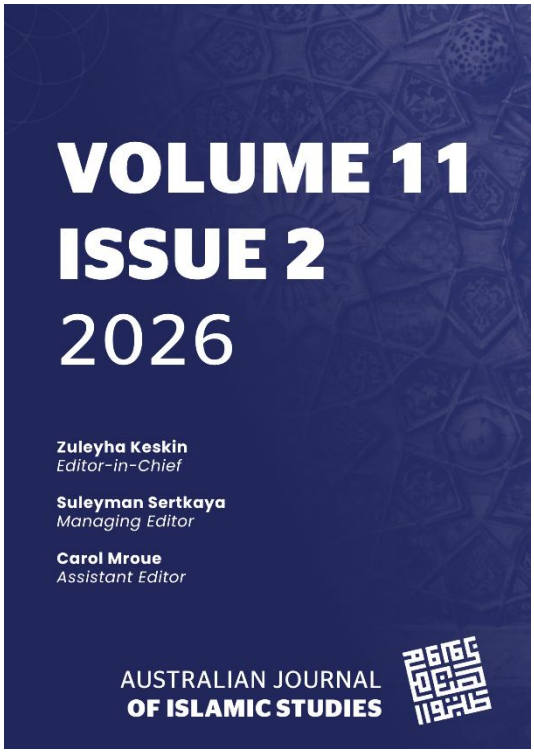

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DEFYING THE HERMENEUTICAL UNIVERSAL: THE CONTOURS OF CLASSICAL ISLAMIC EXEGESIS

Laura Sani*

Abstract: This article re-examines the interpretative methodologies of early Muslim exegetes, particularly ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, arguing that their premodern approach fostered a holistic understanding of the Qur'ānic text. Unlike modern frameworks that often impose rigid categorical divisions, classical tools of interpretation situate revelation within a dynamic temporal and historical context, thereby establishing a palpable nexus between the Divine message and lived human experience. Furthermore, there is pushback against modern interpretative categories that overemphasise sectarian divisions or uncritically borrowed terms from other monotheistic religions. By exploring the concepts of authenticity (*ṣiḥḥah*) and authority (*thiqah*) in early Qur'ānic exegesis, this article demonstrates how these two elements shaped an interpretive paradigm that is not merely a variation of broader hermeneutical theories but a distinct intellectual enterprise with its own logic and objectives. Ultimately, the significant contribution of the endeavour lies in the more nuanced representation of Islamic intellectual history, challenging anachronistic readings and illuminating the unique epistemological commitments that underpinned classical interpretative approaches.

Keywords: *exegesis*, *Islam*, *interpretation*, *modernity*, *ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ*

INTRODUCTION

In his oeuvre, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour discusses a mode of thinking that was born out of modernity. According to him, a defining characteristic of modern times was the emergence of "pure" categories that began to shape how the world is perceived. This purification took place around the 17th century when some of the main authors this article engages with produced their works on hermeneutics. Latour suggests the so-called "modern Constitution" violently separates and maintains a clear distinction between nature and society as the two main aspects of reality. The stark divide necessitated the disregard for hybrids, mixtures of nature and culture, to allow for the illusion of neat compartmentalisation to be

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perpetuated. The denial of hybrid existence represents a further departure from a holistic understanding of the world that existed in the premodern era.[1]

As the efforts of early Muslim exegetes are situated in the premodern era, there has not been an initial incentive for the creation of rigid categories that portioned the world in a way that isolates the different classes of things. There were interpretative tools for approaching the Qur'ānic text that resulted in delineations based on the methodological apparatuses related to temporal and physical contexts, such as the validity of verses (*nāsikh wa-mansūkh*) and the reasons for revelation (*asbab al-nuzūl*).[2] However, they connected the text, or the human production understood by Bruno as society, and the setting, or nature. *Nāsikh wa-mansūkh* ascribes pieces of the revelation to a specific period, showing a trajectory of value-based progression connected with one topic of interest external to the human embodiment, whereas *asbab al-nuzūl* places the verses in a historical context, linking them to real-life events. In both cases, ties are established between nature and society, making this nexus palpable.

Thinking through the logic of the "modern Constitution,"[3] this article focuses on the relations between interpretative categories in the different traditions and how they interconnect rather than closely examining one category to display the internal logic of the interpretative structure that these modern variations of religious hermeneutics – Jewish, Christian, and Qur'ānic – share with the early modern German tradition. The piece also offers a valuable counterpoint to modern Qur'ānic hermeneutical concepts by revisiting the approaches of early interpreters like ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, who prioritised narrative tradition and contextual understanding.

Modern hermeneutics highlight the importance of the author's context and the use of language. In fact, classical Islamic hermeneutics, by implying that a closer adherence to the circumstances of revelation and observance of linguistic nuances can lead to better understanding of the scripture, is more diligent in the historical emplacement of the text than the modern science. In addition, classical hermeneutics push back against modern interpretative categories that may overemphasise division along sectarian lines or use borrowed terms from other monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. Exploring authenticity (*ṣiḥḥah*) and authority (*thiqah*) in the context of Qur'ānic exegesis is a natural progression to examine how studying an early interpreter can help reconcile historical distance and maintain a connection to the foundational understanding of the Qur'ān. Such affordances contained in the tradition challenge the prioritisation of the individual reader's subjective discernment based on shared human values and experiences, as theorised by the German humanists Schleiermacher and Dilthey. For them, the modes of human thinking needed to be liberated from the repressive clerical guild to allow individual interpretation. The classical hermeneutical edifice supported unique points of view regarding the meaning of the text as long as there was no existing

1 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993), 144–45.

2 Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Min al-Naql ilā al-ʿAql: Al-Juzʾ al-Awwal (Ulūm al-Qurʾān)* [From Traditional Sciences to Rational Sciences: First Volume (Qur'ānic Studies)] (Hindāwī, 2017), 115.

3 The concept underscores the understanding that nature and society constitute two totally distinct realms. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 141.

authoritative interpretation that could guide its understanding. In such a way, the exegetes managed to incorporate into their hermeneutic cognition a receptivity to narrative accounts transmitted from the Prophet and his Companions, as well as some personal agency in opining about the essential meaning of the Divine message.

