

# THEMATIC APPROACH TO QURANIC EXEGESIS



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# **Thematic Approach to Qur'anic Exegesis**

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**Published:** 2015

**Categorie(s):** Non-Fiction, Esotericism, Occult, Prophecy, Education and Study aids, Human Science, Philosophy, Religion, Islam

**Tag(s):** islam sadr baqir quran "islamic mobility" xkp

# Chapter 1

## **The Analytic Approach**

By the 'analytic approach' we mean the approach in which the exegete deals with the Qur'an verse by verse, in accordance with their compiled sequence in the Qur'an. The exegete following this approach, follows the Qur'anic text and expounds it in a piecemeal fashion, utilising those instruments of exegesis that he believes to be effective (such as reliance on literal meanings, traditions, or other verses that have some word or meaning in common with the verse under study) to the extent of his capacity to throw light upon the import of the part being commented upon, while taking into consideration the context in which it occurs.

Naturally, while discussing the analytic approach to tafsir we should examine its most developed and complete form. The analytic method made a gradual historical advance before reaching its present stage, where the complete Qur'an comes under its purview.

This method began during the era of the Sahabah and the Tabi'un, at the level of analytic exposition of some words and verses of the Qur'an. With the passage of time, the need for the exegesis of further verses increased, until by the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century, it took its final and most extensive form in the works of Ibn Majah, al-Tabari and others.

The aim of the analytic method was to understand the meaning of God's words, which was possible for a large number of people at the beginning of the Islamic era. But with the passage of time and growing distance from the period of revelation, with new developments and changes in circumstances, the meanings of words became obscure.

The development of the analytic method followed the growth of uncertainties in comprehending the Qur'anic text and doubts in determining the Divine intent, until, eventually, it acquired the most evolved form in the shape of encyclopaedic exegeses in which the exegete begins from the first verse of the Surat al-Fatihah and concludes with the last verse of the Surat al-Nas, expounding the text verse by verse. This was because the literal meanings of many verses required clarification, analysis and emphasis with the passage of time.

Obviously, we do not mean that in following the analytic method the exegete neglects all other verses and does not take their help in understanding the verse he is working upon. Rather, he does use other verses while commenting upon a certain verse, while also using traditions for this purpose. But his use of other verses is only for comprehending the literal meaning of the words of the verse being commented upon.

At every step his purpose is to understand the meaning of the verse being dealt with, with the help of all the possible means at this disposal; that is, his purpose is basically an analytic one. Consequently, the exegete stops after comprehending the meaning of a certain part of the Qur'anic text without generally exceeding this limit.

The result of the analytic method of tafsir at its best is the vast collection of Qur'anic meanings taken into consideration separately; that is, we become aware of a large number of ideas and teachings of the Qur'an, which are disconnected and piled up in such a motley manner that it is not possible for us to identify the link existing between them or to discover their pattern of arrangement. After going through this exercise, it is not possible for us to understand the view of the Qur'an regarding the different spheres of human activity. Thus, what we confront is a huge conglomeration of facts from which we cannot determine the relations and links existing between them that may lead to the formation of composite ideas enabling us to determine the point of view of the Qur'an concerning different fields and spheres of human activity. The analytic tafsir does not have such an aim in view, and if it is occasionally achieved, such is not its essential aim.

This condition of dispersion arising from the analytic tendency has certainly led to the development of several religious

conflicts in Islam, because it is sufficient that an exegete should find a certain verse as justifying his sect's stand, to proclaim it and gather a group of followers around himself. This has happened with many issues of kalam, such as the issue of freedom and predestination. It would have been possible to avoid many of these conflicts if the exegete following the analytic method had taken a step further and not confined himself to bringing together a number of verses.

# Chapter 2

## **The Thematic Approach**

In this method, the exegesis of the Qur'an is not done verse by verse. On the contrary, it seeks to study the Qur'an by taking up a particular theme from among the various doctrinal, social and cosmological themes dealt by the Qur'an. It studies and discusses, for example, the doctrine of tawhid in the Qur'an, the concept of prophethood in the Qur'an, the Qur'anic approach to economics, the laws that shape the course of history (sunan al-tarikh) according to the Qur'an, the cosmology of the Qur'an, and so on. Through such studies, this method seeks to determine the Qur'anic viewpoints and to comprehend as a consequence the message of Islam regarding a particular issue from among the various issues related to life and the universe.

