

Windows on the House of Islam

*Muslim Sources on Spirituality
and Religious Life*

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* Ibn Taymiya

Treatise on the Principles of Tafsir

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Taqi ad-Din ibn Taymiya, whose father and paternal grandfather were also deeply learned in the religious sciences, was born in the northern Syrian city of Harran in 1263. Fleeing the Mongol incursions, his family eventually moved to Damascus, where Ibn Taymiya was educated, earned acclaim as a Hanbali scholar-activist, and, in 1328, died imprisoned in the Citadel. He spent a total of more than six years in prison, both in Mamluk Egypt and in Damascus, condemned by his adversaries for his relentless attacks on what he deemed to be unacceptable innovations in Muslim thought and practice. Ibn Taymiya was a prolific author and his published works continue to exert a strong influence. What follows is an excerpt from his short hermeneutical treatise on the proper approach to the exegesis and explication of the Qur'an, *Introductory Treatise on the Principles of Tafsir*.⁹

PROLOGUE

One of the brethren asked me to write for him an introductory treatise that would include comprehensive rules prescribed for understanding the Qur'an, for knowing its interpretation and its meanings, for distinguishing—in both what has been handed down about it and what is the result of reasoning—between the truth and various kinds of falsehood, and for drawing attention to the decisive argument [*dalil*] that distinguishes correct opinions from incorrect. For the books composed about Qur'anic interpretation are laden with lean and fat, with obvious falsehood and evident truth. Now, true knowledge lies either in a trustworthy transmission [*naql*] from one who is protected from error [*ma'sum*] or in a statement for which there is a clearly understood argument. Anything else is either [a transmission] rejected as a forgery or remains in "suspension," neither recognized as spurious nor ever critically tested. There is a palpable need for the Muslim community to understand the Qur'an, which is "God's strong rope, the wise remembrance, the straight path, which passions cannot divert nor tongues confuse. Despite frequent repetition, it never wears out; its wonders never cease, and learned men never become satiated with it. Whoever professes it speaks the truth;

whoever acts upon it is rewarded; whoever judges by it acts justly; whoever summons [others] to [follow] it is [himself] guided to a straight path. Whoever arrogantly abandons it, God shall deal him a mortal blow. Whoever seeks guidance in anything else, God shall lead astray." . . .¹⁰

THE BEST METHODS OF INTERPRETATION: INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN THROUGH THE QUR'AN AND INTERPRETING IT THROUGH THE SUNNA

If someone asks, "What is the best method of interpretation?" the answer is that the soundest method is that whereby the Qur'an is interpreted through the Qur'an. For what is summarily expressed in one place is expatiated upon in another. What is abridged in one place is elaborated upon in another.

If that defeats your efforts, then you should resort to the Sunna, for the Sunna is what explains the Qur'an and elucidates it. Imam Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Idris ash-Shafi'i* has even said, "God's Messenger based his adjudications entirely upon what he understood of the Qur'an." God said, "We sent down to you the book with truth so that you may judge between people according to what God has shown you; do not, then, side in dispute with those who are faithless" [4:105]. And God said, "We sent down on you the remembrance so that you may make clear to people what has come down to them and perhaps they may reflect" [16:44]. And God said, "We only sent down the book on you so that you may clarify for them those matters on which they hold divergent views and [that it may be] a guidance and mercy for a people who believe" [16:64]. Because of this God's Messenger said, "Truly I was given the Qur'an and its like together," meaning the Sunna. The Sunna, too, came down upon him by inspiration, just like the Qur'an, except that the Sunna was not recited [to him] as was the Qur'an. Imam ash-Shafi'i and other leading scholars have drawn many inferences from that [hadith], but this is not the place [to discuss them].

The point is that you should seek the interpretation of the Qur'an

* Ash-Shafi'i (d. 820) stressed prophetic hadith as, along with the Qur'an, fundamental to the elaboration of Islamic jurisprudence.

from the Qur'an itself, and if you do not find it there, then from the Sunna. As God's Messenger said to Mu'adh when he sent him to Yemen: "On the basis of what will you judge?" Mu'adh answered, "By the book of God." "And if you do not find anything [there]?" "Muhammad pressed. Mu'adh responded, "By the Sunna of God's Messenger." "And if you still do not find anything?" Mu'adh replied, "I will give my own considered opinion." Then God's Messenger tapped Mu'adh's chest and exclaimed, "Praise belongs to God, who grants success to the messenger of God's Messenger in satisfying the Messenger of God." This hadith can be found in the various collections [*fi'l-masanid wa's-sunan*] with a flawless chain of transmitters.

INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN THROUGH THE STATEMENTS OF THE COMPANIONS

Then when you do not find the interpretation in the Qur'an or in the Sunna, you should have recourse to the statements of the Companions. This is because they are particularly knowledgeable in such matters, given what they actually witnessed with regard both to the Qur'an and to those circumstances of which they alone have cognizance. It is also because of their complete understanding and sound knowledge, especially that of the most learned and prominent among them, such as the four rightly guided and rightly guiding caliphs, and 'Abdallah ibn Mas'ud.* Imam Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir at-Tabari† stated that Abu Kurayb related that Jabir ibn Nuh transmitted from al-A'mash, on the authority of Abu 'd-Duha [Muslim ibn Sabih], that Masruq reported 'Abdallah, that is Ibn Mas'ud, to have said: "I swear by the one and only God, no verse from the book of God came down for which I was not the most knowledgeable about when it came down and where. If I knew where there was anyone, whom riding beasts could reach, more knowledgeable about the book of God than I, I would go to him." Al-A'mash also, on the authority

* Ibn Mas'ud (d. 653) was a Companion of the Prophet and a famous Kufan reciter of the Qur'an.

† At-Tabari (d. 923) is renowned for both his massive commentary on the Qur'an and his history of the world from creation to his own times. Samples of his work appear below in parts 2 and 7.

of Abu Wa'il [Shaqiq ibn Salama], reported Ibn Mas'ud to have said:

"When any one of us had learned ten verses, he would not go beyond them until he knew what they meant and how to put them into practice."

Among them (that is, those particularly knowledgeable in interpretation) stands the learned man and scholar 'Abdallah ibn 'Abbas,* cousin of God's Messenger and expositor of the Qur'an by virtue of the blessing obtained for him by the supplication of God's Messenger when he prayed, "O God, give him understanding in religion and teach him the interpretation [ta'wil] of the Qur'an." . . .

Yet sometimes sayings which they used to recount from the "people of the Book"[†] are transmitted on the Companions' authority, [a practice] which was approved by God's Messenger when he said, "Convey on my authority even a single verse and narrate [traditions] about the Banu Isra'il [i.e., Jews and Christians] without constraint. But whoever tells lies against me intentionally, let him take his seat in the Fire." Al-Bukhari related this on the authority of 'Abdallah ibn 'Amr [ibn al-'As].

Because of this, on the day of [the battle of] Yarmuk 'Abdallah ibn 'Amr acquired two camel loads of books belonging to the "people of the Book." He then used to transmit information from them, based on what he understood of this hadith to be the permission to do so.

Yet these Jewish and Christian accounts [*al-ahadith al-isra'iliyat*] should only be mentioned for purposes of attestation, not as a basis for belief. These accounts are essentially of three kinds. The first kind is what we know to be true because we already possess that which attests to its authenticity. That kind is sound. The second sort is that which we know to be untrue because of what we possess which contradicts it. The third type is that about which nothing can be said, being neither of the first kind nor the second. We should neither believe it nor declare it to be false. It is permissible to recount it, given what has just been said, but most of it provides no benefit in matters religious.

Among the "people of the Book" the scholars themselves disagree

* Ibn 'Abbas (d. 686), whose comments on Sura 1 were given above, was perhaps the most prominent early exegete.

[†] This expression—*ahl al-kitab* in Arabic—is a common Qur'anic designation for Jews and Christians as possessors of earlier revelations.

greatly in such matters and consequently disagreement is conveyed through the interpreters of the Qur'an [who utilize *isra'iliyat*]. . . .

The best thing to do in reporting matters about which there is disagreement is this: all of the views pertinent to that case should be included; the reader should be made aware of those that are valid and the erroneous ones should be refuted; and the extent to which the diversity of opinion is useful or fruitful should be mentioned lest prolonged controversy and disagreement over useless matters distract one from what is more important.

Anyone who reports a disputed question without including everything that people have said about it is acting deficiently, since the correct view may be in what he ignores. Whoever simply reports disputed matters and lets it go at that, without drawing attention to which views are sound, also acts deficiently. If he deliberately defines as sound what is not, he has supported falsehood. If he does so out of ignorance, then he has committed an error. The same can be said for one who generates disagreement about useless matters or transmits statements under many different wordings, the gist of which conveys but one or two views as far as sense is concerned. He, too, has certainly wasted his time and made much of what is unsound. He is like someone dressed in "the two garments of a lie" [*thawbay zur*].* But God is the One who leads us to the right answer.

INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN THROUGH THE STATEMENTS OF THE FOLLOWERS

When you find the interpretation in neither the Qur'an nor the Sunna, nor on the authority of the Companions, in that case much that is reported on the authority of the leading scholars goes back to the statements of the Followers, for example Mujahid ibn Jabr,[†] for he was a prodigy [*ayy*] in interpretation. Muhammad ibn Ishaq recounted from Aban ibn Salih that Mujahid said, "I spread out the *mushaf* [i.e., the text

* This expression, which can refer to someone who pretends to have more than he possesses, occurs in a Prophetic hadith recorded in the collections of both al-Bukhari and Muslim.

