

The Role of *‘Aql* in Qur’anic Exegesis: A Comparative Study of Traditional Shī‘ī and Critical Rationalist Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The role of *‘aql* (reason or intellect) in Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) is subject to contrasting interpretations between traditional Shī‘ī scholars of the Qur’an and critical rationalists. Traditional Shī‘ī scholars of the Qur’an – i.e. those who adhere to a classical *uṣūlī* (rationalist) hermeneutical approach – regard *‘aql* as a legitimate source of knowledge like the Qur’an and Sunna and assume it possesses religious authority (*ḥujjiyya shar‘iyya*). Within their framework, an exegetical method is the use of an authoritative source in exegesis, leading them to assert that reason-based exegesis (*tafsīr ‘aqlī*) is an important method in Qur’anic interpretation. In contrast, critical rationalists contend that traditional scholars have attributed an unwarranted role to *‘aql* by equating it with a source of objective truths. According to critical rationalists, *‘aql* encompasses two distinct cognitive faculties: *‘aql* as “reason” distinguishes valid arguments from invalid ones, and *‘aql* as “intellect” seeks to comprehend reality by developing, formulating, and assessing conjectures. *Aql* functions as a method solely in its capacity as reason, albeit with a function that diverges significantly from the traditional scholars’ interpretation. This paper first introduces, compares, and contrasts the traditional Shī‘ī and critical rationalist

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perspectives concerning the role of 'aql in Qur'anic exegesis. It subsequently explores the implications of these differences on the typology and study of exegetical methods and approaches.

KEYWORDS: 'aql, exegesis, traditional Shī'ī, critical rationalist, typology, exegetical methods, exegetical approaches

The perspective of traditional Shī'ī scholars on the role of 'aql in Qur'anic exegesis

Generally, traditional Shī'ī scholars of the Qur'an² – i.e. those who adopt a classical *uṣūlī* hermeneutical approach to the study of Qur'anic exegesis³ – hold the view that 'aql is a valid source of knowledge like the Qur'an and Sunna. They consequently assume it possesses religious authority (*ḥujjiyya shar'īyya*). One of the foundational pieces of evidence frequently cited by these scholars to substantiate their view is a hadith attributed to Imam Mūsā b. Ja'far al-Kāẓim. In this hadith, the Imam addresses his companion Hishām b. al-Ḥakam with the following words:

يَا هِشَامُ إِنَّ لِلَّهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حُجَّتَيْنِ حُجَّةً ظَاهِرَةً وَحُجَّةً بَاطِنَةً فَأَمَّا الظَّاهِرَةُ فَالرُّسُلُ
وَالْأَنْبِيَاءُ وَالْأئِمَّةُ وَأَمَّا البَاطِنَةُ فَالعُقُولُ

O Hishām! God has two pieces of evidence for people: [one is] manifest, and [the other is] hidden. That which is manifest is His messengers, prophets, and Imams. That which is hidden is the

² My research specifically centres on the views of prominent traditional Shī'ī scholars of the Qur'an who have written on reason-based exegesis.

³ *Uṣūlī* (rationalist) here is used in contrast to *akhbārī* (traditionist). *Uṣūlīs* are scholars of the Islamic discipline known as the Principles of Jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), which discusses Islamic legal theory and hermeneutics. For an overview of the *uṣūlī* and *akhbārī* positions, see Gleave (2013, pp. 26-29 and 184-186). For a detailed examination of the use of Shī'ī *uṣūlī* hermeneutics in Qur'anic exegesis, see Ṣādiqī (1391 (solar)/2012).

[people's] *‘aql*.⁴

Traditional Shī‘ī scholars argue that *‘aql* being “evidence” means we must act according to its dictates. If it passes a definitive judgement on some issue, we must act according to it; otherwise, to regard it as evidence would be meaningless (Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī 1390 (solar)/2011, p. 156).

Some traditional Shī‘ī scholars further distinguish between various types of *‘aql* and argue that it is the “demonstrative *‘aql*” (*‘aql-i burhānī*) that has this status, not the “lantern *‘aql*” (*‘aql-i miṣbāḥ*). In its capacity as the lantern *‘aql*, *‘aql* elucidates the meaning of Qur’anic verses by drawing upon other verses, hadiths, and resources such as lexicons. However, in its capacity as the demonstrative *‘aql*, it is a source of knowledge, bestowing us with insights into various subjects. In the context of Qur’anic exegesis, it possesses an innate capacity to unveil the intended meanings of verses.

Ayatollah Jawādī-Āmulī, one of the most prominent Shī‘ī exegetes today, explains the role of *‘aql* in *tafsīr* as follows:

Reason-based exegesis (*tafsīr-i ‘aqlī*), as mentioned previously, is done [in two ways:] either by making sense of internal and external evidence, in that an intelligent and sharp *‘aql* understands the meaning of verses by putting verses and traditions together. In such a case, *‘aql* only plays the role of a lantern, nothing more. As this type of rational endeavour-reason-based exegesis (*tafsīr-i ijtihādī-‘aqlī*) is done by using transmitted sources, it [actually] comes under [the category of] “exegesis by reports” (*tafsīr bih ma’thūr*), not reason-based exegesis. Or, [reason-based exegesis is done] by inferring certain conceptual (*taṣawwuri*) and affirmational (*taṣdīqī*) principles from the inherent source of the demonstrative *‘aql* and self-evident axioms. Here, *‘aql* plays the role of a source (*manba‘*), not a mere lantern, [and this is what is really meant by reason-based exegesis] (1379 (solar)/2000, p. 170).

