

# Classical Insights, Contemporary Relevance: Understanding Tafsīr bi-al-Ma'thūr in Qur'ānic Studies

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## Abstract

This paper explores *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, or tradition-based Qur'ānic exegesis, examining its core elements, interpretive diversity, and relevance in both historical and contemporary contexts. Defined by reliance on the Qur'ān itself, prophetic traditions, and the interpretations of the Companions and Successors, *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* is foundational in Islamic scholarship for preserving original meanings of the Qur'ān. However, its dependence on early sources raises questions about its adaptability to current ethical, legal, and social issues within Muslim communities. Through a qualitative analysis, this study investigates primary interpretative methods within *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, including *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-al-Qur'ān*, *tafsīr bi-al-hadīth*, and interpretations by the Companions and Successors. The paper reveals how *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* maintains Qur'ānic authenticity while offering insights into its potential relevance for contemporary applications. This study contributes to Qur'ānic studies by affirming *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* as both a resilient and adaptable approach, balancing fidelity to foundational texts with interpretive flexibility in modern Islamic discourse.

**Keywords:** Qur'ānic Exegesis; Tradition-based Exegesis; *Tafsīr-bi -al-ma'thūr*; Ta'wīl; Prophet; Companions; Successors.

## Abstrak

Makalah ini mengeksplorasi *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, atau penafsiran Al-Qur'an berbasis tradisi, dengan menelaah elemen-elemen inti, keragaman interpretasi, dan relevansinya dalam konteks historis maupun kontemporer. Didefinisikan melalui ketergantungannya pada Al-Qur'an itu sendiri, tradisi kenabian (sunnah), serta interpretasi dari para Sahabat dan Tabi'in, *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* menjadi landasan utama dalam keilmuan Islam untuk menjaga makna asli Al-Qur'an.

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Namun, ketergantungan metode ini pada sumber-sumber awal menimbulkan pertanyaan mengenai daya adaptasinya terhadap isu-isu etika, hukum, dan sosial yang dihadapi oleh masyarakat Muslim masa kini. Melalui analisis kualitatif, penelitian ini menyelidiki metode interpretatif utama dalam *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, termasuk *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-al-Qur'ān* (penafsiran Al-Qur'an melalui ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an), *tafsīr bi-al-hadīth* (penafsiran berdasarkan hadits Nabi), serta interpretasi dari para Sahabat dan Tabi'in. Makalah ini menunjukkan bagaimana *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* mempertahankan keaslian Al-Qur'an sekaligus menawarkan wawasan terkait relevansinya bagi aplikasi kontemporer. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada studi Al-Qur'an dengan menegaskan bahwa *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* adalah pendekatan yang tangguh dan adaptif, menjaga kesetiaan pada teks-teks mendasar sambil menawarkan fleksibilitas interpretatif dalam diskursus Islam modern.

**Kata kunci:** *Qur'ānic Exegesis; Tradition-based Exegesis; Tafsīr-bi -al-ma'thūr; Ta'wīl; Prophet; Companions; Successors.*

## Introduction

The “*Qur'ān*” is regarded to be a sacred scripture that was revealed by *Allāh* (God) to Prophet Muḥammad (ṣaw). The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) witnessed the divine word over a period of twenty-three years, from 610 to 632, while residing in Mecca and Medina during the first century of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of Islamic history, Muslim scholars have uncovered enduring spiritual guidance in the *Qur'ān*, which is regarded as the direct words of *Allāh*. This drive has enabled them to shed light on and interpret the significance of the *Qur'ān* with regard to the particular circumstances of each individual Muslim, if not all of civilization. Following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), Islamic scholars shifted their focus towards safeguarding the spiritual tenets, profound understandings, and legal foundations of the *Qur'ān*. Acquiring a thorough comprehension of the teachings of the *Qur'ān* and situating them within their proper historical and cultural setting was essential for extracting wisdom to successfully tackle the assortment of mundane difficulties encountered during that period. The extensive geographic and sociological growth of the Muslim empire resulted in several social and cultural challenges, as well as substantial linguistic diversities.<sup>2</sup>

During the designated historical era, the Arabic language had an exclusive prevalence as the only widely spoken language. Each of these civilizations sought to get a thorough understanding of the teachings encompassed throughout the *Qur'ān*. Moreover, the emergence of diverse political alliances with non-Muslim regions and the territorial expansion of Muslim states facilitated favorable

<sup>1</sup> Zurqānī, *Manāhil al 'irfān Fī Al- 'ulūm al -Qur'ān*, vol. II, Cairo: Dār al- Ḥadīth, 2001; Muḥammad 'Alī Sābūnī, *Al-Tibyān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'Ān* (Pakistan: Al-Bushra Publishers, 2011); Muḥammad 'Alī Sābūnī, *Al- Tibyān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Bayrūt: 'Alam al-kutub, 1995., 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Amer Zulfiqar Ali, “A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsīr Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (November 14, 2018): 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.87>.

circumstances for Muslim trade and exploration, resulting in an enormous movement of Muslims to other territories and civilizations. An in-depth understanding of the *Qur'ān* is crucial for providing guidance to Muslims residing in non-Muslim regions.<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to rectify abhorrent social conventions, the *Qur'ān* compelled its primary readers to pursue an exegetical understanding of its commandments. Notwithstanding the *Qur'ān* having been revealed in the mother tongue of the Arab audience, this remained valid. Tragically, the demise of the Prophet (pbuh) and the subsequent growth of the Muslim kingdom gave rise to a multifaceted religious, theological, and political milieu. This transpired subsequent to the demise of the Prophet. Furthermore, the ongoing evolution of the Arabic language has compelled scholars, irrespective of their religious affiliation, to contextualize the *Qur'ānic* words and expressions within the historical milieu of each epoch in the progression of the Muslim faith.<sup>4</sup>

Muslims consider the *Qur'ānic* text to be the focal point of their religious knowledge, with the interpretation of the text being of utmost importance. The presence of a wide range of exegetical works indicates that the *Qur'ānic* text has several significations, resulting in a diverse array of interpretations. This phenomenon may be ascribed to historical factors, as researchers persist in posing inquiries, and the spiritual inclinations of the authors, resulting in diverse traditions and viewpoints. The variety of interpretations is a result of the *Qur'ānic* text's multifaceted character. Based on this significant juncture, it can be deduced that the exegetes imposed their beliefs and doctrinal positions onto the *Qur'ān*, whereas the *Qur'ān* sustained their innermost beings and spirits with the influence of an unwaveringly certain vision of the cosmos and the position of humanity within it. Thus, a dialectical relationship has existed between the fundamental text and its principal interpreters. This is particularly true regarding the general readership, which consists of the majority of Muslims, as each individual possesses a unique textual comprehension level and aptitude.<sup>5</sup>

The Muslim community assimilated civilizations, ideologies, and disciplines from their conquests, subsequently incorporating them into Islamic civilization via social exchange. During the second, third, and fourth centuries of Islamic history, several schools and ideologies arose, each offering a diverse range of interpretations. The spectrum of mindsets varied from a conservative attitude that resisted foreign influences and adhered strictly to historic traditions, such as the teachings of the Prophet and the lifestyle of his Companions, to a more inclusive attitude that included other cultures and viewpoints to develop

<sup>3</sup> Ali. "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsīr Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought,"

<sup>4</sup> Recep Dogan, *Usul al Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of the Qur'an*, Tughra Books, 2014, 121.

