

Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn: A Milestone in the Development of Tafsīr Literature in Kashmir

Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn: Sebuah Tonggak Pencapaian dalam Perkembangan Literatur Tafsir di Kashmir

Ghazi Nazir Naqash^(*),

*Corresponding author: Email ghazinazir7@gmail.com

(*) Islamic University of Science & Technology Kashmir, Administrative Block IUST, IUST, University Ave, Awantipora, 192122

Abstract

This study examines *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fi Tafsīr Kalām Rab al-ʿĀlamīn*, a 16th-century tafsīr work by Yaʿqūb Ṣarfī, which is a significant milestone in the development of tafsīr literature in Kashmir. Despite its substantial influence on Kashmir's intellectual history, Ṣarfī's tafsīr has often been overlooked in academic research due to the poor quality of the manuscript and the limited availability of sources. This article adopts a qualitative approach to explore the unique structure of Ṣarfī's tafsīr, which combines various disciplines such as tafsīr, ḥadīth, fiqh, kalām, and taṣawwuf, and examines how this work connects to the broader tradition of tafsīr in the Islamic world. Through an in-depth analysis of the text and relevant literature, the article demonstrates how *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn* highlights the crucial role of Kashmiri scholars in advancing tafsīr, while also enriching the intellectual discourse of 16th-century Islam. Although incomplete, covering only a small portion of the Qur'an, the work's contribution is invaluable for understanding tafsīr in the Indian subcontinent, which at the time was influenced by major tafsīr works such as *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī* and *al-Bayḍhawī*. The study also addresses the challenges faced in preserving the manuscript of *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn*, which currently exists in a very fragile condition. The article emphasizes the importance of transcription and conservation efforts to ensure that this work can continue to be studied and analyzed by future generations. Thus, this research not only contributes to the understanding of tafsīr in Kashmir but also broadens the scope of tafsīr studies within the larger Islamic intellectual tradition.

Keywords: *Yaʿqūb Ṣarfī, Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn, Tafsīr, Kashmir, Islamic Thought*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fi Tafsīr Kalām Rab al-ʿĀlamīn*, sebuah karya tafsīr abad ke-16 oleh Yaʿqūb Ṣarfī, yang merupakan tonggak penting dalam perkembangan literatur tafsīr di Kashmir. Meskipun karya ini memiliki pengaruh besar dalam sejarah intelektual Kashmir, tafsīr Ṣarfī sering diabaikan dalam penelitian akademik karena kualitas manuskrip yang buruk dan keterbatasan sumber yang tersedia. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengeksplorasi struktur tafsīr Ṣarfī yang unik, yang menggabungkan berbagai disiplin ilmu seperti tafsīr, ḥadīth, fiqh, kalām, dan taṣawwuf, serta bagaimana karya ini terhubung dengan tradisi tafsīr yang lebih luas di dunia Islam. Melalui analisis mendalam terhadap teks dan literatur terkait, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn* menggambarkan peran penting cendekiawan Kashmir dalam mengembangkan tafsīr, sekaligus memperkaya wacana intelektual Islam pada abad ke-16. Meskipun karya ini tidak lengkap dan hanya mencakup sebagian kecil dari Al-Qur'an, kontribusinya sangat berharga dalam memahami tafsīr di wilayah sub-benua India, yang pada masa itu terpengaruh oleh karya-karya



tafsīr besar seperti Tafsīr al-Qurtubī dan al-Baydhāwī. Penelitian ini juga membahas tantangan yang dihadapi dalam pelestarian manuskrip *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn*, yang saat ini hanya ada dalam kondisi yang sangat rapuh. Artikel ini menekankan pentingnya upaya transkripsi dan konservasi untuk memastikan karya ini dapat terus dipelajari dan dianalisis oleh generasi mendatang. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini tidak hanya berkontribusi pada pemahaman tafsīr di Kashmir, tetapi juga memperluas cakupan studi tafsīr yang lebih luas dalam tradisi keilmuan Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Ya'qūb Ṣarfī, Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn, Tafsīr, Kashmir, Pemikiran Islam*

Introduction

The prevailing scholarly discourse on the history of Qur'ānic interpretation in the Indian sub-continent predominantly traces its evolution from the 18th century onwards, emphasizing the contributions of Shah Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (1703-1762) and his school, besides the contribution of modernist scholars such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and others who are often highlighted. These figures are widely credited with shaping the landscape of *tafsīr* in the Indian sub-continent, with particular attention to their methodological innovations and their responses to colonial modernity.¹ However, this narrative is not without contestation, as it marginalizes the exegetical tradition that existed prior to this period, including *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rabb al-Ālamīn* an important work under investigation.

The tendency to anchor the origins of Indian *tafsīr* literature in the 18th century overlooks earlier exegetical efforts that were deeply rooted in the intellectual, theological, and mystical traditions of the region. This oversight results in a skewed historiography that underrepresents the rich tradition of Qur'ānic interpretation prior to the rise of modernist thought. One major gap in this historiographical approach is the neglect of Kashmiri exegetical scholarship, which played a significant role in shaping the *tafsīr* literature in the subcontinent. A critical reassessment is crucial for developing a more nuanced understanding of how *tafsīr* literature evolved outside the dominant paradigms of modernist and reformist thought. This entails recognizing the regional and linguistic diversity of *tafsīr* traditions and acknowledging the intellectual contributions of scholars from Kashmir and other historically marginalized regions.

There are several valuable previous studies related to the tradition of *tafsīr* in the sub-continent. Zubaid Ahmad, for instance, has paved the way to this kind of studies. In his book derived from his dissertation, he wrote a special chapter on the development of Qur'ānic commentary in India. He made an inventory of *tafsīr* and related literature beginning with 'Alāuddīn Maḥā'īmī's (d. 1431) *Tabṣīr al-*

1 For a recent study on tafsīr tradition in the Indian sub-continent, see Abdul Kader Choughley, *Tradition of Tafsīr (Qur'ānic Exegesis) in the Indian Subcontinent* (South Africa: Ahsan Academy of Research, 2021).

Ra mān wa Taisīr al-Mannān to similar works in the 19th century.²For the recent contribution, Abdul Kader Choughley's particular study of *tafsīr* traditions in India is worthy of mention. Although his main study begins with the contributions of the "Walī Allah family" in the 17th and 18th Centuries, he has at least touched upon some material related to the tradition of Qur'ānic *tafsīr* in the sub-continent in the earlier period. Like Ahmad, Choughley start his observation with that of Mahā'imī. He also includes material related to the *tafsīr* literature attributed to Shaykh Mubarak Nāgūrī (d. 1593) and his sons Abū al-Faīḍ Fayḍī/Faizi (d. 1595) and Abū al-Faḍl (d. 1602) who played an enormous role in the propagation of the *Dini Ilāhī* of Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1602) from the Mughal Sultanate.³

However, both Ahmad and Choughley seem to have missed the contribution of Shaykh Ya'qūb Ṣarfī (d. 1595), an important Kashmiri scholar who was contemporary with Shaykh Mubārak's family. Against this backdrop, *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn* emerges as a pivotal yet underexplored work that challenges the conventional historiography of *tafsīr* in India. This rare and significant work of *tafsīr* offers compelling evidence that a rich tradition of interpretation existed in Kashmir well before the 18th century. The neglect of this work in mainstream academic discourse is symptomatic of a broader historiographical bias that prioritizes Persianate and Mughal-era scholarship while marginalizing other regional traditions.

