

ISMAIL HAQQI BURSEVI AND HIS SUFI EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY “RUH AL-BAYAN”

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Annotation

This article provides a scholarly and Sufi-oriented analysis of Ismail Haqqi Bursevi and his mystical Qur’anic exegesis entitled *Rūh al-Bayān*. The general structure of the work, its sources, and its distinctive features are thoroughly examined. Particular attention is given to the manner in which both the outward (zāhir) and inward (bātin) meanings of Qur’anic verses are elucidated in this tafsīr. Furthermore, the study analyzes the symbolic (ishārī) interpretative approach employed in the work and its place within Sufi teachings. The article also considers the strengths of the tafsīr as well as certain critical perspectives. As a result, the significance of “Rūh al-Bayān” within the science of Qur’anic exegesis is clearly demonstrated⁶⁰.

Keywords

Rūh al-Bayān, tafsīr, Sufism, ishārī exegesis, Bursevi, Qur’an, zāhir and bātin, ma’rifa, ‘irfān, Islamic sciences

Аннотация

В данной статье представлен научный и суфийский анализ деятельности Исмаила Хакки Бурсави и его суфийского тафсира под названием «Руху-ль-байан». Подробно рассмотрены общая структура произведения, его источники и отличительные особенности. Особое внимание уделено раскрытию как внешних (захир), так и внутренних (батин) смыслов коранических аятов в данном тафсире. Также анализируется аллюзивный подход в толковании и его место в суфизме. В статье также рассматриваются достоинства данного тафсира и некоторые критические замечания в его

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адрес. В результате раскрывается значение работы «Руху-ль-байан» в науке тафсир.

Ключевые слова

Руху-ль-байан, тафсир, суфизм, тафсир ишари, Бурсави, Коран, захир и батин, ма'рифа, 'ирфан, исламские науки.

Аннотация

Ушбу мақолада Исмоил Ҳаккий Бурсавий ва унинг “Руху-л-баён” номли тасаввуфий тафсири илмий ва тасаввуфий жиҳатдан таҳлил қилинган. Асарнинг умумий тузилиши, манбалари ва ўзига хос хусусиятлари кенг ёритилган. Мақолада мазкур тафсирдаги Қуръон оятларининг зоҳирий ва ботиний жиҳатларини очиб берилишига алоҳида эътибор қаратилгани кўрсатиб берилган. Шунингдек, тафсирдаги ишорий ёндашув ва унинг тасаввуф таълимотидаги ўрни таҳлил қилинган. Асарнинг афзалликлари ва айрим танқидий жиҳатлари ҳам кўриб чиқилган. Натижада “Руху-л-баён” асарининг тафсир илмидаги аҳамияти очиб берилган.

Калит сўзлар

Руху-л-баён, тафсир, тасаввуф, ишорий тафсир, Бурсавий, Қуръон, зоҳир ва ботин, маърифат, ирфон, ислом илмлари.

INTRODUCTION

Ismail Haqqi Bursevi (Abu Muhammad ibn Mustafa al-Bursevi) was a prominent Ottoman Turkish scholar, Qur'anic exegete, and representative of Sufism who lived in the 17th–18th centuries. He made significant contributions to various Islamic sciences, particularly in the fields of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) and Sufism (tasawwuf). He was born in 1653 (1063 AH) in the town of Aydos (present-day Aytos, in modern Bulgaria), which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire. From an early age, he demonstrated a strong interest in knowledge and devoted himself to the in-depth study of religious sciences.

Later, he moved to Bursa, where he spent most of his life. For this reason, he became widely known by the epithet “Bursevi.” He passed away around 1725 (1137 AH) and was buried in Bursa.

Ismail Haqqi Bursevi was a highly prolific scholar who authored works across multiple disciplines, including tafsir, hadith, fiqh, Sufism, and Islamic theology ('aqida). He left behind a rich intellectual legacy of more than one hundred works, primarily written in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. Bursevi was affiliated with the Khalwatiyya Sufi order, and his spiritual mentor was the renowned sheikh, Usman Fazli. In his Sufi teachings, he emphasized the purification of the soul (nafs),

remembrance of God (dhikr), spiritual knowledge (ma'rifa), and love for God. Through his writings, he played a significant role in the spread and development of the Khalwatiyya order.

MAIN PART

Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) is considered one of the most important and central disciplines within the Islamic sciences. Across different historical periods, numerous exegetical works have been produced by scholars employing a variety of methodologies and approaches. Among these, works composed in a Sufi (tasawwufi) spirit occupy a distinct and significant place. One such work is "Rūḥ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān" by Ismail Haqqi Bursevi (d. 1136/1724).

Bursevi's "Rūḥ al-Bayān" is a complete Arabic commentary on the Qur'an, written in a Sufi-allusive (ishārī) style, and is renowned for its integration of outward (ẓāhir) and inward (bāṭin) meanings. It was largely through this work that the scholar gained widespread recognition in the Islamic world. In addition to this, Bursevi is also known for several other works, primarily of a Sufi orientation and ethical content, including "Kitāb al-Natīja," "Fayd al-Rahmānī," "Sharh al-Masnawī" (a commentary on the work of Jalal al-Din Rumi), as well as various exegetical treatises (tafsīrī risālāt).

