

INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT OF

# TAFSEER

OF THE HOLY QUR'AN



*'(This is a great) Book which We have sent down to you, full of blessings,  
so that they may ponder over its Ayāt,  
and so that people of understanding may heed the reminder.'*

*(Holy Qur'an 38:29)*

‘Rather be

**RABBĀNIYYEEN (PEOPLE OF THE LORD)**

because you have taught the Book and because of what you have studied.

(Holy Qur’an: Surah (3) Āl-e-Imrān, part of Ayah 79)

‘You will not come back to Allah with anything better than that which came from Him.’

(Hadith narrated in Mustadrak Hākim)

Imam Suyuti said,

‘The science of Tafseer is

**THE MOST HONOURABLE OF ALL SCIENCES**

for three reason:

The first reason is with respect to its topic.

It deals with the Speech of Allah, which contains every kind of wisdom and virtue.

It contains pronouncements about what has passed, reports of what will happen and judgements concerning what happens between the people. Its wonders never cease.

The second reason is with respect to its goal.

Its goal is to lead mankind to the firm handhold of Allah, and to the true happiness, one that does not end.

The third reason is with respect to the great need for this science.

Every aspect of this religion and this world, in the near or distant future, is in need of the sciences of the Shari’ah and knowledge of the religion, and this knowledge can only be obtained through the understanding of the Book of Allah’.

Imam Iyās ibn Mu’āwiyah said,

‘The example of a people who recite the Qur’an and do not know its explanation is like a group of people who have a written message from their king that comes to them during the night and they do not have a lamp.

Therefore, they do not know what is in the message.

The example of one who knows Tafseer is like a person who comes to them with a lamp and reads to them what is in the message.’

‘Whoever recites the Qur’an, secures (knowledge of) prophethood within his ribs (bosom), though Divine Revelation has not been sent upon him.

It does not befit one endowed with the Qur’an that he should be indignant with those in anger, nor should he indulge in any act of ignorance with those who are ignorant, while the Speech of Allah Almighty is with him in his chest.’

(Hadith narrated in Mustadrak Hākim)

## INTRODUCTION TO TAFSEER

Literal definition: 'to open' or 'to explain, interpret or comment upon'.

Technically definition: The science of Tafseer is a branch of knowledge in which the meanings, injunctions and wisdoms of the Holy Qur'an are described openly and clearly.

The difference between Tafseer and Ta'wil: Ta'wil means to assign the correct meaning where many connotations may exist. Another difference is that Ta'wil means to assign meaning based on Ijtihād and Tafseer means to assign meaning based on narrations.

### TAFSEER DURING THE PERIOD OF THE PROPHET (PEACE BE UPON HIM)

'And We have sent down to you (Oh Muhammad) the Remembrance, so that you may clearly explain to mankind what has been revealed to them, and so that they may give thought'. (Holy Qur'an 16:44)

The science of Tafseer during the Prophet (peace be upon him)'s life was a relatively simple matter. The Sahabah were witnessing the revelation of the Qur'an, and were living the circumstances during which it was revealed. They were aware of the reason behind the revelation of an Ayah or Surah and as such did not need to search for this knowledge in the manner that later interpreters would have to. The Arabic of the Sahabah was the Arabic of the Qur'an, as the Qur'an was revealed in their dialect. Thus it was, in general, understood by them without any difficulties. Most importantly, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was alive and the Qur'an was still being revealed. Even if there were any difficulties in understanding any Ayah, they could turn to the Prophet (peace be upon him) for an explanation.

Regarding the Ayah, 'Those who believe and do not mix their belief with injustice.'... (Qur'an 6:82) the Sahabah asked, 'Oh Messenger of Allah! Who amongst us does not do injustice (to his soul)?' The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, 'Have you not read the statement of Luqman, 'Verily, Shirk is a great injustice?'' (Qur'an 31:13). The Prophet (peace be upon him) explained that the injustice referred to in this Ayah was Shirk.

