



THE EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAJM AL-DIN KUBRA'S SUFI TAFSIR «TA'WILAT AL-NAJMIYYA»

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Abstract. *This article examines the educational significance of the Sufi tafsir «Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya» by the outstanding thinker and scholar Najm al-Din Kubra (1145–1221), one of the most prominent representatives of Sufism in the 12th–13th centuries and a leading authority in the science of tafsir. In this work, unlike other Quranic commentaries, the author systematically enumerates the high moral virtues necessary for the spiritual perfection of the individual, deriving them from Quranic verses. The article reveals the distinctive features of this tafsir through illustrative examples.*

Keywords: *Najm al-Din Kubra, Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya, Khidr (pbuh), Moses (pbuh), humility, Mount Sinai, ishari tafsir, tariqa.*

INTRODUCTION

Najm al-Din Kubra (1145–1221) was an outstanding thinker of the 12th–13th centuries, one of the greatest representatives of Sufism, who also occupied a leading position among scholars in the field of tafsir.

Sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra is the author of dozens of works, among them *Minhaj al-Salikin* («The Path of the Wayfarers»), *Fawa'ih al-Jamal* («The Fragrances of Beauty»), and *Risala al-Turuq* («The Treatise on the Tariqas»). These works pay special attention to the cultivation of such qualities as honesty, nobility, and the formation of the perfect person (*al-insan al-kamil*). (Khayrullaev, 1999:137)

MAIN BODY

The work of Najm al-Din Kubra, *Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya*, belongs to the Sufi (symbolic-allegorical) tafsir genre and is considered one of the most significant works in this tradition. Later commentators (mufasssirs) made extensive use of it, citing numerous passages in their own commentaries.

Sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra did not live to complete this tafsir his work was brought to completion by his disciple 'Ala' al-Dawla al-Simnani (d. 736/1336). Kubra himself completed the commentary up to verse 19 of Surah al-Dhariyat. The work was published in 2009 in Beirut by the publishing house Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya in six volumes, with the sixth volume (*'Ayn al-Hayat*) belonging to al-Simnani.

A distinctive feature of this tafsir is that the author first presents the exoteric (external) interpretation of a verse, and then provides its Sufi (esoteric) interpretation. The conclusions are formulated clearly and are accessible to the reader.

Every verse of the Quran in this tafsir is illuminated through numerous semantic indications and symbolic meanings. For example, approximately 23 pages of commentary are devoted to Surah al-Fatiha and the phrase «Bismillah.» In particular, the tafsir states:

«The wisdom of Almighty God in beginning His book with the letter 'ba,' placing it before the other letters and especially before the 'alif,' and omitting the 'alif' from the word *ism* (name), is that it carries 10 meanings.» (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009a:62)

1) The letter 'alif' symbolizes loftiness and pride, while the letter 'ba' is characterized by being low, small, and broken. Since the letter 'alif' considered itself great, God lowered it, and since the letter 'ba' considered itself small, God elevated its status. A hadith states: «Whoever humbles himself before God, God will raise him, and whoever considers himself great, God will humble him» (*man tawada 'a lillahi rafa 'ahu Allahu wa-man takabbara wada 'ahu Allah*). According to one narration, God commanded Moses (pbuh) to ascend to the summit of a mountain so that Moses might hear His words. Each mountain then began to assert its own height in order to become the place for Moses (pbuh). Mount Sinai, however, submitted and said to itself: «How can I be worthy of being the place upon which Moses (pbuh) stands during his supplication?!» Almighty God then commanded Moses (pbuh): «Ascend this mountain, which does not consider itself worthy.» The same applies to the letters 'ba' and 'alif.'

2) The letter ‘ba’ performs a connective function and is written joined to every letter, unlike many other letters, and in particular unlike ‘alif.’ This is because ‘alif’ has the property of separating letters from one another and is written separately from other letters. Since the letter ‘ba’ joins kinship bonds between letters, Almighty God also joined it with Himself that is, drew it near to Himself. The letter ‘alif’ separates letters, so Almighty God distanced it from Himself. In this connection, Sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra cites another narration. ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Awf transmitted a hadith qudsi from the Prophet (pbuh): «I am God and I am al-Rahman. I created *al-rahm* (the womb) and shared with it one of My names. Whoever joins kinship bonds, I will join, and whoever severs them, I will sever.» (Authentic hadith [sahih]).

3) The letter ‘ba’ is always *maqsura* «bent» or «broken.» Since this brokenness is present in its form and meaning, it was able to taste the wine (*sharab*) of nearness to God. The word *ism* in *Bismillah* is pronounced without the letter ‘alif.’ As Almighty God has said: «I am with those whose hearts are broken for My sake.» (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009a:62)

Thus, the commentator enumerates 10 characteristics of the letters ‘alif’ and ‘ba’ over 3 pages. In the course of this enumeration, he notes the allusions and wisdom contained within these two letters and connects them to narratives of educational significance.

Sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra also addresses, in his work *Ta’wilat al-Najmiyya*, the episode between Khidr and Moses (pbuh) in Surah al-Kahf, stating:

«Know that from the place where Moses said to him (Khidr): ‘May I follow you so that you may teach me some of the right conduct that you have been taught?’ (al-Kahf, 66) up to the place where ‘He (Khidr) said: This is the parting between me and you. I will inform you of the interpretation of those things about which you were unable to maintain patience’ the rules of etiquette in the relationship between a spiritual guide (shaykh) and a disciple are enumerated. There is also an allusion to how a disciple should conduct himself in following his guide along the path of seeking truth and knowledge.»

The commentator also extracts teachings regarding the conditions and requirements that a teacher must set for educating his disciple in order to impart knowledge and guide him to the true path.

As Najm al-Din Kubra observes, like Moses (pbuh), the true murid that is, the disciple must seek the shaykh, that is, the teacher, having left behind his worldly desires

and possessions, and find him. Once he finds him (the shaykh), he must humbly follow him, observing proper conduct, regularly attend his gatherings, and seek permission to honor his teacher. (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009b:146)

In his commentary on the verses of Surah al-Kahf, the commentator further states: «If the disciple seeks knowledge and the righteous path from a teacher who leads to the Truth, and aspires to happiness for himself through serving him, he must like Moses, the prophet of God step beyond what he possesses: his lineage, his honor, his station, his knowledge, and his virtues and see himself as an ignorant person who cannot in any way distinguish dry land from sea. The disciple must follow the instructions and prohibitions of his teacher.»

Moses (pbuh), although he was a prophet and messenger (*nabi* and *rasul*), and the fact that the sacred scripture *Torah* had been revealed to him, that Gabriel (pbuh) visited him, that he had spoken with God, and that he was the guide of the Children of Israel who followed him none of this prevented him from following Khidr and serving him humbly as his shaykh (spiritual guide). On the contrary, he left behind his family, his followers, his supporters, and all his positions and titles, and devoted himself entirely to his teacher, strictly adhering to his instructions and prohibitions. (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009b:146)

Najm al-Din Kubra, in the course of his commentary on these verses, states: «Even if the teacher several times refuses the disciple in order to test his sincerity of will, the disciple must remain firm in his intention, humble, and not withdraw from the threshold. As, for example, when Khidr said to Moses: ‘Indeed, you will never be able to maintain patience with me (in the difficulties of knowledge). How can you be patient with what you do not possess or do not know?’ (Moses) said: ‘By God, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in anything.’» (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009b:146)

In his commentary on this episode, the commentator further states: «Another indication from the verse is that the disciple must submit to the commands and prohibitions of the teacher, endure the hardships of service and companionship with the teacher. He must comply with the teacher’s decisions, adopt his manners, accept his upbringing, and receive his guidance.»

As Najm al-Din Kubra instructs, the disciple must not object to the actions, words, states, movements, and silences of his teacher. Likewise, if he observes in the teacher’s actions something that does not accord with his own reason or with the Sharia, he must

not immediately deny it, must not harbor ill suspicions toward him, must think well of him, must trust him, and must not forget that if the teacher appears to be in error to the disciple, this may be due to a deficiency of knowledge on the disciple's part. The disciple must not hasten to question the teacher unless the teacher himself speaks to him.

Just as conditions are placed upon the disciple, the commentator in his tafsir also enumerates conditions placed upon the teacher. In particular: «The conduct of the shaykh that is, the teacher and the conditions placed upon him are that he must not be hasty in accepting a disciple, but rather must test and assure himself of the disciple's reason, the sincerity of his heart, and the firmness of his will toward the goal he has set for himself. In doing this, he must not make the trial too severe so as to frighten or repel him, but rather must encourage him. If he knows that the disciple is sincere in his striving and will, as well as in the path he has chosen, he must receive him with kindness, show him respect, be to him like a guardian, raise him as his own child, and instill in him the conduct of the finest people.» (Najm al-Din al-Kubra, 2009:147)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Sufi tafsir of Najm al-Din Kubra, *Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya*, is a source of immense importance for the upbringing of the younger generation in the spirit of high human morality such as love of knowledge, diligence, humility, and determination in achieving the lofty goal one sets for oneself. The study of the scholar's life and scholarly legacy vividly demonstrates how high virtues may be attained and what place they occupy in human life.

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