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MAHMOOD IBN ‘UMAR AL-ZAMAKHSHARI AND HIS TAFSIR AL-KASHSHAF: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the tafsir Kashshāf, the Quran commentary of the Mu‘tazilite al-Zamakhsharī. This involves: the continuous reading of the commentary and the study of al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary in the Kashshāf on Quranic passages used by him or his teacher Ibn al-Malāhimī in their theological treatises; and an analysis of a report claiming that al-Zamakhsharī had begun his commentary with the blatantly Mu‘tazilite statement: “Praise be to God who created the Quran”. Tafsir al-Kashshaf ‘a Haqa’iq at-Tanzil ("the Revealer") is a seminal tafsir (commentary on the Qur'an) by Al-Zamakhshari written in the 12th century. Considered a primary by all major scholars, it is famous for its deep linguistic analysis, demonstrations of the supremacy of declamation of the Quran, and the representation of the method the Quran uses to convey meaning using literary elements and figurative speech. However, it is criticized for the inclusion of Mu‘tazilah philosophical views. Al-Zamakhshari studied various popular social sciences, especially theology, the science of Hadith (prophetic traditions), fiqh (jurisprudence), tafsir (interpretation of the Holy Qur'an), and other sciences. He paid particular attention to the study of Arabic language and literature, the various dialects of the Arabs, their customs and traditions. After having perfect grip over language of the Holy Quran, he wrote on all his works, including on grammar and linguistics in Arabic. In particular, "Mukaddimatu al-Adab" (Introduction to Literature), "asas al-Balagha" (Fundamentals of achieving perfection), "fil-mufasssal Nahw" (Details on grammar) and a short version of "Al unmuzadzh fin-Nahw" (sample on grammar). Arabs’ recognition indicates the importance of his works in learning the native language for Arabs and that they expressed the recognition without criticism: "if there would not be al-Zamakhshari, the Arabs would not have known the full depth of their native language.

KEYWORDS

Quranic Interpretation (tafseer); Arabic Linguistics; Grammatical Dexterity; Mutazilah School; Hanafi School; Tafsir Al-Zamakhshari

1. MAHMOOD IBN ‘UMAR AL-ZAMAKHSHARI: RETROSPECT

He is Abu al- Qaasim, Mahmood ibn ‘Umar Ibn Muhammad. He was also known by the honorific title “Jarullaah” [the Neighbour of Allah]. He was born on March 8th, 1075, in Zamakhshar a village in Khwārezm, in Central Asia which sits at the borders of modern-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. He studied under the major scholars of Baghdad, and also frequented Khorana. He also studied at Bukhara and Samarkand¹. He was a skilled man and a learned person in a number of fields, including Tafseer, hadith, grammar, linguistics, and literature. He was also one of the major scholars of the Mu’tazilah theological school, and his Tafseer is inextricably associated with their beliefs. He was a Persian-born Arabic scholar whose chief work is *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq at-Tanzīl* (“The Discoverer of Revealed Truths”), his exhaustive linguistic commentary on the Qur’ān².

He used Persian for some of his work, although he was a strong supporter of the Arabic language as well as an opponent of the Shu’ubiyya movement³. He was also called as "Ustaz al-Dunya - the teacher of the world", "Fakhr khorezm - the pride of Khorezm", "Ustaz al -arab wa al-Ajam – Arabs’ and non-Arabs’ teacher""- Through these words Mahmood al-Zamakhshari was treated with great respect and reverence and he became famous in theology, philosophy, philology, the interpretation of the Koran in the Muslim world. At the end of his name “Al-Zamakhshari” is from his birthplace - the village Zamakhshar of Khorezm oasis⁴. He used to highly revere to Mecca and he wrote about this in the letter to his Alexandrian student Shihabuddin Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Maliki⁵.

