

Early Sufi Qur'an Interpretation



THE QUR'ANIC COMMENTARY ATTRIBUTED TO JA'FAR AS-SADIQ (THE SIXTH IMAM)

INTRODUCTION

Early Sufi Qur'anic interpretation offers a distinctive set of challenges and an equally distinctive depth of riches. The Qur'an is composed in a nonlinear and non-narrative fashion. Sufi exegesis, by following the Qur'an in order, reflects the "scattering" and nonlinear aspects of the original text. In addition, instead of marginal comments alongside the Qur'an or full treatises in which substantial Qur'anic passages are cited in full and discussed, the commentaries of early Sufis have come down to us in the form of discussions instigated by the mention of a key Qur'anic word that can then suddenly jump to a new Qur'anic term and a new discussion. For the educated Muslim, infused with the Qur'anic voice, such a technique is not unexpected. But any audience not so imbued with the Qur'anic text will need some explanations, and even with explanations may find the technique jarring at first. Finally, Sufi interpretation plays on some key Sufi technical terms, a play that demands explanation of the meaning of those terms within Sufi thought.

The first example of Sufi exegesis is in the form of a collection of sayings attributed to Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (the trustworthy) (d. 148/765).¹ This collection brings up the intriguing issue of the relationship of early Sufism

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

(Islamic mysticism) to Shi'ism (the Islamic community that recognizes a series of leaders starting with 'Ali as their Imams or guides). According to Shi'ite belief, the prophet Muhammad entrusted the spiritual leadership (the *imamate*) of the Muslim community to his closest male heir, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, who had married his daughter Fatima. 'Ali, the first Imam, passed on the leadership to his first son, Hasan, the second Imam. Hasan passed it on to his brother Husayn, the third Imam. Husayn was killed fighting against the Caliph Yazid at the battle of Karbala', the central tragic event in Shi'ism. One of the few survivors of Husayn's family, his son 'Ali, became the fourth Imam, and 'Ali's son Muhammad Baqir, the fifth. Most Shi'ite groups are in agreement, then, that the first six Imams are:

1. 'Alī
2. Hasan ibn 'Alī
3. Husayn ibn 'Alī
4. 'Alī ibn Husayn
5. Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Husayn, al-Bāqir
6. Ja'far ibn Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣādīq

Ja'far is a central figure in Islamic tradition. Although Shi'ites and Sunnis accept the same basic principles of the *shari'a*, they differ on their view of the authority and leadership role of the Islamic community, and in aspects of Qur'anic interpretation. It was around Ja'far that the Shi'ite community formed itself as an explicit and articulate version of Islam. To Ja'far are attributed an enormous set of alchemical and astrological writings, and he is considered by tradition to have been the teacher of the famous alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan, although modern scholars have cast doubt on the authenticity of the writings attributed to Ja'far. Theological writings are attributed to Ja'far, and he is said to have had a position between determinism and free will. The legal writings attributed to Ja'far are the basis for what is called the Ja'fari school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Ja'far's Sufi commentary comes down primarily through the collection of mystical commentaries made by Sulami. What is immediately striking is the lack of any particularly Shi'ite slant to the comments. These Sufi interpretations attributed to Ja'far would be a major influence in the development

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

of mystical interpretations of the Qur'an. Did early Shi'ite views of *ta'wil* (symbolic interpretation) help found mystical commentary? Have the Shi'ite aspects of Ja'far's commentary been edited out by later Sufi compilers? This question becomes even more intriguing with the discovery of two manuscripts that partially overlap with the Sulami version of Ja'far's Qur'an commentary, but contain explicit Shi'ite references.² In addition, there is a single manuscript of the Sulami-Ja'far that contains another explicit Shi'ite commentary in which the family of the Prophet (Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn) are given cosmic and mystical roles.³

The translation below will use the Sulami-Ja'far, which is the only text so far to be edited, but it will also include the openly Shi'ite passage from the anomalous Sulami-Ja'far text to give a sense of what kind of Shi'ite mystical commentary may have also been included in the Ja'far text.

The Sulami-Ja'far commentary is striking for the vividness and self-confidence, at an apparently very early period, with which it offers a strong mystical interpretation of the Qur'an, focusing on the key themes of passing away (*fanā'*) and abiding (*baqā'*). Sometimes several interpretations of a given verse will be ascribed to Ja'far, each introduced by the phrase "Ja'far said" or "As-Sadiq said." Although the commentary is unified around the general theme of mystical union with the divine beloved, the style of the commentary varies. Some comments are short and cryptic, others are long and sustained. The selections below focus on the following themes: (1) Shi'ite interpretation of the "names" known by Adam as the key members of the family of Muhammad; (2) interpretation of the Qur'anic Moses stories as a paradigm for Sufi mystical experience; (3) interpretation of the Qur'anic accounts (53:1-18) of Muhammad's prophetic vision; (4) spirituality of ritual Islam, the Ka'ba, and the orientation of ritual prayer as symbolic of Abrahamic intimacy with the divine; (5) the Sufi stress on an interior interpretation of Qur'anic accounts of the afterlife; and (6) examples of early Sufi letter symbolism.

