

**Al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān: A Methodology for Understanding the Qurʾān in the Modern Day**

Zainab Alwani
Howard University

This paper is concerned with the Qurʾānic methodology of Al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān and its impact in the arena of religious sciences and beyond. I provide a concise overview of the classical and contemporary debates concerning the genealogy of this method, including examples and a brief analysis of the works of a number of modern scholars who have contributed to the development of this methodology. Approaching the Qurʾān as a unitary structure, as a consistent hermeneutic, contributes to our understanding of critical issues not only in the Qurʾān and Sunna, but also in other religious disciplines, such as Islamic law. More importantly, I argue that this method provides an important hermeneutic resolution to critical debates surrounding Islam’s moral and ethical framework. I conclude by stressing that Al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān is essential for enhancing religious scholarship in general and for advancing the spheres where Islamic knowledge is applied.

**Keywords:** Qurʾān, Exegesis, Tafsīr, Sunna, Sira, Islamic law, Hadith, Apostasy in Islam.

**Introduction**

This paper is concerned with the Qurʾānic methodology of Al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān (the Qurʾān’s structural unity) and its impact in the arena of religious sciences and beyond. I provide a concise overview of the classical and contemporary debates concerning the genealogy of this method, including examples and a brief analysis of the works of a number of modern scholars who have contributed to the development of this methodology. I propose reading the Qurʾān through its structural unity, *al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān*, a term coined by Taha Jabir al-Alwani, as the framework for a systematic methodology of Qurʾānic interpretation. Approaching the Qurʾān as a structural unity, as a consistent hermeneutic, contributes to our understanding of critical issues not only in Qurʾānic Studies, but in other religious disciplines as well. More importantly, I argue that this method provides an important hermeneutic resolution to critical debates surrounding Islam’s moral and ethical framework, specifically in areas of Islamic law dealing with difficult issues such as apostasy, family matters, marriage and divorce. It is my hope that a broader and more consistent application of this method to the Qurʾān will allow Muslim scholars to approach legal rulings more holistically by connecting them to the Qurʾān’s spiritual and ethical framework. In doing so, it can provide a means for developing a shared understanding among scholars, thereby advancing more constructive conversations among scholars.

A consistent feature of Qurʾānic interpretation throughout the last fourteen hundred years of Islamic history has been the multiplicity of interpretations. Scholarly consensus, however, suggests that interpreting the Qurʾān intra-textually (*tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān*) is the most accepted method of interpretation. Qurʾānic scholars have expressed this notion with the maxim, “*al-Qurʾān yuḥassiru baʾdahu baʾdan*” (different parts of the Qurʾān explain each other). Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) in his *Introduction to The Principles of Exegesis* (Maqaddima fi Uṣūl al-Taʾfsīr) emphasized that
tafsir al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān is “the most correct method of tafsir [ṣaḥḥ al-ṭuruq],” explaining that “where the Qurʾān sums up [a point], the same point is elaborated in another place.” While this concept in Qurʾānic Studies may have existed for centuries, it has been significantly developed in the last two centuries, as scholars have proposed new methods of reading the Qurʾān as an integrated unity.

In the twentieth century, significant developments occurred in the interpretation of the Qurʾān. Muslim exegetes began to approach individual chapters holistically and discuss them in terms of overall themes and general structure rather than as merely a concatenation of verses, as noted by scholars such as Mustansir Mir. This trend in modern exegesis calls for a critical examination that emphasizes the idea of the organic unity of the Qurʾān. Building upon pre-existing classical and modern methods, I suggest a set of methods that researchers and scholars need to explore and develop in order to understand the Qurʾān effectively, alongside those under development by other scholars. In this article, I bring attention to the method of reading the Qurʾān through its structural unity, al-wāhda al-binaʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān, as the framework for a systematic methodology of Qurʾānic interpretation. Al-wāhda al-binaʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān is one of the most important methods in interpreting the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān intra-textually (tafsir al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān). This method conceives of the Qurʾān’s unity through its linguistic, structural, and conceptual elements, such that the Qurʾān in its entirety represents an integrated whole. I argue that reading the sura as a unity also means reading the Qurʾān as a unity, attempting to find connections (which are already present) between the Qurʾān’s letters, words, verses, and chapters, linguistically, structurally, and thematically. Within the Islamic tradition, this method carries a level of unparalleled legitimacy, at least conceptually, because it is based on how Prophet Muhammad discussed the revelation with his companions.

To illustrate the way this proposed methodology envisions a holistic relationship between the Qurʾān, the sunna/hadith, and the sīra, I will analyze Al-Alwān’s original analysis of the laws on apostasy, which overturn the traditional view of apostasy laws. For context, I proceed with a concise overview of the classical and contemporary debates concerning the genealogy of this method, including examples and a brief analysis of the works of a number of modern scholars who have contributed to the development of this methodology.

