

OCCASIONAL PAPERS



The Qur'an and the Sunnah: The Time-Space Factor

Ṭahā Jābir al 'Alwānī
'Imād al Dīn Khalīl

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC
PUBLISHING HOUSE
AND
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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CONTENTS

The Occasional Papers Series	v
Editors' Note	vii
The Qur'an: The Primary Source of Knowledge	1
- Some Qur'anic Features	8
Toward a Proper Reading of the Sunnah	28
- The Role of the Sunnah in Tackling the Problems of the Ummah	37
- The Danger of Too-Literal an Interpretation of the Sunnah	38
- The Role of the Sunnah in the Ummah's Revival	39
- Conclusion	40
The Qur'an and Modern Science: Observations on Methodology	42
1. The Philosophy of Science, Its Aims, and Islam's Basic Principles	45
2. The Methodology	48
3. Facts	50
4. Application	53
IIIT Publications	58

THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

The publication program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has already addressed important issues in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge. In this respect a number of books have already appeared in several languages under fifteen main series: *Academic Dissertations*; *Accessing the Islamic Intellectual Heritage*; *Concepts and Terminology*; *Human Development*; *Indices*; *Islamic Methodology*; *Islamization of Culture*; *Islamization of Knowledge*; *Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought*; *Lectures*; *Occasional Papers*; *Perspectives on Islamic Thought*; *Reform Movements and Methodologies of Change*; *Research Monographs* and *Rasa'il Islamiyat al Ma'rifah* (Studies in the Islamization of Knowledge).

The *Occasional Papers* series, published by the Institute's London Office, covers a number of research papers, articles and lectures from the Institute's worldwide program as well as from Muslim scholars willing to make contributions. These are presented individually in the form of booklets that can be easily read or referred to. It is hoped that the booklets will reach students, scholars, and specialists as well as major sections of the world's Muslims alike in order to generate a fruitful debate on the vital issue of Islamization, and to create an awareness of the intellectual crisis in its various shapes and forms, while encouraging an active role in the proposed course of action and solution. This series is also translated into other languages.

The third work in this series, *The Qur'an and the Sunnah: The Time-Space Factor* includes three papers originally written in Arabic: "The Qur'an: The Primary Source of Knowledge;" "Toward a Proper Reading of the Sunnah," which is an adaptation of Dr. al 'Alwāni's introduction to Dr. Yūsūf al Qaradāwi's *Kayfa Nata'amal ma'a al Sunnah al Nabawiyah* (Methods of Understanding the Sunnah) and "The Qur'an and Modern Science: Observations on Methodology." A different English edition of the last appeared in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 1991. The English editions of the three papers were prepared by the Department of Translation/IIIT. We

also acknowledge the contribution of Huda Khattab and Yūsuf Budd.

The use of Islamic terminology in transliteration is a policy of the IIIT. Some of the terms used defy adequate translation, while others are so essential that the Institute feels that familiarity with them is necessary for a better understanding of Islamic issues. These terms are routinely footnoted once or sometimes explained briefly between brackets. All those which have not yet been accepted in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries are in italics. As many of these occur more than once, readers are advised to refer to the relevant footnotes whenever necessary.

When citing dates the Islamic one is mentioned first, separated from the Gregorian date by a slash. When an Islamic date occurs alone, it is followed by AH.

English translations from the Qur'an used in this series come from 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī's *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an* (Amana Corporation, revised, 1989) with occasional modifications for further clarity.

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Editors' Note

For too long now, the Qur'an and the Sunnah,¹ great sources of strength, purity, knowledge and inspiration for the Ummah,² have not been adequately tapped. Skirting their peripheries or overdwelling on one or two of their multifarious facets and tributaries has done a disservice to the immense potential of the fountainhead, while denying the Ummah—indeed the whole world—innumerable benefits from them.

Now that the Ummah is becoming increasingly aware of its own problems as well as latent powers, and yearns to revive its leading role in the forging of history and civilization, the issue of drawing on the wellspring becomes more relevant and urgent. Revisiting these two sources is no longer a scholastic, academic, nostalgic, or escapist indulgence, but a great journey of discovery that promises untold rewards.

Like all great journeys of discovery, this one too may be beset by many challenges and possible setbacks. Nevertheless, once the will has steeled itself to the task ahead, and the Great Guide and light of all travellers has bestowed His blessings and grace, there should be no going back empty-handed, empty-souled.

The rewards are indeed immeasurable: the better discernment of human potential and God's plan; the recovery of a balanced, active, and purposeful life; the restoration of dignity, peace and harmony, not only to the Ummah, but also to the world at

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1. Sunnah: Literally, a clear path or beaten track. Refers to whatever the Prophet said, did, agreed to, or condemned. The Sunnah is a source of the Shari'ah and a legal proof next to the Qur'an. As a source of the Shari'ah, the Sunnah may corroborate a ruling which originates in the Qur'an. Secondly, the Sunnah may consist of an explanation or clarification of the Qur'an. Thirdly, the Sunnah may also consist of rulings on which the Qur'an is silent. It is generally used in the plural *sunan* to mean the cosmic laws governing life, the universe.
 2. Ummah (pl. *umam*): Community, nation. Specifically, the community of believers or the universal Muslim community.

large—a world that has suffered long from bogus ideologies and precepts.

