



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "BAHR AL-ULUM" AND ITS EXEGETICAL METHODOLOGIES

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the place, scholarly significance, and exegetical methodologies employed in the Tafsir entitled "Bahr al-ulum" ("The Ocean of Sciences") by Imam Abu Layth al-Samarqandi within the history of Islamic sciences. The article thoroughly analyzes the historical context of the composition of this tafsir, its unique characteristics in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, its method of utilizing sources, and its scholarly and methodological foundations. Furthermore, the exegetical methodology of Abu Layth al-Samarqandi is comparatively studied alongside other renowned exegetes, namely Ibn Kathir and Najm al-Din Kubra. The article presents information about the manuscript copies and scholarly editions of the "Bahr al-ulum", as well as the opinions of distinguished scholars concerning this work, such as Mahmud Husayn al-Dhahabi and the author of "Kashf al-zunun". In conclusion, this tafsir of Abu Layth al-Samarqandi constitutes a significant contribution to the development of exegetical science due to its integration of transmitted knowledge (naql) and reason ('aql), its comprehensive coverage of Qur'anic sciences, and its combination of jurisprudential, theological, and linguistic aspects, serving as a primary source for later exegetes.

Keywords: Abu Layth al-Samarqandi, "Bahr al-ulum", Tafsir, Holy Qur'an, Method of Exegesis, Tradition-Based Exegesis (Ma'thur), Transmitted Exegesis (Naqli), Rational Exegesis ('Aqli), Occasions of Revelation (Asbab al-Nuzul), Abrogating and Abrogated Verses (Nasikh wa Mansukh), Recitations (Qira'at), Jurisprudential Rulings, Isra'iliyyat Narratives, Ibn Kathir, Najm al-Din Kubra, Allusive Exegesis (Ishari), Sufi Exegesis, "Al-Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya".

Introduction. The science of Tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis) began to emerge as an independent discipline around the 8th century AH (14th century CE). From this period onward, renowned exegetes emerged from the regions of Transoxiana (Mawarannahr) and Khurasan. For instance, while Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's work "Ta'wilat ahl al-sunna" represents a significant example of theological exegesis, Imam Abu Layth al-Samarqandi's "Bahr al-ulum" ("The Ocean of Sciences") holds a distinguished place among exegeses composed on the basis of verses, hadiths, and narrations transmitted from the Companions (Sahaba) and their successors (Tabi'un). This tafsir within the scholar's legacy is regarded as a scholarly discovery in the field of Qur'anic commentary and is highly acclaimed.

It is known that the science of Tafsir in Transoxiana and Khurasan developed from the 8th century CE onwards in close connection with the science of Hadith. Initially, exegeses were produced in the form of narrations within hadith collections. Clear examples of such exegeses can be found in the works of Imam al-Darimi, Imam al-Bukhari, and Hakim al-Tirmidhi. However, by the 10th century CE, the presentation of exegesis solely within hadith collections could no longer meet the demands of the era. Consequently, Tafsir became an independent

discipline, and works with new styles and approaches began to be authored in this field. Two primary objectives were envisioned in this process:

First, some exegetes had begun to make errors in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, and instances of incorrect interpretation of certain chapters (surahs) and verses were observed. Thus, the need arose for a complete and reliable exegesis of the Holy Qur'an.

Second, there was a necessity to compile exegesis-related hadiths, narrations, and commentaries in one place. Esteemed scholars — such as al-Tabari, Imam al-Maturidi, and Abu Layth al-Samarqandi — successfully accomplished this task in their works.

Abu Layth al-Samarqandi's "Bahr al-ulum" is one of the earliest major works in the field of exegesis produced in Khurasan and Transoxiana, and is regarded as a foundational text of the science of Tafsir. The scholar's exegesis is exceptionally well-structured from a scholarly perspective. It is arranged according to the order of the chapters (surahs) of the Holy Qur'an, providing a comprehensive commentary on all 114 surahs. At the beginning of each surah's exegesis, it mentions where it was revealed (whether Meccan or Medinan). Additionally, it presents the reasons for the revelation of verses (asbab al-nuzul), the interpretations of renowned exegetes, and jurisprudential and theological rulings. The achievements and shortcomings of various reciters (Qurra') in the recitation of verses are also analyzed. Opinions of linguists regarding the words in the exegesis are included. To enrich the commentary, quotations are provided from the hadiths of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the poetry of Arab poets.

