Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis
Genesis and development

Hussein Abdul-Raof
Qur’anic exegesis has become the battleground of political Islam and theological conflict among various Muslim schools of thought. Using comparative and contrastive methodology, examples from the Qur’an are investigated in the light of various theological views to delineate the birth, development and growth of Qur’anic exegesis.

The political status quo, in the past and at present, has impinged upon Qur’anic exegesis more than on any other discipline in Islamic studies. This book illustrates the dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream Islam, showing how Qur’anic exegesis reflects the subtle dogmatic differences and political cleavages in Islamic thought. Chapters explore in depth the intrusive views of the compilers of early exegesis manuscripts, the scepticism among Western scholars about the authenticity of early Muslim works of exegesis and of prophetic tradition, and the role of exegesis as a tool to reaffirm the Qur’an as a canon. Broader themes encompassed include the interpretations of exegetical terms; use of the notion of free will and pre-determinism to justify the political misfortunes of Muslim leaders and the sufferings of their people; politicization of Ramadan; and the disparity between jihād and non-jihād.

Written to appeal to those with comparative exegetical interests as well as those focused on Islamic studies in general, this book will be an important reference for research students, scholars and students of Islamic studies, Theology, Religious studies and Middle Eastern studies.

Hussein Abdul-Raof is Senior Lecturer in Arabic and Qur’anic Studies at the University of Leeds. His research interests include Arabic linguistics, Qur’anic studies, Arabic stylistics, Arabic rhetoric and translation studies, and he has published widely on the Qur’an and Arabic rhetoric.
This series studies the Middle East through the twin foci of its diverse cultures and civilisations. Comprising original monographs as well as scholarly surveys, it covers topics in the fields of Middle Eastern literature, archaeology, law, history, philosophy, science, folklore, art, architecture and language. While there is a plurality of views, the series presents serious scholarship in a lucid and stimulating fashion.

Previously published by Curzon

1. **The Origins of Islamic Law**  
The Qur’an, the Muwatta’ and Madinan Amal  
*Yasin Dutton*

2. **A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo**  
The history of Cambridge University’s Genizah collection  
*Stefan Reif*

3. **The Formative Period of Twelver Shi’ism**  
Hadith as discourse between Qum and Baghdad  
*Andrew J. Newman*

4. **Qur’an Translation**  
Discourse, texture and exegesis  
*Hussein Abdul-Raof*

5. **Christians in Al-Andalus 711–1000**  
*Ann Rosemary Christys*

6. **Folklore and Folklife in the United Arab Emirates**  
*Sayyid Hamid Hurriez*

7. **The Formation of Hanbalism**  
Piety into power  
*Nimrod Hurvitz*

8. **Arabic Literature**  
An overview  
*Pierre Cachia*

9. **Structure and Meaning in Medieval Arabic and Persian Lyric Poetry**  
Orient pearls  
*Julie Scott Meisami*
10. Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily
   Arabic-speakers and the end of Islam
   Alexander Metcalfe

11. Modern Arab Historiography
   Historical discourse and the nation-state
   Youssef Choueiri

Published by Routledge

1. The Epistemology of Ibn Khaldun
   Zaid Ahmad

2. The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah
   Conflict or conciliation
   Abdul Hakim I Al-Matroudi

3. Arabic Rhetoric
   A pragmatic analysis
   Hussein Abdul-Raof

4. Arab Representations of the Occident
   East–West encounters in Arabic fiction
   Rasheed El-Enany

5. God and Humans in Islamic Thought
   Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sinā and al-Ghazālī
   Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth

6. Original Islam
   Malik and the madhhab of Madina
   Yasin Dutton

7. Al-Ghazali and the Qur’an
   One book, many meanings
   Martin Whittingham

8. Birth of The Prophet Muhammad
   Devotional piety in Sunni Islam
   Marion Holmes Katz

9. Space and Muslim Urban Life
   At the limits of the Labyrinth of Fez
   Simon O’Meara

10. Islam Science
    The intellectual career of Nizam al-Din al-Nizaburi
    Robert G. Morrison

11. Ibn ‘Arabî – Time and Cosmology
    Mohamed Haj Yousef

12. The Status of Women in Islamic Law and Society
    Annotated translation of al-Ṭāḥīr al-Ḥaddād’s Imra‘unā fi ‘l-shari‘a wa ’l-mujtama‘, with an introduction
    Ronak Husni and Daniel L. Newman

13. Islam and the Baha’i Faith
    A comparative study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abdul-Baha ‘Abbas
    Oliver Scharbrodt
14. Comte de Gobineau and Orientalism  
   Selected Eastern writings  
   Translated by Daniel O'Donoghue  
   Edited by Geoffrey Nash

15. Early Islamic Spain  
   The history of Ibn al-Qūṭīya  
   David James

16. German Orientalism  
   The study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945  
   Ursula Wokoeck

17. Mullā Šadrā and Metaphysics  
   Modulation of being  
   Sajjad H. Rizvi

18. Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis  
   Genesis and development  
   Hussein Abdul-Raof
Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis
Genesis and development

Hussein Abdul-Raof
Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgements xi
Arabic transliteration system xiii
Introduction xv

1 Preamble to Qur’anic exegesis 1

1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Examination of Tafsīr scholarship 1
1.3 Function of exegesis 12
1.4 Historical authenticity of sources 14
1.5 Scepticism about Ḥisnād and ascription 16
1.6 Recording and transmission of exegesis 24
1.7 Exegesis and historiography 26
1.8 Genres of exegesis 28
1.9 Lexicographical approaches in exegesis 30

2 Exegesis and Ḥadīth 33

2.1 Introduction 33
2.2 The prophetic Ḥadīth 33
2.3 The recording of Ḥadīth 36
2.4 Ḥadīth as a bridge to Qur’anic exegesis 38
2.5 Scepticism about Ḥadīth 41
2.6 The fabrication of Ḥadīth 42
2.7 Validity of Ḥadīth transmission 45
2.8 Forms of defects in Ḥadīth chain of authorities 48
2.9 Classification of Ḥadīth 49
2.10 Criteria of Ḥadīth authenticity 51
2.11 Genres of Ḥadīth 53
## Contents