Ultimately, this article is structured on a critique of Michael Cook's magnum opus *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics* found in the writings of Bruce Lawrence where he states the inherent logic steering Cook's argumentative discourse is that "the modern is addressing, and trying to reform the premodern."[4] To avoid giving precedence to modern perspectives in the analysis, this study will first examine the exegetic work of ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ before addressing the early modern theoretical hermeneutic developments that have influenced current research on Qur'ānic hermeneutics. His efforts constitute a distinctive intellectual enterprise, marked by its own logic and goals, rather than simply being a variant of broader hermeneutical theories. Unlike modern frameworks that often impose rigid categorical divisions, classical interpretive tools dynamically situated revelation within its temporal and historical context, thus forging a tangible link between the Divine message and human experience.

CLASSICAL ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS

The main classical categories of interpretation are *tafsīr*, which draws extensively from traditional narrations (*riwāyah*) ascribed to the Prophet and his Companions, and *taʾwīl*, which signifies an interpretation that is the product of intellectual efforts within the scope of the Islamic tradition. The latter allows for the ascription of allegorical nuances to ordinary linguistic constructions.[5] Some common interpretative devices are semantic aids, such as reference to better-known synonyms and syntax, validity of verses (*nāsikh wa-mansūkh*), reasons for revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), and clarity of meaning and expression (*muḥkam wa-mutshābih*).[6]

The exploration of classical Islamic hermeneutics, however, will be reduced to interpretation based on *riwāyāt* (narrations). Such an endeavour is required not only to understand how the tradition constructs epistemological sources but also to establish authenticity (*ṣiḥḥah*) as a feature of the transmitted interpretation. The Arabic word *tafsīr*, however, does not encompass mere interpretation but the derivation of clarity.[7] Clarity can only be procured if the first interpretation can be linked to the group of people who were cognisant of the conditions of the early Muslims and the Prophet during the time the Qur'ān was revealed. Those are called *al-thiqāt* (the authoritative ones).[8] This label is pivotal in the authentication

4 Bruce Lawrence, "Review of Michael Cook's Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of the Academy of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2017): 556, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44631240.

5 Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdillah al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* [The Guide for Qur'ānic Sciences] (Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1990), 286.

6 Ibid., 284.

7 Muḥammad ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* [The Language of the Arabs] (Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 3412.

8 This constitutes a category of narrators, who are to be trusted with their transmission because of their morality.

of interpretative knowledge derived through a chain of narrators. For narrations ascribed to the Prophet, closeness to his time and Companions has been seen as vital to ensure credibility. Furthermore, moral solvency was an integral part of the identity of the interpreters that legitimatised their transmission in the eyes of later narrators.[9]

Proximity to the time of the Prophet together with the narrator's personal characteristics are two of the building blocks on which units of interpretation can be perceived as sound. An additional prerequisite for establishing the accuracy of the interpretation is the content's similarity when compared with narrations on the same topic, whose transmitters are considered authoritative.[10]

Striving to ascertain authenticity lies in the desire to ensure the continuity of the Prophetic tradition of interpretation. Interpretative authorship, or the ability to approach the Qur'ānic text with one's creativity and rationality, has not been widely practiced in the early stages of scriptural commentaries to ward off distortion of meaning.

Early interpreters, such as ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 114 AH/733 CE), are good examples to look at in the classical Islamic hermeneutic tradition to draw the boundaries of authorship that were limited to interpretation, which used the Arabic linguistic apparatus, conceptual awareness, and other Qur'ānic verses for clarity. His interpretive efforts are placed in the early formative period (632–786), which experienced less guidance from political authority than later periods, particularly al-Maʾmūn (d. 218 AH/833 CE) and his influence on Qur'ānic reception.[11]

ʿAṭāʾ also distinguished himself from his contemporaries. He prioritised following the interpretive tradition of the Prophet and his Companions, with the determination to offer the closest to what can be conceptualised as God's intended meaning (*ghāyah al-Mutakallim bi-al-Qurʾān*).[12] For example, al-Mujāhid (d. 104 AH/722 CE) was said to have ventured into using reason to the extent that, although not entirely incorrect, his hermeneutic theological ideas represented a presumed meaning that went beyond God's intended meaning and, subsequently, inspired the "Qadaris, the Muʿtazila, and predestinationists; and…later Sufi exegesis."[13] Other contemporaries had non-orthodox sectarian affiliations. Saʿīd ibn Jubayr (d. 96 AH/714 CE) was said to possess Shia theological views, whereas ʿIkrimah (d. 15 AH/ 636 CE) was accused of being from among the Khawārij.[14] In this line of thought, the exploration

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9 Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥān, *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* [Facilitating the Study of Hadith Terminology] (Markaz al-Hudā li-al-Dirāsāt, 1994), 69.

10 Ibid., 87–89.

11 See Vanessa De Gifis, *Shaping a Qur'ānic Worldview: Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Rhetoric of Moral Reform in the Caliphate of al-Ma'mūn* (Routledge, 2014).

12 Khālid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAk, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Qawāʿiduhu* [Principles of Qur'ānic Interpretation and its Rules] (Dār al-Nafais, 1986), 228.

13 Ibid., 228; Tariq Jaffer, "Theological Commentaries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2020), 767–68.

14 See Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār Maʿrifah al-Rijāl* [The Selection of the Knowledge of Hadith Narrators] (Muʾassasah Āl al-Bayt ʿAlayhim al-Salām, 1983); Jamāl al-Dīn Abī al-Ḥajjaj al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl fī Asmāʾ al-Rijāl* [Refinement of Perfection in the Names of Hadith Narrators] (Muʾassasah al-Risalāh, n.d.), 288–91.

of interpreters whom the tradition has been identified as non-mainstream is an aberration. The selection of a Companion, like Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68 AH/687 CE), was not deemed appropriate for the theoretical parameters of the research project either, as the need for temporal distance from the historical point of revelation is coveted to assess the methodology of reconstructing a textual vis-à-vis social milieu.

