

Tafsir: the key to qur'an interpretation essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

There was no other field of Islamic scholarship that received the amount of the attention, as that of the exegesis of the Qur'an. This genre had undergone significant evolution since it had begun. Branches of Islamic sciences such as theology and philosophy experienced a decline in its level of importance but tafsir remained rich and co-extensive as the religion of Islam was (Zebiri, 1993).

Tafsir

Tafsir referred to the exegesis or the clarification of God's will in the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an (Sachedina, 1998). It served a significant role in the understanding of the Qur'an in relation to how the Holy Text could be applied in the life of the Muslims. The background of Tafsir would be discussed to determine its formation and present the groundwork as to why it played an important function and served as a significant element in the Islam scholarship.

Background

Tafsir was an important branch of Islam scholarship because it functioned primarily to provide an understanding of the Qur'an and in turn implement its teachings properly. The term " tafsir" came from the word " fassara," which literally meant to explain or to interpret (Qadhi, 1999). It was also said to referred to the act of exposition or uncovering. Tafsir meant the " uncovering the meanings and exposing the secrets of Qur'aan" (Qadhi 1999, p. 289).

The tafsir was described to be brief and simple. During the emergence of the Qur'an's exegesis, it was not written down and it included lexical explanations for individual words and prophetic passages based from the Qur'an (Zebiri, 1993). The Companions were the earliest group of scholars to present the tafsir. They lived in a period wherein they spoke the language of the Qur'an and understood it in a manner that other schools of tafsir scholars did not. This form of tafsir was perceived to be on the practical interpretation of the Holy Book, instead of a theoretical one. This was made out of their regard for avoiding wrong speculations for the true meaning of Qur'an (Zebiri, 1993).

There were several approaches in field of tafsir. Since the Qur'an dictated the way of life of the Islam religion, it presented different areas by which it could be interpreted and analyzed in the manner by which it addressed every facet of the Moslem life. Tafsir Riwa'I took transmitted report as the staple of the first approach (Mir, 2004). The second approach was an exegetical approach that focused on theological issues, the tafsir kalami. The third approach was tafsir fiqhi dealt with the interpretation of the Qur'an on legal matters. Tafsir nahwi discussed interpretations on grammar and tafsir adabi analyzed the Qur'an based on language and style. The modern approach of exegesis of the Qur'an tackled a scientific method with tafsir 'ilimi that was established in the modern times, even if it was not as historically established as the other forms of tafsir. This approach of tafsir was characterized by attempts to show that the Qur'an contained scientific information in the sense that it involved topics within the domain of natural sciences.

There were three Nishapuri exegetes that stood out Ibn Habib, al-Tha'labi and al-Wahidi and had the most influence in the history of medieval Qur'anic exegesis. They attempted to address the perennial inquiry of exegesis in terms of the issues of the classical Qur'an commentary. These issues were posed by Arabic philosophy in addressing the sum total of the grammar, lexicography and rhetorical studies for the theological understanding of the Holy Book of Qur'an (Saleh, 2006).

The Function Tafsir Plays

According to Qadhi (1999, p. 290), tafsir functioned to explain a word that carried one particular meaning and was based on certain knowledge; furthermore, it was termed as “ the explanation of the literal meaning of the verse.” Different methods of Qur'anic exegesis displayed several functions in the interpretation of the Holy Book. The first form was haggadic or narrative, which utilized prophetic tradition, identification, anecdote and circumstance of revelation (Berg, 2003). The second form of exegesis was halakhic or the legal exegesis that used analogy and abrogation (Berg, 2003). The third form of exegesis was masoretic or textual that employed different reading of the Qur'an in terms of poetic exemplifications, lexical and grammatical explanations of the Holy Text (Berg, 2003). There were different approaches to exegesis that emerged over time and provided relative dating of the text and served as alternatives to the dating texts according to ascription.

There were also different types of interpretation within a tafsir that was tradition-based. They all functioned to explain and interpret the Qur'an but were accepted with different levels of authority. The highest level of

interpretation and the best method of tafsir was the interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an (Saeed, 2006). Since the Qur'an was unified whole and carried a single purpose, sections could be interpreted by other parts of the text. Tafsir enabled the readers of the Qur'an to interpret difficult passages by reading, studying and meditating more of the Holy Text.

Prophets also functioned to explain the Qur'an. There were instances that revealed how the Prophets created the tafsir of the Qur'an when they saw difficulty in understanding them (Saeed, 2006). There were two functions of tafsir from a prophetic interpretation; one was practical and the other one was expository. The first function was done when the Qur'anic instruction was translated in to practice; on the other hand, expository interpretation functioned by which particular verses meanings were exposed (Saeed, 2006). For example, a system of " zakat" was created that specified instructions as to how Muslims could pay " zakat" even when it was not directly stated in the Qur'an. Tafsir functioned to teach Muslims how to practically apply the teachings of the Qur'an.

Even those that spoke the language of the Qur'an experienced difficulty in understanding certain verses from it. Tafsir was performed by the Companions of the Prophets in order to provide understanding for those that lived in the surrounding borders of Mecca to Medina, new adherents that had difficulty in understanding certain languages and terms in the Qur'an (Saeed, 2006). There were even difficulties in understanding the historical references of the Qur'an and Companions asked about the events and stories that were used in the Qur'an.

Successors also emerged from the death of the Prophets and Companions. Converts identified a different experience from those that lived in the time of the Prophet and came from other linguistic backgrounds (Saeed, 2006). This made it difficult for these converts to understanding the direct meaning of the Qur'an. They lived in different time periods and thus the contexts of the Qur'an changed and became irrelevant. Tafsir enabled these successors to understand the Qur'an's message according to the original context by which it was written and implement its teachings according to the message that was provided.