In his writings, the scholar paid particular attention to uncovering the deep historical and philosophical meanings of words and concepts. Especially in "Rūḥ al-Bayān," exoteric knowledge and esoteric meaning are presented in a harmonious manner. His approach is distinguished by taking into account the inner spiritual state of the human being, drawing conclusions based on profound scholarly analysis of literary and historical sources, and relying on the views of Sufi scholars. He interprets the Qur'an not only as a source of laws and rulings, but also as a means of spiritual cultivation of the human heart.

Ismail Haqqi Bursevi was one of the most important exegetes of the Ottoman period and a representative of the Sufi school of Qur'anic interpretation. His tafsir has been widely studied in Central Asia, Turkey, and the Balkan Peninsula. His works continue to be studied in madrasas and academic circles throughout the Muslim world up to the present day.

In the composition of the ten-volume "Rūḥ al-Bayān" tafsir, the Persian work "Mawāhib 'Aliyya" and other allusive (ishārī) commentaries served as important sources. In this tafsir, Qur'anic verses are interpreted first from a lexical-grammatical and juridical (fiqhī) perspective, and subsequently from a Sufi standpoint. This methodological sequence distinguishes the work from other exegetical writings.

The tafsir, authored over approximately twenty-three years, is notable for its extensive and detailed nature. For instance, the commentary on Sūrat al-Fātiḥa alone spans seventeen pages. Likewise, although Sūrat al-Baqara in the Qur'an comprises roughly fifty pages, its exegesis in this work extends to 450 pages, thereby completing the first volume of 464 pages. Due to the strong interest it has generated in the Islamic world, the work has been published multiple times by various publishing houses.

Later, this tafsir was abridged by the contemporary Syrian exegete Muhammad 'Ali al-Sābūnī (1930–2021), who produced a concise version by omitting some lengthy and weak narrations and making the text more accessible for readers. This abridged work was published in Arabic under the title “Tanwīr al-Adhḥān min Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Bayān” (“Illuminating the Minds from the Tafsir of Rūḥ al-Bayān”). It was issued in four volumes through a collaboration between Dār al-Qalam in Damascus (Syria) and Dār Nashr al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya in Beirut (Lebanon).

Subsequently, this abridged version was translated into Turkish by a group of thirteen translators and published in Istanbul by Erkam Matbaası under the title “Muhtasar Rūḥ al-Bayān Tefsiri” (“Abridged Tafsir of Rūḥ al-Bayān”), accompanied by commentary, in ten volumes. The fact that this Turkish edition was revised and prepared for its eighth publication in 2012 demonstrates the considerable demand for the work.

In addition to the exegesis of Qur'anic verses, “Rūḥ al-Bayān” also includes hadiths, accounts from the lives of saints (awliyā'), aphorisms, and particularly gnostic ('irfānī) interpretations drawn from Jalal al-Din Rumi's Masnavi. The breadth and detail of the work can further be observed in the fact that, for example, the commentary on Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā alone occupies nine pages.

In the tafsir of Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā, the exegete first draws attention to the lexical meaning of the word “duḥā.” According to the commentary, it refers to the time of the day when the sun rises high, marking the beginning of the day. It is noted that at this time Moses spoke with God, and at the same time the magicians fell into prostration. God says, “Let the people be gathered at the time of forenoon” (Taha, 59). This particular time of day possesses a special merit, as it is unanimously considered sunnah to perform the Duha prayer during it. At this point, the similarities and differences of this act of worship across the four madhhabs, as well as its juridical aspects, are discussed in detail.

The verse “And by the night when it covers with darkness” is interpreted as referring to the time when the twilight disappears and the night enters its darkest phase. It is explained that there is a particular wisdom in swearing by these two

moments: the brightest part of the day and the darkest part of the night. These two times are also interpreted as corresponding to the highest and lowest positions of the sun.

The word “saja” is further explained to mean a state of calmness and stillness, similar to the expression “saja al-bahr,” which denotes the sea becoming tranquil and motionless.

At this point, the arguments are substantiated by citing passages from “Kashf al-Asrar.” In his tafsir “Ruh al-Bayan,” Ismail Haqqi Bursevi makes use of the work “Kashf al-Asrar” authored by the prominent Hanafi scholar ‘Ala al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Ahmad al-Bukhari (d. 730/1330). This work is not an independent tafsir, but rather a commentary on “Usul” by Imam Fakhr al-Islam al-Bazdawi, one of the most renowned manuals in the field of usul al-fiqh. Its full title is “Kashf al-Asrar sharh Usul al-Bazdawi.”