Paradoxically, the journey through the resplendent pages of the Qur'an and the Sunnah to a time and place in the past should yield a more mature awareness of the dynamics of social and historical change and of humankind's role on earth, honing and sharpening the Muslims' capacity to deal with the demands of the present moment and the challenges of the future. The human and relative dimensions of the quest should bring us not only closer to our fellow Muslims and human beings, but also, at a higher plane—indeed, the highest—nearer to the Creator of all life and all endeavor.

In the first paper of this book, Dr. Tāhā J. al 'Alwānī explains how the Qur'an—revealed and protected from corruption by Allah (SWT)³—is a source of knowledge: a source which reveals its benefits only if read properly. Dr. al 'Alwānī argues that there are two levels of reading the Qur'an: the first level consists in cultivating spiritual upliftment; the second urges humankind, as *khalīfah*,⁴ to study the cosmos for the purpose of positive action on earth. Performing the two readings together and keeping a balance between them are prerequisites for well-being in this world and in the Hereafter.

Earlier generations focused essentially on the formal aspects of the Qur'an and the hereafter, and the Revelation came to be seen only as a source of *fiqh*⁵ and legislation. Such restrictive reading of the Qur'an curbed for long the enthusiasm to investigate its validity in time and space. This is why Dr. al 'Alwānī advocates

3. SWT—*Subhānahu wa Ta'āla*: May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed. Said when referring to Allah.

4. *khalīfah*: See footnote no. 40.

5. *fiqh*: Literally, understanding. Knowledge of Islam through its laws: science of the law of Islam. The term "fiqh" is sometimes used synonymously with Shari'ah. However, while *fiqh* is to a large extent the product of human endeavor, the Shari'ah is closely related to divine revelation and knowledge which is only obtained from the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

the need for a new approach that tackles the comprehension of the Qur'an in a holistic way.

Similarly, a proper reading of the Sunnah—the subject of Dr. al 'Alwānī's second paper—will be conducive to a better understanding of the aims of Muhammad's prophethood and, accordingly, to a rational implementation of the spirit of his Sunnah, in accordance with those sensible requirements of the time in which we live and the space to which we belong.

For his part Dr. 'Imād al Dīn Khalīl tackles the relation between the Qur'an and science, arguing that the Qur'an is not a science textbook, but that science-oriented data abound in it in the form of outright scientific facts or pointers. In his view, the Qur'an expounds a flexible and comprehensive methodology for dealing with these science-oriented data—a methodology that is not subject to the fluctuations of time and space and remains valid in every age and environment.

Suggestions for a new reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah have been put forward from Islamic and other angles in the recent years. In this book Dr. al 'Alwānī and Dr. Khalīl, two well-known Muslim thinkers, put forward their views for a proper approach to these sources from within the Islamic framework.

This second edition includes a few additional matters in the way of *aḥādīth*, editing and other specifications which give greater cogency to the argument. In the meantime, the Publications List has been upgraded to include the latest publications of the Institute.

**THE QUR'AN: THE PRIMARY
SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE**

Dr. Ṭāhā J. al 'Alwānī

Islam, the Final Message, is a statement of mercy, light, guidance and healing for all creatures. Allah says: "We sent you not, but as a mercy for all created beings" (Qur'an 21:107). This Message and its Book, the Qur'an, will always guide humanity and remain inviolate against distortion and deviation. Allah has assured that:

No falsehood can approach it from before or behind it. It is sent down by One Full of Wisdom, Worthy of all Praise. (Qur'an 41:42)

The Qur'an is the Book of Allah the Eternal, and was revealed to humankind through Muhammad (ṢAAS),⁶ the Seal of the prophets, to be an admonition to all beings. Indeed there is no prophet after Muhammad, nor any revelation after the Qur'an.

There was a succession of prophetic missions in the times before Muhammad. Every nation was sent its own special messenger to address it in its own tongue and in the manner befitting it. Invariably, prophets responded to the needs of humans in the way that was most appropriate to humans:

And there never was a people without a warner having lived among them [in the past]. (Qur'an 35:24)

We sent not a messenger except [to teach] in the language of his [own] people, in order to make [things] clear to them. (Qur'an 14:4)

The earlier prophetic missions were accompanied by cosmic signs and physical miracles which aimed to astound people and induce them to accept the message. One prophet, for example, would raise a mountain above his people's heads to shade them, divide the sea so that people could walk along a dry passage between its two halves, cast his stick and it would change into a serpent, or put his hand in his pocket, then draw it out and it would be white but unharmed. Another prophet was sent a

6. ṢAAS—*Salla Allāhu 'Alayhi was Sallam*: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. This prayer is said by Muslims whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.

wondrous she-camel as a sign and a symbol. A third prophet would bring the dead to life and heal the blind and the lepers. And when the people rejected their prophets after seeing the signs and miracles, they were afflicted with punishment and ruination. However, Allah has honored the Muslim Ummah and preserved it from doom and destruction.

