

Mullā Şadrā

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1 Introduction

Şadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm ash-Shīrāzī (1571–1640/980–1050), popularly known as Mullā Şadrā, is considered the culminating figure of Islamic philosophy in Persia.¹ Born into an aristocratic family in Shīrāz, he was given the best education from an early age in the city of his birth. He then traveled to Isfahan to study under two of the greatest scholars of his time, Mīr Muḥammad Bāqir Dāmād Astarābādī (d. 1631/1041),² with whom he studied philosophy and theology, and the enigmatic sage and jurist, Shaykh Bahā' ad-Dīn 'Āmilī known as Shaykh Bahā'ī (d. 1620–21/1030)³ with whom he studied transmitted sciences and Qur'ānic exegesis. Having mastered both intellectual and transmitted sciences, he retreated to Kahak, a village outside of Qum, Iran, where he composed his magnum opus, *al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fī l-asfār al-aqliyya al-arba'a* (Transcendent Philosophy on the Four Intellectual Journeys), popularly known as *al-Asfār al-arba'a* (The Four Journeys). He composed more than fifty works, but it was in the *Asfār* that he formulated a comprehensive philosophical system that integrated reason, revelation, and mystical experience. Mullā Şadrā's school of "Transcendent Philosophy" (*al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya*) synthesized several major streams of Islamic thought, including scholastic theology (*kalām*), Avicennan (d. 1037/428) Peripatetic philosophy (*mashshā*), Suhrawardī's (d. 1191/587) Illuminationist philosophy (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*), and the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240/638).

There has been a resurgence of scholarship in the writings of Mullā Şadrā, particularly after Muḥammad Khwājawī published new editions of all of his commentaries in Arabic in the early 1980s. Muḥsin Bīdārfar's introduction to Khwājawī's edition of commentary on the Qur'ān also drew attention to the other Qur'ān-related texts.⁴ Although Henry Corbin (d. 1978/1398), Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993/1413), Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988/1408) first opened the door to Şadrā's thought in Western Scholarship, most of these studies focused on his philosophical works. It was Nasr who dedicated a chapter to Şadrā's Qur'ānic output in his book *Şadr al-Dīn Shīr-*

1 He was later given the title *Şadr al-Muta'allihīn*, the "foremost of the theosophers".

2 Mīr Dāmād was the founder of the philosophical School of Isfahan. Nasr notes, "He was essentially an Avicennan philosopher with an Ishrāqī interpretation of some Peripatetic theses." See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present* (New York: State University New York Press, 2006), 218.

3 The polymath Bahā' ad-Dīn 'Āmilī was a leading Shi'i theologian and jurist of the Safavid era. He was at once a philosopher, mathematician, architect, astronomer, Sufi and poet. See Sayyid Hossein Nasr, "The School of Isfahan," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966), 2: 910.

4 Mullā Şadrā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājawī (Qum: Intishārāt-i Bīdār, 1987–90).

āzī and His Transcendent Theosophy,⁵ ushering in a new wave of studies on Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic output. This was followed by Latimah Peerwani's articles and study *On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse*, where she outlined the principles of Ṣadrā's hermeneutics and his exegetical approach.⁶ Christian Jambet has also devoted attention to *Tafsīr āyat an-nūr* reconciling Ṣadrā's philosophical treatment and spiritual approach to the Qur'ān.⁷ Mohammed Rustom has written several studies on Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic writings, including "Approaching Mullā Ṣadrā as Scriptural Exegete: A Survey of Scholarship on His Quranic Works,"⁸ which surveys the literature on Ṣadrā's approach to the Qur'ān. His tour de force, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā*, is an in-depth study investigating Ṣadrā's commentary on the Qur'ān's opening chapter, *Tafsīr sūrat al-Fātiḥa*.⁹ This work highlights Ṣadrā's esoteric hermeneutical vision, his comprehensive approach to the Qur'ān, and the profound influence of Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240/638) on his thought.¹⁰ Another important study that addresses Ṣadrā's commentaries within the larger backdrop of Sufi commentaries is Annabel Keeler's article, "Mullā Ṣadrā's Commentary on *Sūrat al-Sajda*."¹¹