It should be clear that there is no divorce between the two methods either on the level of actual practice or the practice of exegesis through history, because the thematic method evidently stands in need of the ascertainment by the analytic method of the meanings of the verses being dealt with by thematic tafsir and related to a topic under study. Also, the analytic tafsir, in the course of its semantic journey does stumble upon Qur'anic ideas related to major issues of human life. Nevertheless, the two methods remain different from each other in their features, aims and ideational characteristics.

Among the factors responsible for the popularity of the analytic method and its domination for many centuries was the traditionalist trend in tafsir. This trend was initially so strong that in fact exegesis was a part of hadith in one form or the other, and apart from some lexical, literary and historical information, hadith remained about the sole basis of exegesis for a long period of time.

These traditions of the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A), or the Sahabah and the Tabi'un, were generally replies to questions asked by the people. It was not possible for a tafsir that stopped at the boundary of hadith and relied solely upon it, to take a further step and attempt to combine and synthesise the varied detailed meanings of the Qur'an and to derive a viewpoint lying beyond its lexical meanings. This exegesis was by nature a commentary on the meaning of isolated words, in the sense that synonyms were given, some unfamiliar terms were elucidated, and some ideas were applied to the circumstances of the revelation (asbab al-nuzul) of verses. Such an activity lacks the potential of assuming an innovative role that would have enabled it to go beyond lexical meanings and reach the basic ideas which the Holy Qur'an offers in its scattered verses.

For a better understanding of these two different methods of tafsir, we give an example from our experience in fiqh. In a sense fiqh involves the interpretation of traditions narrated from the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A). We know that there are legal works which deal with the traditions, one by one, and expound every tradition with respect to either its meaning, or the chain of its narrators, or its text, or all of these, depending upon the commentator's approach. This is what we find in the works of the commentators of al-Kutub al-'Arba'ah ("the four books", i.e. al-Kafi, al-Tahdhib, al-'Istibsar and Man la yahduruhu al-faqih) and al-Wasa'il, although the greater part of legal books and studies do not follow this method. On the contrary, they organise their studies on the basis of the problems confronted in everyday life, while citing such traditions as relate to a problem and shed light upon it, leading to the determination of the Islamic viewpoint concerning it. This is the thematic or problematic method in fiqh, while the former method was an analytic one of expounding traditions in that field.

*Al-Jawahir* is in fact a comprehensive commentary on the traditions of *al-Kutub al-'Arba'ah*. But it is not a commentary which expounds their traditions one by one. Instead, it deals with these traditions in relation with the different issues of human activity, such as sale, ju'alah, restoration of wasteland, marriage, etc. It collects the relevant traditions under each head, elaborating and collating them with a view to drawing a

legal conclusion. It is not sufficient to comprehend each tradition separately, for it is not possible to deduce a rule of the Shari'ah from such isolated studies. The deduction of a rule of the Shari'ah requires a study of all the traditions relevant to the exposition of a rule or subject concerning any area of human activity. Following this comprehensive study, a viewpoint emerges as a result of viewing the traditions together, not in isolation from one another. This is the thematic approach as applied to the exposition of traditions.

On comparing the method of enquiry followed in Qur'anic studies with the one prevalent in fiqh, we observe the differing positions of the two methods. Thus while the thematic approach prevailed in fiqh, to the extent that it predominated all the legal studies, and led to advance and development in this field, we find the opposite being true in Qur'anic studies, where the analytic method of tafsir held sway for nearly thirteen centuries. Every exegete would start his work exactly like his predecessor, and expound the Qur'an verse by verse. Consequently, while the thematic method prevailed in fiqh, the analytic method was prevalent in the field of Qur'anic studies. This kind of Qur'anic studies which are occasionally referred to as 'thematic exegeses' - like the studies of exegetes concerning some specific topics such as asbabal-nuzul of the verses, the variant readings, the nasikh and mansukh verses, the metaphors used in the Qur'an, etc. - are not what we mean by thematic exegesis. Such studies are actually compilations of a number of statements from analytic tafsir that have something in common. In other words, not every attempt at collecting or isolating Qur'anic details in a thematic study. The thematic study is one where a problem from among the various doctrinal, social and cosmological issues of life is studied with a view to determining the Qur'anic standpoint regarding it.