### TAFSEER DURING THE PERIOD OF THE SAHABAH AND TĀ'BIEEN

The sources that the Sahabah used for Tafseer were:

1. the Qur'an
2. the statements of the Prophet (peace be upon him)
3. the principles of Arabic grammar and rhetoric
4. their own Ijtihād (reasoning based on other religious teachings they received)
5. knowledge from the Ahl-ul-Kitab in matters which did not contradict our tradition

'Whatever the people of the Book tell you, do not verify them, nor falsify them, but say: We believe in Allah and His Apostle. If it is false, do not confirm it, and if it is right, do not falsify it.' (Hadith narrated in Abu Dawud)

The Sahabah did not have narrations concerning every single Ayah in the Qur'an. This is because the people of their time, due to their strong faith, understood much of what the Qur'an discussed without needing to seek an explanation. Only where the possibility for misinterpretation or ignorance existed did the Sahabah give their own interpretation of the relevant verse such interpretation typically consisted of explaining an Ayah in clearer words, or explaining a particular phrase with pre-Islamic poetry.

One characteristic of this time is the relatively small differences in Tafseer, compared to later generations where deviant groups emerged to try and change the Tafseer by assigning false meanings. Thus, the students of the Sahabah took over the responsibility of explaining the Qur'an. There was more of a need for in-depth explanation and to make Ta'weel (assign meaning) of Mutashābihāt (unclear Ayāt). The sources that the Tābi'een used for Tafseer were the same as those of the Sahabah, including:

6. their (Tābi'een's) own Ijtihād (reasoning based on other religious teachings they received)

### FAMOUS MUFASSIREEN FROM

#### SAHABAH

The four Khulafah Rashidoun

Abdullah ibn Mas'ud

Abdullah ibn Abbās

Ubayy ibn K'ab

Zaid ibn Thābit

Abdullah ibn Amr ibn Aas

Abu Musa Ash'ari, Abdullah ibn Zubair, Anas ibn Maalik

Abu Hurayrah, Jābir ibn Abdullah, Umm-ul-Mumineen A'ishah

#### TĀBI'EEN

Hasan al-Basri

Mujaahid ibn Jabr

Sa'eed ibn Jubair

Alqamah ibn Qays

Dhahhāk ibn Muzahim

Suddi (Isma'il ibn AbdurRahman)

Tāwus ibn Kaysān

Atā ibn Rabāh

### MUSLIMS WHO NARRATED AHL-UL-KITAB TRADITIONS

K'ab al-Ahbār, Wahb ibn Munnabi, Abdul Mālik ibn Jurayj

### EARLY CENTRES OF TAFSEER

The most knowledgeable Sahabi with regards to the interpretation of the Qur'an is: Abdullah Ibn Abbās. He is given the title 'Tarjumān-ul-Qur'an: Interpreter of the Qur'an'. This is due to the fact that the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself prayed for him, 'Oh Allah, give him understanding in religion and teach him the interpretation (of the Qur'an.)' (Hadith narrated in Musnad Ahmed)

Historically, three primary learning centres were established in the Muslim empire:

1. Makkah (students of Sahabi Abdullah Ibn Abbās)
2. Madinah (students of Sahabi Ubayy ibn K'ab)
3. Kufah (students of Sahabi Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud)

From Allah Almighty comes the revelation.

Angel Jibril (peace be upon him) bought down the revelation.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) received and distributed the revelation.

The Sahabah experienced and passed on the revelation.

The Tābi'een inherited and studied the revelation.

The scholars study and explain the revelation.

The rest of the Ummah continues to benefit from their efforts.

## CRITERIA REQUIRED TO SPEAK ON TAFSEER

‘Whoever says about the Qur’an from his own opinion and he is correct, he has indeed (still) erred.’

(Hadith narrated in Tirmidhi)

It should be noted that both speaking and writing on the meanings of the Holy Qur’an must be the domain of authoritative scholars. Imam Suyuti explains some criteria that a scholar must first complete before even delving into commenting on this field.

- Be of correct Aqeedah, utmost piety, adhering to Sunnah, distanced from Bid’ah and possessing correct intention
- Master all aspects of Arabic language such as: Sarf (morphology), Nahw (grammar), Ishtiqaq (etymology), Imlā’ (spelling), Uroodh and Qāfiyah (metres), Jahili Ashā’r (pre-Islamic Arab poetry), Inshā’ (literary composition), Balāghah (rhetoric) which separates into: Bayān (methods of conveying), Badi’ (methods of embellishing) and Ma’āni (methods of formatting)
- Master science of Qirā’ah
- Master Ulum-ul-Qur’an
- Master Usul-ul-Hadith and Hadith tradition
- Master Usul-ul-Fiqh and Fiqh tradition
- Master Aqeedah and theology
- Be strongly grounded in the rational sciences, such as history, mathematics, astronomy, logic etc.
- Be given a gift from Allah Almighty in this science (and acceptance within the Ummah)

## COMPILATION OF TAFSEER LITERATURE

After the period of the Tābi’een, the stage of the compilation and writing of Tafseer flourished. Many of these works have not survived but the scholars added to, supported, discussed upon one another’s work - continuing to enrich this subject.