First, despite the history of classical and modern approaches to reading the Qurʾān holistically, it is important to note that this method of interpretation dates back to the Prophet himself. In Sahih al-Bukhari under the chapter of tafsir, Ibn Masʿud reports:

When the following verse was revealed: “Those who have attained to faith, and who have not obscured their faith by wrongdoing—it is they who shall be secure, since it is they who have found the right path!” (6:82), the companions of the Messenger were very concerned and asked the Prophet, “Which of us has not confused belief with wrongdoing?” The Prophet said, “The verse does not mean this. Didn’t you hear Luqman’s statement to his son: “Verily, joining others in worship with God is a great wrongdoing indeed” (31:13). The Prophet used the verse from Sūrat Luqman to interpret the verse from Sūrat al-Anʾām.

In another occasion reported in al-Bukhari:
The Prophet recited, “And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him” (6:59); and he explained that “The keys of the Unseen are five.” And then he recited the following verse from Sūrat Luqman to clarify: “Verily, the knowledge of the Hour is with God (alone). It is He Who sends down rain, and He Who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does anyone know what it is that he will earn tomorrow; nor does anyone know in what land he is to die. Verily with God is full knowledge and He is acquainted (with all things)” (31:34).

Both of these examples portray the Prophet as explaining Qurʼānic verses by drawing on material from elsewhere in the Qurʼān. Interestingly, the traditional exegesis with a different scriptural canon that gradually began to emerge did not enforce or implement this methodology. Nonetheless, a few classical exegetes articulated a theory for reading the Qurʼān holistically through the philological genres of naẓm and ʾilm al-munāsaba, as I will describe below.

Coherence in the Qurʼān: Arabic as a Divine Language

In the early and medieval Islamic period, some classical exegetes with a linguistic focus primarily investigated the elements of coherence within the Qurʼān. One of the first in this field was Abu ʿUbayda (d. 209/824), a philologist in Kufa who collected materials that dealt with the history and culture of the Arabs, and organized it all systematically. Abu ʿUbayda’s pioneer works, especially Majāz al-Qurʾān, contributed to the development of the field of baḥāḥa (eloquence and Arabic literary criticism), and planted the seed for the theory of naẓm.ix He explained the meaning of “majāz” as the Qurʼānic styles (asālīb) and ways of using its words to provide deeper meanings. He emphasized that majāz is the process of transferring from the close or familiar meaning of the word as seen in the desert Arab’s everyday language to the deeper meaning of the word in the Qurʼānic language. It is important to observe that when the reader reflects deeply on the Qurʼānic word, the meaning that was once simple in the mundane Arab language transforms into a comprehensive divine language.

Linguists and theologians like Abu ʿUthman ʿAmr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 255/869),x Abu Bakr ʿAbd al-Qahir ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jurjani (d. 471/1078),xi and Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillāni (d. 403/1013)xii later developed this notion into a full-fledged concept called ĥāz al-Qurʾān (inimitability). Ibn Qutayba al-Dinawari (d. 276/889) presented another important work in this field, Mushkil al-Qurʾān, where he examined the richness of the Qurʼānic words and the text’s ability to produce different meanings for them. He applied his methodology to words/concepts such as dīn, umma, bīdā, and others. Although the book was only forty-five pages, it served as a proposal for a dictionary system for Qurʼānic concepts. Two centuries later, another profound work by al-Raghib al-Isfahāni (d. 502/1108), perhaps inspired by the early work of Ibn Qutayba, offered a renewed focus on thematic, literary, and structural elements in the Qurʾān that characterize the approaches of many modern and contemporary Muslim exegetes as a strategy for uncovering religious meanings in the Qurʾān beyond those discerned by medieval commentators.

Al-Raghib al-Isfahāni’s classical work, al-Mufradāt fi Gharīb al-Qurʾān, contributed to the development of al-mafāhīm al-Qurʾāniyya, a sub-field in the realm of philology by which links are established between different words and their meanings to show the structural unity and coherence
of the vocabulary of the Qurʾān. More than sixty books were published related to Qurʾānic words/terms before this text, but al-Isfahani’s book transformed the tenor of these studies based on two important methodological points: 1) his emphasis on reading the Qurʾānic words from within the Qurʾān itself, a holistic method done by tracing the word and its meaning throughout the Qurʾān; and 2) his successful application of this methodology. Al-Isfahani proved that Arabic words used by the Arabs before the revelation had been transformed into a new concept by the Qurʾān. His work set the stage for a very important field of Qurʾānic conceptual reading which begins with the premise that every Qurʾānic word carries a deeper meaning and should be read and studied as a concept, not merely as a simple term. Al-Isfahani also endeavored to compile a Qurʾānic dictionary to explain the meanings of words located in the Qurʾān itself, not based on pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Unfortunately, to this day, his methodology has still not been utilized as a comprehensive exegetical methodology. Although there have been a few attempts during the past two decades, there remains a serious need to develop an encyclopedia of Qurʾānic concepts.

