

## 7 With ‘A’isha in mind

### Reading Surat al-Nur through the Qur’an’s structural unity

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#### Introduction

A consistent feature of Qur’anic interpretation throughout Islamic history has been the multiplicity of interpretations. Scholarly consensus, however, suggests that interpreting the Qur’an intratextually (*tafsir al-Qur’an bi-l-Qur’an*) is the most accepted method of interpretation. Qur’anic scholars have expressed this notion with the maxim, “*al-Qur’an yufassiru ba’dahu ba’dan*” (different parts of the Qur’an explain each other).<sup>1</sup> Building upon this method, this chapter explores the Qur’anic methodology of *Al-wahda al-bina’iyya li-l-Qur’an*<sup>2</sup> (the Qur’an’s structural unity) and its impact in the arena of religious sciences and beyond.<sup>3</sup> A term coined by Taha Jabir al-Alwani,<sup>4</sup> *al-wahda al-bina’iyya li-l-Qur’an* conceptualizes the Qur’an as a perfect structure in all its *suras*, verses, words, letters and parts;<sup>5</sup> it is one unit (Q. 11:1), similar to how the sky and the stars, as described in Surat Al-Mulk, are “in full harmony with one another” (Q. 67:3). I argue that the methodology of reading the *sura/chapter* as a structural unit is significant to Islamic studies in general and Qur’anic studies in particular.<sup>6</sup> It is my hope that a broader and more consistent application of this method to the Qur’an will allow Islamic scholars to approach social, cultural, and legal rulings more holistically by connecting them to the Qur’an’s spiritual and ethical framework.

Using an incident involving ‘A’isha bint Abu Bakr (d. 678/57) as an example, this chapter draws attention to an important and underresearched area in *hadith* scholarship identified with a revisionary body of literature that takes for its scope the verification and validation of a prophetic tradition.<sup>7</sup> I argue that this method allows scholars to identify organic interconnections between the Qur’an on one hand and the Prophetic *sunna*, *hadith*, and *sira* on the other. As a case example, this chapter analyzes *sura* 24 of the Qur’an, *sura* al-Nur, to illustrate the way my proposed

methodology envisions a holistic relationship between the Qur'an, the *sunna*, *hadith*, and the *sira*.

Some of the earliest companions of the Prophet assumed a role that went beyond the mere transmission of a legacy to its critical authentication. 'A'isha's "*al-Ijaba fima istadrakat 'A'isha 'ala al-Sahaba*" (The Answer to what 'A'isha Revised on the Companions)<sup>8</sup> belongs to this category and occupies a place of pride within it. In her didactic and often witty rebuttals to the companions' narrations of *hadith*, 'A'isha deliberately advanced a consistent and coherent rationale for dealing with contested issues in the community. Through teaching by example, she also imparted an ethic for disagreement and disputation that drew on the source and model (the Prophet) that inspired and infused her own practice. By going beyond the conventional hagiographies of *ummahat al mu'mineen*, the mothers of the believers,<sup>9</sup> exemplified in 'A'isha's *knowledge*, this chapter points to new and creative possibilities for the classic disciplines for reclaiming a tradition and building on it.

In this chapter, I introduce the significance of 'A'isha for *tafsir*, as she is at times the link between the Qur'an and the *sunna*.<sup>10</sup> I argue that 'A'isha's methodological contribution is a potential model for how to read *hadith*, the *sira*, and even the occasions of revelation ("*Munasabat al Nuzul*") in the light of the Qur'anic message and objectives. In order to exemplify the relationship between the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet, I examine 'A'isha's methodological contribution as a potential model for how to link the Qur'an and the *sunna*. This chapter will examine the incident of the *ifk* (slander against 'A'isha) through the lens of *sura al-nur* and 'A'isha's narration of events. This cross-examination of sources teaches us about the critical reading of the Qur'an based on the reality and the experience of the first Muslim community in relation to a very sensitive and crucial event: the incident of the *ifk*. *Al-Bukhari* narrated the events in great detail from none other than 'A'isha herself. The *hadith* is insightful and allows us, through 'A'isha's first-person narration, to live this experience as she witnessed it. Yet, how does the Qur'an examine the incident of the *ifk* against the Mother of the Believers, 'A'isha, and the Prophet's household?

## **The mothers of believers: engagement with the foundational sources**

Defining the relationship between the Qur'an and *sunna* is significant in its impact on Islamic scholarship and practice.<sup>11</sup> Muslims regard the Qur'an as the ultimate reference for human affairs and believe it to be safeguarded by God from distortion. The Qur'an regards the Prophet as a role model for humanity (e.g., Qur'an 33:21); his mission was to explain, clarify, and demonstrate how to implement the teachings of the Qur'an (e.g., Qur'an 2:151, 3: 164, 62:2). The question of how to approach the *sunna* had not yet arisen during the time of the Prophet, as he instructed the believers to follow him as he adhered to the Qur'an. Translating its teachings

through his actions, the Prophet showed them how to apply the Qur'an as their guide in life. Once, when asked about the Prophet's character, 'A'isha replied, "Do you not read the Qur'an? His character was embodied in the Qur'an."<sup>12</sup> If asked about his way of worship, parenting, marital affairs, transactions, etc., she would have responded the same: "His \_\_\_\_\_ was embodied in the Qur'an."<sup>13</sup>

