

An Epistemology Overview of Textual Sources

ASIPT Curricular Essay Series

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AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF TEXTUAL SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

This essay focuses on an epistemology for confirming and interpreting transmitted knowledge, generally, and Islamic sacred texts, specifically.¹ We will first look at the sciences that treat this aspect of epistemology and then turn our attention to the types of *reported knowledge* and its verification in terms of *reliability* and *authenticity*. Then we will explore how we know what these texts mean, identify who has the authority to interpret texts, and end with how these texts are interpreted through technical sciences, other textual sources, and a methodology.

When you receive a report, some information from a news outlet or maybe a first-hand document, how do you confirm its authenticity? From which sciences do you draw your methodology? What if the report is one from a religious text, meaning the Quran and hadith literature? For religious texts, we have three main and distinct, though interconnected, sciences that outline a methodology of verification and interpretation. These are briefly discussed below and the *definition*, *subject matter*, *aim*, and *general sources* of each are identified.²

THE UṢŪLĪ SCIENCES OF TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION AND INTERPRETATION

Principles of Jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*)

The first science can be thought of as the confluence of the following two sciences, though each has some of its own unique investigations and terminology. The scholars of jurisprudence, beginning with the companions to the imams of the eponymous schools of jurisprudence, developed a set of principles and key investigations for the interpretation of legal texts particularly concerned with individual and communal practice of divine law. These principles and investigations are known as *uṣūl al-fiqh*, principles of jurisprudence. Although the scholars of jurisprudence were concerned with jurisprudence and the practice of divine law, they necessarily focused on the sources of jurisprudence from which the rulings are derived. These sources are the Quran, Sunna and hadith, legal consensus, and legal analogy. Since the foundational sources are religious texts, whether oral or written or communal practice, and transmitted knowledge, the legal scholars needed to compile and systematize principles for the verification and interpretation of these texts to derive practical answers to legal questions.

The scholars of jurisprudence define *uṣūl al-fiqh* as the science of the general (i.e., unspecified) proofs of jurisprudence, the methods of deriving those jurisprudential proofs from specific proofs, and the qualities of the one who derives specific proofs from the general ones; it is the science in which a jurist investigates the principles that lead to deriving specific proofs from general proofs.

¹ I am especially indebted to Dr. Asim Padela for his valuable comments on a draft of this essay. May Allah reward him and bless him and his family.

² The reader is advised to further study these sciences under qualified scholars of the respective sciences.

As for its subject matter, it is these general jurisprudential proofs that the independent jurist uses them to derive practical rulings.

The aim of the science is knowledge of practical rulings from the general jurisprudential proofs and the capability of deriving the former through the latter.

Finally, *uṣūl al-fiqh* relies on nearly all of the sciences related to religious texts. From them are language and lexicology (*al-lughā*), linguistic assignment (*al-waḍ'*), logic, theology, exegesis and Quranic recitations, and principles of hadith (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*) and hadith literature.

The science of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, since it investigates jurisprudential proofs of divine law, deals with the verification and authenticity of these proofs and the methods of accurately understanding their apparent and unapparent meanings for sound derivation of legal rulings.

Principles of Hadith Investigation (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*)

The second of the sciences that investigates transmitted knowledge is *uṣūl al-ḥadīth*, principles of hadith investigation. The hadith scholars, also from the time of the companions until today, laid down principles and terminology for the investigation and verification of reports ascribed to the Messenger ﷺ, and thereafter the reports ascribed to the companions and successors. The hadith scholars determined the methods of oral and textual transmission, such as one-on-one transmission and mass audition to discovery of a handwritten text in the belongings of one's relative, and developed guidelines for narrator criticism in which one considers a narrator's memory and character as it relates to the transmission of a sacred text. They categorized texts by strength of their *chain of transmission* (*al-isnād*) and the clarity and obscurity of their meanings. These scholars defined *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* from two perspectives.

The first perspective is in terms of transmission of texts (*riwāya*). The science of *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* from this perspective is a science that includes the transmission of statements and actions of the Messenger ﷺ, their narration, determinations of wording, and explanations of their words. From the second perspective, the science is defined as the understanding of the texts' content (*dirāya*). From this aspect, it is a science through which one learns what narration is, its conditions, types, and rulings, the state of narrators and their conditions, the types of narrated reports, and secondary matters related to them (like terminology, engaging with the reports, etc.).³

The aim of the science is the accuracy and preservation of reports, transmission to later generations, and ultimately to develop a deep understanding of the texts. Some of the sciences on which it relies are the lexical sciences, history and prophetic biography (*sīra*), logic, and theology.

Principles of Exegesis (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*)

The last of the sciences concerned with textual transmission that we will discuss is that of the scholars of exegesis. The scholars of the Quran and its interpretation developed a science of principles for correct and meticulous derivation of meaning from the Quran, in particular. The science of *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, principles of

³ al-Suyūṭī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Tadrīb al-rāwī*, ed. Muḥammad 'Awwāma (Jedda: Dār al-Minhāj, 2016), 2:9-21.

exegesis, is defined as the theoretical (*ilmī*) foundations to which the exegete resorts when explaining the meanings of the Quran and expounding on different opinions in exegesis.⁴ It aims to explain the meanings of the Quran, giving preference to the sound and strongest interpretations and preponderating some exegeses over others. It relies mostly on the lexical sciences, the principles of jurisprudence, and hadith. Perhaps one may ask why the scholars of exegesis relied on the principles of jurisprudence and not vice-versa. Since the time of the companions, often the foremost exegetes were also the foremost scholars of jurisprudence, from the rightly guided caliphs like ‘Umar (d. 23/644) and ‘Alī (d. 40/661) to the erudite companions ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653), ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 68/687), Mu‘ādh b. Jabal (d. 18/639), and many others to whose knowledge of jurisprudence and exegesis the Messenger ﷺ testified.⁵

TYPES OF REPORTED KNOWLEDGE

The texts we read, the stories we hear and relate to others, the information about our lineage and birth, tales of times long ago and peoples’ lives and stories and civilizations, and, most importantly, Allah’s (exalted is He) divine communication to us on the authority of the Messenger ﷺ are all types of reported knowledge. Some of this knowledge is reported to us orally, passed down generation after generation, from teacher to student, from parent to child, and so on; some we receive through a written medium and even some from physical remains of bygone eras. Today, we have online publishing websites, twenty-four-hour segmented news broadcasts from conglomerate outlets with agendas and biases, mass social media platforms inhabited by individuals with selfish and social motives, and technology with the ability to manipulate and fabricate images, video, and audio. These technologies give us the ability to communicate both sound and unsound reported knowledge in an instant to hundreds and thousands of people, in various countries and languages, if not to the entire population of the world, and receive said knowledge.

In this essay, we focus on religious reported knowledge since a Muslim’s belief is founded on knowledge received from revelation, but we will still look at non-religious sources as well, not only since it is reported knowledge and part of epistemology, but also because non-religious reported knowledge can have an impact on and relate to religious knowledge, like texts that relate to the lives of the prophets (peace be upon them) or confirm statements made in the Quran and hadith or reports of past eras of Muslim history, like the historical figure Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809), for example, or evidence of Islam in America before Columbus. Historical reports of this nature are not definitive but still useful for a Muslim studying history.

A Muslim studying history distinguishes between “Islamic history” and “Muslim history.”⁶ The former ends at the era of the successors of the successors (*atbā’ al-tābī’in*) since the Messenger ﷺ testified to their goodness,

⁴ Musā’id b. Sulaymān al-Ṭayyār, *al-Taḥrīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* (Jedda: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Ma’lūmāt al-Qur’āniyya, 2014), 17.

⁵ For example, see Ibn al-Athīr, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, *Uṣd al-ghāba fī ma’rifat al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Bannā, et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 4:419.

⁶ Shaykh Amin Kholwadia, founder and president of Darul Qasim College, made this distinction in a formal lesson I attended in 2020. I borrow it from him. For further reading, consult Shahab Ahmed’s discussion of the “Islamic” and “Islamicate” drawn from Hodgson’s distinction, especially Chapters 2 and 3 in *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being*

and a Muslim studies this history without judging the companions, successors, and the righteous of the successors of the successors.⁷ “Muslim history” refers to the religious, sectarian, political, and other historical dimensions outside of these eras up to the present day. A Muslim understands that the events that took place during these times may be in line with the Sharia and may not, like some of the political and military policies of the Abbasids or Ottomans. These events have no impact on the faith of Muslims. Whether reports about these eras turn out to be true or false, the faith of the Muslim is not shaken.

How do we evaluate this knowledge? Which type of reported knowledge gives us certainty? How many types of reported knowledge are there, and which are epistemically the strongest? *Certain* (*yaqīnī*) and *probable* (*ẓannī*) knowledge are discussed in ASIPT’s epistemology essay, so how do we apply these categories to reported knowledge? We can consider the type of reported knowledge, how we received it, and then what it signifies. Scholars of theology, jurisprudence, and hadith speak of the method of transmission and *receipt* (*wurūd*) of reported knowledge and the meaning of what is reported (*dalāla*). First, we will look at the types of reported knowledge. But let us keep in mind at the outset that mass-transmission (*tawātur*) of any report gives certainty regardless of the type, be it religious or non-religious; otherwise, if it is not mass-transmitted, then it gives us probable knowledge.

Historical Reports and Texts

The overall category of reported knowledge is historical reports and texts. All reported knowledge is ultimately historical since reported knowledge is the communication of a prior event to someone else, whether that individual was present to witness the event or not and however long after the event the event is reported. Also, all reported knowledge is sensory (*ḥissī*) in that one communicates an experienced event that was witnessed with the senses, whether they were the five external senses or internal senses, like one’s internal sensation of hope or joy, for example.

