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## The Place of the Medieval in Qur'an Commentary

### A Survey of Recent Editions

The medieval Qur'an commentary tradition plays a central role in the modern Qur'an commentary tradition. It is the most authoritative voice in any hermeneutical debate and had managed to dominate other voices remarkably well. This centrality is at first baffling, and has so far not received a systematic examination. Why does a medieval tradition of scriptural interpretation continue to play such a central role given the radical transformation of modernity? Are there reasons for such a position beyond conservatism? In this article I will offer tentative explanations for the continuous significance of the medieval in modern Qur'an commentary tradition. Moreover, I will review some of the recent publications of major medieval works that have appeared. These new editions, I believe, have dramatically transformed what we know of the medieval Qur'an tradition on the one hand, which is exerting an unintended consequence on the current debates on how to interpret the Qur'an among contemporary Muslims. Furthermore, the new editions are setting new standards of scholarship and are opening up venues of research that were not possible before. It is a remarkable moment in the history of Tafsir and the new material made available will contribute significantly to the study of the intellectual history of medieval Islam.

#### 1) The Reasons Behind the Continuous Significance of Classical Tafsir in modern Tafsir

The main reason behind the survival of the medieval corpus of Qur'an commentary, I believe, is that it was mostly a philologically based tradition. This was rarely an allegorical tradition and only marginally mystical, and as such much of its explanations were presented in a rational philological setting that makes it appear to be non-doctrinal and as such timeless. Philology as a tool to interpret scripture, a tool that was soon to dominate the hermeneutical medieval practice, was an early event in the Arabic Islamic tradition. There was thus no moment of a rediscovery of philology in Arabic heritage that entailed a rejection of the inherited non-philological tradition. The Qur'an was not translated into

another language for Arabic to be discovered. The early philological revolution was never forgotten. Rather the tradition became more philological and more philosophical as time went by, and there was a certain de-sacralization of the Qur'an commentary tradition as we can see in the glosses composed in Madrasas from the medieval period. Many of the narratives and mythical interpretations were summarized or hinted at, if not overlooked, in the glosses, such that most of the commentary exercise was a philological exercise. This is, in my opinion, one of the main reasons that allowed this tradition to survive into the modern period. It was not archaic in ways topological or metaphorical interpretations sound to a modern reader. This on its own, however, is not a sufficient reason for the commentary tradition to continue to enjoy authority in the modern period. A philological reading does not necessarily mean a historical-critical reading, it might approach it, but it is an approach that is sustained by a theological outlook that the modern historical-critical method disallows. Theology was not far behind philology, and indeed there was a collusion between the two in medieval craft that allowed for the coherency of the tradition despite philology.

The second reason that permitted this tradition such a central role is its championing by the traditional (mostly Azhari) and Salafi movements in their attempt to wrestle the right to speak for the Qur'an from the rising new educated class that were being trained in the new universities and technical colleges or the Madrasa-educated scholars who became liberals. It is not the place here to retell the story of the fights over the Qur'an that occurred in Cairo at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather I want to point to the implications of these cultural wars on Qur'an commentary.<sup>1</sup> The victory of the conservative camp allowed the medieval heritage an a priori authority that has so far proven impossible to challenge. The Qur'an was not allowed to be turned into a classic work of literature, it remained primarily a scripture and as such guardians stood at its gate. One hadith about the Qur'an was valorized and used to both symbolize the triumph of the traditionalist camp and to undermine any opponent's attempt to venture an interpretation of the Qur'an that was not to their liking. More importantly this hadith was used to undermine any new hermeneutical structure to rise that reached beyond the traditional inherited material. The hadith, available in many variations, was mostly quoted in this form: »man qāl 'alā al-Qur'ān bi-ra'yihī fa-lyatabawwa' maq'adahū min al-nār« (whoever interprets the Qur'an by his own opinion, will have a reserved place in Hell).<sup>2</sup> This hadith will become the

1 J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Leiden 1980.

2 For references on this hadith see Walid A. Saleh, »Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of An Introduction to the Foundation of Qur'anic Exegesis«, in: Shahab Ahmed and Yossef Rapport (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, Oxford and New York 2010, pp. 123-162, here p. 147.

