

## CHAPTER THREE

### SELECTED QUR'ÁNIC COMMENTATORS

---

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Qur'anic commentary, both classical and modern represents to a greater extent a consistent body of literature. Developing ideas within the confines of a limited hermeneutical approach Qur'anic commentary does in essence reflect a comprehensive analysis of the message enunciated by the Qur'án. Exegetical analysis is essentially one in which the "commentator will make explicit the grammatical relationships within the verse and suggest connectives where the passage is elliptical or paratactic. Any apparent irregularities of morphology, syntax, or word order will be discussed within the framework of classical Arabic grammar, itself drawn substantially from the evidence of Qur'anic usage. If the collective members of the community, as enshrined in **ḥadīth**, can offer a historical context for the revelation [sabab al-nuzúl], this will be cited. Any relevant insights recorded from the Prophet [p.b.u.h] or his Companions will be included, as will parallel words and phrases from elsewhere in the Qur'án itself" [McAuliffe 1991:29].

The approaches of commentators do differ for some will introduce narratives, others poetry and even a certain class of **ḥadīth** called *isrá'iliyát*. A commentator may draw moral and legal implications from a particular verse or even consider philosophical issues.

A marked distinction exists between classical and modern commentary. Standard *tafsír* provides a passage by passage explanation of the verses in question, whereas new *tafsír* is representative of the commentator's own ideas and views. There is a great shift from a traditionalist approach to a more radical approach. The exegetes selected for this particular study all exhibit differences in their approaches.

## 3.2 AL-TABARÍ

The third century hijrī introduced the historian cum commentator Abú Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarír bin Kathír bin Ghalib al-Tabarí who through his acumen and overwhelming accumulation of knowledge has perplexed modern man to a point of incredulity. Applauded by Arab biographers, judged by Western critics his influence and contribution to Islám cannot and will not be reproached, even by his most austere critics.

Referred to as:

حافظا لكتاب الله ، بصيرا بالقرآن ، عارفا بالمعاني فقيها في أحكام القرآن ، عالما بالسنن و  
طرقها....

"An upholder of the Book of Allah, well-versed in the Qur'án, an authority of the meanings, an expert in laws pertaining to the Qur'án, erudite in Sunna and its procedures...." [Dhahabí 1961: 1/207],

...a study of his life and works will leave the reader both inspired, yet perplexed.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2.1 Early Life

Al-Tabarí was born<sup>30</sup> in Amul in Tabaristán<sup>31</sup> [a mountainous region behind the Southern Coast of the Caspian Sea]. His formative education was in the native city of Amul, however due to his diligence<sup>32</sup> and intellect he was sent to pursue studies at the religious centre in Ra'y,<sup>33</sup> eventually going to Baghdád. At a fairly young age

---

29. This encyclopaedic work often becomes strenuous for the reader, but it is proof of the meticulousness of his work.

30. He was born in 838 or according to some sources it was 839.

31. Present day Northern Teheran. According to McAuliffe [1991:88] "al-Tabarí was born during the years of Abbasid splendour but far from the center of the dynasty's power and culture."

32. Yáqút in [Irshád 1925:6/423-4] describes the precociousness of the young Tabarí as follows: at age 7 he knew the Qur'án by heart, at 8 he prayed with men in public and at 9 he began to write hadíth.

33. This was initiated by his father who was affluent at the time.

al-Tabarí travelled extensively in pursuit of knowledge to various Islámic institutions; the primary incentive being the search for traditions. According to Cooper [1990:10], "this was a customary journey for those who wished to collect traditions, for one of the main criteria of the authenticity of Traditions<sup>34</sup> is its chain of transmission (isnád)."

He travelled through Egypt, Syria, Iraq [he visited both Basra and Kúfa - leading centres of Islámic learning] but was burdened by old-age and remained in Baghdád till his death in 923. The Baghdád that al-Tabarí had come to know had survived intensified conflicts between the *Mu'tazilites* on the one hand and the ahl al-hadíth on the other. The victory of the latter was largely due to ibn Hanbal, "who weathered the persecution by sheer patience and pertinacity. Against the passive resistance of this pious man, the *Mu'tazili* movement exhausted its political strength; it would never recover it." [Makdisi 1965:7]

Al-Tabarí at this stage founded the Jaríriyah - a movement that was not particularly favoured by the Hanbalí partisans.<sup>35</sup> The survival of the Hanbalí Madhhab is evidence, according to Makdisi [1965:8] that al-Tabarí had "successfully impugned Ahmad b. Hanbal's qualification as a juriconsult."

