

# Majlesi's thematic approach to the verses of Quran

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**Abstract:** Thematic exegesis at the beginning of the chapters of Bihar al-Anwar is a matter that researchers and authors have commented on it and they know him as the beginner of thematic exegesis. He briefly used this method of exegesis (Sobhani, 1981: Vol.1, p.2). Research on the validity of this view can be performed in three parts of gathering chapters, sub-chapters, examining the viewpoints of exegetes and analysis and conclusion according to the definition of thematic exegesis. This study aimed to study the thematic approach of Majlesi to the Quran which is the introduction and entrance basis to thematic exegesis. For this purpose, the number of chapters were randomly and proportionally selected from each subject package of Bihar al-Anwar and then examined. Totally, proportion included about 100 chapters with their titles. According to the results, on the one hand, coverage and diversity of the subjects of Bihar al-Anwar are proved and on the other hand, it is proved that each chapter includes all related verses. Also, the order and coherence of Majlesi's method at the entrance to the exegesis of verses becomes clear.

**Keyword:** thematic exegesis, Bihar al-Anwar, thematic approach to verses

## PROBLEM STATED

One of the most important methods to achieve the exegesis method used in Bihar al-Anwar is to study the thematic categorization at the beginning of each chapter.

Studying Bihar al-Anwar with a specific and thematic method is a solution to achieve the contents in this study. In this method, if any subject of Bihar al-Anwar is supposed as a thematic package, there will be several chapters in each package, depending on the subject and the number of chapters have subject-related verses at its beginning and some of these chapters have exegesis discussion in addition to related verses. In this study, firstly, the number of chapters which have the verses with the same subject were specified and the chapters which have exegesis in addition to verses were specified. In next step, in each thematic package (the chapters which have both the verses with the same subject and exegesis discussion), the number of chapters were randomly selected in the ratio of three to ten and then, evaluated.

In order to judge and approve or reject the thematic approach in Bihar al-Anwar, correct definition of thematic exegesis is required. Before this, it is better to know that firstly 663 of 2378 chapters (including the chapters before the discussion of permissions) are the chapters with related verses. 34 of them have exegesis in addition to verses.

Most exegetes haven't provided a clear definition of thematic exegesis, but their approach to thematic exegesis can be understood by studying their collections. The common aspect of all definitions in thematic exegesis is to gather the verses related to a subject with a specific objective and to analyze and examine them by the exegete.

Many researchers including Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Sadr and Mohammad Hadi Ma'arefat know referring to the Quran as the principle of this method and in fact, they introduce the Quran to Quran exegesis method as the foundation and basis of this method (Sadr, Vol.29; Ma'arefat, Vol.2, p.528; Mesbah Yazdi, Vol.2, p.161).

According to Ma'arefat, some exegetes know the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) and Imam Ali (AS) and the teachings of Ahl al-Bayt as the inventor of this method of exegesis. Certainly, there was Quran thematic method in the first centuries. However, this method was firstly dedicated to the aspects of exegesis such as jurisprudence or vocabulary and has evolved gradually (Ma'arefat, Vol.2, p.15).

Thematic exegesis can be classified into two types: "union thematic exegesis" and "relative thematic exegesis". The former discusses on only an independent subject of Quran. This type of thematic exegesis can be found in the collections such as "Message of the Quran" of Makaren Shirazi, "Eternal Charter" of Jafar Sobhani and "Thematic exegesis" of Javadi Amoli. In the latter, two related subjects such as faith and righteous practice, are examined (such as Tawhid (monotheism) and shirk in Eternal charter). In in-depth definition of thematic exegesis it can be inspired by these words of Imam Ali (AS) on the Quran: "part of it witnesses the other part" (Nah) and it can be known thematic exegesis as a method that exegete conserves with the Quran in his study on the subject of interest and searches in the Quran actively and purposefully and finds its answer and concludes based on all the comments. He reaches an integral conclusion by citing to hadiths and paying attention to the reliability of verses and the order of revelations (Ma'arefat, Vol.2, p.529).

As mentioned above, some scholars such as Ayatollah Sobhani know Majlesi as the beginner of thematic exegesis in his era. In order to verify this, following questions must be answered: was Majlesi in the position of providing thematic exegesis? Are the components forming the definition of thematic exegesis used in Majlesi's method? To what extent was he successful in gathering the related verses with the same theme? Did Majlesi just quote from the exegesis collections at the beginning of the chapters? Or did he criticize and investigate the others' comments? Did he just verify or criticize the others' comments? Or did he provide exegesis? Finally, is there the most important condition of thematic exegesis, i.e. judgments and integrated conclusions about the verses and exegetes' comments, in Bihar al-Anwar? What examined in this study is just the first topic mentioned above, fitness of verses gathered in sub-chapters.

