

Usama al-Sayyid Mahmud al-Azhari • *Introduction to the Principles of Qurʾānic Exegesis* • Trans. with Introduction and Notes by Mostafa al-Badawi • Islamic Village, 2014 • ISBN 978-0-9520853-2-4 • PB • 100pp

This brief but important work is the synopsis of a proposed renewal of the Qurʾānic sciences of *tafsīr* inspired by the former Grand Mufti of Egypt ‘Alī Jumū‘ah and distilled from his teachings by his able student, the author. Originally published in Arabic as *Madkhal ilā ‘ulūm al-tafsīr*, it is the author’s introduction to Jumū‘ah’s 300-page Qurʾānic commentary—itsself based on lectures delivered at al-Azhar—*al-Nibrās fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Cairo: al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib, 2009), which covers the Fatiha and al-Baqara until verse 26. The *Introduction* is intended to help students of *tafsīr* as well as engage and inspire its experts. Its two main ideas are that more exegesis is needed for what the author calls the axes (*maḥāwīr*) and objectives (*maqāṣid*) of the Qurʾān and, second, that such exegesis must show the relevance and applicability of the Qurʾān to contemporary issues. “To transform the verses of the Qurʾān into working programs is a most important matter... It is a scientific endeavour that requires much study and research into the very manner of interpreting the Qurʾān [which] forms the background of all the sources of knowledge of the community, its sciences, methods of functioning and cognitive schemes. It defines its identity, shapes its behaviour and influences its history” (p. 24). The author draws abundantly from al-Ṭāhir b. ‘Āshūr’s ten prolegomena to Qurʾānic exegesis among many other sources and influences both past and contemporary. It is regrettable that oftentimes precise sourcing is not given and that the book is missing indices and a bibliography.

Usama al-Sayyid is an exceptional young scholar. He became an Azhar professor, a consultant to the president of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a stellar preacher and an imam of international stature in the lifetime of his teacher ‘Alī Jumū‘ah. His doctoral defense in 2011 was attended by an international host of Ghazālīan-Ash‘arī Sufis such as Shaykh Muhammad Abu al-Huda al-Yaqoubi, Ahmad ‘Umar Hāshim, Shaykh ‘Alī al-Jifri and Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Saqqaf among others. Although less than 40 years of age,

he has already distinguished himself with a programmatic vision of renewal for what he calls the genuine Azhari intellect and method. He has published manifestos on religious educational reform as well as encyclopedias of hadith transmission chains.

The translation follows the structure of the original with a preface and thirteen terse sections (left unnumbered in the original) that form what the author in his preface calls “the secondary branches and subsidiary purposes” (*maḥāwīr far‘iyya wa-maqāṣid tābi‘a*) of the four “major axes” (*al-maḥāwīr al-kubrā*) of Qur’ānic purposes, which are “instruction, guidance, miraculousness, and legal rules.” This summing up is of course not etched in stone. See, for example, al-Ghazālī’s six *maqāṣid* of the Qur’ān, three essential (Allah, the *Ṣirāt*, the Hereafter) and three complementary (motivation, narratives, way-stations) in *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, cited in this very book (p. 89); or al-Rāzī’s phrase, “the purpose of the Qur’ān is either to do something or to leave something” (*Tafsīr*; al-Ikhlās, verse 1); or the four headings the latter lists as “constituting the entire purpose of the Qur’ān: theologies (*ilāhiyyāt*), eschatology (*ma‘ād*), prophetics (*nubuwwāt*) and the affirmation of the preordained decree (*al-qaḍā’ wal-qadar*)” (*Tafsīr* of the Fatīha, “the name *Umm al-Qur’ān*”); or Shāh Waliyyullāh’s “five categories of knowledge beyond which the Qur’ān never goes” in *al-Fawz al-Kabīr*: the science of legal rulings, that of polemic and dialectics, that of didactical instruction and admonishment, that of divine historiography, and that of the last things and eschatology; or the eight headings proposed by Fazlur Rahman in his *Major Themes of the Qur’an*. The list goes on.

The headings for the author’s thirteen sections are rendered as “Principle One of Qur’ānic Exegesis,” “Principle Two of Qur’ānic Exegesis” and so forth. The contents are a mix of classical and contemporary views of particular currency:

1. “The influence of the relationship between the Qur’ān and the various sciences on defining the tools and resources of the exegete.”

The need for exegetes to be conversant with the thought and sciences of their times was broached in the introductions of several modern commentaries, from the *Manār* to *al-Tahrīr wal-Tanwīr*, and in our teacher Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr’s *Ulūm al-Qur’ān* among others.

2. “The levels of Qur’ānic guidance and their influence on the exegete’s understanding of the Qur’ān’s universal address.”

This section ends with a reminder of this universalism as “the foundation of a global concept called ‘The Mutual Acquaintance of Civilizations’ to replace the concept of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’” (p. 35)—the latter term being the classic self-fulfilling prophecy of our times. The author might have also proposed the concept as an ethical, Islamic form of globalism of

which today's exegete should be acutely aware.

