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Majma' al-Bayan: Bridging Enclaves of Knowledge

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Abstract

Sunnis and Shias have a long history of scholastic exchange as intellectuals of each school of thought have often read and appreciated the works of the other school. The following article deals with Tabarsi's Qur'anic exegeses, particularly the Majma' al-Bayan, and his manner of tafsir which attempted to include, in a respectful way, the views of all the Islamic schools of thought. As the author mentions, this exegesis, was well-received by Al-Azhar scholars, and in particular by Shaykh Shaltut, who wrote a foreword to Tabarsi's Majma' praising its style and content. The author concludes by emphasizing the importance of respect and fairness in the mutual exchange of Islamic knowledge.

Keywords: Sunni-Shia scholastic exchange, Tafsir, Qur'anic studies, Majma' al-Bayan, Tabarsi, Shaykh Shaltut, Tusi, Zamakshari.

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Before the impact of colonialism in the Islamic world, Muslims lived within their communities in a brotherly and compassionate way. Whenever a dispute would occur among the Muslims, they would end it, for the most part, through peaceful means based on the spirit of unity and solidarity. Moreover, such high Islamic ideals would often find their way to other parts of the world through their regular travels.

These ideals first appeared when the noble Prophet (S) unified the Muslims through the dignity of an Islamic brotherhood. Imam 'Ali ('a) continued this ideal, such that in spite of the differences which appeared after the demise of the Prophet (S), he worked hard to reconcile the Muslims and maintain their unity through his undying efforts. These tremendous efforts allowed the Muslims to put aside their

differences, stop bloodshed and spread their message to the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, the colonial powers (as is their habit), attempted to put in place a ruthless policy of 'divide and rule' with the aim of instilling disagreements among the Muslims in order to weaken them. Moreover, they fabricated accusations so as to instigate internecine warfare, and by so doing, had a large role in replacing the brotherly and peaceful coexistence that was their hallmark, with that of animosity and hatred.

Of all Muslim rites, it is the Hajj that provides a golden opportunity to unify the Muslims and to dispel the falsities that give rise to hatred and ill feelings. Among the false accusations directed against Shia Muslims is the claim that they do not pay attention to the current Qur'an, believing it to have been distorted or changed, and that they are in possession of their own version called the "Qur'an of Fatima"! However, the truth is that the most renowned Imami jurisprudents of the past such as Shaykh al-Mufid, Shaykh al-Tusi and Sharif al-Murtadha, as well as those of the not so past, such as Imam Khumayni (r), emphatically stated that the Qur'an was and always will be immune from distortion. If any dissenting and aberrant opinions to the contrary were ever expressed, they were never taken seriously by the scholars—and this includes both Sunni and Shia scholars.

In addition, it is a fact that the Shia exegetes and jurisprudents would make constant use of Sunni tafasir (exegeses) such as those of Imam 'Abdullah al-Ansari and al-Mubaydi, as well as the al-Mawahib al-'Àliyah of al-Kashifi, the Anwar al-Tanzil of al-Baydhawi, the al-Kashshaf of Zamakhshari, and many others. These tafasir of the Qur'an were, and still are, used as reference works in the libraries of the Shias, right alongside their own works. In addition, the above mentioned Sunni tafasir are used as texts in both public schools as well as religious seminaries. Sayyid Khamenei, the Leader of the Muslims, has translated portions of the tafsir of Sayyid Qutub, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an* (In the Shade of the Qur'an), into Persian.

On the other side, many Egyptian scholars and professors of Al-Azhar Islamic University have enthusiastically used al-Tabarsi's exegesis, Majma' al-Bayan. The great scholar, Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut, as well as the the previous Dean of Al-Azhar University who was also a great jurisprudent, Shaykh 'Abd al-Majid Salim, were so impressed with the tafsir that they recommended its publication to the Dar al-Taqrib located in Cairo. They considered it to be one of the best Qur'anic exegeses. Fortunately, the book was produced in a magnificent manner with a worthy introduction written by the General Secretary of the Dar al-Taqrib. It also contained an additional foreword by Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut. The book contained references and useful commentaries written by some Shaykhs of Al-Azhar University.

