

Part I

QOR'AN TRANSLATIONS AND
COMMENTARIES

1

DEVELOPMENTS IN EARLY PERSIAN EXEGESIS

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Introduction

In the introduction to his Persian commentary of the Qor'an, the Shâfe'î jurist of Nishapur, 'Emâd-al-Din Abu'l-Mozaffar Shâhfur Esfarâyeni (d. 1079) makes a case for the use of Persian translations and commentaries as a means of studying the Qor'an. Yet, even before his prefatory remarks, the title of his multivolume collection, *Tâj-al-tarâjem fi tafsîr-al-Qor'ân le'l-a'âjem* (The Crown of all Translations in the Interpretation of the Qor'an for Persians), advertises both its purpose and intended audience.

Foremost, Esfarâyeni's title pairs together the words for translation, *tarjome* (pl. *tarâjem*), and interpretation, *tafsîr*. While semantically distinct, these two terms overlap in important ways, particularly for the field of Qor'anic hermeneutics. The title implies that the translation of the Qor'an should be viewed as part of an exegetical or interpretive enterprise. As we will see, this argument is directly related to theological claims concerning the status of the Qor'an as the inimitable speech of God. Additionally, the rhyme of the title, a common feature in classical Arabic, stresses a conceptual link between *tarâjem*, or translations, and the *a'âjem* (sing. *a'jam*), non-Arabic speakers, a term akin to the Greek *barbaros*, which, while once derogatory, by this period generally was used as a neutral manner of referring to Persians. Furthermore, as the introduction will make clear, the superlative title, that it is the best of its kind, forms part of a normative assertion concerning the proper interpretation of the Qor'an. Lastly, while no doubt apodictic, it deserves mentioning that

the title's bold claim of achieving the pinnacle or crown of all translations, can only be made in a context in which other translations of the Qor'an are already in circulation.

Each of these issues, namely the relationship between translation and interpretation, the sociolinguistic contexts governing the place of Persian in the sphere of Qor'anic learning, the use of exegesis as a platform for asserting orthodoxy, and the historical precedence of Persian translations and commentaries of the Qor'an, are all important elements of the early vernacularisation of Islamic religious writing. These themes also feature prominently in Esfarâyeni's introduction to his Persian commentary, a work which was written in the middle of the eleventh century. A close reading of his remarks offers a concise way of examining the emergence of Persian translations and commentaries of the Qor'an.

**From the Introduction to Shâhfur Esfarâyeni,
*Tâj-al-tarâjem fi tafsir-al-Qor'ân le'l-a'âjem***

[p. 5] From the days of the interpreter of the Qor'an, 'Abdallâh b. 'Abbâs, God be pleased with him, until this time of ours, all of the religious scholars of the community (*'olamâ'-e ommat*) have strived, to the extent of their own devotion and strength, to gather in Arabic the interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qor'an. For various groups, for whom Persian was customary, there arose a need to translate (*tarjome*) the expressions of the Qor'an in such a manner that there would be a way of reading the substance of it.

In assemblies of learning, various sections of [these translations] were heard; a few people across the ages objected to translating into Persian the book of the Lord, His glory be exalted. And when the leading religious scholars examined [these translations] they found in them many errors, some of which were because the wording in these translations corresponded to the lexical meaning, but did not follow the statements of the exegetes; others were because some expressions were rendered with a heretical form of anthropocentrism (*tashbih*), either intentionally, or out of ignorance; further errors were a result of trying to translate every expression with the same Persian word [f. 4a], such that they lost the meaning, and failed to reveal its sense, for they did not grasp that expressions of the Qor'an are more noble and comprehensive than one single Persian expression, which cannot equal the original [in every context].

When I saw these errors in the previous translations, I sought aid from the Lord, sublime and glorious; and with the aid that I obtained, I struggled to render correctly the words in Persian, with the goal that such a translation would be worthy of the language of the Arabs, and would agree with the interpreta-

tions of the exegetes, [and would be] in harmony with the principles of religion, while protected against every whimsical interpretation which might be used [p. 6] to strip away divine attributes, or to spread anthropomorphism, or in any way to support the schools of apostates and heretical innovators, [hoping that this translation] would be righteous and straight in the path of the People of the Tradition and the Community (*ṭarīqat-e ahl-e sonnāt u-jamā'at*). And it is for these reasons that I have titled this work *Tāj-al-tarājem fi tafsīr-al-Qor'an le'l-a'ajem* (The Crown of all Translations in the Interpretation of the Qor'an for Persians). May the Lord, mighty and glorious, grant mercy to those who look upon this book. This sinful servant seeks the forgiveness of the Lord, so that God may forgive his sins and if the author is responsible for any error in this subject, by His own excellency, he seeks forgiveness, for success comes from God alone . . .

[p. 7] Concerning the excellence of translating the Qor'an into any given language where there is a need

As you know, it is God, mighty and glorious, who sent the Qor'an down to the Prophet, God grant him and his family blessings and peace, so that with it he would inspire the fear of God in the Arabs and warn them, along with any other people whom the Qor'an reached. As the Lord, mighty and glorious, said:

'This Qor'an has been revealed to me that I may warn you and whomever it reaches.' (Q. 6:19)

[Persian] 'Say! O Mohammad, "This Qor'an has been sent to me so that through it I may cause fear in you [f. 4b] and in whomever it reaches."'

The Glorious and Mighty also said:

'We have not sent you but for all humankind.' (Q. 34:28)

[Persian] 'We have not sent you but to all of humankind.'

God also said:

'We have not sent you, but as a mercy to all of the world.' (Q. 21:107)

[Persian] 'We have not sent you [p. 8], but that you would be a mercy to all of creation.'

Confirming this, the Chosen Prophet, peace upon him, said:

'I was sent to the red and the black.'

[Persian] 'I was sent to all of the blacks and the whites.' This means all of creation.

He also said:

‘I was sent to the two weighty measures (*thaqalân*).’
 [Persian] ‘I was sent to all of the jinn and all of humankind.’

For this message to inspire fear of God in the foreign nations (*‘ajam*) and warn them in Persian it would be necessary that the Qor’an have a translation (*Qor’ân râ tarjome bâshad*) into another language, so that the people of [that] language would know the message, and thus through it they could be deterred from evil deeds. For this purpose, Salmân the Persian sought permission from the Chosen Prophet, may God bless him and grant him salvation, to write the Qor’an in Persian for his own people, which the Prophet granted him.

Thus, it is said that Salmân wrote the Qor’an [in Arabic] and underneath that he wrote down the Persian. Then at the end of it he wrote in Arabic: ‘This is the Qor’an which was revealed to Mohammad’, and in Persian, ‘This is the Qor’an which was sent down to Mohammad, God grant him and blessings and peace.’

It is known to all learned people that the Arabs and those who know Arabic are fewer in number than all of those people who do not know Arabic. It is necessary that the religion and religious law and the meaning of the revelation of God, mighty and glorious, reach those people [who do not know Arabic]. They will only achieve knowledge of these affairs when the commands of the exalted Lord are translated for them in a language that is customary to them. The spiritual benefits of knowledge concerning this world and the next should reach these people, who are the majority of creation, and are the great multitude. For in no way should they be excluded from this knowledge. For this reason, the imams and the religious scholars in every age have interceded on their behalf, putting the creeds into Persian, and firmly establishing in Persian the religious decrees, so that the people may find a path to this knowledge. For this reason, everyone, from the very first to the very last of this community, has come [p. 9] to a consensus (*ejmâ‘*) on explaining the Qor’an in Persian in assemblies of learning, at the head of the pulpit, in the mosques of both the elite and the masses [f. 5a], and among both religious and worldly people alike. No one thinks it proper to deny this, rather everyone considers this to be a communal duty (*farz-e kefâyat*), for if every person protested over the invitation for humankind to come to religion and the spread of religion among Muslims, and if everyone were only preoccupied with his own work, then everyone would be in sin.

In many situations [translation] is known to be necessary. A great many from the People of the Tradition and the Community (*ahl-e sonnat va-jamâ‘at*) say, ‘If a person does not know the first sura of the Qor’an and he is unable to learn it, he must learn its translation, so that he can perform the ritual prayer using that [translation], learning up until the customary praise to God during

ritual prayer.’ They say, ‘This is better than merely performing only the glorification of God during ritual prayer, for a translation of [the first sura] is closer to the Qor’an, as it is closer than the repetition of the names of God through remembrance (*dbekr*).’

If such a situation arose where Muslims invited infidels to embrace Islam, and the infidels said to them, ‘Show us the Qor’an, and make evident its interpretation, for if it is true and right and the book appears truthful and consistent to us, then we will embrace Islam’, then translating the Qor’an and sending it to them would be necessary, just as we have mentioned with the story of Salmân.

Muslims have also agreed that whatever should not be said, also should not be written down. The virtue of translating the Qor’an is established through this reasoning that we have mentioned. It has become known that on one level this is a communal obligation (*farz-e kefâyat*), so that the majority of humankind is not excluded from the spiritual benefits derived from the book of God, mighty and glorious. At another level, this is also an obligation of individuals (*farz-e a’yân*), as we have outlined. Something which has this importance in the religion of Muslims, such as we have detailed, no one can reject, lest he be negligent of the foundations of religious law (*osûl-e shari’at*), or be a heretic (*mollhed*) who does not wish that the [true] religion become widespread. Anyone may find a way through such a rejection so that he becomes more powerful through his own heresy, in order that the people of weak religious virtue are deceived. ‘They hope to extinguish the light of God with their mouths, but God refuses and only perfects His light, however much the disbelievers are averse’ (Q. 9:32).

A group from among the learned scholars has been extreme, saying, ‘A translation of the Qor’an should be [the same as] the Qor’an.’ This statement [p. 10] is far from the truth, for the structural composition of the Qor’an is an inimitable miracle (*mojtez*). The structural composition of the translation of the Qor’an is not an inimitable miracle. That which is not of the genus of miracles cannot be the Qor’an. If the translation of the Qor’an were to be the same as the Qor’an, then it would be necessary that a translation of poetry would also be the same as the original poetry [f. 5b], in each and every expression. Just as this is impossible, so much more is it the case for the Qor’an.

