A Contribution to the Discussion on
“the Beginning Period and the Sources of Tafsīr” *

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Abstract
Al-Zarkashī’s and al-Suyūṭī’s approaches to the ‘Interpretation of the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān’ and ‘Interpretation of the Qur’ān by the Prophet’s sayings’ are parallel with the data coming from tafsīr reports. These reports also reveal that the Successors’ tafsīr activities (maqṭū’ āḥādīth) tend to dominate all others. Thus tafsīr as a discipline started with the Successors. Al-Bukhārī who aimed to collect the marfū‘ āḥādīth did not present anything conflicting with these approaches. As for Ibn Taymiyya, he presented reactionary methodology (uṣūl) suitable for his competitive life against ‘the heretic tendencies’. However, he disregarded whether or not this methodology was confirmed by tafsīr reports.

Keywords: Exegesis, Isnād chain, Tafsīr methodology, Companion, Successor.

Özet
“Tefsirin Başlangıcı ve Kaynakları” Tartışmasına Bir Katkı


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Topics related to the “first stages and sources of *tafsîr*” are a crucial part of *tafsîr* methodology (*uşûl al-taṣfîr*). One of the contemporary leading figures in this field, al-Zurqâni (d.1368/1948), gives three sources for the *al-taṣfîr al-manqûl* (Interpretation of the Qur’ân by narrations): 1) Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the Qur’ân, 2) Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the Prophet Muḥammad’s sayings, 3) Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the sayings of the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad.¹ One of the examples which al-Zurqâni presented after this classification is connected with al-Baqara 6:82:

“It is those who believe and confuse not their beliefs with wrong - that are (truly) in security, for they are on (right) guidance.” When this verse was revealed, the Companions became anxious, because they thought that lack of any type of ‘Wrong’ from their belief is impossible. Then, reading the verse Luqmân 31:13, the Prophet interpreted ‘Wrong’ as *shirk* (polytheism), so the Companions became satisfied.² Which one of the above mentioned three classes is related to this narration: ‘Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the Qur’ân’ or ‘Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the Prophet’s sayings’? Al-Zurqâni put this narration under the ‘Interpretation of the Qur’ân by the Prophet’s sayings.’ We agree with this choice of his. But this choice appears to be problematic in terms of his above mentioned classification, because the first and second classes of this classification are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, this classification was accepted by many contemporary scholars writing on *tafsîr* history—even by Muḥammad Ḥusayn el-Dhahabî (d.1397/1976), who wrote the most famous contemporary relevant book in circulation.

Reference of one verse to another does not usually depend on objective criteria. However, Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328) in the classic period³ and al-Zurqâni in this century claimed that this type of reference is a source for Qur’ânic Interpretation. In fact, this is not a source. This is only a method that everyone can use to comment on the Qur’ân. On the other hand, a few verses naturally refer to and explain the meanings of some other verses.⁴

⁴ Al-Zurqâni gives some examples, see *Manâhîl*, II, 12.
Nevertheless, this does not mean that ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ is not a method in general.

For example, Al-Zarkashī (d.794/1392), one of the leading figures in ʿüşūl al-tafsīr, considered ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ to be a method.⁵ He did not mention this method among what he thought are the tafsīr’s sources, where he would be expected to do so. According to him, there are four sources in tafsīr: 1. The Prophet’s sayings,⁶ 2. The Companion’s sayings,⁷ 3. Arabic language,⁸ 4. Muṣṭaṣḥā al-ḥāl (raʾy-free opinion).⁹ Al-Suyūṭī (d.911/1505) adopted this classification. Al-Suyūṭī did not dwell on ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ even as much as al-Zarkashī did.¹⁰ Why is it that al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī were able to reach the right classification? The answer is very simple: They knew tafsīr’s narrations in the process of their compilations of narrations: al-Suyūṭī’s renowned book called al-Durr al-mantuḥ fī al-tafsīr al-maʿṭūr has survived.¹¹ We have the information that al-Zarkashī compiled the tafsīr book up until the Sūra 19.¹² Indeed, after becoming acquainted with the narrations, they developed the appropriate ʿüşūl (methodology) for practical situations.

One of the most important sources in al-Suyūṭī’s tafsīr was that of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d.327/939). This is understood from al-Suyūṭī’s statements¹³ and al-Durr’s references to Ibn Abī Ḥātim that occur in about every two pages. Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tafsīr covers very few examples revealing ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’.¹⁴ This data can help to explain al-Suyūṭī’s disregard for ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’.

