

Introduction

FROM ABOUT the third/ninth century, Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān*)¹ has constituted an important sub-discipline of a larger scholarly discipline known as *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (literally, the sciences of the Qur'ān).² This scholarly discipline has been responsible for a literary output that has continued into the modern day. *Tafsīr* works have been principally composed in Arabic, but they also have been written, and continue to be written, in many of the languages of the communities where Muslims have lived: Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Swahili and Malay among others. With the exception of recent attempts to create new paradigms for approaching and interpreting the Qur'ān, primarily by contemporary Muslim intellectuals seeking to find relevances in the text to modern Muslim society,³ there has been a remarkable continuity of form and method in the production of *tafsīr* works since the beginnings of the exegetical enterprise. Such continuity, however, has not meant a uniformity of opinions; varied hermeneutical approaches and interpretations have always found a place within a shared reverence for the divine text. It is hoped that this anthology of Qur'ānic commentaries will reflect that plurality of voices within a shared intellectual heritage. Before discussing the structure of this volume, the history and development of Muslim *tafsīr* will be briefly surveyed.

Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*)

The emergence of Qur'ānic exegesis as a formal discipline in its own right remains elusive. But from the beginning of Islam, exegetical activity in a less formal sense would have been prompted by engagement with the scripture. One can safely assume that the earliest manifestations of exegesis would have been the result of practical considerations on the part of members of the early Muslim community.⁴ Out of a concern for the 'proper' application of the Qur'ānic text to religious and social life, the earliest exegetical discussions would have focused on ritual and law.⁵ Another significant dimension to exegetical activity in the earliest period would have been the contribution made by the so-called religious 'storytellers' (*quṣṣās*) to the ever-expanding body of exegetical narratives.⁶ The desire and curiosity on the part of common believers to hear 'the tales' about prophets or angels and to know more details of other

central themes of the Qur'ānic narrative was catered for by these popular preachers, which in turn meant that 'narrative exegesis' would constitute, alongside law and ritual, a major aspect of the earliest exegetical discussions of the Qur'ān.

During his lifetime, Muḥammad would have been the ultimate arbiter of meaning and the acknowledged mediator between the revelation and his immediate followers, whenever questions were posed about the Qur'ān. After his death, those who had been closest to the revelation, including his family and Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), would have assumed most of the responsibility for the explication of the revelation. With the passing of the first generation of the Prophet's followers, however, the prerogative of interpreting the scripture became more widely diffused among a succeeding generation of scholars who had known and studied with prominent individuals of the first generation, such as Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652), Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. 42/662) and the Prophet's cousin 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660). It is in this second generation, known as that of 'the Successors' (*tābi'ūn*), that one might safely look for a probable starting-point for Qur'ānic exegesis as a scholastic discipline.⁷ Indeed the most celebrated and oft-cited authorities of exegetical opinions belong to this era: Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), Qatāda b. Di'āma (d. 118/736), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Sa'īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714), Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/713), 'Ikrima (d. 105/723–4), Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723), to name but a few, are standard sources for exegetical narratives in Sunnī commentaries; while individuals like Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/735 or earlier) and his son Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Zurāra b. A'yan (d. 150/767) and Ḥariz b. 'Abd Allāh (d. 149/765) are principal authorities in the parallel Twelver and Ismā'īli Shī'ī works.

Although it is possible to postulate the chronology of the early history of Qur'ānic exegesis as an activity, one cannot accurately surmise the precise form which exegetical activity at this stage took. Indeed there is a sustained debate among modern scholars over issues relating to the manner in which these commentaries were put together, finalised and transmitted: determining the authenticity of the material that purports to be early *tafsīr* work is what drives this debate.⁸ The question of when commentaries on the Qur'ān were first formalised and put together as texts is, importantly, closely tied to and dependent upon the issue of orality and literacy in early Islam.⁹ It is generally accepted, however, that written texts that could be considered the earliest formal commentaries on the Qur'ān had emerged at the latest by the early second/eighth century.¹⁰ Indeed, that is the period to which the earliest of the commentaries used in this volume belongs: the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767).

