

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This is a holistic approach to collate Tafasir (plural of Tafsir) or exegeses of the Holy Quran from renowned classical and modern commentators (e.g. Ibn Kathir, Qurtubi, Jalalayn, Mariful Quran, Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad) with a view to gaining a deeper insight and understanding of the messages of the Quran which الله revealed for humanity. This research presents diverse perspectives of various authors. The study is targeted towards Muslims and non-Muslims who have little or no understanding of Arabic and are keen to acquire extensive knowledge. We have endeavored to minimize collating commentaries involving theological controversies or issues with sharply contrasting views in matters of jurisprudence.

Importance of Understanding the Quran

- Imam Al-Baydawi remarked “Truly the greatest of the sciences in scope and the highest in rank and radiance is the science of exegesis (Tafsir), which is the chief and head of all the religious sciences, the framework of the bases of sacred law and their foundation....” (The Lights of Revelation and Secrets of Interpretation)
- “Mujāhid said, ‘The dearest of creatures to الله Almighty is the one who has the most knowledge of what is revealed.’ Al-Ḥasan said, ‘الله has not revealed any āyah without wanting people to know why it was revealed and what it means...’ (Tafsir Qurtubi)
- “Iyās ibn Mu‘āwiyah said, ‘The metaphor of those who recite the Qur’an without knowing its tafsīr is that of some people to whom a letter comes from their king at night when they have no lamp. They are alarmed, not knowing what the letter contains. The metaphor of the one who knows the tafsīr is that of a man who brings them a lamp so that they can read what the letter says.’ (Tafsir Qurtubi)
- Maulana Safiullah stated “if an illiterate man receives a letter from the governor, he rushes to someone who could read it for him so that he could understand its text. Allah Almighty has sent us this great Book. If we do not try to understand it’s meaning, what shall we say to Allah on the day of Judgment?” [Shamsul Ulama Maulana Safiullah (Dadaji)]

Understanding the Quran- Qualities and In-Depth Study

It is generally recommended to study Quran under guidance of religious scholars. Learning from live teachers’ was the general practice in the first three generations. Although acquiring knowledge from books and online materials can be useful, we must not forget the benefits and blessings (baraka) of learning from pious and knowledgeable teachers and obtain their Dua, especially from those with unbroken chain of isnad/ اسناد ie whose link of شيوخ or teachers’ goes back to the Prophet ﷺ.

Yusuf Ali remarks “It is the duty of every Muslim, man, woman, or child, to read the Qur-ān and understand it ...The Qur-ān...has to be read, not only with the tongue and voice and eyes, but with the best light that our intellect can supply, and even more, with the truest and purest light which our heart and conscience can give us...It is like a traveller climbing a mountain: the higher he goes, the farther he sees... How much greater is the joy and sense of wonder and miracle when the Qur-ān opens our spiritual eyes! The meaning which we thought we had grasped expands. New worlds are opened out...The miracle deepens and deepens, and almost completely absorbs us. And yet we know that the “face of God” - our final goal - has not yet been reached... Read, study, and digest the Holy Book. Read slowly, and let it sink into your heart and soul...” (Translation of the Quran). Marmaduke Pickthall states “the Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran and peradventure something of the charm in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so...” (The Meaning of the Glorious Quran).

Ibn Taymiyah mentions that “Abu Abdur Rahman Al- Sulami said, it has been related to us by those who used to teach us to read the Qur’an, Uthman Bin Affan, Ibn Masud, and other than them when learning from the Prophet ﷺ, they would not proceed past ten verses until they had learnt what was contained in them of knowledge and action. They said ‘so we learnt the Qur’an, knowledge and action all at once’. He also cited: Yahya related to me from Malik that he had

heard that it took Abdullah Ibn Umar eight years to learn Surat al-Baqara (Muatta Malik) [Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir- Explained by Ibn Salih Al-Uthaymin’].