<sup>5</sup> Khaled Troudi, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics with Reference to Narratives: A Study in Classical Exegetical Traditions," 2011, 31.

innovative methods of interpreting the *Qur'ān*. During this era, there were dogmatic *tafsīrs* that distorted the original meaning of the book, deviating from its actual substance.<sup>6</sup>

However, exegetical works in Islamic theology primarily center on the study of semantics and the interpretation of *Qur'ānic* texts. These works begin by examining the practical details surrounding the development of the *Qur'ān*. Exegesis is considered by Muslim academics as the paramount discipline of Islamic theology. It pertains to the challenge of interpreting texts and comprehending historical documents and cultures in light of the contemporary circumstances, which has been a distinctive concern for Muslims throughout time. Throughout the annals of Muslim history, numerous elaborate methodologies for *Qur'ānic* interpretation have evolved into formalized fields distinguished by their distinct approaches. These methodologies were all intended to explicate formal theories capable of resolving crucial dilemmas pertaining to the *Qur'ānic* text and its interpretations<sup>7</sup>. The substantial corpus of interpretive works was propelled by these exhaustive works. Significant contributions to the area of *Qur'ānic* interpretation have been made by contemporary academics Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat and Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, who belong to the *Sunnī* and *Shī'ī* sects respectively. Ma'rifat's book, "*At-tafsīr wa-al-Mufasssīrūn fī Thawbihi al-qashīb*," offers a thorough examination of the historical progression of Muslim *tafsīrs*, whilst al-Dhahabī's work, "*At-tafsīr wa-al-Mufasssīrūn*," explores different *Qur'ānic* schools. Although there are many published texts available, "*At-tafsīr wa-l-Mufasssīrūn*" continues to be the primary source and exemplar for other scholars.<sup>8</sup>

In the twentieth century, non-Muslim academics, such as Wansbrough, Rippin, Berg, and McAuliffe, have challenged the interpretations of the *Qur'ānic* text delivered by Muslim interpreters using various approaches. Their main emphasis was on the historical analysis of *Qur'ānic* hermeneutics, since the *Qur'ān* holds a central position in the Islamic framework and its comprehension is crucial for acknowledging the worldwide significance of Islam. For instance, Wansbrough categorized the historical development of *tafsīr* into the following five chronological styles: rhetorical, allegorical, narrative (haggadic), and legal (halakhic) textual (masoretic). He asserted that the aforementioned chronological order may nearly be chronologically plotted in the aforementioned sequence and that it reflects the substance and style of a specific *tafsīr* with minimal overlap.<sup>9</sup> In accordance with Wansbrough's classifications, Rippin asserts that they are

<sup>6</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Princeton University Press, 1981, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Troudi, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics with Reference to Narratives: A Study in Classical Exegetical Traditions," 31–32.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 2003, 311.

<sup>9</sup> Wansbrough, John, "Majāz al-Qur'ān: Periphrastic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33 (1970), 247–66.

“functional, unified, and enlightening in the quintessential scientific fashion.” Over time, he acknowledged that early *tafsīr* compositions comprised aspects from all five categories.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Esack holds a dissenting viewpoint regarding Wansbrough’s characterization of the *Qur’ānic* tradition through the use of terminology, contending that it serves to underscore its inherent void.<sup>11</sup> Graham criticizes Wansbrough’s classifications, arguing that although the identification of parallels between the *Qur’ān* and Jewish scripture generates a fresh perspective on interpretation, it fails to substantiate the assertion that the *Qur’ān* was not acknowledged as a complete text prior to 200 A.H, despite the identification of similar elements between the *Qur’ān* and Jewish scripture.<sup>12</sup> In subsequent works, Berg and McAuliffe have delineated three distinct categories for this literature. Berg conducted an attestation of the text, the Prophet Muḥammad, as well as his disciples and successors.<sup>13</sup> Historical exegesis of the *Qur’ān*, according to McAuliffe, can be divided into three periods: formative, classical, and modern.<sup>14</sup>

However, exegesis of the *Qur’ān* (*tafsīr*) can be broadly classified into two types: *tafsīr bi-al-ma’thūr*, which is exegesis rooted in tradition; and *tafsīr bi-al-ra’y*, which is exegesis founded in reason, independent reasoning, or considered opinion.<sup>15</sup> *Mufasssirūn*, who are the scholars of *Qur’ānic* exegesis, have been diligently striving to convey the narrative of the *Qur’ān* by including prophetic and traditional narrations, resulting in the emergence of *tafsīr bi-al-ma’thūr*. One of the Prophetic responsibilities was to elucidate the meaning of the *Qur’ān* (Q.16:14), which he accomplished via his verbal communication and actions.<sup>16</sup>

Following the Prophet (pbuh), a succession of four caliphs (632–660 CE) (Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, Uthmān, and ‘Alī<sup>ra</sup>) and several Companions (including ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd, ‘Ubay b. Ka‘b, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās, and Zayd b. Thābit<sup>ra</sup>) made

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Rippin, “Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’ān,” in *Approaches to the Qur’ān* (Routledge, 2005), 249–59.

<sup>11</sup> Devin Stewart, “FARID ESACK, The Quran: A Short Introduction (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002). Pp. 192. \$15.95 Paper,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 4 (2004): 682–84.

<sup>12</sup> Hinrich Biesterfeldt, “Review of John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford 1977,” in *Kleine Schriften by Josef van Ess (3 Vols)* (Brill, 2018), 1725–35.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> To know details about three periods, see Guy Monnot, “Jane DAMMEN MCAULIFFE, *Qur’ānic Christians. An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 23, 5 x 16 Cm., XII+ 340 Pp,” *Arabica* 39, no. 3 (1992): 404–5.

<sup>15</sup> Ḥussain Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al- Mufasssirūn*, vol. 1, Cairo: Dār al -kutub al Ḥadīth, 1961, 112–47.

<sup>16</sup> Hakan Coruh, “Tradition, Reason, and Qur’ānic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (2017): 85–104.

substantial contributions to the elucidation and interpretation of the *Qur'ān*.<sup>17</sup> During the beginning of the 150 years following the demise of the Prophet (pbuh), particularly in the period preceding the Umayyad dynasty's ending, scholars initiated the compilation of comprehensive *tafsīr* by drawing upon prophetic narratives and traditional sources. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, shortly thereafter, a number of scholars formulated *tafsīr* that reflected diverse patterns of Muslim thought and were firmly rooted in their own reasoning and personal opinion. The aforementioned Islamic ideas, which emerged from various perspectives, gave rise to *tafsīr* of the *Qur'ān* that were sectarian, theological, legal, esoteric, and philosophical in nature.<sup>18</sup>

The scope of *tafsīr* has been broadened by recent breakthroughs in science, technology, and socio-cultural elements. In this extended scope, reason plays a crucial part in understanding specific *tafasīr*. As a result, there has been an increase in the popularity of *tafasīr* that are founded on reason (*tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*). The interconnected nature of the modern world, driven by advances in digital technology, scientific progress, and aviation, has fundamentally transformed human comprehension and the principles of Islamic ideology. To lead a purposeful Muslim life, it is essential to have a comprehensive grasp of the *Qur'ānic* message that is relevant to the specific circumstances of the present day, in order to effectively tackle the difficulties of our ever-changing world. Contemporary Islamic thinking is having an impact on the readings of the *Qur'ān*, as both rationalistic and traditional approaches to *Qur'ānic* exegesis are significantly reshaping the perspectives and ideologies of Muslims in the contemporary day.<sup>19</sup>

A comprehensive examination of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* requires a focused exploration of its core principles and interpretative methods, as well as its historical significance and continued relevance in Islamic thought. This paper confines itself to an in-depth study of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, setting aside comparative analyses with other forms, such as *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*, in order to provide a clear understanding of this tradition-based approach. Defined by its reliance on prophetic teachings, the insights of the Companions, and the early Muslim community, *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* is widely regarded as a foundational method of *Qur'ānic* exegesis. *Ibn Taymiyyah*, for instance, asserted that the best way to interpret the *Qur'ān* is through the *Qur'ān* itself and by drawing upon the guidance of the Prophet and the early Muslim community.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, al-Ṭabarī emphasized using narrations from the Prophet and his Companions as essential

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, Reprinted, London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *Usool At-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur'ānic Interpretation*, International Islamic Publishing House, 2005; Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsīr Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought."