3  The politics of exegesis  
   3.1 Introduction  55  
   3.2 Politicizing Qur’anic exegesis  55  
   3.3 Exegesis and theological cleavages  63  

4  Dichotomy between tafsīr and ta’wīl  84  
   4.1 Introduction  84  
   4.2 What is tafsīr?  84  
   4.3 What is ta’wīl?  102  

5  Evolution of exegesis  111  
   5.1 Introduction  111  
   5.2 Evolutionary phases of exegesis  111  

6  The formative schools of exegesis  147  
   6.1 Introduction  147  
   6.2 The Makkah school of exegesis  148  
   6.3 The Madīnah school of exegesis  151  
   6.4 The Kūfah school of exegesis  152  
   6.5 The Baṣrah school of exegesis  154  
   6.6 Exegetical techniques of the formative phase  157  
   6.7 Hadīth as an exegetical tool by the four schools  162  
   6.8 Evolution of sects and impact on the formative schools  163  
   6.9 Comparative analysis of the four schools  164  

7  Linguistic and stylistic tools of exegesis  169  
   7.1 Introduction  169  
   7.2 Prerequisites of the exegete  170  

8  Jurisprudential tools of exegesis  209  
   8.1 Introduction  209  
   8.2 Jurisprudential tools  209  

9  Concluding remarks  222  

Glossary  243  
Notes  250  
Bibliography  263  
Index  273
Qur’anic exegesis is a literary activity whose function is the elucidation of the clear and ambiguous aspects of the Scripture and its major principles. Schools of exegesis constitute a major discipline in Qur’anic studies referred to in Arabic as manāhij al-tafsīr, meaning ‘methodologies of exegesis’. Qur’anic exegesis has gone through a historical marathon journey that has lasted fourteen centuries, from the seventh to the end of the twentieth century. The present book delineates precisely the odyssey of the birth, development and growth of Qur’anic exegesis and its various schools. This book, however, is not merely a historiographical account of the development of exegesis but rather a methodologically academic investigation of the genesis and proliferation of the discipline and techniques of exegesis.

_Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis_ taps a rich vein of information in this valuable discipline of Islamic studies. This work presents a holistic survey of exegesis scholarship of classical and modern, mainstream and non-mainstream exegetes that has started since the first/seventh century and continued until our present time. _Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis_ also provides a theoretical insight into the early and modern Qur’anic exegesis activity and its related disciplines from both a Muslim perspective and a non-Muslim critical eye. This work illustrates the major characteristic features and exegetical techniques ad hoc to each school of exegesis together with the theological and/or political implications of a given exegetical point of view. The exegetical activity of mainstream Islam is represented by the Sunni (ahl al-Sunnah wal-jamā‘ah) approach to the Qur’ān, while the exegetical activity of the non-mainstream Islam is represented by Sunni and non-Sunni approaches to the Qur’ān. Thus, the non-mainstream approach to the exegesis of the Scripture of Islam is represented by the Shī‘ah, Iṣmā‘īli, Khawārij, Ibadī, Ash‘arī, Mu‘tazilah and Sufi. Therefore, although the Khawārij and Ibadī are within the non-mainstream Muslim faith, they neither represent the Shī‘i nor the Sunni views. Similarly, while the Ash‘arī, Mu‘tazilah and Sufi are classified within the non-mainstream Muslim faith, they still represent the general Sunni views. The dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream Islam is related to the binary opposition in exegesis between al-tafsīr bil-ma‘thūr, that is, traditional, and al-tafsīr bil-ra‘i, that is, rational/hypothetical.
This dichotomy reflects subtle dogmatic differences and political cleavages in Islamic thought. Since its infancy during the formative phase of the first/seventh century and up to our present time, Qur’anic exegesis has become the channel through which opposing, politically motivated theological views are expressed by different mainstream and non-mainstream students of the Qur’ân. Most importantly, mainstream and non-mainstream exegetical views have significantly influenced the political agenda of Muslim political parties and organizations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Out of Qur’anic exegesis, political Islam is born. The theologically oriented āyahs related to fighting and the development of divergent religious dogmas such as jihād and political allegiance to the ruler have, for instance, found their place at the heart of Qur’anic exegesis. Thus, the tafsīr tradition and written works have evolved in response to varying political, theological, historical and intellectual conditions. The growing polarity between traditional and rational schools of exegesis has significantly contributed to the genesis of the sectarian tafsīr. The exegesis of the Qur’ân has acquired a politico-religious function.

Anyone who employs a hypothetical opinion with regards to the meaning(s) of a given Qur’anic passage or word is dubbed as mu‘awwil (interpreter of the Qur’ân by personal reasoning) and his tafsīr is classified as wrong and counter to the Qur’ân and the standard practice of Mūhammad. The historical dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream Islam has been firmly established in the community due to the emergence of polarity in tafsīr tradition.
Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to the British Academy for their Larger Research Grant (LRG-45468) which enabled me to carry out the present work.

For their kind support and services, a great debt of gratitude goes to the staff of libraries which I visited during my research trips: the Prophet’s Mosque Library of Madinah, the Islamic University of Madinah, the Makkî Holy Mosque Library of Makkah, the Manuscript National Library (Cairo), the Faculty of Dâr al-‘Ulûm Library of Cairo University, Alexandria General Library, the Manuscript National Library of Istanbul, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), the Ministry of Awqāf and Religious Affairs (Oman), the Centre for Preservation and Restoration of Documents and Manuscripts (Oman), Tehran University Library, Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation (Tehran), and the British Library (London).