When the pagans of Makkah asked the Prophet to cause springs to gush forth for them, or mount a ladder right up to the sky, or have a house adorned with gold, while condemning him for being human, God did not respond to their demands:

And they say: "What sort of a messenger is this, who eats food and walks through the streets? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give admonition with him?" or "[why] has not a treasure been bestowed on him," or "why has he [not] a garden for enjoyment?" The wicked say: "You follow none other than a man bewitched." (Qur'an 25:7-8)

In another verse, He says:

And We have explained to man, in this Qur'an, every kind of similitude: yet the greater part of men refuse [to receive it] except with ingratitude! (17:89)

In yet another one, He says:

They say: "We shall not believe in you, until you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth. Or [until] you have a garden of date trees and vines, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst, carrying abundant water. Or you cause the sky to fall in pieces, as you say [will happen] against us; or you bring Allah and the angels before [us] face to face. Or you have a house adorned with gold, or you mount a ladder right into the skies. No, we shall not even believe in your mounting until you send down to us a book that we could read." Say: "Glory to my Lord! Am I aught but a man—a messenger?" What kept men back from belief when Guidance came to them was nothing but this—they said, "Has Allah sent a man [like us] to be [His] messenger?" (17:90-4)

In the same *sūrah*⁷ (*al Isrā'*) Allah demonstrates His wisdom in not responding to the pagans' demands:

And We refrain from sending the Signs, only because the men of former generations treated them as false. We sent the she-camel to the Thamud to open their eyes, but they treated her wrongfully. We only send the Signs as warnings [from evil]. (17:59)

God also makes it clear to Muhammad that the pagans' rejection of the message is not the result of a lack of clear signs and miracles but the influence of other factors. The Pharaoh of Egypt and his people were shown indubitable signs and miracles through the Prophet Mūsā (AS)⁸ yet they responded in the same way as the pagans of Makkah:

To Mūsā we did give nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel: When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him: "O Mūsā, I consider you, indeed, to have been worked upon by sorcery." (Qur'an 17:101)

And Allah confirmed to Prophet Muhammad that the message did not need either a prophet other than him, or a sign and a Book other than the Qur'an:

And We have distributed the [water] amongst them, in order that they may celebrate [Our] praises, but most men are averse [to aught] but [rank] ingratitude; If We so wished, We could have sent a warner to every center of population. Therefore listen not to the unbelievers, but strive against them with the utmost strenuousness, with the [Qur'an]. (Qur'an 25:50-2)

This Final Message sought to convince people by asking them to read, listen to and understand the Qur'an so that they can believe its message. This would be enough to achieve the desired transformation in the hearts and minds of those who are willing to

7. *sūrah*: a unit (chapter) of the Qur'an. Each *sūrah* is divided into a number of verses (*āyāt*) and the *sūwar* are characterized, according to the place of their revelation, as those of either Makkah or Madīnah.

8. AS—'*alayhi al salām* or '*alayhim al salām*: Upon him/them be the blessings of Allah. Said whenever a prophet other than Muhammad is mentioned by name.

listen earnestly and witness the Truth. However, the response of the diehards was one of characteristic arrogance and shallowness:

Yet they say: "Why are not signs sent down to him from his Lord?" Say: "The signs are indeed with Allah; and I am indeed a clear Warner." And is it not enough for them that We have sent down to you the Book which is rehearsed to them? Verily, in it is Mercy and a Reminder to those who believe. (Qur'an 29:50-1)

In His wisdom Allah has made reading the pivot of this Ummah's life. The first word revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Jibrīl was *iqra'* (read), to which the unlettered Prophet replied: "I cannot read." Then the angel gave him Allah's command:

Read in the name of your Lord Who created; created man out of a [mere] clot of congealed blood. Read! And your Lord is Most Bountiful. He Who taught [the use of] the pen. Taught man that which he knew not. (Qur'an 96:1-5)

These *āyat*⁹ which began the process whereby the Prophet received Revelation, contain two commands, each of which has both a Divine and a human aspect.

The first command is to read, that is, to receive, understand and proclaim the Revealed Message. In this command the Divine aspect is manifest in the sense that the Qur'an is the Word and Revelation of Allah and that it is for Him to reveal it to His Prophet so that it can be communicated in complete and accessible form to humankind who is expected to reflect, remember, understand and continually learn:

Be not in haste with the Qur'an before its revelation to you is completed, but say: "O my Lord! Advance me in knowledge." (20:114)

The Qur'an goes on:

9. *āyah* (pl. *āyat*): Literally, sign, indication, message; an aspect of God's creation; a section of the Qur'anic text often referred to as a "verse."