The Shi'ite Passage from Ja'far: The Five Names

2:27: "Adam received from his lord the names."

[Ja'far said:] Before any of his creation existed, God was. He created five creatures from the light of his glory, and attributed to each one of them, one of his names. As the Glorified (*mahmūd*), he called his Prophet Muḥammad [which also means "the praised" or "the deserving-of-praise"]. Being the Sublime (*'alī*) he called the Emir of believers 'Alī. Being the Creator (*fāṭir*) of the heavens and earth, he fashioned the name

Fāṭima. Because he had names that were called [in the Qur'an] the most beautiful (*ḥusnā*), he fashioned two names [from the same Arabic root] for Hasan and Ḥusayn. Then he placed them to the right of the throne.⁴

Ja'far's Interpretation of Qur'anic Accounts of Moses

The Qur'anic Moses (*Musa*) is a prototype of the mystical knower (*'arif*), but the Qur'anic accounts of Moses stress more both the intimacy and the intensity of his encounter with the deity than the character of the knowledge he attains. Like Abraham (*Ibrahim*), who was known as the intimate companion (*khalīl*) of the divine, Moses is also renowned for the intimacy of his relations with the deity. In Sura 19:51–52 Moses is said to be brought near the divine presence as a confidant (*najīyyan*). There is a major tradition in Islam of intimate conversation (*munājāt*) as a form of private prayer and petition (*du'ā*), though such prayer is not as well known as the performed ritual prayer (*ṣalaḥ*).⁵ This intimate relationship of human and divine becomes one of the central features of Sufi language. Some of the most moving passages of Sufi literature will be in the form of *munājāt*.

Yet this intimacy coexists with graphic evocations of awe in the face of the transcendent. In the account of Moses' vision of the divine, the divine presence is so strong that Moses cannot look at it directly; instead he is told to look at the mountain which is destroyed as it encounters the presence of the deity. Moses' vision at Mt. Sinai (*Ṭūr as-Sinīn*, or simply *aṭ-Ṭūr*) is compared to Muhammad's prophetic vision of the lote tree of the furthest limit (53:14). The commentary on the vision of Moses (or rather nonvision, since Moses never really sees the deity) is used to discuss the central Sufi concepts of *fanā'* (passing away or annihilation of the ego-self), *baqā'* (the abiding of the person in union with the divine), and *balā'* (the trial or tribulation that is an essential aspect of Sufi spirituality).

In the Qur'anic account of Moses and the fire, there is a Qur'anic equivalent (at least in Sufi interpretations) of the biblical "I am that I am" (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*): "I, I am your lord" (*innī anā rabbuka*).⁶ This duplication of the "I" is used by Sufis in a manner similar to Jewish and Christian exegetes of the "I am that I am" to deny any definable essence or quiddity of the divine. For many Sufis, it is divine self-revelation; more as act than as content, that is the only true knowledge of the divine. In his commentary, Ja'far supplies an explanatory dialogue in which the deity and Moses engage in a more explicit discussion, with the grammatical duplication (I, I am your lord) discussed in terms of the experience of awe and the moment of mystical annihilation in the divine.

The final Qur'anic passage on Moses discussed in this excerpt from Ja'far involves the appearance of Moses before the Pharaoh. After the magic of Moses overcomes that of the Pharaoh's sorcerers, the sorcerers acknowledge the God of Moses, saying, "We believe in the lord of the two worlds"—usually interpreted as the lord of heaven and earth. The Pharaoh threatens them with mutilation and crucifixion for turning their loyalty to the God of Moses and Aaron (*Hārūn*). Their response, "No harm: to our lord is the return" becomes the occasion for a Ja'farian meditation on the torment, trial, or testing (*balā'*) that each Sufi must pass through on the path to union with the beloved, a theme that will be central to the passages from Junayd in Chapter 8 of this volume.

The commentaries of Ja'far and of Tustari presuppose intimate knowledge of the Qur'an. A simple word or phrase from the Qur'an is given and the commentary follows. The reader is expected to know from that word or phrase the entire passage. In this chapter, the entire passage is given in each case, so that the reader will be able to consult it. To indicate that the full citations of the passage were not part of the original text attributed to Ja'far and Tustari, but are the translator's explanatory interpolations, such passages have been italicized.

JA'FAR'S COMMENTARY ON THE QUR'ANIC MOSES

7:142 *We designated for Musa thirty nights and we completed them with ten more; the appointed time of his lord was thus complete at forty nights. Musa said to his brother Harun: "Govern in my place among my people and act in the best interest; do not follow the way of those who would cause corruption."*

7:143 *When Musa came at our appointed time and his lord spoke to him, he said: "Lord, show me that I might gaze upon you." He said: "You will not see me. Look at the mountain. If it stays in place, you will see me." But when its lord appeared to the mountain, he caused it to shatter and Moses was struck down unconscious. When he awoke, he said: "Glory to you! I have turned back to you in repentance and I am the first of the believers."*

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

“When Musa came to our appointed time and his lord spoke to him.” Ja‘far said: The appointed time was the time for seeking a vision. Ja‘far also said: Musa heard words coming forth from his humanity and attributed the words to him [the deity]⁷ and he spoke to him from the selfhood of Musa and his servanthood. Musa was hidden from his self and passed away from his attributes (*ṣifātibi*). His lord spoke to him from the realities of his meanings. Musa heard his own attribute from his lord, while Muhammad heard from his lord the attribute of his lord and thus was the most praised (*aḥmad*) of the praised (*maḥmūdīn*). Therefore the station of Muhammad was the lote tree of the furthest boundary while the station of Musa was aṭ-Ṭūr [Mt. Sinai]. When God spoke to Musa on Ṭūr, he annihilated its attributes so that no vegetation has ever appeared upon it and it is the abode of no one.

