

Laying The Foundations: Scrutinizing Qur'anic Exegesis in the First Three Hijri Centuries

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Abstract

Tafsir, the interpretation of the Qur'an, holds significant importance in Islamic studies. Its origins trace back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, who provided interpretations of certain Qur'anic verses. The companions whom the Prophet trained also played a crucial role in the development of tafsir. Tabi'in, the successors of the companions, were the students of the students of the Prophet, so their efforts also contributed to tafsir. In the first three centuries of the hijri calendar, tafsir developed a lot, and its foundation was laid down. The paper examines the evolution of tafsir in the first three centuries. It begins by defining tafsir and its historical background. It then delves into the details of tafsir during the first, second and third centuries, highlighting the dominant schools of interpretation, the process of compiling tafsir, known as tadwin, and how it evolved from being part of the literature of hadith to becoming a separate field of study. It also addresses important issues such as the influence of Israeliyyat in tafsir and how tafsir developed into a distinct part of Islamic sciences. Overall, this paper sheds light on the significant role played in the first three centuries in the development and evolution of tafsir.

Keywords: Exegesis, Evolution of Tafsir, First Hijri Century, Second Hijri Century, Third Hijri Century

1. Introduction

The Qur'anic exegesis holds great significance within the realm of Islamic sciences. Muslims have always placed immense importance on understanding the divine message, as it serves as the means through which God communicates with humanity.¹ During the Prophet of Islam's (PBUH) lifetime, interpreting and explaining the Qur'an was relatively straightforward. As the recipient of divine revelation, the Prophet provided direct insights into the meaning and intent behind the Qur'anic verses.²

However, with no one claiming infallibility after the Prophet, comprehending the message of Allah became a complex task. The Prophet's companions sincerely tried to understand the Qur'an, benefiting from their close association with the Prophet and education under the Prophet himself.³ Nevertheless, the real difficulties emerged with

¹ Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar* (Cairo: al-Haiyat al-Misriyya, 1990), 23.

² Abdul Azim al-Zarqani, *Manahil al-Irfan fi Ullum al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, n.d), 314-315.

³ Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldun* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1981), 435.

the successors of the *tabi'in*. They were one generation away from the direct revelation. This period marked a crucial phase in the evolution of *tafsir*, as scholars of the time engaged in rigorous study, analysis, and discussions to extract the intended meanings of the Qur'anic verses. Different schools of *tafsir* emerged, reflecting diverse methodologies and approaches to interpretation. Furthermore, the issue of *tadwin*, i.e. the compilation of *tafsir*, gained prominence during this era. Initially, *tafsir* was intertwined with the literature of *hadith*, as the explanations and teachings of the Prophet were preserved in the form of *hadith* collections. However, as the body of *tafsir* grew and diversified, it became a separate discipline with its own distinct methodology and sources.⁴

Amidst the endeavours of the *tabi'in* to interpret the Qur'an, they faced challenges in distinguishing authentic interpretations from questionable ones. In particular, the infiltration of *Israeliyyat*⁵ posed a concern. Scholars had to exercise caution in discerning the reliability and authenticity of such narratives and ensuring they did not contradict the principles of Islamic belief. During this period, significant advancements shaped the future of *tafsir*.⁶

One notable development was the transition of *tafsir* from an oral tradition to a written one. Initially, *tafsir* was transmitted through narration, similar to the *hadith* literature. However, in the second century, scholars began to compile *tafsir* into written works, paving the way for its further development as an independent science. Moreover, how *tafsir* was transmitted to subsequent generations changed during this time. Previously, scholars meticulously mentioned the chain of narration for *tafsir*, similar to the practice in *hadith* transmission. However, in the second century, this tradition ended, and *tafsir* was transmitted without explicitly mentioning the chain of narration. Additionally, the sources of *tafsir* expanded during the second century. Furthermore, they also started using *Israeliyyat* as an additional source for *tafsir*.

The third century holds immense significance in the historical development of the science of *tafsir* within Islamic scholarship. While the preceding centuries laid the groundwork and established the foundational works, during the third hijri century, we witnessed the emergence of a comprehensive and authentic *tafsir*, namely *Tafsir al-Tabari*. Even today, this *tafsir* remains a primary source of interpretation for scholars. Before this period, the interpretation of the Qur'an relied solely on the Qur'an itself or the Prophetic tradition known as *tafsir bi al-mathur*. However, we observe the advent of *tafsir bi al-ray* in the third century.⁷ This led to the development of linguistic *tafsirs*, theological *tafsirs*, jurisprudential *tafsirs*, and more. Overall, the first three centuries of the Islamic calendar were a pivotal time in the development of *tafsir*. This paper explores and examines the complex details of the evolution of *tafsir* during the first three centuries of the hijra.

⁴ Fadl Hasan Abbas, *al-Tafsir wal-Mufasssirun* (Amman: Dar al-Nafays, 2016), 145-149.

⁵ *Israeliyyat* (إسرائيليات) refers to narrations, traditions, or stories originating from Jewish sources or generally sources of the People of the Book, that have been incorporated into *tafsir* or Islamic historical literature. These narrations often include accounts from the Bible or Jewish/Christian traditions, which may be mentioned in the context of explaining Quranic verses.

⁶ Ahmad Amin, *Fajr al-Islam* (Windsor: Hindawi, 2017), 224.

