

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCES OF THE QURAN

An Introduction to 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân

I. Definition of 'Uloom al-Qur'ân

The knowledge of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân, or 'The Sciences of the Qur'ân', deals with the knowledge of those sciences that have a direct bearing on the recitation, history,

Understanding and implementation of the Qur'ân. It is, therefore, a vast field of Islamic scholarship, and one that is of primary importance.

Thus, for example, with regards to recitation, 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân deals with the science of pronunciation (tajweed), the different methodologies of reciting the Qur'ân (the qira'at), the blessings of reciting the Qur'ân, and the etiquette of its recitation.

With regards to the history of the Qur'ân, 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân deals with the stages of revelation of the Qur'ân, the compilation of the Qur'ân, the art and history of writing the Qur'anic script (rasm al-masaahif), and the preservation of the Qur'ân.

With regards to its understanding and implementation, 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân covers the causes of revelation (asbaab an-nuzool), the knowledge of makee and madanee revelations, the knowledge of the various forms (ahruf) it was revealed in, the understanding of its abrogated rulings and verses (naasikh wa al-mansookh), the knowledge of the various classifications of its verses (muhkam and mutashaabih, 'aam and khaas, mutlaq and muqqayad, etc.), the knowledge of its interpretation (tafseer), the grammatical analysis of the Qur'ân ('iraab al-Qur'ân) and the knowledge of those words whose usage has become uncommon over time (ghareeb al-Qur'ân).

It has been said that the knowledge of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân is in reality the knowledge that one is required to know in order to properly interpret the Qur'ân. Therefore, to call this branch of Islamic knowledge 'The Procedure and Methodology of Interpretation' ('Ilm Usool at-Tafseer) instead of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân would not be far from the truth. [1] However, 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân also includes topics that have very little or no bearing of tafseer, such as compilation of the Qur'ân, and the development of the script of the Qur'ân. Therefore, the knowledge of the 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân is more general than 'Ilm Usool at-Tafseer.

II. Benefits of Studying 'Uloom al-Qur'ân

There are many benefits to the knowledge of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân.

Firstly, it enables the reader to realize the wealth of knowledge and insight that exists with regards to the Book of Allâh. As some of the scholars of the past said, "True knowledge is to know one's ignorance." Only when a person realizes what he does not know will he appreciate how little he does know.

Secondly, it enables the student of knowledge to better understand the Qur'ân, in that he will be familiar with the history of its revelation and collection, and the various aspects that aid its comprehension. When he reads the books of tafseer, he will be able to understand the terms used, and benefit from the knowledge in them to a greater extent. In other words, he will be equipped to further increase his knowledge and to learn about his religion.

Thirdly, it increases a person's belief (eemaan), because he will realize the beauty of the Qur'ân and the great blessings that he has been given through its revelation. He will not be fooled by the fallacious claims of its enemies, and his heart will be at ease with regards to its authenticity. He will understand the miraculous nature of the Qur'ân, and thus better cherish the greatest Book that mankind has been given.

Fourthly, he will be able to defend the Qur'ân against his enemies, since he will be equipped with the true and pristine knowledge of the Qur'ân, unadulterated by the prejudices of its opponents.

It is no exaggeration to say that, once a person learns the essentials of his religion and what is required for him to know, the first knowledge he should turn his attention to is the knowledge of the Qur'ân and its sciences. As Allâh says [2] in the Qur'ân,

“(This is a) Book that We have sent down to you, full of blessings, so that they may ponder over its verses, and that men of understanding may remember.” (Quran, 38:29)

III. The History of 'Uloom al-Qur'ân

Like all the sciences of Islâm, the knowledge of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân initiated with the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) himself. The Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) about any concept that they did not understand in the Qur'ân. For example concerning the verse,

“Those who believe and do not mix their belief with injustice, only they will have security, and they are guided.” (Quran, 6:82)

They asked, “O Messenger of Allâh! Who amongst us does not do injustice (to his soul)?” They had understood that the verse was referring to those believers who did not commit any injustice, or sin. The Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) replied that the injustice referred to this verse was shirk, or the association of partners with Allâh. [3]

Such was the enthusiasm of the Companions in seeking this knowledge that they were able to not only explain any verse in the Qur'ân, but also give its history and the cause of its revelation.

Ibn Mas'ood said, “I swear by Allâh, besides whom there is no other god, there is no soorah in the Qur'ân except that I know where it was revealed! And there is not a single verse in the Qur'ân except that I know the reason behind its revelation! If there were any person that knew more about the Qur'an than I did, and it was possible for me to reach him, I would ride (on my camel) towards him (to get his knowledge).” [4]

Alee ibn Abee Taalib told his students, "Ask me! For I swear by Allâh, there is nothing that you will ask me except that I will answer you. Ask me concerning the Book of Allâh! For I swear by Allâh, there is not a single verse in the Qur'ân except that I know whether it was revealed at night or during the day, or on a mountain or on a plain!"