For their generous time and informative debate, my special thanks are also due to all the scholars who I met with for consultation during my research trips.
This page intentionally left blank
Throughout the present work, the Library of Congress transliteration system has been consistently employed whenever an Arabic expression is quoted. The following table explains the Arabic transliteration system for Arabic consonants and vowels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>أ</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>ط</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ء</td>
<td>'</td>
<td>ظ</td>
<td>z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>ع</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ت</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>غ</td>
<td>gh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ث</td>
<td>th</td>
<td>ق</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ج</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>ك</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ح</td>
<td>kh</td>
<td>ل</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>د</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>م</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ذ</td>
<td>dh</td>
<td>ن</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ر</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>ه</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ز</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>و</td>
<td>w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>س</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>ي</td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ش</td>
<td>sh</td>
<td>ء</td>
<td>an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ص</td>
<td>š</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>un</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ض</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Arabic short-long vowels and case endings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ا</td>
<td>ā</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>ū</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-un</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ى</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أ</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أ</td>
<td>u</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أ</td>
<td>i</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This page intentionally left blank
Introduction

Classical and modern Qur’anic exegesis works have not been taken on board by Muslim scholars as reliable sources for the explication of the Qur’anic text. Yet the role of exegesis has remained as a tool to reaffirm the Qur’ān as a canon. Tafsīr activity began its odyssey from the very early days of the inception of Islam in the first/seventh century. However, tafsīr scholarship flourished and gained momentum only during the end of the formative phase during the end of the first/seventh and early second/eighth century onwards.

The role of Muḥammad (d.570–632) in Qur’anic exegesis is announced by Q16:44, ‘anzalnā ilaika al-dhikra litubahiyina lil-nāsi mā nuzzila ilaihim [We have revealed to you the Qur’ān so that you can explain to people what was sent down for them].’ Through his words and deeds, Muḥammad has become the first and best commentator after the Qur’ān, as the Qur’ān is claimed to have explained itself via intertextual reference within it (al-qur’ānu yufassiru nafsahu). However, there is little known how much in fact Muḥammad, as an exegete, has explained to his companions. Nevertheless, Muḥammad’s sunnah (standard practice, that is, his words and actions) and the Scripture of Islam have soon established exegetical interrelationship. In terms of Qur’anic exegesis, this relationship between the Qur’ān and the sunnah has become a matter of interdependence. In the view of mainstream and non-mainstream Muslim scholars, it is the Qur’ān which is in need of the sunnah and not vice versa. Although the sunnah elucidates the Qur’ān, it is the Qur’ān, and not the sunnah, which can abrogate some Qur’anic āyahs. After the death of Muḥammad, the Muslim community has witnessed a period of intense theological and political ferment. The fitnah (civil war) in 41/662 was sparked off by the assassination of the third caliph ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān in 35/656. This is a major juncture in Islamic history, which together with the evolution of hypothetical opinion based on speculative thought has led to political and theological wrangling, the emergence of non-mainstream exegesis, ḥadith fabrication, and fabricated exegetical views falsely ascribed to iconic companions. Qur’anic exegesis has, therefore, become the vehicle through which dogmatic and political views are funneled. With the proliferation of personal reasoning exegesis, exegetical polemics have flourished, too.

The majority of Muslim exegetes have let their imagination run wild and had the opportunity of using their personal opinion to provide a specific sense to a
given Qur’anic expression. We often encounter numerous semantic details for a single lexical item, at times exceeding a dozen. One is left wondering which meaning is true and which one is purely hypothetical. This fact has led Rippin (1983, p. 320) to conclude that many generations of Muslim scholars studied the Qur’an with a freedom and a resultant unleashing of creativity which has been obscured by the unhistorical nature of the Arabic lexicons. An examination of Qur’anic exegetical sources reveals the story behind some of the more preposterous meanings recorded in those works. According to Rippin (1983, p. 316), ‘the exegetes had the opportunity of using their imaginations to provide an appropriate meaning.’ Rippin (1983, p. 320) concludes that the definition of certain Qur’anic words is arbitrary and results from a desire to solve intra-Qur’anic and Qur’ân versus dogma conflict.

The exegete is expected to be an encyclopaedic Qur’an scholar who is well-acquainted with Arabic linguistics, stylistics, and most importantly, the semantically oriented pragmatic functions of Arabic rhetoric. These three pre-requisites have contributed to the evolution of non-mainstream Qur’anic exegesis. For mainstream exegetes, the partisans of non-mainstream exegetes have gone far astray in their exegetical analysis. Unlike the mainstream school of exegesis which takes into account the exoteric (non-allegorical, literal) meaning of the Qur’ân, Shi‘i, Ismā‘ili and Ibāḍi tafsīrs come in contact with Mu‘tazīlī and Sufī tafsīrs where they all resort to the esoteric (allegorical, underlying) meaning of the multi-faceted meanings of Qur’anic expressions. Thus, each commentator espouses different theological and political views for some Qur’anic passages. This in fact depends on whether an exegete advocates or rejects independent reasoning.

The politico-religious impact has been felt right from the early years of Islam and the evolution of exegesis. In the view of Watt (1973, p. 216), politico-religious movements have developed during the first/seventh century. Different religious attitudes have political implications and both developed under the Umayyad rule (Watt 1973, p. 230). Thus, tafsīr activity has suffered during the new politico-religious milieu. Moreover, a large number of early and classical works of exegesis of the recording phase from the first quarter of the second/eighth century onwards underwent redactional processes and intrusive exegetical views of the compilers. Thus, the authenticity of early Muslim tafsīr works has raised scepticism among Western scholars. This scepticism is attributed to the fact that there are weak and fabricated isnād, intrusive poetic citations falsely ascribed to pre-Islamic poets and contradictory exegetical reports which are ascribed to iconic companions pervaded a large number of early tafsīr works.

