

# The Role of Allegorical Exegesis in Interpreting the Verses of the Quran

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**Abstract:** This article describes that the theoretical and methodological foundations of research on mental interpretations are separate and expressive, one of the topics in Islamic interpretation, and among interpretations Ishari interpretations have a special place, interpretation of verses on the basis of meaning known to oneself, not known to everyone, instead of mufassir, manifested meaning in Ishari interpretations. Examples are also given from mysticism scholars Najmiddin Kubro's "at-TA'vilot an-najmiya" and Hakim Termisi's "Kitab tafsir al-Quran al-musammo bakhr at-tafsir".

**Keys words:** Ishari tafsir, tariqat, apparent meaning, botanic meaning, Hadith, Quranic karim verses, huruf muqattaotlar, sufaf, mufassir.

**Introduction.** The science of tafsir represents a body of knowledge related to the deep study of the meanings of the Holy Quran and therefore holds special significance. This science serves to understand the guidance, teachings, instructions, and commandments of the Quran. Without it, it is impossible to fully comprehend Islamic knowledge and to follow it in practice.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of rational tafsirs constitute one of the special and multifaceted topics in Islamic teachings. Some mufassirs seek to evaluate this field exclusively in a positive light, as an example of the harmony between reason and divine revelation. A mufassir, striving to grasp the spirit of the Quran, attempts to approach it from the perspective of contemporary human consciousness and thought. However, the success of such an approach depends on the recognition of the limitations of human reason and the absolute nature of revelation. From a methodological standpoint, this approach is justified because it highlights the necessity of investigating the complex relationship between reason and revelation not only theoretically but also practically, incorporating elements of critical analysis.

**Main Part** The interpretation of the verses of the Holy Quran is divided into several categories:

1. Tafsir bil Ma'sur — in this type of tafsir, the mufassir explains the verses of the Quran based on authentic hadiths and the statements of the Prophet's companions.
2. Tafsir bir-Ra'y — here, the mufassir resorts to his own opinion and ijihad (independent reasoning). This type is further divided into permissible and impermissible interpretations.

3. Ishari (Esoteric) Tafsir<sup>1</sup> — in this approach, the mufasssir does not rely on the apparent meaning of the verse but interprets it according to inner, hidden indications (allegories).

Sufism represents one of the deepest and most complex spiritual doctrines in the world of human spirituality. Its essence lies in the striving for God, self-knowledge, unveiling the inner capabilities of the soul, and drawing closer to the Divine Light. The science of tariqa (spiritual path) focuses on morality and spiritual discipline. Ma'rifat (gnosis) is the path of the saints leading to self-awareness, struggle against the ego, and complete self-denial. Haqiqat (Truth) is the union of the soul with Divine power.

In ishari tafsirs, the mufasssir explains the verses not through their obvious, external meaning but through the hidden inner meaning known only to him, perceived through symbolism and hints. However, in such interpretations, the external meaning is not negated; on the contrary, a logical connection is established between the external and internal meanings<sup>2</sup>.

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor Davron Maksudov describes this type of tafsir as follows: "Ishari tafsirs are characterized by brevity in explanation and profound semantic disclosure of the verses through both traditional and allegorical interpretation."<sup>3</sup> Ishari tafsir is a method unique to the followers of the spiritual path (suluk) and representatives of the Sufi tradition. In these tafsirs, relying on the verses of the Quran, their inner meanings are explained based on the words of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and subsequently his companions, such as Abdullah ibn Abbas (r.a.) and Abdullah ibn Mas'ud (r.a.).

Prominent Sufi scholars — Hasan al-Basri (641–728), Ibrahim ibn Ahmad (718–777), Junayd al-Baghdadi (830–910) — used allegorical meanings when interpreting Quranic verses, for which they were sometimes criticized.

Among Islamic scholars and Western researchers, there are different views on ishari tafsir. For example, orientalist Reynold Nicholson (1868–1945) believed that ishari tafsir, based on rational foundations, does not express a justified meaning but is rather similar to the method used in Shiite tafsirs. According to him, representatives of both traditions have moved away from the literal meaning of the verses. Moreover, Nicholson explains ishari tafsir as follows: "Sufis, when interpreting the chapters of the Quran, besides the external meaning of each verse, believe in its hidden, inner meaning known only to the chosen servants of Allah. In this, they follow the Shiites. Therefore, they sometimes provide interpretations that completely contradict the apparent meaning of the verse."