<sup>19</sup> Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought."

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah Fī 'Uṣūl Al-Tafsīr*, Ed. Adnan Zarzour, 2nd ed. Bayrūt, 1392.

to preserving the authenticity and intended meanings of the text.<sup>21</sup>

In examining *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, it is essential to address both its strengths and the challenges it faces in addressing contemporary issues. This method is traditionally valued for preserving the *Qur'ān*'s intended meanings through a close adherence to early sources;<sup>22</sup> however, this reliance on tradition can also raise questions about its adaptability to current ethical, legal, and social concerns in Muslim communities.<sup>23</sup> This study uses a qualitative analysis to clarify the core concepts of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* as understood within the Islamic tradition, helping to highlight the historical role and ongoing significance of tradition-based exegesis. Through this lens, we aim to illuminate *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*'s role as both a historically grounded and potentially adaptive method within the field of *Qur'ānic* interpretation.

However, this study is organized to provide a comprehensive examination of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* and its interpretive diversity. It begins with an overview of fundamental elements of *Qur'ānic* exegesis, followed by an exploration of the diversity within *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*. Subsequent sections delve into specific methods, including *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān* (interpretation by the *Qur'ān* itself), *tafsīr bi-l-ḥadīth* (by prophetic traditions), *tafsīr bi-'aḳwāl al-Ṣaḥābah* (by the Companions), and *tafsīr bi-'aḳwāl al-Tābi'ūn* (by the Successors). Finally, the concluding section synthesizes these insights, presenting *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* as a method that bridges classical authenticity with contemporary relevance in *Qur'ānic* interpretation.

### An Overview of Fundamental Elements of *Qur'ānic* Exegesis

A comprehensive understanding of the *Qur'ān* necessitates a solid grasp of its fundamental elements. The vast majority of verses in the *Qur'ān* are classified as "*muḥkamāt* and *mutashabihāt*."<sup>24</sup> *Muḥkam* verses, the singular form of *muḥkamāt*, demonstrate a clear and unambiguous significance, requiring no further explanation or explication. *Mutashabihāt* require interpretation because of

<sup>21</sup> Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Edited by Ma'īn'ūd Muḥammad and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, vol. I, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d..

<sup>22</sup> Coruh, "Tradition, Reason, and *Qur'ānic* Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi"; Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulūm Al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, Nigeria: Islamic Foundation, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Samiullah Faraz and Syeda Asiya, "Impact of the Contextual Approach on the *Qur'ānic* Interpretations: An Analytical Study," *Jihāt Ul Islam* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1–20; Mariam Bushra and Shahzadi Pakeeza, "The Rise of Neo-Modernism and Contextual Approach to *Qur'ānic* Interpretation by Neo-Modernist Scholars," *Majallah-e-Talim o Tahqīq* 4, no. 3 (September 30, 2022): 50–67, <https://ojs.cer.edu.pk/index.php/mtt/article/view/252>; Dr Shahzadi Pakeeza and Mariam Bushra, "The Idea of Context and Contextual *Qur'ānic* Interpretation," *Al-Qanṭara* 8, no. 4 (December 30, 2022): 222–35, <http://alqantarajournal.com/index.php/Journal/article/view/185>.

<sup>24</sup> Ḥussain Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-Ḥadīth, 1961, 33–34; Von Denffer, *Ulūm Al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, 58–60.

their dual nature; they may either suggest resemblance to entities present at the time of the verse's revelation or exhibit ambiguity, lacking a definitive link to a particular object, event, or phenomenon, potentially employing analogy.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, it is argued that these diverse collections of *Qur'ānic* verses ultimately resulted in the emergence of various genres of *Qur'ānic* exegesis, which were driven by the linguistic complexities of the *Qur'ān* that commentators (*muffassirūn*) were compelled to confront.<sup>26</sup> A classification system can be applied to the words, expressions, and verses found in the *Qur'ān*: *ḥaqīqī* (meaningfully employed) or *majāzī* (representing metaphorical usage). Additionally, they may be of the following types: *'āām* (general in scope), *khāṣ* (applied in a particular the setting), *muṭlaq* (indefinite), *muqayyad* (stipulated), *mantūq* (The meaning is evident), *mafḥūm* (unattainable to explicitly comprehend), *nāsikh* (comprising the invalidation of rulings) and *mansūkh* (transporting abrogated regulations).<sup>27</sup>

To achieve insightful interpretation, one must possess expertise not only in language but also in numerous fields of *Qur'ānic* studies. A comprehension of the Meccan and Medinan eras of the Prophet's (pbuh) existence, as well as the *sūras* (chapters) revealed during each time, referred to as the Meccan and Medinan *sūras*, is an essential prerequisite for any interpretive undertaking.<sup>28</sup> In order to identify the verses that are related to a certain event or cause, it is essential to understand the context, known as "*'asbāb al-nuzūl*" or "reasons for revelation," even if some verses recorded in Medina or Mecca may not have a direct connection to a particular event or reason.<sup>29</sup> In addition, numerous *Qur'ānic* exegetes contemplate the significance of the impact of foreign components (*isrā'iliyyāt*) when attempting to explicate the narratives of past prophets.<sup>30</sup> Aforementioned instances merely touch upon the *Qur'ānic* disciplines that are indispensable for any legitimate exegesis of the *Qur'ān*.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, subsequent to the aforementioned understanding of the revelation concerning exegesis or *tafsīr* and its underlying concepts, it is imperative to furnish a lexical and technical definition of the term "*tafsīr*" prior to delving into the subject matter. In Arabic, the word "*tafsīr*" is the most frequently employed for interpretation, encompassing the interpretation of the

<sup>25</sup> Mannā' Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Riyad, Saudi: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 2000; Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan*, Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999, 221–31.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*.

<sup>27</sup> Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān Fī al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. II, Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1988; Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssirūn*, 1:34.

<sup>28</sup> Von Denffer, *'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Jalāl al-dīn Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Karachi: Darul 'Ishā'at, 2008, 85–96.

<sup>30</sup> Ismail Albayrak, "Qur'anic Narrative and Isra'iliyyat in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis" (phd, University of Leeds, 2000), <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/507/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought."



*Qur'ān*. Nonetheless, linguists are divided regarding the precise source of this term. Early academicians employed the term “*tafsīr*” to denote the elucidation of words or discourse.<sup>32</sup> *Tafsīr*, as defined by Mannā‘ al-Qaṭṭān (d.1999/1420), is the derivative form of the Arabic word *fasr*. Its literal translation is “to explicate, unveil, and clarify the comprehensible meanings.”<sup>33</sup> As to Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311–12), the term “*fasr*” refers to the act of uncovering or disclosing something that was previously concealed. *Tafsīr*, therefore, refers to the act of unveiling or enlightening the meaning or connotation of an intricate term.<sup>34</sup> The term is used in this particular context in the *Qur'ān*, as seen in Q.25: 33:

“And they fail to present any instance or resemblance [in an attempt to refute or criticize you or this *Qur'ān*]. Instead, we disclose the truth to you (in opposition to such resemblance or instance), along with the superior explanation [*tafsīran*] of it.”

