

# The Principles of Tafsīr: An overview of Tafsīral-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī

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## ABSTRACT

*Because of its utmost importance and influence, the Qur'ān has received serious attention right from its genesis as a divine dual response to the then Arab society and the humanity at large. This dualistic nature of the Qur'ān was addressed and explicated by Muslim divines and that endeavour was instrumental in framing the principles of Tafsīr. The present paper will address -the hermeneutical approach and the tools used therein in interpreting the text, by two classical exegetes, namely Imām Ṭabarī and Imām Rāzī. As both these classical exegetes represent two distinctive hermeneutical schools, the paper will also trace their development and influence on overall Tafsīr tradition in Muslim world. This paper will also figure out the contemporary relevance of their hermeneutical tools.*

*Keywords: Tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr, Tafsīr bi al-rāy*

## 1. Introduction:

### 1.1 Place of the Qur'ān in Islam

A holistic understanding of the Qur'ān, particularly focus on its self-referential content is lucid conduit for understanding its place in Islam. Apprehending self-referentiality or self-declarative quality of the Qur'ān should be the first endeavour of any serious student of the Qur'ān who is trying to assess the place and pivotal role of the Qur'ān in Muslim tradition.<sup>1</sup> There are ample verses within the Qur'ān which deal with its 'self-referentiality', thereby revealing its place lucidly. We have,

‘Verily, we have sent down as an Arabic Qur'ān in order that you may understand’. (12:2);

‘And truly, this (al-Qur'ān) is a revelation from the Lord. (26:192);

‘Blessed be He who sent down the criterion to his slave that he may be a Warner to the ‘ālamīn’. (25:1);

‘... In it there is guidance for those who are God-Conscious’. (2:2).etc

Apart these verses which candidly reveal the place of the Qur'ān, we have other verses wherein the Qur'ān challenges any would-be prophet to 'produce a sūrah like' those of the Qur'ān (2:23) and in 17:88 declares that even the combined efforts of human and jinn could create nothing equal to it. One can easily gauge the place which these self-declarative verses give to the Qur'ān itself. This self-referential quality, which is quite magnetic in nature and the challenges which the Qur'ān put forward, plus its direct intervention into the then Arabia was bound to attract acquisitive minds who tried to understand the very substance of the Qur'ān and its active recipient, Muḥammad (saas).

From the above brief discussion, it is quite evident that the *Tafsīr* tradition commenced while revelation was still in progress. Here, it must be noted that the self-referential feature of the Qur'ān plays the primary role in the hermeneutics as the Qur'ān often explicates its brevity, if seen as a whole. It is this hermeneutical self-referentiality which places the Qur'ān first in ranking of sources of *Tafsīr*.<sup>2</sup> In the capacity of the messenger of Allah, Muḥammad was duty-bound to explain the Qur'ān (16:44), hence ranked 2nd amongst the sources of *Tafsīr*.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that in his ranking, the author of *al-Tafsīr wa al-mufasīrūn* has adduced 3rd rank to al-Ijtihad and inferring capacity as a *Tafsīr* source in prophetic and immediate post-prophetic period. There is also a debate regarding the Muḥammad's role in the explanations for the entire Qur'ān.<sup>4</sup> There are three views on this issue.

1. Prophet must have elaborated the whole Qur'ān to his followers. Ibn Taymiyyah(d.728A.H) favours this view.
2. Prophet explained little amount of the Qur'ān. Al-Suyūti favours this.
3. Prophet explained a considerable amount of the Quran. Dr. Muḥammad Hussain al-Dhahabi favours this view.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.2 Period of Ṣaḥāba (Companions)

Al-Suyūti (d.911A.H) has counted ten Ṣaḥāba who had *Tafsīr* leanings and contributed to its science. Apart four caliphs, they are 'Abd Allah B. Mas'ūd, 'Abd Allah B. 'Abbass, Ubay B. Ka'b, Zaid B. Thabit, Abu Mūsa al-Asha'ri, and 'Abd Allah B. al-Zubayr.

### 1.3 *Tafsīr* Schools:

With the flow of time, need for interpretation increased in the post-Ṣaḥāba period as the more heterogeneous texture came in the then tapestry Islamic civilization. Hence, different schools of *Tafsīr* got developed.<sup>6</sup> A brief introduction of these hermeneutical schools follows;

**Makkan School**

The most prominent exegetes from this school are,

- A. Mujāhid B. Jabr (d.104 A.H).
- B. Sa‘īd B. Jubair (d.95 A.H)
- C. ‘Aṭṭā B. Abi Rabah (d.114 A.H)
- D. ‘Ikrimah Mawla B. ‘Abbass (d.107 A.H)

**Madinan School**

- A. Zaid B. Aslam (d.136 A.H)
- B. Abu ‘Āliyah (d.90 A.H)
- C. Muḥammad B. ka‘b (d.118 A.H)

**Iraqi School**

- A. Masrūq B. Ajdah (63 A.H)
- B. Qatadah B. Di‘amah (117 A.H)
- C. Al-Ḥassan Al-Basari (d.110 A.H)
- D. Murrah al-Hamdani (d.76 A.H)
- E. Al- Dahakh B. Muzaham.

