

Qur'anic Studies

Methodologies of the Qur'anic Exegesis, by Thameem Ushama. Kuala Lumpur: Noordeen, 1995. Pp.222. ISBN: 983 065 013 8.

The Qur'ān, as a guide for humanity, needs to be interpreted and explained. This job was performed by Prophet Muḥammad (SAS), and this tradition was continued by his able companions. Subsequently, there emerged several schools and scholars who contributed immensely towards the development of the Qur'anic exegesis. Thameem Ushama's main concern in the book under review is to provide a critical and meaningful introduction to the methodologies of the Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*): its types, principles, and characteristics. The *tafsīr*, according to the author, is the key to the treasures of knowledge which is sorely needed, particularly in this contemporary age. (p.2)

The author begins by providing a conceptual definition of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. *Tafsīr* refers to the knowledge and comprehensive understanding of the Book of Allah revealed to Muhammad (SAS) and an elucidation of its profound meaning, extraction of its laws, wisdom and maxims. *Ta'wīl*, however, refers to the interpretation or reclamation of meanings. (p. 5)

Thameem Ushama identifies three categories of *tafsīr*. Firstly, *tafsīr bi al-mā'thūr* which refers to either the commentary of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, the commentary of the Qur'ān by the *sunnah* of the Messenger (SAS), or the commentary of the Qur'ān based on what has been transmitted by the companions. Secondly, *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* or *tafsīr bi al-ma'qūl*, exegesis based on opinion, knowledge, or on independent legal judgement of the commentators. Thirdly, *tafsīr bi al-ishārah* or exegesis based on indications. He discusses each of these in detail and finally enumerates the conditions for correct exegesis, as well as the prerequisites for the exegete.

The attempt at setting the yardstick for ascertaining the validity of exegesis serves the purpose of differentiating and singling out those exegeses which are unacceptable. Thus, Thameem Ushama singles out, with sound arguments, such interpretations as *al-Batiniyyah*, *al-Sab'iyyah*, *Mu'tazilah*, *Shī'ah* and so on as unacceptable. These *tafāsīr* cannot be relied upon "for these are the utterances of deviationists" (p. 53). The chapter ought to have been appropriately labelled "Mischievous and Erroneous Interpretations of the Qur'ān" rather than "Peculiarities in Interpretation of the Qur'ān."

Chapter Three discusses the early schools of exegesis. According to the author, three *madāris* (schools) were established, during the early phase, to explain the Qur'ān. These were the Makkan school led by ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿAbbās, who is reputed to be the first exegete in the history of Islam. There were other schools like the Madinan school led by Ubay ibn Kaʿab and the Iraqi school led by ʿAbd Allah ibn Masʿūd. These early schools contributed greatly to the development of the Qur'anic exegesis. A natural corollary of this discussion is a brief survey of the *tafsīr* literature which is summarily captured in the fourth chapter. The author discusses 23 famous *mufasssīrīn* including Ibn Abbas, al-Ṭabari, al-Samarqandī, al-Zamakhsharī and others, and throws light on the significance of their works.

Chapter Five, however, deviates from the main discussion (i.e., *tafsīr*) and considers the possibility and feasibility of the translation of the Qur'ān. The author categorises the translation into two: *al-tarjumah al-harfīyyah* meaning a literal or word by word translation, and *al-tarjumah al-tafsīriyyah* or *al-ma'nawīyyah* which means explanatory or illustrative translation. Thameem Ushama examines the views of several jurists on the literal and thematic translation of the Qur'ān into various languages. He tries to be as exhaustive as possible by discussing translations in various languages including those of the orientalisists like Alexander Ross and G. M. Rodwell. Finally, the author discusses some of the important themes in the Qur'ān such as justice, supplication, people of the scripture, *da'wah*, jihad and the like. These themes, once more, are not related to the central concern of the book. The author is aware of this and yet he includes it since he considers these to be of immense benefit to students of higher learning institutions.

Thameem Ushama is very modest and makes no claims about the book being a pioneering work. But the book is a brief and concise introduction to the difficult field of exegesis and is written in plain, simple to understand English. It is, as the author states, written for the benefits of students of institutions of higher learning and they would certainly benefit from this work. The book may also be considered a handbook on *tafsīr* and should be helpful for those who would like to grapple with the problem of the interpretation of the Qur'ān.

W. Mohd. Azam M. Amin
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