Tafsīr Based on Opinion
Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y

SUMMARY

This is Qur'anic exegesis based on hadith and reasoning (ijtihad) and is a highly contro-versial area of *tafsīr*. Arguments put forward by proponents and opponents of *al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y* are examined as well as to what extent it is permissible, and under what condi-tions it is acceptable, as a form of interpretation. *Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y* is divided into two categories each of which is closely analysed:

• *Al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* (praiseworthy *tafsīr*) defined as interpretation by inde-pendent opinion which does not conflict with the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'an, or an established principle of Islam, and conforms with the Arabic language.
• *Al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm* (blameworthy *tafsīr*) criticized as it does not consult properly authentic sources and defined as exegesis undertaken without proper knowl-edge of the sources of *tafsīr*, the Sharicah, and sound knowledge of Arabic.

Terms and Definitions

ACCORDING TO ARABIC LEXICONS the word *ra'y* is a verbal noun. It has a variety of meanings, rendered as to see with eyes, with the mind, to reflect, to suppose.[1] According to Muslim grammarians and linguists such as Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī and Ibn Mālik, the word *ra'ā* is derived from *ra'y*, and is a transitive verb which takes one or two direct objects. If referring to one direct object, it means to see with the eyes, i.e. *ra'aytu Zayd* meaning "I saw Zayd" (literally) with (my) eyes. If referring two direct objects it means to see with the mind or to suppose,[2] i.e. *ra'aytu Allāh Akbar min kulli shay'*, meaning literally I saw God greater than everything, or I believed that God is greater than everything, the verb *ra'ā* here meaning to believe because it takes two direct objects.

In the Qur'an, we find the term *ra'y* used in different forms (past, present, and as verbal noun) to denote the same lexical sense. For example, in verse 6:76, "When the night covered him over, he saw a star," the term *ra'ā* (he saw) is used to mean sighting with the eye.[3] Elsewhere in verse 8:48 we read, "lo! I see what ye see not," with *ra'y* used here to mean seen through the eyes. In the Prophetic hadith we find that *ra'y* is used in two senses; one as personal opinion, and two, as an equivalent to ijtihad (self exertion). With reference to the former we have a report from Ibn Isḥāq (d. 213 or 218) in which he states concerning the battle of Badr[4] that the Prophet assigned the Companions to camp at a specific place before the battle. Ḥabbāb ibn al-Mundhir asks the Prophet whether Allah inspired him to camp there or was it "just *ra'y* and a war stratagem and matter of consultation?" The Prophet replies that it was *ra'y* and a war strategem.[5]

With reference to *ra'y* used in hadith in the second sense we have the well-known narration of Muʿādh ibn Jabal. This being that when the Prophet delegated him to Yemen to invite people to Islam he asked Muʿadh, "By what would you judge people?" Muʿadh replies, "By the book of God." And if he found no answer therein questions the Prophet? "I will consult the Prophet's tradition" And if he still found no answer, then? "I will exert my mind (*ajtahid bi ra'yi*)" Muʿadh responds.[6] Using personal opinion is used here in conjunction with ijtihad.

At the time of the Companions, the term *ra'y* was also used with reference to two different meanings. First, as an independent personal opinion in the absence of a clear indication from the Qur'an or the Prophet's tradition. Second, as an equivalent to *qiyās* (analogical deduction). In his *Iʿlām al-Muwaqqiʿīn,* Ibn Qayyim reports ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd as stating: "If a legal issue is brought before you, and you do not find answers for it in the book of God, in the tradition of the Prophet, or in the statements of his Companions, then use your own personal opinion."[7]

A similar statement has been attributed to ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. In his letter containing instructions to Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, ʿUmar advises: "When a case is presented before you and you find no clear answer to it from the Qur'an, or the tradition of the Prophet, then use your mind and analogy and weigh the case against them."[8] In this statement, *ra'y* is used as equivalent to *qiyās*.

During the era of the *Tābiʿūn*, the emergence of various politico-theological groups in Islam led to the term *ra'y* beginning to connote exegesis that was sectarian or *bidʿah*. Hence, exegesis *bi al-ra'y* eventually came to denote Qur'anic interpretation that had no basis in the tradition of the Prophet or his Companions. Thus, *ra'y* became a term of disparagement in relation to exegesis. For example, we have the case of a man once accusing Mujāhid of using *ra'y* in interpreting the Qur'an, with Mujāhid rejecting the accusation and literally crying stating: "I would not dare do that; I have learned Qur'anic exegesis from about nineteen Companions of the Prophet."[9]

ʿUbayd Allāh, a grandson of ʿUmar ibn-Khaṭṭāb, was once asked as to his opinion concerning Zayd ibn Aslam (an outstanding successor exegete of Madinah). He replies, "I do not find anything wrong with him, except that he interprets the Qur'an using his own personal opinion."[10] ʿIkrimah al-Barbarī and al-Daḥḥāk ibn Muzāḥim, were both accused by al-Naẓẓām ibn Yassār (d.450) (an outstanding Muʿtazilite) of using *ra'y*. In leveling this charge, Ibn Yassār kept warning people against their exegeses.[11] Qatādah ibn Duʿāmah and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, were also both accused of using *ra'y* to support the Qadarites' perspectives (the notion that man is responsible for his bad actions, not God).[12]

During this period, the phrase *fulān min ahl al-Ra'y* "so and so belongs to the people who use *al-ra'y*," was used to depict anyone believing in the Kharijites' doctrine[13] (a sect holding that anyone who commits a grave sin is neither a Muslim nor a *kāfir*, even though his doctrine was professed only by the radical wing of the Kharijites). Despite these aforementioned meanings, generally speaking, the

term *ra'y* had been used to mean ijtihad, personal opinion, *qiyās* and belief (*I'tiqād*). Having stated the meanings of *ra'y*, literally and rationally, we next define the term *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* technically.