2 His Works and Influences on his Commentaries

Ṣadrā's writings can be categorized into four main areas: philosophical works, commentaries on key Islamic philosophical texts, polemic pieces, and scriptural commentaries. His philosophical works include *al-Asfār al-arba'a* (The Four Journeys), *Shawāhid ar-*

5 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997²), 123–35. This article was reprinted in a commemorative volume for Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993): "The Qur'ānic Commentaries of Mullā Ṣadrā," in *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, ed. Jalāl ad-Dīn Āshtiyānī et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 47–57.

6 Latimah Peerwani, "Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī," *Proceedings of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* (1991): 468–77; Peerwani, "Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī on the Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān: His Philosophical Meditation," in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith (Islam-West Philosophical Dialogue: The Papers Presented at the World Congress on Mullā Ṣadrā, May 1999, Tehran)* (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute, 2005), 369–90.

7 See Ṣadrā, *Le verset de la lumière commentaire*, trans. Christian Jambet (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2009); Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mullā Ṣadrā*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

8 Mohammed Rustom, "Approaching Mullā Ṣadrā as Scriptural Exegete: A Survey of Scholarship on His Quranic Works," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 4 (2008): 75–96.

9 Mohammad Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: State University New York Press, 2012).

10 See Mohammed Rustom's other works on Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic output: "Mullā Ṣadrā's Prolegomenon to the *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb*," *JQS* 9, no. 1 (2007): 128–33.

11 Annabel Keeler, "Mullā Ṣadrā's Commentary on *Sūrat al-Sajda*," in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith (Islam-West Philosophical Dialogue: The Papers Presented at the World Congress on Mullā Ṣadrā, May 1999, Tehran)* Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute, 2005: 343–56.

rubūbiyya (Divine Witnesses), *Kitāb al-Mashā'ir* (Book of Metaphysical Penetrations) and *al-Ḥikma al-'arshīyya* (Wisdom of the Throne). His commentaries on Islamic philosophical works cover significant texts such as Ibn Sīnā's *Shifā'* (The Healing) and Suhrawardī's *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (Philosophy of Illumination). His polemic pieces in which he defends his views against the criticism of the religious scholars, include *Sih aṣl* (The Three Principles) and *Kasr al-aṣnām al-jāhiliyya* (Shattering the Idols of Ignorance). Lastly, his scriptural commentaries, such as his commentary on Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, include treatises on religious topics such as *Risālat al-ḥaṣhr* (Treatise on Resurrection), also known as *al-Ḥaṣhriyya*, and *Risāla fi-l-imāma* (Treatise on the Imamate), along with works on hermeneutics and Qur'ānic exegesis, which will be addressed below.¹²

Although Ṣadrā is primarily known as a philosopher, he is also an exceptional exegete whose works on the Qur'ān occupy a central position in his metaphysical worldview. Like his philosophical synthesis, his Qur'ānic commentaries bring together four traditions of Qur'ānic commentary: the Sufi, the Shi'i the theological and the philosophical.¹³ It is worthwhile to assess some of these influences beginning with Sufi commentaries, which have often been attributed to Imams Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 732/114) and Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 765/148). The earliest of these commentaries preserved the statements of the Imams, such as Sahl at-Tustarī's commentary *Tafsīr at-Tustarī*, which is the oldest, then Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī's (d. 1021/412) *Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr* (The Realities of Exegesis).¹⁴ This trend continued with Sulamī's student Abū-l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072/465) in his *Latā'if al-ishārāt* (The Subtleties of the Signs) and later with Ibn al-'Arabī's contemporary Ruzbihān Baqlī's (d. 1209/606) *'Arā'is al-bayān fi ḥaqā'iq al-Qur'ān* (The Brides of Explanation on the Realities of the Qur'ān).¹⁵ After the initial wave of Sufi commentaries, the most profound influence on Ṣadrā came from Ibn al-'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings), which expounds on Qur'ānic themes throughout. The most important post-Ibn al-'Arabī commentary to influence Ṣadrā is 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāshānī's (d. 1329/730) *Tafsīr Ibn al-'Arabī*.

