

AL-TABARI

pretend that they do not, and their sin is worse than that of the ignorant. Those who know hold a bigger responsibility. Their knowledge of the truth obliges them to announce it and not hide it. Such are men whose hearts Allah has sealed, and they followed their lusts [evil desires] (47.16).

RAFIK BERJAK

AL-TABARI

Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir ibn Yazid al-Tabari wrote a commentary on the Qur'an which served as a major landmark in the history of Islamic scholarship. In addition, he was a prolific writer across a wide range of Islamic disciplines.

Al-Tabari was born in Persia in 224/225/838-839, in the mountainous region of Tabaristan near the Caspian Sea. He was born into a period when the 'Abbasid Empire, centred on Baghdad, the scientific, commercial and artistic centre of the Mediterranean world.

Al-Tabari's thirst for knowledge manifested itself from an early age. By age seven he had learned the full text of the Qur'an by heart. His education took him throughout the 'Abbasid domains, from Rayy in Persia to Baghdad and thence to Cairo, where he interacted with the Shafi'i law school.

In 256/870 al-Tabari settled in Baghdad, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. He achieved great prominence as a scholar, so much so that a separate *madhhab* (law school), the Jaririyya, was named after him. However, this school was not to survive him by more than two generations.

Fame brought controversy and al-Tabari became embroiled in various debates. First he aroused opposition from followers of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855), the founder of the Hanbali law school, for making no reference to

him in his work *Ikhtilaf al-fuqaha* (The Differences among the Jurists) and later commenting that Ibn Hanbal was a scholar of Tradition, not a jurist. This opposition was no doubt reinforced by the fact that the Jaririyya school represented competition for the Hanbalis. Moreover, Baghdad had witnessed intense ideological conflict during the first half of the third/eighth century between the rationalist theological school of the Mu'tazila and the more literalist Tradition-focused *ahl al-hadith* (*hadith* school). Ahmad ibn Hanbal's efforts in favour of the latter contributed greatly to the demise of the Mu'tazila. Al-Tabari's arrival in Baghdad coincided with the decline of the Mu'tazila, and he was to take a decidedly anti-Mu'tazila line in his famous Qur'an commentary.

By the time of his death in Baghdad in 310/923, al-Tabari had written a vast collection of works, many of which have not survived. These engaged with diverse fields of knowledge: exegesis, history, jurisprudence, recitation of the Qur'an, grammar, lexicography as well as various other disciplines. The *Kitab al-ahkām* (Catalogue) by Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995), which lists all books written in Arabic either by Arabs or non-Arabs, serves as an invaluable record of the breadth of al-Tabari's writing.

Two works stand out among the collection. First, his *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa al-muluk* (The History of Messengers and Kings) contains a history of the world from its creation until 302/915. It has been translated into English in thirty-nine volumes. Second, and arguably his greatest work, is the monumental Qur'an commentary entitled *Jami al-bayan 'an tafsir al-Qur'an* (Collection of Explanations for the Interpretation of the Qur'an). Its existence had been known for centuries, but a surviving example in manuscript form eluded scholars until

Otto Loth located one and published a study of it in 1881. The first published edition of the entire commentary appeared in 1903 and ran to thirty volumes. It is reported in classical Arabic sources that al-Tabari restricted his commentary to thirty volumes out of compassion for his students; he had originally intended to write 300 volumes.

The commentary carries great weight within the classical Arabic literary corpus. Surviving examples of Qur'an commentary writing which pre-date it are few in number, and are often subsumed within other written works but the content of al-Tabari's work goes a long way towards filling in the exegetical gaps from earlier periods. In it he sets out in lucid form the opinions and preferences of earlier commentators, including those with whom he disagreed. However, he does not present diverse opinions for the sake of it, making his own views clear where disagreement between his predecessors is recorded. The commentary itself begins with a generous introduction that engages with wide-ranging exegetical concerns and demonstrates al-Tabari's sophisticated understanding of hermeneutical concepts and processes.

