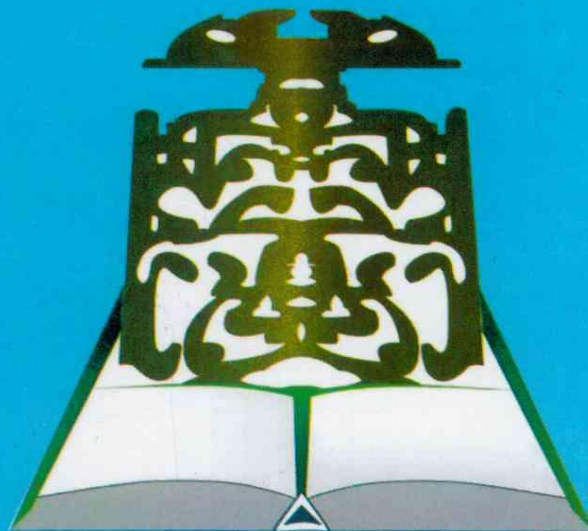


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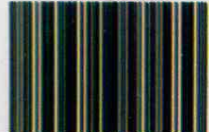


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SOME PRE-REQUISITES FOR CONDUCTING TAFSIR

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Abstract

Tafsir is a very important and sensitive aspect of Muslims' life. This so because it is the transmitter of the commands of Allah to the mankind. The glorious Qur'an as the divine word of Allah the Most High, must be well interpreted so that it's teachings and commandments could be well understood. It is unfortunate that many Muslims tend to engage in analyzing the meanings of Quran while they are empty of the basic requisites to a sound and accepted exegesis, This is why Muslim scholars set aside some pre-requisites for a Mufassir to conduct tafsir. This paper, therefore, attempts to discuss, examine and analyse such pre-requisites with a view to correcting the earranéous nature of tafsir

The Meanings of Tafsir

Literally, *tafsir* means *al-īdāh* and *al-tabyīn* that is elucidation and explanation¹ as Allah says:

And no example do they bring to (oppose) you,
but we reveal to you the truth and the better
explanation (thereof).²

Technically, *tafsir* could be defined as the science through which the Qur'ān can be understood. In other words, *tafsir* means the science by the help of which Qur'ānic injunctions and causes of revelation can be understood. According to Badr al-Dīn Muhammad ibn'Abdullāh al-Zarkashī (745-794 AH), *tafsir* is a branch of knowledge through which the book of Allah which was sent to Prophet Muhammad could be well comprehended through the deduction of its religious injunctions and legislations. According to some scholars, *tafsir* is defined as a science which studies the Qur'ān on the basis of its instructions as ordained by Allah according to the capability of the human being.³ According to al-Qādī (2002), *tafsir* is the science by which the Qur'ān is understood, its meanings explained and its rulings derived.⁴

Some Pre-Requisites for Conducting Tafsir:

Tafsir is a very serious matter because it is intimately concerned with the faith of every Muslim. Explaining the Qur'ān on the basis of one's own personal opinion and reasoning

cannot be regarded as *tafsīr*. Those who indulge in such kind of interpretations should remember the warning of the Prophet (SAW):

Whoever speaks about the Qur'ān with his opinion or without knowledge should prepare his seat in the hell fire.⁵

Based on the above *Hadīth*, therefore, some *mufasssirūn* have laid down some pre-requisites for conducting *tafsīr*. These are:

Arabic Language (*Al-Lughah Al-Arabiyyah*)

Since the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic, proper and authentic knowledge of this language is, therefore, one of the necessary requirements. It is very important to consider the application of words in Arabic lexicography, that is the literal (*al-haqīqah*) and the metaphorical (*al-majāz*) utilization of words. For instance, *al-salāt* once had the meaning of supplication or *al-du'āh*. But the Qur'ān employed it for Islāmic prayers and this second meaning dominated the first as if *salāt* did not mean supplication in the first place; and the word *al-zakāt* originally meant "purification" before it acquired another meaning namely "compulsory charity"⁶.

