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

Abstract. *This article provides a scholarly and Sufi-oriented analysis of Ismail Haqqi Bursevi and his mystical Qur’anic exegesis entitled Ruh al-Bayan. The general structure of the work, its sources, and its distinctive features are thoroughly examined. Particular attention is given to the manner in which both the outward (zahir) and inward (batin) meanings of Qur’anic verses are elucidated in this tafsir. Furthermore, the study analyzes the symbolic (ishari) interpretative approach employed in the work and its place within Sufi teachings. The article also considers the strengths of the tafsir as well as certain critical perspectives. As a result, the significance of “Ruh al-Bayan” within the science of Qur’anic exegesis is clearly demonstrated¹.*

Keywords: *Ruh al-Bayan, tafsir, Sufism, ishari exegesis, Bursevi, Qur’an, zahir and batin, ma’rifa, ‘irfan, Islamic sciences*

INTRODUCTION

IQur’anic exegesis (tafsir) constitutes one of the most foundational and intellectually rich disciplines within the Islamic scholarly tradition. Since the earliest centuries of Islam, Muslim scholars have devoted themselves to elucidating the meanings of the Qur’an through diverse methodological frameworks, including linguistic analysis, jurisprudential reasoning, theological reflection, and mystical interpretation (Saeed, 2006:1). Among these, the Sufi or mystical approach to exegesis – known as tafsir ishari – occupies a distinctive position, seeking to uncover the inner, spiritual dimensions of the Qur’anic text beyond its outward linguistic and legal significations (Sands, 2006:12). This

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tradition, rooted in the conviction that the Qur'an addresses multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, has produced a substantial body of exegetical literature that continues to shape Islamic spirituality and intellectual discourse (Knysh, 2000:78).

Ismail Haqqi Bursevi (Abu Muḥammad ibn Muṣṭafa al-Bursevi, 1653–1725 CE / 1063–1137 AH) was a prominent Ottoman Turkish scholar, Qur'anic exegete, and representative of the Khalwatiyya Sufi order who made significant contributions to various Islamic sciences, particularly in the fields of tafsir and tasawwuf (Bursevi, 1971:1/3). He was born in the town of Aydos (present-day Aytos, in modern Bulgaria), which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire. From an early age, he demonstrated a strong interest in religious knowledge and devoted himself to the in-depth study of the Islamic sciences (Küçük, 2001:110). Later, he moved to Bursa, where he spent most of his life, and for this reason he became widely known by the epithet "Bursevi" (Kara, 2002:45). He passed away around 1725 CE (1137 AH) and was buried in Bursa.

Bursevi was a highly prolific scholar who authored works across multiple disciplines, including tafsir, ḥadith, fiqh, tasawwuf, and Islamic theology ('aqida). He left behind a rich intellectual legacy of more than one hundred works, primarily written in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish (Bursevi, 2012:1/8). His spiritual mentor was the renowned sheikh Usman Fazli, and in his Sufi teachings he emphasized the purification of the soul (nafs), remembrance of God (dhikr), spiritual knowledge (ma'rifa), and love for God (Knysh, 2000:245). Through his writings, he played a significant role in the spread and development of the Khalwatiyya order throughout the Ottoman territories and beyond (Clayer, 1994:128).

Among Bursevi's extensive oeuvre, the most renowned is his monumental tafsir, *Ruḥ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* ("The Spirit of Elucidation in the Interpretation of the Qur'an"), a complete Arabic commentary on the Qur'an written in a Sufi-allusive (ishari) style that integrates outward (ẓahir) and inward (batin) meanings of the sacred text (Bursevi, 1971:1/5). Despite its significance, the work has received relatively limited scholarly attention in Western academia compared to other classical tafsir works, and its methodological contributions to the ishari exegetical tradition remain insufficiently analyzed in contemporary scholarship (Keeler, 2006:32).

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive scholarly analysis of Bursevi's *Ruḥ al-Bayan*, examining its structure, sources, methodological approach, and

distinctive contributions to the science of Qur'anic exegesis. By situating the work within the broader context of the Islamic exegetical tradition and the Ottoman Sufi intellectual milieu, the study aims to elucidate both the scholarly merits and the enduring significance of this tafsir for contemporary Islamic studies.

MAIN PART

1. Historical Context and the Tradition of Sufi Exegesis

The tradition of Sufi Qur'anic exegesis has deep roots in Islamic intellectual history, tracing its origins to the early centuries of Islam when mystics such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) began to articulate interpretations of the Qur'an that emphasized its inner, spiritual dimensions (Sands, 2006:25). The ishārī approach to tafsir is founded on the principle that the Qur'anic text possesses multiple layers of meaning, and that the outward (ẓāhir) and inward (bāṭin) dimensions are complementary rather than contradictory (Lory, 2012:18). This hermeneutical stance is rooted in the ḥadīth tradition itself, including the well-known report attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) stating that every verse of the Qur'an has an outward meaning and an inward meaning (Ibn Ḥibbān, 2000:1/276).