These formal commentaries share a number of features and concerns as well as a general method, and so they can be justifiably identified as a genre of writing within the larger field of Qur'anic sciences. Indeed, Qur'anic exegesis can be found in many forms of Muslim writing and underpins many of the intellectual disciplines within Islamic learning, such as philology, rhetoric, theology and philosophy.¹¹ The works that concern this anthology, however, constitute a literary sub-genre of Qur'anic sciences solely concerned with the explication of the text of the Qur'ān *qua* text, as opposed to Qur'anic interpretation concerned with the elucidation of a specific aspect of law in a jurisprudential context, or the use of a Qur'anic verse as proof-text in support of a point of theology or grammar. Although Qur'anic commentaries will invariably contain theology, law and, to a greater degree, grammatical discussions, these elements do not constitute the primary motivation for the composition of the commentary, even though they represent its content substantially. Almost all of the works used in this volume are commentaries on the entire narrative of the Qur'ān and not just on a single aspect of it. The earliest example of a Qur'anic commentary (sc. that of Muqātil b. Sulaymān) relies on paraphrase to explain the text of the Qur'ān. This approach means that the exegesis physically sits within the text of the Qur'ān, the verses separated by the author's explanatory glosses, and this in turn means that one is able to read and understand the text of the Qur'ān with minimal disruption to the flow of the narrative.¹² Combined with this paraphrastic manner of exegesis is a concern with explaining aspects of the Qur'ān with recourse to narratives derived from the Jewish and Christian traditions (referred to as *isrā'īliyyāt*) and events in the life of the Prophet (*sīra* material), as well as the pre-Islamic Arabian tradition.¹³ Another early type of commentary were *tafsīr* works based on philological interests in the Qur'ān, and the elucidation of its lexical aspects with reference to etymology and syntax. Examples of these are the *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* of al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) and the *Majāz al-Qur'ān* of Abū 'Ubayda (d. 209/824–5).

With time these commentaries became more elaborate in content,¹⁴ and Qur'anic exegesis began to acquire certain formal features; it is on the basis of these features that modern scholars sometimes refer to Qur'anic exegesis as a literary genre. Commentators authored commentaries within parameters that were implicitly acknowledged (and expected) by all those involved in the exegetical profession: knowledge of philology, jurisprudence and theology, as well as of the huge body of transmitted reports (*ḥadīth* or *athar*), constituted just some of the requisite qualifications for authors of Qur'anic commentaries.¹⁵ The commentaries, in large part, begin from the opening chapter (*sūra*) of the Qur'ān and work their way through the remaining 113 *sūras*. There are generally two ways in which the commentators proceed in terms of which

sections or verses of each *sūra* they comment on. In some of the commentaries, such as those of Muqātil, Ṭabarī, Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (henceforth Abū Ḥayyān), almost every verse has some exegetical narrative appended to it. In other commentaries, such as those of Hūd, the three early Shī'ī works of Qummī, Furāt and 'Ayyāshī, and that of Kashānī, for example, the authors are much more selective in the verses they comment on. In such cases, the selection is determined not by the fact that the relevant exegetical reports or traditions to those verses, or sections, have been transmitted to that commentator, but also because the author wishes to represent or voice the exegetical tradition of his own school or affiliation (e.g., Shī'ī or Sufi). Typically, the author will rehearse previous scholarship on a given verse, reproducing the opinions of earlier authorities who are generally Companions or their Successors (or the imams in the case of the Shī'ī commentaries), but sometimes later experts in specific fields, and thus cover various aspects of a particular Qur'ānic passage (lexical, syntactical and semantic). The authors of these commentaries will also add their own voice to the exegetical record by preferring one opinion over another or by adding to the range of opinions.¹⁶ Modern scholarship generally agrees that Qur'ānic commentary reaches its classical form by the fourth/tenth century, as exemplified by the great commentary *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* of Abū Ja'far al-c (d. 310/923). Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is arguably the first classical commentary: the commentaries after Ṭabarī either reproduced his exhaustive approach, in which all traditions and reports relating to a Qur'ānic word or verse are included, or modified it by abridging it (cf. Māwardī's, d. 450/1058, *al-Nukat wa'l-'Uyūn*). With the increasing proliferation of exegetical material, individual commentators, while adhering to the classical form typified by Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān*, could chose to emphasize their particular interests in their particular commentary. In his *tafsīr*, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) brings together a large amount of exegeses that clarify the meaning and the implication of the law (*sharī'a*). In his monumental *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) interweaves his standard rehearsal of previous scholarship with extended discussions of Ash'arī theology and aspects of Avicennan philosophy. Such *tafsīr* works should not be seen as exceptions to the classical form of commentary, but rather as variations within it, and even then variations only in terms of the degree to which one aspect predominates over others within the work.

