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Historical Study of the Evaluation of Jami'ul Bayanfitawil Ay'al-Qur'an (Tafsir Attabari)

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Abstract:

It is rightly observed that, "there is no Book in the world in whose service so much talent, so much Labour, so much time and money have been expended, as has been the case with the Qur'an." Tafsir literature is so voluminous that no single man can compass a perusal of the whole. This paper is an attempt to analyse, briefly, one of the enormous expositions of talent, embodied in the mammoth work entitled Jami'ul Bayan 'An Ta'awil Ayi Qur'an, by the erudite scholar, Muhammad Ibn Jabr at-Tabari.

1. Introduction

Tafsir, the interpretation of the Qur'an is an old tradition in the Muslim History. The need for it arose earlier before the revelation of the Qur'an is accomplished. The prophet (S.A.W) was indeed the first *Mufassir*, and automatically the source of Companion's *Tafsir* next only to the Qur'an itself. After his demise, the well-grounded among them took the task and taught the Qur'anic commentary to their students (*Tabi'un*). *Tafsir* remained a verbal tradition to the end of the first century, when these traditions were collected into books.

The early Books of *Tafsir* mainly composed narrations to the Messenger, his Companions and the *Tabi'un*. That was the standard method of writing *Tafsir* which was later termed as *Tafsir bil Ma'athur*.

Imam at-Tabari was the first to liberate the *Tafsir* and transform it to a new developmental stage; he discussed the narrations with discretion and introduced other related sciences to *Tafsir*.

To properly appraise his work this paper is divided into six sections; Introduction being the first, the author, his objective, the book, being the second, third, and fourth, respectively. The methodology of the author come the fifth and conclusion, the sixth.

2. The Author

The author of the Book is Abu Ja'afar Muhammad bn Jarir bn Yazid bn Khalid or bn Kathir bn Ghalib at-Tabari. He was born in the year 224 A.H in Amul, the capital of Tabaristan. As-Suyuti, A. Ali, (ed,1976), He was brought up in an intellectual house, memorized the Qur'an, read the books of Hadith and led people in prayer before he reached the age of maturity.

He traveled wide and large to meet and learn from the erudite scholars of his time in various disciplines. He first traveled to ar-Rai and its environs, then to Baghdad, Basra, Kufah, Egypt and Sham. He entered Baghdad so many times before he finally settled there, for teaching and writing until his death. Adh-Dhahabi (1982.).

He learned from so many scholars among which al-Hafidh adh-Dhahabi mentioned forty, like Muhammad bn Humaid ar-Razi, Salamah bn al-Mufaddal, Ahmad bn Hammad ad-Dolabi, Isma'il bn Musa as-Sudi, and Muhammad bn Abdul-Malik to mention but a few. He graduated many popular scholars of which adh-Dhahabi also mentioned thirteen. Some of them are Abu al-Qasim at-Tabarani, Ali bn Abdul-Aziz bn Muhamadad-Dolabi and Abubakar as-Shafi'i. Adh-Dhahabi (1982.) Imam at-Tabari has reached the status of *Mujtahid al-Mutlaq* in Fiqh, and formed an independent school of thought, which had later come to perish.

He was described to be extraordinarily excellent in all the fields he studied. Ibn Khuzaimah says: "*I don't know anybody more learned than Muhammad bn Jarir on the surface of this earth*".

Adh-Dhahabi remarks:

- He is the leader. the luminary, the Mujtahid, the leading scholar of the time, one of the world geniuses in knowledge and intelligence and in profundity of academic works, hardly the eye can see the likes of him ... He is reliable, truthful, a hafiz, figure in *Tafsir*, Imam in Fiqh, consensus and discrepancies of opinion, erudite in History and the days of mankind, well learned in *Qira'at* language e. t. c. Adh-Dhahabi, *Siyar*, p.267-270.

During his life, at-Tabari has enriched the Islamic library with many academic works per excellence, though only few of them survived the test of time, part of which are:

Adabul Manasikh, Adab an-Nufus, Al-Jamiu fil Qiraat, Tahdhibul Athar wa Tafsilu ath-Thabit min al-Akhbar, Sarih as-Sunnah, al-musnad al-Mujarrad, Ikhtilaf 'ulamaul al- Amsar, Latif al Qaul fi Ahkami Shariat al- Islam, Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk and Jamiul Bayan 'an Ta'awil Ayil Qur'an.

