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Tabrisi's Exegesis of the Qur'an

The post-Buyid period saw a major transition in Shi'i intellectual discourse. This transition is also evident in Shi'i exegesis where, scholars like al-Tusi and al-Tabrisi employed various tools in their commentary of the Qur'an and often appropriated methods used by Sunni scholars in their exegesis. The paper will engage in a textual and methodological analysis of Abu 'Alī al-Faḍl b. al-Hasan Tabrisi's voluminous commentary of the Qur'an *Majma' al-bayan li-Ulum al-Qur'an*. It will demonstrate how and why, methodologically, his work is very different from previous Shi'i works. It will also argue that his exegesis demonstrates a close affiliation with Sunnite exegetical writings, and includes an analysis on alternative readings (*qira'a*) of a particular verse, an analysis of grammar, etymology of words, verses relating to jurisprudence and legal hermeneutics, a lexical discussion of rare words, issues regarding syntax and content (*ma'ani*) of in a verse. Thus, this *tafsir* work assumes a good deal of background knowledge, of technical terminology, of the context of specific arguments and their representatives.

The paper will further examine how al-Tabrisi divides his commentary on every passage into different sections and employs *ta'wil* in many cases to deduce the inner or implied meaning of a verse. It will also examine how al-Tabrisi devotes a section of each verse's commentary to the variant readings and makes the case for the most appropriate of them. Methodologically, he mentions rationalist arguments, cites traditions from the Imams, and then draws conclusions from them.

The originality of al-Tabrisi's methodology is that he gives his readers an opportunity to see the varying opinions on different issues mentioned in the Qur'an. This citation of polyvalent readings demonstrates, on the one hand, a tolerance of difference but, but he also refutes what he deems to be deviant or incorrect views. For example, Tabrisi cites Mu'tazili tenets but only with firm limits not only in matters of dogma but in fundamental exegetical methodology. *Majma al-Bayan* thus allows for a range of potential interpretations of the verses' meanings, but it keeps this range within limits that have been defined by Shi'i tradition.

Majma' al-bayan is an expression of Shi'i identity of the time, upholding Shi'i dogma and beliefs, but it does so in ways that depart radically from earlier Shi'i commentators such as al-Ayyashi and al-Qummi. In its adoption of sources and format associated with the larger Sunni tradition *Majma' al-bayan* formed part of an Shi'i rapprochement with Sunnism, a rapprochement in which Qur'anic commentary followed jurisprudential developments.

Tabrisi's commentary is unanimously accepted by Muslim scholars, Sunnis and Shi'is alike, and some scholars consider it as a leading work on *tafsir* even up to the present day due to the richness and variety of its contents.



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Dr Liyakat Takim is the Sharjah Chair in Global Islam at McMaster University, Canada. He holds a PhD in the History of Religions from SOAS, University of London. A prolific scholar, he has authored over 140 publications and presented at more than 80 academic conferences worldwide.

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