CHAPTER TWO

TAFSÍR

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Prior to probing into an exhaustive analysis of various Qur'ánic commentators coupled with their unique trends in the field of exegesis, it is imperative to analyse the concept tafsír.

The literary genre tafsír has as its primary meaning to "interpret" and is fundamental to the study of the Qur'án. In this respect it is used in specific reference to all genres of literature which are commentaries of the Qur'án. Tafsír as a "literary genre" is associated with certain distinctive features, which if not adhered to would render such a work as being outside the boundaries of tafsír tradition. This would seem somewhat paradoxical, but in fact a work of tafsír should manifest the following characteristics.

2.2 CHARACTERISTICS

In a work of tafsír, passages of comment invariably follow canonical segments. Canon and segmentation, lemma and comment, where these are not systematically present, then a work is not an example of the central tradition of tafsír, though it may belong to the margins of that tradition [Calder 1993:101].

Tafsír itself is not an independent, isolated science, in fact, the nexus of tafsír and other related factors such as asbáb al-nuzúl, al- násikh wa 'l- mansúkh.

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1. The Arabic term sabáb [asbáb] means "reason" or "cause". The importance of Asbáb al- Nuzúl [occasions of revelation] has been emphasised by al-Wáhidí [d.1075] and in his work Asbáb al-Nuzúl he says:
"Knowledge about tafsír of the áyat is not possible without occupying oneself with their stories and the explanation of the [reasons] of their revelation" [Zarqání 1988:110].
lexicography and grammar are fundamental to all types of Qur'anic interpretation.

Interpretation [Tafsir] seeks to clarify the text in question. Analysis of the text is of primary importance in order to verify its meaning.

Thus the underlying importance of tafsir as a Qur'anic science is not a moot issue and is an absolute necessity, one that warrants continuous research and development.

2.3 THE NEED FOR A QUR'ÁNIC EXEGESIS

The study of the Qur'anic text together with its history runs parallel to the indispensability of its very interpretation.

Interpretation both during and after the death of the Prophet of Islam became a necessity. His compelling presence alleviated problems of doubt and misunderstanding, for he could easily clarify and interpret certain Qur'anic verses. However, with the demise of the Prophet [p.b.u.h], this need intensified [i.e. the need for an interpretation]. The Arabs at the time were in an advantageous position as the Arabic Qur'án was clearly comprehensible to them.

The following statement by Ibn Khaldún⁵ explains the aforementioned view.

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Suyúṭí [d.1505] Lubáb al Nuqúl fí asbáb al- nuzúl is yet another informative text elaborating on this Qur'anic science.
2. Both terms are derived from the root nasakha meaning to "replace", "abrogate" or "withdraw". Násikh is abrogating, whilst mansúkh is abrogated. Certain portions of the Qur'án have been abrogated by others.
John Burton’s Ph.D Thesis al-Násikh wa’l Mansúkh is a detailed exposition on this Qur'anic component.
3. Ibn Khaldún [1332-1406]- reputed as one of the world’s greatest historians and philosophers; a pioneer in several branches of knowledge including education, sociology, political science, metaphysics, philology, medicine etc...
"The Qur'an was revealed in the language of the Arabs [and] according to the styles of their rhetoric; so all of them understood it and comprehended its meaning in terms of its individual words and its construction [composite statements]" [Dhahabí 1961:1/36].

"So all of them understood it", is not entirely accurate for although Arabic was the mother tongue of the Arabs all of them could not comprehend the underlying meaning declared in the Qur'anic text. Various obscure terms manifested difficulties even to the Companions of the Prophet [p.b.u.h]. Yet, it was not the language problem that was the deciding factor of exegesis per se, but moreso the growing number of situations not "considered" as such in the sacred works.

One such aspect would be the tales of the prophets. However commentators both past and present have discussed these by varying degrees of interpretation. The most outstanding example of this [i.e. the connectivity of story writing and exegesis] is apparent in al-Tabari's world history Tārikh al-Rusūl wa'l-mulūk [History of Prophets and Kings] and his Qur'án commentary Jámi' al-bayán 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'án [The Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'án].

This need for a Qur'anic exegesis or a "Deutungsbedürftigkeit", by no means implies that the Qur'anic scripture is enhanced or altered by a commentary, but in essence the scriptural style itself is incomplete without a commentary.

According to John Wansbrough [1977:118]:
From the moment of its utterance the word of God required exegesis.

4. The need for exegesis is termed "deutungsbedürftigkeit" in German terminology; it is one of the nine characteristics of Old Testament narrative.
It has been authenticated of the Qur'an what has been said of the \textit{Injil} \{Gospel\} by the theologian Peter Wernfels:

"كل امرئ يطلب عقائده في هذا الكتاب المقدس و كل امرئ يجد فيه على وجه الخصوص ما يطلبه"

"Every person searches for his faith in this Holy Book and every person finds in it what he searches for" [Najjár 1983:2].

This would in essence refer to guidance and solutions to problems and does not necessarily encompass finding solutions to every problem.

The need for Qur'ánic commentary was ubiquitous and its introduction has sent forth some of the most thought-provoking, yet most impressive commentaries on the Qur'án right to the present day. Both classical and modern commentary has indeed ushered in a rich harvest of exegetical activity.

We now need to define \textit{tafsír}.

\textbf{2.4 DEFINITION AND DERIVATION OF THE TERM \textit{TAFSÍR}}

\textbf{2.4.1 A terminological and hermeneutical derivation of the term \textit{tafsír}.}

The unique context of \textit{tafsir} is polemic in terms of Qur'ánic exegesis and in light of this it is fundamental to acquire a clear perception of this term.

Emerging from an "extremely rich and morphologically\(^5\) as well as phonetically varied root" and having its own etymological structure,\(^6\) it is an important semantic component.

