

***An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries Volume 1: On the Nature of the Divine***, edited by Feras Hamza and Sajjad Rizvi with Farhana Mayer, (New York: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008), xviii + 670 pp., ISBN: 978-0197200001, 95 \$ (hardback).

This book provides a new window onto the vast intellectual and hermeneutic diversity of the Islamic learned tradition and its value cannot be overestimated. The object is to present in English translation the exegesis of the Qur'ān from a wide variety of Muslim authors (twenty in all) over the 12-13 centuries of the history of *tafsīr*. (The considerable and deft translation work is camouflaged by the official bibliographic information from the title page where the translators are listed as “editors”. This is much too modest.) Most of these works are in Arabic, one is in Persian. It is envisaged as the first of several similar volumes under the general title *Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries*. For the present volume, the topic has been narrowed – if such is the correct term – to the general problem of the Nature of the Divine. The editors and translators have had to deal with innumerable methodological problems besetting their wish to present in English an apt and accurate reflection of the exegetical tradition in Islam. Their solution is a good one. Because of the large amount of duplication and repetition in the genre, both within discrete works and between authors and commentaries from generation to generation, it is simply not feasible to attempt a complete translation of the exegesis of every pertinent verse within this general problematic. Indeed, the first impossible problem would be to “disqualify” a verse because of lack of pertinence: each verse and each word of the Qur'ān implies and invokes all the others. So, the editors have chosen six of the most frequently quoted and beloved *āyas* of the Qur'ān, devoted a chapter to each, and presented, in chronological order, translations from the chosen scholars. The verses are: Q 2:115 on God's omnipresence; Q 2:255, the celebrated Throne Verse; Q 6:12, on God's self-imposed obligation to be merciful; Q 24:35, the Light Verse; Q 54:49, God has created all things according to a specific measure; Q 112:1-4, the *sūra* of Sincerity or Oneness. Such a selection bespeaks deep familiarity with the Qur'ān and mastery of the Islamic exegetical tradition. It is no easy task to choose a mere six from the over 6.000 verses. But these remarkable *āyas* have provided the history of *tafsīr* with much

inspiration. And such inspiration is presented in fluid and readable translation from the following authors: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767); Furāt ibn Furāt al-Kūfī (*fl.* late third/ninth century); Abū l-Naḍr al-‘Ayyāshī (*fl.* late third/ninth century); Hūd Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī (*fl.* fourth/tenth century); ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (*fl.* fourth/tenth century); Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923); Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934-5); Ja‘far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. before 346/957); Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (*fl.* sixth/twelfth century); Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144); al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī/Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1154); Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209); ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1336); Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344); ‘Allāma ‘Abd Allāh al-Sharafī (d. 1062/1651); Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī Burūsawī/Bursawī (d. 1137/1725); al-Sayyid Maḥmūd ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854); Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905) & Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935); Sayyid Abū l-A‘lā al-Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979); Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh (b. 1935-2010).

Given the vast number of exegetes that the tradition has produced, there will always be room to discuss the criteria and methods for the choices made in such a context. It seems to me that the editors have chosen wisely and where one might have added, say, a representative group from the late medieval/early modern periods in order to sample the exegetical culture of the Islamicate proto-states of the Ottoman, Ṣafawid and Mughal empires, it is obvious that in a book such as this, one has to draw the line somewhere. One might query the overly sanguine use of the category “Sufi”, as if it represented a distinct “communion” within the world of Islam on the order of Sunnī and Shī‘ī Islam. And despite the very best efforts of the authors to remain aloof from sectarian and partisan bias, it nonetheless appears to creep in, as for example, when Sunnī Islam seems to be considered the measure by which all other interpretations are compared. Thus in speaking of the fascinating *ta’wīl* of Ja‘far ibn Manṣūr, we read:

For him, theology and sacred history are intimately linked: the unfolding of human history reveals the divine plan and realities to the initiated, often through the subversion of the master narrative that is linked to the developing notion of a normative Sunnī conception of the early Muslim community. The elaborate schema whereby he links the past experience of the prophets in the Qur’ān to the difficulties

faced by the *da'wa* express the hermeneutics of *ta'wil* as a process of interpretation embedded in an account of counter-history." [p. 31]

From this are we meant to understand that "normative" Sunnī Islam does not see a connection between human history and "the divine plan"? Does Sunnī Islam not see in the great community of prophets and their travails and triumphs lessons for here and now? And finally, is Sunnī Islam, especially in the mid-tenth century when Ja'far was writing, the triumphant standard-bearer of the Qur'ānic revelation? But such questions arising from the book at hand are part of its payload. They deserved to be continuously asked. The editors demonstrate that they have always been asked within the exegetical tradition of greater Islam. The tradition emerges here as a meta-*majlis* in which Muslims of all times and places have felt free and encouraged to discuss their differences and similarities in a shared language, with shared moral and ethical presuppositions and a shared imaginaire. Tafsīr emerges as what Illich referred to as a "tool of conviviality" and one of the chief emblems of the Islamicate civilizational project.

In addition to the six chapters constructed around the six verses listed above, the book contains much else of great value. The *Introduction*, pp. 1-19, is a densely annotated presentation of the methodological orientation of the volume; *The Commentators and their Commentaries*, pp. 20-65 is an equally learned presentation of the *dramatis personae*: the exegetes themselves. Pages 577-601 contain a *Prosopographical Appendix*, a truly invaluable "directory" of dozens of the most important names in the overall exegetic tradition: ḥadīth scholars, mainly, but also important figures from Islamic history. Here brief entries provide dates, proper spellings of names and general information. Students and scholars will be very grateful for the effort put into this feature. This is no less true for the excellent extensive *Bibliography* (pp. 603-654) and the *Indexes*: Subject (pp. 647-666) & Qur'ānic Citations (pp. 667-670).

This book will appeal to teachers because it comes much closer than any previous effort to display the richness of the tradition in English translation. This is achieved through the judicious choice of topic and the very representatives of the tradition. Names not normally admitted to the "tafsīr club" are here given ample space, demonstrating that not all that goes by the name of Qur'ān commentary is found in works with the word "tafsīr" in their title. The

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form and contents of this fine book, then, says that a deeper study of this remarkable hermeneutical tradition will reveal that not everything named *tafsir* will tell us all we need to know about the way Muslims may understand the Qurʾān.

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