Modern research in Qur’anic exegesis, both theoretical and practical, is a vital discipline for the understanding of the Scripture of Islam in the twenty-first century. Andrew Rippin (1982 and 1999) has highlighted the lack of research in exegesis and the need for it as well as for the need to study other early tafsīr manuscripts in order to appreciate the development of early tafsīr and the periodization of the exegetical enterprise based upon a sequential emergence of exegetical tools (Rippin 1999, p. xv). While Rippin (1999, p. xix) asserts that ‘the study of
tafsir is still very much in its infancy,’ Wild (1996, p. vii) observes that ‘the gen-
esis of the Qur’anic text continues to absorb the interest of scholars.’ Moreover,
Charles Adams (1976; see also Rippin 1982, p. 224) brings to our attention an
important research fact: ‘Qur’anic study is also badly neglected in another of its
aspects, that which deals with the traditional interpretation of the Scripture of the
Islamic community itself.’ We hope that the present work will plug the research
gap in this vital discipline of Qur’anic studies. Although the present work
provides a historical account of the various phases of Qur’anic exegesis, we are
not concerned with the history of redaction. Our aim remains a practical one
ultimately.

The present work comprises nine chapters:

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the evolution of exegesis as a discipline. It exam-
ines tafsir scholarship, classification of schools of exegesis, different approaches
to exegesis, categories of the views of companions and successors, and the pro-
gression stages of Qur’anic exegesis. It also accounts for the three major com-
panion exegetes and their impact on later exegetes. This chapter also provides a
discussion of the authenticity of tafsir sources and the many issues related to exe-
gesis based on the views of Western Qur’ān scholars such as Wansbrough,
Nöldeke, Schwally, Goldziher, Rippin, Abbot, Gätje, Gilliot, Versteegh,
Leemhuis, Watt, Birkeland, Speight, Rubin, Weil, Schacht, Juynboll, Schoeler
and many others. Their views are consulted with regards to controversial issues
in Qur’anic exegesis such as the early opposition to exegesis, the authenticity of
tradition (ḥadīth), forged traditions, ascription of exegesis works to different
authors, historical authenticity of sources and the ascription of exegetical views
to companion exegetes. This chapter also accounts for the difference between the
two major schools of exegesis: traditional (al-tafsir bil-ma’thūr) and hypothetical
opinion (al-tafsir bil-ra‘i) and the reasons why the latter is objectionable to main-
stream Muslim scholars. Thus, this chapter highlights the distinction between
mainstream and non-mainstream Qur’anic exegesis. In Chapter 1, details are also
provided about the functions of exegesis, the phase of recording exegesis, the
classification of the transmission of exegetical sources, the impact of the Judeo-
Christian milieu, reference to Judaic exegetes, the various traditional and modern
genres of Qur’anic exegesis, and the lexicographical and phraseological works on
Qur’anic exegesis.

Chapter 2 investigates the relationship between exegesis and ḥadīth. It pro-
vides an informative analysis of ḥadīth as a second major canonical source for
Qur’anic exegesis. This chapter investigates the functions of ḥadīth and why it
constitutes a bridge to the elucidation of the Qur’ān, the collection and recording
of ḥadīth, the problems of chain of authorities, the biographical analysis of ḥadīth
transmitters, the spread of spurious ḥadīths that are politically and dogmatically
driven, the factors attributed to the fabrication of ḥadīth, the factors that deter-
mine the validity of ḥadīth, informative details about the notions of al-jařḥ wa-
ta‘dīl (impugnment and validation) in ḥadīth literature, the grounds of
impugnment and validation, the classification of ḥadīth under one of several
major categories of trustworthiness, the various kinds of defects that affect the
Introduction

Chapter 3 accounts for the heterogeneous nature of Qur’anic exegesis. It provides interesting details about the floodgates of tendentious political semantics and the binary opposition between al-tafsīr bil-ra‘ī (rational exegesis which employs personal opinion) and al-tafsīr bil-ma‘thūr (traditional or mainstream exegesis). It also discusses how Qur’anic exegesis has been abused for political ends by old and modern Arab and Muslim rulers. This chapter also accounts for the fact that exegesis has become the channel through which opposing theological views are expressed and the polemical discourse employed by different exegetes with regards to various dogmas adopted by different mainstream and non-mainstream exegetes.

Chapter 4 investigates the binary distinction between tafsīr (exegesis) and ta’wil (interpretation) and how this distinction has led to the evolution of the second major school of exegesis, namely, hypothetical opinion exegesis. This chapter provides the definitions for these two notions, discusses them as separate disciplines, accounts for the major genres in exegesis, the companion views and Wansbrough’s exegetical typology. Chapter 2 also accounts for the classification of interpretation (ta’wil), the categories of interpretation, and the reasons that make interpretation objectionable among mainstream theologians. Thus, the word ‘ta’wil’ has assumed a double-edged meaning: al-ta’wil al-mamhūm (commendable, worthy of praise interpretation) and al-ta’wil al-madhīmūm (objectionable, not worthy of praise interpretation).

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive investigation of the evolution of Qur’anic exegesis. It accounts for the various phases of development, namely, the formative phase, the recording phase, and the modern phase. It also investigates in detail the features, sources and differences in exegetical views among the exegetes of each phase. This chapter also provides an account of the Andalus (Spain and Portugal) school of exegesis and its major characteristics, as well as the Sufi school of exegesis and its distinguishing features.

Chapter 6 investigates the four formative schools of Qur’anic exegesis: the Ḥijāz school of Makkah and Madīnah, and the Iraqi school of Kūfah and Baṣrāh. This chapter also accounts for the prototypical features and tools of exegesis of these schools. It also provides a comparative analysis of these four schools.

Chapter 7 is an explicated informative and detailed account of the linguistic tools of exegesis. It expounds the pre-requisites of the exegete and his linguistic and stylistic competencies and skills that are required in the process of exegesis. Copious examples will be furnished to illustrate the possible semantic differences that may lead to theological cleavages among the various schools of exegesis.