Al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y is used to denote exegesis of the Qur'anic text which does not depend on a Hadith, but uses the intellect (exerting the mind) to understand the word of God based on sound knowledge of the Arabic language and implementation of the principles of *tafsīr*.[14] Any Qur'anic exegesis that conforms to this definition is said to be *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd* or *al-Mamdūḥ,* i.e., 'praiseworthy exegesis'. However, any Qur'anic exegesis that does not conform to this definition is technically called *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm* 'blameworthy exegesis'.[15] Thus, *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm,* is defined as exegesis undertaken without proper knowledge of the sources of *tafsīr*, the Shari'ah, and sound knowledge of Arabic. Thus, Islamically speaking, *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* is divided into two categories: *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd* and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm*.

Generally speaking, the former is accepted by the majority of the Sunni traditionalists, jurists, prominent theologians and Sufis, whilst the latter is rejected by all those Sunni traditionalists, jurists and theologians.[16] Before discussing the principles upon which the Sunni scholars base their rejection of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm*, it might be useful to examine the view of three prominent scholars who have elaborated on the issue: al–Ṭabarī, al–Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyyah.

Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī

In his *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, al–Ṭabarī states that the interpretation of the Qur'an can only be attained through four ways. First, there are some verses that can be understood only through the explanation given by the Prophet. This pertains to the ritual aspects of Islam, such as how to perform the prayer (salah), pilgrimage (hajj), etc. and other rituals. Second, the interpretation of some verses whose understanding God has preserved for Himself. This for al–Ṭabarī alludes to information concerning matters of the *ghayb* (unseen) i.e. future dates and times,

such as the hour of resurrection, when Jesus will return etc. Third, understanding verses for which ignorance is not allowed or excused. This applies to very clear verses, such as for example, Qur'anic verse 2:11 which states: "When it is said to them: 'Make not mischief on the earth,' they say: 'Why, we only Want to make peace!'" For al-Ṭabarī the meaning of this verse is crystal clear, since everyone knows what making mischief means.

The fourth is interpretation of some verses which only require scholarly knowledge.[17] In the light of this it is obvious that al-Ṭabarī held that only two types of Qur'anic interpretation can be used by one who speaks or understands Arabic (that is the linguistic meaning of Qur'anic words). Another type to interpret is comprehended by scholars only. Thus, al-Ṭabarī concluded that any attempt to interpret the meaning of verses that are the sole prerogative of Allah is wrong and censurable, because such interpretation would be nothing more than guess and surmise. Hence, Allah forbade His servants to do such a thing (allege things without supporting evidence), as we see in verse 7:33:

> Say: "Verily, my Sustainer has forbidden only shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and [every kind of] sinning, and unjustified envy, and the ascribing of divinity to aught beside Him - since He has never bestowed any warrant therefor from on high and the attributing unto God of aught of which you have no knowledge."

Since there are some verses that cannot be understood without explanation of the Prophet, then any effort to interpret such verses, according to al-Ṭabarī, is blameworthy. Again, al-Ṭabarī holds that, any interpretation which disagrees with the interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, the Successors, or is not attained from sound Arabic language is blameworthy.[18]

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

Being a theologian Sufi, al-Ghazālī believed the Qur'an to contain hidden meanings which could be misunderstood if one relied solely on the literal Arabic (apparent meaning "*ẓāhir*"). Yet anyone not understanding the literal Arabic would be using personal opinion in attempting to explain the hidden meanings. Hence, he argued, hadith is necessary to understand and explain the literal and actual meaning of the Qur'an. Proper and thorough interpretation of the hidden meanings can begin only when the *ẓāhir* (literal/apparent) meaning has been properly understood with the aid of hadith.[19]

This statement indicates that whilst al-Ghazālī accepted interpretation of the Qur'an by *al-ra'y* he admitted only *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd*. As for *tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm*, al-Ghazālī viewed it as interpretation of the Qur'an according to personal opinion in order that one may adduce an argument in favor of one's particular purpose. If this opinion did not exist in the interpreter's mind in the first place, then the meaning he sought to accredit would not appear to him from the Qur'an. More interestingly, al-Ghazālī actually explains three ways in which this can occur:

1. Sometimes it is a deliberate act despite knowledge. For instance in the case of one who derives a meaning from a certain verse for the purposes of advocating and sanctioning a *bidʿah*, knowing very well that this is not the intended meaning of the verse.

2. Sometimes this occurs when a person is ignorant of the basic principles of the Shariʿah. So, for example where a Qur'anic verse can be interpreted from two or more perspectives, his understanding may incline to that perspective which suits his purpose.[20] Therefore, it turns out that, he explains the verse in terms of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm*. If either his personal opinion or the perspective which suits his purpose did not exist, then any other perspective would not carry much weight with him.

3. Sometimes an individual might have a valid purpose for which he seeks supporting evidence in the Qur'an, using a verse to derive that proof, whilst knowing that his own purpose is not intended within it. Al-Ghazālī gives as example verse 79:17: "Go unto Pharaoh - for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of what is right." Al-Ghazālī rejects the claim made by some that Moses was ordered to "go to the heart of the Pharaoh." Such an interpretation, he declares is sometimes used by certain religious preachers for good purpose as embellishment to their sermons and to motivate their audience, but this is forbidden. He goes on to point out that certain sects, mainly the *bāṭinis* (a sect of the Shia) employed this kind of interpretation for corrupt purposes, in order to deceive people and draw them into a false way of thought and practice; twisting the meaning of the Qur'an to support their corrupt thinking, even though they knew better.[21]

Abū al-ʿAbbās ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah

Ibn Taymiyyah was one of the leading figures of the *salafiyyah* (a group of Muslims who believe in following the Qur'an and the Sunnah in the same manner as the Companions of the Prophet and the faithful Muslims of the two succeeding generations.

