The Methods of Research Used By Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari in His Qur'anic Exegesis

Abdulkadir Ayodele Sambo

Abstract-- Interpretation of the Qur'an was one of the major duties of Prophet Muhammad at the early period of his prophetic mission. He was compelled to explain the verses and chapters being revealed so that people would understand them accordingly. In the same vein, The Prophet urged the companions not only to preserve the chapters and verses being revealed but to advance to the eagerness to understand the contents of the Glorious Qur'an. Hence, the Prophet of Islam became the pioneer *Mufassir* of the Qur'an upon whom some notable *Mufassirun* among the *Sahabah* relied in collecting first hand information and guidance for accurate interpretation. The task of interpretation was later inherited by the *Tabiᶜun* and *Tabiᶜu Tabiᶜin* some of whom maintained the chain of transmission to the time of the Prophet. There emerged after *Tabiu-Tabiᶜin* some notable *Mufassirun* among whom was Abu Jaᶜfar Muhammad *Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari,* who made his own contributions to *Tafsir* literature. The method he used in his book titled 'Jamiu l-Bayan ᶜan Ta'wil Ayi'l-Qur'an 'worths appraisal and deep study. This paper therefore examines his approaches to issues in the book and the methods adopted therein.

Keywords-:Exegesis,Method,Interpretation,Tawil,Tafsir

I. INTRODUCTION

PROPHET Muhammad was the custodian of divine message who received revelation and who was assigned to interpret same to the understanding of his followers. The companions, inspite of the fact that the revelation was made in their language (Arabic) relied on the Prophet whom Allah assigned to explain to the people what was revealed to them. Allah says:

And we have sent down onto you the message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent to them and you may give thought (Q16: 44).

The companions had the privilege of referring necessary cases of interpretation of the Qur'anic verses to the Prophet since he was alive. Yet they made their own contributions to the development of *tafsir* literature particularly after the Prophet's death. Muslim scholars from time to time experienced the need to immortalize *tafsir* in order to make the Qur'an relevant to the muslims at all ages. This was necessary as it was not on record that the Prophet commented on all the verses and chapters that were revealed. The Prophet himself instructed the companions to advance their efforts in the Qur'anic preservation to interpretation of verses and commentaries on them. This task was inherited by the Tabi'un

Abdulkadir A. Sambo is a Lecturer of Islamic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies, Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria (+2347068497362, shehuaremu313@gmail.com).

and Tabiut-Tabi'in some of whom maintained the chain of transmissioin to the time of the prophet [1].

Among the later generations after Tabi'un was Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. He was a notable scholar of *tafsir* who contributed a lot to *tafsir* literature. He used a unique method in his *tafsir* showing his intellectual endowment as an expart in the field, and making his *tafsir* book a unique one. This paper therefore, intends to examine the methods of research adopted by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari in his book titled Jamiu'l-Bayan ᶜan Ta'wil-ayi'l-Qur'an.

II. HIS BIOGRAPHY

Muhammad b. Jarir b. Kathir b. Ghalid Abu Jaᶜfar al-Tabari was born in the year 225 A.H/ 838CE at Amol in Tabaristan. This place of birth is a montaineous district of Persia situated alongside the Caspian Sea [2]. He was very handsome and eloquent. Al-Tabari lived for eighty five years as he died in the year 320A.H/ 923CE and was buried in Baghdad. Even though his death was not widely announced, a very large crowd attended the funeral formalities. Requiem prayers were repeatedly observed by different people days and nights on his grave, for several months. He was passionately mourned by intellectuals and pious people [3].