It is pertinent to note the fact that this oasis was better known as a birthplace of eminent scientists and encyclopaedists such as Muhammad Musa al-Khwarizmi, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Abu Abdullah al-Khwarizmi, Ibn Miskavejh, Abu Nasr al-Iraq, Abu Sahl al-Masihi, Abu Khair ibn al-Hammar, Abu al-Fath al-Mutarrazi and others⁶. He was apparently well-travelled and resided at least twice (once for an extended period of time) in the holy city of Mecca, where he earned his address as “Jār Allāh”⁷.

Theologically, he was affiliated with the rationalist Mu’tazilah School. As a philologist, he considered Arabic the queen of languages, in spite of the fact that his own native tongue was Persian (and though he wrote several minor works in that latter language)⁸. His great commentary, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq at-Tanzīl*, was written in Arabic and became the work for which he is best known. A comprehensive study of the Muslim scripture that focused on its grammatical nuance, it was completed in 1134⁹. It was published at Calcutta in 1856 in 2 vol.). It was widely read, in spite of its Mu’tazilite bias, especially in the East and in the western portions of the Islamic world. His dogmatic point of view was offensive to the Mālikīyah School¹⁰. Little is known about his youth yet information about the life and work of al-Zamakhshari was stated partly in his writings, in studying of a number of luminaries of medieval sciences, by his close disciples and followers¹¹.

Among them there are - Ibn Khallikan, Ibn al-Anbari, Yaqut al-Hamawi, Muhammad al-Yafiyi, Ibn al-Jawzi, Jalaliddin al-Suyuti, Ibn al-Kifti and others¹².

According to their testimony, al-Zamakhshari's father was a man of God-fearing, righteous, educated, literate and enjoyed great respect and prestige among the villagers. This allowed him to be appointed as imam of one of the mosques in Zamakhshar¹³. His mother was also a pious, enlightened and wise. He received his primary education from his parents. Striving to improve and deepen his knowledge he went to Bukhara which was the centre of science and education with a great reputation in the Islamic world. However, in the way an accident happened to him: he fell down from his horse and was hurt badly¹⁴. Cold and frost did not spare him and his leg broke. Later in life, he went on a wooden prosthesis. - so the story goes—al-Zamakhsharī felt obliged to carry with him affidavits from noted citizens attesting that his foot had not been amputated as punishment for some crime¹⁵. Despite the fact that his father urged him to learn the craft of tailoring, he went to the capital city of Khorezm, where because of good handwriting and calligraphy, he found a job.

In search of knowledge al-Zamakhshari visited Khurasan, Syria, Iraq, and Hejaz, where he met with prominent scientists of his time, and attended their scientific discussions and established research contacts¹⁶. Al-Zamakhshari was one of the foremost leaders of the Mu'tazilah and he championed the beliefs of the Mu'tazilah in his writings by all means at his disposal¹⁷. Al-Zamakhshari died in the Monday night of 8th Zulhijja, 538 AH/ 12 June, 1144 AD at the capital Gorgan (in the present Gulestan Province, Iran)¹⁸.

Al-Zamakhshari studied various popular social sciences, especially theology, the science of Hadith (prophetic traditions), fiqh (jurisprudence), Tafseer (interpretation of the Holy Qur'an), and other sciences. He paid particular attention to the study of Arabic language and literature, the various dialects of the Arabs, their customs and traditions. After having perfect grip over language of the Holy Quran, he wrote on all his works, including on grammar and linguistics in Arabic. In particular, "Mukaddimatu al-Adab" (Introduction to Literature), "asas al-Balagha" (Fundamentals of achieving perfection), "fil-mufasssal Nahw" (Details on grammar) and a short version of "Al unmuzadzh fin-Nahw "(sample on grammar). Arabs' recognition indicates the importance of his works in learning the native language for Arabs and that they expressed the recognition without criticism: "if there would not be al-Zamakhshari, the Arabs would not have known the full depth of their native language."¹⁹

