

Windows on the House of Islam

*Muslim Sources on Spirituality
and Religious Life*

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JOHN RENARD

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Figure 6. Great Mosque of Cordova, Spain (ca. 961), *qibla* dome mosaics.

elucidation of a revealed text. But Muslim exegetes have also produced countless volumes dedicated to the interpretation of their scripture and to the principles of exegesis. Here are, first, three brief examples of *tafsir* by different exegetes on the Qur'an's first sura, al-Fatiha ('The Opening'); then a treatise by Ibn Taymiya on the principles of *tafsir*; and finally, a study by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali on the more rarefied art of esoteric interpretation called *ta'wil*. Frequent citation of hadith gives ample evidence of the foundational importance of Muhammad's sayings in scriptural interpretation.

* Three Commentaries on Surat al-Fatiha, The Opening

ANDREW RIPPIN

The commentary on the Qur'an by Muqatil ibn Sulayman is probably the earliest existing complete example of this exegetical genre. Muqatil provides an edifying narrative to accompany the reading of the text, with little interest in the Qur'an's grammar and textual details. Muqatil was born in Balkh, lived in Marv, Baghdad, and Basra, and died at an old age in the year 767.⁶

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

"Praise belongs to God"; that is, thanks to God.

VARIETIES OF QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

Qur'an interpretation occurs in many contexts. Sayings of Muhammad sometimes function as occasions for a reflection on the meaning of a particular brief text, as in the hadith cited above. Sermons, too, provide a natural setting for the

"Lord of all beings": that is, the jinn and mankind; this is similar to God's saying in 25:1: "So that he may be a warner to all beings."

"The Merciful, the Compassionate": two names of compassion, one of which is more compassionate than the other. "The Merciful" relates to the sense of being merciful, while "the Compassionate" means to be inclined toward the giving of mercy.

"Ruler of the Judgment Day": that is, the day of reckoning, just as God said in 37:53: "Are we the ones to be judged?" that is, those subject to the reckoning. Concerning this it is said that the kings of the world will rule the earth and He will inform them that no one other than Him will rule over the day of resurrection. That is contained in His saying in 82:19: "That day the command belongs to God."

The saying of God: "Only You do we serve": that is, we declare your unity, just as in God's saying in 66:5: "Those who worship," that is, those who declare the unity of God.

"Only from You do we seek aid": in Your worship.

"Guide us [*ihdina*] along the straight path": that is, the religion of Islam because there is no guidance in any religion other than Islam. According to the variant reading of Ibn Mas'ud the text reads *arshidna*, "guide us."

"The path of those whom You have blessed": that is, We have indicated the way of those whom We have blessed, that is, the proofs of those whom God has blessed with prophethood, just as in God's saying in 19:58: "Those were from among the prophets whom God blessed," among whom was Abraham.

"Not those against whom You have sent Your wrath": that is, a religion other than the Jewish one, against which God was wrathful. Monkeys and pigs were made from them.

"Nor those who are astray": God is saying: "And not the religion of the polytheists," that is, the Christians.

The narrator said: 'Ubayd Allah informed me that his father told him on the authority of Hudhayl from Muqatil from Murtadd from Abu Hurayra that the Messenger of God, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, said: "God, Most Exalted and Most High, said: 'This sura arose between Me and My servant in two halves.' When the servant said:

'Praise belongs to God, Lord of all beings,' God said: 'My servant thanks Me.' When he said: 'The Compassionate, the Merciful,' God said: 'My servant praises Me.' When he said: 'Ruler of the Judgment day,' God said: 'I will praise My servant and the rest of the sura shall be for him.' So when he said: 'Only from You do we seek aid,' God said: 'This is for My servant who seeks aid only from Me.' So when he said: 'Guide us on the straight path,' God said: 'This is for My servant.' And when he said: 'The path of those whom You have blessed,' God said: 'This is for My servant. 'And not those who are astray': this is for My servant alone.'"

The narrator said: 'Ubayd Allah told me that his father told him that Hudhayl told him on the authority of Muqatil who said: "Whenever one of you is reading this sura and reaches its conclusion saying: 'And not those who are astray,' he should say 'Amen'. Indeed, the angels are believers and if the saying of 'Amen' by the angels coincides with the saying of it by people, the previously committed sins of the people will be forgiven."

The narrator said: 'Ubayd Allah told me that his father told him that Hudhayl told him on the authority of Waqi' from Mansur from Mujahid who said that when Sura 1 was revealed, the Devil wailed.