III. HIS EDUCATION

Al-Tabari received his education at Ray, Baghdad, Wasit, Basrah, Kufa and Fustat (old Cairo). He also made extensive study tours to Persia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in quest for collecting information for his monumental historical works. Among his teachers were Muhammad b. Abdulmalik b. Abis-Shawarib, Ahmad b. Hamid al-Qazi, Abu Hamman al-Walid b. Shujai and Muhammad b. Al-Alaᶜi. He learnt the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven [4]. Yaqut Rumi reported Al-Tabari as having confirmed by himself, to have learnt how to read the Qur'an from Sulaiman b. AbdulRahman b. Hamid together with legal aspect of it. Ibn Jarir had the knowledge of traditions of the Prophet and knew how to distinguish between authentic and non-authentic ones. His knowledge of traditions of the Prophet was so deep that he was regarded as an authority in the science of hadith. *Mustalah al-Hadith*. His impact as a scholar was widely felt. Among his students was Ahmad b. Kamil, the person to whom Mishkawayh owed his guidance in history [5]. People used to learn *tafsir* from Al-Tabari's dictations.

IV. His Works

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was an authority in some fields of study, prominent among which are Qur'anic sciences, Hadith, History and jurisprudence. He knew biographies of some personalities and wrote a popular book of history of nations and emperors. Being a prolific writer in a number of disciplines, Al-Tabari was proved beyond doubt by some of his disciples by calculating the leaves he used to write everyday throughout his life time as forty each, for eighty-five years [6]. Based on our finding forty leaves he wrote is eighty pages, for he wrote both front and back of the leaves. The areas he covered in his writing, include *Fiqh*, *Hadith*, *Tafsir*, *Nahw Luqah* and *ᶜArud*. He is said to have exceded other writers in those fields. Also in recitation he wrote a book of eighteen volumes. Below is the list of some of his major works:

1. *Jamiᶜu-l-Bayan ᶜan Ta'wil ayi'l-Qur'an*
2. *Kitabul-Taqwah*
3. *Kitabul-'l-Qira'ah*
4. *Tarikhur-Rusul wal-Muluk*
5. *Kitab Maratib al-ulama*
6. *Kitab Adab al-Qudat*
7. *Kitab Adabin Nufus al-Jayyidah*
8. *Kitabur-Risalah*
9. *Kitab al-Musnad al-Mujarrad*
10. *Al-Basir fi maᶜalimid-deen*

V. His Books On Tafsir

Al-Nawawi said: 'A book of *tafsir* like that of Ibn Jarir has never been presented'. According to Al-sayuti:

The book gains it's distinction to certain level due to the fact that the writer paid attention to various submissions of the contributors of a verse or verses. After that, he would choose the best and take it. The books of *tafsir* before his own were not in this form [7].

This book of *tafsir* is of thirty volumes excluding extra index at Cairo 1902. The author at the end of each volume guides the reader through special table of contents which he tags as *Fihris*. He used this as a tool to guide his readers to the specific areas he touches, having found such, relevant to the verses being interpreted. Such tables include:

1. Table of verses used to interpret other verses. Technically, using a verse to interpret another verse is referred to as *al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*, a kind of interpretation in which one part of the Qur'an is used to explain another. This type is regarded as the highest form of *tafsir bil-Mathur* (Traditional *tafsir*) He would mention the verse in the *Fihris* and tell the reader the actual page such verse(s) can be found in his book of *tafsir*.
2. Table of *Lugah* (vocabularies):The author terms this as *Muᶜajim al-Lugah* (vocabularies concordance).
3. Table of notable personalities (*ᶜAlam al-Mutarjimin*): In this table he arranges those personalities alphabetically, on the list, mentioning the page where each one can be found. Sometimes he mentions the areas of contribution they make in his *tafsir* book.
4. Table of science of subjects (Mustalahat): Al-Tabari uses this table to guide the readers to various sciences of subjects like Hadith and Fiqh etc. He equally gives the number of pages to guide the readers.
5. Table of Sects: *(Firaq)*: This table guides to the pages of the book where theological arguments exist, most especially, views of Muᶜtazilah in some theological arguments.
6. Search into language structure (*Mabahith al-Lugah*): This aspect of the book has to do with language structure and formation of words through letters when they are put together [8].

VI. Methods Adopted In His Books

1. Adherence to Isnad: Al-Tabari's method of presenting narratives is essentially through Isnad (Chain of authority). His Chief sources of information were earlier historical marks of Ibn Is-haq Kalbi, Ibn Saᶜad Muqaffaᶜ and some Persian translators.

