

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
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***Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding
the Holy Quran: A Critical Review***

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Abstract

The Holy Quran is the last revealed book of Allah Almighty. It is the basic source of the teachings of Islam. It presents a complete guidance in all aspects of life. How to understand it and what are the basic principles for learning Quranic sciences?

Some separate books have been written for this purpose, i.e. Allama Zarkashi's "Al-Burhan fi 'Uloom al-Quran", Allama Suyuti's "Al-Itqan fi 'Uloom al-Quran" and Allama Zarqani's "Manahil al-'Irfan fi 'Uloom al-Quran".

Imam Shah Wali Ullah is one of them also. He presented some principles for understanding the Holy Quran. In this article the principles for understanding the Holy Quran as seen by Shah Wali Ullah is discussed in a scholarly manner.

Main topics of this article are as:

- a. *Shah Wali ullah's books regarding Quranic Sciences.*
- b. *Shah Wali ullah's Basic sources regarding Quranic Sciences*
- c. *Five sciences in the Holy Quran.*
- d. *Number of Abrogated verses of the Holy Quran according to Shah Wali ullah.*
- e. *Concept of causes of revelation according to Shah Wali ullah*
- f. *Shah Wali ullah and Isolated Letters.*

Keywords: *The Holy Quran, Shah Wali ullah, Principles of understanding.*

Introduction To Shah Wali ullah

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Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

Imam Shah Wali Ullah was born on 4th Shawwal, 1114 AH/10th February, 1703 AD in Muzaffarnagar (India). His real name was Qutb uddin Ahmad, but was known by Shah Wali ullah. His father's name was Shah Abdur Rahim and his grandfather's name was Shah Wajeeh uddin. His lineage from his paternal side reaches up to Hadhrat Umar (RA) and from his maternal side to Hadhrat Musa Kazim.

He started his education at the age of five and completed the Holy Quran at the age of seven. He completed all the fundamental books at the age of Fifteen and began teaching. When he was seventeen years old, his father died. Thereafter, he taught till 1113 AD in Delhi. In 1730AD/1143AH, he went to Makkah to performed Hajj. After performing Hajj, he remained in Hijaz for fourteen months. In Madina, he heard Bukhari from Sheikh Abu Tahir al-Madani. He received permission in other books as well from Abu Tahir. After completing his studies, he returned to Makkah and performed another Hajj. He returned to Dehli in 1145 AH, and started teaching in Madrasa Rahimiyyah. He died on 29th Muharram, 1176 AH/21st August, 1762 AD ¹

Famous Books of Shah Wali Ullah Regarding Quranic Sciences

Imam Shah Wali Ullah has written about Fifty books on Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, Seerat, history, Tasawwuf, philosophy and other Islamic sciences.² His famous books regarding Quranic sciences are the following,

1. Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi Usool al-Tafsir

It contains the principles for understanding the Holy Quran. It was written in Persian. Later on it translated into Arabic, Urdu and English.

2. Fathur Rahman

It is translation of the Holy Quran in Persian language.

3. Commentary of Fathur Rahman

During translation of the Holy Quran, Shah Wali ullah has mentioned the causes of revelation of the verses, Abrogative and Abrogated verses, the connection between verses and practical

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

Shar‘i Ahkam in a short way. He has written all the necessary explanation in the Margin.

4. Al-Muqaddamah Fi Qawaneen al-Tarjamah

In this booklet, he has mentioned the principles for translation of the Holy Quran. It was written in Persian language.

5. Ta’weel al-Ahadith fi Ramuz Qasas al-Anbiya

In this book, he interpreted the incidents mentioned in the Holy Quran about the prophets (AS), their nations and the miracles happened in their times.

6. Fath al-khabeer bema labudda min Hifzihi fi ‘Ilm al-Tafsir

It is the fifth chapter of “Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi Usool al-Tafsir”. But he has separated it in the form of a booklet. Now it is available in both forms, with “Al-fauz al-kabir fi usool al-Tafsir” and in separate form. It was written in Arabic instead of Persian. It holds the causes of revelation, explanation of difficult words mentioned in the Holy Quran.³

Sources of Shah Wali ullah Regarding Quranic Sciences

Imam Shah Wali Ullah has deeply studied the Holy Quran, and the basic sources of Sunnah, Fiqh, Seerat and other Islamic sciences. Where he discussed a Shar‘i matter, he mentioned the statements of other scholars also. If he did not agree with them, he presented reason and adopted a separate way. He often mentioned his sources in his books. Some of them are the following,

1: The Holy Quran

The Holy Quran was the basic source of Shah Wali ullah in all topics especially in Tafsir and Quranic sciences.