### **Categorization in Bihar al-Anwar**

The first condition in thematic exegesis is to gather the verses with the same theme. According to the ratio of chapters including the verses with the same theme (663) to all the chapters before the discussion of permissions (2378), it can be said that more than a quarter of chapters (27.88%) in Bihar al-Anwar have the verses with the same theme.

By comparing the thematic categorization of verses in Bihar al-Anwar with other existing thematic exegeses, it must be said that on the one hand, coverage and diversity of the subjects of Bihar al-Anwar are proved and on the other hand, it is proved that each chapter includes all related verses. In each chapter, Majlesi referred to related verses (if there are verses), although, he didn't interpret the verses in all the chapters. With an overall review and calculating the number of chapters and the ratio of chapters including the verses with the same theme to the all chapters, it can be observed that in all the thematic packages, there are different number of verses with the same theme. It is worth noting that with setting each theme with more titles, it was possible for Majlesi to access to greater number of verses. This is made clear by looking at the lists of the themes of justice and resurrection (Vol.5), belief and unbelief (Vol.64), promises and treaties (Vol.64) and other themes.

In Bihar al-Anwar, the verses are categorized in a way that naturally, 83% of chapters are dedicated to the theme of justice and resurrection and less than 1% of chapters are dedicated to the history and life of the Imams (PBUH), because the number of verses on justice and resurrection is greater than the ones on the life of Imams (PBUH).

About the collection of verses in Bihar al-Anwar, the question can be raised that how it can be ensured that this collection is complete, because achieving a full set of verses with the same theme in thematic exegesis is of the priorities and if the exegesis of one theme includes all the verses about it, this will be comprehensive exegesis.

In order to answer this question, it should be said that the perspective of each exegete and his objective firstly impact on thematic categorization and then, on the collection of verses and if the mind of an exegete is more coherent and more regular, he achieves a fuller and more regular set.

Maybe, comparing what Majlesi did in Bihar al-Anwar with other thematic sets clarifies this discussion. It should be noted that in thematic categorization, Majlesi was inspired by the sayings of the Imams (PBUH). He firstly categorized the themes in his mind in terms of traditions and then he selected the verses for each them. The reason for this is the chapters which don't have the verses with the same theme. The chapters such as "customs of entering the king" (Majlesi, Vol. 72/ chapter 80), "uncleanness of blood" (Majlesi, Vol. 77/ chapter 3), "what is obligatory in Hajj and occurs in it" (Majlesi, Vol. 96/ chapter 63).

Another reason is that there are chapters that some parts of them have related verses. For example, the coupling of Adam and Eve, bada al-nasl and the story of Cain and Abel (Majlesi, Vol.11/ chapter5) that no verse is referred in its part, the coupling of Adam and Eve. The chapter of "the role of their rings and the reasons for naming and the virtues of the both" in the chapters on the story of Moses and Aaron (AS) in which there are just the verses related to the virtues of Moses and Aaron (AS). So, in Bihar al-Anwar where there is no verse, it is not a failure of Majlesi and that theme had been of interest to Majlesi just because of reliability.

Knowledge and understanding of using Hadith and sayings of the Imams (PBUH) and their eloquent speech in all personal, social, religious aspects and other fields demonstrate the universality of chapter categorization in Bihar al-Anwar. Order and coherence put all things in their places and with a little attention, each researcher finds out that each theme is related to what thematic package and what chapter. For example, the theme of marriage (Majlesi, Vol.100, p.216) and vow (Majlesi, Vol.101, p.205) are in the chapter "promises and treaties".

By comparing the lists of Bihar al-Anwar and other collections such as Lekoran analyse (Jull La baume), Eternal charter and Thematic exegesis of the Quran of Javadi Amoli and also comparing their chapters with each other, the volume and depth of Majlesi's investigations become clear. For example, there are useful content on justice in Eternal charter but it was investigated more completely in the chapters of Bihar al-Anwar in several volumes. Also, there are some themes such as the heavens and universe in Bihar al-Anwar which are not found in others' collections.

The main reason for the differences between Bihar al-Anwar and other collections in terms of thematic categorization is related to the perspective of exegete. For example, Ayatollah Sobhani, after discussion of theology and in the second volume of his collection, selected the themes of second volume according to the project originated from ten principles of the Torah. He aimed to demonstrate the moral principles of Islam in compared to the Torah to reveal the in-depth commands of Islam (Sobhani, Vol.2, p.28).