The narrator said: 'Ubayd Allah said that his father told him on the authority of Abu Salih from Waqi' from Sufyan ath-Thawri from as-Suddi from 'Abd Khayr from 'Ali, may God be pleased with him, concerning the words of God in 15:87, "The seven *mathani*," that he said that they are the seven verses of Sura 1.

The following text of commentary is frequently ascribed to Ibn 'Abbas, although in its present form it probably originated in the ninth or tenth century. Ibn 'Abbas (d. ca. 687) is the source of much Qur'an commentary and is considered one of the best informed of all early authorities, even though he was quite young when Muhammad died. The work is characterized by little narrative embellishment, but considerable attention to difference of opinion as expressed via the connecting phrase "it is also said."⁷

This is a Medinan sura, although some say it is Meccan.
"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

With its chain of transmission from Ibn 'Abbas concerning the saying of God most High, "Praise be to God": He is saying "Thanks to God." He it is who made His created beings, so they praise Him. It is also said [that it means]: "Thanks to God" for his abundant blessing on His servants whom He guides to faith. It is also said that it means thanks and testifies that unity and divinity belong to God, who has no offspring, partner, supporter, or helper.

"Lord of the worlds": Lord of all possessors of spirit moving on the face of the earth and of all the inhabitants of heaven. It is also said that it means: Master of the jinn and of humanity. It is also said that it means: Creator of the created beings for whom He provides the subsistence and whom He takes from one condition of faith to another.

"The Merciful": the One who feels mercy [*raḥiḳ*], which is derived from *al-riḳqa*, mercy, and that is kindness [*rahma*].

"The Compassionate": the One who is a true companion.

"Ruler of the day of religion": Judge on the day of religion [*ḍin*], which is the day of reckoning and destiny on which He shall divide up His creatures. That is, the day on which people shall be repaid [*yudanu*] for their deeds. There is no judge other than Him.

"Only You do we serve": to You do we profess our belief in Your oneness and to You do we yield.

"Only from You do we seek aid": with You do we seek aid in our performance of Your worship and from You we receive trust to perform in Your obedience.

"Guide us along the straight path": direct us to the steadfast religion which pleases You, which is Islam. It is also said that this means: strengthen us in it. It is also said that it means it is the book of God such that He is saying: "Guide us in its categories of permitted and forbidden and in an explication of what is in the book."

"The path of those whom You have blessed": the religion of those to whom You have shown favor by means of religion. They are the followers of Moses [before the blessings of God changed against them (cf. 8:53)], when clouds put them in the shadow and manna and quail were sent down to them in the desert [cf. 2:57]. It is also said [that the people who have been favored are] the prophets.

"Not those against whom You have sent your wrath": other than the religion of the Jews against whom You have been wrathful and have abandoned and have not preserved their hearts in order for them to become [true?] Jews.

"Nor those who are astray": nor the religion of the Christians, who err away from Islam.

"Amen": thus, His community will come into being. It is also said that it means: So be it thus. It is also said that it means: O our Lord, do with us as we ask of You. God knows best.

Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti (d.1505) is the likely author of the following commentary on Sura 1. It is part of *The Commentary of the Two Jalals (Tafsir al-Jalalayn)*, so called because it was begun by Jalal ad-Din al-Mahalli (d. 1459) and completed by Suyuti. As-Suyuti was a prolific writer who collected material from a vast number of sources and presented it both concisely and in a variety of forms. There is little room in the tafsir for expression of differences of opinion or for elaborations of narratives. This work has been quite popular in the Muslim world because of its precise nature and grammatical focus.⁸

This is a Meccan sura with seven verses, if one counts the *basmala* ("In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate") as a verse and counts the seventh verse as starting with "The path of those whom" until the end of the sura. If one does not consider the *basmala* a verse, then the seventh verse starts with "Not those against whom you have sent your wrath" to the end of the sura. One needs to understand the word "say" at the beginning of the sura because of the statements that precede "Only You do we serve." This is in keeping with the sura being a statement repeated by the worshippers.

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

"Praise be to God": this is a predicative sentence, which intends thereby praising God such that the sentence affirms that the Most High is the possessor of all the praise from His creation. Or, it is the praise which He deserves because they should praise Him. Allah is the personal name of Him who is worthy of worship.

"Lord of the worlds": that is, ruler of all creation including humanity,

the jinn, the angels, the animals, and other creatures, all of whom may be said to be endowed with intelligence. It is also said that it means those intelligent members of humanity and those intelligent members of the jinn and so forth. The plurality [of "worlds"] with the *ya'* and the *nun* [i.e., the masculine sound plural ending of "worlds"] indicates the supremacy of those who possess knowledge over all others. The word '*alamīn*, "worlds," is derived from '*alama*, meaning "mark, sign, or characteristic" because the world provides a sign of its Creator.

