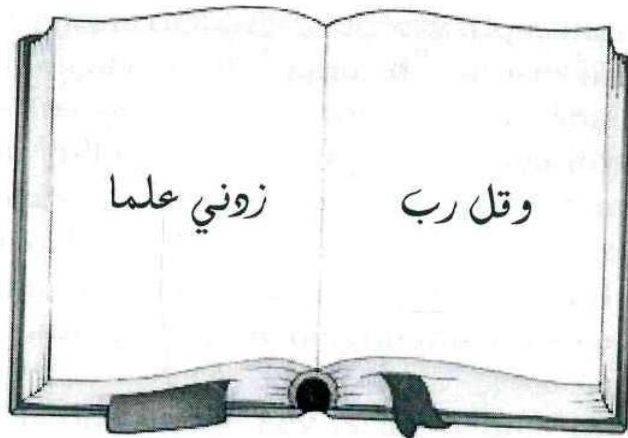


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## THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF *TAFSIR*

By

**Dr. Usman Sani Abbas**

Department of Islamic Studies and Shari'ah  
Centre for Qur'anic Studies, Bayero University, Kano  
[usmansaniabbas@gmail.com](mailto:usmansaniabbas@gmail.com); 07030162376

### Abstract

*This paper discusses tafsir during the revelation period. It, spells out tafsir during the time of the Prophet (SAW), the role of the Prophet (SAW) as the universal Messenger, tafsir during the time of Sahabah, schools of tafsir during the time of the Sahabah, the Sahabah's method of tafsir and the peculiarities of tafsir in their period. The paper also examines tafsir during the time of the tabi'un, the method of tafsir during the time of the tabi'un and. It also discusses tafsir during the compilation period which revolves around the dependent compilation and the independent compilation in the context of narration.*

### The Meaning of *Tafsir*

Literally, *tafsir* means *al-īdāh* and *al-tabyīn* that is elucidation and explanation<sup>(1)</sup> as Allah says:

﴿وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا﴾ الفرقان: 33

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

Technically, *tafsir* could be defined as the science through which the Qur'ān is understood. According to Badr al-Dīn Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah al-Zarkashī (745-794 AH), *tafsir* is a branch of knowledge through which the book of Allah, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) 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<sup>(3)</sup> Al-Qādī (2002) defines *tafsir*



as the science by which the Qur'ān is understood, its meanings explained and its rulings derived.<sup>(4)</sup>

### **Tafsīr During the Time of the Prophet (SAW)**

The Prophet (saw) interpreted the Qur'ān through his sayings, practices and silent approvals. This shows that the basic role of the Prophet (saw) is to explain the Qur'ān.<sup>(5)</sup> For this, the *sahābah* referred to the Prophet (SAW) for clarification pertaining to the interpretation of some verses.<sup>(6)</sup> Allah says in verse 44 of *Sūrah al-Nahl*:

﴿ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴾ النحل: ٤٤

...And we have sent down unto you the Reminder (the Qur'ān) that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them and that they may give thought.

### **Interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān**

It is part of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān that one part of it interprets the other. Thus, the Qur'ān itself serves as the prime source of *tafsīr*. When various related verses are compared, the generalized (*mujmal*) Qur'ānic statement is elucidated in the light of the specific (*mubayyan*) one. For instance, Allah says: "Permitted to you is the beast of the flocks, except that which is now recited to you" (Qur'ān 5:1). The purpose of this statement becomes very clear in the light of another verse of the same chapter: "Forbidden to you are carrion, blood and the flesh of swine..." (Qur'ān 2:173). Also in *Sūrah al-Tāriq* Allah says: "By the heaven and the Night comer". In the same *Sūrah* verse 3, Allah tells us the meaning of the "Night-comer" where He says: "And what will make you know what the Night comer is? (It is) the star of piercing brightness". In *Sūrah al-Fātihah*, Allah interprets the straight path (*al-sirāt al-mustaqīm*) by the next two verses within the same *Sūrah* thus "the path of those on whom you have bestowed Your Grace. Not the path of those who earn Your anger nor of those who go astray".<sup>(7)</sup>

### **Interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Sunnah**

Allah sent the Prophet to the whole world and ordered people to obey and follow him. Allah revealed that the only method of knowing how to worship Him is to follow His Messenger. It is worth mentioning that Allah sent Prophet Muhammad (saw) to all people of all times with no distinction between races.