Scholars generally assert that to fully grasp the meanings of the Quranic ayats, it is imperative to have proficiency in Classical Arabic - the language of the Quran. A rudimentary knowledge of Arabic and vocabularies assist in enhancing an understanding of the ayats. There are also enormous benefits of translation and commentaries of the Quran in non-Arabic languages. Ahmad Von Denfer cogently argues that it is not correct to assume that understanding the Qur'an in order to take guidance from it depends upon knowledge of the Arabic language, since there are numerous Arabic-speaking people who do not understand the message of the Qur'an. Rather the Qur'an tells us that right guidance comes only from الله: 'ذَلِكَ هُدَى اللَّهِ يَهْدِي بِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ...' (6:88)....This message can be understood by all human beings who are willing to listen... 'وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ' (54:17). There are many other ayats in the Quran and ahadith which stress the paramount significance of gaining knowledge and exhort to reflect, ponder and use reason. Allah says:

- شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ ۗ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ۗ
There is no god but He: That is the witness of Allah, His angels, and those endowed with knowledge, standing firm on justice. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Power, the Wise (3:18).
- وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافَ اللُّغَاتِ وَالْأَلْوَانِ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّعُلَمِيٍّ
And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Verily in that are signs for those who possess knowledge (30:22).
- كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ
This is a Book that We have revealed to you, full of blessing, that they may ponder on its ayats/signs, and that those endowed with understanding may reflect (38:29).
- وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ رِزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيحِ آيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ
And in the alternation of Night and Day, and the fact that Allah sends down Sustenance from the sky, and revives therewith the earth after its death, and in the change of the winds, are Signs for those who use their reason (intelligence) (45:5).

Imam Gazzali states that "Ibn 'Abbas (may God be pleased with them both!) said, in the explanation of the words of Allah ... وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا ... "Whoever is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good" (2:269) that "abundant good" means understanding of the Qur'an. He also said " the purpose of reading the Qur'an is to ponder over it. For this reason it is sunna to read the Qur'an in a slow and distinct manner (tartil)... (On the Etiquettes of Quran Recitation). Imam Qurtubi states "Anyone who is given wisdom and the Qur'an has been given the best of what can be given of all the knowledge of the books of the early ones and others because He said about those, وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا "You have only been given a little knowledge." (17:85) This is called "great good" because the Qur'an is the all-inclusive Book. One of the sages said, "Whoever is given knowledge and the Qur'an should value himself properly and not humble himself to the people of this world for the sake of worldly things. What he has been given is better than what the people of this world have been given because Allah called this world "a little good" and called knowledge and the Qur'an "great good"." (Tafsir Qurtubi).

[one night] the Prophet ﷺ read بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful' and repeated it twenty times. Certainly He ﷺ repeated it in order to ponder over its meanings... Penetrating deeply into the explanation of the Qur'an by stages amounts to the understanding of the Qur'an; mere outward exegesis does not lead to that..." (On the Etiquettes of Quran Recitation).

Deep understanding of the Quran can be gained through piety or الله consciousness. Sheikh Abdul Qader Jilani notes "Allah ﷻ says: " وَأَتَقُوا اللَّهَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ اللَّهُ... " (2:282)...The Law refines the behavior at the door, whereas Knowledge refines the behavior inside..." (Purification of the Mind, Jila al Khatir). Imam Qurtubi states " ... الله will teach those who fear him, meaning that He will put a light in their hearts by which they will understand what comes to them...so that they will be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood (Tafsir Qurtubi). Imam Gazzali said "most people are hindered from understanding the meanings of the Qur'an ...[as] veils let down on their minds by Satan so that the wonders of the secrets of the Qur'an have become obscure to them...veil is man's insistence upon sin, or his being characterised by pride, or his being, in general, afflicted with worldly passion... The man who has preferred deception of this world to the delight of the hereafter, is not among those gifted with understanding, and this is why deep meanings of the Book are not revealed to him" (On the Etiquettes of Quran Recitation).

