

## 12. The Principles of the Exegesis

**Synopsis:** The invalidity of depending upon conjecture and the views of commentators in the comprehension of the Qur'an; the sources of the exegesis; particularization of the Qur'anic ordinances through a single tradition; the error of those who deny it, and their views on the question.

*Al-tafsir* (the exegesis), is the clarification of God's purport in His Book, the Qur'an. It is therefore improper to rely in this clarification on conjectures and application of personal discretion. Nor is it proper to depend on a thing which is not established as being a proof derived from the intellect (*'aql*) or from revelation (*shar'*), for it is prohibited to follow conjecture and to ascribe a thing to God without His permission. God, the Exalted, says:

***Say, Has God permitted you, or do you invent a lie concerning God? (Qur'an 10:59).***

In another place God says:

***Do not follow that whereof you have no knowledge (Qur'an 17:36).***

There are other verses in the Qur'an, as well as the traditions, that forbid actions that are not based on knowledge. Moreover, the traditions that prohibit engaging in a conjectural exegesis are exhaustive and reported in the Sunni as well as Shi'ite sources.

Consequently, it is clear that it is not permissible to follow any exegete in his commentary, regardless of whether he is, or is not, of sound religion, for this would be a kind of reliance on conjecture, and that is of no avail in seeking the truth.

### Sources of the Exegesis

Undoubtedly, the commentator has to follow the apparent sense of the text as understood by an Arab well versed in the Arabic language. (We already demonstrated the evidentiary nature of the apparent meanings of the text.) Or one should follow what sound innate reason determines, because it is internal evidence just as the Prophet is external evidence. Or else, one should follow what has been established

by the infallible leaders—the Prophet and the Imams—since they are the authorities in matters of religion. They are also the ones about whom the Prophet has left his last will and testament, requiring the Muslims to adhere to them. Thus he declared, "I leave among you two things of high esteem: the Book of God and my family, my ahl al-bayt. As long as you adhere to them both, you will never go astray, ever."<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt about the certainty of their opinion if it is established through a reliable source of transmission that is not open to doubt, just as there is no doubt about the absence of its certainty if it is proven that it was transmitted through a weak tradition that does not meet the conditions for its admission as evidence. Is it possible to establish an authentic proof by means of evidence derived through conjecture? There is a dispute in this matter among the scholars.

The problem can be stated as follows:

The question rests on the dispute about the evidential nature of a reliable single tradition (*khabar al-wahid al-thiqa*), related from the infallible Imams, explaining the Qur'an. The point of the dispute is that the evidentiary nature that is admitted for a single tradition, or for any other conjectural proof, requires that actions should be based on [these traditions or conjectures] when the true state of affairs is unknown, just as they would be based on the true state of affairs if it were known with certainty. This corollary is not realized except when the underlying idea of communication is a religious-legal ordinance, or a question on which the lawgiver has constructed such an ordinance. This condition may not be available in a single tradition that is related on the authority of the infallible Imams in regard to the exegesis of the Qur'an.

The response to the problem can be formulated as follows:

This objection is without substantiation. We explained, in our discussion of the science of legal theory, that the meaning of the evidentiary admission of a documentation, in matters that function as indicators of the true state of affairs, is their advancement to the level of ascertainment by means of an injunction from the lawgiver. Accordingly, the considered method would be one of the several ways to certainty. But it is the way that is based on obedience to the injunction of the lawgiver, rather than on reasoning. Hence, all that can be derived from the reliable documentation among the transmitted sources can also be derived from this conjectural source. The traditions are authenticated when they are in conformity with it, just as they become authenticated by means of mental knowledge. In any case, it is not an opinion formed without certainty.

This is corroborated by the practice that is common among rational persons. The reason [for this corroboration] is that they treat the reliable method as they do mental knowledge, without differentiating between their effects. Thus, the hand, for example, among rational persons, is a symbol of ownership for the person to whom the hand belongs when he has something in his hand. It is on the basis of this that they assign to him the effect of ownership and inform about his being an owner of a thing, with no one

rejecting [the claim]. There is no evidence from the direction of the lawgiver that prohibits this continuous rational method.

Indeed, the crucial factor that is taken into consideration in a reliable tradition, and in other acceptable methods [of transmission], is that they should meet all the conditions of evidentiality. One of these is that a tradition should not be known to be false, for it makes no sense to give a false tradition the status of evidentiary proof. Accordingly, the traditions that are contrary to the consensus, or to the well-established sunna, or to the Qur'an, or to a sound rational conclusion, cannot qualify for admission as evidential documentation, even if they meet all the remaining conditions that are taken into consideration, in establishing sound evidence. In this regard, it makes no difference whether or not traditions explain a legal ordinance.