The Prophet was also sent as a mercy to all creatures. Therefore, whoever believes in the Prophet and follows him accepts the mercy of Allah and will be rewarded with the paradise. On the contrary, whoever disbelieves in the Prophet and refuses to follow him rejects the mercy of Allah and deserves severe punishment of the Hell fire. As stated by 'Abdulmajīd al-Zindānī:

*Prophet Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah to the beduins in the desert just as he is the Messenger of Allah to the present day scientist in his modern laboratory. He is the Messenger of Allah to all people of all time. Before Prophet Muhammad, each Messenger was sent exclusively to his own people, but Allah sent Prophet Muhammad as a Messenger to the whole universe.<sup>(8)</sup>*

The basic responsibility of the Prophet (saw) was to explain the Qur'ān. It is obvious that the Arabs of Makkah who were directly addressed by the Prophet did not need any translation of the Qur'ānic text. It was revealed in their own mother tongue. Despite the fact that they were mostly illiterate, they had a command of their language and literature. Their beautiful poetry, their eloquent speeches and their impressive dialogues are the basic sources of richness in the Arabic literature. Their understanding of the textual meaning is beyond any doubt. It is, therefore, obvious that the explanation entrusted to the Prophet was something more than the literal meaning of the Qur'ān. It was an explanation of what Allah intended including all the implications involved and the details needed.<sup>(9)</sup> These details were also received by the Prophet through the revelation. Allah says:

﴿ ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ ۗ ﴾  القِيَامَةِ: ١٩

Then, it is on Us to explain it<sup>(10)</sup>

*This verse is self-explanatory on the subject. Allah assured the Prophet (saw) that He shall explain the Book to him. So whatever explanation the Prophet gives of the Qur'ān is based on the explanation of Allah. The Prophet (saw) explained some verses. For example, he interpreted that the words "not of those who earn your anger" ( in Sūrah al-Fātihah) as referring to the Jews, and the words "nor of those who are astray" (in the same Sūrah) as referring to the Christians.<sup>(11)</sup>*



Moreover, when the Prophet (saw) was asked about some verses, the answers he gave became authoritative clarifications of those verses. For instance, when verse 82 of *Sūrah al-An'ām* was revealed, the *sahābah* found it difficult to grasp the import of *Zulm* (wrong doing) and they asked the Prophet as to who among them did not commit *Zulm* (wrong) against himself. The Prophet made it very clear to them that it meant *shirk* which has been characterized elsewhere in the Qur'ān (31:3) as *zulm*. There were some occasions when the *sahābah* consulted the Prophet and his silence or corrections were themselves reported as a kind of *tafsīr*. A typical instance is that when verse 187 of *Sūrah al-Baqarah* was revealed "And eat and drink, until the white thread shows clearly to you from the black thread," a companion 'Adī ibn Hātim took two ropes, one white and the other black, and looked at them, but failed to distinguish one from the other until it was nearly broad day light. Then, he went to the Prophet and told him about what had happened. The Prophet (saw) explained that what was meant by it was appearance of the real dawn (*al-fajr al-haqīqī*) out of the night.<sup>(12)</sup>

