

THE GREAT EXEGESIS  
*al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*



FAKHR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ

THE GREAT EXEGESIS

*al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*

Volume I: The *Fātiḥa*



*Translated with notes by  
Sohaib Saeed*

Foreword by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem

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Sohaib Saeed  
Ramaḍān 1439 / May 2018



## FOREWORD

Translation of the Qur'ān into English started in the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE and gained impetus over the last 50 years, so that there are now scores of such translations. In contrast, very little attention indeed has been given to the *tafsīr* (exegesis) of the Qur'ān. Over the last 25 years or so, a number of translations from Arabic *tafsīr* works, including part of Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, Suyūṭī and Sayyid Qutb, have appeared, but no one has attempted until now to translate what I consider the single most important *tafsīr*, that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1210 CE). This is perhaps due to the fact that it has been seen as a more difficult and complex task than any of the above: Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* is indeed great, both in its size and worth. The editions of Rāzī available until recently were prohibitive, up to eight large volumes with no indexing. The material covered by the *Tafsīr* was also more difficult: Rāzī was a great scholar of philosophy, theology, jurisprudence and an accomplished preacher in both Arabic and Persian, engaged in *taṣawwuf*, with a very fine spiritual sensibility. In addition, he was a top-class linguist in all aspects of the Arabic language: he raised and discussed questions about the language of the Qur'ān which only now, with our modern linguistic thinking, have begun to be noticed.

Because he included, in his *Tafsīr*, elements of all these subjects, especially philosophy, physics and astronomy, this led to the notion, which gained popularity, that his *Tafsīr* included everything except *tafsīr*. In my view, it is correct to say that the 'Great Exegesis' includes all elements of *tafsīr*, plus other things. Rāzī's expertise in all the subjects he mastered, his great holistic vision of the text of the Qur'ān, his sharp power of analysis and, above all, his linguistic skills, distinguish his *Tafsīr*. If I was given the choice to take only one *tafsīr* to rely on, I would readily take Rāzī's.

All this makes translation of Rāzī more difficult and explains why translators have not come forward to take on this task. Translating Rāzī requires understanding and appreciation for the many disciplines that appear in the *Tafsīr*, an intimate knowledge of Arabic at the level used by Rāzī, in addition to mastery of the English language.

Sohaib Saeed has had the courage to attempt the daunting task of translating Rāzī, for which he is well qualified. He had his education in the UK, with a BA and MSc in Philosophy, then a BA in Theology from al-Azhar University, Cairo, and a PhD in *tafsīr* from London University. He appreciates the importance of *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* and has started his translation of the work by translating the *tafsīr* of the first *sūra*, *al-Fātiḥa*, recognising its importance to all Muslims.

Sohaib has not simply summarised but has translated the whole text on the *Fātiḥa* and this is what makes this work particularly important: scholars should be able to read a translation of the real text of *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* rather than what someone selects from it. In addition to translating, Sohaib has corrected some longstanding errors in the Arabic editions of the text and has added his own comments as necessary.

Sohaib should be highly complimented for undertaking this very important and difficult task. His translation is faithful, accurate, and effective; it sets the paradigm for himself and other translators who may come forward to contribute to this enormous enterprise of translating *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, long-awaited by English-speaking Muslim and other readers.

Scholars of the Qur'ān will always be indebted to The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought in Jordan and the Islamic Texts Society in Cambridge who inspired and facilitated this major work of translation. With their support it can be hoped that the whole of *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* will be published in English. But, thanks are of course particularly due to Sohaib Saeed, for his great efforts in producing the actual translation. I have pleasure in recommending this translation highly to readers of the Qur'ān and *tafsīr*.

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This translation is of the first volume of the magnum opus of the celebrated Sunni Imām Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Rāzī, known as Fakhr al-Dīn (544/1149–606/1210), a prolific author and independent-minded proponent of the Ashʿarī school of theology and the Shāfiʿī school of Law.<sup>1</sup> His Qurʾān commentary, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* ('The Great Exegesis')—also known as *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* ('Keys to the Unseen')—is universally acknowledged to be one of the core works of the genre which, despite the uniqueness of its approach to the Qurʾān and the universe, drew from the earlier tradition and provided rich materials for subsequent exegetes. It is a compendium not only of Qurʾānic sciences and meanings, but also Arabic linguistics, comparative jurisprudence, Aristotelian and Islamic philosophy, dialectic theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*).<sup>2</sup>

Rāzī was born in the Persian city of Rayy to a family that claimed lineage to the Arabian tribe of Quraysh. He began his studies under his father, Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn ʿUmar. On account of his father's position at the main mosque of the town, Rāzī became known as 'Ibn Khaṭīb al-Rayy' ('son of the preacher of Rayy'). Among his early teachers was al-Majd al-Jīlī, with whom Rāzī travelled to Azerbaijan, where he specialised in philosophy, Ashʿarī theology and Shāfiʿī jurisprudence. After a period in Khwarezm in which he debated leading Muʿtazilīs, he set

<sup>1</sup> Ceylan writes on Rāzī's willingness to differ with the eponymous founders of both schools. Despite Rāzī's writings possessing a Sufi influence, little is known of his Sufi affiliations, if any, although some biographers considered him to be a conventional Sufi. See Yasin Ceylan, 'Theology and *Tafsīr* in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī', PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1980, pp. 18 and 21–22. [A. Booso, ed.]