⁷ *Tafsir bil Ray*: Also known as Interpretation of Reason or Rational Interpretation, this method involves the interpreter not only relying on the sources and methods of narrative interpretation (*riwayah*) but also critically evaluating the data provided by these sources. The interpreter may question the sufficiency of the information presented in the narration and seek to explain the verse or *surah* with this concern in mind. In this style of interpretation, the interpreter is more active; they apply their reasoning to the sources at hand and, in a sense, engage in *ijtihad*. Abdulhamit Birişik, "Tefsir," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tefsir#1> (accessed December 5, 2024).

2. What is Tafsir?

The word “tafsir” is derived from the Arabic root “*fassara, yufassiru, tafsira*” and carries both a literal and figurative meaning. Literally, “tafsir” refers to the act of explanation or clarification. In its figurative sense, “tafsir” specifically pertains to the scholarly discipline of interpreting the Qur’an. According to Suyuti (d. 794 AH) in his work *al-Itqān*, tafsir is recognized as a scientific study of the Qur’an. It involves elucidating the meaning of the Qur’anic verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and deriving the comprehensive classical rules encompassed within it.⁸

In this context, tafsir is not merely a superficial explanation of the text but a rigorous process that aims to unravel the deeper meanings and intentions conveyed by the Qur’an. It involves linguistic analysis, historical contextualization, consideration of the Prophet’s traditions and sayings (Hadith), and the application of various methodologies and principles developed by scholars throughout history. The goal of tafsir is to comprehend the Qur’anic message accurately, explore its nuances, and extract its universal teachings. It aims to shed light on the moral, legal, theological, and spiritual dimensions of the Qur’an, providing insights into its guidance for individual and collective life.⁹

3. Exegetical Developments in the First Century (1- 100 AH): The Origins of Tafsir

3.1. Tafsir in the Prophetic Period

The Qur’an uses two terms to describe the duties of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in relation to the interpretation of the Qur’an: *Tabligh*

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ بَلِّغْ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ ۗ وَإِنْ لَمْ تَفْعَلْ فَمَا بَلَّغْتَ رِسَالَتَهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْصِمُكَ مِنَ النَّاسِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ﴾¹⁰

and *Tabeen*

﴿بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ ۗ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾¹¹

These terms have distinct meanings. According to scholars of tafsir, *Tabligh* refers to conveying the literal words of the Qur’an to the believers, while *Tabyin* refers to conveying the deeper meanings and explanations of the Qur’an. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) not only conveyed the words of the Qur’an to the Muslims but also provided explanations and commentary on different verses to help the believers understand their true meanings. In his work, *Ma’ālim al-Tanzil*, Husayn bin Mas’ūd al-Baghawī explains that the Prophet (PBUH) was a clarifier of revelation, and the explanation of the Qur’an is sought from his Sunnah (teachings and practices)¹².

The Prophet (PBUH) played a significant role in explaining the Qur’an. He would disclose hidden meanings when necessary, and his Sunnah explains the Holy Qur’an, as stated by Baghawī. This is further supported by the testimony of Aisha, the wife of the

⁸ Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Imiyyah, 1987), p. 381.

⁹ Ibid. Muhammad b. Ashur, *al-Tahrir wal-Tanwir* (Tunisia: Dar al-Tunusiyya, 1984), 10-17.

¹⁰ ‘O Messenger! Convey everything revealed to you from your Lord. If you do not, then you have not delivered His message. Allah will ‘certainly’ protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the people who disbelieve’ (Al-Ma’ida, 67)

¹¹ ‘We sent them’ with clear proofs and divine Books. And We have sent down to you ‘O Prophet’ the Reminder so that you may explain to people what has been revealed for them, and perhaps they will reflect (Al-Nahl, 44).

¹² Husayn b. Mas’ūd al-Baghawī, *Ma’ālim al-Tanzil*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1420) vol. 3, p. 88.

Prophet, who described his character as being in accordance with the Qur'an. She famously said that his character embodied the teachings of the Qur'an.¹³

Additionally, one of the students of the companions shared his experience of learning from him. He mentioned that the companions would learn ten verses at a time from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and would not move on to the next set of verses until they had fully understood the knowledge contained within those verses and how to implement it in practice. This demonstrates that the Prophet would provide comprehensive explanations and guidance on the necessary aspects related to the verses of the Qur'an.¹⁴

Hence, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) holds the distinction of being the first *mufassir* or interpreter of the Qur'an. However, it is important to note that he did not undertake the task of explaining the entire Qur'an word for word. This was primarily because many of the verses were already clear and easily comprehensible to the people of his time, who were predominantly Arabs and possessed a deep understanding of the Arabic language.¹⁵

The Prophet's explanations of the Qur'an were not exhaustive but rather occurred on specific occasions. He provided explanations for three main situations. Firstly, if a particular passage presented complexities or nuances that went beyond the usual understanding of the Arabic language, the Prophet would clarify its intended meaning to ensure a proper comprehension among the listeners.¹⁶ Secondly, the Prophet Muhammad would offer interpretations when the literal meaning of a verse, according to the consensus of Muslim scholars, did not align with the intended message of Allah Almighty. In such cases, the Prophet would provide insights into the underlying wisdom and deeper meanings encapsulated within those verses.¹⁷ Lastly, the Prophet would respond to the inquiries of his companions who sought clarification on specific verses or desired a deeper understanding of certain concepts. His role as a teacher and guide extended beyond merely conveying the words of the Qur'an, as he would elaborate on its teachings and provide practical examples through his own words and actions.¹⁸

There are numerous examples that illustrate the Prophet Muhammad's role in providing Qur'anic tafsir or interpretation. One such instance can be found in the meaning of "*bushra*" (glad tidings) mentioned in surah Yunus:

لَهُمُ الْبُشْرَىٰ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِكَلِمَاتِ اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ۗ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ¹⁹

When the Prophet was asked about its significance, he explained that these verses referred to a good dream that a person sees or a dream that is seen on their behalf. This interpretation provided the believers with a clearer understanding of the context and meaning of the term "*bushra*" in those verses.²⁰

¹³ Salman b. Fahd al-Qadah, "The Prophetic Commentary of the Qur'an." IslamBasics.com (electronically published)

¹⁴ Ibid. *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah* (29929).

