An Examination of the litrary aspect of the quran as evidence that a science of quranic exegesis is possible

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Abstract

In conveying its message at the exoteric level, the Qur'an follows the same common method of communication that intelligent speakers use in conveying their intentions to one another. As such, it can be understood by all intelligent readers—after, of course, obtaining the requisite tools, such as learning the classic Arabic language and literature. Taking into account how important a role literature played in pre-Islamic Arabia and that it was in this milieu that the literary miracle of the Qur'an appeared proves this claim. The reason why some Islamic scholars have historically held that the Qur'an may be interpreted only by certain Islamic authorities (though there is a difference of opinion as to who these authorities are) is that there are a number of hadiths that at first glance appear to forbid the interpretation of the Qur'an. This line of reasoning is, however, invalid as the hadiths in question condemn only those interpretations that violate the common standards of interpretation when the interpreter either fails to acquire the necessary tools or intends to justify a set of preconceptions by applying them to the Qur'an without honestly attempting to understand the Qur'an itself. Once we embrace this view, it is no longer necessary to confine our understanding of the Qur'an to the hadiths from the Infallible Imams (in the case of Shia doctrine) or to those from the Companions (in the case of Sunni doctrine). Thus, the Qur'an is more than just a sacred text to be recited as a ritual; it is the primary source for comprehending and discovering the heavenly teachings revealed to benefit all human beings. In this light, we uphold the feasibility of mutual understanding and criticism among Qur'anic commentators with respect to their divergent views.

Introduction

The question that this essay will deal with is, viewed as a heavenly book, a sacred text, what method does the Qur'an employ in conveying its message? Does it employ the same method of communication—at least at the exoteric level—commonly used by intelligent speakers? Or is there a distinctive method of communication to the Qur'an that precludes any attempt at understanding it, except for a select group? And more importantly, can the Qur'an's literary miracle serve as grounds to prove that it is universally comprehensible? Should we answer these questions positively, there will inevitably be certain implications—implications that are in no way trivial. Some of these implications are as follows.

1. The Qur'an will be vindicated as the primary source for a systematic understanding of the heavenly teachings revealed for the guidance of humankind.

2. The focus on the Sunnah in understanding Islamic doctrine and implementing its injunctions will shift to the Qur'an. For, to accept the universal comprehensibility of the Qur'an results in the Qur'an's authority in evaluating all hadiths, including those pertaining to faith and those

concerning intellectual knowledge: If the Qur'an corroborates them, they are acceptable; otherwise, they are rejected.

3. In this light, reciting the words of the Qur'an is no longer viewed as merely a ritual (without, of course, deprecating the benefit of such recitation).

4. Based on this standpoint, Qur'anic commentators are justified in engaging in discussion and criticism of their respective views, for, after realizing the requisite qualifications for this task, they recognize it as their right to seek to understand the Qur'an, as a universally comprehensible text, extending this right to others as well. (This general recognition of the right to interpret the Qur'an is not intended to confirm the objective value of the various interpretations, for the various interpretations may differ in their grasp of the truth. What is intended here is the epistemic value of these interpretations in so far as they aim at a systematic understanding of the Qur'an and the consequent guidance this may offer.)

Defining the Science of Qur'anic Interpretation

I will begin by examining the various definitions that major Islamic scholars have furnished for the science of Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*) as they have conceived it.

Not all Qur'anic commentators, whether Shia or Sunni, have put forth an explicit definition of the science of Qur'anic interpretation. One can, for instance, point to Tusi, Ibn Jarir, and Zamakhshari, eminent Qur'anologists in whose works one does not find a definition of the science of *tafsir*. Others who have undertaken this task have produced markedly different definitions. Here are some examples.

1. "*Tafsir* treats of the media of revelation, the occasion of revelation, and the accounts related therewith."[1]

2. "*Tafsir* deals with the denotation [of the verses of the Qur'an] and the meaning of the words."[2]

3. "*Tafsir* is the attempt to discover the meaning of the difficult phrases of the Qur'an."[3]

4. "*Tafsir* is the attempt to discover the meaning of [the verses of] the Qur'an and to thereby express God's intent, regardless of whether the phrases in question are difficult or not."[4]

5. "*Tafsir* is the attempt to express the probable (*zahiri*) meaning[i] of the Qur'anic verses in accordance with the rules of Arabic literature."[5]

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[i] In this article and generally in the Islamic sciences, *zahir* is used in two different but similar senses. In one sense it contrasts with *batin*; in the other, with *nass*, on the one hand, and *ijmal*, on the other. Here I have rendered it in the former sense as *exoteric* and in the latter sense as *probable meaning*.