2. Consideration to authentic reports: Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari relies mainly on the reports traceable to companions of the Prophets. Next to this are the parts coming from Tabi'un, these two reports are the yardstick always used to determine his stand as far as interpretation of a verse is concerned. Precisely, when opinions differ, there is a usual statement from the author thus: *"Al-Qawl fi Ta'wil Qawlihi kadha wa kadha"* [9]. This will be followed by the opinion chosen by him after his personal assessment of different views. Next to this would be to buttress his chosen view with the chain of interpretation from either *Sahabah* or *Tabiᶜi* as the case may be. He adheres so strictly to this method that any interpretation based on self effort void of an authentic report of either *Sahabah* or *al-Tabiᶜi Al-Tabari* would reject it outrightly [10]. The reason being that Ibn Jarir al-Tabari has respect for opinions of companions and followers which he regarded as most accurate and genuine. For example, different interpretations are given to verse 65 of *Sura al-Baqarah* which reads thus:

ولقد علمتم الذين اعتدوا منكم في السبت فقلنا لهم كونوا قدوة خاسئين.

And well you knew those amongst you who transgressed. In the matter of Sabt, we said to them: Be ye apes despised and rejected. (Q. 2 verse 65).

Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari samples so many opinions in relation to the above verse before reaching the conclusion on the opinion that the people concerned were not necessarily deformed and turned to apes. What really happened to them was that their senses were tampered with and as a result began to behave like animals [11]. This situation is likened by Al-Tabari to the condition of the people of book in sura al-Jumᶜah.

مثل الذين حملوا التوراة ثم لم يحملوها كمثل الحمار يحمل أسفارا.

The similitude of those who were charged with the obligations of the Mosaic Law but subsequently failed in those obligations, is that of a donkey which carries huge tomes but understand them not (Q. 62:5).

The people of book failed to yield to injunctions conveyed by their divine message and they are likened to donkey. There

is a little or no difference at all between *Ahl-al-kitab* and the people of *sabt* [12].

VII. THE POSITION OF ISNAD IN HIS TAFSIR

Isnad is handled with seriousness by al-Tabari in his *tafsir*. This was because of his familiarity with collection of prophetic traditions and their prudent integration in his *tafsir*. However, when Tabari makes reference to Isnad he might not necessarily mention the status of the transmitters with a view to verifying whether or not the transmission is *Sahih* or *Daᶜif* (sound or weak). Sometimes Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari would criticize an Isnad and trace the transmission under consideration to the origin for confirmation [13]. This is practiced by the author in a verse in *Sura al-Kahf:*

فهل نجعل لك خرجا على أن تجعل بيننا وبينهم سدًّ

Shall we then render thee tribute in order that you might erect a barrier between us and them?

Different opinions came up as to how the last word *Saddan* should be pronounced i.e. can we say *Suddan* or *Suddan*? Al-Tabari traces the chain of authority from Ahmad b. Yusuf to ᶜAkramah whom he based his option on his submission thus:

ما كان من صنعة بنى آدم فهو السد وما من صنع الله فهو السد.

What is attributed to man is *Saddu* and what is attributed to God is *Suddu* [14].

He therefore concluded that it is better to pronounce the word as *Suddu.*

VIII. IJMA IN THE BOOK

Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari applies Ijmaᶜ of scholars in his book of *Tafsir* when a need arises. His application of Ijmaᶜ manifest while interpreting verse 81 of chapter 21 of the Glorious Qur'an which reads thus:

ولسليمان الريح عاصفة تجرى بأمره......

It was our power that made the violent (untruly) wind flow (tamely) for Soloman to his order…

The reciters in Misrah read al-*Riha* (الرّيح) while AbdulRahman al-ᶜAraj reads al-*Rihu* (الرّيحُ) considering the word in grammar as *mafᶜul* and *mubtada'* respectively. He therefore applies consensus of ulama' and bases his reading on their opinion which is to pronounce *Riha* [15].