Documentary accounts

The first type of historical report to consider consists of *documentary accounts* since these are the most common, but of the non-fiction sort. Documentary accounts are texts received in which the author conveys either first-hand or second-hand knowledge of an event. Think of the diaries and journals of soldiers from the American Revolution and their families, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and other autobiographies, biographies, and travelogues such as al-Bīrūnī’s (d. 440/1048) *Taḥqīq mā li-l-hind min maqūla maqbūla fī al-‘aql aw mardhūla*, al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d. 597/1201) *Ṣayd al-khāṭir*, al-Dhahabī’s (d. 748/1348) *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, and so on up until the present time. A first-hand documentary account is one that an individual witnessed and reported on through text without an intermediary such as a written eye-witness account of an event or expression of one’s inner thoughts and sentiments. In a second-

Islamic (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 157-75. However, the present author does not endorse every conclusion Ahmed reaches in his work.

⁷ See al-Mawsū‘a al-ḥadīthiyya, al-Durar al-Saniyya, <https://www.dorar.net/hadith/sharh/79751>.

hand documentary account, one conveys through writing knowledge of a past event through the intermediary of another individual or evidence, be that evidence text or physical remains. As an example, one may record the testimony of an individual for court proceedings or copy and quote from a manuscript. With both first- and second-hand accounts, the issue of authenticity and reliability arises, to be discussed later in this essay.

Oral accounts

The second type of historical report to consider includes oral accounts. Oral accounts are those which are received and passed on orally, meaning without a written medium. Think of how your mother or father told you about your grandparents and great-grandparents, how your mother explained to you the meaning of “courage” when you were a child, or how a friend of yours described a recent trip to Yosemite National Park. In fact, much of our knowledge is acquired through oral communication and audition of reported information, like our initial acquisition of the meaning of words. Like documentary accounts, oral accounts can also be first-hand and second-hand, and in much the same way. We will see investigations later from the science of *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* that treat testimony and the accuracy and trustworthiness of narrators, a sub-science called “criticism and probity” (*al-jarḥ wa-l-ta’dīl*), and in jurisprudence the issues of witness attestation (*al-tazkiya*); we will see the use of these investigations in the hadith sciences for religious transmitted knowledge and their use and limitations for non-religious reports, like history and journalism.

Before moving on to a discussion of religious reports and texts, we need to briefly mention a modern method of historical and textual analysis appropriately called the Historical Critical Method (HCM). Though this essay cannot address the history and detail of the method and the reader is advised to explore the resources in the footnotes for detail, we need to at least give an overview of the method and point out its scope and shortcomings.⁸

Historical Critical Method (HCM)

The HCM is a broad Western academic method of studying and investigating historical claims be they textual or oral, religious or non-religious, physical or non-physical, though it primarily interrogates historical religious texts. Consisting of other sub-methods, like form and source criticism, it attempts to determine the origin and authenticity of historical claims and texts through a set of assumptions and a worldview founded on materialism and skepticism. Just as the contemporary and modern philosophical method of the West is rooted in skepticism, this method of historical analysis draws on epistemological skepticism as its source and lays it as its foundation for its approach and initial premises. In order to authenticate a text or account, the historian must rely on material evidence and a set of principles that, according to this method, ensures objective conclusions. Even where one can have knowledge beyond a reasonable doubt of a claim or event from historical evidence, let alone certainty, the historian using this method will still cast a skeptical glance to the historical claims investigated and the conclusions reached.

⁸ See for example Jonathan Brown, “Blind Spots: The Origins of the Western Method of Critiquing Hadith,” Yaqeen Institute, updated October 18, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/blind-spots-the-origins-of-the-western-method-of-critiquing-hadith>; and Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

The method arose from a series of events and discoveries that changed the Western world's (first in Europe, then the United States) approach to epistemology, history, religion, and social anthropology. In no particular order, Enlightenment promises of objective and universal (i.e., European) reason, Renaissance humanism, developments in the physical sciences, rediscovery of the Greek and Roman skeptical philosophical tradition, an unprecedented critical and linguistic approach to the Bible, and the discovery of fabrications in the Biblical text and Church record are some of the events that prompted the development of the method. Aside from the method's history, the HCM has three main features in its approach to historical texts and accounts: 1) suspicion towards the attribution and accuracy of historical texts and accounts; 2) distrust of traditional narratives about them; and 3) a generalization that the emergence or fabrication of texts and accounts were motivated by amassing power, wealth, and hegemonic dominance. These features are predicated on three assumptions: 1) methodological materialism (if not philosophical materialism) that maintains a material causality (i.e., naturalism) between human events and wherein prophecy, miracles, the unseen realm, God, and so on are excluded; 2) historical analogy asserting that natural laws have not changed, that humans have had the same abilities throughout time, and that their societies and civilizations have had similar factors and motivations for their rise and fall; and, to a lesser degree, 3) that historical accounts often do not tell what really occurred.

Despite the suspect assumptions and probable conclusions of the HCM, the method is useful with caveats. The method is like any other method in that its strength is dependent on its assumptions and their scope and an acknowledgment of the limitations of its domain. The main caveat to using this method is that one must keep in mind the above features and assumptions, meaning what is taken for granted, and the limited domain of the method. One must bear in mind that the method is founded on materialist assumptions and that the method is limited in scope to a physicalist understanding of history and human development. For example, the HCM cannot be used to verify whether or not the Quran is Allah's revelation nor affirm a particular interpretation of a verse. It cannot determine the legal ruling on an issue of Islamic jurisprudence nor whether a particular individual was a companion of the Messenger ﷺ, if what the methodology demands is material evidence of a Companion's existence in addition to narration. However, one may employ the method to assist in assessing the material preservation of the Quran, comparing the Quran to other religious and historical texts, connecting references mentioned in the text to historical people and events, and uncovering how the early Muslim community understood and interacted with the Quran. But the HCM assumes that the Quran is not Allah's revelation, that it is an amalgamation of other texts and stories and the personal experiences of its author, and so on. It treats narratives about the origin and meaning of a text and its transmission with suspicion. But approaching historical texts with this method can expand the way a text is understood and analyzed particularly without an authoritative reading based on an inherited tradition or institution. Furthermore, using the HCM in approaching a text expands human knowledge, in general, and advances an understanding of history, particularly from an anthropological perspective.

The downsides to the HCM should now appear quite obvious. Aside from its materialism and skepticism, the HCM gives little credibility to the oral transmission of historical texts and accounts, and it discredits the chain of transmission system. From an HCM perspective, a chain of transmission does not suffice as material evidence of a historical fact, and some proponents of the HCM argue that the chains are unreliable since they are easily forged, according to their understanding. As a set of methods developed in response to uniquely

Western problems and predicated on a secular Western worldview, its application to Islamic texts, for example, can be out of place. The Western world underwent radical change as a result of the above-mentioned factors, none of which the Eastern or Islamic world experienced. For example, Muslims did not experience a multi-country spanning inquisition against the empirical findings of natural philosophers nor an institutional-level conspiracy to cover up the fabrication of texts and doctrines. Historians using the HCM begin with a deep-seated distrust of any religious authority or tradition due to the method's origin in a distrust of the Church. Moreover, the academic push to analyze religious texts of other traditions presents as another form of colonialism and domination and attempt to "free" the rest of the world from problems that the West perceives other cultures and civilizations to be facing. Historians build the method on their own conception of knowledge, truth, and history, with a claim to neutrality, and they claim to uncover history as it really was, albeit from a materialist paradigm.

Muslim historians and principles of history

Muslims developed their own theories of history when recording and writing on history and historical reports. The illustrious hadith scholars were the first to record history as a discipline, recording the life, statements, and actions of the Messenger ﷺ, companions, and successors, and the events of pre-Islamic Arabia. Some of the earliest historians who wrote chronicles and encyclopedic histories and developed a theory of history include Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956), Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048), 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Khaldūn (Ibn Khaldūn) (d. 808/1406) and Muḥy al-Dīn al-Kāfījī (d. 879/1474). A few of these historians developed theories of recording, critiquing, and analyzing historical reports and how human history unfolds. Al-Mas'ūdī indicates in his *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar* (*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*) that a historian should be one who travels and witnesses events and collects reports directly from people instead of compiling and copying from other unverified sources. He notes that a historian should attempt to corroborate reports and use a rational method.⁹ Ibn Khaldūn critiques previous historians for not abiding by universal principles when recording and analyzing history, principles which he sets out to gather and explain in the introduction (*Muqaddima*) to his own encyclopedic history, *Kitāb al-'ibar wa-dīwān al-mabṭada' wa-l-khabar fī ayyām al-'arab wa-l-'ajam wa-l-barbar wa-man 'āṣarahum min dhawī al-sulṭān al-akbar* (*The Book of Lessons and Record of the Beginnings and Events in the Days of the Arabs, non-Arabs, Berbers, and Their Powerful Contemporaries*). Ibn Khaldūn argues within the first lines of his *Muqaddima* that history is a subdiscipline of philosophy whose inner dimensions, meaning the purpose and benefits of studying history, consist of rationally examining reports and verifying them, finding causes for historical events, and knowing the conditions of phenomena and their reasons.¹⁰ He finds fault with many previous historians who, when recording and analyzing history, failed to consider the following: norm (*'āda*), political rules, the nature of civilization (*umrān*), and characteristics of human society (*ijtimā' insānī*). These

⁹ 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Kamāl Ḥasan Mar'ī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Aṣriyya, 2005), 1:11.

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldūn*, ed. Muṣṭafā Shaykh Muṣṭafā (Damascus: Ma'assasat al-Risāla, 2019), 10.

historians did not compare cultures and civilizations with each other, examine reports through philosophical tools, consider the natures of existent things, and make rational investigation and analysis the judge of reports.¹¹ Failure to observe these factors led historians to report strange and highly improbable incidents and details like an exaggeration of the number of soldiers in an army and attributing the causes of events to mystical factors. Considering the hadith scholars' and Muslim historians' approaches to textual reports and evaluating them, Muslims have their own approach to reported knowledge that counters and rivals till this day the probable and speculative Western models.