By the Ottoman period (14th–20th centuries), the Sufi exegetical tradition had reached a mature stage of development, enriched by the contributions of major figures such as Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 730/1329), and Ni'matullah Wali (d. 834/1431) (Knysh, 2000:180). Within this context, Bursevi's *Ruḥ al-Bayan* represents one of the most comprehensive and ambitious attempts to synthesize the linguistic-juridical and mystical-spiritual approaches to Qur'anic interpretation within a single work (Keeler, 2006:35). The intellectual environment of Ottoman Bursa, a major center of Sufi learning and the Khalwatiyya order, provided fertile ground for the production of such a work (Clayer, 1994:135).

2. Structure and Sources of *Ruḥ al-Bayan*

Ruḥ al-Bayan is a ten-volume complete commentary on the Qur'an, composed over approximately twenty-three years (Bursevi, 1971:1/2). The work is notable for its extensive and detailed nature: for instance, the commentary on Surat al-Fatiḥa alone spans seventeen pages, and although Surat al-Baqara in the Qur'an comprises roughly fifty pages, its exegesis in this work extends to 450 pages, thereby completing the entire first volume of 464 pages (Bursevi, 1971:1/3–464). This level of detail reflects Bursevi's

commitment to thoroughness and his conviction that the Qur’anic text demands multi-dimensional engagement (Keeler, 2006:38).

In the composition of *Ruḥ al-Bayan*, Bursevi drew upon a wide array of earlier exegetical, linguistic, juridical, and mystical sources. Among the most significant are the Persian work *Mawahib ‘Aliyya* by Ḥusayn Wa‘iz Kashifi (d. 910/1505), which served as an important model for the integration of Sufi insights into Qur’anic commentary (Odinayev, 2026:para. 3). Additionally, Bursevi makes extensive use of *Mufradat al-faẓ al-Qur’an* (“A Dictionary of Qur’anic Terms”) by al-Raghib al-Iṣfahani (d. 502/1108), an indispensable reference for understanding the lexical and semantic dimensions of Qur’anic vocabulary (al-Iṣfahani, 2009:5). In the *tafsir*, Bursevi cites al-Raghib frequently with expressions such as “qala al-Raghib” (“al-Raghib said”) or “kama fi al-Mufradat” (“as it is in al-Mufradat”), particularly when explaining the root meanings and figurative extensions of Qur’anic terms (Bursevi, 1971:10/485).

Another key source is *Kashf al-Asrar sharh Uṣul al-Bazdawi* by ‘Ala al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Aḥmad al-Bukhari (d. 730/1330), a renowned commentary on the *Uṣul* of Imam Fakhr al-Islam al-Bazdawi (d. 482/1089) in the field of *uṣul al-fiqh* (Khujayorov, 2026:para. 1). Bursevi relies on this work when explaining technical terminology employed in deriving legal rulings from Qur’anic verses – such as ‘amm (general), khaṣṣ (specific), mujmal (ambiguous), and mubayyan (clarified) – as well as when presenting the evidences and principles of the Ḥanafī legal school (Bursevi, 1971:1/22).

Of particular importance to the mystical dimension of *Ruḥ al-Bayan* is the Sufi exegetical work *Ta’wilat al-Najmiyya* by Najm al-Din Kubra (d. 618/1221), one of the most influential figures in Central Asian Sufism and the founder of the Kubrawiyya order (Kubra, 2009:1/5). Bursevi draws upon this work to provide deeply spiritual interpretations of Qur’anic verses, particularly in passages where the mystical significance of prophetic experience is discussed. For example, in his interpretation of *Surat al-Duḥa*, Bursevi cites from the *Ta’wilat* the interpretation of the verse “Your Lord has neither forsaken you nor hated you” (Q 93:3) as meaning: “He did not withhold from your outward the flow of divine grace and prophethood, nor did He withhold from your inward the grace of sainthood” (Kubra, 2009:6/350).

3. Methodological Approach: Integration of Zahir and Baṭin

The most distinctive methodological feature of *Ruḥ al-Bayan* is its systematic integration of outward (*ẓahir*) and inward (*baṭin*) dimensions of Qur’anic interpretation.

In this tafsir, Qur’anic verses are first interpreted from a lexical-grammatical and juridical (fiqhi) perspective, and subsequently from a Sufi standpoint. This methodological sequence – proceeding from the exoteric to the esoteric – distinguishes the work from many other exegetical writings and reflects Bursevi’s conviction that authentic spiritual interpretation must be grounded in sound linguistic and legal understanding (Bursevi, 1971:1/5; Sands, 2006:45).

