An Introduction to the Science of Tafsir
By Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani

The literal meaning of tafsir in the Arabic language is to open or to explain, interpret or comment. Technically, the science of tafsir is a branch of knowledge in which the meanings of the Quran are explained and its injunctions and wisdoms are described openly and clearly (al-Burhan). Addressing the Holy Prophet, the Glorious Quran says:

We revealed the Quran to you so that you explain to the people what has been sent down to them. (16:44)

The Holy Quran also says:

Surely, Allah did a great favor to Muslims when He sent a Messenger to them from among them who would recite His verses before them and purify them and teach them the Book and the Wisdom. (3:164)

Keeping this in view, it should be noted that the Holy Prophet not only taught the words of the Quran to the people but he also explained them in detail. This is why, on some occasions, the revered Companions had to devote years at a time to learning a single surah.

Until such time that the Holy Prophet graced the mortal world with his presence, seeking the explanation of a Quranic verse did not pose much of a problem. When the Companions faced any difficulty in understanding a verse, they would simply turn to the Prophet (upon him blessings and peace). Later, however, it became necessary that the tafsir of the Quran be preserved as a permanent branch of knowledge so that, along with the words of the Noble Quran, its correct meaning remain protected and conserved for the Muslim Ummah as well, and so heretics and deviants could find no room for distortion of its meanings. So, with the grace and tawfiq of Allah Almighty, the Ummah accomplished this wonderful mission with such efficiency that today we can say without any doubt or fear of rebuttal that not only have the words of this Last Book of Allah been protected but also its correct explanation transmitted to us through the Holy Prophet and his Companions.

In what ways did the Muslim Ummah protect and preserve the science? What extreme hardships did they face in its pursuit? How many stages did this struggle
encompass? All this has a long and fascinating history which cannot be taken up in the present context. The intention here is to mention briefly the sources of Quranic exegesis and how these sources have been utilized in explaining the Noble Quran by the countless books on tafsir available in countless languages.

The sources of Quranic exegesis are six:

1. Quran:

The first source of the knowledge of tafsir is the Quran itself. Accordingly, it happens very often that a certain point which is brief and requires explanation is invariably clarified by some other verse of the Quran. For instance, in the following verse of Surat al-Fatiha, “Guide us on the straight path, the path of those on whom You have blessed…”, it is not clear here as to who are those whom Allah Almighty has blessed. But, in another verse, they have been identified very clearly where it is said:

So, these are the people whom Allah Almighty has blessed, being the prophets, their true followers, the martyrs (in the way of Allah) and the righteous. (4:69)

Therefore, when commentators explain a Quranic verse, they first check to see if a tafsir of the verse is already existent elsewhere in the Quran itself. If such an explanatory verse exists, they elect to adhere to it as their first choice.

2. Hadith:

The words and the deeds of the Holy Prophet (upon him blessings and peace) are called hadith, and as it has been stated earlier, Allah Almighty sent him with the Quran solely for the purpose of explaining, openly and explicitly, the correct meanings of the Quran to people. Consequently, he discharged this duty with grace and excellence both by word and deed. In fact, his whole blessed life is, after all, a practical tafsir of Quran. It is for this reason that respected commentators, in order to understand the Quran, have laid the greatest emphasis on the hadith as the second source of tafsir and it is in the light of hadiths that they have determined the meanings of the Book of Allah.

However, because all sorts of narrations – sound, weak, and fabricated – are included in hadith, research-oriented commentators do not accept a narration as trustworthy until it withstands the principles used in the scrutiny of hadith narrations. Hence, simply finding a hadith report somewhere and then employing
it as a source of Quranic commentary is not correct because of the very likely possibility that the report is weak or even contradictory to stronger reports. Without a doubt, hadith verification and criticism is a delicate matter and venturing therein is the exclusive prerogative of those who have spent years in mastering this field of knowledge.

3. Narrations of Companions:

The noble Sahabah, or Companions (may Allah be pleased with them all), had received their education directly from the Holy Prophet (upon him blessings and peace). In addition, they were personally present on the scene when verses were revealed, and they had themselves witnessed the circumstances and backgrounds of the Quranic revelation. Therefore, naturally, the recorded statements of these blessed souls are far more authentic and trustworthy in explaining the Noble Quran. Hence, in the case of verses the explanation of which is not found in the Quran or Hadith, statements recorded from the noble Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) are given the highest priority. Consequently, if there is a consensus of Companions on the explanation of a certain verse, the commentators follow just that and explaining it in any way otherwise is not considered permissible.