At this juncture, it is noteworthy that traditional Shī‘ī scholars employ

⁴ Al-Kulaynī, 1429 (lunar)/2008, v. 1, p. 35.

various terminologies to describe reason-based exegesis.⁵ For example, Ayatollah Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat (1418 (lunar)/1997, p. 349) and Muḥammad 'Alī Ayāzī (1414 (lunar)/1993), p. 40) refer to it as “rational endeavour exegesis” (*tafsīr-i ijtihādī*); 'Alī al-Ālūsī (1370 (solar)/1991, p. 246) uses the term “rational endeavour-reason-based exegesis” (*tafsīr ijtihādī-'aqlī*); and, as previously mentioned, Ayatollah Jawādī-Āmulī applies the term “rational endeavour-reason-based exegesis” when 'aql functions as a lantern. These examples illustrate that while there are some similarities in the terminology used by these authors for reason-based exegesis, there is no uniformity. The same variability applies to their definitions of this type of exegesis; while common elements exist, there is no consensus on its precise scope and boundaries.

In his definition of reason-based exegesis, 'Alawī-Mihr, another contemporary Shī'ī scholar in the field of Qur'anic studies, draws extensively from the writings of Ayatollah Jawādī-Āmulī:

It is [a type of] exegesis that discovers religious rulings and the teachings and truths of verses of the Qur'an by using the demonstrative 'aql and rational indicators (*qarā'in-i 'aqlī*) as a source rather than merely as a lantern or tool (1394 (solar)/2015, p. 252).

'Alawī-Mihr concludes that reason-based exegesis can be categorised into two distinct types:

1. Specific (*khāṣṣ*): this type of exegesis relies on the demonstrative 'aql and represents exegesis in its truest form.
2. General (*'āmm*): this type of exegesis is conducted through the lantern 'aql (p. 262).

Another prominent traditional Shī'ī scholar, Ayatollah Makārim-Shīrāzī, highlights the significance of the demonstrative 'aql in his explanation of reason-based exegesis:

⁵ Some notable works widely regarded as reason-based exegesis are *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067), *Majma' al-bayān* by Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 1153), *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb (al-Tafsīr al-kabīr)* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī* by Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1853), and *Tafsīr al-mīzān* by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981).

The meaning of exegesis by *'aql* is that we seek the support of evident rational indicators, which are acceptable to all rational minds, in understanding the meaning of words and sentences in texts like the Qur'an and Hadith. For example, when it is stated: "The hand of God is over their hands,"⁶ *'aql* says certainly "the hand of God" does not refer to the particular limb that has five fingers because God definitely does not have a body as every body is limited and destined to perish, and God is not limited nor destined to perish; He is pre-eternal (*azalī*) and post-eternal (*abadī*). Instead, what is meant is the "power of God", which is above the power of all others. The hand is used metaphorically to mean power because the hand manifests an individual's power in action.

Wherever there is mention of exegesis by *'aql*, what is meant is this sort of exegesis, not the imposition [of one's opinions], personal preferences, poor arguments, and baseless opinions (1378 (solar)/1988, pp. 38-39).

This examination of the traditional Shī'ī perspective will conclude by delving into the viewpoint of the contemporary scholar of the Qur'an, Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī. His book, *Rawish-hā wa girāyish-hā-yi tafsīrī-yi Qur'ān* (1390 (solar)/2011), which constitutes volume two of his five-volume series titled *Mantiq-i tafsīr-i Qur'ān*, is widely regarded as one of the foremost textbooks on this subject within Shī'ī seminaries and undergraduate programmes.⁷ After comparing and critically evaluating the views of various Muslim authors, Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī concludes that the method of reason-based exegesis encompasses the following dual dimensions:

One: the use of demonstrative proof (*burhān*) and rational indicators (*qarā'in-i 'aqlī*) in exegesis as a means to clarify the concepts and intent of Qur'anic verses. Here, *'aql* is a source and tool for the exegesis of the Qur'an, and rational judgements and demonstrative proofs become

⁶ Q 48:10.

⁷ This work has been translated into English as *A Textbook on the Methods of Qur'anic Exegesis* (2018, ICAS Press). It is a core reading book on the Approaches to Exegesis module that I teach at The Islamic College, London.

indicators for the exegesis of verses. This type of 'aql is variously called the "acquired 'aql", "decisive rational judgements", and the "demonstrative 'aql".

Two: the use of the faculty of thinking to gather verses (while considering traditions, lexicons etc.) and making inferences from them to clarify the concepts and intent of verses. The product of this endeavour is "rational endeavour exegesis" (*tafsīr-i ijtihādī*) of the Qur'an. In this case, 'aql is a lantern and discoverer. This type of intellect is called "the inherent 'aql", "the faculty of thinking", and "the faculty of perception" (pp. 154-155).

Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī proceeds to explain that, according to the majority view, both types of reason-based exegesis are regarded as constituting the method. Nevertheless, he posits that "what is stated in the second definition is known as reason-based exegesis with a degree of inaccuracy, and in truth, reason-based exegesis is what is stated in the first definition" (p. 155).

Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī's perspective on the role of 'aql in Qur'anic exegesis can be summarised as follows:

1. 'Aql is a knowledge source. It is a knowledge source because it is authoritative evidence (*ḥujja*), as is the Qur'an and Sunna. 'Aql being an authority means we must base our actions on definitive judgements made by it.
2. We have proof that 'aql is an authority, such as the hadith attributed to Imam Mūsā b. Ja'far al-Kāẓim, previously cited.
3. Although 'aql is a knowledge source, it is not at the same level as the other two knowledge sources (Qur'an and Sunna). Instead, the position of 'aql as a source of knowledge is below that of the Qur'an and Sunna. 'Aql makes discoveries from the Qur'an and Sunna; hence, human beings will always need divine revelation (pp. 154-156).
4. As 'aql is a knowledge source, and a knowledge source is a "method" (Arabic: *manhaj*; Persian: *rawish*) in Qur'anic exegesis

(p. 22), it logically follows that *‘aql* is a method for interpreting the Qur’an. This principle also applies to the Qur’an and Sunna, both of which are knowledge sources and, consequently, exegetical methods.

