

## The Place of Isra'iliyyat in Tafsir

By Shaykh Ahmad Shakir, from his introduction to *'Umdah at-Tafsir an al-Hafidh Ibn Kathir* (pp. 14-17), his summary of *Tafsir ibn Kathir*

Al-Hafidh Ibn Kathir has some strong words concerning the issue of *Isra'iliyyat* and the narrations of them, and in the case of some of them, he clarified his stance concerning them. But I have found him – despite that – mentioning some of them. And frequently he follows them up with comments in refutation. So I was of the view that I should gather together, in this introduction, what I found during my reading of it (i.e. his Tafsir) from that which I had had made record of its place. And perhaps I will be able to gather together what I overlooked of that and then mention it in the end of this book (*Al-'Umdah*), if Allah wills.

So he said in the introduction of his Tafsir (pp. 43,44) after mentioning the hadith, **“Convey from me, even if it be *anayah*, and narrate from the Children of Isra'il, and there is no sin in that. And whoever lies upon me deliberately, then let him take his place in the Hellfire.”**

“However, these Isra'ili narrations are mentioned for witnessing, not for support, so they are of three categories:

One of them: That which we know its correctness from that which we have that bears witness to its truthfulness, so that is correct.

And the second: That which we know its falsehood based upon what we have that contradicts it.

And the third: That about which no position is taken, it is not from either type, so we do not believe in it, nor do we reject it, and it is permissible to mention due to what has preceded. And most of that is from that which contains no benefit in any religious matter, and for this reason, the scholars of the People of the Book disagree concerning the likes of this a great deal, and there is much disagreement amongst the *mufassirun* [1] as a result of this. For instance, what they mention concerning the names of the People of the Cave, the color of their dog, and their number; and concerning the staff of Moses, from what type of tree it was from; and the types of birds that Allah brought back to life for Ibrahim, and; the part of the cow with which the murdered person was struck with (to bring him back to life); and the type of tree that Allah spoke to Moses from; and other than that of what Allah left unexplained which contains no benefit for the *mukallafin* [2] in their worldly affairs or in their religious affairs. However, reporting their disagreement is permissible, as Allah (تعالى) said, **“They will say three, and the fourth of them was their dog,”** until the end of the verse.”

Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, may Allah pardon him states: [3] The permission to narrate from them concerning that which we do not have proof of its truth or falsehood is one thing, and mentioning that in *tafsir* of the Qur'an, and making it an opinion or an explanation of the meaning of verses, or in particularizing that which was not particularized in it, or in clarifying the details of what was mentioned in it in general form is something else. This is because mentioning something like this next to the Speech of Allah might give the mistaken impression that this which we do not know to be true or false explains the statement of Allah (سبحانه), and clarifies the details of what is general in it! And Allah and His Book are free of that. And Allah's Messenger (ﷺ), when he

permitted narrating from them, he ordered us to not affirm nor reject what they say, and what affirmation of their narrations and their opinions can be stronger then connecting them to the Book of Allah, and placing them next to it in the place for *tafsir* or explanation?! O Allah, (we seek) forgiveness. [4]

And al-Hafidh ibn Kathir has stated himself in the *tafsir* of verse 50 from *Surah al-Kahf* , after mentioning opinions concerning *Iblis* and his name and which tribe he is from:

“And there are many narrations that have been reported from the *Salaf* concerning this, and the majority of them are from the *Isra'iliyyat* which are reported so that they may be examined, and Allah knows best concerning the condition of many of them. And amongst them is that which we can affirm with certainty that it is falsehood, due to its contradicting what we have with us. And there is sufficiency in the Qur'an from what is other than it of the reports of the preceding (nations), because hardly any of them is free from distortion, subtraction, or addition, and because many of them are forgeries. And they do not have amongst them the precise *Huffadh* [5] who eliminate from their narrations the distortions of those who go to extremes and the forgeries of the falsifiers, like the Imams and scholars; the noble and pious; the righteous and distinguished ones; from the verifying, master scholars and great *Huffadh* that this Ummah possesses who recorded the *Hadiths* and verified them, and explained the *Sahih* from the *Hasan* and the weak, and the rejected and fabricated, and they knew the fabricators, the liars, and the unknown narrators, and other than that of the various classes of narrators. All of this in protection of the Prophetic Position and the Muhammadi Station of the Seal of the Messengers and the Chief of Mankind ( *وسلم عليه الله صلى* ), so that falsehood not be attributed to him, or that something that is not from him should be reported from him, so may Allah be pleased with them and may He please them, and may he may make the Gardens of *al-Firdaws* their abode. And He has done so.”