3. “The Qurʾān Explains Itself.”

The author cites al-Rāzī's description of the Qurʾān as “a single *sūra*, or even a single verse, each part of which confirms and clarifies the rest,” tempered by Ibn ʿAshūr's view that this, of course, is not unconditional, “since passages which are similar may still carry divergent meanings.” The author should have cited the hermeneutic genre of *al-wujūh wal-naẓāʾir* or Qurʾānic polysemy. Another, rather glaring omission here is Muḥammad Amīn al-Shinqīṭī's (d. 1974) magnum opus on the very subject-matter of the section, entitled *Aḍwāʾ al-bayān fī tafṣīr al-Qurʾān bil-Qurʾān*.

4. “The Prophet's Sunna is the second of the two Revelations, its source is the Qurʾān and it is the explanation of its meanings.”

This indissociability of the two types of *wahy*—the *maṭlūw* and the *ghayr maṭlūw*—is indeed a foundational Sunni principle that shapes all exegesis. Al-Suyūṭī summed it up in his book *Miftāh al-janna fīl-iḥtijāj* (also published as *fīl-i-ṭiṣām*) *bil-Sunna*, in the chapter entitled *al-Sunnatu bayānun lil-Qurʾān* (The Sunna elucidates the Qurʾān)—a phrase which formed the title of a work by one of the author's teachers, the Azhari linguist and exegete Ibrāhīm Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh al-Khūlī (b. 1929). The section would have been fine without the last two paragraphs (mentioning al-Jaṣṣāṣ and excerpting ʿAbd al-Qādir Badrān), which I found unrelated to the topic.

5. “The exegete must acquaint himself with the Science of the Principles of Jurisprudence, because it contains important rules for understanding the text and analyzing it.”

This section concerns the deduction of rules and the pursuit of precision common to both exegetes and legal theorists as well as linguists. The author cites Ibn ʿAshūr's remark that the scholars of *uṣūl* clarified certain subtleties of Arabic farther than the lexicographers did. A look at al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī's lexical discussions confirms the accuracy of this observation.

6. “The need of the exegete to keep up with the amplifications in the meanings of verbal expressions (*ittisāʿ madlūlāt al-tarakīb*) that accompany the expansion of the limits of knowledge of a given civilization and the cumulative effects of its experiences.”

Apart from the citation of Ibn ʿAshūr's remarks on the Qurʾān's epistemological inimitability (*iʿjāz ʿilmī*, rendered as “scientific matchlessness”), this very brief section is all-too-similar to the first section and adds little other than very general quotations from Ibn Juzay, Bucaille, Muṣṭafā Šādiq al-Rāfiʿī and a needless reference to Nostradamus!

7. **“The effects of grasping the various manners in which the Qurʾān affects the soul on understanding and analyzing the text.”**

This section is a defense of psychology as an exegetical tool and its indispensability in understanding the Qurʾānic idiom as understood by past and present scholars.

8. **“The stories of the Prophets are expositions of the various cognitive styles governing mankind throughout history.”**

The original states *munāqashatun li-uṣūl al-manāhij al-fikriyya* which is not an exposition but an assessment, as evinced by the section’s examples of the Qurʾānic critique of secularism.

9. **“The axes of the various sūras of the Qurʾān and their influence on understanding the text.”**

This is perhaps the most novel concept, trying as it does to extract from each sura a single over-riding theme, which it calls axis (*miḥwar*). The author states, “We can discern about 100 such issues which together constitute the essentials of revealed religion... uncovering dimensions of meaning that had gone unnoticed before, for this approach is new and I have seen no previous authors mentioning it.”

10. **“Fundamental principles of the Qurʾān or independent inference: a practical method applied by the community over the centuries to derive benefit from the verses of the Qurʾān.”**

This section revolves around excerpts from al-Shāfiʿī, Shāh Waliyyullāh, Ibn ʿAshūr, Jumūʿah and others reiterating the well-known exegetical principle that Qurʾānic verses are not understood exclusively in terms of immediate contextual meanings and historical circumstances of revelation, but also in terms of timeless meanings unconfined to specific contexts and historical backgrounds.

11. **“Divine existential laws governing human societies permeate the Book and form the subject of one of the essential sciences of the Qurʾān.”**

This section cites contemporary sources for the study of civilizational history as integral to Qurʾānic hermeneutics in ever-expanding elucidation of what the Qurʾān calls the divine custom (*sunnat Allāh*) in His creation.