Since the inception of Islam, diversity and plurality have been the main characteristics of Islamic culture and society. This relationship, which has been described in disparate ways and from a variety of perspectives based on changing historical circumstances, has given rise to varied forms of knowledge and expertise. From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the *sunna* has a range of different hermeneutic functions *vis-à-vis* the Qur'an. For instance, jurists regularly discuss and deliberate how a particular *hadith*, relates to the text of the Qur'an. First, each *hadith* is evaluated for authenticity on a sliding scale based on the content and the reliability of the chain of narrators. Then, if the content of a reported *hadith* has no apparent relation to the Qur'an, jurists may accept it as a part of the body of religious law on the condition that it does not directly contradict a more firmly established principle.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the reported action could be general and apply broadly, or it could be a matter that specifically pertained only to the Prophet. Jurists also deliberate whether the action represents simply a custom particular to the time and geographic location, in which case it is not necessarily religiously binding on Muslims at large, or whether a given tradition represents a more fundamental principle that should be religiously binding. This is merely a simplistic rendering of a complex body of legal theory on the relation between Qur'an and *sunna*. A vast array of individual *hadith* reports comprise the corpus of *sunna*, and this corpus differs across sects, schools of thought, and geographic location.<sup>15</sup> Across all trends of thought, the underlying esteem for the Prophet is fundamental. The Prophet was a teacher, a moral guide, and a committed family member; all of these roles were in the reception and subsequent perception of his prophecy and traditions.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the role of the women in his household is highly significant. These women had access to intimate knowledge about the Prophet, including information about many of the situations that he faced in his public life as well as in his more private affairs. The critical engagement of these women is exemplary. Upon examination, the Qur'an and *sunna* demonstrate the significant role that the female companions and family of the Prophet played in Islamic scholarship by broadening religious knowledge.

The Qur'an emphasizes this distinguished place occupied by the women in the Prophet's household and designates the title *ummahat al-mu'minin* for the wives of Prophet Muhammad. The title is evocative of characteristics such as love, care, intuition, and wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the Qur'an specifically instructs the women of the Prophet's household: "Remember [and proclaim] what is recited in your houses of God's revelations and wisdom for God is all subtle, all aware" (Q. 33:34).<sup>18</sup> This verse is directly following a strong confirmation of the equal merit of men and women who are submissive to God (*al-muslimina wa al-muslimat*):

Truly, submissive men and submissive women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, steadfast men and steadfast women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember God often and the women who remember – God has prepared for them forgiveness and a rich reward

(Q. 33:35).

The verses mentioned serve to illustrate the responsibility that God bestowed upon the women of the Prophet's household, as well as the parity of both men and women of good character.

The women in the Prophet's household contributed greatly to the development of Islamic scholarship, alongside the contributions of many other women in the early Muslim community. As in the example of *sura al-nur*, the *sunna* manifests as a body of knowledge and presents a model for the Qur'an's application to real-life situations.

‘A’isha spent over three decades after the Prophet's death honoring his legacy by transmitting knowledge, explaining, interpreting, and correcting misperceptions. ‘A’isha made the Prophet's sayings and the Qur'anic teachings the solid basis from which she launched her dissenting opinions. Her critical methodology is based on narrating the literal words of the Prophet. For her, it was unacceptable to only convey the meaning of the *hadith*, as the meaning was a matter of interpretation and could be modified as a result of the narrator's limited memory or level of understanding. For instance, it is commonly explained that some Companions of the Prophet used to attend the initial part of the Prophet's meetings and would miss the latter part, while others came late, hearing only the last of what the Prophet had said. Hence, ‘A’isha commented on the reports of many who misunderstood the narrative due to tardiness or premature departure.<sup>19</sup> With a distinctive rhetorical skill, she tactfully analyzed, criticized, corrected, and debated in order to expose the weak points in any report she found offensive, misunderstood or otherwise incorrect.

### **The methodology of *al-wahda al-bina'iyya li-l-Qur'an* in practice**

Understanding the Qur'an's unity and divine language, as well as reading it conceptually for the explicit purpose of tracing the derivation of words, is essential to my work. Invariably, such a systematic approach relates the appropriate meaning and application of Qur'anic language to any situation (in time or place). It is, however, challenging to read the entire Qur'an as one unit; therefore, it is more effective to begin with one specific word or *sura* to pave the way, and thus enable the reader to connect with the Qur'an as a whole. For instance, when the reader attempts to understand a Qur'anic word in a certain *sura*, she traces it throughout the Qur'an in order to attain a better understanding of the word and its relevance. This helps the reader to observe the movement of the word and how it changes in meaning when in a different context, without violating the original meaning of the

word.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of *sura al-nur*, reading the opening verse attracts the reader's attention immediately to the significance of this *sura*. It begins: "This is a *sura* that which We have sent down and We have made it mandatory, and We have sent down clear signs in it, in order that you may remember" (Q. 24:1). A strong thesis statement clearly defines its goal, methodology and outcome. Each word is clear and precise, has a specific function and role, and leaves no doubt in how to follow its direction in order to reach the accurate meaning.