You must know that on this subject it is imperative that attention be given to guarding the Qor’an, which here means that care be given so that nothing is written in the Qor’anic codex which is not the Qor’an, unless it is distinguished in such a way from the Qor’an by either colour or form, so that confusion could not fall on anyone, that they might think such to be the Qor’an. It is for this reason that the translations of the suras of the Qor’an, the dividers marking out every thirtieth, tenth and seventh part of the Qor’an, and the signs indicating the parts where prostration is required have all been written down in another colour. If someone writes a commentary in either Arabic or Persian and does

not distinguish this material with a different handwriting, it is fine, for everyone knows that in such a book there has been gathered both the Qor'an and what is not the Qor'an, and in this manner no confusion should befall them. Moreover, if in such an exegesis, either in Arabic or in Persian, the Qor'an was written in one handwriting and a translation of the Qor'an in another, a good balance would be struck with complete care, which is based on respect for the book of God, mighty and glorious. I hope [the following] to be a good work worthy of reward. 'God does not lose the wages of the good' (Q. 11:115); 'God does not uphold the work of the wicked' (Q. 10:81).¹

The Origins of Persian Exegetical Writing

Esfarâyenî's introduction develops a robust justification for Persian exegetical writing, both in the translation and commentary of the Qor'an. A central facet of his argument is the authority of precedence, namely that interpreting the Qor'an in Persian has been an activity that stretches back to the days of the earliest Muslim communities. One of the first matters deserving proper consideration is the historical emergence of Persian exegetical writing. However, as with most questions of origin, it turns out that answering when and where such writings were first produced, as well as for whom and by whom, proves to be anything but straightforward. Part of the problem is that as a written form, the emergence of Early New Persian had to contend with the broad prestige that Arabic had obtained as the privileged language of religion, learning and the state. Over the course of the first two centuries of the Islamic era, Arabic had achieved a broad hegemonic status. This was largely a result of the cataclysmic changes occasioned by the Arab conquests and the social and religious transformations that followed. In a relatively short period, Arabic either replaced or drastically circumscribed the written use of various languages associated with previous imperial structures and pre-existing religious communities. In the contexts of Iraq, Khorasan and Central Asia, the former strongholds of the Sasanian Empire, this would ultimately signal the radical decline of Aramaic, Middle Persian and Sogdian.

¹ This translation is based upon Shâhfür Esfarâyenî, *Tâj-al-tarâjem*, ed. N. Haravî and A. Khorâsânî, partial edition, 3 vols (Tehran, 1996), vol. I, pp. 5–10, and Ankara, Milli Kütüphane, MS Gedik Ahmet Paşa 18353, dated 1352. For a further examination of Esfarâyenî's place in the development of Persian commentaries, as well as more information concerning several of the themes and topics surveyed here, see Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford, 2012).

In the course of the eighth century, non-Arab converts, particularly from areas once occupied by the Sasanian Empire, played a tremendous part in the cultivation of Arabic as a language of esteem and as the gateway to learned authority, for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. During the tumultuous first generations, in the wake of these conquests (which were only achieved by the twin, if asymmetrical, forces of foreign invasion and native incorporation), translation across an array of arenas and practices was a *modus vivendi*. This is borne out in the historical linguistic residue of loanwords between Arabic and Persian, in the epigraphic evidence from the period, as well as in the later written record memorialising the process of conversion across various frontiers. As Esfarâyeti suggests, there is good reason to believe that the Qor'an and the emergent oral and written corpus on the life of the Prophet and early Companions played significant roles in this history of early conversion. The history of Islamisation, however, was neither uniform nor unidirectional, as non-Arabs were not only entering into a new religion, they were also active participants in its formation.

While Esfarâyeti's portrayal is idealised and serves the purpose of advancing the legitimacy of Persian religious writing, it also represents an autochthonous assessment of the rise of vernacular learning. Esfarâyeti depicts the development of exegetical activity as a continuous and uninterrupted enterprise of formal learning that stretches back to the earliest community of converts, which finds its origin in the figure of Ebn 'Abbâs (d. c. 688), an early Companion from the family of the Prophet. Here Ebn 'Abbâs is referred to by the honorific *tarjomân* of the Qor'an, a title that means both interpreter and translator. The promotion of Ebn 'Abbâs, the Hâshemi progenitor of the Abbasid Empire (750–1252), as the seminal figure of the field, forms part of the later development of exegesis in the eighth and ninth centuries;² it also features prominently in the body of regional exegesis from Khorasan that Esfarâyeti had inherited. This is evident, for instance, in the centrality given to the commentarial tradition of Ebn 'Abbâs in the *al-Kashf va'l-bayân* by the famed Nishapuri exegete Abu Eshâq Tha'labi (d. 1035), which is one of the primary sources for Esfarâyeti's Persian commentary.

In his introduction, Tha'labi, who also refers to Ebn 'Abbâs as the *tarjomân-al-Qor'ân*, gives a list of six major redactions of Ebn 'Abbâs's commentary with accompanying *esnâds*, or lines of transmission, for the text. All six religious

² See Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam* (London, 2000), pp. 173–218; Herbert Berg, 'The *Isnâd* and the Production of Cultural Memory: Ibn 'Abbâs as a Case Study', *Numen* 58 (2011): pp. 259–83.

authorities who are said to have first transmitted the so-called *tafsir* of Ebn ‘Abbās are known *mavāli*, that is non-Arab converts and their descendants, who, through formal affiliation as clients, were incorporated, as subordinate members, into various Arab tribal configurations.³ This reflects, if not the actual development of Qor’anic hermeneutics, an early memory of how it emerged. The honorific *tarjomān* thus also points to a process of transmission wherein an Arab Companion, and member of the Prophet’s family, had learned the interpretation of the Qor’an directly from the Prophet and, in turn, explained the revelation to recently converted non-Arabs.

Preachers, Heretics and Numismatics

As Esfarāyeni notes, the ulema conducted this early exegetical activity in Arabic. Nonetheless, he also observes that for various groups who spoke Persian a need arose to ‘translate the expressions of the Qor’an in such a manner that there would be a way of reading the substance of it.’ Esfarāyeni characterises early Qor’anic translation as an exegetical activity that mixes both oral and written modes of communication. During this stage phrases and expressions from the Qor’an were interpreted in Persian in order to read and study the text, and various sections of these translations were read, heard and discussed in assemblies of learning.

Further insight into this historical process of translation and communication can be found in a discussion of Arabic eloquence by the famed polymath Abu ‘Othmān Jāhez (d. 868–9), in his treatment of how popular preachers and storytellers would weave together the Qor’an with accounts of the Prophet and sayings of the Companions into coherent sermons during large gatherings in the mosque and the public square. In this context of sermonising, Jāhez relates the example of the bilingual preacher of Basra, Musā b. Seyyār Asvāri (*fl.* 738). As the *nesbe* indicates, Asvāri descended from the elite group of the Sasanian cavalry known in Arabic as the *asāvera* – from the Middle Persian *aswārān* (*‘swb’l’n*) – many of whom defected to the side of the Arabs during the invasions of Iraq and after the conquests were garrisoned in Basra and Kufa.⁴ Asvāri’s eloquence in Persian was on par with his command of Arabic. He would hold assemblies in the Asāvere mosque in Basra, where Arabs would sit to his right and Persians to his left. During these famed sessions, he would recite a verse from the Qor’an; after first explaining it (*yofasserohā*) to the Arabs in Arabic, he would turn to his Persian audience

³ See Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur’an*, p. 149.

⁴ See Mohsen Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers* (Wiesbaden, 1995), pp. 57, 112–28.

and explain it to them in Persian.⁵ Asvâri was a *qâderi*, that is a proponent of free will, a doctrine associated with many non-Arab converts from the region. He also argued that the Companions of the Prophet were rude and ignorant, while ‘we, the sons of Persia, have come and have explained [the meaning] of this religion.’⁶ These pieces of information fill out the portrait of the bilingual preacher as capable of advancing theological arguments while also encouraging sentiments of ethnic pride against the crudeness of Arab hegemony.

The example of Asvâri’s spoken use of Persian and his theological proclivities points to an oral process of interpreting and communicating the Qor’an in a Persian-speaking milieu which occurred in the urban garrison settlements of Iraq among converts in the early eighth century. This reflects a larger phenomenon of early Persian preachers and storytellers communicating in narrative and homiletic forms the salvific promise of a new religion.

One key strategy in this process was the effort to graft Iranian mythology onto Islamic salvation history. This formed part of a broader set of strategies by non-Arab converts and their descendants for appropriating and domesticating Islamic monotheism, which occurred prominently in the eighth and the ninth centuries.⁷ This Arabic written record intersected with oral lines of communication in Persian which, as with any act of translation, involved analogous reasoning and various forms of equivalence-making between the source and target languages and communities. However, the development of a formalised written corpus of exegetical material in Persian, and with it translations and commentaries of the Qor’an took significantly more time. During the course of the eighth and ninth centuries there is little evidence for formalised Persian exegetical writing, although there are indications that in isolated and sporadic contexts such activity indeed occurred. Rather, the development of vernacular commentaries and translations follows the history of Early New Persian writing in other fields of poetry and prose, which emerges during the course of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Part of this history is the abandonment of previous scripts, particularly Aramaic and Middle Persian, in favour of Arabic as the medium for writing Persian.

⁵ Abû ‘Othmân Jâhez, *al-Bayân va’l-tabîyîn*, ed. A. Hârûn, 4 vols (Cairo, 1948), vol. I, pp. 367–9.

⁶ Shams-al-Dîn Dhahabî, *Mizân-al-E’redâl fi Naqd-al-Rejâl*, ed. ‘Alî M. Mo’avvad, et al., 8 vols (Beirut, 1995), vol. VI, pp. 544, 569.

⁷ See Sarah Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-conquest Iran* (Cambridge, 2013), particularly, pp. 30–61.

