Types of interpretation

All praise is for Allah Who sent down the Qur'an to His servant so that he may be a warner to the worlds; and blessings be on him whom He sent as a witness, and a bearer of good news and a warner, and as one inviting to Allah by His permission, and as a light-giving torch; and on his progeny from whom Allah kept away the uncleanliness and whom He purified a thorough purifying.

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In this article we shall describe the method adopted in this book to find out the meanings of the verses of the Qur'an. at-Tafslr (exegesis), that is, explaining the meanings of the Qur'anic verse, clarifying its import and finding out its significance, is one of the earliest academic activities in Islam. The interpretation of the Qur'an began with its revelation, as is clear from the words of Allah:

Even as We have sent among you an Apostle from among you who recites to you Our communications and purifies you and teaches you the Book and the wisdom and teaches you that which you did not know (2 :151).

The first exegetes were a few companions of the Prophet, like Ibn 'Abbas, 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar, Ubayy (ibn Ka'b) and others. (We use the word, 'companion', for other than 'Ali(A.S.); because he and the Imams from his progeny have an unequaled distinction - an unparalleled status, which we shall explain somewhere else. Exegesis in those days was confined to the explanation of literary aspects of the verse, the background of its revelation and, occasionally interpretation of one verse with the help of the other.

If the verse was about a historical event or contained the realities of genesis or resurrection etc., then sometimes a few traditions of the Prophet were narrated to make its meaning clear. The same was the style of the disciples of the companions, like Mujahid, Qatadah, Ibn Abi Layla, ash-Sha'bi, as-Suddi and others, who lived in the first two centuries of hijrah.

They relied even more on traditions, including the ones forged and interpolated by the Jews and others. They quoted those traditions to explain the verses which contained the stories of the previous nations, or which described the realities of genesis, for example, creation of the heavens and the earth, beginning of the rivers and mountains, the "Iram" (the city of the tribe of 'Ad), of Shaddad the so-called "mistakes" of the prophets, the alterations of the books and things like that.

Some such matters could be found even in the exegesis ascribed to the companions. During

the reign of the caliphs, when the neighboring countries were conquered, the Muslims came in contact with the vanquished people and were involved in religious discussions with the scholars of various other religions and sects.

This gave rise to the theological discourses, known in Islam as 'Ilmuu 'l-kalam. Also, the Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic. The process began towards the end of the first century of hijrah (Umayyad's period) and continued well into the third century ('Abbasid's reign). This created a taste for intellectual and philosophical arguments in the Muslim intelligentsia.

At the same time, at-tasawwuf Sufism, mysticism) raised its head in the society; and people were attracted towards it as it held out a promise of revealing to them the realities of religion through severe self-discipline and ascetical rigoursinstead of entangling them into verbal polemics and intellectual arguments. And there emerged a group, who called themselves people of tradition, who thought that salvation depended on believing in the apparent meanings of the Qur'an and the tradition, with- out any academic research.

The utmost they allowed was looking into literary value of the words. Thus, before the second century had proceeded very far, the Muslim society had broadly split in four groups: The theologians, the philosophers, the Sufis and the people of tradition There was an intellectual chaos in the ummah and the Muslims, generally speaking, had lost their bearing.

The only thing to which all were committed was the word, "There is no god except Allah, and Muhammad (s.a.w.a.) is the Messenger of Allah'. They differed with each other in everything else. There was dispute on the meanings of the names and attributes of Allah, as well as about His actions; there was conflict about the reality of the heavens and the earth and what is in and on them;

there were controversies about the decree of Allah and the divine measure; opinions differed whether man is a helpless tool in divine hands, or is a free agent; there were wranglings about various aspects of reward and punishment; arguments were kicked like ball, from one side to the other concerning the realities of death, al-barzakh intervening period between death and the Day of Resurrection); resurrection, paradise and hell.

In short, not a single subject, having any relevance to religion, was left without a discord of one type or the other. And this divergence, not unexpectedly, showed itself in exegesis of the Qur'an. Every group wanted to support his views and opinions from the Qur'an; and the exegesis had to serve this purpose.

The people of tradition explained the Qur'an with the traditions ascribed to the companions and their disciples. They went ahead so long as there was a tradition to lead them on, and stopped when they could not find any such tradition (provided the meaning was not self-evident). They

thought it to be the only safe method, as Allah says:

"... and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say:' "We believe in it, it is all from our Lord ... " (3:7) .