He died in the year 310 A.H and was buried in his house; many people prayed at his tomb for months. (At-tabari, Jami'ul'Bayan, v.i.p.15), May Allah bless him.

3. Objective of the Work

At-Tabari has clearly stated the objective of his work in his introduction to the Tafsir which is to explain everything that people need to know about the Qur'an, for there are some part of it which Allah reserved its knowledge to himself and nobody should attempt to know it. He says:

- Allah! Guide us to hit the point of the right say on its plain (muhkam) and ambiguous (mutashabih), lawful (halal) and unlawful (haram), general ('am) and specific (khas), compendium (mujmal) and expansive (mufassar) expressions, abrogating (nasikh) and abrogated (mansukh), manifest (dhahir) and esoteric (batin) verses, and the exposition and explanation of its unclear verses ... (At-tabari, Jami'ul'Bayan, v.i.p. 16),

He also says: "We shall -: if Allah wishes us to elucidate its Ta'awil and expound its meaning- compile a book comprising all that people need of its science ...

He also, succinctly argued:

- For the fact that Muhammad (S.A.W.) was an Arab, then it is clear the Qur'an is in Arabic Language, and this is also what says the perfect revelation of our Lord (Qur'an itself). If what we said is clearly the correct position of things, it is necessary that the meanings of the Allah's Book that is revealed to our messenger (S.A.W) is the same and tallies the Arab's tongue. Its apparent is to tally the apparent (meaning of the Arabs) language, even though the Book of Allah is exalted upon it by its exaltation accorded against other (ordinary talks) as explained by us earlier. If what is said is so, then it is clear that it exists in the Arabic language I'jaz and Ikhtisar (shortening and summarizing), using ikhfa for Izhar (concealing instead of bringing out), using few against many in certain circumstances and using lengthening and repeating and stating over and over and bringing meanings out by their names without using euphemism. Concealing in other times and stating specific while intending apparently the general (meaning) and using the general (meaning) while intending apparently the specific and using euphemistic while intending the mentioned and using adjective while intending noun and noun while intending adjective and bringing about the first what supposed to be brought the last and bringing last what is entitled to be brought first, and using (contently) part and meaning all, and that is to be brought out from that is to be erased and bringing out what have been erased – so that what is the Book of Allah that is revealed upon his Messenger Muhammad (S.A.W) from this (that is stated) has its equivalent and has its similarity and equals. We shall explain all these in its right place by Allah's will and we (solicit) and depend on Him for assistance and might.

(At-tabari, Jami'ul'Bayan, v.i.p. 19),

4. The Book

The Book is entitled 'Jami'ul Bayan an Ta'awili Ayi al- Qur'an. Some call it '*Jami'ul Bayan fi Ta'awil Ayi Al-Qur'an*, but is popularly known as Tafsir at- Tabari.

At-Tabari dictated this book to his students after three years of Istikhara by the year 293.AH. The book was lost for many years before it was found with the Amir of Hail in Najd; Hammud Bn Abdur'Rashid. It was first published in 30 volumes in Egypt in 1319 A.H, and later on, several editions of the book were produced with annotation (Tahqiq). The best of which is the work of Mahmoud and Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, which reached up to the verse twenty-seven of surah Ibrahim and was printed in sixteen volumes. (Adh-Dhahabi, m, h, pp.209-210).

Many Scholars regard this Tafsir as the oldest Tafsir by narration to reach our generation and all latter books of Tafsir were influenced in one way or the other by it.

5. Sources of the Tafsir

The inductive reading of Tafsir at-Tabari reveals that, he depended on the following as sources of information in his *Tafsir*.

1. Al-Quran al-kareem, for it is self-explanatory.
2. As-Sunnah, which he has categorically mentioned that certain level of *Tafsir* can only be known through it.
3. *Al-Ijma'a* (consensus of the Muslim Exegetes and Jurists). He held it a reliable and respectable source of Tafsir.
4. Statements of the Sahabah (companion).
5. Statements of the Tabi'un.