Abū Muhammad ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, commonly featured in Islamic annals as ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, studied under one of the Prophet's cousins, ʿAbdullah ibn ʿAbbās, who was a renowned interpreter of the Qurʾān. ʿAṭāʾ's link to a relative of the Prophet, in addition to his being a contemporary of 200 Companions, solidifies his position as an authority (*thiqah*). As for his character, he was described as "one of the most prominent figures of the Successors [one generation after the Companions] in terms of *fiqh* [legal principles], [religious] knowledge, piety, and merit."[15]

ʿAṭāʾ subscribed to the common practice of adopting an opinion similar to that of one's teacher, directly basing his interpretation on Ibn ʿAbbās' to the extent that the exegetic piece repeated the passed down wording verbatim. The explication of a part of verse 10 of chapter al-Zumar: "Allah's land is spacious," is featured in the commentary of Ibn ʿAbbās as a command for those who identify as Muslims to depart from a given land when sins are committed there.[16] ʿAṭāʾ agreed with his master. Perhaps, an innovative element was that he linked the verse with another that covered the same thematic plot – "Was Allah's earth not spacious enough for you to emigrate?"[17]

However, other students of Ibn ʿAbbās sharing thoughts on the same part of the verse painted a slightly different scenario without categorically distinguishing their interpretations in meaning. Al-Mujāhid highlighted that the directive functioned not so much as an instruction to depart but as one to emigrate, which shows more intentionality and preparation. He also cautioned people to stay away from the idols.[18] Saʿīd ibn Jubayr, on the other hand, conceived a situation where a Muslim is commanded to commit transgressions in a specific territory. In such a case, they would definitely need to run away (*fa-la-yahrub*) and establish themselves in another country.[19] Ibn ʿAbbās and Al-Mujāhid contemplated an eventuality entailing an organic popular engagement in iniquity, while Saʿīd ibn Jubayr considered the political authority as responsible for coercing individuals into wrongdoing. Moreover, each interpreter deliberated on the mode of departure from the land of transgressions. Ibn ʿAbbās chose to describe it as a casual journey (*riḥlah*). Although ʿAṭāʾ agreed to use the wording of his teacher, he decided to add another verse, which pointed to emigration, showing a more organised exit.

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15 Muḥammad Ḥusain al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa-al-Mufassirūn* [The Interpretation and the Interpreters] (Maktabah Wahbah, n.d.), 85, https://shamela.ws/book/12393.

16 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn ibn Masʿūd al-Baghawī, *Maʿālim fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* [Signposts in the Interpretation of the Qur'ān], vol. 7 (Dār Ṭayybah, 1997), 111, https://shamela.ws/book/41/2696.

17 Qur'ān 4:97; Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, vol. 7 (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1998), 79, https://shamela.ws/book/23604/3057.

18 Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Tafsīr Āy al-Qurʾān* [The Collection of Statements on the Interpretation of the Qur'ānic Verses], vol. 21 (Dār al-Tarbīyah wa-al-Turāth, n.d.), 269, https://shamela.ws/book/43/12228#p1.

19 Al-Baghawī, *Maʿālim fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 111.

Al-Mujāhid chimed in, accentuating an additional precaution associated with idolatry. Ibn Jubayr, with his interpretative strand of *fa-la-yahrub*, indicated a more stealthy escape befitting for a person under duress.

From the example, one can conclude that the interpretative account of Ibn ʿAbbās in his role as a Companion of the Prophet is a primary epistemological source for later exegetes. Even though later interpretations converge with the transmitted precedent, there were deviations, exemplifying the nuanced understanding and personal reasoning of each commentator.

ʿAṭāʾ contributed to the interpretation of the following verse from the Qurʾānic chapter Tawbah:

> As for the foremost, the first among the Emigrants and the Helpers, and those who followed them with virtue, God is content with them, and they are content with Him. And He has prepared for them Gardens with rivers running below, to abide therein forever. That is the great triumph.[20]

The verse was understood by the early Muslim audience. One segment that required interpretation was "and those who followed them with virtue." ʿAṭāʾ specified that this group consists of people who invoke the Emigrants (those who migrated from Makkah to Madinah to flee persecution and torture) with humility and a desire to be united with them in goodness.[21] ʿAṭāʾ found this formulation in a verse from chapter al-Ḥashr:

> And those who came after them say, "Our Lord! Forgive us and our brothers who preceded us in faith, and place no rancor in our hearts toward those who believe. Our Lord! Truly Thou art Kind, Merciful."[22]

ʿAṭāʾ correlated verses that highlight the faction that comes after the first generation of virtuous predecessors. In his reading, the idea of "virtue" is articulated through the invocation found in the following verse. The act of invoking is a means to pay tribute to the Emigrants, in particular, by seeking forgiveness for and cultivating affection towards them.

The conceptual awareness about the identity of "the foremost" (*al-Sābiqūn al-Awwalūn*) has prompted divergence of opinions among scholars.[23] ʿAṭāʾ was under the impression that the foremost were those who witnessed the battle of Badr. ʿĀmir al-Shaʿbī (d. 100 AH/719 CE) postulated that the verse was directed toward those who swore allegiance to the Prophet after they were prevented from performing a minor pilgrimage.[24] ʿAṭāʾ's contemporaries saw in the foremost a referential cue to those who prayed behind the Prophet assuming two different directions (al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and Kaʿabah in Makkah) in a single congregational

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20 Qurʾān 9:100. Translation was mainly a personal endeavour with limited usage of Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015).

21 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-al-Bayān ʿan Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* [The Unveiling and Elucidation on Qur'ānic Interpretation] (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 83, https://shamela.ws/book/23578.

22 Qurʾān 59:10.

23 Qurʾān 9:100.

24 Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf*, 83.

prayer.[25] These instances clearly show that every interpretation seeking to define the foremost demanded at least a dose of personal input.[26]

Another interpretative dispute was caused by the revelation of the verse:

> Do you think you will be admitted into Paradise without being tested like those before you? They were afflicted with suffering and adversity and were so shaken that the Messenger and the believers with him cried out, "When will Allah's help come?" Indeed, Allah's help is near.[27]

ʿAṭāʾ posited that the verse was sent down to soothe the hearts of the Prophet and the Companions on their arrival in Madinah as they had left their possessions in Makkah at the hands of the polytheists and faced animosity from the local Jewish tribes. Nonetheless, Qatādah ibn Diʿāmah (d. 117 AH/735 CE) and Ismāʿīl ibn ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Suddī (d. 127 AH/745 CE) held the view that the verse was meant for the event of the Battle of the Trench when the Muslims struggled with poor living conditions, cold, and other challenges.[28] In this instance, the events pertinent to the hermeneutical framework do not share much resemblance, but all the same, both occurrences imply a degree of difficulty. One is a migration; the other is a military operation. Regardless, those caught up in these situations likely needed a reassuring message that connected their present circumstances to the experiences of devout communities who came before them. The verse, therefore, operates to fulfil this role.