"The Merciful, the Compassionate": that is, the possessor of mercy, which entails intending good for His people.

"Ruler of the day of religion": that is, the day of requital, which is the day of the resurrection. The day is singled out for mention because there is no ruler in reality for anyone on that day other than God Most High, as indicated by "To whom is the rulership of the day? To God!" (40:16). Those who read *malik* [with an *alif* in its spelling] understand it to mean the ruler of the entire affair on the day of resurrection; that is, He is characterized in that way ceaselessly, in the same way that He is the One who pardons sin. The occurrence of *malik* with *alif* is sound, for it indicates a characteristic of knowledge.

"Only You do we serve; Only from You do we seek aid": that is, we devote only to You acts of Islamic worship and the like. We request help only from You in the acts of worship and the like.

"Guide us along the straight path": that is, lead us to the path, which is grammatically substituted by the following phrase [in the accusative case].

"The path of those whom You have blessed": with guidance. The resumptive pronoun ["those whom"] is then substituted in the next phrase by *ghayr* ["not," which is in the genitive case, being governed by the preposition '*ala* of this phrase].

"Not those against whom You have sent your wrath": who are the Jews.

"Nor": and other than [and thus equivalent to the preceding *ghayr*].

"Those who are astray": and they are the Christians. The subtlety of the substitution is that it is an indication that those who are guided are not Jews or Christians. And God knows best what is right.

6. Muqatil ibn Sulayman, *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Cairo: n.p., 1979). On Muqatil, see Elz under Mukatil ibn Sulayman. On his tafsir, see John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sec. IV, passim.
7. Text is from a work printed in Cairo in 1951 under the title *Tanwir al-miqbas min tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, ascribed to al-Firuzabadi (d. 1414), although this is likely a false ascription. On the text itself, see A. Rippin, "Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas and Criteria for Dating Early Tafsir Texts," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 38–83, 79–80. On Ibn 'Abbas as a commentator, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, sec. IV, passim, and the references to the *Tafsir al-Kalbi*, which is identical to this text.
8. *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:264–265.
9. Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim ibn Taymiya, *Muqaddimatun fi usul at-tafsir*, ed. 'Adnan Zurzur (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1391/1971). Several sections have been abridged in the interest of space.
10. Variants of this hadith may be found in both the *Sunan* of ad-Darimi and the *Jami* of at-Tirmidhi, two of the six most authoritative collections.
11. Translated by Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, summer 1992 issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, commenting on fig. 38 (p. 29).
12. See Mohamed Hosein Halimi, "Le Mihrab en Iran et sa décoration," in *Le Mihrab dans l'architecture et la religion musulmanes*, ed. Alexandre Papadopoulos (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 95–96.
13. Geza Fehervari, "Tombstone or Mihrab? A Speculation," in *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Richard Ettinghausen (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 241–252; Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum, 1991), 96. Cf. Nuha N. Khoury, "The Mihrab Image: Commemorative Themes in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Muqarnas* 9 (1992): 11–28.
14. The translation is based on the text of the work as edited by Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari and published in Cairo in 1359/1940 under the title *Qanun at-ta'wil*. The work is listed by Carl Brockelmann (*Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 1:539, no. 21) under the title *Al-qanun al-kulli fi 't-ta'wil*. An article on Ghazali's *Qanun al-kulli fi 't-ta'wil* with a partial Turkish translation was published by M. Serafeddin under the title "Gazalini Tevil Hakkinda Basilmanis bir Eseri" in *Darulfunun Ilahiyat Fakultesi Mecmuasi*, 1st ser., vol. 4, no. 16 (1930): 46–58. Passages cited from the Qur'an are taken from the English translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall.
15. Reading *fawq* instead of *ma'wqif*.
16. *Manazil al-qanar*: As explained by Paul Kunitzsch, "The stations of the Moon are a series of 28 positions in the heavens through which the Moon passes, in its cycle from new moon to new moon, during each of its 27 or 28 nights. Each individual station has a name and is identified with one or more fixed stars in its immediate vicinity." See Paul Kunitzsch, *Arabische Sternnamen in Europa* (Wiesbaden: n.p., 1959), 53. See also his article "Al-manazil" in *Elz*, 6:374–376.
17. Such as "Alif. Lam. Mim," the first verse of Sura 2.
18. A reference to a well-known tradition; see Graham, *Divine Word*, 202.
19. Nawawi, *At-tibyan fi adab hamalat al-Qur'an*, the Cairo edition of Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa Awlad, 1379/1960.