Nonetheless, by Esfarâyeni's day, in the middle of the eleventh century, such a body of vernacular writing clearly had been in circulation for several generations. Esfarâyeni continues his account acknowledging a resistance among some religious authorities to the translation and interpretation of the Qor'an in Persian. One of the reasons, he argues, for this resistance is that religious authorities had found errors in certain translations, made intentionally or inadvertently, promoting interpretations that did not correspond to orthodox tradition, often with heretical implications. Indeed, according to Esfarâyeni the desire to correct errors in interpretation which he found in previous translations motivated him to undertake his own translation of the Qor'an. From Esfarâyeni's account we can infer that there was an increase of exegetical writing in Early New Persian during the tenth century, specifically in Khorasan and Transoxiana. This is precisely the same period when other forms of New Persian writing begin to fully flourish, rendering Persian in the Arabic script, based largely upon the dialectical forms spoken in north-eastern Iran and Central Asia, particularly in the context of regional courtly patronage.⁸

Yet, there is also evidence, for early written exegetical writing in Persian away from centres of courtly culture. The famed theologian Abu'l-Hasan Ash'ari (d. 936), for instance, attacked the Mo'tazeli theologian Abu 'Ali Jobbâ'i (d. 915–16) for having written a book on the interpretation of the Qor'an in the language of the people of his village and not in the noble Arabic of the Qor'an. Further, Ash'ari also accuses Jobbâ'i of not relying upon the standard exegetical authorities, but rather drawing on 'heretical fancies' that had come to his mind in order to deceive a great number of commoners (*avâmm*).⁹ As Jobbâ'i was from Khuzestan, in south-western Iran, the language in question would presumably have been Khuziyye, a Persian dialect identified by the courtier Ebn Moqaffa' (d. c. 756) with Iranian kings and nobles.¹⁰ This vernacular commentary ascribed to Jobbâ'i no longer exists. However, if such a text was indeed composed, as Ash'ari contends, in a local Persian language, it would make it one of the earliest known vernacular exegetical writings of its kind.

⁸ See Gilbert Lazard, 'Pahlavi, pârsi, dari: Les langues de l'Iran d'après Ibn al-Muqaffa', in *Iran and Islam: In Memory of the Late V. Minorsky*, ed. C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 361–91.

⁹ Ebn 'Asâker, *Tabyîn kadbeh-al-moftari* (Damascus, 1347/1928–9), pp. 138–9.

¹⁰ Ebn-al-Nadîm, *Febrst*, ed. A. F. Seyyed, 2 vols in 4 vols (London, 2009), vol. I, pp. 31–2; cf. Abû Bakr Khwârazmî, *Mafâteḥ-al-'olûm*, ed. E. Abyârî (Beirut, 1979), p. 138.

Ash'ari's attack on Jobbâ'i forms part of his larger argument on the miraculous inimitability of the Qor'an as the supreme expression of Arabic eloquence. Such arguments, which advanced the apologetic miracle of the revelation to Mohammad in linguistic terms, came to shape normative attitudes towards the translation of the Qor'an. Similarly, the identification of vernacular teaching and writing with heretical beliefs was also informed by the privileged status of Arabic as the language of religious authority. For instance, the chief Ismaili missionary of Western Iran, Abu Hâtem Râzi (d. c. 934) argued that 'the majority of those who followed heretical beliefs in Iraq did so due to their lack of knowledge of Arabic and the dialects of the Arabs.'¹¹ Over a century later, the famed Ash'ari exegete of Nishapur, Abu'l-Hasan Vâhedî (d. 1076) would make the same claim, demonstrating how Persian religious authorities from competing sectarian factions used the badge of Arabic as a means of affirming their orthodoxy.¹² Indeed, one of the challenges facing the emergence of written Persian in the diverse spheres of Islamic piety was that as a language it was still closely associated with heretics and non-Muslims, particularly Zoroastrians. For instance, the self-styled prophet and Zoroastrian heresiarch Behâfaridh (d. 748–9), who hailed from the region of Nishapur and was active in Khorasan during the height of the Abbasid revolution, amassed a large following of converts from among the local Zoroastrian community by preaching religious reform. Behâfaridh wrote a book in Persian, based upon his revelations, which appears to have offered a kind of synthesis between Islamic and Mazdean religious practices. Behâfaridh was ultimately executed by Abbasid authorities as a heretic.¹³

The development of Persian exegetical writing builds upon acts of translation that, over the course of several generations, crossed various linguistic and religious frontiers. Echoes of these exchanges can also be heard in the linguistic record, which not only demonstrates the incorporation of Arabic loanwords into Persian, but importantly the adaptation of pre-existing Persian terms to account for Islamic concepts and categories. For instance, much of New Persian religious vocabulary finds direct cognates

¹¹ Abû Hâtem Râzî, *Ketâb-al-zîne*, ed. H. al-Hamadânî (Sanna, 1994) p. 124.

¹² Abû'l-Hasan Vâhedî, *al-Tafsîr al-basîṭ*, ed. M. al-Fauzân et al., 7 vols (Riyadh, 2009), vol. I, p. 408.

¹³ See Abû'l-Reyhân Bîrûnî, *Âthâr-al-bâqîye*, ed. E. Sachau (Leipzig, 1878), p. 210; cf. Khwârazmî, *Mafâteḥ-al-'olûm*, p. 56; Tâj-al-Dîn Shahrastânî, *al-Melal va'l-neḥal*, ed. A. Moḥammad, 3 vols (Beirut, 1992), vol. I, 267.

in Middle Persian, such as prophet (*peyghāmbār*; MP, *paygāmbār*), Lord or God (*khodā*; MP *xwadāy*), angel (*fereshṭe*; MP *frēstag*), heaven (*āsmān*, MP *āsmān*), hell (*dōzakh*, MP *dušox*) and soul (*jān*; MP *gyān*). Other categories from pre-Islamic Persian cosmography take on new valences. Thus, the Arabic *shayāṭīn* (demons or devils) and jinn are often translated by Early New Persian terms as *div* and *pari*, cognates of the Middle Persian *dēw* and *parīg*. In Zoroastrian eschatology, *dēw*, written in Book Pahlavi with the Aramaic ideogram ŠDY, play an important function as adversaries in the battle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman, who represent the forces of good and evil respectively.

Similarly, the term *parīg* has the sense of an evil witch or sorceress; they feature as malevolent forces in the cosmological struggle for good. In addition to demon, the Early New Persian *div* can also be used to translate the word jinn, a pattern of equivalence found, for instance, in early Persian translations and commentaries of the Qorʿan. In contrast, the term *pari* over time would largely lose its associations with evil sorcery. While they are also identified with jinn,¹⁴ which in Islamic eschatology can be either good-natured or wicked, the *pari* also have the general sense of enchanting benevolent creatures from the realm of the spirits, akin to the English cognate fairy; thus we have such common Persian appellations as Parizād (fairy-born) and Paripaykar (fairy-countenance).¹⁵ In contrast, the Middle Persian *jādūg*, sorcerer, and *jādūgīh*, sorcery, generally maintain negative connotations in the New Persian cognate *jādu* for magic, witchcraft and sorcery. As with the early Islamic association of magic (*sehr*) with practices demarcated as ancient, foreign or liminal, the Middle Persian *jādūgīh* also serves as a relational concept that is set in opposition to true religion (*dēn*; New Persian, *dīn*).¹⁶

Of particular note, in the field of ritual practice, are the words for the prayer and fasting which are not the standard Arabic, *ṣowm* or *ṣalāt*, respectively, but rather are the Persian equivalents *rōze* and *namāz*. While ritual fasting is not a formalised element of Mazdean ritual activity, the concept of fasting on days of

¹⁴ For example, *Tarjome-ye Tafsiṣ-e Ṭabari*, ed. Ḥ. Yaghmāʿi, 7 vols (Tehran, 1367 Sh./1988), VII, p. 1946.

¹⁵ See Jes Asmussen, 'A Zoroastrian "De-demonization" in Judeo-Persian', *Irano-Judaica* 1 (1982), pp. 116–17.

¹⁶ For more background, see Satnam Mendoza Forrest with contributions by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran* (Austin, 2011), 63–70.

abstinence (*rōzagīhā*) is certainly not unknown.¹⁷ Fasting, however, is a fully developed feature of eastern Christian and Jewish ritual practice. In the surviving Manichaean corpus of Middle Persian and Parthian texts, discussions of *rōzag* (Parthian *rōžag*) feature prominently as part of a larger cosmological configuration of the human body.¹⁸

As for ritual prayer, in Zoroastrian Book Pahlavi and Manichaean Middle Persian, *namāz* (Parthian *namāž*) has the sense of reverence, prostration, homage and adoration, particularly in worship before kings and superiors, though it also carries the meaning of obeisance and prayer. In Christian Sogdian texts *nm'č* is often used to translate the Syriac *šlōtā*, etymologically related to the Arabic *ṣalāt*.¹⁹ In Book Pahlavi, as well as in inscriptional Middle Persian, the word *namāz* is generally written using the Aramaic ideogram 'SGDH, which is a direct cognate with the Arabic root *s-j-d*, to prostrate.²⁰ The translation of the Arabic *ṣalāt* into the Persian *namāz* places the focus on the act of obeisance and prostration, a central element to the physical action of ritual prayer.

This broad etymological background points to the pre-existing frameworks developed in various religious communities already in place for making equivalencies between languages and religious practices. The religious vocabulary of New Persian developed within a larger sectarian history of contact and exchange occurring in various Iranian languages, particularly among Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Manichaeans and Mazdeans, which preceded and was shaped by the advent of Islam.

Beyond the record of historical linguistics, there is also numismatic evidence, in the form of Arab-Sasanian coins and weights from the first and second centuries of the Islamic era. This early numismatic material opens a window on to a process of translation, adaptation and appropriation in the development of

¹⁷ See, for instance, *The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest nē-šāyest*, ed. and trans. F. Kotwal (Copenhagen, 1969), ch. 12, §5, p. 27, p. 98 n. 7. See also Jamsheed Choksy, 'Fasting: I. Among Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and Bahais', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

¹⁸ See, for instance, W. B. Henning, 'The Manichæan Fasts', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1945): pp. 146–64. With further references to the Manichaean textual corpus, see Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, *Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (Turnhout, 2004), p. 299.

¹⁹ Durkin-Meisterernst, *Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian*, p. 242; Martin Schwartz, 'Studies in Texts of the Sogdian Christians', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1967, p. 109.

²⁰ Cf. Jamsheed Choksy, 'In Reverence for Deities and Submission to Kings: A Few Gestures in Ancient Near Eastern Societies', *Iranica Antiqua* 37 (2002), p. 24.

