

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

## SUMMARY

The Companions of the Prophet are an important source in *tafsīr* and following the Prophet's death became in effect the first *mufasssirs*. They did not explain the whole Qur'an, but more difficult parts, and their exegesis constitutes a first step in the science of *tafsīr*. Whilst this would seem to be an obvious statement, in scholastic terms there are various opinions as to:

- a) what constitutes a Companion as opposed to anyone who lived during this time and witnessed Prophet Muhammad, and
- b) to what extent the Companions's *tafsīr* has definitive authority, that is, in other words, it is considered binding.

The methodology the Companions used was first to consult the Qur'an, then the Sunnah, and if no explanation could be gained from this, to use personal interpretation based on the occasions of revelation of verses, and their knowledge of Arabic grammar. We begin by a discussion of the word *Ṣaḥābī* or *Ṣāḥib* (Companion), then deal with the arguments concerning the authority of the *Ṣaḥābah's tafsīr* before proceeding to present some examples of this.

## Introduction

THE COMPANIONS became the most important interpreters of the Qur'an following the Prophet's death. They used a number of sources in their *tafsīr* including the statements of the Prophet and their own reasoning or understanding (*ijtihād*), as well as Arabic grammar. They were also aware of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was revealed, as well as the reasons of revelation and its place. Some of the most prominent in the field are the Four Caliphs, (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī), as well as 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd,

ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, Ubay ibn Kaʿb, Zayd ibn Thābit, Abū Musā al-Ashʿarī and ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr. ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAbbās is considered the most knowledgeable of the Companions.

### Definition of *Ṣāhib* and *Ṣaḥābah*

The Arabic word *ṣāhib* (adjective) is derived from the verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) *ṣuḥbah*, which has many meanings all denoting the notion of companionship or submission. Thus, the phrase “*wa aṣḥabtuhu al-shay*” means “I made something to be his companion.”<sup>1</sup> Whilst the phrase “*fa aṣḥabtuhu al-nāqah*” (which is part of a hadith) means, according to Ibn Manẓūr, “the camel submitted and followed her owner.”<sup>2</sup>

*Ṣāhib* in Islamic historiography refers to a contemporary of the Prophet, someone who believed in him as a Prophet, kept his company, and died as such. Traditionists and jurists alike have their own definition of this term. Traditionists, including Ibn Ḥajar, Ibn Kathīr and others, define a *ṣāhib* or *ṣaḥābī* as anyone who met Prophet Muhammad in reality (as opposed to seeing him in a dream) after he became a Prophet, and died as a believer in him, even if he or she did not transmit a single hadith from him.<sup>3</sup>

This definition does not seem to have satisfied the critical criteria of legal theorists (*uṣūliyyīn*) for whom a *ṣaḥābī* was not simply someone who met the Prophet, but far more, someone who acknowledged his prophethood, became his disciple, accompanied him over a long period of time, met with him frequently during that period, and learned from him.<sup>4</sup> The jurists’ definition hence excluded from the rank of the *Ṣaḥābah* many people whom the traditionists considered to have that status, especially those people who saw the Prophet once during the only one pilgrimage he made to Makkah.

This difference between the two opinions is largely due to two reasons. First, the notion of *ʿadālah* (justice/fairness), honesty, and uprightness have made it necessary for the jurists to be reserved in

their definition of the term more than the traditionists because the former were more concerned with the legal ramifications of the term whilst the latter were concerned principally with Hadith transmission. Second, the traditionists did not go beyond the literal sense of the word, whilst the jurists went deeper to examine its application in *urf* (usage/custom).

### Arguments Concerning the *Hujjiyyah* (Binding Proof) of a *Ṣaḥābī*'s Interpretation and Fatwa

Praise for the *Ṣaḥābah* in the Qur'an and Hadith have made Muslims of later generations hold the Prophet's Companions in high esteem, although in various degrees, ranging from absolute authority that puts their opinion on an equal footing with that of the Prophet, to mere reverence that is limited to honoring their pioneering role in Islam and their Companionship with the Prophet. This lack of consensus among Muslims regarding the legal status of the *Ṣaḥābah* (to be discussed in greater detail) impacted to some degree Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic law. The Companions, whether during the Prophet's life or thereafter, had at times used their own opinion in the interpretation of both the Qur'an and Hadith. This effort on their part came to be known as *ra'y Ṣāḥib* (a Companion's opinion, saying, or fatwa), and its authority became the subject of controversy among Muslim scholars.<sup>5</sup> In his *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Muhammad Hashim Kamali has correctly presented the arguments in precise context as follows:

The Sunni scholars are unanimously agreed on the 'Companions' *ijmā'* (Muslim scholars' consensus) as a binding proof and the most authoritative form of *ijmā'*. The question arises as to whether the fatwa of a single Companion should also be recognized as a binding proof and therefore be given precedence over fundamental principles such as *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) or the fatwa of another

*mujtahid*<sup>6</sup> (a person qualified to give authoritative opinions in religious jurisprudence).

Scholastic opinion falls into four major groups:

1. The saying of a Companion or his *tafsīr* is an absolute binding authority that takes priority over *qiyās* and everyone else's *tafsīr*. Among the proponents of this view are Imam Mālik, Imam Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim, and others.<sup>7</sup>
2. The saying of a Companion is a binding authority only if it pertains to the occasions of the revelation or to that which cannot be subjectively discussed (*mā lā majāl li al-ra'y fiḥ*).<sup>8</sup>
3. The view that maintains that only the first two Caliphs's statements are absolutely binding.
4. The saying of a Companion is not a binding proof. This is the view of many jurists and theologians including Abū Ḥamed al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ḥazm, al-Āmidī, Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Shawkānī and others.<sup>9</sup>

*Group 1: The saying of a Companion or his tafsīr is an absolute binding authority that takes priority over qiyās and everyone else's tafsīr*

The first group invokes surah 9:100 as a main argument to support their view: “the first of those who forsook (their homes) and of those who gave them aid, and (also) those who follow them in (all) good deeds, well-pleased is Allah with them, as are they with Him.” This refers to the first emigrants from Makkah and the people of Madinah called the Ansar who supported them in Madinah.

They maintain that the importance of this verse lies in the fact that God praised the Companions and those who followed them, individually or as a group. So, in their view, if anyone differs with one of them or does not accept his opinion(s), he will be excluded from the blessing of God. They thus conclude that the Companions' opinion is an absolute binding authority within Islamic law and we must

follow their judgments or opinions.<sup>10</sup> Another verse invoked is: “You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind” (3:110). What is inferred from this is that God is describing the Companions as being the best people ever to have been raised up for mankind,<sup>11</sup> thereby suggesting that their judgments and opinions are the best and must be accepted.

The proponents of this view also refer to several Hadith. One of these being: “*aṣḥābī ka al-nujūm: bi ayyihim iqtadaytum ihtadaytum,*” (my companions are like stars; whoever of you follows anyone of them will be guided to the right path). This hadith is not sound. Another hadith states: “*Khayr al-qurūni qarnī hādihā, thumma al-ladhīna yalūnahum, thumma a-lathīna yalūnahum,*” (the best generation is mine, then the succeeding generation, then the generation that follows).<sup>12</sup> These two hadith, mainly the former, indicate very clearly that anyone who follows any Companion is on the right path. This appears to uphold the authority of the Companions’ opinion. One of the strongest arguments used by the exponents of this view is that God blessed the Companions with the companionship of the Prophet; they learned the whole Qur’an from the Prophet directly; they witnessed the revelation, and understood the circumstances in which it was sent down. Furthermore, they understood well the Prophet’s methodology and mastered the Arabic language, which is the Qur’an’s language.<sup>13</sup>

The two most outstanding advocates of this view are Ibn Taymiyyah and his faithful student Ibn Qayyim, who seriously challenged the opponents of this idea and defended their own position by presenting around forty-six arguments from the Qur’an, Hadith, the Companions’ statements as well as simple logic.

