

‘Isma’iliyyah and the Esoteric Exegesis of the Quran

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Abstract: The Holy Quran’s esoteric aspect is rooted in its verbal miracle and multiplicity of its meaning. This fact arises from the belief in Allah’s absolute power in setting multiple linear meanings in Quranic verses. Prophet Muhammad’s (SA) traditions introduced esoteric meaning of Quranic verses this was confirmed by the traditions of infallible Imams (AS) and the speeches of companions of the Prophet (SA) and their followers. As a result, the belief in this esoteric meaning is an Islamic belief, regardless of various sects. The esoteric aspect of the Quran is acquired from the verses based on certain semantic rules and processes called esoteric exegesis. This exegesis was deviated by some movements and sects such as ‘Isma’iliyyah and was affected negatively by ghuluw movement too. In this study, the presuppositions of ‘Isma’iliyyah in Quran esoteric exegesis are studied.

Key words: ‘Isma’iliyyah exegesis, batn (esoteric aspect) traditions, esoteric exegesis, Quran esoteric aspect, traditions

INTRODUCTION

Based on methodological data, the esoteric exegesis is generally a method on the basis of logical principles and a linguistic process used in semantics of texts. The purpose of this method is finding deep meanings that are hidden beneath the surface meaning of different literary, religious, artistic and other kinds of texts. This is done from the texts’ beyond-appearance using certain semantic rules. The acquired inner meaning should have an exact semantic and literal relationship with the apparent meaning. In Islamic literature and culture acquiring hidden meaning of Quranic verses is called esoteric exegesis (Esoteric aspect vs. exoteric aspect, means hidden, inside, core and secret aspect. Exegesis, in religious literature, refers to discovering the apparent referent of the text and interpretation refers to discovering the hidden referent of it. The esoteric exegesis is discovering hidden unusual referent via religious ways). This process is sometimes called esoteric recognition which is recognizing text secrets (Babak, 1996). Obviously esoteric meaning does not exist only for Divine Texts. Moreover, acquiring it is not possible only by certain people; anyone with necessary conditions and the ability to think about semantic tools can do it. The esoteric exegesis in Islamic viewpoint has a subtle relationship with interpretation (Babak, 1996). It is considered as a branch of Quran exegesis in various exegesis schools of thought such as philosophical exegesis, mystical exegesis (Ibid.) (the Sufis believe that the Holy Quran text has a deeper meaning

hidden beneath its appearance that is acquired by deduction) and traditional exegesis. Quran researchers have attended to it because of its importance and special characteristics. What is cited in old methodological books of exegesis schools of thought about esoteric exegesis is a body of repeated material related to the beliefs of Isma’iliyyah sect. That is while esoteric exegesis with its logical firm method is different from such beliefs and has an older history than advent of mentioned sect. However, the term esoteric exegesis brings to mind extreme tendency to esoteric aspect that is seen in Isma’iliyyah sect and their opinions and books.

BACKGROUND

The traditions entitled ‘Quranic Zahr wa Batn’ (appearance and inner aspect) as cited in the Shi’ah (Samarqandi, 2002) and Sunni sources, led to creation and eloquence of esoteric exegesis in the field of Islamic culture. Historically, these traditions were first issued by Prophet Muhammad (SA) a short time after revelation of early Quranic verses. Later these speeches were used by the Prophet’s (SA) companions, followers of companions and Shi’ah infallible Imams (AS) when quoting exegesis traditions and interpreting Quranic verses. This was to an extent that one of the reasons for different exegesis traditions of the Imams (AS) has been considering apparent and esoteric meanings of Quranic verses. Thus, the Shi’ah scholars not only have observed general rules of interpreting the inner aspects of Quranic verse but also

used the difference between apparent and esoteric meanings to solve the differences (Ibid.). In mentioned traditions the apparent and esoteric aspects are depicted for Quranic verses minimally and maximally. They underline that apparent meanings of Quranic verses have esoteric meanings and the esoteric meanings have hidden meanings themselves (in contemporary hermeneutics, the hidden meaning of the esoteric meaning is called divine meaning which some people think is impossible to be understood by humans). Moreover, they mention the abundance of hidden meanings of verses as 'seventy seven esoteric meanings'. These traditions semantically relate interpretation and eternity with esoteric meaning of Quranic verses. In fact, the secret of continuation of Quranic teachings throughout ages understands esoteric meanings. New methodology works of exegesis schools of thought have had a new look at the principles of esoteric exegesis. They have pondered more deeply in the essence and reality of mentioned traditions which are the theoretical base of esoteric exegesis trend.