But they were mistaken. Allah has not said in His Book that rational proof had no validity. How could He say so when the authenticity of the Book itself depended on rational proof. On the other hand, He has never said that the words of the companions or their disciples had any value as religious proof.

How could He say so when there were such glaring discrepancies in their opinions? In short, Allah has not called us to the sophistry which accepting and following contradictory opinions and views would entail. He has called us, instead, to meditate on the Qur'anic verses in order to remove any apparent discrepancy in them. Allah has revealed the Qur'an as a guidance, and has made it a light and an explanation of everything. Why should a light seek brightness from others' light?

Why should a guidance be led by others' guidance? Why should "an explanation of everything" be explained by others' words? The theologians' lot was worse all the more. They were divided into myriads of sects; and each group clung to the verse that seemed to support its belief and tried to explain away what was apparently against it.

The seed of sectarian differences was sown in academic theories or, more often than not, in blind following and national or tribal prejudice; but it is not the place to describe it even briefly. However, such exegesis should be called adaptation, rather than explanation. There are two ways of explaining a verse-One may say: "What does the Qur'an say?" Or one may say: "How can this verse be explained, so as to fit on my belief? " The difference between the two approaches is quite clear. The former forgets every pre-conceived idea and goes where the Qur'an leads him to.

The latter has already decided what to believe and cuts the Qur'anic verses to fit on that body; such an exegesis is no exegesis at all. The philosophers too suffered from the same syndrome. They tried to fit the verses on the principles of Greek philosophy (that was divided into four branches: Mathematics, natural science, divinity and practical subjects including civics).

If a verse was clearly against those principles it was explained away. In this way the verses describing metaphysical subjects, those explaining the genesis and creation of the heavens and the earth, those concerned with life after death and those about resurrection, paradise and hell were distorted to conform with the said philosophy.

That philosophy was admittedly only a set of conjectures - unencumbered with any test or

proof; but the Muslim philosophers felt no remorse in treating its views on the system of skies, orbits, natural elements and other related subjects as the absolute truth with which the exegesis of the Qur'an had to conform.

The Sufis kept their eyes fixed on esoteric aspects of creation; they were too occupied with their inner world to look at the outer one. Their tunnel-like vision prevented them from looking at the things in their true perspective. Their love of esoteric made them look for inner interpretations of the verses; without any regard to their manifest and clear meanings. It encouraged the people to base their explanations on poetic expressions and to use anything to prove anything.

The condition became so bad that the verses were explained on the-basis of the numerical values of their words; letters were divided into bright and dark ones and the explanations were based on that division. Building castle in the air, wasn't it? Obviously, the Qur'an was not revealed to guide the Sufis only; nor had it ad- dressed itself to only those who knew the numerical values of the letters (with all its ramifications); nor were its realities based on astrological calculations. Of course, there are traditions narrated from the Prophet and the Imams of Ahlul-Bayt (A.S.) saying for example:

"Verily the Qur'an has an exterior and an interior, and its interior has an interior upto seven (or according to a version, seventy) interiors..".

But the Prophet and the Imams gave importance to its exterior as much as to its interior; they were as much concerned with its revelation as they were with its interpretation. We shall explain in the beginning of the third chapter, "The Family of 'Imran", that "interpretation" is not a meaning against the manifest meaning of the verse.

Such an interpretation should more correctly be called "misinterpretation". This meaning of the word, "interpretation", came in vogue in the Muslim circles long after the revelation of the Qur'an and the spread of Islam. What the Qur'an means by the word, "interpretation", is some- thing other than the meaning and the significance.

In recent times, a new method of exegesis has become fashionable. Some people, supposedly Muslims, who were deeply influenced by the natural sciences (which are based on observations and tests) and the social ones (that rely on induction), followed the materialists of Europe or the pragmatists. Under the influence of those anti-Islamic theories, they declared that the religion's realities cannot go against scientific knowledge; one should not believe except that which is perceived by any one of the five senses; nothing exists except the matter and its properties.

What the religion claims to exist, but which the sciences reject-like The Throne, The Chair, The

Tablet and The Pen-should be interpreted in a way that conforms with the science; as for those things which the science is silent about, like the resurrection etc., they should be brought within the purview of the laws of matter;

the pillars upon which the divine religious laws are based-like revelation, angel, Satan, prophet-hood, apostleship, imamah (Imamate) etc.-are spiritual things, and the spirit is a development of the matter, or let us say, a property of the matter; legislation of those laws is manifestation of a special social genius, who ordains them after healthy and fruitful contemplations, in order to establish a good and pro- gressive society.