Arabic Syntax and Morphology (*Al-Nahw Wa Al-Sarf*):

Mastering Arabic syntax and Morphology is also one of the requirements for conducting *tafsīr*. The meaning of a verse easily changes with the changing of a single vowel.⁷

It was narrated by Imām al-Qurtubī that a Bedouin came to Madīnah during the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and showed interest in learning the Qur'ān. Somebody read *sūrah al-Barā'ah* (*al-Taūbah*) to him. When the man came to verse 3 *Annallāha barī'un minal mushrikīna warasūluhu* he read it wrongly to the bedouin as *warasūlihi* (ورسوليه)⁸. Having heard about the episode Caliph 'Umar drew the attention of the Bedouin to the correct version as *warasūluhu* (ورسولته). From there 'Umar gave an instruction that henceforth no one should read the Qur'ān to other people except to a person knowledgeable in Arabic, and ordered Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī (d. 688 A.H) to write the Arabic syntax (*al-Nahw*)⁹.

The Science of Rhetoric ('*Ulūm Al-Balāghah*):

The science of rhetoric is a very vital requirement for the comprehension of the Qur'ān. It has three branches, '*ilm al-bayān*, '*ilm al-ma'ān* (semantics) and '*ilm al-badī*. (rhyme) '*Ilm al-bayān* is a discipline that makes it easy for one to express one and the same concept in different and divergent ways. While '*ilm al-ma'ān* is a discipline that is mainly concerned with the fitness and suitability of a speech to and for the purpose for which it is delivered, and '*ilm al-badī* is a branch of knowledge that deals with the verbal beauty of an Arabic speech such as the use of *al-saja'i*¹⁰

Recitation Dialects (*Al-Qirā'āt*)

Literally, *al-qirā'āt* is the plural of *al-qirā'ah* which is the *masdar* (the root) from which *qara'a* (he read) is derived. But technically, it refers to a school among the schools of reading and reciting the Qur'ān¹¹. The Prophet (SAW) read, recited and taught his

sahābah different versions of the *qirā'āt*. The *sahābah* read from among the *qirā'āt* the one which they felt was more comfortable with them.¹²

There is a lot of wisdom behind the availability of different types of *qirā'āt*.

- i. In order for all the different Arabian tribes to get a simple and precise way of reading the Qur'ān.
- ii. So that they could clearly notice the everlasting miraculous nature of the Qur'ān, and also to believe that they were unable to bring even a single verse similar to that of the Qur'ān.

Some of the *sahābah* who excelled in the *qirā'āt* include 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, Ubayy ibn Ka'b (d.20 A.H), Zaīd ibn Thābit (d.45 A.H/665), 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd (d.32 A.H/653), Abū al-Dardā' and Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d.68 A.H/687). From these *sahābah*, many other *sahābah* and *tabi'ūn* received their *qirā'āt*. From then onwards, Muslims started ascribing these *qirā'āt* to the companion who mastered it, such as the *qirā'ah* of Ubayy and that of Zaīd.¹³

This trend continued up to the time of the *tabi'ūn* and seven *qirā'āt* were ascribed to them. These *tabi'ūn* were Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā', Zabbāna ibn 'Ammār al-Māzūnī al-Basrī (d. 154 A.H), 'Abdullah ibn Kathīr (d. 120 A.H), Nāfi' al-Madnī (d. 169 A.H), 'Abdullah ibn 'Āmir al-Yahsibī (d. 118 A.H), Abū Bakr 'Āsim ibn Abī al-Najwad al-Asdī al-Kūfī (d. 128 A.H), Abū 'Amārah Hamzah ibn Habīb al-Zaiyāt al-Kūfī (d. 156 A.H) and Abū al-Hassan 'Alī ibn Hamzah al-Kasā'ī al-Kūfī (d. 189 A.H)¹⁴

It should be noted that the number of the *qirā'āt* is over seven. It was al-Imām Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid Ahmad ibn Mūsā ibn al-'Abbās al-Taīmī who restricted the number to seven. The later scholars of the sciences of *qirā'āt* increased the number to ten by adding another three *qirā'āt*, namely those of Yazīd ibn al-Qa'qā 'Abū Ja'far (d. 130 A.H), Abū Muhammad, Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq (d. 205 A.H) and Abū Muhammad Khalf ibn Hishām (d. 229 A.H).¹⁵

