

*“We Believe in What was Sent Us and What  
was Sent Down to You”*

Continuity and Contrast with the People of  
the Book



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# Outline

- What are the preoccupations of Islamic exegesis and what questions does it ask of the text?
- What foundational and self-referential material is there in the Quran itself on matters of hermeneutics?
- What are the typologies of exegesis and the terminology spawned by it which has shaped Islamic thinking and constructed rules around interpretation?
- What sectarian differences are there between different Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi approaches to interpretation of Scripture?
- *Text Study*: What is the historical context for Islamic monotheistic self-definition? How valid is the Traditional account?
- *Text Study*: What is the scriptural pattern of continuity and contrast with the People of the Book?

# What are the Questions and Preoccupations of *Tafsir*?

- What does God intend for the pious believer by use of this word in this verse? What variant *qira'at* 'readings' could there be by changing the vowelings of the consonantal text?
- What is the *sarf* 'grammatical analysis' of the text? Could the text be read differently if we decline this verb differently or vary the case ending of that noun?
- Is this obscure word found in the *jahiliyya* Arab poetry? Do the Bedouins use this word? Is it a different dialect of Arabic or a loan word from Hebrew, Aramaic, Coptic, Amharic or Greek?
- What are the metrical features of this poetic form? What are the rhetorical features?
- What were the *asbab al-nuzul* 'occasions of revelation' and what prompted the verse to be revealed? Did the Jews of Medina ask the Prophet a question in the market? Al-Suyuti's *al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* lists 12 categories – Makkan or Medinan, revealed during day or night, while travelling or sedentary, revealed to earlier prophets or only revealed to this prophet...
- Who are the individuals the text is talking about – *ahl al-kitab* 'people of the book', *ashab al-'araf* 'companions of the heights'? What is the name of the Pharaoh's wife? What is the name of the person who pushed Joseph into the pit? What tribe are these people, the 'Sabians'?
- What response does God demand of the pious believer through this text – *hukm* 'juridical ruling'? What is the *mukham* 'evident ruling' or *zahiri* 'evident, apparent' reading?
- Is there a *mutashabih* 'allegorical' or *batini* 'inward, esoteric' reading of this text?
- Wansborough: haggadic (paraenetic, narrative), halakhic (legal), masoretic (linguistic, grammatical), rhetorical (stylistic excellence) and allegorical (allusive or exoteric)

# Typologies of *Tafsir* Discourse: Dialectic Argument in Traditionalist Interpretation

• وَالْأَضْلَاءَ لَهُمْ وَالْأَمْنِيَّاتِ لَهُمْ وَالْأَمْرَتَهُمْ فَلْيَبْتِكُنَّ آذَانَ الْأَنْعَامِ وَالْأَمْرَتَهُمْ فَلْيُغَيِّرُنَّ خَلْقَ اللَّهِ  
وَمَنْ يَتَّخِذِ الشَّيْطَانَ وَلِيًّا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ فَقَدْ خَسِرَ خُسْرَانًا مُّبِينًا

"I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, *and to deface the (fair) nature created by God.*" *Whoever, forsaking God, takes Satan for a friend, has of a surety suffered a loss that is manifest.*" *al-Nisa (Quran 4):119*

- 'Ikrima said, "It is castration." Thus it is also transmitted from Ibn 'Abbas... "It is God's religion (*din Allah*)" It was told to Mujahid that 'Ikrima said "It is castration" whereupon he said, "What is the matter with him, God curse him because he knows it is not castration." Then they told this to 'Ikrima who said, "It is God's nature (*fitrat Allah*)"

# Typologies of Tafsir Discourse: the Senses of Scripture in Traditionalist Interpretation

• هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

- *'He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God [PAUSE??] and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge who say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:" and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.'* Al Imran (Quran 3):7
- Interpretation of this fundamental verse is deeply controversial and is a matter of punctuation! Two readings dependent on whether there is a caesura in the middle of the verse. Traditional Islamic cantillation marks added later in printed copies of the Qur'an place a *waqf lazim* 'obligatory pause' in the middle of the verse!

# Typologies of Tafsir Discourse: the Senses of Scripture in Traditionist Interpretation

- Scripture as *dhu wujuh* 'possessor of faces' in polyvalent textual interpretation
- *mukhamat* 'juridical, evident' relating to *halal* and *haram* versus *mutashabihat* 'allegorical' (terminology from *Quran* 3:7)
- *zahir* 'outward, evident, back' vs. *batin* 'inward, hidden, belly' – in Sufism exegesis in continuity with eisegesis
- Sahl al-Tustari senses of Scripture: *zahir* 'outer meaning', *batin* 'norm', *hadd* 'an anagose', *matla/muttala* 'horizon' – four senses, literal, allegorical, moral/tropological, anagogical – the influence of the medieval Christian *quadriga* and Jewish scholarship on Islam?
- Outer sense in *tilawa* 'recitation' for the common people, inner sense in *fahm* 'understanding' for the 'men of understanding'
- Saadia Gaon *Kitab al-Amanat wa al-'Itiqadat* uses terminology of *zahir* and *ta'wil* and is part of the shared *zahiriyya* school of interpretation as Ibn Hazm which emphasises the primacy of the evident literalist reading