<sup>2</sup> There is a tendency among Muslim scholars to classify this work as *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, i.e. rational-based exegesis, which is then called 'valid/praiseworthy' when it conforms to Sunni orthodoxy, and 'blameworthy' otherwise; see Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, 3 vols., Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth 2005, vol. 1, p. 247. This is made to contrast with tradition-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*) in which sayings of the Prophet and first generations are presented without much elaboration or exploration of new questions. Some traditions are explicit in their condemnation of explaining the Qurʾān according to *ra'y*, but this is understood to describe ignorant speculation. In reality, the boundary between the two approaches is unclear, and mainstream exegesis in general depends upon multiple sources, including traditions, Arabic language/rhetoric and contemporary sciences.

out for Bukhara and travelled around Transoxania, leading a life full of interesting encounters, debates and writings. The last twelve years of his life were spent on his *Tafsīr*, among other works, and it was this grand commentary which most gathered the fruits of his mastery of the rational sciences. By the time of his death in Herat—allegedly due to poisoning by members of the Karrāmī sect—he was known by his followers as *Shaykh al-Islām*, the pre-eminent scholar of his age. During his final sickness, he dictated a famous testament in which he declared the superiority of the Qurʾān over the rational sciences.<sup>1</sup>

Modern scholarship has taken a great interest in the thought and writings of Rāzī, and numerous books and papers have been published in Arabic, English and other languages concerning the place of his philosophical, theological and scientific writings in Islamic intellectual history. Nearly one hundred books and treatises can reasonably be attributed to Rāzī: many are lost or unpublished, and few have received any serious editorial attention, let alone translation in full. As well as facilitating scholarly engagement with the author's views and methods, this translation of his *Tafsīr* is a long-awaited contribution to the library of English-language Qurʾān commentary for the Muslim and non-Muslim reader alike.<sup>2</sup> The reader will discover dimensions of interpretation and reflection which build on narrated exegesis and go further, without departing altogether into the esoteric realms of Sufi commentary: consequently, the work can be characterised as both highly spiritual and intellectual.

While Rāzī's general authorship of *The Great Exegesis* is a matter of agreement, there has been much scholarly discussion about whether it was unfinished at the time of his death and completed by a student or later scholar: the names of Khuwayyī (d. 637/1239) and Qāmūlī

1 I have drawn biographical details mainly from Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qurʾānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; Ṭāhā Jābir al-ʿAlwānī, *al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa-muṣannafātuh*, Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2010. On the dangers of misconstruing the 'last will and testament', see Tony Street, 'Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī', in Peter Riddell & Tony Street, eds., *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and Society*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 135–146.

2 This volume is to be followed by another which will span five chapters of the Qurʾān: *Yūsuf* (xii), *al-Kahf* (xviii), *al-Naml* (xxvii), *Yā-Sīn* (xxxvi) and *al-Mulk* (lxvii). Volume I (the *Fātiḥa*) has recently been translated into French by a Senegalese specialist in Islamic thought. Time did not allow me to draw from his work at all or to investigate the differences in our translations beyond one juncture which interested me (see Rāzī's Introduction below). However, I note that Cissé's translation is barely annotated, and that he has collapsed the overall structure into two 'Books' rather than the actual three. See *Le Commentaire de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī sur la Fātiḥa*, trans. Alphousseyni Cissé, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017.

(d. 727/1327) are mooted in this connection. Whereas some claims are based on biographical remarks which are open to interpretation, others appeal to the content and style of specific commentaries which seemingly differ from parts that have been attributed to Rāzī with certainty. For example, Ibrāhīm Rufayda argues that both the ranges from *al-Ankabūt* to *Yā-Sīn* (Q.xxix–xxxvi) and from *Qāf* to *al-Wāqī'a* (Q.l–lvi) were compiled by another author upon the style of Rāzī.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars, such as Ṭāhā al-ʿAlwānī and Muḥsin ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, have dismissed such claims and argued that any minor divergences in style—and indeed references in the text to Fakhr al-Dīn in the third person—can be attributed to an editorial process applied to a work that had already been completed.<sup>2</sup> An important step to resolve this debate will be to compare extant manuscripts so as to produce a critical edition.

Although there is no dispute that Rāzī authored the exegesis of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, I have raised several points in the footnotes which may have some bearing on questions of authorship. These indicate that it was probably composed later than various other parts of the exegesis. I detected some signs of editorial involvement, as well as discrepancies between opinions presented in the *Fātiḥa* commentary and elsewhere. I also highlight that the last chapter of Book I has all the appearance of being unfinished.