One approach to a text-based analysis of the Qurʾān that did get somewhat popularized exists in ‘ilm al-munāsabāt, where medieval exegetes explored the connections between verses and chapters. Two major exegetical texts have used this method: Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghāyib by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 604/1209) and, Naẓhm al-Durar fī Tanasub al-Ayat wa al-Ṣawwar by Burhan al-Dīn ibn ‘Umar al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480). Al-Razi did not include in his book a clear definition of his view of the munāsabāt, nor did he introduce the theoretical grounds for his analysis of verses with regard to their relations or their order, a possible indication that this method was not widely used by scholars at that time. Later, though, al-Zarkashi (d. 794/1391) in his Burhān devoted a whole chapter to it, and so did al-Suyūṭi (d. 911/1505) in his Itqān, a revision of al-Zarkashi’s work. Al-Zarkashi emphasized the importance of this method and identified a few types of munāsabāt found in the Qurʾān. These works, however, did not lead to the development of further study on the structural unity of the Qurʾān. For centuries, the theory of naẓm and ‘ilm al-munāsabāt did not bring a significant change to mainstream tafsīr. I will now move on to mention some scholars who have explored al-waḥda al-binaʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān and have proven that it can be used to help evince the unity of the Qurʾānic structure.

Twentieth Century Developments

The twentieth century witnessed significant changes in Muslim exegetes’ approach to the Qurʾān. A significant trend in modern exegesis calls for a critical examination that emphasizes the idea of the organic unity of the Qurʾān. It stresses that passages in the Qurʾān are used to clarify other passages, and that this hermeneutic strategy takes precedence over all others. This trend has been documented by scholars such as Mustansir Mir, who identified six different modern exegetes in different parts of the Muslim world who organically developed the idea of a central theme that links the unrelated passages of a given sūra together: Hamiduddin Farahi (d. 1930), Ashraf ‘Ali Thanavi (d. 1943), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997), Izzat Darwaza (d. 1984), and Muhammad al-Tabataba’i (d. 1981). Muhammad ‘Abd Allah Draz (d. 1958) is another important scholar who contributed to this methodology. These scholars suggest this methodological principle to guide the interpreter to a holistic understanding. This modern approach was called “organic-holistic” and was a rejection of reading the Qurʾān in a fragmented way. The Qurʾān itself recommends against tearing apart its text: “And say: ‘I am indeed he that warns openly and without
ambiguity,’ (Of just such wrath) as We sent down on those who divided (Scripture into arbitrary
parts), (So also on such) as have made Qur’ân into shreds (as they please)” (Q. 15:89–91). To read a
chapter as one unit suggests that the sîra’s central theme can be extracted. Amin Ahsan Islahi of
Pakistan and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb both stressed that each sîra has a central theme as its unique
message, and around this idea every theme or topic within the sîra revolves to elaborate, detail,
exemplify, or explain the main focus. Islahi refered to this idea as an ṣamūd (pillar) and Qutb used
the term miḥwar (axis). To find this theme and draw from it, Islahi suggested six principles for
legitimate interpretation. As Bassam Saeh has argued, the Qur’ānic word is of matchless linguistic
perfection that must be understood by the Qur’ān itself. Each sîra has its own personality which can
be discovered through words found in that sîra.

According to this “analytic-synthetic approach” to exegesis, exegetes would “first, determine the
central theme and divide a sîra into sections, and then establish links between those
sections. One writer’s sectional division may differ from another’s, but the underlying assumption is always that the sections can be knit into a connected discourse.” In his conclusion, Mir notes his
hope to see this method developed in a way that provides broader authentic interpretation of the
Qur’ān, especially in law and literature. It is refreshing to see such a new macroscopic approach. It
ought to be encouraged to complement, not replace, the traditional microscopic.

One of the most important questions that Mir raised on the methodology of reading the
Qur’ān as a “unity” is its ultimate practical relevance. As he wrote, “the real test of the organic
reading thesis, is whether it gives rise to new methods for the study of the Qur’ān. Is its thesis capable of generating techniques that will help derive meanings that cannot otherwise be generated? What difference does this method make?” I argue that the methodology of reading the Qur’ān as a “unity” maintains the Qur’ān’s relevance by allowing scholars to continue developing its ability to provide answers to difficult questions and challenges especially in the field of language, philology,
and Islamic law.

The literary school of tafsīr which emerged in the twentieth century has roots in a
premodern Qur’ānic hermeneutics that focused on the rhetoric (balāgha) of the Qur’ān and
contributed to evolving a concept of the Qur’ān’s linguistic inimitability. Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s (d. 1905) intended in his critical edition of the two major works of the classical philologist and
rhetorician ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078), to revive an appreciation of the Qur’ān’s eloquence (bayān). Later, Amin Al-Khūlī (d. 1966) who coined the term al-tafsīr al-adabī, emphasized the relation between tafsīr and literature into an exegetical approach to the Qur’ān. In al-Khūlī’s writings, there is a sustained attention to psychological impact, which becomes elaborated into a concept of contextuality: the historical and cultural background of the text’s first hearers is examined to discover what it meant in their context, in order to assess its impact on them.