All of these features made the scholar's tafsir famous throughout the Muslim world, earning him recognition as the "founder of exegesis" (tafsirshunoslikning asoschisi). This tafsir served as a primary source for many later exegetes. Consequently, his contemporaries bestowed upon Abu Layth al-Samarqandi the lofty title "Imam al-huda" – "The Imam of the Right Path."

Indeed, the scholar's most celebrated work is this tafsir entitled "Bahr al-ulum" ("The Ocean of Sciences"). In some sources, it is also referred to as "Tafsir Abu Layth". There are 77 manuscript copies of it in libraries worldwide, two of which are preserved in the library of the Arab Republic of Egypt (under numbers 56 and 6), one in the Edinburgh University Library (under number 3688), and another in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan (under number 2824). A three-volume scholarly edition of the tafsir was published in Beirut in 1993, verified and edited by scholars from Al-Azhar University – Muhammad Mu'awwadh, Ahmad 'Abd al-Mawjud, and 'Abd al-Majid al-Nuti.

In accordance with the scholarly environment of that time, Abu Layth al-Samarqandi also engaged in defending the creed of Ahl al-Sunna and composing refutations (raddiyya) against the claims of various deviant sects. His tafsir also places significant emphasis on theological views.

The renowned exegesis scholar Mahmud Husayn al-Dhahabi, in his work "al-Tafsir wa al-mufasssirun", says the following about the tafsir of Abu Layth al-Samarqandi: "I have read this tafsir numerous times. In one of its chapters, the author, citing narrations from the early scholars (salaf), encourages people to study the science of exegesis and explains its virtue. Then he emphasizes that one cannot interpret the verses without a good knowledge of the Arabic language and the reasons for their revelation. The exegete bases his interpretation on the sayings of the Salaf, the Companions, and the Tabi'un. However, he often does not mention the

chain of transmission (sanad) for the narrations he cites, and only occasionally mentions the narrators (ruwat). Sometimes he raises objections to certain recitations (qira'at) and refers to linguistic analysis. He interprets the Qur'an with the Qur'an, pointing out when one verse clarifies another.

It also contains Isra'iliyyat narrations. In some difficult places, the author poses a question to the reader and then provides an answer. He dispels the doubts of those who think there are contradictions and discrepancies in the Qur'an. He has combined transmitted (naqli) and rational ('aqli) exegesis in one work, but he prioritizes the transmitted aspect over the rational. Therefore, we consider this tafsir to be a transmitted (ma'thur) exegesis."

The author of "Kashf al-zunun" writes: "The tafsir 'Bahr al-ulum' by Abu Layth al-Samarqandi is a very famous and wonderful book. The hadiths cited in it were transmitted by Shaykh Zayn al-Din Qasim ibn Qutlubugha al-Hanafi, who died in 854 AH (1450 CE)."

In Abu Layth al-Samarqandi's "Bahr al-ulum" tafsir, the following methodologies pertaining to 'Ulum al-Qur'an (Qur'anic Sciences) are extensively applied:

1. Qur'anic Recitations (Qira'at).
2. Identification of Meccan and Medinan surahs.
3. Abrogating and Abrogated Verses (Nasikh wa Mansukh).
4. Occasions of Revelation (Asbab al-Nuzul).
5. Jurisprudential Rulings (Fiqhiy hukmlar).

Comparative Analysis of Exegetical Methodologies

1. Abu Layth al-Samarqandi and Ibn Kathir

The exegetical style of Abu Layth al-Samarqandi is considered similar to that of the renowned exegete Ibn Kathir. Although the tafsirs of Abu Layth al-Samarqandi and al-Tabari were written significantly earlier than that of Ibn Kathir, similarities exist in their methodologies. Ibn Kathir also interprets verses based on hadiths and narrations from the Salaf. The distinctive features of Ibn Kathir's tafsir are as follows:

- He begins the explanation of a verse briefly and simply in his own words.
- He investigates the authenticity (sahih), good (hasan), or weakness (da'if) of the hadiths.
- In jurisprudential matters, he presents the opinions of various school (madhhab) imams but does not strongly favor one over another.
- He does not give sufficient attention to variant readings (qira'at), only referring to them occasionally.