Thus, he openly and emphatically declared: "Whoever adopts a different method to that of the Companions and the Successors in interpreting the Qur'an, or differs with them, even if he is a *mujtahid* (a person who qualifies to deduce a sound judgment from the Qur'an and Sunnah), is absolutely wrong in his interpretation; moreover, he is a *mubtadiʿ*."[22] This strong statement appears to suggest that Ibn Taymiyyah rejected all types of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* whether it is *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd* (praiseworthy personal interpretation) or *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm* (blameworthy interpretation). Reading his *Muqaddimah*, however, indicates that he in fact seems to accept *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd*.

Ibn Taymiyyah considered *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm* to be a flawed interpretation of the Qur'an containing two kinds of errors: error pertaining to meaning and error pertaining to words. Error in meaning (as al-Ghazālī also pointed out) concerns an interpreter having a particular dogma in mind, and then trying to find justification for it in the Qur'an by twisting the meaning of to suit his particular purpose, whilst aware that the real meaning of the verse is not applicable or suitable to the task. As for the error in words this arises through dependence on the literal meaning without considering the meaning intended by God. Thus, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, advocates of the first category approach were wrong in both word and meaning, whilst the second approach was wrong only in the focus on word-oriented interpretations.[23]

Under the first category, Ibn Taymiyyah listed the Kharijites,[24] the Rafidites,[25] the Jahmites,[26] the Muʿtazilites,[27] the Qadarites,[28] and the Murji'ites.[29] The exegeses of all these parties or sects were considered by Ibn Taymiyyah to be *bidʿah* as well as *al-tafsīr bi a-ra'y al-Madhmūm*. Under the second category, Ibn Taymiyyah mentioned the exegeses of many Sufis, preachers, and jurists.

For example the Rafidites with reference to verse 2:67: "And Lo! Moses said unto his people: 'Behold, God bids you to sacrifice a cow'" stated that the cow was none other than a human being, and in fact ʿĀ'ishah, the wife of the Prophet! Another example relates to their explanation of verse 55:19: "He has let free the two bodies of flowing water [also translated as 'seas'], meeting together." The Radifites claimed the two seas referred to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (the Prophet's cousin) and Faṭimah (the Prophet's daughter). Such interpretation has been rejected by all Sunni traditionists, jurists, theologians and moderate Sufis.[30]

In sum, these three prominent scholars rejected *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Madhmūm* because it a) exacerbated *bidʿah*, b) disagreed with the interpretations of the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors, and c) adhered neither to the principles of the Arabic language nor to those of the Shariʿah.

Having said this, examined next is the position of the majority of scholars in regard to the legality of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd*. Are they unanimous on its legality or not?

The Question of the Legality of
Al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y al-Maḥmūd

The debate as to the legality of Qur'anic exegesis based on *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (independent opinion) is theological in nature, and the outcome of a political and intellectual conflict that took place early in Islamic history, following the assassination of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (d. 35 AH).

The Prophet Muhammad died without appointing a successor. As a result the question of who was to succeed him boded potential division in the fledgling Muslim community, until following contentious debate the matter ended amicably with Abū Bakr ibn Abī Quḥafah (d. 13 AH) appointed as the first Caliph. Two years and a few months later, Abū Bakr died, but not before appointing, on his death bed, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as the second Caliph. Following a ten year rule, ʿUmar died and ʿUthmān was chosen as the third Caliph. After twelve years of ʿUthmān's leadership, Islamic unity began to falter. Subsequently, ʿUthmān was assassinated after thirteen years of rule.

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib then became the fourth Caliph by unanimous agreement of all the Muslim governors except Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 60 AH), the Governor of Syria. He disagreed with ʿAlī on how to deal with ʿUthmān's assassins, which led to the political struggle between them. Thenceforth Islamic unity began to fragment and the Muslim states were shaken by political unrest. As a result, Muslims became divided into four major groups. The Alids, (supporters of ʿAlī), the pro-Umayyads (supporters of Muʿāwiyah), the Kharijites, and finally the *Shukkāk* (doubters) as Ibn ʿAsākir called them[31] because they did not take any side in the politico-religious tussle. The most popular being: the Sunnis, the Shias, the Murji'ites,

the Jabirites, the Qadirites, and the Muʿtazilites. Subsequently, many different sects evolved from these groups with each group strongly advocating its dogma and philosophy using the Qur'an and Hadith to prove and justify its position. Note, incidentally these trends have been relentlessly confronted for their compromising of Islamic theology and the Prophet's practice by a group of Muslim traditionists, jurists, and theologians known as the *Salafīs* (following the *salaf*, that is predecessors). The *Salafīs* are also called *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* (those who adhere to the traditions of the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors).

To justify their positions, all the sects, including the Sunnis, have quoted both reliable and unreliable hadith sources, and presented weak arguments and far-fetched exegeses. For example, to justify their position with regard to the politico-religious conflict mentioned earlier, the Kharijites set forth the following hadith: "Carry your sword on your shoulders, and kill disbelievers;[32] and there will be a group of people who still adhere to the truth and without harm from anyone who disagrees with them."[33] Because the Kharijites considered themselves as the group adhering to the truth, they believed it their duty to kill anyone who became, according to their criteria, a disbeliever.

For their part the Shia stated the Prophet to have said: "A people will be prevented (on the Day of Judgment) from drinking from the river that God has blessed the Prophet with, and the Prophet will say: 'O God, they are my Companions.' God will say to the Prophet: 'You do not know what they did after your death.'"[34] The Shia believed these people to be the Sunnis for their betrayal of the Prophet in choosing Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān as Caliphs over ʿAlī.

