



"INNOVATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS IN SCIENCE 2026"

THE MAWARANNAHR TAFSIR SCHOOL: ITS FORMATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND SCHOLARLY LEGACY

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Abstract: *This article examines the formation, historical stages, and distinctive scholarly-methodological features of the science of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) in the region of Mawarannahr from a scholarly-analytical perspective. The study analyses the role of such centres of learning as Bukhara, Samarkand, Termez, Khwarazm, and Merv in shaping local exegetical traditions, as well as the gradual transition of tafsir from a discipline closely interwoven with the science of hadith into an independent field of inquiry.*

Keywords: *Tafsir, Holy Qur'an, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Mahmud al-Zamakhshari, Abu Layth al-Samarqandi, Ta'wilat al-Qur'an, Al-Kashshaf, rational exegesis, transmission-based exegesis, Hanafi school*

Following its emergence on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Islam rapidly spread across vast territories, bringing with it an unprecedented flourishing of science, culture, philosophy, and literature. Muslim scholars adopted the Holy Qur'an as a guide for every sphere of human life and devoted themselves to grasping its profound meanings, interpreting them, and applying them in practice. It was precisely this need that gave rise to the science of tafsir - an independent discipline dedicated to the scholarly elucidation of the meaning and substance of Qur'anic verses.

The science of tafsir initially took shape in Medina among the circles of the Prophet's Companions, before developing further in such scholarly centres as Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and Damascus. However, on the eastern frontier of the Islamic world - in the region of Mawarannahr - this science acquired its own distinctive orientation, style, and methodology, eventually growing into a powerful scholarly tradition that influenced the entire Muslim world. This article examines, from a scholarly-analytical standpoint, the historical formation of the Mawarannahr tafsir school, its classical period, the scholarly legacy of its great exegetes, the school's distinctive characteristics, and its development in the modern era.

Mawarannahr - the territory between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers - has long served as a central hub of the Great Silk Road, a meeting place of civilisations, and a crossroads of trade, culture, and ideas. Cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Termez, Merv, Khwarazm, Shash (Tashkent), and the Fergana Valley towns of Margilan, Kokand, and Andijan possessed an advanced cultural heritage even before the advent of Islam. With the wide spread of Islam in the eighth century, local scholarly traditions were enriched with new religious and spiritual content.



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By the ninth century, Mawarannahr had risen to prominence not only politically but also intellectually. Under the rule of the Samanid dynasty (819–999), Bukhara came to be recognised throughout the Islamic world as the "Dome of Knowledge" (Qubbat al-Ilm). Alongside hadith, fiqh, kalam, lexicography, philosophy, and the natural sciences, tafsir began to emerge here as an independent scholarly discipline. The network of madrasas and libraries, the scholarly circles led by eminent teachers, and the high level of calligraphic art created ideal conditions for the cultivation of Qur'anic exegesis.

In its earliest phase, tafsir in Mawarannahr developed not as an autonomous science but as an integral part of the science of hadith. Exegetical reports transmitted from such Companions as Ibn Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud, and Ali ibn Abi Talib (may God be pleased with them) reached Merv, Bukhara, and Samarkand through the generations of the Successors (tabi'un) and the followers of the Successors. Local hadith scholars then began to compile these narrations in their own works.

In his celebrated *Al-Jami' al-Sahih*, Imam al-Bukhari (810–870) devoted a special section entitled *Kitab al-Tafsir*, in which he organised authentic hadith reports relating to the suras and verses of the Qur'an. This section became a foundational source for the exegetes of subsequent generations. Imam al-Tirmidhi (824–892) likewise included a section entitled *Abwab al-Tafsir* in his *Sunan*, in which he gathered hadith reports interpreting Qur'anic verses. Thus, the earliest stage of tafsir in Mawarannahr took shape on the basis of a transmission-based (naqli) methodology grounded in the textual sources.

The period from the late ninth to the twelfth century represents the true golden age of tafsir in Mawarannahr. During this era, the discipline emerged from the framework of hadith studies to constitute itself as an independent scholarly field, generating its own distinctive methodological currents.