### **3.2.2 Al-Tabarí's Qur'anic Commentary**

*Jámi' al- Bayán an Ta'wil áyát al-Qur'án* (The Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'án) is without reservation the most exhaustive exposition of Islámic exegetical activity.<sup>36</sup> This monumental work

---

34. It was common practice for traditions to be handed down from one source to another - authenticity was verified as the authority of the narratee served as a guarantee for the correctness of the hadíth. The actual writing down of the hadíth was not "appreciated" by many, but at the time of the al-Tabarí era this had become popular.

35. His students were tormented by enthusiastic Hanbalis. Their grievance was due to the fact that al-Tabarí criticised Imám Hanbal whom he considered only as a traditionist and not as a jurist. According to Cooper [1981:11] al-Tabarí's house in Baghdád was besieged by the Hanbalis because his interpretation of a Qur'anic verse was contradictory to Hanbali doctrine.

comprising thirty volumes<sup>37</sup> in its first edition of 1903 marks the apogee of traditional commentary. Composed by a man whose knowledge knew no bounds, "the tafsír of Muhammad b. Jarír is clear; it is clear from beginning to end." [Ibn Khuzaymah 2/111].

Immensely reliable, the extent and the scope of *Jámi'* has been described as follows:

"If a man were to travel to China so as to acquire the book of tafsír of Muhammad b. Jarír that would not be too far" [Yáqút, *Irshád* 1925:6/424 and Dáwúdí, *Tabaqát* 1972:2/109].

Accolades and deference set aside, an appreciation of *Jámi'* could only surface after a study of its method, sources and the breadth of its knowledge.

### 3.2.2.1 Method employed for writing of *Jámi'*

تتجلى طريقة ابن جرير فى تفسيره بكل وضوح اذا نحن قرأنا فيه و قطعنا فى القراءة شوطا بعيدا، فأول ما نشاهده ، أنه اذا أراد أن يفسر الآية من القرآن يقول "القول فى تأويل قوله تعالى كذا و كذا" ثم يفسر الآية و يستشهد على ما قاله بما يرويه بسنده الى الصحابة أو التابعين من التفسير المأثور عنهم فى هذه الآية ، و اذا كان فى الآية قولان أو أكثر ، فانه يعرض لكل ما قيل فيها ، و يستشهد على كل قول بما يرويه فى ذلك عن الصحابة أو التابعين.

"The method used by ibn Jarír in his tafsír becomes apparent when we probe into it and make great progress in its reading. Our first observation of it is when he intends to explain a verse of the Qur'án, he says "the view regarding the

---

36. This would according to McAuliffe [1991:2] represent approximately two and a half centuries of Muslim exegetical exegesis.

37. It was reprinted in 1978 - comprising 12 volumes of 30 books - the Bulaq edition. [Cooper 1981:12].

interpretation of Allah's statement is such and such." He then proceeds with an explanation of the verse and cites as a witness what he has narrated by way of isnád [chain of transmitters] - i.e. [he traces his chain] to the Companions or the followers according to *tafsír bi 'l-ma'thúr* as authorised by them in particular verses. In the event where two or more transmitters are cited he mentions all of them and cites them as witnesses, as to what he has narrated on the authority of the Companions or followers" [Dhahabí 1961:1/212].

ثم هو لا يقتصر على مجرد الرواية ، بل نجده يتعرض لتوجيه الأقوال ، و يرجع بعضها على بعض ، كما نجده يتعرض لناحية الإعراب ان دعت الحال الى ذلك ، كما أنه يستنبط الأحكام التي يمكن أن تؤخذ من الآية ، مع توجيه الأدلة و ترجيح ما يختار.

"He does not limit his sources solely on the basis of reports, but we find that he diverts his attention to a methodical channelling of traditions, giving preference to some above others. We find him doing likewise in matters of grammatical inflection if the situation requires that as well as for deducing laws from verses, channelling proofs and giving preference for his selection" [Dhahabí 1961:1/212].

### **3.2.2.2 Al-Tabarí's sources for the compilation of his magnum opus**

Al-Tabarí's "classic" is noted essentially for the vastness of **hadíth** materials that it incorporates. "Tradition" forms the pith of his exegesis. Having accumulated these **hadíth** materials during the course of his journeys he "created the first comprehensive collection of such material" [Cooper 1990:12].

The material al-Tabarí cites are primarily from the Companions<sup>38</sup> of the Prophet [p.b.u.h] as well as those of the next generation<sup>39</sup>. Al-Tabarí had certainly

---

38. The most frequently quoted authority is Ibn 'Abbás.

39. Refers to those who never had the esteemed pleasure of meeting the Prophet [p.b.u.h], but knew one or more of the Companions.

exceeded his predecessors both in the "scope of his collections and in the degree of his critical analysis of these traditions" [Smith 1975:59].