¹⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldun*, 4

¹⁶ Wanda Krause, Abridged Edition of Ali Suleiman Ali's Original *A Brief Introduction to Qur'anic Exegesis* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2018), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹(Yunus,63-64) "They are` those who are faithful and are mindful `of Him`. For them is good news in this worldly life and the Hereafter. There is no change in the promise of Allah. That is `truly` the ultimate triumph.

²⁰ Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ayi al-Qur'an* (edited by Mahmud Muhammad Shakir and Ahmed Muhammad Shakir, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rif, n.d), Vol. 1, 204.

Another example relates to the command in the Qur'an regarding the timing of breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan. The Qur'an mentions the "white and black thread" in relation to determining this timing. The Prophet Muhammad explained that this phrase referred to distinguishing the early morning light of the horizon (white thread) from the darkness of the sky (black thread). This clarification enabled the believers to discern the appropriate time for commencing and concluding their fasts during the day.²¹

In all these instances, the Prophet's explanations served to elucidate the intended meanings of the Qur'anic verses. His insights provided practical guidance to the companions and subsequent generations, ensuring that they could accurately comprehend and implement the teachings of the Qur'an in their daily lives. These examples demonstrate the Prophet Muhammad's role as a knowledgeable interpreter and his ability to provide a contextual understanding of the Qur'anic texts.

3.2 *Tafsir in Companions' Period*

After the passing of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim community recognized the expertise and knowledge of certain companions in regard to the Qur'an. The Prophet himself had acknowledged their superior understanding of the Qur'an in several ways before his death. Firstly, he would send these companions to different cities to teach the Qur'an and Islam, indicating their proficiency in Qur'anic knowledge. Secondly, the Prophet would praise these specific companions, further emphasizing their elevated status in relation to the Qur'an. Lastly, he would seek their input and ask them to provide legal opinions (fatwas) in his presence,²² highlighting their authority in matters of interpretation and application of the Qur'an.²³

After the demise of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the companions faced the challenge of understanding the divine message, as mentioned earlier. Due to their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and linguistic expertise, they developed different styles and interpretations of specific Qur'anic verses and words. These variations in understanding led to the emergence of different schools of tafsir in various geographical areas. The following are some of the major schools of tafsir:

School of Makkah was led by *Abdullah Bin Abbas*, whom the Prophet prayed for: "O Allah, grant him understanding of the religion and knowledge of interpretation." Saeed b. Jubayr (d.95 AH), Mujahid b. Jubayr (d.104 AH), Aakrama, Taawus b. kisan (d.106 AH), and 'Ata b. Abi Rebah (d.114 AH) were among the famous scholars of the school.²⁴ The school was famous for its tafsir bi al-rayi. The Madinah school of interpretation and recitation was based in Madinah, where the Prophet had established the first Islamic state. This school emphasized the recitation and understanding of the Qur'an as practised by the people of Madinah. This school was led by Ubay b. Ka'b, Abu al-A'lia (d.90 AH),

²¹ Krause, *A Brief Introduction to Qur'anic Exegesis*, 2.

²² The primary sources utilized by the *sahaba* in their tafsir can be categorized as follows: The Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W), deliberation, and eliciting. The *sahaba* were students of the Prophet and received education and spiritual training from him. Suffah, a center of learning, played a crucial role in their development. The *sahaba* were enlightened by the revelations and the wisdom bestowed upon the Prophet. Consequently, they became skilled in deliberation and possessed the ability to extract nuanced meanings from the Qur'anic verses. They deliberated on various aspects, such as the principles of Arabic linguistics, grammar, the terminologies of Arabic literature, and the dialects of the Arabic language. For details, see: Muhammad Sa'ad Siddiqui, "Tafsir in the Age of Sahabah: Methodologies and Salient Features," *Al-Qalam*, December 2013.

²³ Ibn Sa'd ibn Mani' al-Zuhri, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadir, 1957), vol. 2, 98-99.

²⁴ Abduljawad Khalif, *Kitab Madkhal ila al-Tafsir wa 'Ullum al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-Bayān al-'Arabi, 2003), 101.

Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazi (d.118 AH) and Zaid b. Aslam (d.136 AH) were among the famous scholars of the school.²⁵ The Kufah school emerged in the present-day Iraq region, specifically in the city of Kufah. It developed its unique Qur'anic interpretation and recitation style, influenced by the scholars and companions residing in that area. This school was led by Abdullah b. Mas'ud. Alqama b. Qais, Masrūq b. al-ajda' (d.63AH), al-Aswad b. Yazid (d.74 AH), Mura al-Hamdhani (d.76 AH), Aamir al-shaabi (d.109 AH), Hassan al-Basri (d.110 AH) and Qatada b. Duaama al-Sudasi (d.117 AH)²⁶ were among the famous scholars of this school.²⁷

4. Exegetical Developments in the Second Century (101- 204 AH): The Period of Compilation

The compilation of Qur'anic exegesis began during the late Umayyad caliphate and early Abbasid caliphate periods. Initially, the primary source of knowledge was the science of hadith, encompassing various disciplines such as jurisprudence, history, and the science of interpretation. Scholars dedicated significant attention to the science of tafsir in their works, incorporating the narrations of the companions and the successors regarding the interpretation of Qur'anic verses. These narrations included those directly attributed to the Prophet and interpretations attributed to the companions and the successors.

