

ILM UL QURAN

# USOOL UT TAFSIR

PRINCIPLES OF QURANIC INTERPRETATION

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THIS BOOKLET CONTAINS FOLLOWING TWO WRITINGS ON THE TOPIC OF  
'PRINCIPLES OF QURANIC INTERPRETATION':

- AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCE OF TAFSIR

(EXTRACT FROM MUFTI TAQI USMANI'S MUQADDIMAH TO MAARIF UL QURAN)

- QURANIC TAFSIR AND METHODS OF TAFSIR

(SOURCE: USOOL AT-TAFSEER BY BILAL PHILIPS)

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCE OF TAFSIR

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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-Fatihah, “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 *mufasssir* 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 not 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-Itqan2:179)**

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 *tafsiras* 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.*

# QURANIC TAFSIR AND METHODS OF TAFSIR

**Source:** Usool at-Tafseer by Bilal Philips

This post summarizes the key methods of Quranic Tafsir and lists some of the scholars who contributed to this discipline over the past few centuries since the death of the prophet (s) and his companions.

Before getting into the methods of tafsir, it is important to review some of the key terminologies about learning of the Quran.

**Tafsir** refers to the accurate interpretation of the Quranic texts, such as Arabic grammar and syntax, Arabic literature and Quranic sciences (Uloom al-Quran). A commentator's familiarity with modern fields of learning, like the pure sciences and social sciences can aid in making the Quranic explanations relevant to modern human society.

**Usool at-Tafseer** literally means "The Fundamental Principles of Quranic Interpretation". It refers to those branches of knowledge which are necessary to provide the proper Quranic interpretation (tafseer). This branch of knowledge provides the step-by-step methodology of interpreting the Quran to ensure that interpretations are not merely the result of human whims and fancies.

**Uloom al-Quran**, refers to all the fields of knowledge which aid in elucidating the Quran. These include the following:

- Knowledge of tafseer (exegesis),
- Qiraa'at (recitations),
- Ar-rasmul-'Uthmaanee (the 'Uthmaanic script),
- I'jaaz al-Quran (miraculous aspects of the Quran),
- Asbaab an-nuzool (reasons for revelation),
- An-naasikh wal-mansookh (abrogating and abrogated verses),
- I'raab al-Quran (Quranic grammar),

- Ghareeb al-Quran (unusual Quranic terms),
- Religious rulings, and
- Arabic language and literature.

**Source:** Manaahil al-‘Irfaan fee ‘Uloom al-Quran, p. 16.

### **The Method of Tafseer (Quran Interpretation)**

The sahaabah (companions) were taught to seek their understanding of the Quran first from the Quran itself, then from the explanations and applications of the Prophet (ﷺ) and from their own intimate understanding of the language of the Quran. After the Prophet’s death, those who entered Islam as new converts depended first upon the Quran to explain itself, then they depended on the sahaabah to explain the Quran to them. The sahaabah would inform their students among the taabi‘oon of the circumstances in which the verses were revealed, the interpretation given by the Prophet’s statements and his actions, and finally they would explain the meanings of some words which may not have been familiar or which may have had a different meaning to Arabs outside of the Arabian Peninsula. With the passing of the era of the sahaabah, the scholars among the taabi‘oon shouldered the grave responsibility of conveying the original meanings of the Quran to the next generation of Muslims exactly as they had received them. It was the third generation after the Prophet (ﷺ) which began the process of gathering and recording the various narrations of tafseer from the taabi‘oon. From the above-mentioned methodology of the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions and that of the early generations of Muslim scholars which followed them, the following steps have been deduced by orthodox scholars as being the necessary conditions for making correct tafseer of the Quran:

#### ***Tafseer of Quran by Quran***

This refers to the Quranic verses providing an additional explanation of what is already mentioned in the Quran. The Quran, therefore, provides an additional explanation of its own verses.

For example, if we were to ask the question whether Allah can be seen or not, the following Quranic verse provides the answer:



لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ  
سورة الأنعام

*“No vision can grasp Him, but His Grasp is over all vision.” (Quran, Surah Al-Anaam:103)*

However, Allah provides a further explanation of this in two other verses, where He tells us that during the Day of Judgment, people on the straight path will be able to see Allah while the others won't be able to. Here are those Quranic verses:

إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ  
سورة القيامة

*“Looking at their Lord (Allah)” (Quran, Surah Al-Qiyamah:23)*

كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ عَنْ رَبِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَمَّحْجُوبُونَ  
سورة المطففين

*“Nay! Surely, they (evil-doers) will be veiled from seeing their Lord that Day. (Quran, Surah Al-Al-Mutaffifin:23)”*

Therefore, before seeking an explanation or interpretation elsewhere, the Quran must be relied upon to explain itself, for Allaah knows best what He intended.