### The Structure of this Volume

*The Great Exegesis* in its overall structure resembles other lengthy *tafsīrs*, in that it follows the order of the Qurʾān and presents commentary on one or more verses at a time. However, the structure of enquiry within this scheme is reminiscent of his philosophical writings, in that the commentary is divided into units which Rāzī calls 'Enquiries' (*masā'il*, sing. *mas'ala*). There are divisions and categories above and below this basic unit, through which the author explores the issues raised by, and connected to, the verses. Such arguments may include extended lists of proofs for various points of view, which he may respond to summarily or at length.

The present volume represents an exception in terms of structure, as Rāzī has presented his extensive commentary on *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* in three

<sup>1</sup> Ibrāhīm Rufayda, *al-Naḥw wa-kutub al-tafsīr*, 2 vols., Misrata: al-Dār al-Jamāhīriyya, 1990, vol. II, pp. 827–843. In his detailed study of the issue, Muʿallimī included three more *sūras* in the second insertion, making it from *al-Hujurat* (hence Q.xlvii–lvi), and argued for a third insertion from *al-Mumtaḥana* to *al-Tahrīm* (Q.lx–lxvi). See ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Muʿallimī, *al-Majmūʿ*, ed. Mājid al-Ziyādī, Mecca: al-Maktaba al-Makkiyya, 1996, pp. 101–134.

<sup>2</sup> See ʿAlwānī, *al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn*, pp. 151–164.

‘Books’ (*kutub*, sing. *kitāb*).<sup>1</sup> The first of these is concerned with the formula of seeking refuge, the *isti‘ādha*, after introductions loosely connected to this topic.<sup>2</sup> Book II discusses the *basmala*, the formula invoking God’s Name at the outset of the *Fātiḥa* and other *sūras*. This book is largely concerned with theological issues related to God’s Names and Attributes. Book III contains, as it were, the exegesis proper, after four introductory chapters—the last of which is dedicated to juristic issues. These introductions are followed by a chapter which I have divided into two: Chapter Five, which discusses the remaining verses of the *Fātiḥa* in turn; and Chapter Six, a series of thematic reflections upon the whole *sūra*. I trust that the reader will find this adjustment intuitive and helpful.<sup>3</sup>

I have provided cross references throughout the text to assist the reader in connecting related discussions and benefiting from the complete text as a commentary upon the most important *sūra* of the Qur’ān. While intending to keep as close as possible to Rāzī’s intended structure, I have taken some liberties to relabel and introduce a number of additional headings and subheadings (placed between square brackets). The norm in the Arabic text is for lists (or sequential subheadings) to be labelled as ‘first, second’—even for lists within lists. To make this much clearer, I have usually rendered such sequences using letters or numbers, such that *awwal* may be called ‘A’ or ‘1’ rather than translated literally as ‘first’. The choice of label follows this rationale for the most part: ‘A, B, C etc.’ for lists of alternative opinions on a matter; ‘1, 2, 3 etc.’ for evidences of one side or another in a debate, as well as generic lists; and ‘a, b, c etc.’ (lower case) for general points, sometimes within the aforementioned categories. Moreover, questions, objections or problems are introduced with ‘OBJECTION’ etc., together with ‘RESPONSE’ to make the sequence of arguments clearer than can be found in any edition before now.

It is a matter of tremendous regret that this celebrated work has

<sup>1</sup> Alwānī notes that a distinct commentary on the *Fātiḥa* was attributed to Rāzī and known as *Mafātīḥ al-‘ulūm* (‘Keys to the Sciences’); see Alwānī, *al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn*, p. 147. It is possible that it stood alone before being integrated into *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, just as the reverse has occurred. Early print editions bound it together with *al-Baqara* and subsequent *sūras*, but the thirty-two volume editions made the *Fātiḥa* commentary into Volume I by itself.

<sup>2</sup> Rāzī’s *Tafsīr* has been famously characterised as containing ‘everything but exegesis’. Although this is obvious hyperbole, the reader may find this ringing true from the outset of Book I with its linguistic explorations. However, it should be kept in mind that the author intended to lay certain foundations at the outset of the work. His Introduction outlines his theory that an infinite number of sciences—religious and natural—may be derived from, or grounded in, the Qur’ān.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from this, the biggest structural adjustment was to Book I: its last four chapters (Part Two) were renumbered to maintain continuity with Part One. This makes Book I easier to navigate.

not been published in a critical edition, but instead has been reproduced numerous times with the same typographical errors. As such, I selected a typical modern print<sup>1</sup> for the first draft of the translation, noting errors in order to compare them later with earlier prints, especially the Amīriyya (Būlāq) edition of 1862.<sup>2</sup> Latterly, I had the opportunity to compare the text with a digitised manuscript from 1823, spanning the contents of Book III only, located at the University of Michigan.<sup>3</sup> This process led me to confirm the correct reading of certain words, but there are many more corrections I have made based on a close reading of the text itself, together with external sources. As well as references and clarifications in the footnotes, I have taken the liberty—as a critical reader before anything else—of offering my own comments and observations, sometimes referring to later exegetes. No doubt, our modern age requires a balanced approach which builds upon tradition without treating it as ossified.

