**Towards Understanding the Qur'an**

Vol. I

SÜRAHS 1-3

English version of Tafhim al-Qur'an

SAYYID ABUL A'LĀ MAWDŪDĪ

Translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari

Foreword

Islam is unique by virtue of the fact that it is a religion based on a Book the Qur'an. In the same way ay that the Islamic Ummah, whose identity and historical personality have been derived from and fashioned by the Qur'an, is unique so is Muslim culture and civilization. No influence has been greater than the Qur'an in shaping the spirit and ethos of Muslim culture and civilization. If we look at the long history of religions and civilizations, it may be said, without reservation, that if ever there was a book that produced a religion, a community, a culture and a civilization, it is the Qur'an. For this reason, the origins and destiny of the Muslim Ummah rest with the Qur'an.

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that Tafsir literature mirrors Muslim religious and social thought at its best. The real genius of the Muslim mind has expressed itself in its unceasing efforts to understand and interpret the word of God as enshrined in the Qur'an and as exemplified in the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be on him). And just as the Qur'an deals with all aspects of human life, thought and behavior, so Tafsir literature constitutes a spectrum reflecting Muslim ideas in all areas of human thought and behavior. From eschatology and metaphysics to prayer and worship, from epistemology to individual conduct and social behavior, from social philosophy to the problems of familial and societal organization, from theology to law and morality, from the most sensitive aspects of motivation to the explicit problems of war and peace, to justice and Ishan, to history and futurology. A meaningful history of Muslim thought cannot be written without delving deep into Tafsir literature. This is the reason why most of the histories of Muslim thought, written either in the West or which have drawn primarily upon sources other than Tafsir literature, have failed to capture the richness and originality of Muslim contributions to human thought and society.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) was not only the recipient of the Divine Revelation contained in the Qur'an; he was also its most authentic interpreter and expounder. The Sunnah represents the Qur'an in practice. It embodies and radiates the model in both space and time.

The prophetic model is not only the realization of the ideal; it also inaugurates a process through which those who have followed in the footsteps of the Prophet throughout the ages have continued to strive to understand, interpret, explain and implement the Word of God. Succeeding generations strived to follow the model and learn from the efforts of their predecessors. The text of the Qur'an was preserved and protected in its totality; it was spared human explanation. The translation of the Qur'an into other languages was accepted as an aid to the understanding of the Qur'an, but it was never accepted as a substitute for that text. A translation is a human effort and constitutes a form of tafsir (bayān). Efforts were made in every age to understand the meaning of the Qur'an and to discover its teachings' relevance to the problems faced by the people in particular situations. The eternal has continued to provide guidance for the temporal in all times and climes. Similarly, efforts to implement the teachings were made at both individual and collective levels, and which did not lose sight of the specific problems of the age. In facing these challenges, meticulous care was taken to see that the Word of God and the Word of man remained distinct. Every effort to understand the intent of the Master and its relevance to changing situations remained a human effort, despite the fact that, in the context of Islamic thought and literature, these represented the best of the Muslim genius. Over a thousand tafsirs are available in the Arabic language and a similar number in other Muslim languages taken together. Fresh contributions have been made in every age and from all areas of the Muslim world.

The science of Tafsir is a very specialized discipline. I make no effort in this brief foreword to capture even the most distinct aspects of its subject. Although it would be worthwhile to highlight at least three areas of special concern.

First and foremost, I would like to make reference to the Muslim scholars and savants who have strived to find the meaning to verses of the Qur'an by reference to other verses of the Qur'an itself and to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). These efforts have been supplemented by attempts to find out how the Companions of the Prophet understood different verses of the Qur'an. While using the tools of lexicon - the Arab idiom and usage at the time of the Prophet and the literary tradition which constituted the intellectual universe in which the Qur'an was revealed - their real effort was to understand the meaning of the Qur'an in light of the interpretation given by the Prophet, his Companions and the early savants. In the typology of Tafsir, this is known as the tradition of Tafsir al-Ma'thûr.