\footnote{5. [Stetkevych 1989:87ff].}

\footnote{6. Explained as the study of the derivation of terms.}
2.4.2 Derivation

The Arabic term *tafsir* is derived from the verb *fassara*. A grammatical construction of this term is as follows: the triliteral verb *fassara* means to "expound", "explain", or "interpret" (something). The verbal noun [*masdar*] therefore is derived from this second form of the verb which is *tafsir*. This verbal noun has as its meaning "explanation" or "interpretation" or a "commentary" {especially one of the Qur’án} [Cowan 1976:713].

According to Dhahabí [1961:1/13]

"*Tafsir* is the elucidation and the explanation ..."

Occurring only once in the Qur’án, Allah Almighty says in *Súra al-Furqán* [25:33].

"And they do not bring to you by way of example, except We reveal to you the truth and the best explanation."

Initially *tafsir* had "been applied to Greek and Arabic commentaries, on works of philosophy, to interpretation of poetry and in general to any kind of exposition and explanation" [Smith 1975:2]. However in due course the term *tafsir* had been employed by Muslims to denote explanation of a text. *Tafsir* also takes on the meaning of "to make clear" or to "show the objective" and is described as a science through which Qur’ánic injunctions are explained, its primary aim being to facilitate an easy understanding of the Qur’ánic text. It can best be described as a "legitimate and sacrosanct" form "for explaining the Qur'án" [Yusuf 1994:34].

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2.4.3 Lexical and technical explanation of the term tafsir

2.4.3.1 Lexical explanation

"According to Arab lexicography: is the elucidation. In its basic present tense form the middle radical could be vowelled either with "i" or "u". is 7 أفسره أَفْسَرَه "أَفْسَرَهُ " i.e.he clarified it]. And tafsir means the same... refers to removing the covering, and تفسير uncover the meaning of the obscure words" [Dhahabi 1961:1/13].

2.4.3.2 Technical explanation

"Some of the learned scholars relate that tafsir is not a branch of the sciences which assumes limits because it does not have rules or traits arising from the practice of methods like other sciences which makes it is possible for them to imitate the rational sciences. It suffices in elucidating tafsir such that it clarifies 7 Both share similar connotations [i.e.to elucidate, make clear, expound, illustrate etc...].

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Allah’s speech or that it is the explanation of the words of the Qur'ân and its concepts” [Dhahabí 1961:1/14].

The significance of this explanation is that tafsîr does not conform to paradigms sketched for any discipline in the rational sciences.

و برى بعض آخر منهم: أن التفسير من قبيل المسائل الجزئية أو القواعد الكلية.

"And some others among them relate: that tafsîr focuses either on partial problems or total concepts" [Dhahabí 1961:1/14].

"And some others among them relate: that tafsîr focuses either on partial problems or total concepts" [Dhahabí 1961:1/14].

"Other sciences are mentioned which necessitate an understanding of the Qur'ân, like language, morphology, grammar and recitation ...." [Dhahabí 1961:1/14].

A somewhat cursory explanation of the term tafsîr is as follows:

"tafsîr is .... a genre comprising all the sciences .... this is knowledge of recitation .... knowledge of expressions, knowledge of rhetoric and the science of metaphors" [Dhahabí 1961:1/14].

2.4.4 VIEWS OF EXEGETES

Several views among prominent Qur'ânic commentators, authors as well as writers exist regarding the literary focus of this concept. A sound explanation of the term is outlined by al-Suyûtí (d.1445) in his al-Itqán fî 'ulûm al-Qur'ân.

2.4.4.1 al-Suyûtí

و عرف بعضهم: بأنه "علم نزول الآيات وشؤونها و فأصيصها وا لأسباب النازلة فيها ثم ترتيب مكية و مدنية و محكمها و مشابهاتها و ناسخها و ناصحها و عامها و مطلقها و مقيدها
He views *tafsir* as "the knowledge of revelation of the verses and of the conditions of the stories and causes of revelation, of the arrangement of Makkan and Madinan verses, of the clear verses and allegorical verses, of the abrogating and abrogated verses, of the specific and the general, of the abortive and restrictive, of the cryptic and elucidative, of the lawful and prohibited, of promises and threats, of the orders and prohibitions and of admonitions and parables" [al-Suyútí 1951:2/1732].

2.4.4.2 Zarkashí

"Zarkashí views *tafsir* as knowledge through which the meaning of the Book of God, revealed to the Prophet [p.b.u.h], as well as the deduction of its laws may be understood" [Dhahabí 1961:1/15].

2.5 DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF TAFSÍR

The revelation which the Prophet of Islám [p.b.u.h] had received required an exegesis [interpretation]. Commentary on the Qur'án forms the nucleus around which any understanding of the Holy text evolves. Substantial material produced by both Muslim scholars as well as Western Orientalistic research pinpoints the increasing interest in Qur'ánic commentary during the last decades.

The historical development of *tafsir* therefore is of paramount importance for the Islámic reader in order to acquire insight into the factors contributing to the development of this science referred to as *[I]lm al-*tafsír*].

The growth of this science can be divided into three interrelated stages:

- the first is characterised as the Prophetic period;
second, referred to as the *tafsir* by *Sahaba* is the period of the Companions and

third, the period of the *Tabi’un* i.e. the period of the followers or successors.

Although these three phases are discussed independently, they are in essence interrelated, that is each phase emerges from the preceding one.

### 2.5.1 Phase 1: The Prophetic period

Phase One of the development of *tafsir* centres on *tafsir* as an activity, or a necessity already prevalent during this early stage in Islámic history. One of the primary sources from which *tafsir* draws its material is the traditions of the Prophet [p.b.u.h]. *Tafsir* as an activity emerged as a natural practice from the Prophet [p.b.u.h] and continued methodically from that point forward. The Qur’ánic text required an exegesis, it would be indiscreet at this stage to assume otherwise. Several situations cite examples in which the Prophet of Islám provided explanations to various Qur’ánic text. These then evolved into authoritative explanations of the verses in question.