Chapter 8 accounts for the jurisprudential tools employed in Qur’anic exegesis. This chapter also explains in detail why the exegete is required to be armed with the knowledge of exegetical theological devices such as the circumstances of revelation, abrogating and abrogated āyāhs, and clear and ambiguous āyāhs. Through numerous examples, this chapter provides an explicated account of the
required jurisprudential techniques adopted by the exegete. Each example will be
analysed thoroughly and the various theological views based on mainstream and
non-mainstream theologians will also be provided. It also investigates the variant
modes of reading which involve vocalic or diacritic differences. The modes of
reading are accounted for with regards to their impact on the linguistic and
semantic change in meaning.

Chapter 9 furnishes a concluding discussion of our work on the odyssey of
Qur’anic exegesis from its infancy in the first/seventh century to the end of the
twentieth century.

The bibliography of the present work provides a comprehensive list of sources
that are of value to Islamic studies in general and to Qur’anic exegesis in particular.

The Library of Congress transliteration system has been applied throughout this
work. The translation of the Qur’ān is based upon Şaheê International (1997) as
it adopts a communicative approach and employs a modern English style.

The equivalent Western dates have been added to citations of Arabic Hijri
dates. In the alphabetical ordering of the bibliography, the Arabic definite article
(al-) is disregarded.
This page intentionally left blank
1.1 Introduction

The present chapter provides an informative account of the evolution of Qur’anic exegesis since the inception of Islam in the first/seventh century and up to the twentieth century, as well as the diverse approaches that have developed over the past centuries. This detailed investigation takes into consideration the views of both Muslim and non-Muslim Qur’ān scholars with regards to early tafsīr tradition, the controversy over the authenticity and historicity of tafsīr sources and works, the reliability as opposed to the sceptical views about the genuine and spurious chain of authorities, the validity of prophetic tradition, the relationship between the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth, the impact of fabricated prophetic traditions on exegesis and the reliability of ascription of exegetical views to iconic companion exegetes. This chapter also provides a classification of the exegetical views of the companions and successors as well as a ramification of the schools of exegesis that have evolved since the first/seventh century. The documentation and transmission of Qur’anic exegesis is also provided together with the classification of exegetical sources. Through our investigation of historiography and exegesis, the present discussion also accounts for the impact of the Judeo-Christian milieu and the influence of Jewish anecdotes, as a recurrent feature, on some schools of Qur’anic exegesis and, in particular, on some companion and successor exegetes of the formative phase. This chapter also provides an outline of the major genres in exegesis throughout the three distinct phases: formative, recording and modern. These include paraphrastic, narrative, legal, linguistic, thematic, synoptic and scientific genres. A classification of lexicographical tafsīr works has been made which accounts for the distinct approaches in Qur’anic exegesis such as intra-lingual translation of the Qur’ān, gharīb, wujūh, ashbāh and mutashābihāt works.

1.2 Examination of Tafsīr scholarship

While the Qur’ān, for the Muslim, is the word of God and textually inerrant, its written elucidation is the word of the exegete, a man whose sources are mostly characterized by augmentations; interpolations (see Sections 1.4 and 1.5 of the present chapter); internal contradiction; intrusive comments ascribed to the original scholar; spurious prophetic traditions (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.2 and 2.3);
intrusive exegetical tools such as poetic loci falsely ascribed to pre-Islamic poets; and most interestingly, theological cleavages echoing the exegete’s own politico-religious dogma. These dogmatic leanings have rendered some early and medieval Qur’ān commentators as doctrinally suspects. In a similar vein, some tafsīr works have undergone redactional processes and are marked by extrapolation techniques. Therefore, the exegete, unlike God, is not impartial. In his humble attempt to illuminate and explicate the speech of God, the exegete, as a human, remains conditioned by the surrounding circumstances, and is, more often than not, driven by his theological and political dogmatic agenda (see Chapter 3, Sections 3.2 and 3.3). This is true of the theological views of rebel protagonists, for instance, such as the Khawārijī.1 Although the ‘Uthmānic master codex remains the official text for the majority of Qur’ān commentators, one cannot deny the following facts:

(i) Many codices of the Qur’ān have existed where each one may have its own prototypical textual features and at times intrusive, that is, non-canonical, expressions such as the codex of Ubai b. Ka‘b (d.20/640).
(ii) There exist many modes of reading in oral circulation which are contrary to the master codex and are categorized as irregular modes.
(iii) Exoteric and esoteric meaning of the Qur’anic text continues to exist.
(iv) There exist different circumstances of revelation to the same āyah(s).
(v) There exist different views with regards to the abrogating and abrogated āyahs.

This leads us to the conclusion that although the ‘Uthmānic master codex has achieved the textual unity of the revelation, it has not solved the theological and exegetical cleavages among theologians and exegetes. One can easily pin point the serious impact on tafsīr tradition and exegetical views. Nevertheless, the scholarship of tafsīr has continued and so has its oral and written transmission.