This approach is consistent with the mainstream Sufi hermeneutical tradition, which insists that ishari interpretation must not contradict the outward meaning of the text but rather complement and deepen it. As al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) argued in his *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, the Qur’an is like a pearl whose outward shell protects an inner luminosity; both dimensions are essential and inseparable (al-Ghazali, 2011:1/289). Bursevi operationalizes this principle by presenting each verse in a layered manner, beginning with the apparent meaning accessible to all readers and progressively unveiling deeper spiritual significations accessible to those engaged in the Sufi path (suluk) (Keeler, 2006:42).

4. Illustrative Case: The Exegesis of Surat al-Ḍuḥa

The tafsir of Surat al-Ḍuḥa (Q 93) provides an instructive illustration of Bursevi’s exegetical methodology. The commentary on this relatively short sura occupies nine pages – a level of detail that exemplifies the thoroughness characteristic of *Ruḥ al-Bayan* throughout (Bursevi, 1971:10/478). Bursevi begins by drawing attention to the lexical meaning of the word “Ḍuḥa,” explaining that it refers to the time of day when the sun rises high, marking the beginning of the forenoon. He notes that it was at this time that Moses spoke with God and the magicians fell into prostration, citing the Qur’anic verse: “Let the people be gathered at the time of forenoon” (Q 20:59) (Bursevi, 1971:10/478).

The exegete then discusses the juridical dimensions of this time of day, noting that the Ḍuḥa prayer is unanimously considered a sunna across the four major legal schools (madhahib). At this point, the similarities and differences in the juridical treatment of this prayer across the Ḥanafī, Maliki, Shafī‘ī, and Ḥanbali schools are discussed in detail, reflecting the work’s engagement with the fiqhi dimension of tafsir (Bursevi, 1971:10/479).

Moving to the mystical dimension, Bursevi cites the interpretation of the great Sufi figure Junayd al-Baghdadi (816–909 CE), who understood “wa al-Ḍuḥa” as referring to the spiritual station (maqam) of shuhud (witnessing), and “wa al-layli idha saja” as

the station of *ghayn* (veiling or obscurity) (Bursevi, 1971:10/480). In this context, Bursevi references the prophetic *ḥadīth*: “Sometimes *ghayn* comes over my heart, and I seek forgiveness from my Lord one hundred times a day,” drawing from it the moral lesson that human hearts are susceptible to spiritual veiling through attachment to worldly matters, envy, hatred, and miserliness, and that consistent *istighfar* (seeking forgiveness) is necessary for spiritual purification (Muslim, n.d.:*ḥadīth* no. 2702; Bursevi, 1971:10/481).

The exegete further develops the symbolic correspondence between the brightness of day and the reception of revelation (*waḥy*), and the darkness of night and moments of sorrow or temporary cessation of revelation. In this connection, Bursevi recounts the well-known event in which revelation was delayed for fifteen days when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked about three matters – the People of the Cave (*Ahl al-Kahf*), *Dhul-Qarnayn*, and the nature of the Spirit (*Ruḥ*) – and responded without adding the exception “if Allah wills” (in *sha’ Allah*). The subsequent revelation of *Surat al-Kahf*, including the admonition “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed I will do that tomorrow,’ except [when adding], ‘if Allah wills’” (Q 18:23–24), is presented as the divine response, while *Surat al-Ḍuḥā* itself served to reassure the Prophet against the accusations and reproaches of the Meccans (Bursevi, 1971:10/483–485).

5. The Legacy and Reception of *Ruḥ al-Bayan*

The enduring significance of *Ruḥ al-Bayan* is attested by its extensive reception across the Islamic world. The work has been widely studied in Central Asia, Turkey, and the Balkan Peninsula, and continues to be a subject of study in madrasas and academic circles throughout the Muslim world (Kara, 2002:52). Due to the strong interest it has generated, the work has been published multiple times by various publishing houses, most notably by *Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya* in Beirut in 1971 (Bursevi, 1971:1/1).

The *tafsir* was later abridged by the contemporary Syrian exegete Muḥammad ‘Ali al-Ṣabuni (1930–2021), who produced a concise version by omitting some lengthy and weak narrations and making the text more accessible for modern readers. This abridged work was published in Arabic under the title *Tanwir al-Adhhan min Tafsir Ruḥ al-Bayan* (“Illuminating the Minds from the Tafsir of *Ruḥ al-Bayan*”) in four volumes through a collaboration between *Dar al-Qalam* in Damascus and *Dar Nashr al-Kutub al-Islamiyya* in Beirut (al-Ṣabuni, 2001:1/3). Subsequently, this abridged version was translated into Turkish by a group of thirteen translators and published in Istanbul by *Erkam Matbaası* under the title *Muhtasar Ruḥ al-Bayan Tefsiri* in ten volumes. The fact that this Turkish

edition was revised and prepared for its eighth publication in 2012 demonstrates the considerable and sustained demand for the work (Bursevi, 2012:1/5).