Co-extensive to the above it is imperative to penetrate the actual citing of traditions. Al-Tabarí accurately "reproduces the exact chain of authorities" [isnád]<sup>40</sup> and in many an instance includes the matn<sup>41</sup> as well. Certain material is irresolute, but al-Tabarí discreetly tends to the matter.

### 3.2.2.3 The *Jámi'* of al-Tabarí

Abú Ja'far [as he refers to himself in the *Jámi'*] had in his tafsír adhered to mentioning the 'riwáyat' by its isnád and it is likely that he did not follow the asáníd in terms of correctness and weaknesses. Because he had related - as has been reported in the principles of hadíth:

أن من أسند لك فقد حملك البحث عن رجال السند و معرفة مبلغهم من العدالة أو الجرح..

[ألتفسير و المفسرون: ٢١٤]

"Whoever ascribes a tradition based on authorities to you prompts you to investigate the men who have narrated and acquaint yourself with the extent of their honesty or unreliability" [Dhahabí 1961: 1/214].

Al-Tabarí had during the course of his journeys amassed considerable information which accounts for his "comprehensive" collection; but and it is imperative to emphasize that he did not collect everything that existed on the subject, he collected only that which was considered to be reliably transmitted from orthodox Sunní<sup>42</sup> authorities...." [Cooper 1990:12].

---

40. The first portion of a hadíth statement containing the names of narrators is called the isnád.

41. The actual statement or information relating to the Prophet [p.b.u.h] is called the matn.

42. Tabarí precluded Shī'ite exegesis [whose traditions were derived from the Imáms] as well as Sufí exegesis [based primarily on allegory and mystics].

### 3.2.2.4 Materials used by al-Tabarí in his tafsír

#### I. Variant readings - Qirá'át<sup>43</sup>

Another kind of material attested by al-Tabarí is that of the variant readings of the Qur'án. He adheres to this primarily in terms of divergent meanings.

#### II. Isrá'iliyát

Al-Tabarí in addition to the above has made use of legends from Jewish sources, as did ibn 'Abbás. It was a practice that was not always acknowledged, however Dhahabí [1961:1/216] describes this usage as follows:

Ibn Jarír mentions in his tafsír information derived from the Isrá'iliyát narratives; he transmits his isnád back to Ka'b al-Ahbár, Wahb bin Munabbih, ibn Jurayj<sup>44</sup> and Suddí<sup>45</sup>. He relates on the authority of Muhammad bin Isháq and mostly from Maslámah - the Christian.

The usage of Christian and Jewish sources was subject to criticism for later scholars considered the tafsír to contain numerous fabricated legends and narratives.<sup>46</sup>

#### III. Ancient Arabic poetry

Al-Tabarí had recourse to quoting from ancient Arabic poetry by a large mode, following the pattern of ibn 'Abbás.<sup>47</sup> Totally in accordance with his traditional stance towards tafsír he embodies the following in his work: a) lexical

---

43. Qirá'a [pl.Qirá'át] - derived from qara'a [ meaning - reading or recitation ]. Qirá'át is a verbal noun meaning [recitation]. The word Qur'án is also derived from qara'a.

44. He produced a tafsír based on the collections of ibn 'Abbás.

45. His tafsír was based on collections from ibn Mas'úd.

46. Ibn Khaldún in The Muqaddimah [1958: II/444ff] explains the cause of this criticism.

47. Arabic poetry had gained tremendous momentum during the time of ibn 'Abbás and continued henceforth as a means of supporting interpretations.

explanations, b) legends, c) grammatical and philological explanations, d) commentary on abrogation and e) references to law and dogma [Smith 1975:60].

#### **IV. Linguistics**

There exists yet another method which ibn Jarír followed in his book; he allowed the use of linguistics in addition to the transmitted material and had recourse to its reliability in his tafsír in terms of explaining the doubtful [verses]. He gave preference to some linguistic terms above others.

#### **V. Grammatical and syntactical usages - Basran and Kufan schools**

A contributing element to the "Jámi'.... extends to al-Tabarí's usage of grammatical discussions based on the linguistic schools of Basra and Kúfa" [Smith 1975:60].

We find that ibn Jarír turns frequently to the syntactical teachings of the Basrans and Kufans both in terms of syntax and morphology and the distinguishing of words as well, at times in accordance with the Basran school and at others according to the Kufan school.

#### **VI. *Ijmá'*-Consensus**

"About that time [by about 300A.H.] orthodox *ijmá'* concerning interpretations of the Qur'án had stabilized partly on definite interpretations {wujúh} of other passages" [Abdul,M.O.A 1976:50/146].

Similarly we find that ibn Jarír in his tafsír accords importance to the consensus of the community and appropriates to it great authority in the selection of what should be included in his tafsír.



