

## **Shah WaliAllah and the ‘tafsir al-Quran bi’l Quran’**

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### **Abstract**

The tafsir of the Quran by the Quran is the most ancient methodology of explaining the Quran text. In this essay, we exhibit the progress of this approach through the centuries with especial reference to Shah WaliAllah.

**Key words:** *Quran, tafseer, Shah WaliAllah and his approach.*

Shah WaliAllah’s book *Al Fauz al-kabir fi usul al-tafsir* has dominated the field of usul al-tafsir [principles of explanation] for centuries since it appeared [in the 18<sup>th</sup> century]. It is a compact encyclopedia of Quranic knowledge that has introduced the Quran to the Muslim masses in general and informed the Muslim scholars how to proceed in explaining the Quran in particular. This has been examined in detail in *Tehseel*, vol. 1 no. 1 [July-Dec. 2017] by the present writer.

In the present essay, we intend to examine the phenomenon of *tafsir al-Quran bi’l Quran* or the explanation/elucidation of the Quran by itself. *Usul al-tafsir* are literally the basic building blocks to the understanding of the Quran. This term is applicable only to the Quran and not to any other book – sacred or secular. these principles are indeed the keys to unlock the mysteries and probe the profundities of the Quran.

While there are comprehensive and encyclopedic books containing the sciences [*ulum al-Quran*], such as the indispensable *Al Itqan fi ulum al-Quran* by Jalauddin Seyuti [d.1515], it is necessary for the commentator on the Quran to state the principles of analysis and apply them to the study of the Quran that he proposes to embark on. One cannot plunge into the exegesis of the Quran without initially spelling out the principles or axioms that one chooses to approach the

sacred text. These are generally spelt out in the *muqaddimat* that preface the Quran which cover a survey of previous knowledge contributed to by previous scholars by the commentator such as he wishes to include. Such scholarly prefaces can be seen in the *tafsir* of Imam Razi [d. 666 AH] called the ***Tafsir al-Kabir***. In Urdu there is the ***Muqaddima Tafsir Haqqani*** which is a wide-ranging study of the Quranic sciences and is published separately for the information it contains. Each commentator has his own approach [positive/negative] and he will approach the task using the principles [*turuq/asalib*] that he has expressed.

The Quran commands the Muslim to reflect upon its message in the most forceful way. Thus: 'Will they not meditate on the Quran, or are there locks on their hearts?' [47.24]. This *tadabbur* enjoined by the Quran does not allow any exception. All have to reflect upon the Quran and its contents and the scholars have to delve deeply and bring out knowledge of its message to the masses. This is the approach of Abdullah b. Abbas, the Holy Prophet's cousin and the first commentator on the Quran in his *tafsir* commonly called the ***Tafsir Ibn Abbas***.

It is Shah WaliAllah who was the great exponent of the approach of the *tafsir al-Quran bi'l Quran* i.e. the explanation of the Quran by the Quran. It is clear that when the Quran introduces a subject and then explains it, no other explanation is possible or permissible. For example, in Surah Fatiha where the Quran says : 'Show us the straight path'; the 'straight path' is described in the following verses: 'The path of those whom Thou hast favoured; not the path of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray'.

The Holy Prophet also explained the Quran text e.g. in the verse 'Those who believe and obscure not their belief by wrongdoing, theirs is safety....'[6.82]. The Companions asked the Prophet that how is wrongdoing '*zulm*'. The Prophet quoted the Quran: 'Ascribing partners to Allah is '*zulm*'.

The *tafsir bi'l Quran* takes different forms,. It implies an intratextual cross-referencing that involves familiarity with the Quranic text. In the above example [surah Fatiha] the explanation follows immediately but in other cases the explanation may lie at another place in the text. It is vital that all such cases of explanation are known and familiar.

The Companions have also given example of this kind of *tafsir*. Ayesha states that when this verse of the Quran was revealed: 'Then hymn the praises of thy Lord and seek forgiveness from Him' [110.3], the Holy Prophet repeated these words: 'O Lord I praise thee and beg forgiveness.'

So while the best application of the *tafsir* of the Quran is through the Quran, this explanation is seen in the Quranic text itself, then by the Prophetic example [*tafsir nabawi*] and then by that of the Companions [*tafsir sahabi*]. But basically, this is all the *tafsir* of the Quran by the Quran.

Another aspect of this form of *tafsir* is that the Quran may explain parts of it by other parts in the following ways:

- I. Of an ayat by another ayat: this we have seen in the case of surah Fatiha v.6 explained by v. 7.
- II. Of a word by another word: e.g. 'We cast on them stones of clay' [11.82] The use of 'sijjil' is that of an Arabicized Persian amalgam i.e. *sang* and *gil*. Thus is 'stones of hard clay' [tin in 51.33].
- III. Of the general meaning in other words: 'level with the ground' [4.42] explained graphically by 'would that I were dust' [78.40].

The Quranic text is self-explanatory and this is a great facility for furthering its comprehension.

Shah WaliAllah assumes that the *mufassir* [commentator] is guided by his desire to educate the *Ummah* in the meaning of the Quran. He does not comment on the negative aspects of *tafsir* such as a deliberate misinterpretation of a post-facto usage that negates the Islamic world-view. The Holy Prophet stated: 'Whoso explains the Quran by his [self-generated] opinion has made his abode in Hell'. Also: 'Whoso explains the Quran without [proper] knowledge has made his abode in Hell.' The benefits of furthering Quranic education is thus expressed by the Holy Prophet: 'The best of you is he who has learnt the Quran and taught it to others.'

### Notes

Books by Shah WaliAllah [various editions] and on him are given in the Bibliography of my essay in *Tehseel* [ see above]. In addition, I have benefitted from these books:

1. Tayyar, Masaid b. Suleiman. *Fusul fi usul al-tafsir*, Damam, 1439 AH
2. Attar, Nur al-din, *Fi tafsir al-Quran wa uslubuhu al-mujiz*, Damascus, 1999
3. Tayyar, Masaid b. Suleiman, *Mafhum al-tafsir wa tawil wa'l istinbat wa al-tadbir wa al-mufasssir*, Damam, 1439 AH
4. Samira'ii, Fadil Salih, *Balagha al-kalima fi tabir al-Qurani*, Beirut, 2016
5. Samira'ii, Fadil Salih, *Min Asrar al-bayan al-Qurani*, Beirut, 2017