He said: “Lord, show me that I might gaze upon you!” Ja‘far said: “He confided in his lord concerning the matter of seeing him because he saw the phantom of his⁸ words upon his heart.” He replied: “You will not see me,” that is, you are not able to see me because you pass away. How can that which passes away (*fānin*) find a way to that which abides (*bāqīn*)?

“Look at the mountain.” Ja‘far said: The mountain was struck by the knowledge of beholding, was split and shattered. The mountain was destroyed by the mere mention (*dhikr*) of beholding its lord and Musa was struck down upon seeing the mountain fall to pieces. How would it be, then, if one were to behold his lord with his own eyes, face to face! The lord’s face-to-face vision in respect to the servant is the annihilation of the servant.⁹ The servant’s face-to-face vision of the lord and in the lord is enduring.¹⁰

He said: Three things are impossible for servants in regard to their lord: manifestation, contact, and insight. No eye can see him, no heart attain him, and no intellect intuit him. The origin of intuition is innate disposition; the root of connection is the interval of distance; the root of witness is apparition.¹¹

Concerning his saying “You will not see me. Look instead at the mountain,” Ja‘far said: He occupied him with the mountain and then manifested himself. Were it not for Musa’s preoccupation with the mountain, he would have been killed, struck unconscious, never to awake.

Concerning his saying “Glory to you! I have turned back to you in repentance,” Ja‘far said: He affirmed the transcendence of his lord, acknowledged toward him his own weakness, and disavowed his own intellect. “I have returned to you in repentance”: I have returned to you from my self and no longer rely upon my knowledge. Knowledge is what you have taught me and intellect is what you have graced me with. “And I am

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

the first of the believers”: That is, surely you [Allah] cannot be seen in the world.¹²

- 20:9 *Has the account of Musa reached you?*
 10 *How he saw a fire and said to his people: “Stay behind, I make out a fire. Perhaps I can return from it with an ember or find at the fire some guidance.”*
 11 *When he approached it, he was called: “O Musa!*
 12 *Indeed I, I am your lord. Take off your sandals. You are in the sanctified valley of Tuwā.*
 13 *I am the one who selected you, so listen to what is revealed!*
 14 *I am Allah, there is no god but I. Worship me and perform the prayer in remembrance of me.”¹³*

20:11–12 “When he came to it, a voice called out: O Musa, I, I am your lord.” Ja‘far said: Musa was asked “How did you know that the call was the call of the real?” He said: Because he annihilated me, then encompassed me, and it was as if all the hairs on my body were speaking from all sides about the call, and were themselves on their own power responding to the call! When the lights of awe encompassed me and the lights of majesty and *ja-barūt* addressed me, I knew that I was being addressed on the part of the truth.¹⁴ The beginning of the address, “Indeed, I” was followed by another “I.” This repetition of the “I” indicated to me that no one but the real can refer to himself with two consecutive phrases. I was astonished and that was the way-station of passing away. So I said: You, you are that which has endured and will endure and Musa has no station with you nor does he dare to speak except that you make him endure in your enduring and give him your attribute so that you are the addresser and the addressee together. He replied: No one can bear my address but I and no one can respond but I. I am the speaker and the spoken-to and you are in-between, a phantom upon whom falls the way-station of speaking.

26:48–50

They said: we believed in the lord of the two worlds!

The lord of Mūsa and Hārūn

He said: “You believed in him before I gave you permission.

He is your chief who taught you sorcery: you will surely know!

I will cut off your hands and legs, alternatively, and crucify you all together.”

They said: “No harm. To our lord is our return.”

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

"They said: 'No harm, To our lord is our return.'" Ja'far said: Whoever feels the trial (*balā'*) in love is not a lover. Rather, whoever witnesses trial in it is not a lover. Rather, whoever does not take pleasure in the trial in love is not a lover. Do you not see that when the first signs of love came upon the sorcerers, their own destinies faded away and became of little concern through the submission of their spirits in the witness of their beloved, so that they said: "No harm"?

Ja'far's Interpretation of Muhammad's Prophetic Vision

While Moses looked at the Mountain, which was obliterated by the divine theophany, Muhammad is said in the Qur'an to have gazed upon "it" (the antecedent is never specified) in such a way that his eye neither swerved aside nor exceeded its appropriate function. Exactly what Muhammad saw (the deity, the angel Gabriel, etc.) and what the Qur'an means by saying "his eye neither swerved nor exceeded" are central themes of Sufi meditation on mystical experience and the possibility of vision or witness (*shahāda*) of the divine. The interpretations attributed to Ja'far of this famous passage are also representative of another aspect of Islamic interpretation: the attribution to one person of several different interpretations. Thus Ja'far is said to have given at least three interpretations to the opening Qur'anic oath (53:1), "by the star when it falls (*hawā*)."

