



## QUR'ANIC Exegesis, Sources and Methodology in ZAMAKHSHARI'S "AL-KASHSHAAF" TAFSIR

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### Abstract:

It may be asserted that Qur'anic studies originated with the revelation of the Qur'an itself, yet as an independent science, it was formally established at the juncture between the first and second centuries of the Hijri era, marked by the emergence of schools in Mecca, Medina, Kufa, and Basra. Throughout the history of Islamic thought, various methodologies for interpreting the Qur'an have gained prominence, including Intra-Qur'anic exegesis, tradition, rational, linguistic, stylistic, esoteric commentary. In more recent times, additional approaches such as scientific, historical, and thematic exegesis have also been incorporated. Zamakhshari is known mainly for his tafsir "al-Kashshaaf". He commenced writing this work in the year 526 AH/1132 CE and completed it in 528 AH/1134 CE. A distinguishing feature of Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshaaf* tafsir lies in his comprehensive utilization of linguistic resources within his exegesis. Furthermore, he placed significant emphasis on the principles of rationality, demonstrating a meticulous and persuasive approach to interpreting the meanings of descriptions, representations, and metaphors embedded in the Qur'an.

**Key words:** *exegesis, Qur'an, Zamakhshari, al-Kashshaaf, sources, methodology*

### Exegesis (Tafsir) and Hermeneutics (Te'vil)

The lexical meaning of the word "tafsir" as the infinitive of the Arabic verb "fe-se-re" (is finding and presenting the meaning of something, opening a closed thing).<sup>1</sup>

The word "te'vil" (is the infinitive of the form *te'vil* from the root "evl"). (The word "evl" means returning to the source, arriving at the base, orientation to the goal. While the word "tevil" means returning to source, returning to truth, presentation, explanation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibn Mendhur, Muhammad b Makram b. Alij, Jamalu'd Din ibn Mendhur, *Lisanu'l-Arab*, Sadir, Beirut, 1414 h, 5/55.

<sup>2</sup>Ibn Mendhur, *Lisanu'l-Arab*, d. 11, 32-33.

Al-Zarkashi defines *ta'vil* as exegesis based on the requirements of the meaning of the word and the meaning that emerges from the power of the Sharia.<sup>3</sup> According to Ragib Isfahan, *tafsir* is mainly used for words, while *ta'wili* for meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Al-Zarkashi reports that Ibn Abbas said: *Mufasssir* is a traditionalist while *Muevvili* is a deductionist.<sup>5</sup>

According to the traditional Islamic perspective, Qur'anic exegesis began early in the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). However, he did not elucidate the entire Qur'anic text to his Companions, as it was not deemed necessary. This was because the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, the Companions understood it and witnessed the circumstances of its revelation firsthand. Consequently, the Prophet (pbuh) provided partial explanations of the Qur'an, which were either committed to memory or documented by his Companions. These Companions subsequently expanded upon and transmitted these interpretations to their successors (Tabi'un), who further enriched the exegesis and passed it on to the next generation (Tabi' Tabi'un). Later generations of commentators compiled these interpretations of the Prophet (pbuh), the Companions, and their successors, all authenticated by reliable chains of transmission. This initial tradition of exegesis, inaugurated by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is thus referred to as "Prophetic Exegesis" (*tafsir al-nabij*).<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the first half of the first century of Islam, four main schools of exegesis had evolved, whose views and contributions in this field significantly shaped the science of exegesis of future

<sup>3</sup>Al-Zarkashi, Bedrudin Muhammad b. Abdilah Zerkeshi, *al-Burhan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Beirut, 1972, d. 2, 161.

<sup>4</sup>Feth'hi Durejani, *Dirasat ve buhuth fi'l fikri'l Islamiyyi'l Muasir*, Daru Quteybe, Beirut, 1988, v. 1, 257-258

<sup>5</sup>Zerkeshi, *al-Burhan*, d. 2, 150.

<sup>6</sup>Claude Gilliot, "The Beginnings of Qur'anic Exegesis," in *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1999), 1-27.



generations. These schools were named after the main cities: Mecca, Medina, Kufa and Basra. The Meccan school of exegesis was founded by Abdullah b. Abbas. He was known for his extensive knowledge of the Qur'an, the Arabic language, pre-Islamic poetry, history, Arab culture and Arab genealogy. The Medina school was founded by Ubay b. Ka'b, who was Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) first scribe. He was well known for his memorization of the Qur'an and knowledge of the Old and New Testaments. The founder of the Kufa school was Abdullah b. Mas'ud. The founder of the Basra school was "Hasan al-Basri", who was one of the students of Enes b. Malik<sup>7</sup>