Religious Reports and Texts

From here, we shift our attention to Islamic reported knowledge, its types, how it is conveyed, and how its wording and text are preserved and authenticated. Islamic reported knowledge consists primarily of the Quran, its text and recitation, and the Sunna, which includes the statements, actions, habits, and description of physical traits and character of the Messenger ﷺ. Other religious reported knowledge includes statements of the companions, legal verdicts of jurists, texts of the Islamic sciences, and so on.

Mass-transmission (tawātur)

The Quran is the inimitable oral recitation of Allah's divine speech that He revealed to His Messenger ﷺ, often through Jibrīl (upon him peace).¹² It was compiled in codices and memorized by millions, continuing until today. The Quran challenges all of creation to bring the like of it. The Quran has been mass-transmitted through an uninterrupted chain of individuals from the Messenger ﷺ to the companions and their students until now through oral recitation, memorization, and writing. The codices (*maṣāḥif*) preserve the written record of the Quran, unchanged since the time of the third caliph, 'Uthmān (d. 35/656), who commissioned the compilation of the written text of the Quran for the second time and spread the codices throughout Muslim lands.

But what is mass-transmission (*tawātur*)? Mass-transmission, or ubiquitous reporting, from a textual perspective and according to the Quran, hadith, and principles of jurisprudence scholars, refers to the transmission of a report or text, oral or written, from such a large number of individuals that it is normally impossible for all of them to have erred or colluded to lie. Logicians define mass-transmission similarly but restrict the definition to audition, meaning that one receives the report aurally and not materially or through writing. Scholars discussed the number of sources needed for a report or text to reach mass-transmission, some saying ten, others twenty, and others forty. But the minimum number depends on a number of factors such as technology, culture, and the subject of the report, so designating a hard number proves difficult. Mass-

¹¹ Ibn Khaldūn, 17. Here I provide a possible example of each. Norm: the mass exodus of the majority of a population in a given civilization would normatively lead to the collapse of that civilization. Political rules: a king or emperor would not exchange his position for that of his minister. The nature of civilization: crafts and skills form the foundation of a civilization's economic structure. Characteristics of human society: humans tend to aggregate around water sources and settle on fertile lands, which significantly contributes to a successful formation of a large civilization.

¹² Some scholars of *tafsīr* opine that on a few occasions the Messenger ﷺ received revelation without the intermediary of an angel, such as during his ascension to the heavens (*al-mi'rāj*). See Ibn al-Jawzī, "Sūrat al-Najm," in *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm and al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 2015), 1362.

transmission of a report or text is the highest epistemic level a report can reach, ensuring its preservation, reliability of its contents, and accurate attribution to and from its source. Mass-transmission includes oral accounts like an eye-witness news broadcast from multiple sources about a particular incident, texts transmitted orally like a poem or nursery rhyme, and written texts like published folios of Shakespeare's plays, whether hand-copied or printed. The mass transmission of a report or text can occur within a generation and between generations, and it may begin as a well-known or solitary report and then be transmitted between generations and reach the level of mass-transmission from the point at which mass-transmission begins.

Beneath the level of mass-transmission are reports and texts transmitted at the level of renown (*ishtihār* and *mashhūr*) where the source number is less than the number that would give certainty about its reliability and attribution.¹³ Next are reports and texts at the level of solitary reporting (*āḥād*) where there are three or less sources of the report. Solitary reports, in particular hadith, are then classified by the epistemic level of their reliability and accuracy into sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*), good (*ḥasan*), and weak (*ḍaʿīf*). At each level, there are other factors to consider that affect the confidence one would have in a report. The nature of the report and its gravity, the character of the narrators, and the culture of reporting information are just a few of these factors.

In terms of Islamic reports and texts, the Quranic text and its oral recitation are mass-transmitted. From the time of the companions until today, Muslims have transmitted the consonantal text and the methods and modes of reciting the Quran in such number and with such accuracy and detail that rationally and empirically demonstrate the impossibility for there to be error or fabrication in the transmission. The skeletal text was codified within the caliphate of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) (may Allah be pleased with him) and then ratified and spread throughout the Muslim lands during the caliphate of ʿUthmān (may Allah be pleased with him). That skeletal structure has undergone no change since then, a fact that has become even more demonstrable as time has passed with new manuscripts of the Quran being brought to light every year that show a consistent consonantal text. Even the most obstinate detractor of Islam must admit this fact lest he or she be accused of radical skepticism, though some academics and detractors of Islam surprisingly continue to refuse the attribution of the Quran to the time of the Messenger ﷺ.

The recitation of the Quran consists of a science of its rules of pronunciation (*ʿilm al-tajwīd*) and a science of its recitations (*ʿilm al-qirāʾāt*). Suffice it to say that its rules of pronunciation and its recitations have been mass-transmitted whether in general (e.g., *idghām* and *imāla*) or in detail (e.g., reading *taʾmanunā* in Q 12:11 with *ishmām*) from the Messenger ﷺ and companions to the ten eponymous readers and students until now.

Then there are mass-transmitted hadiths in both wording and meaning or just in meaning, which some scholars have compiled into independent works like Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) who compiled *Qatf al-azhār al-mutanāthira fī al-akhbār al-mutawātira* (*Harvesting Scattered Flowers: A Collection of Mass-Transmitted*

¹³ Since the number of narrators required for the level of mass-transmission, the level at which one obtains certainty of the report, is variable, then the number of narrators for renown, the level below mass-transmission, will also be variable, but ultimately less than the number of narrators for mass-transmission. This category has also been termed *mustafīd* (“abundant”). Hadith scholars and scholars of jurisprudence add the category of renown to distinguish between those narrations that have two or more chains but do not reach the level of mass-transmission. For a comparison between the terminology used by Ḥanafī and hadith scholars, see ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Turkmānī, *al-Madkhal ilā uṣūl al-ḥadīth ʿalā manhaj al-Ḥanafīyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Rayāḥīn, 2018), 29-32.

Hadiths).¹⁴ Companions transmitted sometimes the exact wording and meaning of a hadith like “Whoever lies about me, then let him prepare his seat in the hellfire” and at other times only the meaning like narrations about the Anti-Christ and the validity of wiping over leather socks. These hadiths are at the same epistemic level of the Quranic text and recitation. Both give certainty of the accuracy of their attribution and the authenticity of their contents.

Continuing the discussion of oral and written texts, the next few sections detail the types of orally transmitted texts, the chain of transmission system, narrators and factors that affect their reliability, physical transmitted texts and their preservation, and the means to verify the source of a text.

Before moving on, know that Islamic texts and reports have two components that pertain to its authenticity and epistemic strength: a chain of transmission (*isnād*) and a text (*matn*). Texts transmitted orally and through writing have both components even though the chain of transmission, in recent times, is implicit like a publishing house printing a text of a deceased author. For now, the discussion moves to orally transmitted texts and how texts were orally transmitted in the past until today.

Types of Islamic texts

There are three main genres of Islamic texts transmitted orally: the Quranic text and recitation, the hadith corpus, and texts of other fields such as a jurisprudence or creedal text, in prose or poetry. The Quranic text continues to be orally transmitted from teacher to student across the globe through lessons in which a teacher listens to and corrects a student’s memorization and recitation of the Quran. Many people know of the uniquely Islamic phenomenon of the memorization of the entire Quran, with its canonical recitations, by millions of Muslims from past to present and its complete recitation from memory during Ramadan’s communal night prayers (*tarāwīḥ*), let alone a hafiz’s (one who has memorized the Quran) daily recitation. This tradition of memorizing and orally transmitting the Quran has not changed since the time of the Messenger ﷺ even though the method may vary from region to region. For example, in some localities in Africa, teachers may convey a single verse to a student to memorize, which they write on a tablet with ink, and then they test the student on the next day, while in Pakistan, for example, teachers may give multiple verses, which the student practices from a *muṣḥaf* (printed Quran), and then test on the next day. Some Muslims memorize the Quran on their own, checking their memorizing against recordings of the recitation of the Quran or through apps. However, the memorization and recitation of the Quran, in order to be licensed and certified, must be completed with a teacher since only a qualified teacher who possesses a chain of transmission would be able to notice subtle mistakes in memorization and recitation.

Hadith texts are transmitted similarly, though the number of Muslims who have memorized the six canonical works (*Ṣiḥāḥ Sitta*)¹⁵, not to speak of the entire corpus, are rare, though some have done so, with the chains of

¹⁴ See Turath Publishing’s translation of this work, *Qatf al-Azhār Harvesting Scatter Flowers*, eds. Shoaib Shah and Sajjad Shah, trans. Nasir Abdussalam (London: Turath Publishing, 2019).

¹⁵ These are the two *ṣaḥīḥ* works of Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī and Ḥajjāj b. Muslim and the four *sunan* works of Abū ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nasā‘ī, and Ibn Mājah, with some traditions substituting Ibn Mājah’s work for Mālik b. Anas’ *Muwatta’*.

transmission. However, many Muslims, and students of knowledge in particular, regularly memorize shorter works of hadith or selections of works like al-Nawawī's *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* or his *al-Arbaʿīn*, though these works are without the chains. This is the situation of the majority of Muslims; however, authoritative scholars of hadith from the past till the present generally memorized hundreds of thousands of hadith with their chains like the imams Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Suyūṭī, to name merely a few. They are given the title "hafiz" because of this great feat and their preeminence in the science of hadith. In Islamic seminaries around the world, the six canonical works of hadith are often completely recited and studied, some students memorizing a few hadith from each chapter, and correcting their print copies against the teacher's copy. The printing of the Quran and hadith corpus, from reliable publishing houses, are nearly flawless in terms of accuracy and reliability. Discussion on printing follows later.