#### *Tafseer of Quran by the Sunnah*

In some cases, the interpretation of the Quranic verse was provided by the prophet (s). For example, for the following verse, the prophet (s) provided the explanation:

## إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ

“Verily, We have granted you (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him)) Al-Kauthar”  
(Quran, Surah Al-Kawthar:1)”

In a hadith by the prophet (s), he referred to Kawthar as a river in Paradise. [Reported by Anas and collected by Muslim (*Sahih Muslim*, vol. 1, p. 220, no. 790) and Ahmad.]

### *Tafseer of Quran by Aathaar*

Whenever the sahaabah could not find the tafseer of a passage in the Quran itself or in the Sunnah, they would use their own reasoning based on their knowledge of the contexts of the verses and the intricacies of the Arabic language in which the Quran was revealed. Consequently, one of the greatest commentators of the Quran, Ibn Katheer, wrote in the preface of his tafseer, “If we are unable to find a suitable tafseer in the Quran or in the Sunnah, we go to the opinions of the sahaabah. For verily, they knew the Quran better than anyone else due to their knowledge of the circumstances of its revelation, their complete and accurate understanding of it, and their righteous deeds.” These explanations of the sahaabah are known as tafseer by aathaar (the sayings of the sahaabah).

### *Tafseer of Quran by Language*

As time passed after the death of the prophet (s) and after the era of sahaba and tabieen, the Arabic language started to get diluted with foreign words and a lot of vocabulary started to lose its meaning. This necessitated compilation of dictionaries to explain the literal and grammatical meanings of Quran. This natural change in language also created some difference of opinions. We see on such example in the following verse:

...أَوَلَمْ تَسْتَمِئِنَّ لِلنِّسَاءِ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا  
صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ إِنَّ  
اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُورًا غَفُورًا

سورة النساء ٤٣

***“...or you have been in contact with women and you find no water, perform Tayammum with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands (Tayammum). Truly, Allah is Ever Oft Pardoning, Oft Forgiving. (Quran, Surah An-Nisa:43”***

The word “lams” literally means to “touch”.

Imaams ash-Shaafi’ee and Maalik held that it meant the touch of the hand, though each imaam added certain stipulations to it. On the other hand, Imaam Abu Haneefah ruled that it referred to sexual relations. However, the Prophet’s wives reported that he at times kissed them before performing salaah, which indicated that touching was not intended by this verse.

### ***Tafseer of Quran by Opinion***

Opinions based on a careful study of the first four steps can be considered valid as long as they do not contradict any of those steps. Likewise, the application of obvious meanings of the Quran to existing situations and the formation of conclusions based on their similarities are also allowed, as long as such interpretations do not clash with authentic classical explanations. But, free interpretation based on philosophical, scientific, or sectarian ideas is totally forbidden. The Prophet (ﷺ) was reported to have said,

( الْمِرَاءُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ كُفْرٌ . ) ثَلَاثَ مَرَّاتٍ ( فَمَا عَرَفْتُمْ مِنْهُ فَاعْمَلُوا وَمَا جَهِلْتُمْ مِنْهُ فَارْجُوا )  
( إِلَى عَالَمِهِ . )

“Opinion-based argument about the Quran is kufr.” He repeated it three times, then said, “What you know of it, act upon; and what you are ignorant of, refer it to one who knows.” (Reported by Aboo Hurayrah and collected by Ahmad, Ibn Jareer in his Tafseer and Aboo Ya’laa. Authenticated by al-Albaanee in Silsilah al Ahaadeeth as-Saheehah, vol. 4. pp. 26-8.)

We can see from the above-mentioned hadeeth that the Prophet (ﷺ) sternly warned his companions and later generations of Muslims about interpretations of the Quran based on speculation and unsubstantiated opinions. The reason is that the Quran is the foundation of Islam and, as such, it had to remain pure and untampered. If free rein was given to any and everyone to interpret the Quran as they wished, its value would be totally destroyed, and Islam itself would be undermined from its base.

Thus, the only acceptable tafseer is that which adheres to the following sequence: tafseer of Quran by the Quran, then by the Sunnah, then by the sayings of the sahaabah, then by language, and finally by opinion, as long as it is based on the preceding four methods and does not contradict any of them.

The above was a summary of the various tafseer methods that are used in interpreting Quran. We should note that many deviant tafseer books have also emerged that have changed the meaning of the Quran. Care, therefore, should be taken in selecting the right tafseer book. The most popular tafseer is that of Ibn Kathir.