Having surveyed the form and content of these medieval commentaries, it is useful to discuss the dynamics of the hermeneutical approach and its premises. As mentioned earlier, the genre of writing itself is referred to by the term *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. It should be noted that this word refers both to the 'explanation' – the exegesis – of a Qur'ānic word, verse or passage (and by extension,

the scholastic discipline) and to an individual work of exegesis (sc. Ṭabari's *Tafsīr* as a reference to his commentary *Jāmi' al-bayān*). The word derives from the root *f-s-r*, and its basic sense is 'explanation'. Indeed, that is the import of the term in the context of its single occurrence in the Qur'ān (at Q. 25:33).¹⁷ Another term which appears far more frequently in the Qur'ān, with a seemingly similar sense to *tafsīr*, is *ta'wīl*.¹⁸ No clear-cut distinction between the two terms can be inferred from their use in the Qur'ān. This ambiguity is reflected in the exegetical literature, where the two terms have often been used synonymously to refer to the process of interpreting the scripture. However, in the efforts to classify Qur'ānic exegesis and formalise its main features, attempts were made to create a clear distinction between the two terms; these efforts became the locus of an ongoing debate about what constituted the 'proper' hermeneutical approach to the text.

The debate over the emerging distinctions between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* had evidently not been resolved by the fourth/tenth century, as can be seen from the substantial excursus devoted to it by al-Māturīdī in his commentary *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*.¹⁹ One distinction that seems to have been sustained was on the technical level of how one referred to the genre itself. Whereas *tafsīr* could denote both the process of exegesis and the individual commentaries, *ta'wīl* is never used to describe Qur'ānic commentary as a literary genre.²⁰

The tension between the two terms is reflected in Muqātil's introduction to his commentary (one of the earliest examples of the genre), where he cites the following statement reported from Ibn 'Abbās: 'The Qur'ān has four aspects: *tafsīr*, which scholars are able to know; Arabic which Arabs are familiar with; the licit and the illicit which no one can afford to be ignorant of; and *ta'wīl* which only God knows.' When Ibn 'Abbās is asked what that *ta'wīl* is, he replies that it is 'That which will be.'²¹ Here we see an attempt to impose a definitive demarcation between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*,²² by identifying the latter with knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*), a purely divine prerogative.²³ But this also suggests that 'alternative' methods in interpretation were being applied to the Qur'ānic text and that these were met with some hostility by the traditionalist authorities.²⁴ What these 'alternative' approaches may have been is difficult to say, but one can safely surmise that the 'opinion-based' method of exegesis is the target of this criticism. The approach of exegesis based on reasoned opinion (*ra'y*) is thus set up in opposition to exegesis based on transmitted statements (*ḥadīth*), whether going back to the Prophet, his Companions or their Successors. In traditional Muslim literature on *tafsīr*, these categories are commonly used to describe various Muslim commentaries. It is generally conceded, especially by modern scholarship on *tafsīr*, that these labels do not constitute categories into which individual commentaries can be placed, but are convenient ways of

describing the many hermeneutical procedures being employed by a given commentary. Needless to say, most, if not all, commentaries contain a good measure of both.²⁵

