



THE TRADITIONS OF QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS (TAFSIR) IN THE ISLAMIC CIVILISATION OF MOVAROUNNAHR

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Abstract. *In the lands where Islam spread, centres or schools of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) developed alongside the other sciences. The tafsir schools of Mecca, Medina, Iraq, and Syria, in particular, attained great renown in this field. In Movarounnahr (Transoxiana) too, centres of tafsir took shape in the Middle Ages; among them one may mention those that arose in such cities as Samarqand, Bukhara, Khwarazm, Tashkent, Nasaf, Termez, Margilan, and Kokand. In the dozens of madrasas of these centres, tafsir was taught as a separate discipline alongside the rules of the Arabic language, creed (aqida), jurisprudence (fiqh), hadith, and logic. The hundreds of exegetes (mufasssirs) who worked there engaged not only in teaching but also in composing tafsirs, dozens of which won great renown in the Islamic world: some have been published, others are preserved in manuscript, and an unknown portion has not reached us. In all, more than fifty tafsirs were created in Movarounnahr during the Middle Ages, and this tradition continues today, with fourteen official translations published at present.*

Keywords: *tafsir, Qur'anic exegesis, Movarounnahr, transmitted (naqli) tafsir; rational (aqli) tafsir; allusive (ishari) tafsir, Samarqand, Bukhara, Khwarazm, Hanafi school, al-Maturidi, al-Zamakhshari.*

INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Ages, Movarounnahr became one of the centres of the science of tafsir. One of the principal reasons for this was that the local population had long been enlightened and therefore adopted the new religion relatively easily, while its intellectual stratum raised that religion to the highest peaks at the level of scholarship. The famous scholar Ibn Khaldun (732/1332–784/1382) also emphasised this idea, noting that the abundance of learned people here served the rapid advancement of Islamic culture and learning.

Among the works in which the earliest tafsirs of Movarounnahr were set forth, one may point to the hadith collections of Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Tirmidhi, and Imam

al-Darimi, for they contain special chapters devoted to the exegesis of the Qur'an. In this way, tafsir narrations were first gathered within the hadith collections; later the science of tafsir separated from hadith and became an independent field.

It must be specially emphasised that the exegetes of Movarounnahr were predominantly representatives of the Hanafi school, for this school had struck deep roots in the region. In turn, the kings and commanders who came from the Turkic tribes firmly held to the Hanafi school – a supporter of traditionalism – and stood against various innovations (*bid'a*) and superstitions. Turkic dynasties such as the Qarakhanids and the Khwarazmshahs also supported the Hanafi school in their territories, and one consequence of this was that the exegetes too remained faithful to it.

Yet there were also famous scholars of the Shafi'i school in Movarounnahr who contributed to the development of the region's scholarly-religious milieu. Among the most famous of them one may include al-Qaffal al-Shashi (291/904–365/976), Abu al-Hasan al-Qasim, and Imam al-Taftazani (722/1322–794/1392).

To put it in general terms, the tafsirs created in Movarounnahr were taught not only in Central Asia but also in the other famous religious educational institutions of the Islamic world – including al-Azhar (Egypt), Darul Ulum (India and Pakistan), and the institutions of Islamic higher education and research (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and elsewhere) – and these valuable works, written in Arabic, were published again and again. They have secured a firm place among the works that stand at the centre of attention of researchers worldwide.

MAIN PART

Transmitted and rational tafsir

Commenting on a verse by means of another verse, or in accordance with the Sunna or the narrations of the Companions (*sahaba*) or the Successors (*tabi'in*), is considered transmitted (*naqli*) tafsir. One of the most famous such works created in Movarounnahr is Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi's (d. 373/983) "*Bahr al-ulum*" ("The Sea of Sciences").

By rational (*aqli*) tafsir is meant commenting on the verses on the basis of the rules of language, syntax (*nahw*) and morphology (*sarf*), rhetoric (*balagha*) and eloquence (*fasaha*), creed, jurisprudence, and Sufism. Because reason and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) are widely employed in this type, it has been called "rational tafsir," "ijtihadi tafsir," and "diraya (knowledge-based) tafsir."