As Ibn ‘Abbās<sup>ra</sup> explains, “*tafsīran*” in this context corresponds to “*tafsīlan*”, which means “elaboration.”<sup>35</sup> There is an alternative viewpoint that posits “*safara*” (to unveil or disclose) rather than *fasr* as the root of *tafsīr*.<sup>36</sup> The meaning of the phrase *safarat* (*al-mar’at*) ‘*an wajhihā*, as defined by ‘Arthar Jafri, is “(The woman) removed her veil from her face.” When a woman is exposed in this manner, she is labeled *sāfirah*, denoting the absence of coverings on specific areas of her body.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the meaning of *tafsīr* pertains to the act of “disclosing” or “exposing” that which is concealed.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of its origin, it seems that the meaning of *tafsīr* is inextricably connected to the concept of “revealing.”<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, Zarkashī (d.795/1392), an authority on the tenets of *tafsīr*, posits that the technical term *tafsīr* denotes a domain of knowledge through which one comprehends, elucidates, and extracts guidance and regulations from the sacred text revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh).<sup>40</sup> *Tafsīr*, a term coined by Ḥussain al-Dhahabī, pertains to the explication of the words and expressions of the *Qur'ān* or the interpretation of God’s words.<sup>41</sup> *Tafsīr*, as stated by Abū J’afar al-Ṭusī, incorporates the examination of the *Qur'ān*’s meaning, the purpose behind its reading, the analysis of the ‘*i’rāb* and, *mutashabihāt* verses, and the

<sup>32</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 323.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān Al-‘Arab*, vol. V, Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1955, 55; Murtaḍā al-Zubaydī, *Tāj al-‘arus Min Jawāhir Al-Qāmūs*, vol. III, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2006, 470; ‘Alī al-Ṣagīr Ḥussain, *Al- Mabādi’ al- ‘amma Li Tafsīr al- Qur’ān*, Bayrūt: Dār al- Mu’ arrikh al- ‘Arabī, 2000, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 324.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 324.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Arthar Jafri, *Muqaddamatān Fī Al- ‘ulūm al -Qur’ān*, Bagdād: Maṭb‘a al- Sunna al- Muḥammadiyya, 1954, 172.

<sup>38</sup> Edward William Lane, *Lexicon, Arabic–English*, vol. IV, New York: Ungar Pub. Co, 1955, 1370.

<sup>39</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān Fī al- ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, II:33.

<sup>41</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al- Mufasssīrūn*, 1:16.

formulation of responses to the criticisms leveled against the *mulhidūn* (atheists) concerning this subject.<sup>42</sup> Zamakhsharī (d. 1143) explains *tafsīr* as the scholarly pursuit of divining law and significance from the Book of *Allāh* (God), which was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh).<sup>43</sup> *Tafsīr*, as articulated by Abū Ḥayyān (d.745/1344), is a scholarly field that scrutinizes the quotation of *Qur'ānic* words, their semantic and contextual implications, and the interpretations ascribed to them within that specified framework.<sup>44</sup> This definition encompasses the majority of pertinent academic fields upon which *tafsīr* is founded: *Qur'ānic* narratives; the recitation (*ilm al-qirā'āt*); syntax and phraseology; textual and figurative terminology usage; cancellation; and events of revelation.<sup>45</sup>

*Ta'wīl* is, on the one hand, a second most frequently employed term in the exegesis of the *Qur'ān*. The word *ta'wīl* is derived from the root word "*awl*," which signifies a reversion to the source of a particular entity.<sup>46</sup> According to Edward Lane, *ta'wīl* can be defined as the process of uncovering, detecting, revealing, developing, disclosing, explaining, expounding, or interpreting; it pertains to that which an object is, or potentially can be, limited to, or to which it is, or might evolve into.<sup>47</sup> The term "*ta'wīl*" appears throughout the *Qur'ān*. The following is among the most pertinent (Q.3:7):

*"He is the one who sent this book [the Qur'ān] to you [Muḥammad]. There are some verses that are very explicit—they form the basis of the Book—and some that aren't so obvious. For those whose minds are off from the truth, they follow that which isn't entirely apparent, looking for al-fitnah (polytheism, trials), and they want to know what it means [ta'wīl], but only God knows what it means [ta'wīl]. And those with a solid understanding say, "We believe it all; all of it (both the explicit and ambiguous verses) is from our Lord." And no one gets guidance except those who grasp." In another verse in the Q.12:6, the word ta'wīl is used to describe the precise meaning of a dream or to discuss how to decipher dreams: "Thus will God pick you and teach you the interpretation of dreams."*

In terms of elucidating meaning, *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* are also employed nearly interchangeably. *Ta'wīl* was employed by numerous early authorities in this regard. One instance can be found in the Prophet's purported entreaty to God to grant Ibn 'Abbās<sup>RA</sup> comprehension of religion and instruct him the *ta'wīl* (interpretation) of the *Qur'ān*.<sup>48</sup> The renowned exegete Ṭabarī used the word *ta'wīl* in this particular context. When he states 'the assertion with reference to

<sup>42</sup> Abū J'afar Al-Ṭusī, *Al-Ṭibyān Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Nazaf: Al-Maṭb'a al-Ilmiyyah, 1958, 1–2.

<sup>43</sup> Sābūnī, *Al-Ṭibyān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ Fī al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, Cairo: Maṭb'a al-S'ādah, 1328), 13–14; Jalāl al-dīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Muḥammad Abu al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, vol. IV, Cairo, 1967, 194.

<sup>45</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 58.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān Al-'Arab*.

<sup>47</sup> Edward William Lane, *Lexicon, Arabic-English*, vol. 1, New York: Ungar Pub. Co, 1955, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, vol. II, 8, Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1957, 365; Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 327.

the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the word of the highest is exactly thus,' he actually is referring to *tafsīr*.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the interpreter Mujāhid (d. 104/722), in reference to the *tafsīr* of the *Qur'ān*, states, "The scholars are acquainted with its interpretation (*ta'wīlahū*)"<sup>50</sup>. Numerous scholars have argued, on the basis of such usages, that *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* are equivalent. According to Abū 'Ubayd (d. 224/838), these are interchangeable terms.<sup>51</sup>

However, an opposing viewpoint has posited that they diverge. As an example, Ibn Ḥabīb al-Naysābūrī (d. 556/1160) asserts, "During our era, a number of *Qur'ānic* exegetes emerged who were unable to distinguish between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* when queried about such matters."<sup>52</sup> According to Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, the narrated information regarding the *Qur'ān* from the Companions is referred to as *tafsīr*. Similarly, the interpretations and opinions expressed by the *fuqahā'* (Jurists) are categorized as *ta'wīl*.<sup>53</sup> Ḥussain al-Dhahabī posited that the *'uṣūliyyūn* (fundamentalists) employ the term *ta'wīl* to denote an element susceptible to validation.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, endeavors are made to distinguish between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* are frequently perplexing.<sup>55</sup>

Subsequent epochs witnessed the development of a more technical connotation for the word *ta'wīl*, which emerged in relation to the controversy surrounding the superiority of reason or opinion (*ra'y*) over tradition (*ma'thūr*) in the realm of interpretation.<sup>56</sup> Within this particular framework, *tafsīr* merged with *riwāyah* (tradition, narratives, texts), whereas *ta'wīl* became associated with *dirāyah* (reason, comprehension, thoughts).<sup>57</sup> Therefore, *tafsīr* was associated with wisdom that had been transmitted through the ages (tradition), while *ta'wīl* entailed favoring a single interpretation over other potential meanings, regardless of whether they were supported by linguistic or textual evidence. The available evidence, to the extent that it is present, is predominantly derived from *ijtihād* (personal reasoning) and requires a substantial grasp of linguistic, semantic, and contextual understanding. Hence, *ta'wīl* necessitates the application of inference (*istinbāt*),<sup>58</sup> whereas *tafsīr* primarily relies on testimonies attributed to the Prophet and the Companions.

The debates surrounding this split for example can be found primarily within

<sup>49</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:17.

<sup>50</sup> Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-'irfān Fī Al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, II:7; Sābūnī, *Al-Tibyān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1967, IV:192.

<sup>52</sup> Suyūṭī, IV:192; Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:18.