Persian religious vocabulary. An anonymous dirham minted in the province of Kerman in 689–90 bears the Pahlavi inscription *Moḥamad paygāmbār ī yazd* (mḥmt' pgt'mbl Y yzdt'), a translation of the statement that Mohammad is the messenger of God.²¹ In 691–2 a dirham was issued in the name of the Zobeyrid governor of Sistan, 'Abd-al-'Aziz b. 'Abdallah, inscribed with a Middle Persian translation of the complete Muslim profession of faith (*shahāda*), written in the Pahlavi script: *yazd-ēw bē ōy / anī yazd nēst / Moḥamad paygāmbār ī yazd* (yzdt' I BRA OLE / AHRN yzdt' LOYT' / mḥmt' pgt'mbl Y yzdt'). Following closely the original Arabic, the translation reads: 'a god but He, is not any god, Mohammad [is] the messenger of God.'²² This coinage not only reflects an early record of communicating and articulating Islamic religious concepts and terms in Persian, but it also forms part of the larger sociopolitical context of competing sectarian factions stretching across Iraq, Iran and the Hejaz in the wake of the Arab conquests.²³ This is most evident, for instance, in an Arab-Sasanian Khāreji coin type minted in the last quarter of the seventh century that gives the Arabic phrase 'there is no judgement save but God's' (*lā ḥokm ellā 'llāh*) – the slogan of the Khāreji movement in their opposition to the Umayyad state. The Middle Persian translation written in the Pahlavi script closely follows the original Arabic, *nēst dādwar bē yazd* (LOYT' d'twbl BRA yzdt').²⁴ This early material reflects the use of Persian as a staging ground for contesting political and religious legitimacy.

Most importantly for our study of Persian exegetical activity, the material evidence also documents an early record of translating the Qur'an into

²¹ First described in A. Shams-Eshragh, 'An Interesting Arab-Sasanian Dirham', *Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter* 178 (2004): pp. 45–6.

²² See Malek Iradj Mochiri, 'A Pahlavi Forerunner of the Umayyad Reform Coinage', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1981): pp. 170–1; Malek Iradj Mochiri, *Arab-Sasanian Civil War Coinage: Manichaeans, Yazidiya and other Khawārij*, trans. J. Avril and F. Graves (Paris, 1986), p. 57, §112; Stuart Sears, 'A Monetary History of Iraq and Iran, ca. CE 500 to 750', PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1997, pp. 37–8; Stephen Album and Tony Goodwin, *Sylloge of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean* (Oxford, 2002), p. 27.

²³ See Stefan Heidemann, 'The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and its Religion on Coin Imagery', in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Leiden, 2010), pp. 168–9.

²⁴ The original slogan is generally read as *ḥokm*, judgement, and not *ḥakam* judge, indistinguishable in the Arabic script; cf. Mochiri, *Arab-Sasanian Civil War Coinage*, pp. 59–60; Album and Goodwin, *Sylloge of Islamic Coins*, p. 30.

Persian. An Arab-Sasanian copper weight minted in Jay, modern-day Esfahan, produced during this same period, bears the following Qor'anic verse (Q. 5:8), written in a Kufic script: 'Be just for it is closer to piety (*e'delû howa agrabo le'l-taqvâ*).' The reverse side preserves a Middle Persian text in the Pahlavi script. While not completely legible, the inscription is clearly a translation of the Qor'anic verse and can be read as: *mayân-warîh* / *nazdîktar* / *ô warišn* / *î az dâd* (mdy'n wl(y)h / nzdyktl / OL (w)lšn' / Y MN d't'). This could render 'acting with balance is closer to conduct that [comes] from justice.'²⁵ While the partial illegibility of the Pahlavi inscription invites other variant readings, the text appears to represent an early written record of transforming Qor'anic material into Persian. The Arab-Sasanian numismatic material, furthermore, documents a written process of translation, during the first generations of contact that took place entirely within the field of the Pahlavi script, itself notably associated with Mazdean priestly authority and Sasanian power. This material reflects a protean and experimental stage in the evolution of Persian religious writing, as the Pahlavi script ultimately failed to develop into a medium for expressing Islamic piety.

Salmân the Persian and the Juridical Matter of Ritual Prayer

Even before the full emergence of literary New Persian in the Arabic script, as it came into being in the tenth century, there are traces of earlier experimentations that also have direct bearing on the history of translating and interpreting the Qor'an. The case of the translation ascribed to the Companion Salmân Fâresi, the first Persian convert, fits into this period of development. Esfarâyeni states that Salmân requested and received permission from the Prophet to translate the Qor'an, which he then proceeded to do by preserving the original Arabic alongside his Persian translation. The purpose of this claim, which is presented as a historical fact, is to grant vernacular exegetical activity in

²⁵ Raoul Curiel and Philippe Gignoux offer a diplomatic and incomplete reading, highlighting the illegibilities of the inscription, 'Un poids arabo-sasanide', *Studia Iranica* 5/2 (1976): pp. 165–9; Ḥasan Reżâ'î Baghbîdî attempts to fill in more detail, 'Darbâre-ye tarjome-ye 'ebârâtî az Qor'ân be Pahlavî', *Nâme-ye Êrân-e Bâstân* 1 (1380 Sh./2001), pp. 11–14. Shaul Shaked's explanation is largely followed here, though the reading of *mayân-warîh* is conjectural. Baghbîdî's *warišn* (wlšn'), conduct, way of living, better fits the inscription, although Shaked's *râst* (l'st'), straight, truthful, is semantically more compelling. Likewise, the final word could also be read as God, *yazd* (yzdt'), Shaked, 'Mihr the Judge', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): p. 10 n. 38b.

general and Persian translations in particular a Prophetic imprimatur rooted in the precedence of the early community. The authenticity of this account as a reflection of Prophetic history remains to be seen. However, the specificity of Esfarâyeni's description warrants further consideration. The description gives the impression that Salmân translated the entirety of the text, although the passage does not actually specify the amount of the text translated, for the it states: 'he sought to write the Qor'an in Persian for his own people (*tâ qor'ân pârsî be qowm-e khwîsh navîsad*).'²⁶ This could mean that Salmân wished to write a section or portion of the Qor'an and not the full text. No citation or line of transmission is given as evidence of the translation, other than the statement that 'so it is said' (*chonîn goftand*) – a citational form that is no less significant, as it suggests that the story was commonly known. Esfarâyeni also remarks that at the end of the translation Salmân appended a statement verifying in both Persian and Arabic that this was the Qor'an revealed to the Prophet; such a testament certainly suggests a written text ascribed to Salmân that circulated in the region.

Indeed, this was the case. A written Persian translation of the *Fâtehe*, the opening sura of the Qor'an said to have been composed by Salmân survives from the period. A record of it is preserved in an Arabic hadith collection on the merits of the Qor'an compiled by Abu'l-'Abbâs Mostaghferi (d. 1041), a Hanafi jurist and traditionalist from the Central Asian city of Nasaf. As a hadith scholar, Mostaghferi cites a line of transmission for the translation, which interestingly does not stretch back directly to Salmân, but rather stops with Persian religious authorities from Iraq and Iran who lived in the middle of the ninth century. While Mostaghferi does not state so explicitly, the story of Salmân's translation formed part of a juridical argument that had developed within Hanafi circles justifying the use of translations for the performance of ritual prayer. According to later Hanafi jurists, the account that Salmân had composed the translation of the *Fâtehe* at the bequest of Persians, who recited it until they grew accustomed to the original Arabic, was known to Abu Hanîfe (d. 767), the founder of their school of law. Abu Hanîfe purportedly used this story as a justification for his ruling that Muslims, regardless of their capacity in Arabic, could recite a translation of the Qor'an during the performance of ritual prayer.²⁶ There is reason to doubt the historicity of the account of Salmân's translation, as it is used to justify a particular juridical report. Nonetheless, based on Mostaghferi's *esnâd* a translation ascribed to Salmân

²⁶ See Abû Bakr Sarakhsî, *Ketâb-al-Mabsût*, ed. A. al-Shâfe'î, 30 vols in 15 vols (Beirut, 2001), vol. I, p. 138.

was evidently already in circulation during the course of the middle of the ninth century, supporting the Hanafi position as rooted in the practice of the early community. Indeed, by Esfarâyenî's day the anecdote had already taken on the authority of an established tradition.²⁷

The written record of Salmân's *Fâtebe* may well substantiate the use of Qur'anic translations, however limited, in the space of ritual praxis. This is very much the suggestion in the history of Bukhara by Abu Bakr Narshakhi (d. 959), which describes how the first converts of the city in the early eighth century performed ritual prayer in translation, evidently in Sogdian, as they were unable to master the original Arabic.²⁸ In this sense, the account of Salmân's Persian translation reduces the complex history of conversion and ritual performance along linguistic frontiers into a discrete and manageable narrative form. Considering the juridical implications, there is good reason to believe that such narrativisation follows after the very ritual practices it seeks to justify.

The language of Salmân's translation as preserved by Mostaghferi draws on pre-Islamic religious vocabulary, suggesting in its own right the challenge of using Persian for ritual prayer, as it could evoke a set of non-Islamic religious practices and beliefs. Beyond the question of Persian as a vehicle for heresy, there was also the sense shared among many early jurists and religious authorities that only Arabic was befitting proper religious observance. As such, the emergence of Persian in spheres once reserved exclusively for Arabic was a source of profound concern. Many of these tensions build upon the anxieties that followed the waves of early converts. The early Hanafi acceptance of Persian in spheres of ritual activity, particularly for those with no mastery of Arabic, fits into a larger set of debates, which took place during the eighth century, over the use of the vernacular in the domain of ritual piety.²⁹ For instance, the famed jurist Mâlek b. Anas (d. 795) detested hearing foreign languages during ritual prayer. Mâlek justified his juridical opinion with a report from the second caliph, 'Omar b. al-Khattâb (d. 644), who is said to have forbidden the whispering prayer (*raṭâna*) used by

²⁷ For a full account of this text and its larger significance, see Travis Zadeh, 'The Persian *Fâtiḥa* of Salmân al-Fârisî and the Modern Debates over Translating the Qur'an', in *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Tafsir*, ed. S. Burge (Oxford, 2015), pp. 375–420; see also Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 478–83.

²⁸ Abû Bakr Narshakhi, *Târikh-e Bokhârâ*, ed. M. 'Omar (Tehran, 1320 Sh./1940–1), p. 67.