It worths mentioning here that al-Tabari's interest in the art of recitation sprang up from his interest in the Qur'an itself. He is regarded as an authority in the field of recitation (al-Qira'ah). As such he made a very notable impact therein. Unfortunately, most of the books accredited to him in the field got lost.

IX. IBN JARIR AL-TABARI AND ISRAELITE REPORTS

Israelite reports are technically termed as *al-akhbar al-israiliyyah* in the field of Qur'anic studies. Some of these reports are included in the *tafsir* of Ibn Jarir. His sources of such reports can be traced to the famous custodian of Israelite repors Kaᶜb al-Abar and Ibn Is-haq. The latter confirmed that he too collected from Muslimah al-Ansari. It is noteworthy that the influence of history on Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was the major factor that led to collection and inclusion of Israelite report in his *tafsir*. However, this method is criticized by some scholars on the ground that such inclusion is rather delicate owing to the fabrication and interpolation that characterize Israelite reports. In our opinion too this approach to *tafsir* is questionable because the custodians of Israelite reports were either of Jewish or Christian background. Therefore it is envisaged that they might have collected distorted information sourcing from interpolated scriptures which in actual fact can lead people astray.

X. HIS ATTITUDE TO ENQUIRIES

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari discourages making a deep investigation in respect of trivial issues. He was determined to avoid such attempt in his approach to *tafsir*. Though Islam allows being reasonably inquisitive in order to be exposed and familiarized with strange issues of substance. This is encouraged most especially when the issue under consideration has to do with religion. If otherwise it is better not to embark upon so deep investigation as such an attempt may end up in making issues more complicated.

Ibn Jarir's approach to the interpretation of Sura al-Maidah verse 155 can be cited as an example as follows:

إذ قال الحواريون يا عيسى ابن مريم هل يستطيع ربك أذ ينــــزل علينا ما ئدة من السماء.

Behold the disciples said "O Jesus the son of Mary, can thy Lord send down to us a table from heaven (Q5:114).

'A table' in the above verse is synonymous with food for which the followers of Prophet Musa asked from God. Ibn Jarir Tabari rejected the opinions of some *Mufassirun* (exegetes) who uphold that the type of food sent to the people be known precisely. He reacted to this submission in the following words:

To have knowledge or remain ignorant about exactly what was sent down to the people has nothing to do with religion either positively or negatively. Therefore it is better not to waste time on such [16].

Another example is available in verse 20 of sura Yusuf thus:

وشروه بثمن بحس دراهم معدودة وانو فيه من الزاهدين

The brethren sold him for a miserable price for a few *dirhams* in such low estimation did they hold him. (Q 12:20).

In the opinion of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari 'a few dirhams' mentioned in the verse needs not to be known precisely. He further argued that if knowledge about the cost for which Prophet Yusuf was sold was necessary, it would have been precisely mentioned in the Qur'an. According to him, once the Qur'an is silent on it then it is saver for an exegetist to leep silent on the amount knowing fully well that such silence does no harm what soever, socially and religiously.

XI. HIS AGREEMENT WITH ARABIC TERMINOLOGY

Al-Tabari has the belief that the Arabs stand better position to understand the language of the Qur'an since it was revealed in their mother's tongue. The Qur'an says: إنا أنزلناه قرءانا عربيا Verily we revealed it in Arabic language (Q. 12:2) [17].

Against this backdrop Ibn Jarir al-Tabari is always contented with any meaning given to a word of the Qur'an by an ᶜArab. The word *tanur* for example, receives different meanings from different scholars. Some scholars interpret it as the 'daybreak'. Some others give their own meaning of the word as a high

place. Some other scholars Arabs inclusive, interpret the same word as an oven. Ibn Jarir upholds the last submission, being from the Arabs in whom he has confidence that they have a unique linguistic background compared with non-Arabs [18].