I think that, most probably, the prevalence of the thematic approach in fiqh has helped greatly in developing Islamic legal thought, and in enriching scientific studies in this field. On the contrary, the prevalence of the analytic method in Qur'anic studies impeded the development of Islamic Qur'anic thought and resulted in its acquiring a quality of repetitiousness, so much so that we may say that centuries elapsed after



the exegetic works of al-Tabari, al-Razi and al-Shaykh al-Tusi without Islamic thought being able to create anything really new, and the exegetic activity mostly remained in static state throughout these centuries despite the extensive changes brought about by time in the various spheres of human life. Later on, God willing, a comparison of the two methods will reveal the cause and the secret behind this phenomenon.

# Chapter 3

## The Difference Between the Two Methods

Why did the analytic method impede growth, while the thematic method promoted it, leading to the creative expansion in the scope of ijtiḥād? To know why that was so, it is necessary that we have a clearer and sharper understanding of the analytic and thematic methods. The answer will become obvious after our explaining the points of difference between these two methods. Following are some of these differences.

**The First Difference:** The role of the exegete following the analytic method is generally passive. First of all, he starts by taking into consideration a particular Qur'anic text, such as a verse or passage, without formulating any prior premises or plans, and seeks to determine the Qur'anic meaning in the light of assistance afforded to him by the vocabulary of the Qur'an, along with any indications that are available to him within the specific text or outside it. In general, his effort is confined to the exposition of a specific text of the Qur'an. In this, the role of the text is similar to that of a speaker, and the exegete's passive duty is to listen with attention and to comprehend. Here, the exegete's preoccupation is to listen attentively with an enlightened and clear mind and a spirit of familiarity with classical Arabic and its refinements and style. With such a mind and spirit the exegete sits facing the Qur'an and listens attentively. His role is passive while the Qur'an plays an active role. As the Qur'an effuses its literal meanings, the exegete records them in his exegesis to the extent of his understanding.

In contrast to this, the exegete following the thematic method does not start his activity from the text of the Qur'an, but from the reality of life. He focuses on a particular subject from among the various problems relating to the ideological,

social or cosmological aspects of life, employing the accumulated results of human thought and experience concerning that subject, the questions raised and the solutions suggested regarding it, with the gaps present therein. Thereafter, he turns to the Qur'anic text, though not in the role of a passive listener and a recorder. He places before the Qur'an a ready topic and problem out of the great number of human ideas and views. Thus he starts a dialogue with the Qur'an; the exegete questioning and the Qur'an giving the replies.

The exegete studies his topic by relating it, within the limits of his capacity, to the imperfect intellectual experience of mankind as represented by the correct and incorrect viewpoints of various thinkers, focusing the light shed by them on the problem at hand. Then setting aside the results of his enquiry, he turns to the Qur'an, not as a mute listener but as one entering a dialogue. In an inquisitive and contemplative spirit, he questions the Qur'an, beginning with the Qur'anic texts concerning the subject of his study. His aim here is to discover the standpoint of the Qur'an concerning the subject under study, and to arrive at a conclusion inspired by the text, while comparing it with the ideas and viewpoints relating to the subject.

Hence, the results of the thematic tafsir are in constant link with human experience, because they portray the Qur'anic outlines as well as approach to determining the Islamic point of view regarding any issue of life. It is also clear that thematic tafsir operates as a dialogue with the Qur'an by seeking replies from it. But this act of eliciting answers from the Qur'an is not simply a passive way of doing so; rather, it is an active approach with the purpose of discovering a truth from among the great truths of life from the Qur'anic text.