On the other hand, the Sunnis quoted the Prophet reported as having said: "Follow Abū Bakr and ʿUmar after me, for God, His Prophet, and the Muslims will refuse (anyone to be a Caliph), but Abū Bakr, verily indeed, Abū Bakr is the best one of this community after the Prophet."[35]

Meanwhile, the Murji'ites cite a hadith which supposedly says: "Whoever has professed the declaration *lā ilāha illa Allāh* will enter paradise (Jannah) even if he has committed illegal sexual intercourse and stolen."[36]

Below are examples of some far-fetched Qur'anic interpretations the differing groups have mutually accused one another of using. According to the Rafidites verse 111:1: "Perish the hands of Abū Lahab! Perish he!" referred to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar.[37] Similarly, they claimed that in verse 78:1-2: "About what do they [most often] ask one another? About the Great News," ʿAlī was the Great News.[38] On the other hand, some Sunnis claimed that in verse 3:17: "Those who show patience, firmness and self-control; who are true (in word and deed); who worship devoutly; who spend (in the way of Allah; and who pray for forgiveness in the early hours of the morning" are respectively, in succession to the Prophet, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī.[39]

Certain Sunnis also claimed that concerning verse 48:29: "Muhammad is the apostle of Allah, and those who are with him are strong against Unbelievers, (but) compassionate amongst each other. Thou wilt see them bow and prostrate themselves (in prayer), seeking Grace from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure..." that the section "those who are with him" refers to Abū Bakr, "strong against Unbelievers" to ʿUmar, "compassionate amongst each other" to ʿUthmān, and "Thou wilt see them bow and prostrate themselves (in prayer)" to ʿAlī. Ibn Taymiyyah described such interpretations as nonsense (*khurāfat*).[40]

During a certain theological debate which took place between a Qadarite, a Jabarite, and a Sunni, the Qadarite quoted verse 4:79: "Whatever good, (O man!) happens to thee, is from Allah, but whatever evil happens to thee, is from thy (own) soul, and We have sent thee as an apostle to (instruct) mankind. And enough is Allah for a witness." The apparent meaning of the verse is that man is responsible for creating the evil (or calamities) that befall him. The Jabarite

opposed this view arguing that the phrase "from thy (own) soul" actually referred to a hidden interrogative sentence that implied a negation of this apparent meaning, further claiming the phrase should be read as "Is that from your self?" In which case the meaning then would be that both good and evil actions are from God.[41] In other words, man was not responsible for his actions, corroborating the Jabarite belief. Upon hearing this, the Sunni declared both notions wrong, citing the previous verse (4:78): "If some good befalls them, they say, 'This is from Allah'; but if evil, they say, 'This is from thee' (O Prophet). Say: 'All things are from Allah.'"

The difference between the Jabarites and the Sunnis on this issue is that Jabarites believe that man is not responsible for his actions, and therefore God will not punish someone who does not have a choice between doing good or bad.[42] The Sunnis believe that man has been given the choice to do both good and bad, but his choice is not absolute; if his choice were absolute, that would mean that God does not have absolute power.[43] The Sunnis, at other times, attributed all good – but not evil – to God, in order to preserve the idea of the goodness of God and on the other hand to make man a responsible being, particularly for his evil deeds.

Another instance of difference lies in the question of whether we can see God. According to the Muʿtazilite doctrine, God can never been seen with physical eyes, and they base this view on verse 6:103: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things." Sunnis, on the other hand, believe that God will eventually be seen, basing their view on verse 83:15 which affirms: "Verily, from (the Light of) their Lord, that Day, will they be veiled" referring to the evil doers. The Sunnis deduced from this that since evil doers will be veiled from seeing God, Muslims will not be veiled from seeing God. They further support this assumption with a hadith in which the Prophet clearly states that Muslims will see God as clearly as they see the full moon.[44]

Arguments Concerning *al-Ra'y*

These interpretations and arguments were partly the reason some Sunni scholars questioned the soundness and legality of using critical intellectual reasoning (*al-ra'y*) in *tafsīr*, whether *al-ra'y al-mamdūḥ* or *al-ra'y al-madhmūm*. This led a group of theologians and exegetes including al-Ṭabarī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn ʿAṭiyyah, al-Qurṭubī and others to come into conflict with those opponents of *al-ra'y* who differentiated between acceptable and unacceptable *ra'y* without rejecting it entirely.

Sources describing this conflict whilst advancing the arguments concerned did not mention the names of those rejecting *ra'y* in Qur'anic interpretation,[45] leaving us thus with indefinite terminology such as 'some people say', or 'those who reject *al-ra'y*, etc. This was presumably done for one of three reasons:

1. The opponents of *ra'y* were known at the time, so there was no need to mention their names
2. To avoid fermenting conflict between Sunni Muslims.
3. There were some prominent Successors who directly and indirectly rejected or expressed caution in regard to the use of *al-ra'y*. These included Sālim ibn ʿAbd Allāh, al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad, and Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib.

The latter is more likely the case because subsequent generations of Muslims in general gave weight to the opinion and attitude of the first and second generations because of the praise which the first received in the Qur'an and in hadith. Hence, given this omission in names, in examining the arguments put forward by opponents of *al-ra'y* in literature I will do so in general terms, except where reference is made to a specific individual, or where an individual is known for rejecting *ra'y* in his works, such as Ibn Ḥazm.

Arguments of the Opponents of al-Ra'y

Arguments by those opposing *al-ra'y* is discussed under the following four categories: Qur'an, Hadith, sayings of the *Ṣaḥābah*, and statements of the *Tābiʿūn*.