Implementation of mentioned traditions' basic concepts in 'Usul science, logic and various sects led to obscurity and complexity of these traditions (Ma'rifat Magazine, No. 9 and 10). The argument about and secrets of Quran's esoteric aspect, the essence, the realm, quality of presentation and logical and linguistic justification of Quranic verses' esoteric meanings, controversy over Quran's uniqueness regarding its multidimensional meaning among other heavenly books are fundamental questions that led to doubts, obscurities and incorrect understanding of some schools of thought. Meanwhile, the illuminating role of Shi'ah infallible Imams (AS) in defining the scholarly method of Quranic esoteric exegesis and introducing the real face of zahr wa batn traditions is very important. Imposing sectarian, religious and personal suppositions and non-observation of literary principles have increased deviation of esoteric exegesis trend. With the advent of Isma'iliyyah sect (a group of the Shi'ahs are called 'Isma'iliyyah because they believed that the Imam after Imam Ja'far Sadiq (AS) was his son, Isma'il. They believe that Imam Sadiq (AS) referred to the Imamate of his son, Isma'il, during his lifetime, guiding the Shi'ah to follow this son. Thus, they believe in the Imamate of Isma'il after his father, Imam Sadiq (AS)) in the second century AH, esoteric exegesis became inefficient because of various historical-religious reasons and this group's incorrect interpretation of zahr wa batn traditions. Finally this exegesis trend got entangled in extreme religious sectarianism. Since, this group had deviated from real divine teachings was engaged in exaggeration and untrue admiration of religious leaders and tried to attribute its school of

thought to the Prophet's (SA) Ahl Al-Bayt (AS), the Shi'ah Imams, especially Imam Sadiq (AS) severely rejected them. Lack of logical definition of esoteric exegesis, its necessities and necessary tools by the 'Isma'ilis on one hand and its nearness with Quran interpretation on the other hand caused biased scandals against Shi'ah Quran exegeses throughout history. In present time, people such as Goldziher, Zahabi and 'Abu Zuhrah have repeated the same scandals and criticized the monopoly of understanding Quran hidden aspect for the Shi'ah Imams. They have also accused the Shi'ah Quranic exegesis of sectarianism and bias which resulted from merging 'Isma'iliyyah beliefs with exegesis principles of Twelver Shi'ism.

The 'Isma'iliyyah movement gradually completed its beliefs during various historical eras, such as Sitr and Zuhur ages (Ibid.) by its various scholars (Farhad, 2003) and branches. The essence of 'Isma'illiyah movement and the hierarchy of its leaders are among major discussion issues of this sect (Ibid.) that have a close relationship with their esoteric interpretation of some Holy Quranic verses. The 'Isma'iliyyah bibliography reveals their mental and written attempts for widening and reforming their beliefs, thus presenting various works to Islamic researchers today (Ibid.). Because of the sensitivity of their mental attempts among other Shi'ah sects their mental and written works have attracted the attention of orientalist and westerners (Farhad, 2003). As a result, serious studies have been done regarding cultural origin and reexamination of 'Isma'iliyyah works by the westerners. Sometimes the results of their researches have been exactly from major sources of contemporary Muslim turath (religious sources) researchers (this writer gives good information about the 'Isma'iliyyah from the orientalist's sources).