### 3.2.2.5 Precursory review of the *Jámi'*

The *Jámi' al-Bayán* is an invaluable storehouse of information representing the author's skills in poetry, history, philology, grammar and traditions. It is detailed, concise and bulky due to its "enormous depository of information" [Denny 1980:103]. The work, described as one of "immeasurable value" is so not only because of its vast body of information, but because al-Tabarí was the "first to organise and formulate this material, classifying it in terms of its subject matter and relation to the structure of Qur'anic verses" [Smith 1975:61]. This was the first attempt to comment on the whole Qur'an verse by verse.

## 3.3 AL-ZAMAKHSHARÍ

The course of Qur'anic exegesis was to take an unfamiliar turn, a route that diverged largely from the traditionalism that had eclipsed Qur'anic commentary for centuries<sup>48</sup>. Rationalism or independent reasoning swept across the realm of Islámic scholarship transforming the entire mode of Qur'anic exegesis. Reliance on traditionalism per se no longer seemed to be the only criterion for an understanding of the Qur'an. Commentators began to exercise what is termed *tafsír bi 'l-ra'y*<sup>49</sup> [i.e. exposition by means of independent opinion]. The principle figure executing this new change was the *Mu'tazilite*, al-Zamakhsharí.

### 3.3 1 Early Life

Of Persian descent Abu'l Qásim<sup>50</sup> Mahmúd b.'Umar al-Zamakhsharí was born a century and a half after the death of al-Tabarí. Hailing from a small town in the province of Khwárizm<sup>51</sup> called "Zamakshar"<sup>52</sup>, al-Zamakhsharí was born on the 27

---

48. From its inception Qur'anic commentary was based almost absolutely on tradition.

49. This has been discussed in Chapter One.

50. His kunya [agnomen] was Abu'l Qásim.

51. Khwárizm is located south of the Arabian Sea.

52. Zamakhshar is situated almost 500 miles north of Tús.

Rajab 1075. Biographical details are somewhat amorphous, however it can be inferred from his poetry that his parents were religious. Born during the reign of Malik Sháh, the Saljúq Sultan, al-Zamakhsharí spent the first 18 years of his life as a subject of the Sultán Malik Sháh 1.

Al-Zamakhsharí's early schooling career was primarily in his native city Zamakhshar. It was here that he learnt to recite the Qur'án as well. In pursuit of further education he travelled to Bukhára, Samarqand and Baghdád. Bukhára was the centre of education<sup>53</sup> and al-Zamakhsharí studied with prominent scholars in various fields. One of his most distinguished teachers<sup>54</sup> was Abú Mudár Mahmúd b.Jarír ad-Dabbí al-Isfahání [d.1113] - a renowned grammarian and philologist . [He is acknowledged with having introduced the *Mu'tazilite* teachings to the Khwárizm inhabitants].

After his sojourn in Bukhára, al-Zamakhsharí returned to Khwárizm. Here he desired a post [mansab] in the government. He thought that his one time affiliation with the vizier would guarantee him a post, but this was not so. Distraught he left Khwárizm for Khurásán, travelled through Isfahán and returned to Khwárizm - this was largely due to illness. He made a solemn vow that on restoration of his health he would not vie for any governmental post, irrespective of how lucrative the offer would be. He devoted himself to a life of penmanship and teaching. He later travelled to Makka where he earned the title of "Jár Allah" [Allah's neighbour]. Al-Zamakhsharí returned to Zamakhshar where he died in the year 1144. He is buried at Jurjániyya in Khwárizm.

---

53. This was largely due to the rise of the Samanids in 204 A.H.

54. He studied literature under Abú Alí al-Hasan bin al-Mauzfir al-Naysaburi and linguistics under Abú Mansúr Mawhúb b.Abú Táhír Ahmad al-Jawáliqí regarded as [min mafkhur Baghdád] - one of the prides of Baghdád [Ibrahim 1980:19/97].

### 3.3.2 A literary masterpiece

Al-Zamakhsharí's contribution to the field of Qur'anic exegesis is ingenious and is an absolute necessity for one studying the Qur'án in its entirety. The al-Kashsháf *'an Haqá'iq Ghawámidi al-tanzíl wa 'Uyún al-Aqáwíl fí Wujúh al-Ta'wíl* [Unveiler of the Real Meanings of the Hidden Matters of what was sent down and the Choicest Statements about the Various Aspects of its Interpretation], produced during his second visit to Makka is considered unequalled in terms of its literary excellencies.

Having completed his magnum opus within a short span of two years<sup>55</sup> the commentary reveals the brilliance of al-Zamakhsharí both in terms of its content as well as his unrestrained command of the Arabic language.

The biographer Ibn Khallikán in *Wafayát* [1968:5/168] writes of the Kashsháf: "Nothing like it had been written before."