They have further said: One cannot have confidence in the traditions, because many are spurious; only those traditions may be relied upon which are in conformity with the Book. As for the Book itself, one should not explain it in the light of the old philosophy and theories, because they were not based on observations and tests-they were just a sort of mental exercise which has been totally discredited now by the modern science.

The best, rather the only, way is to explain the Qur'an with the help of other Qur'anic verses-except where the science has asserted something which is relevant to it. This, in short, is what they have written, or what necessarily follows from their total reliance on tests and observations.

We are not concerned here with the question whether their scientific principles and philosophic dicta can be accepted as the foundation of the Qur'an's exegesis. But it should be pointed out here that the objection which they have leveled against the ancient exegetes -that theirs was only an adaptation and not the explanation- is equally true about their own method; they too say that the Qur'an and its realities must be made to conform with the scientific theories.

If not so, then why do they insist that the academic theories should be treated as true foundations of exegesis from which no deviation could be allowed? This method improves nothing on the discredited method of the ancients. If you look at all the above-mentioned ways of exegesis, you will find that all of them suffer from a most serious defect:

They impose the results of academic or philosophic arguments on the Qur'anic meanings; they make the Qur'an conform with an extraneous idea. In this way, explanation turns into adaptation, realities of the Qur'an are explained away as allegories and its manifest meanings are sacrificed for so-called "interpretations".

As we mentioned in the beginning, the Qur'an introduces itself as the guidance for the worlds (3:96); the manifest light (4:174), and the explanation of every thing (16:89). But these people, contrary to those Qur'anic declarations, make it to be guided by extraneous factors, to be illuminated by some outside theories, and to be explained by something other than itself! What

is that "something else"? What authority has it got?

And if there is any difference in various explanations of a verse and indeed there are most serious differences-which mediator should the Qur'an refer to? What is the root-cause of the differences in the Qur'an's explanations? It could not happen because of any difference in the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence.

The Qur'an has been sent down in plain Arabic; and no Arab (or Arabic-knowing non-Arab) can experience any difficulty in understanding it. Also, there is not a single verse (out of more than six thousand) which is enigmatic, obscure or abstruse in its import; nor is there a single sentence that keeps the mind wandering in search of its meaning.

After all, the Qur'an is admittedly the most eloquent speech, and it is one of the essential ingredients of eloquence that the talk should be free from obscurity and abstruseness. Even those verses that are counted among the "ambiguous" ones, have no ambiguity in their meanings; whatever the ambiguity, it is in identification of the particular thing or individual from among the group to which that meaning refers.

This statement needs some elaborations:- In this life we are surrounded by matter; even our senses and faculties are closely related to it. This familiarity with matter and material things has influenced our mode of thinking. When we hear a word or a sentence, our mind races to its material meaning.

When we hear, for example, the words, life, knowledge, power, hearing, sight, speech, will, pleasure, anger, creation and order, we at once think of the material manifestations of their meanings. Likewise, when we hear the words, heaven, earth, tablet, pen, throne, chair, angel and his wings, and Satan and his tribe and army, the first things that come into our minds are their material manifestations. Likewise, when we hear the sentences, "Allah created the universe", "Allah did this", "Allah knew it", "Allah intended it" or "intends it", we look at these actions in frame of "time", because we are used to connect every verb with a tense. In the same way, when we hear the verses:

And with Us is more yet (50:35), ... We would have made it from before Ourselves (21:17), . . . and that which is with Allah is best ... (62:11), ... and to Him you shall be brought back (2:28, etc.).

We attach with the divine presence the concept of " place", because in our minds the two ideas are inseparable. Also, on reading the verses: And when We intend to destroy a town (17 :16), And We intend to bestow a favour ... (28: 5), And Allah intends ease for you (2:185).

We think that the "intention" has the same meaning in every sentence, as is the case with our own intention and will. In this way, we jump to the familiar (which most often is material)

meaning of every word. And it is but natural. Man has made words to fulfill his social need of mutual intercourse; and society in its turn was established to fulfil the man's material needs. Not unexpectedly, the words became symbols of the things which men were connected with and which helped them in their material progress. But we should not forget that the material things are constantly changing and developing with the development of expertise. Man gave the name, lamp, to a certain receptacle in which he put a wick and a little fat that fed the lighted wick which illuminated the place in darkness.