The second area of concern I have chosen relates to the fiqhi tafsir. The primary concern, in this context, was to find out the commentary (Ahkām) in relation to the different aspects of individual and collective life and behavior. This covered not only whatever was available in the form of direct and explicit injunctions but also what was derived by applying the principles of tafsir and the inference of law (istinbat al-Ahkām). Efforts were made to apply Qur'anic injunctions to new problems with the aim of deriving the intent of law for situations not explicitly covered. As Qur'anic guidance comprehends all aspects of life, this effort became allem- bracing. Fiqhi Tafāsīr lay its primary emphasis on spelling out Qur'anic guidance on the multifarious aspects of human life, and applies, in particular, general principles to actual problems and infers the law for issues and areas not directly covered in the text.

The third major area of concern covers the wide spectrum of tafāsīr written to highlight the wisdom contained in the Qur'an, the rationale behind its beliefs as well as its commands, the vision of the man and the society the Qur'an builds and how it differs from the vision of man and society in other religions, ideologies and philosophies. These tafsir also deal with objectives and criticisms made against some of the teachings of the Qur’an. Efforts were also made to show the relevance of the Qur'an to the problems of the age and how these problems could be solved by recourse to the Qur'an. This category is known as Kalāmī Tafsir.

Although these three perspectives are not exclusive, Qur'anic studies have nevertheless progressed in every age as a result of them. Muslim scholars, in their attempts to search out Qur'anic answers to the challenges of their times have always tried to fathom Qur'anic depths.

Every age has its own outstanding contributions which testify to the inner strength and vitality of the Islamic traditions. For example, the latter half of the twentieth century will be remembered for two seminal contributions to tafsir literature; namely Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an by Shahīd Sayyid Qutb and Tafhim al-Qur'an by Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdūdī.

The Qur'an held a unique fascination for Sayyid Mawdūdī. To him it was not simply a sacred book which had to be believed in as an article of faith. It was something more, something vitally different and something very special. Let me spell out his relationship with the Book in his own words.

It was in 1946 that an interesting book appeared under the title Mashahir Ahl-e-'Ilm ki Muhsin Kitäben (Books that Moved the Intellectual Luminaries, literally 'their Benefactor Books'). It was an anthology of essays and memoirs written by over two dozen top-ranking scholars and statesmen of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Each one recapitulated and reflected upon the books that had influenced him most. In this myriad galaxy, which highlighted outstanding books from Rūmī's Mathnawi to the Tilism-e-Hushrubā (A Book of Magic and Fairy Tales), the shortest yet the most moving contribution was from Sayyid Mawdūdī. He was alone in identifying only one book, strangely enough the one not mentioned by any of the other distinguished scholars; it was the Qur'an: 'I have studied a large number of books, particularly in the days of my early groping’s in the dark (Jahiliyah). It would not be an exaggeration to submit that I have tried to imbibe quite a library books dealing with philosophy, old and new, science (natural and social), economics, politics and what not. But when I studied the Qur'an with the eyes of my soul it opened up a new world before me. The spell of all that I had read in my age of groping’s was cast asunder. Then only, I realized that now I have had access to the roots of knowledge, and the world of reality; Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx and other secular thinkers began to look like pygmies. In fact, I began to pity them, for they could not resolve issues, despite grappling with them throughout their life and producing thereon huge volumes. This Book has resolved these in a few words. This Book alone is my true benefactor. It has changed me altogether. It has transformed the animal in me into a human. It has conducted me from darkness into light. It has endowed me with a beacon which illumines every dismal corner of life into which I now venture to move. Now reality glows before my eyes without any mask. The key that can open every locked door is called a "master-key". So to me, the Qur'an constitutes the master-key which resolves every problem of human life. It has opened up for me glorious avenues of life and progress. Words fail me to thank the Lord, Allah, subhānahū wataʻālā, who bestowed upon us this Blessed Book.'

The Qur'an is the key to Sayyid Mawdūdī's life and mission. In his view, where the Muslims have failed is in the weakening or pollution of their relationship with the Qur'an. It was the Qur'an that made them masters of the world. It is the Qur'an which can once again set their house in order and enable them to win back their rightful place in the world.

It is significant that the journal through which Sayyid Mawdūdī launched his intellectual crusade was called Tarjuman al-Qur'an

(Spokesman of the Qur'an). And when the Islamic Movement of the Jama'at-i-Islami was formally launched, in August 1941, he devoted most of his energies to writing the Tafhim al-Qur'an so that this movement would imbibe the message of the Qur'an and engage in the struggle to establish the world order that the Qur'an wants to establish. That is why Tafhim al-Qur'an occupies a very central position in Sayyid Mawdūdī's strategy for Islamic revolution.