With the passage of time, some scholars added another four *qirā'āt*, thus, bringing the number to fourteen. The additional four are those of al-Hassan ibn Abi al-Hassan Yasār al-Basrī (d. 110 A.H), ibn Muḥāsīn Muhammad ibn 'Abdurrahmān al-Sahamī al-Makkī, Yahya ibn al-Mubārak al-Basrī (d. 202 A.H) and Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Baghdādī al-Shanbūzī (d. 388 A.H).¹⁶

Abrogating and Abrogated Verses (Al-Nāsikhwa Al-Mansūkh):

It is necessary for a *mufassir* to become well acquainted with the abrogating and the abrogated verses of the Qur'ān as well as of the Prophetic traditions.¹⁷ It was reported from 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib that one day he passed by a Judge and said to him:

Do you know the abrogating and the abrogated? The Judge said: "No", then 'Alī said to him: "you have gone astray and have made others gone astray too".¹⁸

Literally, the word *naskh* has a wider connotation. It could mean to do away with something or to remove something. It could be said, for instance, *nasakhat al-shams al-zillah* meaning that the sun has wiped out the shadow.¹⁹ On this, Allah says:

...But Allah abolishes that which *satan* throws in. Then Allah establishes His revelations. And Allah is All knower, All wise.²⁰

Naskh could also mean to transfer something from one place to another. Technically, *naskh* means abrogating a verse with a similar or a better one ²¹ as Allah says:

We never abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten unless we replace it with a better one or similar to it...²²

Imām al-Shāfi'ī (150-203 A.H) was the first to have written on this. Later on, ibn Hazm maintained that mastering this aspect of the Qur'ān is, in fact, one of the conditions for a valid *ijtihād*.²³ Islām has applied the principle of graduation in bringing about the changes intended to enhance human life. That was why some temporary commandments were enacted, although these were not described as temporary. For instance, about the prohibition of intoxicants, the verses pertaining to this were revealed gradually and on several occasions. This graduation was followed by the Qur'ān not only in the matter of alcohol, but also on other social issues such as interest (*al-ribāh*), and the waiting period (*al-'iddah*) of the widow of a dead husband.²⁴

The Causes of the Revelation (*Asbāb Al-Nuzūl*)

As far as *tafsīr* is concerned, knowing the circumstances behind the revelation of a verse or a chapter is almost necessary. This enables one to interpret the Qur'ān very well and to deduce its legal injunctions. Scholars have expressed their views on this aspect to the extent that many books were published. Imām al-Bukhārī (194-256 A.H), for instance, has published a book on this aspect. Al-Wāhidī (b.468 A.H) also published a book *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, and al-Hāfiz ibn Hajr al-'Asqalānī (733-852 A.H), produced his own version of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, while Imam al-Suyūti (1445-1505) produced *Lubāb al-Nuqūl Fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*.²⁵

In understanding the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, for example, Allah says:

And to Allah belongs the East and the West, so wherever you turn yourselves or your faces – you are in the presence of Allah...²⁶

Some Muslims understood only the direct meaning of this verse to the extent that they came to the conclusion that it is permissible to face either the east or the west while praying. They interpreted the verse wrongly because they ignored its cause of revelation. The verse was revealed in relation to an episode which occurred when some *sahābah* were traveling and they failed to recognize the *qiblah* because of the darkness of the night. After all their effort to locate the *qiblah* failed, they reported the episode to the Prophet (SAW) as a result of which the verse was revealed. This verse teaches that when a Muslim travels and wants to observe a prayer but could not locate the *qiblah*, he is allowed to make an effort to find it. If all his efforts fail, he is allowed to face any direction to pray.²⁷

Basic Principle (*Usūl al-Dīn*).