XII. THE USE OF ANCIENT POEM TO INTERPRET

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari values some ancient poems as an important instrument of interpretation of the Qur'anic verses. He utilizes a poem credited to Hassan b. Thabit to interpret a verse of sura al-Baqarah as follows:

ولا تجعلوا لله أندادا وانتم تعلمون.

Then set no rivals unto God when you know (the truth).[19] (Q. 2:21).

The poem reads:

أتهجوه ولستُ له بنِدٍ ** فشر كُما لخيركما الفداء

Do you (need to) rebuke him while you know that I am not his rival; Therefore the shortcomings of both of you would be overlooked via your virtues.

According to al-Tabari the word *andad* is the plural form of *nidd* which means rival or partner while *andad* appears in the verse *nidd* is used in the poem. So the understanding of the word in the poem as applied by the poet helps in comprehending the verse. This kind of approach is commonly adopted in the *tafsir* of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari [19].

XIII. GRAMMAR IN HIS BOOK OF TAFSIR

When a grammatical issue arises in the book of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, he would verify the accuracy by making reference to Kufa and Basrah grammarians. Though he does not necessarily limit himself totally to Kufites or Basites alone. The sometimes consults other grammarians to solve one grammatical problem or another. He gives recognition to the role of syntax in sentence formulation as having much to the with accurate understanding of the desired meaning. The linguists and grammarians are not of the same opinion on how the following verse should read

مثل الذين كفروا بربهم أعمالهم كرماد اشتدبه الريح في يوم عاصف

The parable of those who reject their Lord is as that their works are as ashes, on which the wind blows furiously on a tempertuous day. (Q. 14:18).

An opinion has it that the word *mathal* in the beginning of the verse should be made to go with the fourth word to it i.e. $A^c mal$ in order to arrive at the exact meaning of the verse. Another opinion prefers that the word *mathall* should maintain its position and preced the word *Alladhina Kafaru*. According to Ibn Jarir, it is more accurate to join the word *mathal* with $A^c mal$ than making it to reform its position [20]. However, an attempt to change its position temporarily, is to make the verse more meaningful and there can be no reason for changing the position permanently.

XIV. FIQH ISSUES IN HIS BOOK

When it comes to the issue of Islamic law in the book of *tafsir* of ibn Jarir al-Tabari, he would assess different opinions of the Jurists with a view to making his own choice, at his level as an exegete. There after he would decide the acceptable opinion on the basis of the main sources of Islamic law i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. He applies this method while interpreting the following verse of the Qur'an:

والخيل والبغال والحمير لتركبوها وزينة ويخلق ما لا تعلمون

And (He has created) horses mubs and donkeys for you to ride and use for show and he has created (other) things of which you have no knowledge. (Q. 16:8).

As usual he subjected all the views on legality of consumption of home mule and donkey to his personal assessment and eventually arrived at the point that their consumption is lawful [21].

XV. SCHOLASTIC ISSUES IN HIS BOOK

Sometimes Ibn Jarir al-Tabari would dabble into the issue of scholasticism to make the issue in question logical to some extent. It is however, noticed that Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was more of Ahlus-sunnah than any other group of people or school of thought. He apparently opposed to the freewillers (*Qadarites*) in their interpretation of the last verse of Sura al-fatihah: غير المغضوب عليهم ولا الضالين Those whose (portion) is not wrath and go not astray. (Q. 1:7).

He considered it as an unpardonable error for the freewillers (Qadarites) to attribute going astray of the people of the book to their own volition. He was vehemently opposed to some theological doctrines of Mu^{c}tazilah. He also condemns their application of self opinion while interpreting the Qur'an. He has a contrary opinion to their belief concerning seeing God, Be it in the life here or in the life hereafter. He always demonstrated his inclination to Ahlus-Sunnah [22].