**Syrian School**

- A. ‘Abd al- Raḥmān B. ganm.
- B. ‘Umar B. ‘Abd al- Aziz B. Marwan.
- C. Raja B. Haywat.
- D. Ka‘b al-Ahbar (d.32 A.H).

**Egyptian School**

- A. Yazīd B. Abi Hubaib
- B. Abu al-khair ( Marsad B. ‘Abd Allah)

**Yemen School**

- A. Tawus B. Kaysan (d.106 A.H).
- B. Wahab B. Munabbih (d.110 A.H).<sup>7</sup>

*Tafsīr* works do not follow the same methodology in interpreting the text. Scholars have classified these works into various groups depending upon the hermeneutical approach adopted therein. Muḥ ammad Hussain al-Dhahabi has done a praiseworthy attempt to classify *Tafsīr* works and has discussed what is what.

He has grouped all the *Tafsīr* works under six headings.

1. *Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr* (Based on traditions)
2. *Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y* (Based on reasoning)
3. *Tafsīr al-Bidi* (Based on Independent inventions)
4. *Tafsīr al-ishari* (Based on inner meanings or Symbolical in Nature)
5. *Tafsīr al-Fiqhi* (Based on juridical rulings)
6. *Tafsīr al-'Ilmi* (Scientific *Tafsīr*).

The paper addresses two classical *Tafsīr* works, one that of Ibn Jarīr which falls in the group first and the other one is that of Imām Rāzī which is *Tafsīr bi al-rāy*.

## 2.1 *Tafsīr of Al-Ṭ abarī, d.310 A.H, (Jami' al alBayān Fi Tawil al Qur'ān)*

Any serious debate on exegetical activities would be incomplete if the mention of Abu Jafar Muḥ ammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭ abarī (d.310/932) is not made. The principal legacy of this extraordinary man, in the field of *Tafsīr*, is to be found in his exegetical work - *Jami' al al Bayān Fi Tawil al Qur'ān*. It has generated praise for its comprehensiveness and clarity. Abu Hamid al-Isfarani says, 'If a man were to travel to China so as to acquire the Ibn Jarīr *Tafsīr* that would not be too far'.<sup>8</sup> This *Tafsīr* is noted for its heavy usage of exegetical hadith and antecedents coming down from the Prophet and his companions. Ibn Taymiyah has praised Ibn Jarīr for this approach and applauded him for doing away with Muqatil b. Sulaiman and Kalbi.<sup>9</sup> The approach of Ibn Jarīr has genuinely styled his work as *Tafsīr Bi al-Mathūr*. al-Ṭ abarī was not only faithful to *Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr* but whenever he found necessary he rebutted the wanton use of reason/ray. Disgusting *Tafsīr bi al-ray*, Ibn Jarīr quoted a few anti-ray narrations and a famous saying of Abu Bakr in the introduction of his *Tafsīr*.<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Jarīr is very meticulous in the transmission of narration and often quotes multiple narrations even for a single verse and sometimes uses his own reasoning in giving preference to any one of them. This very act of preferring, according to some, has jeopardised his status as simply an exponent of *Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr*<sup>11</sup>. The quoting of different narrations really enriches the hermeneutical plurality of this exegetical magnum opus. Norman Calder has it;

The process of the citing authorities and providing multiple readings is in part a declaration of loyalty: it defines the tradition within which on works.<sup>12</sup>

Another prominent feature of al-Ṭabarī's method is his habit of citing sources. This intellectual honesty and well-researched citations establishes the fact that intellectual curiosity was in vogue in classical Islam.

Ibn Jarīr gives due attention to the Seven-reading issue and never fail in giving preference to one over other.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Ibn Jarīr readily takes recourse to Judaeo-Christian narrations although without giving much attention to their scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Jarīr also did away from the useless speculations on the text. For instance, while commenting upon ayat 20 of sūrah 12 Ibn Jarīr dismisses it nonsense to haggle over the amount by which Yusuf was sold.<sup>15</sup>

Being a jurist also, we often see Ibn Jarīr with his own legal acumen while commenting upon legal verses of the Qur'ān. For example, while expounding upon verse 230: 2, he discuss word 'Tankih' with much seriousness. We also find al-Ṭabarī putting forward his own understanding and even dismissing the views of some credible scholars like that of Mujahid. For instance, he refutes the metaphorical interpretation of ayat 65:2 by Mujahid and declares that things happened practically.<sup>16</sup>

In the line with Ibn 'Abbas saying i.e. Preserve the pre-Islamic poetry, for in it is the explanation for your book,<sup>17</sup> Ibn Jarīr takes recourse to poetry whenever needed. For Instance, in the explication of word 'Nid' he quotes a couple of Ḥassān B. Sābit.<sup>18</sup> We also see Ibn Jarīr busy with his grammar knowledge in explicating the text.<sup>19</sup>

The above discussion boils down to the fact that Ibn Jarīr has carved out a tangible place in the tapestry of the *Tafsīr* tradition and as a matter of fact his work serves as a great repository to *Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr* tradition.

