

Tafsīr in the Third and Fourth Centuries (AH)

SUMMARY

1. An incredibly huge volume of work exists on Qur'anic exegesis. Although certain scholars and their works have stood the test of time, and stand in greater prominence to others, to make sense of all this sea of literature as a whole, scholars have tried to categorize it.
2. The two major categories for understanding Qur'an commentaries according to scholars are *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based commentary) and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (opinion-based commentary).
3. The distinctions are important and under them many countless works on *tafsīr*, that is Qur'anic commentaries, have appeared, defined in turn by sub-categories. These sub-categories can be classified in simple terms i.e. Sunni, Shia, Sufi etc. as outlined or under more complex ones i.e. a) *ikhtisār al-asānīd*, b) the age of specialization, and c) *tafsīr al-bid'ah*. Under these categories, we have sub-sub categories of linguistics, law, grammar, mystical interpretation, and others etc. Each sub category and sub-sub category is defined by key scholastic works which typify it.
4. As well as sub-categories we also have different intrinsic approaches in Qur'anic exegesis or methodologies which have been utilised. Some are rigorous focusing on complete chains of hadith transmission, others more interpretive to the point of being considered *bid'ah*. The general idea seems to be that more classical, authentic commentaries follow Qur'anic exegesis based on rigorous methodologies using sound traditions (*al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*) and the more interpretive (and therefore less regarded) commentaries follow less rigorous approaches based on opinion (*al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*).
5. As each Qur'anic commentary was written it naturally had at its disposal the body of work that had already been published before it, and to a lesser or greater degree would therefore have been influenced by it. To simplify timelines the general historical period has been classified as a) the era from the Prophet to the Successors, then b) up to al-Ṭabarī (who wrote one of the first extremely comprehensive works and which is the earliest major running commentary of the Qur'an to have survived in its original form) and then c) the third and fourth centuries, the focus of this chapter, when Qur'anic exegesis further evolved. From there we move up to our modern times and orientalism which saw scholars surface such as Hungarian born Ignaz Goldziher considered the founder of modern Islamic studies in Europe.

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. Relevant but non-extant works include exegeses by Abū 'Abd Allāh Yazīd ibn Mājah (d. 273 AH)¹, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 304 AH)², and Al-Ḥusayn ibn Dāwūd al-Masīṣī known as Sunayd. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the works of these particular traditionists were solely based on the sayings of the Prophet, the Companions, and the *Tābi'ūn*.³

Among the remarkable works completed by lexicographers and linguists were *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur'ān* by Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH), and *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān* by al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥāhānī (d. 502 AH), the latter believed to be the best work in this field. These works dealt with the lexical difficulties of the Qur'anic words. During this period Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī appeared with a methodology and approach distinct from his contemporaries. Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, is generally acknowledged to be the most comprehensive work of *tafsīr* by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.⁴ And in his *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, al-Dhahabī (a contemporary) also claimed the methodology adopted by al-Ṭabarī in the work to be unprecedented. These two claims were challenged by Ibn Ḥazm.⁵

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.⁶

There is another category, not mentioned by al-Suyūṭī, which is *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar*. This 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. Although some scholars like al-Zarkashī in his *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, al-Rāzī in his *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, and others touched upon the subject matter in brief.

a) Ikhtiṣār al-Asānīd and the Use of Unreliable Information

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* which 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. In addition, authors did not distinguish scholarly interpretations from the rest.⁷

A major *tafsīr* work that is representative of others concerning *ikhtiṣār al-asānīd* and the use of unverified information is *Tafsīr al-Kashf wa al-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* authored by the historian al-Tha'ālibī (d. 427 AH). It is largely composed of detailed accounts of stories, without critical attention paid to their veracity, that is whether the information contained is true or false.⁸ In addition to some which are sound, al-Tha'ālibī also narrates a number of hadith, which are weak and fabricated, without distinguishing between the two. He claims to have sourced his information from around one hundred books and statements that he received from around three hundred scholars.⁹

Al-Tha'ālibī informs us in his Introduction that the *tafsīr* was written in response to a request from some people, and that he wanted,

therefore, to write a comprehensive, authentic, brief, understandable, and well organized work of *tafsīr* as opposed to one containing long chains of narrators, repeating various narrations with unnecessary lines of transmitters, such as al-Ṭabarī's whom he criticized. Nonetheless, al-Tha'ālibī himself includes a significant number of stories and *Isrā'iliyyāt*, in addition to judicial issues, grammatical decisions, and traditions emanating from the Prophet, the Companions, and the *Tābi'ūn*. In fact so critical was Ibn Qayyim (d. 701 AH) of al-Tha'ālibī for narrating weak traditions that he produced an edited version of this author's *tafsīr*.¹⁰

b) *The Age of Specialization*

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. The word specialization as used here should not be understood in its modern context. It should be rather understood as a reference to the most dominant element appearing in the work from beginning to end. The extent to which a particular element dominates the work, determines its specialization.

