

Ijtihad in Quranic Exegesis

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Abstract

The ijthadi method of Quranic exegesis is one of the popular and proper methods of interpretation of religious texts. It is superior to the methods of subjective opinion (*tafsīr bi al-ra'y*) and narrative exegesis, and possesses many positive features and applications. These features, which are results of the evolution and comprehensiveness of ijthadi exegesis as well as the multidisciplinary approach, have led to favourable reception of this method among Muslim exegetes. With a focus on the exegesis by Shaykh Ṭūsī, founder of the ijthadi approach, exegetes have developed necessary conditions for using the method. These include jurisprudential, ethical, academic, and, most importantly in this approach, rational conditions. Muslim exegetes have provided valid reasons for ijthadi tafsir including Quranic, narrative, and conventional rationales as well as the argument for the necessity of ijthadi tafsir and the fact that it was an early method utilised by exegetes. Each of these rationales differ in their manner of presentation. However, all exegetes are unanimous that ijthadi tafsir is permissible.

Keywords: Ijthadi tafsir, Quran, reason, permissibility of ijthadi tafsir

1. Introduction

With the gradual revelation of the Quran, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, undertook the task of interpreting its verses (Qur'an 16:44, 62:2). After a while, interpretation of Quranic verses became a matter of interest for Muslims, who became enthusiastic about comprehension of the Quran (Tabārī, 1992, vol. 1, p. 27). A variety of viewpoints and interpretations emerged among Companions of the Prophet of Islam, who were at the forefront of these endeavours (Suyūṭī, 2001, vol. 2, p. 466; Bābā'ī, 2010, vol. 1, pp. 113-116). Though in the period of the Companions and Followers, tafsir was sourced in narratives and reason ('Alawī-Mihr, 2010, pp. 70-127), a comprehensive and independent method of exegesis developed over a period of three centuries from the revelation of the Quran. Narrative tafsir of the Quran emerged with Muhammad ibn Jarīr Ṭabarī's tafsir, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. (Chirāghī, 2001)

In its early form ijthadi tafsir finds its roots in the era of the Prophet of Islam and his Companions and Followers. Approximately two centuries later, in the 5th/11th century when scientific development seriously began in the Muslim world, it emerged in a new comprehensive form that was necessitated by prevailing circumstances. Other methods of tafsir, namely narrative and subjective opinion, shortly became marginalised, and ijthadi exegesis achieved growing acceptance among Muslim exegetes.

The present study seeks to examine the ijthadi approach to interpretation of the Quran. It takes a descriptive and analytic approach to answering the following questions.

What is ijthadi exegesis and what are its conditions?

What is the history of its emergence and development?

What rationales have Muslim exegetes and advocates of ijthadi tafsir provided for its permissibility?

2. Terminological Meaning of Ijthadi Tafsir

The term *ijtihād* means to use one's entire capacity to achieve an aim (ibn Manzūr, 1993, vol. 3, p. 133; Muṣṭafawī, 2009, vol. 2, p. 149). In exegesis, ijthad is to endeavour to comprehend and clarify the meanings and intentions of Quranic verses on the basis of valid evidence (Bābā'ī, 2010, vol. 2, p. 108). Reason is the most

important type of evidence in ijihad since it is the criterion for evaluation of all other evidence. For this reason, ijihadi exegesis is also labelled rational exegesis. (Ridā'ī Isfahānī, 2007, vol. 2, p. 154; Ma'rifat, 2007, vol. 2, p. 224)

For authorship of an ijihadi exegesis, the exegete must observe a specific set of conditions. Such an author must consider valid evidence for interpretation of verses in order to prevent mistakes. What are the conditions that guide exegetes toward correct interpretation?

3. Conditions for Ijihadi Exegesis

In a general sense, conditions for ijihadi exegesis can be categorized into three groups.

3.1 Religious and Ethical Conditions

Some Muslim thinkers believe that the exegete must adhere to a series of religious requirements, including correct belief, avoidance of impulsive behaviour (*hawā* and *hawas*), sincerity and good intentions, piety (*taqwā*), and virtuous conduct (Suhayl, 2008, p. 99). In addition, some mention the necessity of benedictory (*mawhibatī*) knowledge, which they define as knowledge given directly by God for the recipient to implement. In other words, they maintain that exegetes must act upon their knowledge. (Rāghib Isfahānī, 1984, p. 95)