Early Muslim attempts to classify and delineate the ‘right’ hermeneutical approach to exegesis seem to have coalesced around a key Qur’ānic passage, Q. 3:7. This verse became the locus for a debate between Muslim scholars on the proper classification of Qur’ānic exegesis. The question turns on where a recitational pause is effected in the verse, which reads:

He it is Who revealed to you the Book, wherein are verses [that are] clear (muḥkamāt) – constituting the essence of the Book – and others ambiguous (mutashābihāt). As for those in whose hearts there is deviation, they follow the ambiguous therein, seeking [to cause] dissension by their [very] desire to interpret it (ta’wīl). But no one knows its [true] interpretation except God [optional pause] and those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say: we believe in it; it is all from our Lord [...]

If the pause is omitted, then clearly interpretation (here *ta’wīl*), hence knowledge, of those ‘ambiguous’ verses of the Qur’ān is to be understood as a prerogative not only of God but also of certain qualified individuals. This verse thus establishes the connection between *ta’wīl* and ‘ambiguous’ verses, verses which exoteric exegesis, or a ‘superficial’ reading, is not able to penetrate.²⁶ The lack of any qualification of ‘those firmly rooted in knowledge’ (*al-rāsikhūna fīl-‘ilm*), other than the possession of knowledge, provided justification for those scholars who were defending the validity of their attempts at individual, reasoned, engagements with the scriptural text against a rising tide of scholars who insisted that any valid exegesis of the text would have to be based strictly on transmitted knowledge (*ḥadīth*). This seemingly natural phenomenon of scholars seeking to understand the Qur’ān on the basis of their acquired knowledge and out of personal initiative was not limited to the arena of Qur’ānic exegesis but reflected an early tension in Islam between opposing approaches to religion, one based on transmission (*naql*) or reports (*ḥadīth*), the other on reason (*‘aql*) or reasoned opinion (*ra’y*).²⁷ It is against this background of the debate over what constituted valid sources of religious authority that the uneasy relationship between *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl* should be viewed. More importantly, Q. 3:7 implied that if a Qur’ānic verse could not be understood from its literal, apparent sense (*zāhir*), then a deeper, inner (*bāṭin*) meaning existed and this level, if it were to be accessed, required a knowledge beyond that which could be applied at the ‘surface’ level of the written word. Early Muslims noted this, and one finds several *ḥadīths* which in effect later served as proof-texts in support of esoteric exegesis. The most well-known is the *ḥadīth* attributed to the famous

Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd,²⁸ where in effect the Qur’ānic text acquires a four-fold aspect: an apparent sense (*zāhir*), an inner sense (*bāṭin*), a limit (*ḥadd*) and a *muṭṭala’* (a look-out point). Echoing the words of Ibn Mas‘ūd are several other statements attributed to both ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, in which the four-dimensional aspect of the Qur’ānic text is reiterated and with it the notion that different levels of knowledge can discern different profundities of meaning.²⁹ Moreover, it was clear from Q. 3:7 that a certain amount of the Qur’ān was open to more than one level of interpretation.³⁰ For many early Muslims who read Q. 3:7 with the recitational pause in such a way that, after God, ‘those firmly rooted in knowledge’ were accorded the privilege of being able to tap deeper Qur’ānic significations, the link between ‘ambiguous’ verses (*mutashābihāt*) and *ta’wīl* constituted the means by which the scripture could be engaged in order to vindicate esoteric exegesis that could accommodate competing religio-political ideologies (such as early Shi‘ism) or higher dimensions of reality (Sufism). This in effect explains why the term *ta’wīl* is more frequently used within the context of Shi‘i and Sufi exegesis which sought (esoteric) levels of meaning beyond the apparent letter of the Qur’ān. By applying the term *ta’wīl* to that aspect of their engagement with the scriptural text, they were able to reserve the term *tafsīr* for the traditional (exoteric) sciences of the Qur’ān, at once preserving their attachment to the traditional exegetical enterprise while moving beyond the traditional hermeneutical paradigm.

