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Principles of Qur'anic Exegesis (*Usul Tafsir*): A Historical Background

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Abstract: Understanding the message of the Qur'an is one of the most significant purpose of the revelation of the Qur'an. To achieve it, certain principles are needed such as the knowledge of principles of Qur'anic exegesis, the Arabic term of which is *usul tafsir*. This article, therefore, seeks to discuss the definition of *usul tafsir*, its historical development and a review of some selected writings in this field. The methodology employed is a content analysis to analyze the collected data to arrive at the vivid findings.

Keywords: Qur'an, *Tafsir*, *Usul Tafsir*, Exegesis, Principles of Exegesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on principles of sciences are deemed very significant as it serves understanding and achieving the purpose of those sciences. Such examples are sciences of Qur'an for the Qur'an, sciences of principles of Islamic Jurisprudence to understand and enable deduction of Islamic rulings from religious texts. Similarly, principles of exegesis serve for understanding the meaning of Qur'anic texts and deriving its judgement and conclusion. In this manner, numerous writings have been made on discussing the exegetical works on Qur'an and their methodologies whereas a little consideration has been given to the study on the writings of the principles of Qur'anic exegesis (*usul tafsir*) in particular by non-Arabic writers.¹ Its teaching as a curriculum taught subject at higher learning institutions to a large extent has not drawn great consideration except through the teaching of the subjects such as the sciences of Qur'an and the methodologies of Qur'anic exegesis. It is only in a recent years that an interest in introducing *usul tafsir* as an independent subject has enticed a special attention at the higher learning institutions particularly at non Arabic universities.² Thus, this article is an attempt to study a number of issues related to the subject of *usul tafsir* with a specific focus on the definition, differences between the term *usul tafsir* and other related terms, historical developments of *usul al-tafsir* and review of selected writings on *usul tafsir*.

Ulum Quran, Ulum Tafsir, Usul tafsir, and Manahij al-Tafsir

Before proceeding to the discussion on the topic of *usul tafsir*, it is significant to differentiate some of the sciences related to the study of the Qur'an that overshadow the science of *usul tafsir*. These sciences are *Ulum Quran*, *Ulum Tafsir* and *Manahij al-Tafsir*. *Ulum Qur'an* (sciences of the Qur'an) is a science that deals with the Qur'an such as the meaning of the Qur'an, revelation, collection, and its exegesis. *Ulum Tafsir* (sciences of Qur'anic exegesis) is a science that seeks to comprehend the Qur'an and anything related to it.³ Its core subjects are history of exegesis, writings on exegesis, statements of exegetes, principles of exegesis and grades of exegetes.⁴ *Manahij Tafsir* (methodologies of Qur'anic exegesis) is a science that deals with the methodologies and the styles used in interpreting the Qur'an whereas *usul tafsir* is more specific than these three sciences.

¹ Example such as John Wansbrough in his *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Interpretation*. English writing by Muslim writers on this subject can be generally classified into two: firstly, elsewhere discussing this subject in their writings and secondly, discussing the methodologies of exegesis although the title carries the principle of exegesis.

² Examples such as *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Manahijuh* at the International Islamic University Malaysia Kuala Lumpur.

³ Khalil Mahmud Yamani, *Ta'sis Ilm al-Tafsir, Asbabuhu wa Ahammiyatuhu Ma'a Tarhi Muqarabah Ta'sisiyah*, p. 27, Markaz Tafsir lil Dirasat Qur'aniyyah, <https://tafsir.nrt/article/67>, retrieved on 24/11/2021 p.27.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.29.

MEANING OF *USUL TAFSIR*

It has become a custom of Muslim scholars to elaborate the elements of the terminology in their discussion. Various definitions have been given over the meaning of *usul tafsir*.⁵ It seems that the writings on *usul tafsir* compared to its given definitions have created a confusion among a reader as these definitions do not differentiate *usul tafsir* from other subjects that discuss the Qur'an and its explanation such as sciences of Qur'an (ulum Qur'an) and *manahij tafsir* (methodologies of tafsir). Thus, recently a great number of writings has emerged to clarify the exact meaning of *usul tafsir* and its subject matter and content.