If the statements of Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) differ in the interpretation (tafsir) of a certain verse, then the commentators who come later examine them in the light of various proofs and arguments and then determine which interpretation or explanation should be given preference. In handling such a situation, an important corpus of rules and regulations already codified under the sciences of Usul al-Hadith and Usul al-Tafsir have been developed, a detailed discussion of which is not appropriate here.

4. Narrations of the Successors:

After the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) come the Successors (Tabi’in). The latter learnt the tafsir of Quran directly from the former. Therefore, their statements too have great importance in the science of tafsir, although a difference of opinion among scholars exists on whether the statements of the Successors are considered decisive in tafsir. Their importance, nonetheless, cannot be denied. (al-Itqan, 2:179)

5. The Arabic Language:
Since the Quran was revealed in the Arabic language, in order to accurately explain the Quran it is necessary to have a complete mastery over it. There are several verses of the Quran for which there happen to be neither any attending circumstance of revelation nor any related juristic or scholastic question. Therefore, in their explanation, neither the sayings of the Holy Prophet nor the statements of the Sahabah or Tabi'in have been transmitted. Hence, the only means through which such verses can be explained is the Arabic language, and it is on the basis of language alone that they are elucidated. Additionally, should there be some difference in the tafsir of a certain verse, then also the science of linguistics is used to run a test of veracity between varying opinions.

6. Deliberation and Deduction:

The last source of tafsir consists of deliberation and deduction. The subtleties and mysteries of the Quran are an ocean with no shore. Therefore, the more a person who has been blessed with insight into the Islamic sciences by Allah Almighty deliberates into it, the more he discovers ever-new mysteries and subtleties. As a result, commentators do present the outcomes of their respective deliberations as well, but the mysteries and subtleties so described are found acceptable only when they do not contradict the five sources mentioned above. So, should a person, while explaining the Quran, come up with a subtle point or independent judgment which is contrary to the Quran and Sunnah, Consensus (Ijma'), language, or the statements of Companions and Successors, or stands in conflict with another principle of Shari'ah, then it will have no credence. Some mystics in the past sought to describe such mysteries and subtleties in tafsir but investigative scholars of the Ummah did not consider them trustworthy because the personal opinion of any person that contravenes the basic principles of the Quran, Sunnah and Shariah have obviously no weight. (al-Itqan, 2:184)

Rules Pertaining to Israelite Narrations:

Judaica, or Isra’iliyyat, are narratives that have reached us through Jewish and Christian tradition. It should be noted that early commentators used to preserve all sorts of narrations which reached them from identifiable sources. Many of these narrations were Judaica, which therefore necessitates knowledge of what they truly are.

Some Companions and their Successors first belonged to the religions of the People of the Book. Later, when they became Muslims and learnt the Quran, they came across several events relating to past communities in the Quran and
which they had also read in the books of their previous religion. Therefore, while referring to the events mentioned in the Quran they would describe other details to Muslims which they had seen in the books of their old religion. These very details found their way into the books of tafsir under the name of isra’iliyyat. Hafiz ibn Kathir, who is one of the authentic research scholars, has written that there are three kinds of Isra’iliyyat:

1. Narrations the truth of which is proved from evidences in the Quran and Sunnah. For example, the drowning of Pharaoh and the ascent of Sayyiduna Musa (upon him be peace) onto Mount Tur (Sinai).

2. Narrations the falsity of which is proved from evidences in the Quran and Sunnah. For example, it appears in Judaic narrations that Sayyiduna Sulayman (upon him be peace) had become (God forbid) an apostate in his later years. Its refutation is clearly given in the Quran, where it is said, “It was not Sulayman who became an infidel, but the devils did become infidels.” (2:102)

To cite yet another example, it finds mention in Judaic narrations that (God forbid) Sayyiduna Dawud (upon him be peace) committed adultery with the wife of his general (Uriah), or that having him killed through all sorts of contrivances, ended up marrying his wife. This too is a blatant lie, and taking such narrations to be false is imperative.