The work includes a vast number of exegetical traditions drawn from the canonical *hadith* collections. However, al-Tabari was no mere copyist, and his selection of traditions shows his own exegetical inclinations. The extent to which al-Tabari depends on traditions for his exegetical content places his work firmly in the *ahl al-hadith* camp. He firmly rejects the allegorical approach to interpretation of the Mu'tazila, insisting that the immediately visible surface meaning of a Qur'anic verse is crucial for correct interpretation. He also meticulously reproduces the *isnad* (chain of authorities) for each tradition cited. This results in his commentary being somewhat cumbersome and turgid in

parts, but it is essential in terms of his claim to authority. This dependence on traditions for the interpretative process has also resulted in controversy, with some scholars accusing him of having drawn on weak traditions with defective chains. However, this has not had a major impact upon the overwhelmingly positive reputation of the *Jami al-bayan 'an tafsir al-Qur'an*.

The commentary contains copious amounts of information on grammatical issues, including records of *qira'at* (variant readings) of various Qur'anic passages. It thus serves as a key resource for later scholarship on the *qira'at*.

Al-Tabari's commentary has served as a model for many later commentators. Among the more prominent writers to have been influenced by al-Tabari's style are al-Samarqandi (d. c. 375/985), al-Tha'labi (427/1035), al-Baghawi (d. between 1117 and 1122), Ibn 'Atiyya (d. 1147), Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200), Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) and al-Suyuti (d. 1505). Many studies of the work have been carried out, with the study (in French) by Claude Gilliot of particular note.

Further reading

- Cooper, J. (ed.) (1987) *The Commentary on the Qur'an by Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gilliot, C. (1990) *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Tabari (m. 311/923)*, Paris: J. Vrin.
- McAuliffe, J.D. (1991) *Qur'anic Christians: An analysis of classical and modern exegesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

See also: *tafsir in early Islam*

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TABUT

Arabic term commonly used to denote a casket but used specifically in the Qur'an to refer to the 'Ark of Noah and the 'Ark of the Covenant.

TAFSIR IN EARLY ISLAM

The Ark of Noah is described by Muslim tradition as being of very large size. Exegetes relate that Noah worked on the boat for 400 years, building it from the wood of a special teak tree which had grown for forty years until it was 300 cubits tall. The Ark is said to have been anywhere from 300 by 50 cubits to 1200 by 600 cubits in length and width. Ibn 'Abbas relates that Jesus resurrected Ham, the son of Noah, to describe to his disciples the size and structure of the Ark.

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned in 2.248 as containing the Sakina and the remains left behind by the family of Moses and the family of Aaron. The Sakina is defined variously as the presence of God (Heb. Shechinah), a blowing wind with a face like the face of a man or two heads, or a spirit with the head of a cat, two wings and a tail. Ibn 'Abbas reports that the Sakina was the basin of gold from paradise in which the hearts of the prophets were washed. The remains of Moses and Aaron in the Ark of the Covenant are reported to have included the rod of Moses and pieces of the Tablets, the rod of Aaron, some manna, the clothes of Aaron and the shoes of Moses and Aaron. Others report that the term remains refers to what was left of the knowledge of the Torah.

Further reading

Goldziher, I. (1893) La notion de la sakina chez les Mohametans, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 27: 296-308.

McClain, E.G. (1978) The Kaba as Archetypal Ark, *Sophia Perennis* 4, 1: 59-75.

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TAFSIR IN EARLY ISLAM

The word *tafsir* (pl. *tafasir*) is a noun derived from the verb *fassara/yufassiru/tafsir*, meaning explanation, exposition,

elucidation, explication, interpretation and commentary. It also means to elucidate what is meant from a difficult word (Ibn Manzur, 1994, V: 55; al-Zabidi, n.d., III: 470). Technically, *tafsir* is the term encompassing both scholarly efforts to explain the Qur'an and make it more understandable and also the branch of Islamic science that deals with it. The word *tafsir* occurs in the Qur'an just once, at 25.33: They never bring you any simile but We bring you the truth and a better exposition (*tafsiran*).