It is necessary for a *mufasssīr* to know the essence (*dhāt*) of Allah, His qualities (*sifāt*), and His work (*afāl*). The Qur'ān makes it very clear that monotheism is the bedrock upon which lay the whole edifice and superstructure of the same faith all the prophets conveyed from Allah. Allah says:

And we did not send any Apostle before you but we inspired him (saying):
 "there is none who has the right to be worshipped but I (Allah), so worship Me (alone) and none else."²⁸

After every Apostle and his immediate successors, later generations would distort his teachings to the extent that the need for sending another Apostle would arise. *Usūl al-Dīn*, therefore, treats issues relating to belief (*īmān*) which consists of belief in Allah, in His angels, in His revealed Books, in His apostles, in the Day of resurrection and in Allah's pre-ordination of everything.²⁹

Jurisprudence and its *Usūl* (*Fiqh And Usūl Al-Fiqh*)

The Qur'ān and *Sunnah* are the primary sources of Islamic legislation. The statement of the Prophet signifies the same:

I am sent with this Qur'ān and along with it something similar to it (*sunnah*).³⁰

However, there are also two secondary sources namely *ijmā'* and *qiyās*. Through these two, scholars are held responsible for inferring and deducing laws from the texts of the two primary sources. The scholars are in dire need of them as the only gate way to obtain new laws for the fresh problems that might occur with the process of time. This is what brought about the emergence of the discipline of *usūl al-fiqh*.³¹ In *sūrah* al-Jumu'ah verses 9-10, Allah says:

O you who believe! when the call is proclaimed for the prayer on the day of friday come to the remembrance of Allah (*Jumu'ah* religious talk and prayer) and leave off business (and every other thing) that is better for you if you did but know.

Then when the (*Jumu'ah*) prayer is finished, you may disperse through the land and seek of the bounty of Allah (by working etc.) and remember Allah much that you may be successful.

As far as the content of these verses is concerned, two instructions could be noticed, that is Allah requires all believers to give up all their commitments and proceed towards the *salāt*. Then comes another instruction that is to disperse after the *salāt* is ended. It is noteworthy that this second instruction is not obligatory as the first. Differences like this have all been worked out by means of *usūl al-fiqh*.³²

The Established (*Muhkam*) and the Allegorical (*Mutashābih*)

Literally, the word *muhkam* means *al-man'u* that is stopping. That is why the *hākīm* (the ruler) is called with this name because he stops the cheater from cheating, etc. On the

other hand, *mutashābih* means similarity. According to Hussaīn ibn Muhammad ibn Habīb al-Nīsābūrī there are three camps on the issue of *muhkam* and *mutashābih*. Some scholars maintained that all Qur'ānic verses are *muhkamāt* while on the contrary other viewed all Qur'ānic verses as *mutashābihāt*. The third camp asserted that some Qur'ānic verses are *muhkamāt* while others are *mutashābihāt*.³³ The latter view is the acceptable one, for Allah says:

He is the one who has revealed to you the Book. Some of its verses are decisive – they are the foundation of the Book – while others are allegorical. Those whose hearts are infected with disbelief follow the allegorical part to mislead others and to give it their own interpretation, seeking for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. Those who are well grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in it, it is all from our *Rabb*. “None will take heed except the people of understanding.”³⁴

According to some scholars, *muhkam* means the verse whose interpretation is known either by the clear meaning of the verse or through the application of *ta'wīl*, while *mutashābih* refers to those verses whose exact meaning is only known by Allah. Some other scholars viewed *muhkam* as those verses whose meaning is very clear, while *mutashābih* refers to the contrary. The third group viewed *muhkam* as those verses whose meaning could be understood on their own while *mutashābih* stands for those verses whose meaning could not easily be understood on their own unless through the application of *ta'wīl*.³⁵

Hadith and It's Sciences (Hadith and 'Ulūm Al-Hadith)

The importance of *hadīth* and its science as one of the most vital pre-requisites for *tafsir* could not be over emphasized. The sayings and doings of the Prophet (SAW) complemented the Qur'ān. The attention of the *sahabāh* was drawn towards writing down the *hadīth*. During the Prophet's lifetime a large part of *hadīth* became preserved by them. Then, the compilation and arrangement of the *hadīth* narratives was the task of their immediate successors, the *tābi'ūns*. Thousands of scholars and students struggled hard and traveled far and wide for this sake, e.g. to Iran, Khurāsān and many other parts of the world. Their retentive memory, dedication, knowledge, the science of narration and the enduring interest of the 'ummah in the subject, all prove that like the preservation of the Qur'ān, the preservation of the *hadīth* was willed by Allah.³⁶

