

TAFSIR IN EARLY ISLAM

The Ark of Noah is described by Muslim tradition as being of very large size. Exegetes relate that Noah worked on the boat for 400 years, building it from the wood of a special teak tree which had grown for forty years until it was 300 cubits tall. The Ark is said to have been anywhere from 300 by 50 cubits to 1200 by 600 cubits in length and width. Ibn 'Abbas relates that Jesus resurrected Ham, the son of Noah, to describe to his disciples the size and structure of the Ark.

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned in 2.248 as containing the Sakina and the remains left behind by the family of Moses and the family of Aaron. The Sakina is defined variously as the presence of God (Heb. Shechinah), a blowing wind with a face like the face of a man or two heads, or a spirit with the head of a cat, two wings and a tail. Ibn 'Abbas reports that the Sakina was the basin of gold from paradise in which the hearts of the prophets were washed. The remains of Moses and Aaron in the Ark of the Covenant are reported to have included the rod of Moses and pieces of the Tablets, the rod of Aaron, some manna, the clothes of Aaron and the shoes of Moses and Aaron. Others report that the term remains refers to what was left of the knowledge of the Torah.

Further reading

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The word *tafsir* (pl. *tafasir*) is a noun derived from the verb *fassara/yufassiru/tafsir*, meaning explanation, exposition,

elucidation, explication, interpretation and commentary. It also means to elucidate what is meant from a difficult word (Ibn Manzur, 1994, V: 55; al-Zabidi, n.d., III: 470). Technically, *tafsir* is the term encompassing both scholarly efforts to explain the Qur'an and make it more understandable and also the branch of Islamic science that deals with it. The word *tafsir* occurs in the Qur'an just once, at 25.33: They never bring you any simile but We bring you the truth and a better exposition (*tafsiran*).

Ta wil is a word that has a similar meaning to *tafsir*. *Ta wil* is derived from the verb *awwala/yuawwilu/ta'wil*, meaning to interpret dreams, explain, explicate, *tafsir*, *kashf* (discover), elucidate and result. Some scholars think that *tafsir* and *ta'wil* had different meanings from early on, while others believe that at least up until the end of third/ninth century there was no differentiation in meaning. The word *ta'wil* appears in the Qur'an in seventeen different places across fifteen verses, and has various meanings such as the end or intended result of something, interpretation of a dream and exposition of a saying. Once conceptualized, it was used to denote a person using his other rational and intellectual abilities to interpret a word or a text.

The need for commentary on the Qur'an has existed from its conception and stems both from the nature of the text and of the process of the development of Islamic society. In essence, the Qur'an was revealed in the dialect of the Quraysh tribe, who lived in Mecca, home of the Prophet. However, once Islam spread to other Arab tribes, it was possible that some words were either not understood correctly or taken out of context. Also, the Qur'an employs some strange words that not everybody can easily grasp at first glance.

The demand for resolution of apparent contradictions in some verses was

another reason driving interpretation of the Qur'an in the early period of Islam. The fact that some verses in the Qur'an were *muhkam* (clear in meaning), while others were *mutashabih* (ambiguous) forced Muslims to expend extra effort in making the *mutashabih* verses better understood. The Qur'an emphasized this problem more concretely in 3.7 by pointing to those in whose hearts there is vacillation, they follow what is ambiguous in it, seeking sedition and intending to interpret it.

Another important issue in need of explication was the stories the Qur'an narrated. Unlike the biblical narratives, the Qur'anic stories were scattered throughout the text and included repetitions. They generally did not give much detail and were mostly utilized to support the message of the Prophet. Lack of detail in stories made their interpretation necessary to satisfy enthusiastic Muslims eager to know more about them.

The social, political, economic and cultural change that Islamic society underwent after Muhammad's time was another reason behind the need for commentary. Expansion into the lands of Persia and Byzantium under the political successors of the Prophet brought new problems, and to solve these Muslims turned to the Qur'an as a source of advice and knowledge. Moreover, it was not long before the political struggles were carried to the religious sphere, where, in addition to the *ahadith*, some used the Qur'an to defend their position, even at the price of taking the verses out of context.

Although the Qur'an has been interpreted from its very inception, there are reports calling for caution or even asking readers to abstain from comments about the verses. Some *hadith* suggest that those who give their own opinions about the Qur'an have been warned it is

wrong: Whoever talks about the Qur'an relying on one's self-knowledge is wrong, even if he is right (al-Tirmidhi, *Tafsir*: 1; Abu Dawud, *ʿIlm*: 5). Another *hadith* has such people destined for hell.