Examples illustrating the above are as follows:

أخرجه أحمد والشيخان وغيرهما عن عائشة قالت قال سول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم "من نوقش الحساب عذب" قلت أليس يقول الله "فسوف يحاسب حسابا يسيرًا"؟ قال "ليس ذلك بالحساب ولكن ذلك العرض"

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8. In which the Prophet [p.b.u.h] interpreted passages required at the time.
9. The necessity has been emphasised in preceding sections.
Hazrat ‘A’isha [R.A] is reported to have said:

"I heard the Apostle of Allah say: Whoever is called to account will be punished." She said: "I said: O Apostle of Allah, does Allah not say: his account will be easily settled " [Qur’án 84:8].

Whereupon the Prophet [p.b.u.h] [referring to Qur’án 69:18 ff ] answered: "O ‘A’isha, that is the presentation [before God on judgement day], but anybody whose account is thoroughly examined, will be punished"

[Dhahabí 1961:1/49].

Another example elucidating the commentary of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] is:

 وما أخرجه أحمد و مسلم عن أنس قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم "الكوارث نهر أعطانيه ربي في الجنة"

Ahmad and Muslim relate on the authority of Anas who said that the Prophet [p.b.u.h] said: "al-kauthar is a river given by my Lord in paradise" [Dhahabí 1961:1/49]. This prophetic commentary referred to as Tafsír al-Nabawí is found in collections of traditions cited by al-Bukhári, al-Tirmidhi, Muslim and others. The import of Tafsír al-Nabawí is precisely outlined by Ayoub [1984:22].

The Tafsír al-Nabawí is considered a "living commentary on the Qur’án and provides the framework within which tafsír is to be exercised."

Whether all of the traditions can be attributed to the Prophet [p.b.u.h] is a moot question. Sources infer that some of the sayings are those of Ibn ‘Abbás, ‘A’isha [R.A] or even the Tábi’ún. According to Mujahid Muhammad al-Sawwaf [1979:136], "The commentary on the Qur’án is not a complete one, although al-Bukhári and others arranged it according to the chapters of the Qur’án."

10. This is a reference to سورة الإشكاق
11. This is a reference to سورة الحاقة
Ensuing from the aforementioned statement one is inclined to encounter controversy surrounding the extent of the Prophet [p.b.u.h.]'s commentary of the Qur’án.

Questions such as, "Did the Prophet [p.b.u.h] transmit all of the Qur’án by means of interpretation? are bound to emerge. Also did the Messenger of Allah explain all of the Qur’án to his Companions separately and compositely or did he explain to them some of it and remain silent about its remainder? And in which respect was this explanation from the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] directly to his Companions?"

Concentrated research has accentuated the following:

The ‘Ulama [learned scholars] are divided on the extent to which the Prophet [p.b.u.h] explained the Qur’án to his Companions. There are those who believe that he explained all the meanings to his Companions as he explained to them all of its words. Heading this was Ibn Taymiya [Dhahabí 1961:1/52]. On the contrary, al-Suyútí and Khubi expressed the view that he had explained only a very limited portion of the Qur’án.

Co-extensive to the above is Mujahid Muhammad al-Sawwaf’s conviction that the death of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] left them bereft of their sole source of guidance and a "need was felt for the explanation of more and more verses" [1979:138].

قال ابن خلدون في مقدمته كان النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يبين المجمل و يميز الناسخ ويعرفه أصحابه فعرفوه وعرفوا سبب نزول الآيات ومقتضى الحال منها منقولا عنه...

According to Ibn Khaldún in his Muqaddima [1967:382],"The Prophet [p.b.u.h] used to clarify the verses of summaries and distinguish between the abrogating verses and the abrogated ones, and to make this clear to his Companions..."
a) **INDICATION THAT THE PROPHET [P.B.U.H] EXPLAINED ALL THE MEANINGS OF THE QUR'ÁN.**

Dhahabí in his "*al-Tafsír wa'l-mufassirún*" [1961:1/52] discusses the issues pertinent to this problem as follows:

Allah says in the glorious Qur'án:

و أنزلنا عليك الذكر لتبين للناس ما نزل إليهم و لعلهم يتفكرون

"And We have sent down unto you the Message, that you may explain clearly to Men what is sent for them, and that you may give thought" [Qur'án 16:44].

Thus the Prophet [p.b.u.h] explained and interpreted verses to his Companions as was ordained by the Almighty.

ما روى عن أبي عبد الرحمن السلمى أنه قال حدثنا الذين كانوا يقرأونا القرآن كعثمان بن عفان و عبدالله بن مسعود و غيرهما أنهم كانوا تعلموا من النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم عشر آيات لم يجاوزوها حتى تعلموا ما فيها من العلم والعمل ....

Abú ‘Abd al-Rahmán narrates that: "Those who recited the Qur'an to us, like 'Uthmán bin 'Affán, 'Abd Allah bin Mas'úd and others said that when they learnt ten verses from the Prophet [p.b.u.h] they did not exceed them until they understood them and put them into practice....[Dhahabí 1961:1/52-3].

b) **INDICATION THAT THE PROPHET [P.B.U.H] DID NOT EXPLAIN ALL OF THE MEANINGS OF THE QUR'ÁN**

Imám Ahmad and Ibn Májah relate on the authority of Ibn ‘Umar [R.A] who said:

ما أخرجه الإمام أحمد و ابن ماجه عن عمرو رضي الله عنه أنه قال من آخر ما نزل آية الربا وان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قبض قبل أن يفسرها...
"The last of the verses to be revealed was on usury and the Prophet [p.b.u.h] passed away before he could explain them...." [Dhahabí 1961:1/53].