Al-Tayyar has comprehensively studied the definitions of *usul tafsir* and concluded that generally the definitions given can be divided into two categories; firstly, definition that is not under the influence of any sciences and secondly, definition under the influence of other sciences. Under the first category, it can be said that *usul tafsir* is a collection of the principles and means required by exegetes to discover the meaning of the Qur'anic verses whereas the second category can be further divided into two, namely definition under the influence of the science of Islamic jurisprudence and secondly, definition under the influence of the work of Ibn Taymiyyah (d.1328) known as *Muqaddimah Ibn Taymiyyah*.⁶ The former of these two is no doubt comes as a result of similarity between some of the issues covered by Islamic jurisprudence as well as *usul tafsir*. This occurred particularly as *usul tafsir* was overshadowed by Islamic jurisprudence as the latter emerged in the form of writing earlier than *usul tafsir*. The main issue shared by these sciences is the engagement of Qur'anic verses in which Islamic Jurisprudence aims at deducing the Qur'anic ruling whereas *usul tafsir* aims at understanding the meaning of Qur'anic verses.⁷ Similarly, in regard to the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah on *usul tafsir*, it could also be said that not only his writing preceded the writing on *usul tafsir* but also from the point view of the purpose of the writing as both of them aim at understanding the meaning of Qur'anic verses and differentiating between the opinions of the exegetes.⁸

Although the term *usul* and *qawa'id* are used interchangeably to refer to this subject of principles of exegesis, they are in fact linguistically different from one to another. It seems that to some extent the writers of this subject practically have considered them as synonymous. Their definitions of *usul tafsir* have included *qawa'id* as its central element and thus it is likely hard to distinguish between both of these two terminologies. Abd al-Salam al-Majidi, for example, has defined *usul tafsir* as a science of *qawa'id* (principles) by which it leads to understanding of the Qur'an and its interpretation. Similarly, Fahd al-Rumi has described *usul tafsir* as "a precise principles to arrive at clarifying the meaning of the verse or giving preference to one of the opinions".⁹ From this point of view, the use of *usul* and *qawa'id* as regard to Qur'anic exegesis is different from the use of *usul* and *qawa'id* as regard to Islamic Jurisprudence.

Historical Development of *Usul Tafsir*

It has been a general understanding in tradition of Islamic sciences that all knowledge has its seed in the earliest time of Islamic history back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad through the practices rather than theories in which the latter is the result of the following stages after the demise of the Prophet. Musa'id al-Tayyar, as example, has divided the stages of the development of *usul tafsir* into three stages: firstly, early generation of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate succeeding generations of Companions and Successors through their sayings. Secondly is in the form of writing through numerous fields of knowledge, and thirdly, in the specific writings on *usul tafsir*.¹⁰

Elements of *usul tafsir* in the first stage of the Prophet, his Companions and Successors can be divided as follows: firstly, traditions indicating the subject of *usul tafsir*; secondly, traditions implying this subject; and thirdly, by means of deductive method (*istiqra'*) of these three traditions. The first type is the sayings of the Prophet, Companions and Successors, that indicate the interpretation of the Qur'an should be based on these three sources. The second type, as example, is a tradition recorded by al-Tabari in his commentary of the Qur'an that Abu Bisyr once said, I asked Sa'id ibn Jubayr regarding the verse 43 of chapter 13 whether it refers to Abd Allah ibn Salam? Said replied: "This chapter is a Meccan and how Abd Allah ibn Salam was meant in this verse" since his conversion was in a later period". This statement suggested that one of the principles of *usul tafsir* is the knowledge of the history of the revelation of the Qur'anic verses. The example of the third category i.e. by means of deductive method is the statement of Tabari in his commentary of the verse 117 of the chapter 4 of the Qur'an in which he says "the most accurate opinion to me is the opinion saying that 'Gods worshipped by the polytheist Arabs in which they named them as female such as Latta, Uzza, Naila and Manat'. This is because it is evident that all these names are known as female in Arabic discourse. As a result, we should interpret the verse with the meaning that has been widely recognized." The statement of Tabari indicates the

⁵ For the detail of the different definitions of the term *usul al-tafsir* see *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, pp. 100 onwards.

⁶ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, pp. 115-118.

⁷ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p. 120.

⁸ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p. 126.

⁹ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p.153.

¹⁰ Al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi usul al-Tafsir*, p. 21.

principle of interpretation that adhered to the established meaning recognized in Arabic that could possibly be known by means of deduction based on classical (*salaf*) interpretation and the use of language in Arabic discourse.¹¹

The second stage of the development of *usul tafsir* which is in the form of writing through numerous disciplines of knowledge could be possibly ascertained in the writings of introductory books of exegesis, the books of exegesis, the sciences of Qur'an and Islamic Jurisprudence.¹² Tabari, in his introduction to his exegetical book, has discussed "the aspects through which knowledge of the interpretation of the Qur'an is attained" in which he said, "knowledge of the interpretation of some of the Qur'an could be attained only through the elucidation given by the Messenger, ...the interpretation of [some other aspects] is known only to God."¹³ An instance for the principle of *usul tafsir* in the books of tafsir is Tabari's preference to the most established meaning in Arabic language as he said, "the most preferred interpretation is based on what is clearly indicated in the verse...and interpretation that is based on the most popular meaning to Arab is more acceptable than others."¹⁴