There are three specific words of hermeneutic significance in the opening lines of *sura* 24. It begins with "This is a *sura* that which We have sent down (*'anzalnaha*)." The word (*'anzala*) means "the act of descent or sending down." The Qur'an describes itself as a scripture that God 'sent down' to the Prophet. This expression – sent down – conveys immediately, and in itself, the concept that the origin of the Qur'an is divine and that Muhammad is merely a recipient. This concept is mentioned four times in Surat al-Nur, twice in the first verse and then again in 24:34 and 24:46 to emphasize the significance of this *sura* as a whole and its *aya*/verses that were sent down from above.<sup>21</sup> The expression 'sent down', in its various forms, is used in the Qur'an well over 200 times. The second key word is *farada* ("and We have made it obligatory"). By tracing the Qur'anic usage of the word, it means; "it is your duty to apply its rulings" because it was laid down in plain terms.<sup>22</sup> The third key word is *bayinat*, an adjective describing the content of this message as clear and manifest. It is self-explanatory; therefore, there is no need for interpretation because the message is clear-cut.

The last word *tadhdkrun* means to remember your covenant with your Creator to be stewards on this earth by virtue of submission to your Creator. It conveys the commitment to a lifetime of doing what is good and forbidding what is wrong. The foremost quality of mind and character that flows from this commitment is a state of constant awareness of the presence of God, the All-Knowing, that leads to a holistic purification, or *tazkiyya* (Q.49:13, 35:15, 87:14, 91:9).

While *sura* 24 uses the verb *anzala*, the Qur'an uses the second grammatical verb form – *nazzalna* – which reflects a gradual descent of scripture in many other verses, such as 2:23, 2: 97, 3:3, 4:47, 15:9, 16:89, 17:106 and 76:23. The use of this Arabic verb form is significant because it captures the historical reality of the Qur'an's descent to the earthly realm. Qur'anic revelation came to the Prophet gradually over a period of twenty-three years. Therefore, its content is intertwined with the realities of those early communities who witnessed its revelation; it spoke to historical and personal events within the communities that believed in it as well as those that rejected it. A distinctive feature of the Qur'an is its direct response to the affairs of those early communities. *sura al-nur*, without question, is one of those *suras* that captures and responds directly to events on the ground.

The significance of the Qur'an's gradual descent is addressed directly by the Qur'an in the form of a response to the pagans of the Quraysh: "The disbelievers also

say, 'Why was the Qur'an not sent down to him all at once?' We sent it in this way to strengthen your heart [Prophet]; We gave it to you in gradual revelation" (Q. 25:32); "It is a recitation that We have revealed in parts, so that you can recite it to people at intervals; We have sent it down little by little" (Q. 17:106).

A second significant reason for its gradual descent is to allow its teachings to slowly enter the hearts and lives of its first recipients. This was exemplified by the Prophet's companions, both men and women, who were in the habit of learning and practicing the verses of the Qur'an at the same time. Abu Abdur Rahman Al-Aslami reported: "The companions of the Prophet would learn ten verses from the Messenger of God and they would not take another ten verses until they learned their meaning and ruling. They said, "We would learn knowledge and action together."<sup>23</sup> They also taught what they had learnt by helping others to memorize the Qur'an, and most importantly, through their practical example, which reflected directly what they had learnt from the Qur'an.<sup>24</sup> There are at least fifteen times where the Qur'an states: "They ask you about." Most of the questions are mentioned in the Qur'an related to social, economic and legal issues. This indicates that the Qur'an invites the readers to ask the questions about their issues and challenges and seek its guidance.

In relation to this fact, it is important to understand *munasabat al-nuzul* (Occasions of revelation)<sup>25</sup> in light of *al-wahda al-bina'iyya li-l-qur'an* as a methodology. How should we understand this genre of literature that describes the events or questions that allegedly elicited the revelation of certain verses? What are the best methods that we should use to reach the accurate meaning that relates to specific events? What do the questions of the first generation of Muslim men and women illustrate to us, in our current context, about the questions we should be asking of the Qur'an?

I argue that *surat al-nur* makes for one of the best examples of how to read the *sunna*, *hadith*, and *sira* in light of the Qur'an. It provides a good illustration of the critical experience facing the first Muslim community, during which no other than the Prophet's wife was accused of adultery. To exemplify the approach of *al-wahda al-bina'iyya*, I will present a unitary reading of the *sura*. I will not present a line-by-line *tafsir*; rather, I will illustrate how to connect the *sunna*, *hadith*, and *sira* to the Qur'an as related to social and ethical-juristic issues in order to demonstrate the application of the *al-wahda* methodology in cultivating an understanding of the Qur'an that is relevant to our modern era. The experience of the first generation dialoguing with the revelation paves the way for our own conversations with this primary text.

### **The story of the *Ifk*: a comprehensive method of reading the *sira*, *sunna*, and *hadith* in light of the Qur'an**

How does the Qur'an examine the incident of the *ifk*? The event, as narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, occurred after the Battle of Ahzab during the expedition of the Bani

Mustaliq in the sixth year after the *hijra*. The *hadith* is insightful and allows us, through ‘A’isha’s first-person narration, to live this experience from a human perspective.<sup>26</sup> Despite her overwhelming grief, she was careful in her judgment of other people who were involved in this incident. ‘A’isha never abandoned her trust in God, even in the most intense moments of this trial.

