

Mullā Ṣadrā's Prolegomenon to the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*

Amongst the areas of inquiry concerning the thought of the eminent Islamic philosopher, Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1050/1641), his work devoted to the Qur'an and its sciences has received relatively little attention.¹ These writings can be grouped as follows: (1) the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*,² the contents of which shall become clearer shortly; (2) the *Asrār al-āyāt wa-anwār al-bayyināt*,³ a commentary on select ayas of the Qur'an, mainly dealing with those ayas which pertain directly to cosmology and eschatology; (3) the *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān*,⁴ a work dedicated to the 'ambiguous' ayas of the Qur'an; (4) the *Ma'ānī al-alfāz al-mufrada min al-Qur'ān*,⁵ a treatise discussing the meanings of some of the individual terms found in the Qur'an; (5) the Qur'an commentary proper, which consists of thirteen independent commentaries on various suras and ayas of the Qur'an.⁶ His approach in all of these works is philosophical and mystical, but he also manages to engage the traditions of Shī'ī and Sunnī *kalām* and *tafsīr* which preceded him.⁷

In what follows I will closely analyse Ṣadrā's pronouncements in the introduction to his most important theoretical work on the Qur'an, the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. Highlighting the main features of Ṣadrā's prolegomenon to the *Mafātīḥ* will cast light on the overall vision he held for his hermeneutical project, thereby providing an effective basis for further inquiry into his Qur'anic hermeneutics.

The *Mafātīḥ* deals with many of the philosophical issues which Ṣadrā takes up in his other works, yet it is distinguished from them by its heavy emphasis on issues directly pertaining to scripture. A number of scholars have already stated that Ṣadrā lays out his esoteric hermeneutical method for interpreting the Qur'an in the *Mafātīḥ*.⁸ Indeed, Ṣadrā's pronouncements in the prolegomenon to the *Mafātīḥ* do indicate that he viewed this book as foundational to understanding his works on the Qur'anic sciences. At the beginning of the *Mafātīḥ* he tells his readers that he had been meaning to write this work for quite some time:⁹

For some time now I have longed to bring forth the meanings of this Qur'an. [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 consulted my soul (*nafs*), casting aside the arrows of my own opinion ...

Ṣadrā goes on to say that he was reluctant to carry out this endeavour because of the weight of the task itself.¹⁰ These are the words of someone who, according to the dates given by Muḥammad Khwājawī, had already written some ten commentaries on independent suras or ayas of the Qur'an.¹¹ Yet he does not mention these works

from the past in his prolegomenon to the *Mafāṭīḥ*. Slightly before this, Ṣadrā remarks that the work was written as the result of a spiritual experience which compelled him to manifest what he knew of the Qur'anic sciences. That this passage would precede the one cited above, where Ṣadrā expresses his wish to write the *Mafāṭīḥ*, may come as a surprise, but the reasons for this are purely stylistic. The lines cited below are dramatic and compelling; they are written with vigour, a sense of urgency, and in mellifluous Arabic prose. They are, in effect, Ṣadrā's meditations after the fact, summarising the end of his endeavours which he will go on to explicate in more or less chronological fashion for the remainder of the introduction:¹²

A command has issued from the Lord of my heart (*āmīr qalbī*), a spiritual allusion has come forth from my innermost recesses (*waradat ishāra min sirr ghaybī*). His judgement and decision have come to pass and He has decreed that some of the divine symbols (*rumūz ilāhiyya*) be brought forth, and that the matters related to the Qur'anic sciences, the Prophetic allusions, secrets of faith, flashes of wisdom, esoteric glimmerings connected to the wonders of the glorious revelation and the subtleties of Qur'anic interpretation become manifest.

The wording here is very important. Ṣadrā was commanded by God to bring forth the 'divine symbols', the 'matters related to the Qur'anic sciences' and the 'subtleties of Qur'anic interpretation'. As it soon becomes apparent from the contents of the first two sections of this work, the fulfillment of this command was articulated in chapters containing discussions on the Qur'an's use of allusory language (*miftāḥ* 1:1), the senses of scripture (*miftāḥ* 1:10) and the etiquette required for reading and 'experiencing' the Qur'an (*miftāḥ* 2:2).

That this work was inspired is further confirmed by Ṣadrā a page later, where he refers to his experience as an 'opening' (*fath*):¹³

The Master of the Holy Realm of the Divinity (*ṣāḥib 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 near ...