### Qur'ān and *Hadīth* References

For the most part, I have taken Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation as the basis for translated verses throughout this volume; adaptations were necessary for numerous reasons, especially to ensure that the quotation fitted the purpose of the author who cited it. However, as I explain in a note at the beginning of the author's Introduction below, the translation of the *Fātiḥa* was adapted from that in *The Study Quran*.<sup>4</sup>

Before describing the *ḥadīth*-related challenges presented by this book and my approach to solving them, a few words about the complex and subtle sciences of *ḥadīth* verification and referencing are in order. Cognisant of the seriousness of attributing statements to the Prophet Muḥammad (may God bless him and grant him peace)—especially as source-texts for legal rulings etc.—Muslim scholars developed methods of inspecting, critiquing, categorising and compiling such reports. An acceptable (*maqbul*) report is one which is traced through a connected chain of narrators deemed honest and reliable, such that one may state confidently that it originated with the Prophet, whether at the higher grading of 'authentic' (*ṣaḥīḥ*) or just below it as 'fair' (*ḥasan*).

1 Ed. Sayyid 'Imrān, 16 vols., Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2012.

2 Ed. Naṣr al-Hūrīnī, 6 vols., Būlāq: al-Maṭba'at al-Amīriyya, 1862.

3 *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah nuqūla min Tafsīr al-kabīr*, provided by the Hathi Trust Digital Library.

4 Seyyed H. Nasr, Caner Dagli et al., eds., *The Study Quran*, New York: HarperOne, 2015. Translations of the *Fātiḥa*'s verses are generally in italics without quotation marks, whereas other Qur'ānic references are set in roman within quotation marks.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are reports which are rejected (*mardūd*) due to the presence within the chain of any narrator suspected of forgery. As well as the ‘fabricated’ (*mawḍūʿ*) category, this includes reports for which a chain cannot be found, though this could theoretically be remedied by its discovery. The point is that one cannot attribute statements to the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) on this basis. Between these, yet technically within the rejected category, are the ‘weak’ (*ḍaʿīf*) narrations which ought not to be attributed to the Prophet without indicating their doubtful provenance. Nevertheless, Islamic scholarship—including the work of Qurʾānic exegetes—has made extensive use of these reports and deemed them acceptable within a range of contexts, essentially when their utilisation does not establish or contradict a major point of law or creed.<sup>1</sup>

In this volume, Imām Rāzī cites over 200 *ḥadīths* attributed to the Prophet, as well as others from the first generations: these are used in various contexts and to different ends. To engage in a thorough investigation of the reports would be far beyond the scope of a translator, and this is yet another thing which is awaited from a critical edition—may God hasten it! Instead, I referred at first to notes provided in the *Dār al-Ḥadīth* edition (Sayyid ʿImrān),<sup>2</sup> which cover some *ḥadīths* but miss out many. A fuller coverage and more thorough analysis is provided by a 2016 Master’s thesis by Rashā Sulaymān,<sup>3</sup> but even she misses around thirty *ḥadīths*. More concerning are the deficiencies in their treatment of the specific wordings and variants cited by Rāzī, which has led them, in places, to faulty conclusions. Therefore, I checked their statements using print and electronic resources, and credited each (with the initials ‘S.I.’ and ‘R.S.’) in straightforward cases. Whenever Rāzī himself references his source, I suffice with that, sometimes providing a print reference, or an alternative source if the former is not readily available.<sup>4</sup>

1 For an overview of historical approaches and attitudes, see Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Oneworld Academic, 2018, pp. 104–113.

2 Given the notorious practices of some Arab publishers, one cannot assume that an actual editor by this name exists.

3 Rashā ʿAṭīyah Shafīq Sulaymān, *al-Riwāyāt al-wārida fī tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥa min Tafsīr al-Rāzī*, Master’s thesis, An-Najah National University (Nablus), 2016.

4 The footnotes are minimalistic and do not meet the full standards of *takhrīj* referencing. My purpose is to direct the researcher to a source that possesses the general wording of the *ḥadīth*, not necessarily the specific narration quoted by Imām Rāzī.

### *Translator's Introduction*

I have generally remained silent on the grading of the *ḥadīths*, mainly because there are different opinions in many cases. The experienced reader will recognise that certain sources—such as Bukhārī and Muslim—are guarantees of authenticity in the Islamic tradition, while others confer no such guarantee. I have likewise remained silent regarding weak narrations, except when they reach the level of ‘very weak’ (*ḍaʿīf jiddan*) as stated by one of my sources. I also point out ‘fabricated’ reports and others which I could not source. Given the ease with which a multitude of references can be accessed in the modern age, the inability to trace such reports should be deemed sufficient cause to abandon them. My plain advice is to exercise caution when reading *ḥadīths* in even the best scholarly works outside that field of specialism.