Sheikh Ahmad Dehlawi, in his work *Al-Fawz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, writes: "Sufi ishari tafsirs are not the basis of the science of tafsir. This knowledge arose in the hearts of the righteous (early mufasssirs) under the influence of Sufi states during the reading of the Quran. It is similar to how a person, having heard the story of Layla and Majnun, begins to speak of their love relying solely on what was heard." In the same book, he notes: "The sciences of 'Ilm al-Ma'ani' and 'Ilm al-Bayan' appeared after the era of the companions and the Tabi'in and are considered later disciplines".

Books dedicated to ishari tafsir emphasize that the inner (batini) meaning does not contradict the outer (zohiri) meaning. On the contrary, their union is possible, and the zohiri meaning is in no way denied. Among the works related to this category, the following can be noted:

- ✓ Nizamuddin Hasan ibn Muhammad Husayn Khorasani Nishapuri — *Ghara'ib al-Quran wa Raga'ib al-Furqan*
- ✓ Shirazi — *Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Quran*
- ✓ Al-Sulami (d. 412/1021) — *Haqiqat al-Tafsir*

<sup>1</sup> Islamic Encyclopedia. — Tashkent: State Scientific Publishing House "National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan", 2004. — p. 228

<sup>2</sup> Maksudov D. Introduction to the Science of Tafsir. — Tashkent: Kaknus Media, 2019. — p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Maksudov D. Comparative Analysis of Hanafi Madhhab Tafsirs in Mawarannahr. — Tashkent. — p. 203

- ✓ Abdul-Karim al-Qusairi (d. 1072) — *Lata'if al-Isharat*
- ✓ Ahmad Muhammad Maybudi — *Kashf al-Asrar*
- ✓ Hakim al-Andalusi (d. 1141) — *Tanbih al-Afham*
- ✓ Abu Muhammad Ruzbihan (1128–1209) — *Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Quran*
- ✓ Najmiddin Kubra — *At-Tawilut an-Najmiya*
- ✓ Hakim al-Tirmidhi — *Kitab Tafsir al-Quran al-Musamma Bahr al-Tafsir*

Regarding interpretation of verses based on personal opinion (ra'y), already in the early centuries of Islam, Quranic interpretation implied a high level of knowledge, deep understanding, and philosophical contemplation. This required a combination of transmission (naql) and reason ('aql). The methods of the companions, the Tabi'in, and the Tabi' al-Tabi'in — who possessed outstanding knowledge — developed through a rational approach. The mufasssir was required to have exceptional abilities and knowledge of all scientific disciplines of the first three centuries. Reflecting on this, it becomes clear that although ishari tafsir is essentially connected to the revelation of the Quran, its dissemination in the scholarly community began later — after the period of systematization of Islamic sciences (tadwin).

**Discussion.** Ibn Nakib transmitted: “Zahir (the apparent meaning) refers to those meanings of the Qur'an that are known to scholars. Batin (the hidden meaning) refers to the secret mysteries of the Qur'an accessible only to the people of truth (Ahl al-Haqiqah).”<sup>4</sup> This statement is considered one of the most famous opinions concerning the outward and inward meanings of the Holy Qur'an.

Hakim Tirmidhi (835–932) was one of the first scholars in Mawarannahr to write an Ishwari (esoteric) tafsir. Subsequently, other prominent Sufi thinkers worked in this field, including Muhammad al-Wasiti (d. 942), al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), author of *Haqiqat al-Tafsir*, Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (d. 1072), author of *Lata'if al-Isharat*, Ahmad Muhammad al-Maybudi with *Kashf al-Asrar*, Hakim al-Andalusi (d. 1141) with *Tanbih al-Afham*, and Abu Muhammad Ruzbihan (1128–1209) with *Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Qur'an*. These works served as sources and inspirations for Najm al-Din Kubra's *Al-Tawilat al-Najmiyya*.

Hakim Tirmidhi's methodology in his tafsir is expressed through the following directions:

- a) Interpretation of the outward (Zahir) meaning of the verses, as in other tafsirs;
- b) Unveiling the inward (Batin) meaning through Sufi concepts;
- c) Interpretation of Arabic letters as bearers of special indications;
- d) The conviction that the letters of the Arabic alphabet form the foundation of knowledge about the names and attributes of Allah.