Ṣadrā further remarks that this opening granted him new knowledge of the 'treasurers of the symbols of the divine realities' (*kunūz rumūz al-ḥaqā'iq*),¹⁴ which, it will be recalled, he was commanded by God to bring forth. This spiritual opening was also accompanied by a great burden of responsibility. Ṣadrā says, 'I said [to myself] after this opening within myself (*fath li-nafsī*), "now is the time to begin mentioning the principles (*uṣūl*) from which the branches [of the Qur'anic sciences] derive".'¹⁵ This approach would be characterised by its sapiential perspective and

would not delve too deeply into matters pertaining to exoteric exegesis. Ṣadrā states that he will pay attention to the fine points of Arabic only insofar as they relate to esoteric exegesis.¹⁶ He notes that excessive concern with language is characteristic of the approach of the exoteric scholars who ‘have the outward (*ẓāhir*) and the legal aspects (*ḥadd*), whereas we have the inward aspect (*bāṭin*) and the transcendent perspective (*muṭṭala‘/maṭla‘*)! It has been said, “He who comments [upon the Qur’an] from his own opinion has concealed the truth (*fa-qad kafara*)”.’¹⁷ Ṣadrā then provides us with a theoretical definition of *ta’wīl*:¹⁸

As for esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*), *it does not spare nor leave [anything out] (lā tubqī wa-lā tadhar)* [Q. 74:28], for it comes – thanks be to God! – as a discourse (*kalām*) in which there is no crookedness, nor can doubt or confusion come upon it.

He goes on to address his readers in the following manner:²⁰

O intelligent, discerning one! If you want to investigate the science of the Qur’an, the wisdom of God and the principles of faith – that is, faith in God, His angels, books, messengers and the Final Day – then you need to return to the guardians (*ḥafāẓa*) of the secrets of the Qur’an and its meanings, seek out its folk and its bearers 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.

It is the inner purity of the ‘people of remembrance’ which makes them receptacles for the secrets of the holy 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 Muḥammad and °Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Commenting upon the saying attributed to °Alī, ‘Verily God loves courage, even if it be in the slaying of a snake’, Ṣadrā says:²¹

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*)²² 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*).

Ṣadrā then advises those seeking knowledge of the Qur’an but who do not have access to any of the ‘people of remembrance’:²³

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’anic sciences – are destined for you, then you should
 study this book. It contains beneficial principles (*qawānīn nāfi‘a*)
 pertaining to the sciences of revelation [and] is comprehensive in its
 foundations, which allude to the secrets of esoteric interpretation (*al-
 muḥīṭ bi-qawā‘idihi mushīra ilā asrār al-ta’wīl*).

The *Mafātīh*, therefore, does not introduce each individual *tafsīr*. Rather, it introduces the basic esoteric principles underlying the 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’an commentaries.