# THE GREAT EXEGESIS

## INTRODUCTION

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. All praise is for God, Who has enabled us to perform the best of obedient deeds, shown us the means of attaining perfect felicity and guided us to say ‘I seek refuge in God from the rejected Satan’ against every sin and evil.

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful* we commence every virtuous and commanded act. *All praise is for God* to Whom belongs all that is in the heavens; *Lord of the worlds* with all their entities and attributes; *the Compassionate, the Merciful* to all possessors of needs; *Master of the Day of Judgment* Who assigns the righteous to lofty grades and confines the wicked to lowly states. *You we worship and from You we seek help* in fulfilling all our duties. *Guide us upon the straight path* with every form of guidance: *the path of those on whom You have bestowed favour* in every condition and station, *not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray*, the people of ignorance and misguidance.<sup>1</sup>

May God bless and grant peace to Muḥammad, who was supported with the greatest signs and miracles, and to his family and Companions as long as the signs unfold.

As to what follows: this is a book laying out some of what Almighty God has bestowed upon me of sciences of the Opening *sūra*. I beseech Him to grant me the ability to complete it, and to make me deserving of His bounty and generosity in both worlds; indeed He is the best to guide, support and grant succour to the seekers.

This work comprises an introduction and chapters. What follows are the sections of the introduction.

<sup>1</sup> For the translation of the *Fātiḥa*—which the author incorporated here into a rhyming introduction—I have used Nasr, Dagli et al., eds., *The Study Quran*, and adapted it for consistency with the opinions of Rāzī himself. Thus, in place of *Praise be to God*, I have rendered it *All praise is for God*. To reflect the centrality of divine favour (*ni‘ma*) in Rāzī’s discourse, I changed *The path of those whom Thou hast blest*. I also replaced the archaic language preferred by the *Study Quran* editors.

Section I: Summary of the Sciences of this *Sūra*<sup>1</sup>

I have stated at various times that it is possible to extract as many as 10,000 enquiries (*mas'ala*) from the precious and subtle teachings of this noble *sūra*. Yet this was considered fanciful by certain people harbouring envy, ignorance, delusion and obstinacy, who interpreted it in light of their own practice of making meaningless pronouncements.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I have prefaced this book with an introduction which makes clear that what I have claimed is indeed very possible; and so I begin, seeking success from God.

[The *Isti'ādha*]<sup>3</sup>

Our saying 'I seek refuge in God from the rejected Satan' (*a'ūdhu bi' Llāhi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm*) undoubtedly entails seeking divine refuge from all forbidden things, which in turn divide into the categories of beliefs and external actions.

In regards to BELIEFS, the famous *ḥadīth* from the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) says: 'My nation will divide into seventy-three sects, all of them in the Fire except one.'<sup>4</sup> This implies that the remaining seventy-two suffer from corrupted beliefs and stances, which would not be confined to a single creedal issue. Rather, it may occur in numerous branches such as the essence of God, His Attributes, judgments, actions and Names; in matters of free will and preordainment; in attribution of justice and oppression (*ta'dīl wa-tajwīr*);<sup>5</sup> in reward, resurrection, promises and threats, names, rulings and leadership (*imāma*). If we were to

1 This refers to the categories of knowledge which can be derived from the *sūra*, as well as branches of study required in order to understand it comprehensively.

2 Cf. Jaffer, *Rāzī*, p. 33, in which this is read, not as a point about the psychology of projection, but instead as a criticism of earlier exegetes. Jaffer goes on to build upon this reading (which ignores the import of the phrase *alifūhu min anfusihim*) his argument for the novelty of Rāzī's approach. As for the French translation of this volume, it takes the key phrase to refer to the critics' own writings ('qu'ils ont écrit eux-mêmes'), perhaps mistaking *alifū* for *allafū*; see Cissé, *Le Commentaire de Faḥr d-Dīn r-Rāzī*, p. 48. Both have overlooked the fact that if the critics assumed that Rāzī was referring to the 'words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification' (per Jaffer) in existing works of exegesis, then they would have little cause to object to his claim to gather 10,000 such items.

3 This is the verbal noun meaning 'the seeking of refuge', and is often used here to refer to the specific formula which is explained throughout Book I.

4 The first clause from this portion of the *ḥadīth* is well attested, the latter less so. This wording is found in Ṭabarānī (*Awsaṭ*) and elsewhere, and accepted by numerous scholars.

5 This is a reference to Mu'tazilī categories discussed extensively in *kalām* theology—see Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Leiden: Brill, 2006, p. 45. NB: the printed editions have *tajwīz*.

## Introduction

multiply the seventy-two misguided sects by this plethora of issues, the result would be a tremendous number.

If that is so for the misguidance among sects within this nation, then it is well known that the misguided sects outside this nation number close to 700. If their various types of error in conceiving questions of Divinity, essences and Attributes should be added to the preceding number, the sum would be multitudinous indeed.