Besides *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn*, almost thirty complete or partial translations and *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān have been written by the scholars of the Valley. Besides, some books and pamphlets were also written on the technical issues related to *ʿUlum al-Qur'ān*. Among more than thirty small and voluminous works written by Kashmiri scholars, *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rabb al-Ālamīn* is only one of its type. This *tafsīr* was written by Ya'qūb Ṣarfī who is one of the most influential personalities in the socio-religious history of Kashmir. However, this work remained unexplored until this paper was written. In the effort to begin the study of this important work, the present article is a preliminary observation on some pieces of *Maṭlab al-Talibīn*'s manuscript mainly in terms of the material contained therein.

Islam in Kashmir Prior to the 17th Century

The rise of Islam as a global civilization marks a remarkable phenomenon in human history. Within a century of its inception, Muslims expanded their influence across vast territories of Asia, Africa, and Europe, integrating diverse regions into

2 M.G. Zubaid Ahmad, *The Contribution of India to Arabic Literature* (Punjab: Maktaba-i-Din-o-Danish, 1946), 15-35.

3 Choughley, *Tradition of Tafsir*, 35-41.

the realm of Islam. The Indian subcontinent was no exception to this transformative process. In the Indian subcontinent, Sindh was the first province which was liberated through the conquests of early Muslim military expeditions.⁴ However, the picturesque Valley of Kashmir experienced a different trajectory. During the Umayyad Caliphate, while the region attracted the interest of early Muslims, it was not through military conquest but rather through the efforts of scholars and *sūfis* from Central Asia and other parts that Islam began to take root in Kashmir. The profound transformation of Kashmir from a bastion of Hinduism to a stronghold of Islam was heralded by the collective endeavors of the Central Asian scholar, Sayyid Sharaf al-Dīn (d.1326) and first Muslim ruler of Kashmir, Rinchana/Sultān Ṣadr al-Dīn (r. 1320-1323) who was formerly a Buddhist from Ladakh.⁵ However, the first Muslim ruling dynasty only emerged when Shah-Mir (d. 1342) became the ruler of Kashmir.⁶

In Choughley's notes, the penetration of Islamic intellectualism in the Indian subcontinent cannot be separated from the Mongol invasion in the 13th century as the important setting. This invasion, for him, led to a mass exodus of scholars who sought refuge in the subcontinent.⁷ Only after a century after that event, the early preachers and educators of Islam in Kashmir played a pivotal role in imparting the foundational knowledge of Islam to the newly converted Muslim population. Through their tireless efforts, they succeeded in bringing a significant number of people into the fold of Islam, laying the groundwork for the region's spiritual and intellectual transformation. However, the watershed moment in the history of Islam in Kashmir was the arrival of Mir Sayyid 'Alī Ḥamadānī (d.1385), known as "Shāh-i-Ḥamadān," and his distinguished companions.

Shāh-i-Ḥamadān was not only a highly successful Islamic preacher (*dā'ī*) but also a scholar of extraordinary intellectual depth. His vast corpus of writings reflects his mastery over a diverse range of disciplines, including Qur'ānic sciences, philosophy, ethics, jurisprudence, political science, sociology, psychology, and poetry. His linguistic versatility as a polyglot further highlights his intellectual prowess, enabling him to connect with diverse audiences effectively. Shāh-i-Ḥamadān employed a two-pronged strategy to reshape Kashmiri society and redirect it from a fragmented, ethno-centric worldview to a unified Islamic (*tawhīdī*) perspective. On one hand, he emphasized the implementation of Shari'ah by encouraging rulers to

4 Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 4.

5 Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir* (Srinagar: Oriental Publishing House, 2004), 55; Aziz Ahmad, "Conversions to Islam in The Valley of Kashmir, *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (1979), 5-6.

6 Ahmad, "Conversions to Islam", 3.

7 Choughley, *Tradition of Tafsir*, 34.

govern in accordance with Islamic principles. On the other hand, he and his disciples focused on the socio-religious transformation of the general population, fostering spiritual, ethical, and intellectual growth. His works, such as *Zakhīrah al-Mulūk* and *ʿAwrād al-Faṭḥiyyah*, are testaments to this comprehensive approach. These texts encapsulate both practical guidelines for governance and spiritual practices, forming the foundation of his holistic vision for societal reform.⁸

The legacy of Shāh-i-Hamadān continued through the efforts of subsequent scholars and Sūfis, including luminaries such as Shaykh Ḥamzah Makhdūm (d. 1576), Baba Dawūd Khākī (d. 1585), Shaykh Yaʿqūb Ṣarfī (d. 1595), Shaykh Muʿīn al-Dīn Naqshbandī (d. 1674), Shaykh Muḥammad Murād Bukharī (d. 1760) and others. These figures made significant contributions to introducing and institutionalizing core Islamic religious sciences in Kashmir across centuries. Through their teachings, writings, and spiritual guidance, they further enriched the intellectual and religious fabric of Kashmiri society. Thus, the arrival of Shāh-i-Hamadān marked a critical juncture in the history of Islam in Kashmir in the 14th century, catalyzing a profound socio-religious transformation that laid the foundation for the flourishing of Islamic scholarship and spirituality in the region.

In the political context, the history of Islam in Kashmir is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of the broader Indian sub-continent (Hindustan). In the history of Islam in Kashmir, the mid-16th century marked an important phase where Kashmir eventually became part of the Mughal Empire under Akbar the Great. The Mughals' desire to annex Kashmir dates back to the time of Babur (d. 1530), the empire's founder. Internally, a change of power from the Shāh-Mīr dynasty in the 1555 to the Chak dynasty caused turmoil. According to some historians, this was against the backdrop of the oppression meted out by the Chak rulers to some of the *ʿulamā* forcing them to migrate to other regions. It was at this juncture that some of them, including Yaʿqūb Ṣarfī, approached Akbar the Great who at that time wanted Kashmir to be his territory. It was in this context that the Mughal finally annexed Kashmir around 1586⁹ and it is in this context that the author of the *tafsir* under investigation spent the rest of his career in Kashmir.¹⁰

8 Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2015), 28.

9 Manzoor Ahmad Bhat, "Shaikh Yaʿqūb Sarfi (928/1521-1003/1595)", *Insight Islamicus*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001), 122-123. See also Sameer Ahmad Sofi, "Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi of Kashmir: A Case Study of his literary and political contribution" *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (2016), 258-259; Mushtaq Ahmed, "Mughal Rule in Kashmir—An Appraisal, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 48 (1987); Balraj Puri, "Major Identities of Jammu and Kashmir State, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (2001), 71.