### **Interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Sayings of the Sahābah**

When the Prophet (saw) died, the *sahābah* fundamental sources of guidance were halted. They were left to their own understanding and knowledge for the solution of every new problems so that they felt the need for the explanation of more and more verses. Some *sahābah* feared to explain anything in the Qur'ān for they considered that to be the privilege of the Prophet alone. On the other hand, there were some *sahābah* who interpreted the Qur'ān even in the presence of the senior *sahābah*. Umar ibn al-Khattāb gave recognition to 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās over the other *sahābah*. They complained to 'Umar about this. 'Umar therefore, called ibn 'Abbās and asked the *sahābah* about the interpretation of *Sūrah al-Nasr*: "when comes the help of Allah and victory." The *sahābah* remained silent. Then 'Umar requested ibn 'Abbās to interpret it and he stated that it referred to the time of the death of the Prophet. In fact, 'Umar endorsed that interpretation and thereby justified his preference for ibn 'Abbās.<sup>(13)</sup>

Among the *sahābah* who interpreted the Qur'ān were the first four caliphs: Abū Bakr al-Siddiq (573-634), 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb (583-644), 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (573-656) and 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (b.602). However, the *riwāyāt* from the first three were very few. The four *sahābah*, however, took the first place in the list



of *mufassirūn*. They witnessed the revelation and knew much about its causes. They had very retentive memory, they were very intelligent and, above all, were the best people after the Prophet (saw).<sup>(14)</sup>

In addition to the four caliphs, the recognized scholars of *tafsīr* during the early decades of Islām were : 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/653) Ubayy ibn Ka'b (d. 20/640), Zaīd ibn Thābit (d. 45/665), Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 44/664) and 'Abdullah ibn Zubaīr (d. 73/692).<sup>(15)</sup> Caliph 'Alī was very proud of ibn 'Abbās and praised him thus: "It is as if he were looking at the unseen through a thin veil". There was also 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (d. 73 A.H/692) who said: 'Ibn 'Abbās is the most knowledgeable person of the community of Muhammad about what was revealed to him (the Prophet (SAW)). However, ibn 'Abbās became what he was as a result of the *du'āh* of the Prophet to him "may Allah give him a sound understanding of the religion and insight in to the interpretation of the Qur'ān" As for 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd, he was the second scholar in *tafsīr* after ibn 'Abbās. When asked about ibn Mas'ūd, 'Alī ibn Abi Tālib said: "he knows the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*, and his knowledge is the best". Ibn Mas'ūd said of himself: "I swear with the One whom there is no deity worthy to be worshipped but Him, there is no chapter revealed in the book of Allah except I know where it was revealed, and there is no revealed verse in the book of Allah except I know on what it was revealed; and if I know somebody who is more knowledgeable than me in the book of Allah I will go and meet him."<sup>(16)</sup>

However, there were some *sahābah* who related traditions relevant to issues on *tafsīr*, such as 'Ā'ishah (d. 58/675), Abu Hurairah (d. 57/671), 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr ibn al-Ās (d. 63/683), 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb (d. 73/692), Jābir ibn 'Abdullah al-Ansārī (d. 74/693) and Anas ibn Mālik (d. 91/709)<sup>(17)</sup>

The interpretation of the *sahābah* enjoyed great respect among Muslim scholars. Ibn Kathīr says:

"If we do not find the commentary of the Qur'ān in the Qur'ān, or in the traditions we should turn to the sayings of the *sahābah* who knew about it best. This is because of the evidence they had seen and the conditions they had known, and because of the true



nature of understanding, right knowledge and good deeds which they possessed" (18)

The *sahābah* did not comment on the Qur'ān as a whole, but commented on some verses, and generally they did not commit their commentary into writing. Moreover, during the era of the *sahābah*, *tafsīr* remained a branch of *hadīth*.

