

Uṣūl al-Tafsīr: The Sciences and Methodology of the Quran

Recep Doğan

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“The best among you is the one who learns the Qur’an and teaches it to others” is a well-known hadith on the superiority of the Qur’an mentioned in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and many other hadith collections. When one needs to teach something to others, it is crucial to have a well-grounded knowledge of the subject to be taught. More importantly, it is necessary to know the methodology of obtaining this knowledge. In the field of Qur’an studies, *‘ilm al-tafsīr* provides the infrastructure for the interpreter who is preparing himself/herself to interpret the Qur’an. In addition, *uṣūl al-tafsīr* provides him/her with an almost step-by-step guide in this regard.

This book *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* could only have been written by an author with profound experience in the history and exegesis of the Qur’an in particular, as well as with a great deal of familiarity and comprehensive understanding of the various Islamic disciplines. In his valuable work, Recep Doğan, a lecturer of Islamic sciences and civilizations at Australia’s Charles Stuart University, attempts to fill a gap in the literature of the methodology of Qur’anic exegesis. In doing so, he provides detailed accounts on the history of *uṣūl al-tafsīr* and combines both classical and modern Qur’anic exegetical approaches.

In addition to the forward by Ismail Albayrak (pp. xiii-xv), the book consists of twelve chapters, a glossary, and a bibliography. The chapters deal with various topics, such as the history and development of Qur’anic exegesis, the revelation (*waḥy*), the transmission of the Qur’anic revelation, the *i’jāz* of the Qur’an, the history of interpretation and interpreters, occasions of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); clear and ambiguous verses (*muḥkam* and *mutashābih*), the notion of abrogation (*naskh*), Qur’anic readings and the notion of the seven letters, Qur’anic stories, esoteric interpretation, textual analysis, and translation of the Qur’an. The work also contains detailed information on the history of the methodology of exegesis, such as the Makkan and Madinian parts of the Qur’an.

The author contends that the literature in the field of *uṣūl al-tafsīr* is limited in both number and approaches (p. xiv). He also criticizes the approach of some orientalists in this field, which is, according to him, neither satisfying nor flawless. However, the book does not include any evidence to support this claim. Nevertheless, Doğan does state that those who want to interpret the

Qur'an must have an essential knowledge of many subjects, among them Arabic philology, hadith, *fiqh*, and theology.

Many orientalist and western scholars have studied the Qur'an, notwithstanding their employment of different approaches. The author mentions Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) and Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) in particular, along with some other modern western scholars. The picture would have become richer if the works of Abraham Geiger (1810-74) and Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-93) had been included and discussed in this context, as their works have been praised by Muslims and non-Muslim scholars alike.

The book's logical arrangement makes it easy to read and comprehend for those who are unfamiliar with this genre of Islamic studies. Doğan remarkably demonstrates the different meanings of the revelation so as to show that it is not limited to divine messages to the prophets, but could also include natural instincts, inspiration, signals and signs, and divine inspiration to the angels. After that, he moves on to the Qur'an as transmitted in both oral and written forms, and places a strong emphasis on the history of the written text was made, especially the methodology of collecting the Qur'an after the Prophet's death and of writing it down during the rule of Caliph Uthman.

In the introductory chapter, Doğan deals with the history of '*ulūm al-Qur'ān*' and defines the different terminology related to it, such as *fahm al-Qur'ān* (understanding), '*ilm al-Qur'ān*' (science), and *fiqh al-Qur'ān* (jurisprudence). As a field of scholarship, *uṣūl al-tafsīr* is one of the disciplines established in the third/ninth century. Prior to that, the study of the Qur'an used to be included under the science of hadith and recognized as the book of exegesis (*kitāb al-tafsīr*). The two sciences were later separated and established their own methodology. The book addresses the development of this area not only during the first centuries of Islam, but also gives examples of some modern works in a way that enables the readers to establish the connection between the two sciences. The list of resources, however, is not comprehensive because it focuses mainly on the discipline's major traditional and contemporary works.

Building on the previous notion, Doğan tackles the question of why *uṣūl al-tafsīr* developed so late by giving different reasons for this phenomenon. For example, he states that there was no need for it during the Prophet's lifetime, for he and some of his Companions were the only interpreters. Another reason pertaining to the late development of '*ulūm al-Qur'ān*' is that for a long time *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* were used interchangeably. Doğan then provides definitions for many different terminologies in the field of Qur'anic exegesis, such as *ta'wīl*, *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, '*ulūm al-tafsīr*', and the translation of the Qur'an.

Although, the translatability of the Qur'an was – and remains – a subject of dispute among Muslim scholars, it is fair to say that both literal translations and translations of its meaning form an important discipline, especially for Muslims today. For this reason, the author makes a clear distinction between the translation of the Qur'an and *tafsīr* methodologies.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is a miracle (*mu'jizah*) in its entirety, an assertion designed to challenge those who claimed that it is forged. Despite the fact that the topic of *i'jāz* is often mentioned briefly in other modern works on methodology, Doğan gives an ample explanation of this topic and its related subjects.

In three different chapters, Doğan covers three related subjects. In chapter 5, he starts with the history of interpretation and interpreters of the Qur'an in general, while in chapter 11 he deals with esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an. Finally in chapter 12, he focuses on textual analysis and translation. The three chapters list various scholars and their works on Qur'anic interpretation. In addition, the book makes reference in many places to Sufi interpretations, such as Muhiy al-Din ibn Arabi's exciting ideas on the Qur'an's revelation – he regards it as a development from the rank of absorption toward the rank of elaboration, where Divine Being manifests Himself through His speech (p. 33).

The book could serve as an excellent reference for those students being introduced to the Qur'an or to Muslims who want to deepen their understanding of their identity in the light of the Qur'an. The author's wealth of examples enables the reader to build a meaningful bridge between the past and the present. Given the richness of subjects covered, a subject index would have been very helpful.

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