It is very likely that the utilization of the Qur'an through *tafsir* during the intense political struggles and intellectual differences of the early periods resulted in a tentative approach towards the *tafsir* movement and the narrations that followed. Thus Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855) says: Three things have no reality: *tafsir*, fierce battles (*malahim*) and military expeditions (*maghazi*) (al-Suyuti, *Itqan*, II: 227).

As far as *tafsir* methods are concerned, several approaches can be observed. First, the Qur'an comments on itself; this is considered the best *tafsir*. The *tafsir* of the Qur'an by the Qur'an occurs in several ways, such as limiting an absolute statement, restricting the general meaning, explaining ambiguous positions, vague expressions and unfamiliar words, defining the best possible meaning among several alternatives and explicating short and terse expressions in detail. Sometimes the explanation may come after a verse in the same *sura*. For instance, in 5.1, Lawful unto you [for food] are all beasts, with the exceptions named, is followed almost immediately by Forbidden to you [for food] are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which has been invoked the name of other than Allah; that which has been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, or by a headlong fall, or by being gored to death; that which has been [partly] eaten by a wild animal; unless ye are able to slaughter it [in due form]; that which is sacrificed on stone [altars] (5.3). Sometimes the commentary is offered in another *sura*. For example, the *tafsir* of the Master of the Day of Judgement (*malik yawm al-din*, 1.4) can be found in 82.17-19: And

what will explain to thee what the Day of Judgement is? Again, what will explain to thee what the Day of Judgement is? [It will be] the Day when no soul shall have power [to do] aught for another: For the Command that Day will be [wholly] with Allah.

Traditionally, it is held that the *tafsir* of the Qur'an begins with the Prophet. No doubt the Prophet would have had to encounter some questions about the revelation he had received and conveyed to his people. Thus, some verses begin with the expression They ask thee (*yas'alunaka*). It was quite natural that some of the questions asked of the Prophet were answered by the Qur'an, while others were answered by him, for it is possible that, from time to time he was asked questions—mostly by people who were not members of his tribe—about the descriptions or the language used in the Holy Book. Therefore, even if it was not systematic, he certainly commented on some parts of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the Qur'anic parts that the Prophet commented upon must have been very small, for there was no need for wide-ranging explanations—the Qur'an was able to be understood by most of its contemporaries due to the fact that the contexts of most verses were known already.

The *tafsir* of the Prophet was mostly to elaborate upon those questions directed to him about the verses, to give more detail about the concise expressions, to explain strange words or to make the statements required of his mission. Hence, his *tafsir* was not of a systematic type compared to the *tafsir* movement observed in later periods. One cannot talk of the Prophet's *tafsir* as though he were making long, comprehensive interpretations of the verses and words, only of a commentary explaining what might be meant. The *sunna* of the Prophet is particularly important here as it

explicates the succinct expressions of the Qur'an.

Also of use was the commentary as an aid to performing the rituals of the religion. Muslims needed the Prophet's guidance to learn the times of the daily prayers and how they are performed, the quantity of alms-giving (*zakat*) and of its payment time, and to instruct them how to carry out such practices as performing *hajj* (pilgrimage).

During the lifetime of Muhammad, and in a situation in which he was the authority, the *tafsir* of the Companions could only have served to transmit the Prophet's *tafsir*. Upon encountering a problem in understanding the Qur'an, Muslims solved it by referring it to the Prophet. Muslims consider the *sunna* of the Prophet in general as related to the Qur'an and they accept its explanation. In fact, some verses declare that the Prophet was also commissioned to elaborate upon the Qur'an. One such verse states: We have sent down unto thee [also] the Message; that thou mayest explain clearly (*li tubayyina*) to men what is sent for them, and that they may give thought (16.44). Another states: We sent not a messenger except [to teach] in the language of his [own] people, in order to make [things] clear to them (*li yubayyina*) (14.4).

The *tafsir* of the Prophet can be found in different sources. One is as expected, namely the *tafsir* books; another is the *tafsir* sections of *hadith* collections. Other reports can be found in sources such as history books. There are several instances of this: the Prophet explained that the Middle Prayer (*al-salat al-wusta*) (2.238) was the late afternoon (*'asr*) prayer (Tirmidhi, *Tafsir* 2); and the Prophet's explanation of the phrases the white thread (*al-khayt al-abyadh*) and black thread (*al-khayt al-aswad*) (2.187) as daylight and nighttime darkness respectively (Bukhari,

Tafsir 28; Tirmidhi, *Tafsir* 2). Finally, the Prophet's explanation of the term *wasat* in 2.143: Thus, have We made of you an *umma* justly balanced (*umma wasat*), is supposed to mean just (Tirmidhi, *Tafsir* 2).