The Qur’ān, for Wild (1996, p. 140), is the most meta-textual, most self-referential holy text known in the history of world religions. There is no other holy text which would refer so often to its own textual nature and reflect so constantly and pervasively its own divine origin. While the Qur’ān as a Scripture took shape within 23 years, its tafsīr started from the very first day of its revelation in the night between the 26th or 27th of Ramadān of the first/seventh century and the diverse approaches to its multi-faceted discourse will continue to the very last day of its existence as a Scripture. Thus, the odyssey of Qur’anic exegesis has started in earnest during the lifetime of Muḥammad in the first/seventh century. However, after Muḥammad’s death, students of Qur’anic exegesis have politicized the Qur’ān either through the manipulation of the allegorical signification, that is, esoteric meaning, the adoption of prophetic traditions (ḥadīth)2 whose chain of authorities (isnād)3 may be questioned, or through the ascription of fabricated views to early authoritative companion names such as Ibn ʿAbbās (d.68/687) whose name has turned into an exegetical high street trade mark. Thus, the controversy about political and/or forged isnād as well as subjective exegetical views in early tafsīr works have begun in earnest. For further details, see Section 1.5.
It is an accepted fact by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars that the first exegete of the Muslim scripture is Muḥammad, the mouthpiece of the Qurʾān, who explained to his companions Qurʾānic expressions and passages which were either unclear or difficult. We are also informed by Q16:44 about the role of Muḥammad as an exegete (We revealed to you the Qurʾān that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them). If one conceives of Qurʾānic exegesis in the widest sense, it can be said, Gätje (1971, p. 31) argues, that it is as old as the revelations of Muḥammad. Thus, it is statements by the Prophet and testimonies of his companions that stand in the centre of the older exegesis, as tradition handed down from the first generation of Islam (ibid.). However, Muḥammad has not explained the whole text of the Qurʾān to his companions as there was no need for it. This is attributed to the fact that, as pure Arabs, the companions understood the Qurʾān and witnessed its circumstances of revelation at first hand. Thus, the Qurʾān has been partially elucidated by the Prophet and his verbal explanation is recalled and passed on by the companions to the early successors (awāʾil al-tābiʿīn). Therefore, the first tafsīr tradition is that initiated by Muḥammad and referred to as exegesis of the Prophet (tafsīr al-nabi) and is told on the authority of his companions. After the death of Muḥammad, the companions’ exegetical views have gained an extraordinary authority and are held in great esteem. Their views have gained a special status and are referred to as marfūʿ, that is, attributed to Muḥammad (literally meaning ‘elevated’). A companion’s view is accepted even though it is not supported by a prophetic tradition (ḥadīth) and their views have become one of the three criteria, after the Qurʾān and ḥadīth, of traditional exegesis (al-tafsīr bil-maʿthūr). The main reason for this is attributed to a number of factors, including the following:

(i) The companions witnessed the revelation.
(ii) They witnessed historical events and some important incidents.
(iii) They did not rely on Jewish anecdotes.
(iv) They possessed pure linguistic competence and advanced literary skills.
(v) They did not rely heavily on their hypothetical opinion in tafsīr.
(vi) When companion exegetes, like Ibn ʿAbbās (d.68/687) or Ibn Masʿūd (d.32/653) employ their personal, that is, rational, opinions on an exegetical matter, their hypothetical views are considered as commended (mahmūd) as opposed to uncommended (madhmūm). In other words, their exegesis is still traditional (tafsīr bil-maʿthūr) rather than purely hypothetical (tafsīr bil-raʿi). The main reasons for classifying the exegetical views of Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn Masʿūd as commended are due to the following facts:
(a) Their views are compatible with the Qurʾān and the sunnah (the customary practice of Muḥammad that indicates his actions and sayings).
(b) Although Ibn ʿAbbās has dealt with the controversial notion of mutashābihāt like the names and attributes of God, he does not approach them in an esoteric mode. Rather, he deals with them in a bilā kaif (without asking how) manner. As for Ibn Masʿūd and Ubai b. kaʿb, they do not deal with them at all.
(c) Both Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn Masʿūd are referred to as bil-raʾi exegetes. However, this does not mean they are hypothetical opinion exegetes, that is, non-mainstream. For instance, Ibn Masʿūd gives his hypothetical opinion about jurisprudential problems. Therefore, he cannot be classified as a hypothetical opinion exegete. However, the school of Kūfah is known as a school of raʾi (personal opinion).

(d) Most importantly, the word raʾi has adopted a new shade of meaning in our modern time. This word has acquired a negative connotative meaning which is directly linked to uncommended (madhmūm) exegetics. Exegetes who resort to their hypothetical opinion with regards to mutashābihāt problems are dubbed as bil-raʾi exegetes. However, the word raʾi between the 1st and 2nd, and 7th and 8th, centuries does not have a negative meaning. Rather, it means personal opinion about jurisprudential matters only.

However, not all of the companions’ views are considered as a source for mainstream exegesis. Thus, we have two categories of companion:

(i) Companions of first category: They are the companions whose exegetical views are classified as marfūʿ, that is, ascribed to Muḥammad.

(ii) Companions of second category: They are the companions whose exegetical views are classified as mawqūf, that is, based on one’s own viewpoint (literally meaning ‘stopped’). Such an opinion for some theologians, therefore, is not commended and cannot be accepted.

The dichotomy between marfūʿ and mawqūf is related to isnād (chain of authorities) and the exegetical views of the companions and the school of traditional exegesis. Due to the fact that the companions have witnessed the revelation, accompanied Muḥammad throughout his prophetic mission and have been his students, their exegetical views are considered as marfūʿ. Thus, it is categorized as conclusive evidence (ḥujjah). However, there are five conditions for a companion’s viewpoint to be marfūʿ, if his or her view is

(i) related to explaining the reason for a particular revelation;
(ii) based either on Muḥammad’s point of view or his action, that is, his sunnah (the standard practice);
(iii) related to explaining an incident or a historical event that has taken place during the lifetime of Muḥammad, as in ʿĀʾishah’s exegetical view concerning Q33:10, ‘idh jāʿūkum min fawqikum wamin asfala minkum wʿidh zāghat al-abyṣāru wabalaghūt al-qulūb al-hanājira [They massed against you from above and below; your eyes rolled with fear, your hearts rose into your throats]. This, in her opinion, is related to the day of the battle of al-Khandaq (fifth/eleventh century). As a companion, her view is regarded as marfūʿ, that is, taken as ḥujjah for the elucidation of this historical event. In other words, although this is a personal point of view of a companion which is not directly
ascribed to Muḥammad, ‘Ā’ishah’s exegetical view, as a companion, is still considered as marfūʿ since she has witnessed or known at first hand about a given historical incident that has occurred before the death of Muḥammad;

(iv) not a hypothetical opinion; in other words, if an opinion is not based upon uncommended personal reasoning (al-raʿi al-madhımūm) and there is no overwhelming scepticism about it that it may have been borrowed from or influenced by Jewish anecdotes (al-isrāʾiliyyāt) such as stories of the Prophets, the beginning of creation, paradise and the hell fire (e.g. the long anecdote narrated by Ibn ʿAbbās about Ishmael, his mother, his father Abraham and the construction of Kaʿbah without mentioning the direct narrator, that is Muḥammad, by saying, ‘qāla al-nabiyy [The Prophet said]’);

(v) related to the explication of a grammatical, semantic, or stylistic problem. A companion’s linguistic views are of a marfūʿ status and are favoured over later linguists’ views such as those of al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhī (d.776/1374), al-Farrāʾ (d.207/822), and Abu ʿUbaidah (d.210/825).