Qur'an

Reference is mainly made to three Qur'anic verses. The first is verse 4:59: "and if you are at variance over any matter, refer it unto God and the Apostle." Extrapolating from this to *al-Ra'y*, the implication is as there is difference of opinion the final judgment should be referred to God and His Prophet, which action, if not carried through, constitutes disobedience of a divine command. Thus, anyone else's opinion is rejected.[46]

The second is 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..." The point being that God has stated clearly that He has entrusted the Prophet only with the mission of explaining the Qur'anic text to mankind; thus, any attempt by anyone else to elucidate the Qur'an using his own opinion is unnecessary at best.

The third is verse 7:33 which addresses the Prophet: "Say: 'Verily, my Sustainer has forbidden only shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and [every kind of] sinning, and unjustified envy, and the ascribing of divinity to aught beside Him - since He has never bestowed any warrant therefor from on high and the attributing unto God of aught of which you have no knowledge." The verse makes clear that the stating of things concerning Allah without correct and necessary knowledge is a great a sin as the sins mentioned at the beginning of the verse. Any interpretation, therefore, without information from the Prophet is prohibited.[47]

Hadith

Three main hadiths are quoted. The first is the well-known hadith

narrated by Ibn ʿAbbās, which reports that the Prophet said: "Whoever explains the Qur'an according to his personal opinion, shall take his place in Hell." As the hadith does not differentiate between *al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd* and *al-ra'y al-madhmūm,* it is concluded by opponents of *al-Ra'y* that indulging in both (*al-ra'y al-Maḥmūd* and *al-ra'y al-madhmūm*) is a wrong practice.

The second hadith is on the authority of Jandub ibn ʿAbd Allāh, and indicates the Prophet to have said: "Whoever says anything about the Qur'an, by his own opinion, becomes a disbeliever." Al-Tirmidhī and others have declared the hadith unsound because of the lack of reliability of one of its narrators, Suhayl ibn Ḥazm. Both Imam Aḥmed and al-Bukhārī have also disregarded Suhayl's hadith report.[48]

The third hadith is from the wife of the Prophet who is quoted as having said that the Prophet did not use to comment on anything in the Qur'an except for a few verses, which the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) taught him.[49] The point being made that as the Prophet himself did not interpret the Qur'an using his own opinion and that it was rather the Angel Jibrīl who inspired him, who are we to then exercise *al-ra'y*?

Sayings of the Ṣaḥābah

When Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq was asked to explain the meaning of a specific word or words of the Qur'an, he expressed his fear to do so by saying: "What earth shall bear me, and what heaven shall shelter me if I speak what I do not know not concerning the Qur'an?"[50]

It is reported that ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb cited verse 80:31 ("and fruits and herbage (*abban*)") stating that: "We know what the term 'fruits' is, but what does '*abban*' mean?" adding: "It is unnecessary to know this, for otherwise it would become a constraint (*takalluf*)." Both statements illustrate the fact that Abū Bakr and ʿUmar refrained from exercising *ra'y* (their own opinion) because they knew this was prohibited.

Another example is that of Ibn ʿAbbās. He was once asked concerning the meaning of a Qur'anic verse but declined to comment on it. Now, as Muslims knew, or believed, that he had been given a special gift from God with regards to Qur'anic knowledge in answer to a prayer made for him by the Prophet, it was then assumed that his refusal to answer was due to him knowing that recourse to *ra'y* was prohibited.[51]

Statements of the Successors

ʿUbayd Allah ibn ʿUmar (d. 140 AH) stated that he found learned men in Madinah, including Sālim ibn ʿAbd Allāh, al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad and others, abstaining from making comments on the Qur'an using their own opinion.[52] Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib, was the most knowledgeable figure of his time, yet whenever his students asked him anything about the Qur'an he kept silent, as if he had not heard them and (sometimes) reply "we do not say anything about the Qur'an."[53]

Responses of the Proponents of al-Ra'y

Among the verses the proponents of *ra'y* have quoted in support of their argument is verse 4:59: "and if you are at variance over any matter, refer it unto God and the Apostle." Note, this is the same verse the opponents of *al-ra'y* cite in defense of their position. Al-Qurṭubī and others however did not accept it as a statement of proof against the prohibition of exegesis by *al-ra'y*. In their view, the verse actually limits Qur'anic interpretation, making exegesis subject to two conditions only: firstly interpretation is to be confined to the transmitted tradition (*al-naql*), and secondly interpretation is to take into account the principle of 'that which is heard' (*al-masmūʿ*) from the authority of "the Prophet Muhammad" and his Companions. They believed, therefore, that one must refrain from deducing or eliciting meanings from the Qur'an unless these two elements are observed lest the

meaning of the verse(s) be something other than what was heard from the authoritative sources. From this perspective other types of interpretation seem to be forbidden. Hence, al-Qurṭubī concluded that it is sufficient to use only the *tafsīr* from the tradition of the Prophet.