6. "*Tafsir* is the attempt to express the meaning of the Qur'anic verses and to discover their purpose and implications."[6]

As the above examples show, Qur'anic scholars, regardless of their denominations, have offered divergent definitions of the science of Qur'anic interpretation (or *tafsir*).[7] But in spite of this, after an exhaustive examination of the various definitions offered by Qur'anic commentators from the two general denominations, Sunni and Shia, one may safely claim that there are two common elements that determine the science of Qur'anic interpretation:

1. Qur'anic interpretation in the Islamic tradition pertains to the level of verbal expression and the exoteric meaning of the verses, in an effort to understand the meaning intended by God.

2. Qur'anic interpretation applies where there is a degree of ambiguity and unclarity in the meaning of the Qur'anic phrase in question. The commentator thus attempts to clarify the true meaning intended by God. Hence, where the meaning is explicit and God's intention clear, there is no need for any interpretative endeavor in the technical sense.

In this light, the purpose of Qur'anic interpretation is to reveal the more likely meaning where there is a degree of ambiguity and unclarity (as opposed to where the meaning is obvious and certain). This calls for a profound and reasoned analysis, in the process of which the commentator must contemplate all the verbal and extra-verbal indicators and thereafter put the various factors into perspective so as to reduce, to the extent possible, the chances of misunderstanding the Divine Word.

Turning to the Central Question: Whether It Is Possible to Understand and Interpret the Qur'an

The Views of Those who Deny the Legitimacy of Qur'anic Interpretation

There have been scholars from both major Islamic denominations—Shia and Sunni—that reject as illegitimate any attempt at interpreting the Qur'an, except by certain Islamic authorities. They contend that understanding the Qur'an, even at the exoteric level, is a prerogative of—in the Shia school—the Infallibles (who are next to the Qur'an in their religious authority[8]) or—in the Sunni school—the Prophet as the recipient, teacher, and clarifier of the Qur'an[9] and the Companions as those who witnessed the Revelation. Raghib Isfihani expounds the viewpoint of such scholars from the Sunni school:

No one is allowed to interpret the Qur'an—though he may be an erudite and knowledgeable scholar well versed in jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, and the tradition [of the Prophet and the Companions]. We must content

ourselves with the [interpretative] hadiths from the Prophet, the Companions, who witnessed the Revelation, and the Successors who acquired their knowledge from the latter.[10]

In the Shia school, scholars of the Akhbari tendency hold a similar view.[11] Their position is that if there isn't a hadith interpreting a particular phrase of the Qur'an, we have no right to understand it. That is, we may not independently provide an interpretation of the Qur'an, for it would be unfounded.[12]

Generally speaking, the arguments offered by these scholars fall under two main categories: one, that there is no reason that could justify an independent and speculative interpretation of the Qur'an and, two, that based on the hadiths that forbid preconceived interpretation (*tafsir bi al-ra'y*) there is sufficient reason against a speculative endeavor to interpret the Qur'an.

An Examination of Motives

Before analyzing and critiquing the views of the scholars who oppose the legitimacy of Qur'anic interpretation, it is necessary to study the motives that have compelled them to take this standpoint. Reading between the lines, we may infer the following points.

Generally speaking, what compels such scholars to confine the capacity of understanding the Qur'an to the Infallible Imams or the Companions is not to consolidate their intellectual or social status or to hide their shortcomings. Rather, this tendency results from their unquestioning faith in the hadiths and their caution in dealing with the Qur'an, which naturally leads to a denial of rationalism or, at best, a rejection of employing reason in understanding the words of the Qur'an. They argue that since there is no reason to legitimize universal comprehension of the Qur'an, we have no choice but to err on the side of caution, refraining from undertaking this task in ignorance.

The verdict to take up caution and refrain from interpreting the Qur'an rests on the impermissibility of following one's whims and conjectures, a fault that any interpreter, in their view, is bound to commit. For, no interpreter can claim with certainty that his understanding of the meaning of God's words is correct; his interpretation is at best a probability. This standpoint is further strengthened by the transmitted hadiths that forbid interpreting the Qur'an based on one's preconceived view.

