

Tafsīr Based on Tradition

Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr

SUMMARY

1. *Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* is generally speaking understood as follows:
 - Qur'anic exegesis that has been handed down from the Prophet and his Companions
 - Qur'anic exegesis that can be traced back to the Prophet, and also to some degree which pertains to the occasions of the revelation *asbāb al-nuzūl*.
 - The explanation of the Qur'an given in the Qur'an itself, by the Prophet, and by his Companions.
 - The explanations of the Qur'an by other Qur'anic verses, by the Prophet, his Companions, and Successors.
2. The reason for these differences has to do with the concept of *hujjah*. *Hujjah* is usually translated as “binding proof” notwithstanding. Some scholars, however, defined *hujjah* as “to make something clear, to expose and explain and when it is presented before you, it becomes binding to act upon it because it is the decree of Allah.”
3. Then there is an issue of who has greater authority or whose *tafsīr* is *hujjah*. Does the *tafsīr* of the Companions and the Successors have equal weight as the *tafsīr* of the Prophet? Is the *tafsīr* of the Successors to be considered equal to the *tafsīr* of the Companions? Indeed, some scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah believed that the *tafsīr* of the Companions is equal in authority to the exegesis of the Prophet. Others such as al-Ḥākim al-Nisabūrī (d. 450 AH) and Ibn al-Ṣalāh hold that the *tafsīr* of the Companions is *hujjah* when it relates to *asbāb al-nuzūl*. As for the *tafsīr* of the Successors the majority of the scholars viewed it as non-*hujjah*. According to some reports Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal considered their *tafsīr* as a *hujjah*. For Ibn Qayyim the Successor's exegesis is *hujjah*.

This issue and the debate on whether the Prophet explained the entire Qur'an is explored.

Concept and Definition

THE TWO MAJOR CATEGORIES for understanding the Qur'an according to scholars and as mentioned earlier are *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based commentary) and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (opinion-based commentary). 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.” Thus, the phrase “*athara khuff al-ba'ir*” means “He made an incision in the foot of the camel in order to know and trace the foot print.”¹

The Qur'an used the term in different forms to indicate the same lexical meanings and more. In verse 48:29: “On their faces are their marks, (being) the traces of their prostration.” The noun *athar* in this verse is used to mean ‘traces’ or ‘marks’. Its meaning as ‘trace’ is also found in verse 36:12: “Verily We shall give life to the dead, and We record that which they send before and that which they leave behind (*wa āthārahum*), and of all things have We taken account in a clear Book (of evidence).”

In Hadith, the term *athar* is also used as in the lexical meaning. The Prophet said: “*inna ummatī yud'awna yawma al-qiyāmah... min athar al-wuḍū'*,” that is to say, on the Day of Judgment, my community or Muslims will be called (will be distinguished or be known)...from the traces of ablution.”²

At the time of the Companions, the term was used to mean a hadith of the Prophet. For example, Ibn Mas'ūd was once asked about the situation of a woman whose husband had died without consummation of marriage, and while the *mahr* (compulsory gift a groom gives to a bride before the wedding day) was not decided. He said, “Ask the Companions if any *athar* has been handed down in the matter.”³

Ibn ʿAbbās advises the Muslims to, “Stick with the right path and *athar*.”⁴ In the time of the *Tābiʿūn*, the hadith narrators (*muḥaddithūn*) and jurists employed the term to mean two things: that which is related to the Prophet and his Companions, and whatever is ascribed only to the Companions.⁵ In the science of *tafsīr*, however, the term *athar* is technically understood in four different ways:

1. The Qur’anic interpretation that has been handed down from the Prophet and the Companions.⁶
2. The Qur’anic interpretation that can be traced back to the Prophet, and also to some degree which pertains to the occasions of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).⁷
3. The explanations of the Qur’an given in the Qur’an itself, by the Prophet, and by his Companions.⁸
4. The explanations of the Qur’an by other Qur’anic verses, by the Prophet, his Companions, and Successors.⁹

Al-Ḥākim, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and others considered the *tafsīr* of the Companions’s *tāfsīr* as *al-tafsīr bi al-ma’thūr* only if what the Companions narrated pertained to *asbāb al-nuzūl*. It is possible that they, unlike others, classified *asbāb al-nuzūl* as interpretation rather than just a useful tool to aid in understanding a verse in its immediate circumstances or context. Such knowledge is a prerequisite for a competent interpreter (*mufasssīr*). On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyyah and others agreed that *al-tafsīr bi al-ma’thūr* can include the use of one part of the Qur’an to explain another. But they failed to distinguish this from *ra’y* when they opposed *ra’y*. In fact, using the Qur’an to explain the Qur’an without injecting anything from the Prophet would appear to be *ra’y* or *ijtihād* anyway; and there is no clear statement in the Qur’an that certain verses are to be used to explain other verses. In the light of these definitions, it becomes apparent that the Companions’ interpretation is included in three definitions, and the Successors’ included in the fourth definition only.

