

A Brief Introduction to
Qur'anic Exegesis

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Ali Suleiman Ali

IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

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Abridged by Wanda Krause

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IIIT Books-in-Brief Series

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A Brief Introduction to Qur'anic Exegesis by Ali Suleiman Ali aims to introduce students of sciences of *tafsīr* to the historical development of Qur'anic interpretation from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS)* to the present day. The work highlights the nature, characteristics, and methodology of the Prophet's *tafsīr*. It also discusses the *tafsīr* of the Prophet's Companions (Ṣaḥābah) as well as the *tafsīr* of the *Tābi'ūn*, that is to say, the generation that followed the Companions, including the status, characteristics, and methodologies of their *tafsīr*.

A few from the compilations of different types of *tafsīr* that emerged as well as their authors have been included in this abridged work. The book addresses two major types of *tafsīr*, *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. The book also sheds lights on some new trends in *tafsīr* in the contemporary world, highlighting some differences between classical works and modern ones. The chief objective of *A Brief Introduction to Qur'anic Exegesis* is to provide readers with basic information regarding the evolution of *tafsīr*, some major Qur'anic interpreters (*mufasssīrūn*) and their works. It is hoped that this brief introduction will be of great interest to the students of *tafsīr* and that it will encourage them to pursue research in the subject matter dealt with.

* (ṢAAS) – Ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammed is mentioned.

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS

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Chapter One

Historical Overview

The science of *tafsīr* aims to explain the meanings of Allah’s word as revealed in His Sacred Book, the Qur’an, to His Messenger Muhammad, and is usually rendered as Qur’anic ‘interpretation’ or exegesis. It is one of the major Islamic sciences. The Arabic root *f-s-r* means to unveil, to uncover,¹ and traditional or classical Muslim scholars state that the verbal noun *tafsīr* is derived from *fassara*, meaning to explain. *Tafsīr*, literally meaning ‘explanation’ and *ta’wīl*, ‘interpretation,’ are two terms usually used by scholars as synonymous or interchangeable to denote Qur’anic interpretation or exegesis.

The Difference Between *Tafsīr* and *Ta’wīl*

According to Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Maturidī (d. 333 AH), *tafsīr* is the explanation of the ultimate meaning of the text that unveils what God exclusively intended by the text, while *ta’wīl* applies to upholding the more likely interpretation when the text has more than one possible meaning.² *Ta’wīl* is often used to elucidate meanings and sentences and is most used in theological texts or books, whilst *tafsīr* is used in theological texts and other areas (such as the sciences of the Qur’an and Islamic jurisprudence).³

The term *tafsīr* – according to my own finding – when used to mean the explanation of the Qur’an was developed towards the second half or the end of the first Islamic century. Perhaps, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar was the first person known to have used the word *tafsīr* to mean interpretation of the Qur’an when he said “*mā yu’jibunī jarā’at ibn ‘Abbās ‘alā tafsīr al-Qur’ān fal ān qad ‘alemtu annahu ‘ūtiya ‘ilm*” (“I do not like or I do not admire Ibn ‘Abbās’ daring on Qur’anic commentary but now, I know he has been given knowledge).”⁴

Indeed, we find no mention of this term in the Qur'an and the Hadith to mean the explanation of the meaning of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, on the other hand, used the word *tafsīr* in one place (25:33) to mean 'explanation.' Both the Prophet and the Companions allegorically interpreted some Qur'anic verses. Yet, their interpretations are being called *tafsīr*, not *ta'wīl*. This, I assume, is because many scholars of *tafsīr*, if not the majority, have not seen any differences between the two meanings.

The Prophet Muhammad and *Tafsīr*

The Prophet Muhammad was the first exegete or interpreter of the Qur'an (*mufasssir*). But he did not, however, explain the whole of the Qur'an word for word because many of the verses were clear to the people of his time by virtue of their being Arabs who understood their own language. Generally, his explanations of Qur'anic scriptures occurred on one of three occasions: when a particular passage could not be comprehended through a typical understanding of Arabic; when the literal meaning of a verse, according to Muslim scholars, was not intended by God; or when a Companion asked for clarification of certain verses.

An example includes when the Prophet was asked about the meaning of *bushrā* (glad tidings) in Qur'anic verses 10:63-64 and the Prophet said the verse referred to a good dream that a man sees or which is seen on his behalf.⁵ Another example includes the Qur'anic command pertaining to the time of breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan. For this, the Prophet explained that the white and black thread mentioned in the Qur'anic verse referred to the early morning light of the horizon contrasting with the darkness of the sky.⁶

***Tafsīr* After the Passing of Prophet Muhammad**

The Muslims living immediately after the death of the Prophet recognized certain Companions' skills and capabilities in terms of Qur'anic knowledge. Before he died, the Prophet proclaimed their superior status concerning the Qur'an in three ways. First, he used to send them to other cities to teach the Qur'an and Islam. Secondly, the Prophet would praise certain Companions. Thirdly, he would ask certain Companions to give fatwas (legal opinions) in his presence.⁷ After the death of the Prophet, four distinct schools of Qur'anic interpretation and recitation (*qirā'ah*) emerged and were identified by the areas in which they became prominent: Makkah, Madinah, Kufah (in the area of present day Iraq), and al-Shām (present day Palestine, Syria and Lebanon).