What is central to the Qur'anic passage, and brought out further by Ja'far, is the play between *hawā* (to fall, to set) and the homonym used later on to mean desire. The Qur'an announces that Muhammad does not speak out of desire (*hawā*), as do, it is implied, poets who are inspired by the *jinn*. Muhammad, as Ja'far goes on to make explicit, speaks out of the divine command (*amr*) and prohibition (*nuhā*). Not only does he proclaim his message out of the divine command, but he completes the Islamic way of life, the *shari'a*, by refining the commands and prohibitions that were central to all previous prophetic communities.

As in all Sufi interpretations of these verses, the ambiguity over the object seen (*him/it*) becomes a centerpiece of linguistic play and mystical meditation. Because we are in the context of *fanā'* (passing away) in which the Sufi passes away in mystical union with the divine, the standard grammatical distinction between self and other, human and divine, reflexive and nonreflexive, begins to break down. At these points the translations make use of the locution *him(self)* to indicate the ambiguity of the object pronoun and the breakdown of the reflexive/nonreflexive grammatical distinction at the point of mystical union.

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

JA'FAR'S COMMENTARY ON MUHAMMAD'S VISION

Sūrat an-Najm (The Sura of the Star) 53:1-12

*By the star when it falls
Your companion has not gone astray nor is he deluded
He does not speak out of desire
It is nothing less than an inspiration inspired
Taught to him by one of great power
And strength that stretched out over
While on the highest horizon
Then it drew near and descended
At a distance of two bows' length or nearer
He revealed to his servant what he revealed
The heart did not lie in what it saw
Will you then dispute with him on his vision?*

Sūrat an-Najm, 53:13-18

*He saw it descending another time
At the lote tree of the furthest limit
Therein was the garden of sanctuary
When there enveloped the tree what enveloped it
His gaze did not turn aside nor did it overreach
He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs.*

53:1-12 "By the star when it falls" (*hawā*). Ja'far said: This is the way-station of manifestation and veiling from the hearts of the knowers.

Concerning the saying of the Most High, "by the star when it falls," it is related of Ja'far ibn Muḥammad that he said: The star is Muḥammad, peace and blessings upon him. When he fell light diffused from him.¹⁵

He said: The star is the heart of Muḥammad. "When it falls," that is, when it cuts itself off from everything other than Allah.

"Your companion has not gone astray nor is he deluded." Ja'far said: He did not stray from his nearness even for the blink of an eye.

"He does not speak out of desire" (*hawā*). Ja'far said: How could he speak out of desire, he who proclaims the coming forth of unity, and completes the *shari'a* with the proper command and prohibition? Rather he proclaimed only through command and was silent only through command. He

was given the command as an approach to the real. He was given the prohibition as a warning and chiding.

"Then it drew near and descended." Ja'far said: In its nearness, how-it-was¹⁶ was cut off from all understanding. Do you not see that God most high veiled Jibril when Jibril came near, and when his Lord came near to him?

He also said: Muḥammad, God's peace and blessings upon him, came near to the insight and the faith that was placed in his heart, and he descended in the quiet of his heart to what he had come near. All doubt and anxiety was removed from his heart.

"At a distance of two bows' length or nearer." Ja'far said: He brought him(self) near to him until he was two bows-length away. Nearness on the part of God Most High has no limit, while nearness on the part of the servant has limits.

"He revealed to him what he revealed." Ja'far said: Without intermediary between the two of them, secretly to his [Muhammad's] heart. No one knows him(self) without intermediary but him(self) except at the final end, when he gives intercession to his community.

Of his saying, "It drew near and descended," [Ja'far] as-Sadiq said: When the lover draws as near to his beloved as is possible, he is overcome by utter terror. Then the truth treats him with complete gentleness because nothing but complete gentleness can endure utter terror. That is the meaning of his saying, "He revealed to his servant what he revealed," that is: what was, was, and what happened, happened, and the lover said what a lover says to his beloved, treated him gently as the lover treats the beloved, and told him the secret a lover tells his beloved. They kept it secret and let no one in on it but the two of them. For that reason he said: "He revealed to his servant what he revealed." No one knows that revelation except the one who revealed it and the one to whom it was revealed.

"The heart did not lie in what it saw." Ja'far said: No one knows what he saw except the seer and the seen. The lover has come near to the beloved, as intimate and confidant to him. God Most High said: "We raise in degree whomsoever we will" (6:83).