Speaking about the Qur'an, Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) says:

"...That (light) is the Qur'an. Try to make it speak, it will never speak, though I will inform you about it. Indeed, it contains the knowledge of the future and the reports of the past, the cure for your ills and the system of (organising) your affairs."

*(Nahj al-balaghah, Khutbah 158)*

The expression *istintaq* used by 'Ali, the son of the Qur'an, is the most splendid term describing the function of thematic tafsir as a dialogue with the Qur'an, posing the problems of a

particular subject to it with the purpose of eliciting Qur'anic replies to them.

Thus, the first principal difference between analytic and thematic methods of tafsir is that in the former method the exegete plays the passive role of listener taking notes, which is not the case in the latter method. The perpetual task of thematic tafsir in every age is to set the human intellectual heritage and experience as the contemporary thought before the Qur'an, a Book immune to the infiltration of falsehood, to seek its verdict regarding the date collected by the exegete on a subject, to the extent of his ability, to determine, comprehend, and expound that verdict from the verses of the Qur'an.

Here, the Qur'an unites with reality and human life, because thematic tafsir starts from reality and ends in the Qur'an. It is not a tafsir which begins and ends with the Qur'an and is detached from the realities of life and the heritage of human experience. On the contrary, it begins with reality and ends in the Qur'an, in its capacity as a true source for determining the sacred outlook regarding that particular reality.

In this approach, the Qur'an retains its perpetual and everlasting capacity to renew and innovate, because the problem studied is not lexical exegesis. The potential of lexical exegesis is not unlimited, whereas there are traditions which indicate that the Qur'an is inexhaustible. The Qur'an itself is explicit that the words of God never run out. The Holy Qur'an is a perennial, inexhaustible source, whereas lexical exegesis is limited because the lexical meanings are limited and incapable of growth or renewal.

Therefore, the inexhaustible bounty of the Qur'an and the profusion of its meanings, which the Qur'an and the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) explicitly mention, is possible only through the method of thematic tafsir. This is because through it we seek to make the Qur'an speak, which certainly contains the knowledge of the past and the future, the cure for our ills, the plan for organising our affairs, and the outlook of the Heaven on earthly experience.

Hence thematic tafsir is able to develop, grow and flourish because of the developing nature of human experience, and the study and contemplation of the Qur'an in the light of this

experience make this development a vehicle for correct Islamic and Qur'anic understanding.

**The Second Difference:** The second difference between the two methods is that the thematic method takes a step beyond the analytic method. The analytic method confines itself to expressing the detailed meanings of the verses, while the thematic method aims at something more than this and has a more extended scope of enquiry. It seeks to know the relationship between the difference verses, whose individual details have been provided by the analytic method, to arrive at a composite Qur'anic view, within whose framework each individual verse occupies its appropriate place. This is what we call a view or outlook.

The thematic method strives, for instance, to arrive at the Qur'anic view about prophethood, the view of the Qur'an regarding economic theory, its view about the laws which fashion the course of history, and its view concerning cosmology. Thus, by doing so, thematic tafsir goes a step beyond analytic tafsir, and intends to arrive at a composite view which represents the stand of the Qur'an concerning a particular issue from among the various ideological, social and cosmological issues.

These are the two principal differences between the analytic and the thematic methods of tafsir. We have also mentioned that the thematic method was applied in the field of fiqh, while it was not generally followed in the field of exegesis, where the analytic method remained in vogue.

The term 'thematic' has been used here in the light of the first characteristic of this form of tafsir, i.e., its starting from a theme derived from external reality and turning towards the Qur'an. We may also call it 'synthetic' because it seeks to unite human experience with the Qur'an. However, this does not imply that it seeks to impose this experience on the Qur'an and to subject the Qur'an to it. Rather, it unites the two in the context of a single enquiry aimed at deriving from this unified context the Qur'anic notion capable of determining the Islamic stand concerning a particular human experience or concerning a particular idea which the exegesis has brought into the context of his enquiry. Therefore the tafsir is thematic and synthetic on the basis of its first characteristic.