²⁹ See Moḥammad Sheybânî (d. 805), *Ketâb-al-aṣl*, ed. A. al-Afghânî, 5 vols (Beirut, 1990), vol. I, pp. 38–9, 236; Moḥammad Sheybânî, *al-Jâme' al-ṣaghir* (Karachi, 1987), pp. 95–6.

the Persians.³⁰ Some accounts single out Salmân as the source of Omar's ire, for Salmân had uttered prayers in Persian (*raṭâna be-fâresiye*) in the Prophet's mosque in Medina.³¹ There are several reports that circulated in the eighth century that identify 'Omar, who often functions as a placeholder for Arab bellicosity towards Persians, as detesting the use of Persian.³²

As for *raṭâna* in these formulations, it alludes to the Mazdean liturgical practices of chanting,³³ related to the Syriac *reṭnâ*, signifying whispered murmurs or chants, particularly the whispered prayers of the Magi. The activity of drone-like whispering fits into a particular set of Mazdean liturgical practices referred to in Middle Persian as *wāj* or *bāj* and in New Persian as *bāz*, directly related to the Sanskrit *vāç*, with the primary meaning of word or speech, and with the broader significance of sacred communication. The drone-like murmuring of *wāj* recitation was generally referred to in Middle Persian as *māwāg*, or inarticulate speech.³⁴ The term *wāj* as sacred word came to be synonymous with the Avesta itself. The Middle Persian phrase *wāj griftan* 'to take on the *wāj*', refers to the initiation of a ritual action with a murmured recitation of liturgical texts; the recitation often accompanies particular ritual behaviours. While *wāj* is used in a variety of ritual services, it appears most notably in the consecration of meals, functionally akin to benedictions. This murmuring liturgical performance is also a central feature of the daily Yasna service within the fire temple and is employed in the abbreviated rite known as the *yašt ī drōn*, the liturgy of the bread, used

³⁰ 'Abd-al-Salâm Saḥnûn (d. 855), *al-Modavvane al-kobrâ*, ed. A. al-Hâshem, 12 vols (Abu Dhabi, 2000), vol. I, pp. 193–4.

³¹ Eshâq b. Beshr (d. 821), *Mobtada' al-donyâ*, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Hunt 388, f. 183b.

³² 'Abd-al-Razzâq (d. 827), *al-Moṣannaf*, ed. H. al-A'zamî, 12 vols (Beirut, 1970–2), vol. XI, pp. 496–7, §9793; Ebn Abi Shaybe (d. 849), *al-Moṣannaf*, ed. H. al-Jom'ê and M. al-Laḥîdân, 16 vols (Riyadh, 2004), vol. VIII, p. 548, §§26684–6, cf. p. 549, §§26687–90; see Ignâc Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. S. M. Stern, 2 vols (Albany, 1967), vol. I, p. 157 n. 3; Suliman Bashear, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997), p. 31.

³³ On *raṭâna*, related to the Syriac *reṭnâ*, as liturgical chanting, see J. C. Greenfield, 'Rṭyn mgwš (The Sorcerer Whispers)', in *Joshua Finkel Festschrift*, ed. S. Hoenig and L. Stitskin (New York, 1974), pp. 63–9; see also Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, vol. I, p. 158 n. 4.

³⁴ See Moḥammad Mo'in, *Mazdayasnâ va adab-e Pârsî* (Tehran, 1338 Sh./1959), pp. 391–9; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Mumbai, 1922), pp. 354–76.

in the consecration of food, which forms a basic element in the entire theatre of Mazdean ritual praxis.³⁵

The opprobrium that many early Muslim religious authorities expressed towards the use of Persian for the performance of ritual activity is connected to the definition of Arabic as the true language of Islamic piety and to the identification of Persian with non-Islamic ritual activity. In one report, the caliph ‘Omar singled out Persian as teaching only wickedness.³⁶ The hadith corpus contains several similar accounts on the deleterious effects of Persian ascribed directly to the Prophet.³⁷ Similarly, there are sentiments affirming that Arabic is the language of paradise, while Persian and specifically *majusiye*, the language spoken by Zoroastrians, is the language of hell.³⁸

Esfarâyeni’s introduction, in contrast, develops a counter-argument that had gained considerable ground. Foremost, he states that Arabic speakers in linguistic terms are a minority and that the vast majority of Muslims do not know Arabic. Further, he argues that the Qor’an, and with it religious law (*shari‘at*), must be translated so that the great multitude, who do not know Arabic, have access to the precepts of religion and the spiritual benefits obtained by this knowledge. Communicating and transmitting this knowledge, he contends, is both a communal and individual responsibility, a phrase that has the weight of juridical obligation. For this reason, religious authorities across the ages have translated creedal statements into Persian, and based on a legal principle of juridical consensus have collectively agreed on the necessity of explaining the Qor’an in Persian. This exegetical activity, he notes, stretches back to the earliest community of Muslims, occurring in the public arena of mosques and assemblies of learning, among both the elite and the masses.

Esfarâyeni situates the activity of translation in the sphere of interpretation. His characterisation of this exegetical enterprise advances religious scholars and leaders as responsible for shaping the proper interpretation and dissemination of orthodox knowledge. Esfarâyeni argues that it is compulsory for religious authorities to translate the Qor’an for the *savâd-e a‘zam*, a

³⁵ See Mary Boyce and Firoze Kotwal, ‘Zoroastrian *Bāj* and *Drōn*’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34/1 (1971): pp. 56–73.

³⁶ Ebn Abī Shaybe, *al-Moṣannaf*, vol. VIII, p. 548, §26684.

³⁷ See Abū ‘Abdallāh Nīshābūrī (d. 1014), *al-Mostadrak ‘alā’l-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, ed. A. al-Wāde‘ī, 5 vols (Cairo, 1997), vol. IV, p. 184, §§7080–1.

³⁸ Eshāq b. Beshr, *Mobtada’*, f. 183a–b; Ebn Ḥebbān (d. 965), *Ketāb-al-Majrūḥīn men al-moḥaddethīn*, ed. Ḥ. al-Salafī, 2 vols (Riyadh, 2000), vol. I, p. 138.

term signifying the collective body of Muslims, meaning here the commonality, the greater number or majority of people. The phrase is of note, as it is used to signify a collective strength in numbers, which in this context is composed of Persian speakers, who according to Esfarâyihi make up the majority of Muslims.

Furthermore, the expression speaks directly to the title of the well-known Hanafi creedal work, *Ketâb-al-Savâd al-a'zam*, originally written in Arabic by the Hanafi judge of Samarqand Abu'l-Qâsem Samarqandî (d. 953) at the request of the progenitor of the Samanid dynasty Esmâ'îl b. Ahmad (r. 892–907) of Khorasan and Transoxiana.³⁹ Two generations later, a Persian translation of the manual was sponsored by the Samanid emir Nuh b. Mansur (r. 976–97), which according to its introduction was designed to affirm the orthodoxy of Hanafi doctrine in a manner that could be readily understood by both the elite and the masses.⁴⁰ Similarly, though with different ends, Esfarâyihi uses his Persian commentary as a framework to advance Shâfe'i jurisprudence and Ash'ari theology. In this vein, he closes his introduction with a Persian creedal statement promoting the normativity of Ash'ari theological arguments. As the introduction makes clear, the use of Persian is viewed as part of a broader effort of affirming orthodox interpretations of the Qor'an and combating heretical interpretations.

In light of these juridical and theological foundations, Esfarâyihi's treatment of the performance of ritual prayer in Persian is particularly noteworthy. He explains that a great many orthodox religious authorities allow for Muslims with no knowledge of the Qor'an in Arabic to perform the ritual prayer in translation, as they argue that this is better than merely uttering non-Qor'anic formulae. Esfarâyihi advances without any qualification what is fundamentally the Hanafi position on ritual prayer in translation, a position that Shâfe'i uniformly rejected. Nonetheless, during this period there are isolated cases apart from Esfarâyihi of other Shâfe'i authorities in the region upholding the use of translations for those with no mastery of the original Arabic. Similarly, the unconditional use of translations in prayer was advanced by Ebn Karrâm (d. 869), the founder of Karrâmiye, an ascetic group closely associated with Hanafi jurists, who were instrumental in the process of

³⁹ Abû'l-Qâsem Samarqandî, *Tarjome-ye al-Savâd al-a'zam*, ed. A. Ḥabîbî (Tehran, 1969), pp. 17–19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 22.

conversion, particularly in Khorasan and Transoxiana.⁴¹ The early Hanafi acceptance of ritual prayer in translation is congruent with a larger theological argument, advanced by many early Hanafi authorities, particularly those along the frontier regions of Eastern Iran and Central Asia, concerning the primacy of faith over acts. There is reason to believe that such attitudes, shaped in part by *morje'e* theology, continued to be particularly important in the Islamisation of the region.⁴² Esfarâyi's arguments on the necessity of Persian translations for the purposes of comprehension and, in limited cases, their use in the spheres of ritual performance not only reflect an effort to affirm orthodoxy, they are also a recognition that competing sectarian factions also use Persian as a means of spreading their own theological arguments.

The Field and Form of Persian Exegetical Writing

Esfarâyi advances the use of Persian as a pragmatic response to the sociolinguistic realities of the region, a strategy, he believes, to be in keeping with the universalist call to Islam. He does so, however, while affirming the fundamental Arabic nature of the Qor'an as a miraculous, *sui generis*, linguistic expression that is inimitable and unsurpassable. To this end, he identifies his commentary and the complete interlinear translation of the Qor'an accompanying it as an exegetical enterprise. Furthermore, he offers a rationale for the interlinear place of the translation, written between the lines of the Arabic text, based on a respect for the sanctity of the original. The calligraphic instructions prefacing the commentary are all the more telling as they spell out the necessity of distinguishing the exegetical sphere of interpretation and translation, in both the form of the handwriting and the colour of the script, from the original Arabic text. These remarks are meant to ensure a clear separation between the exegetical layers and the immutable scripture. This visual form of the interlinear text, which Esfarâyi dates to the precedent of Salmân, moves translation into the sphere of commentary and interpretation, supplementing, expanding and opening up the Arabic text, but not replacing it.

⁴¹ See Abû 'Alî Marvarrûdhî, *Ta'liq*, ed. A. Mo'avvaz and A. 'Abd-al-Mowjûd, 2 vols (Mecca, 1999), vol. II, pp. 724–5; 'Alî b. al-Ḥoseyn Soghdî (attrib.), *al-Notaf fîl-fatâvâ*, ed. A. al-Nâhî, 2 vols (Beirut, 1984), vol. I, pp. 49–50.

⁴² See Wilferd Madelung, 'The Early Murji'a in Khurāsān and Transoxania and the Spread of Ḥanafism', *Der Islam* 59 (1982): pp. 32–9; Wilferd Madelung, 'The Spread of Māturīdism and the Turks', *Actas do IV Congresso de Estudos Árabes e Islâmicos* (Leiden, 1971): pp. 109–68.

