

The Exegesis of the Quran Through The Means Of *Al-Isyarah*: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract— Since the early days of Islam till present day Muslim scholars have given great emphasis on the science of Quranic exegesis [*ilm al-tafsir*]. Their enthusiasm and dedication is proven by the great number of authentic works on the subject. What is also evident is the various methods and approaches that were implemented in their quest for understanding the Quran. Among the methods used is what is known as *tafsir bi al-isyarah* [the interpretation of the Quran through the means *al-isyarah*]. Although not all Muslim scholars acknowledge the validity of this method of *al-isyarah*, it had been used by a handful of authoritative scholars in defining the meaning of the Quran. These works are still in existence today. This paper discusses the value and the validity of this mode of interpreting the Quran and the extent of its relevancy nowadays.

[Key word : Quran, *tafsir*, implicit meaning of the Quran, *isyarah*]

1. The Importance of Understanding The Meaning of The Verses of The Quran

The Quran is accepted by the Muslims as the holy book of Islam, revealed by Allah with the purpose to lead human being to the straight path, the path which brings happiness and felicity in this world and in the life after death. In verse 9 of the chapter of al-Isra', Allah proclaims, "Verily this Quran shows the way to all that is most upright and gives the believers who do good deeds the glad tidings...."

The role of the Quran as guidance for mankind in every aspect of life will impossible to be realized if its contents, explicitly and implicitly, can not be understood and fathomed by human being, in particular the Muslims. For this reason the necessity to understand the Quran can not be denied. In fact, the Quran has constantly urged all human beings to study the Quran and to ponder over its content, as Allah says, "Will they not then ponder over this Quran or are there locks upon their hearts?" [the chapter of surah Muhammad, ayat 24]

For this very reason, from the early days of Islam, starting from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and followed by the era of his great Companions, the knowledge that pertains to elaborating and interpreting the verses of the Quran, which further named as "*tafsir*", has flourished significantly.

Due to the importance of this "*tafsir*" knowledge [the knowledge of the exegesis of the quran] in the life of the Muslims, from the early days of Islam, many great scholars of Islam have made a lot of endeavour in order to understand and fathom the meaning of the Quran. Through their restless endeavour a lot of significant works pertaining to the science of *tafsir* have been produced. Those works on the "exegesis of the quran" were written by Muslim scholars using various

kinds of approach and methodology and covering nearly all aspects of the Quran. It is clear that those works pertaining to the *tafsir* of the Quran have contributed significantly in the aspect of understanding the Quran as well as helped the Muslims to understand their holy scripture correctly.

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As mentioned earlier, those works on Quranic exegesis have been written in various approaches and ways which generally depend on the academic expertise possessed by the particular scholar. Some of the works have laid great importance on the aspect of Islamic law, that is, giving special attention at expounding those verses of the Quran pertaining to law. Some of the works focus on interpreting the Quran by referring to the comments and remarks made by the Holy Prophet himself or by the Companions of the Prophet This sort of *tafsir* has further been known as *al-tafsir al-ma'thur* which means the exegesis of the Quran based on narration. According to most of the Muslim scholars, this sort of *tafsir* is regarded as the most authentic method for explaining the meaning of the Quran and serves as the pillar for other methods of *tafsir*.

Apart from that there are also some of the Muslim scholars who try at their best to interpret the Quran by relying mainly upon their intellect as well as upon what can be understood from the clear Arabic language itself. Since the Quran was revealed using the highest standard of Arabic language thus the Arabic language itself is regarded as one of the most important instruments for understanding the Quran.

By using their intellect combined with their great knowledge about arabic language they have tried at their best to extract various guidance and lessons from the verses of the Quran. This is to say that, according to them, the understanding of the Quran should not be confined to that which have been reported from the Prophet saw or his Companions. The Quran as a guidance for human being, they argued, should also be elaborated and interpreted in the light of current situation and

contemporary world. Only then the Quran can truly be benefitted by all Muslims throughout the ages.

Apart from what had been mentioned above we find that there are also works on tafsir which, besides interpreting the Quran according to the above-mentioned method of tafsir, include a methodology of tafsir which is termed as *tafsir bi al-isyarah*.

2. The Definition of *Tafsir al-Isyarah*

According to Muhammad al-Zarqani, the *tafsir of isyarah* refers to an effort to interpret the meaning of the Quran without relying on the literal Arabic language of the Quran; rather, it is based on the implicit meanings of the Quranic words which is believed to have been disclosed by Allah to those who are in their spiritual journey to Allah. However, these implicit meanings of the Quran can still be *harmonized with*¹ and *related to* the explicit meanings of the Quran.