Shi'i commentaries are generally traditionist rather than esoteric, explaining the verses according to hadith of the Prophet and the Imams. Even when these statements

12 Ṣadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, trans. James Morris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 51.

13 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī*, 123–35. See Ibrahim Kalin, "An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of Mullā Ṣadrā with a Brief Account of his Life," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2003): 35–41; Sajjad Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī: His Life and Works and the Sources for Safavid Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77–87; Mohammad Rustom, "The Nature and Significance of Mullā Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic Writings," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 6 (2012): 109–30; Rustom, "Approaching Mullā Ṣadrā".

14 See Farhana Mayer, *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Commentary Ascribed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq as contained in Sulamī's Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr from the text of Paul Nwyia* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011).

15 Pieter Coppens, "Sufi Qur'ān Commentaries, Genealogy and Originality," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7, no. 1–2 (2018): 102–24.

reveal mysteries of the Qurʾān, they are classified as traditionist or standard commentaries, such as Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan aṭ-Ṭūsī's (d. 1067/460)¹⁶ *at-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* and Abū ʿAlī l-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan aṭ-Ṭabrisī's (d. 1144/538) *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, and works of ʿAlī b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 939/328) and Muḥammad b. Masʿūd al-ʿAyyāshī (d. 932/320). Alongside these commentaries, Ṣadrā was deeply engaged with the Shiʿi hadith tradition as evidenced by his *Sharḥ Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, a philosophical commentary on Kulaynī's (d. 940–1/329) hadith compilation, *al-Kāfi*.¹⁷

Ṣadrā was also familiar with the commentaries written by the Ashʿarī theologians, Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1209/606) and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/505) and Muʿtazilī commentator, Abū l-Qāsim az-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144/538), about whom he unfavourably said,

That which Zamakhsharī 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 figuratively.¹⁸

Ṣadrā was averse to these types of commentaries because they not only distracted from the real aim of seeking the Qurʾān's inner reality, but those who pursued such superficial scholarship were themselves misguided and were misleading others, keeping them fixated on literalists interpretations.

Although Ṣadrā incorporated all aspects of Islamic knowledge in his style of exegesis, particularly philosophy, he embraced the methodology of the Sufis who relied on unveilings and spiritual experience as the basis for their commentaries. Thus, his hermeneutics or *taʾwīl*, (lit. "returning to the origin") was a return to the prophetic model, which was to learn directly from God: "Be God-conscious and God will teach you" (Q 2:282), and thereafter, "Ask the people of remembrance if you do not know" (Q 16:43). In this regard, after the teachings of the Shiʿi Imams, Ṣadrā was deeply indebted to the philosophical Sufism of the great master, Muḥyī d-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī, whose teachings form the warp and woof of Ṣadrān thought in general. But Ṣadrā also drew from earlier masters of Sufism such as Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 874/261), Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910/297), ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 1089/481) and ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 1131/525).

¹⁶ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan, better known as ash-Shaykh aṭ-Ṭūsī and ash-Shaykh aṭ-Ṭāʾifa, a great Shiʿi jurist and compiler of hadith. His famous compilation *al-Istibṣār fī mā ukhtulifa min al-akhbār* is one of the "four books" or canonical hadith works in Shiʿism.

¹⁷ For studies on Ṣadrā's hadith interpretation, see Karim Crow, "Mullā Ṣadrā on the First Intellect in his *Sharḥ Uṣūl al-Kāfi*," in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, 571–90; Maria Dakake, "The Origin of Man in Pre-Eternity and his Origination in Time: Mullā Ṣadrā and Imāmī Shiʿite Tradition," in *Eschatology, Exegesis, Hadith*, 147–66.