[†] Mujahid (d. ca. 720) was a famous reciter and exegete of the Qur'an among the "Followers," the generation after that of the Companions.

of the Qur'an] before Ibn 'Abbas three times, from its opening sura to its concluding one. At each and every verse I stopped him and asked him about it." At-Tirmidhi included a report about it from al-Husayn ibn Mahdi al-Basri, who received it from 'Abd ar-Razzaq, who was told by Mu'ammār that Qatada said, "There is no verse in the Qur'an about which I have not heard something [significant]." * At-Tirmidhi also included a report about it from Ibn Abi 'Umar, who received it from Sufyan ibn 'Uyayna on the authority of al-A'mash, who heard Mujahid say, "If I had read Ibn Mas'ud's version of the *mushaf* [*qira'ata Ibn Mas'ud*], I would not have needed to ask Ibn 'Abbas about many of the Qur'anic matters on which I sought information." Ibn Jarir [at-Tabari] reported from Abu Kurayb, who related from Talaq ibn Ghannam on the authority of 'Uthman al-Makki, that Ibn Abi Mulayka said, "I saw Mujahid, with his slates in hand, asking about the interpretation of the Qur'an. [Whenever he posed a question] Ibn 'Abbas said to him, 'Write.' This went on until Mujahid had asked Ibn 'Abbas about the interpretation of the whole text." For this reason Sufyan ath-Thawri used to say, "When interpretation comes to you from Mujahid, it is sufficient for you."

[After listing a number of Followers, he continues:] You may mention their statements about a particular verse. But when a difference of wording occurs in what they have expressed, the unknowledgeable person counts it as a divergence of opinion and conveys it as a plurality of views. That, however, is not the case. For among this group are those who express something in its exact wording [*bi-lazimihī*], or the equivalent of that [*nazirihī*], and those who render the essence of it [*bi-ʿaynihil*]. Taken as a whole, this amounts to a single idea expressed in many [different] passages. The intelligent person should certainly understand that. God, however, is the supreme Guide.

Shu'ba ibn al-Hajjaj and others said, "In legal stipulations [*al-furu'*] the statements of the Followers do not constitute sufficient proof [*hujja*], so how can they do so in matters of interpretation?" That is to say, they

* In the *Sunan* of at-Tirmidhi this hadith from Qatada (d. 735), another noted exegete of the Followers' generation, is also inserted among the accounts from Mujahid.

are not considered a sufficient proof against the statements of other Followers who disagree with them. This, in fact, is a sound argument. When the Followers are in agreement, it unquestionably constitutes sufficient proof. If, however, they disagree, the statement of one does not disprove either the statement of another Follower or that of succeeding generations. In that situation one must resort to the language of the Qur'an or to the Sunna or to Arabic usage generally or to the statements of the Companions about the matter.

INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN ON THE BASIS OF PERSONAL OPINION

Interpreting the Qur'an solely on the basis of personal opinion [*ra'y*] is strictly forbidden. . . . Ibn 'Abbas reported, "God's Messenger said, 'Whoever speaks about the Qur'an without knowledge will assuredly take his seat in the Fire.'" Jundab related, "God's Messenger said, 'Whoever speaks about the Qur'an on the basis of his personal opinion, even if he gets it right, has still erred.'" . . .

Similarly, it has been reported that some scholars, both Companions and others, spoke harshly about the interpretation of the Qur'an without well-founded knowledge. No one should suggest, however, that to say Mujahid, Qatada, and other such scholars interpreted the Qur'an means that they spoke about the Qur'an or interpreted it without well-founded knowledge or on their own accord. What, in fact, has been recounted of them definitely confirms what we have said, that is, that they did not speak of their own accord or without knowledge. Whoever *does* speak about the Qur'an on the basis of his own personal opinion feigns a knowledge that he does not possess and acts contrary to the command he has been given. Even if, in actuality, he were to get the meaning right, he would still be erring, because he did not come at the matter in the proper way.

The same can be said for anyone who, in a state of ignorance, judges between people. He, too, is in the Fire, even if, in actuality, his judgment accords with the right one. Still, he is less blameworthy than one who makes a wrongful judgment. God, however, knows best. In similar fashion did God call those who make slanderous accusations liars when He said,

"Since they did not bring witnesses, in God's eyes they are liars" [24:13]. For one who utters slander is a liar, even were he to slander someone who has actually committed adultery. That is because he has made a statement about something on which he has no right to comment, and because he has feigned a knowledge which he does not possess. But, again, God knows best.