2: The Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW)

The second source of Shah Wali ullah is the Sunnah of the prophet (SAW).

3: The Narrations of The Companions

The third source of Shah Wali Ullah regarding Quranic sciences is the narrations of the Companions. In Al-fauz al-kabir fi usool al-Tafsir, under causes of revelation, he narrated the statements of Hadhrat Umar (RA), Hadhrat 'Aiyshah (RA), Hadhrat Ibn Abbas (RA) and Hadhrat Ibn Umar (RA)

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

4: Books of Tafsir

Imam Shah Wali Ullah has got guidance from various Tafasir. Some of them are the following,

i. : Tafsir al-Wajiz

It is written by Imam Abu al-Hassan Ali bin Ahmad Ali al-Wahidi. Shah Wali ullah has given the reference of this Tafsir in the margin of Fathur Rahman.

ii. : Tafsir Zahidi

It is written by Abu Nasr Ahmad bin Hassan bin Ahmad Suleiman Zahidi.

iii. : Al-Kashshaf ‘an Haqa’iq al-Tanzil

It is written by Jar Allah Abu Qasim Mahmud bin Umar al-Zamakhshari.

iv. : Tafsir al-Baidawi

It is written by Qadi Nasir ud Din Abdullah bin Umar al-Baidawi.

v. : Tafsir Madarik

It is written by Abu al-Barakaat Abdullah bin Ahmad bin Mahmud al-Nasafi.

vi. : Tafsir Jalalain

It is written by Jalal ud-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal ud-Din al-Suyuti.

vii. : Al-Itqaan Fi ‘Uloom al-Quran

It is written by Jalal ud-Din al-Suyuti. Shah Wali Ullah has mentioned the Abrogated verses of the Holy Quran from al-Itqaan in his book “Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi Usool al-Tafsir”. He evaluated those verses and gave his opinion about the Abrogative and Abrogated verses. He said that only five verse of the Holy Quran has been Abrogated.⁴

5: Inspired Knowledge

Shah Wali Ullah says that Allah has gifted me some special knowledge regarding the science of Tafsir.

6: Interpretation of The Incidents Regarding The Prophets

Shah Wali ullah says:

“The interpretation of the incidents regarding the prophets (AS), I have written a separate book “Taweel al-Ahadith”.

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

It means that every incident mentioned in the Holy Quran about the prophets (AS), their nations and the miracles happened in their times, all have a reason according to the capability of that nation. But the cause and its reason are entirely hidden. The act of revealing this hidden reason is termed as “Taweel al-Ahadith”. It is not easy to understand these hidden facts. they can be understood only with the blessing of Allah. Allah says:

"وَيُعَلِّمُكَ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ"

“And teach you the correct interpretation of events”.

Five Sciences in the Holy Quran

Shah Wali Ullah has written that the ‘Uloom (Sciences) clearly explained in the Holy Quran are five,

i. Science of Rulings;

The Holy Quran guides mankind in every aspect of life, whether it is related to worship or transactions or social living or politics. The verses relating to this topic are termed as Aayat al-Ahkam. The explanation of these verses is called ‘Ilmul Ahkam (Science of rulings).

ii. Science of Debate;

The Holy Quran has rejected many evil actions of Jews, Christians, Polytheists and Hypocrites. The verses relating to this topic are called Aayat al-Mukhasamah. The explanation of these verses is called ‘Ilmul Mukhasamah (Science of debate).

iii. Science regarding Allah’s Favours;

In numerous places of the Holy Quran, Allah reminds human of His favours. The Holy Quran also mentions the perfect qualities of Allah. The explanation of these verses wherein Allah’s favours and His perfect qualities are mentioned is called science regarding Allah’s favours.

iv. Science regarding the incidents of the past;

A part of the Holy Quran contains the incidents of the past obedient or disobedient nations. Allah rewarded the obedient, and the disobedient were punished. The explanation of these verses where these incidents are mentioned is called the science regarding the incidents of the past.

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

v. Science regarding the death and what happens after the death;

A part of the Holy Quran contains the circumstances of death and what happens after the death. The explanation of these verses is called science regarding the death and what happens after the death.⁵

Abrogative And Abrogated Verses

There is disagreement among the Muslim scholars about the concept of Abrogation in the Holy Quran.

Views of the Earlier Commentators;

According to earlier commentators any form of change in a verse means Naskh. So according to them, the Abrogated verses are more than five hundred and if looked deeper then the number of Abrogated verses would be impossible to determine.⁶

According To Latter Commentators;

According to the later commentators, Abrogated verses are few in number.