From the above it can be ascertained that the Prophet [p.b.u.h] did not explain all of the meanings to his Companions, as this was due to his sudden illness.

The above statement is in accordance with Dhahabí.

I quote evidence from those who say that the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] did not explain all of the meanings of the Qur'án, except a few.

An opinion of foremost relevance is that of Hazrat 'Á'isha [R.A] who is reported to have said:

ما اخرجه البزار عن عائشة قالت: ما كان رسول الله عليه وسلم يفسّر شيئاً من القرآن إلا آياً بعد علمه اباعن جبريل.

"The Prophet [p.b.u.h] did not comment on everything from the Qur'án, except after he had learnt verses from Jibril" [Dhahabí 1961:1/54].

If the explanation of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] pertained to all of the meanings of the Qur'án it would be both impractical and impossible, except for a few verses....

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[Dhahabí 1961:1/ 54].

If the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] had explained all of the meanings of the Qur'án to his Companions then why would he single out Ibn 'Abbás with the invocation, "O Allah, give him understanding in religion and teach him ta'wil (that is interpretation)" [Dhahabí 1961:1/54].

In substantiation, Ibn Taymíya and others quote the Qur'ánic verse

لتبين للناس ما نزل الهمم

12. The underlying reason for this statement is the illness of the Prophet [p.b.u.h]; for this invariably was a setback in terms of Qur'ánic explanation.
"To explain to mankind what has been revealed to them" [Qur'án 16:44].
To conclude that the Prophet [p.b.u.h] by virtue of his ordered explanation, explained to them what was ambiguous .... not all of its meaning .... [Dhahabi 1961:1/54].

c) SUMMATION

The above is further corroborated by the following:

[Dhahabi 1961:1/56-7]
This authority further argues that if the Prophet [p.b.u.h] explained everything, there would be no scope for disputes among his companions regarding the interpretation of certain verses.

...و ان مما يؤيد أن النبي عليه الصلاة والسلام لم يفسر كل معاني القرآن أن الصحابة رضوان الله عليهم أجمعين وقع بينهم الاختلاف في تأويل بعض الآيات ولو كان عندهم فيه نص عن رسول الله عليه وسلم ما وقع هذا الاختلاف أو لارتفع بعد الوقوف على النص.

[Dhahabí 1961:1/56-57]

2.5.2 THE PERIOD OF THE COMPANIONS

Among the Companions who commented on the Qur'an the four rightly guided Caliphs (خلفاء راشدون) take precedence due to their close bondage with the Prophet [p.b.u.h]. As authorities in the domain of tafsír one would naturally expect them to play a dominant role, however there existed several impediments in their paths.

"It may be said that the paucity of riwáyat [reports] from the first three Caliphs is due to their early death and their being preoccupied with problems relating to the governance of the state" [Khurshid 1979:138]. However the fourth caliph 'Alí [R.A] contributed significantly to the field of Qur'ánic exegesis {particularly Shi'í exegesis}.

Jalál al-Dín al-Suyú í {may Allah be pleased with him} has outlined in his Itqán the most prominent Companions as follows:


13. Jalál al-Dín al- Suyú í [849-911], an outstanding Qur’ánic commentator whose tafsír is entitled al-Durr al-Manthúr fí 'l-tafsír bi'l ma’thúr. A highly remarkable piece of work, it has been published in Egypt.
Ibn Kathír singles out 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbás and 'Abd Allah b. Mas'úd as being two instrumental figures in this field.

Some time after the demise of the Prophet of Islám the need for Qur’ánic exegesis escalated. As a result the Companions immersed themselves in exegetical activity. Prior to this they had been somewhat reluctant to engage in such activity for fear of falling into error.

‘Abd Allah b. Mas’úd is reported to have said when questioned about a particular verse in the Qur’án: "You should fear Allah ...." indicating that those who possessed knowledge of why the Qur’án was revealed had gone.

At this critical juncture in Islámic history the influence of the Companions emerges clearly, for ibn Kathír clearly outlines their ranking:
"If we do not find the commentary of the Qur’án in the Qur’án itself, or in the traditions, we should turn to the sayings of the Companions who knew about it best. This is because they had witnessed the revelation and were aware of the conditions and the true nature of understanding right knowledge and good deeds which they possessed" [Ushama 1995:11].

The Companions had personal association with the Prophet [p.b.u.h] and were thus well-acquainted with the Qur’ánic text and were the finest sources for the branch of tafsír known as "Asbáb al-Nuzúl" {causes of revelation}.14

The Companions did not provide a comprehensive commentary on the Qur’án,

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14. The importance of Asbáb al-Nuzúl is as follows:

"قال الهذلي: لا يمكن معرفة الآية بدون الوقوف على قصتها وبيانات نزولها.
قال شفيع العبود: "بيانات سبب النزول طريق فوق فقه من معاني القرآن.
قال عمرو بن الجراح: "معرفة سبب النزول يعبر على فهم الآية. فالتفسير بالنسب يورد العلم بالنسب."
[التفسير في المفسرون: 13]
but they did contribute significantly to the science of *tafsír*. \(^{15}\) Dhahabí states about the nature of their endeavours:

"One finds a Companion who spoke about *tafsír* of the Qur'án by means of what was authorised to him by the Prophet [p.b.u.h] or merely by his opinion and interpretative judgement. That happened rarely when the cause could for it could be attributed to religious narration..." [Dhahabí 1961:1/157].

The Prophet [p.b.u.h.] is reported to have said:

"The inhabitants of the loftiest ranks are seen as people of lower rank just as a sparkling star in the extremities of the sky is seen and Abú Bakr and ‘Umar are among them and are shown special favour."

Another similar *hadíth* is the following:

"My Companions are like the stars, whichever one of them you follow, you will be rightly guided" [Muslim 1981:IV/1344].