10 Mohibul Hasan Khan, "Some Aspects of Kashmir History Under the Shah Mirs and The Chaks", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 16 (1953), 194-195; Sofi, "Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi

However, the introduction and development of core Islamic sciences in Kashmir progressed at a slower pace compared to other parts of the Indian sub-continent. This was largely due to various socio-political challenges that impeded the establishment and flourishing of scholarly traditions in the early phases of the spread of Islam in the valley. In the initial period, the primary focus of the early preachers and educators of Islam was to teach the fundamentals of the faith to the newly converted Muslim population. Their efforts were primarily directed at instilling a basic understanding of Islamic beliefs, practices, and ethics, which was essential for consolidating the religious identity of the nascent Muslim community in Kashmir. These foundational teachings laid the groundwork for the eventual evolution of Islamic sciences in the region.

Over time, as Muslim rule became firmly established in Kashmir, the socio-political environment became more conducive to intellectual and academic pursuits. This stability facilitated the establishment of numerous centers of higher Islamic learning across the valley. These institutions not only served as hubs for the study of core Islamic sciences such as *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, and *ḥadīth* but also became platforms for broader intellectual engagement, including theology, philosophy, and the study of the Arabic and Persian languages. The establishment of these centers marked a significant shift in the intellectual landscape of Kashmir, enabling the region to contribute to the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. Despite the challenges faced during its formative years, the development of Islamic sciences in Kashmir stands as a testament to the resilience and dedication of its scholars and educators.

The Kashmirī Sultāns, in their pursuit of fostering a thriving intellectual milieu, engaged not only local scholars but also sought the expertise of esteemed academics hailing from Central Asia and other regions within the broader Muslim world. The educational curriculum adopted in these institutions was influenced by the traditions prevalent in Sub-continent, Central Asia, and Turkistan. Consequently, for the first time in the region, alongside the foundational Islamic disciplines such as *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *taṣawwuf* a spectrum of other subjects including philosophy, mathematics, metaphysics, and logic were introduced, placing Kashmir at par with other intellectual centers across the Muslim world.¹¹

The introduction and academic teaching of *tafsīr* authored by leading *mufasssirūn* of Arabia and Persia like Ibn Jarir al-Tabarī (d. 923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) led to an understanding of the Qur'ānic

of Kashmir", 259.

11 Ghulam Muhyid Din Sufi. *Kashmīr, Being a History of Kashmir from the Earliest Times to Our Own*. Vol. 2 (Light & Life Publishers, 1974), 347.

discourse as well as other relevant methodological problems and issues pertaining to the science of *tafsīr*.¹² In particular, Choughley mentions *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, alongside other literary contributions, as one of the sources that had a significant influence on Indian exegetes as early as the 13th century. He also notes that the early tafsir works written in the subcontinent were mostly written in Arabic a fact that reflects the genealogical tradition.¹³

Ya'qūb Ṣarfī: A Sketch of His Life

Syaikh Ya'qūb Ṣarfī, popularly known in Kashmir as Ishān-Ṣāḥab, is a towering figure in the socio-religious history of the region. Born in Srinagar in 928/1521, he hailed from a distinguished lineage deeply rooted in Kashmir's socio-political and scholarly traditions. His grand-father, Mīr Bāyazīd, served as a high-ranking official in the court of Sultan Zayn al-Ābidīn (d. 1470), a ruler from Shah-Mir dynasty, renowned for his contributions to the cultural and intellectual life of Kashmir. His father, Syaikh Ḥasan Ganāī 'Āsmī (Mīr Hasan), was a devoted disciple of the eminent scholar Ḥafīz Mulla Muḥammad Basīr, whose intellectual legacy profoundly influenced Ṣarfī's own educational journey.¹⁴

Ya'qūb Ṣarfī (hereinafter referred to as Ṣarfī) displayed an extraordinary aptitude for learning from an early age. At the remarkably young age of seven, he memorized the entire Qur'ān, an early indication of his commitment to Islamic scholarship. This foundational accomplishment marked the beginning of a lifelong dedication to knowledge. His early education was nurtured under the tutelage of Muḥammad 'Ānī, a renowned scholar from Central Asia who laid the groundwork for Ṣarfī's primary education in Islamic sciences.¹⁵ Having completed his foundational studies, Ṣarfī continued his academic journey at the prestigious institution headed by Muḥammad Basīr. There, he undertook an exhaustive curriculum that included *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, philosophy, and logic. This comprehensive education provided him with a robust intellectual framework, enabling him to delve deeply into a wide range of disciplines.¹⁶

At the age of nineteen, He embarked on a transformative journey to Samarqand, one of the most celebrated centers of Islamic learning. This city, steeped in a rich tradition of scholarship, served as the backdrop for a pivotal phase in

12 Sufi. Kashmir, 347; Choughley, Tradition of Tafsir, 35.

13 Choughley, Tradition of Tafsir, 34-35.

14 Muḥammad A'azam Didmarī, Wāqī'āt-e-Kashmir, translated by Shamsudin Ahmad (Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Islamic Research Centre, 2019), 176.

15 Didmarī, Wāqī'āt-e-Kashmir, 177.

16 Didmarī, Wāqī'āt-e-Kashmir, 177-178.

his intellectual and spiritual development. In Samarqand, he became a disciple of the eminent Central Asian *sūfī*, Husayn Khawārizimī. Under the mentorship of Khawārizimī, Ṣarfī gained profound insights into the spiritual dimensions of Islam, further enhancing his erudition.¹⁷ It was from Khawārizimī that Sarfi received religious instruction in Kubrawiyah *sūfī*-order (*ṭarīqah*) making one of the most prominent *sūfī* of the 16th century belonging to this order. In Kashmir, the Kubrawiyah *sūfī*-order has had a tremendous influence on various aspects of people's lives.¹⁸

His journey to Samarqand was punctuated by visits to other notable cities, including Jammu, Sialkot, Lahore, Badakhshan, Balkh, and Ghuristan. Each stop provided opportunities for engagement with local scholars, enriching his understanding of various Islamic disciplines. During a seven-month stay in Kabul, he studied under renowned scholars such as Qaḍī Abū al-Ma'ālī and Muḥammad Lārī, further expanding his intellectual repertoire.

Drawing on the wisdom he had accumulated during his travels, he became a beacon of knowledge and spirituality in the valley. His teaching and guidance attracted numerous disciples, who carried forward his intellectual and spiritual legacy. Driven by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, Ṣarfī undertook another extensive journey, this time exploring key centers of Islamic civilization in Khurasan, Iran, and Baghdad. During this voyage, he met Shah Tahmasp, the Safavid ruler, and counseled him against the persecution of *ahl al-sunnah* (sunni Muslims), demonstrating his commitment to fostering unity and justice within the Muslim community.

Continuing his travels, Ṣarfī ventured to Yemen and eventually to the sacred land of Hijāz with the intent of performing *hajj*. While in Makkah, he seized the opportunity to further his studies under the guidance of some of the most distinguished scholars of the time. These included Ibn Ḥajar al-Makkī (d. 1567), 'Abd al-'Azīz, and Ḥasan Syāmī, among others. His scholarly pursuits in Makkah culminated in the conferral of an *ijāzah* (scholarly authorization) in *ḥadīth* from Ibn Ḥajar al-Makkī, an acknowledgment of his profound mastery of Islamic sciences.¹⁹

His journeys across the Islamic world not only enriched his own understanding but also allowed him to bring diverse scholarly traditions back to Kashmir. On his way back to Kashmir, Ṣarfī made a brief sojourn in Gujarat where he taught *ḥadīth* and *taṣawwuf* to the famous scholar and *sūfī*, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624). When he arrived back in Kashmir, he was met with the challenge of chaos under the leadership of the ruling dynasty at that time, particularly under Ya'qūb Khan where

¹⁷ Didmarī, *Wāqī'āt-e-Kashmir*, 179.