Without doubt, saying ‘I seek refuge in God’ encompasses all these types of misguidance, and one cannot seek refuge in something unless one knows that thing and also recognises its falsity and unseemliness. It is therefore apparent that ‘I seek refuge in God’ comprises thousands of definite and genuine areas of enquiry.

As for wrong ACTIONS, these consist of every prohibited thing in the Qur’ān; *hadīths* which are either mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*) or solitary reports (*āḥād*); the consensus of the Muslims; or based on correct analogy. These certainly number in the thousands, or more, and saying ‘I seek refuge in God’ refers to all of them.

It follows that ‘I seek refuge in God’ comprises 10,000 significant areas of enquiry, more or less.

### [The *Basmala*]<sup>1</sup>

This divine statement can be looked at here in two ways:

THE FIRST: it is widely said by the scholars that Almighty God has 1001 pure and holy Names to be found in the Qur’ān and *Sunna*. Seeking out each of these Names is undoubtedly a noble and lofty pursuit. Moreover, knowledge of the Name does not obtain without prior knowledge of that which is named; and seeking to establish the reality of the named [Essence and Attributes] and their proofs, as well as the false contentions directed towards them—all this comprises many enquiries which number above the thousands.

THE SECOND: the *bā’* in the words *bi’smi ’Llāh* is for attachment (*ilṣāq*)<sup>2</sup> and is connected to a verb, i.e. ‘In the Name of God *I commence my acts of obedience.*’ This meaning is only known in such an abbreviated form once the various types of obedience—true beliefs and pure actions—are realised

<sup>1</sup> This term refers to the formula ‘In the Name of God’ (or its fuller expression), and is ‘carved’ from the words *bi’smi ’Llāh* by a process called *naḥt*. In addition to the author’s own use of the term (along with the word *tasmiya*, ‘the naming’), I have sometimes—as here—used this word for brevity.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Seven below for details on this particle.

with reference to their proofs and contentions to them are responded to, all of which would therefore perhaps exceed 10,000 enquiries.

A SUBTLE POINT: ‘I seek refuge in God’ indicates the disavowal of improper beliefs and actions, while ‘In the Name of God’ points to the desired beliefs and actions. As such, the latter does not become known until all correct beliefs and pure actions are recognised, and this [stated] order is in accordance with sound reason and explicit truth.

[Verse 2]<sup>1</sup>

*All praise is for God*—know that praise (*ḥamd*) is only based on a favour (*ni‘ma*)<sup>2</sup> and therefore depends upon knowledge of that favour. However, the types of divine favours are beyond definition and enumeration, as God has said: ‘If you should count the favours of God, you will never enumerate them’ (Q.xiv.34).

Let us consider one example. The rational person must ponder upon his own self, which comprises both body and soul (*nafs*). Of these, the lesser aspect in terms of status and benefit is surely the body. Nevertheless, anatomists have discovered around 5,000 types of benefit which God has planned with perfect wisdom in the creation of the human body.<sup>3</sup> Yet whoever comes across these types in the books of anatomy will realise that what has been discovered and recorded is like a drop in the vast ocean compared to what has yet to be disclosed. It is thus apparent that knowing the manifestations of divine wisdom in the creation of human beings consists of 10,000 enquiries or more.

If we should add to this account the manifestations of divine wisdom in creating the Throne (*‘arsh*) and the Footstool (*kursī*), and the levels of the heavens and their illuminated bodies set in place and in motion, each accorded its proportion and hue, together with the manifestations of divine wisdom in creating elements and their constituent beings in the inanimate world as well as the plant and animal kingdoms, with all their types and situations, then it will be established that this collection comprises one million (*alf alf*) enquiries, or less, or more.

Indeed, He has drawn attention to the fact that most of these things have been created for the benefit of humankind, as in: ‘He has subjected

<sup>1</sup> This labelling follows the view that the *basmala* is the first verse of the *sūra*: see Book III, Chapter Four, Enquiry 6 for the debate on this point.

<sup>2</sup> See Book III, Chapter Five for a discussion of the word *ḥamd* in comparison to *madḥ*.

<sup>3</sup> Rāzī was writing this nearly eight centuries ago. Cf. ‘ten thousand’ in a later passage: Book II, Chapter Eight, Enquiry 3.

to you what is in the heavens and on earth' (Q.XLV.13). Therefore, His saying *All praise is for God* encompasses a million enquiries, give or take.

As for His saying *Lord of the worlds*, this consists of a noun and its annexed genitive (i.e. *rabb* and *al-‘ālamīn*). Knowledge of this annexed construct (*idāfa*) depends on knowledge of its constituent parts, i.e. to know that He is Lord of the worlds is impossible without understanding both 'Lord' and 'the worlds'.