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⁶ Ibid, II, 156.
¹² Kāṭīb Çelebi, Kashf al-zunān ʿan asāmī al-kuṭub wa al-funūn, (Maṭbaʿat vakālat al-maʿārif, 1360), I, 448.
Mafātīḥ al-ghayb had the inclination to ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ more than al-Ṭabarī’s (d.310/922) and Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tafsīr books. Al-Rāzī (d.604/1207) easily made connections between the verses in his al-tafsīr bi al-ra’y called Mafātīḥ al-ghayb by using his intelligence and free opinions. Al-Rāzī never needed any sources for these connections as opposed to al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim. If ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ was even accepted as a source, its use in al-tafsīr bi al-ra’y would become more easy and logical than in al-tafsīr bi al-maḥfūr.

Concentrating on al-Suyūṭī’s Itqān may be of great benefit in respect to ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Prophet’s sayings’. The Prophet’s explanations are necessary for the right understanding of the Qurʾān, because he and his companions had faced the Qurʾān directly. So they had the understanding of the Qurʾān closest to objectivity. Then, how many reports come from the Prophet in tafsīr? This question can be answered through the relevant data found in al-Ṭabarī’s and Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tafsīr books. Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tafsīr contains about 18283 isnāds, only 4 percent of which dates back to the Prophet.⁵ As for al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, it contains about 38000 isnāds including the Prophet’s sayings (7.8 %).⁶

Al-Suyūṭī stated that the narrations traced to the Prophet about the interpretation of the Qurʾān were a very small part of tafsīr material.⁷ Al-Suyūṭī deserves to be praised on this point too. He gives only about 150 relevant narrations at the end of the Itqān. Leaning aside the data presented in al-Ṭabarī’s and Ibn Ḥātim’s tafsīr books, it suffices to glance at the parts of tafsīr in al-Kutub al-sitta to have an idea. They are only such parts as Kitāb al-ṭahāra and Kitāb al-buyūʿ in this literature. Besides, al-Nasā’ī (d.303/915) was able to collect for his special work only 766 sayings of the Prophet that are connected with the interpretation of the Qurʾān.⁸

Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328) conflicted with al-Suyūṭī not only in ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’ but also in ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Prophet’s sayings’. Ibn Taymiyya’s tafsīr theory requires that there should be an enormous amount of tafsīr material coming from the Prophet. So he believed that the Prophet interpreted the Qurʾān as a whole to

⁵ Iḥb., 107.
⁷ Al-Suyūṭī, Itqān, II, 1193, 1205.
his Companions. He insists that \textit{tafsīr} is inevitable on the one hand, but he minimizes the realm of \textit{ra'y} (opinion) of a \textit{mufassir} (commentator) on the other. Then, he had to come up with reasonable, adequate, and undisputed sources. They are, of course, along with the ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān’, the \textit{tafsīr} narrations coming from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors. He was striving to offer a theory coherent in itself. He did not pay attention to whether it was corroborated by the \textit{tafsīr} material or not. He fought during his life against ‘the heretic tendencies’ which used ‘reason’ arbitrarily. So his negative attitude to arbitrary use of ‘reason’ is reflected in his \textit{tafsīr} methodology. In brief, his methodology was a reactionary not a realistic one. Unfortunately, many contemporary scholars based \textit{tafsīr}’s sources on Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology instead of al-Zarkashi’s and al-Suyūṭi’s. It is probable that they were most impressed with Ibn Taymiyya’s belligerent life against ‘the heretic tendencies’.

There is a crucial point to consider: Goldziher (d.1337/1921) indicated that al-Suyūṭi (d.911/1505) collected ten thousand exegetical \textit{ḥadīths} going back to the Prophet and to Companions.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Muqaddima}, 65.} \textit{Al-Itqān} confirms Goldziher’s quotation from al-Suyūṭi.\footnote{Ibid, 64-66.} Then, was there a contradiction in Suyūṭi’s sayings? So, another investigation is needed for ‘Interpretation of the Qurʾān by the Prophet’s sayings’ in order to make this problem clear: If we read the Prophet’s sayings in al-Ṭabarī’s and Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s \textit{tafsīr} books, even in the \textit{tafsīr} parts of \textit{al-Kutub al-Sitta}, we will face the fact that they mostly were not expressed by the Prophet as \textit{tafsīr}. On the contrary, after the Prophet, a Companion, a Successor or a \textit{mufassir} (commentator) evaluated many of the Prophet’s sayings as \textit{tafsīr} for certain verses. Investigating the \textit{tafsīr} narrations, someone can easily find subjective usages of Prophet’s sayings as \textit{al-tafsīr}. One striking example is connected with al-A'rafa 7:128: “Said Moses to his people: "Pray for help from Allah, and (wait) in patience and constancy: for the earth is Allah’s, to give as a heritage to such of His servants as He pleaseth; and the end is (best) for the righteous.”