<sup>53</sup> Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *T'awīlāt 'Ahl Al-Sunna*, (Iraq: Wajāra al-'awqāf, 1404), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:18.

<sup>55</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 59.

<sup>56</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Ferry Siregar, "EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF LINGUISTIC IN THE QURAN AND ITS TAFSIR," *RELIGIA* 15 (October 3, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v15i1.119>.

<sup>58</sup> Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1967, IV:193.

the disagreement between Ibn Taymiyyah and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Ibn Taymiyya who was very hostile toward the Asharite's method of *ta'wīl* led him to write a voluminous work entitled *Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa al-Naql* which directed as a rebuttal of al-Rāzī's *Ta'sīs al-Taqdīs*. For the former, the method of prioritizing reason as exemplified in the method of *ta'wīl* indirectly can undermine the revelatory power of the *Qur'an* especially by assigning the allegorical interpretation into the text. As Ibn Taymiyya insisted the right use of reason will never contradict the revelation. However, as the recent scholarship has found, his critique toward the Asharite method of *ta'wīl* was missing the broader framework of their epistemology in which even from the view of Ibn Taymiyya himself he would not differ so much on the function of reason as the foundation of revelation.<sup>59</sup>

#### Diversity within *Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr*

An immensely important classification of *tafsīr* is referred to in Arabic as *tafsīr bi al-riwāyah* or *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, which signifies interpretation founded on texts or traditions. Abdullah Saeed, an Australian Muslim scholar explains that tradition-based *tafsīr* entails basing the interpretation of the *Qur'ān* on the Prophet, the earliest Muslims, and the *Qur'ān* itself.<sup>60</sup> In a nutshell, the objective is for interpretation to faithfully mirror the primary sources of Islam to the greatest extent feasible. Furthermore, in cases where the source is a quotation attributed to the Prophet, a companion, or a successor, it is imperative that the narration (*riwāyah*) possesses a "sound" framework. This implies a complete and coherent chain of narrators (*isnād*) whose accounts are dependable and truthful. Subsequent to this condition, the narrated report can be deemed historically authentic and, as such, authoritative. Numerous scholars (both classical and contemporary) have posited that *tafsīr* based on tradition is the most reliable and optimal approach to the interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, a contemporary scholar, asserts:

*"We must adhere to and embrace the exegesis derived from textual sources and traditional teachings. This is because it represents the trajectory towards genuine enlightenment. Additionally, it is the most secure method of protecting oneself from ascribing mistakes and deviations to the divine scripture."*<sup>61</sup>

Based on Qaṭṭān's above definition, Saeed argues that *tafsīr* rooted in tradition holds that the *Qur'ān* can only be authoritatively interpreted by those

<sup>59</sup> Bilal Ibrahim, "Reason and Revelation in Fakhr Al-Dīn al-Rāzī and the Ash'arī Tradition," *Philosophy in the Islamic World in Context. De Gruyter, Berlin and Boston*, 2021, 129–82; Frank Griffel, "Ibn Taymiyya and His Ash'arite Opponents on Reason and Revelation: Similarities, Differences, and a Vicious Circle.," *Muslim World* 108, no. 1 (2018); Choirul Ahmad, "An Unfortunate Refutation: Ibn Taymiyyah on the Priority of Reason over Revelation," *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

<sup>60</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al-'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 350.

who are connected to the Prophet (*salaf*), and subsequent generations should adhere to this and derive their interpretations from the *salaf*'s teachings.<sup>62</sup> As per Denffer's analysis, this encompasses all *Qur'ānic* interpretations that can be authenticated through a transmission chain, including the *Qur'ān* and the interpretations transmitted by the Prophet and Companions.<sup>63</sup> Here, Demirci presents an alternative interpretation that is based on the *Qur'ān*, the Prophet's *sunna*, the accounts passed down from early scholars, the Arabic language, and pre-Islamic Arab poets.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted in this regard that the early Muslims relied on *isrā'iliyyāt* accounts, which are biblical sources, to decipher the *Qur'ān*.<sup>65</sup> According to Paçacı and others, the narratives of earlier prophets are mostly interpreted from *Isrā'iliyyāt* narrations, which are therefore also a part of tradition-based exegesis.<sup>66</sup> In a nutshell, this branch of exegesis involves interpreting the *Qur'ān* in light of the *Qur'ān* itself, the tradition passed down from the prophets, and the traditional accounts from preceding academics. In the annals of *tafsir*, this stands out as a highly influential interpretation.<sup>67</sup>

During the modern era, several contemporary scholars, including 'Abduh, adopted a significantly different approach to *tafsir bi-al-ma'thūr* than their classical counterparts. As an illustration, 'Abduh rejects the relevance and authority of specific traditions brought down from the earliest generations of Muslims in regards to the interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. He argues that classical interpretations ought to be disregarded due to their endeavors to elucidate matters that remain unexplained in the *Qur'ān*, disregard for contextual factors, and reliance on dubious traditions.<sup>68</sup> He also holds the view that commentaries on the *Qur'ān* ought to be devoid of "learned quotations, grammatical monographs, and theoretical speculation."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, he argues that tradition-based commentaries obscure the essence of the *Qur'ān*, leading their readers astray from the intended objectives of the text.<sup>70</sup> As a result, in his interpretation of the *Qur'ān*, 'Abduh largely overlooks the canonical commentaries.<sup>71</sup> Generally, numerous critiques to the classical interpreters can be observed in the works of modernist exegetes.<sup>72</sup> It can be inferred from the aforementioned that

<sup>62</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum al Qur'an : An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an (Koran)*, Kube Publishing Ltd, 2015, 124.

<sup>64</sup> Muhsin Demirci and Tefsir Tarihi, "İFAV Yay," 2003, 128.

<sup>65</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 96.

<sup>66</sup> Mehmet PAÇACI, "Klasik Tefsir Neydi?," *İslâmî İlimler Dergisi* 1, no. 3 (2007): 7–20.

<sup>67</sup> Coruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'anic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi."

<sup>68</sup> Mohammed Abduh, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Karim: Tafsir al-Manar* (oj, 1947).

<sup>69</sup> Johannes JG Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Brill Archive, 1980, 29–30.

<sup>70</sup> Mehmet Paçacı, *Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a ve Tefsire Ne Oldu?*, Klasik, 2008, 96.

<sup>71</sup> İsmail Albayrak, *Klâsik Modernizmde Kur'an'a Yaklaşımlar*, Ensar neşriyat, 2004, 101–2.

<sup>72</sup> Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation:(1880-1960)*, Brill Archive, 1961, 16.

‘Abduh is dissatisfied with the characteristics and textual style of classical *tafsīr*.<sup>73</sup>

However, traditional *tafsīr* encompasses four categories of interpretations of the *Qur’ān*: 1. exegesis based on the *Qur’ān* itself (*tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l-Qur’ān*), 2. exegesis based on the teachings of the Prophet (*tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l Ḥadīth*), 3. exegesis based on the opinions of the Companions of the Prophet (*tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi ‘aqlwāl al-Ṣaḥābah*), and 4. exegesis based on the doctrines of the Successors (*tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi ‘aqlwāl al-Tābi‘ūn*). The first two are regarded as the most authoritative within the *Sunnī* hierarchy, originating from the *Qur’ān* and *sunna* declarations. The Companions’ interpretations, while they were well acquainted with the Prophet, have a lower position on the *Sunnī* spectrum.<sup>74</sup>