Furthermore, he argued that the Companions themselves used their own opinions in interpreting the Qur'anic text. Had that not been the case, the Prophet's prayer in favor of Ibn ʿAbbās "O God, grant him the knowledge of Islam and teach him the meaning of the Qur'an" would have served no purpose.[54]

On the other hand, al-Ghazālī seems to take a more critical stand vis-à-vis the notion of using *al-naql* and *al-masmūʿ* as the exclusive basis for interpretation. He states "…these were intended to confine the understanding of the Qur'an to the transmission of hadith and to that which is heard from the authorities. It is wrong however, to accept that the purpose was to limit our understanding of the Qur'an to the words of authorities."[55]

In respect to the second argument, the proponents of *ra'y*, including Ibn ʿAṭiyyah, al-Zarkashī, and others, argued that no one disputed the fact that the Prophet had been given the responsibility of explaining the Qur'an to mankind, but they point out his interpretation was made according to the necessities of his time, and for the people of that particular time. They contend that after the death of the Prophet, the need for more explanation of the Qur'an arose, simply because the Prophet's interpretations, though possibly clear to his Companions, would not necessarily be clear to subsequent generations. Thus, *ra'y* is permissible, provided the basic rules of *tafsīr* are applied.[56]

For his part, al-Ṭabarī warned that the verses the supporters of *ra'y* set forth for their arguments needed careful explanation. He agreed that there were some verses whose meanings could not be understood without the explanation of the Prophet, going on to remark that verse 7:33; "the attributing unto God of aught of which you

have no knowledge," refers to the interpretation that can only be attained based on the Prophet's explanations, as opposed to what can be obtained through sound Arabic usage.[57]

Concerning hadith, al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī responded to the hadith of Ibn ʿAbbās "Whoever explains the Qur'an according to his personal opinion, shall take his place in Hell" by stating that the *ra'y* which the hadith prohibited is that which pertains to the *mutashābihāt* (verses whose meanings are known only to God), such as those mentioning the time Jesus will return to the world, or difficult passages of the Qur'an which require explanation from the Prophet. Using *ra'y* in such situations, they maintained, was prohibited.[58] Al-Qurṭubī further adds that this prohibition does not pertain to the interpretation of grammarians, linguists and jurists, because their interpretation is based on knowledge.[59]

With respect to the Companions's statements and attitudes, Ibn ʿAṭiyyah, responded to Abū Bakr's statement by presenting some probable answers. He states that Abū Bakr might have said this at the very beginning of his Caliphate to prevent Muslims from engaging in interpretation haphazardly, or perhaps because at the beginning of his Caliphate he was of the opinion that interpretation should not be made by mere personal opinion. Ibn ʿAṭiyyah explains that as time passed Abū Bakr realized that independent opinion in interpretation was inevitable. Thus, when asked about the meaning of the Qur'anic word *kalālah* (in verse 4:12), Abū Bakr replied: "(What) I say (regarding the meaning of *kalālah*) is my opinion. If it is correct, thanks be to God. If it is wrong, it is from Satan, and God is innocent of it." Then he adds, "*kalālah* is a deceased (person) who does not leave behind him a father or a son."

A similar case concerned the issue of compiling and codifying the Qur'an into one book. Abū Bakr initially hesitated and refused, later finding that codification was unavoidable. Thus, he submitted to opinion.[60]

Concerning ʿUmar's attitude toward the meaning of verse 80:31, "and fruits and herbage," this has been interpreted as a kind of discipline. ʿUmar wanted Muslims to avoid using unnecessary opinion in regard to unnecessary things. With regard to Ibn ʿAbbās's behavior, it was thought that he refused to interpret one of the verses that was left to him alone to interpret. And with regard to the refraining of both the Companions and the Successors from engaging in Qur'anic interpretation, al-Ṭabarī states:

> The attitudes or actions of those who did not abstain from interpretation was similar to the actions of those of them who refrained from giving legal opinions concerning particular events and occurrences, that is to say, they [all] believed that God did not cause His Prophet to die until after he had perfected His religion to His servants, and they knew that God had a judgment in a text or through an indication for every event, but [the former believed] perhaps, that they had to search it out, otherwise, they would be denying that God's judgment on these events existed among them. Finally, [regarding those who refrained from engaging in interpretation,] they could have feared that by their own effort (ijtihad) they were not able to carry out the charge God had entrusted to the learned among His servants. It was the same with the learned among the pious predecessors who refrained from speaking about the interpretation and exegesis of the Qur'an. They did so out of caution, lest they should fail to accomplish the objective of speaking correctly, – not because the interpretation of (this verse) was veiled from the men of knowledge in the community and that it did not exist among them.[61]

Ibn ʿAṭiyyah seems displeased with al-Ṭabarī's conclusion that the main reason those learned Companions and the Successors refrained from interpretation was piety, stating simply: "too many of the prominent predecessors (salaf) who were merely concerned or sympathetic with Muslims interpreted the Qur'an."[62] After the

proponents of *al-ra'y* had refuted the arguments of the opponents they set forth the following evidence in support of their view. Firstly verse 38:29 :

(Here is) a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may mediate (ponder) on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition.

Ibn ʿAṭiyyah comments that the significance of the verse in terms of *ra'y* lay in the word "*li yatadabbarū*" (to reflect, to ponder). He states that it originally meant the final end of something. Thus, one who ponders over the meanings of verses is the one who can arrive at an understanding of their actual meanings. Ibn ʿAṭiyyah thus concludes that to ponder over something is nothing other than an exercise in *ra'y*, and therefore were resort to *ra'y* not permissible, this verse would serve no purpose.[63]

Another popular verse referred to in this regard by the exponents of *ra'y* is verse 4:83 which points out:

If they would but refer it unto the Apostle and unto those from among the believers who have been entrusted with authority, such of them as are engaged in obtaining intelligence would indeed know [what to do with] it.