### STAGE ONE:

The most important works were by scholars of Hadeeth, who, as part of their narrations and works of Hadeeth, also had sections on Tafseer.

### STAGE TWO:

The next stage in the history of Tafseer saw the separation of Tafseer literature from Hadeeth, and the emergence of independent works solely on Tafseer. Another stride during this stage was that Tafseer was not only limited to those Ayāt for which narrations existed; rather, these books encompassed explanations on the entire Qur’an.

### STAGE THREE:

Tafseer books branched out into separate focuses such as books which emphasised on grammar, Qirā’at, listing narrations, refuting deviant explanations, explaining Fiqh-ul-Madhāhib etc. Over time, the Asāneed (chains of narrations) were removed from later Tafseer books and the interpretation was quoted with the person it originated from.

## STYLES OF COMPILATION

The most common styles adopted by the authors of Tafsirworks are:

**TAFSEER BIL-MA'THUR:**

Tafseer through the narrations that our passed down in our tradition e.g. Tabari

**TAFSEER BI DIRĀYAH/IJTIHĀD/RA'-IL-MAHMOUD:**

Tafseer also including interpretation based on accepted principals of interpretation e.g. Baydhāwi, Nasafi, Jalālain

**TAFSEER AL-FIQH:**

Tafseer with discussions and highlights on legal aspects e.g. Ahkām al-Qur'an

**TAFSEER AL-ILM:**

Tafseer which emphasizes on interpretations related to religion and the natural world e.g. Tafseer al-Kabir

A style adopted by some later scholars is TAFSEER AL-IJTIMĀ'EE which emphasises on interpretation of the Qur'an as a reading to address what is happening in the world around the interpreter.

A style adopted by innovators and deviants is TAFSEER BI RA'-IL-MADHMOUM in which they try to justify their deviant beliefs using the Holy Qur'an.

Another method beneficial to the student of Arabic is TAFSEER AL-BAYĀNI in which the literary beauty of the Qur'an is expanded on e.g. Ma'ān-il-Qur'an by the great grammarian al-Farrā'.

A method which focuses on the spiritual aspects and lessons in TAFSEER BI-TAZAWWUQ AL-ADABI.

## TECHNIQUES OF COMPILATION

And the four techniques of writing of Qur'anic interpretation are:

**TAFSEER AT-TAHLILI:**

It refers to the interpretation of the Qur'an in accordance to the order of Qur'anic Ayāt and Suwar.

**TAFSEER AL-IJMALI:**

It is an approach of interpretation that is done by general explanation of the Qur'anic contents without an extensive description and nor in detail.

**TAFSEER AL-MUQĀRIN:**

It refers to the approach of interpretation that compares Ayāt of the Qur'an with others or with Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and Āthār of the Sahabah, or other commentary text or scriptures. All of them are compared to see a more accurate opinion.

**TAFSEER AL-MAWDHOU':**

It is the approach of interpretation of the Quran by theme or topic.

## PROMINENT BOOKS OF TAFSEER

### TAFSEER AT-TABARI

JAMI' -UL-BAYĀN 'AN TA'WIL ĀY-IL-QUR'AN by Imam Muhammad ibn Jarir Tabari (d. 310 A.H.)

### AHKĀM-UL-QUR'AN

by Imam Abubakr Jassās Hanafi (d. 370 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-BAGHAWI

MA'ĀLIM-UT-TANZIL by Imam Husain Farrā' Baghawi (d. 516 A.H.)  
an abridgement of TAFSEER ATH-THA'LABI (d. 427 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-KABIR

MAFĀTIH AL-GHAYB by Imam Fakhr-ud-Deen Rāzi (d. 606 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-QURTUBI

AL-JĀMI' LI AHKĀM-IL-QUR'AN by Imam Muhammad Qurtubi Shāfi'ee (d. 671 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-BAYDHĀWI

ANWĀR-UT-TANZIL WA ASRĀR-UT-TA'WIL by Imam Nāsīruddeen AbulKhair Baydhāwi (d.685 A.H.)  
- an improvement on Zamakhshari (d. 538 A.H.)  
who added his Mu'tazili views in his otherwise beneficial work AL-KASHSHĀF

### TAFSEER AL-BAHR AL- MUHEET

by Imam Abu Hayyān Gharnāti Andalusi (d. 754 A.H.)