Thus, Hakim Tirmidhi's tafsir can be considered one of the earliest Sufi commentaries in Mawarannahr<sup>5</sup>. The importance of hadiths in interpreting the Qur'anic verses was also significant, leading muhaddithun (hadith scholars) to achieve high mastery in the science of tafsir.

It is important to note that Hakim Tirmidhi in his works aimed to base his interpretations on the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and Qur'anic verses, expanding and deepening the explanation. His method leaned more toward ta'wil — the unveiling of the inner meaning — rather than the literal transmission of the text, relying on Sufi interpretation. Example: Interpretation of verse 7 of Surah Al-Hujurat: “He (Allah) has made faith beloved to you and has adorned it in your

<sup>4</sup> Najmiddin Kubra. *At-Ta'wilat an-Najmiyya*. Editor Ahmad Farid Mazidi. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2009. Volume 1. – p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Abdullaev A. The Role of Abu-l-Lais as-Samarkandi in the Tafsir Studies of Mawarannahr. Dissertation for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences. – Tashkent, 2007.

hearts<sup>6</sup>". Tirmidhi explains: "The heart (qalb) is an organ consisting of external and internal parts. It is also called 'fu'ad'. It has two eyes and one ear. Allah Himself governs the heart." Therefore, he says, faith in the heart of the unbeliever lacks love and beauty, whereas in the believer's heart it is adorned with intellect. The unbeliever succumbs to the temptations of outward adornment, which may lead him to polytheism and worship other than Allah.

The question arises: "Does the unbeliever have faith?" The answer lies in the idea that inside him remains only an empty form without light and love. Here the author refers to the Day of the "Mithaq" (Covenant), mentioned in A'raf, 172: "Am I not your Lord?" — "Yes, we confirm," they replied. Allah took a covenant from the souls when He created them, that He is their only Lord.

Thus, Hakim Tirmidhi asserts that his interpretive path is based on the Sufi tradition, which includes not only Qur'anic exegesis but also engagement with hadiths and fiqh. He explains that the path of Sufism is one that brings peace to the heart and soul of a person.

By developing such views, Hakim Tirmidhi became one of the great religious scholars of the IX— X centuries, gaining wide recognition in the Islamic world for his deep understanding of Islamic teachings and his contributions to the development of Sharia. It is also worth noting the work of Najm al-Din Kubra *Al-Tawilat al-Najmiyya fi al-Tafsir al-Ishwari al-Sufi*. For example, in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 249: "When Talut set out with the army, he said, 'Indeed, Allah will test you by a river. Whoever drinks from it is not of me, and whoever does not taste it is indeed of me, excepting one who takes from it a handful with his hand.'<sup>7</sup>"

Najmiddin Kubra explains: the river represents worldly life, the water its adornments. Whoever drinks will succumb to temptation and is not among the faithful. Whoever refrains from drinking is "mine," among those close to Allah, who follow my character and feel my divine grace. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "I am the Messenger of Allah, and the believers are from me." The phrase "excepting one who takes from it a handful" means that if a person limits themselves to only what is necessary from the worldly life — food, clothing, shelter — and is content with little, then they are on the right path.

In Surah At-Tawbah, verse 123, it says: "O you who have believed! Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you harshness. And know that Allah is with the righteous<sup>8</sup>." Najmiddin Kubra explains: "O you who have believed..." is a call to believe in the Prophet (peace be upon him) and obey Allah's commands. The phrase "fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you" he interprets as a struggle against the disbelief of one's own nafs (ego) and its evil traits. Resist your passions and guide them to the path of obedience to Allah, because the nafs is a barrier between the person and worship of the Lord<sup>9</sup>.

Some Muslim scholars believe that in the beginnings of certain Surahs where the *Muqatta'at* (disjointed letter combinations) appear, there are Ishwari (symbolic) meanings. Some scholars tried to explain the meanings of these letters, considering that if these letter combinations had no particular meaning, they would not have been needed nor revealed by Allah. Therefore, some of them, using allegorical methods, sought to reveal the meanings of these letters but did not reach a unanimous opinion. Because of this, about 20 different interpretations of these letter combinations are known.

Some scholars believe that the *Muqatta'at* reflect important names and attributes of Allah. For example, they suppose that the combination of the letters "Alif," "Lam," and "Mim" at the beginning of Surah Al-

<sup>6</sup> Quran: Translation and Interpretation of Meanings / Translation and Commentary by A. Mansur. – Tashkent: Publishing House of Tashkent Islamic University, 2016. – 624 pages.