The question that immediately comes to mind is the reason for including a Companion's and a Successor's interpretations, along with that of the Prophet, under the same definition concerning *athar* of the Companion.

The answer has to do with the concept of *hujjah*. *Hujjah* is usually translated in English as 'binding proof.' However, in his *Hujjiyyat al-Sunnah*, Abd al-Ghani Abd Al-Khaliq defined the term as "to make something clear, to expose and explain and when it is presented before you, it becomes binding to act upon it because it is the decree of Allah."¹⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim and others were of the opinion that a Companion's interpretation was equal in authority to that of the Prophet,¹¹ with both considered as *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*. Other scholars i.e. al-Hākim al-Nisābūrī (d. 405 AH) and Ibn al-Ṣalāh viewed the Companions' interpretation differently. They regarded it as *hujjah* (proof, evidence) only when it pertained to *asbāb al-nuzūl*.¹² Some scholars including Ibn Qayyim, held that the *tafsīr* of the Successors was equal in authority to the Prophet and the Companions.¹³ The argument of each group will be presented in detail when the Prophet's *tafsīr*, the Companions' and the Successors' will be discussed separately.

Discussed next is the Prophet's Hadith or his Sunnah in relation to Qur'anic interpretation.

Hadith, *Athar*, *Ma'thūr* and Qur'anic Exegesis

Use of Hadith in the Qur'an

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. Verse 79:15: "Has the story (hadith) of Moses reached you?" The term hadith here denotes story. In verse 68:44: "Then leave Me

alone with such as reject this Message (hadith)...” In this passage hadith refers to the Qur'an itself. In verse 6:68: “When you see men engaged in vain discourse about Our signs, turn away from them unless they turn to a different theme (hadith).” Hadith here is used to mean general conversation.

Hadith in the Sayings of the Prophet

The Prophet used the term hadith as it has been used in the linguistic sense and in the Qur'an. In *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, one hadith reads: “The best hadith is the book of Allah.” Another report from al-Bukhārī, narrates: “Whoever tries to eavesdrop on the hadith of people (people's private conversations) when they dislike his doing so...” with hadith used here to denote conversation, talk.¹⁴

Hadith in the Usage of the Muḥaddithūn

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). The *fuqahā'* (jurists) adhered to the same definition as the *Muḥaddithūn*, but they excluded the description of *Ṣifāt* from the definition. It is reasonable to assume that the jurists excluded *Ṣifāt* because its value did not fall into their sphere. Muslims are commanded by the Qur'an to follow the Prophet without reservation and to regard him as an example to be imitated; this means obeying him and following his behavior, which does not include his physical description.

The Terms Hadith and Sunnah

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. We read in 3:137: “Many were the Ways of Life (*sunan*) that have passed away before you: travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth.”

In his *Riyāḍ al-Sāliḥīn*, al-Nawawī reports a hadith in which the Prophet talks about the reward of introducing a good or a bad Sunnah: “Whoever introduces a *sunnah ḥasanah* (a good Sunnah) ... and whoever introduces an evil *sunnah*...” In this hadith, the word *Sunnah* is used to indicate both good ways or manners and bad ones. Sunnah as an Islamic term, or in the usage of subsequent generations, is restricted to the Sunnah of the Prophet according to the al-Shāfi‘ī school of thought.

However, the terms Hadith and Sunnah were used interchangeably by the Prophet’s Companions. Ibn Qayyim quotes ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as saying: “The users of *ra’y* (that is, those who would use their opinion on matters the Hadith has already dealt with) are the enemies of the Sunnah. It is hard for them to memorize the Hadith. Therefore, they are not able to understand Hadith. They could not bring themselves to say ‘I do not know’ whenever they were asked [about certain matters]. In this manner, they rejected the Sunnah.”¹⁵ For our purpose, and to avoid confusion, we will use both words interchangeably since such has been the practice of the classical and contemporary Muslim scholars.

The Prophet’s Interpretation

It is natural to make this our starting point not only because the Prophet is the only direct connection with God but also because the Sunnah is the second authoritative source on all aspects of the Muslim faith. 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.

Three of the Qur’anic texts that were commonly cited to substantiate this position were verse 16:44: “and We have sent down unto you (also) the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them.” The second verse is 75:17–19: “It is for Us to collect it

and to promulgate it. But when We have promulgated it, follow thou its recital (as promulgated). Nay more, it is for Us to explain it (and make it clear)." The third is 53:3-4: "Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him."