An anthology of Qur’anic commentaries

This volume, then, is a collection of Muslim exegetical narratives on selected verses of the Qur’ān. These narratives are taken from seventeen works of Qur’ānic commentary (*tafsīr*), two Ismā‘īlī *ta’wīl* works and a Zaydī compilation³¹ that span thirteen centuries of Islamic history, beginning in the second/eighth century AD and extending into the twentieth. The commentaries are the work of key representatives of the principal Muslim religious denominations: Sunnism, Shi‘ism (Twelver, Ismā‘īlī and Zaydī) as well as Ibāḍism. In addition some of these commentaries, beyond their particular confessional affiliation or legal school, are also coloured by theological schools (Ash‘arī, Mu‘tazilī), and philosophical (Aristotelian, Neoplatonic) or mystical (Sufi) sub-traditions, some of which began to emerge as early as the second/eighth century.

Ultimately the aim of this collection is to demonstrate the richness of the genre of Qur’ānic commentary and the plurality of interpretative voices that have engaged the text of the scripture. By drawing on commentaries, many

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well-known but others less so, our purpose has been to present the broadest possible range of Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān, from as many perspectives and as many styles as considered feasible within the covers of a single volume. This volume then is intended to make available a *representative* selection of this literature in English, but at the same time to be comprehensive in the treatment of this selection, primarily by translating the text word for word and by guiding the reader with contextual material in the accompanying annotation.³²

The structure of the work

Each chapter deals with a single Qur'ānic verse and presents the commentaries on that particular verse that are available from the 20 works selected for this anthology. In some of the chapters, the reader will note the absence of one or more of the 20 commentaries; this is because Muslim commentators vary in the amount of Qur'ānic text which they select for interpretation, and some are not concerned with providing an exegesis of every single verse of the text.³³ All 6 chapters are structured along the same lines: each begins with a contextual introduction, situating the importance of the verse and summarising the gist of the commentaries that will follow. The introductions focus on the theological implications of each verse in broad and, where appropriate, religio-comparative terms. They also may draw comparisons between the different commentaries; highlight general trends or exceptions in the approaches of the commentators; and articulate as far as possible the way in which the exegetical narratives, although drawing on different confessional traditions, intimate a common heritage that allows for a plurality of interpretations to exist under the unifying umbrella of Muslim *tafsīr*. This last goal is especially important given that the volume is sampling some 1,200 years of *tafsīr* tradition across diverse geographies.

The selection of verses

The title *The Nature of the Divine* seemed a logical starting-point for an anthology of commentaries on the Qur'ān – there simply is no other theme that is more pivotal than that of 'God'. This centrality has been reflected in *tafsīr* literature over the centuries. Discussions of the divine nature, divine attributes and of the relationship between the divine and the human (between God and the world) have consistently held a central position within theological and philosophical works throughout the various Muslim schools of thought. In addition, it will be seen that many of the issues discussed in the course of the commentaries presented here are either on-going universal debates or have a broader relevance extending into contemporary times, and so provide some insight into

the depth and breadth of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual heritage. The selected theme for volume one is, of course, crucial to the fields of theology, philosophy, history and, by extension, comparative religion, moral ethics and ecumenical dialogue – but it cannot be expected to pertain to ‘scientific’ matters, which historically were not addressed in the hermeneutical tradition until the present age.³⁴

As for the verses themselves, these were selected on account of the substantial attention accorded to them by the commentators and, to a certain extent, on account of their prominence within the Muslim popular consciousness. Three criteria were thus borne in mind when making this present selection: 1) the significance of certain verses for devotional purposes; 2) verses used to contextualise and place Islam within the overall Abrahamic tradition; and 3) verses that play an important role in intra-Muslim apologetics.