(i) *Grammatical Tafsīr*

Among the representatives of grammatical interpretation were *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* by al-Zajjāj (d. 316 AH),¹¹ *Al-Wasīṭ fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, and *Al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb* by al-Wāḥidī (d. 468 AH), and *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* by Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745 AH). The discussion that follows focuses upon the latter because it was considered to have been the first comprehensive and the most important work on grammatical *tafsīr*.¹²

Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn 'Alī ibn Yūsuf Ḥayyān al-Andalusī began writing his *tafsīr* at the age of fifty-seven. He stated that he wrote his book to please God. His methodology and

approach was to first explain each verse word by word followed by a grammatical and linguistic discussion. When a verse had more than one meaning, he would mention it, and then proceed to discuss the occasion upon which a particular verse had been revealed. This would be followed by a presentation of both the accepted and rejected variant readings of a passage including a discussion of their grammatical aspect. A textual reading was considered rejected if it contradicted the canonical text put forth by the Caliph ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān or was contrary to the accepted Arabic language use.¹³

Finally, Abū Ḥayyān would quote statements from the *Tābiʿūn* (the generation after the four Caliphs). When a passage pertained to judicial matters, he repeated the opinion of each of the heads of the four Sunni legal schools of thought: Imāms Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, and Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal.¹⁴

(ii) *Juristic Tafsīr (Tafsīr of Fiqh or Islamic Law)*

Juristic *tafsīr*. There are three main juridical interpretation texts with the same name. They are: *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* by Abū Bakr ibn ʿAlī al-Rāzī known as al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370), *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* by Abū al-Ḥasan ʿImād al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Muḥamad ibn ʿAlī, al-Ṭabarī, known as al-Kiyā al-Hurāsī (d. 504), and *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Maʿarīfī known as al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543). Although the authors dealt generally with every chapter of the Qurʾan, they gave the *tafsīr* of only those verses which concern legal aspects.¹⁵

Another common feature of these authors was their bias towards their particular schools of thought. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ was a Ḥanafī, al-Kiyā al-Hurāsī was a Shāfiʿī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī was a Mālikī. Again, each of their works contained some of the traditions emanating from the Prophet Muhammad, the Companions, and the *Tābiʿūn*, as well as some grammatical and linguistic discussion. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ's approach was to arrange his work according to the juristic literature of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. He discussed each issue under a separate section (*faṣl*) or chapter (*bāb*).

He included parts of the Qur'an to explain Qur'anic verses and also hadith to support his school of thought.

Ibn al-ʿArabī, on the other hand, would mention the name of the Qur'anic chapter he intended to explain followed by the total number of verses it contained which were related to juristic matters. He would then number the legal matters pertaining to some verses by stating, for example, that there are five juristic issues in the first verse and ten others in the second verse, etc. Similarly, he would incorporate passages of the Qur'an as al-Jaṣṣāṣ did.

Another prominent interpretation worthy of mention in this regard is *Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* by the jurist Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH).

The contemporary Egyptian scholar Muḥammad al-Dhahabī wrote that al-Qurṭubī was an encyclopedia and that his work was among the greatest exegeses from which the common person could benefit. It was well organized and extremely usable.¹⁶ Modern scholars have classified his commentary under Jurisprudence.¹⁷ Worth noting, however, is that sometimes al-Qurṭubī was so involved in the area of legal issues that he discussed problems that were not relevant to the particular verses he was interpreting.

Furthermore, he stated in his introduction that he had decided to devote the rest of his lifetime to Qur'anic interpretation and to use all his strength to produce a *tafsīr* that would encompass linguistics, variant Qur'anic readings as well as grammar; and that he would rebuke the opinions of perverse men (those who twist the meanings of the Qur'an). He added that he would refer to many hadiths, to the Companions and to the *Tābiʿūn* in support of his views on judicial issues.¹⁸

(iii) *Theological Tafsīr*

The foremost comprehensive work representative of a *tafsīr* written from the perspective of theology was *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* also known as *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī

(d. 606 AH), who was a legal theorist, theologian and exegete. The work consists of 32 volumes. Al-Rāzī gives a detailed account of the existing theological arguments, including discussions on the issues of the relationships or coherence (*munāsabāt*) between Qur'anic verses as well as between the Qur'anic chapters (*suwar*). The author discusses at length the theological propositions and arguments that criticize the Mu'tazilites' doctrine. When he comes to the verses dealing with juristic matters, his interpretation inclines toward the al-Shāfi'i *madhhab* which was his own school of thought

Al-Rāzī also touched upon grammatical and philological issues, Hadith, and the traditions from the Companions and *Tābi'ūn*. It is generally believed that al-Rāzī died before completing his book and that it was completed by his student Aḥmed ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Ḥāzm al-Makkī Najm al-Dīn al-Makhzūmī al-Qummī (d. 672 AH). He followed his master's methodology and style so faithfully that it is impossible to distinguish between the two.¹⁹ A third person may have been involved in completing the *tafsīr*. His name was Shihāb al-Dīn Khalīl al-Khawli al-Dimashqī (d. 639 AH). Although the work has been praised for its importance in the field of Qur'anic interpretation, Abū Ḥayyān, al-Suyūṭī and others on the other hand have criticized al-Rāzī's commentary. They believed it contained too many theological arguments and other elements, to the extent that a reader could possibly find everything but interpretation.²⁰ This view, in my and others' opinion, is an exaggeration. One finds in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr* all the elements of *tafsīr* that al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, as well as Ibn 'Aṭīyyah's, Ibn Kathīr's, and all major *tafsīr* literature's work contain.

Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar

While Qur'anic interpreters (*mufasssīrūn*) compiled their works based on their specialties, Abū al-Ḥasan Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī introduced a new, or more comprehensive element which some previous scholars had only briefly touched upon to enrich the

field of *tafsīr*. And he produced a pioneering work using this approach entitled *Naẓm al-Durar*. It is obvious from the work's introduction that al-Biqā'ī's main focus was the issue of the coherence between both *āyāt* (verses) and *suwar* (chapters). This is where the essence of *‘ilm al-munāsabāt* lies, according to al-Biqā'ī. For him the latter meaning trying to understand coherent themes in the Qur'an whose beginning and end are coherently connected.

Al-Biqā'ī, praised himself for possessing various Islamic sciences, beneficial books and sound opinions. He described his own book as *kitāb al-‘ajā'ib* (book of wonders), an unprecedented high quality work. Indeed, this scholar acknowledged the works authored before him as well as books that discussed the importance of *‘ilm al-munasabāt* (relationships between the Qur'anic verses) such as al-Zarkashī's *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Among the books dealing with the topic of coherence in the Qur'an, he mentioned, *Al-Mu‘lam bi al-Burhān fī Tartīb Suwar al-Qur’ān* by Abū Ja‘far as well as the work of Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Zubayr al-Thaqafī (d. 585), the work of Imam Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Sulayman (well known as ibn al-Naqīb) and also al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*.

However, for al-Biqā'ī, none of these works dealt extensively with the issue of coherence in the Qur'an. For example, the work of Ibn al-Zubayr tackled only the question of the relationships (*munāsabāt*) between the chapters of the Qur'anic verses, whereas al-Zarkashī's book dealt with the issue of *munāsabāt* in only four pages. As for al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*, he did not confine his work to only *munāsabāt*, but also covered issues related to subtlety in the Qur'an. Ibn al-Naqīb's sixty volumes did not cover all the verses of the Qur'an as far as the *munāsabāt* are concerned.

Al-Biqā'ī debated with himself as to the title of his *tafsīr*. After initially naming it *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar*, he decided that the most appropriate title would be *Fath al-Raḥmān fī Tanāsub Ajzā' al-Qur’ān* before opting for *Turjumān al-Qur’ān wa*

Mubdi^c *Munāsabāt al-Qur’ān*. However, in spite of all the alternatives, he ended up keeping the original title, *Naẓm al-Durar*.

His methodology was that generally speaking, before discussing any surah, al-Biqā’ī would state its purpose saying “*maqṣūduhā* . . .” (its purpose is . . .). He would then go on to discuss the surah’s name, why this name was given, what its meaning was, and, if the surah had more than one name, would mention it with an explanation. Then he discussed the meaning of *Bismi Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*. Here, we note an amazing phenomenon. For he does not simply discuss *Bismi Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* on its first occurrence but from the beginning of surah one through to surah 114, al-Biqā’ī qualifies the term ‘Allah’ with different attributes, the word *al-Raḥmān* with different attributes and the word *al-Raḥīm* with yet different attributes.

To illustrate this statement, here are a few examples. In the beginning of the first *Bismi Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* in surah 1 (*al-Fātiḥah*), he states: “*Bismi Allāh al-Qayyūm alladhī lā ya^czūb shay’^c an^c ilmihī al-Raḥmān alladhī^c ammat raḥmatuhu al-mawjūdāt, al-Raḥīm alladhī tammat ni^cmatuhu bi takhṣīṣ ahl walāyatih bi-arda al-^cibadāt*” (in the name of Allah, the Self–Subsisting Who keeps up and maintains all life, Nothing can escape from His knowledge, the Compassionate Whose compassion encompasses all creation; and the Merciful Whose favor is overwhelming in choosing for his servants the most immaculate worship).

In the *Bismi Allāh* at the beginning of surah 2, he states “*Bismi Allāh naṣab ma^ca kawnihi bāṭina dalā’il al-hudā, al-Raḥmān alladhī afāda bi-rahmatihī^c alā’ sār^cir khalqihī, al-Raḥīm alladhī khaṣṣa ahl wuddihī bi al-tawfīq,*” (In the name of Allah, He showed the way to guidance. The Merciful, who showered His mercy upon His creation. The Compassionate, who exclusively granted success to His lovers). After this unique style, he follows up with discussion on the relationship between the previous surah and the following one, and finally, he discusses the *tanāsub*, that is to say, the relationships or coherence among the verses. One of the remarkable features of al-Biqā’ī’s

methodology is that, when he comes to *āyāt* that pertain to legal matters he generally ignores the opinions of the *fuqahā'* (jurists) and gives his own interpretation. However, he quotes from the Hadith and from the Companions' statements for substantiation.