Ta wil is a word that has a similar meaning to *tafsir*. *Ta wil* is derived from the verb *awwala/yuawwilu/ta'wil*, meaning to interpret dreams, explain, explicate, *tafsir*, *kashf* (discover), elucidate and result. Some scholars think that *tafsir* and *ta'wil* had different meanings from early on, while others believe that at least up until the end of third/ninth century there was no differentiation in meaning. The word *ta'wil* appears in the Qur'an in seventeen different places across fifteen verses, and has various meanings such as the end or intended result of something, interpretation of a dream and exposition of a saying. Once conceptualized, it was used to denote a person using his other rational and intellectual abilities to interpret a word or a text.

The need for commentary on the Qur'an has existed from its conception and stems both from the nature of the text and of the process of the development of Islamic society. In essence, the Qur'an was revealed in the dialect of the Quraysh tribe, who lived in Mecca, home of the Prophet. However, once Islam spread to other Arab tribes, it was possible that some words were either not understood correctly or taken out of context. Also, the Qur'an employs some strange words that not everybody can easily grasp at first glance.

The demand for resolution of apparent contradictions in some verses was

another reason driving interpretation of the Qur'an in the early period of Islam. The fact that some verses in the Qur'an were *muhkam* (clear in meaning), while others were *mutashabih* (ambiguous) forced Muslims to expend extra effort in making the *mutashabih* verses better understood. The Qur'an emphasized this problem more concretely in 3.7 by pointing to those in whose hearts there is vacillation, they follow what is ambiguous in it, seeking sedition and intending to interpret it.

Another important issue in need of explication was the stories the Qur'an narrated. Unlike the biblical narratives, the Qur'anic stories were scattered throughout the text and included repetitions. They generally did not give much detail and were mostly utilized to support the message of the Prophet. Lack of detail in stories made their interpretation necessary to satisfy enthusiastic Muslims eager to know more about them.

The social, political, economic and cultural change that Islamic society underwent after Muhammad's time was another reason behind the need for commentary. Expansion into the lands of Persia and Byzantium under the political successors of the Prophet brought new problems, and to solve these Muslims turned to the Qur'an as a source of advice and knowledge. Moreover, it was not long before the political struggles were carried to the religious sphere, where, in addition to the *ahadith*, some used the Qur'an to defend their position, even at the price of taking the verses out of context.

Although the Qur'an has been interpreted from its very inception, there are reports calling for caution or even asking readers to abstain from comments about the verses. Some *hadith* suggest that those who give their own opinions about the Qur'an have been warned it is

wrong: Whoever talks about the Qur'an relying on one's self-knowledge is wrong, even if he is right (al-Tirmidhi, *Tafsir*: 1; Abu Dawud, *ʿIlm*: 5). Another *hadith* has such people destined for hell.

It is very likely that the utilization of the Qur'an through *tafsir* during the intense political struggles and intellectual differences of the early periods resulted in a tentative approach towards the *tafsir* movement and the narrations that followed. Thus Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855) says: Three things have no reality: *tafsir*, fierce battles (*malahim*) and military expeditions (*maghazi*) (al-Suyuti, *Itqan*, II: 227).

As far as *tafsir* methods are concerned, several approaches can be observed. First, the Qur'an comments on itself; this is considered the best *tafsir*. The *tafsir* of the Qur'an by the Qur'an occurs in several ways, such as limiting an absolute statement, restricting the general meaning, explaining ambiguous positions, vague expressions and unfamiliar words, defining the best possible meaning among several alternatives and explicating short and terse expressions in detail. Sometimes the explanation may come after a verse in the same *sura*. For instance, in 5.1, Lawful unto you [for food] are all beasts, with the exceptions named, is followed almost immediately by Forbidden to you [for food] are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which has been invoked the name of other than Allah; that which has been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, or by a headlong fall, or by being gored to death; that which has been [partly] eaten by a wild animal; unless ye are able to slaughter it [in due form]; that which is sacrificed on stone [altars] (5.3). Sometimes the commentary is offered in another *sura*. For example, the *tafsir* of the Master of the Day of Judgement (*malik yawm al-din*, 1.4) can be found in 82.17-19: And