## 2.2 *Tafsīr al-Rāzī* (d.606 A.H) (*Al-Tafsīr al-kabūr, or Mafātih al-ghayb*)

It will be sheer distortion of *Tafsīr* studies if the reference to *Mafātih al-ghayb* is not made. Ḥujjat al-Islam, as remembered, was a polymath and excelled his contemporary scholars as a philosopher, mathematician, historian, physician, astronomer, theologian and an exegete. His magnum opus, known as *Tafsīr al-Kabir* and other valuable works in the field of 'ilm al-kalām, Fiqh etc have been popular among the students of Islamic sciences.

At the outset, it should be borne in mind that it was not in the fate of Rāzī to complete his master piece. For the completion of it, fate smiled on Najm al-Din al-Qumuli (d.777A.H) as per the reports by Ibn Ḥajar. And according to the author of *Kashaf al-Zunon*, it was Qaḏī Shahab al-Dīn b. Khalil Khauli al-Damashqi (d.639 A.H) who gave finishing touch to the work.<sup>20</sup> Scholars also differ about the Rāzī -written content in the work. According to some he has written it up to sūrah al-fath<sup>21</sup> but others take it up to sūrah al-Anbiya.<sup>22</sup>

Exegetical work of Rāzī, though criticised as, 'having everything in it except the *Tafsīr*', turned out to be a great storehouse to gauge the views of Mutzilites, philosophers and other sects. In fact the compiling role played

by al-Ṭabarī in the field of *Tafsīr bi al-Mathūr* is mirrored by Imām Rāzī in his field of *Tafsīr bi al-ray*, thereby both the classical luminaries stand equally glistening on the intellectual firmament and continue to grab the attention. It is for this reason that al-Subki rebutted the Ibn Taymiyyah sarcastic quip by saying, ‘The matter is not like this, in fact, and his work contains everything together with *Tafsīr*’.<sup>23</sup>

Being responsive to his times Imām Rāzī gave vent to his Ashari leanings, through the scholastic hermeneutics of the Qur’ān and his scholastic hermeneutics set a paradigm for upcoming commentaries. As a staunch Ashari, we find anti-Mutazilite tenor as a telling feature of the *Tafsīr al-kabir*. At the same time, one must appreciate the intellectual honesty of Imām Rāzī when he gives due place to al-Zamakhshari while dealing with literary issues. In fact Imām Rāzī did not shy away from praising mutazilites like Abu Muslim and Qafāl for their interpretive endeavours.<sup>24</sup>

Imām Rāzī was conscious of the coherence in the Quran and we often see him expounding upon the *manasibat / Coherence* within verses and also amongst the different chapters.<sup>25</sup> Imām al-Farahi also praises Imām Rāzī for giving importance to the coherence.<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad Hussain al-Dahabi also forwarded the same opinion.<sup>27</sup>

Imām Rāzī would not strip the text of its privilege by obsessed metaphorical interpretations. For instance, while commenting upon verse 255:2, unlike Qafāl he sticks to the apparent text and maintains it be a safer side.<sup>28</sup>

The legal verses also receive the attention of Imām Rāzī. While relating different legal schools, he never fails in attesting preponderance to Shāfi‘ī School.<sup>29</sup>

We also find his *Tafsīr* teeming with philosophical and astronomical discussions coupled with rebuttals to those who stood against such endeavours in interpreting the Text.<sup>30</sup>

It is a fact that people label his *Tafsīr* as *Tafsīr bi al-ray* but it is a sweeping remark taken without serious study of Rāzī-hermeneutics as a whole. We find him taking recourse to traditions, linguistics and hermeneutical antecedents. It is not rocket-science to understand that every *Tafsīr* is a response to the times in which it is produced. This responsive nature plays important part in the hermeneutics and Imām Rāzī’s work is no exception to this. If the text is to be introduced, then the time’s jargon, taste, terminology, priorities, philosophical underpinnings must be addressed and that is the domain of hermeneutics. The text should not lose the privilege as maintained by mainstream and complying with it Imām Rāzī says, ‘successful is he alone who sticks to the religion of the old.’

### 3. Conclusion

The Qur’ānic exegesis is not merely an intellectual pursuit done at ivory tower. Exegesis, from the Muslim perspective, stands as a conduit to arrive at the Will of Allah. Therefore we can say that exegesis is an intellectual pursuit aimed at practical endeavour and thereby manifesting the Will. The hermeneutical plurality

which we find in Muslim World bears witness to the fact that how avidly Muslims engage themselves with the Text and the above discussed two exegetes mark a watershed to the *Tafsīr* tradition. It would be unfair to declare them as mere repositories for they are interpretive in nature also. A cluster of hermeneutical approaches are discussed therein, which in turn act as a catalyst for the modern interpreters of the Qur'ān.

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