Aural transmission of texts

The chain of transmission and reception of a text may occur through aural or textual means. Aural methods include a teacher reciting to a student, a student reciting to a teacher, both of which may be from memory or from a written or printed text, secondary audition, and permission to transmit. In the former two methods, the teacher may inform the students of the chain of transmission from his or her teachers or may omit the chain, particularly if the student is aware of the chain or of the teacher's teachers or has many teachers from whom he or she is receiving the text. The latter often occurs in larger institutions. If a student is reciting to the teacher, other students may be present and receive the same chain and license to transmit, and the teacher or another reliable individual may be checking against the teacher's copy, if a text is being used. However, the student reciting to the teacher may be considered to have a stronger chain than the other students, particularly since the teacher will correct this particular student's recitation of the text. At times, some students present may be copying or writing down the teacher's recitation or may not be able to see the teacher. Secondary audition means that a student sits within a lesson with permission but not as a formal student but as an auditor, that a student attends a lesson without the teacher knowing, or that a formal student misses a part of a lesson and another student fills in what the student missed. These are all secondary since the student does not receive the narration directly or formally from the teacher. Permission occurs when a teacher grants a student permission or license (*ijāza*) to convey all or part of the narrations the teacher has whether that permission extends explicitly to all of those narrations or implicitly, to the narrations generally or specifically.

Textual methods consist of a number of scenarios. These can be grouped into five: receiving a copy of a text from a teacher (*munāwala*), producing a copy of the teacher's copy (*munāsakha*), receiving a bequeathed text from a teacher (*waṣīyya*), receiving a text through post, and discovery of a text (*wijāda*). A student may receive a text from a teacher during which the teacher expressly grants the student permission to relate this text from him or her. The teacher may have even produced the copy themselves or paid to have it copied. In the second method, a teacher may give his or her copy to a student for the student to copy or pay to have copied. In both scenarios, the teacher may check the original against the copy to ensure its accuracy. In the third, a student receives the teacher's copy upon the passing of the teacher. In the fourth, a student receives by post a copy of a text from a teacher. One example of this is a judge in one city receiving by mail the text of another judge's verdict on a case. In the last scenario, which is the weakest form, an individual finds a text that may have a

reliable or unreliable attribution to an author or no attribution. Librarians and researchers encounter this scenario often today.

Of course, there are many details about the aural and textual methods of transmission that have been left out of this essay and can be found in texts of the principles of hadith like al-Suyūṭī's *Tadrīb al-rāwī*. Although the discussion around these methods often relates more to hadith because of the stringent conditions for authenticity and reliability and the intricate details of hadith sciences, one can extend them to the transmission of other texts as evidenced by manuscripts and chains of transmission of these other texts. Moreover, some of these methods are rarer today than in the past due to the rise of modern paper and digital printing and publishing.

Chain of transmission (isnād)

The reliability of a text depends on the chain of transmission and the wording of the text, as mentioned. The chain, though, consists of the chain itself and narrators. The chain of transmission records the path or chain of custody, to use a legal procedure term, the text took to reach the listener or reader. A sound chain will be one without breaks or gaps within it and without apparent or subtle defects. Each link (i.e., narrator) in the chain must have received the text from the previous link. If there were to be a break within the chain, whether due to a missing link or one link having never met the previous link, or a weak link in the chain due to memory or another factor, then the hadith scholars would investigate and possibly declare this report, on its own, to be unreliable.

Volumes have been written on this intricate method from past to present ranging from teaching manuals and accompanying commentaries to introductions that classical authors prefixed to their texts, and more. The fact is that the scholars of this method and science so well developed it that it shines gapless, transparent, and objective. Just like the preservation of the Quran, the hadith sciences have demonstrated the preservation of the corpus. Only a radical skeptic or the most ardent adherent to the HCM can deny the accurate preservation of hadith.

Hadith scholars wrote numerous books and treatises on the chains of transmission, its types, the method of conveying a chain, the method of uncovering apparent and subtle defects, and other related topics. Some of the discussions that preceded pertain to the linkage of the chain of transmission. Then there are the narrators within the chain.

Islamic scholars beginning with the time of the companions, just as they developed the chain system, elaborated an intricate science to assess the reliability of narrators of reports. They investigated the biographies of individuals and composed works recording all the details available about each individual, especially those who related hadith, including their name(s), place and year of birth and death, teachers, students, their travels and how long they stayed in each place, their works, what others have said about them, some of their own statements, and so on. Some scholars composed biographical dictionaries of only those individuals mentioned in the canonical six books of hadith while others composed dictionaries or individual biographies of anyone notable up to their time. In fact, scholars continued to produce such works up until recent times, like *Tarājim a'yān al-qarn al-thālith 'ashar wa-awā'il al-rābi'* *'ashar* (*Biographies of the Notables of the Thirteen and Beginning of the Fourteenth Centuries*) by Aḥmad Taymūr Bāshā and *Siyar wa-tarājim ba'd 'ulamā'inā fi al-qarn al-rābi'*

‘ashar li-l-hijra (Lives and Biographies of Some of Our Scholars in the Fourteenth Hijri Century) by ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Jabbār. If one were to open a work like al-Mizzī’s (d. 742/1341) *Tahdhīb al-kamāl* or al-Dhahabī’s (d. 748/1348) *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* on the entry of ‘Abdallah b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653), Qatāda b. Dī‘āma (d. 117/735), or Shu‘ba b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160/776), one would find pages of detail about their lives, some of which have chains of transmission to the author of the work.

Hadith scholars were primarily concerned with the character of individuals, their memory, and the reliability of their written records, if they would narrate from written texts. They needed to document when, where, and if it was possible for each narrator to have met the narrator from whom they relate. This was needed to ensure there was no aberrancy, lying, or deception within the chain and between narrators. These biographical works fall under the name *‘ilm al-rijāl, al-ṭabaqāt, al-jarḥ wa-l-ta‘dīl, al-tarājim*, and others. Judges also used and developed a similar method of determining the credibility of witnesses (*tazkiya*) in which the judge’s court would employ individuals to investigate the character and background of witnesses. Hadith scholars and jurists acted on the verse «O you who believe! If an iniquitous person comes to you with tidings, then be discerning, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become remorseful over that which you have done» (Q 49:6) in which Allah (exalted is He) commands the believers to investigate the truthfulness and reliability of reports they receive.

Textual transmission and material preservation

Textual transmission relies on chains of transmission and material preservation. Texts in the pre-modern era, before modern typing, printing, and word-processing technologies, were dictated or copied by hand. At the beginning and end of most texts, the copyist would provide details about the manuscript. On the front page, the scribe would include the title of the work, its author, the chain of transmission, and audition certificate. The scribe would include on the last page their personal details, like name and geographic or family relation, the source of the text (i.e., an individual or another text), the date and place the copying was completed, if the text was checked against another source, who commissioned the text, and so on.¹⁶ The chain of transmission and the details ensure the reliability and authenticity of the text.

As for the textual transmission of religious texts, Muslims preserved the written Quran, its consonantal text and recitation aids (e.g., dotting, vowelizing, verse endings, pause and stop markers, etc.), in codices (*muṣāḥif*) starting from the time of the Messenger ﷺ, as previously mentioned, and continuing until today with modern printing technologies.¹⁷ Professional Quran copyists left details similar to those mentioned above about the codex he or she worked on. Today, along with modern printing, professional copyists continue the tradition of

¹⁶ Readers are encouraged to read Mufti Muntasir Zaman’s blog posts at <https://hadithnotes.org/> and his manual *A Beginner’s Companion to Arabic Manuscripts*, Qalam.

¹⁷ For more details, see Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-A‘zamī’s *The History of the Qur’anic Text: From Revelation to Compilation*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2011), Ahmed El Shamsy’s *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), Asad Ahmed’s *Palimpsests of Themselves: Logic and Commentary in Postclassical Muslim South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), Sabine Schmidtke’s *The Written Heritage of the Muslim World in Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, eds. James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), 86-109, among many other studies.

copying the Quran by hand to then be printed and digitized. Muslims from the time of the companions preserved the text of hadiths in early hadith compilations in a similar manner with copyists providing the same details in their texts. The same occurred with manuscripts of other texts, be they in the science of jurisprudence, creed, logic, or even literature. Moreover, the material preservation of texts includes block and movable type printing, lithography, the mass publication of texts with publication information, pictures of manuscripts, and digitization.

Researchers and book editors today continue to print previously unedited manuscripts and produce new prints of books that are checked and re-checked against manuscripts. Oftentimes, editors place photos of the manuscripts they relied on at the beginning of the print with the location data of those manuscripts. Beyond the Quran and hadith collections, one will find texts such as *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* of Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) printed in Istanbul 1883 from al-Ḥājj Muḥrim Efendī printing press and *al-Hidāya Sharḥ Bidāyat al-mubtadiʿ* and *Sharḥ Mullā jāmi* lithographed from printing presses in the Subcontinent, as a few examples. These texts continue to be printed, especially those from the Subcontinent and some of the prints from the Bulāq Amīrī printing presses and others, due to the reliability of the prints and the scholarship that went into producing them. Moreover, universities and seminaries around the world have digitized thousands upon thousands of texts for preservation and research.¹⁸

News and media

Outside the realm of religious texts and interpersonal communication, news and media outlets make up the other main source of transmitted knowledge today. For details about the methods and investigative practices of journalists one will consult the field of journalism. Nevertheless, this essay concerns the information that journalists report and how they report on that information. The factors that need to be considered are source credibility and “fact-checking”; being aware of bias, agendas, and perspectives; and understanding the technology of fabrication, manipulation, and the language and techniques of persuasion.

Archaeology

Mention of archaeological findings concludes the sources of transmitted information that this essay considers. Archaeology, a science that relies on history and anthropology, studies ancient human history and civilization through excavation of buildings, religious sites, artifacts, and other physical remains. Although the origin of archaeology extends back to ancient times, it is a relatively new field of knowledge in respect to the methodology and technologies used in the science, like carbon-14 dating. Recent advancements and discoveries in the field of archaeology from DNA and bone analysis and soil chemistry to modeling and remote sensing, combined with theories of human evolution and civilizational development, enable archaeologists to find new structures and sites and offer narratives of daily human life, including social relations and rituals, supplied with

¹⁸ Examples include Harvard’s *Islamic Heritage Project* and Princeton’s *Islamic Manuscripts* project.

a timeline, and the purpose of structures.¹⁹ As for how archaeology relates to texts, archaeologists discover writing and drawings on walls, paintings, writings in stone, and on coins, all forms of written communication. The discoveries of archaeologists may impact the understanding of religious texts, just as historical findings may, in that these discoveries may reveal more details about ancient peoples and civilizations and claims made within religious texts. Although the findings of archaeologists, situated in a narrative informed by materialism and an understanding of human evolution, will always be probable, they can be used as a supporting source for understanding religious texts when its limitations are respected.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT THEY MEAN?