Al-Khūlī’s textual analysis affirms that to have a proper understanding of the words, a
commentator should examine lexicographical entries for the word that s/he wants to interpret in
order to have the most probable definition of the word. Al Khūlī’s aim was to establish the
development of the word’s meanings (tārīkh ṣ̣uḥūr al-maʿānī) by applying the methods of historical
philology. Al-Khūlī even attempted, with limited success, to produce a lexicon that dates Arabic and
Qur’ānic connotations. He considered the thematic approach as part of the hermeneutic
methodology. Since the Qur’ān was arranged neither in chronological order nor in a sequence of
unitary topics, a commentator who intends to write Qurʾānic exegesis has to take into consideration all verses in which the Qurʾān discusses a topic, and not limit him/herself to a single surah or a single part of the Qurʾān, while neglecting other surahs whose verses discuss the same topic. As a result, reading the Qurʾān holistically will allow Muslim scholars and jurists to restore the Qurʾānic-Prophetic tradition by developing the holistic moral/ethical and spiritual aspects to rulings rather than remaining restricted to pure legal rulings.

Since my aim is to reveal the ongoing efforts in analyzing al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān, I will provide a brief analysis of the tafsīr of ‘Āʾisha ‘Abd al-Rahman Bint al-Shati’. It is an example of a female scholar’s productive dynamic debates that were necessary to integrate reading the sura as one unit as a methodology into the public exegetical field.

_Tafsīr ‘Āʾisha ‘Abd al-Rahman Bint al-Shati’_

‘Āʾisha Bint al-Shati’ (d. 1998), a professor of Arabic literature at the University College for Women at Ain Shams University in Cairo, introduced some elements of al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān into a Qurʾānic exegesis she composed under the alias Bint al-Shati’. Her methodology was based on a holistic, intra-textual, thematic, and literary style of interpretation, al-manhaj al-adabi fi al-tafsīr.xxxiii Bint al-Shati’ adopted Amin al-Khuli’s (d. 1966) school of thought, which called for a holistic reading of the Qurʾān focusing on the literary approach.xxxiv Amin al-Khuli held the view that the Qurʾān is the greatest book in the Arabic language and has had the greatest literary influence. Approaching the Qurʾān as a unified text in this way allows readers of her tafsīr to understand specific verses in light of the larger “spirit” of the text rather than in a piecemeal, de-contextualized way. Therefore, ashab al Nuzul, “occasion of revelation,” as she understands it, refers to no more than the situation relating to specific passages of the Qurʾān. Indeed, she upholds the famous principle of the Muslim jurists that the decisive factor (in determining the meaning of the verse) is the universality of wording and not its specific cause.

The important point in her implementation of the literary method is that Bint al-Shati’ consistently refused the idea of imposing the rules of grammar to judge the Qurʾān where there appeared to be a contradiction between the rules of grammar and the Qurʾān.xxxv She argued for a very precise examination of the Qurʾān itself. It is from this consideration that she insisted, like al-Khuli, that the Qurʾān should be treated as not only the authoritative source on grammar, but that it is above those rules it creates. She criticized the grammar of exegetes who hold that the particle _bī_-(with) in Surat al-Qalam (68:2) is only an extraneous particle. After examining the style of the Qurʾān concerning that particle, she concluded that the particle _bī_, which comes with a negative predicate of a nominal clause, is not _otiōse_, but is used specifically to emphasize denial and rejection. She consistently used the Qurʾān as a criterion to judge differences among exegetes.xxxvi She remarked that exegetes must not limit the meaning of the Qurʾān and that they should seek a decision from the text of the Qurʾān by _iḥtikām_ (judgment). “And We have revealed to you, [O Prophet], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it” (5:48).xxxvii _Al-iḥtikām ila’l-Qurʾān_ is suggestive of a reciprocal agency, whereby the exegete surrenders herself to the text and the text.xxxviii Bint al-Shāṭi’ used the term _istiqrā’_ (literally, ‘denoting a request for a reading’) in referring to the cross-examination of Qurʾānic terms, expressions, and stylistic phenomena to systematize _al-iḥtikām_.xxxix
In specifically qualifying her literary approach as *tafsir bayani* – and not *tafsir adabi* – Bint al-Shaṭi’ can thus be seen to be doing more than reviving the classical Arabic term for the art of eloquent speech. *Al-bayān*, so conceived, can be said to stand for hermeneutics in its philosophical sense of the human endeavor to grasp and articulate meaning as encountered in texts and language. She encoded the rubric of her exegesis with a new understanding of the Qurʾan’s religious ontology, where a hermeneutic that incorporates the aesthetic is what the divine text expects of the human being to fully realize his/her humanity.\textsuperscript{xiii}

**Al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān: Meaning and Application**

Building upon existing holistic readings of the Qurʾān, I illustrate a reading that recognizes the Qurʾān’s complete and total structural and linguistic unity, *al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān*. As articulated by T.J. al-Alwani (d. 2016), this term conceptualizes the Qurʾān as a perfect structure, in all its *sūrās*, verses, words, letters and parts; it is one unit as in how God perfected the universe and described the sky and the stars, “in full harmony with one another” (Q. 67:3). The Qurʾān clearly describes its own structure as possessing *ḥkām* (perfection, precise execution, solidity): “Alif, Lam, Ra. [This is] a Book whose verses are perfected and then presented in detail from [one who is] Wise and Acquainted” (Q. 11:1); the structure is solid and does not allow to any penetration: “God abolishes that which Satan throws in; then God makes precise His verses” (Q. 22:52). It is a “clear book” (Q. 26:2) for which Allah “will be its guardian” (Q. 15:9). The element of the protected perfection of the Qurʾān’s structural unity being so present within the scriptural text itself, it seems fitting to apply to it the methodology used to explore and extract meaning from the text. In my article “al-Maqāṣid al-Qurʾāniyya” (“The Objectives of the Qurʾān”),\textsuperscript{xlii} I explored the nature and the scope of the comprehensive systematic methodology developed by al-Alwani.