¹⁸ Sofi, "Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi", 257-258.

¹⁹ G.R.Jan, *Jāmi' al-Kamālāt* (Srinagar: KitābMa al, 2018), 33-45.

persecution of the *‘ulama* took place. It was at this juncture that he supported the movement asking Akbar the Great to annex Kashmir which took place in 1586.²⁰

Throughout his life, Ṣarfī demonstrated a rare combination of intellectual brilliance, spiritual depth, and an unwavering commitment to the dissemination of Islamic knowledge. His efforts played a crucial role in introducing and institutionalizing the core Islamic sciences in the region, leaving an indelible mark on its intellectual and spiritual landscape. Ṣarfī’s legacy endures as a testament to his dedication to knowledge and his role as a bridge between the Islamic heartlands and Kashmir. His contributions, both as a scholar and as a spiritual guide, continue to inspire generations of students and scholars in the region and beyond.

Ṣarfī authored books on *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, *sīrah* and poetry. Despite their high academic value, most of his books are still in their manuscript form. Among the books authored by Ṣarfī are as follows: *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rabb al-‘Ālamī*, *Syarḥ Thulāthiyyāt al-Bukhārī*, *Maghāzī al-Nabī*, *Manāsik al-Ḥajj*, *Wāmiq Adhrā*, *Maqāmāt al-Murshid*, *Maslak al-Akhyār*, *Risālah Zikriyyah*, *Risālah Kanz al-Jawāhir*, and many other.

He also wrote a *taqrīz*/foreword to *Saḥwātīh al-lhām* of Faizi, which is an essential addition to the science of *tafsīr*. Becoming a *tafsīr* without dotted letters that contains mysterious elements embedded in elusive ways, *Saḥwātī*’ is among the most phenomenal work unprecedented in its genre. As mentioned earlier, Faizi and his brother Abu Fazl were scholars who made a career at the royal court of Akbar the Great.²¹ In this regard, it is worth noting that Sarfi had very close relations with some of the most prominent scholars of his time including Mubarak Naguri family who became statesmen during Akbar’s time.²²

Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn: An Introduction

Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rab al-‘Ālamīn, written by Ṣarfī, is an important milestone in the development of *tafsīr* in Kashmir. The analytical study of this *tafsīr* indicates that at the outset of the 16th century, Kashmiri scholars were not only acquainted with major Islamic religious sciences such as *‘ilm al-ḥadīth*, *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, *usūl al-fiqh*, *taṣawwuf*, Islamic philosophy, Arabic grammar, and literature but had also gained expertise in all these essential sciences. The methodology, style of presentation, extensive discussions on various aspects of *tafsīr* sciences, and a huge number of references from major books of Islamic religious sciences have established

20 Bhat, “Shaikh Ya’qub Sarfi”, 122-123; Khan, “Some Aspects of Kashmir History”, 194-195; Sofi, “Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi of Kashmir”, 259.

21 Choughley, *Tradition of Tafsir*, 43-44; Sofi, “Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi”, 259.

22 Sofi, “Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi”, 258.

the author of this *tafsir* as a scholar of the highest caliber.

Although the surviving *tafsir* material is incomplete and comprises of exegesis of Sūrah al-Fātihah and the first sixty-two verses of Sūrah al-Baqarah only, yet the content of this *tafsir* makes it the only *tafsir* of its kind written by a Kashmiri scholar. The *tafsir* remains in manuscript form and is preserved in the manuscript section of the Department of Libraries and Research, J and K Government, albeit in a deplorable condition. The manuscript comprises of 192 folios and is registered under accession number 4. This study will be based on this manuscript version. The fact that the mentioned *tafsir* was written by Ṣarfī is established by the author's own declaration in the foreword of this *tafsir*. However, due to degradation of the manuscript, it isn't possible to establish whether the said manuscript was written by the author himself or has been copied by someone.



Figure 1

First Pages of *Matlab al-Talibin* from the Manuscript stored in Department of Libraries and Research, J and K Government

At the outset of this *tafsir*, Ṣarfī mentions the reason for writing this *tafsir*.

He states as follows.²³

سألني بعض من الاحباء أن أشرح لأيات القرآن المجيد، وأفسر سور الفرقان الحميد
شرحا وتفسيرا يكشف عن وجوه المعاني، أستارها

“Some of my beloved people asked me to explain the verses of the Qur’ān and to elucidate the *Sūrah*s (chapters) of the Qur’ān in such a way that will reveal the hidden meanings of their words”.

In his brief foreword, He has also hinted at the circumstances in which this *tafsīr* was written. He writes:²⁴

حبا على الإقبال على حصول مسألته، جدت قريحتي بصر البليات وخذت
طبيعتي تعرض النكبات، وساء حالي وتفرق بالي بحوادث الأعصار والأزمان، وتباعد البلدان
وبنوا الأوطان عني حين أحرر صفحا منه بالكشمير وصفحا آخر بالهند

“My desire for fulfilling their request encouraged me to exert myself and prepare my intellect to overlook the [prevailing] troubles, and calamities, the prevailing unpleasant circumstances, and the longing for home and fellow countrymen, [My circumstances] are such that I am writing one page of this *tafsīr* in Kashmir and another one in India.”

Material Sources

Matlab al-Ṭalibīn is one of the finest examples of what is known in Sunni conventional *tafsīr* categorization *asal-tafsīr bi al-ra’y al-mahmūd/al-jāiz*.²⁵ Besides basing his *tafsīr* on Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, and the sayings of the companions and the followers, the author has used pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, *‘Ilm al-kalām* and *taṣawwuf* as the sources for explaining the Qur’ān. He has often substantiated his arguments by quoting and analyzing references from the books of famous scholars like al-Jurjānī (d. 1413), Fakhruddīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), al-Zamakhshārī (d. 1143), al-Qurtubī (d. 1273), al-Bayḍāwī (d.1319), al-Ghazālī (d.1111), Ibn Ṣalāh (d.1245), and many others scholars.

One of the key features of this *tafsīr* is the detailed grammatical and semantic analysis of Qur’ānic verses. Ṣarfī has also discussed many jurisprudential issues in detail. Although He essentially belongs to the Ḥanafī school of jurisprudence, yet he often discusses the opinions of scholars belonging to other schools of Islamic

²³ Ya’qūb Sarafī, *Matlab al-Ṭalibīn fi Tafsīr Kalām Rab al-‘Ālāmīn*, MS No. 4, Department of Libraries and Research, J and K Government, 1.

²⁴ Sarafī, *Matlab al-Ṭalibīn*, 1.

²⁵ Muhammad Hussein al-Dzahabi, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīr* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, nd.), Vol. 1, 183-188

jurisprudence as well. In this *tafsir*, Şarfi has also discussed many issues related to *taşawwuf* as well. He is impressed by the *wujūdī* philosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī. As far as ‘ilm al-kālām is concerned, Şarfi belongs to Asy’arī school of thought.

