205290 - Tafseer on the basis of narrated texts and tafseer on the basis of individual understanding

the question

I have heard that it is not permissible to interpret the meanings of the Qur’an on the basis of one's individual understanding. Can you explain what is meant by this?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

When explaining the meanings of a verse of the Qur’an, the mufassir (scholarly commentator on the meanings) follows one of two methods:

The first method is to see whether there is anything in the texts of the Qur’an or the Prophet’s Sunnah, or in texts narrated from the righteous early generations, that explains this verse. If there is an explanation of it in these sources, he follows it and is content with it. This is what is called “tafseer on the basis of narrated texts”; it is of several types:

1. Tafseer of the Qur’an by the Qur’an: as some parts of the Qur’an explain other parts.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Muqaddimah fi Usool at-Tafseer (p. 93):

If someone were to ask: what are the soundest ways of interpreting the meanings of the Qur’an? The answer is that the soundest way of doing that is to interpret the Qur’an by the Qur’an, because sometimes it may refer to a matter in brief, then explain it in more detail elsewhere, or it may state something in a few words in one place, then expand upon it elsewhere. End quote.

Some examples of that:

Al-Bukhaari (4236) narrated from ‘Alqamah (may Allah have mercy on him) that ‘Abdullah ibn

Mas‘ood (may Allah be pleased with him) said: When the verse “…and confuse not their belief with Zulm (wrong)…” [al-An‘aam 6:82] was revealed, his companions (i.e., the companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: Which of us has not done wrong? Then the verse “Verily! Joining others in worship with Allah is a great Zulm (wrong) indeed” [Luqmaan 31:13] was revealed. [From the latter verse it is understood that the zulm referred to in the first verse is the zulm of shirk (joining others in worship with Allah), and not any lesser wrongdoing.]

But although interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an may sometimes be unambiguous and clear, as in the example mentioned above, in which case it is binding proof that must be followed and not opposed, sometimes it is based on the mufassir’s own ijtihaad and understanding, when he is trying to put together similar verses. Undoubtedly this is of a lesser status than the above, because the one who engages in ijithaad may be wrong or right.

2. The tafseer of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), explaining the meanings of the Qur’an, because he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) came to both convey and explain to us what is said in the holy Qur’an. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “With clear signs and Books (We sent the Messengers). And We have also sent down unto you (O Muhammad blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) the reminder and the advice (the Quran), that you may explain clearly to men what is sent down to them, and that they may give thought” [an-Nahl 16:44].

An example of that:

Al-Bukhaari (4510) narrated concerning the interpretation of the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “and eat and drink until the white thread (light) of dawn appears to you distinct from the black thread (darkness of night)” [al-Baqarah 2:187].

It was narrated that ‘Adiyy ibn Haatim (may Allah be pleased with him) said: I said: O Messenger of Allah, what is the meaning of the white thread being distinct from the black thread? Are they two threads? He said: “The back of your heard must be very broad if you want to watch the two threads.” [‘Adiyy was thinking in terms of threads in a literal sense, which he wanted to put under

his pillow and examine to see when they became distinct from one another with the approach of dawn, but the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) pointed out that if he wanted to put the two threads – which in fact refers to the light of dawn being distinct from the darkness of night – under his pillow, then his pillow must be very big indeed, in which case he must have a very large head! – Translator's note]. Then he said: "No; rather it is the darkness of the night and the light of the day."

If an explanation of a verse or a word in the Qur'an has reached us from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), it is obligatory for us to adhere to it and be content with it.

The interpretation of a verse may be understood from the Sunnah of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), from his actions and words, and from the things that he approved of.

The Sunnah came to explain the Qur'an. Allah, may He be exalted, has instructed us to pray, give zakaah, perform Hajj, carry out the hadd punishments and so on, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), through his Sunnah – his actions and words – has explained to us in detail what is meant by these words. But if the mufassir cannot find any explanation for a verse in the Sunnah, he should look at the sayings of the Sahaabah.

3. Tafseer based on reports from the Sahaabah (may Allah be pleased with them):

Their tafseer takes precedence over that of anyone else, because their tafseer is likely to be based on what they learned from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as Ibn Mas'ood (may Allah be pleased with him) said: One of us would learn ten verses then he would not move on (and learn more) until he understood their meaning and put them into practice. Narrated by at-Tabari in his Tafseer (1/80); its isnaad was classed as saheeh by Shaykh Ahmad Shaakir (may Allah have mercy on him).

In some cases the tafseer of the Sahaabah was based on their own ijtihaad and understanding, and their ijtihaad takes precedence over that of those who came after them, because they accompanied the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and were aware of the circumstances in which the verses of the Qur'an were revealed, such as the reasons for revelation

and the place where revelation came down. They were contemporaries who were well aware of the reality of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was revealed and how people were at that time. Moreover, they had a greater understanding than others of the language in which the Qur'an was revealed; they had deeper knowledge, were less complicated (i.e., they were straightforward people), and the furthest removed from misguidance and error in terms of their knowledge and deeds.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said in Muqaddimah fi Usool at-Tafseer (p. 95): Then if you do not find the explanation of the meaning in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah, you should refer to the words of the Sahaabah, because they had greater knowledge of that, because of what they witnessed of the Qur'an, and because of the advantages they had, and what they had of perfect understanding and sound knowledge, especially the scholars and leading figures among them… End quote.

The views of the Sahaabah concerning tafseer take precedence over the views of anyone else, unless the Sahaabah differed concerning it, in which case the mufassir must try to work out which view is most correct.