Tafsīr After the Era of the Tābi'ūn

By the end of the second century AH, the students of the Companions of the Prophet, the *Tābi'ūn*, had died. No interpreter of that period had produced works devoted exclusively to Qur'anic interpretation. It has been claimed that Mujāhid wrote a complete *tafsīr* of the Qur'an. During the latter half of the second century AH, various scholars began compiling works on the Qur'an according to their specialties and interests. The approaches and methodologies used by grammarians and linguists and by the traditionalists flourished until the end of the third century and the early fourth century AH. Hence, *tafsīr* literature became separated from the main body of Hadith literature. Both came to be established as independent sciences. *Tafsīr* emerged as one such specialty.

After the separation of *tafsīr* literature from the main body of Hadith, each became an independent science with its own literature and concerns. Hadith literature, for instance, is concerned with transmitted reports on the Prophet's actions and sayings only. *Tafsīr* literature deals with the transmission of reports regarding the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'an, as well as those of the Companions and the *Tābi'ūn*, together with linguistic, rhetoric, juridical and theological considerations. These reports and considerations were the subject of intense study after the separation between Hadith and *tafsīr* had taken place. *Tafsīr* literature was eventually divided into two major types technically known as *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*.

Chapter Two

Tafsīr in the Third and Fourth Centuries (AH)

In the third and fourth centuries AH, the writing of *tafsīr* evolved. The transmission of *tafsīr* with a complete chain of transmission (*isnād*) became popular and began to attract the attention of theologians and lexicographers as a specialization in one aspect of Qur'anic exegesis. Thus, they began to produce *tafsīr* commentaries dominated by a notable distinctive feature. Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, is generally acknowledged to be the most comprehensive work of *tafsīr*.

Important Developments After Al-Ṭabarī

After the fourth century AH, three main developments occurred in the

field of Qur'anic commentary. In al-Suyūṭī's terms, these were a) *ikhtiṣār al-asānīd*, meaning the shortening of the chains of narration (which were accompanied by unverified statements), b) the age of specialization, and c) *tafsīr al-bid'ah* (heretical interpretation), that is the emergence of unorthodox exegesis.⁸ There is, furthermore, *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar*, which concerns the relationship between the surahs of the Qur'an on the one hand, and the relationship between the verses in each surah on the other.

The shortcutting of a chain of narration is known in the science of Hadith as *ikhtiṣār al-asānīd*. Instead of repeating the name of each teacher or reporter in a given chain of narration (*isnād*), Muslim scholars began to omit the full *isnād*. Such went against the methodology of Islamic scholarship because this tendency did not provide for the verification of the sources of information. It was, therefore, common and easy to quote or adopt a report from nonexistent or unreliable sources. Consequently, many texts were written of such poor scholarship and standard that their authors made no distinction between accurate and inaccurate data. However, Al-Suyūṭī and others consider the period from the fifth century upward as that of the age of specialization in *tafsīr* because experts produced Qur'anic interpretation from the perspective of their field of specialization only, with greater emphasis on grammatical, juristic, and theological analysis.

Following the assassination of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, the third Caliph, and the religio-political conflict faced by the Muslims, three main groups emerged: the Alids (supporters of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib), the Umayyad (the supporters of Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān), and the Kharijites. The Sunni and Shia divide also resulted. The three parties mutually accused each other of being false Muslims. This ongoing issue is reflected in the texts of the protagonists in general and in *tafsīr* works in particular. Al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* is one of the *tafsīrs* that represent the Sunni points of view. Shia *tafsīr* developed in parallel to that of the Sunnis. However, there are two major distinctions between them. First, some Shia believe that the Qur'an primarily speaks to their imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his eleven descendants. Second, the Shia believe or consider the twelve imams to be the only legitimate authorities on the Qur'an after the Prophet.

The traditionalists branded the *tafsīr* of the Muʿtazilites, as previously mentioned, as *bid'ah* because they believed that the Muʿtazilites twisted some of the words of the Qur'an to support or fit their own

perspectives. The Muʿtazilites hold that the traditionalists misunderstood them or misinterpreted their views. Sufi *tafsīr* is mystical in nature and heavily influenced by philosophical thought. The Sufis believe the Qurʾan to have two meanings: an apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) and an inner, hidden one (*bāṭin*). Finally, a method of interpretation termed *al-tafsīr al-Ishārī* (interpretation by indication or allegory) looks beyond the apparent meanings of the Qurʾan. It infers meanings that are not visible to anyone, its exponents allege, but those whose heart God has opened. Its proponents base their interpretation upon certain *tafsīr* of the Companions of the Prophet.

Orthodox Reaction to the Variations of Interpretation and *al-Raʾy*

The emergence of *tafsīr* variations was strongly criticized by traditionalists such as Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Suyūṭī and others. They believed such interpretations by so-called *mubtadiʿah* (practitioners of un-Islamic unorthodox, blameable innovation) to be nothing but distortions of the interpretation of the Prophet, those of his Companions and those of the Successors. Thus, they launched uncompromising attacks on *tafsīr* variations. In addition, the traditionalists advocated that Muslims should write and read traditional *tafsīr* works only and warned against *al-raʾy* (intellectual reasoning) that is devoid of sound Arabic usage and grounding. They used four different sources to substantiate their views: the Qurʾan, Hadith, the Companions' reports, and those of the Successors.