Thus, the motive that persuades these scholars is simply a religious devotion to prevent the occurrence of an impermissible act. This is illustrated in an account related from Abu Bakr, the first caliph. When asked regarding a phrase from the Qur'an, he replied, "Under which firmament may I take shelter, which land would take me in, whereto may I flee, and what may I do, should I utter my opinion regarding God's Book."[13] This reply indicates the great caution Abu Bakr took concerning the interpretation of the Qur'an and his firm commitment to avoid this iniquity. And this account serves as a model for the scholars of this bent.[14]

It Must be noted at this point that the proponents of the universal comprehensibility of the Qur'an must, first, address the claim that there is no

reasoning in favor of the legitimacy of Qur'anic interpretation and, second, counter the argument against Qur'anic interpretation, which is based on hadiths that denounce preconceived interpretation. This is what I will take up below.

The Views of Those who Affirm the Legitimacy of Qur'anic Interpretation

Now, the cogency of the first argument (i.e, that an independent and speculative interpretation of the Qur'an is unjustifiable) rests on a certain presupposition; namely, that the Qur'an's method in conveying its meaning is different from that used commonly by intelligent speakers. Thus, if this presupposition is shown to be untenable or false, the reasoning derived therefrom would lose credibility. For, without this presupposition, the universal consensus among all intelligent speakers to rely on the probable meaning of the words of a speaker would naturally extend to the Qur'an.

In communicating their thoughts and intentions, the intelligent people of all civilized societies follow a common method that springs from the human being's social intuitions.[i] Intelligent speakers rely on the probable meaning of one another's another's words, whether oral or written, after, of course, considering the entire body of words under consideration as a whole and taking into account every reasonable verbal and extra-verbal modifier.[15] To prove that this universal norm extends to the Qur'an as well—and consequently to prove that it can be understood and interpreted by persons other than the aforementioned authorities—some Qur'anologists have cited Qur'anic verses and hadiths—i.e., doctrinal sources.[16] Although this route is fruitful in its own way, it seems that one could achieve this end by recourse to extra-doctrinal means as well.

The Qur'an's Literary Miracle as an Argument for the Legitimacy of Qur'anic Interpretation

The strongest argument that could be made for this position, it seems to me, is by taking note of the place that literature occupied in the culture of the Arabs of the period of Revelation and how the literary miracle of the Qur'an fit into that context. In several verses, the Qur'an addresses all those who might doubt its authenticity by calling them to the challenge of producing some literature that could rival it: "Do they say, 'He has fabricated it'? Say, 'Then bring a surah like it, and invoke whomever you can besides God, should you be truthful.'"[17] In this challenge, the Qur'an is even content with a single surah.

The critical question that rises at this point is, what are the characteristics of a Qur'anic surah that render futile any attempt at rivaling it? To answer this question, Islamic scholars have articulated the characteristics that give the Qur'an its distinct status. In the science of Qur'anology, this discussion is treated under the title, "the

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[i] In the science of usul al-fiqh (principles of jurisprudence), the term *irtikazat ijtima'i* (here translated as "social intuitions") designates those fundamental preconceptions that govern, in most cases subconsciously, the social interactions of the individual and that are not peculiar to a certain society but are rather universal in nature.

aspects of the miracle of the Qur'an."[18]   Among the various aspects that have historically been considered, Qur'an's literary aspect is a constant. Discussion on this aspect of the Qur'an began towards the end of the second century AH/eight-ninth century C.E. It evolved into such a central topic that even theologians incorporated it into their arguments for proving the inimitability—and hence the divine origin—of the sacred scripture of Islam.[19]

The study of the literary aspect of the Qur'an developed over the centuries, reaching its culmination in Abd al-Qahir Jurjani's (d. 471 A.H/1026 C.E.) *Dala'il al-I'jaz*, an influential work whose impact on later works is clearly visible.[20] What gave rise to such a vast field of study was the recognition that Islamic scholars came to as to the prominence of literature in the Arab culture in the context of which the Qur'an was revealed, which figured into the general principle of the correspondence of prophetic miracles with the predominant social elements of the time of their occurrence. The latter principle is highlighted in Imam Ali ibn Muhammad al-Hadi's (d. 254 A.H./867-868 C.E.) reply to Ibn al-Sikkit (d. 244 A.H./858-859 C.E.). The latter asked the Imam, "Why did God bestow the miracles of the staff and the white hand—apparently magical means—to Moses,[21] the miracle of healing to Jesus, and the miracle of the Qur'an to Muhammad?" Imam Hadi answered,