#### *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l-Qur’ān* (Interpretation of the *Qur’ān* by the *Qur’ān*)

According to McAuliffe, the era of *tafsīr*’s development starts from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and extends until the early tenth century, with him being considered its main interpreter. Hence, the first classification throughout the formative era was *tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l-Qur’ān*. It was considered the primary source for comprehending the meaning of the text.<sup>75</sup> The *Qur’ān* is regarded as a cohesive entity that serves a single objective. This signifies that challenging verses or sections of the *Qur’ān* are elaborated upon in a different section.<sup>76</sup> The clarification of an enigmatic verse might be found in an additional verse or verses.<sup>77</sup> Another verse may provide additional insight or elaboration on a point brought up in one verse. Interpretation of the *Qur’ān* by the *Qur’ān*, which involves the explication of one verse through another, is regarded as the most reliable and authoritative form of interpretation by a great number of exegetes. Ibn Taymiyyah asserts that the most effective approach in *tafsīr* (interpretation of the *Qur’ān*) is to comprehend the *Qur’ān* using the *Qur’ān* itself. The *Qur’ān* provides a concise summary of a topic, which is then further explained in another location. The content that is briefly referenced in one location is thoroughly elucidated in another location.<sup>78</sup>

Ma‘rifat argues that the *Qur’ān*’s preeminence is indisputable due to its status as the primary source of information required to elucidate its ambiguities.<sup>79</sup> However, al-Dhahabī has classified this category of *tafsīr* as follows: Any verses, words, phrases, or passages in the *Qur’ān* might be

<sup>73</sup> Coruh, “Tradition, Reason, and Qur’ān ic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi,” 87.

<sup>74</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Jane Dammen 1944- McAuliffe, *Qur’ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Sābūnī, *Al- Tibyān Fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith Fī Al- ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 330.

<sup>78</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘at Al-Rasā’il Wal-Masā’il*, vol. XIII , Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al- ‘Ilmiyyah, 1983, 363; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah Fī ‘Uṣul Al-Tafsīr*, Ed. Adnan Zarzour, 93.

<sup>79</sup> Muḥammad Hādī Ma‘rifat, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn Fī Thawbihi al-Qashīb*, vol. II , Mashhad: al-Jāmi‘ah al-Raḍwiyyah li al-‘Ulūm al-Islāmiyyah, 1997, 22.

interpreted by another. The *Qur'ānic* verse or passage that is universal (*mujmal*) would be clarified by the specific ones (*mubayyin*), the verse that is confined (*muqayyad*) could explain the absolute (*mutlaq*) verse, and the verse that is general (*āmm*) might be specialized to develop into *khāṣṣ*.<sup>80</sup>

Here, it is crucial to remember that the primary focus of early modern scholars was the *Qur'ān*, and they underlined that God assumes entire accountability for the interpretation, thus elucidating the meaning within the *Qur'ān* itself. They now cite Q.75:19, which states, "We shall render it explicit." An abundance of scholars in the field of *Qur'ānic* exegesis support this interpretation.<sup>81</sup> Saeed emphasizes the significance of interpreting the *Qur'ān* using the *Qur'ān* itself, asserting that one section of the *Qur'ān* elucidates another. He demonstrates, for instance, the multiple verses of the *Qur'ān* lend veracity to the notion that it is capable of self-interpretation. The interpretation of Q.2:37 in light of Q.7:23 is one example. Q.2:37 indicates: Adam was subsequently granted counsel from His Sustainer, who acknowledged his contrition, since He is the sole One who accepts penance and bestows grace. According to this scripture, God gave Adam several "words" (*kalimāt*). It did not, however, go into detail about what these phrases meant. Q.7:23 provides this explanation: Adam and Eve expressed: "Our Lord! We have committed harm on our own souls. If You do not grant us forgiveness and compassion, we will undoubtedly face destruction."<sup>82</sup>

Said Nursi (d.1960), a distinguished scholar, highlighted the importance of this *Qur'ānic* interpretation that suggests one passage clarifying another. When examining *Qur'ānic* verse 1.7, which states "the path of those You have blessed," he cited the verse 4.69, which states "Those who adhere to the Messenger and God will be among those He has rewarded: the messengers, the honest, those who testify to the truth, and the righteous—what splendid companions these are!"<sup>83</sup> Additionally, he cites Q 76.1: "Man was nothing to speak of" in his analysis of Q. 2.28: "How can you neglect God when He provided your life while you were devoid of life?"<sup>84</sup> Within this particular framework, *Nursi* further emphasizes that, similar to how the verses of the *Qur'ān* provide interpretations for one another, the various sections of the Book of the Universe do the same.<sup>85</sup> In order to clarify the *Qur'ānic* text, it is evident that *Nursi* places considerable emphasis on this method of exegesis.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:37–38.

<sup>81</sup> Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation:(1880-1960)*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 43.

<sup>83</sup> Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'ān 's Conciseness*, Barla Publications, 2015, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'ān 's Conciseness* 249.

<sup>85</sup> Badiuzzaman Said al-Nursi, "The Letters: Epistles on Islamic Thought, Belief and Life," *Terj. Huseyin Akarsu*). *New Jersey: The Light Inc*, 2007, 193.

<sup>86</sup> Coruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'anic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi," 90.

## Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l Ḥadīth (Interpretation of the Qur'ān by the prophet)

The Prophet's interpretation of the Qur'ān is the second kind of interpretation in tradition-based exegesis. Muslim scholars often emphasize that this kind of exegesis is the second most reliable and accurate interpretation. It is the Prophet's responsibility to elucidate and clarify the Qur'ān.<sup>87</sup> The majority of traditional interpreters believed that the life, teachings, and actions of the Prophet served as a practical explanation of the Qur'ān and established the guidelines for the practice of *tafsīr*. Al-Ṭabarī, as an example, characterized this kind of *tafsīr* by stating: The actual teachings of the Qur'ān can only be discerned by interpreting the Prophet's words as they pertained to his spiritual community. The Prophet's interpretation, whether derived from the actual text (*ḥadīth*) or the evidence that he established for his community, is the only way in which these aspects may be discussed.<sup>88</sup>

There is a consensus among Muslim scholars that, after the Qur'ān itself, the Prophet's viewpoint on the Qur'ān is considered the most authentic and precise interpretation.<sup>89</sup> In regard to these two forms of interpretations, Zurqānī (d. 1122/1710) asserts: It is obvious that (we ought to) adopt these two interpretational approaches. Regarding the first sort of interpretation of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, this is because the Almighty God is the one who understands what He Himself meant better than anyone else and the most genuine discourse may be found in the Book of God. Regarding the second category, (which is the Prophet's interpretation of the Qur'ān) it is because the Prophet (Pbuh) offers the finest advice. Furthermore, it is his responsibility to elucidate and clarify (the Qur'ān).<sup>90</sup> The following stanza (Q.16:44) is used as evidence to bolster his position:

*"We have granted you this Qur'ān as a reminder, with the purpose of enabling you to elucidate to the people the content that has been revealed to them."*

According to Saeed, there are documented instances when the Prophet clarified the interpretation of particular passages to the Companions when they had difficulties in comprehending them.<sup>91</sup> A specific passage that exemplifies this is Q.6:82. It is speculated that several Companions were unable to understand the meaning of "wrongdoing" (*ẓulm*) as mentioned in the verse:

*"Those who have achieved trust and have not stained their convictions with wrongdoing (ẓulm)-they are the ones who will be safe, since they have discovered the right way of*

<sup>87</sup> Von Denffer, *Ulūm Al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, 41–42.

<sup>88</sup> Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Edited by Ma'īnūd Muḥammad and Ahmad Muḥammad Shākir, vol. I, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d., 74; Ma'rifat, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn Fī Thawbihi al-Qashib*, I:179.

<sup>89</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 45–46.

<sup>90</sup> Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān Fī Al-'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. I, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 45.



action.”

