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TAFSIR AL-QUR'AN BI AL-QUR'AN
AS A DISTINCTIVE METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

While many scholars consider tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an (interpretation of the Qur'an with the Qur'an) to be part of tradition-based tafsir methodology, this view remains under question. This paper seeks to argue that it has become a methodology distinguishable from both tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs. To support the argument, the paper reviews scholars' opinions in favor of viewing tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an as beyond tradition-based methodology, draws a brief comparison between either tradition-based or reason-based Qur'anic commentaries known as displaying tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an, and highlights the practice of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in some modern commentaries as well as the complexity that a practice of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an can involve. With all of these being taken into account, it becomes clear that tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an can be regarded as a distinctive methodology. Recognizing the uniqueness of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an would allow us to develop this methodology further in the future.

Keywords: tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an, tradition-based tafsir, reason-based tafsir

Introduction

While there has been a wide consensus among Muslim scholars on its significance (Shanqiti, 1426 AH; 'Akk, 1986; Saeed, 2008; Mattson, 2008), tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an (interpretation of the Qur'an with reference to the Qur'an itself) is hardly seen as a distinctive approach to the Qur'an distinguished from other categories of tafsir. It is indeed often seen merely as complementary elements found in some exegeses.

While many scholars group tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an under the heading of tradition-based tafsir (tafsir bi al-ma'thur) (Zarqani, 1995; Dhahabi, n.y.; Qattan, n.y.; Saeed, 2006; Shihab, 2013; Haqqi, 2004), there are some other distinct opinions. Khalidi (2008) argues that it is a non-tradition-based tafsir. Buraydi (1427 AH) and Tayyar (1999) maintain that one can differentiate between tradition-based tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an and reason-based tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an. Tabataba'i (1987), meanwhile, distinguishes tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an from both tradition-based and reason-based tafsir.

Indeed, as the paper would argue, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an has been developed as a distinctive methodology. The inclusion and appearance of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs should not make us fail to recognize its distinctiveness.

Methods

There are four areas to deal with to address the topic at issue: scholars' debate on the topic, appearance of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in both tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs, the development of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in modern hermeneutics, and the complexity of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an. All of these areas would be taken into account to show the uniqueness of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an.

Firstly, one needs to review the opinions of scholars with regard to whether or

not tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an is part of tradition-based tafsir to see the arguments they already put forward and identify what is actually agreed upon and what is not.

Secondly, one needs to find and (if possible) compare the appearance of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in both tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs in order to clarify whether it is absent, or more likely to be absent, in reason-based tafsir.

Thirdly, one needs to look at the most advanced practice of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in modern commentaries to know whether or not they have distinguished it from both tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs.

Fourthly, one needs to recognize the level of complexity that a practice of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an can involve, to see whether or not it can be a methodology with comparable complexity with established methodologies like tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs.

Results and Discussion

There has been disagreement among scholars concerning to which category tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an belongs. Many scholars are of the opinion that it can be grouped under the heading of tradition-based tafsir (tafsir bi al-ma'thur). They tend to identify the Qur'an as something transmitted from God (al-manqul 'an Allah). Regarding the way it comes to us, the Qur'an as a source of tafsir is a transmitted one (naqli). Therefore the Qur'an is part of the 'established transmission' (naql thabit) category of source of tafsir. (Sabt, n.y., I, 107).

They see that the involvement of ijtihad (scholarly endeavor) in tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an does not mean that it is not part of tafsir bi al-ma'thur, because ijtihad is in fact involved in Qur'an interpretation based upon transmitted traditions of any kind, either the Prophet's tradition, opinions of the Companions, or opinions of the Successors. (Sabt, n.y., I, 106-7).

Those seeing it as part of tafsir bi al-ma'thur most of the time regard tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an as the first necessary step of the application of tafsir bi al-ma'thur before an exegete needs to proceed with other sources of interpretation, i.e. hadith and some other extra-Qur'anic sources. They often insist on the necessity of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an as the first step of tafsir bi al-ma'thur despite the fact that tafsir bi al-ma'thur is scarcely overwhelmed with tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an.