In “Ruh al-Bayan,” Bursevi draws upon this work particularly in explaining technical terms, that is, the terminology employed in the process of deriving legal rulings from Qur’anic verses (such as ‘amm (general), khass (specific), mujmal (ambiguous), mubayyan (clarified), and others). He also relies on it when presenting the evidences of the Hanafi school, elaborating on the juridical aspects of Qur’anic verses, and outlining the legal principles of the Hanafi madhhab, as well as in conducting lexical and logical analysis, often adopting the definitions provided by ‘Ala al-Din al-Bukhari.

At the same time, in certain passages Bursevi makes references to the work “Kashf al-Asrar wa ‘Uddat al-Abrar” by Khwaja ‘Abdullah Ansari and its commentator Maybudi, which represents an irfani (gnostic) interpretive tradition. This is due to its close affinity with the Sufi spirit of “Ruh al-Bayan.” However, when it comes to scholarly and juridical terminology, the citations of “Kashf al-Asrar” in “Ruh al-Bayan” primarily refer to the aforementioned commentary by ‘Ala al-Din al-Bukhari.

In particular, when explaining the meaning of the word “ḍuḥā,” he cites the interpretation of the great Sufi figure Junayd al-Baghdadi (816–909): “wa al-ḍuḥā” refers to the *مقام* of shuhūd (spiritual witnessing), while “wa al-layli idhā saajā” refers to the *مقام* of ghayn (veiling or obscurity). Regarding this, it is reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said – at this point, Bursevi alludes to the following hadith:

إِنَّهُ لِيُغَاثُّ عَلَى قَلْبِي، وَإِنِّي لَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ، فِي الْيَوْمِ مِائَةً مَرَّةً

“Sometimes ghayn comes over my heart, and I seek forgiveness from my Lord one hundred times a day”. That is, certain humanly inherent states may at times veil the heart of the Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him), and in

order to be relieved from them, he would seek forgiveness a hundred times daily. From this hadith, the tafsir derives the conclusion that there are qualities – such as attachment to worldly matters, envy, hatred, and miserliness – that can continuously affect the human heart, and that a person must frequently engage in seeking forgiveness (istighfar) in order to purify oneself from them.

In connection with the interpretation of the opening verses of this surah, the exegete develops the idea that, just as the revelation (wahy) for the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) corresponds to the *روشن* part of the day, there is also its oppositeness. In other words, just as the world becomes enveloped in darkness at night, there may also be moments of sorrow for you (O Messenger), such as temporary pauses in revelation and other distressing states.

During the course of the interpretation of this same surah, the event is mentioned in which revelation was delayed for 15 days to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him). According to it, a group of Meccans came and asked the Prophet (peace be upon him) about three matters: the People of the Cave (Ahl al-Kahf), the story of Dhul-Qarnayn, and the nature of the Spirit (Ruh). The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, “I will answer these questions for you tomorrow,” but he did not say the exception, “if Allah wills” (in *shā’ Allāh*).

After that, revelation was delayed for 15 days. Then, in Surah Al-Kahf, the answers to these questions were revealed, along with the warning: “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed I will do that tomorrow,’ except [when adding], ‘if Allah wills.’” It is also explained in detail in the tafsir *Rūḥ al-Bayān* that Surah Ad-Duha was revealed at that time in response to the accusations and reproaches of the Meccans.

Ismā‘il Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī, in his tafsir, cites the famous linguist, scholar, and exegete al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502/1108) and his book *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qur’ān* (“A Dictionary of Qur’anic Terms”). This work is considered an extremely important and unparalleled source for explaining the original meanings of Qur’anic words and the figurative meanings derived from them. In *Rūḥ al-Bayān*, al-Bursawī relies heavily on this scholar’s views and presents them with expressions such as “qāla al-Rāghib” (“al-Rāghib said”) or “kamā fī al-Mufradāt” (“as it is in al-Mufradāt”).

The reason for al-Bursawī’s frequent reference to al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī is that al-Rāghib does not merely provide lexical definitions of words, but also reveals their spiritual and ethical dimensions. For example, when explaining the word “qālā” (قال) in Sūrat ad-Duhā, the commentator quotes the following from al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī’s *Mufradāt*: “Whoever considers the alif in this word to be derived from

the letter yā', then it would carry the meaning of 'roasting,' like in the expression: 'I roasted unripe dates and barley flour in a pan'" [4:683].

In this tafsir, the commentator also frequently makes use of the Sufi exegetical work *Ta'wīlāt al-Najmiyya* by Najm al-Dīn Kubrā. For example, in explaining the phrase in *Sūrat ad-Duhā*, "mā wadda'aka rabbuka wa qalā" ("Your Lord has neither forsaken you nor hated you"), he cites from Kubrā's *Ta'wīlāt* the interpretation: that it means, "He did not withhold from your outward the flow of divine grace and prophethood, nor did He withhold from your inward the grace of sainthood" [5].

Ismā'īl Haqqī al-Bursavī is a great scholar who left a profound mark on the sciences of Qur'anic exegesis and Sufism. His tafsir *Rūh al-Bayān* and his other works are not only of scholarly importance, but also serve as a significant source of spiritual and moral guidance.

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