It was natural that there were different approaches towards the *tafsir* of the Qur'an among the Companions of the Prophet and their followers (*tabi'un*). Some abstained from *tafsir*, either when they witnessed its use or rather misuse in political quarrels or due to the fear of moral responsibility. 'Umar, the Second Caliph, is reported to have punished Sabigh b. 'Isl with a beating due to his comments on *mutashabih* verses (Darimi, *Muqaddima* 19; Malik, *Jihad* 19). However, this seemingly stern position does not reflect 'Umar's general attitude towards *tafsir*. He not only permitted *tafsir* of other verses but also reported the *tafsir* of the Prophet (Abbott, 1967: 455). When a question about the Qur'an was put to Sa'id b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/712), he used to say, I do not say anything about the Qur'an. Some of the Followers and the Companions thought it very important to explore and explain the parts of the Qur'an they felt were unexplained or closed in meaning, but their numbers were few. Like that of the Prophet, the *tafsir* method of the Companions was also about the ambiguous parts, not about the text as a whole. The Companions both reported the *tafsir* of the Prophet and also commented on the Qur'an, relying on their view and understanding. By reporting the occasion for the revelation of some *suras* or verses (*asbab al-nuzul*), they made significant contributions to the *tafsir* movements even after their time. The examples of the *tafsir* of the Companions found in the sources are generally concerned with either linguistic clarification or elucidations about a pronouncement that cannot be fully understood.

The important elements in the *tafsir* of the Companions are the reports of those who had associated with the Prophet long enough and had knowledge of the occasion of the revelation of the verses (*asbab al-nuzul*). In later times, the scholars considered the *tafsir* of the Companions an important source after that of the Prophet. Certainly, there were differences among the Companions with respect to knowledge as well as ability. It can also be said that they quite obviously had varying opinions on the understanding of certain verses. After the death of Muhammad, Muslims put forward their own opinions (*ijtihad* and *ra'y*) to solve problems arising from different understandings. Additionally, during the times of the Companions, among the sources consulted for the *tafsir* of the Qur'an were the cultures of other religions and nations, or Muslims associated with the neighbourhood, with Jewish culture heading the list.

'Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. 19/640), 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud (d. 32/652), 'Ali b. Abu Talib (d. 40/661), Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 42/662-63), Zayd b. Thabit (d. 45/665), 'Abdullah b. al-'Abbas (d. 68/687-88) and 'Abdullah b. al-Zubayr (d. 73/692) were some of the well-known Companions associated with the *tafsir* movement. The most renowned of them all was 'Abdullah b. al-'Abbas, the son of the Prophet's paternal uncle, although he did not have the opportunity to be with the Prophet for long. Ibn 'Abbas was considered to be an authority in the fields of *tafsir*, *hadith*, *qh*, military expeditions (*maghazi*), the accounts of the Arabs (*ayyam al-'Arab*) and Arabic literature. It is reported that the Prophet prayed for him by saying Oh, my Lord! Teach him wisdom and the *ta'wil* of the Book (Ibn Sa'ad, 1985, II: 365; Ahmad b. Hanbal, 1993, I: 269). Ibn 'Abbas also benefited from the Jewish converts to Islam, namely, 'Abdullah b. Salam

(43/663-64) and Ka'ab al-Akhbar (32/652-53). It is also possible that his authority was broadened by the erroneous ascription to him of some narrations because of his position as the father of the 'Abbasids: it is certain that some of the *tafsir* credited to Ibn 'Abbas do not belong to him.

The period of the Followers (*tabi'in*) is an era that witnessed significant developments in the field of *tafsir*. Initially, the science of *tafsir* began as part of *hadith* studies, but during this time it developed into an independent science in its own right. Even then the method of the chain of transmission (*isnad*) was used to relate *tafsir* remarks. The increase in differences of opinion around the meaning of some verses during this period is one of the important indicators of discussions in this era. Students gathered around some of the Companions mentioned above not only narrated what they heard from their teachers but they themselves also commented upon the Qur'an.