This kind of tafsir is also thematic on the basis of its second characteristic, because it selects a group of verses related to a single theme. It is synthetic on the same basis, because it synthesises these verses and their meanings into single composite view. Thus, the terms 'thematic' and 'synthetic' are in consonance with both the above mentioned differences.

As we said, the thematic approach has been applied in the study of fiqh, while the analytic method has dominated tafsir. However, it does not mean that legal studies have exhausted the potential of the thematic method. Even today fiqhi studies need to draw on the potential of this method to expand their scope horizontally as well as vertically, because, as said, the thematic method means starting from reality and leading up to the Shari'ah.

Such has been the wont of the 'ulama' and 'fuqaha' in regard to various aspects and situations of real life, as in the case of such contracts as ju'alah, mudarabah, muzara'ah, musaqat, and marriage, to correlate them with the sources of the Shari'ah in order to deduce the rules of the Shari'ah for these activities. This is a thematic or problematic approach, because it starts with a real life situation and leads up to the Shari'ah for arriving at the law applicable to it.

However, it is necessary that the legal studies further extend their scope horizontally, because the scholars who contributed to the development of the thematic method during the course of several centuries were those who were always keen to grasp the current realities of life and to relate them to the Shari'ah, in order to deduce the laws applicable to these realities. But since human activity is continually in the process of change and expansion, with new areas of activity coming into being, it is necessary that the application of this method continue to develop, by harmonising all the new aspects of human activity with the Shari'ah.

The situation of life in the times of al-Shaykh al-Tusi or al-Muhaqqiq al-Hilli was adequate for the needs of their respective periods. However a great number of new vistas that have opened gradually since then in the sphere of human activity need to be correlated with the Shari'ah through the continued application of the thematic method.

For instance, in the early days, about a thousand or eight hundred years ago, such transactions as *tijarah*, *mudarabah*, *muzara'ah*, and *musaqat* were representative of the commerce of those days. But today the range of economic transactions has widened and they have become much more complicated. Therefore, it is essential for the *faqih* today, as it was for the earlier '*ulama*' who were always keen to relate every new aspect of life to the *Shari'ah* for obtaining the rules, to constantly relate real life to the *Shari'ah*. Hence, it is essential that this method continue to expand horizontally, as it did at its beginning. This was from the point of view of horizontal expansion.

It is also necessary that the thematic method operate in *fiqh* in a vertical direction. Such a vertical expansion is essential in order to reach the fundamental viewpoints which manifest the outlook of Islam, on which detailed legislation and the legal superstructure rest. This is because we know that every set of laws pertaining to any particular field of human activity is linked, on the one hand, to the basic concepts, and to the principal developments related to them, on the other. For instance, the economic laws of the *Shari'ah* are based on the Islamic outlook on economics; its laws of marriage, divorce and those concerned with the relations between man and woman are based on its basic outlook on man and woman and their roles.

These basic concepts, on which the superstructure of *fiqh* rests, should be studied more intensively. It is not correct to view the study of these basic concepts as an activity separate from *fiqh*, as an unessential or luxury of an academic nature, because it is not so. Rather, it is one of the necessities of *fiqh*, and it is essential to explore them to the extent humanly possible.

Returning to *tafsir*, we mentioned the differences between thematic and analytic *tafsir* and explained a number of advantages present in the thematic method that makes it superior to the other method. The thematic method of *tafsir*, in the light of what has been said, has wide horizons and is more fertile in that, going a step beyond analytic *tafsir*, it is capable of continuous development and productivity, replenished as it is with new material provided by human experience. This material is placed before the *Qur'an* so that the exegete is enabled to

derive replies from it. This is the only way to reach the basic concepts of Islam and the Qur'an concerning different issues of life.

It may be asked as to why it is necessary to know these concepts. What is the need to comprehend the Islamic concept of prophethood, the Islamic view of the laws that mould the course of history, the Islamic outlook on economics, and the Islamic cosmology? It is obvious that the Prophet (S) did not teach these concepts in a general and defined form; he gave the Qur'an to Muslims in its present order. Now what is the need to exhaust ourselves in an effort to isolate and determine these concepts, when we observe that the Prophet (S) was content with delivering his message in an unsorted lump.