An example of the traditional approach

The traditional perspective asserts that reason-based exegesis can be traced back to the time of the Infallibles. According to this viewpoint, the following report illustrates an instance of an Imam engaging in reason-based exegesis when addressing a question about the interpretation of a Qur’anic verse:

كُنْتُ فِي مَجْلِسِ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ إِذْ دَخَلَ عَلَيْهِ عَمْرُو بْنُ عُبَيْدٍ فَقَالَ لَهُ
جُعِلَتْ فِدَاكَ قَوْلَ اللَّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى ﴿وَمَنْ يَحْلِلْ عَلَيْهِ غَضَبِي فَقَدْ هَوَى﴾ مَا
ذَلِكَ الْغَضَبُ فَقَالَ أَبُو جَعْفَرٍ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ هُوَ الْعِقَابُ يَا عَمْرُو إِنَّهُ مَنْ زَعَمَ أَنَّ
اللَّهَ قَدْ زَالَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَى شَيْءٍ فَقَدْ وَصَفَهُ صِفَةَ مَخْلُوقٍ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى لَا يَسْتَفِزُّهُ
شَيْءٌ فَيُغَيِّرُهُ

I was in Abū Ja‘far [al-Bāqir]’s session when ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd suddenly entered. ‘Amr asked him: “May I be your ransom! In the statement of God, the Blessed and Exalted, ‘He upon whom My wrath descends will definitely perish,’⁸ what is this wrath?” Abū Ja‘far [al-Bāqir] said: “It is punishment, O ‘Amr! One who thinks God has changed from one state to another has thereby described Him as one describes a creature. Indeed, nothing provokes God thereby changing Him.”⁹

This interpretation exemplifies reason-based exegesis, unfolding through the following logical progression: when humans become angry, they undergo a change in their emotional state. However, God is immutable, remaining constant and unchanging. Therefore, a literal

⁸ Q 20:81.

⁹ Al-Kulaynī 1429 (lunar)/2008, v. 1, pp. 270-271.

reading of the verse would be incorrect as it would ascribe human-like anger to God. Instead, the verse is to be understood metaphorically to mean that God will punish the person with whom He is displeased.

The perspective of critical rationalists on the role of ‘aql in Qur’anic exegesis

Critical rationalism is a school of thought developed during the mid-twentieth century by the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper (d. 1996).¹⁰ One of Popper’s most famous quotations captures the essence of the critical rationalist philosophical outlook (1994, p. xii):

It is a way of thinking, and even a way of living: a readiness to listen to critical arguments, to search for one’s own mistakes, and to learn from them. It is, fundamentally, an attitude that I have tried to formulate (perhaps first in 1932) in the following two lines:

“I may be wrong and you may be right,
and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth.”

These lines reflect the core principles of critical rationalism, emphasising the importance of open-mindedness, self-critique, and the ongoing pursuit of truth through critical inquiry and learning from one’s mistakes.

Critical rationalists present a notably different perspective on the nature and role of ‘aql compared to traditional Shī‘ī scholars. According to Paya, a prominent Muslim critical rationalist, ‘aql encompasses two distinct cognitive faculties, expressed in English as “reason” and “intellect”. In its function as reason, ‘aql distinguishes valid arguments from invalid ones, while in its function as intellect, it seeks to comprehend reality by developing, formulating, and assessing conjectures (Paya 2022, pp. 45-46).

According to critical rationalists, reason serves as a tool for

¹⁰ For a short account of his life, see Popper, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (1974), and Miller, *Out of Error* (2006). For a sample of Popper’s works, see Popper, *Popper Selections*, ed. David Miller (1985).

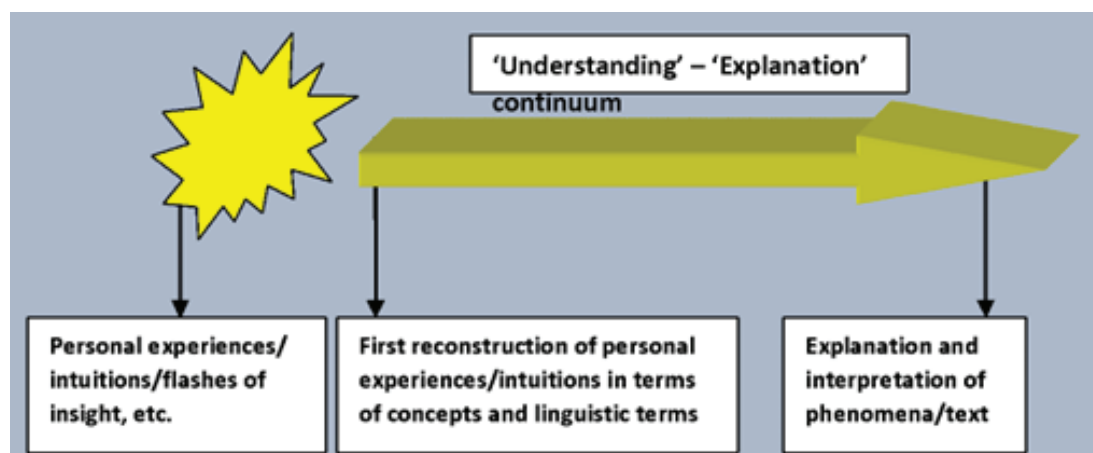
assessing the logical coherence of the form and structure, as opposed to the content, of arguments. On the other hand, the intellect's role is to formulate conjectures and apply them to reality. The content of knowledge claims cannot be assessed by any inherent truths stored in *‘aql* as posited by traditional Shī‘ī scholars. This is because *‘aql* does not inherently contain actual knowledge claims. Instead, the content of conjectures undergoes assessment in two ways: firstly, conjectures that have empirical content or deal with empirically accessible aspects of reality are assessed through empirical testing and analytical (i.e. rational, logical, and philosophical) processes. Secondly, conjectures lacking empirically testable content or pertaining to aspects of reality beyond empirical accessibility, such as assertions about the existence of angels, are assessed through analytical means. Additionally, these claims can be indirectly assessed by considering the empirical or practical implications that may arise from them.

