

Book Review

Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), viii+244 pages.
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Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) has been the subject of much recent scholarship that has affirmed his importance as an innovative thinker, who had a hand in advancing the many disciplines in which he wrote. Tariq Jaffer's new book stands on the shoulders of long-standing work by the likes of Ignaz Goldziher and Josef van Ess, as well as scholars who have recently written on al-Rāzī including Ayman Shihadeh and Michel Lagarde. Jaffer adds valuable insights to the available work on this towering figure in Islamic intellectual history. This book is not meant to be a comprehensive account of al-Rāzī's thought but rather a focused examination of his methodology, particularly in his famous commentary on the Qur'ān, the *Mafātīh al-ghayb*. Jaffer shows how *tafsīr*, in al-Rāzī's hands, becomes more complex and comprehensive than simply an exegesis in the narrow sense; it provides, rather, "a context in which philosophical questions can be examined,"

by using critical reasoning to arrive at truth (173-4).

Jaffer explores several related dimensions of al-Rāzī's thought in the service of demonstrating the scholar's innovative adaptation of disparate methodologies to the genre of *tafsīr*. In his opening chapter, he briefly takes account of the history of doubt in Islamic thought as a method of arriving at personal understanding, highlighting al-Rāzī's effort to escape from *taqlīd*, the uncritical acceptance of authority, in both his philosophy and exegesis. In order to eschew *taqlīd*, al-Rāzī implemented a dialectical method, raising questions and formulating arguments so to achieve a critical investigation of the philosophical and theological issues that the text raises in the reader's mind. Al-Rāzī was not the only thinker to apply this type of method in his writings around this time in history, Jaffer writes, but he was unique in pioneering its use in *tafsīr*.

The individual effort to arrive at understanding rather than blindly accepting authorities' conclusions goes hand in hand with privileging the intellect, 'aql, as a tool for approaching Islamic thought. The championing of 'aql, over and above the authority of transmitted sources (*manqūlāt*), is conventionally seen as central to Mu'tazilite thought. Jaffer, in his second chapter, demonstrates al-Rāzī's elevating of the status of 'aql in *tafsīr*, thus challenging his identity as a wholehearted Ash'arite and positioning him instead as having a "strongly Mu'tazilite" methodology (55). In so doing, Jaffer demonstrates the way in which al-Rāzī assigns the intellect priority over revelation, placing limits on the authority of the Qur'ān and *hadīth*.

Jaffer draws connections between this hierarchy and particular facets of al-Rāzī's commentary. Applying 'aql to Qur'ānic exegesis, for al-Rāzī, meant, most prominently, using reason to determine when non-literal interpretation of a verse is in order. The reader's 'aql determines when the plain meaning of a verse is in conflict with rational evidence, providing the cue to read the verse figuratively. 'Aql also plays a central role in establishing the credibility of the Qur'ān. It is logically impossible, in al-Rāzī's thought, for scripture to confirm itself: it requires a witness. Thus, the credibility of Muḥammad himself, and not simply the attestation of miracles, must be subject to rational confirmation (Chapter Three). Ultimately, it is reason that tells us God would not send a false prophet. These fascinating explorations of the results of al-Rāzī's privileging of 'aql are a strength of Jaffer's book.

The final two chapters of the book

consist of case studies of al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*, carefully chosen to highlight al-Rāzī's adaptation of non-traditional sources and methods in his commentary. Jaffer, in Chapter Four, provides a detailed analysis of al-Rāzī's interpretation of the Light Verse (Q 24:35) as a means of showing that al-Rāzī employed Avicennian thought as well as the paradoxical logic of al-Ghazali's interpretation in his commentary on the particular *āya*, ultimately staging a developed theory of knowledge through this exegesis. The methods of Avicenna's allegorical *falsafa* and al-Ghazali's Sufi principles were adopted into Sunni *tafsīr* in this way.

Jaffer turns, in Chapter Five, to al-Rāzī's doctrine of the soul in *Mafātīh al-ghayb*. His comments showcase the adoption of Mu'tazilite thought on the soul as well as al-Rāzī's mediation between *falāsifa* and theologians' disagreements on the topic of the soul. These later chapters of Jaffer's book are very detailed and replete with lengthy quotations. A thorough reading will nonetheless reward the reader who is interested in the fine points of al-Rāzī's exegesis and its relationship to other thinkers' explanations of the Light Verse and the soul.

Though Jaffer's book is a focused study of al-Rāzī's methodology, particularly in his *tafsīr*, the book does strive to place al-Rāzī into the context of his position in the history of Islamic thought. Al-Rāzī was not the first thinker to make many of the important intellectual moves that Jaffer examines, and the book provides some background on earlier thinkers such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), accounting for the ways in which al-Rāzī responded to and incorporated his predecessors' insights into his thought. Jaffer considers

the influence that al-Rāzī's methodology had on later Islamic thought, referencing research that has shown its adoption among Sunni scholars, such as al-Ījī (d. c. 756/1355), al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390), and al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), who drew on al-Rāzī's *tāwīl* methodology (117). He also looks closely at the Traditionalist rejection of the *'aqlī* method, as represented by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).

Jaffer's book is a solid contribution to scholarship on al-Rāzī as well as the broader development of Islamic disciplines in the "postclassical" period. Over and above academic work on individual fields of thought such as exegesis, philosophy, and theology, Jaffer offers a perspective into the cross-pollination of thought across disciplines. By showing the ways in which al-Rāzī applies a method used in one discipline to his writing in another, Jaffer describes and analyzes those methods that were characteristic of al-Rāzī as a thinker, as opposed more narrowly as an exegete or theologian. The book provides an account, illustrated through adeptly translated excerpts of al-Rāzī's writings, of al-Rāzī's commitment to integrating *'aql* into *tafsīr*. In fact, as Jaffer shows, al-Rāzī saw the Qur'ān itself as being organized according to rational logic and containing answers to the questions it poses, with "the solutions to difficulties... already worked out by divine reasoning and... embedded in Qur'ānic verses for human reasoning to discover" (170).

Jaffer depicts al-Rāzī as a scholar who applied a consistent logic across his oeuvre, one who was concerned with importing the methods of philosophy and theology into *tafsīr* and applying them critically. The result, Jaffer shows, is an eclectic compound method of reading the

Qur'ān in which elements of disparate origins coexist and together produce insightful interpretation. In light of this methodological exploration, it is especially intriguing to read that al-Rāzī in fact developed divergent interpretations of the Light Verse in different books that he authored. This section raises some thought-provoking questions about the coherence of al-Rāzī's oeuvre.

Jaffer attributes these differences, especially between the *Mafātīh al-ghayb* and the more Sufi-like *Asrār al-tanzīl*, to generic conventions (166) and the "unprecedented" flexibility of his methodology (168) rather than concluding that there are inconsistencies in al-Rāzī's work. Considering Jaffer's thesis that al-Rāzī freely adopted a variety of schools' ways of thinking in his *tafsīr* and yet still differed in his explanations of key *āyāt* across his commentaries, such divergences seems worthy of further exploration. One wonders what the significance of generic boundaries was for a scholar like al-Rāzī who, as Jaffer so aptly demonstrates, worked to apply the methods of many schools of thought to *tafsīr*.

Jaffer's writing is admirably clear. He carefully leads his readers through each chapter with explicit explanation of what each section seeks to demonstrate and the way each topic fits into Jaffer's larger project. This book will be useful for students and specialists in Islamic Studies, especially those interested in understanding the so-called postclassical developments in Islamic thought across disciplines. Jaffer adds his voice to those of scholars who have helped advance understanding of one of the most influential figures in Islamic intellectual history.