The fact is that there is today a basic need to determine these concepts and it is not possible to neglect them. The Prophet (S) did present these concepts, but by applying them in general Qur'anic climate generated by him in the Islamic society. Every Muslim living in that atmosphere understood these concepts, even if summarily and subconsciously, because the educative, spiritual, intellectual and social atmosphere created by the Prophet (S) was capable of giving a clear vision and a genuine ability to appraise different situations and incidents.

For a better understanding of this, consider the following two situations. The first situation is that of a person living among people speaking a certain language. The second is that of an outsider who wants to learn a particular language. There are two ways open to him. The first is for this person to live amidst the people who speak it and to immerse himself in this language. After living in this milieu for a long period of time he will grasp the structure of the language and its usages. With this, his mind will travel in accordance with the words, because he has acquired a general subconscious grasp of the meanings and rules of the language, the choice of the correct words, and the ability to differentiate a correct usage from a wrong one.

On the other hand, if a person living outside the climate of a language intends to cultivate the ability to use it correctly, what should he do?

This could be done by learning the rules of that language. This requires him to study the current usage, whose knowledge he wishes to cultivate, and to refer to it, for deducing the



general rules of that language. This is what happened in the case of Arabic studies. In the beginning the Arabs did not need to study classical Arabic because they lived in its atmosphere, But with the passage of time and changes in the cultural atmosphere, the language began to weaken . Other languages also cast their influence and entered the lives of these people. With this they began to feel the need for philological studies and grammar, because the current usage did not provide them with a wholesome grasp of their language. Thus it became necessary to develop a science with grammatical concepts and rules of syntax on whose basis they could use this language, and reflect and debate in it.

This was an example intended to explain the need for thematic tafsir. The Sahabah, who lived with the Prophet (S), though they did not learn these concepts in their generalised form, nevertheless, did comprehend them summarily and subconsciously. They were engraved in their minds and implicit in their thoughts. The general social, spiritual and intellectual atmosphere in which they lived was itself conducive to the understanding, even if sketchy, of these concepts, and in creating an appropriate criterion for appraisal.

But since this atmosphere no longer exists, there is the need for studying the concepts of the Qur'an and Islam. This need has become more pressing with the emergence of new views and ideas as a result of the interaction between the Islamic world and the West, with their vast, and variegated cultural experience in different fields. As a result of this interaction, a Muslim finds himself confronted with numerous ideas related to various spheres of life, and it is necessary to determine the Islamic viewpoint regarding them. It is necessary that the Islamic texts be studied intensively and 'made to speak', in order to discover the Islamic standpoint, affirmative or negative, in regard to them. These viewpoints of Islam, when determined, would enable us to solve the problems in diverse fields of human existence that human intellectual experience has sought to address.

Therefore, the thematic method is the better of the two methods of tafsir. But this does not mean that there is no longer any need for analytic tafsir. The merit of a method does not mean that it should replace another. What is meant is that

we should add the one method to the other; because thematic tafsir is nothing but a step beyond analytic tafsir, not that there is no need for it in the presence of the thematic method. Therefore, the issue at stake is not the replacement of one method by another, but a union of the two methods. This means that there are two essential steps involved in tafsir: the first one consists of analytic tafsir, and the second one is represented by thematic tafsir.

### **NOTES**

\*Editor's Note: This is translation of two lectures delivered by Martyr al-Sadr on 17th and 18th Jamadi al-Awwal, 1399 (April, 1979), and published with the title "alTafsir al-mawdu'I wa al-tafsir al-tajzi'I " . These have been published, together with other twelve lectures of the author dealing with history and society, under the title alMadrasat al-Qur'aniyyah, by Dar al-Ta'aruf li al-Matbu'at, Beirut. The text translated here has been edited to remove repetitions and inessential explanations.

(1) From **Al-Tawhid, Vol.VI, No.3 Rajab - Ramadhan, 1409 A.H. - March - May, 1989**



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