In addition to its exegetical content, *Ruḥ al-Bayan* also includes ḥadīths, accounts from the lives of saints (awliya'), aphorisms, and particularly gnostic ('irfani) interpretations drawn from Jalal al-Din Rumi's (d. 672/1273) *Mathnawi*. This integration of Rumi's poetry and wisdom into Qur'anic exegesis reflects the deep influence of the *Mathnawi* tradition on Ottoman Sufi intellectual life and underscores Bursevi's commitment to a holistic, spiritually enriched approach to tafsir (Chittick, 1983:45).

6. Critical Evaluation and Scholarly Significance

While *Ruḥ al-Bayan* is widely celebrated for its depth, comprehensiveness, and spiritual richness, certain critical perspectives have been noted in the scholarly literature. Some traditional scholars have expressed reservations about specific ishāri interpretations that appear to extend beyond the established boundaries of mainstream exegetical methodology, particularly where allegorical readings seem to attenuate the primacy of the outward meaning (al-Dhahabi, 2000:2/382). Additionally, the inclusion of certain weak (ḍa'if) or fabricated (mawdu') narrations has been noted as a limitation, although this is a feature shared by many classical tafsir works of the pre-modern period and reflects the different standards of ḥadīth criticism that prevailed in Sufi scholarly circles (Brown, 2009:235).

Nevertheless, the scholarly significance of *Ruḥ al-Bayan* remains substantial. The work represents one of the most successful attempts in the history of Islamic exegesis to bridge the divide between the exoteric and esoteric sciences, offering readers a multi-layered engagement with the Qur'anic text that is simultaneously linguistically rigorous, jurisprudentially informed, and spiritually profound (Keeler, 2006:48). Its methodological approach – proceeding from the outward to the inward, from the legal to the mystical, from the textual to the experiential – constitutes a distinctive contribution to the hermeneutics of sacred scripture that merits continued scholarly attention and critical engagement (Sands, 2006:55).

From a broader perspective, Bursevi's work serves as a crucial document for understanding the intellectual and spiritual culture of the Ottoman period, the dynamics of Sufi scholarship in the Balkans and Anatolia, and the transmission of Islamic knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Its integration of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish scholarly traditions within a single exegetical framework reflects the cosmopolitan

character of Ottoman Islamic learning and its capacity for creative synthesis (Kara, 2002:58; Clayer, 1994:142).

CONCLUSION

Ismail Haqqi Bursevi stands as one of the most significant exegetes and Sufi scholars of the Ottoman period, and his tafsir *Ruḥ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* represents a monumental achievement in the science of Qur'anic interpretation. The present analysis has demonstrated that the work is distinguished by several defining characteristics: its comprehensive scope, spanning ten volumes and engaging every sura of the Qur'an with exceptional detail; its systematic methodological approach, which integrates lexical-grammatical, juridical, and mystical dimensions of interpretation in a coherent sequence; its extensive engagement with a diverse array of earlier Islamic scholarly sources, including linguistic, legal, and Sufi works; and its deep commitment to the *ishari* exegetical tradition, which seeks to uncover the spiritual significances of the Qur'anic text without negating its outward meaning.

The illustrative analysis of the tafsir of Surat al-*Duḥa* has revealed how Bursevi operationalizes his methodology in practice, moving from lexical and juridical analysis to profound mystical reflection, drawing on the interpretations of classical Sufi figures such as Junayd al-Baghdadi and Najm al-Din Kubra, and extracting ethical and spiritual lessons from prophetic narratives. The work's subsequent abridgment, translation, and continued publication across the Islamic world attest to its enduring relevance and appeal.

At the same time, a balanced scholarly assessment requires acknowledgment of certain limitations, including the occasional inclusion of weak narrations and the potential for certain *ishari* interpretations to be perceived as exceeding the established bounds of mainstream exegetical practice. These limitations, however, do not diminish the fundamental scholarly and spiritual value of the work, which remains an indispensable resource for students and scholars of Qur'anic exegesis, Sufism, and Ottoman intellectual history.

In conclusion, *Ruḥ al-Bayān* occupies a distinguished position within the Islamic exegetical canon as a work that successfully bridges the divide between the outward and inward sciences of the Qur'an. Bursevi's legacy, as both a prolific scholar and a dedicated spiritual practitioner, continues to inspire scholarly inquiry and spiritual reflection across the Muslim world. Future research should explore comparative analyses of *Ruḥ al-Bayan*

with other major Sufi tafsir works, investigate its reception and influence in specific regional contexts – particularly Central Asia and the Balkans – and examine its potential contributions to contemporary hermeneutical discussions within Islamic thought.

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