Some proponents of the traditional approach to *tafsīr* have claimed that the Qurʾan cannot be understood without the Prophetic Hadith. The call for traditional interpretation exclusively and against all use of rational endeavor is not intellectually justifiable in their view. Certain jurists, grammarians, and theologians including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Ibn ʿAṭīyyah, al-Qurṭubī, and Abū Ḥayyān challenged this view using the same sources employed by their opponents. In response to the traditionalists reference to Qurʾanic verse 16:44, Ibn ʿAṭīyyah argued that although the Prophet was given responsibility to explain the Qurʾan, his interpretation was given according to the necessities of his time and for the people of that particular period. Following his death, the time-space factor might require further intellectual exertion to clarify generalities in the Prophet's interpretation. This, the argument proceeded, would necessitate resort to scholastic reasoning (*raʾy*) and is permissible provided the basic rules of *tafsīr* are applied. The defenders of the use of *raʾy* in *tafsīr* also used the Qurʾan to substantiate their position. The proponents of *raʾy* also cite the famous hadith in

which the Prophet clearly encouraged his followers to engage in *ijtihad*: “whoever makes *ijtihad* and he is right, will earn two rewards. If, however, he is wrong, he will earn only one reward.”⁹

As a result of these arguments between traditionalists and theologian-jurists, the classical *tafsīr* was divided into two major categories: *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. The word *ma'thūr* is a passive participle derived from the root verb *athara*, meaning ‘to trace,’ or ‘to mark.’ The verb *athara* also means to transmit, to report, to pass along, etc. Thus, *ma'thūr* means that which is transmitted, handed down. *Al-Tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* is, generally speaking, understood to be the Qur’anic interpretations derived by the Prophet, by the Companions and by the Successors. The word *ra'y* is a verbal noun which means opinion, view, belief, and usually involves analogy and intellectual exertion. Technically, it refers to independent opinion that is used to derive Qur’anic interpretation by exerting the mind in understanding the word of God. It is usually based on the sound knowledge of the Arabic language and the implementation of the agreed principles of *tafsīr*, which is divided into *al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* or *al-mamdūḥ* (praiseworthy) and *al-ra'y al-madhīm* (blameworthy).

Chapter Three

***Tafsīr* in the Third and Fourth Centuries (AH)**

Concepts and Definitions

In reality, as will become apparent, the division is not so clear cut as *ra'y* will inevitably be involved at some stage in *ma'thūr* tradition-based exegesis. The word *ma'thūr* is a passive participle derived from the verbal noun *athara*. According to the Arabic lexicon, *athara* has a variety of meanings, ranging from to ‘trace,’ to ‘mark,’ to ‘report,’ and to ‘transmit.’ Further, in Arabic, the term ‘hadith’ literally means ‘new’ as opposed to ‘old,’ and it refers to report, story, communication, conversation, talk, etc. – that is to say, news. The Qur’an uses this word normally to denote the linguistic meaning of story, communication, and conversation. The Prophet used the term hadith as it has been used in the linguistic sense and in the Qur’an.

In *Fath al-Bārī*, one hadith reads: “The best hadith is the book of Allah.” The *Muḥaddithūn* (scholars of Hadith) used the term hadith to denote that which was transmitted from or about the Prophet

concerning his deeds, sayings, tacit approval or descriptions of his *Ṣifāt* (physical appearance). Also, Sunnah is literally a way, rule, or manner, whether it be good or bad, and the Qur'an uses the term in the linguistic meaning to denote this literal sense. However, the terms Hadith and Sunnah were used interchangeably by the Prophet's Companions.

Muslims believe that the Prophet was divinely commanded to explain the Qur'an to mankind, not by his own reasoning, but through the words which Angel Gabriel had brought to him from God. Several verses indicate that the Prophet must be the first interpreter of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic phrase Ibn Taymiyyah brings forth to support this argument ("that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them,") in my opinion does not necessarily imply the Prophet explained the totality of the Qur'an. It more likely implies the explanations of problematic verses as well as those that cannot be comprehended through the Arabic alone, such as the verses on fasting, pilgrimage, etc., which can only be understood through the Sunnah (for example, how to perform salah). Muslims are urged more than once in the Qur'an and Hadith to reflect on the Qur'an as a way of understanding it. For example verse 38:29: "[All this have We expounded in this] blessed divine writ which We have revealed unto thee, [O Muhammad,] so that men may ponder over its messages, and that those who are endowed with insight may take them to heart."

Chapter Four

***Tafsīr* and Fatwas of the Prophet's Companions (Ṣaḥābah)**

The Companions became the most important interpreters of the Qur'an following the Prophet's death. They used a number of sources in their *tafsīr* including the statements of the Prophet and their own reasoning or understanding (ijtihad), as well as Arabic grammar. They were also aware of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was revealed, as well as the reasons of revelation and its place. Some of the most prominent in the field are the Four Caliphs, (Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān and ʿAlī), among others. The Arabic word *ṣaḥīb* (adjective) is derived from the verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) *ṣuḥḥbah*, which has many meanings all denoting the notion of companionship or submission.

Ṣāhib in Islamic historiography refers to a contemporary of the Prophet, someone who believed in him as a Prophet, kept his company, and died as such. Traditionalists and jurists alike have their own definition of this term. Traditionalists define a *ṣāhib* or *ṣaḥābī* as anyone who met Prophet Muhammad in reality (as opposed to seeing him in a dream) after he became a Prophet, and died as a believer in him.¹⁰ Jurists (*uṣūliyyīn*) viewed a *ṣaḥābī* not simply as someone who met the Prophet, but more broadly someone who acknowledged his prophethood, became his disciple, accompanied him over a long period of time, met with him frequently during that period, and learned from him.¹¹ The jurists' definition excluded from the rank of the *Ṣaḥābah* many people whom the traditionalists considered to have that status, especially those people who saw the Prophet once during the only one pilgrimage he made to Makkah.

