
BOOK REVIEWS

Walid A. Saleh: *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qurʾān Commentary of Al-Thaʿlabī* • Leiden • Boston: Brill 2004, x+267 pp., HC \$122.00 • ISBN 90 04 12777 1

One of the most apparent characteristics of the academic Orientalism is its self-perpetuation: it takes a fresh graduate student bubbling with ideas, energy, and zeal, and offers him or her a ladder that would eventually lead where the professor holding the ladder is now standing. Once recruited and groomed, this graduate student joins the ranks of those who produce ‘scholars’ and ‘experts’ on Islam. Absorbed in an alluring profession, teaching Islam at the religious studies department of a university as an assistant professor, the first thing this graduate student of yesteryear does is the presentation of his or her doctoral thesis to the world as an expert’s book, thus adding to that storehouse of themes, ideas, opinions, and thoughts which Edward Said made sour for all times to come. Walid Saleh’s debut into the academia and first book is a typical example of this entrenched Orientalism.

Former graduate student at Yale, now an assistant professor of religion at the University of Toronto, Saleh imbibed currents of Orientalism under the able guidance of Gerhard Böwering and Andrew Rippin; their views about the Qurʾān are engraved on his work—a stamp which, in turn, is minted in the factory established by their precursors. Saleh was led to do his doctoral work on *al-Kashf wa-al-bayān ‘an tafsīr al-Qurʾān* of al-Thaʿlībī al-Naysabūrī (d. 427/1035) by “Professor Böwering’s steady hand” that “saw [him] through the completion of this project” (ix).

The “steady hands” that used to guide young men and women seem to have become less steady over time, for the usual disguises of scholarly apparatus which used to be the hallmark of Orientalism are becoming less apparent in the work of new generation of ‘experts’ on Islam. Saleh’s work is a testimony to this faltering of “steady hands”.

As one reads through this book of disparate ideas and self-contradictory assertions, problems of grammar and syntax multiply, established norms and conventions are trampled, and typos abound.

Inconsistencies notwithstanding, what is really surprising about this work is the abundance of a rambling that attempts to recast history by ignoring even the most basic aspects of Muslim attitudes toward the Qurʾān. Thus one finds unsubstantiated claims such as

Many were the challenges faced by the Qurʾān in vying for the prime place in the hearts of the Muslims; we should not forget that the Qurʾān has little by way of a formal role in Islamic liturgy, and thus there is a great unvoiced ambivalence as to its value as a devotional source.

Mystical poetry, devotional poetry, invocations, belle-lettres, dance and dhikr competed for the heart of the devout believer, and the Qurʾān was not necessarily assured of a victory... al-Thaʿlbī was instrumental in assuring the Qurʾān a formal position as a medium for devotion. (225)

Imagine, even the *heart of the devout believer*, according to Saleh—who, soon after completing his graduate degree, is already “a specialist on tafsīr and the Qurʾān” as per the claim on the back cover of the book—was attracted to the belle-lettres and dance in the same manner as it was to the Book which he or she considered the actual words of God! And it was a fifth/eleventh-century commentator of the Qurʾān who “secured for the Qurʾān a formal position as a medium for devotion”!

Saleh misconstrues the Qurʾān as secondary to the Sunnah of the Prophet of Islam and distorts its real importance by claiming that it was commentators like al-Thaʿlbī who made it a medium of devotion for Muslims by “tying the Qurʾān with the prophetic tradition [for this] was the best way to guarantee the relevance of the Qurʾān to a Muslim community where the Sunnah of the prophet was at the heart of its devotional inspiration” (225).

Other astonishing claims by the author include statements like: “Indeed, when it comes to the value of the insights of medieval exegetes into the meaning of the Qurʾān there is a sense that they have nothing to offer” (225). Hundreds of years of scholarship are relegated to the dustbin by a newly recruited assistant professor!

There are conceptual problems as well. *Tafsīr biʾl-maʾthūr* (tradi-

tion-based commentary) and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* (opinion-based commentary) are contrasted and given the status of two different categories of tafsīr literature, but within that same paragraph we are told that “most of the *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* is in reality a *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y* (16).

It is difficult to see how such a schizophrenic work could have been accepted as a doctoral thesis, let alone published as the work of an expert.

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Andrew J. Lane: *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī*

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Divided into five chapters, a brief conclusion, and eight appendices, this book initially began, as the author tells us in his “Introduction”, as a thesis intending to study the Mu'tazilite theology of the *Kashshāf*, but its focus shifted from Mu'tazilite theology to Mu'tazilite influences on the *Kashshāf* and later to the broader question of sources for the well-known tafsīr of al-Zamakhsharī. The result is a hybrid product that taps into a large number of primary sources to construct a broad overview of the scholar, his times, and his work as seen from the perspective of a graduate student whose own outlook on the long history of Qur'ānic sciences is shaped and defined by an Orientalism which comes with its own characteristic concerns and methodologies.

When viewed from this perspective, most researchers tend to follow a similar pattern: they search for biographical information, situate their subject in a broad historical perspective, show influences upon the author and his work, and end with his own influence on subsequent scholars. Lane's work follows this recipe and is a useful reference work providing information about primary sources. It does not, however, lend any new insights into the man and his work; it merely accumulates useful information using a methodology marked by Western concerns about historical