Persian exegetical literature included an array of material from various genres and served multiple purposes. This ranged from glosses and literal interlinear translations to fully developed major commentaries based on particular legal, theological and sectarian leanings, as is the case with Esfarâyi's *Tâj-altarâjem*. There is reason to believe that word-for-word Persian translations of the Qor'an became more common by the tenth century in Eastern Iran and Central Asia. Often, these translations took an interlinear form, following the original Arabic text line by line. In addition to interlinear translations and glosses, it was also common for translations to appear at the end of a liturgical division of the Qor'an, thereby breaking up the Arabic text, usually at intervals of five or ten verses.

The sheer volume of Persian translations alone suggests their accepted status in the region.⁴³ The fact that so many translations have indeed survived the vicissitudes of time is in its own right a general testament to the meaningfulness of their early diffusion. For instance, the shrine complex of Imam 'Ali Rezâ in the eastern Iranian city of Mashhad alone houses more than 300 Qor'an codices with Persian translations, a significant number of which were produced prior to the thirteenth century.⁴⁴

Based on the surviving codicological record, full translations that effaced the original Arabic of the Qor'an appear to have had no meaningful presence in the region or period under consideration. While there are examples of translated passages of the Qor'an without the accompanying original Arabic text, such as Salmân's Persian *Fâtehe*, these are quite rare. Rather, the early corpus of Persian translations followed the established Arabic exegetical practice of enveloping scripture through various layers of interpretation.

From glosses to periphrastic expansion, vernacular practices of supplementation were still very much acts of translation. Translations were often designed to complement the Qor'anic text, as interlinear word-for-word explanations. The majority of early Persian translations of the Qor'an were produced anonymously. Such anonymity was not unusual in the earlier codicological practices of commissioning and copying Qor'anic codices: it was not uncommon to leave out introductory material and the concluding

⁴³ See the catalogue prepared by 'Alî Şadrâ'î Khû'î, *Fehrestgân-e noskhehâ-ye khaṭṭî-ye tarjomehâ-ye fârsî-ye Qor'ân-e karîm* (Qom, 2004), pp. 63–120.

⁴⁴ See *Farhang-nâme-ye Qor'ânî: farhang-e barâbarhâ-ye Fârsî-ye Qor'ân bar asâs-e 142 noskhe-ye khaṭṭî-ye koban-e mahfûz dar Ketâbkhâne-ye Markazî-ye Âstân-e Qods-e Razavî*, ed. under the direction of M. Yâḥaqqî, 5 vols (Mashhad, 1993), introduction, vol. I, pp. 34–46.

colophon, and, with them, information concerning the provenance and date of production.

Given this anonymity, the dating of early interlinear translations has been, admittedly, rather difficult. Particularly illustrative is the case of the Persian translation held in the shrine of Mashhad (MS 54) and published by 'Alī Ravâqī under the title *Qor'ân-e qods*. The grammatical and lexical features of this particular interlinear translation are rather unique and archaic compared to standard New Persian. The language itself contains notable dialectic elements of Pâzand. A Middle Persian script and dialect used by Zoroastrian priests for the exegetical commentary of the Avesta, Pâzand represents a bridge, as it were, between Pahlavi and New Persian. Based on the archaic character of the language, 'Alī Ravâqī claimed that the translation was the oldest of its kind, produced likely around the beginning of the tenth century. He also proposed Sistan, in the south-east of Iran, as the location for the production of the translation based upon its linguistic similarity to the modern Balochi dialect spoken there.⁴⁵ After Ravâqī, Gilbert Lazard studied the Pâzand dialectical features in the translation, some of which are also found in early Judeo-Persian material, datable to the eleventh century. While largely agreeing with the identification of either Sistan or the neighbouring areas as the provenance of the translation, Lazard opted for a later date of the eleventh or twelfth century for the composition of the text.⁴⁶

The surviving codicological evidence points to an active tradition of translating the Qor'ân into Persian during the middle of the tenth century.⁴⁷ Apart from the *Qor'ân-e qods*, which exhibits rather unique dialectical features, the broader question of archaism is particularly thorny, as the language and style of any given translation may well have promoted an archaic form to lend greater weight and rhetorical force to the material. Furthermore, there is evidence that interlinear translations were themselves copied over different

⁴⁵ See *Qor'ân-e qods*, ed. 'Alī Ravâqī, 2 vols (Tehran, 1364 Sh./1985), vol. I, p. 6. Cf. Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Rûḥānī, 'Nowtarīn ganj dar kohantarīn ganjīne: Qor'ân-e qods', *Bayyânât* 4 (1373 Sh./1994): pp. 134–45; Khû'ī, *Fehrestgân*, pp. 63–4.

⁴⁶ See Gilbert Lazard, 'Lumières nouvelles sur la formation de la langue persane: une traduction du Coran en persan dialectal et ses affinités avec le judéo-persan', *Irano-Judaica* 2 (1990): pp. 192–8. See also Albert de Jong, 'Pâzand and "Retranscribed" Pahlavi: On the Philology and History of Late Zoroastrian Literature', in *Persian Origins: Early Judaeo-Persian and the Emergence of New Persian*, ed. L. Paul (Wiesbaden, 2003), pp. 67–78.

⁴⁷ Khû'ī, *Fehrestgân*, pp. 63–9.

periods of time, reused in various forms and reproduced as integral parts of later translations.⁴⁸ The fragmentary state of the archive also presents considerable challenges, as several translations and commentaries survive today in acephalous manuscripts lacking clear identification of authorship. This is the case with the early commentary of the Qur'an that is now housed in Cambridge University. The surviving material from this major commentary only begins with the sura of Maryam, and lacks both a title and an author. The manuscript was copied in 1231.⁴⁹ However, the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the text and absence of later datable references suggest that the commentary upon which the manuscript was based is significantly older.⁵⁰ The commentary makes countless references to the earliest generations of Arabic exegetical authorities associated with the school of Ebn 'Abbâs. There are also notable Shi'i currents running through the work, yet not enough to indicate who composed the text, when or where.

Even more intriguing is the fragmentary quire of folios housed in the shrine complex of Imam Rezâ in Mashhad (MS 2309). The manuscript, which covers less than one fifteenth of the Qur'an (Q. 10:62–14:26), divides the Arabic text into liturgical units that are then followed by a rhyming paraphrase in Persian. Given the archaic form of the syntax and lexicographical character of the language, the late tenth century is a plausible date of composition. Benedikt Reinert has studied this fragment in regard to its significance for Persian poetry, building upon the study of Ahmad 'Ali Rajâ'i, who edited the manuscript and who viewed the metred quality of the translation as a valuable testament to the early development of New Persian poetics.⁵¹ The translation consists of rhymed prose that follows a range of metrical patterns. This attention to rhyme and rhythm suggests that the text was designed to be recited by a preacher or some other religious authority in the context of a sermon or a religious assembly. Such exegetical material lends

⁴⁸ See Âdhartâsh Adharnûsh, who offers several examples, *Târikh-e tarjome az 'Arabî be Fârsî az âghâz tâ 'aqr-e safavî*, Vol. I: *Tarjomehâ-ye Qur'ân* (Tehran, 1375 Sh./1996), pp. 73–81.

⁴⁹ *Tafsîr-e Qur'ân-e majîd, noskbe-ye mahfûz dar ketâb-khâne-ye dânesbgâh-e Kambrij*, ed. J. Matîni, 2 vols (Tehran, 1349 Sh./1970), vol. II, p. 662.

⁵⁰ See Gilbert Lazard, *La langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane* (Paris, 1963), pp. 56–8.

⁵¹ Benedikt Reinert, 'Hazaq: Genese eines Neupersischen Metrums', in *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms: Festschrift for Wolfhart Heinrichs on His 65th Birthday*, ed. B. Gruendler and M. Cooperson (Leiden, 2008), pp. 68–98.

further substance to Esfarâyi's picture of Persian exegetical activity as both a written and oral process of communication.

Despite these anonymous examples, many Persian commentaries and translations bore the imprimatur of particular scholars, such as the prosimetrical translation by the renowned Hanafi jurist of Samarqand Abu Hafsa Nasafi (d. 1142), which is also attentive to issues of cadence and rhythm in its form. As with the work of Esfarâyi's commentary, Nasafi's translation circulated within the context of madrasa education. Furthermore, by the end of the twelfth century, every single juridical and theological school active within the Persianate sphere had produced some form of exegetical of writing in Persian that is known to have survived. As with Esfarâyi's multivolume commentary, this Persian exegetical material was issued within the framework of competing theological and juridical traditions, such as: the Persian translation by Mo'ayyad Sherâzi (d. 1078) of the *Asâs-al-ta'vil*, originally written in Arabic by the Ismaili missionary Qâzi No'mân (d. 974); the multivolume work of Karrâmi exegesis, the *Tafsir-e tafâsir*, by the leading Karrâmi scholar of Nishapur, Abu Bakr Surâbâdi (d. 1100); the major commentary by Abu'l-Fazl Meybodi (fl. 1126), the *Kashf-al-asrâr*, which expands upon, in both Arabic and Persian, the exegetical work of the famed Hanbali mystic from Herat, Abu Esmâ'il Ansâri (d. 1089); the *Tafsir-e basâ'er* by the Hanafi judge and littérateur, Mo'in-al-Din Nishâburi (fl. 1153), who was an official in the Ghaznavid court; the sprawling *Rawz-al-jenân*, by Abu'l-Fotuh Râzi (d. c. 1159), a work of Imami exegesis profoundly influenced by Mo'tezali rationalism; the *Latâ'ef-al-tafsir*, a concise commentary by the Hanafi jurist of Bokhara, Abu Nasr Zâhedi (d. 1154), which, as with many of these works, draws on various sources of Sufi piety. Commentaries, in both Arabic and Persian, were often promoted as articulations of religious authority, either through the memory of a student who preserved and expanded the work of his master, or through an author's own synthesis of material presented to his disciples.

The codicological diffusion of Persian interlinear translations and commentaries followed a similar pattern of dissemination as Arabic exegetical material, from mosques, madrasas and shrines to personal homes of religious teachers and students, and individuals with the material means to acquire the valued commodity of a physical book. As with all forms of writing, the court was also a locus for the production and transmission of translations. It was not uncommon for scribes to write out the Qor'an and then, at a later date, for someone else to add an interlinear translation. Generally, however, translations were copied as part the original production of Qor'anic codices, which were designed in terms of spacing and layout, to accommodate the accompanying interlinear Persian text.