Abdul Jawad Khalf outlined the main characteristics of this early stage of writing, which can be summarized as follows: 1. Tafsir was not treated as a separate and independent field of study distinct from the science of hadith. Instead, it was closely intertwined with hadith literature and considered an integral part of it. 2. At this stage, it was not known that any scholar had undertaken the comprehensive task of interpreting all the verses of the Qur'an, systematically analyzing each surah and verse. The focus was primarily on collecting and transmitting the interpretations of specific verses as narrated by the companions and the successors.²⁸

Al-Dhahabi outlines a detailed progression of the compilation of exegesis, which can be summarized into six stages.²⁹ Approximately three of these stages took place in the second century, while the remaining three took place in the third century:

As a first stage, the writing of tafsir began as part of the hadith literature. It was included as a separate chapter among the chapters of hadith collections, where narrations of interpretation from the Prophet, his companions, and the successors would be collected. Subsequently, hadith and tafsir became distinct, and specific authorship was dedicated to tafsir. The earliest known example of this was a parchment narrated by Ali b. Talha from Ibn Abbas. Following this, specific portions of tafsir were documented separately. For example, the portion attributed to Abu Ruq and the three portions attributed to

²⁵ Ibid., 103.

²⁶ Ibid., 104.

²⁷ These are just a few notable examples, and there were other schools of tafsir that developed in different regions. Each school had its unique approach, methodology, and emphasis, shaped by the scholars and their understanding of the Qur'an. These schools played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the rich exegesis tradition of the Qur'an throughout history.

²⁸ Khalaf, *Kitab Madkhal ila al-Tafsir wa 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, p. 127.

²⁹ In another account, according to al-Dhahabi, the science of tafsir went through four stages: The first stage occurred in the first century of the hijra. During this period, the interpretation of the Qur'an was transmitted through narration. The second stage began in the second century of the hijra and coincided with the period of writing hadith. Tafsir became one of the chapters within the broader field of hadith. The third stage involved the classification of sciences, during which tafsir became distinct from Hadith as a separate discipline. In the fourth stage, the door of opinion (al-ray) was opened for tafsir. This means that scholars started to provide their own interpretations and engage in independent reasoning and analysis while interpreting the Qur'anic text. Muhammad al-Sayyid Hussein al-Dhahabi, *al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba), p. 104.

Muhammad ibn Thawr from Ibn Jurayj were recorded independently. During the fourth stage, the *mufasssirun* would mention narrations along with their chains of narrators (*asanid*) without necessarily verifying their authenticity (*sahih*) or weakness (*saqim*). By including the narration, they believed they fulfilled their responsibility towards it. In the subsequent stage, i.e., the fifth stage, the *mufasssirun* began to refrain from mentioning the narrators and chain of the narrations. Consequently, they started mixing different chains of narrations. An example of this can be seen in the work of *Samarqandi*, specifically his *Bahr al-'Ulum*. Finally, the last stage of compilation, which continues until today, involves opening the door for personal interpretation in tafsir. This allows for a more diverse range of opinions and perspectives to be explored in the field of Qur'anic exegesis.³⁰

In the second century of hijra, the successors and those who followed them in their pursuit of tafsir utilized various sources, which can be categorized as follows:

The exegete or Mufasssir, when explaining Qur'anic verses, primarily relied on the Qur'an itself. They would often clarify a verse by referencing other verses.³¹ The Qur'an sometimes provides concise descriptions in one place, expands upon them elsewhere, or presents a general statement and then provides specific details in another context.³² The second source of tafsir was the Prophetic legacy. Since the companions would directly consult the Prophet when they encountered difficulties in interpreting a verse, the Prophetic Sunnah served as an essential explanation of the Qur'an.³³ The interpretation of the companions who directly witnessed the revelation holds significant authority in tafsir, especially regarding the reasons for revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*), which comes in the next source.³⁴ When comparing the celestial books, particularly the Qur'an, with the Torah and the Gospel, it becomes evident that the Qur'an emphasizes conciseness, while the Torah and the Gospel focus on elaboration. Consequently, the Qur'an emphasizes the essence and spirit of a subject, enabling humans to derive lessons and morals. Hence, in their interpretations, the generations following the companions expanded on the narrations of Israelite stories.³⁵ The *tabi'un* would exhaustively explore the four aforementioned sources; however, if they did not find an explanation in these sources, they would resort to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) and analogy (Qiyas). This particularly applied to those who possessed the necessary tools for interpretation, such as knowledge of Arab customs, language conditions, the abrogating (*nasikh*) and abrogated (*mansukh*) verses, and a strong comprehension and broad perception.³⁶

In the second hijri century, the exegesis works of the *tabi'in* or successors gained prominence. However, some scholars have raised questions regarding the value and significance of their exegesis.³⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah³⁸ addressed this issue by stating that if an individual is unable to find an explanation for a particular Qur'anic verse in the Qur'an

³⁰ Muhammad al-Sayyid Hussein al-Dhahabi, *Ilm al-Tafsir* (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, [verify year]), pp. 41–43.