The formative period of exegesis began in the second period of the eighth century, where many types of tafsir developed as a result of divergences in the schools of Qur'anic exegesis. In this period, four categories of tafsir can be distinguished; paraphrastic ( *rivaje* ), narrative ( *serdu'l kasasij* ), legal ( *fik'hij* ) and linguistic ( *lugevij* ):<sup>8</sup>

#### Methods of Qur'anic exegesis

In the process of commenting the Qur'an, exegetes have employed a variety of approaches to elucidate its meaning and clarify its message. These methods of Qur'anic exegesis are essentially ways of translating the Qur'an in certain contexts. Among the most widely recognized approaches to Qur'anic commentary are:

1. Intra-Qur'anic exegesis ( *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān* ).
2. Exegesis on the Qur'an with Traditions ( *Tafsiru'l Etheri* ).
3. The rational Exegesis ( *Tafsiru'r Re'ji* ).
4. Linguistic Exegesis ( *Tafsiru'l Lugeavi* ).
5. Stylistic Exegesis ( *Tafsiru'l Bejani* ).
6. Sufi or esoteric Exegesis ( *Tafsiru's Sufi/Ishari Eu al-Batini* ).
7. Scientific Exegesis ( *Tafsiru'l Ilmi* ).
8. Historical Exegesis ( *Tafsiru't Tarihi* ).
9. Thematic Exegesis ( *Tafsiru'l Meudui* ).

Historically the oldest is the first method of commenting on the Qur'an (Intra-Qur'anic

<sup>7</sup>Hussein Abdul Raof . *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and development* , Routledge, 2010, 147.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 238-239.

exegesis), while historical and scientific commentary are considered the newest.<sup>9</sup>

#### Exegesis / Tafsir "al-KASHSHAAF"

Al-Zamakhshari, in the introduction to his tafsir, directly explains why he wrote it and what his purpose was. The process of writing his commentary took place in two stages: first the commentary of certain parts of the Qur'an and then the commentary of the entire Qur'an.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Zamakhshari is known mainly for his tafsir " *al-Kashshaaf* ". He commenced writing this work upon his arrival in Mecca in 526 AH /1132 CE, and finished it in 528 AH/1134 CE. Al-Zamakhshari narrates in his preface regarding the beginning of the writing of this tafsir. The peculiarity of Al-Zamakhshari's *Kashshaaf* tafsir is that, in addition to using all the possibilities of language in his tafsir, he also attached great importance to the principles of *reason* and was considered extremely successful, especially in interpreting the meanings of descriptions, representations and metaphors in the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup>

#### The *Kashshaaf* Manuscripts

*Fihris al-Shamil* documents 843 manuscripts of *al-Kashshaaf*, 443 of which are dated and are housed in various libraries and museums across the globe.<sup>12</sup> Out of these 443 manuscripts, Lane conducted an analysis of 250, the majority of which are located in Istanbul. His analysis revealed that the earliest manuscript (Fajzullah 221, dated 542 AH/1148 CE) was copied only four years after Zamakhshari's death and fourteen years after he completed the commentary in Mecca. The most recent manuscript given in *al-Fihris* is in Riyadh, dated 1301 AH/1882 CE. This continuous tradition of copying indicates that there was never a period when Zamakhshari's tafsir was not being reproduced somewhere. These manuscripts were copied in the major capitals of the

<sup>9</sup>Enes Kariç, *Hyrje në shkencat e tefsirit*, Pristina, 2005, 205-206

<sup>10</sup>Zamakhshari, Abu Qasim Mahmud b. Omar b. Muhammad b. Omar al-Hawarizmi, *Al-Kashshaaf an Hakaik Gavamidi Tenzil ve Ujunu'l Ekawi'l fi Wujhuh Ta'wil* , Daru'l Kitab al-Arabi, Beirut, 1366/1947, d. 1, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 3-6.

<sup>12</sup>Mueseset Ale'l Bajt, *Al-Fihris el-Shamil li al-Turath al-Arabi al-Islami al Mahtut*, Amman, Mu'ssasat Ale'l Bajt, 1987, v. 2, 368-510.