The previous section of this essay concentrated on the transmission of a text, its chain and narrators, and the different types of texts that are transmitted. Every text has a chain of transmission, which is how it arrived at the receiver, and the text itself. But what comprises a text? How does one know what it means and what are the methods of accurately interpreting a text such that the source's intended meaning is understood?

A text, whether oral or written, has two components: the meaning and the word. The meaning has priority over the word both ontologically and in importance. What is intended by meaning is not the word one pronounces in one's mind and then either verbally pronounces that word or writes it down with symbols. The word one pronounces in the mind is still a word with an assigned meaning. Rather, the meaning is an intelligible form (*ṣūra*), knowledge, conception, or an image in the mind. Once this image has settled in the mind, one assigns it a word. This act of assignment occurs first in the mind and then, in general, verbally, and then in writing. The science of linguistic assignment (*ʿilm al-waḍʿ*) studies this process of assigning a word to a meaning. Muslim jurists compiled and developed this science, ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 756/1355) in particular, from the works of early Muslim jurists, linguists, lexicographers, and exegetes, starting with the companions' linguistic analysis of the Quran and statements of the Messenger ﷺ and their methods of exegesis and delivering legal verdicts.

The science of linguistic assignment forms the foundation of understanding what any text means, most importantly religious texts. Other knowledge fields rely heavily on this science such as exegesis of the Quran, principles of jurisprudence, logic, and rhetoric. To have an accurate apprehension of the meaning of a text and intent of the speaker, one must know the meanings of the words used, and this is informed by their "placement" in a statement, the surrounding context and domain of the words, and how they are being used. Without considering these factors, one cannot reach the intended meaning of the words. Without considering these factors, one's understanding of these words is trapped in a potentially inaccurate semantic field in which misunderstanding and misinterpreting the speaker's intent lie wait. Ultimately, the meanings behind the words

¹⁹ For a brief overview of the field of archaeology, see: National Geographic, "Archaeology," *National Geographic* (<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/archaeology/>) and Society for American Archaeology, "What do Archaeologists Do?" (<https://www.saa.org/about-archaeology/what-do-archaeologists-do>).

are most important. In fact, al-Ghazālī repeating points out that words are not the focal point of discussion but rather the meanings they are intended to convey.²⁰

Meaningful words are assigned specific meanings that refer to realities, meaning mentally or extramentally existent things. If words do not refer to anything, then they are meaningless and not useful for sciences and discussions. For example, the word “yartebiw” has no assigned meaning in the English language. To quote Imam al-Ghazālī again, he says that words may change over time, but the meanings do not.²¹ Take the word “starling,” for example, assigned to the meaning of a “common European songbird, *Sturnus vulgaris* (family Sturnidae), typically having dark iridescent plumage with occasional white speckles, gregarious behavior, and a loud, mimicking call.”²² Suppose that the word used to refer to this bird changes to its reverse, “gnilrats.” The reality that this word refers to has not changed. The common European songbird remains the same as it was before.

Primary and secondary meanings, signification, and literal and figurative meanings of words

Words have two senses: a primary and a secondary meaning. A word's primary meaning is the meaning to which it originally was assigned. Words, though, take on other dimensions of meaning, be they technical, new cultural usages that differ from the original intent, or figurative usages. These are their secondary meanings, meanings to which the reference of words are transferred. The primary meaning of the word “accident” may have been “an unintended occurrence,” but then in logic and philosophy it refers to a non-essential property and in music theory to the alteration of pitch by raising or lowering it half a step. You may see a friend after some time and notice a scar on his forehead. He preempts your question with, “It was an accident.” You may first think he means he fell or something unintentional occurred that gave him the scar. Then you remember that he is immersed in philosophy and often speaks with philosophical terms to annoy his friends, so he means that it is non-essential to his being. With the Arabic term *ṣalāh*, originally meaning “supplication,” the Sharia gave it a secondary meaning for the ritual prayer. Consider the layers in a statement such as, “The *ṣalāh* was accidental,” and what additional information and context you would need to determine the original intent.

Sometimes the use and familiarity of a word's secondary meaning can supersede its original meaning with a shift in authoritative use, cultural factors, contexts, etc. Between these two senses are the limits of interpretation and usage. One approaching a text must determine the original, primary meaning of a word in the language and locate the accepted figurative usages of that term in the chronological and cultural context in which it was spoken. With both at hand, one has discovered the limits or scope of that word's usage in the language. Careful consideration of the additional meanings a word may have, especially since a word could have a significant number of derived secondary meanings, and the grammatical, situational, and cultural context in which it is used are also important factors to observe when considering the meaning of a word. Otherwise, the original intent of the speaker or author may be missed. Scholars may refer to the primary meaning with the terms lexical (*luḡawī*), original (*aṣlī*), or apparent (*ẓāhir*). They give a general principle of

²⁰ Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2019), 120.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “starling, n.1”, July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1047699030>.

interpretation, “Texts are interpreted according to their primary meanings as long as there is no decisive proof to turn away from them” and “Primary meanings are assumed unless there are contextual variables that indicate otherwise.”²³

The science of linguistic assignment affirms that words have objective meanings that remain within the boundaries of their primary and secondary meanings. Words are not subject to relativism or sophistry; rather, words have real and knowable meanings that result in the affirmation of a scope of possible interpretations with their primary meanings being first in priority and their secondary meanings accepted when a cultural and chronological context deems it fit.

In terms of interpreting texts, one must be aware of changes that occur in the use and assignment of words. Jurists were well-aware of this and discussed four types of assigned meanings to words: lexical (*lughawī*), religious (*sharʿī*), general conventional (*ʿurfī ʿāmm*), and special conventional (*ʿurfī khāṣṣ*). A similar discussion is found in logic and rhetoric texts, in the former under the introductory chapters on signification and words, and in the latter under the sections on literal and figurative usage.

Signification (*dalāla*) divides into verbal and non-verbal, both of which divide further into three types. Verbal signification (*dalāla lafẓiyya*) divides into assigned (*waḍʿiyya*), rational (*ʿaqliyya*), and natural (*ṭabʿiyya*). Assigned verbal signification occurs by means of a meaning being assigned to a word, rational verbal through the intellect’s judgment, and natural verbal by means of what the essence of a thing demands. Exegetes, jurists, grammarians, and logicians turn their attention to verbal signification since the subject matter of their respective sciences treat verbal expressions. The exegete interprets Allah’s revelation, revealed in the Arabic language, to reach the intended meaning. The jurist and scholar of principles of jurisprudence investigate Allah’s revelation, the statements and actions of His Messenger ﷺ, and cases presented to the jurist to reach legal rulings, all of which are conveyed through words. Grammarians consider the structure and principles of the Arabic language. Logicians, though the subject matter of their study comprises conception and judgment, study verbal expressions since conception and judgment are normally conveyed through words.

From assigned verbal signification, one looks at the types of assignment to words. In linguistic assignment, the native speakers of a language assign words to meanings through a technical vocabulary or through Allah’s (exalted is He) assignment and informing humans of it (*tawqīf*) like the “starling” mentioned before. However, the assignment of meanings to words under consideration are only generic nouns like “fox” and “evergreen.” As for Allah’s divine names, the names of angels, and such, then Allah assigns these words; for names of individuals, human or otherwise, then the one who assigns these are humans.²⁴ In religious verbal assignment, the Legislator (i.e., Allah) assigns a religious meaning to a word whereby the word takes on a meaning different from, though perhaps still related to, its lexical meaning. Allah (exalted is He) assigned the meaning of “the

²³ *Al-nuṣūṣ ʿalā ẓawāhirihā mā lam yaṣriḥ ʿanhā dalīl qaṭʿī*. See a similar phrasing in Taftāzānī’s *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid al-Nasafiyya*, 608.

²⁴ Scholars take one of four positions regarding the identity of the one who assigns in lexical assignment: Allah alone, human beings, Allah up to the point that human beings can teach others lexical assignment, and uncommitted to any of the three. See Aḥmad al-Nazīf Muḥammad Raḥmī al-Aḡīnī, *al-ʿUjāla al-raḥmiyya fī sharḥ al-Risāla al-waḍʿiyya*, ed. Muhammed Salih Sürücü (Istanbul: Marmara University, 2017), 174, 176-178.

specific form of worship that consists of recitation, standing, bowing, and prostrating” to prayer (*ṣalāh*), which lexically means to approach, supplicate, implore, etc.²⁵ Religious verbal assignment falls under a type of special convention. When a specific group of individuals assign a meaning to a term, then they have assigned that word a special convention such as when auto-mechanics use “transmission” for the auto-part that transfers power from an auto-engine to its axle. Other groups may use “transmission” differently, like telecommunication engineers who use the term to refer to the process or information transmitted by radio through radio and cell towers. General convention differs from special convention in that a general group assigns a meaning to a word such as “fork” to the eating utensil, which lexically refers to a division into two branches.

