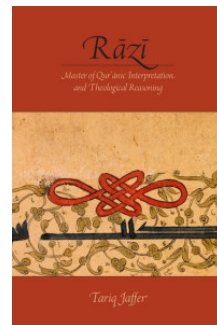


***Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning***, by Tariq Jaffer

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The insights of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), a well-known interpreter of the Qur'ān and Islamic theologian, are specifically *re*-examined by Tariq Jaffer. The major part of his introduction presents a literature review of Rāzī studies, with an analysis of how scholars have viewed Rāzī's interpretive and *kalāmī* methods. Rāzī's influence on different groups of scholars in various parts of the world is documented; for instance, upon Rāzī's death, his works were extensively used by different institutions and centres until the



twentieth century. Both Sunni and Shī'ī exegetical and theological schools were significantly influenced by his accounts.

Numerous scholars have attempted to find answers to serious questions in dealing with Rāzī's rational way of thinking in his major works. Also, many like al-Baydāwī (d. ca. 1280), al-Nisābūrī (d. ca. 1330) as well as contemporary commentators including al-Nawawī al-Jawī (d. 1897) in *Tafsīr Marāb labīd* and so on, have referred to Rāzī's arguments. This book shows that knowledge of the early period of Islam and familiarity with Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy, Peripatetic thought, Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism, and the Sunni-Shī'ī *kalamī* schools are all tools with which every Rāzī studies scholar needs to be equipped.

For many Muslim scholars (mainly traditionalists like Ibn Taymiyya (d. ca. 1328), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's exegesis of the Qur'ān contains everything except *tafsīr*. It reminds me of twentieth-century scholars who compared Tantāwī Jawharī's (d. 1940) *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* with Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān. They also considered that Tantāwī's so-called *scientific* exegesis contains everything but *tafsīr*. Yet Jaffer's book intends to reject underestimations of Rāzī's commentary and affirm that comprehending Rāzī's work(s) requires time and continuous effort to allow scholars to assess different aspects of his profound intellectual arguments.

This book is divided into five chapters starting with "Forging a new methodology," in which the author identifies that Rāzī not only endeavoured to remove traces of *taqlīd* in theology but also to establish a non-*taqlīdī* path in philosophical as well as *tafsīrī* works. In this volume, *taqlīd* is defined as "assenting to the beliefs of intellectual authorities—parents, teachers, or colleagues—without first examining the epistemic value of such beliefs for oneself" (17). For assessing "the *taqlīd* eradication process in philosophy," Rāzī's *al-Mabāhith al-mashriqiyya* ("Oriental studies") is considered. It is expressed that Rāzī inherited al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) anti-*taqlīd* arguments. Ghazālī accused prominent Muslim polymaths such as Fārābī and Avicenna of following Aristotelian philosophical foundations. Jaffer deemed that Rāzī "formulates objections and counter-objections to the default positions of the philosophical canon as a means of resolving the doubts and difficulties that had arisen within it. By adopting this methodology, he avoids accepting methods and ideas simply because they are associated with the illustrious names of established authorities—especially Aristotle, Fārābī and Avicenna" (25). Later on, the reader's attention is drawn to Rāzī's exegetical methods and arguments applied in *Mafātih al-ghayb* (the keys of the unseen), a *tafsīr*

written to introduce a new Qur'anic perspective. The main feature of Rāzī's *tafsīr* is his use of different disciplines, including ancient and Islamic knowledge such as logic, physics, metaphysics, law, *hadīth*, and mysticism in order to explain all Qur'anic verses. His theological-philosophical concerns are evident in his interpretation; for Rāzī, the Qur'ān can systematize both ancient and Islamic knowledge, according to Jaffer (32). In fact, it can be said that using different branches of classical knowledge was Rāzī's innovation in deterring his contemporaries and (perhaps) future generations from *taqlīd* and referring to unverified matters.

Following Ignác Goldziher, Jaffer also moves against the majority of scholarly works which indicate that Rāzī's methodology resembles that of the Ash'arites. Jaffer's voice is fresh when he, unlike many, contends that relying on human reasoning as a source of religious knowledge is the foundation of Rāzī's ideological approaches. In the second chapter, it seems the author attempts to introduce Rāzī as a moderate theologian who inherited knowledge from both Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. In other words, Rāzī gave "priority to reason over scripture" but viewed both the Qur'ān and Hadīth as reliable sources of knowledge. This book suggests that theological topics such as nature and God's vision as well as Muhammad's infallibility (*isma*) were among the crucial points in which Rāzī opposed the Mu'tazilites. By contrast, in the *ta'wīl* subject for example, Rāzī followed the Mu'tazilites' methodology in standing against Hanbalite opponents.

According to Jaffer, both Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites are indebted to Rāzī's robust innovation in his commentary on the Qur'ān. Rāzī's main innovation was in naturalizing philosophical arguments and adopting them in his *tafsīr*, something not previously practiced by his predecessors, namely Ghazālī (a so-called Ash'arī thinker) and Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) (a Mu'tazilī exegete of the Qur'ān).

Some passages of chapter 3, "Reconciling reason and transmitted knowledge," indicate Rāzī's emphasis on the accuracy of prophetic truthfulness through miracles and the differences between miracles and saintly marvels. Rāzī believed that, unlike a saintly marvel, a miracle is a unique act accompanied by a claim of prophecy: "the claimant must announce and describe the miracle that God will perform" (107). Chapter 4 addresses the Light Verse from the Qur'ān: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth..." (Q 24:35). Jaffer's innovation is again illustrated when he goes through (a) Avicenna's philosophical exegesis of the above verse by contrasting Rāzī's opinions in *Sharh al-Ishārāt* ("The Commentary upon the Ishārāt) and *Mafātīh*

*al-ghayb*, and (b) Ghazālī's exegetical accounts compared with Rāzī's *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt* ("Sparkles of the clear proofs") and *Mafātīh al-ghayb*.

The final chapter of this book addresses Rāzī's exegetical methods as well as thoughts on the concepts of the soul and vital spirit as mentioned in the Qur'ān. It demonstrates how Rāzī combined the "Aristotelian-Avicennian and Ghazālīan notions regarding the soul's perfection in his Qur'anic commentary."

This monograph is unquestionably able to fill a gap and it deserves to be translated into different Islamic languages (Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Malay) so as to allow it to be precisely examined and taught by Muslim theologians and Qur'anic studies scholars. Rāzī's resume (14) and list of works (215) are helpful as well. Comprehensiveness and innovation are the main features of Jaffer's book, which should capture the attention of enthusiastic scholars in respect of these theological and exegetical aspects of Islamic heritage.

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