[5]

There were many Companions who were famous for their knowledge of the Qur'ân, among them were the four Khulafaa ar-Raashidoon, [6] 'Abdullaah ibn Mas'ood (d.32 A.H.), 'Abdullaah ibn 'Abbaas (d.68 A.H.), Ubay ibn Ka'ab (d.32 A.H.), Zayd ibn Thaabit (d.45 A.H.), Aboo Moosaa al-Ash'aree (d.50 A.H.), 'Abdullaah ibn Zubayr (d.73 A.H.) and 'Aa'ishah (d.57 A.H.).

The generation that came after the Companions, the Successors, studied eagerly under the wise guardianship of the Companions. These students took over their predecessors' responsibilities, and passed this knowledge faithfully to the next generation. Ibn 'Abbaas' students, Sa'eed ibn Jubayr (d.95 A.H.), Mujaahid ibn Jabr (d.100 A.H.), 'Ikrimah al-Barbaree (d.104 A.H.), Taawoos ibn Kaysaan (d.106 A.H.), and 'Ataa' ibn Rabaah (d.114 A.H.), were all famous in Makkah; Ubay ibn Ka'ab's students, Zayd ibn Aslam (d.63 A.H.), Aboo al-'Aaliyah (d.90 A.H.) and Muhammad ibn Ka'ab (d.120 A.H.), were the teachers of Madinah; and in Iraq, 'Abdullaah ibn Mas'ood left behind his great legacy to 'Alqamah ibn Qays (d.60 A.H.), Masrooq ibn al-Ajda' (d.63 A.H.), al-Hasan al-Basree (d.110 A.H.), and Qataadah as-Sadoosee (d.110 A.H.). These three places, Makkah, Madinah, and Koofah, were the leading centres of all the sciences of Islâm, including tafseer and 'uloom al-Qur'ân.

Thus the knowledge of the Qur'ân was passed on '...by the trustworthy (scholars) of the ummah, who protected it from the alteration of the heretics, the false claims of the liars, and the false interpretations of the ignorant.' [7]

Early scholars did not write on 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân in general, but rather wrote separate tracts on each science of the Qur'ân. This was due to the fact that, during the early stages of Islamic history, the oral transmission of knowledge occupied a more important status than the written transmission. In addition, the general level of knowledge was high, and did not warrant the extensive writing down of knowledge.

The first and most important of the topics to be written on was tafseer. For example, each of the following scholars wrote a tafseer of the Qur'ân, composed of statements from the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) and the Companions: Sufyaan ath-Thawree (d.161

A.H.), Sufyaan ibn 'Uyaynah (d.198 A.H.), Wakee' ibn al-Jaraah (d.197 A.H.), and Shu'bah ibn al-Hajjaaj (d.160 A.H.).

Following his predecessor's footsteps, Muhammad ibn Jareer at-Tabaree (d.310 A.H.) wrote the monumental Jaami' al-Bayaan 'an Ta'weel aay al-Qur'ân, a tafseer that all later scholars who benefit from. Other early tafseers were written by Aboo Bakr ibn Mundhir an-Naysabooree (d. 318 A.H.), Ibn Abee Haatim (d.328 A.H.), Ibn Hibbaan (d.369 A.H.), al-Haakim (d.405 A.H.) and Ibn Mardawayh (d.410 A.H.). All of these tafseers were based on reports from the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) and the Companions and Successors, and included the chains of narration (isnaad) of the reports.

After the books of tafseer followed a plethora of books on the other sciences of the Qur'ân: 'Alee al-Madeenee (d.234 A.H.), the teacher of Imaam al-Bukhari, wrote a book on Asbaab an-Nuzool; Aboo 'Ubayd al-Qaasim ibn Sallaam (d.224 A.H.) wrote two books, one on the science of the Qira'at (which was one of the first of its kind), and one on abrogation in the Qur'ân, Naasikh wa al-Mansookh; Ibn Qutaybah (d.276 A.H.) wrote a book on rare words in the Qur'ân, Mushkil al-Qur'ân;

Aboo Ishaq az-Zajjaaj (d.311 A.H.) wrote a grammatical analysis of the Qur'ân, 'Iraab al-Qur'ân; Ibn Darstawayh (d.330 A.H.) composed a tract on the miraculous nature of the Qur'ân, I'jaaz al-Qur'ân; Aboo Bakr as-Sijistaanee (d.330 A.H.) wrote another book on rare words in the Qur'ân, Ghareeb al-Qur'ân; Aboo Bakr al-Baaqillaanee (d.403 A.H.) wrote his famous treatise, also related to the miraculous nature of the Qur'ân, I'jaaz al-Qur'ân; Imaam an-Nasaa'ee (d.303 A.H.), the author of the Sunan, wrote one on the merits of the Qur'ân, Fadaa'il al-Qur'ân; Aboo al-Hasan al-Waahidee (d.468 A.H.) wrote his famous book on Asbaab an-Nuzool; 'Ilm ad-Deen as-Sakhaawee (d.634 A.H.) wrote one on the various qira'at, and so on.

It must also be mentioned that, in addition to these books, many of the books of ahadith, such as the Saheehs of al-Bukhari and Muslim, included sections on various topics of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân. For example, most of the books of the Sunnah have chapters on the tafseer of the Qur'ân, the benefits of reciting the Qur'ân, the history of its compilation, and other topics.