Critical rationalists maintain that, unlike the Qur’an and Sunna, *‘aql*, in its function as reason, makes no knowledge claims and cannot be deemed a knowledge source since knowledge sources serve as repositories of knowledge claims. *‘Aql*, in its role as intellect, does make knowledge claims, but it does so by formulating conjectures; *formulating* conjectural knowledge claims is different from being a *source* of knowledge. Whereas the knowledge claims made by the Qur’an and authentic Sunna are true and infallible, those made by our intellect are fallible. We can better understand the content of the Qur’an and Sunna by successively correcting the defects of our proposed conjectures. Within the realm of *tafsīr*, these conjectures are expressed as interpretations of the Qur’anic text.

As for the hadiths about *‘aql* being *ḥujja*, critical rationalists provide an interpretation that significantly diverges from traditional Shī‘ī scholars. According to critical rationalists, the Qur’an, prophets, and Imams hold the status of *ḥujja* as authorities, providing valuable information that can be relied upon and tested against our conjectural understanding of their wisdom. However, *‘aql* serves as *ḥujja* in a different sense: in

its role as reason, it functions as a tool which authoritatively enables us to assess the form of knowledge claims. While the Qur’an, prophets, and Imams guide us by offering reliable information and correcting our erroneous conjectures, ‘aql guides us by assessing the correctness of our arguments by examining their logical and rational validity.

The diagram below illustrates the critical rationalist perspective on the development of conjectures from the point of their emergence through to becoming objective knowledge. Every conjecture, produced in response to a genuine problem presented by reality to the inquirer, begins as a lived experience, intuition, or flash of insight. Next, the intellect transforms these into thoughts by utilising memory, concepts, and language; this is the first stage of the individual’s “understanding”. Then, the intellect employs reason to translate these thoughts into publicly accessible and assessable arguments; this is “explanation” (Paya 2022, p. 83).



Understanding-Explanation Continuum
(Diagram courtesy of ICAS Press)

Critical rationalists argue that the growth of knowledge hinges on the elimination of errors in our proposed conjectural solutions. As the final arbiter, reality either corroborates or refutes our conjectures, thereby enhancing our understanding of it. In essence, our acquisition of knowledge about reality occurs through two avenues: *via positiva* and *via negativa*. Knowledge *via positiva* is the sum of all our conjectures,

which, so far and despite our best efforts to expose their shortcomings, have remained unrefuted. Knowledge *via negativa* is the sum of all our conjectures which have been shown to be false, indicating that the reality in question does not align with those conjectures. The process of refining our understanding through interaction with reality is never-ending, as we can never obtain the complete and absolute truth about any facet of reality. Even if, by chance, we were to stumble upon such truth, we would not be able to conclusively ascertain its status as such because of our limited cognitive abilities on the one hand and the indefinite richness and complexity of reality on the other (Popper 1979 and 1994).

An example of the critical rationalist approach

Paya (2018, pp. 38-39) offers an example from the Qur'an that he contends corroborates and endorses the critical rationalist approach to knowledge development. This example is found in Q 6:76-79, where Prophet Abraham delivers a compelling demonstration to the polytheists.

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ اللَّيْلُ رَأَىٰ كَوْكَبًا قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَا أُحِبُّ الْكَافِلِينَ

When the night grew dark over him, he saw a star and said: "This is my Lord," but when it set, he said: "I do not like things that set."

فَلَمَّا رَأَىٰ الْقَمَرَ بَازِعًا قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَئِن لَّمْ يَهْدِنِي رَبِّي لَأَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الضَّالِّينَ

And when he saw the moon rising, he said: "This is my Lord," but when it too set, he said: "If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray."

فَلَمَّا رَأَىٰ الشَّمْسَ بَازِعَةً قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي هَٰذَا أَكْبَرُ فَلَمَّا أَفَلَتْ قَالَ يُرِيدُ بَرِيءٌ مِّمَّا تُشْرِكُونَ

Then he saw the sun rising and cried: "This is my Lord! This is greater." But when the sun set, he said: "My people, I disown all that you worship beside God.

إِنِّي وَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّذِي فَطَرَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا أَنَا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists."

In his demonstration, Prophet Abraham employs a series of conjectures, each suggesting that a celestial body might be God. When reality exposes the shortcomings of a conjecture, he replaces it with a better one. Each time he does this, there is a growth of knowledge for the people *via negativa* as they learn what cannot be God. The conclusion is that God, as the unchanging source of guidance, help, and benefit, cannot be associated with entities that disappear.

After examining both the traditional and critical rationalist viewpoints, it becomes apparent that although both groups of scholars agree that 'aql is a tool and method for interpreting the Qur'an, they differ considerably in their reasons for why 'aql serves as an exegetical method and the role it plays. Traditional Shi'ī scholars view 'aql as an exegetical method because it is a knowledge source, whereas critical rationalists consider 'aql, in its function as reason, an exegetical method because it evaluates the form of arguments. The implications of these differences on the typology and study of exegetical methods and approaches will now be explored.