Another way in which the individual's originality played a role was in connecting words to other words, potentially enhancing their understanding. ʿAṭāʾ explained, similar to his teacher Ibn Abbas, that *rayb* in the second verse of the Qurʾān chapter al-Baqarah can be understood as *shakk*. *Shakk* can be translated as "doubt" for convenience. *Rayb*, on the other hand, traditionally is used to describe the production of butter from raw milk. A significant element in this production is the addition of water, a substance foreign to the original milk. In other words, *rayb* signifies a mixture created by the introduction of an external particle into an entity to tamper with its initial composition. If the traditional usage of the word *rayb* was featured, interpretation of the verse from al-Baqarah would have been "This is the Book in which there is nothing outside of its original content to tamper with it – a guidance for the reverent."[29]

Nonetheless, ʿAṭāʾ chose to proceed with "This is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guidance for the reverent." A probable incentive in his decision might have stemmed from the desire to offer a juxtaposition between "*shakk*" (doubt) and "*al-muttaqīn*" (the reverent), which comes from "*yaqīn*" (certitude) – an antonym of *shakk*. By extension, the underlying logic was to ascertain that this book (the Qurʾān) can guide those who have religious certitude on the premise of its trustworthy content.

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Qur'ān 2:214.
28 Abū al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qurʾān* [Occasions of the Revelation of the Qur'ān] (Dār al-Iṣlāḥ, 1992), 67, https://shamela.ws/book/11314/64.
29 Qurʾān 2:2.

Beyond instances necessitating a specific form of authorship, certain scenarios demanded an understanding of the Qurʾān's intrinsic structure and contextual comprehension of its content. Regarding the latter, ʿAṭāʾ commented that the following part of a verse "and make provision, for indeed the best provision is reverence" was revealed in the context of a man who travelled with his wealth and tried to use it against others.[30]

Part of understanding the intrinsic structure of the Qurʾān is the ability to discern between verses whose legal discourse is final and those that have been abrogated. It was reported that Ibn Abī Laylah narrated that he caught ʿAṭāʾ eating during the month of Ramadan (the month of fasting). ʿAṭāʾ responded that he was elderly and, when the ruling on fasting was revealed, it was optional. Those that could not fast fed a poor person. However, this ruling was abrogated when the verse about the obligatory character of fasting was legislated.[31]

Departing from instances in which early interpreters like ʿAṭāʾ can offer some original perspective and contextual knowledge, the remaining examples of exegetical devices for understanding the scriptural text rely on narrations passed down from the Prophet, his Companions, or the Judeo-Christian communities.

ʿAṭāʾ has interpreted the phrase "the seven oft-repeated" as "the substance of the Qurʾān" based on a narration attributed to the Prophet where he says, "The substance of the Qurʾān is the seven oft-repeated verses and the Great Qurʾān."[32]

Drawing from the insights of his mentor Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿAṭāʾ formulated "who recite it as it should be recited" as "who follow it as it should be followed."[33] At the same time, he added commentary from his contemporary Mujāḥid, which read "who learn it as it should be learned."[34]

Although ʿAṭāʾ was cautious of using interpretations from the Judeo-Christian tradition due to the lack of robustness in their internal process of narrative validation, he limited their usage to detailing some aspects of Qurʾānic stories alluding to communities before the time of the Prophet. For example, the adornment of Qārūn (Korah), one of the wealthy elites during the time of Moses, was described as two red cloths of fabric.[35]

Ultimately, classical Islamic hermeneutics challenge anachronistic readings by relying on authenticity (*ṣiḥḥah*) and authority (*thiqah*), which fundamentally shaped the interpretative paradigm. However, they simultaneously allowed for personal perspectives based on proficiency in Arabic, awareness of intertextual relationships within the Qur'ān, and understanding of pertinent historical contexts. On the other hand, modern Qur'ānic

30 Qurʾān 2:197; al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*, 62.
31 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, vol. 3, 422.
32 Ibid., vol. 17, 136; Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muhsin Khan, https://sunnah.com/bukhari:4704.
33 Qurʾān 2:121; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, vol. 2, 567.
34 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 568.
35 Qurʾān 28:79; 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* [Interpretation of the Glorious Qur'ān], vol. 9 (Maktabah Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1998), 3013, https://shamela.ws/book/8658.

hermeneutics, originating in the early modern German hermeneutical tradition, impose rigid categorical divisions that influence how the scripture is received and interpreted. Such an approach demands an epistemological commitment from the reader, who may be temporally distant from the instance of revelation and its contextual semantics.

CATEGORIES OF INTERPRETATIVE UNDERSTANDING IN THE FIELD OF MODERN HERMENEUTICS

Early Modern German Hermeneutic Tradition: Dilthey and Schleiermacher

Hermeneutics, as a field of study, represents the aids with which to understand human production, in text or oral form. While emphasis has been put on the former, the tradition has stretched to encompass a comprehensive approach to interpreting a wide array of consciously lived experiences coded in historical moments. Apart from strictly literary discourses, scholars versed in the field of hermeneutics strived to extract a meaningful whole from human behaviour, legal tractates, art, and customs. With figures like Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), the science of hermeneutics has acquired a more universal character. No expression stood outside the fold of the discipline anymore.[36] Each expression had an impression that required interpretation.

Modern hermeneutics from the late 18th century, especially if the focus does not transcend the boundaries of the German tradition, presuppose that true meaning can only be derived through interpretation. Interpretation, as an act of conveying a probable state of nature, points to the indefinite conclusiveness of hermeneutics. In comparison with the natural sciences where explanation creates a cause-and-effect relationship between assumedly connected components, human sciences require more understanding of the separate elements and the structure with which they are engaged. The idea of understanding is featured in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) as Verstehen, an interpretive approach to comprehending social activity that relies on commonalities and empathy.

Dilthey, as one of the pioneers of hermeneutics, recognised the need to empirically differentiate between the two main orbits of knowledge about the universe. The unique elements attributed to humanities and social sciences are essentially found in the specificity of the studied objects. The methodological probation of nature required the sensory organs to collect information about the verity of the phenomenon at hand, while the human studies necessitated the reflectivity of human consciousness of an "inner reality" in relation to others.[37]

The main interest in Dilthey exhibited in this article stems from the clarity of his work and ability to offer solid grounding to the science of hermeneutics by providing a framework of understanding divided into neat categories. By exploring Dilthey's categorisation, the article

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36 Jeff Malpas, "Introduction: Hermeneutics and Philosophy," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 2.

37 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume IV: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton University Press, 1996), 236.

previews the way life connects with human agency to make sense of the expression produced by a fellow being.