PRE-SUPPOSITIONS

The necessity and generalization of interpretation:

Reviewing the usage of the term interpretation in the speech of Prophet Muhammad (SA) his Household, companions and followers of companions shows that this term means the intention of writer including compatible, necessitating, real and cyber meanings as well as instances of that meaning. One of the mental characteristics of the 'Isma'iliyyah has been resorting to interpretation in its mentioned meaning in explaining various kinds of Islamic texts. This resembled a kind of optional discovery, based on one's taste, together with unscientific considerations. According to 'Isma'iliyyah scientists, religious texts are secrets and hints that help discover hidden facts and mysteries. They have cited

reasons from Allah's Book and Prophet's traditions to prove the necessity of interpretation in understanding the meaning of texts. They have also obliged the belief in existence of apparent and esoteric aspects of Islamic teachings (Ibid.). This necessity is to such an extent that in the viewpoint of Nasir Khusruw, the brilliant 'Isma'ili scholar, the religion has no value without interpreting religious texts; just as a body without soul is worthless. He also maintained that someone who does not know religion's esoteric aspect is not only deprived of the real religion but also is hated by the Messenger of Allah (SA). In his view, the religion and Allah's Book are like the body and interpretation is the soul (Ibid.). His book, *Wajhi Din* is replete with esoteric interpretation of the religion. In this book, Nasir Khusruw has mentioned special interpretations even for verdicts of sexual intercourse, 'istibra', urination and menstruation. Some of them such as Kirmani have cited seven reasons for the necessity of interpretation, including the seventh verse of Quranic chapter 'Ali 'Imran and some traditions like this one from Prophet Muhammad (SA), "Every Quranic verse that is revealed to me has an apparent aspect and an esoteric one" (Kirmani, 1996). Kirmani has written about the Quranic verse, Surah Al-'Anfal (8): 11, "(Remember) when He covered you with a slumber as a security from Him and He caused water (rain) to descend on you from the sky to clean you thereby and to remove from you the Rijz (whispering, evil-suggestions, etc.) of Shaitan (Satan) and to strengthen your hearts and make your feet firm thereby", "Undoubtedly, Satan's whispering is infidelity, doubt, heterodoxy, ignorance, etc. that is placed inside human heart, mind and soul. It is not logical to clean these things by the water descending from the sky and used by both the believers and disbelievers. Therefore, we can do nothing but interpret this verse". The 'Isma'iliyyah scholars have generalized interpretation to all religious aspects including belief and practical teachings. This generalization is seen in all their works. The 'Isma'iliyyah has generalized its esoteric viewpoint to other heavenly books and even natural phenomena. Many of their interpretations are incompatible with conventional and linguistic rules, Allah's Book and Prophet's traditions. In most cases, they have attributed a meaning to a Quranic verse without considering logical necessities. Historically, the base of esoteric exegeses and interpretations is the acceptance of the philosophical belief that everything has an apparent and an esoteric side, generalizing it to religious teachings and verdicts and that the Imams are mediators of this interpretation. Although, there are traces of extreme interpretations and the figurative interpretation method among some Christian and Jew sects and other kinds of it among gnostics, the real origin of interpretation

by the 'Isma'iliyyah has been Islamic beliefs and discoveries such as those of Shi'ah ghulat of transoxiana in the second century, especially Mughayriyyah and Mansuriyyah groups and above all Khatabiyyah group (Farhad, 2003). Nevertheless, Goldziher has attributed the apparent-hidden dichotomy for linguistic forms in Islamic thought to Hellenism and similar to Muthul theory of Plato, saying that this is the same Zahir Wa Batin viewpoint in Islamic thought.