However, a companion’s point of view is classified as mawqūf according to the following conditions:

(i) If his or her view is about a particular matter that is not related to, that is, has not taken place during, the lifetime of Muḥammad;

(ii) If he or she is known to have been influenced by Jewish anecdotes, such as ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAmru b. al-ʿĀṣ and Abu Hurairah;

(iii) If his or her view is based on hypothetical personal reasoning (al-raʿi).

Given the above three conditions, a companion’s point of view is a mawqūf and, therefore, is inconclusive evidence (ghair ḥujjah) in matters related to the elucidation of the Qurʾān. Therefore, the views of the first category of companions are dubbed as ‘conclusive evidence’ while the views of the second category companions are labelled as ‘inconclusive evidence’ of a given exegetical problem. For instance, the views of companions like ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAmru b. al-ʿĀṣ and Abu Hurairah are characterized as mawqūf rather than marfūʿ because they are known to be heavily influenced by Jewish anecdotes.

Compared to the marfūʿ/mawqūf dichotomy, it is worthwhile to note that the opinion of a successor, early or late, is categorized as maqṭūʿ (literally meaning ‘terminated’, ‘cut off’ because such views are disconnected from Muḥammad’s period) and, thus, cannot be taken as conclusive evidence for exegetical matters. The successors’ exegetical views are of much less authority. Therefore, a successor’s opinion on Qur’anic subject matters is categorized as inconclusive evidence (Ibn Kathīr 1994, pp. 54–56; al-ʿIrāqī 1996, pp. 56–57; al-Suyūṭī 1996a, 1, pp. 94–101; al-Juḍayfī 2001, pp. 304–307). This is attributed to a number of reasons, such as

(i) The successors did not witness the revelation.

(ii) They did not witness historical events like battles, or some incidents during the lifetime of Muḥammad.
(iii) They relied on Jewish anecdotes.
(iv) They relied upon their personal hypothetical opinions.
(v) They had non-mainstream dogmatic theological and political views.\(^7\)

This dichotomy between companion and successor’s opinions on Qur’anic subject-matters is explained in the following diagram:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1** Dichotomy between marfūc, mawqūf and maqṭūc exegetical views

Although the companions are considered as sacrosanct by mainstream and most non-mainstream exegetes, their intellectual capacity and level of comprehending the Qur’ān vary from one companion to another. This is true of lexical problems, circumstances of revelation, mutashābihāt, and abrogating/abrogated āyahs. Among the companions whose exegetical views are held in high esteem are ʿAli b. Abī Ṭālib (d.40/661) and Ibn ʿAbbās (d.68/687) of the evolutionary phase of tafsīr (for more details, see Chapter 5, Section: 5.2.1.2.1). The major sources from which the companions derive their exegetical analysis and which are employed as exegetical devices include the Qur’ān through intertextuality which is based on the widely held view that the Qur’ān elucidates itself (al-Qur’ānu yufassiru nafsahu), prophetic tradition, general and specific meaning (takhṣīṣ al-ʿāmm), paraphrase (tabyīn al-mujmal), unrestricted and restricted meaning (taqyīd al-muṭlaq), context, Qur’ānic parables, explanation of lexically related expressions, hypothetical opinion and some Jewish anecdotes (for more details on the sources of companion exegesis see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.1.2.2).
The tafsīr activity of the companions is primarily oral, part of ḥadīth, unstructured, and is practised for teaching and learning. The companions’ tafsīr can be characterized as synoptic where the general meaning of a Qur’anic passage is provided. Also, in their tafsīr, the companions refer to two modes of reading only: the mutawātīr (multiple source) and the shāhīdhah (irregular) modes of reading. Another striking feature of the companions’ tafsīr is that they do not touch upon the mutashābihāt, especially the anthropomorphistic expressions such as the notion of al-istiwā’ ‘alā al-‘arsh (literally meaning ‘sitting on the throne’), al-raḥmānū ‘alā al-‘arshi istawā’ (the Lord of Mercy, established on the throne [Q20: 5]) and God’s attributes (for more details, see Chapter 5, Section: 5.2.1.2.3). After the death of Muḥammad, that is, during the formative phase, some of the first category companions established their own schools of Qur’anic exegesis in the areas they settled in. Three prominent schools of Qur’anic exegesis have evolved. They are set up by three prominent and authoritative companion exegetes (see Chapter 5, Section: 5.2.1.3.1, for further details). These are as follows:

(i) Makkah school of exegesis set up by Ibn ʿAbbās (d.68/687),
(ii) Madīnah school of exegesis set up by Ubai b. Kaʿb (d.20/640),
(iii) Kūfah school of exegesis set up by ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d.32/653).

Leading early successor exegetes have studied in one of these three schools and are supervised by their relevant companion teachers. Thus, the tafsīr activity of the successors is heavily dependant on the companions’ views who have acted as supervisors of their successor students. However, a leading early successor exegete has also laid down a prominent school of Qur’anic exegesis. Thus, we have
(iv) Başrah school of exegesis set up by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.110/728).