"He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs." Ja'far said: He witnessed marks of love beyond what can be told.¹⁷

Ja'far on Abraham and the Ka'ba

Ja'far's short discussion on the Ka'ba, or as it is known in Arabic, the bayt (dwelling), constructed according to the Qur'an by Abraham and his son Ishmael is less complex than the previous discussion. Yet it offers an impor-

tant discussion of the spirituality of Islamic ritual prayer (ṣalā), the physical motions and position (rak'a) of the prayer, its spatial orientation (the qibla or direction of the Ka'ba marked by the prayer niche), and the intimacy it provides with the divine, an intimacy associated throughout the Qur'an with Abraham, the intimate (al-khalīl) of God and builder of the Ka'ba.

JA'FAR'S COMMENTARY ON ABRAHAM AND THE KA'BA

2:125 *When we made the dwelling (bayt) a refuge for people and a sanctuary—so make the station of Ibrahim a place for prayer!—and we made a covenant with Ibrahim and Isma'il that they should purify the house for those who would circumambulate it, withdraw to it, or make the positions (rak'as) of prayer.*

"When we made the dwelling a refuge for people." It is reported of Ja'far ibn Muḥammad that he said: The dwelling here is Muhammad. Whoever believes in him and in the truth of his message enters into the fields of refuge and faith. "The station of Ibrahim": that is, the station of the qibla [the direction facing the Ka'ba or bayt]. He made your heart the station of knowing and your tongue the station of witness and your body the station of obedience. Whoever maintains it will have his prayer answered completely.

Ja'far and Sufi Understanding of the Qur'anic Afterlife

Contrary to some stereotypes about the Qur'anic afterlife, a nonphysical (though never antiphysical) notion of paradise does exist within the Qur'an, as is made clear in the following passage. The passage begins on a cosmic level (a garden whose breadth is the heavens and the earth) and then moves toward an intimate questioning of the human person, his hopes, angers, and motivations, with a central meditation on forgiveness and remembrance:

SURAT AL-IMRĀN (THE SURA OF THE FAMILY OF IMRAN) 3:133-136

*And race to a forgiveness from your lord
and a garden whose breadth is the heavens and earth
made ready for the self-vigilant¹⁸*

*Who spend in ease and in adversity
and check their wrath and show forgiveness to others
Allah loves those who show kindness*

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

*And those who when they corrupt others or oppress themselves
remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their offense
—who forgives offenses but Allah?—
and do not persist knowingly in what they did*

*For them is a reward of forgiveness from their lord
and gardens with rivers flowing underneath
eternal there
fine is the recompense for those whose deeds are fine.*

In the passages that follow here, Ja'far extends this aspect of Qur'anic spirituality by integrating it into the sophisticated Sufi psychology of the human heart. In many Sufi interpretations the temporal ("after") and spatial (heavens and hells) aspects of the afterlife are transformed into an interior reality, the heart-secret or destiny, that lies behind or within each person. Both the afterlife and the bounty of the compassionate deity given to humankind in this life, one example of which is included below, are interiorized within the Sufi symbolic interpretation. The selections conclude with a reference to the creation and "renewal of creation," which could be interpreted as a reference to creation and the final resurrection (qiyāma), or as a reference to the original creation and keeping it in existence through bestowal of life and fertility. While not abandoning these possibilities, Ja'far's commentary stresses creation and renewal as a cycle of original coming-to-be, annihilation in mystical union (fanā'), and the final abiding (baqā') of the human in the divine and the divine in the human.

The reader will note that the following passages take very small sections of the Qur'an and comment on them without referring to their larger Qur'anic context. This kind of commentary exists in a world where the larger context is presumed to be known by the audience. For the reader not immersed in the Qur'an, contextual questions will no doubt arise that would require lengthy Qur'anic quotations and explanations of them—something beyond the scope of this book. Yet the interpretations of Ja'far here can be appreciated on another level without a large contextualization apparatus. Although they might seem atomized in the way they are presented, certain key themes and images in Ja'far's commentary keep coming back and will set the stage for later Sufi developments.

JA'FAR'S COMMENTARY ON SELECTED AFTERLIFE VERSES

43:70–72

*Enter the garden, you and your spouses, gladdened!
Around them plates of gold will be passed and cups of gold*

EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

*Containing what each self craves and what pleases the eye
You are there, eternally!
That is the garden that you have inherited with what you have done.*

"Containing what each self craves and what pleases the eye." Ja'far said: What the self craves and what pleases the eye are two distinct categories. All of what the garden contains, of bliss, gratification, and pleasures—next to what pleases the eye—is like a finger plunged into the sea. The gratifications of the garden have a limit and an end because they are created. The eye finds no pleasure in this enduring abode, but rather in the enduring one (*al-bāqī*), the majestic, the most high. There is no limit in that, no attribute, no end.

55:11 "In it are fruit and date palms with unfolding calyxes." Ja'far said: The real made the hearts of his friends into gardens of his intimacy. He planted in them the trees of knowing, roots firm in the secrets of their hearts, branches standing in the presence of witness. In every time they gather the fruits of intimacy. This is what is meant by his saying "In it are fruit and date palms with unfolding calyxes," that is, of all kinds. Each one gathers from it a kind according to the capacity of his labor and what is unveiled for him of the manifestations of knowing and the traces of friendship with the divine.¹⁹

76:21: "And their lord quenched them with a drink that was pure." Ja'far said: He quenched them with unity in their hearts' secret. They were lost (*tābū*) to everything other than him, not waking except upon the vision, the lifting of the veil between them and him, and the taking of the drink in what it was taken from. No state from him endures. He comes forth in joy, in presence, in seizure.²⁰

Concerning "a drink that was pure," Ja'far said: He purified them with it of everything other than him, since no creature can be in any way pure of defilement.

