

In his wonderful conclusion, our gentle, perspicacious scholar reminds us that positivism is not his religion, that we now have more empirical evidence to help avoid using those (in the Islamicate instance) imbecilic terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* by understanding the somewhat accidental, *ad hoc*, and thoroughly human evolution of the Islamic historical and institutional reality. One feature of this reality, *walaya* (no entry in index), may be considered the “ghost in the machine” susceptible of benevolent and/or malevolent issue, depending upon the context, the bearer, the audience, and the historical “weather.” Why al-Ghazzali and not `Ayn al-Qudat? is a question left inevitably, marvelously “methodologically” open. We are invited to explore this opening for the truth about Islam. And behold! That truth is found circling around the plangent verity that however much the Qur’an is clearly the Word of God and Muhammad, upon whom be His blessing and peace, is the shining example of the virtuous life, it is human beings with all of their plusses and minuses that hear and follow.

It is unfortunate that such an important book is produced so badly; my brand new paperback copy is already falling apart. While it may be true that all things are perishing, it would be sporting, at least, if the buyer had a chance to read the book at least once before pages go missing. This, of course, is not the author’s responsibility. But perhaps the publisher could consider charging a little more for a better quality product. With the current US\$ 20.96 as the price of admission to this beautifully meditated, researched, and illuminating rethinking of one of the more crucial periods in Islamic (and therefore world) history, we surely have here a case of inaccurate valuation.

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

*Walid Saleh*  
*Leiden: Brill, 2004. 267 pages.*

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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