One of the most distinguished representatives of the Mawarannahr exegetical tradition is Abu Mansur Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Maturidi (d. 944). Born in the village of Maturid near Samarkand, this scholar produced the work *Ta'wilat ahl al-Sunna* (also known as *Ta'wilat al-Qur'an*), which occupies an important place in the history of tafsir. The distinctive feature of this work is that the exegete, in interpreting Qur'anic verses, draws extensively not only on transmission-based sources - hadith reports and the sayings of the Companions - but also on rational and logical argumentation.

Through this work, al-Maturidi subjected questions of doctrine to scholarly-philosophical analysis grounded in the Qur'anic text, thereby laying the foundation for the second major school of Sunni theology, the Maturidi tradition. His method later became the doctrinal foundation for Muslims of the Hanafi school across Mawarannahr, Khurasan, India, and the Ottoman Empire. The *Ta'wilat* is not a tafsir in the conventional sense, but rather a scholarly-philosophical encyclopaedia composed at the intersection of theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy.

Another luminary of the Mawarannahr tafsir tradition is Mahmud ibn Umar al-Zamakhshari of Khwarazm (1075–1144). His work *Al-Kashshaf an Haqa'iq Ghawamid al-*



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Tanzil ("The Unveiler of the Hidden Truths of Revelation") analyses the most subtle meanings of the Qur'an from the standpoint of Arabic rhetoric and lexicography. Al-Zamakhshari elucidates with unparalleled depth such rhetorical phenomena as metaphor (*isti'ara*), simile (*tashbih*), allusion (*kinaya*), and figurative usage (*majaz*) in the Qur'anic verses.

Al-Kashshaf became so renowned in the Muslim world that virtually no subsequent tafsir was composed without reference to it. Exegetes from Egypt, Syria, Andalusia, and Iraq drew widely upon al-Zamakhshari's methodology. To this day, his work remains a fundamental source for the in-depth study of the Arabic language and for understanding the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an.

Abu Layth Nasr ibn Muhammad al-Samarqandi (d. 983), of Samarkand, produced the work *Bahr al-Ulum* (also known as *Tafsir al-Samarqandi*). This work is regarded as a model of moderate exegesis that combines transmission-based and rational interpretation in a balanced manner. Abu Layth al-Samarqandi was renowned not only as an exegete but also as a major jurist and preacher. His tafsir served as an exemplary teaching text for the scholars of subsequent generations.

After Bukhara emerged as the principal centre of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence from the ninth century onwards, tafsir in this city developed in close connection with juridical concerns. Bukharan scholars devoted their primary attention to elucidating the legal rulings, ritual prescriptions, and questions of social transactions contained in Qur'anic verses. This approach gave rise to a special genre known as the "exegesis of legal verses" (*tafsir ayat al-ahkam*). In his celebrated *Al-Hidaya*, Burhan al-Din al-Marghinani (d. 1197) provides profound analyses of Qur'anic verses in support of legal arguments.

Termez, in turn, gained renown as a centre of mystical exegesis. Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 932) produced works that interpret not only the apparent (*zahir*) meaning of the Qur'an but also its inner (*batin*) and symbolic significance. In his *Khatm al-Awliya'* and other writings, he provided spiritual and gnostic interpretations of Qur'anic verses, laying the foundations for the subsequent Sufi exegetical tradition. According to the teachings of the Termez scholars, every verse of the Qur'an contains levels of outer and inner meaning, allusion and ultimate truth, accessible only to those of pure heart and righteous conduct.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, under the rule of Amir Timur and his successors, Mawarannahr underwent yet another period of cultural and intellectual flourishing. Samarkand and Herat became leading centres of scholarship, artistic creativity, and spiritual life. Under Mirza Ulugh Beg, the religious sciences flourished alongside the natural sciences. Although originally from Khurasan, Mawlana Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (1322–1390) lived and worked in Samarkand, and his writings on theology and rhetoric exercised a significant influence on tafsir studies.

During this period, exegetical works also began to be composed in the Persian language. Husayn Va'iz al-Kashifi (d. 1505) wrote his *Mawahib-i Aliyya* (also known as *Tafsir-i Husayni*) in Persian, thereby making the Qur'an accessible to broad communities of



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Turkic- and Persian-speaking peoples. In such works as Hayrat al-Abrar and Lisan al-Tayr, Alisher Navoi offered artistic and gnostic interpretations of Qur'anic verses, enriching the exegetical tradition through the medium of literature.