3.2 Academic Conditions

Academic conditions have a fundamental role in ijihadi exegesis. Exegetes are able to author exegeses only if they are well versed in the specialised sciences of Islamic hermeneutics, including but not limited to Arabic areas of study such as philology (*lughat*), grammar (*nāḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), and rhetoric; Quranic areas of study such as circumstances of revelation, and the concepts of abrogating (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*), ambiguous (*mujmal*) and clarifying (*mubayyan*), absolute (*muṭlaq*) and conditional (*muqayyad*), general (*ūm*) and specific (*khāṣ*), etc.; Islamic jurisprudence; and the words and deeds of Muḥammad and his Companions. (Ibid; Suhayl, 2008, p. 99)

3.3 Rational Conditions

Naturally, exegetes can only successfully utilise specialised knowledge to carry out ijihadi exegesis if they are capable of ijihad. In other words, the exegete must draw on reason to examine various pieces of evidence in order to interpret Quranic verses. Three principles must be observed for this. First is consideration of all rational and narrative evidence relevant to the verse. Second is use of only definitive rational arguments as rational evidence to preclude use of fallacies in exegesis. Third is refraining from imposing false opinions upon the Quran. (Ridā'ī Isfahānī, 2007, vol. 2, p. 170; Ma'rifat, 2007, vol. 2, p. 225; Kamālī Dizfūlī, 1976, p. 270)

Ijihadi exegesis is at a point between two extremes, i.e. subjective opinion and narrative exegesis. Therefore, it is considered the most complete and comprehensive method of Quranic interpretation ('Amīd Zanjānī, 2001, p. 331). It is more comprehensive than narrative exegesis, which is only based on Islamic narratives for exegesis, and less prone to subjective opinion, wherein the exegete only utilises personal beliefs and reasoning for interpretation without referring to other types of evidence such as Islamic narratives and other related Quranic verses.

When were the capabilities and applications of ijihadi exegesis as well as its advantages over exegesis based on narrative and subjective opinion discovered?

4. Emergence of Ijihadi Tafsir

Many scholars maintain that ijihadi exegesis goes back to the time of Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, and his Companions and Followers (Ma'rifat, 2007, vol. 2, p. 224; 'Amīd Zanjānī, 2001, p. 331; Ridā'ī Isfahānī, 2007, vol. 2, p. 144). However, there is no doubt that ijihadi exegesis flourished in the 5th/11th century, contemporaneously with the authorship of *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'añ* by Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan Ṭūsī or Shaykh Ṭūsī (d. 460/1068), a prominent Shia scholar and jurisprudent (Ṭūsī, 1982, vol. 1, p. 1). At its inception, ijihadi exegesis was thematic, and exegetes only implemented exegetical subtypes to the extent of their skill and knowledge such as in interpretation of jurisprudential verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*) and other types of jurisprudential exegesis. However, in the 5th/11th century, cultural conditions in the Islamic world paved the way for the development of Islamic sciences such that it was named a golden period in the history of Islam. Naturally, the sciences of tafsir evolved as well (Makkī, 2005, pp. 308-309; Aqīqī Bakhshāyishī, 1994, pp. 12-13, 23) such that ijihadi exegesis, which was in its early stages until the 5th/11th century, became a comprehensive method. Proponents of this method utilised a wide range of exegetical techniques (e.g. intra-textual, narrative, and literary) and approaches (e.g. kalamic, philosophical, and social) alongside each other. (Mu'addab, 2008, p. 293)

The connection between the cultural development of the Islamic world and the transformation in the ijihadi

method of exegesis was that, with the change in the conditions of the age, thematically limited exegesis could no longer respond to the needs of Muslim thinkers. This need moved Shaykh Tūsī to author a comprehensive work of ijtihadi exegesis (Tūsī, 1982, vol. 1, p. 1; 'Alawī-Mihr, 2010, p. 222). Thus, the practical implementation of the originator of comprehensive ijtihadi exegesis, Shaykh Tūsī, was later used to define the previously discussed criteria and conditions for this type of exegesis. In his work, which treated all chapters of the Quran, this Shia scholar and jurisprudent considered differences in recitation, philology, conditions of revelation, and opinions of other exegetes and also made use of Arabic poems and other literature. He also utilised rational argumentation when examining exegetic topics. ('Alawī-Mihr, 2010, p. 220)

It must be noted that the evolution of ijtihadi exegesis as well as its advantages in comparison with subjective opinion and narrative exegesis eventually led to the popularity of the method among both Shia and Sunni scholars such that many exegetical works after *al-Tibyān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* implemented ijtihadi exegesis. The most important ijtihadi exegeses include *Majma' al-bayān li-ūlūm al-Qur'ān* by Faḍl ibn Ḥasan Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153), *al-Mīzān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1402/1981), *Mafātīh al-ghayb* by Fakhr Rāzī (d. 606/1210), and *Rūh al-Ma'āni fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Āzīm* by Maḥmūd Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), the first two being Shia exegeses and the latter two Sunni.

