

## Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment

ANYONE who has spent any time with the exegetical traditions of scripture in Islam cannot fail to notice that much ink is spilt on matters of how to read, how to parse and how to explain meaning based on a thorough lexical analysis. Similarly, anyone who studies Arabic grammar and lexicology will recognize that much of the case material for analysis comes from the Quran. A classic example of this is the voluminous exegesis of the grammarian Abu Hayyan al-Ghar-nati (d. 745/1344) in which every verse, phrase and term is glossed in a masterful way—but its intricacies only make sense if you have the Arabic in front of you and the rules of grammar to mind. This intimate relationship of the two genres of writing was well known to the tradition of Arabic lexicology but has also been noticed by specialists such as Kees Versteegh. Thus far most of the Qur'anic Studies Series of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, in which this volume appears, has addressed itself to exegesis as such. But this volume—along with another recent one on Adab—attempts to demonstrate that critical elements of theological, legal and philosophical debates on the meaning of terms and phrases in the Quran often hinge upon a lexical foundation. The 13 chapters in this volume come from a range of perspectives, some focused on a particular verse or pericope, others on a specific exegete and others still on general trends in exegesis and approaches to the Quran.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first considers lexicography in the formative period and contains contributions from some of the leading

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figures in the study of early Islam. The second looks at four case studies from the middle period in exegesis as well as in specialist works on particular Quranic terms (the genre called *mufradat* or *gharib* al-Qur'an). Section three shifts to the ways in which lexicography can inform our understanding of Islamic law, especially in its modernist guises. The last section is focused on how modern thinkers make sense of the medieval disputes. Burge prefaces these sections with an introduction that presents the chapters in context and argues for why the volume is necessary. Basically, he makes two points: that exegesis in its attempts to recover meaning and tie the Quran to various disciplinary fields has to be predicated on lexical meaning in the first place; and second, that there is still a major deficiency in the field of Quranic studies when it comes to hermeneutics. The first point requires us to take cognizance of lexicography

(*'ilm al-lughah*).

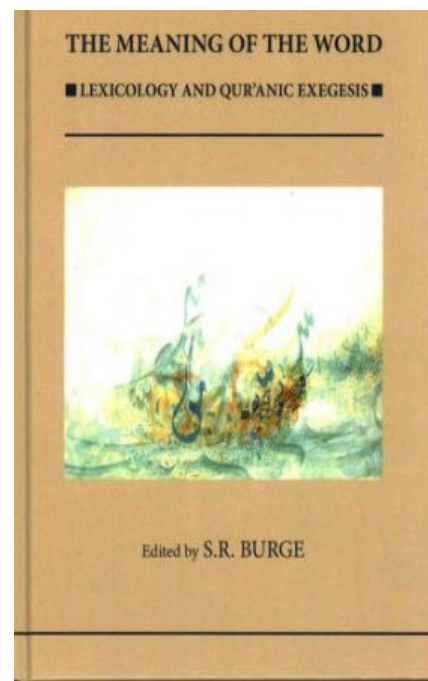
The second relates to a presentation of the semantic fields of tafsir and ta'wil. He mentions the three difficult cases of how mystical lexicography seems to divert our attention, how Islamic legal readings often seem forced and finally how translation attempts to fix meanings. The whole discussion is framed within a sophisticated understanding of hermeneutics and semantics. However, it is worth challenging the two main points. First, it is difficult to see how the lexical range and lexicography of terms in the Quran can be considered to be independent of it. Lisan al-'arab and other means for discerning classical and Quranic usage work within a particular hermeneutical circle which places the Quran at the centre and at the periphery of the endeavour. Furthermore, as the author himself suggests, mystics tend to read terms and etymologies (the best examples coming from the school of Ibn 'Arabi, the Kubrawi tradition and Maybudi) in the light of their own experiences. Others still, such as the modern Downloaded by [University of Essex] at 03:10 04 October 2017 qasdiyya in Egypt and Iraq (figures such as the late 'Alim Subayt al-Nili) as well as, to an extent, the maktab-i tafkik in Iran, insist that Quranic usage is unique and can only be discerned on its own terms. But then the very process of glossing the Quran by the Quran can be caught in a tautological conundrum. Second, there have been a number of studies of hermeneutics in the reading of Islamic texts and their reception. One might argue that there is still much to do but it is

not really justified to say that the studies so far are inadequate; apart from the volumes published in the Qur'anic Studies Series at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (including one forth-coming on the Quran in Iran), there are various further works by Peter Heath, Paul Balanfat, Jane MacAuliffe and many others. The threshold of adequacy needs to be determined. Nevertheless, another volume that touches on hermeneutics is welcome anyway.

Section one begins with a piece by Versteegh which summarizes much of his work on the rise of semantic explanation in early exegesis. The simple point is that the earliest exegeses were paraphrastic in nature, glossing terms to make the usage of the Quran better known to those unfamiliar with either the dialect of the Quraysh or Arabic as such and this often involved recourse to poetry that was contemporary (or supposedly pre-Islamic). But at the same time, he is quite correct to critique Wansbrough's scheme for how exegesis develops from the haggadic to the halakhic to the Masoretic. Wansbrough argues that these are discrete stages and if one finds exegeses displaying all these various features at once, they must be dated later. But of course, as Versteegh points out, such an argument is circular. Besides, the extensive Masoretic material in the earliest exegeses seems to provide evidence that contradicts Wansbrough. His own argument about how these genres of exegesis develop alongside the discipline of Arabic grammar suggests, if anything, that a concern with semantics was an early one that tied understanding the scripture to understanding the nature of the language in which it was expressed. Berg follows with another study on the exegetical corpus transmitted from the companion Ibn 'Abbas. He uses three case studies to question whether there was a school of Ibn 'Abbas and

whether the evidence better indicates that certain late-second-century consensuses were attributed to him. So on one hand he confirms Wansbrough; but on the other hand, he confirms that his case studies show an early interest in lexicography that runs contrary to Wansbrough. Melchert examines three terms used by and associated with early renunciants (*zuhhad*). He concludes rather simply that tafsir is not the ultimate arbiter but rather if one wishes to make sense of terms and concepts in early Islam, it would be best to look at other genres including law and Hadith. Wansbrough's ghost still remains in the background with the questions of whether tafsir is earlier or not and whether exegesis tells us anything useful (since the case studies demonstrate exegetical traditions pointing away from the scripture). However, the problem here concerns fixing a 'common sense' meaning based on an appeal to lexicography from which the exegeses seemingly diverge.

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