Al-Húfí [1966: 245] describes al-Zamakhsharí's linguistic talents as follows:

تفوق الزمخشري في اللغة كما تفوق في التفسير ، و قد تجلت عنايته باللغة و حقائقها و مجازاتها و نصوصها و نحوها في تفسيره الكشاف .

"Al-Zamakhsharí had excelled in linguistics as he had in tafsír, for his meticulousness to language and its real meanings, its metaphors, its style and its syntax in his commentary Kashsháf was evident."

The philological and syntactical commentary of this *Mu'tazilite* ranks as one of the "most noted and most quoted of Qur'anic commentaries" [McAuliffe 1991:52]. Essentially the style of the Kashsháf is as follows:

Al-Zamakhsharí sets forth the style of the passage as it is most apparent, notes the progression of ideas and then suggests possible interpretations based on both grammatical and philological analysis. One cannot help but notice the extent of

---

55. The introduction to Kashsháf shows that it would have taken him more than thirty years, but the power of the Ka'ba and the blessed influence greatly speeded his process.

these two aspects for they are considered unique in the history of Islámic literature. As a Persian by birth his mastery of the Arabic language coupled with grammatical analyses has made his work the most valuable in its field. The exegesis falls unreservedly in the category of tafsír bi 'l-ra'y for employing reasoning was his primary objective. Described as a "rational commentary" [Smith 1975:91], the text is not prolix or voluminous, but is infact condensed, precise and complex<sup>56</sup>. According to Jansen[1974:63], "al-Zamakhsharí analysed the stylistic peculiarities of the Koran and gave reasons for the apparent irregularities in the text..."<sup>57</sup>

Al-Zamakhsharí had in the course of his commentary followed methods employed by Ibn 'Abbás and al-Tabarí. He cited poetry<sup>58</sup> in order to demonstrate the meanings of certain words. As a strict adherent of the *Mu'tazilite* sect these ideas were indoctrinated in al-Zamakhsharí and manifested in his commentary as well.

### **3.3.2.1 Controversial views surrounding the Kashsháf**

The *Kashsháf* as its study discloses comprises the *Mu'tazilite* dogma together with hermeneutical reasoning. The former cannot be disregarded for the *Mu'tazilite* influence was sure to manifest itself. However al-Zamakhsharí advanced his arguments and statements in such an ingenious way that it became almost impossible to label his views as "unorthodox". Orthodox Sunnis have made use of his tafsír as a means of understanding the language of the Qur'án. Ibn Khaldún [1967:II/447] says of the *Kashsháf*:

Al-Zamakhsharí uses the various methods of rhetoric [balágha] arguing in favour of the pernicious doctrines of the *Mu'tazila*, wherever he believed they occurred in the verses of the Qur'án. Competent orthodox scholars have, therefore, come to disregard his work and to warn everyone against its

---

56. The work is certainly not light reading for one not totally familiar with the Arabic language.

57. These were obviously based on rules governing Arabic grammar.

58. Ibn 'Abbás said: "When you are confused concerning a verse from the Book of Allah, then search for it in poetry, for it is the diwán of the Arabs."

pitfalls. However, they admit that he is on firm ground in everything related to language and style [balágha]. If the student of the work is acquainted with the orthodox dogmas and knows the arguments in their defense, he is no doubt safe from its fallacies. Therefore, he should seize the opportunity to study it, because it contains remarkable and varied linguistic information.

Goldziher contends that although al-Zamakhsharí's work has been used extensively, opponents are critical of him for they oppose his "dogmatic deductions" which they felt were filtered in accordance with rationalistic formula [Najjár 1955:117-19 & Smith 1975:92].

Praise or criticism, the Kashsháf is a highly acclaimed commentary and to dub it as anything other than that is pure ignorance.

### **3.4 AL-RÁZÍ**

The twelfth century of Islám prided itself with the intellectual figure of Fakhr al-Dín al-Rází- [Glory of Religion]. A Persian<sup>59</sup> by birth the personality of this "renewer of religion" [مجدد الدين]<sup>60</sup> was to shape Islámic intellectual thought beyond its outermost limits. As a mathematician, astronomer, theologian, physician, historian and exegete al-Rází has indeed challenged the greatest Islámic minds for centuries to come.

#### **3.4.1 Early Life**

Abú 'Abd Allah Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥasan bin 'Alí, al-Tamimí

---

59. A keen examination unveils how an overwhelming majority of classical Qur'anic commentators were of Persian descent. This did not elude the social theorist Ibn Khaldún who voiced the view that most Qur'án commentators were Persians, for he quoted the Prophetic hadíth, "If scholarship hung suspended at the highest portions of heaven, the Persians would [reach it and] take it" [1967: II/313].