Sayyid Mawdūdī is one of the chief architects of contemporary Islamic resurgence. He was a prolific writer. He authored more than 150 books and treatises on different aspects of Islam, ranging from al-Jihad fi al-Islam to the Manifesto of the Jama'at-i-Islāmī. His magnum opus, however, remains the Tafhim al-Qur'an, his translation and tafsir (exegesis) of the Qur'an. This alone epitomizes his elegant literary style, his vast erudition, the clarity and brilliance of his thought and the candor of his commitment to change the world in the image of the Qur'an. It was in the maturity of his youth, in February 1942, at the age of thirty-nine, that he began the writing of this tafsir; it was not until May 1973, when his hair had run white and he had sought retirement from the active leadership of the Jama'at, that he completed the work. Tafhim al-Qur'an is the choicest product of a lifetime a life dedicated to the glory of the Lord, a life engaged in honest intellectual inquiry, in robust scholarship, in all round Jihad to establish the supremacy of the truth as revealed by Allah and as practiced by His prophet. Tafhim al-Qur'an has been published in six volumes. The first volume appeared in 1950, when Sayyid Mawdūdī was in prison, and the last one appeared in 1973.

The Tafhim al-Qur'an is the most widely read tafsir in our times.

Tafhim is a unique contribution to contemporary tafsir literature. For this reason, some of its distinct contributions deserve to be highlighted.

The uniqueness of Tafhim lies in the fact that it looks upon the Qur'an as a book of guidance (hidayah). There is no denying that the Qur'an does deal with aspects of history, geography, socio- economic relations, natural phenomena, etc., but it is not primarily concerned with any of these subject areas. It is a masterpiece of higher literature, but it is not meant to be used as a mere piece of literature. As such, the Qur'an has been approached as the main- spring for guidance, destined to play a decisive role in the reconstruction of thought and action, of institutions and society; as was the case when it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). The function of Tatham is not to dwell primarily or mainly on literary beauties and legalistic niceties which have not been ignored but to develop an understanding of the Qur'an as the source of guidance.

Sayyid Mawdüdī also emphasizes that the Qur'an is a book of a movement. It presents a message, invites the whole human race to a view of reality and society, organizes those who respond to this call into an ideological community and enjoins upon this community the necessity to strive for the socio-moral reconstruction of humanity, both individually and collectively. The Qur'an wants to produce a universal ideological movement and constitutes a guide-book for this movement. Much of the Qur'an cannot be properly understood unless it is studied in the context of this framework. The Prophet was assigned to play a historical role as the leader of this Islamic movement. The Qur'an was revealed to him piecemeal during the twenty-three years of his prophetic career, guiding his steps through- out his struggle. This guaranteed guidance has a particular, as well as a general and universal, aspect. In its particular aspect, this entire milieu provides an illustration of the movement and change which the Qur'an wants to bring about. In its general and universal aspect, the Qur'an abstracts from the specific time-space context and presents the model which can and should be applied in different time-space situations. Sayyid Mawdūdī approached the Qur'an as the guide-book for this movement of Islamic reconstruction. As such, the internal evidence of the Qur'an, revealing as it does different aspects and situations of this Da'wah and movement, the Sunnah of the Prophet and of his Companions and the evidence on Asbab al-Tanzil, assumes great significance in his understanding of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an presents a complete way of life a code of conduct and a scheme for organizing the total gamut of human life - belief, action and society. It does not divide itself into water-tight material and spiritual, this-worldly and that-worldly, compartments. It creates only one supreme loyalty to Allah and His prophet; and tries to organize the whole fabric of human life on this basis. Sayyid Mawdūdī suggests that the key concepts of the Qur'an are Ilah, Rabb, 'Ibadah and al-Din. The Qur'an invites man to accept the Creator as Rabb, the Sustainer and Sovereign, to harmonize his will with the Will of Allah in all its aspects ('ibadah) and to establish the Will of Allah over the totality of life (din). This is the path through which man can seek the fulfilment of his real nature. This is the approach that the Tafhim has expounded.