Further Qur’anic evidence for this group includes verse 27:59: “Say: ‘Praise be to Allah, and Peace on his servants whom He has chosen (*iṣṭafā*) (for his Message).’” For Ibn ‘Abbās, God’s selected servants are the *Companions* of the Prophet, and according to Ibn Qayyim: “The actual implication of the word *iṣṭifā*’ is purification

from impurity which includes mistakes. Thus, the Companions are purified.” He further adds: “Although the Companions differed on some issues, this neither contradicts their purity nor affects their claims, for no one can have true understanding of Islam better than them.”<sup>14</sup> Additional textual support includes:

And among them are men who listen to thee, but in the end, when they go out from thee, they say to those who have received Knowledge (*al-ilm*), “What is it he said just then?” Such are men whose hearts Allah has sealed, and who follow their own lusts. (47:16)

God will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted [true] Knowledge (*al-ilm*). (58:11)

Ibn Qayyim claims that the definite article “*al*” in the word *al-ilm* in these verses stands for *al-ahd*, which indicates that it was something specifically known to the audience. Ibn Qayyim interprets this term as referring to the Qur’an. Thus, he concludes that if the Companions were given such knowledge, they must be followed in all what they said or decided.<sup>15</sup>

A third piece of Qur’anic evidence Ibn Qayyim quotes in support of this view is verse 2:143: “Thus, have We made of you an Ummah justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations.” The point that Ibn Qayyim makes here is that, Allah has made the Companions the chosen and upright people by granting them the status of witnesses over people on the Day of Judgment. The testimony that Allah accepts is one which is based on knowledge and thus confirms the soundness of the knowledge of the Companions. Therefore, the truth or real understanding never escapes the latter’s circle. Hence, he concludes: “We say to whoever disagrees with the Companions that the Companions’ opinion is better than yours.”<sup>16</sup>

Ibn Qayyim refers to the following hadith: “Do not abuse my Companions for if any one of you spent gold equal to (Mount) Uhud (in Allah’s Cause), you still would not be able to achieve what they have done, nay, not even half of it.” Ibn Qayyim commented on this hadith saying: “If the reach of the Companions is better in the sight of God than gold equal to Mount Uhud, than how could Allah not have inspired them with correct understanding in their fatwas and [why would He] instead inspire one of the next generations with such knowledge? This is obviously impossible.”<sup>17</sup>

The second hadith cited is: “Verily, Allah has selected or chosen and selected companions for me. Some of them he made my ministers, helpers, and in-laws.” Therefore, according to Ibn Qayyim, it is impossible that Allah would take away correct understanding or opinion on matters from the very people He had chosen as the Prophet’s ministers, helpers and in-laws.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence is also cited from the Companions’s own statements such as that of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd who states:

Whoever is looking for models to follow should follow the Companions of the Prophet, because they were the most virtuous people of this community, deeper in knowledge, less involved in unnecessary things, more guided and in a better condition. Allah chose them to accompany His Prophet and to establish Islam. You should recognize their virtue and follow their footsteps for, verily, they were on the right path.

Ibn Qayyim comments on this, using the same argument as in his previous statements.

A second statement is from Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, who says to a group of Qur’an reciters (*qurrā’*):

Oh you group of Qur’an reciters, follow the path of those who were before you. I swear by Allah that if you stand straight (stick to Islam),

you will be guided, and if you abandon the path of your predecessors, you will go far astray.<sup>19</sup>

Thirdly, there is the case of an incident that took place in the house of a Companion, Jundub ibn ʿAbd Allāh. A group of Muslims (whom Ibn Qayyim describes as Kharijites) came to Jundub and said to him: “We are inviting you to Allah’s Book.” He said: “You?” They replied: “Yes.” He repeated, “You?” They repeated: “Yes.” Then he said: “Oh you the most evil among the creatures of Allah, do you want to follow evil or to follow our Sunnah for guidance?” Ibn Qayyim states that it is known that anyone who thinks that the Companions can possibly make mistakes, and thereby disagrees with them in their fatwas, has not followed their Sunnah.<sup>20</sup>

Fourthly, when a Companion says something or gives a fatwa, we might share the same opinions with him or we might not, but we have to realize that, not all of what the Companions heard from the Prophet was reported. To substantiate his point, Ibn Qayyim asks: “Where are the hadith that Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq and the prominent Companions narrated?” Abū Bakr accompanied the Prophet from the time he became a Prophet until he died. But the number of Hadith narrated by Abū Bakr does not exceed one hundred. Thus, whatever they said concerning Islam is most likely what they heard from the Prophet. Furthering his arguments, he presented six categories under which a fatwa or opinion of a Companion may fall:

1. He might have heard a statement from the Prophet, but did not ascribe anything to him for fear of misquoting him;
2. He might have heard it from a Companion who had heard it from the Prophet;
3. He might have understood it from the Qur’an, although it was unclear to others;
4. He might have said something which the majority of the Companions agreed upon, although it was not narrated to us

except the statement of one person who initiated a particular opinion;

5. Since the Companions understood their language very well, understood the ultimate purpose of Islam, observed the behavior of the Prophet in dealing with different issues, they were thereby qualified to understand what the next generation could not understand and, therefore, their opinions and fatwas are binding and must be followed
6. He might have misunderstood the saying of the Prophet, although this, Ibn Qayyim contends, is not possible or realistic.<sup>21</sup>

*Group 2: The saying of a Companion is a binding authority only if it pertains to the occasions of the revelation or to that which cannot be subjectively discussed (mā lā majāl li al-ra'y fih).*

The second group of scholars includes those who support the idea that a Companion's interpretation or his fatwa is binding only if what he narrates concerns the occasions of revelation. They believe whatever a *ṣahābī* narrates in that context cannot be held as mere opinion. Thus, whatever the Companions relate in this regard must be based on eyewitness accounts or something heard from the Prophet.<sup>22</sup>

*Group 3: The view that maintains that only the first two Caliphs' statements are absolutely binding.*

The third group based their argument on the hadith which commands: "stick to my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the four guided Caliphs." A similar hadith also enjoins: "Imitate these two persons after me; Abū Bakr and 'Umar."<sup>23</sup>

*Group 4: The view that maintains that the saying of a Companion is not a binding proof (ḥujjah).*

The fourth group upheld their opinion by quoting many verses of which two are central to this opinion. The first is verse 4:59: "If you

differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to God and His Messenger.”

They point to the fact that in this verse God has commanded the Muslims to refer what they differ upon only to God and His messenger. Hence, if a Companion's opinion were to be binding, God would have mentioned it.<sup>24</sup>

The second is verse 47:24: “Do they not then earnestly seek to understand the Qur'an, or are their hearts locked up by them?” In this verse, God exhorts Muslims to ponder over the verses of the Qur'an. It is therefore this group's view that to consider the opinion of a Companion as binding (*hujjah*) would be a violation of this divine injunction.<sup>25</sup>

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī seems to be the most insistent on rejecting the opinion of a Companion as *Hujjah*. He even rejects the idea that if the four rightly guided Caliphs were unanimous on an issue it would become binding on the Ummah, believing this viewpoint to be null and void (*wa al-kull bāṭil 'indanā*),<sup>26</sup> adding that any person who is subject to making mistakes cannot be infallible. Furthermore, he questioned: “How can two people, each rendering an infallible opinion, differ on the same issue?” that is, how could two binding proofs (*hujjah*) be contradictory on the same issue? He pointed out that the Companions did differ on many issues to the extent that their opinion cannot be harmonized in any way.<sup>27</sup> He also argued that the Companions recognized that their own opinions were not binding proof. If they believed their opinions were binding, they would not have allowed themselves to differ. Scholars who support this opinion even go so far as to say that considering a Companion's *tafsīr* or fatwa as binding proof is tantamount to suppressing the intellect.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the implication of these theological arguments has two dimensions. One is religious, the other is intellectual. Al-Ghazālī states regarding the religious dimension that if the opinion of a Companion is a binding proof, then it becomes one of the basic principles of Islam. For this to occur, their binding character must be

established in the same way as the other basic principles of Islam were, that is to say, through proof and argument from the Qur'an and the Hadith.<sup>29</sup>

Another dimension in this thorny issue is that if the opinion of a Companion is a binding proof (*hujjah*), then it arrogates to itself the authority to restrict the general implication of the Qur'an. The Ḥanbalī jurists al-Qāḍī Abū Ya'ālā and Abū Barakāt, both confirmed that if the opinion of a Companion is to be considered a *hujjah*, then it can restrict the general implication of the Qur'an.<sup>30</sup> Al-Shāṭibī for his part holds a similar opinion with minor differences.