During the successors’ phase, Qur’anic exegesis has begun to be recorded. However, the tafsīr activity of the successors, particularly the late successors (awākhir al-tābiʿīn), is characterized by hypothetical opinion, weak chain of authorities of ḥadīth, paraphrase, Jewish anecdotes, variant modes of reading, theological cleavages and politically oriented theological views. Among the exegetical tools of the successors are the circumstances of revelation and abrogation (for more details on the main characteristics of successors’ exegesis, see Chapter 5, Section: 5.2.1.3.3). It is during the successors’ phase that the mutashābihāt āyahs have begun to be accounted for by exegetes and, most importantly, the different schools of thought (madhāhib – [sects]) have evolved. With the evolution of madhāhib, the views of mainstream and non-mainstream exegetes have seeped into tafsīr works. It is worthwhile to note that the activity of writing down (tadwīn) tafsīr works has started during the post-successors’ period in the first quarter of the 2nd and 8th centuries during which tafsīr has gained limited autonomy and become more independent of ḥadīth studies. However, interest in Qur’anic gharīb works and the recording of gharīb works have started during the first half of the 2nd and 8th centuries. Gharīb al-qurʾān refers to Qur’anic expressions that are not widely used by native speakers of Arabic.
Although the companions and the successors have shown tremendous interest in the teaching and learning of Qur’anic exegesis, Western scholars such as Ignácz Goldziher (1920; cf. Rippin 1987, p. 237), Abbot (1967, pp. 111–113) and Wansbrough (1977, p. 158) are of the opinion that there has been opposition to the exegesis of the Qur’ān, especially the mutashābihāt (unclear) āyahs.\footnote{Preamble to Qur’anic exegesis} It was not until the close of the second century that tafsīr al-mutashābihāt was permitted to be studied by fully qualified religious scholars. In the opinion of Wansbrough (1997), the objections to tafsīr are to be understood only secondarily as disapproval of independent reasoning (ra‘i) as opposed to traditional science (‘ilm). However, Birkeland (1955, p. 19) rejects this contention and asserts that opposition to Qur’anic exegesis did not exist in the first century, but had a short-lived existence from the end of the first till the end of the second century. Similarly, Gäije (1971, p. 32) argues that ‘already in the early exegesis, there was a tendency to interpret as many of the ambiguous passages (mutashābihāt) of the Qur’ān as possible, if not all of them, including even unimportant detail.’ If there really was such an opposition, Versteegh (1993. p. 56) argues, it must have come from certain circles which were, however, unable to prevent its widespread practice. Leemhuis (1988, p. 16) and Gilliot (1999, p. 7) support Birkeland’s hypothesis as the most satisfactory. There is no reason to think, Gilliot (1999) asserts, that the very first generations of Muslims were opposed, in any general way, to giving explanations of the Qur’ān. We are of the opinion, however, that if there was such an opposition to the exegesis of the Qur’ān, it must have been justified in the light of

(i) undue concern over the likelihood of confusing the prophetic tradition, that is, ḥadīth, with exegetical views especially those hinged upon hypothetical opinion, and

(ii) over zealous concern by early companions about the analysis of theological mutashābihāt āyahs.

However, during the companions’ phase of exegesis, the opposition to tafsīr has been adopted as an orthodox defence against independent reasoning and heretics, especially against the tafsīr of the theological mutashābihāt. The reason for this is that while the muḥkamāt are āyahs that are clear and self-explanatory, comprehending the mutashābihāt is not an easy task for every one. Early Muslim scholars are concerned that the discussion of a mutashābih āyah may lead to theological confusion and the spread of heretical views in the Muslim community. The mutashābihāt are ‘ambiguous’ theologically, stylistically and linguistically (cf. Abdul-Raof 2004). Thus, hypothetical personal opinion plays a major role in their exegesis. According to Rippin (1999, p. xviii; 2000, p. 86), the lack of documentary evidence makes the issue of the legitimacy of and opposition to tafsīr a difficult one to adjudicate, and the debate among the views of Ignácz Goldziher, Harris Birkeland, Nabia Abbot, John Wansbrough and Fred Leemhuis remains unresolved. The opposition to the exegesis of the Qur’ān suggested by Abbot can be seen in view of the following factors:
(i) Both the ḥadīth and exegesis of the Qur’ān were parallel to each other in terms of recording.

(ii) The recording of exegesis was not as paramount as that of ḥadīth.

(iii) Qur’ānic exegesis was entirely backed up by ḥadīth.

(iv) Qur’ānic exegesis was part of ḥadīth studies.

(v) And most importantly, the companions’ priority, after the Prophet’s death, was to collect and record ḥadīth.

Although the early verbal and written tafsīr of the Qur’ān ascribed to the companions and the successors is mostly hinged upon Qur’ānic and ḥadīth intertextuality which, in general terms, belongs to the school of traditional exegesis (al-tafsīr bil-ma’tḥūr), the early tafsīr tradition of the companions and the successors contains some hypothetical personal opinions (al-tafsīr bil-ra’i). Thus, their tafsīr is slightly mixed with what has become to be known as al-tafsīr bil-ra’i which is not based on tafsīr al-nabi; that is, it is not compatible with Muḥammad’s tradition. However, some of this tafsīr literature is dubbed as ‘commended’ (mahmūd), although it has no intertextual backing from the ṣhadīth. The rest of early tafsīr tradition ascribed to the early successors is also categorized as al-tafsīr bil-ra’i but is stigmatized as ‘uncommended’ (madhmūm) due to reliance on their own independent reasoning and speculative periphrasis of Qur’ānic passages and expressions. This has marked the development of speculative tafsīr tradition and the emergence of non-mainstream tafsīr represented by the Shi‘ah, Mu’tazilah, Khawārij and the Sufis who do not rely much on ḥadīth, as opposed to mainstream tafsīr represented mostly by Sunni scholars, that is, the traditionists. The dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream schools of Qur’ānic exegesis has become a dogmatically oriented approach to the linguistic and theological analysis of the Qur’ānic text. This dichotomy and its ramifications can be illustrated by the following diagram:

![Figure 2 Ramifications of approaches to Qur’ānic exegesis](image-url)