beginning and the end of any hermeneutical discussion – it foreclosed any attempt to claim authority to speak as an exegete, unless you prioritized tradition. The potency of this hadith summarized the wrapped victory of the traditionalists, authority was non-human and only inherited material was allowed to speak. It is remarkable that across various fields a select few hadiths were used to symbolize the potency of the victory of the traditionalist camps, and to prevent the legitimization of any new authorities of interpretation. This hadith can be compared to the hadith against allowing women assuming leadership roles in the newly founded colonial structures (namely as presidents or judges): »lan yufliḥa qawmun wallū amrahum imra'ah« (a people will never find salvation if they let a women lead them).<sup>3</sup>

In Qur'an commentary the battle was also waged by issuing new editions of medieval Qur'an commentaries, and as such editing texts in Tafsir was never a purely academic event. The publication history of Qur'an commentary works is thus intimately tied to the debates about the authority of the exegete and about who gets to speak for the meaning of the Qur'an (above and beyond the debate about the place of the Qur'an in the culture).<sup>4</sup> The Salafi hermeneutics tied its claims to speak for the voice of God to a peculiar kind of Tafsir works and hadith works stemming from the medieval period, and a massive effort soon followed to find, edit, and propagate these works. Works as such acquired a fetishist power. They proved that what needs to be known about the Qur'an is already available.

There was however a problem in the structuring of this new hermeneutical paradigm, the Salafi hermeneutics. It was far more restrictive and radical than the mainstream medieval Ash'arite tradition. Indeed, the radical hermeneutics of Salafism was as opposed to classical modes of interpretation as it was against modern interpretative hermeneutics. It was always a minority despised Sunni fringe program. By claiming it represented the mainstream of medieval interpretive hermeneutics, it pushed itself to a corner, since most of the medieval works were of the classical Ash'arite school. Soon, the Salafi movement ran out of works to edit or discover, and they ended up championing the very works that would one day undo their program. Medieval works were eventually seen by the Salafi movement as a lesser evil than modern interpretations and editing these works has become a major part of the scholarly program of modern Salafism. A sort of conflation was created with the hope that no one would disentangle the confusion between traditional mainstream Ash'arite tradition and modern Salafi paradigm.

<sup>3</sup> For references on this hadith see Fatima Mernissi, *Can We Women Head a Muslim State?*, Lahore 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See Walid A. Saleh, »Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsir in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach«, in: *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, 1-2 (2010), pp. 6-40.

There was however an overarching reason for the increase in the significance of Qur'an commentary in the modern period, a state that resulted in Tafsir becoming far more central to cultural debates among the Muslims than ever before. Modernity destroyed the two-foundational religious institution of power and cultural organization, namely Islamic law and Kalam (traditional theology). The field was left open for the emergence of a new kind of scriptural theology in which interpreting the Qur'an was the mode of reestablishing religious authority. A cultural market was created for Qur'an commentaries that was never seen before, a market in which the gloss could no more reign supreme. A Qur'an commentary mode had to be found that could be read by all, and non-gloss Qur'an commentary are supremely suitable for this mode. It is in this new landscape that Tafsir became one of the major Islamic modes of Kulturkampf. Everyone wanted to publish Tafsir works, and suddenly the very titles made available were making a statement.

## 2) New Editions in Tafsir in the Last Two Decades

The repositioning of Qur'an commentary as one of the central Islamic sciences is a major development in Islam. It is for this reason that a review of the new titles appearing in Tafsir is essential. The last two decades have seen the publication of several fundamental medieval works that were not available before. Moreover, new critical editions of previously published works have been appearing, a remarkable new awareness that Tafsir works deserve the same scholarly attention as any other. These new critical editions of older works are a radical improvement over the older editions, and more importantly they make them easier to access, read and study. These works collectively represent a new kind of development not seen since the publication of al-Ṭabarī in 1905. Moreover, all the new editions are multivolume massive works that run into thousands of pages. The editions not only make available material that was inaccessible before, but they stem from various historical periods and as such they have revolutionized what we know of the history of Tafsir.

Each of these works deserves dedicated attention, and the listing here is meant to prove that there is now a critical mass of new and old material that demands a serious attention from scholars of Tafsir. The list here is chronological. It is not exhaustive and should be updated every few years. One remark about »indexing« in the Arab world. The tradition of exhaustive full names index is not the customary tradition in multivolume works. Most of the indexes are for hadiths cited, Qur'anic verses, names of places, of books, and sometimes of significant names. As such readers should become aware of this aspect of Arabic edited works, and the same applies to this list.

1. Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āyī al-Qur'ān (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/911), ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī, 24 Vols. (Cairo: Dār Hājar 2001). Volume 24 is an index volume. The issuing of this critical edition of this most foundational of Qur'an commentaries is a monumental event. For the first time, we have a proper critical edition of this massive work, an edition that has opened for us a work that remains despite all the attention understudied. The improvements on the previous editions are immense – especially the Bāb al-Ḥalabī 1968 edition, to which it is also keyed. New manuscripts were unearthed and used, and a critical apparatus was supplied. A comparison with previous editions shows that a huge number of mistakes were corrected and many omissions were supplied. The introduction to the work supplies a history of the prints of the work, and a list of the new manuscripts used. The work can be seen as the completion of the work of Aḥmad and Maḥmūd Shākīr, who issued an incomplete edition that stopped at the beginning of Surat Ibrāhīm (chapter 14). 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī stands at the head of a program to re-edit most of the massive Tafsīr works, and his work has transformed the field already. Regrettably the index is not cumulative and lacks an index of names. There is however a mitigating factor in the task of indexing these works properly, the index runs the danger of becoming too large and exorbitant an addition that might prevent the finishing of such works.
2. Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), ed. Ahmad Wānli Ūghlī (Ahmet Vanlioglu) et. al. (Istanbul: Dār al-Mizān 2005-2011). 18 Vols. Volume 18 of this edition is a cumulative index, and each volume has its own index. The proper indexing of this edition makes it one of the few works in Tafsīr that has such a tool to analyze. The publication of this edition represents the return of Turkey as a centre for Islamic studies and as a publication centre for classical texts. The significance of this work cannot be overstated, it being one of the earliest of encyclopedic texts we have. Al-Ṭabarī now has a companion to compare with. I have already analyzed the significance of this work in an article and compared him to al-Ṭabarī.<sup>5</sup> There is a ten-volume edition from Beirut that can be also used, although scholars should use the Istanbul edition when they can.<sup>6</sup>
3. al-Kash wa-al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān, al-Tha'labī al-Naysābūrī (d. 427 / 1035), ed. Ṣalāh Bā'uthmān et al. 33 Vols. (Jeddah: Dār al-Tafsīr, 2015). Volume 1 is an introduction to the work, volumes 31, 32 and 33 are indexes. This 33-volume work is a masterpiece of scholarship and grants overdue at-

5 See Walid A. Saleh, »Rereading al-Ṭabarī through al-Māturīdī: New Light on the Third Century Hijrī«, in: *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18 (2016), pp. 180-209.

6 Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunnah*, ed. Majdī Bāsallūm, 10 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2005).

attention to a work that was foundational in the history of Qur'an commentary. I have already dedicated a monograph to this work.<sup>7</sup> The previous Beirut edition was a calamitous work of shoddy scholarship and was full of mistakes and omissions.<sup>8</sup> The present edition radically transforms our access to this work and makes available the work with detailed annotation and cross references. Unfortunately, the indexing is not an exhaustive index of names, but rather of hadith and other miscellaneous organizational access points that are helpful but not exhaustive. The significance of this edition is that it offers a detailed contextualization of al-Tha'labī's material. By offering a reference and a number for every hadith tradition in this work, the editors made possible a genealogical study of the sources of his hadith. Moreover, the editors supplied biographical information for every informant of his hadith chains (sanad). This is a monumental scholarly work. That it should come out of Saudi Arabia is, of course, an event rife with irony. The Salafi movement vilified al-Tha'labī and his Qur'an commentary. It is this self-contradictory development that I want to highlight. Most of the Qur'an commentary tradition is Asharite and not hadith-based Qur'an commentary, and as such they contradict the foundational claims of the Salafi hermeneutics. By issuing editions of this Asharite tradition the Salafi movement is undermining its own hermeneutics. The work is based on editions done in PhD programs in Saudi Arabia universities, and as such this is a team effort (see more on this point below).