The Companions, whether during the Prophet's life or thereafter, had at times used their own opinion in the interpretation of both the Qur'an and Hadith. This effort on their part came to be known as *ra'y Ṣāhib* (a Companion's opinion, saying, or fatwa), and its authority became the subject of controversy among Muslim scholars.¹² There are ample verses in the Qur'an and Hadith which command Muslims to seek knowledge and teach it. Inspired by this command, the Companions became involved in *tafsīr*. They did not interpret the whole Qur'an, nor did they leave a compendium of their contribution.

Scholars are divided into two groups concerning the binding authority of the Companions' interpretation. Those who consider the *Ṣaḥābah*'s exegesis to be binding include Imam Mālik, Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn Qayyim. They based their argument mainly on the fact of the Companions' virtues and merits, for they were praised both in the Qur'an and in the hadith, and were witnesses of the Revelation. In addition, they had mastered the language of the Qur'an. Among those who believed otherwise, that is the Companions' *tafsīr* is not binding, include al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ḥazm and Abū Ḥayyān. The focus of their argument rested on the practicality of the Companions' interpretation which contains irreconcilable contradictions in places. By this is meant that practically speaking, to accept as binding the *tafsīr* of the Companions, with their irreconcilable differences, would place the Muslims in a state of perplexity and confusion, as such contradictions would necessarily have binding practical application in the various fields of the Muslims' life. The Companions' interpretation is without doubt important in understanding the Qur'an and has

unquestioned value and intrinsic merit given their proximity to the Prophet and knowledge of the Qur'an.

Chapter Five

***Tafsīr* and Fatwas of the Successors (*Tābi'ūn*)**

Debate on the Binding Character of the Successors' Interpretation

There is disagreement over whether or not the interpretations of the *Tābi'ūn* (Successors) is considered legally binding. Unfortunately, the historical materials devoted to the discussion of this issue are not extensive as in the case of the Companions – it naturally follows that scholars who did not believe the exegesis of the Prophet's Companions to be binding (i.e. al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ḥazm and others) showed no interest in discussing the authority of the *Tābi'ūn's* interpretation. However, the majority of Sunni scholars have agreed that the *ijmā'* of the Successors is a binding proof (*ḥujjah*).

Tābi'ūn is the plural of *Tābi'*. The word *Tābi'* is an active participle derived from the verbal noun *Taba'a*, meaning to follow. Thus, *Tābi'ī* means a person, or a generation that comes after another one that has gone by; someone, or a generation, that follows or succeeds a previous one – a follower, a successor. Technically, *Tābi'* refers to a Muslim who had no direct contact with the Prophet Muhammad (did not see him), but did have direct contact with one of his Companions (met him) and died as a Muslim.¹³ The *Tābi'ūn*, or Successors, are considered the second generation of Islam, and the best following the Companions.

Whether the interpretation or religious fatwa of a single Successor should also be recognized as such, among Sunni scholars, Abū Ḥanīfah, believe the interpretation of the Successors and their religious decrees to be not binding. This is simply in view that they did not have the chance of seeing the Prophet or witnessing the Revelation. Ibn Taymiyyah supports this opinion, while for Abū Ḥayyān to accept the *Tābi'ūn's* interpretation is intellectual or scholarly suicide.¹⁴ The second group includes – according to some reports – Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and some Mālikī jurists, who believed interpretation by the immediate Successors to be binding.¹⁵ However, according to a modern Ḥanbalī jurist, Abd Allah ibn Muhsin al-Turki, most of the Ḥanbalī jurists seemed to believe that the most authentic report to have come from

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal indicates that the opinions of the *Tābiʿūn* are not binding.

Differences in the Qurʾanic Interpretations of the *Tābiʿūn*

The *Tābiʿūn* differ in five key areas: fiqh, theology, Qurʾanic historical personages, linguistics, and Qurʾanic phrases. Regarding the area of fiqh, differences among the issues in the legal implications of verses may have been caused by differing understandings of those verses, a lack of knowledge of the Prophet’s sayings concerning related issues, or dependence on weak hadith. One example illustrating lack of knowledge of the Prophet’s saying on a specific issue can be seen in relation to verse 2:196: “And complete the Hajj and *ʿumrah* in the service of Allah. But if ye are prevented (from completing it), send an offering for sacrifice, such as ye may find, and do not shave your heads until the offering reaches the place of sacrifice.”¹⁶ The Prophet has specified in hadith (agreed upon by al-Bukhārī and Muslim) how many days one should fast and how many poor people one should feed when one is prevented from performing Hajj or *ʿumrah*. However, we find the *Tābiʿūn* differing concerning the number of days one should fast and the number of poor people one should feed.

Further, there are Qurʾanic references to individual personalities whose actual names are not given. The *Tābiʿūn* nevertheless tried to identify them in one way or another (probably referring to the Torah and the New Testament) and not surprisingly differed as to who they were, for example, verse 2:246: “Hast thou not Turned thy vision to the Chiefs of the Children of Israel after (the time of) Moses? They said to a prophet (that was) among them: “Appoint for us a king,....” The Qurʾan does not mention the name of this prophet of Israel, but some of the *Tābiʿūn* tried to locate the identity.