That apparatus kept changing until now it has become the electric bulb of various types; and except the name "lamp" not a single component of the original lamp can be found in it. Likewise, there is no resemblance in the balance of old times and the modern scales - especially if we compare the old apparatus with the modern equipment for weighing and measuring heat, electirc-current's flow and blood-pressure. And the armaments of old days and the ones invented within our own times have nothing in common, except the name.

The named things have changed so much that not a single component of the original can be found in them; yet the name has not changed. It shows that the basic element that allows the use of a name for a thing is not the shape of that thing, but its purpose and benefit. Man, imprisoned as he is within his habitat and habit, often fails to see this reality.

That is why al-Hashawiyyah and those who believe that God has a body interpret the Qur'anic verses and phrases within the fame-work of the matter and the nature. But in fact they are stuck with their habit and usage, and not to the exterior of the Qur'an and the traditions. Even in the literal meanings of the Qur'an we find ample evidence that relying on the habit and usage in explanation of the divine speech would cause confusion and anomaly. For example, Allah says: Nothing is like a likeness of Him (42:11); Visions comprehended Him not, and He comprehends (all) visions; and He is the Knower of subtilities, the Aware (6:73); glory be to Him above what they ascribe (to Him) (23:91; 37:159).

These verses manifestly show that what we are accustomed to cannot be ascribed to Allah. It was this reality that convinced many people that they should not explain the Qur'anic words by identifying them with their usual and common meanings. Going a step further, they sought the help of logical and philosophical arguments to avoid wrong deductions. This gave a foot-hold to academic reasoning in explaining the Qur'an and identifying the individual person or thing meant by a word. Such discussions can be of two kinds:

i) The exegete takes a problem emanating from a Qur'anic statement, looks at it from academic and philosophical point of view, weighs the pros and cons and with the help of the philosophy, science and logic decides what the true answer should be. Thereafter, he takes the

verse and fits it anyhow on that answer which, he thinks, is right. The Muslim philosophers and theologians usually followed this method; but, as mentioned earlier, the Qur'an does not approve of it.

ii) The exegete explains the verse with the help of other relevant verses, meditating on them together-and meditation has been forcefully urged upon by the Qur'an itself-and identifies the individual person or thing by its particulars and attributes mentioned in the verse. No doubt this is the only correct method of exegesis. Allah has said:

And We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything (16:89).

Is it possible for such a book not to explain its own self? Also He has described the Qur'an in these words:

A guidance for mankind and clear evidence of guidance and discrimination (between wrong) (2:185);

And He has also said:

and We have sent down to you a manifest light (4:174).

The Qur'an is, accordingly, a guidance, an evidence, a discrimination between right and wrong and a manifest light for the people to guide them aright and help them in all their needs. Is it imaginable that it would not guide them aright in its own matter, while it is their most important need? Again Allah says:

And (as for) those who strive hard for Us, We will most certainly guide them onto Our ways (29:69).

Which striving is greater than the endeavour to understand His Book? And which way is more straight than the Qur'an? Verses of this meaning are very numerous, and we shall discuss them in detail in the beginning of the third chapter, The Family of 'Imran. Allah taught the Qur'an to His Prophet and appointed him as the teacher of the Book:

The Faithful Spirit has descended with it upon your heart that you may be of the warners, in plain Arabic language (26 :193-4); And We have revealed to you the Reminder that you may make clear to men what has been revealed to them, and that haply they may reflect (16: 44);... an Apostle ... who recites to them His communications and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and the Wisdom (62:2).

And the Prophet appointed his progeny to carry on this work after him. It is clear from his unanimously accepted tradition:

I am leaving behind among you two precious things; as long as you hold fast to them you will never go astray after me: The Book of Allah and my progeny, my family members; and these two shall never separate from each other until they reach me (on) the reservoir.

And Allah has confirmed, in the following two verses, this declaration of the Prophet that his progeny had the real know- ledge of the Book:

Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanliness from you, O people of the House! and to purify you a (thorough) purifying(33:33); Most surely it is an honoured Qur'an, in a Book that is hidden; None do touch it save the purified ones (56 :77-79).