> When God appointed Moses, sorcery was the predominant concern of the society of the time. Thus Moses brought for them from God that which they could not emulate and which annulled their magic and thus demonstrated for them God's proof. God appointed Jesus at a time when chronic, debilitating diseases were widespread and so people were in need of medicine. Thus Jesus brought from God that whose like did not exist, that which brought to life their dead, healed their blind and leper by God's will, thus demonstrating for them God's proof. And God appointed Muhammad at a time when rhetoric and literature prevailed [and I think he also mentioned poetry][i]. Thus he brought from God words of advice and wisdom that countered their literature, thus demonstrating for them God's proof....[22]

This principle of correspondence between prophetic miracles and the prevalent elements of each age has been expounded by a number of Qur'anologists.[23] The standard exposition is as follows. Moses exhibited such miracles as the white hand and his extraordinary staff, which could metamorphose into a dragon (thereby annulling the magical tricks of the highly esteemed sorcerers) and by which he split the sea into two and caused twelve springs to flow from a rock.[24] Since the sorcerers—who constituted one of the most highly respected castes of Egypt—realized that such miraculous feats were of a nature superior to magic, they conceded and took up the faith preached by Moses.[25] In the same vein, at the time of Jesus, Greek medicine was the dominant vocation in Palestine, the birthplace of Jesus, as it was dominated by Hellenic culture. Against this backdrop, Jesus performed such miracles as healing the blind and the leper, breathing life into birds he shaped from clay, and finally bringing the dead back to life. Such instances

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[i] The words enclosed in brackets are Ibn Sikkit's.

proved to the physicians the supra-human and divine power of Jesus—a convincing proof for the masses.[26]

At the time of Prophet Muhammad, the predominant cultural theme was literature: rhetoric and poetry were very popular. It was the age of such great poets as Imru' al-Qays, Zuhayr ibn Salma, Tarfah ibn Abd, and Nabighah Dhabyani and such eminent orators as Subhan Wa'il, and Qays ibn Sa'idah Ayadi, whom were highly respected by the Arabs.[27] Literary criticism was popular. The best literary figures, such as Nabighah Dhabyani, were appointed to determine the best pieces of poetry (referred to as *Mu'allaqat*)[28], which were then inscribed with gold on parchments and posted on the wall of the Kaaba for display.[29] It was in this milieu that the Qur'an was revealed; it was in the presence of such great poets and orators that the Qur'an voiced its challenge, calling on anyone who doubted it to bring a chapter that could rival its literary beauty. In this way, the Qur'an demonstrated the veracity of Muhammad's message. After hearing its verses, those who were impartial acknowledged that it was beyond any human capacity to create such wonderful literature.

Let us point to one notable instance. On hearing the Prophet recite some Qur'anic verses, Walid ibn Mughayrah went to Abu Jahl and said,

> By God, none of you knows more about poetry, *rajaz*,[i] *qasidah*,[ii] or even the poems of jinn than me. By God, his words do not resemble those of man or of jinn. By God, his words are sweet, fresh, and pregnant [with meaning]. His words are lofty, such that no loftier words exist. It defeats all other [literary works].[30]

So powerful was the literary aspect of the Qur'an that even those who were reluctant to convert to Islam would in some way admit that the literature of the Qur'an was beyond anything human speech could accomplish; so it was that Walid ibn Mughayrah said that the Qur'an was devised through magical deception.[31] In an effort to explain the extraordinary beauty of the Qur'an in such a way that would relieve them from the obligation to accept Islam, the heathen Arabs would derogatorily call it a poet's versification, a soothsayer's words, or the speech of someone influenced by the jinn.[32] The heathen Arab made such allegations as he could sense the extraordinary beauty of the Qur'anic verses but was nevertheless reluctant to admit its divine origin.

The conclusion we may draw from the above discussion for the topic at hand is that a speculative study of the exoteric level of the Qur'an[33] is possible or, in other words, it is reasonable to attempt at a science of Qur'anic interpretation. For, were the Qur'an's method in communicating its message different from that employed commonly by intelligent speakers, such as only a select group were capable of comprehending it, it would have been nonsense for the Qur'an to challenge the Arabs to produce a literature that could rival it, and moreover it would violate the

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[i] *Rajaz*: A martial genre of poetry. Before engaging in battle, the Arab warrior would recite verses to introduce himself and his family genealogy and to boast of his valor so as to weaken his rival's morale.

