

“Read in the Name of your Lord”
How Does Classical Islamic Scholarship
Interpret the Qur’an?



Muhammad Al-Hussaini

Introduction to Classical Study of the Qur’an

Leo Baeck College, London

<http://www.scriptsuresindialogue.org/>

Outline

- Why is the interpretation of the Qur'an relevant to Jewish people?
- Structure, compilation, recension, and reception of the text
- The origins of Qur'anic *tafsir*
- Contrasts and controversies in exegesis
- Some major classical commentators

Why is Interpretation of the Qur'an Relevant to Jewish People?

Common DNA – Jewish Influences

- Judaism and Islam – intertwining mutuality
- Narratives from Bible and Midrash in the Qur'an and hadith
- *Isra'iliyat* and *qisas al-anbiya'* literature fundamental to Qur'anic exegesis

The angel of death was sent to Moses, peace be upon him. When he came to Moses, Moses slapped him in the eye. The angel returned to his Lord and said, "You sent me to a slave who does not want to die." God replied, "Return to him and tell him to put his hand on the back of an ox, and for every hair under his hand he will be granted one more year of life." Moses said, "O Lord, what will happen after that?" God replied, "Death". Moses said, "Then let it come now." Moses then requested God to let him die only a stone's throw from the Holy Land. Abu Hurairah added: The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said: "If I were there, I would show you his grave below the red sand hill at the side of the road."

Why is Interpretation of the Qur'an Relevant to Jewish People?

Common DNA – Islamic Influences

- Jewish/Karaite exegetical and grammatical methods – Yefet ben Eli (c.10), Abu al-Faraj, Ibn Nuh (c.10) *Diqduq*
- Sacred language, 'ijaz and linguistics – Saadiya Gaon (892-942) *Kutub al-Lugha* in Iraq, Judah HaLevi in Andalus
- *Kalam* and Philosophy – *Mu'tazilism* and Maimonides, Bachya ibn Pakuda, Ibn Daud
- Sufism and Hasidism – Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (1780) *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, Rabbenu Bachya *Duties of the Heart*



Why is Interpretation of the Qur'an Relevant to Jewish People?

The Immediacy of Anti-semitism

• كتب علينا في القرآن أن نقتل اليهود حيث نجدهم إن أشد الناس عدواة للذين آمنوا اليهود الشيخ أحمد ياسين

- It is decreed upon us in the Qur'an that we kill the Jews wherever we find them – "*Truly the strongest among people in enmity to those who believe are the Jews*" **Sheikh Ahmed Yassin**

Why is Interpretation of the Qur'an Relevant to Jewish People?

The Hope of a New Convivencia?

• ان الذين امنوا والذين هادوا والصابئون والنصارى من امن بالله واليوم الاخر وعمل صالحا فلا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون *المائدة* 69

- Truly those who believe, and those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians and the Christians – whomsoever believes in God and in the Last Day and works righteousness, there shall be no fear upon them, nor shall they grieve *The Table (Qur'an 5) 69*

Structure

- Qur'an in Egyptian Edition – 114 chapters *sura* (pl. *su'ar* from root *s-w-r* 'fence, division')
- Arrangement is not chronological but longest to shortest
- The *ayah* (pl. *ayy* from root *a-y-y* 'indication, sign') is the basic unit of exegesis because it was the basic unit of revelation
- A *sura* is Makkan (*Makkiyya*) or Medinan (*Madaniyya*) or amalgamated corresponding to the two phases of the Prophet's ministry
- Traditional division into 30 sections or *juz* (pl. *azja'*) or 60 *hizb* (pl. *ahzab*)

