

supposed to know best what the Prophet meant in many of his revelations¹; so the tendency grew in later days to trace back all explanations to this circle, with the result that we frequently find various conflicting opinions traced back through different chains of authorities to the same person.²

Now it is conceivable that there may have been correct tradition from the Prophet himself in many cases as to the interpretation of some of the strange words that meet us in the Qur'ān, but if so, it is evident that this tradition was soon lost,³ for by the time the classical exegetes came to compile their works there was a bewildering entanglement of elaborate lines of conflicting tradition as to the meaning of these words, all emanating from the same small circle of the Prophet's immediate Companions. Numerous examples of this can be found on almost every page of the great Commentaries of aṭ-Ṭabarī, al-Baghawī, or ar-Rāzī, but a typical case may be cited here in illustration.

Thrice in the Qur'ān⁴ we find mention of a people called Ṣābiān, الصابئون, who with the Jews and Christians (i.e. the اهل الكتاب), and the Magians, receive special recognition and favour. Yet as to the identity of these Ṣābiān we find among the authorities the widest divergences. Thus aṭ-Ṭabarī, in commenting on ii, 59, tells us that some held that they were a community without a religion, others said they were a monotheistic sect but without a Book or a Prophet: others said they worshipped angels, and others that they were a community of the People of the Book who followed the *Zabūr* (زبور), as the Jews followed the *Taurah* and the Christians the *Injīl*. Later writers have a still greater variety of opinions about them, that they were star-worshippers, descendants of the people of Noah, or some sect midway between

¹ Quite early we find popular opinion claiming that only the Companions, or followers of Companions, were capable of giving correct interpretations of the difficulties of the Qur'ān.

² e.g. in commenting on الرقيم in xviii, 8, aṭ-Ṭabarī gives us lines of tradition all going back to Ibn 'Abbās to prove that *Raḳīm* means a *village*, a *valley*, a *writing*, or a *mountain*. Thus we are forced to conclude either that Ibn 'Abbās is a very unsafe authority whose opinion on the meaning of important words varied considerably at different times, or that the lines of tradition are worthless.

³ Lists of interpretations coming from the Prophet himself are given by some writers, e.g. as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, 918 ff. (and see Goldziher, *Richtungen*, 64), but such have little value.

⁴ ii, 59; v, 73; xxii, 17.