Theology refers to the *Tābiʿūns*’ own understanding of a Qurʾanic verse and its interpretation without depending on a hadith or statement from the *Ṣaḥābah*. An example of this interpretation can be seen in verse 4:159: “And there is none of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) but must believe in him [Jesus] before his death (*qabla mawtihi*)...” The *ḍamīr* pronoun “*hi*” meaning *his* in the phrase *qabla mawtihi* (before his death) can refer to an individual of the People of the Book or to Jesus. If the pronoun “*he*” refers to an individual of the People of the Book, the meaning of the verse would be that all of the People of the Book must certainly believe in Jesus as a Messenger of God before he (the individual) dies. If, however, the pronoun refers to

Jesus, then the meaning would be that there are “none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death.”

Linguistics concerns individual words or terms which the *Tābi‘ūn* understood differently according to their own varying linguistic backgrounds. More interestingly, they also differed in terms of the origin of some Qur’anic words allegedly derived from foreign languages. For example, the word “*al-Ṣamad*” in verse 112:2 has been interpreted in a variety of ways: Zayd ibn Aslam sees it as *al-Sayyid* (the master), Qatādah understands it as *al-Bāqī ba‘d khalqih* (one who outlasts His creation), ‘Ikrimah explains it as *alladhī lam yakhruj minhu shay’ wa lā yuṭ‘am* (one who does not expel waste or needs to be fed),¹⁷ al-Rabi‘ ibn Anas states it to mean *alladhī lam yalid wa lam yūlad* (He who begets not, nor has been begotten),¹⁸ and finally according to Mujāhid, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr, al-Suddī, and al-Dahhāk *al-Ṣamad* is *nūr yatala’la’* (a light that shines).¹⁹ Another example is the word *al-zaytūn* in the Qur’anic verse 95:1. Ka‘b al-Aḥbār and Qatadah believe it to refer to the sacred Mosque in Jerusalem, while Mujāhid and ‘Ikrimah indicate that it is the olive that is known.²⁰

Qur’anic phrases relate to terms in the Qur’an which the *Tābi‘ūn* have interpreted differently due to a lack of knowledge of hadith that mentions the meaning of these phrases or because there were no hadith concerning difficult phrases, leading to each individual using his own opinion or knowledge in explaining the meaning. Thus the phrase in verse 15:87: “And, indeed, We have bestowed upon thee seven of the oft repeated [verses], and [have, thus, laid open before thee] this sublime Qur’an,” has been interpreted differently. For students of Ibn ‘Abbās, mainly Mujāhid, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr and al-Dahhāk, along with their teacher Ibn ‘Abbās, it meant the seven longest chapters of the Qur’an. On the other hand, for al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Qatādah, and eventually also Mujāhid (as he once held the former opinion), *al-sab‘ al-mathānī* meant *al-fātiḥah* (the first *sūrah* of the Qur’an) only. They quote a hadith found in *al-Bukhārī* to support this interpretation, whilst those holding the former opinion did not refer to any hadith.

Principal Characteristics of the *Tābi‘ūn*’s *Tafsīr*, Sources, and Methodology

Despite the claims that some *Tābi‘ūn* such as Mujāhid, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr and others wrote exegeses, their texts did not cover all the verses of the Qur’an. Generally speaking, the *tafsīr* of the *Tābi‘ūn* was simple and clear. It included very few quotations from poetry to support the

definition of Qur'anic text, and whilst grammatical analyses are lacking, some of them, such as Qatādah, did provide rhetorical and linguistic observations of some verses. They also explained a considerable number of individual words (the scope and purposes of which lie outside the purpose of this research).²¹

The *Tābi'ūn* primarily used three sources for their exegesis. One was the Qur'an. The second source was the *Ṣaḥābah*, to whom the Successors referred extensively in their exegeses. The third source was independent opinion. One other source they utilized for their interpretation of the Qur'an was the *isrā'iliyyāt*, especially the students of Ibn 'Abbās.

Muslim scholars are divided into two groups in terms of the binding authority of the *Tābi'ūn* exegesis. Most believe their exegesis to be not *ḥujjah* as they did not meet the Prophet in person or witness the circumstances surrounding the revelation.

Others hold that as the exegetical works of the *Tābi'ūn* are based on the knowledge they acquired from the *Ṣaḥābah* they thus have equal standing with the work of the *Ṣaḥābah* as binding proof, because whatever knowledge the *Tābi'ūn* acquired would have been the same as that of their teachers.

However, ultimately, it seems that the justifications and reasons provided by both sides in terms of the binding authority of the *Tābi'ūn* exegesis hardly rest on scholastic credentials, but rather are based solely on the fact or merit of the individual having lived at the time of the Prophet and having had contact with him.

Chapter Six

Tafsīr Based on Opinion: Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y

According to Arabic lexicons, the word *ra'y* is a verbal noun. It has a variety of meanings, rendered as to see with eyes, with the mind, to reflect, to suppose.²² According to Muslim grammarians and linguists such as Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī and Ibn Mālik, the word *ra'ā* is derived from *ra'y*, and is a transitive verb which takes one or two direct objects. If referring to one direct object, it means to see with the eyes, i.e. *ra'aytu Zayd* meaning "I saw Zayd" (literally) with (my) eyes. If referring two

direct objects it means to see with the mind or to suppose,²³ i.e. *ra'aytu Allāh Akbar min kulli shay'*, meaning literally I saw God greater than everything, or I believed that God is greater than everything, the verb *ra'ā* here meaning to believe because it takes two direct objects.