The *Tafsir-e Tabari* and the History of Persian Exegesis

In addition to the codicological evidence and later written accounts, such as Esfarâyiñi's assessment, the juridical record offers a further means of historicising the development of Persian translations and commentaries, particularly as several jurists are recorded as having advanced the legality of interlinear translations. For instance, the leading Hanafi judge of Balkh, Abu Ja'far Hendovâni (d. 973), gave juridical licence to the written translation of the Qur'an, arguing that such a translation (*tarjome*) should appear directly under each line of the Qur'an, concluding that 'there is no issue with this in our region for the masses only grasp its meanings and their inner dimensions in this manner.' However, importantly Hendovâni also explains that the Arabs, in their own region, dislike these translations, as they argue, 'the Qur'an was revealed in our language.'⁵² This statement underscores that resistance to such scriptural practices in linguistic and ethnic terms was often regional in scope. Even more importantly, the position documents the written use of translations in Transoxiana and Khorasan during the middle of the tenth century. Such a position complements Esfarâyiñi's portrayal from the middle of the following century, where Persian translations and commentaries clearly had been in circulation for several generations.

This picture complicates the claim made by several modern scholars that the Persian commentary and interlinear translation titled the *Tafsir-e kabir*, generally known as the *Tafsir-e Tabari*, was the first Persian translation of the Qur'an. There are several problems with this formulation, some of which have to do with the nature of the text itself. According to the introduction of this multivolume Persian commentary, the translation was commissioned on the orders of the Samanid emir Mansur b. Nuh (r. 961–76). The text suggests that the work in question is a translation of the major commentary written in Arabic by the famed Persian religious authority Abu Jarir Tabari (d. 923).⁵³

⁵² As quoted in Borhân-al-Dîn Bokhârî (d. 1219–20), *al-Mohtâ al-borbhânî*, ed. A. al-Jondî, 9 vols (Beirut, 2004), vol. I, p. 308; see also Ashirbek Muminov, 'Disputes in Bukhara on the Persian Translation of the Qur'an', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 59 (2006): p. 301 n. 4.

⁵³ The problem of the introduction and the nature of the commentary is taken up by Shârokh Moḥammad Beygî, 'Tarjome-ye *Tafsir-e Tabarî*', *Âyene-ye Pezhûbesh* 23 (1373 Sh./1994): pp. 21–9. See also Elton Daniel, who examines the problems of the introduction in light of the broader Samanid translation project, 'The Sāmānid "Translations" of al-Ṭabarî', in *Al-Ṭabarî, A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work*, ed. H. Kennedy (Princeton, 2008) pp. 270–7.

Given the importance accorded to this particular Persian commentary in the history of vernacular exegesis, the introductory section describing the origin of the project is translated here in full.

**From the Introduction to the *Tafsir-e kabir*,
also known as the *Tafsir-e Tabari*
The Story of this Book**

This book is the major commentary, based on the transmission of Mohammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, the mercy of God upon him, translated into Persian and correct Dari. The [original] book was brought in forty codices from Baghdad, written in Arabic with long lines of transmission (*esnâd*). It was brought to the noble victorious emir, Abu Sâleh Mansur b. Nuh b. Nasr b. Ahmad b. Esmâ'il, the mercy of God upon them all. But reading this book was difficult for him, as it was [P f. 3a] written in Arabic, so he requested that this book be translated into Persian. Then he gathered the religious scholars of Transoxiana and he sought from them a religious decree stating, 'It is lawful that we translate this book into Persian.'

They said that it is lawful to read and write the interpretation (*tafsîr*) of the Qor'an in Persian for a person who does not know Arabic, based on the statement of the Lord, mighty and sublime, who said:

'We have never sent a Messenger save with the language of his own people' (Q. 14.4).

[Persian] He said: 'I have never sent a Messenger save in the language [R p. 9] of his people.'

That is, a language that they understand. Another point was that the Persian language has been known since antiquity. From the days of Adam until the days of the Prophet Esmâ'il, peace be upon them, all of the prophets and kings of the earth spoke Persian. The first person to speak Arabic was the Prophet Esmâ'il. Our Prophet, peace be upon him, came from the Arabs and this Qor'an was sent to him in the language of the Arabs. Here in this territory the language is Persian and the kings of this region are Persian.

Then the victorious king Abu Sâleh ordered that the religious scholars of Transoxiana come together. Those from the city of Bokhara included: the imam Abu Bakr Mohammad b. al-Fazl, the jurist Abu Bakr Mohammad b. Esmâ'il, the jurist Abu Bakr Ahmad b. Hâmed; the brilliant mind of the scholars, Khalil b. Ahmad al-Sejestâni; those from the city of Balkh included: Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. 'Ali from the Hindu gate; the jurist al-Hasan b. 'Ali b. Mandust; and the learned jurist Abu'l-Jahm Khâled b. Hâni; similarly from this group [R p. 10] were those from the city of Samarqand, the city of Espijâb and Farghâne, and from all the cities that were located in Transoxiana. All of

them gave their signatures [testifying] that the translation of this book was a lawful course of action.

Then an order from the noble emir, the victorious king, was issued via the people of his inner circle and associates and ministers. The decree was communicated by his trusted agent and personal attendant, Abu'l-Hasan Fâ'eq, to this group of men, these religious scholars, stating that they should choose the best and most learned among themselves so that they translate the book.

So they translated the book. [P 3b] And from the entirety of the [original] codex they discarded the long chains of transmission and they shortened the hadith reports. They made this into twenty codices. Out of this [collection] they produced fourteen codices on the commentary of the Qor'an, from the first creation of the world until our Prophet left the world and the revelation had broken off. Up to this point in time, they produced these fourteen codices with each codex equalling one fourteenth, so that [in total] it would contain the entire commentary of the Qor'an. Then from the death of the Prophet until the time that Mohammad b. Jarir al-Tabari left this world, in the year 345 (956–7) after the Hijra [R p. 11], they produced six more codices. This makes a total of twenty volumes, containing everything that has been said concerning the commentary of the Qor'an and the stories of the Companions of the Prophet who lived after him [and the stories of the caliphs and the kings who came later] until this time which we have mentioned. From that composition, we copied all of this into seven volumes in an abridged form.⁵⁴

First, it is important to recognise that this is a later account describing a translation project that occurred at some point in the past, originally undertaken on the orders of the Samanid emir Mansur. Furthermore, the introduction never explicitly claims that the Arabic work in question is Tabari's encyclopedic commentary, the famed *Jâme'-al-bayân*. Rather, it states that the text at hand is a major commentary of the Qor'an translated into Persian based on the transmission from (*az revâyat*) Tabari. What that original Arabic text was remains to be seen, although it was evidently quite voluminous, as the forty codices brought to Mansur make clear. It may well be that the forty codices in question contained both exegetical and historical writings associated with

⁵⁴ This translation takes as a basis Raza Library, Rampur MS 67 Persian/149 = R; with relevant variants from Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS Supplément persan 1610 = S; also consulted was British Library MS Add 7601; cf. *Tarjome-ye Tafsi'r-e Tabari*, vol. I, pp. 5–7.

Tabari and his school. Whatever these original writings were, it is also possible that they differed in significant ways from the respective modern editions of Tabari's history and commentary.

In addition to the process of translation, which here evidently means something quite different than the faithful rendering of one language into another, the opening story also points to several stages of redaction, abridgement and rearrangement. This not only takes place in the form of dropping the long citational transmissions, which are a central component to Tabari's method as a hadith scholar, but also in reducing the multiple narrative accounts which take the form of variant reports and hadiths. It is of note that Persian exegetical writing in general has very little patience for the citational practices of Arabic hadith scholarship.

In this process of redaction, which occurred in the course of translation, an assembly of scholars chosen from across Central Asia produced fourteen volumes. While these volumes purportedly contained the entirety of the commentary of the Qor'an (the nature of which is not specified), they also appear to have had a profoundly historical framework, progressing chronologically from the beginning of creation until the death of the Prophet. These fourteen volumes were then supplemented with another six, which treated, again evidently in chronological fashion, the stories of the Companions, the caliphs and kings, taking the work up to the year 956–7. This would be at the beginning of the reign of the Samanid emir 'Abd-al-Malek b. Nuh (r. 954–61). While the text of the introduction, as it stands, implies, incorrectly, that this was the year in which Tabari died, this mistake could also reflect a corruption in the codicological record of the work. The date may have indicated that these supplementary six volumes continued in chronological fashion up to the reign of Mansur's predecessor. It could also be that the scribe or scribes responsible for the introduction mistook the final date mentioned in the six volumes to be the date of Tabari's demise. Whatever the case may have been, as the last line of the passage makes clear, material from this original Samanid collection was then subsequently abridged into seven volumes, by an unnamed scribe or group of redactors at some unspecified point in time. Unfortunately, the modern edition of the text drops this last line, which explicitly states that a later redaction has taken place. This lacuna has contributed, in part, to a general misunderstanding concerning the nature of the Persian commentary and its relationship to the original Samanid project it describes.

While it is not clear what exactly this Persian text is abridging, there is reason to believe that it is related in some fashion to the *Târikh-nâme*,

a Persian translation and adaptation of Tabari's universal Arabic history, the famed *Târikh-al-rosol va'l-moluk*. According to the Arabic introduction accompanying many manuscripts of the *Târikh-nâme*, this Persian history was commissioned in the year 963–4, also by the emir Mansur, on the orders of his powerful courtier Abu'l-Hasan Fâ'eq (d. 999), who is referenced by the same phrase found in the *Tafsir-e Tabari*, as the emir's 'agent and personal attendant'. The Arabic introduction to the *Târikh-nâme* is written in the first person, although it leaves out the identity of the translator or translators put in charge of the project. This is clarified, however, in a Persian introduction written in the third person to the history that accompanies several manuscripts of the *Târikh-nâme*; here the Samanid vizier Abu 'Ali Bal'ami (d. 974) is identified as having been put in charge of translating the text.⁵⁵ It remains to be seen exactly what role Bal'ami played in the composition of the *Târikh-nâme*, which properly speaking represents a Persian adaptation of the original, both heavily redacting the Arabic text and expanding beyond it in important and innumerable ways. The concept of translation as employed in this particular context proves to be much more elastic than a literal adherence to the text. The numerous manuscript recensions of the *Târikh-nâme* also present an added quandary, particularly with regard to the instability of the text. Even the earliest surviving textual witnesses, dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, evince significant variants and divergences that are not easily homogenised. The proliferation of variants extends from basic issues of wording to broader questions of order and content; similarly, some recensions express either strong Shi'i or Sunni sympathies in their respective treatment of history. For these reasons, the notion of unitary authorship as a heuristic device has notable limits.