It is rightly observed that Tafsir at-Tabari is the most popular Qur'anic Exegesis depended on narratives from messenger of Allah, his companions and their students. Most of his narratives are from the latter two for the total number of Hadith is not more than three thousand, while the entire narrations in it are about thirty-seven thousand with the repeated ones. (Shaukani, A, I, p.3)

6. Arabic Language, which though he analyzed deeply the linguistic, grammatical, syntactical aspects of Arabic, he opined; it was a means of the Tafsir and nothing more. He says:
 - We presented what we propounded about its (Arabic) phases of syntax – eventhough our intention in this book was to disclose the Ta'awil of Qur'anic verses- because of the fact that variation and discrepancy in its phases of analysis brings about discrepancy in the phases of the Ta'awil. Therefore, we are necessitated by need to unveil the phases of its I'irab, so that the meaning of its Ta'awil become manifest to the searcher of its Ta'awil according to the discrepancy of the scholars on its Ta'awil and Qiraat. (At-Tabari, v,1, p.177).
7. Isra'iliyyat: which means, the Jewish and Christian information, about any aspect relating to Qur'an
8. Interpretative discretion and our Imam used his discretion to reconcile or prefer one of the conflicting, opinions, be it in the aspect of language, law, Qira'at or purely exegetical issue.

Having comprehended the sources of this book, they can be classified into two types:

1. Traditional and transitive source, which includes Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma'a, Statements of the Companions and Tabi'un and isra'illiyat.
2. The Intellectual and Rational source, which include Language and interpretive discretion.

Therefore, in the light of the above, this writer asserts that to categorize this Book among what is known in Usul at-Tafsir, as At-Tafsir bil Ma'athur, as done by Ibn Khaldun and many other researchers, is not acceptable. However, this view is shared by a number of researchers in the past and present. Alfadil Ibn 'Ashur even went far to opine the preponderance of the rational side of the Tafsir over the tradition. (Sidi-Abdul-Qadirat-Tufai'l, p. 28).

6. Methodology

The method adoption by Imam at-Tabari, and which, he opened every *Muffasir* should adopt is perspicuously described in the introduction of the *Tafsir*, He says:

- We shall- if Allah wishes us to elucidate its Ta'awil and expound its meaning – compile a book comprising all the people need of its science. We shall narrate all that reached us about the concordance of evidence where the Ummah agreed and their discord where they disagreed concerning it. We shall explain the reasons of every school of thought and disclose the most correct one to us with utmost precision and abridgement. (At-Tabari, v,1, p.16.)

Theorizing on the methodology of *Tafsir*, at-Tabari says:

- The most entitled person to be correct in saying the truth while explaining the Qur'an is he who has the tools of explaining what can be known by the people, is he who has more proof of what he says and explains, in that whose explanation is only with the prophet is that whose explanation is traceable to the Messenger of Allah, be it through the narration that is very much popular among the things that popular narration is possible or through an authentic and reliable narration. And has more cogent reasons for what he translates or explains of what is traceable from the language, either by examples, from the poems that are popular or from the logic and the tongue that is widely known, whoever is that who explains and translates and should not go out in his translations and explanations from what the Salaf (previous scholars of the) Companions and scholars and the Khalaf (later scholars of) Tabi'un and the scholars of the Ummah agreed on. (At-Tabari, v,1, pp.63-64.)

6.1. Details of the methodology of at- Tabari

A- Preface to the Tafsir

At-Tabari started his Tafsir with a long Preface, which can be rendered under the following sub headings:

1. Talks on explanation of the cohesiveness of the meanings of the Qur'anic verses with the meaning of the language of those in whose tongue the Qur'an was revealed and proving that, that comes from Allah the exalted and al mighty and that, that is the highest wisdom, with elucidation of the virtue of the meaning by which the Qur'an verses varies with other speech.
2. Talks on explaining the words whose Arabic vocalization corresponds with the words of other various nations.
3. The talks on the dialect with which the Qur'an was revealed among the Arab dialects.
4. Talks on elucidation of the messenger's statement "the Qur'an was revealed from the seven gates of paradise" and citation of the tradition that related that.
5. Talks on the ways through which the knowledge of the Qur'anic exposition is acquired.
6. Citation of the related narrations prohibiting talks about Qur'anic interpretation with mere personal opinion.
7. Citation of the Traditions imploring the learning of the Tafsir of Qur'an and its exegetes among the companions.
8. Citation of the narration, which the abhorers of Qur'anic interpretation misinterpreted.
9. Narrations from some predecessors on I the
10. Praise worthiness and blameworthiness of the knowledge of Tafsir of some ancient exegetes.
11. Talks on meanings of the names, chapters and verses of the Qur'an.
12. Talks on meanings of names of Fatihatul-Kitab.
13. Talks on the Interpretation of Isti'adhah.

6.2. Beginning of Each Verse

He starts the interpretation of each verse with the saying "The opinion in the Ta'awil of Allah's statement ... is ... ' then interpret it and support it with narrations from sahabah and Tabi'un on the verse, and if there are different opinions, he usually cites all and their evidences, discuss it and prefer the most plausible. He delves into grammatical analyses (I'rab) where necessary and also deduce legal injunctions from the verse and discuss the various opinions of the jurists on it.

6.3. Authorities of his Tafsir

His sources of information in Tafsir as stated above are: the Qur'an itself, the messenger (S.A.W) i.e. his Sunnah and the opinion of the companions, especially Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud, Ali bn Abi Talib and Ubayy bn Ka'ab. Among the Tabi'un, are: Mujahid bn Jabr, Said bn Jubair, Dahhak bn Muzahim, 'Ikrimah, Hassan al-Basri, and others like Abdurrahman bn zaid bn Aslam, Tafsir of Ibn Juraij, Tafsir of Muqatil bn Hibban and others.

For the Grammar and linguistics his sources were the books of Ali bn Hamza al-Kisai'i, Yahya bn Ziyadat al-Farra'a, Abul-Hassan AI-Akhfash, Abu Ali Qutrub and others, but he rarely mentions them' by name.

He did not depend on any unreliable book of Tafsir like that of Muhammad bn Saib al-Kalbi, Muqatil bn Sulaiman and Muhammad bn Umar al-Waqidi he only referred to Ibn As-Saib al-Kalbi, his son Hashim.al-waqidi and the likes on important matters relating to

human history, Sirah and the history of Arabs when there is no such information from people other than them. (Al-Hamawi, yaqut, p.16).

6.4. *Commentary by Opinion and the Chain of Transmission*

He persistently condemns the scholars who interpret-the Qur'an by their initiatives to give such information that can only be known through the messenger, without recourse to him, like some Arabic scholars'; He even criticized Mujahid, Dahhak and other Ibn 'Abbas' students for committing this kind of Tafsir as in the commentary on the Qur'an:12:49, 2:65, 2:229 etc.

He followed the method of Muhaddithun in narration, and relates every opinion through its full chain of narration. He uses to keep silent about the authenticity of the chain, may be relying on the saying; 'whoever narrates the chain is exonerated', but in rare cases he criticizes it, as in the commentary on 18:94.

6.5. *Qira'a and Tafsir Isra'iliyat*

At-Tabari has shown so much concern to Qur'anic recitations; he cited a considerable number of it, for many reasons in different styles. He will always analyze all the recitations linguistically depending on evidences from the Qur'an, Ancient Arabic poems, principles of syntax, grammar etc. He independently verifies the Qira'ah, criticize it, reconcile the conflicting ones where possible, prefer one and reject another, all based on facts and the criteria for the sound Qira'ah enshrined by the scholars of the field.

Isra'iliyyat. (Sing. Isra'iliyyah) in the context of Tafsir simply means all information that crept to Tafsir from Jewish, Christian and other non-Islamic sources. Some scholars alluded that it includes all that is forged against Islam by its enemies in their bid to distort it. Isra'iliyyat is however classified into various categories with different considerations.

Considering its chain of narration is divided into authentic, weak and fabricated. Considering its subject matter is divided into credal, legal and historical. Considering its concordance with Shariah is divided into compatible, incompatible and non-aligned.