*Al-‘ālamīn* refers to every existent other than Almighty God, comprising three categories: [substances which are either] spatial (*mutahayyiz*) or separate<sup>1</sup> (*mufāriq*), and attributes (*ṣifāt*). Spatial things are either simple (*basīṭ*)<sup>2</sup> or composite (*murakkab*). The former is represented by the heavenly spheres (*aflāk*) and bodies (*kawākib*), and the elements (*ummahāt*), while the latter is represented by 'the three generated [kingdoms]' (*al-mawālīd al-thalātha*).<sup>3</sup>

Know that there is no proof of bodies<sup>4</sup> being restricted to these three categories; rather, it is proven that beyond the world<sup>5</sup> there is a void without bounds, and that the Almighty is capable of all possible things. As such, He could create a million worlds external to [our] world, each greater and more expansive than ours, and each containing the same in terms of Throne, Footstool, heavens, earths, sun and moon. The philosophers' proofs for the world being only one are flimsy and built upon faulty premises. Said Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī:

O people, how many celestial spheres belong to God,  
through which the stars run with the sun and the moon!  
Trifling it is for God [to create] our past and our future,  
so we have no idea what lies beyond.

Evidently, seeking out all these types of bodies which we have mentioned would consist of thousands of thousands of enquiries. Indeed, if one were to focus solely on encompassing the wonders of the minerals that emerge from the mountains, such as metals, ores, brimstone, arsenic

1 I.e. immaterial.

2 This refers to bodies that are made of only one substance: sometimes called *basīṭ ‘urfī*.

3 I.e. animal, vegetable and mineral (see below). Compare this paragraph with that on *Lord of the worlds* in Book III, Chapter Five, under Verse 2.

4 Or perhaps what is intended here are *existents*.

5 I.e. the universe. This is an interesting contention in the light of modern cosmological theories which postulate a multiplicity of parallel universes, often termed the 'multi-verse'. See Adi Setia, 'Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi on Physics and the Nature of the Physical World: A Preliminary Survey', *Islam & Science*, vol. II, no. 2, 2004, pp. 177–178.

compounds and salts, and knowing the various types of plant life, such as flowers, blossoms and fruits, as well as the species of animal life—from cattle to wild animals, and from birds to insects—then one’s entire life would have been expended whilst barely scratching the surface. God said: ‘If all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea were replenished by seven seas behind, the words of God would never be exhausted’ (Q.xxxi.27). All of this is entirely subsumed within *Lord of the worlds*.

[Verse 3]

*The Compassionate, the Merciful*—know that mercy (*rahma*) means to remove flaws and deliver goodness to those in need. The former aspect cannot be known without knowing the types of harms, the abundance of which is known only to God. To gain an appreciation of a small quantity of these, look at the books of medicine to encounter the diseases which take root in each limb and organ. Then ponder how God has guided the intellects of His creation to know that which is nutritious and medicinal from among minerals, plants and animals, and you will find this thought process to be an ocean without end.

Galen<sup>1</sup> related that when he composed his work on the benefits in the components of the eye, he said: ‘I have held back from mentioning to people God’s wisdom in making the hollow nerves meet at one place.’ In his sleep, he saw an angel descending from heaven, saying: ‘O Galen, your God is asking: Why have you held back from My servants in mentioning My wisdom?’ Upon this, he became alert and wrote a book on the subject.<sup>2</sup> He further related: ‘My spleen became inflamed so I treated it in every way I knew, but to no avail. Then, in the temple, I saw what appeared as an angel descending from heaven and commanding me to bleed between my small and ring fingers.’

Most significant medical discoveries originate at some point in such forms of inspiration. If a person were to come to know of such things, he

1 A Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher in the second century CE. Biographies of scholars from the Islamic era onwards are provided in the Appendix.

2 See Galen, *Peri Chreias Morion*, trans. M. T. May as *Galen on the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, 2 vols., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968, pp. 490–491. In it, Galen says: ‘I have explained nearly everything pertaining to the eyes with the exception of one point which I had intended to omit lest many of my readers be annoyed with the obscurity of the explanations and the length of the treatment...But afterward I dreamed that I was being censured because I was unjust to the most godlike of the instruments and was behaving impiously toward the Creator in leaving unexplained a great work of his providence for animals, and so I felt impelled to take up again what I had omitted and add it to the end of this book.’ Rāzī cites this again (with slightly different wording) in Book II, Chapter Eight, Enquiry 3.

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would realise that the mercy of God upon His servants is so multifarious that it cannot be known comprehensively.

[Verse 4]

Know that the human being in this world is like a traveller, with his years being as leagues, his months as miles and each breath a step, as he strives towards the world of the Hereafter in which the everlasting rewards are achieved. So if he should witness, while on the path, these various wonders in the dominion of the heavens and the earth, then let him consider the bliss, joy and delight of the wonders of the Hereafter!