\textbf{References:}

22. Ibid, 92-94.
Ibn Abî Ḥātim mentions three narrations to explain the expression *iṣbirū* (Be patient!) in this verse:25

1. The Prophet said: “Fasting is half of the patience.”26
2. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d.23/644) said: “There are two kinds of patience: Patience during any disaster is good. Better is to become patient with things God banned.”
3. Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d.95/714) said: “Patience is the servant’s consent to things coming from God for God’s sake and his/her hope from God for the reward of this patience. Nevertheless, a person sometimes becomes impatient.”

It is clear that these three sayings were not uttered to interpret al-ʿAḍrāf 7:128. However, the second and the third narrations can be related to this verse subjectively. For Moses gives advice the people fleeing from the cruelty of Pharaoh to be patient in this verse, and these two narrations show that patience is a virtue. But there is no relation between the Prophet’s saying (first narration) and this verse. The unique common point is the word *ṣabr* (patience) which is used in both texts. If Ibn Abî Ḥātim used the Prophet’s mentioned saying as the interpretation of al-Baqara 2:183 it could be meaningful; because, the topic of this verse is fasting.

The other example is related to Hûd 11:103:

“In that is a Sign for those who fear the penalty of the Hereafter: that is a Day for which mankind will be gathered together: that will be a Day of Testimony.” Ibn Abî Ḥātim mentions the following narration coming from the Prophet for the interpretation of this verse:27

“Send blessings on me (the Prophet) on Fridays mostly. Because, “Friday” is the day which angels witnessed.”28

There is a topical difference between this verse and the Prophet’s saying. The only similarity is some words common in both texts.

We inferred all these results relating to the ḥadîth narrations mostly from al-Ṭabarî’s and Ibn Abî Ḥātim’s books. It’s important if the famous

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\(\text{\textit{hadîth}}\) book such as al-Bukhârî’s work confirms these results. In addition, a comparison of characteristics of al-Bukhârî’s \textit{tafsîr} part with al-\textit{\textscript{T}abarî}’s and Ibn Abî \textit{\textscript{H}âtim}’s \textit{tafsîr} works generally contributes to this essay’s points of emphasis. Al-Bukhârî’s work, the most renowned Sunnite compilation among six \textit{hadîth} books, contains 2500 \textit{hadîths} excluding the repetitions. Part of \textit{tafsîr} covers 457 \textit{hadîths}. Our target is not to focus on al-Bukhârî’s work in respect of its general features. This was made by Marston Speight to some extent.\textsuperscript{29} His article is consisting of two main concerns in general. First, it gives some examples presented by contemporary \textit{tafsîr} historians almost with their categories. Second, it makes the six authoritative collections known in general, their parts of \textit{tafsîr} (if available) in particular.

One may find al-Bukhârî’s position in \textit{tafsîr} part strange: As it is known, \textit{hadîth} books must be more reliable than others in many aspects. As the most renowned \textit{hadîth} book, al-Bukhârî’s, must be the most reliable one at least for the existence of relevant references. Al-Bukhârî includes some narrations by means of anonymous \textit{insnâd} moulds such as \textit{yuqâlu} … (is said …), \textit{qîla}… (was said …) and \textit{wa qîla ghayruh}… (the other said …).\textsuperscript{30} This type of presentation was tolerated for \textit{tafsîr} books. Thus, they are covered by al-\textit{\textscript{T}abarî}’s and Ibn Abî \textit{\textscript{H}âtim}’s \textit{tafsîr} books. But it is no doubt that al-Bukhârî is questionable on this point.