Exposing the different connections between self-reflectivity and lived experiences central to his Verstehen, Dilthey conceptualises three forms of manifestation through which meaning is externalised. These forms are the visible aspects of consciousness. First, mention is made of the "concepts, judgements, and larger thought-formations."[38] Such forms conform to universal truths and exist independently of the lived experience. Thus, they are not contingent on space and time. This aspect of their nature appeals to transcendental human reason, which is assumed to grasp the logical continuum "which remains identical in every context."[39]

Second, Dilthey notes an additional type of manifestation of life. A connection is established between the action and the expression of the human spirit, found in the intention. The action is only a string of the wider intention that is manifested in the outer world. In Dilthey's words: "It is always necessary to distinguish the situationally conditioned state of mind that produced the action and whose expression it is from the life-nexus itself in which the state of mind is grounded."[40] The life-nexus constitutes the totality of being generated by the individual and collective interactions with the cosmos, whereas the action is the enactment of a portion of that being trapped in a motivation.

The last manifestation becomes the central embodiment of life around which the discussion about elementary and higher forms of understanding, covered in the subsequent section, revolves. According to Dilthey, "a special relation exists between it [the expression of lived experience], the life from which it stems, and the understanding that it brings about."[41] In this formulation, again the life-nexus appears, but in symbiosis with its linguistic expression. Here, the meaning-giving signs of language are under scrutiny in comparison to the previous form, whose main concern was the deed. These signs are important because they communicate significance, which can be deciphered with proper methods of understanding. Although expressions can deceive, the deception is likely to occur in the act of interpretation and not in the sole existence of the expression.

The act of interpretation has been elaborated by Dilthey's predecessor, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Dilthey was influenced by him. However, Dilthey was presented earlier in this article as his ideas provide the epistemic edifice that explicates the relationship between life, expression, and the interpreter. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, worked on the methodology of interpretation, delineating the schism of language and psyche in relation to external occurrences.[42] Dilthey and Schleiermacher hold significance for this article because they were trying to disentangle the art of interpretation from the domain of theology, characterised by the authority of the religious elite. During their time, broadly the 17th to 18th

38 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume III: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton University Press, 2002), 226.
39 Dilthey, *Selected Works Volume III*, 226.
40 Ibid., 227.
41 Ibid.
42 Gunter Scholtz, "Ast and Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and Critical Philosophy," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 67–69.

centuries, despite their initial efforts concentrating on Biblical texts, their main pivot was to allow the layperson to extract meaning from these texts based on their spontaneous engagement with the world without the assistance or intervention of the ecclesiastical few.[43]

Schleiermacher conceptualises two main methods for deriving correct understanding. The first centres on the purely linguistic coherence of a given text. He notes: "Everything in a given utterance which requires a more precise determination may only be determined from the language area which is common to the author and his original audience."[44] It is important to consider that language is subject to change, despite being transmitted from one generation to another. Due to its malleability, Schleiermacher holds the view that the author's context should be studied so the language from which it arises is better understood. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to suggest the author strictly conformed to the conventions of their time. If an author wishes to demonstrate creativity in their writing, they may veer off course in their use of a notion.

This scenario mandates grasping the interference of a given word in relation to others in a sentence, as the same words may have different implications depending on their surrounding ones. Once the individual components start to be related to the whole, a reader finds themselves in the so-called "hermeneutic circle." The concept was developed to provide a basis for constant revision of the understanding of the whole incumbent on the parts, and the parts incumbent on the whole.

In addition to the "grammatical explication," Schleiermacher stresses the importance of the "psychological explication."[45] This approach includes apprehension of the author's intention in the completeness of their thoughts. Similar to Dilthey, Schleiermacher suggests that shared ideas of lived experiences expressed through language can assist the reader in their initial understanding of a written piece, but only deeper knowledge about the stylistic genre of the composition and organisation of ideas assures accurate interpretation.[46] As a result, he concludes, "Everything must be understood and explicated via his thoughts."[47]

Schleiermacher's conclusion, however, is unable to fully account for texts that cannot be linked to an originator. Another difficulty introduced with this line of reasoning lies in the assumption that authors express in their writing ideas that form a coherent whole.[48]

This section on early German hermeneutics provides the stepping stone for the way modern interpretation of religious texts was practiced after the liberation from the authority of the gatekeepers of knowledge – be they the elite or clergy. At the same time, the intricate connection that it offers between text and author makes whole analysis of the written piece

43 Rudolf A. Makkreel, "Dilthey: Hermeneutics and Neo-Kantianism," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 75.
44 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism, and Other Writings*, ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 30.
45 Ibid., 30, 90.
46 Ibid., 104–7.
47 Ibid., 135.
48 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 16–18, https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188.

incumbent on the producer's historical context and encourages the interpreter to extrapolate meaning through assumptions. The interpreter assumes what the author has thought about when searching for their intention. The psychic interconnectedness between individuals, however, cannot fully account for a temporal or linguistic gap that exists between the author and their interpreter, if we assume that authorship does not manifest in the singular.

Judaic and Biblical Hermeneutics

As this article's main objective is to assist in understanding the literary approach of an Islamic scholar, it only seems logical to engage with the hermeneutic traditions of closely linked monotheistic religions that predate the advent of Islam. Although modern Judaic and Biblical hermeneutics were theoretically systematised after modern hermeneutics, their focus exceeded the lived experiences that traditional hermeneutic offered. The excess accounts for the desire to acquire meaning, which is not limited by the physical and psychological connectedness in actual or imagined human experience. This meaning appeals to the spirit that in this domain is not Hegel's objective spirit, which signals commonality among species, but higher consciousness tied to a Divine entity.

Another important feature joining modern theological thought about interpretation is the idea of the text as a source for commands to be applied. The text in Dilthey and Schleiermacher is merited on its function to convey information in the form of an opinion. In contrast, the religious scriptures as a manifestation of the Word of God assume a different standing – that of truth. Their positionality as the Truth draws on the idea that, despite the multiplicity of possible interpretations, only one string of thought dictates their plausibility – the canon.[49] The canon is interpreted for the extraction of moral guidance that should be put into practice.

Furthermore, early modern hermeneutics consider interpreting texts a collaborative effort between the written piece and the reader who uses tools they already possess, such as reason, experience, and a complex level of linguistic comprehension. On the other hand, in the Judaic and Biblical traditions, several layers of interpretation are on display. The most organic one is between the original scriptural text and a reader, which has been taken as the primary one in the works of Dilthey and Schleiermacher. This interaction was broadened to include an exchange between the interpretation of an authoritative pious individual and the reader to facilitate comprehension.