Tafsir and its Need

The word Tafsir is derived from the root word فَسَّرَ which means explanation, elaboration and commentary of the Quran. Ahmad Von Denfer in his book, Ulum al Quran, mentions three types of Tafsir:

1. Tafsir bi-l-riwaya- by this is meant all explanations of the Qur'an which can be traced back through a chain of transmission to a sound source: (i) the Qur'an itself; (ii) the explanation of the Prophet ﷺ; and (iii) the explanation by Companions of the Prophet ﷺ .
2. Tafsir bi'l-ra'y- it is the use of reason and ijtehad based on sound sources.
3. Tafsir bi'l Ishrara – it is interpretation of the Quran beyond its outer meanings, and the people practicing it concerns themselves with meanings attached to the verses of the Quran...to those whose heart الله has opened.

"...The best method to explain the Quran is by Quran itself. What is mentioned in general terms in one place in the Quran is usually explained in another place..." (Tafsir Ibn Kathir). It is prohibited to interpret the ayats of the Quran based on one's opinion or whims. Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Whoever says (something) about the Qur'an without knowledge, then let him take his seat in the Fire." (Tirmidhi). Imam Qurtubi notes "...Someone who does not have a firm grasp of the literal tafsir and then sets out to derive meanings by simple understanding of Arabic often errs and joins the company of those who interpret the Qur'an according to their own opinions." (Tafsir Qurtubi). Imam Gazzali argues that the use of personal opinion to explain the Quran is traceable to the companions of the Prophet ﷺ including Ibn Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud (رضي الله عنهما) but their kind of personal opinions is not to be equated with the tafsir by opinion that the Prophet ﷺ prohibited...What this means is that it is only scholars knowledgeable in many academic disciplines who would be able to produce high quality exegetical works...For Al- Baydawi, the idea of 'ilm in the doctrine of tafsir 'ala 'ilm would embrace both naqlyi (transmitted) and 'aqliy (intellectual-rational) sciences (Tafsir Al-Baydawi 'The Lights of Revelation and Secrets of Interpretation').

- The main reason to study tafsir is to fully understand the message of the Quran, receive guidance from it for implementation. Allah says: ذٰلِكَ الْكِتٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيْهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِيْنَ This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who are Allah conscious (2:2); هٰذَا بَصٰٓٔرٌ لِّلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْقَوْمِ الْيُوْقِنُوْنَ These are clear evidences to mankind and a Guidance and Mercy to those of assured Faith (45:20).

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُوْنَ الْقُرْآنَ ۗ وَ لَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيْهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيْرًا Do they not ponder on the Qur'an? Had it been from other Than Allah, they would surely have found therein Much discrepancy (4:82).

قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِكِتٰبٍ مِّنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ مِنْهُمَا أَتَّبِعُهُۥٓ إِن كُنتُمْ صٰدِقِيْنَ Say: "Then bring you a Book from Allah, which is a better guide than either of them, that I may follow it! (do), if you are truthful!"(28:49)." The Prophet ﷺ said, "Every Prophet was given miracles because of which people believed, but what I have been given, is Divine Inspiration which الله has revealed to me..." (Bukhari). Imam Qurtubi states "the eloquence of the Qur'an possesses the highest levels of excellence and most elevated degrees of concision and clarity. Indeed, ... the argument was won against the Arabs since they were masters of eloquence... Similarly in the case of 'Alī عليه السلام, the proof of the miracle was established against doctors and that of Mūsā عليه السلام ... against the magicians. الله gave the Prophets miracles in the field in which people were most skilled at that time so that the Prophet could defeat them...(Tafsir Qurtubi).'