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NOTES

1 I list here – to the best of my knowledge – the secondary literature pertaining to Ṣadrā’s work on the Qur’an: Fāṭima Muḥammad Ārānī, ‘*Taṭābuq-i madārīj-i Qur’ān wa-ma‘ārij-i insān az manẓar-i ṣadr-i muta‘allihīn*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 32 (1381 Sh), pp. 46–52; Fāṭima Muḥammad Ārānī, ‘*Mabānī-yi ‘irfānī-yi ta’wīl-i Qur’ān az manẓar-i ṣadr-i muta‘allihīn*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 42 (1384 Sh), pp. 63–74; Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī’s, ‘*Muqaddima*’ in Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, *Sah risālah-yi falsafī*, ed. Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī, 2nd edn (Tehran: Markazī-yi Intishārāt-i Daftari-i Tabliḡhāt-i Islāmī, 1379 Sh), pp. 77–180; Mudabbir Azizi, ‘Mullā Ṣadrā’s Gnostic Approach Towards the Qur’ānic Verses’ in *Islam-West Philosophical Dialogue: The Papers Presented at the World Congress on Mullā Ṣadrā (May, 1999, Tehran)* (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute, 2005), vol. 10 ‘*Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*’, pp. 445–66; Muḥammad Bīdhandī, ‘*Barrasī wa-tahlīl-i barkhī ta‘ammulāt-i ta’wīlī-yi Mullā Ṣadrā dar kitāb wa-sunnat*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 38 (1383 Sh), pp. 4–16; Muṣṭafā Burujirdī, ‘*Ta’thīr-i Qur’ān-i karīm dar shaklgīrī-yi ḥikmat-i muta‘āliya*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 20 (1379 Sh), pp. 57–60; David Dakake, *Defining Ambiguity: Early and Classical Commentary on the Mutashābih Verses of the Qur’ān*, PhD thesis in progress (Temple University); Abū’l-Qāsim Ḥusayn Dūst, ‘*Hurūf-i munqaṭī‘a-yi Qur’ān dar ḥikmat-i muta‘āliya-yi Mullā Ṣadrā*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 36 (1383 Sh), pp. 58–63; Marcia Hermansen, ‘Mullā Ṣadrā’s Commentary upon the Light Verse (Āyat al-Nūr 24:35)’ in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 409–28; Christian Jambet, *L’acte d’être: la philosophie de la révélation chez Mollā Sadrā* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), passim, now available in English as Jeff Fort (tr.), *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mullā Sadrā*, (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2006); Ibrahim Kalin, ‘An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of Mullā Ṣadrā with a Brief Account of His Life’, *Islamic Studies* 42:1 (2003) (under the heading ‘Works in the Field of Transmitted Sciences’); Shigeru Kamada, ‘Mullā Ṣadrā Between Mystical Philosophy and Qur’ān Interpretation through his Commentary on the “Chapter of the Earthquake”’, *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2:2 (2005), pp. 275–89; Mustafa Khalili, ‘Mullā Ṣadrā on Resurrection’ in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 295–318 (deals with Ṣadrā’s *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Sajda* in passing); Sayyid Muḥammad Khamenei, *Principles of Interpretation and Qur’ānic Hermeneutics According to Mullā Ṣadrā* (London: Islamic Studies Press, 1999), which is a collection of two of the author’s previously published articles: ‘*Uṣūl-i tafsīrī wa-hirminūtik-i Qur’ānī nazd-i Mullā Ṣadrā*’, *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 18

(1378 Sh), pp. 64–71, and 'Fahm-i kalām-i Khudā dar maktab-i Mullā Ṣadrā', *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 31 (1382 Sh), pp. 19–25; Muḥammad Khwājāwī, *Lawāmi^c al-^cārīfīn fī sharḥ aḥwāl ṣadr al-muta^callihīn* (Tehran: Āriyan Press, 1987), pp. 107–27; Muḥammad Khwājāwī, 'Taqdīm' in Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qur^cān al-karīm*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājāwī (7 vols, Qum: Intishārāt-i Bīdār, 1987–90), vol. 1, pp. 108–11, pp. 118–28; Annabel Keeler, 'Mullā Ṣadrā's Commentary on *Sūrat al-Sajda*' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 343–56; Bilal Kuspinar, 'Mullā Ṣadrā on the Light-Verse' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 357–68; Dihqan Mangabadi, 'Mullā Ṣadrā's Method of Qur^cān Commentary' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 429–44; Abū'l-Qāsim Nakūdiyān Iṣfahānī, 'Dīdgāh-i Mullā Ṣadrā pīrāmūn-i nāmā wa-ṣifāt-i Qur^cān', *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 24 (1380 Sh), pp. 83–7; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life and Works*, 2nd edn (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), pp. 125–35, also available in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'The Qur^cānic Commentaries of Mullā Ṣadrā' in *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī et al. (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1998), pp. 47–57; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Mullā Ṣadrā: His Teachings' in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, reprint (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 656–7; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 224–29; Latimah Peerwani, 'Qur^cānic Hermeneutics: The Views of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī', *BRIMES Proceedings* (1991), pp. 468–77; Latimah Peerwani (tr.), *On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse of the Qur^cān* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies, 2004), Translator's Introduction, pp. 9–32; Latimah Peerwani, 'Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī on the Hermeneutics of the Qur^cān: His Philosophical Meditation' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 369–90; Ali Zamani Qumshai, 'Mullā Ṣadrā on Eschatology' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 167–74; ^cAlī Arshad Rabbāhī, 'Ta^cthīrāt-i muthbat wa-yā manfī-yi falsafa-yi Ṣadrā dar fahm-i ū az āyāt-i Qur^cān', *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 35 (1383 Sh), pp. 50–8; Hasan Sa'īdī, 'Illumination, Unveiling and Intuition in Mullā Ṣadrā's Qur^cānic Commentary' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 519–38; Mohsen Mahmoud Saleh, *The Verse of Light: A Study of Mullā Ṣadrā's Philosophical Qur^cān Exegesis*, unpublished PhD thesis (Temple University, 1994), pp. 1–83, pp. 237–9; Mohsen Mahmoud Saleh, 'Being: The Light of Lights (An Analysis of Mullā Ṣadrā's Commentary on the Verse of Light)' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 321–42; Sayyid Sadr al-Din Tahiri, 'Guzārashī az tafāsīr', *Khīrad-Nāmah-yi Ṣadrā* 1 (1374 Sh), pp. 57–63; Sayyid Sadr al-Din Tahiri, 'A Critical Study of Resurrection in the Qur^cānic Commentary and Philosophical Ideas of Ṣadr al-Muta^callihīn' in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, pp. 45–76.