A question that arises here is what rationales and evidence did ijtihadi exegetes rely on when validating this method.

5. Permissibility of Ijtihadi Tafsir

The permissibility, or lack thereof, of ijtihadi exegesis has been a controversial issue among Muslim exegetes over the centuries. Most exegetes have provided reasons for the permissibility of this type of exegesis (Najjārāzādīgān, 2010, vol. 1, p. 18). These reasons can be divided into five categories.

5.1 Quranic Rationales

Quranic rationales are derived from the content of Quranic verses. These verses differ in terms of content and method of argumentation and thus can be divided into the following categories.

5.1.1 Verses that Call to Contemplation and Reasoning

Tadabbur (contemplation) of Quranic verses includes tafsir since in its absolute sense, it is defined as thought and obtainment of the truth (Zabīdī, 1993, vol. 6, p. 389). This sense is in line with tafsir as contemplation of the Quran for understanding of its meaning and truths. (Bābā'ī, 2010, vol. 2, p. 121)

This type of verse calls people to contemplate the Quran in various ways. For example, verse 29 of chapter Ṣād encourages thus: [It is] a blessed Book that We have sent down to you, so that they may contemplate its signs, and that those who possess intellect may take admonition. In verse 24 of chapter Muḥammad, the Quran strongly rebukes those who are remiss in understanding of Quranic verses: Do they not contemplate the Quran, or are there locks on the hearts?

These verses express that the Quran can be understood, and thus interpreted, through contemplation and thought. Otherwise, God the Wise would not instruct contemplation.

5.1.2 Verses of Challenge

In some verses the Quran openly challenges its opponents (Qur'ān 2:23, 10:38, 17:88). It calls them to either admit the truth of the Quran or produce verses similar to this holy book. It is clear that such a challenge can only be valid if the Quranic verses are comprehensible. A challenge for people to reproduce something that they cannot comprehend is not credible. ('Amīd Zanjānī, 2001, p. 336)

5.1.3 Verses that Reveal Attributes of the Quran

Some Quranic verses express various attributes of the Quran, naming it a book of guidance, a book of healing, a source for resolution of hostility (Qur'ān 41:44, 10:57, 4:59), etc. How could the Quran address the needs of humans in these areas if it were incomprehensible and tafsir was not possible?

The verse that classifies Quranic verses into *muhkam* and *mutashābih* (Qur'ān 3:7) suggests that at least some of the verses, i.e. the *muhkam* verses, are comprehensible and interpretable.

5.2 Narrative Rationales

Many narratives indicate that ijtihadi tafsir is permissible. These narratives involve a variety of topics including the following.

5.2.1 Narratives Recognising the Authoritativeness of Reason

As previously indicated, reason is the fundamental element of ijtihami tafsir, albeit reason of the kind that can issue judgements on the basis of a series of rational arguments. In line with the Quran, Islamic narratives emphasise the importance of employing rationality, naming it ‘the inner authority’ (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 1, p. 16). Since reason is the inner authority, whenever it comprehends something and issues a conclusive judgement, the judgement is binding and must be followed. Otherwise, its authoritativeness would be meaningless. (Ridā’ī Isfahānī, 2006, vol. 2, p. 156)

5.2.2 Narratives Requiring Comparison with the Quran

These narratives state that in cases of conflict between narratives, the Quran is the criterion for acceptance or rejection of the narratives (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 1, p. 69; ‘Ayyāshī, 2001, vol. 1, p. 8; Muttaqī Hindī, 1981, vol. 1, p. 197). In effect, the narratives that match the Quran may be accepted and all others are invalid. (‘Amīd Zanjānī, 2001, p. 340)

Clearly, the Quran cannot act as the criterion for Islamic narratives unless it is interpreted and understood. This clear order to weigh narratives against the Quran leaves no doubt that the Quran must be interpreted.

5.2.3 Narratives that Discuss the Manner in Which the Quran Must Be Utilised

Some Islamic narratives explain how the Quran must be used (Şadūq, 1958, vol. 1, p. 290). For example, Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, has stated that the Quran has various facets and that the best facet must be considered (Muttaqī Hindī, 1981, vol. 1, p. 551). Doubtless, using the Quran with respect to the best aspect requires understanding and tafsir of the Quran.