The basic concern that al-Alwani attempted to address in his work is a methodological one. His aim was to propose a systematic methodology of reading the Qurʾān that minimizes errors in understanding the truth of its message. Al-Alwani asserted that *al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān* is important for developing methods that advance the intertextual reading of the Qurʾān in terms of *tafsir al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān*, and thematic and conceptual readings.\textsuperscript{xliii} Within this context, he presented his critical approach regarding the relationship between the Qurʾān and sunna. He emphasized that the Qurʾān should be the primary source for legal rulings, whereas the sunna is a secondary source that explicates the Qurʾānic text.\textsuperscript{xlv} He critiqued scholarly methods that elevated the status of hadith from clarifying and explicating the Qurʾān to making it equal or parallel to it. As in the case example of apostasy below, al-Alwani argued that misinterpretations of Islamic law arose due to scholars allowing hadiths to reign supreme over the Qurʾān. The sunna, a body of knowledge which presents a model for the Qurʾān’s application to real-life situations, remains a practical experience at the highest level of human capability as practiced by the Prophet. Rejecting the employment of foreign sources to understand the Qurʾān, Al-Alwani’s methodology emphasized that “[a] genuine reading of the Qurʾān gets rid of interpretive elements that control the open nature of the Qurʾān, such as *izrāʾ ilḥyāṭ* (apocryphal interpretations), and *naskh* (abrogation) in the Qurʾān in all its types.”\textsuperscript{xlvi}
The Methodology of *al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān* in Practice

Believing in the holistic reading of the Qurʾān allowed Taha Jaber Al-Alwani as a legal theorist and thinker to re-think traditional perspectives on controversial issues, such as apostasy, in a way that is more consistent with the Qurʾān’s overall paradigm.

As a case example of Al-Alwani’s practical employment of *al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān*, I will illustrate his unique reading of the Qurʾānic verses on apostasy, which led him to challenge the dominant legal understanding of apostasy’s prosecution in Islamic law. In one of his most influential studies, *Apostasy in Islam: Historical and Scripture Analysis*, he rejected the earthly capital punishment for individuals who apostate from Islam. In his analysis of legal rulings on capital punishment for those who apostate from Islam, Al-Alwani addressed the issue as a dialectic that invited scholars to discuss and evaluate his method and conclusions. The aim of this study was to provide a methodology to serve as a model by which one can place the Islamic tradition under the authority of the Qurʾān, thereby bringing it into full conformity with Qurʾānic teachings.

**Qurʾānic Arabic tongue (lisān al-Qurʾān)**

The design philosophy for the *al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya* methodology reveals its ability to complement some proven effective methods developed throughout the history of Islamic thought, such as al-Raghib al-Isfahani’s philological method of analyzing Qurʾānic words and proving the significant difference between the Divine Arabic tongue (lisān al-Qurʾān) and the human Arabic language. Al-Alwani argued that reading the Qurʾān according to the Qurʾānic Arabic tongue, as opposed to human understandings of language, would allow scholars to overcome misconceptions and derive comprehensive meanings in their quest for legal injunctions.

In seeking to determine the meanings of linguistic terms which appear in the Qurʾān, the first criterion Al-Alwani identified is the Qurʾān’s own usage of such terms. The second criterion he used are the Prophet’s explanatory statements in the sunna, and third, the Arabs’ customary usage of such terms in their various dialects, literary styles, and rhetoric. By following this order of priority, one ensures that Arabs’ linguistic usages of terms are not the sole factor in determining the meanings of the Qurʾān. Rather, one must first consider the Qurʾān’s own usage of the words.

Al-Alwani’s re-examination of the legal rulings on apostasy entailed a close linguistic examination of two terms: ḥudūd (plural of ḥadd) and ridda. To arrive at the Qurʾānic definition of the terms, Al-Alwani applied the above-described method in his book *Apostasy in Islam*.

The terms employed by Muslim jurists and scholars of the methodology of jurisprudence have tended to be dominated not by ‘the Qurʾānic tongue’ but, rather, by ‘the Arabic tongue.’ A salient example of this may be seen in the use of the term ḥadd and its plural, ḥudūd. The term ḥadd, linguistically, means prevention or prohibition. This term occurs in fourteen verses of the Qurʾān. In two of these, it is used in the sense of God’s law and commands. For example: “These are the bounds set by God (ḥudūd Allāh); do not, then, offend against them – [for] it is thus God makes clear His messages unto humankind, so that they might remain conscious of Him.” (2:187)
It is clear from the preceding verses (183-186) that the bounds set by God regard to the practices of fasting, marriage and divorce, and inheritance. For example in 2:230, God says: “So if a husband divorces his wife (irrevocably), he cannot, after that, re-marry her until after she has married another husband and he has divorced her. In that case there is no blame on either of them if they re-unite, provided they feel that they can keep the limits ordained by Allah. Such are the bounds set by God, which He makes plain to those who understand.”