However, the view that tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an is part of tradition-based tafsir has been criticized on some grounds. It has been considered as beyond tradition-based tafsir provided that the Qur'an is not the words of a human being, rather the words of God (kalam Allah). As the words of God, the use of the Qur'an in tafsir does not require some processes of verification as required in the use of narrated reports attributed to the Prophet, the Companions and the Successors. While tradition-based tafsir is mostly characterized by a constant need for verification and comparison of the authenticity and relevance of reports, it is not needed in tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an. (Khalidi, 2008, 148, 200).

In fact, some scholars have introduced the distinction between two kinds of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an: 1) the one that is wahy/naql-based, regarded as tawqifi (decided by Allah and His Messenger); and 2) the one that is ra'y/istidlal-based, regarded as ijtihadi (open for scholarly reasoning). (Buraydi, 1427 AH, 19; Harbi, 1996, 320). In other words, they distinguish between tradition-based tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an and reason-based tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an. This means that categorizing it as (merely) part of tafsir bi al-ma'thur can no longer be adequate.

In practice, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an often relies on comprehension and intellectual creativity (al-fahm wa al-ijtihad) much more than the interpretation of the

Qur'an with reference to hadith, opinions of the Companions, and opinions of the Successors. Particularly when the interpreting verses (al-ayah al-mufassirah) presented in tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an are based on personal opinion and intellectual creativity (tariq al-istidlal/al-ra'y wa al-istinbat), as some scholars imply, it should be regarded as part of reason-based tafsir (tafsir bi al-ra'y). (Buraydi, 1427 AH, 14; Tayyar, 1999, 53).

On the other hand, a few scholars, e.g. Tabataba'i (1986; 1997), seek to distinguish tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an from both tradition-based and reason-based tafsirs, and see it as a more authentic tafsir methodology that offers an interpreter a sure way out from both his own baseless opinion and the problem of inauthentic transmitted tradition.

Moreover, beyond this debate among scholars, just like in tradition-based tafsirs, one can find tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an featured in reason-based tafsirs. Just take a closer look at Qur'anic commentaries such as Razi's Mafatih al-Ghayb, Zamakhshari's al-Kashshaf and Ibn 'Ashur's al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir, to find the practice of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an in the tafsirs categorized as reason-based tafsirs, comparable to what one can find displayed in Qur'anic commentaries heavily relying on traditions, such as Ibn Kathir's Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim and Tabari's Jami' al-Bayan. My previous research found that compared to Ibn Kathir's tafsir (which is categorized as heavily tradition-based tafsir), Razi's tafsir (which is commonly categorized as reason-based tafsir) is more likely to quote more verses of the Qur'an to interpret a part of the Qur'an. (I. Rohman, 2013).

In its modern practice, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an has even sometimes been pursued in a way in which an exegete seeks to minimize the role of traditions (riwayat) and reason. In a heavily Qur'an-based tafsir, the role of tradition and reason can be secondary or minimum. For instance, while grounded in tradition-based tafsir paradigm, Shanqiti's Adwa' al-Bayan uses traditions in a very limited number. (I. Rohman, 2013). Another notable instance is Tabataba'i's al-Mizan where the exegete seeks to apply tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an as a more independent and separate approach to the Qur'an, particularly in the section he named 'bayan' regularly featured in his tafsir. Tabataba'i seeks to stick to the notion that the Qur'an does not need other things to act as a guide since it has declared itself as a clear explanation to everything (tibyan li kull shay'). The notion that external sources are secondary and theoretically dispensable is also central in Farahi's and Islahi's hermeneutics. (Afaki, 2009).

When a Qur'anic commentary puts tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an as the key and dominant part of its methodology, it could no longer be easily grouped under the popular heading of either tafsir bi al-ma'thur or tafsir bi al-ra'y. (I. Rohman, 2016, 79). Tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an has indeed been practiced in a way that very much limits the role of external sources, such as hadith and opinions of the past, making it different from tradition-based tafsir, and at the same time becomes an effort to leave no room for the interpreter's subjectivist presupposition in Qur'an interpretation, making it different from reason-based tafsir.

Last but not least, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an may already involve multiple, complex steps. To apply tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an means to pay attention to connections within the Qur'an. These connections exist on various levels: 1) within a verse; 2) within a set of consecutive verses; 3) within a surah; 4) within a group of consecutive surahs; and 5) within the Qur'an as a whole.