\(^{15}\) For purposes of the present study detailed analysis is not required.
2.5.3 THE PERIOD OF THE TÁBI'ÚN [followers]

The prestige accorded to the Companions has been lauded by many Muslim writers, but as the Companions passed away a new generation of Qur'ánic commentators emerged. With the lapse of time Qur'ánic commentary became a necessity for the changing community. However this succeeding generation [the tábí'ún] was now challenged with a mammoth task of continuing the course of Qur'ánic interpretation. At the same time it needs to be emphasised that some members of this group, like the Companions, refrained from interpretation.

As the Companions had not commented on all the verses, the followers took it upon themselves to provide veritable explanations for certain texts and "carried the torch of Qur'ánic studies" [McAuliffe 1991:18].

According to Yusuf [1994:40] the "successors started to improve the science of Tafsír." These followers had not been fortunate to have personal contact with the Prophet [p.b.u.h], but their contact with the Companions had indeed familiarised them with the text. This also resulted in the science of hadíth.

A great number of Companions had disciples whom they had taught during their lifetimes. Three schools of Qur'ánic commentary developed during the first half of the first century. The students of ibn ‘Abbás, ibn Mas'úd and ‘Ubayy bin Ka'b were located in metropolitan areas such as Makka, Madina and Iraq respectively. Their methods of tafsír were based along comparable lines, although the Iraqi school did infact differ due to its use of ra'y [personal opinion]. According to McAuliffe [1991:19] "exegetical activity was still principally an oral exercise at this stage."

However the followers may have compiled proto-tafsírs, but there does not exist sufficient evidence to substantiate this claim.

Ibn Kathír in Tafsír al-Qur'an al-'Aím [n.d:1/4] explicitly states that the pronouncements of the tábí'ún do not carry the same authority as do those of the Companions.
Regardless, the three schools flourished successfully and served as an impetus for future Qur'anic studies.

a) The Makkan School

"The Makkan school flourished under ibn ‘Abbás, and included his companions who formed the tābi‘ún [successors]. He explained to them the Book of Allah, enlightening them about the most difficult [obscure] points of its meaning" [Dhahabi 1961:1/107].

The most distinguished students of this school were:

- Sa‘íd bin Jubayr {d.712/13}
- Mujáhid bin Jabr al-Makkí {d.722}
- Tawus bin Khaysan al-Yamaní {d.724}
- ‘Atá’ bin Abi Riyah {d.732}

b) The Madinan School

Several Companions were settled permanently in Madina and the commentators in this area had many companions as their teachers. As a result they acquired from them knowledge of the Qur’án and the Sunna of the Prophet [p.b.u.h]; eventually there developed within this domain the Madinan school of Tafsir headed by ‘Ubayy bin Ka‘b.

The most prominent proponents of this school were the following:

وقد وجد بالمدينة في هذا الوقت كثير من التابعين المعروفين بالتفسير اشتهر من بينهم ثلاثة هم زيد بن أسلم وأبو العالية و محمد بن كعب القرشي.
There was to be found in Madina at about this time many of the well-known followers in the [field] of *Tafsir*; influential among them were three:

- Zaid bin Aslam (d. 747);
- Abú 'l-'Aliya al-Riyahí (d.708) and
- Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qaráí (d.735) [Dhahabí 1961:1/119].

c) The Iraqi School

‘Abd Allah bin Mas‘úd was the leader of the Iraqi school, "although there were other companions from whom the Iraqis had acquired the knowledge of *tafsir*" Yusuf [1994:40].


The method of *tafsir* employed by the Iraqi school was based along similar lines as those of the two preceding schools; however a contrasting factor was the use of *ra'y* - the implementation of this method by Ibn Mas‘úd familiarised *tafsir* by means of personal opinion and independent judgement.

Basic characteristics of *tafsir* during this period were:

- inclusion of Israelite legends;
- sectarian tendencies;

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16. They acquired knowledge from him and rallied around him.
17. The Makkan school also employed *ra'y* to a certain extent.
differences among companions;
and weaknesses in culture of transmission and collection [Yusuf 1994:40].

Notable figures of the Iraqi school include:
- Masrúq b. al-‘Ajdá’ {d.682} ;
- ‘Alqama b. Qays {d.61A.H} ;
- al-Aswad al-Yazíd {d.74A.H};
- al-Hasan al- Bäsfrí {d.738} ;
- Qatádah b. Dî’ámah Al-Sudúsi {d.117A.H} and
- Ibrahim al-Nakha’í {d.713}.

2.5.4 PERIOD OF THE TABAQÁT [Later generation]

There emerged another category succeeding the followers and they narrated what they {referring to the Companions} had said and they eliminated to a certain degree the level of uncertainty....thus tafsír continued to expand generation after generation.

2.5.5 CONCLUSION

All three schools discussed above exhibit certain similarities in their approaches to the science of tafsír. Their individual methods emerged primarily from their "leaders".
However they did not differ significantly in terms of their methods. With the passage of time these three schools branched out into other branches. Tafsír activity could be more accurately discussed in terms of their divisions. The next section discusses this aspect in greater detail.

2.6 PREREQUISITES FOR A MUFASSIR

There exists in tafsír as in any other specialised field certain standards that have to be attained prior to the acceptance of any commentary.
"Scholars have stipulated certain prerequisites for a mufassir to explain the Qur’an by his personal opinion without being obligated to stop at the boundaries specified by {ma’thúr} only..." [Dhahabí 1961:1/266].

The stipulations that have to be met are as follows:

(I) علم اللغة - knowledge of the Arabic language and its rules

This would facilitate easy comprehension of words/terms and its meanings.

Mujáhid said: "It would not be lawful for one who believes in Allah and the Last Day to speak about the Book of Allah if he is not familiar with the language of the Arabs" [Dhahabí 1961:1/266].

(II) علم النحو - knowledge of syntax

This is essential, for the meanings do differ and vary according to divergencies in grammatical context and syntax.