He knew studying hypocrisy and anthropology important and in the fourth volume of his collection, he interpreted these two issues in two main chapters (Sobhani, Vol.4, p.10). But in Majlesi's mind, the themes look like the rooms of a large and systemic building and he explained each of them in their places.

And it is true that by reading other collections, new titles such as alienation, global aspect of community and life of creation is a plan of creation can be observed (Sobhani, Vol.2, p.5 and Vol.4 and p.2) but categorization of chapters and themes in Bihar al-Anwar can be the best model and plan for thematic exegesis so that the researchers of this field can use it and take effective steps (with over-viewing the titles of Lekoran analyse, a general categorization of verses in the areas of beliefs, laws and ethics can be understood but categorization in Bihar al-Anwar is more precise. There are more common points between Javadi Amoli's thematic exegesis and Bihar al-Anwar but there are also more differences between them in terms of categorization due to using the terms of philosophy and new categorizations).

### **Fitness of verses with the titles of chapters**

The most important condition in achieving thematic verses is not to rely on common words. Because many of the verses are similar in terms of content without any common words. For example a exegete cannot rely on searching in collections on the terms of Quran to find the verses on a specific theme and ignore the verses which are about that them but don't have the same words.

In Bihar al-Anwar, although the roots of words is one of the main ways to achieve the verses with the same theme (Majlesi, Vol.5, chapter 12) but about many chapters, Majlesi titles them based on his understanding of the verses and concepts which can be placed in the same chapter. For example, in a

chapter such as “The cause of difference in creation”, he cited to the verses which have no words common to the title (Majlesi, Vol.5, chapter 12). For example, the verses such as:

If Allah had expanded His provision to His worshipers, they would become tyrannical in the earth, but He sends down to them what He will in due measure; He is Aware and sees His worshipers. (Sura: ASH-SHURA, 27)

What, is it they who divide the Mercy of your Lord! (It is) We who divided between them their livelihoods in this life, raising some in rank above others, so that some may take the other into his service. Your Lord's Mercy is better than all they gather. (Sura: AZ-ZUKHRUF, 32)

And in the theme “Consequences for the unbelievers and corrupt people in the world” (Majlesi, Vol.6, Chapter.22), he cited the verses where the words of unbelief and lasciviousness were not observed in.

He has attendant angels before him and behind him, who, by the Command of Allah watch over him. Allah does not change what is in a nation unless they change what is in themselves. Whenever Allah wants evil for a nation, none can ward it off. Other than Him, they have no guardian. (Sura: AL-RAD, 11)

Give them the parable of two men. To one we gave two gardens of vines and surrounded them with palm trees and in between the two we placed a sown field. (Sura: AL-KAHF, 32)

'Begone! Your lot in this life is to cry: "untouchable!" ' said he (Moses). 'An appointment awaits you that you cannot fail to keep. Look at your god which you clung to indeed we will burn it and scatter its ashes upon the sea. ' (Sura: TA-HA, 97)

You are not able to frustrate Him in the earth, nor do you have a guardian and a helper other than Allah. (Sura: ASH-SHURA, 31)

And among His signs are the ships that run on the sea like mountains and (Sura: ASH-SHURA, 32)

And in another place, he placed the verse “Whatever the Messenger gives you” (Sura: AL-HASHR, 7, ref. Majlesi, Vol.16, Chapter 6, p.82; Vol.17, chapter.13, p.1; Vol.70, chapter.130, p.179; Vol.179, chapter6, p.1) in the sub-chapter “obligation of Obeying Mohammad (pbuh) and loving him and entrusting the works to him”. Also, no common words are observed in it.

In fact, in Bihar al-Anwar, some selected titles are perfectly conceptual and similar verses cannot be searched literally. For example, in the title of “the customs of socializing with him, honoring him in life and after his death”, the customs of socializing with Mohammad (pbuh) was examined and the verses used are related with the title (Majlesi, Vol.17, chapter14, p.15; also, ref. Vol.19, chapter8, p.133; Vol.22, chapter14, p.441). In fact, previous knowledge and information can assist in selecting verses.

Another issue that the exegete should not ignore is to use the verses with the synonym words. For example, in the theme of “the creation of the universe and the beginning of creation”, in addition to the words with the root of “creation”, the words with the root of “make” were also used, because, in Quran, it means creation (Majlesi, Vol.54, chapter1, p.2; also, ref. Vol.67, chapter52, p.130).