³¹ One of the instances that illustrate the concept of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an is what was narrated from Abdullah ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him). He said: "When the verse [Those who have believed and not mixed their belief with injustice] [Surah Al-An'am: 82] was revealed, we said, 'O Messenger of Allah, who among us does not wrong himself?' He replied, 'It is not as you think. [And not mixed their belief with injustice] [Surah Al-An'am: 82] means with shirk (associating partners with Allah). Have you not heard the words of Luqman to his son: O my son, do not associate partners with Allah. Indeed, association with Him is great injustice [Surah Luqman: 13].'"

³² Muhammad 'Umar al-Hajji, *Mawsu'at al-Tafsir Qabl 'Ahd al-Tadwin* (Damascus: Dar al-Maktaba, 2007), p. 273.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 274.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 276

³⁶ Ibid., p. 277

³⁷ Muhammad Bin Salih Al-Uthaymin, *Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir by Ibn Taymiyyah* (n.a), p, 189.

³⁸ A prominent Islamic scholar who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries.

itself, the Sunnah, and the commentaries of the Prophet's companions, then they can refer to the tafsir of the tabi'in. Ibn Taymiyyah acknowledged that there were reputable scholars among the tabi'in, such as Mujahid bin Jabr, a student of Ibn Abbas. Mujahid bin Jabr was known for his extensive study of the Qur'an, reciting it three times to Ibn Abbas and inquiring about the meaning of each verse.³⁹

Notably, the infiltration of Israeliyyat (narrations from Israelite traditions) into the science of tafsir was a significant development in the second century. This infiltration began as a response to the increasing number of converts from the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) to Islam. The infiltration of Israelite narrations into exegesis can be traced back to the early days of Islamic scholarship. While addressing certain topics like the stories of prophets and nations, the Qur'an generally focuses on moral lessons and reflections without providing detailed specifics. However, detailed accounts of these stories can be found in the Torah and the Gospel. It was permissible to narrate these stories as long as they did not contradict Islamic principles and Shariah.⁴⁰ During the time of the companions, we can observe the early signs of this infiltration. Some companions, recognizing the value of additional knowledge, sought wisdom from those who had converted to Islam from the People of the Book. Notable figures such as Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. 32 AH), Abdullah ibn Salam (d. 43 AH), and Tamim al-Dari (d. 40 AH) were sought after for their insights. This marked the beginning of the incorporation of Israelite narrations into exegesis.⁴¹ As time passed, particularly during the era of the tabi'un, this infiltration gained momentum. The tabi'un actively sought knowledge from their predecessors and engaged with Muslims who belonged to the People of the Book during their time. Scholars like Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 114 AH) and Abdul-Malik ibn Abd al-Aziz ibn Juraij (d. 150 AH) were sought for their expertise. Among the tabi'un, Muqatil ibn Sulayman's (d.150 AH) exegesis stands out as one of the most prominent examples of relying on Israelite narrations. However, readers of his work may encounter both authentic and unreliable narrations.⁴²

Unfortunately, as the generations progressed beyond the era of the tabi'un, scholars became increasingly enthusiastic about incorporating Israelite narrations into their exegeses. This enthusiasm extended to including myths and fictional stories contradicting Islamic law and reason.⁴³ This uncontrolled integration compromised the authenticity and scholarly rigour of Qur'anic interpretation.⁴⁴ In the early centuries, during the time of the companions, they had limited engagement with the People of the Book, and the knowledge they acquired from them was primarily unrelated to matters of creed or legal rulings. As a result, they exercised caution and selectivity in accepting information from the People of the Book, verifying its accuracy and refuting any

³⁹ According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the views of scholars like Mujahid bin Jabr hold great value due to their knowledge, understanding, and proximity to the time of the Prophet. However, Ibn Taymiyyah also emphasized that individuals are not obligated to strictly adhere to the views of the successors. If there is a difference of opinion among the successors, then one has the freedom to explore other interpretations and scholarly perspectives. Nevertheless, if there is a consensus or agreement among the successors on a particular matter, Ibn Taymiyyah suggested that it should be considered as an authoritative view. Ibid.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Ali al-Hasan, *Al-Manar fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an ma'a Madkhal fi Usul al-Tafsir wa Masadiruh* (Beirut:Ma'had al-Risalah, 2000 M) p.247

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ An example of unacceptable Isra'iliyat is the claim that Prophet Dawood killed one of his soldiers out of desire for his wife. Other narrations suggest that David killed the woman's husband after he committed immoral acts with her. It is mentioned in different sources such as Tabari's tafsir.

⁴⁴ Muhammad 'Umar, *Mawusu'at al-Tafsir Qabl 'Ahd al-Tadwin*, p. 274.

statements that did not align with the truth.⁴⁵ However, the tabi'un expanded their acquisition of knowledge from the People of the Book. They heavily relied on Israelite narrations in their interpretations of the Qur'an. This was driven by the curiosity of the newly converted Muslims, who were eager to hear details about Jewish and Christian events mentioned in the Qur'an.⁴⁶ Consequently, it became common for those discussing Qur'anic exegesis to find narrations for every verse, even though the Prophet had left behind only a limited number of explanations of the Qur'an.⁴⁷ This marked a significant departure from the earlier approach, where the focus was primarily on the Qur'an itself, the Prophetic Sunnah, and the interpretations of the companions.