Timeline of the Prophet Muhammad

- c570 Birth in Makkah
- c576 Death of mother Amina
- c578 Death of grandfather Abd al-Muttalib, care of uncle Abu Talib
- c583 Trading journeys to Syria
- c595 Meets and marries Khadija
- **610 Beginning of Revelation and Makkan Ministry**
- c615 Emigration of followers to Abyssinia
- 616-619 Boycott of Banu Hashim
- c618 Medinan Civil War
- c619 Death of Khadija and Abu Talib
- **c622 Emigration to Medina and Medinan Ministry**
- 624 Battle of Badr – Muslim defeat Makkans, expulsion Banu Qaynuqa
- 635 Battle of Uhud – Muslims defeated, expulsion of Banu Nadir
- 627 Battle of the Ditch – Destruction of Banu Quraydha
- 628 Treaty of Hdaybiyya
- 630 Bloodless conquest of Makkah
- 631 Rule over most of Arabian Peninsula
- **632 Farewell pilgrimage and death**

Compilation of the Qur'an

- Three phases to Uthmanic recension
- Primary text written on fragments during the lifetime of the Prophet and memorised by the *qurra'* (pl. of *qari'* root *q-r-'* reader)
- First compilation of the *mushaf* (root *s-h-f* manuscript) by Zaid b. Thabit under Abu Bakr caliphate
- Second recension by Zaid b. Thabit under Uthman b. Affan caliphate
- Final pointing of *scriptio defectiva* to a *scriptio plena* by Abu Bakr b. Mujahid

Abu Bakr Compilation

- Abu Bakr first caliph (d. 634)
- Battle of Yamama 633 during wars of Apostasy, death of 700 *qurra'*
- Zaid bin Thabit (d. 666), commissioned to collect only written copies with oral testimony of two Companions
- *"...By Allah, if he (Abu Bakr) had ordered me to shift one of the mountains it would not have been harder for me than what he had ordered me concerning the collection of the Quran... So I started locating the Quranic material and collecting it from parchments, scapula, leafstalks of date palms and from the memories of men"* [al-Bukhari 6:60:201](#)
- Collection of *mushaf* through to third caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab; the document given to 'Umar's daughter Hafsa

Uthmanic Recension

- Recitational variants across the Islamic Empire
- 653 Zaid commissioned with Caliphal committee of six notables and reviewed the text based on the *mushaf* of Hafsa
- *"So 'Uthman sent a message to Hafsa saying, "Send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you." Hafsa sent it to 'Uthman. 'Uthman then ordered Zaid bin Thabit, 'Abdullah bin AzZubair, Said bin Al-As and 'AbdurRahman bin Harith bin Hisham to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies. 'Uthman said to the three Quraishi men, "In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of Quraish, the Qur'an was revealed in their tongue." They did so, and when they had written many copies, 'Uthman returned the original manuscripts to Hafsa. 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt. Said bin Thabit added, "A Verse from Surat Ahzab was missed by me when we copied the Qur'an and I used to hear Allah's Apostle reciting it. So we searched for it and found it with Khuzaima bin Thabit Al-Ansari. (That Verse was): 'Among the Believers are men who have been true in their covenant with Allah.'*
[al-Bukhari 6:61:510](#)
- Other *masahif* in existence recorded from Ubayy b. K'ab, Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, Ali b. Abi Talib, Abu Musa al-'Ashari

The Textus Receptus

- The Uthmanic recension said to be in existence in the Topkapi Museum and Uzbekistan; earliest manuscript in the British Library
- *Scriptio defectiva* – consonantal only like Hebrew
- Final vowelless to a *scriptio plena* according the 7 *ahruf* (pl. of *harf* *h-r-f* letter) by Abu Bakr b. Mujahid; 7 *qira'at*
- Controversies due to allegations by Western scholars over the status of the Uthmanic recension – Crone and Cook