It was customary for the Prophet to take his wives along on expeditions or battles. This *hadith* indicates that women used to travel, even during war, with their husbands and other close relatives. On this expedition, ‘A’isha became separated from the group and noticed she had lost a special necklace. Though she eventually found her necklace, when she came back to rejoin the travel party, no one was there. However, she knew that someone would come back to look for her, because it was customary for a Companion to trail behind to look for people who had become separated from the army. In this case, Safwan b. al-Mu‘attal was appointed to the task. While waiting for someone to come back, ‘A’isha had fallen asleep. Later, when Safwan saw her, he helped her onto his camel and started to walk quickly to catch up with the army. ‘Abd-Allah ibn Ubayy, the leader of the hypocrites, saw them enter Medina and remarked: “By God! Neither ‘A’isha nor that man will be acquitted of this incident!” Rumors quickly spread.

The first Muslim society was not immune from ‘Abd-Allah ibn Ubayy’s insinuations. For over a month until the revelation of *surat al-nur*, the hypocrites were able to successfully deceive some sincere believers and even got them to join the slander. *Surat al-nur* not only defended the Mother of Believers but also provided a preventive model for avoiding such a moral disaster in the future. This experience was an extensive training session that required people to go through an internal and external filtering process under the observation of the Divine. Hypocrites at every stage of Islam’s history have had a pivotal role in igniting rumors, controversy, and accusations in order to undermine the moral foundations of the Muslim community. The Qur’an illustrates and teaches us how to diagnose this social problem by providing a comprehensive and systematic methodology to deal with false accusations. The principle of carefully evaluating one’s words and actions and that mechanisms should be developed to hold people accountable based on their actions surfaces in more than one context in the Qur’an.<sup>27</sup> I will now illustrate the relationship between the Qur’an and the *sunna*, *hadith* and *sira* by using the narrative of ‘A’isha.

## Through ‘A’isha’s eyes

What can we learn about the *sunna* of the Prophet in terms of his relationship with his wife? What public activities were women at that time involved in? How did ‘A’isha describe the *hijab*? Did this stop women from traveling? ‘A’isha narrated:<sup>28</sup>

Whenever the Prophet intended to go on a journey, he used to draw lots among his wives and would take with him the one on whom the lot had fallen. So he cast these lots on one of these

expeditions and my name came up, so I traveled with the Prophet. This was after the verses pertaining to veiling were revealed and therefore I would travel in my hawdaj and be carried in it. "The hawdaj is a small type of tent, placed on top of the camel wherein the women would sit.

Through this narration, 'A'isha provided details about women's diet, size, and morals during her time:

During those days women were very thin and they had not put on a lot of weight. They used to only eat a few morsels of food, so the men did not question the lightness of the hawdaj when they picked it up and put it on the camel. And on top of that, I was a young woman. So they sent the camel forward and I found my necklace after they had gone. By the time I returned to the caravan camping ground, there was not a soul in sight, so I went to the place where I used to stay, thinking that they would miss me and come back in my search. While I was sitting at my place, I felt sleepy and slept.

How did men behave toward women? According to 'A'isha, this is how men treated women at that time:

Safwan bin Al-Mu'attil As-Sulami Adh-Dhakhw-ani was behind the army. He had started in the last part of the night and reached my stationing place in the morning. He saw the shape of a person sleeping, and when he saw me, he recognized me for he had seen me before the revelation of the verses of veiling. I was woken up by his exclamation of (Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un) "We surely belong to God and to Him we shall return," which he uttered on recognizing me, so I covered my face with my outer garment. And I swear by God we did not speak a word to each other nor did I hear any statement from him except "Inna Lillahi wa inna ilaihi rajiun," He lowered his camel such that I could ride on it and when I mounted the camel he guided it until we caught up with the caravan while they were encamped. That is where the rumors started spreading and the people that spread the rumors were destroyed; the leader of them was 'Abdullah ibn 'Ubay ibn Salul.

What do we learn about the Prophet in terms of how he tended to his wives when they were ill? Why did 'A'isha not hear anything about the rumor initially? What do we learn about the household of the Prophet? What was the reaction of the Prophet to the rumor? 'A'isha narrates:

So we arrived in Madinah but I fell ill with a fever for a whole month. The inhabitants of Madinah were all talking about the slander, but I did not know anything about it. However, I was hurt by the fact that I did not see the tenderness I used to see from the Prophet while I was sick. He would enter upon us and ask all of us, "How are all of you doing?" then he would leave. So I was doubtful but I did not realize evil was afoot.

She continues:

After I had been cured I once exited with Umm Mistah ('A'isha's great aunt and the Prophet's first cousin) toward the area that we used to relieve ourselves and used not to go out for this purpose except from night to night, and that was before the time that people started building restrooms close to their houses. We considered it troublesome and harmful to take lavatories



in the houses.

How did ‘A’isha eventually learn about the rumor? What was her reaction? How long had the rumor been spreading? What was her parents’ reaction to the rumor?

“So I went out with Umm Mistah and her son was Mistah bin Uthatha. When we had finished our affair, as we returned to my house, Umm Mistah tripped over a stone and exclaimed, “Let Mistah be ruined!”” When something happened to the Arabs, they would curse someone. So she cursed her son. I said to her, “What an evil thing you have said. How can you curse a person who has witnessed the Battle of Badr? She said, “O you there! Didn’t you hear what he has said?” I said, “And what did he say?” She then told me the statement of the people of the Ifk (forged statement), I became ill, worse than before.