Implications of the two perspectives on the typology and study of exegetical methods and approaches

Typologies of exegetical methods and approaches and their importance

Typologies of exegetical methods and approaches help us determine

the particular genre to which a *tafsīr* can be attributed, and they make it easier to compare and contrast various exegeses. Moreover, the process of classification necessitates thoughtful judgement, requiring us to critically evaluate why certain labels are apt for categorising these works. For instance, when examining Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *al-Mizān*, certain questions arise: should it be classified as a philosophical exegetical work due to its use of philosophical *methods*? Or is it more accurate to consider *al-Mizān* as adopting a philosophical *approach* among various other approaches? This evaluative dimension of classification aids us in scrutinising exegetical works, prompting us to explore in greater depth the hermeneutical frameworks and tools employed by their authors.

Through my experience of teaching courses on methods and approaches of Qur'anic exegesis to undergraduate and graduate students, it has become evident that the categorisation of exegetical methods and approaches plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of them. In Islamic studies, courses and texts on Qur'anic hermeneutical methods and approaches tend to be structured around a specific typology. The selection of methods and approaches for discussion and how they are perceived is heavily influenced by the typology adopted by the course or text.

Typologies of Qur'anic exegesis

Ignác Goldziher is credited with being the first person to have written specifically on Qur'anic exegetical methods and approaches. His *Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* was first published in 1920 and has since been translated into Arabic in 1944 and 1955, Persian in 2004, and English in 2006 (Zadeh 2015, p. 329). Goldziher divided Qur'anic exegetical works into the early stages, traditional exegesis (Sunnī works with a linguistic or hadith-based approach), dogmatic exegesis (focused on theological disputes), mystical exegesis, sectarian exegesis, and modern exegesis.

Among the notable works originally authored in English on this

subject is John Wansbrough's 1977 book, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Wansbrough borrowed terminology from the Jewish exegetical tradition to classify early exegetical texts into haggadic (narrative), halakhic (legal), masoretic (textual), rhetorical, and allegorical types. Johanna Pink's research in 2010 is also noteworthy for her development of a typology for modern *tafsīr* by analysing modern Arabic, Turkish, Malay, and Indonesian *tafsīr* works (2010a and 2010b).

The first book originally written in Arabic that systematically classified works of exegesis was Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī's *al-Tafsīr wa-l-mufasssīrūn* (Exegesis and Exegetes), first published in 1961. In response to al-Dhahabī's treatment of Shī'ī exegesis and aiming to present a more accurate representation of exegetical works and their authors, Ayatollah Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat wrote *al-Tafsīr wa-l-mufasssīrūn fī thawbihi al-qashīb* (Exegesis and Exegetes in New Clothes) in 1409 (lunar)/1988.

In recent decades, a substantial body of Persian literature has enriched this field. Notable publications include 'Abbās 'Alī 'Umayd Zanjānī's *Mabānī wa rawish-hā-yi tafsīrī-yi Qur'ān* (Foundations and Exegetical Methods of the Qur'an) in 1366 (solar)/1987; Sayyid Riḍā Mu'addab's *Rawish-hā-yi tafsīr-i Qur'ān* (Methods of Exegesis of the Qur'an) in 1380 (solar)/2001; Ḥusayn 'Alawī-Mihr's *Rawish-hā wa girāyish-hā-yi tafsīrī* (Exegetical Methods and Orientations) in 1381 (solar)/2002; 'Alī Akbar Bābā'ī's *Makātib-i tafsīrī* (Exegetical Schools) in 1381 solar/2002; Muḥammad 'Alī Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī's *Rawish-hā wa girāyish-hā-yi tafsīrī-yi Qur'ān* (Exegetical Methods and Orientations of the Qur'an) in 1390 (solar)/2011, which is the second volume of his five-volume series, *Mantiq-i tafsīr-i Qur'ān* (Logic of Exegesis of the Qur'an); and the encyclopaedia entry in volume seven of *Dānishnāmih-yi jihān-i Islām* (1383 (solar)/2004), which has been translated into English as *Tafsir: Qur'anic Exegesis: An Entry from Encyclopaedia of the World of Islam* (2012). The authors of these works utilise various approaches to categorise exegetical works and employ a wide array of terms to

label the categories, such as exegetical “foundations”, “methods”, “methodologies”, “schools”, “orientations”, and “approaches”.

A traditional Shī‘ī typology

In his highly popular textbook mentioned earlier, Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī (1390 (solar)/2011) distinguishes between exegetical “methods” and “approaches”:

Methods [are] the use of specific tools or sources in Qur’an interpretation to clarify the meaning and intent of its verses and arrive at distinct conclusions. In other words, how an exegete discovers and extracts the meanings and intent from the verses (p. 22).

Approaches [are] the influence of religious and doctrinal beliefs and trends in the exegete’s era, and the exegete’s style of *tafsīr*, which is shaped by his beliefs, objectives, tastes, preferences, and academic specialisation (p. 23).

In an interview I conducted with Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī, he emphasised that in the realm of Qur’anic exegesis, it is the knowledge source that distinguishes an exegetical method from an exegetical approach. He explained that the term “method” is a homonym and carries a particular meaning in Qur’anic exegesis. Just as the word “Shaykh” refers to “Ibn Sīnā” (Avicenna) in philosophy but to “Ṭūsī” (Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī) in jurisprudence, the term “method” takes on various meanings within different contexts. In the context of Qur’anic exegesis, “method” assumes a specific definition provided by experts in the field.

I also interviewed ‘Alawī-Mihr, whose work I referenced earlier. He explained that knowledge sources are considered methods because the religion regards them as credible and authoritative (*ḥujja*). The religious authority (*ḥujjiyyat-i shar‘ī*) of a knowledge source makes it a method; therefore, since the Qur’an, Sunna, and *‘aql* are all authoritative, they are methods. When these authoritative sources of knowledge are employed for exegetical purposes, they function as methods of *tafsīr*. ‘Alawī-Mihr defined method as “the use of a knowledge source that has

religious authority.” He referred to the view of Ayatollah Jawādī-Āmulī, who contends that if something in science is certain, it is authoritative. Therefore, “scientific” (*‘ilmī*) exegesis is considered a knowledge source and a method based on the premise that it uses accurate and authoritative scientific knowledge in exegesis.