4. Al-Basīṭ, al-Wāḥidī al-Naysabūrī (d. 468 / 1076), ed. Muḥammad b. Sālīḥ al-Fawzān et al. 25 Vols. (al-Riyāḍ: Imām Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd University 2009). Volume 25 is an index. This edition came out before no. 3 (above), and it started a new tradition in Arabic editorial practices, the publishing of a work out of PhD dissertations done already at universities. Saudi Arabian universities allow for editions of medieval works to be the topic of a dissertation. Professors have devised a process by which a work is divided among several students, each editing a portion. Usually such editions lie dormant and inaccessible in libraries in Saudi Arabia. But every so often an editorial team is set up to harmonize these editions and produce a printed copy of the whole work. This is such a collective effort, and so is no. 2. I have already offered a review of this edition, and I will highlight here the most important aspects.<sup>9</sup> The edition offers a detailed cross-referencing and source references

<sup>7</sup> Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha'labī* (d. 427 / 1035), Leiden 2004.

<sup>8</sup> For references and a review see *ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>9</sup> Walid A. Saleh and Shuaib Ally, »A Lacuna in the New Imām University Edition of al-Basīṭ: A Critical Edition of Q 4:41-53 and a Review«, in: *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 6 (2019), pp. 1-51.

for every hadith and item of interpretation. This attention to providing the history behind the work allows us to see how and from where a commentator obtained his material and what he changed. Al-Basīṭ remains one of the most important of grammatical commentaries and its importance is only now becoming apparent. Al-Kashf (no. 3) and al-Basīṭ are the jewels of the Nishapuri School of Tafsir and the new editions have opened up for us one of the most important centuries of the genre in medieval Islam.

5. Al-Hidāyah ilā bulūgh al-nihāyah, Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib al-Qaysī (d. 437 / 1045), ed. under the supervision of al-Shāhid al-Būshaykhī, 13 Vols. (al-Sharīqah: The University of Shariqah 2008). Volume 13 is an index for the edition. The author comes from Muslim Iberia (al-Andalus) and thus his is one of the early works from the western lands of Islam. It is a work that has not been studied so far and coming as it is from the same century as nos. 3 and 4 it has to be included in any comprehensive study of Tafsir from that century. The work uses sources not available to exegetes in Nishapur and as such preserves material not available in other works. The work's originality and significance remains to be assessed, and the absence of any study presents a challenge to our overall understanding to the history of Tafsir. This work is also based on dissertations produced in U. A. E.
6. Al-Taḥṣīl li-fawā'id kitāb al-Taḥṣīl al-jāmi' li-'ulūm al-tanzīl, al-Mahdawī (d. 440 / 1048) ed. Muḥammad Sha'bān et al. 7 Vols. (Doha: Wazārat al-Awqāf 2014). This is another work from the western parts of the Islamic world, from Morocco. It is an early work and was influential in the western tradition of Qur'an commentary. The work has not been studied or investigated, and one hopes that its availability now will make possible an understanding of this scholar and his contribution to the history of the genre.
7. Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-'azīz (Tafsīr Ibn 'Aṭīyah), Ibn 'Aṭīyah (d. 542 / 1048), ed. Idārat al-Shu'ūn al-Islāmīyah, 10 Vols. (Doha: Wazārat al-Awqāf 3rd edition, n.d.). Volume 10 contains an index. This is the third edition of the work and it is a critical edition. The work has been published before, but it was not properly edited. The work is one of the most important editions that came out of Muslim Iberia and was foundational for the medieval tradition since it was used by Abu Ḥayyān (see no. 8, below). The work has yet to receive the attention it deserves, and this edition should make such a study an easier task. This is a magnificent scholarly work and it represents the attempt of smaller Gulf countries to leave their mark on the scholarly Islamic scene. Editions of Tafsir are seen as one way to impact the field. The problem is that these editions are hard to acquire since they are not part of the commercial distribution networks of the Arab world.