These and other verses indicate that the Prophet must be the first interpreter of the Qur'an. Did he provide interpretation for the whole Qur'an or not? There are three different opinions regarding the answer to this question. First, there are those who hold that the Prophet explained the whole Qur'an. In his *al-Taḥsīn wa al-Mufasssīrīn*, al-Dhahabī states that certain prominent scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah believe that the Prophet explained every single word of the Qur'an.¹⁶ In his *Fatāwā*, he quotes the Qur'anic statement, "*litubayyina li al-Nās mā nuzzila ilayhim*" ("that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them,") which expresses Allah's command to the Prophet to communicate the words of the Revelation as well as explanations of its meanings. These scholars also maintain that the Companions of the Prophet did not move on to learn any additional portion of the Qur'an before comprehending the full meaning of what they had already received from the Prophet. Hence, scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah believe that this is evidence enough that the Prophet has explained the meaning of all the Qur'an to his Companions.

They also cite a statement ascribed to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb which states: "Among the last verses revealed was the verse of *ribā* (usury). However, the Prophet died before explaining it." From this, they inferred that the Prophet used to explain every single verse to the Companions. Otherwise, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's specifically mentioning that the Prophet was unable to explain the verse because of his death serves no purpose. Finally, they maintain that people naturally try to comprehend important books and scientific knowledge, hence the Qur'an being far more important than anything else including the latter, they would not have simply memorized it without understanding it in full.¹⁷

Secondly, there are those such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Suyūṭī, al-Shāṭibī and others who believe that the Prophet gave the interpretation of only a few verses of the Qur'an. In support of this they cite the statement of the Prophet's wife, ʿĀ'ishah: "The Prophet explained but a few verses that the angel Gabriel had taught him."¹⁸ Scholars of this opinion contend that if it is true that the Prophet did explain the whole of the Qur'an, then his singling out of Ibn ʿAbbās for God to bless him with *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an would have been superfluous (the Prophet made a *duʿā* for Ibn ʿAbbās: "O Allah, bless him with understanding of the *dīn* of Islam, and teach him the meaning of the Qur'an," indeed, I found the Prophet did not make this *duʿā* for any Companion). Al-Suyūṭī challenges those who dispute this opinion by presenting a list of the verses that he believed were actually explained by the Prophet.¹⁹ But the supporters of this opinion argue in response that it is impossible that Allah would have ordered the Prophet to explain every verse in the Qur'an because this would leave no room for human reflection on it, something which God has urged both Muslims and non-Muslims to do.

Thirdly, there are those such as al-Zarkashī's disciples who believe that the Qur'anic verses which the Prophet explained were numerous. Unlike al-Suyūṭī, however, they do not list the verses which were explained by the Prophet, therefore failing to substantiate their claim with any concrete evidence.²⁰

A quick glance at the supporting arguments which each side presents gives the impression that the questions are hopelessly confusing. But closer examination of the arguments reveals otherwise. To begin with, 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). The same also can be said of the report regarding the Companions' way of learning the Qur'an. Even though they were careful to comprehend the meaning of the portion they memorized, such comprehension could come through private discussion among themselves or through individual meditation and reflection on the Qur'an. In fact, 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."

In his *Matn al-Arbaʿūn al-Nawawiyyah*, Imam al-Nawawī reports that the Prophet said:

No people gather in one of the houses of Allah reciting the Book of Allah and studying it among themselves, without tranquility descending upon them, mercy enveloping them, the angels *surrounding* them, and Allah making mention of them amongst those who are with Him.²¹

Moreover, it cannot be inferred from what ʿUmar ibn Khaṭṭāb stated concerning the verse on *ribā* that the Prophet used to explain every single verse of the Qur'an. Rather, it gives the the impression that this verse was somewhat confusing to ʿUmar ibn Khaṭṭāb himself and would have been made clear by the Prophet had he not died shortly afterward. In fact ʿUmar himself on other occasions expressed difficulty in understanding some verses of the Qur'an, such as the verse mentioning *kalālah* (4:176) for those who die and "leave no descendants or ascendants as heirs."²²

It is noteworthy that in his *Fatḥh al-Bārī*, a commentary on al-Bukhārī's *Al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī collected 548 hadith in the chapter that discusses *tafsīr*.²³ Of these 548 only 100

hadith are not, from a technical point of view, repetitions or *mu^ʿallaq*.²⁴

In his concise and excellent study of *tafsīr* literature in the six authoritative collections, R. Marston Speight (who directed the Office on Christian/Muslim relations for the National Council of Churches for from 1979 to 1992) gives an account of 475 hadith in al-Bukhārī's chapter – not counting repetitions. He also lists 393 reports which *Jāmi^ʿ al-Tirmidhī* contains in regard to *tafsīr*. In the four books, he did not give a specific statistic, but sufficiently explained the attitude of each book towards the function of hadith as commentary on the Qur'an and what pertains to it, such as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *al-aḥruf al-sab^ʿah* (literally seven versions but the exact meaning remains elusive) etc.²⁵