### **Schools of *Tafsīr* During The Time of The *Sahābah***

By the end of the first half of the first century of the *hijrah*, there emerged three main schools of *tafsīr*. The first was the Makkān school led by 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās and whose students were: Sa'īd ibn Jubāir (d.95 AH/713), Mujāhid ibn Jabr al-Makkī (d.140 AH/722); 'Ikrimah (d.105 AH/723) – the *maūlā* (domestic assistant) of 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās, Tāwūs ibn Kaīsān al-Yamānī (d.106 AH/724) and 'Atā' ibn Abī Rabāh (d.114 AH/732).<sup>(19)</sup>

The second school was that of 'Irāq which recognized 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd as its master. His students were 'Alqamah ibn Qaīs (d.102 AH/702), al-Aswad ibn Yazīd (d. 75 AH/694), Masrūq ibn al-Ajda (d.63 AH/682), Murrāh' al-Hamdānī (d. 76 AH/695), 'Āmir al-Sha'bī (d. 105 AH/723), Ibrāhīm al-Nakhā'ī (d.95 AH/713), al-Hasān al-Basrī (d. 121 AH/738) and Qatādah al-Sadūsī (d. 117 AH/735).<sup>(20)</sup>

The third school was that of Madīnah which as the first capital of the Islāmic caliphate, was full of *sahābah* and Muslim scholars. The most famous scholar was Ubayy ibn Ka'b. His students were Abū al-'Āliyah (d.90 AH/708), Muhammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazī (d.117/735) and Zaīd ibn Aslam (d. 130 AH/747) under whom his son 'Abdurrahmān ibn Zaīd and Mālik ibn Anas studied.<sup>(21)</sup>

These three schools of *tafsīr* were not in rivalry with one another, nor was there any fundamental difference in their outcome of *tafsīr*. However, the schools of Makkah and Madīnah were somewhat closer to each other in comparison with the school of 'Irāq, which was known as the school of *ahl al-ra'y*. (They were given this name because of their overdependence on reasoning, that is *ijtihād*).<sup>(22)</sup>

### **The *Sahābah's* Method of *Tafsīr* and the Peculiarities of *Tafsīr* in their Period**

After the death of the Prophet (saw) the *sahābah* considered four main sources to be the basis of *tafsīr*. These sources are: the Qur'ān, the *sunnah*, the use of



personal *ijtihad* and information derived from *ahl al-kitāb* (Jews and Christians).<sup>(23)</sup>

### **The Qur'ān as the First Source of the *Sahābah's Tafsīr***

Right from the time of the Prophet (saw) onwards, the Qur'ān served as the prime source of *tafsīr*. It is part of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān that one part of it interprets another.<sup>(24)</sup> Murata and Chittick submitted that:

Muslims regard the most reliable Qur'ānic commentary as being contained in the Qur'ān itself. In other words, the ways in which certain āyāt clarify other āyāt are regarded as being the most significant form of commentary.<sup>(25)</sup>

### **The Prophet (saw) as The Second Source of The *Sahābah's Tafsīr***

When the Prophet (saw) was asked about some verses of the Qur'ān, the answers he gave became authoritative explanations of those verses.<sup>(26)</sup> Murata and Chittick stated that:

A second form of Qur'ānic commentary is how the Prophet interpreted the Qur'ān. And his comments on the Qur'ān as well as everything he ever said or did are recorded in the *hadīth* collections.<sup>(27)</sup>

### ***Ijtihad* and Ability to Extract the Meanings of the Qur'ān as the Third Source of the *Sahābah's Tafsīr***

The *sahābah* of the Prophet (saw) resorted to the application of *ijtihad* in the process of *tafsīr* if only they were unable to grasp the interpretation of a particular verse either in the Qur'ān or in the *hadīth*.<sup>(28)</sup> Some *sahābah* feared to explain anything in the Qur'ān. This might have been because they considered that to be the privilege of the Prophet (saw) alone. It is related that Abū Bakr was once asked about the meaning of verse 85 of *Sūrah al-Nisā'* and he replied that "which sky could provide me with shade and which earth could bear me if I were to say something concerning the book of Allah which I do not know".<sup>(29)</sup> This however, did not deter him from commenting on verses the meaning of which he was sure, as is found in his commentary on *kalala* (when one dies leaving no direct hier).<sup>(30)</sup>

However, on the contrary, there were some *sahābah* who interpreted the Qur'ān even in the presence of the Prophet (saw) such as 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb,