According to al-Ghazālī this verse endorsed the use of *ra'y* because God affirms the validity of *istinbāṭ* (inference) by men of learning. And it is unquestionable that, *instinbāṭ* is something 'beyond *al-masmūʿ*.'[64]

Al-Ṭabarī elaborated further on both verses arguing that God's encouragement to believers to ponder over the Qur'an's verses is an indication that the exercise of *ra'y* in understanding Qur'anic verses is possible and must be further pursued to present a logical argument: "It is impossible to say to someone who does not comprehend that

which is being said to him, '*iᶜtabir*,' ('take admonition'), unless he understands and reasons what is being said to him. Otherwise, it would be useless to do so. It is likewise impossible to say to some non-Arabs who do not understand Arabic to take advice from Arabic poems, proverbs and wise speeches. Similarly, God would not command people to ponder over the Qur'an's verses, unless there were some indications which would lead to the meanings of its verses. Thus, to interpret the verses which are not the sole prerogative of God is permissible."[65]

Concerning the hadith evidence presented by the proponents of *ra'y*, namely Ibn ᶜAbbās' narration whereby the Prophet said: "O God, grant him the knowledge of Islam and teach him the meaning of the Qur'an" (*wa ᶜallimhu al-ta'wīl*), the point al-Ghazālī and al-Qurṭubī make is that if interpretation of the Qur'an is confined to Prophetic hadith only, then the Prophet's prayer for Ibn ᶜAbbās to bestow him with understanding of Qur'anic interpretation would have no raison d'être.

Another well-known hadith is that reported by Muᶜādh ibn Jabal, in which he indicates that the Prophet approved the exercise of ijti-had by saying: "*idha ijtahad al-ḥākim fa akhṭa' falahū ajr, wa in ijtihada fa-aṣāba falahū ajrān* ("When a judge makes ijtihad and errs, therein he shall have one reward. And whosoever performs ijtihad and if he is correct, he shall have a double reward").

Concerning the Companions' sayings supporting the use of *al-ra'y*, the following is quoted concerning a question once asked of ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: "Did the Prophet single you out [to be endowed] with special comprehension and understanding concerning knowledge of the Qur'an?" ᶜAlī replies: "No, except that God bestows upon a servant understanding of the Qur'an."[66] In this respect al-Ghāzalī asks: "If there is no meaning other than [that which is based on] the transmission of the interpretation of the authority, what is the meaning of the understanding [of the Qur'an] that God bestows upon a servant?"[67]

Al-Ṭabarī reports that both Ibn Masʿūd and Ibn ʿAbbās used to give comprehensive interpretations of the Qurʾan with Ibn Masʿūd's exegesis of one surah alone taking an entire day to explain.[68] Worth noting here is that the Prophet never gave such a long interpretation of any surah, thus, it can only be concluded that detailed interpretation of this nature could have only come from opinions or commentaries. As for the respect given to the Successors' statements, again al-Ṭabarī quotes Saʿīd ibn Jubayr who was reported to have said: "Whoever reads the Qurʾan and cannot explain it, (that is to say, did not understand it), is just like a blind person or a bedouin"[69] (the latter generally speaking considered not intelligent).

Nonetheless, Abū Muḥammad ibn Ḥazm rejects the use of all kinds of personal opinion in Islam in general and in the Qurʾan in particular. To him, no one, including the Companions, has any right or authority to utilize his own opinion in this regard, and whoever does use his opinion in either deducing the law, or the meaning of the Qurʾan, and assumes that such is the meaning meant by God of a particular verse, or ascribes that to God, is a liar.[70] Ibn Ḥazm based his rejection of personal opinion on the following Qurʾanic verses: "We have neglected nothing in the book" (6:38), and "Follow what has been sent down unto you by your Sustainer" (7:3). Ibn Ḥazm reasons that as God has stated clearly in verse 6:38 that He did not leave anything out the Qurʾan thus contains all that needs to be known in Islam and there is no need therefore for anyone to add his opinion. Further, the second verse commands mankind to follow the revelation, not someone else's opinion.[71]

As already mentioned, the first of the two strongest arguments of the proponents of *ra'y* is verse 4:83 and the other is the popular hadith of Muʿādh ibn Jabal in which the Prophet approved of using ijtihad.

As regards the hadith reported by Muʿādh, Ibn Ḥazm considered it invalid because of al-Ḥārith ibn ʿUmar who is historically considered to be *majhūl* (unknown narrator). Furthermore, according to Ibn Ḥazm, al-Bukhārī also reportedly rejected this hadith.[72]

It appears that as a result of all these theological or exegetical debates on Qur'anic interpretation objections were raised concerning both *al–tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd,* and *al–tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm*. Consequently, a new principle known as the "prerequisites of the *mufassir* (exegete)" was developed and added to the sciences of Qur'anic exegesis. In relation to these prerequisites some guidelines had already been given by certain Companions and Successors, before scholars such as al–Zarkashī and al–Suyūṭī codified them in their works. For example, in his work *Al-Itqān*, al–Suyūṭī reports that ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib witnessed a story teller speaking about Qur'anic interpretation. ʿAlī asks him, "Do you know about abrogating and abrogated (verses)"? He (the story teller) replies, "No" to which ʿAlī responds, "You destroyed (your self) and destroyed others."[73] Another codified guideline is that of Ibn ʿAbbās according to whom one part of Qur'anic exegesis can be obtained through mere knowledge of the Arabic language, a part can be understood by scholars through their ijtihad, and a portion can only be known through the Prophet's explanation. All these aspects have been incorporated into the prerequisites of interpretation.

Al–Bayhaqī, quotes Imam Mālik ibn Anas as having said "No man who interprets the Qur'an without knowledge of Arabic would be brought before me without my inflicting punishment on him."[74] Al–Suyuṭī lists fifteen prerequisites of *tafsīr* in his work, and here we have categorized them under six headings as follows:

1. Hadith of the Prophet: one must be well versed in this science.
2. Arabic Language: one must master all aspects of the Arabic language
3. Islamic Jurisprudence: one must be highly knowledgeable of, and/or exposed to the different opinions of the various legal scholars in all aspects of Islamic Law.
4. One must have pure belief (opposite of heresy) and a clear perspective of theological issues, understanding them in the way the Companions, Successors and Sunnis scholars did.

5. One must have knowledge of the abrogating and abrogated verses, and the occasions of revelations.
6. One must be gifted with a specialized knowledge (ʿilm al-Mawhibah).