Whereas Khalid Abdul Rahman al-‘Akk is of the opinion that *tafsir al-isyarah* is a kind of *tafsir* that interprets the verses of the Quran, not be based on the explicit and literal meaning of the Arabic words, that is, not be based on what can be understood through the means of standard Arabic language, nor by referring to the accepted principles of Quranic exegesis, but through the implicit and hidden meanings of the word which Allah reveals and discloses to those Muslims who are in their spiritual journey to Allah. He further views that these implicit meanings of the word are - at the same time - established on a kind of suitability and harmony that exist between the implicit meanings and the explicit meanings which can be understood from any verse of the Quran in those aspects which are acceptable for this sort of *tafsir*.²

Based on the above-mentioned definition for *tafsir al-isyarah* it can be concluded that there exist three main elements which form the valid and qualified *tafsir al-isyarah* which are :

1] the interpretation does not look at or focus on the meanings of the Arabic language which are understood and acceptable in general. This is to say it is different from the general approach to the interpretation of the Quran made by Muslim *Mufassir* where they constantly emphasize the importance of Arabic language as well as the knowledge pertaining to the Quranic sciences and regard them as the most reliable instrument for understanding the meaning of the Quran,

2] Eventhough this sort of *tafsir* is not basically based on the explicit meanings of the Quranic words, nevertheless it does not appear to be disconnected completely and totally from the explicit meanings of the word. By contrast, the interpretation of the Quran by means of *isyarah* should has some sort of harmony with the explicit meaning of the Quran and can be related to it.

3] The interpretation of the Quran by the way of *isyarah* is in reality related to the hidden meanings of the verses of the

¹ Muhammad ‘Abdul ‘Azim al-Zarqani [1998], *Manahil al-Irfan Fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*, Beirut : Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, page 386

² Khalid ‘Abdul Rahman al-‘Akk [1986], *Usul al-Tafsir Wa Qawā'iduhu*, Beirut : Dar al-Nafa’is, page 205

Quran which is believed to be a sort “inspiration” that Allah reveals or unveils to those who have possessed of the high level of purified soul.

3. Does this approach of *tafsir* is accepted unanimously by Muslim scholars ?

In general there are many among muslim scholars who do not accept the methodology of *tafsir al-isyarah* as one of the authoritative and valid approach for understanding the verses of the Quran.

According to them, this methodology of Quranic exegesis will only open the door to some individuals, especially to those Muslims who are seeking nearness to God by travelling the sufi path, who do not possess sufficient knowledge pertaining to the science of Quranic exegesis, to interpret the Quran incorrectly or without adhering to the authentic and valid principles of Quranic exegesis.

In other words, the methodology of *isyarah tafsir* will only expose the Quran to various kinds of wrong interpretation which does not base on valid knowledge, guidance and solid evidence.³

As an example, al-Nasafi, who is a great scholar in the field of tafsir and well-known for his great work *Tafsir al-Nasafi*, says, “.....the verses of the Quran should be interpreted based on the literal dan explicit meaning of its words where any kind of deviation from its explicit meaning, that is, to interpret the Quran by giving its hidden and implicit meaning, as claimed by those who have gone astrayed from the right path, and by refusing the explicit meaning of the Quran is in reality a kind of *ilhad*.....”⁴

By contrast, there are also a group of Muslim scholars who accept the validity of this sort of *tafsir*. In validating their stand on this matter they have quoted verse 24 of the chapter of Muhammad which reads, “*Will they not then ponder over this Quran or are locks upon their hearts...?*”

According to them, this verse clearly emphasizes the importance of pondering over and understanding the Quran and this understanding of the Quran is not only confined to the explicit meaning of the Arabic words. In fact, it also includes the implicit and hidden meaning of the words which can be perceived and fathomed by utilizing one’s sound intellect and through deep observation as well as through divine inspirations which, they claim, are the result and the outcome of the soul that has been purified from all elements of infidelity and polytheism⁵

They also argue by saying that when the Arab musyrikin at the time of the Prophet Muhammad saw heard the verses of the Quran, it is clear that they are capable completely of understanding the explicit meaning of the Quran since it is revealed in their own language.

Nevertheless, their understanding of the explicit meaning of the Quran appear to be insufficient and ineffective since they

³ Ibid. , page 208

⁴ Muhammad ‘Abdul ‘Azim al-Zarqani, op. cit. , page 386.

⁵ Ibid.

remained as infidels and refused to have faith in the quran. Thus, it can be concluded savely that what is meant by God through the word “pondering over” in the verse is a kind of deep reflection, meticulous observation and pondering upon both the explicit and the implicit meaning of the Quran, which is to say, by applying one’s sound mind and intellect and further supported by having truly purified soul, and not by those souls which are tarnished by sins, infidelity and disobedience to Allah..