5. Exegetical Developments in the Third Century (205- 300 AH): The Period of Classification

During the first and second centuries of hijra, the inclusion of personal opinion⁴⁸ in tafsir was primarily centred around making efforts to prioritize certain viewpoints. However, in the third century, these efforts expanded and encompassed a wider scope, eventually incorporating various Islamic sciences into the field of tafsir. Accordingly, this expansion allowed for the incorporation of disciplines such as Arabic grammar, rhetoric, theology, jurisprudence, and even aspects of history and linguistics, all of which could be categorized as ra'y.⁴⁹ This major transformation mainly happened in the third hijri; as a result, tafsir became a multidisciplinary endeavour, encompassing a broader range of knowledge and perspectives. This enriched approach to interpretation enabled scholars to delve deeper into the profound layers of meaning within the Qur'an and to explore its teachings from a multidimensional standpoint. Therefore, from the initial stages of opinion-based interpretation, tafsir gradually evolved into a comprehensive framework that embraced the diverse Islamic sciences, enhancing our understanding and appreciation of the Qur'an's wisdom and guidance.

In the 3rd century of the hijri calendar, there was a significant increase in the number and variety of works on the sciences of the Qur'an, and specialization in these fields became more common.⁵⁰ Among these was linguistic tafsir.⁵¹ During this time, the scholars focused on the method of narration and observation, conducting philological studies on the words and texts of the Qur'an. This was because the Islamic state had expanded to include diverse races, languages, and civilizations through conquests. However, due to insufficient knowledge, people in this new demographic made mistakes in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. As a response, language scholars delved into

⁴⁵ 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Namr, *Ilm al-Tafsir Kayfa Nasha'a wa Tatawwara Hatta Intaha Ila 'Asrina al-Hadir* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1985), p. 82.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The term ray or "opinion" here refers to "ijtihad" (independent reasoning). Therefore, interpretation based on personal opinion, known as "tafsir bi al-ra'y," involves interpreting the Qur'an through independent reasoning after the interpreter has knowledge of Arab language and their ways of expression. It also requires understanding of Arabic words and their various connotations, as well as utilizing pre-Islamic poetry and knowing the reasons for revelation. Additionally, knowledge of abrogating and abrogated verses in the Qur'an, and other tools needed by the interpreter, are essential. Vol.1, p.181.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ İsmail Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsir Tarihi-1* (Ankara: Fecr Yayınları, 1996), pp. 252-278.

⁵¹ The linguistic approach to tafsir is based on the interpretation of the Qur'anic text using grammatical and rhetorical rules. When supported by context, this approach is accepted, but if there is no explicit textual evidence for a different meaning, it is rejected, and we rely on what corrects and strengthens it with evidence. In the linguistic approach, emphasis is placed on understanding the Arabic meanings that the Arabs themselves use in interpreting the Qur'an. This method is employed when there is no clear indication in the text that suggests an alternative interpretation. Ibid; Abdullah Khudair Hamad, *al-Kafāyah fi al-Tafsir bi al-Ma'thūr wa al-Dirāyah -1* (Dār al-Qalam: Beirut, 2017), 143.

various aspects such as Qur'anic grammar, meanings, metaphors, difficulties, and similarities.⁵²

Works on the Qur'an's meanings emerged when errors in language and Qur'anic recitation (*lahn*) became apparent. There were linguistic exegesis written before, but the field matured with Yahya ibn Ziyad al-Farra's⁵³ (d. 207) *Maani al-Qur'an*.⁵⁴ Further, there were tafsis in this field, such as Abu 'Ubaidah Ma'amar b. al-Muthana's (d. 210/826) *Majaz al-Qur'an* and al-Akhfash's *Maa'ni al-Qur'an*, Muhammad b. Mustanir al-Basri, known as Qatrab's (d. 211/827) *Ma'ani al-Qur'an*, Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Salam (d. 224/838) authored the first glossary book, "*al-Gharib al-Musannef*," organized by subject and focusing on rare words known as *gharib al-lughah*.⁵⁵ These scholars, among others, have contributed significantly to the linguistic analysis of the Qur'an in the third hijri century, providing valuable insights into the Arabic language and its application in understanding the Qur'anic text. Their works serve as important references for those seeking a linguistic understanding of the Qur'an's message.

In addition, the emergence of the jurisprudential schools was accompanied by each Imam having his own methodology for deriving legal rulings from the Qur'an, which led to their contribution to tafsis. Their tafsis of Qur'anic verses was found within the books of jurisprudence. For instance, Imam al-Shafi's book on the rulings of the Qur'an is titled *Ahkam al-Qur'an*.⁵⁶ Some of the works categorized as juridical tafsis⁵⁷ written in the third century are *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by Yahya b. Abdullah b. Bakir (d. 231 AH), *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by Ali b. Hajar al-Saadi (d. 242 AH), *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by Ismail al-Azdi al-Basri (d. 282).⁵⁸

Furthermore, during the third century of hijra, hadith scholars also focused on the field of tafsis, and some of them authored separate books dedicated to tafsis alongside their works on hadith. One notable example is Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH), who authored the book *al-Tafsir*. Similarly, Ibn Majah, Muhammad ibn Yazid al-Qazwini (d. 273 AH) had a separate book titled *al-Tafsir*. Ibn Majah was known for his knowledge in this field, and his tafsis was comprehensive, including detailed interpretations of the companions, the successors, and their followers.⁵⁹

However, some hadith scholars of the third century did not produce standalone works on tafsis but included it within their compilations. Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi (d. 261 AH) is one such example, as he included tafsis in his book *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, which was his final compilation. Abu Dawood Sulaiman ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani (d. 275 AH) also included tafsis in his book *Nasikh al-Qur'an wa Mansukhu*. Abu Dawood also authored the book *al-Huruf wal-Qira'at* within his collection *al-Sunan*. Imam Abu Isa al-Tirmidhi (d. 279 AH) included tafsis in his book *Jami' al-Kabir*. Similarly, Imam Abu Abdur Rahman al-Nasa'i (d. 303 AH) included tafsis in his book *Sunan al-Kubra*⁶⁰. It is

⁵² Ibid., 269-302.