In discussion of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd*, and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm*, the work of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān is also worthy of consideration and this is examined next.

Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān's al-Wujūh wa al-Naẓā'ir

This work is generally believed to be the first complete book of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y*.[75] The book and the author were controversial. Some scholars, like Imam al-Shāfiʿī, highly praised Muqātil's knowledge of interpretation, with al-Shāfiʿī stating: "All people are indebted to Muqātil in *al-tafsīr*," and ʿUbadah ibn Kathīr claiming that there was noone living (in his era at any rate) who was more knowledgeable of the Qur'an than Muqātil.[76] While these scholars praised Muqātil we find in contrast some prominent critics of Hadith literature such as al-Bukhārī, Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn (d. 274 AH), al-Dhahabī and others, portraying Muqātil as a liar, and a *mujassim* (anthropomorphist).[77] However Muqātil was considered to be the first exegete who resorted to *ra'y*, simply because despite living in an era in which interpretation was being taught by narration with full accounts of the chains of transmission (*isnād*) given, he took the liberty of deleting these chains (*asānīd*) throughout his work depending rather on his own personal opinion alone.

Muqātil's work *Al-Wujūh wa al-Naẓā'ir* goes under a variety of names or titles, with the following two titles being the most popular: *Kitāb al-Wujūh wa al-Naẓā'ir* and *Al-Ashbāh wa al-Naẓā'ir*. *Al-Wujūh wa al-Naẓā'ir* deals basically with *mushtarak*, or homonyms, that is to say words written and pronounced in the same manner, but having different or opposite meanings. The category of *Mushtarak* corresponds to semantic lexicology.[78]

The methodology that Muqātil adopted in his *tafsīr* was of two kinds, the conceptual and the general method that Sunnis employed in their interpretations of the text, which was to explain the text by referring to its background, or to interpret the *ṣifāt* verses (verses pertaining to God's attributes) without negating or twisting their obvious meaning. Consider the following Qur'anic verse 48:10: "Behold, all who pledge their allegiance (*yubāyiʿūnaka*) to thee pledge their allegiance to God: the hand of God is over their hands." Muqātil, in accordance with his approach, thus gives a few details on that meeting with regards to explaining the text in terms of its background:

> Those who gave the loyalty pledge under the tree in the sacred territory of Makkah, were the embodiment of *bayʿah al-Riḍwān* and the number of the Muslims that day was one thousand and four hundred.

To illustrate the conceptual aspect of Muqātil's methodology we examine the word *kafara* (to disbelieve) and its substantive *kufr* mentioned several times in the Qur'an. The word's meaning differs in each of the passages in which it is mentioned. Muqātil compiled the occurrences of *kufr* and then explained the word's meanings in each verse. He goes on to state that one aspect of *kufr* is to reject the oneness of Allah, as in verse 2:6 which states: "As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe." A second aspect of *kufr* is to be ungrateful to Allah, as in verse 27:40: "...and if any is grateful, truly his gratitude is (a gain) for his own soul; but if any is ungrateful, truly my Lord is Free of all Needs, Supreme in Honour!"

The third aspect, states Muqātil, is to declare oneself free, separate, and different as in verse 29:25; "on the Day of Judgment ye shall disown each other..."79

Summary and Comments

In the light of these discussions we can conclude that *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* (praiseworthy *tafsīr*) can be defined as interpretation by independent opinion which does not conflict with the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'an, or an established principle of Islam, and conforms with the Arabic language, that is with sound Arabic usage and grammar.

At the time of the Prophet and during the tenure of the first two Caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, the term *ra'y* held no negative connotations, being understood as personal opinion and analogy. Following the assassination of ʿUthmān, the third Caliph, Muslims suffered internal division, with generally speaking, each group, including the supporters of Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, using the Qur'an to support their own perspective.

The Sunni and the Shia in particular distorted the meanings of certain verses with far-fetched exegeses using fabricated hadith to support their own particular point of view. As a result, some prominent scholars such as Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib, Sālim ibn ʿAbd Allāh, al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad and others abstained from *tafsīr*. Subsequently, the term *ra'y* became identified with sectarianism. These theological political schools continued to spread across the Muslim world and are with us today. Their exegeses became polemical in nature, leading eventually to the grouping and division of *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* into kinds: *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd* (praiseworthy) and *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm* (blameworthy). There also evolved qualifications for a *mufassir* to save the integrity of *al-tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis).

Nonetheless, historically as the different schools of thought evolved as a result of various theological or political differences, *al-tafsīr* became unfortunately embroiled in polemics, leading to an inevitable loss of objectivity. For instance, Mujāhid's interpretation of verse 75:22-3: "Some faces, that Day, will beam (in brightness and

beauty); looking towards their Lord", differs not only from that of the explanation given by the Prophet and that of his Companions, but also in such a way that it actually contradicts them. Worth noting also is that whilst Mujāhid's *tafsīr* is not labeled as *bidʿah*, that of the Muʿtazilites, who interpreted in the same way as Mujāhid, is labeled as such, meaning they were accused of *bidʿah* whilst Mujāhid was not.

A critical look at the arguments of both the opponents and the proponents of *al-ra'y* in defense of their position reveals that some arguments needed more support while others are deemed irrelevant. For example, the opponents of *ra'y* would quote 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") to back their prohibition of *ra'y*. In my opinion this argument is a weak one, practically speaking, for the Prophet did not explain the whole Qur'an, not even most of it, and his Companions consequently used their own opinion in explaining some of its verses.

But whatever the case, the majority position of scholars is that *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (under the grouping *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-maḥmūd*) is permissible subject to certain conditions, for men endowed with sound knowledge and based on sound sources.