Certain Companions addressed the Prophet, “O God-Messenger! Who among us has not engaged in any wrongdoing?” Here, the Companions interpreted *ẓulm* literally, as a form of misconduct. Their concern was that they might not be included in the group of individuals who had discovered the correct path. Strictly attributing majesty to a being apart from God (*shirk*) is what the Prophet defined as rectifying this misunderstanding.<sup>92</sup>

However, Saeed argues that despite being queried about the interpretation of verses, there is no evidence that the Prophet conducted dedicated sessions to expound upon and clarify the *Qur’ān*’s meaning.<sup>93</sup> This was an ad impromptu practice that was wholly contingent on the circumstances. Evidently, the Prophet merely recited aloud to those in attendance what he had received as revelation at the time, presuming they had comprehended the text. Given the social context in which the *Qur’ān* was being revealed and the fact that it was predominantly spoken in a language known to the Prophet’s disciples, this would have been a rational supposition on his part. Undoubtedly, the comprehension of certain verses would have varied among individuals, particularly those that employed metaphorical language. As an illustration, one of the Companions, ‘Adiy b. Ḥātim (d. 68/687–688), reportedly failed to comprehend the significance of the terms “the white thread” and “the black thread” as they pertained to the subsequent verse (Q.2:187) concerning fasting:

*“And consume both food and drink until the white thread [representing dawn] becomes discernible in contrast to the black thread [representing nighttime darkness].”*

‘Adiy b. Ḥātim purportedly regarded ‘the white thread’ and ‘the black thread’ in a literal sense, and it has been reported that he went to bed carrying lengths of black rope and white rope in order to determine the appropriate time to commence fasting. According to the records of Bukhrī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*: “‘Adiy b. Ḥātim stated that when the passage “until the white thread [representing dawn] becomes discernible in contrast to the black thread [representing nighttime darkness]” I placed two strands of rope, one black and the other white, behind my pillow in response to the revelation of (Q.2:187). I gazed at the obscurity of the night, attempting to see the contrast between the white and black rope to confirm the arrival of morning, although I was unable to make out any distinction. At dawn, I approached the Prophet (pbuh) and informed him of the situation. He said, It is the transition from darkness to daylight.”<sup>94</sup>

However, Saeed posits that the Prophet served as the conduit for God’s message and was fully engaged with it on an emotional, spiritual, and cognitive level. The connection between the Prophet and the *Qur’ān* was characterized by

<sup>92</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath Al-Bārī, Sharḥ , Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. I, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1997, 123.

<sup>93</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an*, 45.

<sup>94</sup> al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath Al-Bārī, Sharḥ , Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, IV:629.

sincerity and reciprocity. The Prophet had firsthand encounters with the *Qur'ān*, while the *Qur'ān* itself portrays the Prophet's challenges and dissatisfaction, his wavering between hope and despair, and his interactions with both Muslims and non-Muslims. The divine message was conveyed in Arabic, a human language, by means of the Prophet, who was profoundly affected by its grandeur and potency. The Prophet's interpretation of the *Qur'ān* is distinctive due to his profound understanding and intimate connection with the 'word', which gives him the right to interpret it.<sup>95</sup>

In this case, Said Nursi's explanation regarding the *Qur'ānic* verse "I have only created jinn and men, that they may worship Me" Q. 51:56, primarily when he corroborated it by quoting the *ḥadīth* "I was a hidden treasure, so I created creation that they might know Me", might be a good example of how the *ḥadīth* can give a profound significance in deepening the meaning of a verse. Nursi comes to the conclusion that by taking the *Qur'ānic* verse and the *ḥadīth* together, one can find that the purpose of creation is that God, the 'hidden treasure,' be somehow unearthed, known, and worshipped. What the 'hidden treasure' *ḥadīth* does is to employ a striking metaphor in order to convey in readily understandable terms, a most subtle truth; since God exists, and He is the Creator, creation also exists. God and creation are conceptually inseparable, like the face and its reflection in the mirror, or the hand and its shadow on the wall.<sup>96</sup>

*Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi 'Aqwāl al-ṣaḥābah* (Interpretation of the *Qur'ān* by the Companions)

The third category of interpretation pertains to the Companions' interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. Regarded as the preeminent source for *Qur'ān* interpretation in the tradition based *tafsīr*, this interpretation surpasses Prophetic exegesis due to the Companions' intimate knowledge of the *Qur'ān*'s revelation and the events surrounding its revelation.<sup>97</sup> Saeed asserts that while numerous individuals were involved in the exegesis of the *Qur'ān*, only a few number are documented to have made direct contributions to its interpretation. He holds that a number of Companions of the Prophet encountered challenges in comprehending specific verses of the *Qur'ān*. He also hypothesized that one of the factors leading to these difficulties may be the application of the *Qurayshī* dialect, which was mostly spoken in Mecca and its neighboring areas, for reading and reciting the *Qur'ān*. Given that the Prophet and the early Muslims, especially those from Mecca, were either *Quraysh* or had connections to the Quraysh tribe, they were well-acquainted with the dialect.<sup>98</sup> As the Prophet's teachings gained popularity and reached areas like as Mecca, Medina, *Ṭaif*, and other territories,

<sup>95</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 46.

<sup>96</sup> Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Gerlach Press, 2013), 174–75.

<sup>97</sup> Sābūnī, *Al-Ṭibyān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 67–68.

<sup>98</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 46.

new followers who spoke different dialects may have had challenges in comprehending certain expressions or terminology used in the *Qur'ānic* text. This phenomenon would have mostly taken place during the latter phase of the Prophet's mission, when individuals from tribes outside of the *Ḥijāz* region embraced the Islamic faith.

Moreover, Saeed notes that the Companions would have had another difficulty in comprehending some historical allusions in the *Qur'ān*, including those related to the narratives of prophets and ancient civilizations. A group of Companions contacted the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*), namely Jews in Medina, and enquired about many different occurrences and narratives. Several Jewish individuals who migrated to Islam, such as Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 33/652–653) and 'Abd Allāh b. Sallām (d. 43/663–664), played a significant role in disseminating the knowledge of the People of the Book to the Companions. This information included tales of biblical prophets. During the post-prophetic era, several Companions, like Ibn 'Abbās<sup>ra</sup>, extensively debated these subjects among the many Jewish migrants to Islam. In addition, Saeed argues that the Companions' interpretation was often personal. They would express their own understanding of the texts they worked with, without necessarily providing evidence to support their opinions. He presents an example that highlights the individualistic aspect of their interpretations, as demonstrated in the analysis of the term *muttaqī* (one who is conscious of God) in Q.2:2.<sup>99</sup>

However, each Companion in Ṭabarī's *tafsīrs* provided their own interpretation of the above mentioned term, expressing what they believed to be the ideal meaning. As per Ibn Mas'ūd<sup>ra</sup>, *muttaqī* is defined as 'believers.' An interpretation of *muttaqī* by Ibn 'Abbās<sup>ra</sup> suggests that it refers to individuals who have a deep reverence for God and actively look for His kindness by placing their faith in what He has revealed. Another perspective on *muttaqī*, as explained by Ibn 'Abbās, suggests that believers should refrain from attributing divinity to anyone other than God. Additional companions, such as Abū Hurayrah (d. 58/678) and Abū al-Dardā'<sup>ra</sup> (d. 32/652), offered alternative explanations.<sup>100</sup>

In this statement, Saeed points out that the different perspectives presented and the absence of any linguistic or analytical examination of the term "*muttaqī*" indicate that each Companion was offering their own individual viewpoint or preference. He also highlights that the Companions lacked an organized strategy when it came to understanding and explaining the *Qur'ān*. They did not feel obligated to provide evidence from the *hadīth* or conduct in-depth linguistic analysis to support their interpretations. Frequently, it was their *ijtihād* (an exercise of individual judgement) that formed the foundation of interpretation. It was a scholarly endeavor that drew upon the interpretation of the *Qur'ān* and

<sup>99</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 46.