An underlying consideration in admitting a document as evidence is that the narrator, no matter how trustworthy, is not immune from reporting something different from the facts. As such, there is always, however minimal, a possibility of his having made an error, more so when the intermediaries are many in number. Therefore, one needs to cling to the criteria of evidentiary proof to eliminate this possibility, and to assume it to be almost nonexistent. As for the assumption that there is a discrepancy, and that the tradition does not accord with reality, it makes no sense to follow its nonconformity, because that which renders a thing absolute is its essence, and its evidentiary status is established in accordance with the necessary rational verdict.

It is therefore necessary that the criteria of evidentiary proof be restricted to traditions other than those whose falsehood is incontrovertible, and whose narrative departs from the real state of affairs. The same applies to the accepted methods, other than the traditions, that assist a researcher in discovering the truth of a matter. This discussion leads us to consider many other situations and to respond to a number of problems and objections that arise from the admission of a communication reported, in the form of a single narration, as proof.

## **Particularization of the Qur'anic Ordinances through a Single Narration**

If the evidentiary nature of a single narration is established by means of definitive proof, can one use it to particularize the general injunctions that have been stated in the Qur'an? The prevalent view is that this is permissible, but a group of Sunni scholars has differed with it. Some of them have rejected it in absolute terms. According to Isa b. 'Aban, if a general injunction of the Qur'an has already been particularized through an established proof, then it is permissible to particularize it by means of a single narration; otherwise, it is not. However, al-Karakhi maintains that if a general injunction of the Qur'an has been particularized by a proof outside it, then it is permissible to particularize it after that by means of documentation provided by a single narration; otherwise, not. On the other hand, al-Qadi Abu Bakr has maintained that a final decision should be withheld in the matter.<sup>2</sup>

We have followed the well-established opinion in this matter because the incontrovertible tradition, as we have assumed, necessitates that one would follow its terms, as long as there is no reason to reject them.

Nevertheless, we should consider the objections that some scholars put forward against relying on single narrations, although these objections are baseless. These objections, moreover, are prompted by their error in the following matters.

1. They maintain that the Book of God is the Speech of God the Almighty, which was revealed to His Prophet, and that this is an incontestable fact about which there is no room for doubt. A single narration, however, does not have the certainty of being in conformity with the reality or to be an authentic pronouncement of the infallible Prophet or the Imams, for there is a possibility, however small, of an error in the narrator's communication about it. In this situation, reason does not permit abandoning the incontestable proof for evidence in which there is a possibility of error. The response [to this is as follows]. Although the origin of the Book of God is incontrovertible, it is not certain that its actual injunction is in accordance with its general sense. This is because it is necessary to act in accordance with the general sense, since it constitutes the apparent sense of the text. To be sure, the practice of rational persons has been to accept the apparent sense of the speech as evidence, and the lawgiver has not prohibited this practice. It is evident that the practice of the rational persons regarding the evidentiary nature of the apparent sense applies only when there is no context to suggest the contrary, regardless of whether that context is attached or unattached. When the context points to something other than the apparent sense, then one ought to discard the latter and act in accordance with the contextual sense. Consequently, it is inevitable that one should particularize the general injunctions of the Qur'an by means of a single narration, following the establishment of the absolute proof of its evidentiary status. In other words, the subject of the single narration, related on the authority of the infallible Imams, should be followed [as coming from the lawgiver]. The argument can be rephrased by saying that the chain of transmission of the Qur'an, even when the Qur'an itself is incontestable, is based on a conjectural proof. According to rational judgment, there is no problem in disregarding one conjectural proof in favor of another whose evidentiary status has been established by means of an incontrovertible proof.

2. They [some scholars] maintain that sound traditions from the infallible Imams affirm that traditions should be correlated with the Qur'an, and they maintain that those of them which disagree with the Qur'an should be discarded and rejected outright, for they cannot be something the Imams had said. Moreover, a tradition dealing with a particular matter reported on the authority of the Imams, which runs contrary to the general sense of the Qur'an because of the evidence it includes, should be rejected and its validity be denied.