(III) علم الصرف - morphology

Study of the grammatical inflections of words.

(IV) الإشتقاق - etymology

When a word or noun is derived from its different constituents, and it varies on account of its dissimilarities. We could say: It varies from a similar appearing word on account of its dissimilar derivation. For example مسيح is derived from سبحة.

18. Arrangement and interrelationship of morphemes in words, the smallest meaningful unit of a language or a dialect.
(V) - principles of religion

This would incorporate scholastic theology enabling the *mufassir* to judge in accordance with that which is necessary in compliance with the laws of the Almighty.

(VI) - knowledge of jurisprudence

The *mufassir* should know how to derive the legal judgements from verses so as to draw conclusions therefrom...\(^{19}\)

(VII) - knowledge of the causes of revelation

Familiarity of the causes of revelation indicates an understanding of events leading to the revelation of particular verses.

(VIII) - knowledge of stories/narratives

Such knowledge elaborates and illustrates as a whole what is essentially contained in the Qur'án.

(IX) - gifted knowledge

This knowledge Allah confers upon one through "mystic institution"; one should refrain from worldly pleasures and it is only through abstinence, action and asceticism that one can acquire such status.

Encapsulating the above it would be germane to include the views of Bint al-Shá ít who agrees that while it is every person's right to understand the Qur'án according to his own mental capacity and knowledge, it is only for specialists to

\(^{19}\) According to Dhahabí [1961:1/268]:

...يعرف كيف يستنبطة الأحكام من الآيات ويستدل عليها، ويعرف الأحوال والتبعير، و العلوم و

الخصوص، والإطلاق والتقييد، دلالة الأمر والنهي...
offer an exegesis to the public. The exegete, she emphasises, should be well versed in the "sciences of the Arabic language such as grammar, rhetoric and stylistics and in the sciences of the Qur'án such as various readings and orthography...knowledge of the clear and allegorical verses" [Boullata 1974:109]. Other fields of expertise should include ḥadith sciences, law, theology and Islámic history. Command of the Arabic language is of foremost relevance for the commentator.

2.7 A TAXONOMY OF DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF TAFSÍR
Classification of Tafsír

Tafsír is divided into three basic categories:
- Tafsír bi 'l-riwaya {ma'thúr} [interpretation by reports]
- Tafsír bi 'l-ra'y [interpretation by opinion]
- Tafsír bi 'l-ishára [interpretation by indication]

2.7.1 TAFSÍR BI 'L-MA'THÚR

Early Muslim scholars have designated the term tafsír bi 'l-ma'thúr to exegesis that is traditionally based. Tafsír bi 'l-ma'thúr or traditionist tafsír as the name suggests is a particular branch of tafsír based on ḥadith reports {i.e. reports from the Prophet [p.b.u.h]}, asbáb al-nuzúl {information about occasions of revelation} as well as riwáyat {historical reports or reports of early authorities}. Dhahabí, in "al-Tafsír wa 'l-mufassirún" [1961:1/156] sheds light on what tafsír bi 'l- ma'thúr is and what it entails.
a) What is *tafsir bi 'l-ma'thur*?

"*Tafsir bi 'l-ma'thur* comprises of what the Qur'án says of itself {i.e. the Qur'án explains itself} and the elaboration of some of its verses; that which is transmitted on the authority of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] as well as that which is related from the Companions {may Allah be pleased with them}; what is transmitted from the successors; all of this centres on the explanation and the elucidation intended by the Almighty regarding the arrangement of His Noble Book."

"*Traditionist tafsir*" or "*orthodox tafsir*" is generally characterised by the reiteration of *hadith* materials transmitted via a reliable source.

*Tafsir bi 'l-ma'thur* is divided into two categories:

1. the period of the *riwáyat*
2. the period of writing/recording

Category One comprises the following periods: the period of the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] in which he explained the obscure meanings to his Companions, the period of the Companions, the *Tábi'ún* [the followers] and the *Tabaqát* [later generation]. [All these have been briefly discussed already].

Category Two is the period of collection

It was during the first and second centuries *hijrî* that scholars began documenting *hadith* of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] with *tafsir* holding a predominant position.

Scholars travelled far and wide in order to collect *hadith* materials, noteworthy figures include, Shu'bah b. al-ajjáj [d.60 A.H.], ‘Abd al-Razzáq b. Hammán [d.211 A.H.], ‘Abd al-‘amid [d.249] and many others.

Gradually *tafsir* became an independent science and the major contributions that culminated at the time were those of al-Tabarí, al-Nisábúrí, Ibn Abí Hatim and others [Yusuf 1994:41].

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20. A term used to designate traditional commentary, utilised primarily by Abbott,N [1967].
b) Criticism against *tafsír bi' l-ma'thúr*

The well-known Islámic scholar al-Ghazálí\(^{21}\) [d.1111] levels cogent criticism against this type of *tafsír*. His view is as follows: "traditional commentary is an insufficient approach in and of itself ...." [Denny 1980:106]. He is implying that one should accept traditions that can be reliably traced to the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] only.

As maintained by this eminent scholar an adequate understanding of the Qur'ánic text coupled with firm logic and a thorough understanding of Qur'ánic sciences could result in interpretation of the Qur'án itself; for he wrote that "the obvious traditional *tafsír* is not the highest achievement of intellectual effort" [Denny 1980:107].

Al-Ghazálí provides reasonable basis for his argument when he points out the weakness of interpretation given by the traditionists. He plausibly says the following:

If traditionists maintain that *tafsír* should be based exclusively on traditions and بسطاط[deduction] and رأي[opinion] have no grounding, then he feels that the opinions of Ibn ‘Abbás and Ibn Mas‘úd should be rejected for all of their sayings are not derived from the Prophet [p.b.u.h.]\(^{22}\) [Jullandri 1968:12/86].

c) SUMMATION

A connotation associated with *tafsír bi 'l-riwáya* or *tafsír bi 'l-ma'thúr* it that it denotes the elucidation of the Qur'án with the Qur'án or with the *Sunna* or even a statement of the Companions {سَائِحَة}.  