Allama Suyuti has mentioned by the reference of Ibnul Arabi in his book “Al-Itqan fi ‘Uloom al-Quran” that the Abrogated verses are twenty one in number.⁷ But according to Shah Wali Ullah, Abrogated verses are five only,⁸ which are the following,

1: كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ إِنْ تَرَكَ خَيْرًا الْوَصِيَّةَ لِلْوَالِدَيْنِ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ حَقًّا عَلَى الْمُتَّقِينَ⁹

“It is enjoined upon you, when death approaches anyone of you and he leaves some wealth, that he must bequeath for the parents and the nearest of kin in the approved manner, being an obligation on the God-fearing”

It has been abrogated by the following verse,

يُوصِيكُمُ اللَّهُ فِي أَوْلَادِكُمْ لِلذَّكَرِ مِثْلُ خِطَّةِ الْأُنثَيَيْنِ¹⁰

“Allah directs you concerning your children: for a male there is share equal to that of two females”

2: يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ حَرِّضِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ عَلَى الْقِتَالِ إِنْ يَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ عِشْرُونَ صَابِرُونَ يَغْلِبُوا مِائَتِينَ وَإِنْ يَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ مِائَةٌ يَغْلِبُوا أَلْفًا مِنَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ¹¹

“O prophet, rouse the believers to fighting, if they are twenty among you, who are patient, they will overcome two hundred; and if there are one hundred among you, they will overcome one thousand of those who disbelievers, because they are a people who do not understand”

It has been abrogated by the following verse,

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

الآن خَفَّفَ اللهُ عَنْكُمْ وَعَلِمَ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ ضَعْفًا فَإِنْ يَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ مِائَةٌ صَابِرَةً يَغْلِبُوا مِائَتَيْنِ وَإِنْ يَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ
أَلْفٌ يَغْلِبُوا أَلْفَيْنِ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ¹²

“Now Allah has lightened your burden, and He knew that there is weakness in you. So, if there are one hundred among you, who are patient, they will overcome two hundred; and if there are one thousand among you, they will overcome two thousand by the will of Allah. Allah is with the patient”

3: لَا يَحِلُّ لَكَ الْبَسَاءُ مِنْ بَعْدِ وَلَا أَنْ تَبَدَّلَ بِهِنَّ مِنْ أَزْوَاجٍ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ حُسْنُهُنَّ¹³

“No women are lawful for you after this, nor is it lawful that you replace them (the present wives) with other wives, even though their goodness may attract you”

It has been abrogated by the following verse,

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَحْلَلْنَا لَكَ أَزْوَاجَكَ اللَّاتِي آتَيْتَ أُجُورَهُنَّ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ يَمِينُكَ بِمَا آفَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ¹⁴

“O prophet, We have made lawful for you all your wives whom you have given their dower, and those (bondwomen) whom you own, out of the captives Allah has given to you as spoils of war”

4: يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا نَاجَيْتُمُ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدِّمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ نَجْوَاكُمْ صَدَقَةً¹⁵

“O you who believe, when you consult the Messenger in private, then offer something in charity before your consultation”

It has been abrogated by the following verse,

أَشْفَقْتُمْ أَنْ تُقَدِّمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ نَجْوَاكُمْ صَدَقَاتٍ فَإِذْ لَمْ تُفْعَلُوا وَتَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ¹⁶

“Have you become afraid of offering charities before your consultation? So when you did not do so, and Allah has forgiven you”

5: يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُزَّمِّلُ (1) قُمْ اللَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا (2) نِصْفَهُ أَوْ انْقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا (3) أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ
تَرْتِيلًا¹⁷

“O you, wrapped up in clothes, stand at night (for prayer) except a little, or half of it, or make it a little less, or make it a little more, and recite the Quran clearly with tartil”

It has been abrogated by the following verse,

فَأَقْرئُوا مَا تَيَسَّرَ مِنْهُ¹⁸

“Therefore, recite as much of it as is easy”

Shah Wali ullah And Causes of Revelation

There are two types of verses of the Holy Quran. The first one is those which were sent by Allah without reference to an incident. The second type is those which were sent with reference to an incident. This is termed as the causes of revelation of such verses.¹⁹ Shah Wali Ullah says:

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

The Commentators use the terminology “That is why this verse was revealed” for causes of revelation. The companions and the successors used this terminology in other occasion which is not related to causes of revelation e.g.

