān only to obtain particular types of knowledge, such as legal injunctions. These forms of knowledge, if followed, will grant human beings salvation.⁵³ But there are other birds who seek a different kind of sustenance from the Qur'ān. They hover over the Qur'ān's hunting nets, seeking their nourishment from the Qur'ān's letters and sounds since they contain the meanings of God's Word.⁵⁴ Since their sustenance in the deepest sense is contained in the Word itself and not just in its surface meanings, they immerse themselves within the Qur'ān's universe and become its “prisoners.” These prisoners of the Qur'ān cannot but be captured by the Qur'ān's hunting nets, seeing as it is that they expend all their efforts grappling with its nets, but which, in the end, must necessarily overpower them.

In three instances the Qur'ān refers to itself as being or containing a “cure” (*shifā'*),⁵⁵ and the Prophet is reported to have said that “the Qur'ān is the cure.”⁵⁶ We are thus not surprised to find references

to the “hospital of the Qur’ān” (*shifā’-khāna-yi Qur’ān*) in Sufi literature.⁵⁷ Souls will naturally gravitate toward the Qur’ān since, as Ṣadrā remarks, it contains the cure to the greatest sickness which plagues the human condition, namely ignorance (*jahil*).⁵⁸ Hence, the deeper one is immersed in the Qur’ān, the more entangled he finds himself in its hunting nets, and the less ignorant he becomes. It is with this consideration in mind that we should read an important statement about the Qur’ān in one of Ṣadrā’s early *tafsīr* compositions. Here, he employs several other images to convey the book’s depth and significance. We find that ignorance, identified with blindness, is what keeps human beings fettered from attaining true life:

Every one of its chapters is an ocean saturated with gems of meaning and exposition; rather, it is a celestial sphere filled with the stars of divine realities and essences. . . . The verses are shining stars which adorn and illuminate the heaven of guidance, prophecy, and sanctity [*walāya*], because of whose flashes and illuminations man and jinn attain unto *the last configuration* [*al-nash’at al-ukhrā*]⁵⁹ [Q 53:47] and the abode of life, being freed from the darkness of blindness and deprivation, the punishments of the grave, and the fires of Hell.⁶⁰

We have already seen how Ṣadrā refers to the Word of God as that by virtue of which man “ascends.” By extension (and paradoxically), the less immersed/imprisoned one is in the Qur’ān, the more pinned down one is by other than it, which is tantamount to darkness, blindness, and ignorance. But what exactly is this book that contains the cure for the illnesses of man’s existential condition and allows him to ascend? Drawing on another image, Ṣadrā alludes to the Qur’ān’s nature by referring to it as a “rope” that descends from Heaven in order to save all those trapped in what Corbin would call the “cosmic crypt”⁶¹:

The Qur’ān is God’s firm rope [*ḥabl Allāh al-matīn*]⁶² which was sent down from Heaven in order to save those shackled in the cradle of satans and the abyss of those who have descended. It is one of God’s lights [*nūr min anwār Allāh*]: it contains guidance for wayfarers, and through it one can ascend from the lowest of worlds to the highest way stations [*manāzil*] of the ‘Ilīyyīn⁶³ and the most exalted levels of those seated upon *the seat of truth* [Q 54:55] and certainty. So read it, O impoverished one, and advance!⁶⁴

It is significant that Ṣadrā refers to the Qur'ān in the above-cited text from the *Maḥāṭib* as “one of God’s lights.” This reference, as we will see later in this study, is all the more important because of the emphasis placed in the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-fātiḥa* on the nature of light and its identity with God’s Essence. In the present context, it is worth noting that Ṣadrā does not provide us with a clear-cut definition of the nature of the Qur'ān. All we have to work with are several stock images, and in each case Ṣadrā employs them, his intention is to convey the salvific role of the Qur'ān and not its nature as such. The reason he does not attempt to provide a definition of the sacred book for us seems to be because he wants to identify the Qur'ān with being. Although Muḥsin Bīdārfar⁶⁵ and Latimah Peerwani⁶⁶ insist that Ṣadrā does this explicitly, there is not one clear-cut text in his oeuvre which makes this point.