Rational tafsirs began to multiply from the 11th–12th centuries. This indicates, on the one hand, that the rational sciences had developed by that time and, on the other, that rational arguments were increasingly used in disputed questions. Thus, with the passage of time, interpreting the Qur'an by relying on reason, in addition to transmission, also became a requirement of the age. Tafsirs of this type are divided into various orientations according to their method, their features, and the sciences advanced in them: in some, more attention is paid to syntax; in others, to creed or philosophy; and in still others, to history and to "Isra'iliyyat," that is, the narrations of the People of the Book – all of which are counted among the permitted rational tafsirs. The most famous of this kind created in Movarounnahr include Imam al-Maturidi's "Ta'wilat al-Qur'an," Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi's "Madarik al-tanzil wa haqa'iq al-ta'wil," Mahmud al-Zamakhshari's "al-Kashshaf," and others. Among them, al-Zamakhshari's "al-Kashshaf" is considered one of the world's most authoritative works, embodying the possibilities of the Arabic language.

Famous transmitted (naqli) tafsirs of Movarounnahr

In the 9th century, the tradition of writing transmitted tafsir in Movarounnahr was begun by such traditionists (muhaddiths) as Abd ibn Humayd al-Kashshi, Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Tirmidhi, and Abu Abdullah al-Darimi. Abd ibn Humayd al-Kashshi also had a tafsir in the transmitted style; consisting of the commentary on Surat Al Imran and Surat al-Nisa, it was published in Beirut in 2004 and is counted among the earliest transmitted tafsirs of Movarounnahr. The sources record that Imam al-Bukhari had a book entitled "al-Tafsir," but it has not reached us. It is not known whether al-Tirmidhi and al-Darimi wrote tafsir books; however, Imam al-Bukhari gathered hadiths concerning tafsir in his "al-Jami al-sahih." In its chapter "The Book of the Exegesis of the Qur'an," the commentaries on the verses of eighty-five suras – such as al-Fatiha, al-Baqara, Al Imran, al-Nisa, and al-An'am – are included, with commentary on nearly four hundred verses in all.

In Abu Isa Muhammad ibn Isa al-Tirmidhi's "Sunan" there are chapters entitled "The Book of the Virtues of the Qur'an," "The Book of the Reward of the Qur'an," "The Book of the Recitations," and "The Book of the Exegesis of the Qur'an." The last, in particular, is one of the largest chapters, containing 377 hadiths in all, in which are gathered hadiths concerning the virtues of the suras from al-Fatiha to al-Nas.

This tradition continued in the 10th century and afterward. The manuscript of Abu Ishaq al-Nasafi has not been found, but it is stated that he had a book entitled “al-Tafsir” that may have been a transmitted tafsir. In Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi’s “Bahr al-ulum,” much use is made of tafsir based on verses and hadiths. Although it is said that Abu Hafs Umar ibn Muhammad al-Hamadani al-Samarqandi also had a work entitled “al-Tafsir,” it is difficult to express a definite opinion about it, since it has not reached us; nevertheless, proceeding from the period and the scholar’s views, it may with high probability be said to have been a transmitted tafsir. It is also stated that the Tashkent scholar Abu Bakr al-Qaffal Muhammad ibn Ali al-Shashi had a tafsir entitled “al-Tafsir al-kabir”; although no manuscript copy has been preserved, the quotations cited from it in certain tafsirs show that it was of a transmitted-rational character.

In the 13th–15th centuries, alongside the other Islamic sciences, the science of tafsir also developed in Movarounnahr. However, as a result of the passage of time, the appearance of new fields, and the growing need for rational answers, no transmitted tafsir written in the territory of Movarounnahr after the 12th century has been identified. On this basis it may be noted that transmitted tafsirs were created mainly up to the 12th century, while in later periods rational tafsirs were written more than transmitted ones. There are several reasons for this.

First, by this time the transmitted narrations – the hadith collections and the musnads – had been gathered in the early tafsir books. As the sound (sahih) collections took shape, even the transmitters (ruwat) ceased to be mentioned in the books, for the sound hadiths had been sorted out and their transmitters identified; instead, it became customary to be content with expressions such as “narrated by al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi.” At the same time, the chains of transmitters increased the size of the book. This may be said to have been a cause of the decline of transmitted tafsirs.

Second, in the course of the development of science, the appearance of new fields and the increase of discoveries gave rise to a need to understand the Qur’an on the basis of those sciences; for example, tafsirs in such directions as jurisprudence, creed, philosophy, and Sufism multiplied. Moreover, today there are observed cases of connecting the meanings in the verses with the achievements of modern technology, and as a result many studies relating to the Qur’an in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and physics are appearing.