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21. Abú Hamíd Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ta‘ús Ahmad al-Tusi al-Shafi‘í, known by his nisba al-Ghazálí occupies a unique position in Islámic philosophy. He was a lawyer, a philosopher/sceptic, mystic, theologian, a traditionist and a moralist.
22. One should only accept those sayings that can be traced directly to the Prophet [p.b.u.h.]. al-Ghazálí in his *Ihya* [vol.1/297] substantiates his view by referring to the Prophet [p.b.u.h.] invocation for Ibn ‘Abbás alluding to the fact that other sources of *tafsír* do exist besides tradition.
It is a class of tafsír which centres on traditionalism; a method that has received tremendous accolades; however a distinct form of tafsír began infiltrating through the course of Qur'ánic exegesis, one that was not to be accepted without a challenge. It is discussed below.

"For the traditionists that which was rendered unacceptable was the exercise of personal opinion {ra'y} in interpretation" [Smith 1975:37].

Traditional commentary had for the most part dominated Qur'ánic studies. It had brought to the light the where, the why and the how of Qur'ánic passages by virtue of recollection as well as knowledge of the circumstances of revelation {asbáb al-nuzúl}. Although tradition had formed the nucleus of Qur'ánic exegesis, it could not suffice for the questions of lapsing centuries [Cragg 1985:55]. Certain situations emerged which required a more rationalist approach.

Theoretically speaking "orthodox" tafsír had enjoyed so massive a prestige to be almost sacrosanct; on the contrary it served as an incubus to the very meanings of the Qur'ánic text.

Time demanded a different approach. Where traditionalism was unsatisfactory, it was replaced by rationalism.

2.7.2 TAFSÍR BI 'L-RA'Y

Tafsír bi 'l-ra'y referred to as "rational" or "subjective" commentary employs reasoning in its interpretation. Although this form of tafsír has been subject to immense criticism, its introduction has infused an invigorating and innovative meaning to the study of tafsír. The school of al-ra'y centres on deriving "opinions through ījtihád based on sound sources" [von Denferr 1983:132]. The forerunners of this school were the free - thinkers in general as well as the Mu'tazila,23 who

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23. A Muslim school of thought whose interpretation of the Qur'án is based upon reason and intellect.
considered reason as a necessity as opposed to mere imitation. The Kashsháf of al-Zamakhsharí bears testimony to this new trend.

a) Meaning of tafsír bi 'l-ra'y

The meaning of ra'y {here} is exercise of personal judgement. Ra'y applies to opinion and independent judgement {and} analogy...... Tafsír on the basis of personal opinion is equivalent to tafsír of the Qur'án with independent opinion after the mufassir has a clear perception of the speech of the Arabs and their rhetorical form in speech; and he {referring to the mufassir} should know Arabic words and their denotations and he should make use of pre-Islámic poetry. He should be familiar with the causes of revelation and be aware of the abrogating and the abrogated verses of the Qur'án....”

b) Categorization

Tafsír bi 'l-ra'y has been divided into two categories:

- tafsír maғmúd {praiseworthy}
  
  In this category analysis of the Qur'ánic text is based on ijtihád and is in

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24. Jalál al-Din Suyú í in conformity with Dhahábí adds that a commentator should possess profound knowledge of grammar, syntax, etymology and morphology, knowledge of jurisprudence, rhetoric, asbáb as well as ilm al-Mawhibah [gifted knowledge] [Ushama 1995: 24-5].
consonance with the rules of Shari‘ah as well as Arabic grammatical constructions {i.e. with the Arabic language}.

tafsir madhmûm {blameworthy}
this type of tafsir is based without sound knowledge of tafsir, shari‘ah and the rules governing Arabic grammar. It therefore has to be rejected on these grounds.

c) CRITICISM

Interpretation by arbitrary opinion has indeed been a controversial issue. From its very inception orthodox Muslims have taken a vehement stance against this type of interpretation.

The Prophet [p.b.u.h] is reported to have said:

"Whoever talks about the Qur‘án on the basis of his personal opinion {ra‘y} or whoever deliberately distorts my saying should occupy his seat in the fire."

This applies even to the level of being correct in one’s assertions:

The Prophet [p.b.u.h] has said: "Whoever says anything of the Qur‘án based on his personal opinion has already committed an offense."

[Dhahabí 1961.1/260]
The above is a Prophetic denunciation of tafsir bi ‘l- ra‘y.
Abú Bakr Siddiq was asked to interpret a word of the Qur'án, to which he responded:
"What heaven would protect me and what earth would bear me up were I to speak about a word of the Book of God other than what Allah intended?" [Dhahabí 1961:1/261].

It has been mentioned of Sa'íd bin Musayyib that when he was questioned about the lawful and the unlawful he would speak, but when asked about interpretation of the Qur'án he would remain silent as though he did not hear a thing [Dhahabí 1961:1/261].

It has been reported of Shu'bí that he said: "Three things I will not speak of to my death, the Qur'án, the soul and opinion {i.e. interpretation based on personal judgement}" [Dhahabí 1961:1/261].

Such was the fear of falling into error that any attempt at interpreting the Qur'án was viewed as being tantamount to blasphemy.


The severe punishment inflicted by Caliph ‘Umar [R.A.] on Sabígh Ibn Isl for his preoccupation with interpretation of ambiguous verses {mutashabiḥát} of the Qur'án highlights the opposing views of Birkeland and Goldziher. Birkeland
contends that there was no opposition to any kind of *tafsir* until the late first century. It was only during the second century that opposition developed from ultra-pious circles. This would be in contrast to Goldziher's opinion "that from the earliest times onwards a strong opposition existed to certain kinds of *tafsir*, namely subjective exegesis." which was termed *tafsir bi 'l-ra'y* [Goldziher as quoted by Leemhuis 1988:16].