Finally, the scholars of the later generations started compiling all of these sciences into one book, and thus began the era of the classic works on 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân. The first works of this nature were actually meant to be works of tafseer. One of the first works that is reported in later

references (but is not extant) is that of Aboo Bakr Muhammad ibn Khalaf ibn al-Marzaban (d.309 A.H.), entitled 'al-Haawee fee 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân.' [8] Another work, of which manuscript copies of fifteen of a total of thirty volumes are extant, is that of 'Alee ibn Ibraheem Sa'eed (d.330 A.H.), otherwise known as al-Hoofee, which he entitled, 'Al-Burhaan fee 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân'. This book is primarily one on tafseer, but also discusses all related aspects of a verse. So, for example, after each portion of the Qur'ân, it includes information about the verses' meaning, its interpretation, its purpose of revelation, its proper method of recitation, the different qira'aat of the verses and how they affect the meaning, where to stop and where not to, and so forth. This work is considered to be the first of its kind in its expansive approach to all the related sciences of the Qur'ân. [9]

There appeared after this, books of a similar nature, until finally Badr ad-Deen az-Zarkashee (d.794 A.H.) appeared with his monumental Al-Burhaan fee 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân (the same title as al-Hoofee's work). This is one of the great classics on 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân available in print. A little over a century later, another classic appeared, that of Jalaal ad-Deen as-Suyootee (d.911 A.H.), entitled Al-Itqaan fee 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân. These two works are considered the standard resource works on 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân, and both have been printed a number of times during the last few decades.

Books on 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân continued to appear throughout the centuries, [10] and these last few decades have been no exception. The better known books of this era have been Manaahil al-'Irfaan fee 'Uloom al-Qur'ân by Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd al-Adheem az-Zarqaanee; al-Madhkhal li Dirasaat al-Qur'ân al-Kareem by Muhammad Aboo Shahmah; and the two books, both of which are entitled Mabaahith fee 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân, one by Dr. Subhee Saalih and the other by Dr. Mannaa' al-Qattaan.

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be great interest in English circles concerning this topic. Other topics, such as hadeeth and fiqh, have been given greater attention. [11] In English, the only work present [12] is Ahmed Von Denffer's book, 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ân. [13] It is a useful book in that it presents a summary of many concepts of 'Uloom Al-Qur'ân, and is meant for a young adult audience. However, probably due to the nature of the audience, the author does not go into great detail.

1. cf. ar-Roomee, Fahd ibn 'Abd al-Rahmaan ibn Sulaymaan: Dirasaat fi 'Uloom al-Qur'ân, Maktabah at-Tawbah, Riyadh, 1994, p.33, who equates 'Uloom al-Qur'ân with Usool at-tafseer.

2. It should be pointed out that the Qur'ân is only in Arabic, and is the speech (kalaam) of Allâh, as shall be proved and elaborated upon in the next chapter. Therefore, the unconditional phrase, "Allâh says," when used in this book (or any book), only refers to the Qur'ân. When this phrase is used in a language other than Arabic, it contains an additional implicit cause, that should be understood by the audience, and this clause is, "the meaning of which is," since the Qur'ân is only in Arabic. Therefore, this phrase should be understood as, "The Meaning of what Allâh has said is..."

3. Reported by al-Bukhari.

4. Reported by al-Bukhari.

5. ar-Roomee, p.37.

6. A term that means 'The rightly guided Caliphs', used to denote the first four caliphs, Aboo Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmaan and 'Alee.

7. A paraphrase of an authentic Hadith of the Prophet (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam), reported by Ibn 'Adee and Ibn 'Asaakir. The beginning of the Hadith is, 'This knowledge will be carried by the trustworthy of the Ummah, who will protect...'

8. ar-Roomee, p.45, quoting Ibn Nadeem's Fihrist, p.24.

9. az-Zarqaanee, Muhammad 'Abd al-'Adheem: Manaahil al-'Irfaan fi 'Uloom al-Qur'ân, Dar al-Fikr, Cairo, n.d., p.35 and Qattaa, Manna': Mabathith fi 'Uloom al-Qur'ân, Muasasat al-Risalat, Beirut, 1983, p.14.

10. See ar-Roomee, pps.41-48, where he lists the most important works in this field from every century of the hijrah, starting from the second century until the present one.

11. In hadeeth, the best works out for introductory-level students are Hadith Literature: Its Origins, Development and Special Feature by Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi (Islamic Texts Society, London, 1993), and Studies on Hadith Methodology and Literature by Muhammad Mustafa Azami (American Trust Publication, Indianapolis, 1977); in 'Usool al-Fiqh, a good work is by Muhammad Hashim Kamali, Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (Islamic Texts Society, 1991).

12. This is the only book that this author came across concerning this topic from a Muslim author. There is, however, a translation of Ibn Taymiyyah's An Introduction to the Principles of Tafseer (al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, Birmingham, 1993).

13. Published by, 'The Islaamic Foundation,' Leicester, 1983.

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