In the Qur'an, we find the term *ra'y* used in different forms (past, present, and as verbal noun) to denote the same lexical sense. For example, in verse 6:76, "When the night covered him over, he saw a star,..." the term *ra'ā* (he saw) is used to mean sighting with the eye.²⁴ Elsewhere in verse 8:48 we read, "...Lo! I see what ye see not,..." with *ra'y* used here to mean seen through the eyes. In the Prophetic hadith we find that *ra'y* is used in two senses; one as personal opinion, and two, as an equivalent to *ijtihad* (self exertion). At the time of the Companions, the term *ra'y* was also used with reference to two different meanings: first, as an independent personal opinion in the absence of a clear indication from the Qur'an or the Prophet's tradition, and second, as an equivalent to *qiyās* (analogical deduction).

During the era of the *Tābi'ūn*, the emergence of various politico-theological groups in Islam led to the term *ra'y* beginning to connote exegesis that was sectarian or *bid'ah*. Hence, exegesis *bi al-ra'y* eventually came to denote Qur'anic interpretation that had no basis in the tradition of the Prophet or his Companions. Thus, *ra'y* became a term of disparagement in relation to exegesis. 'Ubayd Allāh, a grandson of 'Umar ibn-Khaṭṭāb, was once asked as to his opinion concerning Zayd ibn Aslam (an outstanding successor exegete of Madinah). He replies, "I do not find anything wrong with him, except that he interprets the Qur'an using his own personal opinion."²⁵ Despite this aforementioned meaning, generally speaking, the term *ra'y* had been used to mean *ijtihad*, personal opinion, *qiyās* and belief (*I'tiqād*).

Al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y is used to denote exegesis of the Qur'anic text which does not depend on a Hadith, but uses the intellect (exerting the mind) to understand the word of God based on sound knowledge of the Arabic language and implementation of the principles of *tafsīr*.²⁶ Any Qur'anic exegesis that conforms to this definition is said to be *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-mahmūd* or *al-mamdūh*, i.e., 'praiseworthy exegesis.' However, any Qur'anic exegesis that does not conform to this definition is technically called *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhūm* 'blameworthy exegesis.'²⁷ Thus, *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhūm*, is defined as exegesis undertaken without proper knowledge of the sources of *tafsīr*, the Shari'ah, and sound knowledge of Arabic. Thus, Islamically speaking,

al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y is divided into two categories: *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhḥmūm*. Among the sunni scholars who reject *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhḥmūm* are three prominent scholars: al-Ṭabarī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyyah.

Al-Ṭabarī believed that the interpretation of the Qur'an can only be attained through four ways: first, there are some verses that can be understood only through the explanation given by the Prophet; second, the interpretation of some verses whose understanding God has preserved for Himself; third, through understanding that there are verses for which ignorance is not allowed or excused; and fourth, understanding interpretation of some verses only require scholarly knowledge.²⁸ Al-Ghazālī believed the Qur'an to contain hidden meanings which could be misunderstood if one relied solely on the literal Arabic (apparent meaning “*zāhir*”). Yet anyone not understanding the literal Arabic would be using personal opinion in attempting to explain the hidden meanings. Hence, he argued, hadith is necessary to understand and explain the literal and actual meaning of the Qur'an. Ibn Taymiyyah seemed to accept *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* but believed that those who adopt a different method to that of the Companions and the Successors in interpreting the Qur'an is wrong.

At the time of the Prophet and during the tenure of the first two Caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, the term *ra'y* held no negative connotations, being understood as personal opinion and analogy. Following the assassination of ʿUthmān, the third Caliph, Muslims suffered internal division, with generally speaking, each group, including the supporters of Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, using the Qur'an to support their own perspective. Nonetheless, historically as the different schools of thought evolved as a result of various theological or political differences, *al-tafsīr* became unfortunately embroiled in polemics, leading to an inevitable loss of objectivity.

A critical look at the arguments of both the opponents and the proponents of *al-ra'y* in defense of their position reveals that some arguments needed more support while others are deemed irrelevant. For example, the opponents of *ra'y* would quote verse 16:44 (“...and We have sent down unto you (Muhammad) (also) the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them...”) to back their prohibition of *ra'y*. In my opinion this argument is a weak one, practically speaking, for the Prophet did not explain the whole Qur'an, not even most of it, and his Companions consequently used their own opinion in explaining

some of its verses. But whatever the case, the majority position of scholars is that *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (under the grouping *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-mahmūd*) is permissible subject to certain conditions, for men endowed with sound knowledge and based on sound sources.

Chapter Seven

Trends in Modern Qur'anic Interpretation

From 1750 until the middle of the 20th century, the occupation and decline of the Muslim world became increasingly pronounced, with the civilisation eroding under the cultural and political influence of the West penetrating ever deeper all aspects of Muslim life, socially, politically, educationally, culturally, and economically. In an effort to stem the tide, various revivalist ideas and reform movements emerged seeking to re-establish and strengthen Islamic identity, India and Egypt being a case in point. Some of these movements sought to achieve their goals by adopting rational, intellectual and scientific approaches to interpreting Islam as a way of life. Thus, new trends appeared in Islamic literature in general and *tafsīr* in particular, predominantly intellectual, scientific, rhetorical, philological, traditional and what relates to natural history.