XVI. CONCLUSION

The book of *tafsir* of Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari is a special book in this field. Naming the book as *Jami^c al-Bayan fi ta'wil ayil-Qur'an* is one of instrumental fragments to this speciality. It has been argued by some scholars of *tafsir* Sheikh Sabuni inclusive, that *tafsir* and ta'wil are not synonymous to each other. That is the major reason while most of the books of *tafsir* pick the title *tafsir* al-Qur'an in order to avoid the confusion that is likely to arise in using *ta'wil*. Ta'wil to some scholars means hidden meanings of the Qur'an that are best known to the sender of the divine message; Allah the Most High says: وما يعلم تأويله إلا الله "But no one knows its hidden meanings except God". Naming this book as Jami^c al-bayan fi ta'wil ayi al-Qur'an by the author presupposes that he was of the intention to deal with only hidden meanings there. Contrarily he deals with all meanings generally.

Tafsir al-Qur'an evolved during the time of the Prophet while the pioneer *Mufassir* was the Prophets himself. He made the message very easy to comprehend while the companions transmitted the comments of the Prophet on the Qur'anic verses to the later generation. The followers of companions (the Tabi^{c}un) came after the companions and made their own contribution to *tafsir* literature like their predecessors.

Among the scholars of later generation was Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. The author adopted several methods in his book. First and foremost, he attached importance to *Isnad* to ensure that any adopted interpretation of verses maintains its originality by tracing same to the Prophet the pioneer *Mufassir*. He does not

ignore the consensus of ᶜUlama' but gives it a serious recognition to appreciate the role of the early scholars among the companions.

He does not reject Israelite reports totally but he encouraged using Arabs' ideas to interpret verses than any other opinions. He emphasized that the Qur'an was revealed in their mother tongue. Other issues touched in the book include *Fiqh,* (Islamic law) and Masa'il al-kalam (scholastic issues) Ibn Jarir al-Tabari drew attention to the importance of language and grammar considering them as important tools capable of aiding adequate comprehension of the Qur'an.

REFERENCES

[1] The Prophet was the first *Mufassir* who interpreted the verses and chapters with a view to making them clear and understood by the people. Yet as the Prophet instructed the *Sahabah* to preserve the verses the verses being revealed he equally encouraged them to interpret same.

[2] Yaqut Rumi; *Muᶜjam al-Udaba*; Maktabah al-Qira'ah Wa al-thaqafah, Cairo; nd, vol. 18, p. 40.

[3] Jamil Ahmad; Hundred Great Muslims; Farozson Ltd Laore, 1977, p. 574.

[4] Jamil Ahmad; Hundred Great Muslims; Farozson Ltd Laore, 1977, p. 574.

[5] Jamil Ahmad; Hundred Great Muslims; Farozson Ltd Laore, 1977, p. 574.

[6] Yaqut Rumi; Muᶜjam al-Udaba; p. 61.

[7] Muhammad Hussain Al-Dhahabi; Al-Tafsir Wal-Mufassirun; vol. 1, p. 208. nd.

[8] Yaqut Rumi; Muᶜjam al-Udaba, p. 42.

[9] It means the statement in the context as explained by the author is how the author views it.

[10] This is an aspect of his dependence on the opinions of the companions

[11] Yaqut Rumi; *Muᶜjam al-Udaba'* p.46

[12] The people of *Sabt* and the people of the book are likened to animals the latter due to disobedience and the former for negligence.

[13] The attempt made for authentication of facts.

[14] Yaqut Rumi; Muᶜjam al-Udaba' p.57.

[15] Yaqut Rumi; Muᶜjam al-Udaba' p.57.

[16] He has the belief that two much enquiries may lead to confusion and consequently to infidelity

[17] The verse confirms the assertion.

[18] Contrary opinion to this is that being an ᶜArab man does not guarantee automatic understanding of the Qur'anic verses.

[19] Yaqut Rumi; *Muᶜjam al-Udaba'*, p. 61.

[20] Yaqut Rumi *Mujam al-Udaba*; p.64.

[21] This method revolves in sampling opinions of jurists for appropriate submission.

[22] Muhammad b. Jarir; Jamiᶜ al-Bayan ᶜan Ta'wil Ayil, Qur'an Daru'l-Maᶜarifa Cairo, 1951, vol. 12, p. 593.