c) Emergence of Unorthodox Exegesis – Tafṣīr Variations

This is the third of al-Suyūṭī's categories, which he called *tafṣīr al-bid'ah* (heretical interpretation). I have chosen to designate it as 'tafṣīr variations.' Following the assassination of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, the third Caliph, and the religio-political conflict faced by the Muslims, three main groups emerged: the Alids (supporters of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib), the Umayyad (the supporters of Mu'āwiyah 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 on-going issue is reflected in the texts of the protagonists in general and in *tafṣīr* works in particular. Al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān* is one of the *tafṣīrs* that represent the Sunni points of view. Sunni scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Suyūṭī, and others have classified most, if not all, of the *tafṣīrs* written by the Shia, the Mu'tazilites and the Sufis as *tafṣīr al-bid'ah* (interpretation that has no Islamic precedence in the Qur'an or more particularly, in the Sunnah of the Prophet). On the other hand, al-Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 410 AH), al-Zamakhsharī, and others have retaliated by claiming that such Sunnis were unintelligent and un-realistic, that they were false Muslims and hypocrites.²¹

(i) The Shia

Shia *tafṣīr* 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 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his eleven descendants, for it is part of Shia belief that it is they who inherited the knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad and previous Prophets. The Sunnis, on the other hand, believe that the Qur'an is

addressed to all mankind in general. Second, the Shia believe or consider the twelve imams to be the only legitimate authorities on the Qur'an after the Prophet. The Sunnis believe that the Prophet, the Companions and any qualified Muslim are legitimate authorities.²²

Muhammad Ayyub a contemporary Islamic scholar and lecturer at Temple University, Philadelphia, notes that the *tafsīr* of Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Hāshim al-Qummī (d. 328 AH), known as *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, is an example of early Shia work representing the Shia point of view.²³ Al-Qummī's text, says a partisan Sunni Monograph, frequently accuses the Companions and the Sunnis of literally altering the text of the Qur'an. For this and other reasons it labels them as non-Muslims, unbelievers, hypocrites, etc.²⁴ Nonetheless, the Shia, in general, have regarded Qummī's work as a reliable and trustworthy authority.

Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548 AH) wrote *Majmaʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* and took a liberal approach to moderate the Shia position relative to the Sunnis. Thus, he quotes hadith from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* a Sunni hadith collection and a text the Shia in general reject, and also uses narrations from both those Companions who were praised by the Shia and those who were not. Sometimes, he even prefers someone else's opinion over that of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib's. For example, concerning verse 56:10: "And those Foremost (in Faith) will be Foremost (in the Hereafter)" ("*wa al-sābiqūn al-sābiqūn*"), al-Ṭabarsī mentions that whilst ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib stated the term "foremost" to refer to those who are first in congregation to say the five daily prayers, others explain the term as referring to Muslims who are foremost in the various good deeds that Islam calls them to do. So, foremost is not limited to those first in congregation for Salah but includes all the various categories of good deeds and people that have been mentioned in the Qur'an.²⁵

Furthermore, in his introduction, al-Ṭabarsī indicates that the reason he had written his *tafsīr* was because Sunni scholars alone had written comprehensive and intelligent *tafsīr* and had elucidated the

deep and hidden meanings of the Qur'an. He describes Shia *tafsīr* in contrast as being very simple and brief, without giving full lines of transmission, and lacking detailed discussion. The only exception being Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī's (d. 460 AH) who produced *Al-Tibyān al-Jāmi' li Kull 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. But nevertheless this work according to al-Ṭabarsī, suffered from linguistic and grammatical errors, a lack of reliable information and was poorly structured, it did not contribute to a better understanding of the Qur'an and, according to al-Ṭabarsī, failed to win the intellectuals' appreciation.²⁶

Al-Ṭabarsī's approach consists in explaining the whole Qur'an word by word, in the chronological order of the Qur'anic revelations over the 23 years in which it was revealed. Before explaining each surah, he clearly states to which of the two Qur'anic revelation phases (Makkan or Madinan) the surah belongs, and also indicates if the whole or part of the surah was revealed in Makkah or Madinah. Then he follows up with the traditions of the Prophet, and those of the Companions and *Tābi'ūn*, while mentioning the virtue of the surah in general. Afterwards, he proceeds to present the various *qir'āt* (variant readings of the Qur'an) and begins to interpret verses applying his linguistic skills, and pointing out the grammatical impact on the meaning. He then goes on to mention the circumstances in which the verse was revealed as well as the *tanāsub* (relationship) between the preceding and the following verses.

When he comes across a verse pertaining to judicial matters, he frequently mentions the opinion of the *Shī'ah imāmiyyah* (the major Shia sect), trying to support their viewpoints. Sometimes he quotes the Sunni perspective too.

(ii) *Tafsīr of the Mu'tazilites*

The *tafsīr* of the Mu'tazilites as previously mentioned was branded by the traditionalists as *bid'ah* because they believed that the Mu'tazilites twisted some of the words of the Qur'an to support or fit their own perspectives. We previously mentioned, for instance, verse 75:22-3:

“Some faces, that Day, will beam (in brightness and beauty); looking towards their Lord” wherein it is believed that Muslims will literally see God with their own eyes in Paradise. According to the Mu‘tazilites, the verse means that Muslims will be expecting a reward from God. Verses relating to the attributes of God are interpreted contrary to the traditional *tafsīr* of the Prophet and his Companions.²⁷

The Mu‘tazilites, however, wrote many *tafsīr* books expressing their points of view and exposing what they believed to be the mistakes of the traditionalists.