¹⁸ Ṣadrā, *Sih aṣl*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1961), 84, cited in Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy*, 29.

3 His Works on the Qur'ān

His works on the Qur'ān¹⁹ consist of sixteen pieces, thirteen of which are commentaries on independent suras, and three of which revolve around the theoretical aspects of the Qur'ān. His major exegetical works include: *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān* (The Ambiguous Verses of the Qur'ān), *Asrār al-āyāt* (The Mysteries of the Verses), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen) and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Commentary on the Noble Qur'ān). In addition, the following works deal the exegesis of individual suras:²⁰

1. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (sura 1, The Opening)

This is the last of his complete commentaries, written less than a decade before his death. Ṣadrā's views on ontology, cosmology, psychology, and eschatology closely follow Ibn 'Arabī's doctrines. He also covers topics such as the meaning of the *Basmala* (the phrase: "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate"), and his theory of substantial motion (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*).

2. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Baqara* (sura 2, The Cow)

Though incomplete, it is the last of Ṣadrā's commentaries. In this work, he addresses the questions of freewill and determinism as held by the other Ash'arī and Mu'tazalī theological schools. An important discussion on the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*ijāz al-Qur'ān*) is provided in relation to the 23rd verse which challenges the unbelievers to produce a verse of equal measure.

3. *Tafsīr sūrat as-Sajda* (sura 32, The Prostration)

This 135-page commentary is of the entire sura. Ṣadrā discusses his eschatology and spiritual psychology, the correspondences between the microcosmic heart and the divine Throne, as well as other concepts such as the Perfect Man, the Muḥammadan Light and the levels of God's folk.

4. *Tafsīr sūrat Yāsīn* (sura 36, Yā-Sīn)

Traditional sources consider this sura to be the "heart" of the Qur'ān. In this 450-page commentary, similar to his *al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād*, Ṣadrā devotes his attention to key eschatological issues and the posthumous states of the soul, relying heavily on Ibn 'Arabī's doctrines.

¹⁹ This section is derivative of Mohammad Rustom's more complete outline of Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic works in, "The Nature and Significance of Mullā Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic Writings."

²⁰ The following are the most popular editions of these works: *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājawī (Beirut: Mu'assasat at-Tārīkh al-'Arabī, 1999); "*Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān*" in Ṣadrā, *Sih risāla-yi falsafī*, ed. Jalāl ad-Dīn Āshtiyāni (Tehran: Markazī-yi Intishārāt-i Daftar-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī, 2000²), 255–84; *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājawī (Qum: Intishārāt-i Bidār, 1987–90); *Asrār al-āyāt wa-anwār al-bayyināt*, ed. S.M. Mūsawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Hikmat, 2006).

5. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Ḥadīd* (sura 57, Iron)

The first of his commentaries, this 280-page work connects his philosophical ideas found in the *Asfār* to Qur'ānic symbolism. Ibn al-'Arabī's influence is evident in his exposition of man's receptivity to the divine names, being the locus of the comprehensive name *Allāh*.

6. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Wāqī'a* (sura 56, The Event)

In this 120-page commentary, Ṣadrā addresses eschatological issues and also explores the Imaginal world, much in the spirit of Ibn al-'Arabī.

7. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Jum'a* (sura 62, Friday)

This 200-page commentary deals with ontology, prophetology, the levels of faith and praxis. Towards the end, there is a discussion on the degrees of remembrance (*dhikr*).

8. *Tafsīr sūrat aṭ-Ṭāriq* (sura 86, The Morning Star)

This short 50-page gnostic commentary discusses some cosmology with respect to the stages of man's development and spiritual journey. According to Ṣadrā, the basis of this commentary is intuition and unveiling.

9. *Tafsīr sūrat al-A'lā* (sura 87, The Supreme)

One of the shorter commentaries, this 50-page work explains the nature of God's transcendence, given that the sura begins by a command to glorify the name of God (*sabbihi sma rabbika l-a'lā*).