The diagram below illustrates Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī’s typology of exegetical methods and approaches.¹¹ As can be seen, the reason-based method is placed alongside the intratextual exegetical method (*tafsīr al-Qur’ān bil-Qur’ān*),¹² the tradition-based exegetical method (*tafsīr bil-riwāya*),¹³ the scientific (*‘ilmī*) method,¹⁴ the allegorical (*ishārī*) method,¹⁵ and the amalgamate (*jāmi‘*) method.¹⁶

¹¹ The aim of this section, along with the following sections, is to compare and contrast a traditional Shī‘ī typology with a critical rationalist one to understand how these different paradigms influence their typologies, and how these typologies, in turn, impact the study of exegetical methods and approaches. Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī’s typology was chosen due to the widespread use of his work as a primary textbook in Shī‘ī seminaries and undergraduate programmes.

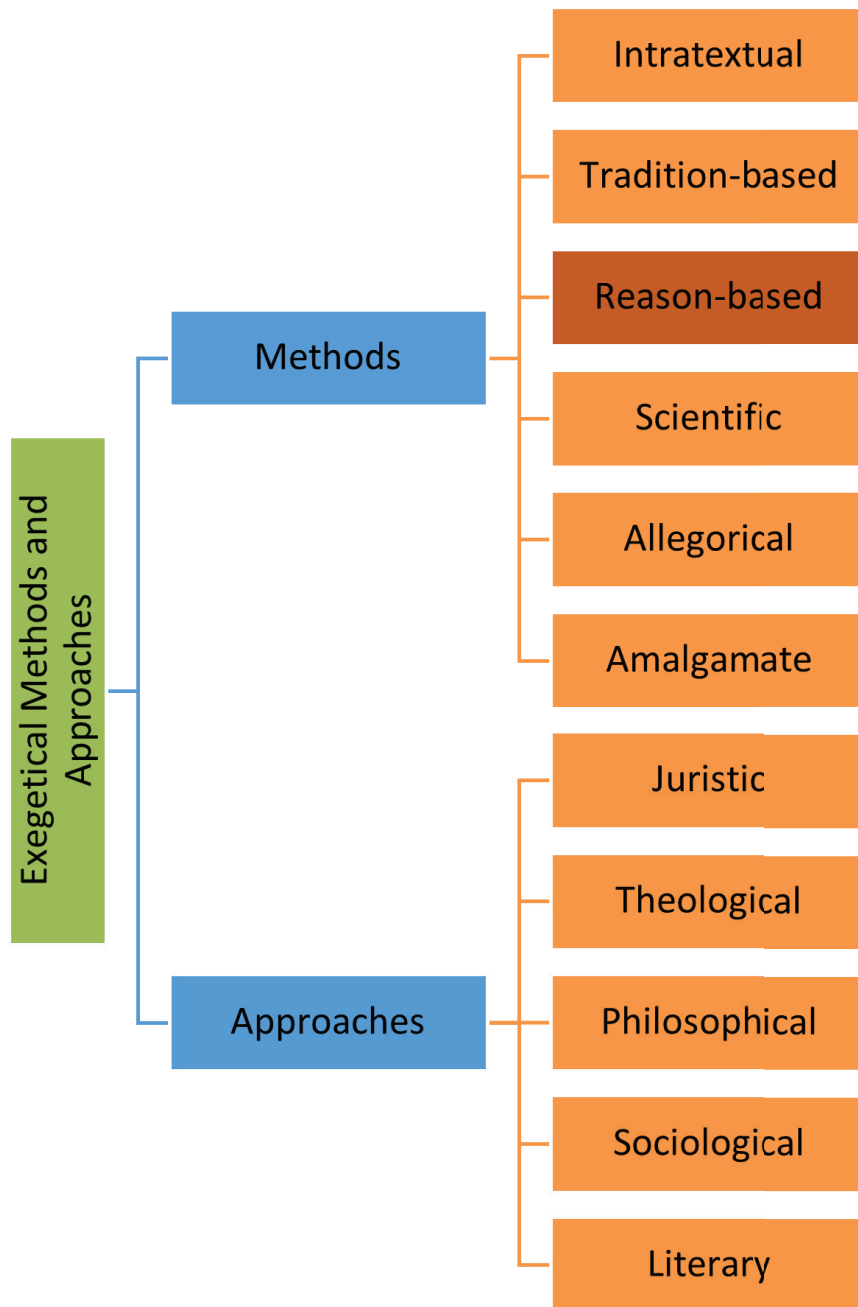
¹² In this method, verses of the Qur’an are used to interpret other verses.

¹³ This method involves using reports of the Sunna, which incorporates the words, actions, and tacit approvals of Prophet Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima al-Zahrā’, and the Twelve Imams, to interpret verses of the Qur’an.

¹⁴ This method employs empirical science to gain a better understanding of verses with scientific content.

¹⁵ In this method, the exegete delves beyond the apparent meaning of the verses to explain their hidden aspects and inner meanings.

¹⁶ Also called “the meta-method”, this is a comprehensive method that acts like an umbrella under which several methods can be used.