Like Abu Layth al-Samarqandi, Ibn Kathir also utilized Israelite stories (Isra'iliyyat) in his works. For example, in the exegesis of verse 67 of Surah al-Baqarah regarding the story of the Children of Israel and the cow, he states: "These narratives have been transmitted from Abu 'Ubayda, Abu 'Aliyya, al-Suddi, and others. They are taken from the books of the Children of Israel; it is permissible to mention them, but one cannot confirm their truthfulness or falsehood."

2. The Exegetical Style of Najm al-Din Kubra's "Al-Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya fi al-Tafsir al-Ishari al-Sufi"

Najm al-Din Kubra (1145–1221 CE) was a prominent figure of the Sufi exegetical school. He harmonized exoteric (zahir) knowledge with esoteric, spiritual and gnostic (batini) approaches in interpreting the Qur'an. His work "Al-Ta'wilat al-Najmiyya fi al-Tafsir al-Ishari al-Sufi" is considered a key example of the Sufi exegetical genre. In this work, Qur'anic verses

are interpreted not only in their literal linguistic sense but also through the lens of the heart, soul, and spiritual states.

1 Esoteric (Gnostic) Exegesis Approach: Najm al-Din Kubra explains the inner (batini) meanings of verses beyond their outer (zahir) meanings, connecting them to spiritual states occurring within the human heart, spiritual journey (sayr), and the discipline of the soul (nafs)

2 Symbolic and Allegorical Interpretation (Ishari Tafsir): He interprets the Qur'anic text in a symbolic and allusive manner: Pharaoh is portrayed as a symbol of the soul's arrogance; Moses (peace be upon him) as the divine call appearing in the heart; the Nile River as spiritual life; and the mountain (Tur) as the locus of divine manifestation (tajalli).

3 Exegesis Centered on Spiritual Stages: The commentary is conducted based on psychological, cardiac, and spiritual levels (such as the soul commanding evil – nafs ammara, the self-accusing soul – nafs lawwama, and the soul at peace – nafs mutma'innah), along with Sufi concepts like spiritual state (hal), station (maqam), asceticism (zuhd), love ('ishq), annihilation (fana), and subsistence (baqa).

4 Exegesis Based on Remembrance (Dhikr) and Inspiration: Najm al-Din Kubra relies on personal spiritual experience, the state of remembrance (dhikr), and inspiration of the heart in his exegesis. This is a form of intuitive or witnessed exegesis (shuhudi tafsir), i.e., an attempt to understand verses through inner perception (ilham) in a state of nearness to God.

5 Interpreting the Qur'an as a Map for Spiritual Journey (Suluk): He views the Qur'an as a path for the spiritual seeker (salik). Each verse is considered a stage that the seeker must pass through. For instance, in his interpretation of Surah al-Asr: "Al-'Asr" is not merely time but the transformation in the servant's spiritual state; "Inna al-insana lafi khusr" means that a person who wastes their time is in inner ruin.

6 Multi-Layered Analysis: Verses are simultaneously explained on exoteric (shar'i), esoteric (ma'nawi), and allusive (ishari) levels: first, an exoteric explanation; second, a spiritual-psychological meaning; and third, an allusive-allegorical analysis is provided.

7 Emphasis on Perceiving the Qur'an with the Heart: He calls for understanding the Qur'an through heartfelt and spiritual perception, not solely through reason. The Qur'an is described not merely as text, but as light descending upon the heart.

The exegetical style of Najm al-Din Kubra is a system of spiritual exegesis infused with Sufi thought. This methodology was later continued by Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, al-Simnani, and Najm al-Din Daya, becoming one of the fundamental principles of the Sufi exegetical school.

Conclusion. Abu Layth al-Samarqandi's "Bahr al-ulum" tafsir not only met the scholarly demands of its own time but also served as a guiding source for later generations of exegetes. Its integration of transmitted knowledge (naql) and reason ('aql), along with its comprehensive coverage of Qur'anic sciences, made the work a significant milestone in the history of exegetical science. Today, such invaluable heritage from our ancestors holds great importance in elevating the spirituality of our youth and guiding them towards righteousness and guidance.

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