10. *Tafsīr sūrat az-Zilzāl* (sura 99, The Quaking)

This short, 34-page commentary raises some eschatological points related to the opening of scrolls on the Day of Judgement.

11. *Tafsīr sūrat al-Ikhlās* (sura 112, Sincerity)²¹

This gnostic commentary discusses divine unity, its degrees and the knowledge of God.

The following are commentaries on individual verses:

12. *Tafsīr āyat al-kursī* (The Verse of the Pedestal)

This is a 300-page commentary on verse of the Throne (Q 2:255) and the two verses following it where Ṣadrā explains the doctrine of spiritual authority (*walāya*). Beginning with God's *walāya*, Ṣadrā discusses the *walāya* of the Imams and their intercession in the hereafter.

²¹ While this work is not commonly attributed to Ṣadrā, Kalin has included it in his bibliography. See Ibrahim Kalin, "An Annotated Bibliography".

13. *Tafsīr āyat an-nūr*²² (The verse of Light)

Completed in 1620/1029, this work draws attention to the tradition of commentaries on this verse (Q 24:35), highlighting the sayings of the early Sufis, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728/110), Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899/286), Dhū n-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 860/245), Baṣṭāmī, Abū Bakr ash-Shiblī (d. 946/334), as well as those of al-Ghazālī, Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, and Naṣīr ad-Dīn aṭ-Ṭūsī (d. 1274/672). The verse of light serves as his point of departure for describing the human microcosm and his ideas on spiritual psychology.

4 Hermeneutical Vision

In this section, we will take a closer look at Ṣadrā's hermeneutical vision in his key theoretical works on the Qur'ān: *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen),²³ *Asrār al-āyāt* (Secrets of the Verses),²⁴ *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān* (The Ambiguous Verses).²⁵ *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, which consists of an introduction and twenty chapters, was written in 1632/1042 when he had already composed ten commentaries, making it a mature reflection on his hermeneutical approach. However, only the first two chapters focus specifically on hermeneutics, while the remaining chapters unfold his method in the context of other themes, such as the nature of knowledge, cosmogony, eschatology, wayfaring and others.

The second work of hermeneutics, *Asrār al-āyāt* (Secrets of the Verses), delves into the nature of revelation and the divine books. It also covers a range of theological, philosophical and mystical issues, including proofs for God's existence, the Muḥammadan reality, the Perfect Human, the origin of the world, eschatology, the nature of God's speech and the divine book.

In the last and shortest of his hermeneutical works, the *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān* (The Ambiguous Verses), Ṣadrā elucidates the nature of the ambiguous or allegorical verses and the necessity of unveiling to interpret them correctly. This work serves as a polemic against the exoteric commentators of the Qur'ān, who attempt to interpret the allegorical verses without the requisite insight nor unveiling.

When we begin to analyse Ṣadrā's approach to the Qur'ān in the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, it becomes evident that Ṣadrā was not merely a traditional exegete, but a gnostic seeking its inward meanings. His study of hermeneutics was driven by spiritual experience

²² Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr*, 4: 345–427; Ṣadrā, *Majmū'at*, Lithographed by Aḥmad Shīrāzī (Tehran, 1904), 358–75. The work has been translated by Latimah Peerwani, *On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse of the Qur'ān*, (London: ICAS Press, 2004).

²³ The published version with Mullā 'Alī Nūrī's glosses is 700 pages. See Ṣadrā, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājawi (Beirut: Mu'assasat at-Tārīkh al-'Arabī, 1999).

²⁴ Ṣadrā, *Asrār al-āyāt wa-anwār al-bayyināt*, ed. S.M. Mūsawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ḥikmat, 2006).