82:13–14: "Surely the pious are bound for bounty and surely the corrupt are bound to hell-fire." Ja'far said: The bounty is insight and witness. The hell-fire consists of ego-selves; they contain kindled fires.

85:13: "He is the one who creates and renews his creation." Ja'far said: He creates and then annihilates everything that is other than him. Then he renews his creation and causes it to endure in his enduring.²¹ Concerning

the words "he is the one who creates and renews his creation," Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq also said: That is, he clothes the enemies in the garb of friends so they might be led along little by little. He clothes his friends in the garb of enemies that they might not admire themselves.²² Then, at the moment of death, he renews his creation.

Ja'far's Letter Symbolism and Mystical Exegesis of the Opening of the Qur'an

The first sura of the Qur'an begins with the phrase "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Caring." This phrase is also pronounced at the beginning of every sura of the Qur'an, though it is only with the first that the phrase is considered an integral part of the sura. The first section of the commentary focuses on this first Qur'anic verse, 1:1, taking each letter (short vowels excluded) of the phrase and discussing its symbolic meaning. For example, the first expression, "in the name of," in Arabic is *bismi*. Thus the major letters, B, S, and M,²³ will each be attached to a key word based on one of the letters. In another example, Ja'far associates the letter A, the Arabic alif, which in Arabic is a straight vertical line, with a column, making a connection not through a key word that begins with alif, but through the shape of the letter. The column will become central in Sufi meditation on columns of light. These letter-symbols occur at the very beginning of Ja'far's commentary. Ja'far's commentary on the first words of the Qur'an is an example of the kind of letter symbolism that has been popular in the Islamic world to the present day.²⁴ The commentary also contains a fourfold hierarchy of interpretation that might bear interesting comparison with similar hierarchies in medieval Kabbalah and Christian mysticism.

JA'FAR'S COMMENTARY ON THE BEGINNING OF THE QUR'AN

1: Introduction: It is related of Ja'far ibn Muḥammad that he said: The book of Allah has four aspects: The expression, the allusion, the subtleties, and the realities. The expression is for the masses, the allusion for the elite, the subtleties for the Godfriends, and the realities for the prophets.

1:1 *bismi allāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi* (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Caring)

1:1: *bismi*. It is said of Ja'far ibn Muḥammad that he said: The *b* is his enduring (*baqā'*) and the *s* is his names (*aSmā'*) and the *M* is his dominion

(*mulk*). The faith of the believer—his remembrance is through his enduring. The service of the seeker—his remembrance is through his names. The knower passes away from the kingdom into its king.

1:1 He also said: *bism* has three letters: The *B*, *S*, and *M*. The *B* is the *bāb* (gate) of prophecy. The *S* the *sirr* (secret) of the Prophet to the elite of his community. The *M* is the kingdom (*mulk*) of the faith which includes the white and the black.

1:1 It is related that when Ja'far ibn Muḥammad was asked about the verse *bismi llāhi r-raḥmān ar-raḥīm* (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Caring) he said: The *B* is the splendor (*babā'*) of Allah and the *S* is his brilliance (*sanā'*) and the *M* is his glory (*majd*). Allah is a God of every thing, the Compassionate to all his creatures, the Caring for his believers especially. Of Ja'far it is related that he said of the word "Allah" [in this verse] that it is the complete name because it has four letters: the *A*—and that is the column of unity;²⁵ the first *l* and that is the tablet (*lawh*) of understanding, the second *l* and that is the tablet (*lawh*) of prophecy, and the *b* is the furthest reach of allusion. Allah is a singular name, unique, that cannot be attributed to anything; rather all things are attributed to it. Its interpretation is the object of worship which is the God of creatures, yet beyond any perception of what-it-is²⁶ and any comprehension of how-it-is²⁷—veiled from all gaze and imaging, covered by its majesty from all perception.

These excerpts are relatively brief, and sometimes cryptic. As the reader proceeds through this volume, however, the key Qur'anic passages and Ja'farian interpretations should become clearer as they are reflected in a wide variety of later Sufi literature. Also helping to clarify the Ja'farian exegesis is the second example of early Sufi Qur'an interpretation that follows here: the interpretation of Sahl at-Tustari.

◆ ◆ ◆ SAHL AT-TUSTARI (FROM THE INTERPRETATION OF THE MAJESTIC QUR'AN)

INTRODUCTION

The second selection of Sufi exegesis is taken from the Qur'anic commentary of Muḥammad Sahl ibn 'Abdullāh at-Tustarī.²⁸ Sahl was born in the town of Tustar, from which he takes his nickname, and died in the famous

accounts are basically consistent with the hadith accounts, but much more elaborate, with an emphasis on reward and punishment, physical characteristics of the prophets, and other details that have relatively little relevance for the mystical texts that are presented in this volume.