A careful study of Şarfi’s *tafsir* reveals that he was well versed and had access to the most important works in the field of ‘ilm al-*tafsir*, ‘ilm al-*ḥadith*, *fiqh*, *taşawwuf*, ‘ilm al-kālām, *lughah* and even Islamic philosophy. Some of the books pertaining to major Islamic religious sciences referred by Şarfi in his *tafsir* includes *Mafātih al-Ghayb* (al-*Tafsir al-Kabir*), *Tafsir al-Kasyāf*, *Tafsir al-Bayḍawī*, *al-Jām’i li Ahkām al-Qur’ān* (*Tafsir al-Qurtubī*), and *al-Durr al-Manthūr*.

Besides being a *mufassir* (exegete) of the Qur’ān, Şarfi was a *muḥaddith* as well. His expertise in the science of *ḥadith* is evident from the fact that besides quoting numerous narrations in support of his arguments, he has often commented on the authenticity of narrations as well. Some of the major Ḥadith collections and commentaries quoted are *Şahīh al-Bukhārī*, *Şahīh al-Muslim*, *Muw’atta* of Mālik, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Musnad Aḥmad*, *Sunan al-Bayhaqī*, *Misykāt al-Masābih*, *Musnad al-Firdaws of Abū Manşūr al-Daylamī*, *Mu’ajjam al-Tabarānī*, and *Fath al-Bārī*.

He also made the works of Arabic language as reference, including *al-Şihāb* of al-Jawharī, *Mufradāt al-Qur’ān* of Rāghib Işfahānī, *al-Nihāyah* of Ibn al-Athīr, *Fiqh al-Lughah* of Ibn al-Faris, *Syarḥ al-Miftāḥ* by ‘Allāmah Shīrāzī, *al-Muṭawwal* by Taftāzanī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīt* by Fayruzābād. Besides these books, Şarfi has also substantiated his grammatical arguments by referring to famous scholars of Arabic language like al-Akhfasy, Sībawayh, Khalīl & Māzinī. However, their books haven’t been mentioned by name.

In addition to that, he also consulted to *al-Umm* of al-Syāfi‘ī, *al-Talwīḥ ‘ala al-Ta’wīḥ* by al-Taftāzanī, *Nihāyat al-Aqdām fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām* by al-Syahristanī, *Fusūs al-Ḥikam* by Ibn ‘Arabī, until *al-Maqṣad al-Asnāfī Syarḥ Asmā Allah al-Ḥusnā* by al-Ghazalī. Besides the books mentioned above, Şarfi has also quoted ‘Allāmah Tībī, Abū Syāma al Maqdisī, al-Jazarī, Abū Naşr al-Fārābī, Ibn al-Hājib, Abū Manşūr al-Maturīdī, al-Āmidī, and even Ibn Sina, in support of his arguments but the names of their books haven’t been mentioned. The variety of source material used by Şarfi in *Matlab al-Talibin* demonstrates the breadth of his Islamic scholarship.

‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān

‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān is a branch of Islamic religious sciences which deals with different aspects of revelation, preservation, recitation and understanding of the Qur’ān. A *mufassir* must be well-versed in different aspects of ‘ulum al-Qur’ān like

asbāb al-nuzūl (the context of revelation), *aḥruf* (the various forms/dialects in which the Qur'ān was revealed), *al-nāsikh wa al-mansūkh* (abrogated and abrogating verses) and *i'rāb al-Qur'ān* (grammar) etc.²⁶ Although Ṣarfī's *tafsīr* is incomplete, yet the available portion convincingly establishes that he was well-versed in 'ulūm al-Qur'ān. Ṣarfī has discussed following key issues pertaining to 'ulūm al-Qur'ān in his *tafsīr*

In his interpretation on QS. al-Fātiḥah, Ṣarfī has discussed whether *ta'awwudz* and *tasmiyyah* (*bismillāh*) are a part of QS. al-Fātiḥah or not, He has discussed different names of QS. al-Fātiḥah in detail, He has discussed also *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the context of revelation) as well, commenting upon one of the criteria laid by *muḥaditsūn* for accepting the narrations related to *asbāb al-nuzūl*, Ṣarfī writes:²⁷

ذكر ابن الصلاح و غيره من اهل الحديث ان الصحابي اذا ذكر ما يتوقف على السماع
كبيان سبب النزول و نحوه كان مرفوعا

"Ibn al-Salah and others among the scholars of *ḥadīth* stated that if a *Sahābī* (companion) narrates something which is solely based upon hearing, then this narration is treated as *marfū'*".

Ṣarfī has also discussed '*ilm al-qirā'at*' (different ways of reciting Qur'ān) at many places. Discussing various permissible methods of reciting the word in the third verse of QS. al-Fatiha, he writes:²⁸

ثم اعلم ان عاصم و الكسائي و يعقوب قراؤا مالك يوم الدين بصيغة اسم الفاعل

"Know that 'Āsim, Kisā'ī and Ya'qūb have recited it on the pattern of *fā'il*"

Similarly, discussing various patterns of reciting **الصراط** in the fifth verse, he writes:²⁹

وقرا ابن كثير برواية قبل و رويس عن يعقوب بالاصلاى السراط بالسين و حمزة والخلف
والخلاد بالاشمام والباقون بالصاد وهي لغة قریش

Ibn Kathīr has narrated it's recitation from Qunbul and Ruways has narrated from Ya'qūb using the letter س whereas Ḥamzah, Khalf and Khallād have recited it with Ishmām and others have read it by using letter ص and that is the dialect of

26 Jalaluddin al-Suyūī. *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. Resalah Publishers, Lebanon, 2008, 771-772

27 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Talibīn* 19.

28 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Talibīn* 37.

29 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Talibīn* 46.

Quraysh.

These discussions establish that Şarfi was well-versed in *‘ilm al-qir’at* as well. He has also discussed *i’jāz al-Qur’ān* (miraculous nature of Qur’ān), especially in its linguistic paradigm. In this context, besides other books, Şarfi has quoted extensively from ‘Abd al-Qāhir Jurjānī’s work *Dalā’il al-I’jāz*. He has also discussed *al-amthāl* (Qur’ānic parables) in great detail. While discussing the parables, He has quoted extensively from *Tafsīr al-Kasyyāf* and *Tafsīr al-Baydāwī*. In his interpretation on QS. al-Baqarah, Şarfi has presented a detailed discussion on the meaning of *ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa’āt*. Besides substantiating his arguments on the basis of authentic narrations, he has also strengthened his arguments by providing evidence from Arabic poetry. While deliberating on the stories of previous nations mentioned in the Qur’ān, Şarfi has primarily abstained from quoting *Isrā’iliyyāt* narrative.

In the tradition of *tafsīr* writing throughout the sub-continent, *‘ulum al-Qur’ān* material has been one of the main features. As Choughley notes, this was already prevalent in the Maha’imi’s style of tafsir in the 15th century. In his tafsir, Syaikh Mubarak, another scholar who was contemporary with Şarfi also gives a detailed account of *‘ulum al-Qur’an* and expresses his deep reflections on verses that have mystical meanings.³⁰ As such, the material of *Matlab al-Talibin* reflects a tradition of writing *tafsīr* literature that is connected to the rest of the sub-continent.