[ii] *Qasidah* or purpose poem: one of the genres of poetry that is composed on a single rhyme.

general principle of correspondence between the prevalent cultural theme of an age and the miracle introduced by the respective prophet of God. Apparently, the scholars who forbid interpreting the Qur'an ignore this very clear fact. How can they reasonably consider the Qur'an's challenge to produce a literature that could rival it as valid while holding that it is impossible to understand it?

An Analysis of the Hadiths that Forbid Preconceived Interpretation

In defense of their position, these scholars cite the hadiths that forbid preconceived interpretation.[i] Their contention is that any interpretation that is put forth by other other than the Infallibles (in the case of the Shia) or the Companions and their Successors (in the case of the Sunnis) constitutes a preconceived interpretation.[34]

The hadiths forbidding preconceived interpretation are to be found in both Sunni and Shia sources. In Shia sources there are over ten such hadiths, thus amounting to *istifazah*[ii].[35] Some Shia scholars have gone further to consider the number of the chains of transmission of such hadiths to reach the level of Among these hadiths, there are several with credible (*mu'tabar*) chains of transmission; one example reads, "God, dignified and exalted is He, said, 'He who interprets My Word based on his opinion (*ra'y*) is not a believer.'"[37]

Similarly in the Sunni sources there are a number of hadiths to the same effect. Although some Sunni scholars have doubted the authenticity of these hadiths,[38] nevertheless the popularity (*shuhrah*[iv]) of such hadiths compensates for the possible weakness in the chains of transmission.[39] The case of these hadiths is made still stronger by the fact that some Sunni scholars have accepted a number of the chains of transmission in question as valid (*sahih*) or good (*hasan*). Tirmidhi, for instance, assesses the following two hadiths from the Prophet as good (*hasan*): "He who comments on the Qur'an without knowledge prepares his resting place in hellfire"; "He who comments on the Qur'an based on his own opinion (*ra'y*) prepares his resting place in hellfire."[40]

Thus it may be concluded that both Sunni and Shia scholars are agreed on the reliability of the chains of transmission of such hadiths, their main concern thus being to understand the meaning of these hadiths correctly.

Obviously, the opponents of a science of Qur'anic commentary argue that any interpretation of the Qur'an that is not directly derived from the Islamic authorities (explained above) is based on the interpreter's opinion (*ra'y*) and presupposed by his personal convictions. As such any interpretation is prohibited by the hadiths in question, regardless of whether it is founded on sound or unsound convictions.

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[i] Preconceived interpretation or *tafsir bi al-ra'y* designates an act of interpretation whose objective it is to impose the interpreter's preconceived opinion on a Qur'anic phrase rather than to discover the true meaning of the phrase regardless of the interpreter's biases.

[ii] In the science of hadithology, the term *istifazah* is applied to a hadith with numerous chains of transmission but not enough to constitute *tawatur*, at which point the authenticity of a hadith is considered certain and beyond doubt.

[iii] See previous note.

[iv] *Shuhra* in the science of hadithology designates a hadith that occurs in numerous books of hadith with the same chain of transmission.

Thus, to understand the Qur'an, we must content ourselves with the interpretative hadiths narrated from the Islamic authorities, for it is only in this way that we avoid involving our personal opinions.

A Criticism of the Arguments Based on the Hadiths Forbidding Preconceived Interpretation

But those who deny the validity of Qur'anic interpretation have misconceived the hadiths forbidding preconceived interpretation. For, to construe the hadiths in question in this way goes against the norm of intelligent speakers in relying on the probable meaning of one another's speech or writing. Therefore, those who favor this construal of the hadiths in question must concede that in conveying its meaning, the Qur'an departs from the norm of intelligent speakers, employing a distinctive method that is unfathomable to all but the aforementioned authorities. However, we have already demonstrated that the Qur'an does not in fact employ an alternative method. For a more thorough understanding of this topic, we must examine more closely the hadiths in question.