²⁵ Ṣadrā, *Sih risāla-yi falsafī*, ed. Jalāl ad-Dīn Āshtiyānī (Tehran: Markazī-yi Intishārāt-i Daftār-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī, 2000), 257–84.

and the very impulse to write on the Qur'ān was not his own but divinely inspired, as he states:

(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.²⁶

His goal in writing was to expound on the esoteric dimension of the Qur'ān, addressing exoteric and linguistic matters only as they pertain to the esoteric. Ṣadrā aimed to elucidate symbols and subtleties through what he describes as piercing insight: “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 near.”²⁷ With this divine illumination, he began to lay down the foundation of his *ta'wīl* in the *Mafātīh*.

The basic structure of his hermeneutics mirrors his cosmology, positing that Being is a graded reality manifesting in three primary planes: the intellectual, the imaginal and the material. The levels of hermeneutics also correspond to these three degrees: the intellectual, symbolic and literal. By “intellectual,” Ṣadrā does not mean rational but realities that exist without representation. The first premise of his hermeneutics is that the Qur'ān has both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, quoting the Prophet who states, “God, the Almighty has not revealed a verse except that it possess an outward and inward (dimension),”²⁸ and Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, “There is no verse in the Qur'ān which does not possess an outward (*zāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) meaning and a point of departure (*maṭla*).”²⁹ This principle aligns with the general ethos of Sufi hermeneutic tradition, which appreciates both the literal and symbolic aspects of the Qur'ān. Ṣadrā elaborates:

The Qur'ān has degrees and ranks, just as man has levels and stations. The lowest level of the Qur'ān is like the lowest level of man: the Qur'ān's lowest level is what is contained in the book's binding and covering (*jild wa-aghlaḥ*), just as the lowest rank of man is what is in the outer covering and skin (*al-ihāb wa-l-bashara*). The husk of man attains nothing but the blackness of the Qur'ān and its sensory form. The man of the outward husk only perceives husk-like meanings (*al-ma'ānī al-qishriyya*).³⁰

26 Ṣadrā, *Mafātīh*, 76–77, cited in Rustom, “Mullā Ṣadrā's Prolegomenon,” 129.

27 Ṣadrā, *Mafātīh*, 78, cited in Rustom, “Mullā Ṣadrā's Prolegomenon,” 129.

28 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Muttaqī al-Hindī *Kanz al-'ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa-l-af'āl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), no. 2461.

29 Ṣadrā, *Mafātīh*, 70.

30 Ṣadrā, *Mafātīh*, 117, cited in Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy*, 29.

These various levels of interority are expressed through either the explicit (*muḥkam*) verses or the allegorical (*mutashābih*) ones. The allegorical verses lend themselves to multiple interpretations because of the multivalence of their words. Once one becomes conversant with the literal meaning of the text, they must not be confined by the literal meanings and delve into its inward meanings.

This brings us to another key aspect of his methodology: reading the book of God through its relation to the book of the soul. Ṣadrā posits that there is a correspondence between the outer book of existence and the inner book of the soul. Both Qur'ān and hadith affirm that God's signs manifest on both planes of existence and within the human soul as illustrated by the verse, "We will show him Our signs on the horizons and in the self until it becomes clear that He is the Truth (Q 41:53)" Ṣadrā elaborates:

Know that the Qur'ān, like man is divided into a manifest (*alan*) and hidden dimension (*sirr*), each of which has an outer (*zāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) aspect. Its inner aspect has another inner aspect known only to God: and none knows its interpretation but God (Q 3:7). 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 (*naḥs*), heart (*qalb*), intellect (*ʿaql*), spirit (*rūḥ*), innermost mystery (*sirr*), and the hidden and most hidden (*al-khaṭī wa-l-akhfā*).³¹

There the Book of God can be read on the plane of the intellect or the plane of the heart, each revealing a different reality as it reaches the deepest aspects of the human being.³² Since the intellect is considered the inner prophet and the inner law, it mirrors the outer prophet and the outer law. Only those who possess true intellect can attain knowledge of the Qur'ān's inner mysteries, and even this understanding is granted through divine opening and assistance. Ṣadrā writes,

As for the spirit of the Qur'ān, its kernel (*lubb*), and its secret, none but the possessors of deep understanding (Q 12:111) (*ūlū l-albāb*)³³ perceive it. They do not attain this through knowledge

31 Ṣadrā, *Mafāṭīḥ* 115, cited in Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy*, 27. See also Shigeru Kamada, "Mullā Ṣadrā Between Mystical Philosophy and Qur'ānic Interpretation through His Commentary on the 'Chapter of the Earthquake'," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005): 280.