A critical rationalist perspective

From a critical rationalist perspective, “Methods are ‘tools’. They are used in various sciences and disciplines to either facilitate the task of exploring or investigating different aspects of reality (whether natural or socially constructed) by assisting researchers/practitioners to collect data or help them to achieve specific practical goals through taking certain concrete steps” (Paya 2022, p. 10). Methods are technologies, serving two primary purposes:

1. fulfilling our non-cognitive needs; and
2. acting as tools to facilitate our cognitive pursuits. As such, they are not knowledge themselves but tools for obtaining data and assessing conjectures/interpretations.¹⁷

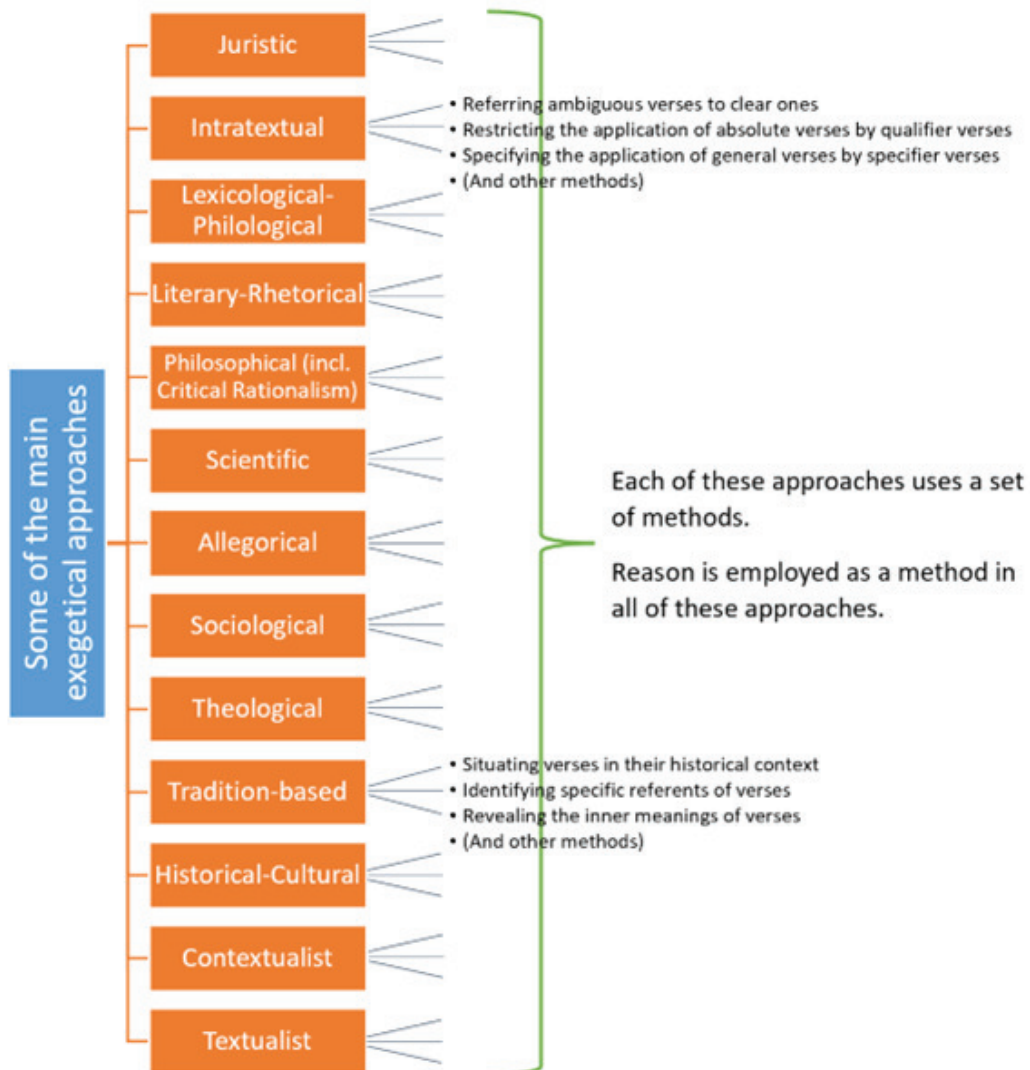
Methods vary according to the approach taken by an exegete. An “approach” in this context is the perspective and theoretical framework that the exegete adopts when considering the verses. An approach can be likened to a lens through which the exegete examines the Qur'anic text. Similar to how different lenses alter one's perception, an exegete's chosen approach influences how they interpret the Qur'an.

Each approach uses a constellation of methods and brings its own terminology, concepts, principles, fundamental assumptions, and axioms. For instance, a philosophical approach to interpreting a verse may employ “the causality principle”.¹⁸ Certain methods may be shared across several approaches, whereas others might be specific to a single approach. Furthermore, an exegete may employ multiple approaches when interpreting Qur'anic verses, as seen in Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *al-Mīzān*. The selection of an approach or approaches by an exegete depends on various factors, including their academic specialisation, interests, and objectives.

Based on what was stated above, Qur'anic exegetical methods and approaches can be represented as follows:

¹⁷ Traditional Shī'ī scholars often employ the term “*qawā'id*” (principles) to denote what critical rationalists call “methods”. This usage can be observed in works such as al-Maybudī's *al-Qawā'id al-tafsīr ladā l-Shī'a wa-l-Sunna* (Principles of Exegesis According to the Shī'a and Ahl al-Sunna) (2007), Riḍāyī-Iṣfahānī's *Mantiq-i tafsīr-i Qur'ān (1): mabānī wa qawā'id-i tafsīr-i Qur'ān* (Logic of Exegesis of the Qur'an (1): Foundations and Principles of the Exegesis of the Qur'an) (1387 (solar)/2008), and 'Alī Akbar Bābā'ī's *Qawā'id-i tafsīr-i Qur'ān* (Principles of the Exegesis of the Qur'an) (1394 (solar)/2015).

¹⁸ See, for example, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's exegesis of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1:1) (1390 (lunar)/1970, v. 1, p. 24).



As an example, methods used in the intratextual approach include the following (due to space limitations, only the first three are shown on the diagram):

1. Referring the ambiguous (*mutashābih*) verses to clear (*muḥkam*) ones.
2. Restricting the application of absolute (*muṭlaq*) verses by qualifier (*muqayyid*) verses.
3. Specifying the application of general (*‘āmm*) verses by specifier (*mukhāṣṣis*) verses.
4. Interpreting ambiguous (*mujmal*) verses by clarifier (*mubayyin*)

verses.