Nabia Abbott in her treatise, "Studies in Arabic literary Papyri: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition" [1967:106-13] reviews the story of Sabigh and concludes that it was not *tafsir bi 'l-ra'y* that was frowned upon, rather *tafsir al-mutashabihat*.

Birkeland, as discussed in Abbott's research questions Sabigh's historicity on the grounds of his name; for he was referred to by a multiplicity of names. The severity of the punishment meted on him is also analysed by Abbott.

Perusing through Abbott's detailed exposition, the conclusions that can be inferred are as follows:

Caliph 'Umar [R.A] had taken drastic action against pre-occupation with *tafsir*; but this stance was only on the *mushtabihat al-Qur'an* for he himself had participated in other forms of *tafsir*. His approval of Ibn 'Abbás and his succour towards him would then be consistent with Birkeland's view which substantiates the point that the Caliph was not opposed to all types of *tafsir*.

According to Leemhuis [1988:17], "Birkeland's view about opposition to *tafsir* developing towards the end of the first century still stands."

This "controversial" *tafsir* is summed up as follows: "*Tafsir bi 'l-ra'y* is far

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25. He is reiterating his statement that all *tafsir* to this stage was acceptable.
26. He was referred to as Sabigh ibn al-Mundhir, Sabigh ibn al-Shárikh ibn al-Mundhir etc......
28. Sabigh was also punished for harassing the people with difficult questions from the Qur'án, asking about *ad-dhariyat* etc......
removed from the kind of common sensical exegesis of the early generations. It is by and large, a rationalistic, highly sophisticated philosophico-theological enterprise which arose in the second and third centuries along with the development of the *Mu'tazilite*..." [Denny 1980:106].

2.7.3. **TAFSÍR BI 'L-IŞHÁRA**

This third category of *tafsír*  *bi 'l-ishára* assumes a different angle from the two previous forms of *tafsír*. It is "interpretation of the Qur'án beyond its outer meanings" [von Denferr 1983:134]. Delving into more than external meanings of the Qur’án, interpretation on this level is only accessible to one whose heart the Almighty has opened, thus it is not easily attainable to the average human.

*Tafsír bi 'l-ishára* is acquired by those whom Allah "has inspired" and granted "clear vision" and "ideas". Diverse from other forms of *tafsír* this branch is not a matter of "science and scientific principles" [von Denferr 1983:134].

De facto this *tafsír* is not knowledge acquired through research and study, but by *piety*; *righteousness* and *prayer* [Ushama 1985:34].

An example explaining the usage as well as the permissibility of *tafsír bi 'l-ishára* is a tradition recorded by al-Bukhári in the *Sahih*. It is basically the interpretation of *Súra Naṣr* by ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbás; which was done in accordance with a request by Caliph ʿUmar [R.A]. The former interpreted it as signifying the end of the messenger’s life on earth. As a result it was accepted by the Caliph [Ushama 1985:36]. Such an interpretation is classified as *tafsír bi 'l-ishára*.

Scholars are divided on the actual incidence of *tafsír bi 'l-ishára*. Some commend it whilst others reject it; the most salient views are the following:

Those who concur with its occurrence have based their views in accordance with a *hadith* cited by al-Bukhári in the *Sahih* {Chapter báb al-Tafsír} where Ibn ʿAbbás
was asked about the interpretation of *Súra Naárr*.

The *hadith* statement together with its translation is as follows:

Narrated Ibn ‘Abbás [R.A.] that ‘Umar [R.A.] asked the people regarding Allah’s statement: "When comes the Help of Allah [to you O Muhammad {p.b.u.h}] against your enemies and the conquest of Makka [Qur’án 110:1]. They replied, "It indicates the future conquest of towns and palaces [by Muslims]." ‘Umar [R.A.] said, "What do you say about it, Ibn ‘Abbás?" He {i.e. ibn ‘Abbás} replied, "{This *Súra* indicates} the termination of life or it is an example coined for Muhammad [p.b.u.h]. It announced his death."

The above illustrates the Divine inspiration endowed upon ibn ‘Abbás for his interpretation was not comprehensible to all. However those who rejected it claim that it is a "deviation, perversion and digression from the Religion of Allah [S.W.T]" [Ushama 1995:35].

Those who prohibit this *tafsír* suppose that the methodology employed by this *tafsír* is tantamount to the activities of the *bázíniya* for they contend that the Word of Allah cannot be comprehended by man. Their views are vehemently opposed by mainstream *Sunní* scholars as "apostate" and "heterodox".

Other pertinent views are those of:

- al-Nasafí and Taftázání.

- **Al-Nasafí**

  In his book, *al-ʿAqá'id* he explains *tafsír bi l-ishára* as one in which the
text of the Qur’án is based on external expression and to refute this would be akin to heresy.

Taftázání
Commenting on al-‘Aqá‘id Taftázání feels the báiínites were heretics for they claimed that the Qur’án was not based on externality. They believe that its real meaning was known to none except Allah. In this manner they neglected the Shari‘ah as well.

According to Muhammad ‘Alí al-Sábúní the learned scholar combines both the external meaning with the secret/hidden meaning, for Allah imparts wisdom to whomsoever He pleases.

2.7.4 SUMMATION

Scholars of the science of tafsír have divided tafsír into the three categories analysed above. Each category is analysed by distinctive features, which makes the one distinct from the other. These unique aspects are in essence what makes the study and further research of these exegetical forms interesting.

In the subsequent chapter we first discuss biographical and exegetical details relating to exponents we have selected for our study on the Prophet Músá. This will be followed by a synopsis of our subject’s biography.