The Mu‘tazilites hold that the traditionalists misunderstood them or misinterpreted their views. Hence, one of their great scholars, al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, wrote his *tafsīr* entitled *Tanzīh al-Qur’ān ‘an Al-Maṭā‘in* (Defending the Qur’an against Slander) to elaborate on the distinction between *muḥkam* and *mutashābihāt* and to point out the mistakes of the traditionalists.²⁸

The most comprehensive existing *tafsīr* in which the Mu‘tazilites doctrine is brilliantly demonstrated is *Al-Kashshāf* by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 467 AH).²⁹ The work was highly praised as much as it was bitterly criticized. In his introduction, al-Zamakhsharī mentions three reasons for writing the *tafsīr*:

1. He was asked by a group of al-Mu‘tazilites who admired his knowledge to write a commentary of the Qur’an for them. They were so emphatic about the need for him to offer a course that they asked some dignitaries to intercede with al-Zamakhsharī on their behalf.
2. The *amīr* of Makkah, Imam Sharīf Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Ḥamzah, who belonged to the Prophet’s family, also asked him to write a *tafsīr*.
3. He, al-Zamakhsharī, wanted to please God so that he would be saved from the Hell fire. It took him a little over two years and two or three months to finish writing *Al-Kashshāf*, and even described it a poem:

Verily, there are countless works of *tafsīr* in this world; but you cannot find one like *Al-Kashshāf*. If you are looking for guidance you have to persist in reading it. Ignorance is just like sickness, and *Al-Kashshāf* is like a cure.³⁰

Muslim scholars have both praised and condemned *Al-Kashshāf*. Abū Ḥayyān states that Ibn Bashkuwal believed *Al-Kashshāf* to be very precise and deep, but its author twisted the meaning of some verses in favor of his Muʿtazilite doctrine. However, Abū Ḥayyān himself expresses great appreciation of al-Zamaksharī's *tafsīr*.³¹ Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH) commented on it, saying: "it was one of the best *tafsīrs* as far as philology and literary aspects are concerned."³² Taj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 735 AH) stated that *al-Kashshāf* was a great book in its field, and its author a leading scholar in his field, but that he was nevertheless a heretic innovator (*mubtadiʿ*) who publicly declared his *bidʿah*.

Al-Zamaksharī's approach is not unique for his time, and he uses the same methods as his contemporaries. For the most part, at the beginning of surahs he states the place of revelation, Makkah or Madinah, to which the surah belongs. Occasionally, he follows this with a discussion on Qur'an and its recitation methods. He then proceeds with a detailed, grammatical, linguistic or philological and rhetorical discussion. When he comes across verses pertaining to judicial issues he briefly touches upon them, and sometimes mentions the jurists' point of view. In other instances, he quotes the traditions of the Prophet, of the Companions, and those of the *Tābiʿūn*. Also, when dealing with verses that relate to theological propositions, he clearly presents various arguments, applying his language skills to support the Muʿtazilite perspective. For example, and once again, the traditional interpretation of verse 75:22-23: "Some faces, that Day, will beam (in brightness and beauty); looking towards their Lord" is that Muslims shall see God with their physical eyes in Paradise.³³ The Muʿtazilite position is that God can never and

will not be seen. So, al-Zamaksharī interprets the words “*ilā Rabbihā nāẓirah*” as “expecting and hoping in Allah’s mercy”³⁴ because, according to him, it is impossible, physically speaking, to ever see God. Because of such an interpretation, Goldziher and others went along with the traditionalists’ opinion and considered al-Zamaksharī’s *tafsīr* as both *bid‘ah* and one of the best representations of the Mu‘tazilite point of view.³⁵

Despite being a Mu‘tazilite representative al-Zamaksharī’s analysis of the Qur’an from a grammatical, linguistic and rhetorical perspective is so well done that Ibn Khaldūn, Abū Ḥayyān and others declare *Al-Kashshāf* to be one of the best *tafsīrs* for philological, rhetorical, and grammatical interpretation. Finally, among the dominant features of al-Zamaksharī’s methodology is “*fa in qāla*.” This refers to his style in raising assumptive questions where he often says “*idhā qulta, qultu*” (if you say so and so, I say).

(iii) *Tafsīr of the Ṣūfīs*

Sufi *tafsīr* is mystical in nature and heavily influenced by philosophical thought. The Sufis believe the Qur’an to have two meanings: an apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) and an inner, hidden one (*bāṭin*). They assert that general people only know the outer meaning while the inner meaning is known to the Sufis alone. Thus, much of Sufi *tafsīr* clearly contradicts both the plain meaning of the language and the meaning given by the Prophet, the Companions, their Successors (*Tābi‘ūn*) and the Traditionalists. For example verses 55:19–20: “He has let free the two bodies of flowing water, meeting together: Between them is a Barrier which they do not transgress.” The two seas to most, if not all Sunni Muslims, are salt-water ocean and the fresh water that meet. Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638 AH), a prominent Sufi Shaykh interprets the two seas to be the soul and body of a person.³⁶ Another example, concerns verse 73:8: “But keep in remembrance the name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him whole-heartedly.” Ibn ‘Arabī states this to mean “remember the name of your Lord, for