Third, the need to study the language of the Qur'an, the meanings of its words, their grammatical features, and their rhetoric and eloquence intensified not only among non-Arabs but even among the Arabs themselves; for with the passage of time there arose a distancing from the original language and a need to understand certain words, or to understand them more deeply. Naturally, the study of these aspects by linguists gave an impetus to the creation of many linguistically oriented tafsirs.

Famous rational (aqli) tafsirs of Movarounnahr

In the 10th century, fully developed rational tafsirs began to appear in Movarounnahr. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333/944) may be said to have been one of the first exegetes in this direction. On the basis of the methods of composition of his work "Ta'wilat ahl al-sunna" and the many instances in which he interprets the verses, it may be called a rational tafsir. In many places the scholar poses rational questions, gives answers grounded in logic, and then substantiates them with verses and hadiths; even in commenting on Surat al-Fatiha he cites several verses and hadiths, yet the rational explanations and interpretations there are more numerous than the transmitted ones. More precisely, this tafsir consists of rational arguments resting on a transmitted basis, and it is counted among the most famous works of the doctrinal (aqida) direction in the Islamic world.

Subsequently, the tradition of writing rational tafsir was continued by such scholars as Abu Hafs Umar al-Nasafi, Abu Nasr al-Haddadi al-Samarqandi, and Ala al-Din al-Samarqandi. In Abu Hafs Umar al-Nasafi's tafsir, special emphasis is also placed on the Persian language.

Jarullah al-Zamakhshari, as an accomplished scholar who brought the rational sciences to perfection, disclosed the rhetorical, syntactic, and lexical aspects of the Holy Qur'an at a high professional level – a truth acknowledged by many exegetes over the centuries.

Tafsirs grounded in the rational sciences may also be encountered in the work of such scholars as Abu Ali Ibn Sina and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Zahid al-Bukhari.

The tradition of creating rational tafsirs in Movarounnahr was continued by the scholars of subsequent centuries as well. Among them one may name Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi (d. 710/1310), Jamal al-Din al-Kashani (d. 731/1329–1330), Abu al-Fada'il Muhammad al-Burhan al-Hanafi (d. 687/1289), Ala al-Din Abd al-Aziz al-Bukhari (d. 730/1330), Mas'ud Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (722/1322–794/1392), Ala al-Din Ali Mawlana al-Qushchi (805–879/1403–1474), Abu al-Qasim ibn Abu Bakr al-Samarqandi

al-Bayani (9th/15th c.), Kamal al-Din Hafiz al-Kuhaki al-Tashkandi (895–980/1490–1572), and Bukhari-zada Muhammad al-Bukhari (d. 985/1578).

Abu al-Barakat al-Nasafi adopted and applied, from his Uwaysi master al-Maturidi, rational and logical examples and methods that summon to reflection in refuting deviant currents, and, from al-Zamakhshari, the skill of disclosing the rhetoric and eloquence of the Qur'an and the secrets of syntax and vocabulary.

Among the rational tafsirs of Movarounnahr, allusive (ishari) tafsirs also developed, as may be seen in the example of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, who lived in the 9th–10th centuries. In a book attributed to his pen, but whose name remains unknown, commentary is written on eighty words occurring in the Qur'an, and the verses are explained in a Sufi-allusive style. Among the allusive tafsirs one may also include the books of such figures as Najm al-Din Kubra (545–618/1150–1221), Jamal al-Din al-Kashani, Khwaja Parsa (756–822/1355–1420), and Ya'qub Charkhi (764–851/1363–1447). This shows that, in the course of the development of the Sufi orders, Sufi tafsirs also multiplied.

CONCLUSION

The science of tafsir has passed through several stages, each distinguished by its own features. The earliest periods are marked by the conciseness of the tafsirs and their reliance on oral narrations; later, by the appearance of written books based on transmission; and from the 10th century onward, by the emergence and multiplication of rational tafsirs. In general, the number of tafsirs in the Arabic language alone exceeds 2,500, and if translations and commentaries are added, this figure increases still further. Importantly, among the venerable writings devoted to expounding the meanings of the source of Islam, the authoritative tafsirs created by the scholars of Movarounnahr occupy a special place.

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