And We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to understand and to remember. Then is there any that will receive admonition? (54:17)

Move not your tongue concerning [the Qur'an] to make haste therewith. It is for Us to collect it and to promulgate it. (75:16-17)

Thus it is for Allah to reveal, send down, collect and safeguard; and for humankind to read, learn and teach so that souls can become purified and cleansed. Only then will they become qualified to fulfill their appointed roles as vicegerents and apply the tools put at their disposal for the purpose of building civilization and producing the finest peoples ever evolved for humankind:

It is He Who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves, to rehearse to them His signs. (62:2)

The second exhortation to read urges humankind to study the cosmos and decipher its affinities and its multifarious components, all ruled by Allah and intimating His Oneness. Indeed the Divine aspect is evident in all creation, including the creation of humankind itself: "[Who] created man out of a [mere] clot of congealed blood" (96:2). The relationships and stages from the clot to human, and between life and death, have their equivalents in all the other signs of the Divine Power at work in the orderly universe. The purpose behind them all is to prepare humans to acquire learning and promote civilization. This is clear evidence of the Mercy of Allah, whose glory is declared by all voices and tongues: "There is not a thing but that celebrates His praise" (17:44). Another purpose is the realization of the aim of existence and the wisdom of creation:

He it is Who has produced you from the earth and settled you therein. (Qur'an 11:61)

I have only created *jinn* and men that they may worship me. (Qur'an 51:56)

The two readings are interconnected and must occur simultaneously, and be in the name of Allah. Moreover, their interconnection will create a correspondence between Allah and

humans and ensures that He accompanies them in their endeavor as vicegerents and in the Hereafter: "And He is with you wheresoever you may be" (57:4). Allah is too Bountiful to leave humans alone in either of the two situations. Rather, He guides humans through their reading:

Read! And your Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught the use of the pen, taught man that which he knew not. (Qur'an 96:3-5)

He knows humankind's weakness, the limits of its potential, the paucity of its knowledge and the relativism of its thought:

Should He not know—He that created? And He is the One that understands the finest mysteries [and is] well acquainted with them. (Qur'an 67:14)

For man was created weak [in flesh]. (Qur'an 4:28)

Of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, [o men]. (Qur'an 17:85)

Thus Allah taught Adam all the names, He taught with the pen and He taught human beings that which they did not know, in order to enable them to fulfill the first reading. And He made everything subject to them, ordered them to travel through the earth, provided them with all the necessary faculties for observation, contemplation and understanding, and disposed the signs for them so that they may undertake the second reading.

Performing the two readings together is a prerequisite for well-being in this world and in the next. Abandoning or neglecting either of the two readings—or upsetting the balance between them—is a turning away from the Message of Allah. The unfortunate consequences of such an attitude are such as to render this life difficult and hard to live and the Hereafter an abode of dire constraint:

But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him is a life narrowed down, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment. (Qur'an 20:124)

In such a situation, humankind will thus be dethroned from its position as vicegerent and witness and placed in a state of subjection and disgrace:

While those who reject God will enjoy [this world] and eat as cattle eat; and the Fire will be their abode. (Qur'an 47:12)

They are like cattle,—nay more misguided: for they are heedless [of warning]. (Qur'an 7:179)

Excessive preoccupation with the first reading without paying sufficient attention to the second may result in readers acquiring a mass of interpretations and reflections which may well be highly beneficial to their perceptions and feelings. On the other hand, however, it may lead to a sort of spiritual coma and an absorption in matters unrelated to the needs and functions of the human as *khalfah* and builder of civilization. This may be tolerable, even understandable, in a limited, personal context, but it is extremely perilous if it occurs at the broader level of the Ummah or becomes accepted as part of its way of life, since this will lead to the neglect and rejection of the idea of the value of human endeavor. If such a behavior were to happen, it would lead people to adopt a distorted view of the meaning of life and the meaning and role of humans in their worldly existence—to the extent that they may come to see their very existence here on earth as a burden and strive to be relieved of it with the utmost dispatch, so that they can proceed to the Hereafter.

Some Qur'anic Features

The Qur'an was revealed in separate installments. Most of these were connected with specific situations and events, in order to prepare people's hearts, minds and souls to accept, understand and meditate on it at the time of its revelation. People would then be able to understand it and fix its words, meanings, guidelines and directives permanently in their consciousness. Then their hearts would be opened to receive it, their minds would comprehend it and their souls would be uplifted by it. The whole of life would

respond to it and be transformed into one of contentment and rectitude.

The Qur'an could thus be a guide, a proof and an authoritative source to the first generation and all later generations:

[They] say: "Why is not the Qur'an revealed to him all at once? [It is revealed] in this manner that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and we have rehearsed it to you in slow, well-arranged stages, gradually. (25:32)

[It is] a Qur'an which We have divided [into parts from time to time], in order that you might recite it to men at intervals: We have revealed it by stages. (17:106)

The Qur'an was revealed as a challenge and a miracle that would overwhelm people's hearts and cause their souls to marvel, thus paving the way for them to accept the message and respond to it with all their being.