ESOTERIC AUTHENTICITY

Extreme tendency to esoteric aspect in interpreting religious texts is another quality that differentiates 'Isma'iliyyah from other Islamic sects. This extremism is to such an extent that some 'Isma'iliyyah scholars have rejected deniers of hidden side as infidels. Reviewing the works of the 'Isma'iliyyah reveals that this sect has had the tendency to hidden aspect from the outset and its religious and mental system has been based on the principle of hidden aspect of religious teachings. Some 'Isma'iliyyah factions have even neglected Quran's statements, disregarded the Quranic rules and only attempted to acquire hidden aspect of Quranic verses. This approach has forgotten Quranic teachings and verdicts altogether and regarded the Quranic appearance as the violator of message of revelation. They only allow the interpreters to recite the Quran in a special meaning, dislike its appearance (Cf. 'As'adi, No. 83). Propagation of this belief led to attribution of absolute permissibility and violation of religious verdicts to them which is rejected by the 'Isma'iliyyah followers. The hidden and apparent as well as revelation and interpretation concepts are fundamental concepts of 'Isma'iliyyah system. They believe that the esoteric aspect of a Quranic verse is superior to the apparent one and that the esoteric aspect is the main purpose of the verse. Moreover, togetherness of esoteric and apparent sides is like togetherness of body and soul; only if they are together they can be understood. In such a view, everything should inevitably have an apparent and a hidden side; its apparent side is the side that can be felt by the senses and its hidden side is something that can be acquired by knowledge. According to Nasir Khusruw everything in the world has an apparent and an esoteric side; the apparent side is never hidden and what is hidden is never clear; if there were no hidden things no one was superior to others since people's apparent aspects are equal (Ibid.); apparent things are stable with the help of hidden parts (Ibid.). Accordingly, the term *Batiniyyah* (people of esoteric aspect) attributed to the 'Isma'iliyyah in early writings of Islamic studies about nations and schools of

thought reveals their real belief in and tendency to esoteric aspect of religious teachings beside apparent aspect of the religion (Zahabi has written about the reason for calling Isma'iliyyah as Batiniyyah, "It is because they believe in esoteric Imam that is hidden Imam or that they believe that the Holy Quran has an apparent and a hidden aspect and its hidden aspect is away from its apparent aspect". However, they differentiated between 'Isma'iliyyah and Batiniyyah). The speech of Qazi Nu'man clearly proves this point as follows, "Every tangible issue has an appearance and a hidden part whose appearance is felt with senses and whose hidden side is acquired by knowledge. Therefore, every tangible appearance includes a hidden side that accompanies it. The Almighty Allah has stated, Surah Al-Zariyat (51): 49, 'And of everything We have created pairs that you may remember (the Grace of Allah).' The word 'everything' in this Quranic verse includes the words of verses too, so the revelation has an esoteric side, just like a human who has a soul and a body; the body is his apparent side and the soul is his hidden side". Qazi Nu'man has stressed the belief in esoteric and apparent side and implementing both of them by resorting to the appearance of these two Quranic verses: Surah Al-'An'am (6): 120, "Eschew all sin, open or secret: those who earn sin will get due recompense for their 'earnings. Surah Luqman (31): 20, "and (Allah) has made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen".

Some 'Isma'ili scholars have differentiated the apparent side and the esoteric side in that the appearance is the very religion and the hidden side is the very reality; the owner of the religion is Prophet Muhammad (SA) and the owner of the reality is Ali Ibn 'Abi Talib (AS). They have also considered Imam Ali (AS) as the Prophet's (SA) partner in his prophecy and religion. Accordingly, they set propagation of half the religion for the Messenger of Allah (SA) and the other half for his successor, Imam Ali (AS), who is called 'asas (the base). The status of 'asas as the owner of interpretation is like the night and the status of the Messenger (SA) as the owner of apparent revelation is like the day.

Of course, the 'Isma'ilis's emphasis on improper personal interpretations without considering religious, traditional and lexical regulations has led to their excommunication by some Islamic sects (Ibid.). Some contemporary researchers about 'Isma'iliyyah has called this sect a body of inconsistencies and opposite concepts. Moreover, they have used some instances to conclude that all misled deviant sects such as Babiyyah, Baha'iyyah and Qadiyaniyyah have taken Quranic interpretations from the 'Isma'iliyyah to propagate their false beliefs. One of their improper personal

interpretations is that of Nasir Khusruw about the Quranic verse Surah Al-Nisa' (4): 11, "(your children's inheritance) to the male, a portion equal to that of two females". He has said in this regard, "Allah's speaker (Natiq) has two levels; one is interpretation and the other is writing. And Allah's base ('Asas) has one level that is the interpretation. The speaker has a masculine level in the religion and the base has a feminine level in the religion. That is why the Almighty Allah stated", He has also written about the exegesis of Quranic verse Surah Al-Tin (95): 3, 'And this City of security', "This is the example of the base that saves the sage from any doubt of apparent aspect. In the verse, Surah Al-Rahman (55): 17, '(He is) Lord of the two Easts and Lord of the two Wests', the two easts are the mind and the soul from which the light of unity arises and the two wests are the speaker and the base; the light that arises from the two easts sets in the two wests". Furthermore, Nasir Khusruw has interpreted the verse, Surah Al-Takwir (81): 8, 'When the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned' as questioning about the levels of hujjats, interpreted Surah Nur (24): 35, 'The Lamp enclosed in Glass' as the status of Imam Hussayn (AS) in the womb of Hadrat Fatimah (SA) (Kirmani, 1953) and the verse Surah Al-Mumtahinah (60): 12, 'believing women will not steal' as revealing the hidden aspect before the people who believe in apparent aspect.