60. Every Islámic century produces an eminent reviver of Islám; the 5th century hijrî exhibited al-Ghazálí and the 6th al-Rází. The Prophet [p.b.u.h] is reported to have said: "Every hundred years a renovator from among my descendants will renew their religion for them" [Tabaqát al-Shafiyyah: I/104].

{tribe} al-Bakrī {clan} al-Tabrastání {ancestry} al-Rází {his name by birth} known simply as Fakhr al-Dín was born on 25th Ramadan 1149 in Ray, presumably from a *Shafi'ite* and *Ash'arite* family<sup>61</sup>. He received his formative education largely under the tutelage of his father Diyá' al-Dín 'Umar, a well-known preacher of the town which accounts for the title of Ibn Khaṭīb al-Rayy to the young Rází. He does allude to his father's teachings as this is mentioned in his *Tabsīl al-Haqq*. He studied in Ray and Marágha where he went in pursuit of his teacher Majd al-Dín al-Jílí. Biographers do not give a detailed account of his early life. He died in Herat in 1209.

### 3.4.2 Controversies surrounding al-Rází

Al-Rází travelled extensively and held interesting discussions with the savants at the time and his concise autobiography entitled:

مناظرات العلامة الفخر الرازى فى سحاية الى سمرقند ثم جهة الهند

"The controversies of Fakhr [al-Dín] al-Rází which took place during his travel to Samarqand and later on his way to India" sheds light on his travels. In this treatise his encounter with eminent scholars and celebrities is illuminated and it emits the character of al-Rází as well. It contains sixteen chapters, but the present study requires focus on his Qur'anic commentary.

Al-Rází was endowed with abundant knowledge. He taught in both Arabic and Persian and composed Arabic poetry<sup>62</sup> as well. He was greatly influenced by Ibn Síná, al-Fárábí, al-Ghazálí and Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Rází. He had a retentive memory, for according to Kholeif [1966:17] he had committed to memory the *Shámil* of Imám al-Haramayn, the *Mu'tamid* of Abu 'l-Hasan al-Basrí and the *Mustasfa'* of al-Ghazálí. Al-Rází's biographer Khalíl b. Aybak al-Safadí describes the philosopher cum exegete as follows:

---

61. According to Ceylan [1980:8] he was brought up in the *Shafi'ite* rite but belonged to the *Ash'arite* sect. He was critical of both and rejected their doctrines on many issues.

62. Safadí expressed the view that his Arabic poetry was mediocre, this view is questionable.

As distinguished from others like him, he had five qualities which God gathered for no one else. They were a masterly expressiveness in discourse, a sound intellect, a limitless store of knowledge, a comprehensive memory [*al-hafizát al-mustawba'a*] and ability to recall apposite instances of demonstrations and corroborating proofs [*al-dhákirat allati tu'ayyinuahu 'ala' má yurídu fí taqrír al-adilla wa-'l-baráhín*] [McAuliffe 1991:64].

### 3.4.3 Al-Rází's magnum opus

The tafsír, known as Mafátíh al-Ghayb [The keys of the Unseen] or al-Tafsír al-Kabír [The Great Commentary] consists of eight bulky volumes. Packed with philosophical and theological erudition the style of the work bears semblance to the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas. Al-Rází divides the study of the verses in to questions [masá'il]. These are then further subdivided into several interpretations. In a way he explains how each passage is linked to the preceding one. Al-Safadí considers this original as he says: "He was the first one to devise this arrangement in his writings. He accomplished in them what no one before him had done, for he stated the question [mas'ala] and then proceeded to divide it and to classify further these sub-divisions. He drew conclusions on the basis of such probing and apportioning and determined the scope of the masá'il" [McAuliffe 1991: 69].

Al-Rází includes several scholars and grammarians in his work. His reliance on the latter is to explain the meanings of words, phrases and grammatical constructions and thus approaches exegesis from a linguistic point of view. Earlier commentators feature in his work to a certain extent<sup>63</sup>. Prophetic traditions are a valid source for his interpretation. He includes jurists such as Abú Hanífa, al-Sháfi'í and Málík b.Anas and the historians al-Wáqidí and Muhammad ibn Isbáq. Abú 'Alí al-Jubbá'í the chief of the *Mu'tazilite* school of Basra is often quoted as is al-Qádí 'Abd al-Jabbár from Ra'y. Another important commentator

---

63. He often includes Ibn 'Abbás, al-Tabarí is rarely mentioned and his reliance on others is more for theological, moral and historical issues.

included in al-Rází's commentary is al-Qaffál of Transoxiana, a former *Mu'tazilite* who became an *Ash'arite*.