And the Prophet and the Imams from his progeny always used this second method for explaining the Qur'an, as may be seen in the traditions that have been narrated from them on exegesis, some of which will be quoted in this book in appropriate places. One cannot find a single instance in their traditions where they might have taken help of an academic theory or philosophical postulate for explaining a verse.

The Prophet has said in a sermon: "Therefore, when mischiefs come to confuse you like the segments of darkened night, then hold fast to the Qur'an; as it is the intercessor whose intercession shall be granted; and a credible advocate; and whoever keeps it before him, it will lead him to the Garden; and whoever keeps it behind, it will drive him to the Fire; and it is the guide that guides to the best path; and it is a book in which there is explanation, particularization and recapitulation; and it is a decisive (world), and not a joke; and there is for it a manifest (meaning) and an esoteric (one);

thus its apparent (meaning) is firm, and its esoteric (one) is knowledge; its exterior is elegant and its interior deep; it has (many) boundaries, and its boundaries have (many) boundaries; its wonders shall not cease, and its (unexpected marvels shall not be old. There are in it the lamps of guidance and the beacon of wisdom, and guide to knowledge for him who knows the attributes.

Therefore, one should extend his sight; and should let his eyes reach the attribute; so that one who is in perdition may get deliverance, and one who is entangled may get free; because meditation is the life of the heart of the one who sees, as the one having a light (easily) walks in darkness; therefore, you must seek good deliverance and (that) with little waiting .

'Ali (a.s.) said, inter alia, speaking about the Qur'an in a sermon: "Its one part speaks with the other, and one portion testifies about the other."

This is the straight path and the right way which was used by the true teachers of the-Qur'an and its guides, may Allah's blessings be on them all! We shall write, under various headings, what Allah has helped us to understand from the honoured verses, by the above- mentioned method. We have not based the explanations on any philosophical theory, academic idea or mystical revelation. We have not put into it any outside matter except a fine literary point on which depends the understanding of Arabic eloquence, or a self-evident or

practical premises which can be understood by one and all. From the discussions, written according to the above- mentioned method, the following subjects have become crystal-clear:

1. The matters concerning the names of Allah, and His attributes, like His Life, Knowledge, Power, Hearing, Sight and Oneness etc. As for the Person of Allah, you will find that the Qur'an believes that He needs no description.

2. The matters concerning the divine actions, like creation, order, will, wish, guidance, leading astray, decree, measure, compulsion, delegation (of Power), pleasure, displeasure and other similar actions.

3. The matters concerned with the intermediary links between Allah and man, like the Curtain, the Tablet, the Pen, the Throne, the Chair, the Inhabited House, the Heavens, the Earth, the Angels, the Satans, and the Jinns etc.

4. The details about man before he came to this world.

5. The matters related to man in this life, like the history of mankind, knowledge of his self, the foundation of society, the prophethood and the apostleship, the revelation, the inspiration, the book and the religion and law. The high status of the prophets, shining through their stories, come under this heading .

6. The knowledge about man after he departs from this world, that is, al-Barzakh.

7. The matters about human character. Under this heading come the various stages through which the friends of Allah pass in their spiritual journey, like submission, faith, benevolence, humility, purity of intention and other virtues. (We have not gone into details of the verses of the law, as more appropriately it is a subject for the books of jurisprudence.) As a direct result of this method, we have never felt any need to interpret a verse against its apparent meaning. As we have said earlier, this type of interpretation is in fact misinterpretation.

As for that "interpretation" which the Qur'an has mentioned in various verses, it is not a type of "meaning"; it is something else. At the end of the commentaries, we have written some traditions of the Prophet and the Imams of Ahlul-Bayt (a.s.), narrated by the Sunni and Shi'ah narrators. But we have not included the opinions of the companions and their disciples, because, first, there is too much confusion and contradiction in them; and second, they are not vested with any authority in Islam. On going through those traditions of the Prophet and the Imams (peace be on them all!), you will notice that this "new" method of exegesis (adopted in this book) is in reality the oldest and the original method which was used by the Teachers of the Qur'an (peace of Allah be on them all!).

Also, we have written separately various topics - philosophical, academic, historical, social and ethical- when there was a need for it. In all such discussions, we have confined our talk to the

basic premises, without going in too much detail. We pray to Allah, High is He, to guide us and keep our talk to the point; He is the Best Helper and the Best Guide.

Al-Mizan, Allamah Tabatabaee, p. 3-16