In Judaism, for example, interpretation of the *Tanakh* comes in the form of:

> Peshat, Remez, Derash and Sod. Peshat can be understood as the literal; after which comes Remez or the allegorical; Derash the exegetical dimension incorporates what can be described as both the moral as well as the social aspects of the text…Finally, Sod, which is the mystical dimension of the text.[50]

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49 Henry A. Virkler and Karelynne Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Process of Biblical Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2023), 7–8.

50 Andrew Benjamin, "Hermeneutics and Judaic Thought," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 700.

These types of interpretations are featured in the *Talmud*, which represents a body of commentaries ascribed to religious people. Reason and commonality of lived experience present in Dilthey and Schleiermacher are substituted with expert opinion that assists the reader in understanding God's Word. The expert opinion, however, is consistent with types of readings discussed within the tradition of modern hermeneutics.

Similarity can be drawn between *Peshat* and Dilthey's elementary understanding. The first interpreter, the pious individual, tries to fashion the message of the *Tanakh* to provide the subsequent interpreter, the reader, the context of events and basic linguistic clarification. Essentially, it can be rendered as a device to create a nexus between the reader and the original text through additional imagery introduced by the pious individual that is more relevant to the human existence.

Remez somehow mirrors Dilthey's higher forms of understanding that require a greater capacity to make correlation between the psyche and the external manifestations of life. Instead of connecting inner and other relativities, in the Judaic tradition, the interpreter connects passages from one scriptural source to the other to create a wholesome narrative.

Derash and *Sod* have no apparent analogy in modern hermeneutics. As stated earlier, the unique feature of theological hermeneutics is its didactic function and transcendental relevance.

In addition to these interpretative forms, readers of the *Tanakh* were aided with the *Targum*. The *Targum* is the translation of the *Tanakh* in Aramaic, a language that was widely used compared to Hebrew at the time of its production. The rationale behind the initiative was probably to make the language more accessible so the unfamiliarity with the original language would not pose a problem in trying to discern God's Will. This point is reinforced in Schleiermacher's exposé on the translation of scriptural texts where his main arguments revolve around the idea that interlingual transposition is an adaptation of the words in the source language to convey the same significance by encapsulating real-life experiences.[51]

Biblical interpretation follows a similar pattern of categorisation. Its system, which consists of "littera," "allegoria," "moralis" and "anagogia," completely overlaps with the typology present in the Judaic tradition.[52] Nonetheless, the main point of divergence is found in the lack of hierarchy of interpretation. In Judaism, the literary approach was favoured more in comparison to the others. The Biblical interpreter, on the other hand, did not exhibit preference for any of the available methods.[53]

Another specificity attributed to interpretation of the New Testament hides in the role of the Holy Spirit and the degree of the interpreter's religiosity. The New Testament was thought to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this context, one cannot speak of the intentionality of an author, a human being with analogous physical and psychological traits likely to be comprehended through the similitude shared among species of the same kind. The register

51 Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism, and Other Writings*, 39–40.

52 Jean Greisch, "Hermeneutics, Religion, and God," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 442.

53 See Virkler and Ayayo, *Hermeneutics.*

through which the interpreter could grasp the essential meaning of the Divine text is religiosity. Religiosity is used purposefully to indicate adherence to a faith tradition the tie with which is reinvigorated through the repetitiveness of rituals, prayer, and meditation.[54] This assertion is featured in the writings of St Augustine, articulated as: "a genuine Christian faith was necessary for the understanding of the Scriptures. The inner spirit of the exegete was as important as his technical equipment."[55]

Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: Questions around Goldziher's Verstehen and that of other Orientalist Scholars

The preceding segment explored the way theological hermeneutics are carried out in the Judaic and Christian traditions. The exposé on those religions would be of tremendous utility for the development of the section on the specificity of modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics.

As stated last, the interpreter's religiosity played an important role in Biblical exegesis. The scriptural text's message would not have been effectively communicated without it. In classical Islamic hermeneutics, the religiosity of a commentator for a canonical religious writing was tied to the problem of the authenticity of the narrative chain through which an interpretation was transmitted. Although this way of probing the religious text appeared approximately 20 years after the durée of the Prophetic mission, it was indispensable for ensuring the integrity of an informational piece ascribed to the Prophet and the efforts of his Companions.[56]

The earliest interpretative efforts to clarify the meaning of the verses were commentaries on Qur'ānic verses uttered by the Prophet, transmitted through his Companions and those who followed them. The Qur'ān, as the main source for conveying knowledge, is thought to embody a meaning and stylistic expression intended by God. God entrusted an angel by the name of Jibril with the task of communicating the intended message in its totality to the Prophet, who is responsible for disseminating the message without alteration to the rest of humanity.[57]

Commentaries on the Qur'ānic verses, on the other hand, are a part of the Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) that contains narrations about the religious practices, sayings, and overall conduct of the Prophet. The conceptualisation of the *ḥadīth* can be narrowed to texts whose authorship is possessed by or credited to the Prophet, and the message they communicate is not in conflict with God's Will. Traditional scholars extend the *ḥadīth* scope to include interpretative narrations that are not directly attributable to the Prophet but reflect his potential way of interpretation as captured by his Companions and their successors.[58]

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54 Joseph Pamplany et al., eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Vimala Offset Press, 2020), 17.

55 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Baker Academic, 1970), 36.

56 Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Routledge, 2000), 7.

57 Ali Mostfa, "Redefining Qurʾānic Hermeneutics: Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābrī and Nasr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's Humanistic Interpretations," *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 9, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030278.