The Prophet (SAW) interpreted many verses of the Qur'ān without which many uncertainties could have thrown some Muslims into misunderstanding their meanings. In the Qur'ān, Allah talks severally about the obligation of *salāt*, *al-zakāt*, *sawm* and *hajj*. But no where in the Qur'ān was a mention of the prescribed time for the *salāt*, its description and many other related issues. All these and many other issues were clearly explained by the Prophet (SAW). Based on this, the Prophet was reported to have said:

Pray as you see me praying.³⁷

He also said:

Get (learn) the rites of your pilgrimage from me.³⁸

The understanding of the Qur'ān is impossible without some knowledge of the relevant *hadīth* of the Prophet as well as the sciences of *hadīth* (*'ulūm al-hadīth*). For, who is better qualified to interpret the Qur'ān than the man to whom the Book was revealed?. The Qur'ān, therefore, provides the general outline of the life ordained by Islām and the *hadīth* provided all the necessary details. When 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, was asked to describe the mode of the Prophet's life and conduct, she replied:

His character is the Qur'ān³⁹

This clearly shows that the Prophet's daily life was the true picture of the Qur'ānic teachings. He was an embodiment of all the virtues which have been mentioned in the Qur'ān. The record of his life which sheds light on his conduct as a child, as an adult, as a father, as a neighbour, as a merchant, as a preacher, as a friend, as an army Commander In Chief, as a Judge, as an administrator and above all as a devoted servant of Allah is truly an exemplification of the Qur'ān.

History (*Al-Tārīkh*)

In the Qur'ān, Allah makes frequent references to history in order to decide a disputed matter, for instance He says:

Verily, the first House (of worship) appointed for mankind was that at Bakkah (Makkah), full of blessing, and guidance for all people.

In it are manifest signs (for example) the station of Abraham:⁴⁰

These verses were revealed when the direction of the *qiblah* was changed from Jerusalem towards Makkah. Some Jews claimed that the temple of Jerusalem was the most blessed for a number of reasons, some among which were the frequent visits to it by a number of prophets, and that it was the most ancient temple on earth. To them, it should be held in higher esteem than the Ka'bah at Makkah. However, the Qur'ān proved them wrong. They seem not to be aware of the ancient place of worship named in the Qur'ān with its ancient name Bakkah. By mentioning *Maqām Ibrāhīm*, the Qur'ān has also provided them with another evidence. This is because Prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm) existed before prophets David (Dāwūd) and Solomon (Sulāimān) who first built the temple of Jerusalem.⁴¹

In fact, there are many verses in the Qur'ān that deal with some historical facts. Mention is made severally by Allah of different peoples and nations. For instance, *sūrah* Hūd verse 100, *sūrah* Tā Ha verse 99 and *sūrah* Yūsuf verse 3. Many historical facts were mentioned in the Qur'ān, such as the creation of earth and heavens, Prophet Adam and his episode with *Iblis*, the earlier prophets and messengers of Allah who appeared before Prophet Muhammad (SAW). During the time of the Prophet, Allah cites cases involving hypocrites, such as in *sūrah* al-Baqarah verse 204⁴²

It is not only the past historical facts that are in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān deals with the concept of history at a general level regardless of past, present or future because it is a revelation from Allah to whom the considerations of place, time and circumstances do not

apply. The Qur'ān cites many historical events which were foretold to occur in future and they occurred precisely. Among such historical events were the conquest of Roman empire by the Muslims as in *sūrah* al-Rūm verses 1 to 4. Allah also promised the Prophet (SAW) and his *sahābah* entering Makkah as in *sūrah* al-Fath verse 27. There are many verses whose interpretations could not adequately be given without tracing the historical circumstances that led to their revelation. It is, therefore, clear that without being equipped with history a *mufassir* can not interpret the Qur'ān very well.⁴³

Personal Qualities:

For a scholar to be allowed to interpret the Qur'ān, he must first and foremost be a Muslim. He should also be faithful. Without possessing these two personal qualities, it is invalid for him to conduct *tafsir* no matter how learned he may seem to be.