The works produced by the scholars of Mawarannahr were not confined to a local readership but spread widely throughout the Muslim world. Al-Maturidi's Ta'wilat was taught as a principal textbook in the madrasas of the Ottoman Empire. Through the Deobandi school in India and through Central Asian émigré scholars, this tradition reached the whole of South and Southeast Asia.

Al-Zamakhshari's Al-Kashshaf attained such fame among scholars in Mamluk-era Egypt, Syria, and Andalusia that exegetes including Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, and al-Baydawi drew upon it extensively. Indeed, al-Baydawi's Anwar al-Tanzil is in essence a reworking of Al-Kashshaf that removes its Mu'tazilite elements while preserving its insights within an Ahl al-Sunna framework. This testifies to the immense contribution of the Mawarannahr tafsir school to global Islamic intellectual history.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the conquest of Mawarannahr by the Russian Empire and the subsequent establishment of Soviet rule dealt a severe blow to the development of tafsir studies. Madrasas were closed, the religious sciences came under persecution, and many scholars were either repressed or compelled to leave their homeland. Nevertheless, the teaching of tafsir continued discreetly in the madrasas of Bukhara and Kokand.

During this period, the Jadid reform movement infused new life into tafsir studies. Such Jadid figures as Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Munavvarqari Abdurashidkhanov, and Abdurauf Fitrat interpreted Qur'anic exegesis as the spiritual foundation of enlightenment and reform. They paid particular attention to the social and ethical verses of the Qur'an, advocating the harmonisation of religious learning and modern knowledge as a path toward the modernisation of Muslim society.

Following Uzbekistan's attainment of independence in 1991, tafsir became a discipline supported by the state. During this period, translations of and commentaries on the Holy Qur'an in the Uzbek language were published. The Qur'anic translation by Alouddin Mansur, the six-volume Tafsir-i Hilal by Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, and the translation and commentary by Shaykh Abdulaziz Mansur won wide recognition among readers. Tafsir-i Hilal stands as the most prominent example of the contemporary Uzbek exegetical tradition, harmoniously combining classical methodology with a modern scholarly approach.

Today, tafsir is taught and researched as an independent discipline in such institutions as the Tashkent Islamic University, the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, the Imam al-Bukhari International Research Centre, and the Imam al-Maturidi International Research Centre. The manuscript heritage of the great Mawarannahr exegetes is being studied, and their works are being published according to modern scholarly standards.



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Several distinctive features distinguish the Mawarannahr exegetical tradition from other regional schools. First, this school is characterised by the harmonious integration of reason and transmission - that is, the balanced use of logical demonstration and source-based authority. The exegetes adopted a measured approach to interpretation, drawing upon both methods. Second, juridical interpretations were dominated by the perspective of the Hanafi school, ensuring a close connection between exegesis and the practical concerns of everyday life. Third, considerable attention was given to lexicography, rhetoric, and linguistics, so that verses were also analysed from the standpoint of literary art. Fourth, mystical and spiritual interpretations enriched the school's gnostic dimension. Finally, the emphasis on ethical, social, and political teachings transformed tafsir from a purely theoretical discipline into a practical source of guidance for life.

The Mawarannahr tafsir school is one of the most significant and multifaceted branches of Islamic exegesis, having contributed substantially to the scholarly progress of the entire Muslim world for many centuries. The works of such great scholars as Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Mahmud al-Zamakhshari, and Abu Layth al-Samarqandi remain an invaluable legacy that responds not only to the intellectual and spiritual needs of their own age but also to those of the present day. These scholars illuminated the Qur'anic sciences from rational, transmission-based, lexicographical, juridical, and gnostic perspectives, leaving future generations a rich spiritual heritage.

During the period of independence, this rich heritage is being re-examined, and the classical tafsir tradition is being continued within contemporary scholarly paradigms. The further in-depth study of the Mawarannahr tafsir school, the translation of the works of classical exegetes into modern Uzbek, and their presentation to the international scholarly community remain among the principal tasks facing the present generation. For this heritage is not merely a relic of the past, but a beacon that guides the spiritual life of today and tomorrow.

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