On reflection, it becomes clear that the above construal of the hadiths in question is erroneous. These hadiths do not oppose the norm of intelligent speakers. Rather, they merely introduce a *hukm irshadi* [i] that actually reaffirms this norm, which, it should go without saying, endorses a reasoned understanding of verbal expressions based on their probable meaning, after of course taking into account every reasonable verbal and extra-verbal modifier. And as these hadiths are themselves subject to the norm of intelligent speakers, we must construe them accordingly. So I will now turn to an examination of the hadiths in question.

The first term in these hadiths that merits consideration is "opinion" (*ra'y*). An opinion is a conviction, a point of view that one arrives at by reflection, whether with recourse to rational reasoning or in deference to some authority. An opinion may be true (i.e., corresponding to reality) or false (i.e., not corresponding to reality); one may hold an opinion with certainty or with some doubt. This is what we commonly understand when we speak of our *opinion*.

The next question in this connection that calls for our attention is the function of the preposition *bi* that precedes the word *ra'y*. There are three possibilities as to the function of this word: 1. that it denotes *sababiyyah* (causal dependence); 2. that it indicates *isti'anah* (seeking help; undertaking an action with the help or aid of someone or something); 3. that it serves merely as a syntactic tool for relating the verb to its indirect object without any additional meaning (in which case *bi* is referred to as *ba' al-ta'diyah*).

If in these hadiths *bi* is used in the first sense, it would mean that the person attempting to interpret the Qur'an is doing so for the purpose of justifying his personal convictions. Such a person would be imposing his opinion on the Qur'an. Obviously the person thus motivated does not intend to honestly understand the Qur'an; rather, he is only attempting to vindicate his personal convictions by

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[i] *Hukm irshadi*: In Islamic jurisprudence, this term designates a religious rule that is advisory in nature, meaning that it only recommends what human reason can independently grasp.

invoking the verses of the Qur'an—an unforgivable sin. In the words of Imam Ali, such persons "bend the truth to conform it to their whims" rather than conforming their views to the truth.[41]

But if the *bi* indicates *isti'anah*, then, the hadiths in question would be in reference to one who—instead of applying the rules of Arabic grammar and literature and taking into account all the verbal and extra-verbal modifiers for arriving at an understanding of the Qur'an—resorts to his own presuppositions. Clearly enough such a person is not sincere in his attempt at understanding the Qur'an.

The reading of the hadiths in question in accordance with the first two senses of *bi* may be corroborated by taking note of the pronoun that follows *ra'y* (in the hadiths in question the word *ra'y* appears in conjunction with the third person singular masculine pronoun: *ra'yihi*). What this implies is that the person in question attempts to understand the Qur'an *because of his own opinion* (if we take *bi* to indicate *sababiyyah*) or *in accordance with his opinion* (if we take *bi* to indicate *isti'anah*)—a blameworthy error indeed.

Let us now turn to the extra-verbal elements that may help in understanding the hadiths in question. After considering a variety of historical factors, Shahid Sadr draws the following conclusion:

> In light of our knowledge of the circumstances and the atmosphere in which these hadiths were uttered, especially with reference to the word *ra'y*, we are justified in holding that *ra'y* was used in reference to conjectural interpretations of the Qur'an. As such, the hadiths in question do not forbid an interpretation that is based on one's intuitive [not biased] understanding [that results from a thorough and accurate study].[42]

The above explanation is supported by the different wording in which some of these hadiths appear: "He who interprets the Qur'an without knowledge…." Clearly such a conjectural interpretation is not condoned by the norm of intelligent speakers. Thus, we may infer that those hadiths that condemn interpreting the Qur'an based on one's personal opinion are actually referring to interpretations not based on knowledge.

It is thus that the majority of the scholars from the Sunni denomination, going back to the early days of Islam, affirm that those who disavow Qur'anic interpretation altogether on the basis of the hadiths that forbid *tafsir bi al-ra'y* are mistaken, and their understanding of the hadiths in question is wrong; for four reasons.