37. More detailed discussions can be found in the following recent works: Suzanne Stetkevych, ed. *Reorientations: Studies in Arabic and Persian Poetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Mustansir Mir, ed., *The Literary Heritage of Classical Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993); M. Sells, "Like the Arms of a Drowning Man: Simile and Symbol Worlds in the *Nāqa* Sections of Bashama's *Hajarta Umāma*," in *A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Ewald Wagner, 2 volumes*, ed. W. Heinrichs and G. Schoeler (Beirut/Istanbul: Beirut Studien, 1994), pp. 18–41; idem, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by 'Alqama, Shanfara, Labid, Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhū al-Rumma* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); idem, "Ibn 'Arabi's *Alā Yā Hamāmātī l-Arākātī wa l-Bāni*, A Modern Translation," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 10 (1991): 1–11; and Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse and His Shrine* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

38. In translating place-names and personal names from poetry, I mark English accentual accents rather than the quantitative transliterations, in order to allow the rhythm of the poetic translations to come through.

39. From M. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, pp. 35–36.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

42. See John Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover: *The Ṭayf al-Kbayāl* in *al-Mufaddaliyyāt*," in Stetkevych, ed., *Reorientations*, pp. 180–189.

43. From M. Sells, "Along the Edge of Mirage: The *Mufaddaliyya* of Mukhabbal as-Sa'dī, an Interpretation," in Mir, ed., *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam*, pp. 119–120. The water imagery in this poem, as in all the other *nasīb*s, brings together an eroticized world of sexual waters with a purified world of ablutionary waters. See M. Sells, "Guises of the Ghul: Disassembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic *Nasīb*" in Stetkevych, ed., *Reorientations*, pp. 103–164.

44. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, p. 14.

45. Sura 26:225. Though often interpreted as a kind of Platonic criticism of poetry, the Qur'anic depiction here could also be viewed as simply stating what the poets themselves would freely admit.

46. From the elegy of Ḥassān ibn Thābit, translated by Stetkevych in *The Zephyrs of Najd*, p. 61.

47. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, p. 18.

48. See Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, pp. 33–54.

49. The people of 'Ad, the city of Iram: a fabled Arabian civilization whose destruction is recounted in the Qur'an as an example of the fate of those civilizations that reject their prophets.

50. Name given to Sassanian Persian kings (derived from Caesar).

51. See the Sarraj passages on Bistami, below.

52. Reading *wa annī anti* for *wa annī 'anki*: the reading of K and A (in which this reading is written in above the text). The alternative reading would give: "I search my heart secret for desire for you/ but find only myself, that you are separate, and the inner essence greater."

53. See Qushayrī's "On the Interpretation of Expressions," below.

54. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, pp. 67–76. For the Arabic text of the passage cited here, see *Dhū al-Rumma, the Dīwān of Ghaylān ibn 'Uqba*, ed. Carlile Henry Hayes Macartney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), pp. 80–83.

CHAPTER 2. EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

1. These translations of selected sections are based on the text of Paul Nwyia. See his, "Le Tafsīr Mystique Attribué à Ga'far Ṣādiq: Édition critique," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 43 (Beirut, 1968): pp. 181–230. Nwyia collected the various interpretations attributed to Ja'far (d. 148/765) from the *Ḥaqā'iq at-Tafsīr (Realities of Interpretation)* of Sulamī (d. 412/1021), basing the edition on three manuscripts from Istanbul. I have selected those passages that offer a distinctively Sufi interpretation, with special emphasis on the more extended sections of commentary. Nwyia discusses the thorny issue of whether the commentary is correctly attributed to Ja'far in his introduction (pp. 181–185).

Ja'far was born and lived his entire life in Medina and lived during the transition between the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus and the Abbasid Caliphate that became centered in Baghdad.

2. See Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq Editours, 1970), pp. 158–159. Nwyia lists two manuscripts: Bankipore, n. 1460, 232 fol. (v. Catalogue of the Arabic and Persian mss., t. XVIII, 2, pp. 143–144) and Istanbul, Nafiz Pasa 65, 154 fol. For a close discussion of Ja'far's Qur'anic exegesis, see pp. 156–208 of *Exégèse coranique*.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 159. The manuscript is listed as Yeni Cami 43.

4. Because the Yeni Cami manuscript is not available to me, I have translated this passage from Nwyia's French translation of it on p. 159 of *Exégèse coranique*, no. 3.

5. For an example of *du'ā* and *munājāt*, see Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, *The Psalms of Islam (Al-Sahīfat al-Sajjadiyya)*, trans. William Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1988).

6. While Moses' encounter with the burning bush and his experience on Mount Sinai are distinct events in the narrative of Exodus, the Qur'an tends to give various versions of a single encounter that has elements analogous to each of the two Exodus episodes. Western polemicists have found such differences between Qur'anic and biblical accounts a way of portraying Muhammad as a copier of biblical

traditions who just could not get them right. In Islamic tradition, the discrepancies are a result of errors in the Jewish and Christian transmission of the original prophetic revelations, and the Qur'an is viewed as offering the original and correct version of the story.