In his unique style, Sayyid Mawdūdī emphasizes that the key to the understanding of the Qur'an lies in its style and methodology. These are distinct and unique suited to its purpose and mission -

And consequently do not fit any framework developed by human scholarship. Its purpose is Hidayah (guidance). It addresses itself to man. Its target is to develop a new consciousness of reality and to generate a new social movement to establish a new culture and civilization. To achieve this objective, it has adopted a direct and straightforward method of heart-to-heart conversation between God and man. Its style is that of brief and precise Khuțubāt addressed by God to man but containing all the elements of a meaningful dialogue between the two. Individually, every ayah of the Qur'an serves this purpose, and in the context in which it occurs. Sayyid Mawdūdī develops a new concept of the (Nazm) system and sequence within the Qur'an. Earlier Mufassirün have tried to elaborate on the relationship between the different sürahs of the Qur'an. Some have studied Nazm within every sūrah. Sayyid Mawdūdī attempted to study the Nazm of the whole of the Qur'an and of each sūrah, and the relationship between different sürahs and between verses within the sürah in light of the overall objectives of the Qur'an, and has shown how they are woven together into one glorious pattern. The apparent diversity is permeated with a purposive unity. To Mawdūdī, the style and methodology of the Qur'an are not secondary to its purpose, rather they are its essential instruments. Instead of presenting an apology for the methodology of the Qur'an or trying to justify it logically or rhetorically, he has presented this methodology of the Qur'an as a unique and essential key to the understanding of the message and mission of the Qur'an.

These propositions form the framework in which Sayyid Mawdūdī tried to study the Qur'an. He has written a Muqaddimah, pro- legomena, to the Tafhim al-Qur'an, wherein he has discussed his approach to the study of the Qur'an and the principles of interpre- tation he has followed, and a treatise on the key concepts of the Qur'an: Ilah, Rabb, 'Ibadah and al-Din. Every sürah has been prefaced by an introduction giving the subject matter of the sürah, its relevance to the overall scheme of the Qur'an, its historical setting and a summary of the questions and issues discussed in it.

The Tafhim offers a new translation of the Qur'an which is neither literal nor liberal. It is an interpretative translation in direct, forceful and modern Urdu. In the first place, this translation conveys the meaning of the Qur'an in a forceful style nearest to the spirit of the original. Secondly, it renders the spoken word of the Arabic into the written word of Urdu. With this translation, Sayyid Mawdūdī has tried to provide for the ordinary Urdu reader an almost direct access to the Qur'an.

Another distinctive aspect of this translation is the use of paragraphs. In the text of the Qur'an, there are no paragraphs. The division of the Qur'an into Manzil, Juz' and Rukū' is only for the convenience of recitation. They are not meaningful divisions. The introduction of paragraphing in translation is a major innovation and to the best of my knowledge, Sayyid Mawdūdī has been the first scholar to do so in Urdu, and perhaps in any language of the world.

The translation is followed by explanatory notes elaborating the meaning of the Qur'an, giving historical and other information wherever necessary, pin-pointing the relevance of a verse to the message and spirit of the Qur'an and the needs of the Islamic movement, explaining the hikmah (rationale) behind different injunctions and their import for our own times. Through these notes, Sayyid Mawdūdī has tried to develop a new 'ilm al-Kalām based upon the Qur'an and utilizing the developments of modern know- ledge, the principles of historical criticism, comparative religion and ideologies. In using the methodology of the Qur'an to develop a new 'ilm al-Kalām Mawdūdī has added grist to his mill. His effort is to use these notes as an aid to the understanding of the Qur'an and to dispel doubts and difficulties which a modern-educated Muslim may face in his efforts to study the Qur'an. He has been only too eager to avoid any issues which may distract the reader's attention from the word of the Qur'an. The notes are functional and not just ornamental.

He has also used these notes to delineate and elaborate the broad outlines of the total scheme of life adumbrated in the Qur'an and to suggest how this can be translated into the reality of the present time.

While dealing with the Ahkam, he has avoided sectarian controversies. Although he generally follows the Hanafi School, he has usually in his explanatory notes stated the viewpoint of all major schools of Islamic thought, including that of the Shi'ah. This helps the reader appreciate how a certain verse has been explained or approached by scholars belonging to different schools. It also identifies the flexibility of Islamic law, and paves the way for bridging the gap between the different schools of thought. In so doing, it lays the foundations for an ecumenical movement within Islam.