The intellectual implication concerns restricting thinking. Al-Ghazālī and al-Āmidī state that if one accepts the opinion of a Companion as a binding proof, then this is tantamount to *taqlīd* (acceptance and adoption of a legal conclusion without examining the premises). This, they say, is contrary to the Qur'anic invitation to Muslims to reflect upon the Qur'an (verse 47:24 above) and analyze its information. Thus, the scholarly approach concerning the authority of a Companion's opinion involves intellectual inquiry and analysis.<sup>31</sup>

Abū Ḥayyān raised yet another scholastic issue when he stated: "If it were true that the Qur'an can be understood only by reference to the Companions' and the *Tābi'ūn*'s interpretations, then there would be no need for further interpretation by the scholars who followed them."<sup>32</sup>

### Qur'anic Interpretation by the Companions

There are ample verses in the Qur'an and Hadith which command Muslims to seek knowledge and teach it. Inspired by this command, the Companions became involved in *tafsīr*. For all their endeavors, they did not interpret the whole Qur'an, nor did they leave a compendium of their contribution. This was for four main reasons. First, it was not common for ordinary Arabs to write. Ibn al-Nadīm

mentions that only 13 people in Makkah were literate when the Prophet Muhammad became a messenger. This is why he trusted his own memory.

Secondly, at the beginning of his Caliphate, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb discouraged writing anything other than the Qurʾan for religious purposes, including the traditions of the Prophet. But later he allowed this. The point was to prevent confusion between the Qurʾan and the Hadith, or to avoid people occupying themselves with the Hadith rather than the Qurʾan.

Thirdly, the Qurʾan is in Arabic, this being their language, the *Ṣaḥābah* understood the language better than the subsequent generation, so they had a better understanding of the Qurʾan.

Fourthly, they dedicated their lives to propagating Islam; thus, most of their life was spent in defending and protecting Islam and giving people the ability to choose the religion they would like to follow. It follows that the Companions who actually engaged in *tafsīr* were very few. The same applies to their giving fatwas.

In his *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, Ibn Ḥazm specifies that the number of the Companions, both male and female, who issued fatwas ranged between 133–139.<sup>33</sup>

Generally speaking, according to the existing sources, the prominent exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) among the Companions were ten: The four Caliphs (Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān and ʿAlī), ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd, ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, Ubay ibn Kaʿb, Zayd ibn Thābit, Abū Musā al-Ashʿarī and ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr. The others who are recognized for their ability to produce interpretation are Anas ibn Mālik, ʿĀʾishah bint Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, the wife of the Prophet, Abū Hurayrah, ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar, Jābir ibn ʿAbd Allāh, and ʿAmrū ibn al-ʿĀṣ.<sup>34</sup>

The interpretation which the first three Caliphs produced was minimal compared to what ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, ibn Masʿūd and Ibn ʿAbbās produced. Al-Suyūṭī asserted that the reason for the small amount of *tafsīr* from the first three Caliphs was due to the fact that

they died earlier than ʿAlī and other *mufassirūn*. He also noted that even though Abū Bakr was the closest Companion to the Prophet and the first man to accept Islam, he narrated very little *tafsīr* from the Prophet,<sup>35</sup> perhaps for reasons associated with piety (out of fear to misquote the Prophet). It is also possible, but unlikely, that his *tafsīr* became lost; he died shortly after the Prophet. However, Abū Bakr's well-known statement "What heavens shall shade me and what earth shall shelter me, if I say anything concerning the Qur'an of which I have no knowledge," suggests that the first assumption is the most likely reason. In spite of the fact that the three Caliphs' *tafsīr* is minimal, they are still considered by Muslim scholars to be among the most prominent exegetes, if not the first and foremost. This is because Muslims hold in high esteem the Companions in general and the four Caliphs in particular for they were extolled in the Qur'an and by the Prophet.

We examine next the *tafsīr* of some of the Companions. These include the four Caliphs (Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī) as well as four other prominent Companions who are highly acclaimed for their Qur'anic commentary: Ibn Masʿūd, Ubay ibn Kaʿb, ʿĀ'ishah Bint Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq and Ibn ʿAbbās.

### *Tafsīr of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq*

Abū Bakr had noticed some Companions abstaining from enjoining good and prohibiting evil on the basis of their understanding of Qur'anic verse 5:105 which states: "O you who have attained to faith! It is [but] for your own selves that you are responsible: those who go astray can do you no harm if you [yourselves] are on the right path." This verse does not mean that people should just worry about their own salvation, and not shoulder the task of bettering or guiding others who may be deviating. This is why Abū Bakr corrected their perception stating to them: "Oh people! You recite this verse and misinterpret it. I heard the Prophet say, if people see corruption taking place and do not do anything to stop it, then God will cover them

with His punishment.”<sup>36</sup> In another instance, Abū Bakr was asked about the meaning of the Qur’anic term *kalālah*. He replied: “I say [regarding its meaning], that in my opinion it refers to anyone who has passed away and has no father or son.” On another occasion, Sa‘īd ibn ‘Imrān (a Companion) requested Abū Bakr to explain verse 41:30: “In the case of those who say, ‘Our Lord is Allah’, and, further, stand straight and steadfast...” Abū Bakr interpreted it by stating: “They are those who do not associate anything with Allah.”<sup>37</sup>

In light of these three instances, it is noticed that Abū Bakr:

- a) In the first example refers to a hadith of the Prophet in explaining the meaning of Qur’anic verse 5:105.
- b) In the second example depends on his own opinion.
- c) In the third example, he did not refer to the Prophet, nor did he state clearly his opinion as he did in the case of *kalālah*. Perhaps he deduced his perspective from the Prophet’s explanation of verse 41:30 that “most of the people who stated in this verse ‘Our Lord is Allah’ became disbelievers afterwards. Whoever says this until his death has stood upright. Some people profess Islam but reject it later. So those who die in the state of Islam are those who have stood upright.”<sup>38</sup>

### *‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb*

Among the Companions ‘Umar appears to have taken more time in pondering the deepest meanings of the Qur’an and the one more inclined to get the Companions to engage intellectually in understanding it. This assumption is based on the following incidents.

Whilst the rest of the Companions were delighted, ‘Umar cried when verse 5:3 of the Qur’an was revealed: “This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” When the Prophet asked ‘Umar why he was crying, he replied, “Nothing has ever been perfected but that afterwards it decreases.” The Prophet supported his statement by saying “You are correct.”<sup>39</sup>

Al-Bukhārī narrates that one day ʿUmar sought the Companions' opinion regarding the meaning of Qur'anic verse 2:266 which states:

Would any of you like to have a garden of date-palms and vines, through which running waters flow, and have all manner of fruit therein - and then be overtaken by old age, with only weak children to [look after] him - and then [see] it smitten by a fiery whirlwind and utterly scorched? In this way God makes clear His messages unto you, so that you might take thought.

They replied, "Allah knows best." At this, ʿUmar exclaimed: "Say we know or we do not know." Upon hearing this, Ibn ʿAbbās stated: "Oh commander of the believers! I have something in mind." ʿUmar said: "O son of my brother, do not underestimate yourself." Ibn ʿAbbās said: "[The verse] has set up an example for deeds." ʿUmar said, "What deeds?" Ibn ʿAbbās repeated "for a deed." ʿUmar said, "What type of deed?" Ibn ʿAbbās replied, "For a wealthy man who does good deeds out of obedience to Allah, and then Allah sends Satan to him where upon he commits sins till his good deeds are annulled."<sup>40</sup>

On a similar occasion to this, we see ʿUmar asking the Companions as to their understanding of verses 110:1-3 of the Qur'an which read: "When God's succour comes, and victory, and thou seest people enter God's religion in hosts, - extol thy Sustainer's limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness: for, behold, He is ever an acceptor of repentance". Some answered: "We are commanded to praise Allah and ask Him for forgiveness when He blessed us with victory." Others remained quiet. ʿUmar interrogates further: "Ibn ʿAbbās, do you agree with their interpretations?" Ibn ʿAbbās replies: "No. I say it is an indication of the death of the Prophet."<sup>41</sup>

Again, we find ʿUmar interpreting the word "*istaqāmū*" (stand straight and steadfast) in verse 41:30 of the Qur'an: "[But,] behold, as for those who say, 'Our Lord is Allah', and, further, stand straight and

steadfast, ....” explaining it as: “I swear by Allah, they follow the straight path to Allah by obedience to Him and they do not swerve the way foxes do,”<sup>42</sup> meaning they do not take advantage of any loopholes.