She goes on to further say:

When I returned home, and the Prophet came to me, and after greeting, he said, “How is that (lady)?” I said, “Will you allow me to go to my parents?” At that time, I intended to be sure of the news through them. The Prophet allowed me and I went to my parents and asked my mother, “O my mother! What are the people talking about?” My mother said, “O my daughter! Take it easy, for by God, there is no charming lady who is loved by her husband who has other wives as well, but that those wives would find fault with her.” I said, “Subhan Allah! Did the people really talk about that? “That night I kept on weeping the whole night till the morning. My tears never stopped, nor did I sleep, and morning broke while I was still weeping.

It is important to note here that ‘A’isha did not hear anything about the rumor from the Prophet or from any member of his family until she left the house. So what do we learn about their moral and ethical standard? He did not berate her, abuse her, or insult her. He did not even accuse her of the crime. However, after a month of rumors circulating around Madina, the rumors cast suspicions in the mind of the Prophet. At this point, the Prophet decided to consult two of the closest members of his family, who were in a position to give him some insight on Aisha’s moral character:

Then the Prophet called ‘Ali bin Abi Talib and Usama bin Zaid when the Revelation delayed, in order to consult them as to the idea of divorcing his wife. Usama bin Zaid told the Prophet of what he knew about the innocence of his wife and of his affection he kept for her. He said, “O Messenger! She is your wife, and we do not know anything about her except good.” ‘Ali bin Abi Talib said, “O Messenger! God has not restricted matters upon you and there are plenty of women beside her. If you however, ask her maidservant; she will confirm what she knows about her.

It is important to point out that all of the Prophet’s actions at this point fell within the realm of the private sphere. He did not take any public measures either to rebuke ‘A’isha or those accusing her of adultery. Rather, he continued to seek knowledge to arrive at an informed decision. === ‘A’isha narrates:

So the Prophet called for Barira and said, “O Barira! Have you ever seen anything from

‘A’isha that will cause you to have doubts about her? Barira said, “By Him who has sent you with the truth, I have not seen anything from her what so ever that will cause me to have doubts about her except one thing. Except that she is a young girl who sometimes falls asleep when she is kneading the dough. And when she falls asleep, the lamb comes, eats the dough and goes away. So this is the crime that I know she does.”

‘A’isha further stated that:

The Prophet also asked Zainab bint Jahsh about my case. He said, “O Zainab! What have you seen?” She replied, “O Messenger of God! I protect my hearing and my sight (by refraining from telling lies). I know nothing but good (about ‘A’isha).” Of all the wives of God’s Apostle, it was Zainab who aspired to receive from him the same favor as I used to receive, yet, God saved her (from telling lies) because of her piety. But her sister, Hamna, kept on fighting on her behalf so she was destroyed as were those who invented and spread the slander.

How did the Prophet feel during that time? How did he express his feeling toward ‘A’isha, the people who spread the rumor, and the community? What is the *sunna* of the Prophet when he was confronted with this trial? The Prophet and his family did not discuss the rumor while ‘A’isha was home until she left to her parents’ house. He heard testimony from family members who interacted with ‘A’isha on a daily basis. ‘A’isha later described the reaction of the Prophet and how he addressed the people publicly about the rumor for the first time. Although it was clear the Prophet had no doubt about his wife, he did not want his regard for his wife to cloud his vision or even to say anything before there was clear evidence.

So the Prophet got up (and addressed) the people. While the Prophet was on the pulpit, he said, “O Muslims! Who will help me against a man who has hurt me by slandering my family? By God, I know nothing except good about my wife, and people have blamed a man of whom I know nothing except good, and he never used to visit my family except with me.

What was the reaction of people? What does the reaction of the people tell us about the complexity of the situation? In Madina at that time, there were two great tribes, the ‘Aws and Khazraj. The man who instigated the crisis was from the Khazraj and was protected by his tribe. When the Prophet asked for the people’s support to stop spreading the lies, members of the two tribes began to fight one another. The Prophet had to calm them down and resolved their argument. At that time, the Prophet went to visit ‘A’isha at her parents’ house for the first time about the rumor. ‘A’isha described the meeting: “While I was in that state, the Prophet came to us, greeted, and sat down. He had not sat with me for the whole month while these rumors were being spread. For this whole month he had not been receiving revelation concerning my case.”

‘A’isha continues:

The Prophet praised God after he sat and he said, “Thereafter, O ‘A’isha! I have heard about you such and such, so if you are innocent, then God will clear you of this charge, and if you have slipped into a sin then seek God’s forgiveness and repent to Him, for whenever a servant

does a sin, admits to it, and repents, God accepts his repentance from him.”

‘A’isha said: “When the Prophet had finished his speech, my tears ceased completely so that I no longer felt even a drop thereof. Then I said to my father, “Reply to the Prophet on my behalf as to what he said.” He said, “By God, I do not know what to say to the Prophet.”