### TAFSEER IBN KATHIR

TAFSEER-UL-QUR'AN AL-KARIM by Imam Isma'il Ibn Kathir (d. 774 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-JALĀLAIN

by Imam Jalāluddin Mahalli (d. 864 A.H.) and Imam Jalāluddin Suyuti 911 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AD-DURR AL-MANTHUR

AD-DURR AL-MANTHUR FI TAFSEER BIL-MA'THUR by Imam Jalāluddin Suyuti

### TAFSEER AL-MAZHARI

by Imam Qadhi Thanā'-ullah Panipatti (d. 1225 A.H.)

### TAFSEER RUH-UL-BAYĀN

by Imam İsmail Hakkı Bursevî (d. 1127 A.H.)

### TAFSEER AL-ĀLUSI

RUH-UL-MA'ĀNI FI TAFSEER-UL-QUR'AN AL-AZHIM WA SAB'-IL-MATHĀNI by Imam Mahmud Ālusi  
(d.1270 A.H.)

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS OF TAFSEER FOR STUDENTS

Beginner and intermediate level:

ANWĀR-UL-BAYĀN: ILLUMINATING DISCOURSES ON THE NOBLE QUR'AN

by Maulana Āshiq İlahi (d 1421 A.H.)

MA'ĀRIF-UL-QUR'AN by Mufti Shafi Usmani (d. 1396 A.H.)

Advanced level:

BAYĀN-UL-QUR'AN (only in Urdu as of date) by Hakeemul Ummat Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (d.1362 A.H.)

### MADĀRIK-UT-TANZIL WA HAQĀ'IQ-UT-TA'WIL

by Imam Abul Barakāt Abdullah Nasafi (d. 710 A.H. ), also the author of 'Kanzud-Daqā'iq  
(not to be confused with Imam Abu Hafs Umar Nasafi; author of 'Aqeedah Nasafiyah')

## THE SUBJECT OF ULUM-UL-QUR'AN

The subject of Ulum-ul-Qur'an is an entirely different subject to the subject of Tafseer. It deals with the knowledge of those sciences that have a direct bearing on the recitation, history, understanding and implementation of the Holy Qur'an. It covers detailed discussions on the following topics, as well as others:

- Wahy (revelation) and its types
- History of revelation of Qur'an
- History of transmission of Qur'an
- History of compilation of Qur'an
- Asbāb-un-Nuzul (causes and context of revelation)
- Order of Suwar and Ayāt
- Rabṭ (connection) between Suwar and Ayāt
- Makkan and Madinan Ayāt
- Seven Ahruf (modes of revelation)
- Qira'āt and their history
- Nāsikh Mansukh (abrogating and abrogated)
- Muhkam Mutashābih (clear and ambiguous)
- Script and diacritics of Qur'an and Arabic language
- Subjects and themes in Holy Qur'an
- I'jāz (miraculous nature) of Holy Qur'an
- Science of Tajweed and its history
- Science of Tafseer and its history
- Questions and answers to objectors

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON ULUM-UL-QUR'AN

Beginner level:

### AN APPROACH TO THE QUR'ANIC SCIENCES

by Justice Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani (may Allah preserve him)

Advanced level:

AT-TIBYĀN FI ULUM-IL-QUR'AN by Shaykh Muhammad Ali Sābuni

AL-ITQĀN FI ULUM-IL-QUR'AN by Imam Jālaluddin Suyuti

Compiled by B.M.I for @piousfacts, with appreciation to all the sources.

May Allah Almighty make the Qur'an, the spring of our hearts. Āmeen.

May Allah Almighty make the Qur'an, a comfort in our graves. Āmeen.

May Allah Almighty make the Qur'an, an intercessor on the day of resurrection. Āmeen.

Contact piousfacts@hotmail.com to report any errors. Please keep us in your prayers.