‘Ilm al-Ḥadīth

It is notable that *‘ilm al-ḥadīth* is Şarfi’s primary area of expertise. He was a student of the famous *muḥaddith* Ibn Ḥajjar al-Makkī. Şarfi holds his teacher in high esteem and has mentioned him by name at several places. He writes in this case:³¹

و اجاب شيخى و استاذى خلف المتقدمين و قدوة المتأخرين شهاب الدين احمد المعروف بابن
الحجر قدس سره فى كتابه المسمى بالدر المقصود

“My mentor and teacher - the remembrance of (pious) predecessors
and a role model for the later ones – Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad aka Ibn
al-Ḥajar replied in his book *al-Durr al-Maqṣūd*”

Şarfi’s expertise in *‘ilm al-ḥadīth* is evident from the fact that *Maṭlab al-Talibin*, in spite of being a *tafsīr* of very small portion of Qur’ān, it also contains hundreds of *aḥadīth*. It is essential to note that Şarfi hasn’t only quoted *aḥadīth* from different books, but he has also commented on their authenticity. His expertise in

³⁰ Choughley, Tradition of Tafsir, 42-43.

³¹ Sarafi, *Maṭlab al Talibin*, 74.

'ilm asmā al-rijāl is evident from his comments about many narrators of ḥadīth. He writes:³²

مدار هذا الحديث على العلا بن عبد الرحمن بن يعقوب وقد ضعفه يحيى بن معين وتكلم فيه هو وغيره

Ibn Ya'qūb, who has been designated as weak narrator by Yaḥyā Ibn Ma'īn and others".

At the other place,³³ He writes ابن أبي مليكة ليس بمدلس Ibn Abī Mulaykah isn't a *mudallis* narrator. Commenting upon one of the criteria laid by *muḥadīthun* (scholars of Ḥadīth) for accepting the narrations related to *asbab al-nuzūl*, Ṣarfī writes:³⁴

ذكر ابن الصلاح وغيره من اهل الحديث ان الصحابي اذا ذكر ما يتوقف على السماع كبيان سبب النزول ونحوه كان مرفوعا

"Ibn Salah and others among the scholars of Ḥadīth stated that if a Ṣaḥābī narrates something which is solely based upon hearing, then this narration is treated as *Marfū'*"

At many places in his *tafsīr*, Ṣarfī has reconciled two seemingly contradictory narrations either by *taṭbīq* (removing the contradiction) or *tarjīh* (prioritizing). Commenting on the principles of *tarjīh*, He writes:³⁵

ان الروايتان عن ابي هريرة تعارضتا وان الترجيح معنا لان رواية الاثبات مقدمة على رواية النفي

"The two narrations from Abū Hurayrah are contradictory, and the (principles) of *Tarjīh* (preference) are in our favour because (the principle is that) the confirmatory narrations are preferred over the narrations of negation"

Regarding the narrative related to *faḍā'il* (merits) of different *sūrah*s, Ṣarfī writes:³⁶

³² Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalibīn*, 20.

³³ Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalibīn*, 20.

³⁴ Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalibīn*, 19.

³⁵ Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalibīn* 25.

³⁶ Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalibīn* 54.

هذا حديث صحيح وإن كان أكثر الحديث المروية عن أبي بن كعب في فضائل السور موضوعة وزاد الصغاني: وضعه رجل من أهل عبادان وقال: لما رأيت الناس اشتغلوا بالأشعار وفقه أبي حنيفة رحمه الله وغير ذلك ونذوا القرآن وراء ظهورهم، أردت أن أضع لكل سورة فضيلة أرغب الناس بها في قراءة القرآن وقل تفسير خلا من ذكر هذه الفضائل إلا من عصمه الله تعالى، والله أعلم بتحقيقه

“This is an authentic narration, although most of the *aḥādīth* narrated by Ubay Ibn Ka’ab regarding the *Faḍā’il* (merits) of *Sūrah*s are concocted. And Saghani explained that: These (*aḥādīth*) were fabricated by a person from the people of ‘Abādān, he said: When I saw that people were too occupied with poetry and jurisprudence of AbūḤanīfah and other things and that they had thrown the Qur’ān behind their back, I decided to make up narrations relating merits of every *sūrah* to encourage people to read Qur’ān. There are very few *tafsīr* that haven’t related such narrations except the one protected by Allah.

Hence, we observe that Ṣarfī, besides basing his *tafsīr* on ḥadīth literature, is also concerned about drawing inferences from authentic narrations only. The strong presence of the hadith scholar’s way of thinking in *Maṭlab al-Ṭalībīn* is one of the uniqueness of this commentary. As is well known, although it passes through a phase of religious life patronized by the heterodox policies of *Din-Ilāhī* carried out by Akbar the Great, this material shows Ṣarfī’s strong allegiance to orthodoxy to a certain extent.

‘Ilm al-Kalām

Similar to *‘ilm al-ḥadīth*, Ṣarfī is also well versed in the field of *‘ilm al-kalām* (theology). As the exponent of Asy’ariyyah, Ṣarfī has been deeply influenced by al-Rāzī and al-Ghazali. Ṣarfī has more than once categorically mentioned that in the issues of *‘ilm al kalām*, he is on the path of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā’ah*. In spite of being highly influenced by Zamaksharī’s linguistic exegesis, Ṣarfī has refuted him for his M’utazilite creed.

Ṣarfī considers *‘ilm al-kalām* as one of the important tools for explaining the Qur’ān and refuting the misconceptions of deviant groups. Stating the importance of rational sciences, Ṣarfī states:³⁷

اعلم ان في هذه السورة نكات شريفة لا يطلع عليها الا من هو بارع في العلوم العقلية والنقلية

“Know that in this *Sūrah*, there are many praiseworthy points for those who are well versed in both rational and revealed sciences. It is well established in rational sciences”.

37 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalībīn*, 14.

In the major issues of *‘ilm al-kalām* like *taṣḥīd al-Asmāwa al-sifāt* (understanding the names and attributes of Allah), *qadr* (Destiny), *khalq af‘āl al-Ibād* etc, Ṣarfī has defended the creed of *ahl al-Sunnah* and refuted *Mu‘tazilah*. Among the different *kalāmī* (theological) schools of *ahl al-Sunnah*, he has adopted the methodology of scholars belonging to Asy‘arī school of thought.

Commenting on the issue of names and attributes of Allah Ṣarfī states:³⁸

ثم لا يخفى ان كلام الله تعالى من امهات صفاته سبحانه اى صفاته الثبوتية السبعة وهى
الحياة والعلم والارادة والقدرة والسمع والبصر والكلام

It is well known that the word of Allah (*sifāt al-kalām*) is one of the seven major attributes (of Allah) which are *al-Hayāt* (life), *al-‘Ilm* (Knowledge), *al-Irādah* (volition), *al-Qudrah* (Power), *al-Sam’* (Hearing), *al-Bashar* (seeing) and *al-Kalām* (speech).