In light of this presentation, we conclude that ‘Umar had been studying the Qur’an and using his reasoning to understand it, and seems not to have depended on the obvious meaning of the text.

### *‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān*

‘Uthmān was one of the Caliphs but we have very little *tafsīr* from him with regard to understanding and interpreting the Qur’an, the sources consulted hardly mentioning him. Even so, the little interpretation that exists attributed to him will be discussed later in the chapter when comparing *tafsīr* differences between the Companions.

### *‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*

Among the four Caliphs, ‘Alī was the most prolific exegete. He seems to have been strongly self-confident in his knowledge of the Qur’an, and is reported to have declared:

Ask me! I swear by Allah, you ask me nothing but I answer you. Ask me about the book of *Allah*, I swear by *Allah*, no verse was revealed but I know whether it was revealed during the night or during the day, on level ground or on a mountain.”<sup>43</sup>

One of ‘Alī’s interpretations concerns Qur’anic verse 9:124 which states: “Whenever there cometh down a surah, some of them say: ‘Which of you has had his faith increased by it?’” ‘Alī interpreted the verse by stating:

Faith appears as a small white spot in the heart. Whenever it increases, the white sport also increases until the whole heart becomes white. (On the other hand) Hypocrisy appears as a small black spot in the heart. Whenever it increases, the black spot also increases...<sup>44</sup>

A further instance of 'Alī's interpretation concerns the completion of *ni<sup>c</sup>mah* in verse 2:150 which indicates: "...and that I may complete My favours [*ni<sup>c</sup>matī*] on you, and ye may (consent to) be guided." Ali explains this to mean that one should die in a state of surrender to Allah (Islam). He elaborates further stating that *ni<sup>c</sup>mah* includes Islam, the Qur'an, the Prophet, covering someone's sins or shortcomings, good health and being self-sufficient.<sup>45</sup>

In his *tafsīr*, 'Alī also used the Qur'an to explain other Qur'anic verses, which has led contemporary Qur'anic scholar, Muhammad Ibrahim Sharif, to assume that 'Alī was the first *mufasssīr* to initiate a conceptual approach to *tafsīr* which is known in modern times as *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū<sup>c</sup>ī*.<sup>46</sup>

'Abd Allāh ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd

Al-Suyūṭī regarded the *tafsīr* received from Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd to be more developed than that originating from 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd's biography indicates that he went over the meaning of the Qur'an thoroughly.<sup>47</sup> This assumption is implied by Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd's observation when he states: "The most comprehensive verse in regard to good and bad morals in the Qur'an is verse 16:90 which points out that 'Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion...'"

If he had not studied the Qur'an comprehensively, how could Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd have made such a statement? One instance of his interpretation concerns verse 2:121 which reads: "Those to whom We have sent the Book study it as it should be studied." Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd explains 'those' as referring to people who legalized that which the book of God had ordered to be legalized and abstained from that which the book of God had prohibited, and did not distort it.<sup>48</sup>

Masrūq ibn Ajda<sup>c</sup> once stated: "I asked Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd about injustice in judgment done by a judge?" to which he goes on to say Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd responded by reciting verse 5:44, which warns that "If any

do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) Unbelievers.”

It appears that by referring to this verse, Ibn Mas‘ūd interpreted the failure to judge by what Allah has revealed to be injustice, and injustice itself to be that is to say, disbelief, and a rebellion against Allah’s commandment.

Concerning verse 44:10, “Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a pall of smoke which will make obvious [the approach of the Last Hour]” Ibn Mas‘ūd uses the historical circumstance of the verse’s revelation to derive its meaning. He states:

When the Quraysh agitated and rebelled against the Prophet, the latter invoked God, saying: “O Allah! Help me against them by afflicting them with seven years of famine like the seven years of Yūsuf.” So the Quraysh were stricken by a year of famine during which they ate bones and dead animals. When the tribe pleaded with God, saying: “Our Lord remove the torment from us, really we are believers,” Allah told the Prophet that if He put an end to their torment, they would revert to their ways. But the Prophet pleaded in their favor with his Lord who ceased their punishment. Later they reverted to their initial habits, where upon Allah punished them at the battle of Badr, which is what Allah’s statement indicates.

In the light of this interpretation, it is clear that Ibn Mas‘ūd, exercised his own judgement to understand the text, as in the case of verse 2:121, going beyond what is obvious to derive a novel meaning. It is worth noting that in so doing, Ibn Mas‘ūd followed one of the Prophet’s interpretation methods as shown in the case of Qur’anic verse 44:10. That method involving answering the question by referring to the Qur’an.

### *Ubay ibn Ka‘b*

Ubay ibn Ka‘b was one of the best reciters of the Qur’an and the

principal teacher of the Madinah school of *tafsīr*. He was also of Jewish background and thus it was expected that his Jewish education would be reflected in his exegesis as noted by scholars in the Islamic interpretations of Ka'b al-Aḥbār and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sallām. One of Ubay's interpretation concerns verse 2:213: "Mankind was one single nation...". Scholars have understood this verse in so many different ways, with some interpreting "one single nation" to mean Adam and Eve, and others as referring to the prophet Nūḥ and the people who were in the Ark with him. Still others have assumed that reference is being made to mankind in general by virtue of the verse connoting disbelievers,<sup>49</sup> etc. Ubay, however, interpreted the verse as referring to mankind being one single nation or community "only once." By this he meant that Allah had brought the souls of the children of Adam together before dispersing them on the earth. That is to say, mankind was one community when it was in the loins of Adam. He supports his view by reference to verse 7:172 which states:

When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): "Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?" - They said: "Yea! We do testify!"<sup>50</sup>

On another occasion, Ubay was asked by Muṣ'ab ibn Sa'd, one of the *Tābi'ūn*, whether verse 107:5: "Who are neglectful of their prayers," meant thinking about oneself while praying.<sup>51</sup> Ubay dismissed the suggestion remarking that all people did so, and we find him going on to explain that the verse referred to neglecting the accomplishment of *salah* on time.

At another time a man comes to Ubay stating: "A verse in the Qur'an made me uncomfortable." When Ubay inquires as to the verse in question the man recites verse 4:123: "It may not accord with your wishful thinking - nor with the wishful thinking of the followers of earlier revelation - [that] he who does evil shall be requited

for it.” Ubay explains to him that, “The verse means when a calamity befalls a believer, and he patiently tolerates it for the sake of Allah, he will have all his sins wiped out.”<sup>52</sup>

Ubay’s methodology does not differ from that of his contemporaries. We find that he used the Qur’an to explain other Qur’anic verses and he exercised his own judgement in explaining the meaning of the text.

### *‘Ā’ishah Bint Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq*

Among the wives of the Prophet, ‘Ā’ishah was the most knowledgeable. She has been listed third in terms of narrating the Prophet’s hadith. Her nephew, ‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr narrated many of her interpretations as shown by the following exchanges between them both. The first instance concerns verse 2:158 which clarifies issues around Hajj rituals. It states:

Behold! Safa and Marwa are among the Symbols of Allah. So if those who visit the House in the Season or at other times, should compass them round, it is no sin on them (*fa lā junāḥa ‘alayhi an yaṭṭawafa bihimā*). And if any one obeyeth his own impulse to good, – be sure that Allah is He Who recogniseth and knoweth.

‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr narrates that he asked ‘Ā’ishah, “Tell me about the sayings of Allah 2:158.” Before ‘Ā’ishah responded as to her understanding he said: “There is no blame on anyone who does not walk between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah*.” ‘Ā’ishah replied, “Woe to what you said oh my nephew. If your interpretation was correct the verse would have been “*fa lā junāḥa ‘alayhi an lā yaṭṭawafa bihimā*”. There is no blame on anyone who does *not* walk between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah*. This verse was revealed in connection with the *Anṣār* who before Islam, used to assume *Ihlāl* (or *iḥrām* for Hajj) in the area of Mushallal for their idol *Manāt* that they used to worship. Those who assumed *Ihlāl* for *Manāt*, used to hesitate to perform *ṭawāf*

between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah* after embracing Islam regarding it as sinful to do so.<sup>53</sup>

In another instance related by al-Bukhārī, ‘Ā’ishah was asked by ‘Urwah as to the meaning of verse 12:110. He remarks: “Did (the apostles mentioned in the verse) suspect that they were betrayed by Allah or that they were treated as liars by their people?” ‘Ā’ishah answers him: “They suspected that they were treated as liars by their people.”

‘Urwah went on: “But they were sure that their people treated them as liars and it was a matter of suspicion.” She replied: “Yes, ‘upon my life’ (*la‘amrī*), they were sure about it.” ‘Urwah said to her: “So they (apostles) suspected their Lord of such a thing?” adding “What about this verse then?” ‘Ā’ishah said, “It is about the apostles’ followers who believed in their Lord and trusted their apostles, but the period of trials was prolonged and victory delayed until the apostles thought that their followers treated them as liars. There upon Allah’s help came to them.”<sup>54</sup>

Again, ‘Urwah asks ‘Ā’ishah’s interpretation of verse 4:127:

And they will ask thee to enlighten them about the laws concerning women. Say: God doth instruct you about them: And (remember) what hath been rehearsed unto you in the Book, concerning the orphans of women to whom ye give not the portions prescribed, and yet whom ye desire to marry...

‘Ā’ishah replies:

These verses have been revealed regarding the case of a man who has an orphan girl under his care, who shares with him all his property, even a date palm (garden), but he dislikes to marry her and dislikes to give her in marriage to somebody else, who would share with her the portion of the property due to her. For this reason, that guardian prevents that orphan girl from marriage.<sup>55</sup>

In the light of this brief presentation it can be concluded that ʿĀ'ishah used three different methods in Qur'anic interpretation. The first concerns her language skills, as illustrated in her correction of ʿUrwah's understanding of verse 2:158 wherein she states, "if what you have said is correct, the verse would have been *fa lā junāḥa ʿalayhi an [lā] yaṭṭawafa bihimā*." In the first part of this statement, the particle 'lā' stands for negation whereas in the latter part the 'lā' (in bold) is not mentioned in the Qur'anic verse. Secondly, she uses her knowledge of traditional Arab culture as in the case of verse 2:158. Thirdly, she uses her knowledge of the circumstances of the revelation, as noted in her explanation of verse 4:127.

#### *ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās*

When the Prophet died, Ibn ʿAbbās was about thirteen or fourteen years of age. However, he has been generally recognized as the most prominent exegete among the Companions. Muslim scholars believed that this was due to the Prophet's well-known prayer in his regard: "O God, grant him the knowledge of this religion (Islam) and teach him the interpretation the Qur'an."<sup>56</sup> As a result of his exegesis, Ibn ʿAbbās received praise from various contemporaries of the Prophet who called him invariably *tarjumān al-Qur'ān* (the best interpreter of the Qur'an), *ra's al-mufasssīrīn*, (head or leader of the exegetes), *ḥabr hādhihi al-ummah* (scholar of the Ummah), and so on. A negative consequence of Ibn ʿAbbās's popularity as an authority has been the false ascription to him of numerous hadith and exegetical texts. According to al-Suyūṭī there were countless numbers of such hadith (*Mā lā yuḥṣā kathrah*), and according to al-Shāfi'ī: "No more than one hundred hadith have come authentically from Ibn ʿAbbās."<sup>57</sup>

In his *Al-tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrīn*, al-Dhahabī mentions the reason for this attribution of fabricated *tafsīr* reports to Ibn ʿAbbās as being due to his membership of the Prophet's House, and the fact that he was related to those from whom Muslims wanted to obtain their

blessing. And because of Ibn ʿAbbās’s status, even a complete book entitled *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* was attributed to him. The work was compiled by Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb Al-Fayrūzābādī Al-Shīrāzī (d. 817), and has been published several times in Egypt and Pakistan by *al-Maktabah al-Fārūqīyyah*. In reality, Ibn ʿAbbās’s *tafsīr* as reported in al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, in al-Bukhārī’s *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, in Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān Al-ʿAzīm*, and in other sources is different from Ibn ʿAbbās’s alleged *tafsīr* (interpretation) in *Tanwīr al-Miqbās*. Thus, I incline towards *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* cannot possibly representing the *tafsīr* of Ibn ʿAbbās. For example, all Qurʾanic surahs except one (surah *al-Tawbah*) begin with the *Basmala* (In Name of Allah, The Most Merciful, The Most Compassionate).<sup>58</sup> However, no interpretation attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās concerning the meaning of the *Basmala* exists except in *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* which reportedly has him stating: The letter ‘*bā*’ stands for ‘*bahāʿu Allāh, bahjatuh; balāʿuh, barakātuh*’ (the magnificence of God, His delight, His trials, and His blessings). The letter ‘*sīn*’ stands for ‘*sanāʿuh, sumuwuh*’, and *ibtidāʿu ismihi al-samīʿ* (God’s sublimity, His highness and the beginning of His lofty name and All-Hearing). As for the letter ‘*mīm*’, it stands for ‘*mulkuh, majduh, minnatuh ʿalā ʿibādih*’ (God’s dominion, His glory, and His favors to His servants).<sup>59</sup>

Interpretations of such verses were not mentioned in any of the major *tafsīr* works. In his *Fath Al-Qadīr*, al-Shawkānī mentions a weak or fabricated hadith from a Companion by the name of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudurī (d. 16) who is supposed to have narrated the following hadith: The Prophet said that Jesus’s mother sent him to a school to learn. The teacher asked Jesus to write down *bismi Allāh*. Jesus inquires: “what is *bismi Allāh*?” The teacher responds: “I do not know.” Then Jesus states the letter ‘*bā*’ stands for ‘*bahāʿu Allāh*,’ (the magnificence of God), the letter ‘*sīn*’ stands for ‘*sanāʿuh*’ (God’s sublimity) and the letter ‘*mīm*’ stands for ‘*malakūtuh*’ (God’s kingdom).<sup>60</sup>

These interpretations are representative of the Sufi’s allegorical interpretations (*taʿwīlāt*). And these type of allegorical interpretations

appear in *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* at the beginning of most chapters which start with what are known as *al-hurūf al-muqattaʿah*, the abbreviated letters. However, al-Ṭabarī, al-Shawkānī and others have reported Ibn ʿAbbās to have stated, regarding the meanings of the abbreviated letters, that they are the greatest names of God. When he was asked about their meanings he did not give any specific interpretation.<sup>61</sup>

An analysis of *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* reveals that all the narrations it contains go back to Muḥammad ibn Marwān (d. 186),<sup>62</sup> Muḥammad ibn al-Sāʿib al-Kalbī,<sup>63</sup> and ʿAlī ibn Abū Ṣāliḥ.<sup>64</sup> This chain of narration is technically known as *silsilat al-kadhib* (the chain of fabricated narrations).<sup>65</sup> Due to the rejection of this chain, it can safely be stated that *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* is not from Ibn ʿAbbās.

However, some questions remain without answer: If the work is falsely attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, who is its originator? Why did he ascribe it to Ibn ʿAbbās? And more importantly, what was his purpose in doing so? We can only speculate.

In answer to the first perhaps it was Abū Ṭāhir al-Fayrūzābādī who might have been the original author. As to why, it is assumed to advocate this type of mystical *tafsīr*, and finally as to the purpose, simply to give the text more credence.