- Muhammad Asad remarks “...to all who believed and believe in it, the Qur'an represents the ultimate manifestation of God's grace to man, the ultimate wisdom, and the ultimate beauty of expression:...the true Word of God. This attitude of the Muslims towards the Qur'an perplexes...the Westerner... [as] in Europe's and America's orientalist literature, [it] is frequently described as "incoherent rambling";... for instance, Western critics of the Qur'an frequently point to the allegedly "incoherent" references to God - often in one and the same phrase - as "He", "God", "We" or "I", with the corresponding changes of the pronoun from "His" to "Ours" or "My", or from "Him" to "Us" or "Me". They seem to be unaware of the fact that these changes are not accidental..but are obviously deliberate, a linguistic device meant to stress the idea that God is not a "person" and cannot, therefore, be really circumscribed by the pronouns applicable to finite beings” (The Message of the Quran).
- Quran covers a wide range of subject matters including beliefs in the Oneness of the Creator, Messengers, the day of judgement, life in this world and the Hereafter, social, spiritual, political, historical, economic and scientific. Unlike other books, there are abrupt transitions of one subject matter to another in the Quran. A question/statement was made by a non-Muslim along the lines: Quran is not systematic and lacks coherence but other religious book(s) are organized in a systematic way into chapters with coherent subject matters. Maulana Safiullah (Dadaji) responded: look at a botanical garden (i.e. manmade/tampered) and a jungle (i.e. natural/Allah's revelation). The non- Muslim found the response convincing. Fakhru'l Muhaddeseen Maulana Abdul Gafoor (Bare Bhaiya) used to tell that the reply should be according to the capability of understanding and intelligence of the person who is asking the question.
- Another reason for tafsir is the Quran cannot be understood correctly through translation because no translation can adequately explain the words of الله. Yusuf Ali explains “Classical Arabic has a vocabulary in which the meaning of each root-word is so comprehensive that it is difficult to interpret it in a modern analytical language word for word...No human language can possibly be adequate for the expression of the highest spiritual thought... Instances are: الرَّحْمٰنِ and الرَّحِيْمِ (Most Merciful)...The fact is that it gives us a very limited idea of God’s Mercy, when we only use the English word “mercy”: the Quranic idea implies not only pity and forgiveness but the Grace which protects us and keeps us from sin, and indeed guides us to the light of His “Countenance.” So the “forgiveness” of God is a thing totally different in quality from the forgiveness which a man can give to his brother man...”
- Wahidi said: “ It is impossible to interpret a verse without reference to the story behind it, and its revelation” . Ibn Daqiq `l-`Id said:” Knowing the revelatory context is a powerful tool to unraveling the meaning of the Quran” (Imam Soyuti, The Perfect Guide to the sciences of the Quran).
- Without tafsir, it may not be possible to comprehend the intended meanings of an ayat. For example, in relation to the ayat صُمُّوا بُكْمًا عَنَىٰ فَهُمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ Deaf, dumb, and blind, they will not return (to the path) [2:18], Imam Qurtubi clarifies “ what is meant here is not the actual senses themselves, rather what is intended is the negation of the ability to perceive the truth. Qatada said...they are deaf to hearing the truth, dumb to speaking it and blind to seeing it...”(Tafsir Qurtubi). Ibn Taymiyah states “...the exegesis of the Quran includes its meanings, its wisdoms and mysteries...the Quran is explained in both fronts: a literal explanation and an...intended meaning, and these two explanations are sometimes synonymous and at other times they differ” (“Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir- Explained by Ibn Salih Al-Uthaymin’).
- Whether suras were revealed in Makkah of Madinah provide contextual and historical background of revelation and hence assist in understanding the meanings and interpretations of the ayats. Ahmad Von Denfer states the main themes of Makki Suras are: (i) الله and His unity (tawhid); (ii) the coming resurrection and judgement; and (iii) Righteous conduct..while the Madani suras dealt, among other things, with a growing Muslim community and the formation of the Ummah.
- The concept of abrogation is crucial for understanding of the Quranic texts but it needs to be understood in the context of universal message of the Quran and gradual revelation of verses. The Quran superseded earlier divine revelations, alcohol prohibition occurred in stages and later revelations superseded earlier ones. Yusuf Ali aptly remarks “Allah's Message from age to age is always the same, but that its form may differ according to the needs and exigencies of the time...”. Imam Soyuti stated “... No one is allowed to interpret the Book of God except after he is thoroughly familiar with verses that abrogate or have been abrogated” (The Perfect Guide to the sciences of the Quran).