Commenting on the issue of interpreting the meaning of Allah’s attributes, Ṣarfī states:³⁹

ومذهب السلف في التشابهات ترك الاشتغال بتاويل وان تؤمن بان التشابه صدق حق ولا
شك في كونه كلام الله وبان ما اراده الله منه حق وعقلنا عاجز عن ادراك مراد الله منه واما
المتأخرون فذهبوا الى تجويز الاشتغال بتاويل فيه

the Prophet) with regards to *mutasyābihāt* (unclear verses) is not to engage in their explanation and to believe that they (revelation) are true and well established, and (to believe) that there is no ambiguity in it being a part of Allah’s revealed word and our intellect isn’t capable of grasping their (complete) meaning as intended by Allah. As far as scholars of later generations are considered, they consider seeking their explanation as permissible.

Stating his belief about the issue of *qadr* (predestination), Ṣarfī states:⁴⁰

وقوله اياك نعبد و اياك نستعين يدل على نفى القدر و الجبر وعلى اثبات ان الكل بقضاء الله تعالى

And his Saying (اياك نعبد و اياك نستعين) negates the creed of *qadr jabr* and establishes that everything happens by the will of Allah.”

Refuting the *Mu‘tazilah* on the issue of *khalq af‘āl al-‘ibād* (creation of actions

38 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalībīn* 92.

39 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalībīn*, 40.

40 Sarafī, *Maṭlab al Ṭalībīn*, 16.

of servants), Şarfi writes in his explanation of QS. al-Baqarah: 15.⁴¹

ولا يخفى ان الطغيان اضعف اليهم لانه من مكتسباتهم وان كان مخلوقا لله تعالى كما هو
مذهب اهل السنة من ان فعل العبد كسب العبد وخلق الله تعالى فلا وجه لتوجيه المعتزلة في
هذه الاية نصرة لمذهبهم

one among their acquired [actions] even if Allah created it. This is in accordance with the Madhab of ahl al-Sunnah that the action of a human being is his acquisition and, at the same time, creation of Allah, the Almighty. So, there is no scope for the *Mu'tazilah* to interpret this ayah in support of their Madzhab".

From the above discussion, it is evident that Şarfi wasn't only aware of the intricacies of *Ilm al-Kalām* but has also utilised its tools to refute the misconceptions of deviant groups like the *Mu'tazilah*. The presence of this material in *Maṭlab al-Tālibīn* shows that Şarfi was not only familiar with the religious transmitted sciences (*al-'ulūm al-naqliyyah*), but also mastered the rational sciences (*al-'ulūm al-aqliyyah*). This is even more evident in the following material on Sufism in the work

Tasawwuf

Besides being an expert in above mentioned religious sciences, Şarfi was a practicing *sūfī* as well. As mentioned above, he belonged to the *Kubrāwī* school of *taṣawwuf*. Purifying one's heart of all spiritual ills and establishing a strong bond with Allah is the essence of *taṣawwuf* or *'ilm al-sulūk*. However, these lofty goals can't be achieved without holding firmly to the tenants of the *syarī'ah*. Şarfi considers upholding the tenants of *syarī'ah* as the indispensable condition for achieving the inner solace and a world order based on peace and justice. Commenting upon the importance of establishing and practicing the injunctions of *syarī'ah*, he writes.⁴²

ثم إن المراد من الفساد في قوله و يفسدون في الأرض الصد عن طاعة الرسول لان تمام
الصالح في الأرض بطاعته عليه الصلاة والسلام إذ طاعته عبارة عن العمل باحكام شريعته
وهذه الأحكام هي اسباب نظام العالم وفي عدم الانقياد بهذه الأحكام فساد العالم و تخريب
نظامه كما أن القصاص مثلا وهو من جملة احكامها لو لم يعمل به ليتجاسر الناس في قتل
بعضهم بعضا من غير حق

⁴¹ Sarafi, *Maṭlab al Talibīn*, 107.

⁴² Sarafi, *Maṭlab al Talibīn* 105.

“The meaning of *al-Iṣṣād* (spreading mischief) in the saying of Allah (وَيُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ) means to dissuade from the obedience of the Prophet because all the uprightness on earth is achieved by obeying Him –peace and blessings be on him. The manifestation of His obedience is to act on his *Syarī’ah* and these injunctions are the means of achieving the order in the world, and disobedience towards them leads to corruption and destruction of the world order e.g., the ruling of *al-qisās* (seeking retribution) is one of the commandments of the *Syarī’ah*, If it isn’t put into practice, it will encourage people to kill each other without any established reason.”

Ṣarḥī’s *sūfī* thought is primarily based upon Ibn al-Arabi’s philosophy of *wahdat al wujūd*. He holds Ibn ‘Arabī in high esteem and has praised him by calling him *Ra’īs al-Muwahḥidīn*. Ṣarḥī also advocates some of the typical *sūfī* practices like reciting *wazā’if* for specific purposes. He has quoted Abū al-Abbas Bunī’s *wazā’if* while discussing the spiritual benefits of *basmallah*.

The Unique Structure of Ṣarḥī’s *Tafsīr* and Its Influence

One of the notable features of Ṣarḥī’s *tafsīr* lies in the intermingling of various issues, which detracts from its coherence and systematic structure. However, this fact is a strong indication of the encyclopaedic character of *Maṭlab al-Ṭalibīn*. It is notable that by the time Ṣarḥī composed his *tafsīr*, the discipline of *‘Ilm al-tafsīr* had reached a level of considerable sophistication. Renowned works, such as *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, to which Ṣarḥī often refers, exhibit a meticulously organized and aesthetically refined approach to scholarly discourse. This supports Choughley’s statement that *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī* had a significant influence on commentators in the sub-continent from the early 13th century.⁴³ In this context, we can sketch a scholarly network that connects the subcontinent with a work written by a scholar from the western part of the Islamic world (*maghrib*).

Another fact is that he also used *al-Kashāf*, *Mafāṭih al-Ghayb*, and *Tafsīr al-Bayḍhāwī* as important references. Given that these three literatures are authoritative sources in the genealogical tradition of *tafsīr* writing, this shows that Ṣarḥī is directly connected to the network of *tafsīr* writing traditions in the eastern region of the Islamic world in particular. Thus, a brief study of *Maṭlab al-Ṭalibīn* shows what he refers to as the parallel development of *tafsīr* writing which witnesses the emergence of original works in the sub-continent influenced by the context in the sub-continent on the one hand and the continuity of *tafsīr* traditions on the other. *Maṭlab al-Ṭalibīn* was composed in what Walid Saleh refers to as “the Bayḍhāwī period” that spanned

43 Choughley, Tradition of Tafsir, 34-35.

from the 15th to the 19th century. In this period, al-Baydhāwī's tafsir replaced the dominance of *al-Kashāf* as the main choice in teaching. The work was soon adopted by the Ottoman Empire as a textbook for teaching Qur'anic exegesis. Walid Saleh also notes that al-Baydhāwī's dominance could be felt in the new centres of Islamic learning, including the Mughals in India.⁴⁴

Additionally, the manuscript ends abruptly, with the final sentence incomplete, suggesting that Ṣarfī may have continued his commentary beyond the extant portion of the work. Some scholars contend that a complete manuscript of the *tafsīr* exists in various libraries. However, despite diligent efforts to locate such a manuscript, no verifiable evidence has been found to support this claim. A further challenge arises from the fact that only a single, severely damaged manuscript of this *tafsīr* is currently known to exist. Its fragile condition poses a significant risk to the preservation of this historical text.