Another *tafsīr* which has been ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās is that of *Masāʾil Nāfiʿ*<sup>66</sup> (the questions of Nāfiʿ). This book consists of around two hundred questions which Nāfiʿ ibn al-Azraq allegedly asks Ibn ʿAbbās. The story goes that one day whilst Ibn ʿAbbās was sitting inside the sacred Mosque in Makkah, answering people's questions concerning the meaning of various portions of the Qur'an, Nāfiʿ and his friend Najdah ibn ʿUwaymir approach him, with Nāfiʿ stating: "We have come to ask you about some meanings of the Qu'ran, but we want the answers to be supported by Arabic poetry." Nāfiʿ reportedly puts before Ibn ʿAbbās two hundred questions which Ibn ʿAbbās is said to have replied to, quoting supporting verses from poetry.

This story has been generally accepted by scholars such as Abu al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Mubarrid (d. 285), Ibn Ḥajar al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Asqalānī, al-Suyūṭī, Fuad Sezgin, and modern Egyptian scholar Aishah Abd al-Rahman bint al-Shati. The latter read the different manuscripts of *Masā'il* and compared them. While recognizing the problems involved in the text and its *isnād* (chain of transmission), she nevertheless seems to be convinced that the text is genuinely from Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās. According to al-Shati: “Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās’s answers (to Ibn al-Azraq) were presented in the linguistic exegetical literature and in the comprehensive works on the Qur’anic sciences.” She concluded her studies with the following note: “The purpose of presenting *Masā'il ibn al-Azraq* [*Masā'il Nāfi*<sup>ʿ</sup>] here, as I mentioned previously, is to address the issue of the Qur’anic miraculous inimitability through the narration of Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās’s interpretation of the Qur’anic words in *Masā'il ibn al-Azraq*.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, Western scholars such as Goldziher, Wansbrough and Andrew Rippin considered the *Masā'il* to be legend or fabrication. Goldziher, who does not present critical analysis to support his rejection, nevertheless describes the *Masā'il* as “ein lehreiche legende angesetzt” (a scholarly legend).<sup>68</sup> Wansbrough believed the *Masā'il* to be a skilful forgery attributed to Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās. In support of this contention he consulted certain Islamic sources, such as *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, and *al-Itqān*, finding in doing so that poetry was only occasionally cited for lexical explanation. In al-Bukhārī’s *Masā'il* only one line of poetry was cited in connection with the Qur’anic description (9:114) of Prophet Ibrahīm as “*la-awwāh*” (tender-hearted). In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, a single verse was adduced, Qur’anic verse 7:31, and in *al-Tirmidhī*, none in an exegetical sense. He concluded that *Masā'il* exhibits an exegetical method considerably inferior to Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās’s standard.<sup>69</sup> As for Rippin, he relied on Wansbrough’s conclusion and declared *Masā'il* a fiction designed to lend the so-called Ibn <sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās *tafsīr* more credence.<sup>70</sup>

And he is not alone. In his *Gharīb al-Qur'ān li Ibn 'Abbās: Dirāsah Ijtima'iyah lughawiyyah*, Tahir al-Mannai Muhammad Rashad al-Hamzawi also declared *Masā'il* to be a fabrication and even doubted that Ibn 'Abbās and Nāfi' had ever met.

There is further argument to support the issue of fabrication. Al-Mubarrid notes that Nāfi' allegedly questioned Ibn 'Abbās at length, until his patience ran out. At this point, the famous poet 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah arrives, greets Ibn 'Abbās and sits down. Ibn 'Abbās asks Ibn Abī Rabī'ah to recite some of his poems. He recites about eighty verses. Nāfi' listening angrily suddenly exclaims: "Oh God. O, Ibn 'Abbās, we came from a distance to ask you about Islam and you turn your face away listening to foolishness from this young Qurayshī?" Ibn 'Abbās replies "By God, I have not listened to foolishness." Nāfi' responds: "Did he ('Umar) not say: '*ra'at rajulan amma idhā al-shams 'āraḍat fa yadhā wa amma bi al-ashiy fa yakhsar*' (she saw a man, when the sun appears he becomes ignominious and as for at night he suffers from the cold and it pains)?" Ibn 'Abbās replies: "No he did not say *fa-yakhzā* (to abash), but he said, *fa yad-hā wa bi al-ashiy fa yakhsar*". At this point Nāfi' asks in amazement: "Did you memorize all of the verses?" "Yes," answers Ibn 'Abbās adding, and "If you would like to hear all of them I will recite them." When Nāfi' replies he would Ibn 'Abbās recites all the eighty verses.<sup>71</sup>

One has a right to be sceptical, for the number of the questions involved, two hundred, and the manner in which Nāfi' is asked throws into question the entire credibility of the story. We could only take it seriously if: a) Nāfi' had been well versed in *tafsīr* and the Arabic language; b) had memorized the whole Qur'an or a large portion of it; c) had in advance prepared for the two hundred questions; and d) had a strong memory, which he did not because he misquoted 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah's last verses mentioned above.

Furthermore, al-Mubarrid mentions that Nāfi' plagiarized the two hundred verses of Ibn 'Abbās's *istishhādāt* (to quote a word or a text for supporting something). Meaning that, if what al-Mubarrid

claims is true, then Nāfi<sup>c</sup> must have memorized all the two hundred verses at the time Ibn <sup>c</sup>Abbās recited them, since it is known he (Nāfi<sup>c</sup>) did not write them down. Now, if Nāfi<sup>c</sup> could not memorize properly <sup>c</sup>Umar ibn Abī Rabī<sup>c</sup>ah's eighty verses, as mentioned above, how could he have memorized these two hundred verses? Hence, we are inclined to doubt the authenticity of the story and are forced to conclude that the *Masā'il* seems to be fiction designed to give more credence to Ibn <sup>c</sup>Abbās's exegesis.

We now present some of Ibn <sup>c</sup>Abbās's exegesis as documented in some major *tafsīr* and hadith works.

In *Fatḥh al-Bārī*, there is an account of a man<sup>72</sup> once appearing before Ibn <sup>c</sup>Abbās and putting forward to him the following: "I find in the Qur'an certain things which seem to me contradictory. For example, Allah says in verse 23:101: 'Then, when the trumpet [of resurrection] is blown, no ties of kinship will on that Day prevail among them, and neither will they ask about one another.' Yet, Allah says in verse 37:27: 'but [since it will be too late,] they will turn upon one another, demanding of each other [to relieve them of the burden of their past sins].' Similarly, in verse 4:42, Allah says: 'Those who were bent on denying the truth and paid no heed to the Apostle will on that Day wish that the earth would swallow them: but they shall not [be able to] conceal from God anything that has happened.' Yet again, we read in verse 6:23: 'Whereupon, in their utter confusion, they will only [be able to] say: "By God, our Sustainer, we did not [mean to] ascribe divinity to aught beside Him!"' According to this verse, the idolaters will hide some facts. Moreover, in verse 79:27: '[O Men!] Are you more difficult to create than the heaven which He has built?' God mentions the creation of the heavens before the creation of the earth. Furthermore He says in verse 41:9-10: 'Say: Is it that ye deny Him Who created the earth in two Days? And do ye join equals with Him? He is the Lord of (all) the Worlds. He set on the (earth), mountains standing firm, high above it, and bestowed blessings on the earth, and measure therein all things to give them

nourishment in due proportion, in four Days, in accordance with (the needs of) those who seek (Sustenance).’ He mentions in this verse the creation of the earth before the sky. Meanwhile, He says in verse 4:56: ‘Verily, God is Almighty, All-Wise,’ while in verse 4:23, He says, ‘for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful,’ and in verse 4:58, ‘verily, God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.’ It seems to me that the meaning is Allah was Oft-Forgiving and not any more.”