Spiritual Quality:

The Qur'ān was revealed to guide mankind spiritually. It, therefore, clearly stresses the importance of spiritual discipline. This spiritual discipline is in fact the bedrock upon which Islām is established. It is this discipline which all the prophets and messengers of Allah were sent to establish on earth at different times. The Qur'ān as the word of Allah, therefore, requires the scholar who is spiritually sound to interpret it so that its spiritual meaning and message could be conveyed to the audience. The essence of *tafsir* is to impart to the audience that spirit. Hence, a scholar who is spiritually weak could never convey the spiritual message of the Qur'ān.⁴⁴ See the interpretation of *sūrah* al-Baqarah: 282 "... so be afraid of Allah; and Allah is teaching you. And Allah is knower of all things".

The *mufassir* who is spiritually disciplined surely enjoins a unique kind of talent and gift of expression. This is a divine gift of intellect which Allah gives to His faithful servants. This type of intellect is known as *'ilm al-maūhibah* which is referred to in the Qur'ān as *'ilm al-ladunnī*, that is intuitive knowledge. Pertaining to this, Allah says:

Then they found one of Our slaves unto whom We had bestowed mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from Our presence.⁴⁵

Imām al-Shāfi'ī sheds more light on this, thus:

- I complained to Wakī' over my poor memory
- He instructed me to abstain from committing sinful acts.
- And informed me that knowledge is light.
- And the light of Allah is not given to the committer of sinful acts.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This paper, spells out that not all Muslim scholars are qualified to conduct *tafsir* of the Qur'ān. This is so because of the sensitivity of *tafsir* as the transmitter of the meaning of the Qur'ān. The paper highlights some pre-requisites for conducting *tafsir*. These are: Arabic language, Arabic syntax and morphology, the science of rhetoric, recitation dialects, the abrogating and abrogated verses of the Qur'ān.

Other pre-requisites are: the causes of the revelation, *Usul al-Din*, jurisprudence and its *usul*, the established and the allegorical verses of the Qur'ān, hadith and its science. There are also: history, personal qualities and spiritual qualities.

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- ³³ al-Zarkashī, op-cit, vol.2, pp.68-70 and al-Zurqānī op-cit, vol.2, pp.166-168
- ³⁴ The Qur'ān, *sūrah* al'Imrān : 7
- ³⁵ al-Zarkashī, op-cit, vol.2, pp.68-70 and Al-Zurqānī, op-cit, vol.2, pp.166-168
- ³⁶ "The Place of Hadīth in Islām" Proceedings of the Seminar on Hadīth to celebrate the 1200th Anniversary of the Great Muhaddīth, Imām al-Bukhārī" held at Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, July 11-13, 1975 Published by the International Graphics Printing Service, Maryland, U.S. p.16
- ³⁷ al-Bukhārī reported it, see al-Bānī M.N., *Irwā' al-Ghālīl Fī Tākhrij Ahādīth Manār al-Sabīl*, vol.1, Baīrūt: al-Maktabah al-Islāmī, hadīth number 262, (1985) p.291
- ³⁸ al-Sijistānī, op-cit, "Bāb Fī Ramyi al-Jimār" hadīth number 1970, p. 318
- ³⁹ Muslim reported it in "kitāb musāfirun", see Wensing A.J. and Mensing J.P. *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahrasu Li alfāz al-Hadīth al-Nabawī*, vol.2, Leider E.J Brill, (1943), p.75.
- ⁴⁰ The Qur'ān, *sūrah* āl-'Imrān, : 96-97
- ⁴¹ A Postgraduate Paper "The History books of ibn Ishāq, ibn Hishām, al-Wāqidī and ibn Sa'd in the Light of Muslim Historiography" presented by Usman Sanī Abbas in March, 2002 during the Ph.D coursework presentation, Department of Islāmic Studies, Bayero University, Kano and Bauchi, op-cit, pp.150-156
- ⁴² Ibid, a Postgraduate Paper
- ⁴³ Ibid, a Postgraduate Paper
- ⁴⁴ al-Zurqānī, op-cit, vol.1 pp. 516-517 an al-Dhahabī, op-cit, p. 268
- ⁴⁵ The Qur'ān, *sūrah* al-Kahf: 65
- ⁴⁶ al-Zurqānī, op-cit, vol.1, p.519

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