12. **“The science of Qurʾānic Purposes (*al-maqāṣid al-Qurʾāniyya*), one of the most important tools of the exegete.”**

The author takes al-Suyūṭī to task for not making this Ghazālian contribution an independent category in his *Itqān* although he did (73rd category)—only he named it *Fī afḍal al-Qurʾān wa-fāḍilīh* (Concerning Superexcellent and Excellent Content in the Qurʾān). The author also states that al-Fayrūzābādī’s work on Qurʾānic purposes, identified as *al-Durr al-naẓīm al-murshid ilā maqāṣid al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, is nowhere to be

found in print or manuscript form, and that its contents remain unknown to him, but he seems unaware that the first of the six-volume print edition of al-Fayrūzābādī's *Baṣā'ir dhawī al-tamyīz fī laṭā'if al-Kitāb al-ʿazīz* contains a sura-by-sura discussion of the *maqāṣid*. It might in fact be the same work as *al-Durr al-naẓm*. Perhaps *Tafhīm al-Qurʿān* and *Fī zūlāl al-Qurʿān* might have also been included in the author's purportedly exhaustive survey of the works that address this aspect.

13. “Effect of the Science of Derivatives on understanding the text.”

This section presents the valuable concept of *ishtiqaq akbar* (larger etymology) towards a deeper understanding of the science of Arabic roots (particularly trilaterals) where letter transmutation often parallels similar meanings as in *ḥamd* (praise) and *madḥ* (compliment), but the author should have mentioned that the concept also includes entirely replacing one letter while preserving the original order, as in *khatm* (sealing)—which Bayḍāwī glossed as *katm* (concealing) under al-Baqara 2:7—or in the semantic consimilarity of *naḥaqa*, *naḥada*, *naḥadha*, *naḥasa* etc., which all share the meanings of through passage and termination as long as the first two letters are *n-f*.

The translation at times leaves something to be desired: *al-naẓm* is first rendered as “organizational guidelines” (p. 15) then, two pages down, as “the Qurʿānic symphony” when the accurate translation in both cases is “the [Qurʿānic] arrangement of words and verses.” The translator confuses *juzʿ* with *ḥizb* as one and the same thing (p. 21 n. 3 “A *ḥizb*, also called *juzʿ*...”) whereas the *juzʿ* is one thirtieth while the *ḥizb* is one sixtieth of the Qurʿān. *Bāb maʿānī al-ḥurūf* is not “the science that studies the meaning of articles” (p. 47) but of particles (this is probably just a typo). *Al-Mawsūʿa al-Qurʿāniyya al-Mutakhaṣṣiṣa* is not “Professional” (p. 78) but rather “Specialized Qurʿānic Encyclopedia,” as was made clear by Jumūʿah who said in its preface that it was meant to follow up the prior publication of the *Mawsūʿa al-Islāmiyya al-ʿĀmma* (General Islamic Encyclopedia). I liked the renderings of *khawāṣṣ al-makhlūqāt* as “biology” (p. 27) and of *al-namūdḥaj al-maʿrifī* as “cognitive model” (p. 79), but *Sunnat Allāh* as “the Wont of God” (p. 84) is stilted—*wont* was already archaic 200 years ago according to Samuel Johnson—so why not keep “divine existential laws” which is used on the previous page? The authorial phrase “I say:” (*qultu:*) is vital in dense or unpunctuated Arabic texts so as to differentiate the main author from others being quoted, but is superfluous in nicely typeset English texts when punctuation and quotation marks preclude the risk of confusion. In the discussion of derivation, the proper transliteration should be “*shajja raʿsah* and *jashsha*,” not “*jasha*” (p. 94).

The cover and feel of the book are artful and attractive, with the title material and blurb embossed in a centered box on the front and back cover

respectively; the inside is marred by the absence of front and back fly-leaves, very narrow top, bottom and outer page margins, absence of indentation, and lack of differentiation between the line spacing of the main text and that of the excerpts.

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• HB • ISBN: 9789004246911 • 2013

Volume 5 (al-Bīrūnī–Daḥw al-Ard)

• HB • ISBN: 9789004307896 • 2015

With the publication of three more volumes of *Encyclopaedia Islamica*—the English version of *Dā‘irat al-ma‘ārif-i Islāmīyā al-kubrā* (The Great Islamic Encyclopedia)—the project has attained a steady production schedule; publication of one volume every two years is, indeed, impressive.¹ The translation is being produced collaboratively by the Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia, established in 1983 (Tehran), the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London), and Brill (Leiden).

The English version differs from the original Persian in its organization; some entries are omitted, others are abridged, but the integrity of the text has been preserved. *Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī* is also being translated into Arabic; several volumes have been published. The most prominent feature of all three versions of this encyclopedia is the prominent coverage of specifically Shi‘i themes, personalities, culture and history. These aspects are said to be “precisely [those], which were either given scant attention in earlier encyclopaedias or ignored altogether, as a result of the Arabo-centric and Sunni-centric tendencies which have, until recently, prevailed in Orientalist academic circles in the West.” The project description, however, also states that “it is far from being simply an encyclopaedia of ‘Shi‘i Islam’” (1:x).

Unlike the recently completed forty-four volume *Islam Ansiklopedisi*,² which

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1. For a review of volume 1 and 2, see *Islam & Science* vol. 9 (Summer 2011) no. 1, pp. 33-49.
 2. In Turkish only, with specific focus on entries related to Turkish history