### 3.4.3.1 Method employed in the Tafsír

He determines if a passage should be read in a literal sense or be interpreted; he then determines if a proposition is necessary, possible or impossible. If possible there follows an interpretation and in case of an historical event he turns to tradition and he quotes other Qur'anic verses to explain texts being interpreted. This method is known by the expression *al-Qur'ánu yufassiru ba'duhu ba'd*. A theological problem is dealt with by expounding on Qur'anic teachings. Pertaining to issues of a religious nature he turns his attention to the juridical schools.

### 3.4.3.2 Al-Rází - the centre of controversy

Al-Rází, the Persian theologian cum religious commentator comes forth as a highly controversial figure. His philosophical beliefs, the *Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite* dispute and the unfinished tafsír all lend themselves to the genius of the man. The *Mafátíḥ al-Ghayb* includes many subjects other than interpretation of the Qur'án. The fact that his exegesis encompasses numerous other subjects as well has led many scholars to criticise it" [Kafrawi 1999:63/188]. An extract from Dhahabí [1961:2/295] reads as follows:

"جمع الإمام الرازى فى تفسيره أشياء كثيرة طويلة لا حاجة بها فى علم التفسير ، و لذلك قال  
بعض العلماء : فيه كل شىء الا التفسير "

"Imám Fakhr al-Rází had included in his tafsír many lengthy details which are not required in the science of tafsír, and this has led some learned scholars to draw the following [conclusion]: 'It contained everything except tafsír.'"<sup>64</sup>

Al-Rází was strongly devoted to the philosophical approach, but when it came to making a choice between Sunní orthodoxy and rationalist philosophy, he sided

---

64. This view was expressed by Ibn Taymiyyah.



with the former [Smith 1975:105]. He was accused of spreading unorthodox views, but Paul Kraus defends the commentary by saying: "it is not merely, as it is frequently supposed, an *Ash'arite* answer to *Mu'tazilite* theological commentaries such as the *Kashsháf* of al-Zamakhsharí" [McAuliffe 1991:70]. Roger Arnaldez has stressed the significance of the commentary and has called for a serious study of the work [McAuliffe 1991:70].

The authorship of al-Tafsír al-Kabír is yet another controversial issue. Some biographers are of the opinion that al-Rází did not complete the work. Jomier's study has revealed some new information:

by scrutinising the colophons of a number of manuscripts he found that al-Rází wrote with tremendous speed and at other times he adopted a leisurely approach; a study of dates indicates that he did not comment on súras in order; research shows that súras 29-36 were not done by al-Rází himself.

Al-Rází can be categorised as a philosopher, writer or commentator. According to Smith [1975:106] "he is still coming to be recognized as one of the most deeply pious as well as intellectually creative of Muslim thinkers."

### **3.5 MUHAMMAD ASAD**

Muhammad Asad, writer, diplomat and Qur'ánic commentator par excellence has not been accorded the status which a man of his erudition deserves. His death in Spain 1992 has left the world bereft of a Muslim visionary, yet he remains virtually unknown in the west and little known in the Islámic world. Ironic as it is, his absence is felt for he had worked zealously to bridge the gap between east and west.

### 3.5.1 Early Life

Muhammad Asad, formerly Leopold Weiss, was born to Jewish parents in the Polish city of Lvov<sup>65</sup> in 1900. At age 14 he joined the Austrian army to fight in World War One and he converted to Islám in 1926. As a journalist by profession he became a foreign correspondent for Frankfurter Zeitung-a widely read newspaper in Europe. During 1926 he travelled to Saudi Arabia and stayed there for five years. In 1932 he visited India and was inspired by Sir Muhammad Iqbal to translate the Sahih al-Bukhárí into English.

After the partition of India, he played a pivotal role in Pakistan's Islámic law. In 1953 he was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations. In 1957 he organised an Islámic colloquium in Lahore - this was initiated by the Pakistani Government. During 1958 he travelled to Switzerland and continued translating the Qur'án into English. After 22 years of study he completed the translation. Prior to this he immersed himself in an intense study of classical Arabic whilst living among the bedouin of Central and Eastern Arabia whose dialect linguistic articulation had remained unaltered since the time of the Prophet [p.b.u.h]. This gave him a broad understanding of the semantics of the Qur'ánic language and facilitated his task during his translation of the Qur'án into English.

### 3.5.2 Muhammad Asad's - The message of the Qur'án

As a preface to his Qur'ánic translation and commentary Muhammad Asad has described his work as follows:

"It is an attempt - perhaps the first attempt, at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'ánic message into a European language" [1980:5-7].

An important linguistic consideration for Asad's interpretation is his view that the Qur'án should not be studied in the light of "individual injunctions and

---

65. Formerly part of the Austrian Empire.

exhortations" but as one integral whole - in other words every verse has a bearing on other verses and sentences. An easy understanding would be to view and correlate statements and verses to what has been said in preceding statements and thus to explain by means of cross-referencing, "always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic" [1980:7].