3. Narrations regarding which the Quran, the Sunnah, and the Shar’iah are silent. In regards to such narrations, the prophetic teaching is to observe silence and neither confirm nor falsify. There is, however, a difference of opinion among scholars whether or not reporting such narrations is permissible. Hafiz Ibn Kathir has given a decisive ruling that reporting them is permissible but doing so is useless because they cannot be taken to be authentic. (Muqaddamah Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

**Misconceptions about Tafsir**

It is hoped that the details provided above have made it clear that the tafsir (exegesis or interpretation) of the Quran is an extremely delicate and difficult undertaking for which knowledge of the Arabic language alone is not sufficient. In fact, it is necessary to have expertise in all related branches of knowledge. Therefore, scholars say that a mufassir or commentator of the Quran must have vast and deep knowledge of the syntax, etymology, rhetoric, and literature of the Arabic language, as well as, that of prophetic traditions, principles governing
jurisprudence and exegesis, doctrinal articles of belief, and scholastics. The reason is that one cannot arrive at correct conclusions while explaining the Quran without adequacy in these fields of knowledge.

It is regrettable that a dangerous epidemic has overtaken Muslims lately whereby many people have started taking the ability to read Arabic alone to be sufficient for the interpretation of the Quran. As a result, anyone who attains the ability to read ordinary Arabic starts passing out opinions in the domain of Quranic exegesis. In fact, it has been noticed on occasion that people having just passable familiarity with the Arabic language and who have yet to master their Arabic to perfection take it upon themselves to engage in explaining the Quran, even going to the limit of finding faults with classical commentators. Bad come to worse, there are some subtle tyrants who would, by simply reading the translation, imagine that they have become scholars of the Quran, not even feeling shy of criticizing commentators of great stature.

It should be understood very clearly that this is a highly dangerous pattern of behavior which, in matters of religion, leads to fatal straying. As regards secular arts and sciences, everyone can claim to understand that should a person simply learn the English language and then proceed to study books of the medical sciences would not be acknowledged as a physician by any reasonable person anywhere in the world, and certainly not trustworthy enough to take care of somebody’s life unless he has been educated and trained in a medical college. Therefore, having learnt English is not all one needs to become a doctor.

Similarly, should anyone knowing English hope to become an engineer just by reading through engineering books, it is clear that no sane man would accept him as an engineer. The reason is that this technical expertise cannot be acquired simply by learning the English language. It, rather, requires a formal training in the discipline under the supervision and guidance of expert teachers. When these stringent requirements are inevitable in order to become a doctor or engineer, how can the learning of Arabic language alone become sufficient in matters relating to the Quran and hadith? In every department of life, everyone knows and acts upon the principle that every art or science has its own particular method of learning and its own peculiar conditions. Unless these are fulfilled, the learner’s opinion in any given art or science is not be considered trustworthy. If that is so, how can the Quran and the Sunnah become so unclaimed a field of inquiry that there be no need to acquire any art or science in order to explain them, and anyone who so wishes starts passing out opinions in this matter?
Some people say that the Quran has itself stated that: “And surely We have made the Quran easy for the sake of good counsel.” And since the noble Quran is a simple book, its explanation hardly needs much of a support from any art or science. This argument, however, is terribly fallacious and based on lack of intellect and abundance of superficiality.

The fact is that the verses of the Quran are of two kinds. First, there are verses that offer general good counsel, relate lesson-oriented events, and introduce subjects dealing with taking of warning and acting on sound advice. Examples include verses that discuss the mortality of the world, the accounts of Paradise and Hell, the discourses likely to instill a fear of God and a concern for the Hereafter, and other very simple realities of life. Verses of this kind are undoubtedly easy and anyone who knows the Arabic language can benefit from their good counsel by understanding them.

It is in relation to teachings of this kind that, in the verse cited above, that it was said that “We have made them easy”. Hence, the expression “for the sake of good counsel” in the verse itself is pointing towards this meaning.

Contrary to this, the other kind of verses consists of those which include injunctions, laws, articles of faith, and intellectual topics. Understanding verses of this kind as they should be rightfully understood and then deducing and formulating rulings from them cannot be achieved without insight and a permeating reach into various Islamic areas of knowledge. This is why the noble Companions, whose mother-tongue was Arabic and who did require any linguistic training, would spend long periods of time in learning the Quran from the Holy Prophet. ‘Allamah Suyuti has reported from Imam Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami that the Companions, who formally learned the Quran from the Holy Prophet, such as Sayyiduna ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan (may Allah be pleased with him) and ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud (may Allah be pleased with him), have told us that after having learnt ten verses of the Quran from the Holy Prophet they would not proceed on to the next verses until such time that they had covered all that was intellectually and practically involved in the light of those verses. They used to say: “We learnt the Quran, knowledge, and action all together.” (al-Itqan 2:176)