Of this period, some of the important teachers and their students are as follows. Among the students of Ibn 'Abbas were Sa'id b. Jubayr (d. 95/713), Mujahid b. Jabr (d. 103/721), Ikrima al-Barbari (d. 105/723), Tawus b. Kaysan (d. 106/724), 'Ata b. Abu Rabah (d. 114/732), Sa'id b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/712), 'Ubaydullah b. 'Utba (d. 98/716) and al-Qasim b. Muhammad b. Abu Bakr (d. 107/725?); of 'Ubayy ibn Ka'ab were Abu al-'Aliya al-Riyahi (d. 90/709), Muhammad b. Ka'ab al-Qurazi (d. 108/726), Zayd b. Aslam (d. 136/753); and of the well-known commentator of Iraq, 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud, were 'Alqama b. Qays (d. 62/682), Masruq (d. 63/683), al-Aswad b. Yazid (d. 75/694), al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728) and Qatada b. Di'ama (d. 117/735).

Most of the names just listed, as well as others such as Wahb b. Munabbih (d.

114/732), Nafi' (d. 117/735), 'Amr b. Dinar (d. 126/744) and Wasil b. 'Ata (d. 132/749), comprise some of the most renowned *mawali* scholars. And during this era, the importance of the *mawali tafsir* scholars and the role that they played in the development of the *tafsir* schools can easily be recognized. Although there were differences of opinion among the Arabs before the *mawali* accepted Islam, these differences were not so opposed or sufficiently strong as to constitute a separate school. The interest of the *mawali* in *tafsir* catalysed things. One trigger was the need to explain the Qur'an because of the fact that Arabic was not the mother tongue of the *mawali*. Another was the comparative lack of Arab involvement in *tafsir* and other Islamic sciences, the result of their previous nomadic lifestyle and accompanying lack of any solid grounding in intellectual research. Also of influence was the Arab preoccupation with the day-to-day running of things—as the ruling power and political elite, Arabs held most of the administrative offices.

Jewish and Christian cultures also have an important role to play in the development of *tafsir*. The term *Isra'iliyyat* usually denotes that which was borrowed from Jewish culture, especially in *tafsir* literature, but its scope is wide enough to include news and reports imported from Christianity and other cultures. For example, to complete the missing parts of succinctly told stories in the Qur'an, Muslim scholars generally referred to the Bible, which told them about those incidents in more detail. There was a dramatic increase in the number of *Isra'iliyyat* borrowings during the times of the Followers, this information mostly deriving from Jewish Muslim converts.

The traditional sources have various positions as to whether to include reports from foreign sources. In one

hadith the Prophet is reported to have said: Even if it is one verse, convey my message, tell it again from the sons of Israel (Banu Isra'īl), and there is no problem in doing that. [But] If anybody forges lies about me, let him prepare his place in hell (Bukhari, *Anbiya*: 50). Nevertheless, there are also reports of the Prophet criticizing consultation of the Torah. It is narrated that he became angry when he saw a piece or page from the Torah in 'Umar s hand (Ahmad b. Hanbal, 1993, III: 470 1; IV: 265 6). Apart from these, there are also reports suggesting taking a middle way. In one *hadith*, the Prophet enjoins: Neither accept nor deny the [reports of the] People of the Book. Say to them We believe in God and what was revealed to us (Bukhari, *Tafsir*: 11).

Although there are reports indicating that some scholars in the first century had written *tafsir* books, this does not mean that they commented on the Qur'an in its totality. They can be thought of as short treatises containing either explanations on the meaning of some verses that caused disagreement among Muslims or narrations they received from the Prophet or from the Companions about the *tafsir* of some verses. One such *tafsir* is ascribed to Sa'id b. Jubayr, who wrote a *tafsir* book at the request of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan and sent it to him. Later, 'Ata b. Dinar found this *tafsir* in the Caliphate Library (*diwan*) and narrated from it (Ibn Abu Khatim, 1952, VI, 332). Unfortunately it is no longer extant. There are reports also claiming that scholars such as Mujahid b. Jabr, 'Ikrima, al-Hasan al-Basri, 'Ata b. Abu Raba and Su yan b. Sa'id al-Thawri (d. 161/778) had produced examples of the *tafsir* genre. However, it is Muqatil b. Sulayman who is recognized as the first person to comment on the whole Qur'an. Many of the early *tafsirs* did not survive long enough to

come down to us and many of them are included in the *tafsir* of al-Tabari (d. 150/923). We can also find linguistic *tafsirs*, that is *tafsirs* focusing on linguistic analysis, right from early times: Zayd b. 'Ali s (d. 121/738) *Tafsir gharib al-Qur'an al-majid* (The *tafsir* of the foreign words of the noble Qur'an) and *Ma'ani al-Qur'an* (The meanings of the Qur'an) by Wasil b. 'Ata (d. 131/748) are examples of this type.