4. Tafseer based on reports from the Taabi'een

If the mufassir does not find anything in the words of the Sahaabah to explain the meaning of the verse, then he should look at the tafseer of the Taabi'een, who acquired their knowledge from the companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon them), because in their circumstances, words, deeds and time they were – naturally – closer to the Sahaabah and to their teachings and were able to learn from them directly.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Muqaddimah fi Usool at-Tafseer (p. 102): if you do not find the explanation of the meaning in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah, and you do not find it in what is reported from the Sahaabah, in that case many of the imams (leading scholars) turned to the views of the Taabi'een… End quote.

He (may Allah have mercy on him) also said (p. 37):

Among the Taabi‘een are some who learned all their tafseer from the Sahaabah, as Mujaahid said: I showed the Mushaf to Ibn ‘Abbaas, pausing at each verse and asking him about it. Hence ath-Thawri said: If the interpretation of the meaning of a verse comes to you from Mujaahid, it is sufficient for you. Hence ash-Shaafa‘i, al-Bukhaari and other scholars relied on his (Mujaahid’s) tafseer. End quote.

If the scholars of tafseer among the Taabi‘een are agreed upon a view concerning the meaning of a verse, then undoubtedly it is obligatory to follow it. But if they differed, the view of one of them is not necessarily stronger than that of another and cannot be given precedence over another or be regarded as the ultimate proof. Rather it must be examined and his proof may be quoted or referred to, (but it is not binding proof).

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Undoubtedly the Taabi‘een differed, but those who learned tafseer from the Sahaabah are not equal to those who did not do so.

However, if they did not state that they learned it from a Sahaabi, then their view is not proof against those who came after them, if they differed in their views, because they are not of the same status as the Sahaabah, but their views are more likely to be closer to the truth. The closer people are to the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), the more likely they are to be correct than those who come after them. This is very clear, because of the prevalence of whims and desires in subsequent periods, and because of the presence of numerous intermediaries between them and the time of the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Undoubtedly this distance detracts from the value of their opinions; hence we know that referring to the view of earlier generations is very important.

End quote from Sharh Muqaddimat at-Tafseer, p. 140

The second method is for the mufassir who has knowledge of tafseer to use his understanding to interpret the meaning of the verse of the Qur’an, and his ijtihaad must be based on the proper method, following the guidelines and principles of tafseer. This is what is called tafseer on the

basis of individual understanding and ijtihaad.

Az-Zarqaani (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his book Manaahil al-'Irfaan fi 'Uloom al-Qur'an (2/43):

With regard to the permissible type of tafseer on the basis of one's understanding, it is essential to be aware of what has been narrated from the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and his companions that may give the mufassir some insight into how he should interpret the meaning on the basis of his understanding. The one who does that must also have extensive knowledge of the rules of the Arabic language and its styles and manner of expression, as well as deep insight into the rules of sharee'ah, so that he will be able to interpret the words of Allah on the basis of what is well established of the rules and regulations of His sharee'ah. End quote.

Tafseer that is based on one's individual understanding is blameworthy in the following scenarios:

1. When the one who is seeking to interpret the meaning is not qualified to do so, and he is trying to explain the words of Allah without knowledge. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "Say (O Muhammad blessings and peace of Allah be upon him): '(But) the things that my Lord has indeed forbidden are Al-Fawahish (great evil sins, every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, etc.) whether committed openly or secretly, sins (of all kinds), unrighteous oppression, joining partners (in worship) with Allah for which He has given no authority, and saying things about Allah of which you have no knowledge'" [al-A'raaf 7:33]; "O mankind! Eat of that which is lawful and good on the earth, and follow not the footsteps of Shaitan (Satan). Verily, he is to you an open enemy" [al-Baqarah 2:168-169].

2. When he is following his own whims and desires and his aim is to support his bid'ah (innovation) and opinion, even if that is by twisting the meanings of the words or not paying attention to the proper way of understanding, the ways in which the Arabs express different ideas in their language, and the guidelines of sharee'ah, as some innovators among the Raafidis and others did, when they interpreted some verses in a manner that is contrary to what is indicated by the guidelines of sharee'ah and knowledge of the Arabic language.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Interpretation of the Qur’an based on individual opinion: sometimes, in order to be in harmony with his preconceived ideas, as the followers of whims and desires do, a person may say that what is meant by a given word or phrase is such and such – saying something that is in harmony with his preconceived ideas. That includes some later scholars who interpreted the Qur’an in such a manner as to be in harmony with the latest scientific discoveries – whether astronomical or terrestrial – when the Qur’an does not indicate that. In that case they are interpreting the Qur’an on the basis of their own preconceived views, because the Qur’an does not indicate that, either on the basis of the text or of what is indicated by the language. This is their own opinion, and it is not right to interpret the Qur’an on that basis.

Similarly, if a person does not understand the linguistic meaning or the shar‘i meaning indicated by the verse, if he then says something without knowledge, he is sinning, such as if one of the common folk were to interpret the verse of the holy Qur’an according to his understanding, without basing it on proper understanding of the linguistic or shar‘i guidelines, in which case it is haraam for him to do that, because the one who interprets the meanings of the Qur’an is testifying that Allah meant such and such. This is a very serious matter, because Allah has forbidden us to say about Him that which we do not know.

“Say (O Muhammad blessings and peace of Allah be upon him): ‘(But) the things that my Lord has indeed forbidden are Al-Fawahish (great evil sins, every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, etc.) whether committed openly or secretly, sins (of all kinds), unrighteous oppression, joining partners (in worship) with Allah for which He has given no authority, and saying things about Allah of which you have no knowledge’” [al-A‘raaf 7:33].

Any person who says about Allah that which he does not know about the meaning of His words or any of His rulings has made a serious error.

End quote from Muqaddimat at-Tafseer, p. 142

And Allah knows best.