He is you.”³⁷ This bold assertion is a clear counter statement to *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* (112), “Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.” It also contradicts the verse of the Throne (*Āyatu al-Kursy*, *Sūrah al-Baqarah*: 2:255) as well as other parts of the Qur’an. Fundamentally, this statement about God is the outcome of misguided knowledge. Due to such interpretations, scholars such as al-Dhahabī and Ibn Taymiyyah have regarded the Sufi *tafsīr* as a heresy.³⁸

Another *tafsīr* which reflects the Sufi perspective is *Ḥaqā’iq al-Tafsīr* by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Azdī, also known as al-Sulamī (d. 412 AH).³⁹ The work of al-Sulamī was very controversial. Some scholars bitterly criticized it, while others praised it.⁴⁰ The late modern Egyptian *tafsīr* scholar, Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, read the manuscript and found that it comprised whole chapters of the Qur’an, but it did not cover all the verses. Based on Dāwūdī’s report in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssīrīn*, it can be said with assurance that *Ḥaqā’iq al-Tafsīr* was solely of the Sufi point of view.

Consequently, some Muslim scholars such as al-Wāḥidī (d. 468 AH) stated, “If al-Sulamī believes that *Ḥaqā’iq al-Tafsīr* is *tafsīr*, then he has committed apostasy (“*faqadd kafar*”).”⁴¹

Abū Bakr Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Arabī ibn Muḥammad (d. 638 AH) is regarded by many both in his time and today as the epitome of Sufism and its greatest figure. He was given the title of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* “the greatest master” and *al-‘Ārif bi-Allāh* “the knower of God.” He remains the most controversial Sufi figure. It has been a popular belief that the author of the famous *tafsīr* work known as *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Arabī* was Ibn ‘Arabī, however, the late Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh queried this believing it to be the work of ‘Abd Al-Razzāq al-Qashānī al-Bāṭinī. Furthermore, Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi not only supported Muhammad Abduh’s claim but, on the basis of the manuscript available in Cairo, was categoric

that the work was by al-Qashānī. Certain scholars have also stated that it is now proven beyond doubt that the *tafsīr* was not written by Ibn ʿArabī.⁴²

Ibn Taymiyyah, Dhahabī and other scholars bitterly criticized Ibn ʿArabī because of this *tafsīr* work, while scholars like Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Shirāzī al-Faīrozābādī (d. 812 AH) and al-Suyūṭī were among the scholars who defended him.

Although the real *tafsīr* of Ibn ʿArabī has not reached us, we do have some of his Qurʾanic interpretations contained in certain of his published works, such as *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*. For example, consider verse 71:28: “O my Lord! Forgive me, my parents, all who enter my house in Faith, and (all) believing men and believing women.” Ibn ʿArabī interprets “parents” as intellect and nature, “house” as heart, “believing men” as intellect, and “believing women” as soul.⁴³

(iv) *Al-Tafsīr al-Ishārī (Indication or Allegorical Interpretation)*

This method of interpretation is termed *al-tafsīr al-Ishārī* (interpretation by indication or allegory) because it looks beyond the apparent meanings of the Qurʾan. It is one which 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. One frequently given example in this respect is Ibn ʿAbbās’s *tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Naṣr* (110: 1-3) which states:

When comes the Help of God, and Victory, And thou dost see the people enter God’s Religion in crowds, Celebrate the praises of thy Lord, and pray for His Forgiveness: For He is Oft-Returning (in Grace and Mercy).

Since Ibn ʿAbbās interpreted the verse as a special indication of the Prophet’s impending death, and because it is regarded both as an

accurate interpretation of the text by mainstream Muslims and as an interpretation that, obviously, does not concern an 'outer' meaning, it has become a supporting proposition for the legitimacy of allegorical interpretation. Another reference for this type of *tafsīr* is ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's understanding of verse 5:3: "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." Because ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb understood the verse as an indication of the start of the decline of the quality of Islam as practiced by its adherents,⁴⁴ in addition to the obvious meaning of the verse, some allude to this as another justification for allegorical *tafsīr*.

A third example is from Ālūsī concerning the meaning of verse 11:105-6. The verse states: "The day it arrives, no soul shall speak except by His leave: of those (gathered) some will be wretched and some will be blessed. Those who are wretched shall be in the Fire: There will be for them therein (nothing but) the heaving of sighs and sobs". According to Ālūsī "shall be in the fire" is "*nār al-ḥirmān ʿan al-murād*" (the fire of being denied a goal, desire or want). He further stated that the "fire" in this verse is not the fire of Hell, but rather "*adhāb al-nafs*" (punishment of self).⁴⁵

Scholars have differed as to the legality of *al-tafsīr al-Ishārī*. Some have rejected it on the grounds that it is based on sheer opinion. Others like Muḥammad ibn Abū Bakr Shams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH), accept it provided that five principles are adhered to: a) that there is no disagreement with the obvious meaning of the verse and the derived allegorical meaning, b) that it is a sound meaning in itself, c) that in the wording, there is some indication to warrant the derived allegorical meaning, d) that there are close connections between it and the obvious, outer meaning, and finally, e) that it should not be claimed that the derived allegorical meaning is the only intended meaning.