# Typologies of Tafsir Discourse: Resistance to Allegory

- Sufi involvement in the development of *tafsir* was extensive, and even Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728) wrote *Risala fi 'ilm al-batin wa-l-zahir* expressing the view that there is *majaz* 'metaphor' in readings of Quranic phrases
- Shi'ite *tafsir* genre very similar to Sunni but with sectarian allegorical interpretation favouring *ahl al-bayt* 'the People of the House [of the Prophet]' – eg. the Verse of Light (*Quran* 24:35) that the verse is about 'Ali (Prophet's son-in-law), Fatima (daughter) is the 'niche' and the 'shining star', Hasan and Husayn (grandsons) are the 'lamp' which is mentioned twice, etc
- Al-Ghazali who writes the allegorical *Mishkat al-Anwar* permits allegorical and symbolic explanations as *supplementary only* – eg. *wuquf* (standing) during Hajj likened to future standing before God, but *only where the literal meaning is established first as the primary reading*. This principle remained Sunni orthodoxy and orthopraxy in exegetical sciences for many centuries in scholarly circles, maintaining a balance between literalism and metaphor.
- Rejection by al-Ghazali in *Fada'ih al-Batiniyyah* of unfettered Isma'ili allegorical and anti-nomian substitution – eg. fasting really means withholding true esoteric knowledge from the uninitiated, circumambulation in Hajj is really the circling of the seven Imams in one's heart
- Even Sufi *tafsir* of Quran circumscribed for allegory, despite extensive esoterism in their spiritual activities – clear principle of confluence between sects where the Quran is concerned
- In the modern world, highly literalist 'super-zahiri' and anthropomorphic Wahabi schools of reading have started to predominate, notwithstanding al-Ghazali's exegetical principles of balance between literalism and allegory

# Islamic Monotheism Born in the Context of Arabian Idolatry

- Please examine the sample texts – traditional Islamic self-definition is that of a robust monotheism in clear linear continuity with Abrahamic monotheism, with the God of Islam being defined as the One God of the prophets of Israel. The Quran is thus seamlessly part of a family of Books ‘sent down’.
- However, a pure Islamic monotheism has now arisen miraculously within a 7th Century Hijazi environment which is largely polytheistic. Later Islamic polemical scholarship excoriates the crude *kufr* ‘unbelief’, *shirk* ‘associationism’ and idolatry of the *Jahiliyyah* ‘age of ignorance’. Al-Kalbi’s *Kitab al-Asnam* (d. 820) lists the many idols of the Arabs and immorality before the coming of Islam.
- Traditional Islam does maintain however that throughout there remained a minority of *hanif* ‘natural monotheist’ believers who faithfully upheld the patriarchal faith of Abraham despite the pagan milieu
- There are Christian Arab tribes (the Banu Taghlib, the Ghassanids, Lakhmids) in the Peninsula, these being chastised in the Quran for their deviant Trinitarian and Incarnational beliefs as also being *shirk*
- There are Jewish clans in the oases around Medina and Khaybar (Banu Quraydha, Banu Nadir, Banu Qaynuqa)
- How valid is the traditional narrative of Islamic monotheism arising *ex nihilo* in a crudely polytheistic environment? Was there in fact a native Arabian proto-monotheism which existed alongside subordinate deities and spirit worship? Is Islamic Tradition’s view of the *Jahiliyyah* too tendentious?
- Gerald Hawting and other Western Orientalists contend that the picture is more complex than suggested by the Traditional account, and do not accept the narrative of such a robust monotheistic iconoclasm arising exceptionally in a crude idolatrous setting, as is suggested by Islamic Tradition.
- What Jewish and Christian influences may have been extant in the formative period of Islam?



# Summary

- *Tafsir* arising out of Scripture in conversation with the pious believer seeking to better understand and submit to God's Word in all its facets – language and grammar, rhetoric and poetry, narrative and 'naming of parts', juridical and orthopraxy, historical contexts for revelation
- The Quran is self-referential in its discussion about approaches to 'evident' and 'esoteric' verses, and controversies around this have shaped Islamic hermeneutics and rules of interpretation
- Despite considerable sectarian differences between them, where the Quran is concerned, Sunnis, Shi'ites and Sufis have broadly similar approaches to *tafsir*, albeit sometimes reaching different interpretative conclusions
- Throughout, the influence of Jewish, Christian and philosophical thinking is evident in Islamic scholarly views on the senses of Scripture, hermeneutics and semiotics
- *Text Study*: The Traditional account of Islamic Abrahamic monotheism arising miraculously within a purely pagan Arabian milieu is controversial. What possible influences exist with extant Jewish and Christian communities in the Peninsula during the formative period of Islam?