<sup>100</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Edited by Ma'īn Ūd Muḥammad and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, I:99–100.

the teachings of the Prophet, as they comprehended it.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, Ma'rifat puts forth two requirements for considering the exegetical works of the Prophet's companions as evidence for *tafsīr*: 1. ensuring the authenticity of the chain of the *ḥadīth* they have narrated, and 2. acknowledging their profound comprehension of the *Qur'ān*ic text. According to Ma'rifat, once these two conditions are met, it is essential for interpreters of the *Qur'ān* to rely on the *tafsīr* works of the Companion to interpret the *Qur'ān*.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, Nursi asserts that the *Qur'ān* served as the authentic and comprehensive source of direction for the most esteemed individuals among the Companions of the Prophet and the subsequent two generations. According to Nursi, the transition from the external observance of Islam to its inner essence may be accomplished via two methods: either by becoming a member of a spiritual order and progressing within its hierarchy, or by receiving divine favor without the need to join a spiritual order. The Companions and their successors chose to take the most straightforward route, as shown by their actions. Elsewhere, he argues that the Companions attain the esteemed status of major sainthood (*al-walāya al-kubrā*) by directly inheriting the prophetic legacy (*warāthah al-nubuwwa*).<sup>103</sup>

*Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi 'aqwāl al-Tābi'ūn* (Interpretation of the *Qur'ān* by the Successors)

The proliferation of Muslim dominance during the first period of the seventh century resulted in a substantial adoption of Islam by adherents of many faiths. The demise of the Prophet caused newly converted Muslims to depend on prominent Companions for comprehending the faith and the *Qur'ān*. The companions who established themselves in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen, or preferred to stay in Mecca and Medina, emerged as the authoritative interpreters of the *Qur'ān*'s significance. The *Qur'ān* served as the primary foundation for the emerging religion, but, some individuals who converted from different language and theological backgrounds had difficulties in comprehending its significance. The Leading Companions performed a pivotal role in facilitating the comprehension of the *Qur'ān* for a contemporary cohort of Muslims, a significant portion of whom were unfamiliar with the prescribed *Qurayshī* dialect of Arabic.<sup>104</sup>

The *Qur'ān*ic interpretation was conducted in three distinct places, namely Mecca, Medina, and Iraq. Following the teachings of prominent mentors, several successors (*tābi'ūn*) gained recognition as proficient scholars in interpreting the

<sup>101</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 48.

<sup>102</sup> Ma'rifat, *Al-Tafsīr Wa-al-Mufasssīrūn Fī Thawbihi al-Qashīb*, I:179.

<sup>103</sup> Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'an's Conciseness*, 508–9; Coruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'anic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi," 91.

<sup>104</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 48–49.

*Qur'ān* in these three specific areas: The preeminent figure in Mecca was the Companion Ibn 'Abbās<sup>ra</sup>, who had a number of noteworthy disciples. Some of the individuals mentioned were 'Aṭā' (d.114/732), Mujaḥid (d.104/722), and 'Ikrimah (d.105/723). In Medina, Ubay b. Ka'b (d. 29/649) was the foremost authority on *tafsīr* and had several prominent disciples, such as Abū al-'Āliyah al-Riyāḥī (d. 90/708), Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qaraḏī (d. 117/735), and Zayd b. Aslam (d. 130/747). Ibn Mas'ūd<sup>ra</sup> held the highest position of power in Iraq. Notable individuals who were taught by him include al-Ḥasan al-Basrī (d. 110/728), Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (d. 95/713), and Masrūq b. al-Ajda' (d. 63/682).<sup>105</sup>

However, it can be argued that, like to the Companions, the Successors used a somewhat subjective approach in interpreting the *Qur'ān*. This was demonstrated in the explanation of the word *muttaqī*, mentioned once more in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*: According to Qatādah, a *muttaqī* is someone who has faith in things that cannot be seen, engages in prayer, and donates assets for the sake of God.<sup>106</sup> As stated by Ḥasan al-Basrī, *taqwā* (devoutness; God-consciousness) persists in the *muttaqūn* as long as they refrain from engaging in many lawful activities out of the dread that they may become banned. Sufyān al-Thawrī explains that the *muttaqūn* are named as such because they actively avoid things that are often considered inevitable. Rajā's viewpoint is that anybody who wants to become a *muttaqī* should exhibit humility. According to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, achieving "*taqwā*" (piety) towards God does not come from just fasting throughout the day and worshipping all night. Instead, it derives from avoiding what God has forbidden and fulfilling the obligations that God has set.<sup>107</sup>

On the other hand, Saeed posits that interpretation by the Successors is regarded to be authoritative in tradition-based *tafsīr*.<sup>108</sup> However, Muslims remain divided regarding the extent of authority that the Successors possess when it comes to interpreting the *Qur'ān*.<sup>109</sup> In their capacity as disciples of the Companions, they are commonly perceived as being indebted to their mentors for guidance. Notwithstanding their strong affiliation with the Companions, prominent scholars on *tafsīr*, including Ṭabarī, expressed questions regarding the Successors' authority.<sup>110</sup> During the second to eighth centuries, Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), the main *imām* (leader) of the *Ḥanafī* school, unequivocally expressed his stance regarding the matter of authority. He noted that he was liberated to select from among the Companions' perspectives, even in that regard. Should this be true regarding the Companions, he would have regarded the opinions of the Successors with a considerably diminished degree of authority.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Saeed, 49; See for details Denffer, *Uloom al Qur'an*.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Edited by Ma'īn'ūd Muḥammad and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, I:100.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, I:58.

<sup>108</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Philips, *Usool At-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur'anic Interpretation*.

<sup>110</sup> Muḥammad al-Khuāārī, *Tārīkh Al-Tashrī*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1992, 232.

<sup>111</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:128.

Conversely, Ibn Taymiyyah held that the interpretation of the Successors, who fall within the broader classification of *salaf*, should be regarded as authoritative. He said, "If they (the Successors) reached a consensus on the interpretation of something, there is unquestionably conclusive evidence."<sup>112</sup> *Imām* Aḥmad ibn Hanbal expressed two contrasting views on this matter. One opinion suggests that the *tafsīr* of the successors should be acknowledged, while the other implies that it ought to be discarded. However, the majority of Islamic scholars hold the view that the *tafsīr* of the successors must be recognized, as they derived their interpretations from the companions.<sup>113</sup>

## Conclusion

The study underscores *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* as a pivotal method in the field of *Qur'ānic* interpretation, marked by its grounding in the authentic traditions of the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors. Through an investigation centered on *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*'s commitment to preserving the *Qur'ān*'s original context, this study highlights the method's historical role in maintaining the intended meanings of the *Qur'ān*. The findings suggest that while *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* remains anchored in its classical sources, it also holds value for contemporary *Qur'ānic* studies by offering a method that is adaptable enough to engage with present-day interpretive challenges. By connecting early exegesis practices, such as *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān* and the guidance of *sunna*, to the demands of contemporary contexts, this study suggests that *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* is more than a static tradition. Instead, it functions as a bridge between the *Qur'ān*'s historical interpretations and its applications in current ethical, social, and legal discussions within Muslim communities. This paper has thus revealed *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* as a resilient interpretative model that supports a balanced approach, one that respects classical integrity while engaging thoughtfully with the complexities of modern contexts. This paper affirms the place of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* within both historical and contemporary *Qur'ānic* scholarship. By focusing on its dual role as a preserver of authentic interpretation and a model for dynamic engagement, this study contributes to the field's understanding of how tradition-based exegesis continues to provide meaningful insights into the *Qur'ān* for present and future generations.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah Fī 'Uṣūl Al-Tafsīr*, Ed. Adnan Zarzour, 96; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū'at Al-Rasā'il Wal-Masā'il*, XIII:370.

<sup>113</sup> Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:138.

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