Tafsir was used in the elaboration of certain principles that for the messages of Qur'an. According to Qadhi (1993, p. 291), " the elaboration of perfect set of beliefs with regards to the Creator, and the relationship of the created with the Creator." It was also used to perfect the personal conduct of the Muslims, as well as good morals. Tafsir also played the role of clearly establishing a set of laws and code of conduct in governing the way of life of the individual, the family, and the society (Qadhi, 1993).

According to Qadhi (1993, p. 291), " Allah communicates with man in a way that he will be able to understand." Messengers were perceived to be sent to speak in the language of his people. Tafsir was necessary and significant because Allah made use of a language that was clear to those who were eloquent in Arabic language and there were also other members of the Muslim community that were entitled to this level of communication. In order to understand certain verses, tafsir provided the context by which these verses were given in order to provide a more in-depth understanding. Tafsir also provided explanations to words with multiple meanings (Qadhi, 1993).
<https://assignbuster.com/tafsir-the-key-to-quran-interpretation-essay-sample/>

Significance of Tafsir

An individual who has access to all of the facts about the Qur'an could experience a higher degree of understanding and would benefit more from the knowledge of the Qur'an. There was significant wisdom that would be gained when a person was armed with tools of exegesis when analyzing the Holy Book. The tafsir functioned to help people to understand the Qur'an in terms of interpreting it within the context that it was originally written in. It helped individuals to understand and implement the teachings of the Qur'an in their daily lives. Tafsir provided the theoretical and practical impacts of the Holy Book.

The search for Islamic identity in the face of the problems of the modern world elevated the role of tafsir in understanding the Qur'an and made it one of the original resources of Islam (Rippin, 1990). Islam was widely based on its scriptures and there was much scholarly attention that was given to commentaries in order to attribute to its validity. Muslim scholars devoted so much of their time and energies into writing tafsir texts for each verse or portion of the Qur'an (Rippin, 1990). Tafsir did not only provide deeper understanding for the Holy Book. It also characterized the scripturalist faith of the Islamic identity. It also justified the systems and practices that were observed in the Islamic faith because of the context evidence that tafsir created from exegetical analogies and interpretations. The value of the tafsir in its function to make the text understandable and relevant could not be made more significant enough. The emphasis on the spiritual content of the Qur'an and the guidance it provided made tafsir a wide branch of Islam scholarship (Rippin, 1990; Mir, 2004)

<https://assignbuster.com/tafsir-the-key-to-quran-interpretation-essay-sample/>

The compatibility of Islam with modernity was established through tafsir (Abu-Zayd, 2003). It enabled the modern Muslim to live their lives under the faith within a modern environment without having to compromise their identities as a Muslim. Since tafsir clarified and occluded the meaning of Qur'an passages, it provided practical guides for the Muslim's daily lives (Berg, 2003).

The lack of scholarly attention for the Qur'an was referred to a period of complete darkness (Tur, 2007). It was called a time of darkness because of the lack of understanding the people had for the Qur'an out of the fear of indicating wrong judgments at the cost of missing out on the messages it had to offer. One could not believe and live a lifestyle of faith that was something that was unclear or if they were ignorant of it. It was important for the Qur'an to become clear and understandable for the Muslims (Ismail, 2008).

Tafsir was one of the twin methods (the other one being the ta'wil) that dealt with the interpretation of the signs and the symbols of the Qur'an (Ismail, 2008). The tafsir-ta'wil method provided a formula for the interpretation of the Islam text.

The worldview of Islam was conceived within two theoretical implications: there was an avoidance of secularization and the appropriation of the tafsir-ta'wil method in reading the signs and symbols of the Qur'an in order to interpret the Qur'an. If these implications were disseminated through sufficient education, the development of Islam scholarship would be wholistic and progressive.

The Holy Book was significant because of the way it bridged a connection with the Muslims and with Allah through providing a deeper understanding for the message:

“ The Qur’aan is like a treasure trapped in a glass receptacle; mankind can view and benefit from this treasure, but they are in need of tafseer, for tafseer acts like the key that unlocks the treasure, so that mankind can benefit from it to the greatest possible extent (Qadhi 1993, p. 292).

References

Abu-Zayd, Nasr (2003), ‘ The Dilemma of the Literary Approach of the Qur’an’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* , Issue no. 23, pp. 8-15.

Berg, Herbert (2003) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*. Brill, Boston.

Ismail, Mohd Zaidi B. (2008), ‘The Cosmos as the Created Book and Its Implications for the Orientation of Science’, *Islam and Science* , vol. 6, Issue no. 1, pp. 31-43.

Mir, Mustansir (2004), ‘ Scientific Exegesis of the Qur’an-A Viable Project?’, *Islam and Science* , vol. 2, Issue no. 1, p. 33.

Qadhi, Abu Amaar Yasir. (1999), *An Introduction to the Science of Qur’an* . Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, United Kingdom.

Rippin, Andrew (1990) *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 2nd Volume. Routledge, London.

Saleh, Walid A. (2006), ' The Last of the Nishapuri School of Tafsir: Al-Wahidi (D. 468/1076) and His Significance in the History of Qur'anic Exegesis', *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* , vol. 126, Issue no. 2, pp. 223-242.

Sachedina, Abdulaziz A. (1998) *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an* . Oxford University Press, New York.

Seed, Abdullah (2006), *Interpreting the Qur'an* . Routledge, New York.

Tur, Yashab (2007) ' The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of Al-Tha'labi.' *Islam and Science* , vol. 5, Issue no. 1, page 71-75.

Zebiri, Kate (1993). *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism* . Oxford University Press, USA.