Hadith and the Origins of *Tafsir*

- *tafsir* verbal noun of *fassara* (II form root *f-s-r* to explain, expound) - exegesis
- *ta'wil* verbal noun of *'awala* (root *'-w-l* to elucidate) – deeper hermeneutic, moral and allegorical meaning
- *hadith* (root *h-d-th* news, conversation, chat) – the oral tradition of the sayings of the Prophet reported by his Companions and Followers of the Companions – this is called the *sunna* (the practice of the Prophet)
- a *hadith* consists of a *matn* (actual saying) and a *sanad* or *isnad* (chain of narration) – Markus reported that Sandy reported that Larry reported that Jackie reported that Irit said, “I take one sugar in my tea”
- Science of *hadith* – *mutawatir* (‘widespread’ >20 reporters in each generation from different places), *hasan* (‘good’ >4 reporters in each generation in one place), *da'if* (‘weak’ <4 reporters in each generation)
- Modern Jewish Orientalists Goldziher, Schacht and Wansborough questioned the authenticity of *hadith* - “isnads have a tendency to grow backwards”

Exegesis Traditionis

- Wansborough classification – haggadic, halakhic, lexical, masoretic
- *Exegesis traditionis* – *tafsir bi-l-ma'thur* 'exegesis according to what is inherited'
- The only legitimate authority of interpretation of the Qur'an derives from 1) other verses of the Qur'an 2) the Prophetic *sunna* 3) the reports of the Companions and the Followers **Ibn Kathir**
- "Whoever talks about the Qur'an on the basis of his personal opinion (*ra'y*) or from a position of ignorance shall surely occupy his seat in the Fire" **Ibn Kathir Tafsir 1:5**
- Canonised in 8th century by the principles of '*usul al-fiqh* expounded by *al-Shafi'i* in his legal-exegetical work the *Risala*
- Will admit lexical discussion from pre-Islamic poetry in order to elucidate points of Arabic grammar, but little else that is external
- *asbab al-nuzul* 'the occasion of revelation'; *ahkam al-shari'i* 'legal injunctions'; *isra'iliyyat* 'Jewish stuff'

Exegesis Rationis

- *Exegesis rationis* – *tafsir bi-l-ra'y* ‘exegesis from reason’
- Basra in the latter half of 8th century at school of sage Hasan al-Basri, argument with Wasil b. ‘Ata on free will versus *qadar* ‘predestination’
- *‘itazala* (VIII root ‘-t-z to leave, slip, kick) – *mu’tazila* or *ahl al-tawhid wa al-‘adl* ‘the people of monotheism and justice’
- Key Mu’tazilite theological doctrines: Unity of God without any *sifat* ‘attributes’, hence the Qur’an is created not an eternal attribute of God; Man has free will; Revelation through Scripture but ultimately only Reason can bring true knowledge of Faith
- Development of *kalam* ‘philosophical ratiocination’ and *falsafa* ‘Greek philosophy’
- Jewish and Karaite Mu’tazilites: Musa b. Maimun (Maimonides), Dawud al-Muqammiz, Yusuf al-Basir
- Under Caliph Ma’mun and Mu’tazilism becomes the official doctrine and the *mihna* ‘inquisition’ takes place of Sunni dissenters such as Ahmad b. Hanbal
- With Sunni victory, the Gates of Ijtihad are closed – shut to this day

Some Notable Classical Commentators

- Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (Tabaristan 839) *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil 'Ay al-Qur'an* – exemplar of *tafsir bi-l-ma'thur*
- Abu al-Qasim Mahmud b. 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (Khwarazm 1075) *Al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq Ghawamid al-Tanzil wa 'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Ta'wil* – Mu'tazilite *tafsir bi-l-ra'y*
- 'Umar Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (Rayy 1149) *Mafatih al-Ghayb* – Asharite anti-Mu'tazilite but still discursive and rationalist
- 'Imad al-Din Isma'il b. Umar b. Kathir (Damascus 1300) *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim* – Hanbalite and juridical

Summary

- Relevance of Qur'an study for Jewish people and mutuality of Jewish-Islamic theology and exegetical influences
- Structure, compilation, recension and reception of the text
- Key terminology in the development of the sciences of *hadith* and how they are intimately linked the development of the science of *tafsir*
- Theological controversies between Traditionist and Rationalist schools of interpretation in early and classical periods of Islam have shaped the way the text is read and interpreted by the Muslim community today