The Qur'an contains basic conceptions and general rules, guidance and advice valid for all human beings in every place and time and every realm of life. If it had dealt with minor details and issues relevant to the period of Revelation, it would not have acquired this unique quality of time-space universality, and later generations would have found in it a great many contradictions and inconsistencies. The specific issues that are dealt with in fine details are essentially the same objectives and rules applicable in every time-space situation and relevant to *'ibadah* (worship), inheritance and histories of earlier peoples and nations. And the Creator pledged to safeguard the Qur'an when He said:

We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it [from corruption]. (Qur'an 15:9)

The purpose behind the command to preserve the Qur'an in its original language (and the prohibition of transmitting it in Arabic according to meaning or by paraphrase) was to ensure that the Book remained able to establish the way of life that Allah wished for humankind. There is a profound wisdom in the fact that millions of Muslims read and recite it in its exact original words

and in the form in which it was revealed, since this enables it to remain the foundation on which all Muslims agree at all times and in all places—however much their paths and inclinations might diverge. Hence the Prophet and the leading *fuqahā*¹⁰ who followed him were determined that every letter of the Qur'an should be first fixed in people's minds and hearts, and then transcribed. This same wisdom may have been behind the many traditions from the Companions of the Prophet reported by the *ṭabī'ūn* (the generation after the Companions) which prohibited the transcription of anything other than (or with) the Qur'an. All other things are related to it in a practical application—and understanding at the highest level—of its teachings. This is a situation that has never occurred with any other text, religious or otherwise.

As for the meanings of the Qur'an, the Prophet had the knowledge to give *tafsīr* (exegesis) of every *āyah*. However, he did not do so. It is narrated that 'Aisha (RAA)¹¹ said: "The Prophet of Allah only gave interpretations of the few *āyāt* from the Qur'an, which were taught to him by Jibrīl." These *āyāt* deal with matters related to *al ghayb* (the Unseen), together with some other questions that can be understood only through Revelation. Consequently schools of *tafsīr* proliferated and over the centuries Muslim intellectuals roamed through the Qur'an along many different routes. Some were successful, others were not. Concerning the Prophet's Companions who witnessed the Revelation while it was being sent down and knew the reasons for revealing abrogating and abrogated (*al nāsikh*)¹² *āyāt* as well as the factors linking these *āyāt* to real events, so much has been said that Imam al Ghazālī and Imam al Qurtubi remarked:

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10. *faqīh* (pl. *fuqahā*): A specialist in fiqh (see note 5). Also can be a synonym for *ʿālim* (pl. *ulama*) meaning Islamic scholar.
 11. RAA—*Radiya Allāhu 'Anhu/'Anha* (or *'Anhum*): May Allah be pleased with him/her (or with them). Said whenever a Companion of the Prophet is mentioned by name.
 12. *al nāsikh* (abrogating): Those verses of the Qur'an whose contents have revoked a meaning in another verse, which is therefore called *al mansūkh* (abrogated).

It would be incorrect to assume that everything said about *tafsīr* by the Companions actually came from the Prophet for two reasons. One is that it is only established that the Prophet gave *tafsīr* of a few *āyāt*... This was also 'Aisha's view. The other is that they themselves differ in their *tafsīr* on various points that cannot be reconciled and cannot all have come from the Prophet of Allah—even though some may have done so.¹³

Implied here is the contention that the intellect should not be constrained by a limited understanding of the Qur'an that "imprisons" its meanings in a particular period or ties it to a given generation. Indeed, one of the most effective ways of bringing Muslims nearer to their Lord is for them to read the Qur'an and contemplate constantly on its *āyāt* and their meanings. Conversely, reading or contemplation without understanding is not permissible. The *fuqahā'* are agreed that understanding and contemplation with little reading is better than much recitation without thinking or contemplation. And by contemplation we mean here reciting the *āyah*, reviewing it, dwelling on its meanings in an attempt to know all the possible meanings it contains, and allowing one's thought to wander freely and unhampered through it in order to arrive at the hidden meanings that Allah reveals to certain people of intellect and understanding.

As a heavenly Revelation, the Qur'an is the most reliable source for all kinds of knowledge and an authentic guide for scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. It contains general scientific pointers and indicators that awaken and guide a person's scientific instincts. Unfortunately, however, many Muslims have long been under the impression that the Qur'an is primarily a source for past histories of nations, whose stories were told for the purposes of admonition and warning, in addition to being a repository of information about the Hereafter and its Unseen aspects as well as a fount of *fiqh* rulings.