She said:

“I know by God that you have heard this story (of slander) so much that it has been settled in your minds and you have believed it. So now, if I tell you that I am innocent, and God knows that I am innocent, you will not believe me; and if I confess something, and God knows that I am innocent of it, you will believe me. By God, I cannot find of you an example except that of Joseph’s father said: ‘But [as for myself,] patience in adversity is the best: [in the sight of God]; and it is to God [alone] that I pray to give me strength to bear the misfortune which you have described to me.’

(Q. 12:18)

How did ‘A’isha feel at that time? What did she expect? What was the outcome?

“Then I turned away and lay on my bed, and at that time I knew that I was innocent and that God would reveal my innocence. But by God, I never thought that God would sent down about my affair, Divine Inspiration that would be recited (forever), as I considered myself too unworthy to be talked of by God with something that was to be recited: but I hoped that the Prophet might see a dream in which God would prove my innocence.

She continues:

“By God, the Prophet had not left his seat and nobody had left the house when the Divine revelation came to the Messenger. So there overtook him the same hard condition which used to overtake him (when he was Divinely Inspired) so that the drops of his sweat were running down, like pearls, though it was a (cold) winter day, and that was because of the heaviness of the Statement which was revealed to him. When that state of Prophet was over, and he was smiling when he was relieved, the first word he said was, “‘A’isha, God has declared your innocence.” My mother said to me, “Get up and go to him.” I said, “By God, I will not go to him and I will not thank anybody but God.”

(Q. 24:11–20)

It is interesting that ‘A’isha explained another significant reaction by her father, Abu Bakr As-Siddiq, who at first neither said anything or took any action against Mistah for the entire month until the verses were revealed. Abu Bakr was Mistah bin Uthatha’s caretaker and guardian. He later decided to stop taking care of him. The Qur’an responded beautifully to the action of Abu Bakr, in a general way that includes any person in a similar situation: “And let not those of virtue among you and wealth swear not to give [aid] to their relatives and the needy and those who have migrated from their homes in the cause of God. Let them forgive and overlook. Do you not wish God to forgive you? God is forgiving and merciful. (Q. 24:22)

## The general meaning of *sura al-nur*

I identify the theme of *sura al-nur* as “establishing a pure and healthy family and then society.” This is due to the fact that the family, rather than the individual, is the basic unit of society. From this, we can derive a Qur’anic model for how to develop an integrated, *tawhid*-based society. The title of the *sura* means “the light,” which reflects that things will be exposed and clarified. This *sura* deals with the mutual relations of the sexes and with the ethical rules that come with these interactions. It opens with one of the most serious and uncompromising rulings in the event of transgressing the bounds of morally defined sexuality.<sup>29</sup>

How can this critical convergence between sexuality and spirituality be explained? The *sura* introduces a new model for the community, one that is clear with its various provisions designed to reinforce morals for both individuals and families. Sustained mutual support and realistic measures uphold the moral fabric of the community, as much as that of its nuclear units and individual members.

*Sura al-nur* reveals that the Qur’an sought social change by exposing the most sensitive and complicated moral issues such as sexuality, marital relations, and longstanding customs that viewed women as bringing shame and dishonor. The Prophet and his household were chosen to lead this difficult and painful transition for the entire community. The personal and collective struggle reveals that change takes planning, time, and struggle. This *sura* therefore reflects the Qur’anic comprehensive plan for reform. It illustrates that seeking to abolish ancient customs requires the involvement of the entire community. The community must be educated, convinced of the need for change, and then trained to implement these changes.

*Sura al-nur* provides strategies for how to examine established customs and introduce change into society. The Qur’an not only deconstructs unjust and misogynistic practices but also offers practical and healthy alternatives. In this context, a comprehensive Qur’anic reform plan includes: 1) saving a woman’s honor and life from any injustice done against her; 2) presenting women as respected, equal, and active partners with men in establishing society, and enforcing this perspective legally; 3) presenting a new model of sexuality and gender relations; and 4) presenting the family and its structure, rather than the tribe, as the cornerstone of society. An example of this is what happens when a man accuses a woman of *zina* (fornication). While in pre-Islamic Arabia it was considered a socially acceptable punishment for a man to kill his wife if he suspected her of having an affair, to protect the family’s honor and uphold moral values, the Qur’an prohibited this act of violence and introduced reforms to protect the wife and those who were accused of immoral conduct by introducing fair and just legal procedures to address the problem.

*Sura 24* prescribes a severe punishment for people who accuse chaste women of adultery without bringing sufficient evidence and requires a strict measure for determining the truth of such an accusation (four witnesses of upright character must

have each witnessed the act of sexual intercourse). This verse prohibits men from taking action against women based on their own assumptions or even their private proof of wrongdoing. It establishes the legal premise that men are not allowed to take matters into their own hands and must resort to the state or legal authorities. Furthermore, verse 24:4 makes clear that the mere accusation of a woman of *zina* without the proof of four witnesses is punishable by law. Under the law, the wife's testimony is also equal to her husband's. If a woman swears to her innocence, even if she is lying, her testimony is enough to avert her punishment.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Qur'anic strategy against rumors: an analytical reading in *sura al-nur***

How did the Qur'an describe and analyze this experience? What are the main issues that the Qur'an emphasizes? How does the Qur'an examine the attitude of the people toward the slander? Does the Qur'an provide guidance and strategies for people on how to deal with similar problems? What was the problem according to the Qur'an? Why is it important to analyze people's stands on issues? How do we define the relationship between the Qur'an and *sunna* in light of *sura al-nur*? There are clear rules that can be formulated from this *sura*.