'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās and 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd to mention a few.<sup>(31)</sup> In relation to this, Murata and Chittick stated that:

Knowledgeable companions and later generations of pious and learned Muslims expressed their view of the meaning of various āyāt. It was on this foundation that the science of Qur'ānic commentary was built.<sup>(32)</sup>

### **Information Derived from the Sources of *Ahl Al-Kitāb* as the Fourth Source of the *Sahābah's Tafsīr***

Some contents of Torah especially on issues relating to stories (*qisas*) of some previous prophets of Allah are in conformity with the Qur'ān; and some contents of the Gospel. The people of the book have narrated some details of stories of the Prophets and their communities which have not been mentioned in the Qur'ān. Such details are bound to be either true or false and so such reports could be accepted in as much as they do not contradict any established Islamic reports.

Some of the *sahābah* of the Prophet (saw) consulted the converts among Jews and Christians on information which were not discussed in detail in the Qur'ān. Among those *ahl al-kitāb* consulted by the *sahābah* were 'Abdullah ibn Salām and Ka'b al-Ahbār (d.32 AH).<sup>(33)</sup> But this source is less important compared to the other three sources discussed previously, i.e, the Qur'ān, the *sunnah* and the *ijtihād* of the *sahābah*.<sup>(34)</sup>

### ***Tafsīr* During the Time of the *Tābi'ūn***

The first stage in the historical development of *tafsīr* was *tafsīr* during the time of the Prophet (saw), then *tafsīr* during the time of the *sahābah* respectively. Therefore, *tafsīr* during the time of the *tābi'ūn* is regarded as the second stage in the development of *tafsīr*. The *tābi'ūn* were those Muslims who had not met the presence of the Prophet (saw) but met only the *sahābah* of the Prophet (saw) and studied under them.<sup>(35)</sup>

### **Interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Sayings of the *Tābi'ūn***

There are two views with regards to the position of the *tafsīr* of the *tābi'ūn*. Some scholars are of the view that it is also part of *tafsīr bi al-riwāyah*. These scholars established their view that most of the reports of the *tābi'ūn* were received from the *sahābah* of the Prophet. On the contrary, there are some scholars who maintain that the *tafsīr* of the *tābi'ūn* is only among the types of



*tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. This means that their *tafsīr* is valid only if it fulfils the general requirements laid down by the *mufasssīrūn*. However, if it fails to fulfil such requirements, it automatically becomes *tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm*. Hence, an invalid kind of *tafsīr*.<sup>(36)</sup>

### **Method of *Tafsīr* During the Time of the *Tābi'ūn***

The Prophet (saw) interpreted those verses of the Qur'ān which needed to be clarified to his *sahābah*. After the death of the Prophet, his *sahābah* needed to explain the verses to their disciples. This is because those *sahābah* who were well versed in *tafsīr*, interpreted some verses of the Qur'ān, especially those verses whose understanding needed further explanation.<sup>(37)</sup> After the period of the *sahābah*, the *tābi'ūn* continued to teach in as much the same way as they had learned from their teachers (the *sahābah*).

In their *tafsīr*, the *tābi'ūn* relied very much on five sources.<sup>(38)</sup> These are:

- i. The interpretation of the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān. As stated earlier that one part of the Qur'ān interprets another.
- ii. From what they heard the *sahābah* reporting from the Prophet (saw).
- iii. The *sahābah's* interpretation of the Qur'ān. This is because they were and still are the best people after the Prophet (saw), for they stayed with the Prophet, studied under him and witnessed the revelation of the Qur'ān.
- iv. From what they (the *tābi'ūn*) derived from *ahl al-kitāb's* scriptures, which were in agreement with islamic teachings.
- v. From what they understood out of their *ijtihād* which was exercised in line with the teachings of the Qur'ān, the *sunnah* and the sayings of the *sahābah*.<sup>(39)</sup>

### ***Tafsīr* During the Compilation Period**

The discussion here concentrates on two aspects. These are: the dependent compilation (*al-tadwīn ghaīr al-mustaqīl*) and the independent compilation in the context of narration (*al-tadwīn al-mustaqīl fī hudūd al-ma'thūr*).