In none of the verses does hudūd refer to punishment, but instead affirms the necessity of adhering to God’s ordinances and laws. Rather, al-Alwani argued that the term uqubah is more fitting for punishments. Hudūd, as it is mentioned in the Qurʾān, in fact is hardly associated with any kind of punishment. It mostly deals with problems associated with family affairs. In fact, hudūd carries a wider meaning in the general law and ordinance set up by God. The Qurʾān stresses the importance of adhering to God’s laws having to do with family-related issues, so one wonders how Muslim jurists shifted the use of this Qurʾānic term, restricting its meaning to the realm of the penal system. It must be further noted that the penalties mentioned in the Qurʾān for theft and sexual misconduct do not use the term had either. What lies behind this blatant contravention of Qurʾānic usage?

Another example of al-Alwani’s unique approach was his analysis of the term al-ridda. The terms al-ridda and al-irtidad in the Qurʾānic understanding represent a return to something one had left from something one had reached. However, none of the varied Qurʾānic contexts referring to apostasy speak of it as a withdrawal from Islam alone, or as a withdrawal relating to the spiritual plane alone. Rather, the Qurʾān uses the term inclusive of both the spiritual and the material, in combination with the verb radda (to avert or turn away). Riddah in the Qurʾān is an explicit retreat from and abandonment of Islam to unbelief. While warning against disbelief, these verses also urge everyone who has entered Islam to cling to it steadfastly because it is the true guidance: the most authoritative, solid basis for life and living.

Riddah has been used over the centuries to refer unambiguously to a retreat from religion, and specifically, from the religion of Islam. Al-Alwani listed twelve verses to shed light on the fundamental meaning of the concept of apostasy as presented in the Qurʾān. For example, in the following ayah, God emphasizes that for those who commit apostasy, their deeds in this life and the hereafter become worthless. “If any of you should turn away from his faith and die as a denier of the truth—these it is whose deeds will go for nought in this world and in the life to come; and these it is who are destined for the fire, therein to abide” (2:217).

None of the verses referred to above – which include everything the Qurʾān has to say concerning either riddah or irtidad – make any mention of an earthly punishment for the sin or crime of apostasy; nor do they refer, whether explicitly or implicitly, to the need to force an apostate to return to Islam or to kill him if he refuses to do so. As portrayed in the Qurʾān, the term riddah reflects the psychological and mental state that brought the individual concerned to the point of apostasy. Given this clarification of the concept of apostasy, or riddah, in the Qurʾān, we can see how the Qurʾān has put this linguistic term to convey a variety of meanings by employing it as a verbal noun related to the religion. The verbal noun al-riddah is used to refer to a retreat from Islam, although the Qurʾān does not prescribe an earthly punishment for this spiritual betrayal, according to al-Alwani. A person abandons his faith if he denies the truth after having surrendered himself to God through Islam.
Apostasy: Reading the Sunna in the light of *al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya*

Al-Alwani asserted that the philosophy of *al-Waḥda al-Bināʾiyya* illustrates the Qurʾān and the Sunna as mutually supporting sources of evidence. There can be no conflict, contradiction, inconsistency, or disagreement between them, nor could any part of the Sunnah abrogate or nullify what is stated in the Qurʾān. The Sunnah, taken as a whole, offers the methodology of emulation of the Prophet. The Qurʾān, ultimately endorses and legitimizes but invariably supersedes the other available sources, including the Sunna. Al-Alwani highlighted the following four approaches to analyzing the Sunna: a) Its unity and language, b) the combined reading of the Qurʾān and the Sunna, c) the reading of the Sunna and the universe, and, finally, d) the conceptual reading of the Sunna, which helps clarify the circumstances and places of the Prophet’s time and mission. This is what enables Muslims to connect any reality with the Qurʾān, regardless of time and place.

In the case of apostasy, al-Alwani argued that capital punishment for apostasy was not found either in the Qurʾān nor in the actions of the Prophet. Rather, it can be found in the verbal Sunnah. One of the most salient hadiths that mention the command to kill the apostate, and the most widely cited among Muslim jurists, states, “If anyone changes his religion, put him to death” (a hadith on the authority of Muʿādh ibn Jabal). Al-Alwani comprehensively analyzed this hadith in its varied chain of narrations and in all its different versions, as well as the textual evidence in support of it and what scholars have had to say about it. In so doing, he explained that one will be able to see how scholars have put it to use, bringing it out from the realm of that which merely explicates the Qurʾān into the realm of that which rules over it and issues verdicts which are not found in the Qurʾān itself nor in the practice of the Prophet. According to Al-Alwani, the frequent habit of jurists placing the hadith, at least on the level of practice, above that which is stated explicitly in the Qurʾān has caused the lasting confusion. In doing so, the hadith was elevated from the status of clarifying and explicating the Qurʾān (that which clarifies being subordinate to that which is clarified) to the status of that which is equal or parallel to it. The end result of this process has been to allow hadiths to reign supreme over the Qurʾān and pass judgment on it.