With that in mind, *Master of the Day of Judgment* points towards all matters of the Hereafter, resurrection and gathering. These are of two categories:

1. Those which are purely dealt with by the intellect: for example, to say that it is possible for this world to be obliterated then recreated, and that it is possible for the human to be resurrected. This area of enquiry is dependent on seeking the reality of the soul (*nafs*), its states and characteristics, how it can outlive the body, the causes of its felicity or its misery, and how God is most able to restore it. These complex intellectual enquiries would number close to 500.
2. Those which are known by transmission (*sam'iyāt*), comprising three types:
  - a. What takes place [before]<sup>1</sup> the coming of the Day of Judgment, of which there are minor signs as well as the ten major signs which we shall mention and explain.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. What takes place upon the establishment of the Day of Judgment, namely the blowing of the trumpet, the death of all creatures, the collapse of the heavens and stars, and the death of every spiritual and corporeal being.
  - c. What takes place after the Day of Judgment commences and how the people stand [before God], which includes: how they are brought to stand and what they experience there; the manner in which the angels and Prophets are brought, the judgment takes place, deeds are weighed, one party proceeds to the Garden, and the other to the Fire. Then, what are the characteristics of each party, what they experience once they reach the Garden or the Fire, and the words they utter and actions they perform.

<sup>1</sup> The printed editions have *inda* here as in the point following.

<sup>2</sup> These are mentioned at scattered junctures. The *hadith* mentioning all ten is cited under Rāzī's comments on Q.vi.158.

It is likely that these intellectual and transmitted enquiries number in the thousands, all of which fall under *Master of the Day of Judgment*.

[Verse 5]

*You we worship and from You we seek help*—know that worship (*‘ibāda*) means to perform a commanded action in such a way as to glorify the commander. It is therefore not possible to fulfil the implications of *You we worship* unless it is shown with proof that this world has a single, omnipotent, omniscient Deity Who is free of all needs and has obligated His servants with certain things and forbidden them from others, and that it is incumbent on creatures to obey Him and comply.

After establishing the aforementioned, one must detail the categories of duties (*taklīf*) and the types of commands and prohibitions. Everything written in the genre of positive law (*fiqh*) falls under the duties enjoined by God. Then beyond this specific [Muḥammadan] Law (*sharī‘a*), it encompasses the duties which He revealed upon the earlier Prophets in their respective dispensations, as well as the duties He has enjoined upon the heavenly angels ever since they were created and dedicated to devotion and service.

Just as the books of positive law are concerned with duties that are enjoined upon the limbs, the duties upon the heart—which are greater and nobler—are contained in the books of character (*akhlāq*) and practical philosophy (*siyāsāt*) according to the traditions of various religions and nations.

When a person looks at all these enquiries and realises that they are all subsumed in *You we worship*, he will consider the knowledge within this verse to be a tremendous ocean of which the intellects can only appreciate a small portion.

[Verse 6]

*Guide us upon the straight path* is a request for guidance (*hidāya*), which is attained through two methods: seeking knowledge via evidence and proof; and cleansing and disciplining one’s inner self.

The EVIDENTIAL METHODS are in fact without limit, in that every single atom of creation from top to bottom bears testament to His perfect Divinity, might and supremacy. It has thus been said [poetically]: ‘In everything there is a sign, pointing to the fact that He is One.’<sup>1</sup>

To explain: bodies in the universe are equal with respect to the fact of

<sup>1</sup> This is a line of Abū al-‘Atāhiya.

corporeality, but they differ in their attributes: colours, places and states. It cannot be that the variations between them are due to corporeality or its concomitants, because in that case everything would be identical; therefore, they must be due to an entity which particularises (*takhṣīṣ*) and plans (*tadbīr*). If this should be another body, then the same problem will apply to it, so it must be that the opposite is true. Then, if this entity operates through emanation (*fayḍ*) and disposition (*tabʿ*) as opposed to being living, knowledgeable and powerful, then this too would result in all things being identical. Therefore, it must be living, knowledgeable and powerful. Once you know this, it is apparent that every single particle in the heavens and on earth witnesses truly and testifies audibly to the existence of the powerful, wise and knowledgeable God.

My father, the Shaykh and Imām Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn ʿUmar (may God have mercy on him), used to say: ‘In every singular essence there are infinite types of evidence for the divine power, wisdom and mercy. This is because each atomic substance could be in an infinite number of alternative positions, and it could also have any of an infinite<sup>1</sup> number of attributes. Each one of these permutations, if it should obtain, would demonstrate the need for the wise and merciful Creator.’ All of this goes to show that this field of enquiry is limitless.

As for seeking guidance through CLEANSING AND DISCIPLINE, then that is a sea without a shore. Each traveller on the path to Almighty God has his own method and approach, as God has said: ‘To each is a direction to which he turns’ (Q.II.148). The intellects are unable to penetrate these secrets, and minds have no way of grasping these sources of illumination. Nonetheless, the expert gnostics have discovered profound enquiries in this field, and subtle secrets which the majority are unlikely to appreciate.

[Verse 7]

*The path of those on whom You have bestowed favour, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.* How majestic are these stations, and how great these levels! Whoever reads the explanations we have mentioned will be able to grasp the principles of all these conditions, for it has been shown above that this *sūra* contains an unlimited quantity of enquiries and secrets. As such, one who says that it contains 10,000 enquiries [is actually understating the case] in order for one’s listeners to understand.

<sup>1</sup> Some editions have dropped the word *mutanāhiya* here.