The following provides brief outlines of the justifications underlying each of the six chosen verses:

- **Q. 2:115, God’s omnipresence**

This verse establishes the relationship in time and place between God and His servants; it addresses the question of God’s omnipresence and the wisdom behind His establishing a ‘direction of prayer’ (*qibla*). Discussions about the *qibla* are significant because of their affirmation of Muslim identity and because, together with the profession of the faith (*shahāda*), the *qibla* is an essential symbol of the faith unifying the range of schools and confessional groups in Islam: whatever Muslims may argue about with one another, they are united under the banner, self-proclaimed, of *ahl al-qibla*.

- **Q. 2:255, God’s seat/throne**

This verse deals with God’s attributes, more specifically, with His sovereignty, knowledge, power and management of creation. The question of God’s attributes is essential for understanding the disputes among the earliest intellectual movements in Islam. Significantly, it is on the basis of God’s attributes that philosophers were able to work out their theories about the process of creation, God’s relation to it, and its ultimate destiny – issues that are still debated in philosophy and theology today. In addition, the commentaries on this verse also inform us about the liturgical uses of this verse in Muslim devotions and the verse’s appeal to Muslim consciousness, past and present.

- **Q. 6:12, God’s mercy**

This verse substantiates a fundamental Muslim teaching, namely that God has made it incumbent upon Himself to be merciful, something which has always

been pitted against God's threats of severe punishment for sinners in the Hereafter; it also provides a starting point for discussions about the nature of reward and punishment within the overall divine scheme. This is clearly an important verse given that the question of the status of sinners was a divisive issue in early Islam and sometimes constituted the defining stance of a particular Muslim sect. Furthermore, through the unique formulation of the relationship of mercy to God, as stated in this verse, God reveals Himself in the Qur'ān as quintessentially merciful. This formulation – *kataba 'alā nafsīhi al-rahma* – may be rendered *He has inscribed mercy upon His Self*, for *nafs* means self as well as 'essence' (*dhāt*), and is used only in relation to mercy (it is repeated only once again in the scripture, at Q. 6:54). Among the commentaries on this phrase, mercy is related to the perfection of the divine essence (*dhāt*) and to the very being of existents.

● **Q. 24:35, God's light**

For Muslims, this is the most famous simile of God. Of all the Qur'ānic images, 'light' is arguably the most significant, since it represents one of God's greatest favours to mankind: His guidance. In interpreting it, the commentaries discuss the nature of His guidance, through the Qur'ān, the Prophet and, in the case of Shī'ī commentaries, the imams. For all the different intellectual currents in Islam, God's explicit reference to Himself as *the Light of the heavens and the earth* was the stimulus for a plethora of interpretations and discussions among theologians, mystics and philosophers that sought to define the nature of this fascinating and incontestable link between God and the phenomenon of light.

● **Q. 54:49, God's measure**

The commentaries tell us that, as 'Master Creator', God created everything according to a precise measure; this is reflected in the world around us (in creatures, nature and the cosmos). More significantly, of course, it also raises the question of whether in predetermining measures for every thing, God also preordained the fate and course of life for all His servants. Together with the question of the this-worldly status and the other-worldly fate of the Muslim sinner, the question of 'free will' *versus* predestination constituted one of the earliest theological dilemmas faced by early Muslims; this question is still debated today by philosophers and religious scholars all over the world.

● **Q. 112:1–2, God's Oneness**

This verse articulates the fundamental doctrine of the Muslim faith, belief in which – and this is possibly the only point upon which Muslims of all denominations unequivocally agree – constitutes the minimal requirement for a

person to be identified as a Muslim. The importance of including this verse is self-evident. The commentaries will present to the reader the manner in which this foundational concept of their religion has been understood by Muslims.