A second feature of his commentary and a point which he emphasises is that the Qur'án should not be viewed from an historical point - references to historical events should be seen as illustrations of the human condition. The historical causes of revelation he feels should not obscure the underlying purport of the verse and the teaching which the Qur'án as a whole reflects.

Asad stresses that his Qur'anic interpretation differs from classical commentators, for their understanding reflected the times and situations in which they lived. Interpretation differs due to the individual's different forms of reasoning, for the Prophet [p.b.u.h] is reported to have said: "The differences of opinion [ikhtiláf] among the learned men of my community are an [outcome of] divine grace [rahma]" - meaning the differences of opinion are based on progress in human cognition. The Message of the Qur'án was devoted to people who think. This is why he emphasised the use of ijtihád, a fact which has been stressed in the Qur'án as well. Ijtihád, he believed would enable Muslims to adapt, change and develop according to the times, yet remain steadfast to the Qur'án and Sunnah of the Prophet [p.b.u.h].

Muhammad Asad is quoted to have said the following:

"Every Muslim ought to be able to say, 'The Qur'án has been revealed for me' " [Rahim 1995:46].

### **3.6. AL-JAZÁ'IRÍ**

‘Abd al - Raḥmán bin Abí Bakr Jábir al-Jazá'irí was born in Madina on the 1 Rajab 1375. Details of his early life are vague. However protracted research has furnished the following scanty details. He has obtained a degree in the faculty of

*Sharí'a* at the Islámic university in Madina in the year 1399 A.H. At about 1403 A.H he obtained his masters degree at the Muhammad bin Sa'ud Islamic University. The title of his dissertation is "الشائعات فى الميدان الإعلامى و موقف" - "Rumours in the domain of information and the stance of Islam pertaining to it." Within a span of four years he completed his doctoral thesis entitled "خصائص الدعوة والدعاة فى هدى الكتاب و السنة" Characteristics of supplication and composure in the method of the Qur'án and *Hadíth*." Al-Jazá'irí is as present an associate professor at the Islámic University in Madina and his Qur'án commentary "أيسر التفاسير لكلام العلى الكبير" - "The easiest interpretation of the Word of the Most Supreme, the Eminent" forms an integral part of the present study.

### 3.6.1. Aysar al Tafásír

Al-Jazá'irí introduces Aysar al Tafásír as follows:

....هذا تفسير موجز لكتاب الله تعالى القرآن الكريم وضعته مراعيًا فيه حاجة المسلمين اليهم الى فهم كلام الله تعالى الذى هو مصدر شريعتهم ، و سبيل هدايتهم و هو عصمتهم من لأهواء و شفاؤهم من الأدواء ...

"This tafsír is a brief outline of the Book of Allah, the Holy Qur'án. It [i.e.the tafsír] has been drawn up to comply with the needs of Muslims today towards an understanding of the Word of Allah which is the root of their code and the path for their guidance, [it is a means] to safeguard them from the heretic tendencies and to cure them from maladies" [al-Jazá'irí 1987:1/5].

### 3.6.2. The form and structure of Aysar

The Book of Allah is a systematised, consistent and structured work. Al-Jazá'irí in his commentary selects one verse at a time for study, he then explains its

terminology followed by the meaning of the relevant verse. This is then supplemented with points on guidance that can be accrued as articles of faith and action from the verses. He prefers a conglomeration of verses pertaining to one issue and then discusses the meanings applicable to these.

This work has had recourse to authoritative works of al-Tabarí, Jalál al-dín Suyúti, al-Marághí and ‘Abd al-Rahmán bin Násir al-Sa’dí.

إنى أطلب المسلم أن يقرأ أولاً الآيات حتى يحفظها ، فإذا حفظها درس كلماتها حتى يفهمها ،  
ثم يدرس معناها حتى يعيه ، ثم هداياتها للعمل بها .

"I request the Muslim to read the verses at first until he has memorised them, once this has been accomplished he should study its words until he understands them, then he should study its meanings until he has grasped them, then he should derive guidance from it and act upon it" [al-Jazá'irí 1987:1/8].

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

أن الله تعالى يرفع بهذا الكتاب أقواما ، و يضع آخرين

"Allah has raised nations with this Book and humiliated others" [al-Jaza'irí 1987:1/8].

Al-Jazá'irí has requested all Muslims, male and female to read his Qur'anic commentary "أيسر التفاسير لكلام الله العلى الكبير"

### 3.7 SUMMATION

This chapter has highlighted fundamental aspects in the lives of the five selected commentators. Each one of them has emerged from different Islámic periods and an insight into their lives has shed light on their varied methods of Qur'anic interpretation.