Although the Majma' al-Bayan is brief and concise, its author, al- Tabarsi, has managed to include within its contents a host of Qur'anic sciences, which includes but is not limited to: the styles of Arabic recitation, the circumstances surrounding the revelation of verses, various linguistic aspects, points of grammar, discussions on the order of verses and chapters, related historical reports and stories, and

judgments concerning what is lawful and unlawful. This tafsir enjoys the acceptance and admiration of Sunni and Shia Muslims alike, as it contains balanced and non-sectarian opinions and beliefs of the Shia Muslims with regards to the glorious Book of God.

Professor Shaykh ‘Abd al-Majid Salim of Al-Azhar said in this regard:

I do not think I am exaggerating in any way when I say that it is a book poised in the forefront of the other tafasir as a source of knowledge and research. I have read this book many times and use it as a reference in many situations. It provided me with solutions to certain problems and explained a number of unclear items. I found its author (may Allah bless his soul) to have possessed deep thoughts, to be gifted with great honour, to have authority based on his knowledge, to be strong in his style and expression and to be very concerned about providing people with useful solutions to questions which they may have.

Tabarsi wrote in his own foreword to the Majma’ al-Bayan:

… I prepared myself to take on hard and serious work, strove with my utmost energy, deprived my eyes from sleep, strained my mind, prolonged my thinking, kept in my mind the various interpretations, and asked Allah the Most Glorious for success and assistance. I proceeded to write a book, which would be brief, succinct and orderly, and collected within it, all the different types of this knowledge and its sub-specialties. This work on the science of Qur’anic exegesis and its arts contains the gems and the pearls of knowledge which are manifested in the arts of reading, grammar, and linguistic expressions. I investigated its unclear terms and problems, its meanings and its aspects, the reasons behind the revelations and their circumstances, its stories and its effects, its judicial boundaries and judgments, its lawful and unlawful items. The tafsir even contains the opposing opinions of those who disagree with it, and mentions what my colleagues (r) had contentions with… It makes note of their opinions regarding the basis and branches of religious knowledge, the intellectual sciences and the narrational ones. All was presented in a sensible and concise tone, more detailed than a summary but less involved than a profuse work, since today’s minds would not bear extravagant and detailed explanations of knowledge.

Shaykh Shaltut, in his own foreword, added:

Among the characteristics of this book is the breadth of thinking and the desire to bring closer the opinions of the various Islamic schools of thoughts. Their opinions are presented in their true context with sincerity, to the point that the opinions of the other schools of thought are seemingly promoted with regards to certain issues. He [i.e., the author] strove to be trustworthy and concise in reporting the opinions of the other schools and distanced himself from using insults and abusive language or from acting as if he was the guardian of the other schools. On the other hand, some of our Sunni brethren, when they talked about the Shia, accuse them of being Rafidhi (Refuters), and some of our Shia brethren accuse the Sunni Muslims to be Nasibi. However, Tabarsi always kept in his mind the glorious verse of the Qur’an which states in the Chapter of the Bee: “and have disputations with them in the best

manner."

An example of Tabarsi following this noble verse is what he writes in his exegesis on the fifth verse of al-Fatiha, Keep us on the right path. He writes: "The phrase 'the right path' was reported to have various meanings: Firstly, it is the book of Allah, as reported by the Prophet (S) and 'Ali ('a), as well as Ibn Mas'ud (r). Secondly, it meant the religion of Islam, as narrated by Jabir and Ibn 'Abbas. Thirdly, it is the religion of Allah which is the only one acceptable from Allah's servants, as narrated by Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya. Fourthly, it meant the Holy Prophet (S) as well as the Imams ('a) who represented him, and this was reported by our people."

Tabarsi then goes on to say, "The best manner is to consider this verse to have the general meaning which contains all the above mentioned meanings; hence, 'the right path' represents the religion which Allah commanded us to follow which includes the doctrine of tawhid, practising justice and giving allegiance to those whom Allah has ordered us to obey." It is a known fact that the last narration quoted is the one most preferred by the Shia and was practised by the Imams as reported in their recorded deeds. However, Tabarsi did not give it any greater degree of preference and did not put it ahead of the other opinions and theories. Instead, he set it side by side with the other expressed opinions and took the verse to have a comprehensive meaning.