As stated above, *usul tafsir* is traceable in the writings of Sciences of Qur'an, the writing of which that covers a great number of subjects related to the Qur'an. Classical treatises on this subject such *al-Burhan fi Ulum al-Qur'an* of al-Zarkasyi, *al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an* of al-Suyuti and *al-Ziyadah wa al-Ihsan* of Ibn 'Uqailah al-Makki have a great coverage of the issues of *usul tafsir*. Al-Suyuti, as example, mentions in his *al-Itqan* essential principles required by exegetes, requirements of exegetes and historical levels of exegetes.¹⁵ As for the inclusion of *usul tafsir* in the writings on Islamic Jurisprudence, there is no doubt that its discussion on the Qur'an would have covered some issues of *usul tafsir* such in *al-Risalah* of al-Syafi'i (d.820CE) as laid down by Hilali, "the main topic in *al-Risalah* of al-Syafi'i is to write down the principles of explanation of the Book of God and deducing the rulings from it."¹⁶

As for the third stage which is a specific writing on *usul tafsir*, it seems that the first scholar who used the term *usul tafsir* as a title for his book was Ibn Taymiyyah in his *Muqaddimah fi Usul al-Tafsir*.¹⁷ The purpose of Ibn Taymiyyah's writing was to reach the understanding of the Qur'an and differentiating between the different opinions.¹⁸ He was followed by Waliyullah al-Dihlawi (d.1762CE) in his *al-Fawz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir* and *al-Iksir fi Usul al-Tafsir* by al-Qinnaui (d.1890CE) both of which are originally in Persian and *Rasa'il fi Usul al-Tafsir wa Usul al-Fiqh* by a Syrian Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (d.1914CE). However, according to al-Tayyar, in fact the first scholar who applied *usul tafsir* as a title of the book was al-Dihlawi. Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah could possibly be regarded a pioneer in writing on this subject.¹⁹ It is also a belief that al-Dihlawi's writing has influenced al-Qinnaui to compose his *al-Iksir fi Usul al-Tafsir*.²⁰

In addition to the above-mentioned sources of *usul tafsir*, Hilali mentions that *usul tafsir* could possibly be found in other fields of sciences that deal with the Qur'an. Examples given by him such as treatises on Islamic theology like *al-Ibanah fi Usul al-Diyanah* of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d.672CE) and *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah* of al-Maturidi (d.944CE) and *Qanun al-Ta'wil* by al-Ghazali (d.1111CE). Commenting on this, he says, "the effort of theologians provided a direct additional examples on *qawa'id [usul] tafsir*. Its names as *qanun* [maxim] indicates a regulation whereas the term *ta'wil* indicates a text."²¹ In addition to this, *usul tafsir* could also be found in Arabic grammar books since Arabic is a language of the Qur'an.²²

Following *al-Iksir fi Usul al-Tafsir* are treatises such as *Qawa'id al-Hisan*, *Qawa'id al-Tadabbur al-Amthal* and the latest of this category is *Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan* by Khalid bin Uthman al-Sabt. Apart of them is Musa'id al-Tayyar who wrote a number of books on *usul al-tafsir* such as *Fusul fi Usul al-Tafsir*, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-*

¹¹ Al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, 24.

¹² Al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, 25. See also. Al-Hamdani, *Qira'ah fi Kitab Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan*, Markaz Tafsir lil Dirasat Qur'aniyyah, p. 4, <https://tafsir.nrt/article/5361>, retrieved on 24/11/2021

¹³ Cooper, Madelung, Wilfred and Jones, *The Commentary on the Qur'an by Abu Ja'far Muhammad b Jarir al-Tabari*, Great Britain:Oxford University Press, 1989, 1/32.

¹⁴ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan fi ta'wil Ayy al-Qur'an*, al-Nisa' 106; al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, 27.

¹⁵ al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, 28.

¹⁶ Abd al-Rahman Hilali, *Quwa'id al-Tafsir al-Nash'ah wa al-Tatawwur wa al-Silah bi al-Ulum al-Ukhra*, retrieved from <https://tafahom.mara.gov.om/storage/al-tafahom/ar/2014/045/pdf/05.pdf> on 9/11/2021.

¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah preceded hundred years before the time of al-Dihlawi and the name of his book was given by a Muslim Hanbalite mufti Muhammad Jamil al-Shatti. See, *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p, 53.