All early religious and political movements that emerged in the Islamic world put great effort into defending their views by relying on the Qur'an. In order to do so they interpreted certain verses in such a way that they supported their cause. This was one of the elements that motivated the *tafsir* of the Qur'an. Some reports in the traditional sources indicate that certain people attempted to explain the political events during the time of the Companions by relying on the Qur'an. The son of Sa'id b. Abu Waqqas, Mus'ab, related: I asked my father who was meant in Shall we tell you of those who lose most in respect of their deeds? (18.103) I asked whether it was it the *Haruriyya* (Kharijites). His father replied No, they are the Jews and the Christians ... whereas *Haruriyya* were those who were mentioned in But those who break the Covenant of Allah, after having plighted their word thereto (13.25). Sa'id used to describe them as *fasiq* (rebellious and wicked) (Bukhari, *Tafsir*: 18).

The Kharijites, one of the influential sects in the first century of Islamic history, based their existence on unwavering allegiance to the Qur'an. Reports pointing to the name of the sect as being inspired by verse 4.100 And whosoever leaves his home as an emigrant unto Allah and His Messenger (*wa man yakhruj min baytih muhajiran ila Allah wa rasulih*) are part of Kharijite efforts to defend their position in the light of the

Divine Word. The famous Kharijite slogan, Judgement only belongs to Allah (*La hukm illa li Allah*) is inspired by the verse Command is for none but Allah (*In al-hukm illa li Allah*) (12.40, 67).

Their strict reliance on the Holy Book meant they tried to find in it answers to all the questions they encountered in their daily life. Among the first Kharijites, there was no one who spent long enough with the Prophet to make him knowledgeable about the contexts in which the verses were revealed. Thus, it is highly likely that they took the verses out of context when trying to understand them. It has been said that the Kharijites' understanding of the Qur'an was rather narrow-minded and superficial owing to the fact that they were mostly from the Bedouin tribes and had limited experience in dealing with the subtleties of life in large urban communities.

Examples of how the Kharijites understood and commented on certain Qur'anic verses are related in the sources of their opponents. What we do not have is satisfactory information regarding which of the first Kharijites commented on the work, although reports exist that confirm the conversion of Ikrima, one of the well-known scholars in the Followers' period and the *mawla* of 'Abdullah b. al-'Abbas, to the sect. Naturally, the *tafsir* of the Qur'an was used to defend the views of the Kharijites as well as to criticize them.

As a political phenomenon of the first century, the Shi'at 'Ali (supporters of 'Ali) also placed special emphasis upon the *tafsir* of the Qur'an to defend their views. While the work by Jabir al-Ju' (d. 128/746), which is generally acknowledged as the first Shi'i *tafsir*, is not extant, there is mention of another *tafsir* by Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 114/733). Depending on the *tafsir* examples ascribed to some Shi'i groups, we can rea-

sonably argue that they commented upon the verses without taking into account their context. For instance, it is said that Bayan b. Sem'an (d. 119/737), leader of one of the early Shi'a movements, claimed that his name was mentioned in the verse: Here is a *plain statement* (*bayan*) to men, a guidance and instruction to those who fear Allah (3.138) (Ibn Qutayba, 1972: 72).

The reign of the Umayyads was the period during which theological discussions of the Qur'an created the need for *tafsir*. It was the time when terms such as *jabr*, *tashbih* and *irja*, from which originated many of the sects, were introduced. We can trace the beginnings of those discussions in some reports. Mujahid is reported to have said: The best worship is a good opinion (*afdal al-'ibada al-ra'y al-hasan*) (Ibn Qutayba, 1972: 57). With these words, he was possibly replying to criticisms levelled against the tendency to favour the *tafsir* of those verses relying upon personal opinion. He explained the verse Looking towards their Lord (*ila rabbihna nazira*) (75.23) as meaning They expect reward from their Lord. He further elaborated his views on the subject by adding Nobody from His creation can see Him (al-Tabari, 1985, XXIX: 192). However, Muhammad b. Sirin (d. 110/729) is reported as saying, by way of comment on the verse, See you not those that dispute concerning the signs of Allah? How are they turned away [from reality]? (40.69); If it was not revealed about the Qadriyya, I do not know who it was revealed about (al-Tabari, 1985, XXIV: 83).

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See also: **ahl al-kitab; aya; Isra'iliyat; language and the Qur'an; Muqatil b. Sulayman; sunna**

ADNAN DEMIRCAN
AND RIFAT ATAY

TAFSİR – SALAFI VIEWS

Tafsir (exegesis, commentary) of/on the Qur'an, it might be argued, is the most important Islamic science because the