Elsewhere and in the theme of “arrogance”, in addition the verses including the words with the root of “arrogance”, the verses including the words of "glory," "honor", "algebra" and "stage" were cited (Majlesi, Vol.70, chapter130, p.179).

And beyond the words, Majlesi placed the verses in each theme carefully and with precision. One of the best choices, placing the verse “But Allah would never waste your faith. Indeed, Allah is Gentle with people, the Most Merciful. (Sura: AL-BAQARA, 143)” under the title of “practice is a part of faith” and Majlesi reasoned his selection as following:

This means your prayers and this verse is cited that practice is a part of faith (Majlesi, Vol.66, Chapter30, P.19). Accordingly, prayer with is a worship act, has been a part of faith.

One way to convey the concept or theme correctly is to use the antonyms concepts. For example, in order to define the attribute such as courage, it may be better to define the concept such as fear to clarify the

concept perfectly. So, Majlesi sometimes considered the wording of verses which is higher than the concept and includes the meanings opposite the verses. For example, in the theme of “certainty and patient on hardship in religion”, following verse can be seen:

There are some people who say: 'We believe in Allah, ' yet when such is hurt in the cause of Allah, he makes the persecution of people as though it were the punishment of Allah. But then if help comes from his Lord, he will say: 'We were with you. ' Does Allah not know what is in the (people's) chests of the worlds? (Sura: AL-ANKABOOT, 10)

This verse and similar verses which are completely opposite the title (ref. Malesi, Vo.93, Chapter1, p.1) clarify the certain aspects of the theme such as certainty and patient. So, selecting them doesn't despoil the fitness of verses and also helps to explain the theme.

Another examples are: the verses of “Those who have gone before them devised, but to Allah is the devising altogether. He knows what every soul earns. The unbelievers shall know without doubt for whom is the Ultimate Abode. (Sura: AL-RAD, 42)”, “Then, he will look and see him in the midst of Hell. (Sura: AS-SAAFFAT, 55)”, “Woe on that Day to those who belied it! (Sura: AL-MURSALAT, 45)” in the chapter of “heaven and blessings” (Majlesi, Vol.8) and the verses of “And he who disobeys Allah and His Messenger and transgresses His Bounds, He will admit him to a Fire and shall live in it for ever. For him, there is a humiliating punishment. (Sura: AN-NISA, 14)”, “a caller to Allah by His permission and as a light shedding lamp. (Sura: AL-AHZAB, 46)”, “Those who oppose Allah and His Messenger shall be among the humiliated. (Sura: AL-MUJADILA, 20)”, “Allah has written: 'I will surely be the Victor, I and My Messengers. ' Surely, Allah is the Strong, the Almighty. (Sura: AL-MUJADILA, 21)” and “because they broke their promise with Allah and His Messenger; and whosoever breaks their promise with Allah Allah is Stern in retribution. (Sura: AL-HASHR, 4)” in the chapter of “obligation of Obeying Mohammad (pbuh) and loving him and entrusting the works to him” (Majlesi, Vol.17).

Another point should be sad about Bihar al-Anwar is that some titles are general and so, Majlesi had more choices in selecting the verses and any limitation in choosing verses had been prevented.

The titles such as “Aspects of Tawhid” (Majlesi, Vol.4, chapter4, p.212), “reading the Quran and its traditions and commandments” (Majlesi, Vol.82, chapter23, p.1), “its advantages and disadvantages and what would lead to salvation and guidance” (Majlesi, Vol.7, chapter8, p.131) that in the last title, the fate of honest people, kindness, accepting the Lord, faith and good deeds were placed in the theme of “the pious people” and the ends of the fate of the people of unbelief, concealing the truth, discord, jealousy, injustice, sin, ignorance and denied were placed in the theme of “the offenders”.

### **The number of selected verses**

After studying the integrity of categorization in Bihar and ensuring the fitness of verses with the themes, it should be examined that how the volume of verses selected by Majlesi is compared to others' collections? The complete and comprehensive list can be observed in Bihar and now the question is that are there the great number of verses in each theme?

The discussed difference between the perspectives of exegetes and their impact on thematic categorization of verses provide less possibility of comparing different lists and examining the match of themes in thematic packages. In other words, except for issues such as Tawhid and prophets' lives which are common in all the collections, the titles of chapters are different and the exegeses cannot be compared correctly.