Consequently, as reported in the Muwatta of Imam Malik, Sayyiduna ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) spent a full eight years memorizing Surat al-Baqarah. In the Musnad of Ahmad, Sayyiduna Anas (may Allah be pleased with him), says that “the one amongst us who would learn Surat al-Baqarah and Surat Aal ‘Imran would have his status enormously elevated.” (Ibid)
Worth pondering is why these noble Companions, whose mother-tongue was Arabic, who had the highest degree of expertise in poetry and letters, and who would have no difficulty in committing long qasidah poems perfectly to memory, would need up to eight years just to memorize one surah of the Quran and understand its meanings? The only plausible reason is that they understood that proficiency in the Arabic language was not enough to be considered learned in the Quran. In order to do so, it was also necessary to seek the benefit of the teaching and the company of the Holy Prophet, and it was the Holy Prophet himself who once said:

Whoever says anything about the Quran without knowledge, he should make his abode in Hell. (Abu Dawud, from al-Itqan 2:179)

The Holy Prophet also said:

Whoever speaks about the Quran on the basis of his opinion, even if says something true he has still made a mistake. (Abu Dawud, Nasa’i)

Famous Commentaries of the Quran

Countless commentaries of the Glorious Quran have been written since the blessed period of the prophethood. In fact, no other book of the world has received as much attention of the scholars as the Quran. Introducing all these commentaries is not possible even in a detailed book, much less in a brief introduction such as this. However, we still wish to very briefly introduce the major commentaries that served as primary reference sources for Quranic exegesis today.

**Tafsir Ibn Jarir**: The real name of this tafsir is Jami‘ al-Bayan and it was compiled by ‘Allamah Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (died 310 AH). ‘Allamah Tabari was a highly rated commentator, muhaddith (hadith expert), and historian. It is said that he continued to write for forty years continuously and would write forty pages every day (al-Bidayah wa ‘l-Nihayah 11:145). There are charges of being Shi’ah leveled against him but researchers have refuted this charge, and the truth of the matter is that he is a highly regarded Sunni scholar.

In thirty volumes, his tafsir enjoys the status of having served as a primary source for later commentaries. In his explanation of the verses, he quotes different scholars and then goes on to prove the position which, according to him,
is weightier in light of proofs. It must, however, be admitted that narrations of all sorts, sound and weak, found a place in his commentary. Because of this, not every narration presented by him can be relied upon. In reality, he was aiming through his commentary to collect and compile all the narrations that were available to him so that the collected material could be put to use later on. Conceded is the fact that he has given the chain of reporters along with each narration so that whoever wishes to investigate the chain of narrators can do so and decide for himself if the narrations are true or false.

**Tafsir Ibn Kathir:** Hafiz ‘Imad al-din Abu ‘l-Fida’ Isma’il ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi al-Shafi’i (died 774 AH), a distinguished research scholar of the eighth century, is the author of this commentary. It has been published in four volumes. In this commentary, emphasis has been laid on explanatory hadiths. A special feature is his criticism as a hadith expert on different narrations, and from this point of view his book holds a distinct place among all books of tafsir.

**Tafsir al-Qurtubi:** Its full name is al-Jami’ li Ahkam al-Qur’an. It was written by the famous learned writer and research scholar of Andalusia (Spain), Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad Abi Bakr ibn Farah al-Qurtubi (died 671 AH). He was a follower of the Maliki school of fiqh and was renowned for his worship and piety. The basic objective of this book was to deduce juristic injunctions and rulings from the Quran. While doing so, however, he has also provided the explanation of verses, research into difficult words, discussion of diacritical marks and the elegance of style and composition (rhetoric), and related numerous hadiths in his tafsir (and quite ably so). This book is in twelve volumes and has been published numerous times.