Moreover, they have concentrated only on its miraculous quality of the inimitability of its poetic language, style, and literary

13. Shaikh Muhammad al Tāhar Ibn 'Ashūr, *Tafsīr al Tahrīr wa al Tanwīr* (Tunis: al Dār al Tūnisīyah, 1984), 28-9.

elegance, representing the highest possible peak that Arabic is capable of attaining—a brilliant treatment of language in a manner previously unknown in Arabic style, while remaining within the bounds of expression permitted by the Arabic language. Indeed, studies of the Qur'an's miraculous qualities by the earlier generations were confined to almost these three aspects, as works by al Rumani, al Baqillani, al Jurjani, al Qaḍi Ayyad and other scholars show. The Qur'an came to be seen only as a source of fiqh and legislation, which restricted it to between 200 and 500 *āyāt* only. The rest were regarded as being included solely for the purpose of admonition and warning as well as edification. However, such restrictions, in addition to confining the miracle of the Qur'an purely to the level of rhetoric, curbs the enthusiasm to seek those aspects which are renewable and applicable to every time and place, and which testify to the Qur'an's miraculous nature.

Since we are seeking the path to a decent, contemporary Islamic life, to bring about a revival of Islam, we must be aware that the fiqh rulings account for only a very small part of the area covered by the Qur'an. We must further realize that Muslims need to use their intellect to understand and meditate on all the *āyāt* of the Qur'an, making it the primary source and basis of all knowledge in the areas of human *fiṭrah* (innate nature) and of social and applied sciences. Indeed, all Muslims with specialist qualifications in any field of knowledge must turn to the Qur'an for inspiration and guidance. A conscious and contemplative reading of the Book of Allah will enable them to amend, add to and reshape their store of knowledge. This will enable Muslims to rebuild the true Ummah of the Qur'an. However, before we can reach this stage we must first achieve a number of things:

To begin with, studies of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an need to be reviewed, seeking additional characteristics that the modern Muslim can add to those aspects of the Qur'an that are commonly regarded as miraculous. Areas of particular interest may include the effect of the Qur'an on human *fiṭrah*, its ability to create the finest form of human being and the finest form of family in any time or place, and its effect on society and the

establishment of nations. Muslim psychologists and sociologists would find this a profitable area to investigate. Likewise, Muslim applied scientists and other scholars can find valuable material in the Qur'an. Muslim thinkers and ulama¹⁴ can investigate its miraculous nature in areas of *aḥkām* (rulings) and legislation capable of forming a sound basis for a decent human life, as well as systems that are just and easy to understand and to put into practice.

In the second stage, the aims behind the reading and interpretation of the Qur'an need to be reconsidered. This should go beyond the three aims of acquiring knowledge about earlier peoples and nations, the Hereafter and fiqh rulings. There are indeed also other essential aims, the most important of which may be:

1. To obtain general guidance on human affairs and the sciences that deal with individual and social behavior as well as with *fiṭrah*.
2. To acquire knowledge of the basic rules and guidelines for reforming society as well as its political system—in a manner consistent with its view of both human and social nature—and to endeavor to discover how this can be achieved.

We can classify all the social sciences under these two aims. Thus the Qur'an becomes the reliable reference and moral yardstick for all types of scientists and scholars, a reference whose contents will never become outdated. Specialists in the social and applied sciences, literature, etc. will find it a valuable source to consult on a daily basis. This means that Muslims must treat the Qur'an differently from the way they do at present, that is, merely

14. *'ālim* (pl. ulama): Islamic scholar. One who knows, a scholar, a scientist. Commonly used for someone who has a thorough knowledge of Islam and its sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. An important characteristic of an *'ālim*, according to the Qur'an, is that he is deeply conscious of God and stands in awe of Him.

a book that they read when they wish to acquire Allah's blessing or find out about certain rulings.

Here we must tackle an important question regarding two forms of interpretation: *al tafstr bi al ma'thūr* (exegesis by means of traditions received from the Prophet and his Companions) and *al tafstr bi al ra'i* (exegesis by means of free exercise of the mind). This issue deserves attention because today's ulama and scholars will not find most of the time practices and traditions from the Prophet and the early Companions to support their conclusions and interpretations. Thus their pronouncements will be based on nothing more substantial than personal opinion. These authentic *aḥādīth*¹⁵ state:

whoever interprets the Qur'an on the basis of his opinion, will have his place in the hell-fire¹⁶

whoever interprets the Qur'an without knowledge, will have his place in the hell-fire¹⁷

whoever interprets the Qur'an on the basis of his opinion is wrong even if his interpretation is right¹⁸

Now the question is: how can *al tafstr bi al ra'i* be resorted to when there exist *aḥādīth* that clearly prohibit interpreting the Qur'an on the basis of personal opinion. Indeed, many of the Companions and the *tābi'ūn* would abstain from making interpretative pronouncements unless these were supported by the Sunnah. How, then, should we expect a committed Muslim researcher in any discipline today to apply his/her reason to interpret the *āyāt* of the Qur'an? Although this is a big and

15. hadith (pl. *aḥādīth*): The verbalized form of tradition of the Prophet Muhammad constitutive of his Sunnah. Also a collective term for all the *aḥādīth*. A hadith narrative is divided into two parts: the *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the *matn* (content of the narrative). With capital H it applies to the sciences dealing with the Prophet's tradition in all its aspects. The scholars of hadith are called *muḥaddīthūn*.