8. Al-Jāmi‘ la-ahkām al-Qur’ān al-karīm, al-Qurtubī (d. 671/1272), ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī. 24 Vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah 2006). Volumes 23 and 24 are indexes. This is another new critical edition of an already printed work. This critical edition follows the established norms of Arabic editorial practices of suppling a critical apparatus that gives the sources of every hadith and important citation. The first Egyptian edition of 1933 and the subsequent reprints, however, remain reliable if without a critical apparatus.
9. Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ, Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745 / 1344), ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī et al. 27 Vols. (Cairo: Dar Hajar 2015). This is a monumental work, a marvelous development that opens this most fundamental work for real study. The first edition of this work was published in Cairo in eight massive volumes in 1910, in the usual 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulaq style of print. This edition remained the only source for this work and all subsequent prints were pirated from this edition (with disastrous mistakes creeping into these supposed new editions). The amount of care and attention given to this new edition is clear from the fact that the new edition is four times larger than the first Cairo edition. One cannot emphasize enough how radical this new development in Tafsir studies is. Works like these, with thousands of pages were hard to study and get a handle on. Now with these user-friendly editions, they are accessible in ways that we could only dream of.
10. *Futūḥ al-ghayb fī al-kashf‘an qinā‘ al-rayb*, (ḥāshiyat al-Ṭībī ‘alā al-Kashshāf), al-Ṭībī (d. 743 / 1343), ed. Muḥammad Sulṭān al-‘Ulamā’, 17 Vols. (Dubai: Jā‘izat Dubay al-Dawliyah li-al-Qur’ān al-Karīm 2013). Volume 17 is an index. This is the first gloss on a Qur’an commentary to be published since 1911. Glosses (a commentary on a commentary) are one of the least studied sub-genres of Tafsir.<sup>10</sup> The publication of this particular gloss is a remarkable development in the Islamic world, and points to a reawakening interest in the gloss after a century of neglect. This is the most important gloss written on al-Kashshāf of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 / 1144). The edition comes with an extensive introduction that does a great job contextualizing the development of the genre and its format. The study of glosses is the next frontier in Tafsir studies.
11. Al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr bi-al-maṭhūr, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 / 1505), ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī, 17 Vols. (Cairo: Markaz Hajar 2003). Volumes 16 and 17 are indexes. This work was first published in Cairo in 1896 in six volumes, a print that was the basis of all other reprints for over a century. This 19<sup>th</sup> century print was an uncritical edition and the work remained as such

<sup>10</sup> On the glosses see Walid A. Saleh, »The Gloss as Intellectual History: The Ḥāshiyahs on al-Kashshāf«, in: *Oriens* 41, 3-4 (2013), pp. 217-259.

without a critical apparatus. The new critical edition of this work is part of a remarkable trend in the Arab world, the issuing of new critical editions of older works in Tafsir that were not edited. Thus, this most important of medieval Qur'an commentaries is now available in a new edition with full critical notes that makes the study of the traditions in it a much easier task. By using this new edition, we can find the sources of all the material used by al-Suyūfī. Indeed, this new edition will revolutionize how we use this work and how we unlock it.

12. *Mawṣu'at al-tafsir al-ma'thūr*, ed. Musā'id al-Ṭayyār, 24 Vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm 2017). Volume 24 is an index volume. This is not a Qur'an commentary from the medieval period, but an encyclopedia of all the traditional interpretations on the Qur'an from the medieval period. It uses no. 11, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, as a scaffolding to collect all available traditions on every verse of the Qur'an with references and editorial comments. This is a monumental work and is the culmination of a Salafi hermeneutical program that valorized »tradition-based« (*al-tafsir bi-al-ma'thūr*) as the only method to interpret the Qur'an. Commentary on the Qur'an is thus only a narrative art, a branch of hadith science. The ideological aims of this work are clear, but it should not prevent us from utilizing it as a tool for the study of Tafsir. This is now one of the most useful tools to look up the history of any hadith or early interpretation and how it traversed the centuries. This encyclopedia also brings to a dead end the attempt to claim that this method was the mainstream method in the medieval period.

### 3) Conclusion

Tafsir studies is in the midst of a transformative period. Never before have we had available to us this number of new works that are properly edited. The publication of this new literature has radically transformed the field already. One can no more complain about the dearth of material edited – an excuse that one can no more hide behind. We have now critical editions of some of the most important works from the medieval period. Every year, new material is appearing and Tafsir is now a field that needs specialization. It is hoped that now scholars will use these new editions and direct their students to study them.

One of the implications of the availability of this literature is that it is undermining the Salafi notion of tradition-based commentary (*tafsir bi-al-ma'thūr*) as the mainstream method of medieval Tafsir. Rather, medieval Qur'an commentary was Asharite and philologically based, and as such the sheer appearance of these new works is having an ideological impact. We might be at the eve of a new

development in Islamic hermeneutical tradition, one in which al-Azhar is posed to reassert its independence from Gulf Salafism and reassert its Ashārite heritage and its philological Qur'an hermeneutical tradition.