The monopoly of esoteric interpretation: The specific and the general are other frequently-used terms in 'Isma'iliyyah esoteric system that have a firm relationship with the terms hidden and apparent aspects, revelation and interpretation. According to this sect, human beings are two kinds; specific and general. The general people are the majority; the non-'Isma'ili Muslims, normal religious people and the followers of apparent aspect of the religion. These people can understand only superficial religious concepts. The specific people, however are the elites who have acquired the esoteric aspect of these concepts via passing some levels. These special individuals are called successor, hujjat and Imam in 'Isma'ili books. The secrets and hints can be learnt from an Imam. Understanding religious secrets is only possible through infallible Imams (AS) their companions and deputies. Basically, the fundamental belief and philosophy of 'Isma'iliyyah is learning from the Imams (AS), thus they are also called Ta'limiyyah. They say that if someone acquires teachings from a non-Imam, he would be like the people of Prophet Moses (AS) who set a cow as their deity. The interpretation of Quranic verses and getting their secrets and esoteric aspects cannot be done easily by everyone; rather, it is an important duty upon the Imams and their successors. The Imamate has always

been a base for Quranic interpretation, since this is the basic core of 'Isma'iliyyah teachings. They have divided the apparent aspect and the hidden aspect among the Messenger of Allah (SA) and his successor respectively; invitation to the apparent aspect of religion is the job of the Messenger (SA) and invitation to the esoteric aspect the job of his successor. As long as the owner of the interpretation propagates half the religion his status is not less than the owner of the revelation who propagates the other half of the religion. The former is aware of what the revelation owner knows and is sometimes scientifically superior to the latter since he knows the esoteric aspect of things (Ibid.). In other words, the exegesis and statement of apparent aspect of Holy Quran is the duty of Prophet Muhammad (SA) or the speaker but Quranic interpretation and propagating the esoteric aspect is the duty of the Prophet's (SA) Imam and successor. In the viewpoint of Kirmani, famous 'Isma'ili thinker, one of the reasons for necessity of existence of an Imam is the necessity of interpretation of the Quran and Prophet's (SA) traditions which are only acquired through an Imam. Nasir Khusruw has interpreted the Quranic verse, Su rah Al-Shams (91): 1 and 2, 'By the Sun and his (glorious) splendor. By the Moon as she follows him' this way, "The sun is, in fact, the Messenger of Allah (SA) and the moon is his successor. This is Allah's swearing. Allah means that His messenger is like the sun in the religion and the successor to the messenger is like the moon which goes after the sun and has an admired character and states the interpretation of the Book and then the revelation. It is more preferred that the Exalted Allah swears by His Messenger and his successor than swearing by the ignorant sun and the moon that shine to the pure and impure beings". Although, the 'Isma'ilis consider the interpretation as the job of an Imam there is no reference to the Imams' speeches in their books; except that it is said that the du'at, hujjats and companions learnt knowledge from the Imams and transferred to others (Eskandari *et al.*, 2012).

In three books, namely *Ta'wil Da'a'im Al-Islam* by Qazi Nu'man, *Wajhi Din* by Nasir Khusruw and *Al-Kashf* by Ja'far Mansur Al-Yaman, the presented interpretations are from the hierarchy of 'Isma'iliyyah du'at and are incongruous. This incompatibility is the result of gradual development of this system. It is as if all religious teachings and verdicts and Quranic verses are secrets to the religious invitation, hierarchy, general meanings and certain individuals accepted by the 'Isma'ilis (Ibid.). Since, the ghulat pioneered in extreme tendency to esoteric aspects, especially in attributing some religious concepts

to definite people (Ibid.) and the 'Isma'ilis had relations with them and the Khatabiyyah, some have doubted about the traditions about Quranic apparent and esoteric aspects, claiming that such traditions are fabricated by the 'Isma'iliyyah and are worthless (Ibid.).