16. Reported by Tirmidhi.

17. Reported by Tirmidhi.

18. Reported by Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud.

delicate question, its answer will become clear if one notes the following.

We have stated that there is a limited volume of *al tafṣīr bi al ma'thūr* from the Prophet. Wisdom would therefore seem to suggest that the Muslim intellect should be allowed to continue with its efforts of contemplation, reflection and deductions in order to understand the *āyāt* of the Qur'an.

Numerous books of interpretation have appeared throughout the ages and interpreters have adopted a wide variety of approaches to their deductions of the meanings of the Qur'an—in the *āyāt* containing rulings as well as others. Fakhr al Din al Razi (d. 606 AH) stated that if he wished to produce a camel-load of interpretations of *Sūrat al Fātiḥah* he would be able to do so. In fact, his *tafṣīr* of this *sūrah* that has come down to us comprises one large volume. Many ulama—like Ibn 'Aṭiyyah, al Qurṭubī, Ibn al Ṣabbagh and others—could have deduced a meaning from an *āyah* or created tens, even hundreds, of questions for examination on it. In such cases the new questions raised and examined issues related to cosmic laws, civilization patterns, etc.—which make the Qur'an unique among other revelations—would not have been mentioned earlier or explained by the Prophet himself. Nevertheless, other ulama and exegetes did not reject this approach to the Qur'an as long as the right conditions for exegesis were met. Under these conditions, interpretation, in the words of al Ṭayyibi,

should be in conformity with the actual words [of the text] and be free from artificiality, affectation, verbosity and prolixity.¹⁹

Therefore the interpretation that was considered *bid'a* (unacceptable innovation)—in the sense intended by the narrated *aḥādīth* prohibiting interpretation by personal opinion—could belong to one of the following categories:

19. Ibn 'Ashūr, op. cit., 12.

1. Interpretation based on personal opinion without a serious consideration for the genius of the Arabic language, its styles, the aims of the Shari'ah,²⁰ the question of abrogating and abrogated *āyāt* and without due attention to the reasons underlying the revelation of a specific *āyah* or *āyāt*. This kind of casual interpretation is pure guesswork and contributes nothing to the advancement of Truth.
2. Interpretation which includes thought and contemplation, but of a defective kind because of the failure by the aspiring interpreter to take into account all the factors connected with the *āyah*. In this case the exegete draws his/her conclusions from the apparent meaning of the words—or even an aspect of this meaning—and takes this to be the only meaning intended.
3. The last category is when the interpreters are followers of a particular school of thought, schism, or tendency which causes them to interpret certain *āyāt* of the Qur'an to suit the views of their trend without taking linguistic meanings and/or the circumstances of revelation into consideration. For example the Bayaniyah group interpret the *āyah* "this is a *bayān* [a plain statement] to men" (3:138) as referring to their leader Bayan bin Sam'an al Timimi who was killed in 119 AH. The Qadyaniyah interpret "giving glad tidings of an apostle to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad" (61:6) as referring to Ghulam Ahmad Qadyani. The Batiniya claim that the Qur'an has an outward and a hidden meaning, the outward meaning being the one understood by Muslims, while the hidden one provides support for their own collected superstitions derived from bygone philosophies, ancient religious beliefs, or the delusions of their various leaders. To prevent anyone from refuting them they attribute all their nonsensical claims to "hidden meanings" in the Qur'an. Leading scholars of the Ummah have nevertheless been able to refute this tendency and expose its evil aims.

20. Shari'ah: The collective name for all the laws of Islam, including Islam's whole religious and liturgical, ethical and jurisprudential systems.

Then there exist what are called "signs"—also known today as "symbolism." For example, an *ayah* might be understood as having a symbolic meaning, that is, representing something which does not spring immediately to mind and which is not directly conveyed by the language. Let us consider the following:

And who is more unjust than he who forbids that in the *masājid* of Allah, Allah's name should be celebrated?—whose zeal is [in fact] to ruin them? (Qur'an 2:114)

Here some might claim that *masājid*²¹ might be interpreted as meaning "hearts" since hearts are the locations of subjection to Allah. This is a kind of interpretation by opinion in which the meaning is totally unsupported by linguistic factors. However, there are three methods of interpretation which may be considered acceptable:

1. Restricting it to the understanding of the obvious meanings of the words.
2. Deducing concepts implied by the obvious meanings of the words. These would be reached by capable interpreters after careful thinking, and would be based on linguistic considerations in conjunction with usage, and would not be estranged from the aims and purpose of the Qur'an.
3. When the interpreter makes use of the intellectual, scientific and cultural resources of his own time and applies them to the *āyāt* to see how compatible they are with the pointers of the Qur'an. He can then decide how these disciplines can be rectified in the light of the meanings indicated in the *ayah*: "And he to whom wisdom is granted receives indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding" (Qur'an 2:269).