**Al-Tafsir al-Kabir:** This is the work of Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (died 606 AH). Its real name is Mafatih al-Ghayb but is popularly known as al-Tafsir al-Kabir. Imam Razi is considered an imam of Islamic theology. Therefore, great emphasis has been laid in his tafsir on rational and scholastic debates and on the refutation of false sects. The truth is that his tafsir is a unique key to the Quran. The refreshing manner in which the meanings of the Quran have been clarified and the mutual link of the Quranic verses established is all too praiseworthy. Most likely, Imam Razi himself wrote his tafsir as far as Surat al-Fath. Onwards from there, he could not complete it. The remaining part of the tafsir, from Surat al-Fath to the end, was completed by Qadi Shihab al-Din ibn Khalil al-Khawli al-Dimashqi (died 639 AH) or Shaykh Najm al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Qamuli (died 777 AH). (Kashf al-Zunun 2:477)
Imam Razi has particularly emphasized scholastic debates and the refutation of false sects in accordance with the dictates of his time. While doing so, his discussions became quite lengthy at several places. Therefore, some people have made the following comment on his tafsir: “There is everything in this (book) except tafsir”. But this comment is a terrible injustice to al-Tafsir al-Kabir. That which is the truth has already been stated above, namely, that this tafsir enjoys a high status as far as the resolution of the meanings of the Quran is concerned. At the same time, there are places where he has explained verses of the Quran in contradiction to the consensus of the Ummah. Such places, however, are very few and far between in a lengthy, eight-volume masterpiece.

**al-Bahr al-Muhit**: This was written by ‘Allamah Abu Hayyan al-Gharnati al-Andalusi (died 754 AH), a master of syntax and rhetoric in addition to many other Islamic fields of learning. As a result of his mastery of language, his tafsir is replete with discussions on syntax and rhetoric. He places special stress on investigating the words of every verse, the difference in structures, and rhetorical devices.

**Ahkam al-Qur’an li ’l-Jassas**: This was written by Imam Abu Bakr al-Jassas al-Razi (died 370 AH), a scholar who occupies a distinguished place among Hanafi jurists. The deduction of juristic injunctions and rulings from the noble Quran is the subject of this book. Instead of explaining verses in serial continuity, he has taken up the juristic details as called for by verses which consist of juristic injunctions. Several other books have also been written on this subject, but this book enjoys a prominent place among them.

**al-Durr al-Manthur**: This was authored by ‘Allamah Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (died 910 AH). Its full name is al-Durr al-Manthur fi ’l-Tafsir bi ’l-Ma’thur. Here ‘Allamah Suyuti has tried to collect all narrations about the tafsir of Quran that he was able to find. Several hadith scholars such as Hafiz Ibn Jarir, Imam Baghawi, Ibn Marduwayh, Ibn Hibban, and Ibn Majah had earlier attempted to do the same and collect as many narrations as possible themselves. ‘Allamah Suyuti assembled the narrations they had all collected in his book. But, rather than include the complete chain of narrators for each tradition, he found it sufficient to simply name the particular author who has presented that narration under his authority. If necessary, one can go refer to the original source to verify the status of the chains. Since his purpose was simply to collect a mass of narrations, all sorts of narrations, sound and weak, were included in his book. Hence, every narration allowed entry by him cannot be considered reliable without investigation into its authority. There are occasions when ‘Allamah Suyuti does indicate with
each narration the degree of its authority. But, as he is known to be fairly lenient in respect to hadith criticism, it is difficult to fully rely on his judgments.

al-Tafsir al-Mazhari: This was written by Qadi Thana’ullah Panipatti (died 1225 AH). He named his book al-Tafsir al-Mazhari after the name of his spiritual master, Mirza Mazhar Jan-e-Janan al-Dihlawi. This tafsir is very simple and clear and extremely useful for locating brief explanations of Quranic verses. Along with the elucidation of Quranic words, he also included related hadiths in ample detail, and in doing so, he made an effort to accept narrations after much more scrutiny than that of other commentaries.

Ruh al-Ma‘ani: The full name of this tafsir is Ruh al-Ma‘ani fi Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim wa ‘l-Sab’ al-Mathani and it was written by ‘Allamah Mahmud al-Alusi (died 1270 AH), the famous scholar of the last Period of Baghdad. The commentary comprises of thirty volumes. He made his best possible effort to make the tafsir comprehensive. There are exhaustive discussions on language, syntax, recitations, rhetoric, jurisprudence, creed, scholastics, philosophy, astronomy, mysticism, and related hadith. He made an attempt to leave no intellectual aspect pertaining to a verse unexplained. In the case of hadith narratives as well, the author was more cautious when compared to other commentators. From this angle it is a very comprehensive commentary and no future venture in connection with the tafsir of the Quran can afford to ignore its assistance.

This article was taken from Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani’s introduction to Ma’ariful Qur’an. It was translated by Dr. Muhammad Shamim and edited by Bilal Ali.

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