Early Development of *Tafsir*

To a certain degree, it can be said that Sahabah had almost no difficulty in understanding the meaning and message of the *Qur’an* because the *Qur’an* was revealed in their own language and they were aware of the situations surrounding the revelations. Despite these facts, still a need was felt for *Tafsir* because of different reasons. The *Qur’an* came with words already existing in the society but with new meanings. For instance the word “Zakah”, which had the original meaning of “Growing”, has been infused with a new connotation of “Purity.” Allah says:

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خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ بِهَا وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ صَلََتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَهُمْ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ
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“Of their goods, take alms, that so thou mightest purify and sanctify them; and pray on their behalf. Verily thy prayers are a source of security for them: And Allah is One Who heareth and knoweth.” (9:103)

Another example, which clarifies that at certain places, Sahabah were also in need of *Tafsir*.

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الَّذِينَ آَمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمُ الَْْمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ
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“That those who believe and donot obscure their faith with transgression, for them there is security and they are rightly guided.” (6:82)

Ibn Mas‘ud narrates that when the above *ayat* was revealed, some of the Sahabah became worried and distressed, because the general meaning of *Zulm* covers any kind of wrong, major or minor and no one is free from error. When they approached Muhammad (peace be upon him) in order to put their concerns before him, he explained them in this way.

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“It is not as you all think. It is no more than what Luqman said to his son; verity, shirk is the top most form of Zulm.” (Sahih Muslim, al-Qur’an [31:13])
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Thus in this way Muhammad (peace be upon him) explained them the broader meaning of *Zulm*. Therefore it becomes very much clear that the *job* of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was to explain the meaning of the *Qur’an* to the people. So during the lifetime of Muhammad (peace be upon him), Sahabah used to approach him in different matters worth to be explained.

But after the demise of Muhammad (peace be upon him) for interpretation and explanation of the *Qur’an*, Sahabah turned to those among themselves who were more gifted in understanding the *Qur’an* and who have spent more time with Muhammad (peace be upon him). Some of the Sahabah who became most noted and popular for their ability to make *Tafsir* of the *Qur’an* are the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, the wife of Muhammad (peace be upon him) –

As the time elapsed, these Sahabah carried Islam to different parts of the world and the great empires of the world like Persia and Byzantine came into their folds. In these new areas Sahabah used to teach and explain those who came to Islam the meaning of the Qur’an. This is the fundamental reason that how the knowledge of the Tafsir spread and how its development took place, and we find that different centers of Qur’anic learning sprung up everywhere. The persons who gathered around the Sahabah were outstanding individuals who remained their students and absorbed from them the knowledge. They came to be known in the history as Tabi’un. It is obvious that each Sahabah carried with him a portion of knowledge, some of which overlapped with that of other and some of which did not. At the same time, many students travelled to others Islamic centers to study under many other Sahabah, while some remained with their teachers until their demise.

Different centers of Tafsir evolved and among them important were those of Makkah, Madinah and Iraq. In Makkah, the Tafsir School of Ibn-‘Abbas became the most famous. Ibn-‘Abbas was one of the greatest scholars among the Sahabah. Muhammad (peace be upon him) prayed for him as follows:

“O Allah give him a deep understanding of the religion and make him skilled in interpretation.”

(Sahih Bukhari)

It is reported that “Abd Allah ibn Mas’ud conferred on him the title, “Tarjaman al-Qur’an.” The most famous students of Ibn-‘Abbas were Mujahid, Ikrimah, S’aid Ibn Jubayr, Tawus ibn Kisan and ‘Ata Ibn Abi Rabah.

In Madinah, the most important school of Tafsir was that of Ubayy Ibn Ka’ab. He was the person who was chosen by Muhammad(peace be upon him) to record the revelation of the Qur’an. He was considered by most of his contemporaries as the top reciter of the Qur’an. His most notable students were Zaid ibn Aslam, Muhammad ibn Ka’ab al-Qurathi and Abu al-‘Aliyah.

In Iraq another Important school of Tafsir flourished headed by ‘Abu Abd Allah ibn Mas’ud. He used to say:
“By the one besides there is no god, I know where every ayat of Allah’s book was revealed.” (Sahih Muslim)

The most famous students of Ibn Mas‘ud were Hasan al-Basri, Alqamah Ibn Qays, Masruq and Amir al-Sha‘bi. During this period, Sahabah used to teach Tafsir by narration. They used to quote the sayings of the Muhammad (peace be upon him) which explained the meanings of *ayats*, or explained the historical context in which these *ayats* were revealed. After the era of Sahabah, their students also taught by means of narration in the same manner as their teachers did. It was during their era (Tabi‘un) that some compilation of Tafsir took place. The most significant example is that of Mujahid, who had compiled the earliest known Tafsir.

It was at the expiry of the rule of Umayyads that the systematic compilation of *Tafsir* started. Special attention was paid to the narration of *Tafsir* attributed to Muhammad (peace be upon him), Sahabah and their followers. However, during this period complete *Tafsir* of the whole *Qur’an* did not took place. It was only toward the expiry of ninth century Christian era, that the field emerged as an independent science. This generation was first to compile *Tafsir* of the *Qur’an* according to the order of written text. The earliest *Tafsir* of such a type to reach us was of Ibn Jarir al- Tabari (839-923 C.E. / 225-310 A.H.).

Other *Tafasir* were written by Ibn Hibban (d .980 C.E.), Ibn Abi Haytham (d.939 C.E.) and others. Since then the process continued and is still going on.