Al-Alwani argued that if the Prophet had been aware of such a penalty, he would not have hesitated to carry it out, since he was forthright in calling for punishment for specific crimes in other cases. The Prophet’s era witnessed literally hundreds of those who believed, who then later became hypocrites or committed apostasy. In fact, their apostasy reached the point where it represented a source of harm to the Messenger of God and the Muslim community. However, the Prophet refrained from doing them any harm lest it be said that “Muhammad kills his Companions,” imposes his doctrine on people, or forces them to embrace his religion. In no case did the Prophet respond by calling for death, unless an individual was accused of a separate crime warranting such punishment.

Furthermore, nearly two hundred verses of the Qurʾān reject the principle of coercion in matters of faith and stipulate absolute human freedom to choose what one believes. As has been seen, the Qurʾān affirms there is no earthly penalty whatsoever for the decision to change one’s religion (so long as the individual concerned is not guilty of some other crime, especially in terms of treason). On the contrary, the Qurʾān affirms that the right to declare the penalty belongs to God alone. When one views this hadith in light of Qurʾānic verses whose meanings are definitive and clear, it presents no difficulty. However, when the various versions of the hadith are cited in isolation from the Qurʾān, and when some narrators connect these accounts with other events and
stories, the hadith may become incomprehensible. In addition, chains of narration may be incomplete and/or weak, and therefore such hadiths are not reliable sources. One finds, for example, that this hadith implies approval of destruction of the human life that the Qur’an takes great care to preserve and safeguard, and whose destruction it seeks to prevent by all means possible.

**Muslim Jurists: The Penalty for Apostasy**

Al-Alwani discussed thoroughly the foundational arguments of the most prominent schools of thought and provided his analysis in the light of his reading of the Qur’anic-Prophetic model on the issue. Applying this method led him to explain the reason and the context that led Muslim jurists to affirm the death penalty for apostasy. Generally, in its historical context, apostasy was frequently the result of a comprehensive shift away from allegiance to the Muslim community and rejection of its associated system, laws and culture. Confusion between political treason and religious apostasy arose in an oral culture that was prevalent in the Hejazi environment; further, the influence of the Jewish culture of oral tradition played a role which viewed it necessary to kill anyone who left Judaism. Also, the Islamic conquests brought many new nations – all with their own systems, customs, cultures, and laws – within the jurisdiction of the Muslim nation. Such laws related, for example, to the shifting of allegiances, rebellion against the political and legal order, and so forth. The Byzantines, the Persians and others all had well-established laws and regulations that generated customs and cultures in the conquered lands, and which in turn pervaded the Muslim environment. These laws, regulations, customs and cultures thus came to color the Muslim juristic mindset. Therefore, transmitters of Islamic jurisprudence promoted the claim that there was a consensus among the majority of fiqh scholars that the apostate must be compelled to return to Islam on pain of death. The purpose behind this ruling was to protect the religion from attempts to undervalue it or to undermine its function as the foundation upon which the Muslim Umma came into being, the foundation of the state’s legitimacy, and the source of Islamic doctrine, law, and all related life systems within the Muslim state. Apostasy was also a major threat for the need to maintain loyalty and uniformity in the Muslim armies.

Al-Alwani raised serious concerns about the issue of apostasy and brought forward various examples in the past and the present to prove the validity of his concerns. The ruler looks upon the penal system as the most important means of imposing order, commanding respect, and achieving aims. The most formidable penal system is one whose authority can be attributed to God, since it is through this type of system that the ruler can reap the greatest benefit for his regime. Consequently, pious scholars such as Imam Malik, Abu Hanifa, Al Shafi, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Sufyan al-Thawri, and others frequently denounced rulers for misusing the penal system and exploiting it for their own tyrannical and capricious ends. The written corpus of Muslim heritage contains such denunciations in jurists’ sermons and exhortations to rulers, as well as in their epistles, lessons, and juristic writings. Indeed, in our own age some proponents of political Islam reduce Islam and Islamic law in their entirety to the penal system alone. Consequently, when many such individuals speak of applying Islamic law, what they mean by Islamic law is nothing but its associated penalties. Likewise, some regimes are quick to apply certain penalties in order to demonstrate their religious rigor and their commitment to the shari’ah. Recently, the hideous acts of violence committed by members of ISIS against any who oppose them is obnoxious from the perspective of both Islamic law and human rights law alike. The question is: what is the best way to address this issue in the current context where many Muslims are driving away from their religion?
Since no reading can be definitive, al-Alwani saw interpretive multiplicity as inevitable. The future exegetical community is therefore required to continuously critically engage with its past. Al-Alwani thus conceived understanding as a cumulative effort that cannot be achieved by a single reading. He called for Muslims to study thoroughly the Islamic intellectual heritage in light of the Qurʾān. This call was advocated by many early scholars, such as Abu Hamid al Ghazali (d. 505 AH), Ibn Hazm Al Dhari (d. 456 AH), Fakhr al Razi (d. 606 AH), Ibn Taiymiah (d. 728 AH), and Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH). Al-Alwani’s aim was to provide a systematic methodology to serve as a model, which one can use to place the Islamic intellectual heritage under the authority of the Qurʾān, thereby bringing it into full conformity with Qurʾānic teachings. “And We have revealed to you, [O Prophet], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it” (5:48). A serious dialogue with the tradition and its intellectual and spiritual inclusiveness is what permits expansion and transformation.