First, such a reading of the hadiths in question is in conflict with all the Qur'anic verses and hadiths that very clearly point to the permissibility of interpreting the Qur'an.[43]

Second, if this reading were correct, we would have had to discard a great number of Islam's injunctions that are derived from the Qur'an, for the interpretative hadiths narrated from the Prophet are very few, leaving out a majority of the injunctions. Moreover, if interpreting the Qur'an were impermissible, the Prophet would have been obliged to interpret the entire Qur'an,

which he in fact did not, leaving the greater part of the Qur'an to be interpreted by Islamic scholars.[44]

Third, historically speaking, the precedent established by the Companions refutes such a reading of the hadiths in question. For, their disagreement on the meaning of certain verses shows that their views concerning the points of contention were the products of their own reasoning and were not obtained from the Prophet. What confirms this reason is that in various instances the Companions—for instance Umar, the second caliph—would ask those he considered most knowledgeable regarding the meaning of a certain verse without requesting hadiths from the Prophet.[45]

Fourth, it is true that the early Qur'anic commentators practiced caution and, in some instances, refrained from giving a definitive interpretation, but that was not the regular practice and was limited to certain instances.[46]

Conclusion

In fine, we may conclude that although some scholars have deemed impermissible any speculative attempt at interpreting the Qur'an, the predominant view has been in favor of such an endeavor. The hadiths that the former scholars cite as grounds for their position only forbid preconceived interpretation, not interpretation based on one's reasoned study of the verses of the Qur'an while equipped with the requisite knowledge and in accordance with one's intuitive understanding. Preconceived interpretation is wrong with respect to any text, not just the Qur'an.

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Endnotes

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[1] Baghawi, vol. 1, p. 34.

[2] Razi, vol. 24, p. 80.

[3] Ibn Manzur, vol. 5, p. 55 and ÓabrasÐ vol. 1, p. 39.

[4] Suyuti, vol. 4, p. 168.

[5] Aqa Buzurg, vol. 4, p. 232.

[6] Tabataba'i, vol. 1, p. 4.

[7] For a more thorough study of the various definitions of *tafsir*, see Amin, vol. 3, p. 47; Isfihani, pp. 43-44; and Baba'i, pp. 12-23.

[8] In Shia doctrine, the status of the Infallible Imams, who are the extension of the Prophet's House, is equal to that of the Qur'an. This belief is derived from the famous prophetic hadith, *al-Hadith al-Thiqlayn*, which has been related through various and valid (*sahih*) chains of transmission; it reads, "Verily, I leave with you two weighty things to which if you cling, you will not go astray: the Book of God and my progeny, my Household. The two will remain united and thus they will meet me by the Pool." For Sunni sources wherein this hadith appears, see Tirmidhi, vol 5, pp. 622-663 (no. 3876); Ibn Hanbal, vol. 17, p. 161 (no. 11104); Nayshaburi, vol. 3, pp. 109-110; Ibn Abi Asim, pp. 629-630 (no. 1553-1558).

[9] See Qur'an 16:44 and 62:2.

[10] Raghib, p. 93. Also see Mawirdi, vol. 1, p. 34 and Qirtabi, vol. 1, p. 33.

[11] Akhbarism is a Shia school of though that promotes a very strict literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the tradition of the Prophet and the Infallible Imams). It was established as a distinct school of thought by Mulla Muhmmad Amin Istarabadi (d. 1032 A.H./1622-1623 C.E.). For more on this school, see Amin, vol. 2, p. 219.

[12] See Istarabadi, p. 128; Bahrani, p. 174; and Hurr al-Amili, vol. 27, p. 176.

[13] Raghib, p. 93.

[14] Regarding Abu Bakr's cautiousness, it is said that in time he underwent a change of mind. Later when asked of the meaning of *kalalah* (which occurs in verse 176, surah Nisa), he answered, "I present my own view. If correct, it's from God, and if not, it's from me and Satan. *Kalalah* means…" (Dhahabi, vol. 1, p. 261).

[15] Extra-verbal modifiers comprise, for instance, the circumstances under which the speech or writing was produced.

[16] For instance, see Ibn Jarir, vol. 9, p. 39; Tabrasi, vol. 1, p. 12; Ibn Kathir, vol. 1, p. 6; Ibn Atiyyah, vol. 1, p. 13; Tabataba'i, vol. 3, p. 36; and Muzaffar, vol. 2, pp. 157-159.

[17] Qur'an 10:38. See also Qur'an 2:23 and 11:13.

[18] See Zarkishi, vol. 2, pp. 93-107; Suyuti, vol. 2, p. 122. Zarkishi in particular counts twelve such characteristics. In the Qur'an itself, there is explicit mention of two aspects of its inimitability: one, there not being any contradiction among the verses of the Qur'an (see Qur'an 4: 82); two, the Prophet's illiteracy (see Qur'an 29: 48). In another instance, the Qur'an alludes to yet another aspect of its inimitability where it asserts that if the Qur'an were revealed to the mountains they would have collapsed.