2 Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājāwī, reprint (Beirut: Mu^cassasat al-Ta^crīkh al-^cArabī, 2002).

3 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asrār al-āyāt wa-anwār al-bayyināt*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣafwa, 1993).

4 This work is to be found in Ṣadrā, *Sah risāla-yi falsafī*, pp. 257–84. Ṣadrā's *Mutashābihāt al-Qur^cān* is translated as an appendix in Dakake, *Defining Ambiguity*.

5 This work is yet to find its way into a critical edition. For its extant manuscripts, see Nahīd Bāqirī Khurramdashūtī, *Kitāb shināsī-yi jāmi^c-i Mullā Ṣadrā* (Tehran: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmī-yi Ṣadrā, 1999), p. 74.

6 Ṣadrā's seven-volume *Tafsīr* contains all of his commentaries with the exception of his *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Tawhīd*, which is to be found in Ṣadrā, *Majmū^ca al-rasā'il al-falsafīyya*, ed. Ḥāmid Nāji Iṣfahānī, reprint (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' Turāth al-^cArabī, 2001), pp. 429–72, originally published as *Majmū^ca-yi rasā'il-i falsafī-yi ṣadr al-muta^callihīn* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ḥikmat, 1375 Sh), pp. 395–439. Khwājāwī feels that this commentary cannot be attributed to Ṣadrā, which is why it is not included in his edition of Ṣadrā's *Tafsīr* (see Khwājāwī, 'Taqdīm' in

Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 118). For summaries of Mullā Ṣadrā's works dedicated to the Qur'an and its sciences, see Kalin, 'An Annotated Bibliography'; Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī*, pp. 126–8; Peerwani (tr.), *On the Hermeneutics*, pp. 11–12. Of all of Ṣadrā's Qur'an commentaries proper, only his commentary on the Light Verse has been translated into English (see Peerwani (tr.), *On the Hermeneutics*. Ṣadrā's commentary on this aya is also translated in Saleh, *The Verse of Light*, pp. 84–236).

7 See Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī*, pp. 125–6; Peerwani (tr.), *On the Hermeneutics*, pp. 28–9.

8 Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī*, pp. 127; Peerwani (tr.), *On the Hermeneutics*, pp. 11; Saleh, *The Verse of Light*, pp. 42. Cf. Khwājawī, 'Taqdīm' in Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 109; Khwājawī, *Lawāmi' al-ʿarifīn*, p. 123.

9 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 77.

10 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 77.

11 See Khwājawī, 'Taqdīm' in Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 108–11. For a corrective to Khwājawī's dating of one of Ṣadrā's *tafsīr*, see the 'Translator's Introduction' in Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, tr. William Chittick (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), pp. xix–xx.

12 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, pp. 76–7.

13 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 78.

14 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79.

15 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79.

16 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79.

17 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79. Notice Ṣadrā's use of the famous tradition – often attributed to either Ibn Mas'ūd, ʿAlī, or Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq – concerning the 'senses' of scripture. For a survey of the reception of this tradition and its interpretation by both Ṣūfī and non-Ṣūfī authors, see Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qur'ān in Classical Islam* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 8–13.

18 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79.

19 For ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī's (d. 736/1335) use of this aya and the above-cited tradition in the introduction to his Ṣūfī *tafsīr*, see Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters* (2 vols, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), vol. 1, p. 5.

20 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 79.

21 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 81.

22 This phrase harks back to Q. 20:21, where *sīra* takes the accusative case ending.

23 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ*, p. 81.