Conclusion

Given the preceding discussion, it is important to continue searching for systematic methodologies of approaching the Qurʾān and Sunna. In the light of implementing al-wahda al-bināʾīyya li-l-Qurʾān, we should push forth more discussion and strategies about the method of reading the Qurʾān in its unity and interpreting the Qurʾān intertextually (tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān). Since the Qurʾān is an eternal guide for humanity, all the problems Muslims face can be addressed via a comprehensive vision based on Qurʾānic principles in conjunction with the examples provided by the sunna. The Qurʾān states that the Prophet is a role model for humanity (33:21). Thus from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the sunna explains, clarifies, and demonstrates how to implement Qurʾānic teachings (75:16–19). The sunna represents the ethics, morals, and behaviors outlined in the shariʿah. Muslims scholars need to construct a methodology that enables them to understand how to relate the teachings of the revelation to the lives of Muslims living today. In other words, one should not read the hadith separately from the Qurʾān or focus only on the sunna’s legal rulings, but rather on its reasoning as discussed in this paper. Doing so will release it from being just a collection of particular responses to specific questions and circumstances.
Bibliography


END NOTES


iii In the interest of full disclosure and an attempt to make clear any possible bias, it should be noted that late Dr. Taha Jabir al-Alwani is my father. Al-Alwani earned his Ph.D. at Egypt's Al-Azhar University. His dissertation, a comprehensive six-volume study of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Mabsūl fī 'ilm al nsūl, is a systematic review of the classical literature on nsūl al-fiqh (Islamic legal theory). He examined 700–800 scholars' arguments on different areas of classical Islamic thought. See Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, al-Mabsūl, ed. T. J. al-Alwani (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad University Press, 1400 AH). He studied the juristic nsūl hierarchal structure of al-bukm al- ṣha'ī (the sources of rulings) and the intensive discussions among early scholars concerning giyās (analogical reasoning) and its elements, 'illa (cause/reason), maslahā (interest/welfare), and other related issues. The determination of the 'illa in nsūl al-fiqh is of the utmost importance to its legal system. See the details in Taha J. al-Alwani, Shaykh Taha Jabir al-Alwani: Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought (London and Washington: IIIT, 2005). This collection of articles first appeared in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences and mostly were translated by Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo. In his more than thirty books, al-Alwani has written extensively about the need for ḵaṭha’d (legal reasoning) and has called for the critical examination of the ṭurāth (the Islamic legacy) by Muslims themselves. For the last three decades of his life, he focused on the Qur'ānic Methodology and published more than ten books and numerous articles discussing this issue.

iv Muḥammad ‘Ali al-Ṣāḥibī, Mukbaṭ taraf Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, v.1.28, al-Muhaddith Program. v. 11.36 available at www.muhaddith.org. There are only a few tafsīrs which bear the title of tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān, two of which are Aḏlawa’ al-bayān fi ġuḍa al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān by Muḥammad al-Shinqīṭi, and Al-Tafsīr al-Qur’ān li al-Qur’ān by ‘Abd al-Karīm Khaṭṭāb. However, upon close reading, these two tafsīrs are not really tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi al-Qur’ān as the titles seem to suggest. However, Al Farahi Islahi’s Urdu exegeses, Tadabbur-i-Qur’ān is one of the important references in this regard.


x Abu 'Uthman' Amr ibn Bahr Al-Jahiz, Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1975).

There are different scholars and institutions that produced important work in this area, for example, in Morocco, al-Shaikh al shahid Al-bushikhi, in Fez at the Institute of Qur’anic Concepts. He was the academic advisor for several studies for Masters and Ph.D. The Institute published about fifty five studies focusing on Qur’anic concepts.


<ref>There are different scholars and institutions that produced important work in this area, for example, in Morocco, al-Shaikh al shahid Al-bushikhi, in Fez at the Institute of Qur’anic Concepts. He was the academic advisor for several studies for Masters and Ph.D. The Institute published about fifty five studies focusing on Qur’anic concepts.


Mustansir Mir, "The Sura as a unity,” 204.

Mustansir Mir, "The Sura as a unity,” 217.


Asrār al-balāgha and Dalāʾīl al-iʿjāz


Naguib, Bint al-Shāṭi’’s Approach to tafsīr: An Egyptian Exegete's Journey from Hermeneutics to Humanity. p 60.

Ibid., p 61.


Taha Jabir al-Alwani, *Naḥwī muqīf qurʾāni min al-naskh towards a Qurʾānic Approach on Abrogation* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shurūq al-Dawliyya, 2007)

Al-Raghib al-Asfahani (d. 502 AH/1108) was an eleventh-century Muslim scholar of Qur’anic exegesis and the Arabic language. One of his most famous works was Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur’ân, Dar Ihya Turath al-Arabi; 1st edition (2013).


See the chain of narration in al-Alwani, *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural analysis*, 67-69

Ibid., *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural analysis* 67-97

Ibid., *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural analysis*, 60-61