Advocates of the intellectual approach aimed at waking Muslims up to the realization that the Qur'an was revealed first and foremost to guide humankind, and that it educates humankind on how to achieve success in this life and the Hereafter. Thus, the Qur'an is presented as the answer to all of humankind's problems and one's spiritual and worldly needs. Muslims must seek, in the Qur'an alone, the solutions to all their problems, in every sphere of their life: be it the social, economic, political, day-to-day affairs, or other areas, etc. According to this approach, Muslims must understand the Qur'an as a book of guidance to be used according to how Muslims perceive their problems within the modern world.

The most popular exponent of this trend is represented by the voluminous work *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm*, popularly known as *Tafsīr al-Manār*. *Tafsīr al-Manār* contains a variety of interpretations and propositions ranging from the Prophet's interpretation, that of his Companions, to that of the immediate Successors and to linguistic considerations such as rhetoric, quotations from Jewish and Christian

sources, and judicial issues. The work, generally speaking, has been well received by the Muslim world.

Because of the scientific advances of the modern world, the scientific approach strongly advocates that the Qur'an must be understood in the light of modern science, rather than in terms of a jurisprudential approach. One of the representative key works of this trend is *Al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Pearls from the *Tafsīr* of the Noble Qur'an) by Shaykh Jawhar Tantawi (d. 1940). Tantawi declared that the scientific approach to Qur'anic interpretation was incumbent upon individuals whereas jurisprudence was not. In so doing, he openly attacked the jurists for failing to incorporate the scientific approach. Contemporary scholars did not warmly embrace Tantawi's methodology. Subhi al-Salih, Jansen, and others criticized it for, in their opinion, its excessive attention to scientific considerations and other ideas, so much so that the work was not considered a true exegesis.²⁹

The style of the rhetorical approach is rhetorical, that is much attention is given to literary sociological considerations. *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* by Sayyid Qutb, published in Cairo in eight volumes, is a famous example of this approach. In his introductory statement, Sayyid Qutb states that the solution to the Muslim community and mankind's problems lies in the teaching and practicing of the Qur'an only, simply because the Qur'an was a book revealed primarily to guide mankind to achieve peace and happiness.³⁰ *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* has been overwhelmingly acclaimed by Muslims worldwide simply because it focuses on the social problems experienced by Muslims of his time.

The philological approach advocates that the Qur'an must be understood through the Arabic language simply because it has been revealed in Arabic. According to this approach, one must know the chronological order of the Qur'an and the circumstances of time and place surrounding the revelation of the text. Whilst no complete work of *tafsīr* exists which represents this trend, there is however, one incomplete work which serves this purpose. Entitled, *Tafsīr al-Bayān li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* it was written by Aishah bint Abd al-Rahman al-Shati, best known as Bint al-Shati. Bint al-Shati's *tafsīr* has been described by Manna al-Qattan as an acceptable effort. However, he expresses some concern over the deficiency of this method with regard to certain aspects of the Qur'anic sciences, including the miracles associated with the Qur'anic laws and basic principles.³¹

The traditional approach relies heavily on classical *tafsīr* and literature, but it also addresses some issues of modern times. Representatives of the trend include Shaykh Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866-1914) and his work *Maḥāsīn al-Ta'wīl* and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur, author of the famous *Al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. The work is highly comprehensive in nature and typically classical in approach. It can be fairly described as an “encyclopedia.”

Muhammad al-Dhahabi (1915-1977) describes the approach, which focuses on natural history as one that is preferred or used by renegades, while Jansen terms it a natural history approach. The trend contends that all *tafsīr* literature is useless. It even rejects some of the established principles of the Qur'an and Hadith as well as the miracles of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Solomon and so on, claiming to be a new method of understanding the Qur'an. One of its outstanding exponents is Muhammad Abu Zayd, who penned the controversial *Al-Hidāyah wa al-ʿIrfān*, a work confiscated by al-Azhar University who declared its author an apostate and issued a fatwa rejecting its contents.³²

Conclusion

Qur'anic exegesis has a long history. It aims to make clear the true meaning of the Qur'an. Each generation of exegetes has approached *tafsīr* from perspectives unique to the time, place and circumstances of the era in which they lived. Qur'anic interpretation began with the Prophet Muhammad, the supreme exegete, who gave precise and clear explanations. After his death, the Companions believed they had a divine obligation to disseminate and teach the Qur'an and its interpretation to the next generations of Muslims. During their time, four major schools of Qur'anic interpretation emerged.

Each of these schools produced a number of highly regarded authorities on interpretation. During the era of the *Tābiʿūn*, the method and nature of interpretation was not much different from that of the Companions. Later the *tafsīr* of the Companions and that of the Successors became the subject of heated debate among scholars centered on whether or not their *tafsīr* was a binding proof (a *ḥujjah* or *ḥujjiyyah*), an issue which would have future consequences at the Shari'ah level. The arguments of those who held that the Companions' *tafsīr* was a binding proof, were mostly based on the merits of the Companions, whereas

the arguments of those who believed otherwise were based on textual evidence and intellectual analysis.

During the first century of Islam no exhaustive *tafsīr* work existed that covered the entire text of the Qur'an. The only known extant commentary of this type is al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. After the fourth century AH, three main developments occurred in the field of Qur'anic exegesis: the use of unverified statements, the age of specialization, and the emergence of reprehensible interpretation or *tafsīr al-bid'ah*. These developments subsequently led to two further important ones in the field of Qur'anic interpretation: *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and its natural counterpart *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* as two distinctive fields. Various scholars further divided the latter into two categories: *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-mahmūd* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhūm*.