And he said at the *tafsir* of verses 51-56 from *Surah al-Anbiyaa'* after indicating the relationship of Ibrahim ( *عليه السلام* ) with his father, and his looking towards the stars and the created things:

“And the stories which many of the scholars of *tafsir* and other than them have mentioned, much of it is from the narrations of the Children of Isra'il. So whatever of it agrees with the truth that we have coming from a *ma'soom* [6], we accept it, due to its agreeing with what is authentic, and whatever of it contradicts anything of that, we reject it, and that which neither agrees nor contradicts, we do not affirm it or reject it, rather we refrain from taking a position concerning it. And many of the *Salaf* allowed for narrating that which was of this type, and much of that is from that which contains no benefit, and there is no conclusion from it that can be benefited from in the religion. And if it had a benefit for the accountable individuals in their religion, this perfect, all-encompassing *shari'ah* would have explained it. And the course that which we tread in this *tafsir* is avoiding many of these *Isra'ili* narrations, because of what they contain of wasting of time, and because of what many of them encompass of falsehood which was spread amongst them. For they make no distinction between what is authentic from what is weak, in the manner that the precise *Huffadh* and Imams of this *ummah* verify them.”

And he said at the *tafsir* of verses 102 of *Surah al-Baqarah* :

“And there has been related concerning the story of Harut and Marut from a group of the *tabi'in* , such as Mujahid, as-Suddi, al-Hasan al-Basri, Qatadah, Abu al-'Aliyah, az-Zuhri, ar-Rabi' ibn Anas,

Muqatil ibn Hayyan, and other than him, and many of the scholars of tafsir, from the early ones and the later ones, related these stories, and they are dependent in their details upon the reports of the Children of Isra'il, for there is not an authentic, *marfu'* [7] hadith with a connected chain going back to the Truthful, Believed One who is guarded from error, the one who does not speak based on desire. And the apparent wording of the Qur'an leaves the mention of the story in general form without going into great depths and without any exaggeration, so we believe in what has been mentioned in the Qur'an as Allah (تعالى) intended it, and Allah is most knowledgeable concerning the reality of the affair.”

And he said at the beginning of *Surah Qaf* :

“And it has been narrated from some of the *salaf* that they said, ‘ *Qaf* is a mountain that surrounds the whole earth, it is called Mount *Qaf* !’ And it is as if this, and Allah knows best, is from the superstitions of the Children of Isra'il that some of the people took from them, because of their considering it to be permissible to narrate from them that which is not affirmed nor rejected. And I think that this and its likes are from the forgery of some of the *Zanadiqah* [8] amongst them who deceive the people concerning the matter of their religion, just as hadiths have been fabricated upon the Prophet (وسلم عليه الله صلى) in this Ummah – despite the great status of its scholars, *Huffadh* , and Imams – and it has not been such a long time. So how about the nation of *Bani Isra'il* , what with the great time that has passed, the lack of precise *Huffadh* amongst them, their drinking alcoholic drinks, their scholars twisting the words from their places and changing Allah's Books and Verses. And the Legislator only permitted narrating from them in his statement, ‘**Relate from the Children of Isra'il, and there is no sin in that,**’ concerning that which the intellect can conceive, but as for what the intellects find to be impossible, and it is judged to be falsehood, and it seems apparent that it is a lie – then it is not of this type.”

And he said at the *tafsir* of verses 41-44 of *Surah an-Naml* , having mentioned from ibn ‘Abbas a long narration concerning the story of the Queen of Sheba, which he characterized as “*munkar, gharib jiddan* (rejected, extremely strange),” then he said:

“And what is most likely concerning the likes of these reports is that they are taken from the People of the Book, from what is found in their scrolls, such as the narrations of Ka'b and Wahb, may Allah be kind with them concerning that which they reported to this *ummah* from the reports of the Children of Isra'il, of strange, outlandish, and fanciful reports, some of which occurred and some of which did not, and some of which were distorted or changed or abrogated. And Allah (سبحانه) has sufficed us from that with that which is more correct than it and more beneficial, clearer, and better. And to Allah belongs the Praise and the Grace.”

And he said at the *tafsir* of verse 46 of *Surah al-'Ankabut* , after relating the hadith, “**When the People of the Book narrate to you, do not believe nor reject them,**”:

“Then, it should be known that most of what they narrate is falsehood and forgery, because distortion, change, and false interpretation has entered into it, and truth is very rare in their reports, and even if it were authentic, it is of little benefit.”

