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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

right application of Islam is based on a proper understanding of the guidance given by God. The word *tafsir* is derived from the root *fassara*, which means to explain, to interpret. *Tafsir* is used for explanation, interpretation and commentary on the Qur'an, comprising all ways of obtaining knowledge in order to acquire a proper understanding of the text, explain its meanings and outline its legal implications. The word *mufasssir* (pl. *mufasssirun*) is used for the person doing the *tafsir*, the commentator. The word *ta'wil*, which is also used to describe commentary, is derived from the root *awwala*, and also means explanation or interpretation.

A distinction is often made between *tafsir* that explains the outer (*zahir*) meanings of the Qur'an and *ta'wil* which is considered by some to mean the explanation of the inner and concealed (*batin*) meanings of the Qur'an, in so far as a knowledgeable person can have access to them. *Tafsir* is of great importance because God has sent the Qur'an as a book of guidance to humanity. It sees the purpose of our lives to worship him, i.e. to seek his pleasure by living the way of life God has invited us to adopt. We can do so within the framework of the guidance that God has revealed concerning this, but we can do so only if we properly understand its meanings and implications of the Book.

Some Muslim scholars have warned against *tafsir*. Ahmad b. Hanbal said: Three matters have no basis: *Tafsir*, *malahim* (tales of eschatological nature) and *maghazi* (tales of the battles) (Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima* 1971: 59.). By this is meant that there is much exaggeration and unsound material in these areas, but it does not mean that neither of them ought to be considered. Ibn Hanbal himself based his position on his interpretation of the Qur'an. Any *tafsir* which is acceptable to those sceptical of

the enterprise like Ibn Hanbal needs to adhere to certain conditions. The *mufasssir* (commentator) should be sound in belief (*'aqida*), well grounded in the knowledge of Arabic and its rules as a language, well grounded in other sciences that are connected with the study of the Qur'an (the relevant history and Tradition, for example), and should possess the ability for precise comprehension. The important thing is to reject the use of mere opinion, and one can do this by basing the *tafsir* of the Qur'an on the Qur'an itself. This comes first and then there is a hierarchy of authorities, ranging from seeking guidance from the words and explanations of the Prophet, the reports from the *sahaba* (Companions), the reports of the *tabi'un* (Followers) and finally the opinions of eminent scholars.

As Ibn Kathir explains, the best *tafsir* is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an. The next best is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet Muhammad, who, as Sha'fi explained, acted according to what he understood from the Qur'an. If nothing can be found in the Qur'an nor in the *sunna* of the Prophet, one turns to the reports from the *sahaba* (Ibn Taymiyya 1971: 95). If nothing can be found in the Qur'an, the *sunna* and the reports of the *sahaba*, one turns to the reports from the *tabi'un* (Ibn Taymiyya 1971: 102). However, nothing can match the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet.

*Tafsir bi'l-riwaya* (by transmission) also known as *tafsir bi'l-ra'y* (by sound opinion; also known as *tafsir bi'l-diraya*, by knowledge) is the sort of commentary which comes highest in status for the Salafi or traditionalist thinkers. This is based on all explanations of the Qur'an which can be traced back through a chain of transmission to a sound source, such as the soundest

source of all, the Qur'an itself. Then there is the explanation of the Prophet, the explanation by Companions of the Prophet. They were witnesses to the revelations, were educated and trained by the Prophet himself and were closest to the period of the first Muslim *umma* (community). Of course all reports of explanations by the Prophet or by a *sahabi* must be sound according to the science of *riwaya* as in *'ulum al-hadith*. This is why so much trouble is taken to ensure that the transmission of *hadith* are sound.

The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an is the highest source of *tafsir* and many of the questions which may arise out of a certain passage in the Qur'an have their explanation in other parts of the very same book, and often there is no need to turn to any sources other than the word of God, which in itself contains *tafsir*. To seek to explain an *aya* from the Qur'an by referring to another *aya* from the Qur'an is the first and foremost duty of the *mufasssir*. In many cases this succeeds to resolve the matter. Only if this does not succeed, need he refer to other sources of *tafsir*.