1.1. Zamkhshari as an Interpreter of the Holy Quran (Muffasir-i-Quran)

Zamakhshari was the author of more than fifty books, Zamakhshari's fame as a scholar rests upon his commentary on the Qur'an. In spite of its Mu'tazili theology he was famous among scholars²⁰. Of al-Zamakhsharī's grammatical works, Al-Mufaṣṣal fī 'ilm al-'Arabīyah ("Detailed Treatise on Arabic Linguistics," written 1119–21, published Internet 1859; it is sometimes titled Kitāb al Mufaṣṣal fī al-Nahw ["Detailed Treatise on Grammar"]) is celebrated for its concise but exhaustive exposition²¹. He was also the author of a collection of old proverbs; though well regarded, this work has been considered second to the anthology Al-Amthāl ("The Proverbs") written by his close contemporary Abū Faḍl al-Maydānī with whom al-Zamakhsharī had a notorious and somewhat undignified feud²². Al-Zamakhsharī's other works include three collections of apothegms as well as treatises on moral discourses and a number of poems²³.

2. FOUNDER OF ARABIC LINGUISTICS

It is not exaggeration to say that he was one of the founders of Arabic linguistics, the new method of description of Arabic grammar and compilation of Arabic dictionaries by alphabet. Al-Kashshaaf ("the Revealer) tafsir of the Holy Qur'an) is one of the most studied Qura'nic commentaries, there are more than 80 commentaries over it²⁴. His other major works are as under:-

1. Rabi al-Abrar
2. Asas al-Balagha (Arabic: اساس البلاغه) — Literature
3. Fasul-ul-Akhbar
4. Fraiz Dar-ilm Fariz
5. Kitab-Fastdar-Nahr
6. Muajjam-ul-Hadud
7. Manha Darusul
8. Diwan-ul-Tamsil
9. Sawaer-ul-Islam
10. Muqaddimat al-Adab (مقدمه الادب) (Arabic-Persian dictionary)
11. Kitab al-Amkinah wa al-Jibal wa al-Miyah (كتاب الامكنه والجبال والمياه) (Geography)
12. Mufasssal Anmuzaj (مفصل النموذج) (Nahw: Arabic grammar).

3. ZAMAKHSHARI AND THE KHWARESMIAN LANGUAGE

The greater part of the surviving vocabulary of the now extinct Iranian Kwaresmian or Chorasmian language is found in the form of interlinear glosses throughout a single manuscript (of ca. 596/1200) of Zamakhshari's Arabic-Persian dictionary, the Muqaddimat al-adab (Zamakhshari. Some other manuscripts of this work also contain a few such glosses²⁵. Thus the Muqaddimat al-adab is a very important primary source for the study of this extinct language²⁶.

4. TAFSIR AL-ZAMAKHSHARI: A CRITIQUE

TAFSIR AL-ZAMAKHSHARI popularly known as Tafsir al-Kashshaf 'a Haqa'iq at-Tanzil ("the Revealer") is a seminal tafsir (commentary on the Qur'an) by Al-Zamakhshari written in the 12th century. Considered a primary source by all major scholars, it is famous for its deep linguistic analysis, demonstrations of the supremacy of declamation of the Quran, and the representation of the method the Quran uses to convey meaning using literary elements and figurative speech. However, it is criticized for the inclusion of Mu'tazilah philosophical views²⁷.

Al-Zamakhshari strongly insisted that scholars of the Mu'tazilah sect should have a basis tafsir of their own. Therefore, he started writing his commentary in 1132, after he was convinced by Emīr Ebū'l-Hasan Ibn Vehhâs while he was residing in Mecca, and finished it in two years²⁸. He himself states that writing such a book in a short time is a blessing of God. During his research, he referred to many older works and commentaries, especially Zeccac's ma'am al-Kuran, which constitutes the basis of his work²⁹.