Lastly, a word can be used in a literal or figurative sense. Before one can understand the literal and figurative use of a word, one needed to comprehend assignment. A word can be assigned in one of the above four assignments and used in that meaning or used figuratively from the perspective of the contextual assignment. To illustrate this, consider the word *taqwā* in Arabic, lexically assigned to mean “take protection or precaution” and “fear” and religiously assigned to mean “to protect the soul from what harms it by avoiding what is forbidden [in Islam].”²⁶

Imagine the following scenario. Yaqub had a childhood friend, Ahmad, who lived in the U.S. through his childhood to early adult life. They attended primary, middle, and high school together and attended the same university. When Ahmad finished his degree, he told Yaqub he had to return back to the U.A.E. to help run the family business that constructed and managed large corporate buildings in Sharjah. A year after graduation, Ahmad invited Yaqub to Sharjah to visit him. When Yaqub arrived, Ahmad greeted him warmly and offered that they visit a local restaurant for local thareed and ice cream afterwards. Ready to go, Ahmad asks Yaqub, “Do you want to see the jaguar?” Yaqub, having never seen a jaguar in person, answered, “Of course!” Ahmad led Yaqub into the house, while Yaqub was thinking that it was probably a showroom model. They entered the living room and there was to Yaqub’s surprise a live, young jaguar roaming freely in a section of the living room. Yaqub jumped back, frightened. Ahmad turned to him, “You said you wanted to see the jaguar. Well, here she is! She’s here for a few days until her area is ready at the wildlife rehabilitation center. Come here, Tata.” The source of Yaqub’s confusion is that he understood “jaguar” as the literal technical name for the brand of car owned by Tata motors. However, Ahmad used the word in its literal lexical meaning for a large cat species of the Americas known for its rosette spotted pattern on its fur. Could context have helped Yaqub in this situation?

As another example, take the word *ṣawm* (fast) that is lexically assigned in the Arabic language to the literal meaning of restraint and withholding. So, one could fast from speaking or sleeping, meaning that one refrains from speaking or sleeping. Allah (exalted is He) assigned the word to the literal religious meaning of withholding from food, water, and intimate relationships from true dawn to sunset. If Zaynab were to say that she would fast from social media for a week, she would be using the word in its literal lexical sense. If she said

²⁵ For the lexical meanings, see ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī, *Mufradāt al-qur’ān*, ed. Ajmal Ayyūb al-Iṣlāhī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2002), 209-210.

²⁶ Al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-qur’ān* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, 2015), 545.

she would fast (lexically) from social media during the month of Ramadan from true dawn to sunset every day, then from a religious assignment perspective she would be using the word in a figurative sense because fasting during Ramadan refers literally to the religious fast from true dawn to sunset. When Allah (glorified is He) requires of us to fast (lexically) also from lying and backbiting during the month of Ramadan, then this fasting is used in a figurative sense.

The point brought to bear here relates to how one interprets the words and expressions of a text. For every word, phrase, and sentence of a text, one needs to identify its assignment, then if it is used literally or figuratively in that assignment, and then its place within Arabic rhetoric. Within the science of Arabic rhetoric is the science of rhetorical figures (*‘ilm al-bayān*). This science covers simile, indirect implied metaphor and metonymical implied metaphor, metonymy, indirect language, parables, proverbs, idioms, imagery, and so on.²⁷ Thus, when one approaches a text, the text's rhetorical aspect must also be recognized and factored into understanding the text. The Quran states: «*And let not thine hand be shackled to thy neck; nor let it be entirely open, lest thou shouldst sit condemned, destitute*» (Q 17:29). The literal, and lexically assigned, meaning of this text advises that one not shackle his hand to his neck nor let his hand be open. Obviously, the verse does not intend this. Rather, the two expressions are indirect expressions (*kināya*) for miserliness and prodigality, respectfully. Similarly, Allah (exalted is He) says that He sent the Messenger ﷺ to «*bring those who believe and perform righteous deeds out of darkness into light*» (Q 65:11), using «*darkness*» figuratively for misguidance and «*light*» figuratively for guidance. He also informs us that «*He is Dominant over His servants; and He is the Wise, the Aware*» (Q 6:18), from which some scholars have understood that He is literally and directionally above creation. Rather, the verse uses a parabolic implied metaphor (*isti‘āra tamthīliyya*) that explains Allah's might and power like one who seizes an individual from above. It is a misunderstanding to dissect this expression into individual parts and posit an attribute of each for Allah (exalted is He).²⁸

A hadith of the Messenger ﷺ brings all this together. The Messenger ﷺ said: «*Certainly, Islam began strange (gharīban) and will return to being strange*». ²⁹ In this hadith, «*Islam*» is used in its literal religiously assigned meaning of submitting to Allah and of the religion of Islam. «*Began*» and «*return*» are used in their literal lexically assigned meanings. However, the word «*strange*» requires explanation. Lexically, the word «*gharīb*» was assigned to a distant thing. Figuratively, it is used for something being unknown or not having many peers. The Messenger ﷺ alluded to the nascent state of Islam as being strange and that near the end of time it would return to its former state. Given knowledge of this allusion, the use of «*strange*» refers indirectly to the state of Islam in Makka. Initially, only a few adherents and supporters responded to Islam, resulting in Islam being like a strange and foreign individual being ignored and outcast from the clan or city. Islam then rapidly spread, but it

²⁷ Meaning *tashbīh*, *isti‘āra muṣarraḥa*, *isti‘āra makniyya*, *majāz mursal*, *kināya*, *tamthīlāt*, *amthāl*, *takhyīl*, and so on.

²⁸ In fact, Allah (glorified is He) recounts a similar expression from the Pharaoh in Q 7:127. Imam al-Ghazālī speaks of lexical assignment in his *Ijām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām* and its role in understanding the Quran and hadith. See for example, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ijām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām* (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017), 126-137; and al-Ghazālī, *A Return to Purity In Creed*, trans. ‘Abdullah bin Ḥamīd ‘Alī (Philadelphia: Lamp Post Productions, 2008), 91-102.

²⁹ Muslim b. Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Bushrā, 2016), 1:188, #373.

will return to being like a strange and foreign, outcast, and rejected individual and one with few supporters near the end. Thus, an implied metaphor was drawn between Islam's initial state and that of a strange, foreign individual.

Scholars of the principles of jurisprudence explored many other aspects of words and expressions and meanings that can be extracted from them such as whether a word indicates its complete meaning (*muṭābaqa*), part of its meaning (*taḍammun*), or something entailed by its meaning (*iltizām*); whether a counter implicature (*mafhūm al-mukhālaḥa*) can be understood from a word; whether a word is general (*ʿamm*) or specific (*khāṣṣ*), unqualified (*muṭlaq*) or qualified (*muqayyad*), and so on. They looked at four types of significations of a word, levels of an expression's clarity, and exception and abrogation in and between statements. All the above shows the intense and exacting focus Muslims scholars applied to language and meaning.

Transmission of words and usage

In each of the above examples, this essay claimed a particular meaning for words but did not cite a source for these meanings. Early on, the companions, such as ʿUmar b. Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) and Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687), turned their attention to documenting and preserving the Arabic language, including the hundreds of thousands to millions of pre-modern Arabic words through learning and passing on Arabic poetry, sermons, idioms, and expressions. Both ʿUmar and Ibn ʿAbbās are reported to have emphasized learning and referencing Arabic poetry in the exegesis of the Quran and preserving sound usage of the language, calling poetry the “register of the Arabs” (*dīwān al-ʿarab*). In poetry, the Arabs recorded and recounted their language, histories, battles, emotions, culture, and what it meant to be Arab. The Quran and Messenger's ﷺ first audience were the Arabs and then the rest of humanity.³⁰ Some poetry is still preserved through a chain of transmission, though most poetry is recorded in anthologies of individual poets or a particular topic, like the *Dīwān of Imruʿ al-Qays*, *al-Muʿallaqāt*, and *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*. Of course, the hadith literature and other religious texts preserve the meanings of words and expressions and include explanations of usage.

The largest repository for the meanings of words is none other than dictionaries. Once Muslims learned the art of papermaking from contact with Chinese soldiers and converts to Islam, they began writing dictionaries like *Tāj al-lughā wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-ʿarabiyya* by Ismāʿīl b. Ḥammād al-Jawharī (d. 393/1003), al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 173/789) being one of the first to do so with his *Kitāb al-ʿayn*. These dictionaries often cite pre-Islamic poetry as evidence of the meanings for each word entry. Muslims produced a variety of dictionaries like standard lexicons, foreign etymology compilations like *al-Muʿarrab min kalām al-aʿjamī*, dictionaries of obscure and rare words from the Quran and hadith, and technical dictionaries ranging from those for zoologists to jurists. The devotion to language and meaning is a hallmark of the Semitic languages, and the Arabic language and Muslim scholars are no different. Among the dictionary sciences, one finds compilations on the science of etymology and derivation (*ishtiḳāq*) such as Ibn Fāris's (d. 395/1004) renowned *Muʿjam maqāyīs al-lughā*. The science of derivation studies major and minor common derivation between words and provides a key to understanding the meanings assigned to words and the relationship between them.

³⁰ This should not be taken to mean that Islam is a religion for the Arabs. Rather, it is for all of humanity, beginning with Ādām (upon him peace) through all the other prophets and messengers sent to every people, Arab or not.

Context and intention

After the linguistic aspects of the meaning of words, the second layer to their meanings is the context and intention in which they are used, elements outside the actual word. External to words and related to time, historical context, culture, and customs aid in understanding how a word should be understood. Moreover, a text may offer verbally expressed or practically understood indications from within itself that clarify its meaning just as other texts within or without its genre may offer additional details. Scholars of exegesis and hadith speak of the latter case as exegesis of the Quran by the Quran or the Quran by the Sunna, and so on.

DEFINITIVE AND PROBABLE REVELATORY TEXTS

Now that the discussions on transmission and signification have passed, they can be brought together in an analysis of the epistemic levels of revelatory texts. After this section, the final section on the authority and method of interpreting religious texts follows.

It has become clear that every text has two aspects: transmission and signification. Each aspect may be definitive (*qaṭʿī*) or probable (*ẓanni*), thus resulting in four possible iterations. Definitive means that the text produces certainty (*yaqīn*) such that its attribution or meaning being false or something else are inconceivable. Anything other than definitive is probable, possibly producing certainty, strong supposition (*ẓann*),³¹ or doubt (*shakk*). A text may be definitive in transmission and signification, definitive in one and probable in the other, or probable in both. What follows are examples of each, in order of highest epistemic strength to lowest. These categories overlap with some of the epistemic categories the scholars of jurisprudence provide, particularly a determined expression (*muḥkam*) and an obscure expression (*mutashābih*). Only a text probable in its signification is open to interpretation.