It is worth mentioning that monopoly of understanding the esoteric aspect for the Imams (AS) has been an 'Isma'ili viewpoint (from the viewpoint of Isma'iliyyah, understanding esoteric facts of religion is only possible for 'Isma'iliyyah through interpretation and discovering secrets and examples), not a belief of Shi'ah infallible Imams (AS). There is no firm document about such monopoly in the original heritage of the 'Imamiyyah. Moreover, the practical tradition of Shi'ah Imams reveals that these guiding leaders have taught the necessities and true method of acquiring esoteric aspect of Quranic verses to their students in a logical firm framework, reminding them of probable deviations and harms. In fact, the *Zahr Wa Batn* (apparent and esoteric) exegesis is a characteristic of exegesis method of the Prophet's Ahl Al-Bayt (AS). Obviously, what is narrated from the Shi'ah Imams (AS) regarding Quran exegesis has an exemplary essence. What Zahabi has narrated in his book, *Al-Shi'ah wa Mawqifahum min Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim* as an introduction to Shi'ah exegesis is nothing but the viewpoints of Batiniyyah and its various sects. He has attributed Batiniyyah viewpoints to the Twelver Shi'ism without citing any sources or documents. He has said, "The 'Imamiyyah consider Quran's apparent aspect for inviting to the prophecy and its esoteric aspect for the Imamate". In the viewpoint of Zahabi, the Twelver Shi'ah has an extreme inclination to make a relationship between Quranic apparent meanings and esoteric meanings in order to present a logical appropriate sense and do their best to fulfill it. The Twelver Shi'ah in the viewpoint of the Isma'iliyyah has benefitted from religious beliefs to make the relationship between apparent and esoteric meanings. Moreover, the necessity of believing in Quran's esoteric aspect just like its apparent aspect, although through a brief knowledge and regarding denial of esoteric aspect as a means to one's disbelief are considered a characteristic of Shi'ism. Zahabi has considered understanding esoteric and even apparent meanings of Quran as a special ability of Prophet Muhammad (SA) and the Shi'ah Imams (AS) which nullifies mentalism in understanding the Quran in Shi'ism (Ibid.). The reason why Zahabi and his fellows could not have acquired the original teachings of Shi'ah infallible Imams (AS) has been their imitating other exegesis methodology works and acceptance of false views of orientalist about Shi'ah Imams' exegesis school of thought.

CONCLUSION

The idea of an esoteric aspect for the Holy Quran has a root in Prophet Muhammad's (SA) traditions narrated by the Shi'ahs and the Sunnis. Also interpretation means acquiring esoteric meanings of Quranic verses. There is a two-sided relationship between Quran esoteric aspect and the interpretation issue in a way that accepting one of them necessitates accepting the other too. Because of subtlety of process of acquiring esoteric meanings, Prophet's Ahl Al-Bayt (AS) have seriously defined its principles and rules, warning about misuse of enemies. Contemporary with the infallible Imams (AS), the 'Isma'iliyyah used Quran's esoteric capacity to strengthen their religious bases but faced the criticism of the Imams (AS). The originality of esoteric aspect, generalization of interpretation and monopoly of understanding it are principles of 'Isma'iliyyah in interpreting Quranic verses which have some faults. The extremism of Isma'iliyyah in interpreting and generalizing esoteric meaning of Quran was to such an extent that they considered esoteric meaning for uninterpretable verdicts, stories and statements. Unfortunately, some people have

equaled 'Isma'ili beliefs in interpreting the Quran with the interpretation viewpoint of Twelver Shi'ah. They have also accused the Shi'ah of having some beliefs that were actually denied by the Imams (AS) and great Shi'ah exegesis writers before. The lack of a historical insight in differentiating 'Isma'iliyyah movement and Twelver Shi'ah is one of the faults of such people when introducing true Shi'ah belief about Quran interpretation.

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