58 Al-Ṭaḥān, *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth*, 16.

As foundational meaning-making elements for understanding the Qur'ān, those narrations had to be authenticated. Early traditional scholars employed methods to ensure the soundness of the narration (*ḥadīth*) through inspection of the biography and personal traits of every individual who participated in the transmission chain (*isnād*) of a single literary unit, in addition to scrutinising the narration's content (*matn*) for coherence in relation to other comparable units.[59]

Modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics have their grounding in the writings of Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921). Goldziher, similar to his contemporary – Dilthey, strove to liberate the act of interpretation from the single authoritative voice of the canon. The canonical interpretation in the field of Islamic studies is understood as *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthūr*. *Maʾthūr* refers to information that has been transmitted through a verifiable chain of testifiers who confirm the authenticity of the interpretative accounts. Even though *maʾthūr* was an influential source for Qur'ānic exegesis, it was not the sole source for discerning God's word. Other mechanisms were in place to derive meaning from the scripture: language use, knowledge of the historical context, personal opinion based on hints provided within the Qur'ānic text, or narrations attributed to other religious traditions. Moreover, *maʾthūr* did not contain opinions that were identical to one another. There were occasional differences of opinion between the generations of early Muslims who tried to understand the Qur'ānic text. However, the divergences constructed avenues for interpretative plurality rather than impeding the flow of exegesis with ideas that are contradictory.[60]

Goldziher, who was in favour of using philology and historical methods in analysing *ḥadīth* literature, argued that the canon reflected the later religious and social developments of the early Muslim community rather than being an authentic record of the Prophetic words. In other words, he established the interpretative text not as transmitted but as a reflection of the sole opinions of the transmitters. His methodology, in a way, resembled that of Dilthey and Schleiermacher, focusing on the interpreters' immediate circumstances and linguistic abilities, with no reference to previous accounts of exegetic exertion.

For example, in his book first published as *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (The Schools of Qur'ānic Interpretation) in 1920, Goldziher indicates a controversy that arose from speculations regarding the middle prayer mentioned in verse 239 in the Qur'ānic chapter Baqarah, which reads: "Be watchful of your prayers, and especially the middle prayer." Goldziher states that:

> An attempt was made to apply this reference to the morning and the midday prayers. The overwhelming majority of the early commentators tend to take this to refer to the afternoon prayer because this time of the day was generally considered to be of great importance, a view which entered the fold of Islam from outside. In order to defend this interpretation

[59] Ibid.

[60] Mannāʿ al-Qaṭṭan, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* [Studies in the Qur'ānic Sciences] (Maktabah al-Maʿārif, 2000), 359, https://shamela.ws/book/11368/464#p1.

> against other definitions, early commentators projected their interpretation into the very text of the Koran.[61]

After he presents his claim, Goldziher provides examples of different people who might have influenced the understanding that the middle prayer was the afternoon prayer by inserting their individual whims. He then confidently concludes that these incidents constitute enough evidence to show that what circulated as Qur'ānic recitation among the early Islamic community, pointing to the afternoon prayer by name, was abrogated and substituted with the ambiguous "middle prayer." He subsequently assures his readership of the argument's validity, citing *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ*.

However, if one consults the source, Goldziher's entire dialectic falls apart. The source mentions explicitly that the verse came in passing without specifying the middle prayer. Then different Companions of the Prophet added the afternoon or noon prayer as they saw fit.[62] The afternoon prayer appears in more narrations than the noon prayer. If we provide reasoning for naming the middle prayer, it most logically appeared in accounts as a form of opinion rather than an authoritative statement that influenced the Qur'ānic text. Hence, the difference lies in choosing which prayer is named the middle one. Furthermore, the narrations are attributed to the Companions of the Prophet, who were his contemporaries and observed his behaviours and words that might have been recorded as narrative chains. As Ibn Kathīr highlights:

> When we do not find interpretation in the Qur'ān or in the Prophetic tradition, we turn to the sayings of the Companions. Indeed, they are the most knowledgeable of this due to their intimate connection to and physical presence in the circumstances of revelation, and complete comprehension, solid knowledge, and righteous deeds.[63]

In another instance, it has been reported that ʿAbdullah ibn Masʿūd said:

> I swear by the One who bears no resemblance that when a verse was revealed from the Book of Allah, the Exalted, I was aware of the occurrence it addressed and where it was revealed. And if not, I knew the place of a more knowledgeable person than me to get it from.[64]

The same Companion also disclosed that any man among his generation would memorise ten Qur'ānic verses and would not continue with the next set without extracting their meaning and implementing them.[65] The most important insight that these incidents offer is that the text of the Qur'ān was progressively integrated into their daily routines through a profound grasp of it. Thus, contrary to Goldziher's claims, what is seen in the narrative accounts is suggestive interpretations about the middle prayer rather than conclusive assertions that could have potentially been woven into the body of the scripture.

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61 Ignác Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic commentators: With an Introduction on Goldziher and Hadith from 'Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums' by Fuat Sezgin*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 9.

62 Mālik ibn Anas, *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* [The Well-Trodden Path] (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1985), 138–39, https://shamela.ws/book/1699/404#p1.

63 Al-ʿAk, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Qawāʿiduhu*, 112.

64 Ibid., 113.

65 Ibid.

Goldziher further cast doubt on some aspects of the compilation of such narrative accounts. One of his main arguments against the presumed validity and intactness of such texts is the absence of the incorporation of early collections of *ḥadīth* in those that were subsequently produced.[66] Asserting this claim, Goldziher overlooked the compilers' immediate circumstances, who included the narrations that were at their disposal.

Another point in his discussion on the fabrication of *ḥadīth* texts centres on the orality of the transmission. Abbott challenges it on the grounds that oral transmission was the standard method used for conveying important information in those days.[67] Furthermore, she tries to highlight that the Companions of the Prophet used to make notes of his words and practices as a way to preserve the knowledge that was likely to perish with the cessation of their temporal existence.[68] Yet, these written records circulated within close-knit groups mainly to facilitate the process of religious instruction.[69] The primary factor behind their restricted spread was mainly the reluctance of the second Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to endanger the relevance of the nascently compiled Qur'ānic verses by the systematic documentation of the Prophetic tradition.[70]

As a prolific writer, Goldziher contributed to the classification of early modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics. In his propositional typology, five main categories seem to be present: "liturgical," "traditional," "dogmatic," "Sufi" and "sectarian," bearing no Arabic equivalent in the tradition.[71] Even though Goldziher distinguishes between these five categories,[72] his study lacks the robustness to justify the compartmentalisation. The "liturgical interpretation" documents the discussion among scholars that led to the standardisation of the Qur'ānic text before its establishment in written form. This category is not an illustration of an instrument to discern meaning, but of a literary unit. The "traditional," "dogmatic," "Sufi," and "sectarian" could have been grouped under the title "conceptual approaches according to ideological inhibition." The traditionalists represent the mainstream view that emphasises the continuity of the Prophetic interpretation. Under the dogmatic interpretation, Goldziher discusses the approach of the Mu'tazilite school of thought, which favoured Greek logic in construing the true meaning of verses. Sufi interpretation is linked to the practice of an Islamic religious order that extracts textual significance through "gnostic enlightenment."[73] Goldziher's examination of sectarian interpretations centres on the Shia approach, highlighting how they use the Qurʾānic verses to support their excessive veneration of Alī ibn Ṭālib in comparison to the rest of the Prophet's Companions.