5.2.4 Narratives Describing the Quran

Some Islamic narratives discuss virtues and attributes of the Quran that are only justifiable if the Quran is comprehensible. Some of these narratives emphasise the necessity of consulting the Quran as a central element in comprehension of religion (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 2, p. 599). According to some Islamic narratives, the Quran is God’s *ḥujja* (authority/proof) upon the earth (Majlisī, 1983, vol. 23, p. 107). As it is God’s proof or authority, it must be understandable, otherwise it cannot retain its authority. (Shākir, 2003, p. 80)

Other narratives describe the virtues of the Quran and demonstrate its true status. Some of these characteristics are as follows: It is an Imam and leader, a brilliant light, the straight path, a source of goodness for all people in the past, present, and future, and a healer of hearts; additionally, it has a beautiful appearance and profound substance with endless wonders and lasting innovations. (Muttaqī Hindī, 1981, vol. 1, p. 515; ‘Ayyāshī, 2001, vol. 1, p. 3; Majlisī, 1983, vol. 2, p. 284; Bahrānī, 1995, vol. 2, p. 207; Irbilī, 1962, vol. 1, p. 572)

These characteristics demonstrate the necessity of utilising the Quran as the most comprehensive programme for human happiness.

5.2.5 Narratives that Permit Jurisprudential Exegesis

Some Islamic narratives permit experts to perform jurisprudential exegesis. For example, Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, said the following prayer on behalf of his Companion, Ibn ‘Abbās: ‘O Lord! Make him an expert in religion and give him knowledge of *ta’wīl* (esoteric exegesis)’ (Hākim Nīshābūrī, 1990, vol. 3, p. 615). Doubtless, in order to understand religion, the meaning and tafsir of the Quran and its commandments must be understood. If tafsir were limited to reporting narratives, the Prophet’s prayer on behalf of Ibn ‘Abbās would have been baseless.

5.3 The Rational Method

A fundamental among rational people for understanding the content of any book is to resolve ambiguities through special methods and thus clarify the meaning of the text and purpose of the author. For example, if the ambiguity of the text is due to a certain word, scholars endeavour to find out the meaning of the word by how it is utilised in other texts and also by the use of specialised dictionaries. This method is an element in ijtihad or scientific endeavour, and has long been a favoured and acceptable method. The Quran has not devised a new method for comprehension of its verses, but rather follows the rational method. If not, the Quran should have explicitly declared this in order to prevent application of this method. (Bābā’ī, 2010, vol. 2, p. 125)

5.4 Necessity of Ijtihadi Exegesis

In the view of Muslims, Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, was the final prophet of God, and prophethood ended with him. Therefore, prophethood must be replaced with something that can make up for this fundamental vacuum in religion. History has proven that the guidance of humans in every time period requires the presence of

a leader, a role that was filled by prophets. Therefore, Muhammad presented a miraculous book to the world that is able to lead people and act as a reference for solving worldly problems and attaining happiness in this world and the next (Khūī, 1974, p. 65; Zarqānī, 2004, vol. 2, p. 7). This book, the Quran, contains a comprehensive programme that manifests new aspects with the gradual progress of humankind. (Qur’ān 68:52; Ṣadūq, 1958, vol. 2, p. 87)

It is therefore important to understand the Quran. Having said this, it must be emphasised that comprehension of this holy book necessitates tafsir. In other words, the Quran can only be utilised properly if its correct tafsir is attainable. Considering the efficacy and popularity of ijtiḥadi tafsir compared to other methods of exegesis, it can be considered the best and most accurate exegetical method. The following are some reasons for the necessity of ijtiḥadi tafsir for comprehension of the Quran.

5.4.1 Unfamiliarity with Arabic and Quranic Words and Syntax

Since the Quran has been revealed in Arabic, a prerequisite for understanding it is knowledge of the Arabic language, specifically word and sentence structure and literary devices such as metaphors and similes. Though the Quran utilises words common among Arabs at the time it was revealed, in many cases, speakers of a language are not aware of all the meanings of words in their native tongue and therefore, it is necessary to perform research on the words in such texts (Rajabī, 2008, pp. 25-26). Quranic and historical investigation reveals that even at the time of revelation, some of the words in the Quran were unfamiliar for its early audience (Suyūtī, 1984, vol. 3, p. 7). In such cases, understanding of Quranic verses requires exegetic endeavour toward awareness of Arabic literature and comprehension of the words used in the verses.

5.4.2 Necessity of Knowledge about Religious Decrees

Some Muslim exegetes believe that ijtiḥadi exegesis is necessary. The Quran includes legal and juristic decrees, the learning of which is obligatory for Muslim scholars. The only way to learn religious decrees is ijtiḥad of Quranic verses and relevant Islamic narratives.