5. Determining the referent (*miṣḍāq*) of a verse by examining other verses.
6. Using the literary context (*siyāq*) of a verse.
7. Collating similar verses (similar, that is, in words or content).
8. Resolving apparent contradictions between verses.
9. Determining the meaning of Qur'anic terms with the assistance of other verses.
10. Giving preference to a meaning of a verse with the assistance of other verses.
11. Combining the abrogating (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*) verses.¹⁹

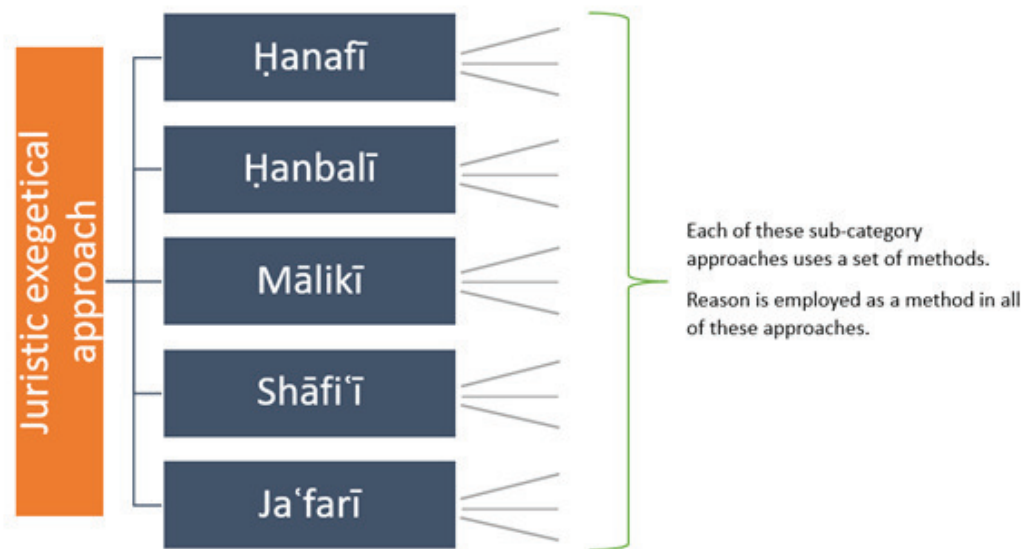
Another example pertains to the methods employed in the tradition-based approach (again, only the first three are shown on the diagram):

1. Situating verses in their historical context.
2. Identifying the referent of verses.
3. Revealing the inner meanings of verses.
4. Clarifying the meaning of words and sentences.
5. Providing detail, particularly to laws, eschatological matters, and stories.
6. Specifying the application of general verses.
7. Restricting the application of absolute verses.
8. Identifying abrogating and abrogated verses.

Exegetical approaches can be further divided into sub-categories or types, each with its own set of methods. For instance, within the

¹⁹ Riḍāyī-İşfahānī 1390 (solar)/2011, pp. 72-82. The author describes them as “sub-types” of the intratextual method rather than methods used by the intratextual approach.

philosophical approach, critical rationalism can be identified as a sub-category, employing the “conjectures and refutations” method. Likewise, the theological approach can be sub-divided into Ash‘arī, Mu‘tazilī, Māturīdī, and Twelver Shī‘ī categories. Similarly, the juristic approach can be sub-divided into Ḥanafī, Ḥanbalī, Mālikī, Shāfi‘ī, and Ja‘farī categories, as illustrated below. While some methods may be shared among these sub-categories, others might be particular to one sub-category.



This alternative to the traditional typology is uncomplicated and precise, making it easy to understand while accurately representing the main exegetical methods and approaches used to interpret the Qur’an. It notably integrates reason-based exegesis as a method across all approaches rather than placing it as a separate category. Furthermore, while the illustrated typology is not meant to be exhaustive, it includes several important approaches that are not mentioned in the traditional classification.

Conclusion

Traditional Shī‘ī scholars and critical rationalists approach their

analysis of *'aql* from different paradigms, resulting in divergent views on its function and role in Qur'anic exegesis. While both recognise reason-based exegesis as a method in *tafsīr*, their definitions of what constitutes a method vary considerably. Thus, when reading the works of traditional scholars and critical rationalists on Qur'an interpretation, it becomes paramount to grasp the nuanced meanings they attribute to the terms they use.

Beyond terminology variations, such as “demonstrative *'aql*” and “lantern *'aql*” versus “reason” and “intellect”, and different interpretations of shared terms like “method” and “approach”, lie fundamental disparities in epistemological principles that underpin their viewpoints.

Prominent traditional Shī'ī scholars contend that exegetical methods serve as authoritative knowledge sources. They view *'aql* as an authoritative source of knowledge, much like the Qur'an and Sunna, unveiling the meaning of the Qur'anic text. Consequently, they consider *tafsīr 'aqlī* an important hermeneutical method for comprehending the Qur'an.

In contrast, critical rationalists regard methods as tools that serve non-cognitive needs and facilitate cognitive pursuits. According to their perspective, *'aql* does not function as a source of knowledge; instead, it qualifies as a method in Qur'anic exegesis because, in its function as reason, it assesses the logical validity of our conjectures. Within the context of Qur'anic exegesis, these conjectures assume the role of interpretations.

The disparities between the two perspectives have significant implications for students studying exegetical methods and approaches and for educators teaching the subject. While critical rationalist scholars in Qur'anic studies remain relatively few in number, growing academic interest in critical rationalism within certain segments of Islamic studies suggests that the implications of this trend may become more substantial in the future.

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