A case in point often mentioned is the detailed explanation of 5.3 by 5.4, concerning permissible and prohibited meat. Another example of explanation of one *aya* in the Qur'an by another concerns a question which might arise from *sura* 44.3. It is explained in *sura* 97.1: We sent it down during a blessed night, we read in *sura* 44.3. Which night is this blessed night, in which the Qur'an was sent down? We have indeed revealed this in the *laylat al-qadr* (97.1). So it was the Night of Power. A third example is the explanation of *sura* 2.37 by *sura* 7.23: Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned towards him, for He is always present and most merciful (2.37). These words of inspiration are explained by the

Qur'an as follows: Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls. If you forgive us not, and bestow not upon us your mercy, we shall certainly be lost (7.23).

There are numerous examples of explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet, who either himself asked the Angel Gabriel for explanation of matters not clear to him, or who was asked by the Companions about the Qur'an. Al-Suyuti has given a long list of explanations of the Qur'an by the Prophet *sura* by *sura*: And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread (2.187). In a report we read that 'Adi b. Hatim said: O Allah's Apostle! What is the meaning of the white thread distinct from the black thread? Are these two threads? He said: You are not intelligent, if you watch the two threads. He then added, No, it is the darkness of the night and the whiteness of the day (Itqan II: 191 205).

Next in value after explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself and of the Qur'an by the Prophet himself ranks the explanation of the Qur'an by the *sahaba*. Among them, the following best known for their knowledge of and contribution to the field of *tafsir* are Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn 'Abbas, 'Ubay b. Ka'b, Zaid b. Thabit, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari and 'Abdullah b. Zubayr. 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas (d. 68/687) is often considered to be the most knowledgeable of the Companions in *tafsir*. Since he was related to the Prophet, being his cousin, and his maternal aunt Maymuna was one of the Prophet's wives, he was very close to the Prophet and learnt much about the revelation. It is said that he saw the Angel Gabriel twice. Apart from his detailed knowledge of everything concerning *tafsir*, he is also given the credit for having emphasised one of the basic principles of *'ilm al-tafsir* (science of *tafsir*) which

has remained important to this day, namely, that the meaning of words, especially of unusual words in the Qur'an ought to be traced back to their usage in the language of pre-Islamic poetry.

There is a long list of such explanations quoted by Suyuti. The following is an example of *tafsir* from a *sahabi*, in fact, Ibn Abbas, con rmed by 'Umar:

So celebrate the praises of your Lord, and ask for His forgiveness. Verily! He is the one who accepts repentance and forgives (110.3). Ibn 'Abbas reported: 'Umar used to make me sit with the elderly men who had fought in the battle of Badr. Some of them did not like that and said to 'Umar: Why do you bring in this boy to sit with us, while we have sons like him? 'Umar replied Because of what you know of his position [i.e. his religious knowledge]. One day 'Umar called me and made me sit in the gathering of those people, and I think that he called me just to show them [my religious knowledge]. 'Umar then asked them in my presence: What do you say about the interpretation of the statement of Allah? : When comes help from God, and the conquest? (110.1). Some of them said: We are ordered to praise Allah and ask for His forgiveness, when Allah s help and the conquest [of Mecca] comes to us . Some others kept quiet and did not say anything. On that 'Umar asked me: Do you say the same, O Ibn 'Abbas? I replied: No . He said: What do you say then? I replied: That is the sign of the death of Allah s Messenger which Allah informed him of. God said: [O Muhammad] when comes the help of Allah [to you against your enemies] and the conquest [of Mecca] [which is the sign of your death], you should celebrate the praises of your Lord and ask for His forgiveness, and He is the one who accepts repentance and forgives (110.1 3). On that 'Umar said: I do not know anything about it

other than what you have said (*Bukhari*, VI: 494). Another example is the *hadith* where 'Ata said: When Ibn 'Abbas heard: Have you not seen those who have changed the favour of Allah into disbelief? (14.28), he said: Those were the disbelieving pagans of Mecca (*Bukhari* VI:222).

