

Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory

Robert Gleave

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This book surveys the development of literal meaning and literalism in Islam and Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) in particular. The term *literal meaning* refers to the meaning that a text is believed to hold “in itself” by virtue of the sound-meaning relationships of words that were “coined” (*waḍʿ*) at some point in time. Although Muslim debates on how words were coined (see second chapter) are quite interesting and at times entertaining, the origin of language was secondary to the language’s actual existence. In other words, legal theorists contended that the establishment of the “sound-meaning connection” was more important than who established it and when.

Literalism, the other focus of the book, is the view that Islamic law privileges literal meaning. As Gleave explains in his first chapter, literalism sees literal meaning as having an “advantage” over allusion, metaphor (*majāz*), and other kinds of meaning because it holds a “higher level of epistemological security” (p. 1). Detecting the author’s intended meaning, although ideal, is fraught with uncertainties for it involves discerning another person’s intentions. In other words, for legal theorists, the literal can be established through a strict science of language and more importantly functions as a “starting point” for understanding texts which gives it a central role in hermeneutics. Even if the literal meaning is shown not to be the author’s intended meaning, it is nevertheless essential for controlling and understanding the linguistic and semantic parameters of a word and the overall text in question.

Gleave makes it clear that his purpose is not to establish whether or not there is such a thing as literal meaning but instead to demonstrate the importance of its various concepts and the role they played for Muslim legal theorists of all sects as understanding how a language system works is key to grasping “God’s meaning when he addresses (*khitāb*) his servants” (p. 35). The first two chapters are useful introductions to concepts of literal meaning in legal theory. The third chapter, where the author traces one of the early concepts and uses of literal meaning in Qur’anic exegesis, delineates its early historical emergence in Islamic thought. This is significant for Islamic law and legal theory as later Muslim legal hermeneutics had “imprints” of the debates that took place in scriptural exegesis where literal meaning was often identified (e.g., through establishing what a word “literally” meant by tracing its “orig-

inal” usage in *kalām al-‘Arab* [the “linguistic norms” of the Arabs]) and contrasted with what God was presumed to have meant in the Qur’an. The author is careful in not suggesting that these exegetical notions were the cause behind “later doctrines of the literal/non-literal distinction in Muslim jurisprudence” (p. 72), but that it was a relationship of influence in terms of an early awareness that literal meaning existed and could be contrasted with what a text was actually trying to say.

The fourth chapter deals with literal meaning in early Islamic legal theory. Specifically, it focuses on three trends in early Sunni *uṣūl al-fiqh* represented by three Sunni jurists. The first trend is represented by the Hanafi Abu Bakr al-Jassas (d. 980 CE), who argued that literal meaning is “primarily bound up” with how ordinary language users and the community in general understand the text. This is what Gleave calls a “populist” and “non-technical” way of understanding language (the author asserts that language development over the passage of time is not regarded as problematic in this view). The second trend is represented by the Maliki and Ash‘ari theologian Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 1013 CE) who, contrary to al-Jassas, held an “elitist” view in which literal meaning is determined through linguistic and grammatical rules. The author views this as a construction that takes literal meaning away from the community and places it in the hands of the experts. The third trend, represented by a Maliki as well, is found in the works of Ali ibn Amr ibn al-Qassar (d. 1008 CE) who believed that literal meaning was primarily dictated or at least established as a starting point by the language of the Arabs (*luḡhat al-‘Arab*). The significance of these three trends is twofold: (1) They are evidence for the existence of *wad‘* and how one comes to know a *wad‘ī* meaning and (2) they also demonstrate clear markers of how language theory developed over time and how these theories could be traced back to early Qur’anic exegesis.

The fifth chapter explores early notions of literal meaning in Shi‘ism. Here, Gleave traces literal meaning back to the Imami hadith corpus and how the Imams understood literal meaning in Qur’anic exegesis. He also deals with conceptions of literal meaning in early Imami *fiqh* and *uṣūl* during the tenth and eleventh centuries. What is particularly interesting about this chapter is that despite the later harmonization of Imami language theory with those present in Sunni *uṣūl al-fiqh* (which for the author resulted in *uṣūl al-fiqh* transcending sectarian differences. On this note, however, it may be argued that both streams of Islam largely drew from a common intellectual pool), Gleave demonstrates how an analysis of early traditions (particularly those of Sulaym ibn Qays) indicate an early development of notions of literal meaning in Imami Shi‘ism that “ran alongside” and “perhaps predated those present within early

Sunni literature” (p. 130). This is noteworthy as it counters the claim of a number of scholars who view Shi‘i law and legal theory as largely, if not exclusively, the result of borrowing and copying Sunni intellectual enterprises.

The sixth chapter is an overview of literalism in Zahirism. Gleave presents the Zahiris as the most uncompromising of all groups in holding the supremacy of literal meaning. However, despite their strictness, the Zahiris also admitted in some instances that literal meaning may not always be the author’s actual intended meaning suggesting that at times even the strictest literalists had to admit the preponderance of *majāz*.

The final chapter focuses on two specific examples of literal meaning in modern Muslim legal theory: Salafism and Twelver/Imami Shi‘ism. Despite their doctrinal divergences, they show a common and renewed shift in leaning towards literalism. For the author, this is because literal meaning gives a sense of “comforting certainty” (p. 175) in a world where modernity is viewed as having exacerbated hermeneutic chaos.

Islam and Literalism is not only a wonderful contribution to studies of Islamic law and legal theory but also to the sciences of *tafsīr* and our overall understanding of the role that hermeneutics and conceptions of language play in the major schools of Islam. On this note, the author gives extensive coverage to Twelver Shi‘ism and provides a detailed picture of Shi‘i contributions to the field. This addition is welcome for Shi‘i studies in the West especially when considering the not-so-rare tendency to subtraditionalize the school’s legal system as a heterodox mimicry of mainstream Sunni jurisprudence.

There are, however, a few areas where some clarifications may be welcome. For example, on page 65 the author writes that *zāhir* was used as a preponderant meaning in later Muslim jurisprudence. This of course is correct, but *zāhir* was also used to define what may have first come to mind as the proper understanding of a text’s position and legal meaning only to be discarded as illusory vis-à-vis what is “more true” in signification.

On page 128 he cites Sulaym ibn Qays’ tradition as evidence for the early awareness of literal meaning in Shi‘i Qur’anic exegesis. He writes that the tradition, which could be dated back to the early or mid-ninth century, was transmogrified into al-Sharif al-Radi’s (d. 977 CE) literary compilation: *Nahj al-Balāghah*. A helpful expansion on this point would be that the tradition in question, also narrated in the earlier texts of al-Kulayni’s *Al-Kāfi* and al-Saduq’s *Al-Khiṣāl* (this confirms the author’s dating of the text), was considered “weak” according to the normative Usuli Imami view (*da‘īf ‘alā al-mashhūr*) as confirmed by the Safavid traditionist Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1698 CE). This point may be relevant as it raises questions about

the historical receptivity of the tradition by some Imamis and therefore the extent of its relevance to Imami Shi'ism. This reviewer, however, acknowledges that this latter point might be beyond the overall message the author is trying to convey.

There is notable gap in western academic studies on language theory in Islamic law. The book will be of tremendous use for specialists in linguistics, scholars of Islamic law, as well as lay people who wish to be acquainted with one of the major fields of Islamic legal theory. Aside references to *a fortiori* arguments in Islamic law, the subject of literal meaning is second to none and even surpasses references to *takhṣīṣ al-‘āmm* (qualifying a general legal clause) which are quite ubiquitous in their own right. Gleave's contribution is an important step in filling this crucial gap.

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