Muslim world, including Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and Istanbul.<sup>13</sup>

#### Sources used by Zamakhshari in *Kashshaaf*

##### 1) Sources of Tafsir

- Tafsir Mujahid (d. 104 H).<sup>14</sup>
- Tafsir Amr ibn Ubayd al-Mu'tazila (d. 144 h), from which he transmits variant readings (*qira'at*) and interpretation.<sup>15</sup>
- Tafsir Abu Bakr al-Esamm al-Mu'tazila who was a contemporary of Abu Hudhayl al-Allaf, (d. 235 H), Zamakhshari makes narrations from him and responds to him.<sup>16</sup>
- Tafsir az-Zajjaj (d. 311 h), Zamakhshari has benefited two things from this tafsir: The first is a linguistic interpretation of the Qur'an and the second is a general textual and stylistic interpretation compiled by az-Zajjaj.<sup>17</sup>

##### 2) Hadith sources

In the interpretations of Zamakhshari, it is not explicitly mentioned other than Sahih Muslim.<sup>18</sup> Although the author of *Kashshaaf* has also referred to hadith sources that are not in Sahih Muslim, but usually when he quotes a hadith he precedes the phrase (transmitted in the hadith).<sup>19</sup>

##### 3) Sources of qira'at (variants of reading)

- Mus'hafi Abdullah b Mas'ud.<sup>20</sup>
- Mus'hafi Al-Harth b Suwayd Sahib Abdullah.<sup>21</sup>
- Mus'hafi Ubay.<sup>22</sup>
- Mus'hafi Ahlu'l Hijaz and Sham.<sup>23</sup>
- Some other Mus'hafas, as we notice in some of his phrases (in some Mus'hafas).<sup>24</sup>

##### 4) Arabic language sources

- The book of Sibevejh (d.180 h).<sup>25</sup>
- *Islah al-Mantak* - Ibn es-Sekit (d. 244 h).<sup>26</sup>

- Al-Kamil - Mubarrad (d. 285 h).<sup>27</sup>
- *Kitabu'l Kitab al-Mutemim fi'l hatti wa'l hejah* - Abdallah b. Derstevejhi (d. 347 h).<sup>28</sup>
- *Kitabu'l Hujja* - Abi Ala al-Faris (d. 377 h).<sup>29</sup>
- *Kitabu't Temam* - Ibn Jeni (d. 392 h).<sup>30</sup>
- 5) Moral educational sources (Edeb)
- Al-Hajwan - al-Jahid.<sup>31</sup>
- Hamas - Abi Temmam.<sup>32</sup>
- *Kitab "Istegfiri Istegfiri"* - Abi A'la al-Mearri.<sup>33</sup>
- Some works of Zamakhsharisuch as: *Navabigu'l Kelim*,<sup>34</sup> *Shafi al-Aj min Kalam esh-Shafi'i*<sup>35</sup> and *Nesaih es-Sigar*.<sup>36</sup>

#### Methodology of exegesis in Zamakhshari's al-*Kashshaaf*

Although Zamakhshari's al-*Kashshaaf* follows the text of the Qur'an sequentially from beginning to end, his exegetical approach deviates from the conventional format of traditional tafsir. The defining features of his exegesis include a focus on the distinction between clear and ambiguous verses "*Muhkam and Mutashabih*", an emphasis on semantics and stylistics "*Ilm al-Ma'ani and 'Ilm al-Bayan*", the use of a question-and-answer format "*al-As'ila wa'l-Ajwiba*", the intra-Qur'anic interpretation "*tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*", interpretation of the Qur'an with hadith, and variant readings of the Qur'an "*al-Qira'at*". These exegetical elements are distinctively employed throughout al-*Kashshaaf*.

#### Conclusion

Muslim scholars have expressed diverse opinions regarding the terms *exegesis* (Tafsir) and *hermeneutics* (Ta'vil). However, the generally accepted understanding is that "Tafsir" refers to the act of uncovering and elucidating the meaning of something, essentially opening up what is closed. In contrast, "Ta'vil" is understood as a return to the origin, a return to the truth, or a presentation and explanation. Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshaaf* tafsir gained widespread recognition throughout the Islamic world, as evidenced by the numerous manuscripts that have been preserved to this day. In

<sup>13</sup>Lane, Andrew JA *Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur' a n Commentary: The Kashaf of Jar Allah, al-Zamakhshari*(d. 538/1144). Leiden, 2006, 59-61.

<sup>14</sup>Zamakhshari, *al-Kashaf*, d. 2, 320.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 2/83.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 1/323.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 2/73.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 1/47.

<sup>19</sup>Juwayni, Mustafa al-Sawi, *Manhaj al-Zamakhshari fi tafsir al-Qur'an wa-bayan i'jazuh*, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, 1984, 89.

<sup>20</sup>Zamakhshari, *al-Kashaf*, d. 1, 55.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 387.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 100.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 76.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 462.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 342.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 139.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 475.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 13.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 11.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 4.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 142.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, v. 2, 127.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 262.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 125.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 189.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, v. 1, 182.



composing *al-Kashshaaf*, Zamakhshari drew upon a variety of sources, which can be categorized into four main groups based on their focus: sources related to tafsir, hadith, qira'at (variant readings), the Arabic language, and moral education. Zamakhshari employed a distinctive methodology in his work.

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