7. "Humanity": *bashariyyatihi*. The antecedent of "him/it" here is not clear. The most probable reading is that it refers to the deity: Moses heard words from his own self and attributed them to the deity. The meaning is clarified below when Moses' experience is compared to that of Muhammad. God spoke to Moses through Moses' human attributes, but to Muhammad through the attributes of Muhammad's lord.

8. The ambiguity is even more acute here than in previous instance. Does the "his" refer to the words of the deity or the words of Moses? The grammatical ambiguity is enhanced by and enhances the meditation on the fine line between unmediated revelation and that which passes through the medium of one's own consciousness or sensibility. Some manuscripts then read redundantly: "In this he confided in him."

9. "Face-to-face," and below, "eye witness": *'ayyānan*; "Face-to-face vision in respect to the servant": *mu'āyanat ru'yati llabi li 'abdīhi*.

10. An alternative translation would be: The eyewitness of the lord belongs to the servant while the servant passes away; witnessing the servant belongs to his lord while the servant endures in his lord.

11. "Manifestation": *tajallī*; "contact": *wusla*; "knowing": *ma'rifa*; "innate disposition": *fiṭra*; "interval of distance": *masāfa*; "apparition": *mubāyana*. Yet another elusive Sufi aphorism.

12. The implication of this cryptic comment is that, because the deity cannot be seen, Moses must believe without seeing.

13. The passage then turns (verses 15–16) to a discussion of the apocalyptic final hour, and then (verses 17–24) with Moses being given the power to turn his staff into a snake as a sign to show before the Pharaoh.

14. *Jabarūt*: a technical term that designates one of the higher realms of reality, related to the Arabic *jabr* (power, compulsion), but non-Arabic in morphology, probably borrowed from Aramaic, Syriac, or Hebrew.

15. A lyrical and elusive point. It is not clear whether this "fall" represents Muhammad's birth and prophecy on earth, and thus suggests the preexistent Muhammad discussed more explicitly in later Sufi writings, such as those of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), or perhaps the death of the Prophet.

16. "How-it-was" or its "howness": *kayfiyya*. When the vision approaches the peak of nearness and intensity, the mode or manner of its being is no longer accessible as the seer is totally overcome.

17. The commentary skips over the "lote tree" part of the vision passages (53:13–17), perhaps because they have been discussed in the earlier comparison of the vision of Moses to that of Muhammad.

18. "Those with *taqwā*," that is, with the quality of being on-guard and vigilant against the wiles of one's own ego-self.

19. "Friendship with the divine": *wilāya*. The word has a complex lexical field. See Michel Chokiewitz, *Le Sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

20. *Wa ḥaṣḥubu fī mūdān as-savūr wa l-ḥuḍūr wa l-qabḍa*. Another difficult phrase, the obscurity of which is attested by variant manuscript readings.

21. That which is annihilated in *fanā*' is then reconstituted and endures through the enduring (*baqā*') of the divine.

22. An early example of the attitude known as *malāmatiyya*, the regarding of blame in the eyes of the wider society as a protection against self-admiration, and conversely, the regarding of praise as dangerous. The point draws on a number of Qur'anic passages explaining to the Prophet Muhammad and to the general hearer of the message why the wicked are sometimes allowed to prosper and be praised. The two Ja'farian statements on this verse offer a good example of the anthology character of the text. The first Ja'far interpretation was primarily concerned with Sufi notions of passing away and enduring, with a focus on the synchronic notion of annihilation, that it can occur in the present moment, mystically. The second quotation is more concerned with the reason that exterior reality, in which the good are sometimes disdained while the wicked prosper, is allowed to continue; in other words, in which the annihilation and renewal (in the more conventional sense of the final judgment and resurrection) do not take place immediately.

23. *B* (the Arabic *bā*'), *s* (the Arabic *sīn*), and *m* (the Arabic *mīm*).

24. For an excellent view of twentieth-century letter symbolism, see Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

25. "Column": *'amūd*. The first letter of *'amūd* is the *'ā* (the Arabic *'ayn*), not *a*, equivalent to the Arabic *alif*, which begins the word "Allah." The correspondence depends on the shape of the *alif*, which as a vertical straight line represents a column.

26. *Mā'īya*, i.e., its quiddity or whatness (from the Arabic pronoun *mā*—"what").

27. *Kayfiyya*, i.e., its "howness" (from the Arabic *kayfa*—"how").

28. These translations are based on selected passages from the following Arabic printed text: Muḥammad Sahl ibn 'Abdullāh at-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Gharbiyya al-Kubrā, 1329/1911). For a full discussion of Tustarī and his tafsīr, see Gerhard Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Sahl at-Tustarī (d. 283/896)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

29. The milieu in which Tustarī lived and taught has been described by Bowering (*Mystical Vision*, p. xx) as follows:

Tustarī, a native of Tustar in the Persian province of Khuzistan, who died at Baṣra, the Arab metropolis of Lower Iraq, lived in a region where for centuries the Iranian civilization of Susian had bordered on the cultural traditions of Southern Mesopotamia. His own life-span arches these two