Not only should one pay attention to these levels, but also pay attention to what possibly connects between parts of the Qur'an. While interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an, one should think about the link between parts of the Qur'an at least in terms of: 1) their topic; 2) their historical context; 3) their structure; 4) their linguistic style; and 5) their meaning/message.

In addition, employing tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an means paying attention to various types of intra-Qur'anic connections. There are at least 13 distinguishable types of intra-Qur'anic connections for an exegete to take into account for his interpretation to be holistic. They are: 1) the internal relationship between all or some parts available in a verse; 2) the relationship between a verse and the immediate preceding verses (al-sabiq); 3) the relationship between a verse and the immediate succeeding verses (al-lahiq); 4) the relationship between a word or a statement with the textual context (siyaq) of a group of verses where it is located; 5) the relationship between a verse and the pillar/central theme ('amud) or the objective (gharad/hadaf) of the surah where it is located; 6) the relationship between a verse and a distant part of the Qur'an dealing with the same or relevant topic; 7) the relationship between a verse and a distant part of the Qur'an displaying a comparable linguistic feature; 8) the relationship between the use of a word or phrase in a verse and the entire/dominant usage of the word or phrase in the Qur'an; 9) the relationship between variant modes of reading (qira'at); 10) the relationship between two or more consecutive groups of verses; 11) the relationship between different sections (the first, the middle and the last) of a surah; 12) the relationship between two or more consecutive surahs; and 13) the relationship between a surah or a section in a surah and another distant surah or its section. (I. Rohman, 2016, 104).

Not only can an exegete seek to pay attention to all of these connections while interpreting a passage of the Qur'an, but also he may consider various objectives he could have with referring to other Qur'anic parts. At least, there can be eight different objectives an interpreter may choose: 1) reference to other Qur'anic verses to re-emphasize the message of the verse being interpreted, or to let the readers know the place where the same message is available (either delivered with the same or similar expressions, or with different expressions, or in an abridged form); 2) reference to other Qur'anic verses that are more detailed, clearer, more specific or have different context to elucidate the meaning of the verse/phrase/word being interpreted, or to add more information to it; 3) reference to other Qur'anic parts to select or prefer one meaning among some possible meanings hinted at by the verse being interpreted; 4) reference to other Qur'anic parts (containing relevant vocabularies) to explain the usage of a word (mentioned in the verse being interpreted) in the rest of the Qur'an and/or to clarify the meaning of the word or another word mentioned in the verse; 5) reference to nearby verses to show the harmony or the relationship between the verse being interpreted and the surrounding verses, or to clarify the context, the objective or the central theme of a set of verses or a surah in its entirety; 6) reference to other Qur'anic verses to clarify the agreement between the verse being interpreted and other verses whose meanings seem to be in conflict, unlikely congruent or irreconcilable; 7) reference to other Qur'anic parts to support a statement an exegete makes or an opinion he cites in his discussion of the topic of a certain verse, which is not directly related to the meaning of that verse; and 8) reference to other Qur'anic parts only to indicate similarities and/or differences between the verse being interpreted and these parts in terms of linguistic features and aspects, structure (uslub) as well as textual context (siyaq) to be considered in understanding the verse. (I. Rohman, 2016, 83-101).

This sophisticated way to apply tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an means that an interpreter of the Qur'an may choose to focus on applying it with greater breadth and depth without resorting to other interpretive devices or applying other methodologies.

Conclusion

While some practices of tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an may be still involved in

either tradition-based tafsir or reason-based tafsir, it has become a methodology of Qur'an interpretation that is more appropriately categorized on its own. One should not be confused with its existence within tradition-based commentaries and reason-based commentaries since even in reason-based commentaries narrated traditions are also cited, and in tradition-based commentaries linguistic and historical analyses also exist.

Once one categorizes interpretation of the Qur'an with reference to the Qur'an as a distinctive methodology, it would allow more scholars' attention and further development. For one thing, this methodology could be built upon ideas already put forward by modern exegetes like Farahi, Islahi, Shanqiti, Tabataba'i and others.

As many have implied, there has been a wide consensus among Muslim scholars on that this method is not only a must but also the first thing to do or even the best, most authoritative and highest way in interpreting the Qur'an. However, without being recognized as a distinctive methodology and further development, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an would remain not widely employed.

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