The selection of commentators

Needless to say, it is a near impossible task to select the most important Muslim commentators while also covering the range of Sunnī, Shī'ī, Ibādī, Mu'tazilī and Sufi sub-traditions, across thirteen centuries of exegetical activity. Some commentators, because of their prominence in their own times and beyond, constituted an obvious choice: al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭabrisī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, to name a few. The choice of the remaining authors, however, was dictated by the need to avoid including commentaries which, while not insignificant in themselves, when grouped with others produced repetitious content. In certain cases, although it was acknowledged that a *tafsīr* was important, it was felt that the inclusion of that commentary would have undermined the objective of offering as varied a range of exegetical styles as possible (particularly medieval to modern ones). This is exemplified by the decision to include Faḍl Allāh's commentary instead of al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *Mizān*. While the latter's approach to exegesis, notably his inclusion of the fundamental, the rational and the mystical elements of Shī'ī *tafsīr*, may to a large extent be gleaned from a combination of the commentaries of al-Qummī, al-Ṭabrisī and Burūsawī, Faḍl Allāh's approach, idiosyncratic and unique as it is, could not, it was felt, be represented at all by resorting to any other commentaries.

The selection of commentators could never reasonably be based on any criteria such as the 'best' commentaries. Indeed, there are arguments against including the commentaries of Alūsī and Mawdūdī. In a similar vein, a recent monograph (Saleh 2004, 5) has argued that the *tafsīr* of Tha'labī should assume as privileged a place as, if not replace, that of Ṭabarī in modern scholarship on *tafsīr*; but again, the concern was to provide that range which would represent a plurality of voices and styles.

One clarification remains regarding three of the works used here. In our attempt to be representative of the range of Muslim exegetical activity, it was felt that the Ismā'īlī contribution to the field could not properly be omitted. However, as the reader will note, the two Ismā'īlī works included here do not conform to the format of *tafsīr* described above. The reason for this is that the very doctrinal premise of Ismā'īlism precludes the notion of a systematic (exoteric) commentary on the Qur'ān, of the sort that are employed in this volume. This literary lacuna ensues from the general Ismā'īlī belief that the literal text (*ẓāhir*) of the Qur'ān, while indispensable, is only symbolic of a deeper inner truth (*bāṭin*), which can only be accessed and disseminated by the imam, for

whom is claimed the status of an enunciating word of God, or ‘the speaking Qur’ān’ (*Qur’ān nāṭiq*), as opposed to the ‘silent’ (*ṣāmī*) scriptural text between the covers. However, this does not mean that the Qur’ān plays an insignificant role in Ismā‘īlī teachings and writings, nor does it mean that there is a complete absence of texts that focus on the Qur’ān or explain it in order to justify and elucidate Ismā‘īlī doctrinal positions. The Qur’ān-*ta’wīl* works, in fact, constitute a genre of Ismā‘īlī literature in itself (often taking the form of recorded *Majālis*).³⁵

Despite these formal differences, the reader will note that a fair amount of what, for example, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī’s *Kitāb al-Zīna* offers, has much in common with the other *tafsīrs*: grammatical explanations, *ḥadīth* reports and so on. Beyond practical considerations, the main reason these particular texts were chosen was to represent the two traditions: Fāṭimid Ismā‘īlism (Ja‘far b. Maṣūm) and Persian Qarmaṭism (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī). The only other anomaly, in this respect, is the compilation by al-Sharafī; again, this was included in order to properly represent the Zaydī exegetical tradition from the earliest times, given the lack of substantial or extant *tafsīr* works. Detailed descriptions of these relevant works will be found in the chapter on the commentators and their commentaries.