When a modern Muslim economist considers the words of Allah: "In order that it may not make a circuit between the

21. *masjid* (pl. *masājid*): Place for worship usually meaning mosques.

wealthy among you" (Qur'an 59:7), and then puts forward an idea never previously raised by Muslim scholars regarding the formation and distribution of wealth, and the way in which this can be best done for the public good, he/she should not be opposed on the grounds that such a statement has never been made before and does not have the backing of Hadith. However, the *uṣūliyyūn*²² would maintain that it is not permissible to deduce a meaning outside the original (hence *aṣḥli*) comprehension of the Arabs at the time of Revelation. Their position, too, is based on much thought but is open to discussion.

Al Shatibi says:

When something from the "illiterate's Shari'ah" (*ummiyyat al shari'ah*)²³ is accepted as applying to its people—the Arabs that is—rules are built on it. One consequence of this is that many people have gone too far in invoking the Qur'an in that they have extended its scope to include all the natural sciences, known to contemporary and earlier generations in addition to linguistics, logic, semantics etc. But this does not tally with earlier practices. The venerable forefathers were the best versed in the Qur'an, its sciences and contents; yet they were never heard to pronounce on anything apart from proven commandments and precepts related to the Hereafter. Yes, the Qur'an encompasses sciences which the Arabs knew and were familiar with, though in a manner which astounds men of understanding and cannot be grasped by the more powerful intellects.²⁴

Al Shatibi's remarks are based on the assumption that the Qur'an is no more than a source of legislation and that it is a Message to an illiterate nation—the Arabs. Hence Qur'anic concepts and style are determined by the Arabs' own ability to understand. Many people consider this attitude to be one of this venerable *uṣūli*'s most serious errors, since the Qur'an was revealed as a Book of Guidance to the whole world in every time and place. The Arabic language, with its breadth and richness, is an apt vehicle for

22. *Uṣūliyyūn*: Derogatorily rendered as "fundamentalists" and wrongly as "puritans," the correct word is "purists" as it refers to those who insist on adhering to the traditional interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and thus are not prone to engage in *ijtihād* (see footnote no. 27).

23. *ummiyyat al shari'ah*: Designed for and can be understood by illiterate people.

24. Ibn 'Ashūr, op. cit., 44.

carrying its meanings. This does not mean, however, that the Arab mind is the sole authority on all these meanings, linguistic or otherwise. In addition, the Qur'an contains much that the Arabs did not previously know or understand and would not be possible to list in such a short study. Allah says:

Such are the stories of the Unseen, which We have revealed unto thee:
Before this, neither you nor your people knew them. (11:49)

The Arabs at the time of Revelation were addressed in a way that they were able to understand. Later, understanding broadened and new circumstances and influences revealed in the text a number of additional meanings which were not constrained by language limitations. This, in fact, is an important aspect of the Qur'an's miraculous nature; namely, that through the ages a single text—properly understood and containing the same words and letters—should be able to respond to different needs. A hadith narrated by al Tirmidhi on the authority of 'Ali ibn Abu Talib states: "The wonders of the Qur'an never cease." To say that it is not permissible to go beyond the linguistic meanings conveyed by the text is tantamount to asserting that the Qur'an's wonders are finite and thus bound by time and space. The fact that the forebears did not mention a particular thing with regard to a certain *ayah* or *ayāt* does not mean that it is forbidden to interpret them; this simply means that their interpretation focused on areas in which they were experts and in which interpretation was needed. It clearly does not mean that others are forbidden to explore areas that they themselves did not explore.

The statements and assertions on this issue point to the fact that the relationship between the Qur'an and the various sciences exists at different levels:

ON THIS BOOK

For too long now, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, great sources of strength, purity, knowledge and inspiration for the Ummah, have not been adequately tapped. Skirting their peripheries or overdwelling on one or two of their multifarious facets and tributaries has done a disservice to the immense potential of the fountainhead, while denying the Ummah—indeed the whole world—innumerable benefits from them.

Now that the Ummah is becoming increasingly aware of its own problems as well as latent powers, and yearns to revive its leading role in the forging of history and civilization, the issue of drawing on the wellspring becomes more relevant and urgent. Revisiting these two sources is no longer a scholastic, academic, nostalgic, or escapist indulgence, but a great journey of discovery that promises untold rewards.

Paradoxically, the journey through the resplendent pages of the Qur'an and the Sunnah to a time and place in the past should yield a more mature awareness of the dynamics of social and historical change and a human being's role on earth, honing and sharpening the Muslims' capacity to deal with the demands of the present moment and the challenges of the future.

Suggestions for a new reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah have been put forward from Islamic and other angles in the recent years. In this book Dr. al 'Alwānī and Dr. Khalīl, two well-known Muslim thinkers, contribute their views for a proper approach to these sources from within the Islamic framework.

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