(Re)constructions of the Sacred Past, Gender, and Exegesis: Some Medieval Trajectories


...and he [al-Zamakhsharī] gave al-Silafī² and Zaynab al-Shaʿriyya licenses to transmit [his works].³

The first of these quotations is a merit-of-sūra tradition which al-Thaʿlabī cites in the preamble to his exegesis of Sūrat al-Nūr in his Quran commentary. The second is from the entry for al-Zamakhsharī in al-Dāwūdī’s tenth/sixteenth century biographical work on Quran commentators. In different ways, these two quotations illustrate Jan Assmann’s contention that human beings generate the past by relating to it.⁴ They also highlight the gendered nature of human (re)constructions of the past in the medieval tafsīr genre.

Al-Thaʿlabī elects to quote a tradition ascribed to ʿĀʾisha bt. Abī Bakr (henceforth, “the spinning tradition”) which he had obtained from one of his teachers, Ibn Fanjawayh (d. 414/1023). While as we will see, its ties to ʿĀʾisha are very dubious at best, this is beside the point for al-Thaʿlabī. Here, he exercises his power as an exegete to (re)construct and (re)present an idealised vision of the sacred past at his discretion, in order to address concerns current in his own historical context.

In his Ṭabaqāt al-mufassirīn, a well-known biographical dictionary of exegetes, al-Dāwūdī elects to make a very brief mention of a woman who had died some three centuries earlier, in his entry for al-Zamakhsharī. Umm Muʿayyad

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¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, al-Kashf iv, 342. For the appearance of this tradition in other exegetical works, see below.
² Abū l-Ṭāhir Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Silafī of Alexandria (d. 576/1180); for him, see: Lane, A traditional Muʿtazilite 57–8.
³ “wa ajāza li-l-Silafī wa Zaynab al-Shaʿriyya” (al-Dāwūdī, Ṭabaqāt 511).
⁴ Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis 31.
Zaynab bt. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sha‘rī of Naysābūr (d. 615/1218) had received a general license (ijāza ʿāmma) from al-Zamakhsharī to transmit all of his works, which included his Quran commentary, and her name appears in one of the chains of transmission of the Kashshāf. In this entry, she is a footnote in what is otherwise a man’s story.

This chapter examines the (re)construction of memory in some medieval Quran commentaries as a gendered process through the lens of one interpretive trajectory—the continued citation of exegetical materials ascribed to women who are for the most part Companions or (much less often) Successors. To varying extents, a number of medieval exegetes followed their predecessors such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha‘labī and others in citing such exegetical materials. The spinning tradition illustrates an important means—the isnād—through which exegetical materials of this type continue to be incorporated into some medieval Quran commentaries. At the same time, this tradition also raises some complex historical questions about portrayals of wittingness, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the implications of (re)constructions of idealised visions of the sacred past in a number of early and later medieval Sunni Quran commentaries for the gendering of exegetical authority. Beginning with a discussion of the spinning tradition’s implications for some exegetes’ (re)constructions of exegetical authority, this chapter then focuses on some of the considerations involved in select Quran commentators’ decisions to include or exclude exegetical materials ascribed to female figures, to the extent that this can be reconstructed. While such decisions were apparently shaped by the interaction of a number of factors, ultimately it was the individual (male) exegete who enjoyed the authority to select from the past and the present in the course of the interpretive process.

As the brief mention of Zaynab al-Sha‘riyya in al-Dāwūdī’s biographical entry for al-Zamakhsharī illustrates, regardless of what al-Tha‘labī’s choice to quote the spinning tradition in his Quran commentary might lead us to assume, available evidence indicates that a few women from scholarly families apparently participated in certain ways on the margins of the tafsīr tradition. It seems that this was possible because rather paradoxically, the persistent

5 Lane, *A traditional Mu‘tazilite* 57. For more on Zaynab, see below.
6 The great majority of Quran commentaries discussed in any detail in this chapter are Sunni, with the significant exception of al-Zamakhsharī. His commentary is included here for three main reasons: (1) it provides evidence for the impact of al-Tha‘labī’s commentary on the pre-modern tafsīr genre, (2) its widespread influence on late medieval Sunni quranic exegesis, and (3) the evidence its transmission history provides for female involvement on the margins of tafsīr.