However, there is good reason to believe that the translation activity described in the opening of the *Tafsir-e Tabari* overlapped in some fashion with the historical project of the *Târikh-nâme*. The strong historiographical component promised in the introduction to the *Tafsir-e Tabari* appears to be more appropriate to a work of history than a Qor'anic commentary in the traditional sense of a verse-by-verse explanation of scripture. The commentary is primarily focused on historical and mythical material that progresses in a rather cyclical fashion with accounts from pre-Islamic history, the mission of Mohammad and the stories of the first four caliphs. The Battle of Karbala and

⁵⁵ These two introductions are published in Abû 'Alî Bal'ami, *Târikh-nâme-ye Tabarî*, ed. M. Rowshan, 5 vols (Tehran, 1995–9), vol. I, p. 2, vol. II, pp. 855–6.

the martyrdom of Hoseyn mark the last events to be mentioned in the historical progression of the commentary.⁵⁶

What relationship the commentary had with the *Târikh-nâme* is not directly addressed. However, a comparison between introductions of both works reveals a similarity in the justifications presented and methodologies followed for both projects. Both are said to have been commissioned by Mansur; both quote the same Qur'anic verse (Q. 14:4), as a rationale for the use of Persian, described equally as Dari, that is, court Persian; and both mention the necessity of cutting down the long narrative accounts and chains of transmissions that characterise Tabari's work. The introduction to the *Tafsir-e Tabari* echoes the *Târikh-nâme* in its courtly patronage, the rationale given for the work, and the process of translation and redaction proposed for the Arabic text. Several manuscripts also make reference to the courtier Abu'l-Hasan Fâ'eq functioning as a maecenas for the enterprise.

Unlike the *Târikh-nâme*, where the original Arabic source text can often be deduced, a close analysis of the *Tafsir-e Tabari* reveals that it is not a translation in any manifest fashion of Tabari's major commentary. Rather, the multivolume work weaves together stories on ancient Iran and prophetic history, many of which find direct parallels in the Persian *Târikh-nâme*. Rather than a traditional, verse-by-verse explanation, the commentary develops a series of narratives that form part of the genre of writing focused on recounting the lives of the prophets (*qeṣaṣ-al-anbeyâ'*),

Given the evident proximity between the two works, some have speculated that Bal'ami also oversaw the Persian translation of Tabari's commentary, although there is little in the way of either internal or external evidence to directly substantiate this claim. While such similarities may mean that these projects were commissioned together, they could also suggest that the opening to the *Tafsir-e Tabari* was a later addition consciously modelled upon the introduction to the famed *Târikh-nâme*, a work which survives today in more than 160 manuscript copies.⁵⁷

While the introduction of the *Tafsir-e Tabari* clearly states that it is a later redaction, there is also evidence that a core part of the Persian text dates to the Samanid period and along with *Târikh-nâme*, likely reflects, in some fashion, part of a larger courtly initiative that sought to advance

⁵⁶ See *Tarjome-ye Tafsir-e Tabari*, vol. V, pp. 1383–95.

⁵⁷ See Elton Daniel, 'Manuscripts and Editions of Bal'amî's *Tarjamah-i Târikh-i Tabari*', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1990): pp. 282–321.

Persian history and language as central to Islamic orthodoxy and to the proper understanding of the Qur'an. In this vein, the specificity of the names of the religious authorities mentioned as signatories to the fatwa issued supporting the project gives room for pause. While some of the onomastic details have been jumbled in the course of the codicological transmission of the passage, several of the figures referenced correspond to known authorities from the region.⁵⁸ Arguably, the most prominent of these scholars was the Hanafi chief judge Abu Sa'ïd Khalil b. Ahmad from Sistan (d. 988), who accompanied the Samanids on military campaigns and served as a judge for the dynasty in a variety of locations in Transoxiana. Similarly, the opening appears to reference the famed jurist of Balkh, Abu Ja'far Hendovâni (d. 973), although it transcribes the name of his father as 'Ali, instead of 'Abdallah. Interestingly, as noted above, Hendovâni is also known in Hanafi juridical literature to have advocated the use of interlinear translations of the Qur'an; he developed his rationale in terms very similar to those found in the opening anecdote of the *Tafsir-e Tabari*, arguing that interlinear translations were appropriate for use in a region where the majority of the population did not know Arabic.

It stands to reason that the scholars listed as signatories to the Samanid fatwa reflect an actual historical context in which a Persian commentary was produced and disseminated, perhaps as part of the larger courtly initiative outlined in the distinct Arabic and Persian introductions to the *Târikh-nâme*. Yet, apart from the royal request for juridical authorisation, there is little to suggest that Persian interlinear translations or commentaries on the Qur'an originated solely with the Samanid initiative. As noted earlier, there are indications that Persian exegetical writing actually preceded the commissioning of this particular commentary. Aside from the opening anecdote of the *Tafsir-e Tabari*, there is no external memory of the Samanid initiative as a watershed moment in the history of Persian translations or commentaries of the Qur'an, either in the subsequent juridical literature or in the development of Persian exegesis.

The courtly context given in the opening anecdote of the *Tafsir-e Tabari*, however, is particularly noteworthy. In contrast to multivolume Persian commentaries produced within the framework of institutional religious education, the *Tafsir-e Tabari* scales away the matters of juridical divergence, theological debates and lexical comprehension, focusing attention rather largely on the narratives of the prophets and pre-Islamic Persian history. Some manuscripts of the *Tafsir-e Tabari* are known to have circulated in later courtly settings.

⁵⁸ See Daniel, "The Sāmānid "Translations"", pp. 287–8 n. 74.

In this regard, the *Tafsir-e Tabari* shares much in common with a four-volume Persian translation and commentary of the Qor'an originally presented as a royal gift to the Ghurid sultan Ghiyâth-al-Din Mohammad (d. 1203). This collection was delivered to the sultan in 1188. The Arabic colophon of the commentary documents the royal dedication by a copyist and redactor who identifies himself as Mohammad b. 'Ali Leythi from Nishapur.⁵⁹

The splendid Ghurid codex is a composite of several sources and appears to represent Leythi's independent work of compilation. In this regard, there are general parallels between the structure of the *Tafsir-e Tabari* and the Ghurid commentary, which likewise contains an interlinear translation accompanied by material that focuses largely on prophetic narratives. The prominent space accorded to stories of the prophets fits into broader courtly reading practices. Storytelling was one of the primary modes for the instruction of rulers and courtly officials, as is reflected, for instance, in the mirror for princes genre of courtly didactic literature. The ideal prince or ruler, as imagined within the advice literature of the period, was one who had an appreciation for learning and for religious scholars, and who had knowledge of the Qor'an.⁶⁰

Without explicitly acknowledging it, the Ghurid codex draws extensively from the Persian commentary by the Karrâmi exegetic Abu 'Atiq Surâbâdi.⁶¹ While the commentary clearly abridges a significant amount of material from Surâbâdi, it conceives of itself as a distinct work of exegesis, drawing from a range of sources. Leythi's use of Surâbâdi, however, is more than mere coincidence, as the Ghurids were themselves aligned with the Karrâmi movement.⁶² While Surâbâdi's commentary was originally designed for institutional religious education, material from it was redeployed here within a courtly context.

As a field, Persian translations and commentaries of the Qor'an developed through the institutional support of Islamic colleges, Sufi lodges and royal courts. The manuscript record of Persian commentaries highlights interconnected linguistic networks that facilitated the broad circulation of exegetical

⁵⁹ For more context see, Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 548–55.

⁶⁰ See Nezâm-al-Molk, *Seyâsat-nâme*, ed. H. Darke (Tehran, 1962), p. 76.

⁶¹ See Qadîr Afravand, 'Qor'an-e mowqûfe-ye Torbat-e Sheykh Aḥmad Jâmi', *Mîrâth-e Farhangî* 15 (1375 Sh./1996): p. 9, §10.

⁶² C. Edmund Bosworth, 'The Early Islamic History of Ghūr', *Central Asiatic Journal* 6 (1961): pp. 129–31.

knowledge and authority.⁶³ In 1256, the Ghurid codex was gifted as an endowment to the *khânaqâh* of the famed Sufi, Ahmad-e Jâm (d. 1141), in a village located between Nishapur and Herat. The title of endowment stipulates that the commentary had been given to the shrine complex so that the Qur'an could be studied, learned, copied and memorised from it.⁶⁴ This not only highlights the ways in which Persian exegetical material was used in religious education, but it also demonstrates a broader nexus between courtly and religious contexts of instruction and education. For his part, Esfarâyi was appointed as a head of madrasa in Tus by the powerful Seljuk vizier Nezâm-al-Molk (d. 1092), while his commentary is known to have circulated within Islamic colleges in and beyond the region.

One of the prominent characteristics surrounding the production of pre-modern Persian commentaries is the motif of making the meaning of the Qur'an available to a wider audience. By writing in Persian, exegetes could also assure a wide dissemination across the Islamic societies of the east. Much of this religious scholarship took place within institutional structures of madrasa education. The frameworks of linguistic and sectarian identities, religious institutions and political authority have continued to shape the diverse ways in which Persian exegetical traditions emerged over the course of history.⁶⁵

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⁶³ For a further example of this phenomenon, see the Ghaznavid exemplar of the *Tafsîr-e munîr* by Abû Naşr Ḥaddâdî (d. after 1009), discussed in Alya Karame and Travis Zadeh, 'The Art of Translation: An Early Persian Commentary of the Qur'an', *Journal of Abbasid Studies*, 2/2 (2015): pp. 119–95.

⁶⁴ The title of endowment is reprinted in 'Alî Fâzel, *Sharḡ-e aḡvâl va naqd va tablîl-e âthâr-e Aḡmad-e Jâm* (Tehran, 1373 Sh./1994–5), pp. 346–7.

⁶⁵ For a survey of the modern Persian exegetical tradition, see Travis Zadeh, 'Persian Qur'anic Networks, Modernity, and the Writings of "an Iranian Lady", Nusrat Amin Khanum (d. 1983)', in *The Qur'an and its Readers Worldwide: Contemporary Commentaries and Translations*, ed. S. Taji-Farouki (Oxford, 2016), pp. 275–323.

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