According to al-Zarkashī *al-tafsīr al-ishārī* is not the kind of *tafsīr* that one acquires through learning, rather, it is the outcome of a mystical experience that one feels while reciting the Qur'an.⁴⁶

The best considered example of *al-Tafsīr al-Ishārī* is a work authored by 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin ibn 'Abd al-Malik ibn Ṭalḥah ibn Muḥammad al-Nisābūrī, known as al-Qushayrī (d. 465 AH), and entitled *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*. Al-Qushayrī was regarded as *the* Sufi shaykh of his time, and also a moderate Sufi personality. He had mastered the traditional Islamic sciences such as Hadith and fiqh, as understood by non-Sufi scholars, never claimed to have received knowledge from the unseen, nor believed interpretation to be devoid of traditional or linguistic substantiation,⁴⁷ Other Sufis considered him a scholar of mysticism. Because he did not write material that was considered extreme, his *tafsīr* was the only one or one of the Sufi *tafsīr* works that escaped stringent criticism. Indeed, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* was praised by both traditionists and *Shūfis*.

Al-Qushayrī's work is a complete *tafsīr*. It discusses each surah as a unit in addition to explaining all of the verses of the whole Qur'an. Each surah of the Qur'an which begins with "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" is covered, including surah nine (which note does not begin with this statement). Al-Qushayrī does not consider each surah's introductory phrase '*Bismi Allāh*' to be an independent introduction to each surah but rather a part of the surah. In addition, he believed each one to have different meanings from the others, and each a significant mystical implication.⁴⁸ He begins each surah by explaining its unique meaning before explaining each verse individually, sentence by sentence. In doing so, he first presents the apparent meaning or the meaning as understood by the traditionists, then he moves on to its mystical meaning according to the moderate Sufis. This sequence is not rigidly followed though in his work, which can be described as typical of moderate Sufi works. He sometimes touches slightly on grammatical issues and totally ignores juristic ones.

Here is an example of Al-Qushayrī's interpretation of "*Bismi Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* (In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful)." He interprets the term "*al-ism*," (the name) as the reader should strive to elevate himself to ascend to the rank of those who have elevated themselves to the status of *al-mushāhadāt* 'witnesses (of the truth). He further adds that whoever does not strive to elevate himself, will not feel the ecstasy that one should feel upon reciting the verse, and will fail to honor the purity of the relationship that is inherent between the state of the reciter/witness of the truth and the verse.⁴⁹

Orthodox Reaction to the Variations of Interpretation and al-Ra'y

The emergence of *tafsīr* variations was strongly criticized by traditionists such as Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Suyūṭī and others. They believed such interpretations by so-called *mubtadi'ah* (practitioners of un-Islamic unorthodox, blamable 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 traditionists advocated that Muslims should write and read traditional *tafsīr* works only and warned against *al-ra'y* (intellectual reasoning) that is devoid of sound Arabic usage and grounding. They used four different sources to substantiate their views: the Qur'an, Hadith, the Companions' reports, and those of the Successors. Among the Qur'anic, verses quoted to support their position is verse 7:33:

Say: the things that my Lord hath indeed forbidden are: shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to Allah, for which He hath given no authority; and saying things about Allah of which ye have no knowledge.

According to traditionists the structure and clear meanings of the verse indicate that stating things about Allah without having the correct and necessary knowledge is a great sin similar to the sins mentioned at the beginning of the verse. Therefore, any interpretation not corroborated by the Prophet is prohibited.⁵⁰

Then there is the following 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, and that they may give thought.” The idea here, as understood by the traditionists, is that the Prophet Muhammad is the only person who has been given authority by God to explain the Qur’an. Thus, no one can give *tafsīr* by recourse to his own independent opinion.

The orthodox also frequently quote the following hadith to support their view: “Whoever explains the Qur’an according to his personal opinion, shall take his place in Hell.”⁵¹ In another narration, “whoever said anything about the Qur’an based on his own opinion, even if it is correct, is wrong.”⁵² They quote Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq’s well known comment: “What earth will bear me and what sky will shadow me if I say anything based on my own opinion when explaining the Qur’an?”⁵³ They also cite Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyib (d. 94 AH) who whenever he was asked about *tafsīr* stated, “We do not say anything about the Qur’an.”⁵⁴ According to Masrūq ibn al-Ajda‘: “Be careful with *tafsīr* (*‘ittaqū al-tafsīr*”), for, indeed, it is a narration about God.”⁵⁵

Some proponents of the traditional approach to *tafsīr* have claimed that the Qur’an 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 ‘Aṭīyyah, al-Qurṭubī, and Abū Ḥayyān challenged this view with uncompromising, sharp, and forceful responses using the same sources employed by their opponents. In response to the traditionalists reference to Qur’anic verse

16:44, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah argued that although the Prophet was given responsibility to explain the Qur'an, 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 (*ra'y*) and is permissible provided the basic rules of *tafsīr* are applied.⁵⁶

Al-Bayhaqī (d. 458 AH) questioned the authenticity of the hadith "Whoever explains the Qur'an according to his personal opinion, shall take his place in Hell," adding if the hadith were authentic it could be a prohibition only on opinions that do not adhere to the basic rules of *tafsīr*.⁵⁷

According to al-Ghazālī the hadith had two probable meanings or indications, either that it limited *tafsīr* to the Prophet only, which he believed was not the case because the Prophet did not explain the whole of the Qur'an, or that it might mean something else. He added that if the first assumption were correct, then verse 4:83 should be taken into account as well: "When there comes to them some matter touching (Public) safety or fear, they divulge it. If they had only referred it to the Messenger, or to those charged with authority among them, the proper investigators would have Tested it from them (direct). Were it not for the Grace and Mercy of Allah unto you, all but a few of you would have fallen into the clutches of Satan". Al-Ghazālī contended in reference to the verse that proper investigation cannot be done without using *ra'y*.