Yet Bīdārfar and Peerwani are not mistaken in their insistence on Ṣadrā’s identification of the Qur'ān with being from one perspective, even if he does not explicitly make this connection. There is one text in *Miftāḥ* 1 in particular that provides us with a key piece to the puzzle. In the passage in question, Ṣadrā notes that the Qur'ān is one in its reality, but multiple in its levels of descent:

Although the Qur'ān is one reality, it has many levels in its descent [*nuzūl*]⁶⁷ and many names⁶⁸ in accordance with these levels. So in every world and configuration it is called by a name which corresponds to its specific station and particular rank.⁶⁹

As was seen above, Ṣadrā’s fundamental ontological stance is that there is one underlying reality, namely being, which in and of itself is indefinable. Yet we know of being through its many instantiations, all of which help define it in some limited fashion. The Qur'ān, likewise, cannot be defined, which is why Ṣadrā does not provide us with a definition of it, and limits himself to allusions of its true nature by employing symbolic imagery. Yet how is the Qur'ān one in its reality and multiple in its instantiations? The missing ingredient here, and which is essential to a proper understanding of Ṣadrā’s Qur'ānic hermeneutics, lies in the function of God’s Word.

Because the Qur'ān is God’s Word, it is not to be identified with being as such. As we will see in Chapters 4 and 6 of this study respectively, being can, strictly speaking, only be identified with God’s Essence (*dhāt*) and mercy (*rahma*). The primary reason being cannot be identified with the Qur'ān is because the Qur'ān, by virtue of being God’s Word, is itself an instantiation of being. That is to say, as soon

as there is “movement” within being as such, it will necessarily be delimited and hence “defined” in some sense. On the other hand, Ṣadrā also insists that God’s Word is to be identified with the divine Command “Be!” (Q 2:117):

The Word is the High Spirit which is said not to fall under the shade of “Be!” because it is the same as the word “Be!,” which itself is the same as the Command, for “Be!” is God’s Command [*amr*] through which things are existentiated.⁷⁰ There is no doubt about the fact that the Word [*qawl wa-kalām*] of the Real is above engendered things [*akwān*] and higher than them, since through God’s Word, actuality [*fi ‘l*], effectuation [*ta’thīr*],⁷¹ and engendering [*takwīn*] occur. So how can God’s Word fall under engendered existence [*kawn*]? He says, *God’s Word—it is the highest* [Q 9:40].⁷²

When God wills for His Word to emerge from its primordial silence and state of latency within the Essence, the Command sends out reverberations, which make up the “stuff” of the cosmos.⁷³ Yet the Word or Command⁷⁴ is “above” existent things, which allows us to understand why, in one sense, we can identify the Qur’ān—God’s Word—with being. Since God’s Word (*kalām*) is the first movement of being, that is, the first instance in which being makes itself known, it too is, in a sense, hidden and yet completely manifest. This explains why the cosmos only comes about through the Word and can be identified with it.⁷⁵

Employing the language of theoretical Sufism, Ṣadrā identifies the cosmos with the articulation of the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-rahīmān*), a term based on a *ḥadīth*⁷⁶ and made popular by Ibn ‘Arabī.⁷⁷ Ṣadrā identifies the Breath of the All-Merciful with expansive being (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*) and the Real through whom creation takes places (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*).⁷⁸ Following Ibn ‘Arabī, he likens this Breath to human breath. Just as human breath gives rise to articulated forms through the act of speaking, so too do the various levels of being take on concretized form within God’s Breath, that is, through His act of speaking.⁷⁹ In other words, just as the forms of words become articulated in human breath (this being nothing other than the outward manifestation of an inward form), so too do the things which are formed within the divine Breath take on corporeal form through God’s act of existentiating, effectively bringing the latent possibilities contained within God’s “mind”⁸⁰ from potentiality

into actuality.⁸¹ God's Self-knowledge is thus made manifest (*izhār*)⁸² through His Breath, bringing it from the Unseen to the seen until the Command is uttered.⁸³

God's Command itself, however, has levels. For if this were not the case, then all of His Commands would have the same ontological status, which would mean that His Word would ontologically be on the same level as, for example, His creatures, who are lesser manifestations of the Word or Command. Strictly speaking, the Word consists of three levels: the highest, the mid-most, and the lowest.⁸⁴ God's Word at the highest level is referred to by Ṣadrā, following the wording of a well-known Prophetic supplication, as the Perfect Words (*al-kalimāt al-tāmmāt*):