⁵³ See for details: Yahya b. Ziyad al-Farra, *Maani al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Alam al-Kutub, 1980), p. 21.

⁵⁴ Muhammed b. Ali al-Dawudi, *Tabaqat al-Mufassirin-3* (Cairo: Mektebet al-Wahba, 1972), 367.

⁵⁵ Zülfikar Tüccar, "Ebü Ubeyd, Kâsim b. Sellâm," TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ebu-ubeyd-kasim-b-sellam>.

⁵⁶ Yûsuf ibn 'Abd al-Barr Andalusi, *al-Intiqâ' fi Fadâ'il al-A'immat al-Thalâthah al-Fuqahâ'* (Beirut: Dar al-Bashair al-Islamiya), p. 132.

⁵⁷ Juridical tafsis: The interpretation that gives special attention to the subject of legal rulings". Muhammad b. Lutfi al-Sebagh, *Lamahat fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an wa Ittijahat at-Tafsir* (Beirut: Maktab al-Islami, 1410 AH), p. 226.

⁵⁸ 'Abd ar-Razzaq Hermas, *al-Ittijâh al-Fiqhî fi at-Tafsir: Nash'atuhu wa Tatawwuru* (Cairo: Majallat al-Ihya, 1997), vol. 1, p. 113.

⁵⁹ Muhammad Kamel Karabelli and Abdurrahman Ensari, *al-Tafsir Bialma'thur 'ind Muhaddithi al-Qarn al-Thalith al-Hijri: Tafsir al-Imam al-Bukhari fi Sahihilihi Namudhajan*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

also worth mentioning that Ali ibn Madini (d. 234 AH) wrote a work on the *asbab al-nuzul*, in addition to his authority in the field of hadith sciences.⁶¹

One of the remarkable events of the third century of the Islamic calendar was the compilation of the monumental work by the greatest scholar⁶², Ibn Jarir al-Tabari,⁶³ known as *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* or *Tafsir al-Tabari*. This tafsir holds a prominent place in the intellectual history of Islam as it is the first comprehensive interpretation that is properly based on reliable narrations and can be rightfully referred to as tafsir. Although earlier tafsir works existed before Ibn Jarir's work, those were often plagued with flaws and heavily influenced by Israeliyyat or partial tafsir. *Tafsir al-Tabari* is the only work that can truly be considered a proper, authentic, and full tafsir work.⁶⁴ Subsequent tafasir, in one way or another, is dependent on the foundation laid by Tabari. Scholars within the Islamic academic sphere and Orientalists unanimously agree that al-Tabari's commentary is comprehensive and surpasses other commentaries in its depth and breadth. Ibn Taymiyyah affirms that among the commentaries available to people, the most reliable and authentic is the commentary of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. Tabari meticulously presents the statements of early scholars with reliable chains of narration, avoiding any inclusion of innovated or dubious material.⁶⁵ Some scholars even consider Ibn Jarir as the father of interpretation.⁶⁶ The renowned German Orientalist Goldziher cites a statement written by another Orientalist, Nöldeke. In 1860, upon learning about the book *Jami' al-Bayan* by al-Tabari, which was yet to be published, Nöldeke remarked

⁶¹ Shams al-Din Abu Abdullah al-Dhahabi, *Mizaan al-I'tidaal fi Naqd al-Rijal*, vol. 3 (Cairo: Dar Ihya al-Kutub al-Arabiyya, 1963), pp. 138-141.

⁶² Some scholars are of the view that he had a well-known school of jurisprudence (mazhab), and his followers were known as the Jaririyya. However, this school of thought did not survive to our time. Suyuti mentioned in "Tabaqat al-Mufasssirin": "He was initially a Shafi'i, then he established his own independent school of thought, with his own opinions and choices. He had followers and imitators, and he wrote many books on principles and branches of knowledge.

⁶³ Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir bin Yazid bin Kathir bin Ghaleb al-Tabari, passed away in the year 310 AH. Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari was born in the year 224 AH in Amol, Tabaristan, and he is attributed to this place. At the age of twelve, he embarked on a journey in search of knowledge, traveling to Egypt, Sham (Greater Syria), and Iraq. He acquired knowledge from renowned scholars of his time in these regions, including Muhammad bin Abdul-Malik bin Abi al-Shawarib, Ishaq bin Israil, and Ahmad bin Mani' al-Baghawi, Muhammad bin Hameed al-Razi, Abu Hamaam al-Waleed bin Shuja', Abu Kuraib Muhammad bin Alaa, Ya'qub bin Ibrahim al-Durqi, Abu Saeed al-Ashaj, Muhammad bin Bashar, Muhammad bin al-Muthanna, Amr bin Ali, and others of their contemporaries in the lands to which he traveled, including Sham (Syria), Iraq, and Egypt.