As for Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq's statement "What earth will bear me and what sky will shadow me if I say anything based on my own opinion when explaining the Qur'an?"⁵⁸ Ibn 'Aṭīyyah allowed for two possibilities, either that Abū Bakr had said this at the very beginning of his *khilāfah* to prevent Muslims from engaging in *tafsīr* haphazardly; or that when he first became Caliph, this was his initial opinion (that *tafsīr* should not be made on the basis of reasoned

opinion, *al-ra'y*, alone), but, as time passed, he realized that the use of *ra'y* was unavoidable in *tafsīr*. Thus, when he was asked about the meaning of “*kalālah*,” mentioned in Qur’anic verse 4:12, he said, “I answer on the basis of my own view (*al-ra'y*). If it is correct, thanks be to God. If it is wrong, however, it is from me and the devil, and God is innocent of it.”⁵⁹

As for some of the *Tābi‘ūn*’s refraining from engaging in *tafsīr*, al-Zarkashī compared their attitudes to that of the Prophet’s Companions. He pointed out that certain eminent Companions, such as al-Zubayr ibn al-‘Awwām, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, and Ṭalḥah ibn ‘Ubayd Allāh avoided narrating hadith or ascribing sayings to the Prophet not to avoid giving independent opinion, but out of piety only. Therefore, the same could be said of the *Tābi‘ūn*’s stands vis-à-vis *tafsīr*.⁶⁰

The defenders of the use of *ra'y* in *tafsīr* also used the Qur’an to substantiate their position. Among the frequent examples quoted was verse 38:29 whereby Allah invites men to ponder over and draw meanings from His words: “(Here is) a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition” (38:29). They also quote verse 47:24 which states: “Do they not then earnestly seek to understand the Qur’an...?” The point made here is that, if using opinion in understanding the Qur’an was prohibited, there would be no purpose for the revelation of these verses.

The proponents of *ra'y* cite the famous hadith in which the Prophet clearly encouraged his followers to engage in *ijtihād*: “whoever makes *ijtihād* and he is right, will earn two rewards. If, however, he is wrong, he will earn only one reward.”⁶¹

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’tḥūr* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. Naturally, the *tafsīr* literature was also divided into two.

The Major Categorizations of *Tafsīr*

Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr

The word *ma'thūr* is a passive participle derived from the root verb *athara*, meaning 'to trace', 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 major *tafsīr* works considered as representatives of *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* are:

1. *Jāmi' al-Bayān* by al-Ṭabarī.
2. *Al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-ʿAzīz*, by Ibn ʿAṭīyyah.
3. *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl* by al-Baghawī.
4. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿAzīm* by Ibn Kathīr.
5. *Al-Durr al-Manthūr*, by al-Suyūṭī.
6. *Baḥr al-ʿUlūm* known as *Tafsīr Abu Layth al-Samarqandī*.

Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y

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*. This type of *tafsīr*, however, is divided into two parts:

1. *Al-Ra'y al-Maḥmūd* or *al-mamdūḥ* (praiseworthy).
2. *Al-Ra'y al-Madhmūm* (blameworthy).

1. *Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y al-Maḥmūd*

Al-ra'y al-maḥmūd is independent opinion that is based on the principles of *tafsīr* and the Arabic language, provided that the resulting interpretation does not conflict with the tradition of the Prophet or the general fundamentals of Islamic thought.

2. *Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y al-Madhmūm*

Al-ra'y al-madhmūm is independent opinion that is neither based on the principles of Arabic nor on the Hadith and the Sunnah of the Prophet, the Companions' reports, or the *Tābi'ūn*'s statements. *Al-ra'y al-madhmūm* earned this classification because both traditionalists and traditionists believed that the purpose of producing such *tafsīr* was to promote *bid'ah*.⁶² *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* by al-Rāzī and *Anwār al-Tanzīl* by al-Baydāwī (d. 685 AH) are among the important *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm*.

The *tafsīr* texts mentioned earlier in the section on *tafsīr* variations are considered to be *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm* by traditionalists and some jurists, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Kathīr and others. They believed these works of *tafsīr* had ignored the linguistic aspect as well as the Prophet, his Companions and the Successors' interpretations. They further believed that the authors of such texts were too educated to be unaware that they were misapplying and misinterpreting Qur'anic verses. They simply desired Qur'anic justifications for the teaching of the dogma to which they wished to give prominence.

Al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* continued to be the two major categories of the science of *tafsīr* until our modern time, when other trends and methodology in *tafsīr* emerged due to new social structures, diverse political systems, technological advancement, and science.