The authentic and compatible Isra'iliyyat with Shariah on either matter is acceptable and can be narrated in Tafsir. The weak, fabricated and incompatible with the Shariah is rejected and can be reported for critique. While the non-aligned neither accepted nor rejected, but narrating it in the context of Tafsir is what some scholars resented and resisted. (Al-Qardawi, p. 37).

Imam at-Tabari has dabbled into narrating Isra'iliyyat in his Tafsir to the extent that he included all the types earlier mentioned, He narrated them with full chain of transmission to Companions, Tabi'un and others, especially Ka'b al-Ahbar, Wahb bn Munabbih, Ibn Juraij, As-Suddi and Muhammad bn Ishaq who was a perfect mine of historical information like him,

He shows his diligence to make sure that his sources on Isra'iliyyat are people known of their conversance with and or closeness to Jewish and Christian sources. He some time inform the reader that Abu 'Attab (a source in the chain) was a Christian 40 years before he converted to Islam or (someone) was from Ahlul- Kitab who narrates the story of the non- Muslims (al' Ajam).

He has narrated so many noisome Isra'iliyyat to Muslim mind without any criticism, some of which relegates the status of Allah's Messengers, like the story of Sakhr the knave, under his commentary on Q: 38:34, the story of Zainab bint Jahsh and the messenger Muhammad (S.A.W) which was forged by John of Damascus during the Umayyad Period- under 33:37, the story of resurrection of the flood (Tufan) eye witness by Isa under 11:38 and others repugnant to human reasoning like the story of Nuh in the Safinah (Ship) under 11:38.

He at times criticizes a chain of such narrations but not to weaken or belief the narrative, rather to support his legal or linguistic argument on the Qur'anic text, which the narrative may disturb as in the commentary of 18:94.

He only criticizes the text of Isra'iliyyat when it contains such information of issues that the Qur'an left out for their irrelevance to its objectives as in the commentary on 5: 112 and 2:259 etc. (Adhahabi, m. h. pp. 97-106.)

6.6. *Summoning to the Common Arab Language*

At-Tabari used to summon to Arabic language to judge any doubtful expression or opinion, as in 12:40. He depends so much on the ancient Arab poems to expound the Qur'anic terms and prefer an opinion to another. This can be found virtually in every page of the Tafsir. He also referred to Arabic grammar schools and benefited immensely from their research in explaining the Qur'anic verses, he uses both Kufi and Basri terminology, with somewhat inclination to the Kufi school.

6.7. *Legal Injunctions and Theological Arguments*

At-Tabari was so much concerned with deducing injunctions from the legal verses, he discusses legal aspects and argue with the jurist and make an independent opinion in a succinct and perspicuous language as in the Tafsir of 16:8, etc. He refuted many claims of abrogation.

He delves into theological discussions and stand fast to the Sunni school, defend it and criticize bitterly its opponents, like the Qadariyya in the very beginning of his book as in 2:7, and in most cases, criticize the opinions of the Mu'tazilites regarding Allah's attributes as is in the commentary of: Maidah, 5:64 and Zumar, 39: 67.

7. Conclusion

At-Tabari was a prodigy in terms of his intellectual capacity. He was relatively very able to fulfil his aim though some unwarranted narrations were found in his book.

He transformed the Tafsir to the stage of exercising discretion; this is what convinced us, not to categorize him with the narrators of traditions of forerunners alone.

His technical terms in Qira'at were inconsistent with the standard terminology. He escaped many renditions of Qira'at. He rejected forms of Qira'at that scholars established to be authentic and sound, for they did not fulfill the criteria in his view.

He narrated so many unauthentic reports without criticizing them. He narrated such Israiliyyat, which contradict the Shariah without remarking on its status. He used to be very pungent in discussion be it on theology, exegesis, Qira'ah or legal aspects of the verses.

Man is imperfect in all his endeavours, and so was Imam at-Tabari. Despite that his work in Tafsir remains an unparalleled legacy for all the Muslim generations to date. And it shall remain as long as the Tafsir(commentary on the Qur'an) continue to exist, a leading luminary.

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