BOOK REVIEWS


Exegesis of the Qurʾān is one of the subjects that have attracted special attention and interest of the Muslim scholars since the dawn of Islam. Volumes of books have been devoted to this subject, and the exegetes have explored and explained the various aspects of the exoteric and esoteric meanings of this most revered book which the Muslims unequivocally accept as the prime source of all their principles and laws directing their social as well as individual life. The most important, comprehensive and original works in this discipline have naturally been written in Arabic, the language of the Qurʾān. A number of voluminous and valuable books, however, on the subject have also either been created in other languages of the Muslim world in the light of the earlier Arabic works, or some of the outstanding exegeses from the latter category have been translated into other languages, such as Persian, Urdu, Turkish, etc.

At the same time, it is very strange, rather extremely sad, that although more than eight centuries have passed since the Islamic philosophy, theology and law have made inroads into the academic and theological realms of the West, yet no serious attempt has hitherto been made to introduce the collective contents of this most important branch of Islamic learning in any of the Western languages. Prof. Mahmoud M. Ayoub of Temple University is perhaps the first to embark on this vital and maiden enterprise. The Professor enjoys full command over Arabic, being his mother tongue, as well as English, having long experience of teaching Islamic sciences in the Western seats of learning. At the same time he has attained a deep and profound insight into the overt and covert meanings of the Qurʾān through delving thoroughly into the earliest as well as the most authoritative sources on the subject and its allied materials.

The present book is the second of the series on "The Qurʾān and Its Interpreters" by Prof. Ayoub, the earlier volume being concerned with the presentation of the gist of the commentaries on the first two Chapters of the
Qur'ān, the Sūrat al-Īfāhah (The Opening) and al-Baqarah (The Cow). The whole work consisting of several volumes, each dealing with a particular part of the Book, will be an encyclopedia of the exegeses of the Qur'ān, no doubt an undertaking too ambitious for any one individual in one lifetime.

The primary object of the author as elucidated by himself is to present a comprehensive account of the views of the Muslim commentators of various schools of thought, approaches and movements. Using commentaries from the oldest period through the medieval and modern periods to the present day, the author has made serious and sincere endeavours to give an aggregate of what the Muslims have understood about the Qur'ān and interiorized it throughout its rich exegetical history. Moreover, as further explained by him, the book has been written, not primarily for scholars, but for the Western readers who are interested in studying Islam and for students and non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

In order to avoid allegations of partisan approach, the author has very carefully chosen the leading sources representing all the major schools and trends in Islamic thought. The exegeses of al-Ṭabarî, (Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wil Ay al-Qur’ān, 16 vols.), and Ibn Kathîr, (Tafsîr al-Qur’ān al-ʿĀzîm, 7 vols.), used by the author, represent the commentaries based on tradition. He has chosen al-Qurtûbî’s encyclopedic commentary, (Al-Jâmiʿ li-Aḥkâm al-Qur’ān, 20 vols.), with its hagiographical, linguistic and theological wealth, not only as a juristic exegesis but also as a general commentary. For giving philological and theological views, he has selected the tafsîrs of al-Zamakhshâri, (Al-Kashshâf ‘an Haqāʾiq al-Tanzîl wa ‘Uyun al-Aqâwil fi Wujûh al-Ta’wil, 4 vols.), and al-Râzî, (Mafâṭîh al-Ghayb known as Al-Taafsîr al-Kabîr, 32 vols.) respectively. Moreover, al-Shawkâni’s taafsîr, (Fath al-Qâdir al-Jâmiʿ bayna Fannay al-Riwayâh waʾl-Dirâyah fi ’Ilm al-Taafsîr, 5 vols.), gives the views of mainline Sunnî traditionist and theological taafsîrs. From among the mystical exegeses, he has chosen the taafsîrs of Ibn ʿArâbî, (Taafsîr al-Qur’ān al-Karîm, 2 vols.) and Nîsâbûrî, (Gharaʾib al-Qur’ān wa Râghâʾib al-Furqân, 10 vols.), particularly giving the esoteric or mystical (ta’wil) materials from the latter in order to present a more clear contrast between the significantly different approaches and interests of the two scholars. The Shiʿî point of view has been given from the taafsîrs of al-Qummî, (Taafsîr al-Qummî, 2 vols.), al-Ṭabarî, (Majmaʿ al-Bayān fi Taafsîr al-Qur’ān, 6 vols.) and al-Ṭabâtabâ’î, (Al-Mizân fi Taafsîr al-Qur’ān, 20 vols.). He has treated Sayyid Qûb’s Fi Zilâl al-Qur’ān: (8 vols.) and Wâhîdî’s Ashâb Nuzûl al-Qur’ān as general commentaries.

Repudiating the charge of sectarian approach for giving the views of three Shiʿî commentators among his thirteen sources, the author has stressed that he regards all areas of Islamic thought and history as legitimate subjects of research and study, and that his aim in this work is not to espouse any particular view or interpretation, but to represent all the major schools of thought in Muslim history that have made any significant contribution to the discipline of
Qur'ān exegesis. He adds that his purpose is not to judge the truth or falsehood of any view; the only criterion in selecting a source is that it should be a complete work of *tafsīr*, and that it should represent a major school or movement in Islamic thought and piety.

Throughout the book the author has compared the views of the various commentators on the *Sūrah* or verses of the Qur'ān, without, indeed, giving his own opinion on the soundness of the views or otherwise. For example, he says: "Commentators are generally agreed that the first eighty-odd verses (of the *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*) were revealed concerning the Christian delegation of Najran, an ancient town in South Arabia." Then he gives the views of Wāhīdī (pp. 1–2), Ṭabarī (pp. 2–4), Ibn Kathīr (p. 4) and Qurṭubī (p. 4) in its favour, and those of Rāzī (p. 4) that it was revealed concerning the Jews, the other opinion being that it was revealed concerning the delegation of the Christians of Najran. Lastly, he mentions the opinion of Ṭāḥātabā'ī (p. 4) and that of Sayyid Quṭb (p. 5) that this *Sūrah* was not revealed specifically on the occasion of the Christian delegation of Najran. While the former believes that its continuous narrative indicates that it was revealed altogether at one time, the latter is of the opinion that while the *Sūrah* refers to the errors of the Christians, it also contains allusions and reprimands to the Jews as well as warnings to the Muslims against the hidden schemes of the people of the Book.

Similarly, under verse 97 (of *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*), the author has given the diverse interpretations of the "manifest signs", the obligation of *Hajj* and the words: "whoever enters it shall be safe" from Ṭabarī (pp. 261–262), Ibn Kathīr (p. 263), Qurṭubī (pp. 263–266), Zamakshārī (p. 266), Rāzī (p. 267), Shawkānī (p. 268), Nīsābūrī (pp. 268–269), Ibn 'Arabī (pp. 269–270), Qummī (p. 270), Ṭabarṣī (pp. 270–271), Ṭāḥātabā'ī (p. 271) and Sayyid Quṭb (p. 270).

In short, this series when completed will be certainly a very useful addition to the literature existing in English and will serve as a valuable contribution for introducing the views and opinions of the commentators as well as traditionists on the various commandments, rules, laws and tales contained in the Qur'ān. It is hoped that it will be helpful in providing a proper understanding of the meanings of the Book in the light of the explanations and elucidations forwarded by the commentators through the whole span of Muslim history.

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