However, it must be recognized that the methods used by Majlesi to choose verses are different and by comparing the chapters which can be compared with each other, it becomes clear that there is a significant difference between Bihar and others' collections in terms of the number of verses.

For example, in the theme of “heaven and blessings” (Majlesi, Vol.8, chapter23,p.71) which can be found in others' collection, in clear difference, up to 301 verses can be counted in Bihar al-Anwar.

In a few cases, perhaps Majlesi used one or two verses less than others (ref: table2), but, in general, the total number of verses in Bihar al-Anwar is greater than others' collections.

Another point is regular arrangement and order of verses at the beginning of each chapter in Bihar. Majlese examined the verses surah by surah. This shows his final decision in selecting the verses. With this method, he used some verses as testifier or he cited a verse in quoting to other exegeses. This is not confused with his final decision. This is considered in new thematic collections recently and after the first edition (ref. Sobhani, 2004).

And the final point is that Majlesi used that part of verse at the beginning of each chapter which fits with theme and in such way, he clarify his reason for selecting the verse.

### CONCLUSION

Making judgments about the rightness or wrongness of the comment that Majlesi is a pioneer of thematic exegesis requires a study on the components of exegesis in Bihar al-Anwar. The first step in this regard is examining the set of verses with the same theme in each chapter. By comparing Majlesi's collection with other thematic collections, the order, extent and comprehensiveness of Majlesi's method in Bihar al-Anwar are proved which has been obtained due to the order and extensive knowledge and detailed look of Majlesi that is inspired by the traditions and also, different methods used in choosing the verses.

No	Volume	Number of chapter	The chapters which have verses	Percentage of chapters having verses
1	1 and 2 and 3	39	24	61.53
2	3-4	29	14	48.27
3	5-8	61	51	83.60
4	9 and 10	30	1	3.33
5	11-22	166	114	68.67
6	23-27	136	28	20.58
7	28-34	68	3	4.41
8	35-53	300	1	0.33
9	54-63	224	55	24.55
10	64-70	145	92	63.44
11	71-73	174	57	32.75
12	74-75	33	1	3.03
13	76	47	19	40.42
14	77-79	64	9	14.06
15	79-88	127	41	32.28
16	89-92	289	27	9.34
17	93	29	13	44.82
18	93-95	85	6	7.05
19	96	72	20	27.77

20	97	16	12	75
21	97-99	68	2	2.94
22	100-101	176	73	41.47

No.	Theme	Book	Vol.	Number of verses	No.	Theme	Book	Vol.	Number of verses
1	Eternal blessings of paradise	Charter	3	23	3	Prostration of angles	Javadi	6	26
2	Eternal blessings of paradise	Bihar	8	301	1	The story of Prophet Saleh (AS)	Charter	11	60
3	blessings of paradise	Javadi	5	216	2	The story of Prophet Saleh (AS) and his people	Bihar	6	71
1	Factors of ignorance and misdirection	Charter	3	39	3	The miracle of the Prophet (PBUH)	Javadi	6	11
2	Advantages and disadvantages and what leads to salvation and guidance	Bihar	66	108	1	The miracle of the Prophet (PBUH)	Javadi	9	29
1	Exam and test	Charter	3	100	2	The story of Bani nazir	Charter	18	32
2	Exam and test	Bihar	5	52	1	Wars of Bani Nazir	Bihar	4	5
1	Dimensions of justice and equity	Charter	2	17	2	Ismat of Jonah (AS)	Charter	20	16
2	Ketab al-adl	Bihar	5	286	1	Stories of Jonah and his father Mattew	Bihar	5	25
1	Question, pressure of grave, grave and purgatory	Javadi	4	12	2	War of Zat al-Salasal	Charter	14	16
2	Question, pressure of grave, grave	Bihar	6,7	12	1	War of Zat al-Salasal	Bihar	7	5

	and purgatory								
1	Blowing of the trumpet	Javadi	4	32	2	The conquest of Mecca	Charter	21	5
2	Blowing of the trumpet	Bihar	6	37	1	The conquest of Mecca	Bihar	7	18
1	Witnesses of the resurrection	Javadi	4	19	2	Obedience to the Prophet	Charter	21	23
2	Witnesses of the resurrection	Bihar	7	18	1	obligation of Obeying Mohammad, ....	Bihar	7	16
1	The balance	Javadi	5	11	2	Tabook war	Charter	17	28
2	The balance	Bihar	7	12	1	Tabook war	Bihar	7	20
1	Adam prostrated by angels	Charter	11	13	2			21	73
2	Prostration of the angles	Bihar	11	47					

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