⁶⁴ Abd al-Jawwad Khalaf summarizes the main approaches of the book of Tabari in several points: Firstly, his complete adherence to transmitting narrations from the first three generations, with mentioning the complete chain of narration until it reaches the original speaker, whether it is attributed to the Prophet (PBUH), stopped at the Companions, or attributed to the Successors. Secondly, He begins to interpret the verse he wants to explain by mentioning its general meaning in accordance with what is agreed upon by the narrations he has. Thirdly, He does not confine himself to simply narrations, but rather, he critically examines them if it becomes evident to him that the narration contradicts the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text, or he weighs between two opinions and chooses one over the other. Fourthly, Imam al-Tabari resorts to the Arabic language and relies on what is known from the speech of the Arabs when he finds that opinions are conflicting with the linguistic concept. He provides numerous examples of this approach in his interpretation. Additionally, he incorporates the use of ancient poetry as a reference in his methodology. Fifthly: He shows great attention to mentioning the different recitations (qira'at) of the Qur'an, and he confirms the authenticity of the narrations regarding these recitations, while refuting recitations that are not attested to by reliable authorities. Sixthly: al-Tabari extensively discusses the issues of grammar and morphology according to their various schools, and he clarifies the different grammatical analyses if multiple interpretations are possible within a verse. Seventhly: He often mentions narrations transmitted from the People of the Book, such as Jews and Christians, or what is known as "Isra'iliyat." Eighthly: He frequently focuses on verses that deal with halal (permissible) and haram (prohibited) matters, and addresses the jurisprudential issues by mentioning the opinions of jurists. In presenting these matters, he demonstrates his mastery of independent reasoning (ijtihad), choosing the most reliable opinion or formulating his own, and presenting scholarly evidence to support his stance.

⁶⁵ Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmoo' al-Fatawa*, ed. Abdulrahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim (al-Madinah: Majma' al-Malik Fahd li-Taba'at al-Mushaf al-Shareef, 2004), vol. 2, p. 192.

⁶⁶ al-Hasan, *Kitab al-Manar fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, p. 261.

that if they had access to this book, there would be no need for later commentaries.⁶⁷ At the time, it seemed as if the book was completely lost, similar to Tabari's monumental history work, which served as a primary source for subsequent scholars.⁶⁸

To conclude, Ibn Jarir al-Tabari's *Tafsir al-Tabari* is undoubtedly a magnum opus in the history of tafsir. Its significance and impact on subsequent tafsir literature cannot be denied by anyone well-versed in the field. This monumental work, compiled in the third century of the Islamic calendar, marked a breakthrough in the history of tafsir.

Tafsir in the third century had some unique characteristics, which can be summarized as follows:⁶⁹ Previously, tafsir primarily consisted of narrating the views and traditions of the Prophet without incorporating linguistic techniques or personal opinions. However, in the third century, there was a notable shift, linguistics and personal opinions were incorporated into the interpretation of the Qur'an. It encompassed various sources, including the traditions of the Prophet (hadith), the interpretations of the Companions, the Successors and their followers from all generations. Furthermore, the emergence of different schools of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) led scholars to interpret the Qur'an in the context of legal issues. Each scholar approached the interpretation of the Qur'an based on the principles and teachings of their own legal and jurisprudential school. Besides, tafsir gained recognition as an independent field of study, similar to law and theology. It excelled in its organization and classification, being more orderly and precisely categorized than before. Before this, the interpretation of the Qur'an was scattered and lacked organization. Finally, new and more advanced approaches to tafsir were adopted as a result of progress made in other sciences, such as hadith (Prophetic traditions), grammar, etymology, and mysticism. These advancements contributed to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the Qur'anic text.⁷⁰

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the first three centuries of Islamic history hold immense significance in the evolution of the science of Qur'anic exegesis, or tafsir. The process began with the Prophet of Islam himself interpreting certain portions of the Qur'an, and his companions played a pivotal role in establishing different schools of interpretation. As subsequent generations emerged in the second century, the compilation of the Qur'an, known as *tadwin*, became an important undertaking. This lengthy process contributed to the formalization of the Qur'anic text. Tafsir, which was previously intertwined with hadith, gradually emerged as a distinct branch of Islamic sciences in the third century, and different classifications of tafsir works came into existence during this century.

During this period, tafsir faced new challenges and incorporated additional sources. Influences from Israelite sources began to infiltrate the interpretations, bringing a broader perspective to the understanding of the Qur'an. Furthermore, linguistic analysis started to play a prominent role in the interpretation of the Qur'anic text, enabling a deeper

⁶⁷ Ignaz Goldziher, *al-Mazahib al-Islamiyye fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, trans. Ali Hasan Abdul Qadir (Cairo: Matbaat al-Ulum, 1944), p. 85.

⁶⁸ However, in recent times, the book has resurfaced when a handwritten copy was discovered in the possession of Prince Hamoud bin Abdul Rashid, the prince of Hail in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia. This valuable finding led to the printing and dissemination of the book, making it accessible to students of knowledge and scholars alike. See: Khalaf, *Kitab Madkhal ila al-Tafsir*, p. 121.

⁶⁹ 'Abdullāh Rajab 'Ali Mūsā, *al-Marāḥil al-Tatwuriyyah li-'Ilm al-Tafsir: Rasd lil-Tadarruj al-Kamil wa al-Tahawul al-Namṭi* (electronic publication), p. 207.

⁷⁰ Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Mahmud, Abu Maṣṣur al-Maturidi, *Tafsir al-Maturidi Tawilat Ahl al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), vol. 1, p. 233.

comprehension of its nuances. Additionally, the concept of *tafsir bil ray*, or interpretative opinion, gained prominence as scholars began to express their own insights and perspectives.

It was in the third century that tafsir reached a stage of significant development, with comprehensive works dedicated solely to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Notably, the work of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari stands as an exemplary example of a comprehensive tafsir produced during this time. This period witnessed a consolidation of knowledge and laid the foundation for future growth and diversity in the field of tafsir.

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