5.4.3 Long Interval from the Era of Revelation

Fourteen centuries have passed from the time when the Quran was revealed. For at least two reasons, this interval makes the use of ijtiḥadi tafsir necessary. First, there have been many changes since the era of revelation which may cause problems in understanding the meaning of words and sentences that were used at that time. Second, with the emergence of new needs in every period, new questions may arise that are not clearly answered in the Quran. Deducing the answers to these questions from the allusive statements of the Quran necessitates a special source of scientific endeavour. In effect, only through ijtiḥadi tafsir may we respond to these questions. (Rajabī, 2008, p. 28)

5.4.4 Characteristics of the Quran

The Quran has undertaken the happiness of human beings in both worlds (Qur’ān 16:30, 41) and thus possesses distinct attributes that reveal the necessity of ijtiḥadi tafsir. These characteristics are of three types. First, in its manner of expression, the Quran utilises the maximum capacity of words and sentences in order to form profound meaning. Thus, this book has provided all knowledge necessary for human happiness in a relatively small number of words and phrases. Therefore, comprehension of some verses requires further meticulousness and precision.

The second characteristic is that the Quran discusses truths about the immaterial world. These truths are presented in the form of words that have been created for understanding worldly affairs. Some such words include angel, heaven, and hell (Qur’ān 16:2, 2:82, 3:12). This has led to difficulty in comprehension of God's intentions, requiring special intellectual endeavour, in other words, ijtiḥadi tafsir.

The third characteristic of the Quran is its special style. The Quran does not discuss the entirety of a topic in one place. Instead, it may discuss an issue diffusely throughout the text. One example of this is the story of the children of Israel to which numerous verses have been dedicated (Qur’ān 2:40, 3:49, 5:12, 110, and others). Thus, the ultimate view of the Quran about each topic can only be known when all relevant verses are gathered in one place for exegesis in a collective manner. (Rajabī, 2008, p. 27)

5.4.5 Shortcoming of Narrative Exegesis

There is no doubt that narrative exegesis cannot free us of the need for ijtiḥadi tafsir since at the very least exegetic Islamic narratives are not extant for all Quranic verses. Furthermore, many of these narratives are not credible (Riḍātī Iṣfahānī, 2006, vol. 2, p. 157). Therefore, without ijtiḥadi exegesis, comprehension of many Quranic verses would not be possible. Such an outcome would be incompatible with the purpose of the Quran's

revelation, which is use of the Quran by the people for guidance. (Qur'ān 32:3, 38:29, 10:57.)

5.5 The Method of Early Exegetes

Examination of the sayings and methods of early Muslim commentators of the Quran, including the Prophet Muḥammad, his Companions and Followers, demonstrates that ijtiḥādī tafsīr has a long history. The Prophet of Islam continually emphasised rationalism in tafsīr of the Quran (Muttaqī Hindī, 1981, vol. 1, p. 551). Moreover, examination of the methods of the Companions and Followers shows that they also carried out ijtiḥādī tafsīr. Even though they paid great attention to exegetical narratives, they set contemplation and ijtiḥād as the basis for Quranic understanding. Whenever they encountered a verse without a relevant exegetical narrative, they utilised ijtiḥād to understand its purpose ('Amīd Zanjānī, 2000, p. 331; Kamālī Dizfūlī, 1976, p. 279; Rīdātī Iṣfahānī, 2006, vol. 2, p. 145; Ma'rīfat, 2006, vol. 2, p. 224). On this basis, the history of ijtiḥādī tafsīr may be considered to be as long as the entire Islamic period. Without a doubt, such a history is an important factor in permissibility of ijtiḥādī tafsīr.

6. Conclusion

This article shows that ijtiḥādī exegesis is a valid method of Quranic interpretation. This method dates back to the era of Quranic revelation when ijtiḥādī interpretation was performed in a limited, thematic manner. With the passage of time and evolution of Islamic sciences, the method developed into a comprehensive form of ijtiḥādī exegesis. The comprehensiveness of the method laid the foundations for its adoption and popularity among Muslim exegetes. Eventually, the superiority and efficacy of the ijtiḥādī method compared with other methods became evident. Accordingly, Muslim exegetes who sought to correctly apply the comprehensive method of ijtiḥādī exegesis extracted exegetical criteria from the work of Shaykh Tūsī, describing the requisite conditions for achieving correct ijtiḥādī exegesis and providing a variety of rationales for the permissibility of the method. It is important to note that according to Muslim exegetes, the majority of the rationales for permissibility were derived from the popular sources of Muslims, i.e. the Quran, Islamic narratives, and reason.

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