<sup>7</sup> Tafsir Hilol / Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf. Second revised and supplemented edition. Vol. VI. – Tashkent: Mawarannahr

<sup>8</sup> Tafsir Irfan, Volumes 3, 4, 5, 6. Translation and Commentary by Mufti Usmonkhon Alimov. – Tashkent: "Shark", 2013. – 352 pages.

<sup>9</sup> Najmiddin Kubra. At-Ta'wilat an-Najmiyya fi-t-Tafsir al-Ishwari as-Sufi (Al-'Alaudd Dawla Ahmad ibn Muhammad as-Simmoni, Ainul Hayat) / Editor: Sheikh Ahmad Farid al-Mazidi. Volume 6. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2009. First Edition. – 2464 pages.

Baqarah points to divine names of Allah — “Alif,” “Latif,” and “Majid.” Other scholars held that these letters express several names and attributes of Allah: “Alif” — Ahad (The One), Awwal (The First), Akhir (The Last), Azal (Eternal), and Abad (Immortal); “Lam” — Latif (Subtle, Merciful); “Mim” — Malik (King), Majid (Glorious), Mannan (Bestower).

Some interpreters, such as in the book *Fath al-Bayan lil-Kanudji*, explained these letters using the Abjad numerical system (numerical values of letters). Thus, “Alif” = 1, “Lam” = 30, “Mim” = 40, and this interpretation is associated with the fact that the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) at the age of 40.

Zayd ibn Aslam believed that these letters are the names of the Surahs. Kalbi stated that these lettered oaths are Allah’s oaths, marking the virtues and high status of these letters.

Hakim al-Tirmidhi was notably active in the field of *Ilm al-Huruf* (the science of letters). He believed that knowledge is the names of things, and the root of knowledge is hidden in the letters. *Ilm al-Huruf* is one of the highest sciences, called *Hikmat al-Ulya* (The Highest Wisdom), and those who know it are called ‘*Ulama’ al-‘Ulama’* (The Scholars of Scholars). In his book *Tahsil Nazar al-Qur’an*, Hakim al-Tirmidhi provides 15 meanings of the word “al-Huda” (الهدى), concluding that the general meaning is “to incline, to turn towards.” He interprets the verse: *Биз Синга мойил бўлдик* (A’raf, 156) — “We have inclined towards You,” explaining that if a person with an open heart turns to their Lord with a supplication, other hearts also incline to this light, as this word contains the light emanating from the enlightened heart.

He also lists 15 meanings of “al-Huda” from dictionaries — such as “Bayan” (clarification), “Islam,” “Tawhid” (monotheism), “Din” (religion), “Dua” (supplication), “Basira” (insight), “Ma’rifa” (gnosis), “Qur’an,” “Rasul” (messenger), “Rushd” (right guidance), “Sawab” (reward), “Taqwa” (piety), “Tawfiq” (success), “Tawba” (repentance), “Yulaq” (path)<sup>10</sup>.

Hakim al-Tirmidhi, as an encyclopedic scholar, made a significant contribution in the fields of tafsir, fiqh, hadith studies, theology, language, and tasawwuf (Sufism). He often avoided excessive citation of traditions and preferred to focus on the Sufi interpretation of the Qur’an. Thanks to this, he can be considered the founder of the Sufi school of Qur’anic exegesis in Mawarannahr.

The main idea in *Tahsil Nazar al-Qur’an* is that Qur’anic words are polysemous, but there are no completely identical words. Each word has a specific meaning in its place, and even if it points to different senses, all indicate precise meanings. In the Qur’an, every word is firmly connected to a particular meaning<sup>11</sup>.

The features of Hakim al-Tirmidhi’s tafsir also include that he became an important figure in shaping the style of tafsir of the Mawarannahr school. In his opinion, the best qualities are just interpretation of the Qur’an and hadith, and a logical approach to fiqh questions, which is especially characteristic of the Sufis. He maintained that in difficult situations, one must keep calm and objectivity in order to selflessly serve Islam.

**In conclusion** it can be said that Ishwari (allegorical) tafsirs have existed since the early period of Islam. From the hadiths, it is known that the verses of the Qur’an possess not only an apparent (Zahiri) meaning but also a hidden (Batini) meaning. Disagreements arose in the interpretation of these hidden meanings, and due to negative remarks about Ishwari tafsirs, this method became regulated through established rules and norms.

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