Some texts are definitive in their transmission, meaning one has certainty that they were accurately and reliably transmitted. Examples include the consonantal skeleton of the Quran, its ten canonical readings, and mass-transmitted hadiths. However, the signification of these texts may be definitive or probable. Take for instance Allah's (exalted is He) statement «*and that He creates the two mates—male and female*» (Q 53:45). This verse, like all verses, is definitive in its transmission since it is a verse of the Quran. It is also definitive in its signification. The meaning of the words within this verse «*creates*», «*two*», «*mates*», «*male*», and «*female*» are known definitively and cannot bear any other literal meaning apart from their apparent meaning. Similarly, the portion of the verse «*naught is like unto Him*» (Q 42:11) is definitive in both transmission and signification. The verse can have no meaning other than that Allah (exalted is He) is completely unlike His creation. Then, there are texts that are definitive in transmission but probable in signification like the mass-transmitted response of the Messenger ﷺ «*Its water is pure, and its dead is permissible*» when asked about the sea.³² Jurists disagreed over what is considered in the dead of the sea with some excluding all crustaceans like crabs and shrimp and others allowing them.

³¹ Also termed “*ghalabat al-ẓann*” and “*al-ẓann al-rājih*.”

³² See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's *Qaṭf al-azhār*, ed. Khalil Muḥy al-Dīn al-Mubīn (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1985), 47.

Texts may be probable in transmission and definitive or probable in signification. Examples are the additional four readings of the Quran, spurious readings (*qirā'āt shādhda*) of the Quran, and solitary hadiths, be they sound, good, or weak. An example of a text that is probable in transmission but definitive in signification is the hadith found in al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* in which the Messenger ﷺ said «By Allah, I certainly ask Allah forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance more than seventy times in a day».³³ Although this hadith is sound since it occurs in al-Bukhārī's collection, it is probable in its transmission because it is solitary. However, its signification is definitive in that the Messenger ﷺ would do both actions and no one has disagreed over this. Another example is the Messenger's ﷺ statement to Mu'ādh b. Jabal when he sent him to Yemen, «Inform them that Allah has prescribed five prayers for them in a day and night».³⁴ This hadith is probable in transmission and definitive in signification. One cannot understand from this hadith that a Muslim must pray one, two, three, four, or six prayers in a twenty-four-hour period nor that these prayers are voluntary nor that they are only prayed in the day or only in the night. An example of a text that is probable in transmission and signification is the hadith «There is no marriage without a guardian», recorded in the *Sunans* of al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, and Ibn Mājah, and elsewhere. Jurists disagreed over the ruling to be extracted from this hadith.

AUTHORITY TO INTERPRET AND IMPLEMENT AND SOURCES

The final section of the essay treats the topic of authority to interpret and the methodology of interpreting religious texts. One first needs to ask from where such authority originates. Allah (exalted is He) revealed religious texts, be they His speech that He commands Muslims to recite as an act of worship or His speech revealed to a messenger or prophet that manifests as that messenger or prophet's statements and practice. Since revelation belongs to Allah, it is only He who explains His own speech and sanctions individuals to interpret His revelation.

The first source of authority for the interpretation of religious texts then is Allah Himself such as when the Quran clarifies its own meaning. The second source is the recipient of the revelation and the one charged with conveying, teaching, and explaining it, namely the prophet who receives it. For the Quran, the Messenger ﷺ is the first authority after the Quran, but in a way, he and the Quran are one authority since the Messenger explained how to interpret the Quran through the Quran. The Messenger instructed his companions while the Quran was being revealed in how to interpret and put the verses of the Quran into practice, sanctioning with authority to interpret the Quran and his sunna some of his companions like Ibn Mas'ūd, Ibn 'Abbās, and others who were close to him and had spent their time devoted to learning from him. This is the first level of interpretive authority.

The second level of interpretive authority extends back to the Messenger ﷺ through a chain of transmission by which scholars pass on texts and an interpretive methodology. From teacher to student, scholars train other

³³ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-bukhārī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Bughā (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), 5:2324, #5948.

³⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2:529, #1389.

scholars in the methods of interpreting texts. Sometimes this is on an individual basis and other times through institutions that certify that its graduates are capable of properly implementing the interpretive methodology they learned, developing it, and teaching it. These scholars pass on the requisite sciences for interpreting texts (e.g., grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the higher sciences that give them the tools for approaching and soundly interpreting a text's meaning. Other than these two categories of individuals with interpretive authority, from a religious perspective, anyone else who attempts to interpret revelation as an authority would be sinful, not having the qualifications nor sanction to interpret.

Sources for interpretation, types of exegesis, and methodology

In the two sciences of the principles of jurisprudence and principles of exegesis, scholars recorded and developed methods for interpreting religious texts, identified valid textual and non-textual sources to be used in interpretation, and maintained a methodology for using those sources in interpreting texts.

Of the textual sources, the primary sources are the Quran and hadith both of which clarify the meaning of revelatory texts. The scholars of exegesis noted the Messenger's ﷺ methodology of interpreting verses of the Quran through other verses of the Quran. When the verse of *Sūrat al-An'ām* was revealed in which Allah (exalted is He) tells the believers «*Those who believe and who do not obscure their belief through wrongdoing, it is they who have security, and they are rightly guided*» (Q 6:82), the companions worried and rushed to the Messenger ﷺ. They understood the verse to mean that the belief of anyone who sins will be nullified and not accepted. The Messenger explained that “wrongdoing” means “ascribing partners” just as Luqmān said to his son: «*And behold, Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him, “O my son! Do not ascribe partners unto God. Truly ascribing partners is a tremendous wrong*» (Q 31:13). In this case, the Messenger explained the meaning of one verse through another verse. Exegetes mention that the context within a verse and from other verses and observing similar or repeated phrasing in other verses fall under the Quran explaining itself.³⁵

The Messenger also explained the Quran through his actions just as he would sometimes explain his own statements and actions at later times. In fact, his life (*sīra*) is an explanation of the Quran. Al-Bukhārī, for example, included a book on exegesis in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* that progresses from the first to last chapter of the Quran. In each chapter, he included actions of the Messenger ﷺ and statements of the companions that reference the Messenger's life as exegesis of the Quran. 'Ā'isha (d. 58/678) (may Allah be pleased with her), a mother of the believers, was asked about the Messenger's character to which she responded: “His character was the Quran.”³⁶ In fact, many of the hadith collections have a chapter on exegesis of the Quran. Moreover, jurists and scholars of hadith rely on the hadith corpus to compare narrations from the Messenger by which some narrations clarify others, add missing detail, and mention abrogated practices and rulings. One hadith scholar and jurist, Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933), composed two seminal texts on this method: *Sharḥ ma'ānī al-āthār* and *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*.

³⁵ See 'Abdallāh b. Yūsuf al-Juday', *al-Muqaddimāt al-asāsiyya fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Rayyān, 2016) 281-282.

³⁶ See al-Mawsū'a al-ḥadīthiyya, al-Durar al-Saniyya, <https://dorar.net/hadith/sharh/135240>.

The opinions and statements of the companions who also conveyed the occasions of revelation are another textual source. The companions were the first witnesses and recipients of the Quran and sunna (i.e., the statements and actions of the Messenger ﷺ) and thus most aware of the meanings and details of both. They witnessed the revelation of the Quran and what took place at the time when each verse and chapter was revealed, known as the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). They saw the Messenger’s practice, noted it, practiced it faithfully, and learned the appropriate application of the Messenger’s sunna and when it changed. Then the successors took from the companions, learned their methodology, and continued the companions’ legacy of interpreting revelation. Their interpretations are included as a textual source.

The Arabic language, discussed before, holds considerable weight as a source scholars use to interpret revelation. Musā‘id al-Ṭayyār presents an excellent study in his *al-Taḥsīn al-lughawī li-l-qur’ān al-karīm* of language-focused Quranic exegesis, its history, and main works and scholars. He filled the work with examples from eminent grammarians and the works of exegesis they composed.

The last textual source includes history, reports from other civilizations, and a genre of reports called *Isrā’īliyyāt*, which are statements, traditions, histories, and exegeses received from Jews, Christians, and other peoples who received prophets prior to Islam. Al-Ṭayyār also wrote a work on these reports called *al-Murāja‘āt fi al-isrā’īliyyāt* in which he explores the history of using these reports for exegesis and the conditions for using them and responds to modern critiques of employing them in exegesis. Muslim scholars turned to these sources for additional clarification and for details of events mentioned in the Quran without relying on their veracity. Most scholars approached these sources with apprehension, only denying the veracity of those texts that contradict clear verses from the Quran, statements from the hadith, and principles of Islamic belief. They certified only those texts that confirm what is already mentioned from these three categories. Otherwise, scholars operated upon the prophetic principle not to deny or confirm what does not fall into the above three categories, but rather to relate and preserve what was received. Archaeology and other historical reports fall under the same principle since these are all probable sources.

Non-textual sources include scholarly investigation and the use of reason and empirical data such as scientific findings and material remains, and intuition and mystical unveiling. A few hadiths relate that the one who interprets the Quran according to his own opinion (*ra’y*), even if he is correct, has erred.³⁷ Scholars seriously considered the ramifications of interpreting revelation without the qualifications to do so, with bias or partisanship for a group or position, and without any support from the above sources for one’s interpretation. Books and guides on the principles of exegesis mention these qualifications, some of which were mentioned above like a high level of proficiency in the Arabic language and knowledge of the principles of jurisprudence. However, one should not understand from this warning that scholars are prohibited from using non-textual tools to interpret revelation; in fact, they are encouraged to do so as evidenced by the practice of the Messenger ﷺ and the companions when they would employ their scholarly effort (*ijtihād*) to understand and implement verses of the Quran. The warning instead applies to those scholars who interpret without considering these ramifications and when their interpretation conflicts with definitive textual sources.