¹⁸ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p.121.

¹⁹ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p.53.

²⁰ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p 48.

²¹ Hilali, *op.cit.*, pp.92-93.

²² Al-Farīh, Hamīd Ya'qūb Yūsuf (2011), *Juhūd al-'Ulama' fi Usul Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim*, al-Mu'tamar al-'Alami lil-Bahithin fi al-Qur'an al-Karim wa 'Ulumih, np., p.1642; See also, Khalid bin Uthman al-Sabt, *Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan*, p. 4; Hilali, *Quwa'id al-Tafsir*, p.11.

Tafsir and Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat. Another Saudian scholar, Fahd al-Rumi, has produced a concise writing of the methodologies and principles of exegesis in his *Buhuth fi Usul al-Tafsir wa Manahij a-Mufassirin* followed by another book, *Usul al-Tafsir wa Manahijuh*.

REMARKS ON SOME OF THE WRITINGS ON USUL TAFSIR

Muqaddimah fi Usul al-Tafsir by Ibnu Taymiyyah

The issues discussed in this writings are the need for understanding the Qur'an, the explanation of the Prophet of the words in the Qur'an and its meanings for his Companions, the various opinions of the Companions and Successors on Qur'anic interpretation, reasons of disagreement, ways of interpretation and interpretation based on good judgement.²³ As a result, the writing of Ibn Taymiyyah is a mixture of *usul tafsir* and *manahij tafsir* (a combination between principles and methodologies of exegesis).

Al-Fawz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir by Waliyullah al-Dihlawi

As stated earlier, the original language of this book was Persian. It has been described as "a manual of the principles and subtleties of Qur'anic exegesis. In it, the author outlines the five fundamental sciences that the Qur'an contains: the science of judgements (*ahkam*), reminding others of the Favours of Allah, the Day of Judgement, Life after Death, as well as giving particular attention to the science of polemics. He also reviews other sciences of *tafsir* such as the circumstances of revelation (*asbab an-nuzul*), abrogating and abrogated *ayat* (*an-nasikh wa-l-mansukh*) and unusual words and phrases of the Qur'an (*ghara'ib al-Qur'an*), before his conclusion on the extraordinary and miraculous aspects of the Noble Book, and a final chapter on the meanings of the letters of the Arabic alphabet."²⁴ The book, thus, is not comprehensively discussing *usul tafsir* rather it draws some of its relevant issues.²⁵ Accordingly, the purpose is "to lay down the significant benefits for his colleagues in contemplating the word of Allah with the hope that the understanding of these principles would open a wide way for the students in understanding the meaning of the book of Allah".²⁶

Al-Iksir fi Ilm al-Tafsir by Najm al-Din al-Thufi al-Hanbali (d.1416CE) sees the need of the science of exegesis that contains regulation of exegesis in which he tries to accomplish the task. He says, "it continues to remain in my heart the issues of the science of exegesis and what has been practiced by the exegetes whereas I did not find anyone who had discovered what I have written and underwent what I have undergone". Hilali views that the book, however, deals insufficiently with the issues of *usul tafsir* in which the majority of the book covers the subject of the science of eloquence.²⁷

Qawa'id al-Hisan li Tafsir al-Qur'an written by Abd al-Rahman bin Nasir al-Sa'adi (d.1956CE) contains 71 topics. According to Hilali, although the book entitled the principles of the Qur'an, it deals mostly with the sciences of Qur'an. However, if the contents are seriously taken into account the book is indeed deals with sciences of Qur'an and numerous topics in the Qur'an rather than *usul tafsir* per se.²⁸ Amongst the contents of the books are manual of receiving the Qur'an, ruling is based on a generality of the wording, Qur'anic way in establishing the Oneness of God, the verses are understood in contradiction to each other, and illness in the Qur'an.

Quwaid al-Tadabbur al-Amthal by Abd al-Rahman Hassan Hanbakah

This books actually deals with the methodologies of conducting a reflection on Qur'anic message rather than discussing the principles of exegesis. According to this, the topics of this book are confined to five issues: the thematic of chapter and the correlation of the Qur'an, the revelation of the Qur'an, the technique of Arabic language, miracles of Qur'anic eloquence and the styles of Qur'anic discourse.²⁹

Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan by Khalid bin Uthman al-Sabt

This book is another famous contemporary book in the principles of exegesis. He was motivated by a notion that a less emphasis has been given to the subject of *usul tafsir* in which he says, "since this is the case, it is an accurate determination to discover those principles (*usul*) from its places and organised them in a same line so it would become a close reference and easy to deal [with it]. By doing this, the book contains a number of purposes of composing it."³⁰ On the other hand, it means that his intention is to deduce principles of exegesis from various Islamic sciences to serve the

²³ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, p.164.