#### **The Dependent Compilation**

The compilation period began during the last part of the Umayyad period to the early part of the Abbasid period. Prior to this period, *tafsīr* was derived through narration (*riwāyah*). The *sahābah* narrated *tafsīr* from the Prophet (saw), which explained the meanings of verses or explained the historical context in which the verses were revealed. Likewise, the *tābi'ūn* narrated *tafsīr* from the *sahābah*



as they narrated it from among themselves. This, indeed, was the first process in the compilation of *tafsir*.<sup>(40)</sup>

After the period of the *sahābah* and *tābi'ūn*, *tafsir* passed into the second stage, and this was when the compilation of the *hadith* of the Prophet (saw) started. At this stage, chapters on *hadith* were arranged according to their subject matter, and the chapter on *tafsir* was included. Some of the scholars paid special attention to the narration of *tafsir* attributed to the Prophet (saw), the *sahābah* and the *tābi'ūn*. During this period, there was no specific collection on *tafsir* of the Qur'ān from the beginning to the end. The trend was that some 'ulamā', traveled to different places in order to collect *hadith*. In the same vein, they collected some *tafsir* connected to the Prophet (saw), the *sahābah* and the *tābi'ūn*. These forms of *tafsir* were placed in a separate chapter of the *hadith* books as pointed out earlier.<sup>(41)</sup>

Among those 'ulamā' who did this were: Yazīd ibn Hārūn al-Sulamī (d.117 AH/735), Shu'bah ibn al-Hajjāj (d.160 AH/776), Waki' ibn al-Jarrāh (d.197 AH/812) Sufyān ibn 'Uyainah (d.198 AH/813), Rauh ibn 'Ubādah al-Basrī (d.205 AH), 'Abdulrazzāq ibn Hamāny (d.211 AH), Adam ibn Abī Iyās (d.220 AH), and many others. All these scholars, were *muhaddithūn*, and they narrated from their predecessors (*salaf*) through their chain of narration (*isnād*).<sup>(42)</sup>

### **The Independent Compilation in the Context of Narration (*al-Tadwīn al-Mustaqil fī Hudūd al-Ma'thūr*)**

It was in the third stage of compilation that *tafsir* was separated from *hadith*. Thus, *tafsir* evolved into an independent Islāmic science. This means that *tafsir* was made of every verse of the Qur'ān, and it was arranged according to its present sequential order in the Qur'ān.

All the *tafsir* works of the scholars at this stage were reported with their chains of narration linked to the Prophet, the *sahābah*, the *tābi'ūn* and *tābi' al-tābi'ūn*. This shows that their *tafsir* were all narrative (*al-tafsir al-ma'thūr*) except the *tafsir* of Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī who brought different views of scholars and prioritized some over the others. Ibn Jarīr also included *I'rāb* in his *tafsir* when the need arose. However, the fact that at this stage *tafsir* became independent from *hadith*, does not mean that the previous two stages of the compilation of *tafsir* were abrogated. In fact, it only shows a kind of graduation in the compilation process of *tafsir*. Therefore, the scholars of *hadith* continued



narrating *hadīth* relating to *tafsīr* in a separate chapter within their *hadīth* books.<sup>(43)</sup>

### Conclusion

From the foregoing, one understands the historical development of *tafsīr*. The paper discusses the process through which *tafsīr* passed from the time of the Prophet (SAW), the time of the *Sahabah* to the period of the *tabi'un* and then to the period of *tabi'un tabi'un* and the later periods. In all the processes, there were some special features and methods which made *tafsīr* of one period distinct from another.

Moreover, the paper presents and reflects on the role of the Qur'ān, Sunnah and sayings of the *Sahabah* in the interpretation of the Qur'ān. As for the Isra'iliyyat, i.e. the information derived from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, it is only those which did not contravene the islamic teachings that had been accepted.

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