First, as God says, is to assess the people who instigate the story and circulate it without confirmation and to hold them accountable: "Indeed those who came with a falsehood amongst you are a group among you. Do not regard it as a misfortune, for it is good for you. Every one of them shall be held to account for the sin he has committed; and he who took the greater part in it shall have a terrible punishment" (Q. 24: 11).

Second is to establish strong relationships among the community based on trust and compassion. "Why when you heard it for the first time did not the believing men and the believing women think good of one another and say, 'This is an obvious falsehood?'" (Q. 24: 12)

Third, verify the story before making any comments or statements. Those who spread lies must face the consequence of their actions. "Why did they not bring four witnesses. And when they do not produce the witnesses then it is they in the sight of God who are the liars. Had it not been for the favor of God upon you, and His mercy in this world and the hereafter, you would have been touched for that lie in which you were involved by a great punishment" (Q. 24: 13-14).

Fourth, be mindful of what you say because your words could cause irreparable damage. They can create problems and lead to conflict among people. "When you received it with your tongue and said with your mouths that which you had no knowledge of, you thought that it was an insignificant thing, while it was in the sight of God something very great" (24:15-16).

Fifth, create mechanisms to help control rumors from spreading. "Why when you heard it did you not say: 'It is not for us to talk about this. Glory be to You (O God)! This is a great lie. God warns you against doing this forever if you are true believers.

Fourth, be mindful of what you say because your words could cause irreparable damage. They can create problems and lead to conflict among people. "When you received it with your tongue and said with your mouths that which you had no knowledge of, you thought that it was an insignificant thing, while it was in the sight of God something very great" (24:15–16).

Fifth, create mechanisms to help control rumors from spreading. "Why when you heard it did you not say: 'It is not for us to talk about this. Glory be to You (God)! This is a great lie. God warns you against doing this forever if you are true believers. And God explains the commandments clearly to you, and God is the All-Knowing the All-Wise'" (Q. 24:17–18).

Sixth, set firm rules of accountability for those who gossip and spread slander. "Those who love (to see) scandal broadcast among the Believers, will have a grievous Penalty in this life and in the Hereafter: God knows, and you know not" (Q. 24:19).

And finally, strengthen your relationship with God and seek His guidance. "But for the grace of God and His mercy upon you, and were not God compassionate and merciful, [you would have come to grief]" (Q. 24:20).

### Conclusion

Given the preceding discussion, it is important to continue searching for systematic methodologies in approaching the Qur'an and *sunna*. We should push for more discussion about reading the Qur'an in its unity and interpreting the Qur'an intertextually. Since the Qur'an is an eternal guide for humanity, all the problems facing Muslims since its revelation can be addressed via a comprehensive vision based on Qur'anic principles and in conjunction with the examples provided by the *sunna*. The Qur'an states that the Prophet is a role model for humanity (e.g., Q. 33:21). Thus from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the *sunna* explains, clarifies, and demonstrates how to implement Qur'anic teachings (Q. 75:16–19). The *sunna* represents the ethics, morals, and behaviors outlined in the *shari'a*. A holistic relationship between the Qur'an, the *sunna*, and *hadith* has been clearly established as evidenced in the example of *surat al-nur*. Based on this example, we can examine the authenticity of any given *hadith*, including the actions (*fi'l*), sayings (*qawl*), and spoken approval (*taqrir*) of the Prophet, by examining a particular narration and reading it holistically in light of the Qur'an. This body of knowledge presents a model for its application to real-life situations. Islamic scholars need to construct a methodology that enables them 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 Qur'an or focus only on the *sunna's* legal rulings, but rather on its reasoning, as evidenced in the different examples cited in this chapter. Doing so will release the *sunna* from merely being a collection of particular responses to specific questions and circumstances.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Ibn Taymiyyah 1392 AH, 93. There are only a few *tafsirs* which bear the title of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*, two of which are *Aḍwā' al-bayan fi idāḥa al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* by Muhammad al-Shinqiti, and *Al-Tafsir al-Qur'ani li al-Qur'an* by 'Abd