32 Imam Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 765/148) says, "The book of God Almighty has four aspects: the expression (*ibāra*), the allusion (*ishāra*), subtleties (*laṭā'if*), and realities (*ḥaqā'iq*). The expression is for the layperson (*awāmm*), the allusion for the elite (*khawāṣṣ*), the subtlety for the saints (*awliyā*), and the reality for the prophets (*anbiyā*)." Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār: al-jāmi'a li-durar akhbār al-a'imma al-aṭhar* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Wafā', 1983), 92: 95. See Mayer, *Spiritual Gems*, xxi, and Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentar of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 55, citing from as-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr*, ed. Paul Nwiyā, "Le tafsīr mystique attribué à Ġa'far Ṣādiq", Arabic text and introduction," *MUSJ* 43 (1967): 188.

33 *Lubb* means essence or kernel, referring to the intellect.

acquired by way of learning and thinking. Rather, (they attain this) through God-given (*ladunnī*) knowledge.³⁴

However, even if the Qur'ān's true meaning is attained through divinely inspired knowledge, this does not undermine Ṣadrā's synthetic approach of employing reason (*'aql*), revelation (*naql*) and gnosis (*'irfān*). In other words, the outer and inner meanings are mirrors for each other; one cannot seek the inner by disregarding the outer. The pure heart is like a mirror, clear and free of rust. When it faces the realities of the worlds, it can perceive them according to its receptivity for reflection and perception.

Ṣadrā's commentaries adhere to certain established structures of traditional Qur'ānic exegesis. He often begins with philological concerns, comparing the views of the grammarians and discussing variant readings of a verse. At times, he mentions the occasion of revelation (*asbāb an-nuzūl*) to contextualize the verse before delving deeper into esoteric readings. However, he rejects the methodology of the exoteric commentators insisting that if scripture could be fully understood through the rules of grammar, logic and rational inquiry, then the Arabic scholars and philosophers would have deciphered the entirety of the Qur'ān.³⁵ Thus, he interprets the verses according to mystical insights, seamlessly integrating them with his metaphysical framework.

5 Conclusion

The reception of Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic corpus differs significantly from his other philosophical writings, especially the *Asfār* which has had the greatest impact in Islamic philosophy since Avicenna. These writings, however, are equally valuable, displaying a thinker vast in scope and prolific in output. In many ways, they represent the culmination of his thought and life's work. The uniqueness of his commentaries lies in the synthetic approach for which he is known. Just as his philosophy is a confluence of various philosophical schools and epistemologies, his hermeneutical vision reflects this syncretic approach to the Qur'ān. However, it is abundantly clear that the thrust of his approach is spiritual and mystical, rather than historical, lexical or legal. Ṣadrā's writings are inexorably rooted in the school of Ibn al-'Arabī.

Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic works are more praxis-oriented than his philosophical works. He emphasizes the importance of spiritual purification and decorum (*adab*) before embarking on the path of interpretation (*ta'wīl*). He insists that certain conditions must be met, such as presence of heart, reflection on the verses, contemplation on the

³⁴ Ṣadrā, *Mafātīh*, 117, cited in Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy*, 29.

³⁵ Ṣadrā, "Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān," in *Sih risāla-yi falsafī*, 257–84.

divine mysteries, and the removal of spiritual veils. His method exemplifies an existential reading, reflecting the correspondence between scripture, the book of existence, and the book of the soul.

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