It is very intelligent of Tabarsi to mention: "give allegiance to those whom Allah has ordered to be obeyed" because this phrase would neither upset the Sunnis nor the Shias. Every faithful Muslim believes that there are those to whom Allah has commanded obedience, such as to the Messenger of Allah (S) and to the leaders. The beauty is that Tabarsi did not give a judgment about the question of Walayah (sanctity and spiritual authority) and Imamah (religious and social authority) here because it is not the place for it. However, he brought forth a phrase which is acceptable by every Muslim and is not offensive to anyone.

Historians who reported the biography of Tabarsi mention something splendid about him. They say that he authored his present book, Majma' al-Bayan, in which he distilled the best points from an earlier work, called al-Tibyan by Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ibn 'Ali al-Tusi. At that time, Tabarsi had not yet read the Tafsir al-Kashshaf of Zamakhshari. After he read it, he wrote another tafsir and titled it al-Kaf al-Shaf min Kitab al-kashshaf (the Sufficient Cure of the Book of Kashshaf). It is obvious from this title that he included in this latter work, some of what he learned from the book authored by Zamakhshari, and which he had not mentioned in his first book. There is also mention of another work of his called al-Wasi, in four volumes, and a third book called al-Wajiz in one or two volumes. He wrote all of these volumes about the subject of Qur'anic exegesis after he completed his main work Majma' al-Bayan. Sometimes the last two books mentioned are known by the expression or title, al-Jawami' Jami' (the Collections of the Collectors) because in them he brought together both the outstanding and unique points from al-Tibyan as well as the extraneous points from the al-Kashshaf.

After having compared the works of Zamakhshari and Tusi, Shaykh Shaltut readily gave assent to the

depth and breadth of vision demonstrated by Tabarsi by saying:

I felt overwhelmed due to the deed of this Imami Shia Scholar because he was not content with what he possessed and with what he had gleaned from the knowledge of the greatest authority and doctor of his school of thought, al-Tusi [the author of al-Tibyan]. Then he gave himself wholeheartedly to a new body of knowledge that came to him. This was the knowledge of the author of al-Kashshaf.

Thereafter he took the old and added the new, not letting sectarian predilections come in the way, lest it lead him towards immoderation and bias. He also did not let the temporal disparity between the old and the new affect him — for it is, indeed, an impediment. Hence, in this way, this great man achieved two additional successes over and beyond his first scholarly success: First, he was victorious against sectarian extremism, and second, he overcame the barrier of time. Such successes might be expected to have caused illusions of grandeur or feelings of scorn and disdain for others, but this was not the case for him; instead, for him it led to obedience, compliance and pliancy! Certainly, the struggle against one's self is indeed the greatest struggle, if only they would know.

Shaykh Shaltut continued in his introduction to the book, "If I wanted to offer this book to the Muslims of every school and nation, I offer it for these characteristics and their like. They should take heed of the good in its contents, its strong knowledge, its straightforward way of presentation and high ethics."

Muslims do not belong to different religions and they do not have differing scriptures. They belong to one religion, read one book and have one set of principles; if they differ, it is only due to differences in opinion and narration, and the variance of their methodology. They are all seekers of the truth which comes from the same sources, i.e., the Book of Allah (swt) and the Sunnah of His Prophet (S). For all of them, wisdom is their lost heritage, which they seek and long for in every horizon.

The first responsibility that bears down on the Muslims, and which is all the more incumbent upon their leaders and scholars, is to engage in an exchange of knowledge and culture and to desist from prejudice, from calling each other derogatory names and from insulting each other with accusations. It is also necessary that they take only the Truth to be their goal and fairness as their modus vivendi, and that they make the best of everything.

الَّذِينَ يَسْتَمِعُونَ الْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُ ۚ أُولَـٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ هَدَاهُمُ اللَّـهُ ۖ وَأُولَـٰئِكَ هُمْ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

Those who listen to the word, then follow the best of it; those are they whom Allah has guided, and those it is who are the men of understanding. (***39: 18***)

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