- al-Karim Khatib. However, upon close reading, these two *tafsirs* are not really *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* as the titles seem to suggest. However, Al Farahi-Islahi's Urdu exegeses, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is one of the important references in this regard.
- 2 Al-Alwani 2006.
  - 3 For more details of the classical and contemporary debates concerning the genealogy of this method, see my article "*Al-wahda al-bina'iyya li-l-Qur'an: A Methodology for Understanding the Qur'an in the Modern Day*, Alwani 2018.
  - 4 In the interest of full disclosure and an attempt to make clear any possible bias, it should be noted that the late Dr. Taha Jabir al-Alwani was the author's father. Al-Alwani earned his PhD at Egypt's Al-Azhar University. His dissertation, a comprehensive six-volume study of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's *Mahsul fi 'ilm al-usul*, is a systematic review of the classical literature on *usul al-fiqh* (Islamic legal theory). He examined 700-800 scholars' arguments on different areas of classical Islamic thought. See al-Razi 1400 AH; and Al-Alwani 2005. This collection of articles first appeared in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, most of which were translated by Yusuf Talal De Lorenzo. In his more than thirty books, al-Alwani wrote extensively about the need for *ijtihad* (legal reasoning) and called for the critical examination of the *turath* (the Islamic legacy) by Muslims themselves. For the last three decades of his life, he focused on Qur'anic Methodology and published more than ten books and numerous articles discussing this issue.
  - 5 Early exegetes referred briefly to how consecutive *āyāt* and *sūrahs* connect with each other called, '*ilm al-Munasabat* of Qur'anic discourse. See the two major *tafsir* works that have been known to use this method are: Al-Razi 1981; and Al-Biqā'ī 1995.
  - 6 See Mir 1986, 6-8, 1993. Hamiduddin Farahi (1863-1930) was an Islamic scholar of South Asia known for his groundbreaking work on the concept of *Nazm*, or Coherence, in the Qur'an. Farahi's views on the subject are found in two of his works: Farahi 1394 AH, in which he states his theory, and Farahi 1973, which is a collection of his commentaries on a small number of the Qur'anic surat.
  - 7 At least three classical Sunni scholars have previously sought to develop this field of study: Abu Manṣūr 'Abd al-Muhsin bin Muhammad bin 'Alī al-Baghdādī (d. 489/1095 or 6), was the first to compile about twenty-five sayings attributed to the Prophet by his Companions which 'A'isha had revised in a volume titled: "*al-Ijaba fima istadrakat 'A'isha 'ala al-Ṣahaba*" (The Answer to what 'A'isha Revised on the Companions); subsequently, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allah Badr al-Din al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1370), a prominent scholar of *hadith* and Qur'anic sciences, composed a commentary on al-Baghdādī's example; and finally, Jalal al-Din al-Suyutī, (d. 910/1505), composed another commentary on this material which had come to be known as *istidrakat 'A'isha*, ('A'isha's revisions).
  - 8 al-Zarkashī 1980.
  - 9 See 'Abd al-Rahman 1984, 25.
  - 10 This chapter draws upon a published article by the author. See Alwani 2002, 181-198; and see her recent publication on this methodology, Alwani 2013, 45-58.
  - 11 See Al-Alwani 2017.
  - 12 Qur'an:68:4.
  - 13 It is mentioned in the lengthy story about Sa'd ibn Hisham ibn 'Aamir, when he came to Madinah and went to 'A'isha and asked her about some matters. He said: "I said: O Mother of the believers, tell me about the character of the Messenger of Allah (S)." She said: "Do you not read the Qur'an?" I said: "Of course." She said: "The character of the Prophet was the Qur'an." "I wanted to get up and not ask about anything else until I died..." Narrated by Muslim (746).
  - 14 See Kamali 2003; Al-Alwani 2003; and Hallaq 1997.
  - 15 See Brown 2009, 150-183; and Alwani 2013, 47-48.
  - 16 See Mottahedeh 2001.
  - 17 See 'Abd al-Rahman 1984, 25.

- 18 Here, A. Yusuf Ali in his translation of this verse explains that the verb *adhkurna* takes the wives of the Prophet as its subject and means not only "remember" but also "recite, read, make known, and publish the message." See Ali 2004, 1067.
- 19 Al-Zarkashi 1980, 103.
- 20 Al-Raghib al-Isfahani's classical work, *al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an*, contributed to the development of *al-mafahim al-Qur'aniyya*, 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 Qur'an. al-Isfahani, Al-Raghib (n.d.) *Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an*, ed. Muhammad Seyd Kaylani (Beirut: Dar al M'arifa).
- 21 See al-Isfahani n.d., 376.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Source: Musnad Ahmad 22971.
- 24 Source: Al-Qurtubi n.d., 1/52. There are many authentic narrations that urge a Muslim to learn the Quran. The Prophet, said: "The best of you is he who learns the Quran and teaches it to others." Sahih al-Bukhari 5027, Book 66, Hadith 49. USC-MSA web (English).
- 25 Al-Suyuti n.d., 28. See, for further readings about the coherence of the Qur'an; Mir 1986, 29-30, 61-62.
- 26 Her narrative should be studied as a model for historians, sociologists, and even anthropologists, as the story establishes key principles of societal relations and sexual morality.
- 27 See Surah 49, al-Hujurat for another example.
- 28 Sahih Al Bukhari Book 6: Volume 60: Hadith 274, Prophetic Commentary on the Qur'an [www.Qur'anexplorer.com/Hadith/English/Hadith/bukhari/006.060.274.html](http://www.Qur'anexplorer.com/Hadith/English/Hadith/bukhari/006.060.274.html).
- 29 A Surah [is this] which We have bestowed from on high, and which We have laid down in plain terms; and in it have We bestowed from on high messages which are clear [in themselves], so that you might keep [them] in mind. (1) AS FOR the adulteress and the adulterer flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion with them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you [truly] believe in God and the Last Day; and let a group of the believers witness their chastisement. (2) [Both are equally guilty:] the adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress – that is, a woman who accords [to her own lust] a place side by side with God; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer – that is, a man who accords [to his own lust] a place side by side with God: and this is forbidden unto the believers. (3)
- 30 Qur'an, 24:8 "But it would avert the punishment from the wife, if she bears witness four times (with an oath) By Allah, that (her husband) is telling a lie."

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