The highest level of the Word is the Word itself in terms of its principal purpose [*maqṣūd awwalī*], there being no other purpose beyond it because of the nobility of its existence, the perfection of its being, and because of its being the final goal [*ghāya*] of whatever is beneath it.⁸⁵ This is like God's originating the World of the Command through the Command "Be!" and nothing else. These are God's Perfect Words [*al-kalimāt al-tāmmāt*] which are never exhausted, nor do they perish.⁸⁶

Ṣadrā goes on to tell us that the highest form of the Word corresponds to the Originating Command (i.e., the world of the Decree, *qadāʾ*); the mid-most to the engendering Command (i.e., the world of temporal measuring out, *qadar*); and the lowest to the prescriptive Command.⁸⁷ The engendering Command must be obeyed, whereas obedience to the prescriptive Command is entirely man's choice. The engendering Command must be obeyed since human beings do not have a say in whether or not they will come to exist. The prescriptive Command, on the other hand, corresponds to God's rules as laid out in the religious law.⁸⁸

The originating Command, being ontologically higher than both the engendering and prescriptive Commands, is of a completely different order. The intellective and disembodied forms of being which emerge from the Command are known as God's "Words." As intermediaries between God and His creatures, the function of these Words of God is to carry out His will in the created order.⁸⁹ Just as human commands—which proceed from human volition—come about through the function of our words, so too do the Perfect Words proceed from

God's Command.⁹⁰ And, just as the individual letters that make up the words of a human command arise spontaneously—that is, not gradationally—our words carry out our commands in a manner that is more primary than the actual objects of our commands. Likewise, God's Words embody His Command and are thus complete and perfect, since they come about as a direct result of the originating Command. That which is the object of the Command, namely the things in the cosmos (all of which come into being by virtue of the Command "Be!"), are thus weaker in being and less potent in effects than the Perfect Words themselves. Since these words are "Perfect," they inform the less perfect words, which are nothing but the shadows of the Perfect Words.⁹¹

God's Word is therefore the mode in which He reveals His will to the cosmos. His Word is the "stuff" of the cosmos since the cosmic order is nothing but the articulated form of the originating Command "Be!," which means that all the beings in the cosmos are simply instantiations of the Perfect Words which themselves are the primary instantiations of the originating Command. The highest level of God's Word, that is, His most principal Command which is identified with the Qur'ān, is therefore the prototype of being.⁹² As the scroll of being, the Qur'ān's verses are everywhere, since they are entities of being which are to be found in the parchment of the cosmic order:

Just as when the Command becomes an act, as in His saying "Be!," and it is [Q 2:117], when the Word becomes individuated [*tashakhkhaṣa*] and descends, it becomes a book.⁹³ The scroll [*ṣaḥīfa*] of the being of the created world is the book of God [*kitāb Allāh*], and its signs [*āyāt*] are the entities of the existent things [*a'yān al-mawjūdāt*]: *In the alternation of night and day, and in what God created in the heavens and on earth, are signs for a people who are God-wary* [Q 10:6].⁹⁴

The fact that the Qur'ān is the prototype of being explains why Ṣadrā does not attempt to define the Qur'ān's nature. The Qur'ān is not being as such, since, as the Word, it emerges through a delimitation of being. But, since it is the first delimitation of being, the Word of God cannot properly be encompassed.⁹⁵ It is, as the highest of the Perfect Words, the most inaccessible of them as well. Like the Intellect in Neoplatonism which contains all the archetypal forms and thus "is" the forms, so too can we say that the Qur'ān contains all of being and "is" being.