The response [to this is as follows]. The conventional factual evidence for the explanation of the purport of the Qur'an is not ordinarily regarded as something that is in contradiction to its intent. Moreover, a specific verification in a single narration is evidence of the elaboration of the intended meaning of the

Qur'anic statement that expresses the intent in general terms. However, the inconsistency between the two forms of evidence comes into effect when one of them contradicts the other in such a way that, when both originate from the same speaker or from someone who acts on his behalf, then the people who follow an accepted practice will withhold judgment concerning the intent of these statements. Thus, in this sense a specific single narration does not contradict the general sense of the Qur'an; rather, it functions as an expounder of its implications.

This is further supported by our knowledge of numerous traditions, related on the authority of the Imams, that particularize the general meanings of the Qur'an and restrict its absolute injunctions. If particularization or restriction by a single narration were in contradiction of the Qur'an, then the Imams would not have spoken correctly when they said, "That which contradicts our Lord's statement would not have been said by us. It is either vain or erroneous." In the light of this statement it is evident that particularizing or restricting a general sense does not involve a contradiction of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, the Imams established that if one of two contradictory traditions were in harmony with the Qur'an, that would weigh in favor of it against the other. In other words, the one contradicting it—that is, the one that does not agree with the general sense of the Qur'an—would have been evidence in itself had it not been contradicted by the other tradition. Therefore, it is evident that such a tradition, if its disagreement with the Qur'an were so great that it would be impossible to attain harmony between the two, then it would no longer be proof in itself, nor would there be any point in countering it with the other tradition and establishing the latter's preponderance. Consequently, it is inevitable that the purport of its disagreement with the Qur'an is that it is possible to harmonize the two conventionally on the basis of particularizing or restricting the general meaning of the Qur'anic revelation.

To conclude, the tradition that functions as a particularizer for the Qur'an, or a restricter for it, is evidentiary in itself and hence must be abided by except if it is tested by a contradicting tradition.

1. They maintain that if it is permissible to particularize the Qur'an through a single narration, then it would also be permissible to abrogate it by the same means. Since abrogation by means of such a tradition is definitely not permissible, it follows that particularization by means of it is also not permissible. The evidence in support of this correlation is that abrogation, as discussed in chapter 10, is a form of particularization of the period [of applicability], and the evidence of the abrogator is provided by the clarification that the earlier ordinance was specifically limited to a period terminated by the appearance of the evidence provided by the abrogator. Abrogation therefore does not abolish the substance of an ordinance but simply sets it up formally and outwardly. Particularization with respect to persons is similar to time specification—in both cases it is particularization, and, accordingly, if the first is permissible, so is the second.

The response [to this is as follows]. That which distinguishes the two kinds of particularization is the incontestable consensus regarding the prohibition of admitting a single narration as evidence of abrogation. Had it not been for this consensus, then it would have been permissible to admit abrogation

by means of an evidentiary single narration, just as the particularization by it is permissible. We explained earlier that the Qur'an, although incontrovertible in the matter of its transmission, is not decisively clear in its meaning. There is no objection to resolving this latter aspect by means of a single narration whose evidentiary nature is established by means of absolute proof.

To be sure, the stated consensus is not a type that must be merely followed. Rather, it arises because certain things are of such a nature that if they occur externally, they would be transmitted without interruption. If it is transmitted by a few, to the exclusion of others, this, then, would be the proof of the falsehood of its narrator or his error. Consequently, it does not meet all the criteria that establish the evidentiary nature of a single tradition. It is for this reason that we maintain that the Qur'an does not become established by means of a single tradition. It must be transmitted successively. Among the things which cannot be doubted is the fact that an abrogation is not applicable to some Muslims, to the exclusion of others. Therefore, the reasons for reporting it are strong. Hence, if an abrogation became conclusively established, then information about it would have been transmitted without interruption. If, however, it were reported by a single narration, this would serve as proof of its falsehood and error. In this way, the distinction between particularization and abrogation becomes clear, and the correlation between the permissibility of the former and that of the latter ceases to hold true.

<sup>1</sup>. See Ibn 'Abd al-Muttaqi, *Kanz al-'Ummal*, including the section dealing with *I'tisam*, vol. 1, pp. 153–54, 332, where many sources of this tradition are listed

<sup>2</sup>. 'Ali b. 'Abi 'Ali al-Amidi, *al-Ikam fi Usul al-Ahkam*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat wa Matba'at Muhammad 'Ali Sabib, 1968), vol. 2, pp. 150–51.

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