In his exegesis, Sayyid Mawdūdī tries not only to capture the original meaning and impact of the Qur'an but also to throw light on the model that emerges from that, as a guide for the present and for the future.

Another distinct feature of the Tafhim al-Qur'an is its index. Running into some three hundred pages it is, perhaps, the most elaborate and exhaustive concordance of the Qur'an. It deals with the concepts, themes, personalities and events in the Qur'an and is an extremely useful aid to any researcher.

Tafhim al-Qur'an is a major contribution to Tafsir literature. It is difficult to measure it with the yardsticks of modernism or traditionalism. It may, more correctly, be described as revivalist and revolutionary. Its emphasis is on movement, activism and dynamism, without taking liberties with the Word of God or equating the concepts of the Qur'an with the thought-content of modern ideologies. It is permeated with respect for tradition in thought and practice without completely identifying the Qur'an with the institutional structures produced by the Muslims during the course of history. It is a plea for purposive change and tries to develop the faculty to discriminate between the essential and the incidental, between the divine, and as such permanent, and the human, and as such changeable. The Tafhim al-Qur'an is, itself, a human effort and is subject to all the possibilities and limitations of the human effort to understand and explain the Divine Word. It has its own contemporary flavor and this constitutes its merit as well as its limitation.

The need to produce a complete translation of the Tushim in the English language has been felt ever since its publication in Urdu. To fulfil this need, Islamic Publications, Lahore has published an English translation of the Tafhim. Although this rendered a useful service, it was commonly realized that the translation could not capture the real force and elegance of the Tafhim al-Qur'an, which is not only a masterpiece of scholarship, but also a rare piece of literary excellence. The text of the Qur'an, as translated in Urdu by Sayyid Mawdūdī, could not be effectively reproduced in the English translation. Explanatory notes were abridged in a number of places. Editorial language standards and the physical production of the book left much to be desired. Sayyid Mawdūdī realized these limitations and wanted a new and more forceful translation of the Tafhim al-Qur'an in modern English and was eager that the same be printed to professional and international standards. It was with this ambition that the late Chaudhri Ghulam Muhammad and the present writer discussed with Sayyid Mawdūdī the plan for a new translation of the Tafhim. We all agreed that Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari would be the most competent person to undertake this onerous task. His command of Arabic, Urdu and English and his deep understand- ing and insight into the thought and style of Sayyid Mawdūdī qualified him for the job. It was in deference to the wish of Sayyid Mawdūdī that Chaudhri Ghulam Muhammad and I persuaded Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari to commit himself to this assignment, a respon- sibility that he shouldered with some reluctance. It is unfortunate that both Sayyid Mawdūdī and Chaudhri Ghulam Muhammad are no longer with us to see the fruit of Dr. Ansari's heroic effort to recreate the Tafhim in English. Their souls would, however, be happy to see that their dream is now coming true.

The Islamic Foundation is publishing this new translation in fulfilment of the command of Sayyid Mawdūdī, with the co-operation of his family, and with the permission of the Idāra Tarjumānul Qur'an which holds the copyright of the original. The Foundation has established a permanent cell to prepare and oversee the production of the Tafhim al-Qur'an in the English language. We have tried to achieve the highest standards of accuracy, literary elegance and aesthetic production. The first volume contains the Muqaddimah and tafsir of Surah al-Fatihah, al-Baqarah and Al 'Imran. The second volume, to appear shortly, will go upto Sürah al-A'raf. The translation of the entire Urdu Tafhim is expected to be completed in twelve to fifteen volumes of almost equal size. It is hoped that at least one volume will appear every year. May Allah enable us to achieve this target and may Allah make this translation as instrumental in spreading the message and mission of the Qur'an all over the world as He has blessed the Urdu Tafhim to rekindle the spark of faith in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and committed them to the Islamic mission. And may Allah give the best rewards to all those who have been engaged or who have been helpful in producing this English version of the Tafhim al-Qur'an.

Leicester

9 Jumāda al-Thani, 1408

23 January, 1988

Khurshid Ahmad