

**The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition:
The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha`labi (d. 427/1035)**

Walid Saleh

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While one may question the title of the book under review, there is little doubt that Walid Saleh's revised Yale doctoral dissertation is a major development in Qur'anic studies and, in particular, of the exegetical traditions in Islam. Al-Tha`labi was important, but remains neglected in the field. A Sunni author widely cited by Shi'i exegetes and polemicists, a traditionist who

drew upon Sufi commentaries, and a Muslim thinker interested in pre-Islamic religious lore, he had a major influence on the development of the Islamic East's exegetical traditions. This is signalled by citations from his famous exegesis *Al-Kashf wa al-Bayan*, a monumental work that still awaits a critical edition, and by the disputes during the medieval period over his probity and reliability.

After a useful introduction to the problematic of exegesis, the book comprises seven chapters. The introduction is not, however, free from contention. Saleh would like to argue that al-Tha`labi represents the "intellectual victory" of Sunnism during a period when it was "weak but most culturally open"; Sufi exegesis was co-opted some time before al-Ghazzali, Shi`ism through the incorporation of philo-`Alid material, and rationalism "dethroned by proclaiming the salvific power of belonging to the Muslim community." I am not so sure. While *Al-Kashf* was influential, al-Tha`labi was widely derided in the medieval Sunni tradition, not least by every Islamicist's favourite *bête noire* Ibn Taymiyya. His supposed "inclusive" Sunnism was clearly not favored in a time when Sunni political power dominated and was institutionally perpetuated in the madrasah. The gradual development of the nature of Sunni consensus and hegemony probably explains the process of al-Tha`labi's work and its reception.

Chapter 1 presents a concise account of al-Tha`labi's life, showing his importance in the transmission of exegetical material and Prophetic narrations and reminding readers of medieval Nishapur's intellectual significance. Chapter 2 briefly considers his relationship with Sufism. Saleh is critical of Nagel's depiction of al-Tha`labi as a Sufi, thereby explaining his unpopularity in Hanbali traditionist circles, and argues (I think correctly) that while al-Tha`labi was strongly influenced by mystical writings and individuals, he was not a Sufi. But the dispute raises the question of what the label *sufi* meant in the tenth century before the advent of the formal institution of the *tariqah*. Chapter 3 focuses on the exegesis and its structure and examines some of the sources.

Chapter 4 broaches the question of hermeneutics and al-Tha`labi's almost contextualist understanding of *ta`wil* as being rooted in one's religious experience. As such, it already represents a development from the traditionism of al-Tabari. Chapters 5 and 6 shift from theory to the practice of exegesis, beginning with such themes as *fada'il al-Qur'an*, the Revelation's salvific nature, the Qur'anic text's anthological nature to such tendencies as using mystical interpretation to demonstrate its polyvalent nature, and the use of seemingly pro-Shi`i material to make anti-Shi`i polemical points. These two chapters constitute the book's heart and main argument.

The final chapter examines al-Tha`labi's legacy in the Sunni exegetical tradition, which is equivocal not least because of the enthusiastic Shi'i embrace of his exegesis. Saleh presents al-Tha`labi as a Sunni exegete *par excellence* drawing upon the wide range of scripturalist expertise of his time and expresses surprise at the Shi'i adoption of him and the Sunni rejection based on misunderstanding. The conclusion reiterates his central point about al-Tha`labi redoing al-Tabari's work in a more comprehensive, composite, and inclusive manner. It also repeats his main contribution to the study of exegesis; he is no doubt correct that much scholarship on medieval exegesis is wrong-headed because it does not deal with a close reading of the texts, which would yield the multiplicity of meanings offered by the medieval exegete. A brief postscript mentions a recent uncritical edition of the exegesis undertaken by a Shi'i shaykh in Lebanon.

The book's title reflects Saleh's ambition to reorient our study of exegesis in Islam, and for that it should be applauded and receive serious engagement. The book forces one to reassess and reexamine perhaps long-held prejudices about the nature of medieval Sunni exegesis and its formation. For some time, scholars have studied al-Tha`labi's exegesis for the richness of its traditionist material and for its role in Sunni-Shi'i polemical exchanges. This book's real achievement is to ask readers to recenter al-Tha`labi within the mainstream of Sunni exegesis and recognize that medieval exegesis was neither closed or exclusivist. This latter point is especially important now, and there can be little doubt that Saleh's method is at least partly present-minded in its approach. Muslims and non-Muslims, scholars and laypeople, need to rediscover the rich polyvalence of medieval Muslim exegetical traditions. Saleh's book is a step, therefore, in the right direction.

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