The age of specialization is characterized by an expansion of *tafsīr* into specialties with descriptions such as juristic, grammatical, intellectual, as well as other forms of *tafsīr*. New exegesis trends continued to appear, creating new *tafsīr* categories such as scientific, literary, natural history and philological interpretation. Generating precise comprehension of the Qur'an and the true meaning of its verses is in my opinion the essence of perhaps the most important of the Islamic sciences, Qur'anic exegesis or *tafsīr*. Success both in this life and the hereafter cannot be achieved except by Allah's will and as a result of a life lived in accordance with the tenets laid down in His message to mankind – the Qur'an. It is therefore imperative that the text is given the study, attention, focus, priority, and the respect that it deserves.

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Notes

- 1 Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abū Bakr, *Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, 1st edn., (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿImiyyah, 1987/1407).
- 2 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 382.
- 3 Ibid., p. 381.
- 4 Ibid., p. 413.
- 5 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Fath al-Rabbānī li Tartīb Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal al-Shaybānī*, ed., Abd al-Rahman al-Banna, (Cairo: Dār al-Shihāb), vol. 18, pp. 175-176.
- 6 Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān*, eds., Mahmud Muhammad Shakir and Ahmed Muhammad Shakir, (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 204.
- 7 Ibn Saʿd, Muḥammad ibn Saʿd ibn Manīʿ al-Zuhrī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), vol. 2, pp. 98-99.
- 8 Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān*, vol. 2, p. 419. See also, Muhammad Abd al-Adhim al-Zarqani, *Manābil al-ʿIrfān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, vol. 2, pp. 32-3.
- 9 Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqiy al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm, *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, ed., Adnan Zorzo, (Beirut: Dār al-Qurʾān al-Karīm, 1979/1399), p. 52.
- 10 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Al-Iṣābah fī Tamyīz al-Ṣaḥābah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyah, 1969), vol. 2, p. 83.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī, *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, ed., Abd al-Razzaq Afifi, 2nd edn., (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islamī, 1402 ah), vol. 4, pp. 140-145.
- 13 Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bāʿith al-Ḥathīth fī Ikhtisār ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* (Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1967), p. 78.
- 14 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, p. 105.
- 15 Muhammad Abu Zahrah, *Al-Muʿjizah al-Kubrā: Al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, n.d.) p. 513.
- 16 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, vol. 1, pp. 412-413.
- 17 Ibid., vol. 7, p. 412.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., p. 476.
- 21 *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 4, pp. 123-170.
- 22 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), vol. 14, pp. 299-300.

- ²³ Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yūsuf ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī, *Al-Taṣrīḥ ʿalā al-Tawḍīḥ*, eds., *Majmūʿah min al-ʿUlamāʿ*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 26.
- ²⁴ Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn ʿAlī al-Andalusī Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, (Riyadh: Maktabah wa Maṭbaʿah al-Ḥashr al-Ḥadīth, 1969), vol. 3, p. 178.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 397.
- ²⁶ Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Abd al-Rahim al-Mubarakpuri, *Tuḥfat al-Ahwadhī bi Sharḥ Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, ed., Abd al-Rahman Uthman, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 270-80.
- ²⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʿ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, p. 292.
- ²⁸ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmed ibn Taymiyyahh*, ed., Ahmed Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Najdī al-Hanbali, (Makkah: Maṭbaʿah al-Nahḍah al-Hadīthah, 1404 / 1983), vol. 13, p. 471.
- ²⁹ Subhi al-Salih, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, 2nd edn., (Beirut: Dār al-Malayīn, 1986), p. 297.
- ³⁰ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī-Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, 10th edn., (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982/1400), vol. 1, pp. 11-16.
- ³¹ Al-Qattan, Manna ibn Khalil, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1981), p. 375.
- ³² Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1st edn., (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Hadīthah, 1961/1381), vol. 2, pp. 500-9.

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Generating precise comprehension of the Qur'an and the true meaning of its verses is arguably the essence of the most important of the Islamic sciences, Qur'anic exegesis or *tafsīr*. Since the passing of the Prophet many scholars have worked hard to bring a proper understanding of the meaning of the Qur'an to Muslims, and indeed to the world at large, as fully as possible, in an attempt to widen knowledge of the guidance contained therein, and how to live life in accordance with its principles. The result has been a wealth of historical Muslim literature on the subject which has come to be known as *ʿUlūm al-Tafsīr* or the sciences of *tafsīr*, a systematic exegesis of the Qur'an following several methodologies. This work traces the evolution of Qur'anic exegesis, from the time of the Prophet, the Companions, the Successors, the early *mufasssīrūn* (exegetes) with independent *tafsīr* works, to the present day. In doing so, it addresses some major issues including to what extent has *tafsīr* been influenced by differing theological traditions (classical, mystical sufi, persian), political and sectarian interests etc. and how interpretation has differed in some cases, mainly pertaining to juridical, theological, historical, and linguistic issues.

Certain scholars and Qur'anic commentaries have stood the test of time and stand in greater prominence to others. These are introduced, and different methodologies compared and critiqued. What we are left with is a broad yet important overview of a subject which otherwise can be too complex and extensive for the ordinary reader to grasp, and which acts as a valuable addition to his/her understanding and study of the Qur'anic text.