There are many more from among the *tabi'un* known for their interest in *tafsir*, because many more people had embraced Islam and the need for knowledge about the Qur'an had increased. Also, the Prophet himself and many of his Companions were no longer available to give this guidance, and therefore greater efforts had to be made to satisfy this need for proper understanding of the book of God. Of the *mufasssirin* from among the *tabi'un* one distinguishes three groups, according to their origin and area of activity, those from Mecca, Medina and Iraq.

According to many, the Meccan *mufasssirin* from among the *tabi'un* are the most knowledgeable in *tafsir*, because they learnt about it from 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas. They are many in number, and among the best known out of many others are Mujahid (d. 104/722), 'Ata (d. 114/732) and 'Ikrima (d. 107H). Mujahid, the best known among them, is reported to have gone through the Qur'an three times with Ibn 'Abbas and to have asked him about the when and how of each verse that had been revealed (Ibn Taymiyya 1971: 102.)

For example, Humayd b. Qays Makki reported: I was with Mujahid and we were circumambulating the *Ka'ba*. A man came and asked whether the fasts of penalty with respect to an oath should be observed continuously or severally. Humayd replied that if he liked he could observe them severally too! But Mujahid said: Not severally, for the reading of 'Ubayy b. Ka'b is to fast three days continuously (*Muwatta Malik*: 617).

Sound reports must be distinguished from unsound ones, for many views have been falsely attributed to some *sahaba* and *tabi'un* (especially to Ibn 'Abbas and Mujahid, the most renowned ones among them), which cannot be traced back to them when the *isnad* or source is investigated. Those reports must of course be rejected. Material from the *ahl-al-kitab* (the People of the Book), in particular the Jewish traditions (*isra liyyat*) must be sorted out and evaluated. Material which crept in due to theological, philosophical, political and other considerations, must be excluded unless it is based on a solid source.

The second kind of *tafsir*, after *tafsir bi'l-riwaya*, is the so-called *tafsir bi'l-ra'y*. It is not based directly on transmission of knowledge by the predecessors, but on the use of reason and *ijtihad* (independent judgement). *Tafsir bi'l-ra'y* does not mean interpretation by mere opinion, but rather involves deriving an opinion through *ijtihad* based on sound sources. While the former has been condemned in the *hadith*, the latter is acceptable when used in its proper place as sound *ijtihad*, and was also approved by the Prophet, e.g. when he sent Mu'adh bin Jabal to Yemen. *Tafsir bi'l-ra'y* as a whole has been declared *haram* or forbidden on the basis of the following *hadith*: From Ibn 'Abbas: Allah's messenger said: He who says [something] concerning the Qur'an without knowledge, he has taken his seat of fire (Ibn Taymiyya 1971: 105, from Tirmidhi, who says it is a sound report). However, this *hadith* can be explained in two ways. It might mean that no one should say of the Qur'an what is not from the *sahaba* or *tabi'un*. Or that no one should say of the Qur'an what he knows to be otherwise. The obvious meaning of the *hadith* is that one should not say something about the Qur'an without having the proper knowledge i.e.

without having gone through the proper search for the sources of the interpretation via the Qur'an itself, the Companions, etc. This clearly brings out the difficulties in drawing a tight line around what counts as proper commentary on the Qur'an, a debate that continues in all religions to dominate the definition of the faith itself.

### References and further reading

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OLIVER LEAMAN

### TAFWID

The root verb *fawwad* means to entrust, return or to authorize. This term has been used only once in the Qur'an. It is mentioned in the *sura* of Ghar (*sura al-Mu'min* (the Forgiver or the Believer). A believer of the people of the Pharaoh, he advised his people to follow the right path, to pursue monotheism as sent with Moses. He explained that believing in Allah is the only way to attain salvation. After he received a hostile response from them he said: Soon you will remember what I say to you and my affairs I return to Allah (40.44).

RAFIK BERJAK

### TAHARA

see: purify

### TAWJID

The proper recitation of the Qur'an is the subject of a separate discipline (*ilm al-tajwid*) which determines down to the most minute detail how the Qur'an should be recited, how each individual