To safeguard this valuable work from further deterioration, it is imperative to undertake a careful transcription of the manuscript using contemporary tools and techniques from the field of paleography. Such efforts would ensure that Ṣarfī's *tafsīr* is preserved for future generations, enabling scholars to engage with and analyze the text despite the constraints of its current form. Preserving this work would contribute to a broader understanding of the evolution of *tafsīr* literature and the scholarly contributions of Ṣarfī within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Conclusion

The study of *Maṭlab al-Ṭalībīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rab al-ʿĀlāmīn* by Ya'qūb Ṣarfī underscores its pivotal role in the intellectual and spiritual history of Kashmir. This Tafsīr represents not only an advanced scholarly endeavor in Qur'anic exegesis but also a testament to the depth and dynamism of Kashmiri Islamic scholarship during the 16th century. Despite being an incomplete work, limited to the exegesis of QS. al-Fātiḥah and the first sixty-two verses of QS. al-Baqarah, it reveals a profound engagement with the Qur'ān and reflects Ṣarfī's methodological rigor and intellectual breadth. Drawing upon a wide range of classical Islamic sciences—including *ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*, *ʿilm al-ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, *taṣawwuf*, and *ʿilm al-kalām*—the work highlights Ṣarfī's erudition and mastery of diverse disciplines. His reliance on authoritative sources demonstrates a deep familiarity with foundational texts in the Islamic tradition, while the incorporation of poetic references and grammatical discussions enriches the exegetical discourse. Ṣarfī's engagement with theological debates, such

⁴⁴ Walid Saleh, "Periodization in the Sunni Qur'an Commentary Tradition: A Chronological History of a Genre", *The Medieval Globe*, Volume 8, Number 2, (2022), 60.

as those surrounding *tawḥīd* and *qadr*, reveals his alignment with the Asy'arī school of thought.

However, the lack of systematic organization and the deteriorated condition of the sole surviving manuscript pose significant challenges and emphasizes the need for scholarly interventions to preserve and analyze this invaluable text. Ṣarfī's extensive travels to centers of learning such as Samarqand, Makkah, and Baghdad enriched his intellectual repertoire and positioned him as a bridge between Kashmiri and Central Asian scholarship, exemplifying the transregional flow of ideas that characterized the Islamic golden age. *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn* reflects the aspirations of Kashmiri scholars to establish a robust intellectual tradition within a region marked by socio-political challenges, highlighting the interplay of local and global influences in Ṣarfī's work and contributing to a nuanced understanding of the evolution of Islamic thought in peripheral regions of the Muslim world. The enduring legacy of Ṣarfī lies in his dual role as a scholar and spiritual guide, and through this *tafsīr* and his other works, Ṣarfī laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of scholars who continued to enrich Kashmiri Islamic scholarship. His emphasis on the harmonious co-existence of rational sciences and spiritual practices offers valuable insights for contemporary engagements with Islamic intellectual heritage. Despite its limitations, *Maṭlab al-Ṭālibīn* serves as a remarkable testament to the intellectual vibrancy of 16th century Kashmir, bridging the local and global dimensions of Islamic scholarship, and by revisiting and preserving this significant work, scholars can continue to unravel the complexities of Kashmiri contributions to Islamic intellectual history and inspire a renewed appreciation for the region's rich scholarly tradition.

Authors' contributions

Data availability statement

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest that could potentially influence the research outcomes or compromise its integrity.

Funding

This article was not financially supported by specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Ahmad, Aziz. "Conversions to Islam in The Valley of Kashmir, *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (1979).
- Ahmad, M.G. Zubaid. *The Contribution of India to Arabic Literature*. Punjab: Maktaba-i-Din-o-Danish, 1946.
- Ahmed, Mushtaq. "Mughal Rule in Kashmir—An Appraisal, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 48 (1987).
- Bhat, Manzoor Ahmad. "Shaikh Ya'qub Sarfi (928/1521-1003/1595)", *Insight Islamicus*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001).
- Choughley, Abdul Kader. *Tradition of Tafsir (Qur'ānic Exegesis) in the Indian Subcontinent*. South Africa: Ahsan Academy of Research, 2021.
- Didmarī, Muḥammad A'azam. *Wāqī'āt-e-Kashmir*, translated by Shamsudin Ahmad. Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Islamic Research Centre, 2019.
- al-Dzahabi, Muhammad Hussein. *al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun Vol. 1* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, nd.)
- Jan, G.R. *Jāmi' al-Kamālāt*. Srinagar: KitābMaḥāl, 2018.
- Kawakib, Kawakib, and Hafidz Syuhud. "Interelasi Akal dan Wahyu: Analisis Pemikiran Ulama Mutakallimin dalam Pembentukan Hukum Islam." *Journal of Islamic Law* 2, no. 1 (February 9, 2021): 43–61.
- Khan, Mohibul Hasan. "Some Aspects of Kashmir History Under the Shah Mirs and The Chaks", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 16 (1953).
- Kumar, Tribhuwan, Mahyudin Ritonga, and Julhadi Julhadi. "Mother Tongue as a Threat for English Language Learning at Primary Level in Indian Schools: A Survey-Based Study." *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 10, no. 3 (September 30, 2022): 817–32.
- Mursyid, Achmad Yafik. "Endonezya'daki Mushaf Basım Faaliyetlerinin Osmanlı Geleneksel Mushaflarıyla İlişkisi." *İlahiyat Tetkikleri Dergisi*, 2020.
- Puri, Balraj, "Major Identities of Jammu and Kashmir State, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (2001).
- Rafiqi, Abdul Qaiyum. *Sufism in Kashmir*. Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2015.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*. Leiden: Brill, 1980.
- Saleh, Walid. "Periodization in the Sunni Qur'an Commentary Tradition: A Chronological History of a Genre", *The Medieval Globe*, Volume 8, Number 2, (2022), 60.
- Sa'diyah, Fatichatus. "PEMIKIRAN HADIS SHĀH WALĪ ALLAH AL-DAHLAWĪ TENTANG METODE PEMAHAMAN HADIS." *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 20, no. 2 (November 4, 2019): 163–86.
- Sofi, Sameer Ahmad. "Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi of Kashmir: A Case Study of his literary

and political contribution" *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (2016).

Sufi, Ghulam Muhyid Din. *Kashmīr, Being a History of Kashmir from the Earliest Times to Our Own. Vol. 2*. Light & Life Publishers, 1974.

al-Suyūṭī, Jalāludin. *al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Lebanon: Resalah Publishers, 2008).

Wani, Muhammad Ashraf. *Islam in Kashmir*. Srinagar: Oriental Publishing House, 2004.

Manuscript Source:

Şarfī, Ya'qūb. *Maṭlab al-Talibīn fī Tafsīr Kalām Rab al 'Ālamīn*, MS No. 4, Department of Libraries and Research, J and K Government.