²⁴ <https://archive.org/details/fawz-al-kabir-compressed/Fawz%20al%20kabir>, retrieved on 10/11/2021.

²⁵ al-Tayyar, *al-Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, 31.

²⁶ *Usul al-Tafsir fi al-Mu'allafat*, 48.

²⁷ Hilali, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

²⁸ Hilali, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

²⁹ Nurul Zakirah Mat Sin, *Contribution of Abd al-Rahman Hassan Habannakah in the Field of Tafsir: Background Studies on the Principles of Tadabbur in the Qawa'id al-Tadabbur al-Amthal li Kitab Allah*, in Proceeding GTAR 2014, Vol. 1, 402-415.

³⁰ Khalid bin Uthman al-Sabt, *Qawa'id al-Tafsir*, p. 2.

idea of encompassing the particular parts of the principles to ease the sciences of exegesis.³¹ In this writing, he inscribes two types of principles of exegesis, approximately 28 primary principles and 100 secondary principles.³²

***Usul al-Tafsir wa Manahijuh* by Fahd al-Rumi**

The book is a result of his deep thought on his first book on this topic namely *Buhuth fi Usul al-Tafsir wa Mahahijih*. According to him, "I have received numerous comments from my colleagues who have taught this subject as well as from my friends in my faculty. Thus, I think that I should relook into it by adding, removing and correcting what has been written in its first version."³³ This work can be regarded as an extensive study that covers a huge number of principles of exegesis.³⁴

Examples of Principles of Qur'anic Exegesis

Examples of principles of Qur'anic exegesis are as follows:

1. Fahd al-Rumi's classifications in which he divides the principles of exegesis into three categories:³⁵
 - a) From the point view of the methods of exegesis in which one of them is "there is no need to rely on other sources when the meaning of a verse has been identified by the Prophet's saying."
 - b) From the point view of principles of Islamic Jurisprudence in which one of them is "a general phrase remains as it is unless its specifier can be justified."
 - c) From the point view of Arabic language in which one of them is 'interpretation of the word should be based on the established meaning known to Arab.'
2. Khalid al-Sabt's classifications. As stated earlier, he divides the principles of exegesis into 28 primary principles and 100 secondary principles. One of the examples of these principles is a principle of a cause of revelation in which is further divided into seven second principles. One of the latter principles is a principle saying, "occasionally a verse came down together with a new ruling, on another occasion before stipulating a new ruling and on the other after a stipulation of a new ruling".³⁶ Another primary principle is a principle of pronounce in which "when a word and meaning can be applied for a pronounce in one verse then a preference is given to the ward over the meaning."³⁷

CONCLUSION

According to Muslim writings, *usul tafsir* as a theoretical subject has begun as early as in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and gradually developed as a written subject in the succeeding ages. Some of the writings that bear the title of *usul tafsir* are not necessarily an extensive writings on this subject rather they merge it with other subjects of Qur'anic exegesis and sciences such as methodologies and sources of exegesis. It also can be concluded that it is not easy for any writings on this subject to cover all its subject-matter in one single writing as well as there are no writings that have similarity of all of its subject matter between them in which it can be assumed that it is quite a challenge for them to include everything as regard to the subject-matter of *usul tafsir*.

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³¹ Rabi' al-Hamdawi, *Qira'ah fi Kitab Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan*, Markaz Tafsir lil Dirasat Qur'aniyyah, p. 3, <https://tafsir.nrt/article/5361>, retrieved on 24/11/2021

³² Khalid bin Uthman al-Sabt, *Qawa'id al-Tafsir*, p. 2.

³³ Al-Rumi, Fahd, *Usul al-Tafsir wa Manahijuh*, Riyadh: Maktabah al-Malik Fahd, 2017, p. 6.

³⁴ Rabi' al-Hamdawi, *Qira'ah fi Kitab Qawa'id al-Tafsir Jam'an wa Dirasatan*, Markaz Tafsir lil Dirasat Qur'aniyyah, p. 5, <https://tafsir.nrt/article/5361>, retrieved on 24/11/2021

³⁵ Rumi al, Fahd b Abd al-Rahman b Sulayman (2017), *Usul al-Tafsir wa Manahijuh*, Riyad: Maktabah Malik Fahd, pp.171-172.

³⁶ Khalid al-Sabt, op. cit., p. 58.

³⁷ Khalid al-Sabt, op. cit., p. 406.

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