According to them, the the Quranic phrase “*iqfal al-qulub*” [or are locks upon their hearts?] which is mentioned in verse 24 of chapter Muhammad is referring a kind of spiritual dirts that befall human heart where this sort of dirts is the outcome of one’s committing sins, following the carnal desire without guidance, being obsessed in enjoying worldly pleasures, excessive negligence, having to much love for relaxation, seeking human praise and having other characteristics which are not pleased to Allah swt.

For this reason, when Allah “re-opens” that which has locked the heart, due to one’s sincere repentance to Allah as well as one’s regrets for what he or she has done, He will pour into the heart, out of His mercy, various kind of implicit understandings pertaining to the verses of the Quran.⁶

This reality, according to them, shows that if human heart is being purified from the dirts of sin and negligence, it will become the main factor for the heart being able to fathom the various implicit meaning of the quran.

4. Does the permissibility for interpreting the Quran by *isyarah* is absolute [without any condition]?

As for those Muslim scholars who accept the legality of interpreting of the Quran through the way of *isyarah* , they have laid down four conditions that need to be fulfilled. The purpose of these conditions is to ensure the interpretation of the Quran by this approach will not do any damage to the meaning of the Quran, nor deviate from the correct interpretation of the Quran, that is, the interpretation of the Quran which contradicts the understanding of the school of *ahlu sunnah wal jamaah*.

The four conditions are as folloe :

1] the meaning of the Quran attained and arrived at by the means of *isyarah* should not go against the literal meaning of the quran that can be understood clearly from the verse.

2] No one should claim that the implicit meaning of the Quran is the sole interpretation meant by Allah through the very verse, not the meaning understood through the means of Arabic language or through other valid and qualified principles of quranic exegesis

3] the interpretation by *isyarah* should not be in contradiction to any other valid evidence in Islam, neither to the dictates of the sound mind.

4] the implicit meanings of the verse arrived at by the way of *isyarah* should be substantiated and supported by other valid evidence in Islam.

⁶ Ibid. , page 211.

5. Does the acceptance of the meaning of the Quran by *al-isyarah* is obligatory in Islam?

According to Khalid `Abdul Rahman, eventhough this approach to understanding the quran is basically permissible when the four above-mentioned conditions are fulfilled, nevertheless, to accept the meaning of this tafsir is not obligatory.

He says at this point, “it is very important to note that accepting the implicit meaning of the quran is not incumbent upon a muslim, as that of accepting the explicit meaning of the quran arrived at by the valid principles of quranic exegesis. This is because the meaning of the Quran that was unveiled through the means of *isyarah* is more like the secrets of the quran *revealed to* and *poured into* the heart of the believer who is pious and knowledgable. Thus, this sort of knowledge which bears a kind of secrecy and exclusiveness [pertaining to unveiling the meanings of the Quran] may probably be kept by the particular believer as a kind of special knowledge bestowed upon him by Allah or probably he may reveal those special knowledge to other muslims without compelling them to accept it”.⁷

6. Examples Regarding the Exegesis of the Quran by *al-isyarah*

These are some of the examples on how the verses of the Quran pertaining to “Islamic law” are being interpreted by the way of *al-isyarah* :

1. In commenting, by the way of *isyarah*, the verse of the Quran that forbids the muslims from eating people’s wealth or money in the wrong way; that is, in the verse 188 of the chapter of al-Baqarah, “*And devour not one another’s possessions wrongfully.....*”

Ibn `Ajibah says, “...the *batil* [wrongfully] that is mentioned in the verse is referring to all things other than God. Thus, anyone who takes or accepts any wealth or gift from the people without perceiving God as the real Giver of the wealth or money has in reality taken the wealth in the wrong way”⁸

Thus, according to Ibn Ajibah’s remark, no one is able to safeguard himself from the sin of eating other’s wealth wrongfully until he is able to perceive Allah as the Giver of all that arrive to him. This means that, apart from using the lawful means for acquiring wealth, it is also incumbent upon a muslim to perceive Allah as the giver for what he possesses.

2. In commenting the verse of the Quran that deals with the law of *jihad* [Islamic holy war], that is in the verse 190 of al-Baqarah which reads, “*And fight for the cause of Allah those who fight youbut do not be aggressive...*”

Ibn `Ajibah says, “...you should know that the enemies of the servant [of God] which will prevent him [from the way of Allah] and cut himself totally from Allah are four : the

⁷ Ibid. , page 209

⁸ Abu al-`Abbas Ahmad Ibn `Ajibah [2002], *al-Bahr al-Madid Fi Tafsir al-Qur`an al-Majid* , Beirut : Dar al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, volume 1, page 191.

uncontrolled inner self, the satan, the worldly life and human being.