The man then asks Ibn ‘Abbās to clarify his confusion. Ibn ‘Abbās answers him thus: “As for verse 23:101 (‘Then, when the trumpet [of resurrection] is blown, no ties of kinship will on that Day prevail among them...’), this will occur on the first blowing of the trumpet. The trumpet will be blown where upon all that is in the heavens and in the earth will swoon except those whom Allah will exempt. Then there will be no relationship between them, and at that time no one will ask one another questions. Then, when the trumpet is blown for the second time, they will turn to one another and ask questions. Concerning the statement that they never worshipped other deities besides Allah, and that they can hide no facts from Allah, Allah will forgive the sins of those who were sincere in their worship. As for the pagans, they will say (to each other) ‘come, let’s say we never worshipped other deities besides Allah,’ but their mouths will be sealed and their hands will speak (the truth). At that time, it will be evident that no speech can be concealed from Allah and those who disbelieved (and disobeyed the Apostle) will wish that they were level to the ground, for they will not be able to hide facts from Allah. Concerning the idea that Allah created the earth in two days, and that He spread it (the earth), the spreading here means the bringing of water and pasture out of it. (Note this refers to verse 79:30: “And after that, the earth: wide has He spread its expanse”). He then created the mountains, the camels and the hills, and whatever is between them. Hence, (the earth and the heaven) came in two (other) days. Ibn ‘Abbās states that the meaning of Allah’s saying “He spread its expanse” and His saying “And He created the earth in two days” is

that, earth and whatever is in it was created in two days. As regards His saying Allah was Oft-Forgiving, this is how Allah refers to Himself, but the contents of His saying is still valid; for if Allah ever wants to do something, He surely fulfills what He wants. So you should not see any contradiction in the Qur'an for all of it is from Allah.”<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, according to al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ʿAbbās once wrote to a Jewish convert to Islam known as Abū Jallād, asking him about the tree mentioned in verse 2:35: “And We said: ‘O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in this garden, and eat freely thereof, both of you, whatever you may wish; but do not approach this one tree, lest you become wrongdoers’.” Abū Jallād wrote back to Ibn ʿAbbās claiming the tree is an ear of corn “*sunbulah*.” Ibn ʿAbbās also used to ask Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, a Jewish convert, about some meanings of the Qur'an, for example he asked him concerning the meaning of *Umm al-Kitāb* (The Mother of the Book) and *al-Marjān* (Coral).<sup>74</sup>

Using the sources of the People of the Book in explaining some Islamic concepts in general and *tafsīr* in particular is allowed in Islam. Indeed, reference to Jewish and Christian sources can be made based on the following hadith: “*balligū ʿannī wa law āyah, wa ḥaddithū ʿan banī Isrāʾīl wa la ḥaraj*”<sup>75</sup> (Transmit to others what you know or hear from me, even though it is only a word, and there is no harm in quoting from *banī Isrāʾīl*). *Banī Isrāʾīl* in the hadith refers to both Jews and Christians who are Qur'anically speaking called *Ahl al-Kitāb* (the People of Book). It is obvious that the hadith allows Muslims to quote from the People of the Book.

This permission is believed to be given for two reasons. The first is that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share some fundamental beliefs such as belief in God, the prophets and the day of judgment Heaven as well as other things. The second is that during his lifetime, the Prophet did agree with some of what the people of the book quoted from their scriptures. For example, in *Fathī al-Bārī* we read that, “A Jewish Rabbi came to the Prophet of God and said: ‘O, Muhammad!

We find that in (the Torah) God will put all the Heavens on one finger and the earth on one finger, and the trees on one finger, and the water and the dust on one finger, and all the other created beings on one finger. Then He will say “I am the King.” Thereupon the Prophet smiled so that his premolar teeth became visible. Then the Prophet recited the verse: (No just estimate have they made of God such as is due to Him, 39:67).<sup>76</sup>

In *Sunan al-Nasā'i*, a Jewish man is reported to have approached Prophet Muhammad accusing certain Muslims of *shirk* (polytheism) for stating “*māshā' Allāh wa shi'ta*” (How wonderful that Allah and you (Muhammad) have willed it). Upon hearing this, the Prophet instructed the Companions to say “*māshā' Allāh thumma shi'ta*.” The point being made by the Jewish man was that the letter (*wāw*) in the phrase *māshā' Allāh wa shi'ta*, is a coordinating conjunction used to indicate the involvement of more than one party in an action, without necessarily determining which of the parties does the action first. Thus, to say *māshā' Allāh wa shi'ta* might mean or be understood as the will of the Prophet being able to possibly come even before the will of God. This contradicts the Islamic concept of *tawhīd* as in verse 76:30 which states: “But ye will not, except as Allah wills; for Allah is full of Knowledge and Wisdom”, meaning that God wills first before anyone else. Thus, to avoid the misconception which the letter *wāw* could lead to, the Prophet commanded the Companions to replace the *wāw* with *thumma* (then), which shows the chronology of the action taking place between two parties, with the action mentioned before *thumma* occurring first, and the verb or name mentioned after *thumma* occurring later. Thus, the phrase *māshā' Allāh wa shi'ta* is rephrased as “*māshā' Allāh thumma shi'ta*” (God willed, then you willed).<sup>77</sup>

### *Differences in the Companions' Qur'anic Interpretations*

Having presented the interpretation of the most prominent exegetes among the *Ṣaḥābah*, it is worth pointing out that the *Ṣaḥābah's*

understanding of the Qur'an and its interpretation differed in some cases, mainly pertaining to juridical, theological, historical, and linguistic issues. Ibn Taymiyyah who viewed the Companions' differences to be those of variation rather than contradiction categorised them as broadly of two kinds: expression and illustration.

Expression means to express an idea in different words but the ultimate meaning is one. For example Ibn 'Abbās interpreted the Qur'anic phrase "*al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*" (the straight path) as the religion of God, whilst Ibn Mas'ūd interpreted it as the Book of God. Each of these two prominent exegetes are seen to ascribe to the phrase two different meanings, but they mean or imply one thing, this is because both the religion of God and the Book of God are called the straight path.<sup>78</sup>

Illustration can be seen in the Companions' explaining a general term of the Qur'an, by reference to another general term to draw audience's attention to the original term instead of giving a definition in terms of its genus and difference. For example verse 35:32 states:

Then We have given the Book for inheritance to such of Our Servants as We have chosen: but there are among them some who wrong their own souls; some who follow a middle course; and some who are, by Allah's leave, foremost [*sābiq*] in good deeds; that is the highest Grace.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah previous generations explained this verse with reference to one or more acts of obedience to God. Some stated the *sābiq* to be one who offers prayers at the earliest prescribed time, the *muqtaṣid* as the one offering prayers late but on time, and the *zālim* as one who deferred, for instance the evening prayer till the sun begins to set. Others referred to the *sābiq* as a generous person giving money in charity over and above meeting their obligation, the *zālim* as the one taking usury or failing to pay the zakah, and the *muqtaṣid* as the one who pays zakah and who refrains from taking usury, and so on.<sup>79</sup>

We next examine the Companions' differences in four areas: fiqh, theology, Qur'anic historical personalities, and linguistics, to see whether Ibn Taymiyyah's claim holds.

### *Fiqh*

This refers to those verses in which the Companions differed in interpretation due to either their individual understanding of a given verse or to lack of knowledge of the Prophet's hadith on a particular issue. For instance, God states in verse 5:5:

Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime is lawful to you, [14] and your food is lawful to them. And [lawful to you are], in wedlock, women from among those who believe [in this divine writ], and, in wedlock, women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time...

Based on this verse almost all the Companions declared the permissibility of marriage between Muslim men and Jewish or Christian women. 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar, however, held a different opinion. Quoting verse 2:221, "Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe" (become Muslim), he pointed out that, "God has forbidden Muslims to marry idolaters, I do not know anything greater than *shirk* and there is no sin greater than to say Jesus is my Lord."<sup>80</sup>

Another example concerns the prescribed waiting period of a pregnant widow or a divorcee before she is allowed to re-marry. This is known as *'iddah* in respect of which verse 65:4 stipulates: "and as for those who are with child, the end of their waiting-term (*'iddah*) [in case of divorce] shall come when they deliver their burden."

'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd understood the verse in its general sense, aware of the hadith concerning Subay'ah al-Aslamiyyah, the wife of Sa'd ibn Khawlah, who was pregnant when her husband died.