The Soul's Ascent

In his *tafsīrs*, Ṣadrā occasionally alludes to the correspondences which exist between the Qur'ān and man. He tells us, for example, that all of the Qur'ān's verses are "hidden shells containing valuable and precious pearls, every one of which corresponds to the soul of man."⁹⁶ As is the case with his other theoretical discussions concerning the Qur'ān, Ṣadrā's most important treatment of the correspondences shared between the Qur'ān and man is to be found in Miiftāḥ 1 of the *Maḥāṭib*. In one key passage, he addresses a version of the famous Sufi doctrine of the Qur'ān's senses:

Know that the Qur'ān, like man, is divided into a manifest [*alan*] and hidden dimension [*sirr*], each of which has an outer [*zahr*] and inner [*baṭn*] aspect. Its inner aspect has another inner aspect known only to God: *and none knows its interpretation but God* [Q 3:7].⁹⁷ It has also been related in the *ḥadīth*, "The Qur'ān has an outer and inner aspect." Its inner aspect consists of up to seven inner dimensions [*abṭun*] which are like the levels of man's inner dimensions, such as the soul [*nafs*], heart [*qalb*], intellect [*ʿaql*], spirit [*rūḥ*], innermost mystery [*sirr*], and the hidden and most hidden [*al-khaṭī wa-l-akhfāʾ*].⁹⁸

Although the above-cited text occurs quite late in Miiftāḥ 1 and Ṣadrā does not develop it in any significant fashion, some of the earlier discussions in Miiftāḥ 1 shed a good deal of light on his statement concerning the relationship shared between the Qur'ān and man. At the beginning of Miiftāḥ 1, Ṣadrā makes the point that outward faculties will only be able to perceive the outward realities of things. The more outward and exoteric one's outlook, the more exoteric his vision of reality. Ṣadrā gives the example of Abū Lahab and Abū Jahl. Both of these individuals were eloquent in Arabic, yet neither of them saw the Qur'ān for what it was.⁹⁹ Their inner sight was blinded by the defilement of exterior forms, and hence their hearts were unable to perceive the truth of the Prophet's message.¹⁰⁰ The more one is immersed in outward forms, the less opportunity will he have to purify his inward state. The less purified his inward being, the less will he be able to perceive inward realities.

Yet Ṣadrā clearly does not limit his criticisms of exoteric individuals to the early enemies of Islam. There are many Muslim scholars who, despite their knowledge and formal learning of the Islamic sciences,

when it comes to the Qurʾān, do not even “hear” one of its letters as they should be heard, and thus do not truly understand its words.¹⁰¹ Ṣadrā makes it very clear that, when interpreting the Qurʾān, one cannot depart from conventions of the Arabic language, since this can only lead to mistaken interpretations of scripture.¹⁰² At the same time, there is a difference between remaining faithful to the written Word and being confined by its most outward expressions (one of the *maṭwāni* ‘*al-fahm* in the etiquette-related guidelines listed in Miftāḥ 2). In his Persian work *Sih aṣl* (“The Three Principles”), which is anything but mild in its condemnation of the exoteric ‘*ulamā*’, Ṣadrā makes his point clear:

That which Zamakhsharī [d. 538/1144] and his likes understand from the Qurʾān is not, in reality, knowledge of the Qurʾān. Rather, it goes back to the sciences of lexicography, grammar, verbal expressions, and dialectical theology [*kalām*]. But knowledge of the Qurʾān is other than these sciences, just as the skin and husk of man is not man in reality, but only metaphorically. This is why, when one of the people of the heart [*aṣḥāb al-qulūb*]¹⁰³ read [Zamakhsharī’s *tafsīr*,] the *Kashshāf* [“The Discloser”], he said to its author, “You are one of the scholars of the husk [*qishr*].”¹⁰⁴

The famous exegete Zamakhsharī and his likes are on the receiving end of Ṣadrā’s criticisms here because they approach the Qurʾān through exoteric lenses, devoting the bulk of their reflections on scripture to issues related to grammar, language, theology, and law. The correspondence between the Qurʾān and man in this text is telling. Ṣadrā likens the outer reality of the Qurʾān to the outer reality of man, just as he likens the inner reality of the Qurʾān to the inner reality of man. The most superficial aspect of scripture is its husk, just as the most superficial aspect of man is his outward form or “skin.”

Returning to Miftāḥ 1 of the *Mafātīḥ*, Ṣadrā again draws on the image of husks and outer coverings in discussing the relationship between the Qurʾān and man. This time, however, he juxtaposes the image with the necessary complement to the outward, namely the inward:

The Qurʾān has degrees and ranks, just as man has levels and stations. The lowest level of the Qurʾān is like the lowest level of man:¹⁰⁵ the Qurʾān’s lowest level is what is contained in the book’s binding and covering [*jild wa-aghḷāf*], just as the lowest rank of man is what is in the outer covering and