- a) Those narrations when the companions discussed a particular law among themselves and they quoted a certain verse as an example.
- b) Sometimes the Prophet (SAW) cited a verse as evidence on a particular occasion, and then the companions said: “That is why this verse was revealed”.
- c) Sometimes the prophet (SAW) stated the same subject as has been revealed in the Quran.
- d) Those narrations which mentioned the place where a certain verse was revealed.
- e) Those narrations which specify the name of those people which have not been specified by the Holy Quran.
- f) Those narrations which mention the correct pronunciation of a certain word of the Holy Quran.
- g) Those narrations which mention the virtues of a particular Surah.
- h) Those narrations directing the method in which the prophet (SAW) fulfilled a particular instruction given to him.

Responsibilities of The Commentators

Shah Wali Ullah has written in the explanation of the meaning of a verse, the commentators present such narrations, which are not the part of the causes of revelation. He further writes, in case of causes of revelation two things are necessary for any commentator. A commentator must have knowledge of two things,

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

1: The incident and happening in the verse, because it is impossible to understand the meaning of the verse without knowing the related incident.

2: It is necessary to know those incidents which make specific the general sense of a verse or change the apparent meaning of verse.²⁰

Shah Wali Ullah & Muhkam And Mutashbih

Muhkam Verses

The word which has a single meaning is known as Muhkam. The verse which is understood by one meaning is Muhkam. In this regard the Arabs of earlier generations are standard.

Mutashabih Verses

Those verses which have the possibility of more than a single meaning are known as Mutashabih verses.

Example: أَوْ لَأَمْسُتُهُمُ النِّسَاءَ. “Or you touch your wives”

It has two possible meanings,

1: Touching by hands.

2: Sexual intercourse.²¹

Shah Wali Ullah’s View

Imam Shah Wali Ullah says:

“The Mutakallimeen have transgressed in the interpretation of Mutashabih verses and about the attributes of Allah. But it is not my viewpoint. My viewpoint is the same as that of Imam Malik, Sufyan Thuri, Abdul bin Mubarak and other earlier scholars. Our viewpoint is, to bring Imaan upon it, and not delve into its interpretation”.²²

Shah Wali Ullah And Isolated Letters

Meaning of Isolated Letters is; according to certain commentators, the isolated letters are the name of the Surah at the beginning of which they occur. According to others, they are the symbols of the Divine names. But majority of the Companions and

Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

the Successors have preferred the view that they are the symbols. Its meaning is known to Allah alone or may have been entrusted as a special secret to the prophet (SAW) not to be communicated to anyone else. That is why no commentary or explanation of these letters has at all been reported from them.²³

Shah Wali Ullah says: “Allah has gifted me some knowledge, one of them is the knowledge of isolated letters”. In “Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi Usool al-Tafsir”, he discussed Isolated letters in a briefly manner.

For example: The word “طسم”. It contains three words, Ta, Seen and Meem. The word “Ta” means greatness, “Seen” means spread in the world and “Meem” means determine. So the meaning of “طسم” is, the knowledge which were given to the prophets (AS), released in world and spread in the whole world.²⁴

Conclusions

Imam Shah Wali Ullah was born on 4th Shawwal, 1114AH/10th February, 1703AD in Muzaffarnagar (India). He has written about fifty books on Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, Seerat, Tarikh, Tasawwuf, philosophy and other Islamic knowledge. He said that the Uloom (Sciences) clearly explained in the Holy Quran are five i.e Science of rulings, Science of Debate, Science regarding Allah’s Favours, Science regarding the incidents of the past and Science regarding the death and what happens after the death. According to Allama Suyuti and Ibnul Arabi, the Abrogated verses are twenty one in number, But according to Shah Wali Ullah, these are five only. According to Shah Wali Ullah, a commentator must have knowledge of two things regarding causes of revelation i.e. the incident and happening in the verse, and to know those incidents which would make specific the general sense of a verse or change the apparent meaning of verse. Shah Wali ullah has interpreted isolated letters. His viewpoint regarding Mutashabihat is, to bring Imaan upon it, and not delve into its interpretation.

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Shah Wali ullah's Principles of Understanding	
The Islamic Shariah & Law	Spring 2019 Issue: 01

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¹⁰ Surah an-Nisa 4:11

¹¹ Surah al-Anfal 8:65

¹² Surah al-Anfal 8:66

¹³ Surah al-Ahzab 33:52

¹⁴ Surah al-Ahzab 33:50

¹⁵ Surah al-Mujadalah 58:12

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¹⁷ Surah al-Muzzammil 73:1-4

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²² Ibid, p.171.

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