66 See Ignác Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, vol. 2, ed. S. M. Stern, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (Aldine Publishing, 1966).
67 Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition*, vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 1967), 11.
68 Ibid., 11.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 10.
71 See Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic commentators*.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 139.

John Wansbrough (1928–2002), another influential Orientalist, organised his classification according to the function and substance of the interpretation of a particular Qurʾānic verse. In a manner reminiscent of the partitioning present in the Judaic and Christian exegetical traditions, he suggested the divisions: haggadic (narrative), halakhic (legal), masoretic (linguistic), rhetorical and allegorical.[74]

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: QUR'ĀNIC AND CLASSICAL ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS

Goldziher and Wansbrough meticulously followed the early modern German hermeneutic practice. Their methodological frameworks profoundly influenced contemporary Western academic works in the field of Qur'ānic hermeneutics. For instance, Rippin attempted to update the sect-based interpretive categorisation of Goldziher with the addition of two "novel" compartments: formative and modernist. These two categories, however, seem to have been introduced for situational convenience to support his argument regarding the discipline's historical development rather than to represent distinct techniques for textual understanding.[75] The enduring nature of the sect-based typology is evident in recently published academic handbooks that are introductory guides to Qur'ānic hermeneutics. For example, *Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, published in 2020, dedicates nearly one-fifth of its content to discussing exegetical scholarship produced in accordance with specific theological doctrines, including the exegeses of Twelver Shīʿī, Ismāʿīlī, Ibādī, Sufi, and Sunnī as the groupings.[76]

Apart from interest in sect-based interpretation, relatively recent literature focused on another of Goldziher's obsessions, which is the authenticity of the *aḥādīth* that contained interpretations. In addition to scholars whose works appear in the *Oxford Handbook*, a few other authors have taken up the endeavour of *ḥadīth* criticism, grappling with large exegetic compilations.[77] Extension of the notion of corrupted content by default required the modern reader, or immediate interpreter, to reimagine the impression of the piece according to their historical emplacement and cognitive capacity. Thus, the interpretation no longer requires reference to the opinions of the early interpreters who lived close to the time of the Qur'ānic inception but is understood as "an [individual] intellectual phenomenon that happens in a specific social context."[78]

Another consequence of propagating the supposedly faulty nature of the interpretative *ḥadīth* corpus in academia, aside from empowering the reader, is the negation of the scripture's originality. The study by Reynolds, which tried to establish the Jewish and Christian roots of

74 John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, trans. Andrew Rippin (Prometheus, 2004), 119.

75 Andrew Rippin, "Early Qur'anic Commentaries" in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2020), 607–19.

76 See Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

77 See Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam.*

78 Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Equinox, 2019), 12.

the Qur'ān, exemplifies this trend of refusing to theorise the Islamic tradition as a separate intellectual endeavour.[79] His central methodological flaw lies in his cross-scriptural analysis, where he seeks out similar tropes and motifs between Biblical and Qur'ānic texts. Further, he emphasises verses that were directed toward the People of the Book, while seemingly overlooking those addressing the pagan Arabs.[80]

With his treatment of the Qur'ānic text as a literary piece, Wansbrough inspired theoretical ideas that highlighted the scripture's different motifs, themes, and overall linguistic aesthetics. Stripping the scripture of its transcendental meaning allowed for academic productions, such as the works of Abdulla Galadari and Muhammad Abdel Haleem.[81]

Nonetheless, the influence of the German hermeneutic tradition stretched even beyond the continent, impacting early modern Islamic exegetes. They embraced individual interpretation that resisted the established theological opinions. Modern Eastern scholarship paralleled the Western canon. Ebrahim Moosa, commenting on the interpretative methodology of Rashid Rida (d. 1935), underscored that "Rida also torqued the tradition in order for it to be more responsive to the needs of the individual and lessened the communitarian control over the meaning of the Qur'an."[82] A similar conclusion was drawn from the scholarship of Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), who was "acutely aware of the need for a hermeneutics that would renew the reasoning of the past and empty it as a resource."[83]

In contrast, classical Islamic hermeneutics, exemplified by ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, took the early interpretations of the Prophet and Companions as the foundation for expanding exegetical understanding. This approach stemmed from the premise that, because the Prophet and Companions lived concurrently with the revelation of the Qur'ān, their opinions merited preference. They were considered best acquainted with the historical contexts and linguistic conventions at the time of revelation. In classical Islamic tradition, an interpretation is usually grounded in transmitted accounts (*riwāyāt*), as repetition of a prior exegesis or slightly modified version thereof. Alternatively, an interpretation might be personal, relying on knowledge of historical occurrences, intertextual connections within the Qur'ān, or profound command of the Arabic language.

Ultimately, restoring to ʿAṭāʾ helps this article establish a bridge to the context of revelation's descent. The incidents to which the scriptural text refers were in temporal proximity to the interpreter, being only one generation removed from the Prophet and his Companions. Furthermore, the language's meaning is likely to have remained truer to its original intent. This reliable, context-grounded source of interpretation challenges the modern

79 See Gabriel Reynolds, *Christianity and the Qur'ān: The Rise of Islam in Christian Arabia* (Yale University Press, 2025).

80 For a discussion on types of predatory readings of premodern Islamicate texts, see Sarah R. bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose* (Palgrave, 2016).

81 See Abdulla Galadari, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (I.B. Tauris, 2001).

82 Ebrahim Moosa, "Arabic and Islamic Hermeneutics," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Routledge, 2015), 711.

83 Ibid., 712.

idea of textuality, which, as noted, relies on the reader's independent ability to discern meanings.

Interpreters, such as ʿAṭā, had a commitment to the Divine nature of the scripture that prevented them from employing methodological devices, which enabled the promulgation of the ideology based and stylistically centred paradigms of post-Enlightenment hermeneutics, whether treating religious or non-religious texts. Being grounded in a different epistemological system, these interpretative efforts cannot be understood as a historical precursor of modern hermeneutics. Instead, they remain a valuable self-contained mechanism for meaning-making, one that upholds the life-nexus sustaining the enterprise of "organic" interpretation, which is as significant in our contemporary world as it was in the early era of Islam.

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