39771 - al-Saabooni and his book Safwat al-Tafaaseer

the question

What is your opinion of the book Safwat al-Tafaaseer by Shaykh al-Saabooni? Some of the religiously-committed youth criticize us for reading this book, and say that the ‘aqeedah of Shaykh al-Saabooni is Mu’tazili or Ash’ari, and his Tafseer (commentary) on the Qur’aan is likewise. I do not know anything about this Shaykh, so I started to read this book because it is straightforward and written in an attractive style. What is your opinion on this book and its author? What are the books that you recommend for every Muslim (who is not specialized in the sciences of sharee’ah) to read concerning his ‘aqeedah and his everyday acts of worship and interactions with others?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Professor Muhammad ‘Ali al-Saabooni is one of the professors in the College of Sharee’ah in Makkah al-Mukarramah. He was active in the fields of Qur’aan sciences and Tafseer (commentary), then he wrote a number of books on Tafseer and Qur’aanic sciences, most of which are summaries of longer books such as Mukhtasar Tafseer Ibn Katheer, Mukhtasar Tafseer al-Tabari, al-Tibyaan fi ‘Uloom al-Qur’aan, Rawaa’i’ al-Bayaan fi Tafseer Ayaat al-Ahkaam, Qabs min Noor al-Qur’aan, and Safwat al-Tafaaseer, which is the book under discussion here.

This is a concise tafseer of which its author said: it is comprehensive, based on both narrated reports and rational argument, based on the most authentic well known tafseers such as al-Tabari, al-Kashshaaf, Ibn Katheer, al-Bahr al-Muheet and Rooh al-Ma’aani. It is written in a simple style that is easy to understand, paying attention to literary style and linguistic form.

He says in the introduction:

I have called my book Safwat al-Tafaaseer (The Best of Tafseers) because it combines the best of the major detailed tafseers in a brief, organized and clear fashion.

The book was published in three volumes, in 1400 AH.

With regard to the ‘aqeedah of the author, his beliefs are Ash’ari, which makes his books and summaries subject to criticism and rejection. This also makes him misquote some hadeeth texts by not quoting them in full, and distort some of his quotations from other scholars, as we shall see below.

Shaykh Safar al-Hawaali said:

With regard to al-Saabooni, it does not bother me to say that what he has written about the ‘aqeedah of the salaf and that of the Ash’aris conflicts with the basic principles that every researcher who studies ‘aqeedah should know, and his style is also far removed from the authenticated academic style and from rationality.

Manhaj al-Ashaa’irah fi’l-‘Aqeedah, p. 2

He was refuted by many scholars such as Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azeez ibn Baaz, Shaykh al-Albaani, Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan, Shaykh Bakr Abu Zayd, Shaykh Muhammad Jameel Zayno and others.

With regard to his book Safwat al-Tafaaseer, it is one of those books of his which were most emphatically refuted by the scholars. There follows a list of some of those who refuted it, along with the titles of their books:

1.al-Radd ‘ala Akhta’ Muhammad ‘Ali al-Saabooni fi Kitaabihi Safwat al-Tafaaseer wa Mukhtasar Tafseer Ibn Jareer, by Shaykh Muhammad Jameel Zayno, teacher of Tafseer in Daar al-Hadeeth, Makkah.

2.Tanbeehaat Haammah ‘ala Kitaab Safwat al-Tafaaseer by Shaykh Muhammad Jameel Zayno.

3.Mulaahazaat ‘ala Kitaab Safwat al-Tafaaseer by Shaykh Sa’d Zallaam, Dean of the School of Arabic Language in Egypt.

4.Mulaahazaat ‘ala Safwat al-Tafaaseer by Shaykh ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Jibreen.

5.Mulaahazaat ‘Aammah ‘ala Kitaab Safwat al-Tafaaseer by Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan.

6.al-Tahzeer min Mukhtasaraat al-Saabooni fi’l-Tafseer by Shaykh Bakr Abu Zayd; this is included in his major book al-Rudood.

These criticisms led the Ministry of Awqaaf in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to ban this book and confiscate it, as stated in the Decree of the Ministry of Hajj and Awqaaf no. 945/2/S, dated 16/4/1408 AH, from the General Headquarters of Awqaaf and Mosques in the Riyaadh area, pertaining to the confiscation of the book Safwat al-Tafaaseer and banning circulation thereof until its errors with regard to ‘aqeedah have been corrected.

Shaykh Bakr Abu Zayd said:

The title Safwat al-Tafaaseer (“The Best of Tafseers”) is deceiving and confusing. How can it be described as the best when it mixes good and bad, when it mixes the tafseers of the Salafis Ibn Jareer and Ibn Katheer with the tasfeers of the Mu’tazili al-Zamakhshari, the Raafidis al-Radiy and al-Tubrusi, the Ash’ari al-Raazi and the fanatical Ash’ari grave-worshipper al-Saawi and others? Especially when this mixing is done by one who does not know what he is doing and is like one who tries to climb a wall without a ladder. Otherwise scholars may benefit from the prominent mufassireen who do not stray from the path of the salaf, the guidelines of tafseer and the rules of the Arabic language.

Al-Rudood, p. 311.

And he said: He is described as ignorant because he classes da’eef (weak) reports as saheeh (sound), and vice versa; he attributes many ahaadeeth to the two Saheehs or the four Sunans etc when they are not to be found in the two Saheehs or in any of those books; he quotes the Israa’eeliyyaat (reports derived from Jewish sources) as evidence; and he contradicts himself when discussing rulings.

He is described as betraying the academic trust because he misquotes reports, quoting them only

partially; he attributes things to scholars that they did not say; he distorts many texts; and he tries to produce evidence for the views of the khalaf (later scholars) concerning the verses that describe the divine attributes from the books of the salaf.

Because of his own beliefs, he tries to distort the ‘aqeedah of the salaf in his commentaries on the Tafseers of Ibn Jareer and Ibn Katheer, and even more so in his own book Safwat al-Tafaaseer. His distortion of a number of texts is aimed only at proving his own distorted ‘aqeedah.

Al-Rudood, p. 313, 314.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azeez ibn Baaz offered him the following advice:

We advise you to fear Allaah, and strive to follow the path of the righteous salaf in all your books. We also advise you to study the Qur’aan, the pure Sunnah and the words of the salaf of this ummah a great deal, and to benefit from the writings of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim. And we advise you to study the two essays al-Tadmuriyyah and al-Hamawiyyah by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah, and al-Sawaa’iq, and Ijtimaa’ al-Juyoosh al-Islamiyyah by Ibn al-Qayyim, and other books of the salaf.

Al-Rudood, p. 375.

Secondly:

With regard to your request for a list of books that a Muslim needs, please see question no. 14082 which gives a list of what you want and more.

And Allaah knows best.