Although hundreds of scholars have contributed to the knowledge and content of Quranic Tafseer (starting with the prophet’s companions, his wives, and so on), most of the work was not compiled until after a few years of their death. The systematic compilation of tafseer started toward the end of the Umayyad dynasty. However, even at that time no complete tafseer had been fully put together. The actual compilation didn’t start until the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The following are some of the major works of tafseer and related works by scholars of various times.

Scholar	Tafsir / Other works name	Timeframe when this work was done (CE)
Abdul-Hameed al-Faraahee	At-takmeel fee usool at-ta’weel	
Shu’bah ibn al-Hajjaaj	Tafsir was a collection of the opinions of prophet’s companions and sahabah	8th century
Sufyaan ibn Uyaynah	Tafsir was a collection of the opinions of prophet’s companions and sahabah	8th century
Wakee’ ibn al-Jarraah	Tafsir was a collection of the opinions of prophet’s companions and sahabah	8th century
Ibn Jareer at-Tabaree	Wrote the greatest tafseer with strongest opinions of companions and sahabah	9/10th century

Alee ibn al-Madeenee (Imaam al-Bukhaaree's teacher),	Wrote on asbaab an-nuzool,	9th century
Aboo Ubayd al-Qaasim ibn Salaam	Wrote on abrogation	9th century
Aboo Bakr as-Sijistaanee,	Write on the unusual construction of the Quran	10th century
Alee ibn Sa'eed al-Hoofee,	Wrote a book about Quran's grammatical construction	11th century
Abul-Qaasim 'Abdur-Rahmaan as Sabeelce	Wrote on mubhamaat al-Quran (Quranic ambiguities)	12th century
Ibn Taymeeyah	Usool at-tafseer is a treatise called muqaddimah fee usool at-tafseer	13th century
Ibn 'Abdis-Salaam	Wrote on Quranic metaphor (majaaz al-Quran)	13 th century
Alamud-Deen as-Sakhaawee	Wrote on the recitations	13 th century
Aboo Bakr Muhammad ibn Khalaf	Al-haadee fee Uloom al- Quran	10th century
Alee ibn Ibraaheem ibn Sa'eed	Al-burhaan fee tafseer al- Quran	10th century
Al-Jassaas	Tafseer concentrated on the deduction of fiqh (Islamic law) from the Quranic passages according to their respective madhabs (schools of fiqh).	10th century
Ibn al-Jawzee	Funoon al-afnaan fee Uloom al-Quran	12th century
Ibn al-Jawzee	Al-mujtabaa fee Uloom tata'allaq bil-Quran	12th century

Alamud-Deen as-Sakhaawee	Jamaal al-qurraa'	
Aboo Shaamah 'Abdur-Rahmaan ibn Ismaa'eel al-Maqdasee	Al-murshid al-wajeez fee maa yata'allaq bil-Quran al-'azeez	13th century
Al-Qurtubee	Tafseer concentrated on the deduction of fiqh (Islamic law) from the Quranic passages according to their respective madhabs (schools of fiqh).	13th century
Badrud-Deen az-Zarkashee	Al-burhaan fee Uloom al-Quran,	14th century
al-Haafith ibn Katheer	Tafseer al-Quran al-'Atheem	14th century
Muhammad ibn Sulaymaan al-Kaafejee	Mawaaqi' al-Uloom min mawaaqi' an-nujoom	15th century
Jalaalud-Deen al-Balqenee	Mawaaqi' al-Uloom min mawaaqi' an-nujoom	15th century
Jalaalud-Deen as-Suyootee	At-tahbeer fee Uloom at-tafseer.	15th century
Jalaalud-Deen as-Suyootee	Kitaab al-itqaan fee Uloom al-Quran	15th century
Shaykh Taahir al-Jazaa'iree	At-tibyaan fee Uloom al-quraan	20th century
Shaykh Muhammad 'Alee Salaamah	Minhaaj al-furqaan fee Uloom al-Quran	mid 20th century
Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdul-'Atheem az-Zarqaanee	Manaahil al-'irfaan fee Uloom al-Quran	mid 20th century
Subhee as-Saalih	Mabaahith fee Uloom al-Quran	late 20th century
Mannaa' al-Qattaan	Mabaahith fee Uloom al Quran	late 20th century

Muhammad ‘Abdullaah Daraaz	Madkhal ilaa al-Quran al-kareem	late 20th century
Muhammad Aboo Shahbah	Al-madkhal li diraasah al-Quran	late 20th century
Muhammad ibn Lutfee as-Sabbaagh	Lamahaat fee Uloom al-Quran	late 20th century