Using this work

In the past decade or so a handful of works on the topic of Muslim *tafsīr* have been published, but none have drawn on as extensive a range of commentaries, both confessionally and historically, as this volume. Though the actual contents of the chapters may serve as an informative thematic study of Muslim *tafsīr*, the simple purpose of this otherwise ambitious exercise has been to acquaint students and interested readers with a wide and varied selection of compositions from the huge body of literature that is Muslim exegesis. It is with this purpose in mind that detailed introductions to the commentators and their works have been included in a separate section in this volume (see ‘The commentators and their commentaries’). It is hoped that this section and the prosopographical information in the appendix will constitute a valuable source of reference for students of Islamic studies, given that the great majority of these commentators are not only little known by non-specialists or students of the field, but also have received scant attention in modern studies on Muslim *tafsīr*.

Another key feature of this volume is its extensive annotation. It was felt that the few previously published works on this subject do not provide the sort of sufficient annotation that would equip the reader with the references necessary to follow up on themes or points of interest. Thus, the extensive annotation that runs right through this work will allow the reader, in most cases, to easily find

the standard references as well as up-to-date works on a particular theme or idea. In many instances the notes themselves provide occasion for expanding upon certain debates and allowing for analyses of themes without intruding on the main text itself.

For teachers one obvious way to use this volume would be to select samples from four or five commentaries on the same theme (in other words, from the same chapter) and then present them to students for analysis. The point is then that the student should be able to recognise those features that distinguish, say, a Sunnī commentary from a Shī'ī one. Such features may be immediately noticeable from the *isnād* (the chain of names listing the transmitters of a report); this, the student can learn to do fairly quickly. More often than not, however, they will need to learn to tease out such distinguishing features through a close reading of the text and an analysis of its substance as it relates to that particular religious affiliation. It is hoped that there is enough material in this volume to reflect the different styles in which Muslim commentaries have been composed over the centuries, and in particular to provide students with sufficient examples of what a particular type of *tafsīr*, for example a Sufi one, does with the Qur'ān.



While our starting point for this volume was not a 'thematic' study of *tafsīr*, it was immediately obvious that some sort of organising principle was needed to bring such a wide and varied range of commentaries together in a single volume under a single title. Our choice of a 'theme' as an organising principle is by no means the only or best method of presenting *tafsīr* literature; it is certainly not foolproof. For even within the same theme, different commentaries may select different verses as relevant to their inquiry. Sometimes more than one verse may be traditionally used to express the religio-political sentiments of a given group, so that commentaries belonging to another confessional group may not have anything to say on those verses, all of which renders the task of bringing together commentaries from across confessional affiliations into one volume that more difficult. Moreover, commentaries written during a particular historical period may share socio-political features and theological concerns common to that era, so that one useful way of bringing confessionally diverse commentaries into play would be a volume of commentaries organised according to a historical period. Still another potentially fruitful approach might be to group commentaries according to *madhhab* or religious denomination (a volume of Shī'ī commentaries, for example) and to then present their narratives on a particular theme common to Shī'ī commentaries of all ages (say, on the question of the imamate). In certain cases, *tafsīrs* may be grouped according to

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the topic with which they seem to be most concerned (Arabic grammar, for example), and so on and so forth.

In all cases, it is believed that Muslim *tafsīr* may be useful not only as a reflection of, ultimately, a plurality of religious discourse within Islam, but also as source-material for the study of the development of religious ideas as they crystallise across time. For Qur'ānic commentary in Islam is not only a cumulative record of Muslim exegetical work since the time of the Prophet, but also a repository for theological concepts and religio-political attitudes, a repository that can be used to chart and even date the development of these concepts and attitudes as they re-emerge from one commentary to the next. For example, on the Sunnī side, one could use the commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) and compare or contrast lingering theological issues as they re-appear in the later Sunnī commentary of Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). Similarly, but now on the Shī'ī side, one could take the three early Shī'ī commentaries of Qummī, 'Ayyāshī and Furāt (all fourth/tenth century) and compare their stances on particular questions with those of the later Shī'ī commentaries of Ṭabrisī and Ṭūsī, commentaries composed in a distinct socio-political environment. Thus, even taken chronologically, commentaries may offer insight into the development of the very religio-political group or confessional denomination to which they belong.³⁶