Immediately after she had given birth, the Prophet informed her that her *‘iddah* had been ended by the delivery. Thus, aware of this hadith, Ibn Mas‘ūd declared the *‘iddah* of a pregnant widow/divorcee as terminated with the delivery of the child. On the other hand both, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Ibn ‘Abbās viewed the *‘iddah* as being the longer of the ‘two *‘iddahs*.’ What is meant by the ‘two’ *‘iddahs*? According to Islamic Law, when a husband dies, his widow has to observe an *‘iddah* period of four months and ten days. Thereafter, she can marry whomever she wishes. The reference for this law is verse 2:234 which reads: “And if any of you die and leave wives behind, they shall undergo, without remarrying, a waiting-period of four months and ten days.”

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Ibn ‘Abbās combined the above verse and verse 65:4 which enjoins:

Now as for such of your women as are beyond, the age of monthly courses, as well as for such as do not have any courses, their waiting-period - if you have any doubt [about it] - shall be three [calendar] months; and as for those who are with child, the end of their waiting-term shall come when they deliver their burden.

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Ibn ‘Abbās inferred from both verses that the *‘iddah* of an eight-month pregnant widow is four months and ten days. If a widow is two months pregnant, the *‘iddah* is seven months. This is what ‘Alī and Ibn ‘Abbās referred to as *ab‘ad al-ajalayn* (the longest period of the *‘iddahs*).

### *Qur’anic Historical Personages and Places*

The Companions also differed concerning the exact historical personages and places mentioned in certain Qur’anic verses. For example, verse 37:102 states:

Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him,

he (prophet Abraham) said: “O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!” (The son) said: “O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou will find me, if Allah so wills one practising Patience and Constancy!”

Which son had God commanded the prophet Abraham to sacrifice? Ismā‘īl or Ishāq? According to Ibn Kathīr some of the Companions, including Ibn ‘Abbās, considered this to be Ishāq, while ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and others believed the son to be Ismā‘īl.<sup>81</sup>

Verse 9:108 illustrates another example of differing interpretation: “Never stand thou forth therein. There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety...” Which Mosque was this? Where was it located? ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, Zayd ibn Thābit and others believed this to be the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah, whereas Ibn ‘Abbās and others believe it to be the Qubā’ Mosque,<sup>82</sup> which the Prophet built upon his arrival in Qubā’.

### *Theology*

The Companions held varying theological views on certain subjects when not aware of a particular or explicit Prophetic hadith relating to it. Thus, each one would depend on his own understanding of a verse in question. For example, verse 17:1 states: “Glory to Him (Allah) Who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless.”

The Companions differed as to how this journey took place. Did the Prophet travel physically or was it only his soul (*nūh*)? Ibn ‘Abbās, Anas ibn Mālik and others, who had knowledge of the hadith in this regard, believed the Prophet to have travelled physically, whilst ‘Ā’ishah, the wife of the Prophet and Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān believed it to be his soul.<sup>83</sup> Another example is shown by verse 53:7-9: “appearing in the horizon’s loftiest part, and then drew near, and came close, until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer.”

Ibn Mas'ūd and 'Ā'ishah relate that, “the verse refers to the Angel Gabriel in the highest of the horizon and that he came closer to a distance of two bow-lengths or nearer to the Prophet. Thus, did God convey the revelation to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel.” Ibn 'Abbās, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the verse refers to the Prophet coming closer to his Lord by a distance of two bow-lengths or nearer, and that he saw his Lord by his heart, and not with his eyes.<sup>84</sup>

### *Linguistics*

Another factor that influenced the way the Companions interpreted certain Qur'anic passages was the respective dialects of their Arabic language. It is interesting to note the different interpretations ascribed. For instance, in verse 77:1, the term *al-murasalāt* (the ones sent forth) is explained by Abū Hurayrah to mean angels, while Ibn Mas'ūd interprets it as referring to the winds.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, in verse 85:3, the words *shāhid* and *mashhūd* (the witness and the subject of the witness), were interpreted by Abū Hurayrah to mean respectively ‘Friday’ and ‘the day of ‘*Arafāt*’ during Hajj,<sup>86</sup> whilst Ibn 'Abbās interpreted *shāhid* to mean the Prophet Muhammad and *mashhūd* as the day of judgment. In this respect, al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, the grandson of the Prophet, supported his uncle Ibn 'Abbās's view, backing his opinion with verse 4:41 which reads: “How, then, [will the sinners fare on Judgment Day,] when We shall bring forward witnesses from within every community, and bring thee [O Prophet] as witness against them?” The point made by al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī was that in this verse, the Qur'an clearly describes the Prophet as a *shāhid* (a witness), thus, *shāhid* in the aforementioned verse refers to the Prophet.<sup>87</sup>

Again with regard to the term *al-‘ādiyāt* in verse 100:1, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib interprets it as referring to ‘camels’, while Ibn 'Abbās interprets it as pertaining to ‘horses.’<sup>88</sup> As regards the Qur'anic words “*wa al-shaf' wa al-watr*” (“By the even and odd (contrasted)”) in verse

89:3, both Abū Hurayrah and Ibn ʿAbbās interpret *al-shafʿ* as being the first day of ʿīd al-adḥā and *al-watr* as referring to the day of ʿarafāt. Another report by Ibn Kathīr states that Ibn ʿAbbās interpreted *al-watr* as Allah (God) and *al-shafʿ* as mankind.<sup>89</sup>

Some of these examples of exegetical differences amongst the Companions are irreconcilable. Thus, the argument which claims the differing interpretations of the Companions in *tafsīr* to be merely those of variation rather than contradiction cannot be sustained.

Having presented the Companions' differing interpretations of the Qur'an with supporting examples, what follows next is an overview of their sources and methodology.

### *Principle Characteristics of the Companions' Tafsīr, Sources, and Methodology*

The sources we have consulted with regards to the exegesis of the Companions reveal that in reality they did not interpret the whole Qur'an. The Prophet himself did not explain the whole Qur'an before his death. They exercised their own judgment with regards to further interpretation on the basis that the Qur'an itself encourages Muslims to ponder over its meanings. Thus, the Companions embarked on explaining many verses that included judicial, theological, linguistic and historical considerations, making use of the following six resources in their exegesis:

- 1) They sometimes used Qur'anic verses to explain other verses, as noted in ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib's *tafsīr*.
- 2) They occasionally referred to the hadith in support of their Qur'anic interpretation as in the example given in Abū Bakr's *tafsīr*.
- 3) They would sometimes quote the People of the Book, Jewish and Christian sources to support the meaning of some verses as noted in Ibn ʿAbbās's *tafsīr*.

- 4) They sometimes let the Qur'an explain itself in a process whereby verses are illustrated by other Qur'anic verses.
- 5) The Companions had recourse to linguistic skills, the circumstances of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as well as knowledge associated with pre-Islamic religious culture.
- 6) They occasionally resorted to poetry.

### Conclusion

Scholars are divided into two groups concerning the binding authority of the Companions' interpretation. Those who consider the *Ṣaḥābah's* exegesis to be binding include Imam Mālik, Aḥmad, Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn Qayyim. They based their argument mainly on the fact of the Companions' virtues and merits, for they were praised both in the Qur'an and in the hadith, and were witnesses of the Revelation. In addition, they had mastered the language of the Qur'an.

Among those who believed otherwise, that is the Companions' *tafsīr* is not binding, included al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ḥazm and Abū Ḥayyān. The focus of their argument rests on the practicality of the Companions' interpretation which contains irreconcilable contradictions in places. By this is meant that practically *speaking*, to accept as binding the *tafsīr* of the Companions, with their irreconcilable differences, would place the Muslims in a state of perplexity and confusion as such contradictions would necessarily have binding practical application in the various fields of the Muslims' life. Which binding proof should the Muslims accept? How can two binding proofs contradict one another?

See for example the issue of the *ʿiddah* of a pregnant widow discussed earlier. Consider also the example discussed of Qur'anic verse 37:102. Which son had God commanded the Prophet Abraham to sacrifice? Ismāʿīl or Ishāq? And finally there is the example of the miraculous night journey and the ascension of the Prophet

Muhammad. Was the Prophet's body and soul involved in this journey or was it only his soul?

In sum the Companions' interpretation is without doubt important in understanding the Qur'an and has unquestioned value and intrinsic merit given their proximity to the Prophet and knowledge of the Qur'an.