[19] For examples of such theological considerations of the literary aspect of the Qur'an, one can point to *Ma'ani al-Qur'an* by Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Ziyad al-Farra (d. 207 A.H/822-823 C.E.) and *Majaz al-Qur'an* by Abu Ubaydah Mu'ammar ibn al-Muthanna (d. 208 A.H./823-823 C.E.) (see Zarrin Kub, p. 413).

[20] See Tajlil, p. 59. A recent work on this topic is A'ishah Abd al-Rahman Bint al-Shati's *Al-I'jaz al-Bayani wa Masa'il Ibn al-Arzaq*. For a historical survey of the topic of the Qur'an's literary miracle, see Abd al-Karim al-Khatib's *Al-I'jaz fi Dirasat al-Sabiqin*, Ahmad Arshad Irshad al-Afghani's *I'jaz al-Qur'an wa Fikratuh*, and Muhammad Sa'id Abd al-Ghani Barakah's *Al-I'jaz al-Qur'an: Wujuhuh wa Asraruh*.

[21] See Qur'an 20:18.

[22] Al-Kulayni, vol. 1, p. 25 (no. 20).

[23] See Ibn Qutaybah, pp. 11-23; Ibn Jarir, vol. 1, pp. 28-29; Zarkishi, vol. 2, p. 98; and Khu'i, pp. 18-22.

[24] See Qur'an 2:60, 20:20-23, and 26:24 and 63.

[25] See Qur'an 20:70.

[26] See Qur'an 3:49 and 5:110.

[27] See Ibn Abi al-Khattab; Ibn Sallam; Umar Farrukh, vol. 1, pp. 100-236; and Jahiz, vol. 1, p. 241 and vol. 4, p. 83.

[28] To learn about the *Mu'allaqat*, see Ibn Abi al-Khattab, pp. 95-161.

[29] See Umar Farrukh, vol. 1, p. 75.

[30] See Ibn Jarir, vol. 14, p. 156 and Ibn Abi Hatam, vol. 10, p. 3382. Suyuti narrates this account from various sources; see Suyuti (1983), vol. 8, pp. 329-331.

[31] See the works cited above and also Qur'an 74:24.

[32] See Qur'an 37:36, 69:42, 52:29, and 51:39.

[33] In regard to the esoteric dimension of the Qur'an, see Javadi Amuli, vol. 1, pp. 128-130; Ma'rifat, vol. 3, pp. 28-34; Ghazali, vol. 1, p. 366.

[34] See Bahrani, p. 174; Qirtabi, vol. 1, p. 31; and Raghib, p. 93.

[35] See Ayyashi, vol. 1, p. 95 (no. 1-6); Saduq, p. 68; Majlisi, vol. 92, pp. 110-111; Bahrani, vol. 1, pp. 17-19; and Baba'i, p. 56.

[36] See Khu'i, p. 269.

[37] See Mahmudi, vol. 8, p. 349 (no. 4789).

[38] See Alusi, vol. 1, p. 6 and al-Urna'ut, vol. 3, p. 496.

[39] See Ibn Jarir, vol. 1, pp. 58-59; he narrates 7 hadiths forbidding preconceived interpretation. In this regard, see also Baghawi, vol. 1, p. 35.

[40] See Tirmidhi, vol. 5, p. 199 (no. 2950-2952); Nisa'i, vol. 5, p. 31 (no. 8084-8085); and Ibn Hanbal, vol. 3, p. 496.

[41] See Sharif Radhi, letter no. 53 and speech no. 176.

[42] Shahid Sadr, vol. 1, p. 306.

[43] See Ibn Jarir, vol. 1, p. 63; Mawirdi, vol. 1, p. 33; Ibn Kathir, vol. 1, p. 6; Baghawi, vol. 1, p. 36; and Alusi, vol. 1, p. 6.

[44] Ibn Jarir, vol. 1, p. 62; Alusi, vol. 1, p. 7; Qasimi, vol. 1, p. 165.

[45] See Baghdadi, vol. 1, p. 5; Qirtabi, vol. 1, p. 33; and Ibn Ashur, vol. 1, p. 34.

[46] See Ibn Kathir, vol. 1, p. 13; Shatibi, vol. 1, p. 165; Dhahabi, vol. 1, p. 261.