In the preface, it is pointed out that commenting on the Quran is a challenging and difficult effort; and any mufassir willing to do so must have deep knowledge of Arabic language, literature, eloquence and culture, alongside critical thinking skills, a highly disciplined way of studying and general academic skills. Comments are a blend of logic and narrative, including many hadith (though the only source stated for these narratives is Sahih Muslim) and older accounts of Arabic poems³⁰. A very elegant analysis of words is done throughout the commentary, while figurative expressions are broken down, and appropriate Qira'at is chosen where needed. Abrogated verses are indicated along with their successors. Verses containing Islamic jurisprudence are deduced according to the Hanafi school of law (which was the juristic school al-Zamakhshari followed). Verses that seem contrary are reconciled. Some older comments are criticized, especially those of Sufi origin³¹.

4.1. Zamkhshari's Stance regarding Fiqh (legal) Issues

He would enter into discussions of fiqh without going into extensive detail. Although he himself was a Hanafi, he was balanced in his view of fiqh-related issues and not fanatically attached to the views of his madhhab³².

4.2. Stance regarding Israa'eeliyyaat (Judaean-Christian traditions)

He was very sparse in mentioning Israa'eeliyyaat narrations, and he would follow up those by saying, "and Allah knows best." In light of this, it is surprising that he would close his tafsir of each surah by mentioning fabricated ahaadeeth regarding the virtues of the surah³³.

4.3. Stance regarding poetry, linguistic analysis, grammar

He gave great importance to explaining the linguistic issues of the Qur'an and devoted much ink to discussions of its linguistic eloquence and beauty³⁴.

4.4. Alkashshaf's Editions

There are at least three different editions of the book. Ibn Hisham Nahvi speculated some errors with some meanings given to certain words, correcting them in his own edition³⁵.

4.5. Critical Evaluation of His Tafseeri Capabilities

One of the most criticized aspects of Al-Zamakhshari's interpretations is his adaptation of Quranic verses according to the Mu'tazilah viewpoint. Al-Zamakhshari has interpreted verses that cohere with his viewpoint as muhkam (rigid), and those which don't as mutashâbeeh (allegorical), and has abandoned the apparent meanings of some verses for the sake of preserving a strict Mu'tazilah view³⁶. The great 14th-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn regarded the work highly appreciable. He said "the book is distinguished by its attention to highlighting the beauty of the Qur'an and its eloquence, and the author excelled in this due to his intimate knowledge of the Arabic language and its poetry. However, it should be noted that he would also use his linguistic expertise and prowess to provide faulty interpretations which supported the beliefs of the Mu'tazilah, often giving more credence to the mutashaabihat (ambiguous) than to the muhkamaat (clear) verses in his explanations"³⁷.

Al-Subki described the work in light of these prominent features by writing, "You should know that al-Khashshaf is a marvelous work in its field, and its author is a master in his trade, however

he is an innovator who openly propagates his bid'ah." Thus many of the scholars have warned caution when approaching this book, especially for the beginning student³⁸. Imam al-Dhahabi described him in his book al-Meezaan by writing, "He was righteous, however he was a caller to the beliefs of the Mu'tazilah – may Allah protect us -, so beware of his book al-Khashshaaf"³⁹.

Ibn Taymiyah briefly mentioned some of the theological issues in this tafsir by writing, "And as for al-Zamakhshari, then his tafsir is filled with bid'ah and it is on the way of the Mu'tazilah in terms of denial of the sifaat (Allah's attributes) and the ru'yah (i.e. that the believers will see Allah in the Hereafter), and saying that the Qur'an is created, and denying that Allah wills all created things or that He is the Creator of the actions of the slaves, and other than that from the fundamental principles of the Mu'tazilah."⁴⁰

5. CONCLUSION

Tafsir al-Kashshaf 'a Haqa'iq at-Tanzil ("the Revealer") is an excellent literary tafsir. It is considered a primary source by all major scholars, it is famous for its deep linguistic analysis, demonstrations of the supremacy of declamation of the Quran, and the representation of the method the Quran uses to convey meaning using literary elements and figurative speech. However, it is criticized to be tainted with Mu'tazilah philosophical views.

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