\textit{Ta\'lîq} narrations are seen in al-Bukhârî’s book more frequently, which is the narration from any Companion or Successor without \textit{insnâd} chain. \textit{Ta\'lîq} is one of the main methods of al-Bukhârî in \textit{Kitâb al-\textit{tafsîr}}. He narrated from Ibn ‘Abbâs (d.68/687) and Mujâhid b. Jabr (d.103/721) mostly by means of \textit{ta\'lîq}.\textsuperscript{31} ‘Abdallâh b. Mes\'ûd (d.32/652), ‘Alî b. Abî \textit{\textscript{T}alib} (d.40/660), Sa\'îd b. Juba\'îr (d.95/714), \textit{Ikrima} (d.105/723), al-\textit{\textscript{D}alhâk} b. Muzâ\'îm (d.105/723), al-\textit{\textscript{H}asan} al-\textit{\textscript{B}a\'rî} (d.110/728), Qatâda b. Dî\'âma (d.117/735), Zeyd b. Aslam (d.136/753), Sufyân b. \textit{\textscript{U}yayna} (d.198/814) are referred by al-Bukhârî in the same manner of transmission.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} R. Marston Speight, “The Function of \textit{\textit{hadîth}} as Commentary on the Qur\'\textit{\textscript{a}n}, as Seen in the Six Authoritative Collections”, \textit{Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur\’\textit{\textscript{a}n}}, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{30} Al-Bukhârî, \textit{al-\textit{\textscript{S}a\'hîb}}, V, 188, 240; VI, 37, 48, 90.

\textsuperscript{31} For example, see ibid., V, 158, 165, 184, 186, 188, 198, 220.

\textsuperscript{32} For example, see ibid., V, 162, 165, 198, 212, 220, 223, 238, 240, 241.
Al-Bukhārī sometimes makes philological analysis like al-Ṭabarī does. It is seen that al-Bukhārī is familiar with “metaphor” (majāz) literature which started to develop just before him. Al-Bukhārī makes references to Abū ʿUbayda Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā (d.209/824). The writers of these literature used the word majāz almost in place of “meaning”. Al-Bukhārī used this word in one place. Besides, he does not hesitate even to present poetical evidence in order to emphasize some word meanings.

The other crucial point concerns the qirāʿāt narrations (different readings of the Qurʾān). They were transmitted without citing classic isnād chains. That is why Ibn Abī Ḥātim did not compile them because of his strict position about isnād chains. Unlike Ibn Abī Ḥātim, al-Ṭabarī cited this kind of narrations with taʿlīq way easily. Al-Bukhārī cited some of them in the same way too.

All this shows that al-Bukhārī’s tafsīr part almost has a similar form to tafsīr books. Now we may come to important questions: When did tafsīr begin? And why? Which generation has priority to doing tafsīr? Which generation experienced in understanding difficulties about the Qurʾān?

The data coming from the encyclopedic tafsīr compilations such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim shows that tafsīr, as it is understood today, started during the Successor generation. The former process must be regarded as a simple preparation stage. I wonder if al-Bukhārī’s tafsīr part falsifies these approaches. Thus, it will be useful to glance at this part’s content briefly:

The hadīths in this part do not generally make Qurʾānic texts any more understandable. They present expanding information on the verses’ meanings. They naturally address to persons who know basic meanings of relevant verses. The ḥadīths consisting of Ashbāb al-nuzūl (circumstances of revelations) are exception. This kind is composed of a special category. They are inevitable knowledge for the understanding of the Qurʾān. Thus, they are regarded as binding narrations even though the Prophet’s name sometimes is

33 For example, see ibid., V, 182, 229; VI, 22, 24, 73.
34 Ibid., VI, 22.
35 Ibid., VI, 34.
36 Ibid., V, 213; VI, 14, 34.
37 Ibid., VI, 53, 80.
not clearly cited in their isnād chains. They inform “persons”, “situations” or “events” that revelation talks about. For example:

When al-Maʾāṣida 5:90 verse came down, intoxicants were prohibited. After that some Muslims worried about Muslims that passed away before since they had drunk it. Upon this, The following verse was revealed: “On those who believe and do deeds of righteousness there is no blame for what they ate, when they guard themselves from evil, and believe, and do deeds of righteousness,- (or) again, guard themselves from evil and believe,- (or) again, guard themselves from evil and do good. For Allah loveth those who do good” (5/93). There is no doubt that al-Maʾāṣida 5:93 verse cannot be understood truly without explanation coming from 5:90 verse.