³⁷ See for example hadith #2963 through #2965 in al-Tirmidhī’s *al-Jāmi‘*. Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Bushrā, 2017), 3:1137.

The work *Bida' al-tafāsīr* by 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) records a number of these spurious interpretations arising mostly from deviant sects, but also from ignorance, as does al-Suyūṭī's *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-qur'ān* (quoting from *al-'Ajā'ib wa-l-gharā'ib* by al-Karmānī) and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī's *al-Tibyān fī 'ulūm al-qur'ān* such as the interpretation of «*In retribution there is life for you, O possessors of intellect, that haply you may be reverent*» (Q 2:179) in which some ignorant individuals understood «*qiṣās*» as “stories” instead of “retribution.”³⁸ Al-Ṣābūnī cites another example, this one from the Twelver Shi'a, for the exegesis of the section of the verse «*The earth will shine with the Light of its Lord*» (Q 39:69) that “the earth will shine with the light of the imam,” referring either to 'Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) or other supposed imams according to their heretical beliefs.³⁹

From non-textual sources, two genres of exegesis emerged: exegesis through scholarly opinion and mystical exegesis. Regarding exegesis through scholarly opinion, as opposed to the spurious and unqualified opinions above, all exegesis that is not explicitly from the Quran and Messenger ﷺ is exegesis through scholarly opinion. Qualified scholars employ the tools they have mastered to engage with revelation through the above sources, determining which sources apply when and how, which are most relevant, which conflict with others, and so on. All of this is a matter of scholarly opinion and effort. The exegete then decides on the most reliable and accurate interpretation of a verse or hadith. Examples usually included in this genre of exegesis are Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī's (d. 333/944) *Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, al-Bayḍāwī's (d. 685/1319) *Anwār al-tanzīl* and its many glosses, and al-Ālūsī's (d. 1270/1854) *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, among hundreds of others. These exegetes draw upon all the material and sources available to them up to their respective times to understand and extract meanings from revelation, broadly including the linguistic sciences (particularly grammar and Arabic rhetoric), logic, philosophy, theology, hadith, and empirical science.

The modern period saw the rise of modernist and empirical science-based exegesis, some more accurate and faithful to the apparent meaning of revelation and exegetical tradition than others. Examples include Rashīd Riḍā's (d. 1935) *Tafsīr al-manār* and Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī's (d. 1940) *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-qur'ān al-karīm*. In the latter, Jawharī intended to connect scientific discoveries of his time such as those made in physics, biology, and chemistry and medicine, psychology, and philosophy to Quranic exegesis.⁴⁰ Several Ottoman and Turkish scholars participated in a similar endeavor like Sa'īd Nursī's *Risāle-i Nūr* (d. 1960) and Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*.⁴¹ Al-Ālūsī's exegesis includes mystical interpretations after most sections, conveying them without affirming their reliability. Scholars generally accepted mystical interpretations of religious texts as long as they were not taken to be the definitive interpretation of a text. Mystical interpretations hold subjective value and may offer other dimensions of meaning from a text; however, these interpretations must

³⁸ See Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī's *al-Tibyān fī 'ulūm al-Quran* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Bushrā, 2015), 125.

³⁹ Al-Ṣābūnī, 126.

⁴⁰ See Majid Daneshgar's study of Jawharī's work: *Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī and the Qur'an: Tafsīr and Social Concerns in the Twentieth Century* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴¹ For an excellent study of the types of exegeses, see Hussein Abdul-Raof's *Theological Approaches to Qur'anic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012).

not conflict with the express meaning of the text. Al-Suyūṭī notes five conditions for accepting these interpretations, most condensing to these two notices.

Methodology for interpreting texts

In closing this section of the essay, one should note that there is no particular order for using one source over another in interpreting religious texts. Scholars approach a text, like a verse of the Quran, and use all the sciences and sources at their disposal while negotiating the relevance of each science and source in interpreting the text.⁴² With a verse such as Q 8:24, the portion «*And know that God comes between a man and his heart*», scholars relied on linguistic sciences, hadith, theology and philosophy, and mystical unveiling. The following is an analysis of this portion of the verse from al-Ālūsī's commentary to illustrate how Quranic exegesis works.⁴³

Allah (exalted is He) said in verse 24 of *Sūrat al-Anfāl*: «*And know that God comes between a man and his heart*». Al-Ālūsī first notes that this verse is connected to the imperative in the beginning of the verse «*Respond*» (Q 8:24). The phrase «*comes between*» comes from the verbal noun *ḥawl*, meaning for something to change and be separate from something else. Al-Ālūsī says that this is inconceivable in relation to Allah (exalted is He), and thus the wording must be a figurative expression for being very close to something since if one separates two things and comes between them, he will be closer to both than they are now to each other. In fact, al-Ālūsī says that many exegetes understood this verse as a parabolic implied metaphor (*isti'āra tamthīliyya*), while others considered it another type of implied metaphor or indirect language for being close to something, the latter having been reported from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Qatāda (d. 118/736). This verse resembles the portion of the verse: «*and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*» (Q 50:16). Thus far in his exegesis of this portion, al-Ālūsī has employed a grammatical and rhetoric analysis, brought in theology and a creedal point, and cited a textual narration for support of his interpretation.

There is an allusion in the verse to the fact that Allah (exalted is He) is fully aware of the things hidden within hearts and minds even if individuals are sometimes unaware of what their own hearts hold. It is possible that Allah (exalted is He) intends to encourage the believer to make their hearts sincere and pure, says al-Ālūsī. What is then meant by «*comes between a man and his heart*» is that He causes it to die and thus he misses the opportunity to purify it and treat its ills and diseases. Perhaps Allah (exalted is He), after commanding the believers to respond to the Messenger's ﷺ call, indicated that the believer should then take the chance to purify his or her heart through obedience. In this case, causing to die is likened to coming in between an individual

⁴² One finds several works on the principles and methodology of Quranic exegesis that past and contemporary scholars have written, including the introductions to works of Quranic exegesis, such as al-Ālūsī's introduction to his *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, Ibn 'Ashūr's (d. 1970) extensive introduction to his *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, and the contemporary Musā'id al-Ṭayyār's commentaries on introductory chapters to well-known exegeses. Although this essay cannot detail these principles and methodology, readers can consult the works such as Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Kāfiyājī, *al-Taysīr fī qawā'id 'ilm al-tafsīr* (Ṭanṭā: Dār al-Ṣaḥāba li-l-Turāth, 2007) and Musā'id al-Ṭayyār, *al-Taḥrīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* (Jeddah: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Ma'lūmāt al-Qur'āniyya bi-Ma'had al-Imām al-Shāṭibī, 2014).

⁴³ Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-qur'ān al-'aẓīm wa-l-sab' al-mathānī*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Amad and 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām al-Salāmī (Peshawar: al-Maktaba al-Ḥaqqāniyya, n.d.), 9/10:252-253, 274.

and his or heart. Here al-Ālūsī has given a practical interpretation of the verse, drawing on theology once again and on spiritual practice.

Supporting the position that the verse gives a parabolic implied metaphor, al-Ālūsī cites a hadith from the Messenger ﷺ in which he supplicates to Allah: «Turner of hearts! Make firm my heart on your religion». He ﷺ then explains this supplication to Umm Salama (may Allah be pleased with her): «There is not a single human but his heart is between two fingers of Allah (exalted is He). Whomever He wills, He makes them firm, and whomever He wills, He turns away». Thereafter, al-Ālūsī brings another hadith to support this interpretation in which Ibn ‘Abbās (may Allah be pleased with him and his father) says that he asked the Messenger ﷺ about this verse, to which he replied: «He comes between the believer and disbelief, and between the disbeliever and guidance».

Al-Ālūsī goes on to give additional detail about the interpretation of the verse, expounding on these hadiths and the connection of this verse with previous verses. He critiques an interpretation of the verse, and then mentions another reading of the verse with «*al-marri*» (man) instead of «*al-mar’i*» (man).

Al-Ālūsī provides a mystical interpretation of the verse in connection to the rest of the verse: «*O you who believe! Respond to God and the Messenger when he calls you unto that which will give you life. And know that God comes between a man and his heart, and that unto Him shall you be gathered*» (Q 8:24). The interpretation begins within the main commentary, partly mentioned above, and then continues at the end of the chapter. Allah (exalted is He) calls the believers to purify their souls through knowledge of Him. Others have said that Allah tells the believers to respond to Him with their inner and heart-related actions and to the Messenger ﷺ with their outward and soul-related actions. Al-Ālūsī gives other mystical interpretations.⁴⁴

This summary excerpt from Imam al-Ālūsī’s phenomenal and encyclopedic work of exegesis illustrates how a master exegete draws on all the sources available from the science of Quranic recitations, hadith, theology, Arabic grammar and rhetoric, mystical interpretations, and more to exhaust the meanings of the verses in accordance with the level reached by the sciences of his day. The field of exegesis, like the field of jurisprudence, continues as humans make new discoveries and advance in fields of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This essay on the epistemology of textual sources of knowledge explored a number of facets about how textual sources relate to knowledge and what can be known. Everyone receives textual information every day, be that through the news or friends or written material. All social media conveys textual information. Given the ubiquity of this source of knowledge, one needs a clearly defined understanding and methodology to evaluate and interpret these sources and the information they convey. Whether religious or non-religious and whether one receives a textual source through oral or written transmission, that text has a chain of transmission and a text composed of words. These words contain meanings to which the words are assigned. These words can be used literally or figuratively, and they can be assigned in one of four types of assignment, as discussed. Muslim

⁴⁴ Al-Ālūsī, 9/10:252, 274.

scholars devoted enormous effort to composing a system to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of a text, most importantly religious texts, and a methodology to understand them in a way faithful to the intent of their source. This essay offered an overview of the types of textual sources and their components and illustrated the methodology Muslim scholars took to approach these sources.



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