For to wage war against the inner self is by opposing one's desire and curbing its inclination and burdening it with doing that which the soul dislikes or hates until it becomes completely under control. As to wage war against the satan is by not obeying that which the satan commands and urges to do; and to wage war against the worldly life is by being ascetic in one's life and refraining oneself from taking delight in worldly pleasures. Furthermore, one should be content with all that which is available to him, that is, without hoping for more than what is being decreed for him by God. And to wage war against human being is by not giving the slightest attention to them [whether they like or dislike you] and turning away from them [by giving full attention to God]....."⁹

3. In commenting the verse of the Quran which speaks about the permissibility of seeking the bounty of Allah during performing the rituals of hajj, that is in verse 198 of the chapter of al-Baqarah, "*It is no offence to seek a bounty from your Lord.....*"

Ibn `Ajibah says, "It is incumbent upon a servant of God to continuously strive for having additional spiritual gift from Allah eventhough he may has arrived at the highest level of spirituality. For to feel content with one's spiritual attainment in the travelling to Allah is a kind of *hirman*, [that is, a condition in which the servant will be prevented from receiving more spiritual bounties from Allah] and to think of oneself as having arrived at the highest level of spiritual journey is a kind of defect. Thus, it is not an offence, O those who have the highest level of spiritual attainment, to continuously strive to obtain more additional spiritual gift from your Lord with the intention of strengthening your conviction and faith in God..."¹⁰

4. In commenting verse 222 of chapter al-Baqarah which deals with the issue of menstruation, "*They ask you about menstruation, tell them, this is a discomfort. Therefore, keep away from women during their menstrual period and do not approach them until they are clean again*"

Ibn `Ajibah says, "that is, when you are being asked about the inner self when it is in the state of *junub*, that is, being tarnished by the dirt of negligence and loving the pleasure of worldly life; so say to them that this kind of inner self is truly dirty and impure. Therefore, whosoever approaches it will inevitably be effected by the impurities of that inner self. For this reason, it is prohibited to be close to someone whose inner self is still in the state of dirty until he is being purified from the dirt of negligence and loving worldly life"

At this point we are able to see how Ibn Ajibah has interpreted the implicit meaning of the word "menstruation" as referring to the inner self that has been tarnished with the dirt of negligence and loving worldly life. Thus, according to him,

this state of inner self is absolutely impure and therefore should be avoided from being near to it."¹¹

7. Evaluation and conclusion

Based on our brief discussion regarding the exegesis of the Quran by the way of *isyarah*, I would like to make some important evaluation and conclusion :

1. Eventhough there are a group of muslim scholars who do not agree with the method of interpreting the Quran by the way of *isyarah* arguing that a lot of mistakes may take place in applying this methodology, nevertheless, all the misinterpretation of the Quran can surely be avoided if those conditions pertaining to the science of Quranic exegesis, as expounded by the muslim scholars, are strictly maintained and observed.

2. By looking at the development of the science of quranic exegesis it is clear that this mode of quranic interpretation has attained significant development and consideration from the Muslim scholars. This can be seen clearly through the emergence of many authoritative works on this sort of *tafsir* in the history of Islam.

3. This mode of *tafsir* - which focuses on the aspect of spirituality and the purification of the inner self – has in reality given the highest value to the science the Quranic exegesis itself. This is because, the knowledge of "the purification of the soul" is one of the most important objectives of the revelation of the Quran, as the Quran testifies in verse 129 of the chapter of al-Baqarah, "Our Lord, send them an apostle from among themselves who will recite to them Your revelations, to teach them the Book and the wisdom, and to purify them....."

4. Eventhough there are a group of Muslim scholars who acknowledged the validity of this mode of *tafsir*, it is clear that this "validity" is not absolute and can be done by all Muslims. At all times this mode of *tafsir* should be maintained by adhering to those conditions pertaining to the principles of Quranic exegesis. By doing this, any sort of misinterpretation of the Quran can be avoided.

In short, in my point of view, the mode of interpreting the Quran by the way of *isyarah* has truly given great contribution in the field of the exegesis of the Quran. Thus, the Muslims should take benefits from those valuable knowledge pertaining to the interpretation of the Quran.

⁹ Ibid. , volume 1, page 195.

¹⁰ Ibid. , volume 1, page 201.

¹¹ Ibid. , volume 1, page 223.