An explanation coming from ‘Āʾisha (d.58/678) relating to the verse al-Baqara 2:158 has important clue for it’s meaning. The translation of the verse is like this: “Behold! Safa and Marwa are among the Symbols of Allah. So if those who visit the House in the Season or at other times, should compass them round, it is no sin in them. And if any one obeyeth his own impulse to good, be sure that Allah is He Who recogniseth and knoweth”. Al-Šafā and al-Marwa hills were sacred in the pre-Islamic times. Some Companions wondered if their sacredness would continue. According to ‘Āʾisha, the verse al-Baqara 2:158 came down to answer these Companions.

Apart from Ashbāb al-nuzūl narrations, most narrations from the Prophet or Companions are only enrichment. Let’s see this verse al-Šaffāt 37:139: “So also was Jonah among those sent (by Us)”. This verse has so clear a meaning that it does not need any additional information to be understood. Nevertheless, Al-Bukhārī cited from the Prophet’s following ḥadīth: “whoever said “I am better than Jonah, would lie”. This ḥadīth obviously does not target to interpret the above mentioned verse. It is only an additional effort to keep Jonah’s respect.

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39 Al-Bukhārī, al-Ṣaḥīḥ, V, 189-190.

40 Ibid, V, 153.

41 Ibid, VI, 31.
The other narration is as follows: ‘Ā’isha said that: The Prophet said: “when any prophet becomes ill, he is given to choose the option between this world and Hereafter”. ‘Ā’isha continued: “The Prophet Muḥammad suffered from illness leading him to die and I heard He was reading the following verse ‘All who obey Allah and the messenger are in the company of those on whom is the Grace of Allah,- of the prophets (who teach), the Sincere (lovers of Truth), the martyrs, and the Righteous (who do good): Ah! How beautiful is there fellowship!’ And I understood he was in an optional position”. This narration of al-Bukhārī’s does not give any knowledge about the meaning of this verse. It quotes ‘Ā’isha’s feeling. Many similar narrations includes personal observations on the verses and events.

Al-Bukhārī’s reader sometimes meets startling situation. For example, the verses in the beginning of the Sūra 77 al-Mursalāt are full of vague statements. There is no explanation about those verses in al-Bukhārī’s tafsīr part. Instead, one can find the knowledge about a particular verse of the same Sūra whose meaning is already clear: Irka’ū : Şallū ; Lā yarka’un: Lā yuṣallūn.

**GENERAL EVALUATION**

Data coming from the survived tafsīr reports must play a primary role in developing a more coherent theory about tafsīr history. Moreover, this method can clarify not only different opinions of the tafsīr scholars but also their contradicting evaluations. Different milieus, priorities, trainings and qualifications lead them to different conceptions. Al-Suyūṭī’s tafsīr methodology based on the scientific approach complies with the above-mentioned tafsīr reports unlike Ibn Taymiyya’s.

According to tafsīr reports: 1. The Successors were the first to face the problem of understanding of the Qur’ān in exegetical terms. Thus the lack of an urgent need for tafsīr before the era of the Successors clearly shows that the Prophet and his Companions fully understood the Qur’ān. In fact, the largest part of the tafsīr reports dates back only to the Successors generation. 2. “Reference of one verse to another” does not usually depend on objective criteria. “Tafsīr of the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān” is essentially a method which may be used by any exegete.

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42 Ibid, V, 181.
43 Ibid, VI, 77.
The Ḥadīth literature does not reveal any concept contrary to what has been said above either. For example, al-Bukhārī’s tafsīr part is consistent with the data coming from the abovementioned data. Al-Bukhārī’s genuine contribution to tafsīr is his personal explanations consisting of synonyms of obscure words, along with his taʾlīq narrations going back to the Successors. The rest of the tafsīr part in al-Bukhārī, which is full of marfuʿ and mawqūf ḥadīths, comprises details that are not essential with respect to the understanding of Qur’ānic verses.

Amongst the generations that have faced problems concerning the understanding of the Qur’ān, the Successors have an undisputed advantage in capturing the true meaning: the generation of the Successors had privilege to live in the nearest period to the time of revelation and its direct addressees and surroundings. Distance from the first listeners of any text is inversely proportionate to the correct understanding of it. Briefly, though tafsīr reports are not marfuʿ or mawqūf ḥadīths, the correct understanding of the Qurʾān can only be acquired through them.

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