And he said at the *tafsir* of verse 190 of *Surah al-A'raf* :

“Their reports are of three types: so from them is that which we know its correctness, as indicated by evidence from the Book of Allah or the Sunnah of His Messenger. And from them is that which we know its falsehood, as the opposite of it has been proven by evidence from the Book and the Sunnah. And from them is that about which no position is taken, so it is permissible to relate, due to His statement ( *والسلام الصلاة عليه* ), ‘**Narrate from the Children of Isra'il, and there is no sin in that.**’ And it is that which cannot actually be confirmed or rejected, due to his statement, ‘**Do not believe them nor reject them.**’”





And there is a very long story that an-Nasa'i reports in the chapter of *at-Tafsir* in *as-Sunan al-Kubraa* – which we have not seen [9] - and Ibn Abi Hatim reports in his *Tafsir* , from Ibn ‘Abbas, and al-Hafidh ibn Kathir refers to it as the Hadith of “*al - Fatoon*. ” He relates it in full at the *tafsir* of His ( *تعالى* ) statement, “**And We tried you with a heavy trial**” from verse 40 of *Surah Ta-Ha* , then he said:

“And it is *mawquf* [10] from the statement of ibn ‘Abbas, and there is nothing *marfu'* except concerning a little bit of it, and it is as if ibn Abbas took it from that which has been permitted to narrate of *Isra'iliyyat* , from Ka'b al-Ahbar or other than him, and Allah knows best. And I heard our shaykh, Abu al-Hajjaj al-Mizzi state that as well.” And this hadith – the hadith of *al-fatoon* – al-Hafidh ibn Kathir refers to it in a number of places in his *Tafsir* . And I have thoroughly eliminated it from this book of mine, and I did not refer except one time, at the first time that Ibn Kathir referred to it, at the *tafsir* of verse 40 of *Surah al-Baqarah* , then I avoid reference to it, so I do not refer to it except if there is some pressing need to do so. And I ask Allah for support in doing what is right and making it easy, and I ask for guidance and firmness.

And from the greatest of statements indicating that the Glorious Qur'an is free of these *Isra'ili* reports is a statement of Ibn ‘Abbas that al-Bukhari reports in his *Sahih* , and al-Hafidh ibn Kathir relates from him, at the *tafsir* of verse 79 from *Surah al-Baqarah* ; Ibn ‘Abbas said:

“O community of Muslims! How can you ask the People of the Book about something, while your Book that Allah revealed to His Prophet is the most recent of reports from Allah, and you read it fresh, it has not grown old. And Allah has informed you that the People of the Book altered the Book of Allah and changed it, and wrote scripture with their own hands and said, “This is from Allah,” so as to purchase by it a small gain. Does the knowledge that has come to you not prohibit you from asking them? And no, by Allah, we have not seen any of them ever asking you concerning that which has been revealed to you.” And this strong, clear admonition has been related by al-Bukhari in three places in his *Sahih* (5/515; 13/282,414 from *Fath al-Bari* ).

### Footnotes

1.  Scholars of *Tafsir* .
2.  Those who are held accountable in the religion for their actions.
3.  These are from the words of Shaykh Ahmad Shakir himself. This type of usage is common in Arabic to make clear when a long quote is coming to an end and the author's words are continuing.
4.  It seems, and Allah knows best, that al-Hafidh ibn Kathir mentioned these narrations so that they could be known and recognized and because they have been quoted in the books of *Tafsir* before him so he wished to cover the work of his predecessors. Likewise the mere fact that he mentioned these narrations in his *Tafsir* does not mean that he intended them to be used as the

explanation of the meanings of the Qur'an, just as he did not intend that weak *hadiths* be used as the explanation of its meanings, yet he chose to quote all *hadiths* relevant to every topic that came up, irrespective of their level of authenticity. So what Shaykh Ahmad Shakir has said here cannot be agreed with completely. However, one must agree that it is not fitting to mention these stories or weak *hadiths* in books of *Tafsir* directed to the common Muslims, as they will not have the foundational knowledge to distinguish between the correct and the incorrect, and because of the confusion and misunderstandings it would create for them, although there may be benefits in it for the scholar or the capable student of knowledge. And certainly, the *Tafsir* of Imam ibn Kathir is a scholarly work addressed to a knowledgeable audience, so Imam ibn Kathir, may Allah reward him for his tremendous work, is free of blame in that regard. And Allah knows best.

5. 🚩 Plural of *Hafidh* , a title for great scholars of Hadith.
6. 🚩 One free of error: Allah or His Messengers.
7. 🚩 A *hadith* that is “raised up”, that is, it goes back all the way to the Prophet (عليه الله صلى وسلم ).
8. 🚩 Heretics who seek to undermine the religion.
9. 🚩 Since that time, an-Nasa'i's book, *As-Sunan al-Kubraa* , has been printed and made available, and all Praise is due to Allah.
10. 🚩 Going back to a Sahabi, not the Prophet (عليه الله صلى وسلم ).