For this reason a group of our distinguished predecessors refrained from any interpretation of which they had no knowledge. . . . Abu Bakr as-Siddiq* exclaimed, "What earth would support me and what heaven would overshadow me were I to say about the book of God what I knew not." . . .

Ayyub, Ibn 'Awn, and Hisham ad-Dastawa'i reported that Muhammad ibn Sirin said, "I asked 'Abida as-Salmāni about a verse of the Qur'an and he replied, 'Those who know why the Qur'an was sent down (that is, the circumstances of revelation) have died, so fear God and follow the right course.'"

Abu 'Ubayd related from Mu'adh, who transmitted from Ibn 'Awn that 'Ubaydallah ibn Muslim ibn Yasar reported that his father said, "When you speak about God stop to consider the premises and the consequences of what you say."

Hashim related from Mughira that Ibrahim said, "Our associates have always feared and dreaded interpreting the Qur'an."

Shu'ba related from 'Abdallah ibn Abi as-Safar that ash-Sha'bi said, "By God, there is not a single verse about which I have not asked, and yet it is God's own transmission!"

Abu 'Ubayd reported from Hashim, who related from 'Umar ibn Abi Za'ida on the authority of ash-Sha'bi that Masruq said, "Beware of interpreting the Qur'an because it is nothing less than God's own transmission!"

These and other well-founded reports, which come down to us from our leading predecessors, are concerned with their refusal to say anything

* Abu Bakr (d. 634) was the first caliph of the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad.

of which they have no knowledge about the interpretation of the Qur'an. There is no objection, however, to one who speaks from a basis of [sound] linguistic and legal knowledge.

There is no contradiction, consequently, in the fact that statements about the interpretation of the Qur'an have been reported from these and others, because they talked about what they knew and kept quiet about what they did not know. This is what everyone should do. Just as one should remain silent about what he knows not, one should speak when asked about what he knows. This is supported by God's saying, "You shall expound it to people and not suppress it" (3:187), and by the hadith that is handed down through various lines of transmission: "Whoever is asked about something he knows but suppresses it, will be bridled on the Day of Resurrection with a bridle of fire."

Ibn Jarir [at-Tabari] reported from Muhammad ibn Bashshar, who transmitted from Mu'ammal on the authority of Sufyan who reported from Abu 'z-Zinad that Ibn 'Abbas said, "Interpretation of the Qur'an is of four kinds: a kind that the Arabs recognize on the basis of their [native] speech; interpretation that no one can be excused for not knowing; interpretation that the scholars [alone] know; and interpretation that only God knows." For God, may He be exalted and glorified, is all-knowing.

* Sacred Text and the Mihrab

In many mosques the primary visual focus is the niche (mihrab) that indicates the *qibla*, the ritual orientation to Mecca. Around the outer edges of the tile mihrab shown in figure 7 runs the same text featured on the drum of the Sultan's mosque in Shah Alam, near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (9:18-19; see fig. 1), in *muhaqqaq* script, but here the inscription also includes the following three verses (20-22) encouraging believers to emigrate (lit., "make a *hijra*") and strive "in the cause of God" in sure hope of eternal reward. Around the inner arch runs a hadith, in Kufic script, about the five pillars; and at the center of the niche another brief hadith declares: "The mosque is the house of every God-fearing person."¹¹

The inscription in thuluth script above the mihrab of the Rustem Pasha mosque (1561-1562) built by Sulayman the Magnificent's chief architect,

Notes

PREFACE

1. In that volume, a concern with form and function in textual and visual sources provided the chief organizational and structural considerations. Thematic content in the works studied was important, but generally remained a sometimes distant third. So, for example, chapter 6, on pedagogy, gathered various literary forms (letter, lecture later transcribed by a disciple, compendium, and lexicon) among whose principal functions pedagogy seems to dominate. Here I have modified that overriding concern with form and function somewhat. Now thematic content emerges as an organizational category in its own right. For example, while the Prophet's Hadith as a foundational source belong formally and functionally in part 1, I have here sometimes included selections from Muhammad's sayings in other parts when thematic content warrants. Part 2 thus includes a hadith on how the practice of five daily ritual prayers became the standard for the Muslim community. Part 3's section on wisdom literature includes a selection from the Qur'an's Surat Luqman as a scriptural paradigm of wisdom. And part 7 features an extended hadith narrative of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension as the exemplar of mystical experience. For pedagogical purposes, therefore, one can either pair the respective sections of the two volumes, or dip more selectively into the parts of this anthology to illustrate specific sections of volume one.

PART ONE

1. An earlier, more fully annotated version appeared in James W. Morris, "Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities," *Journal of Turkish Studies* (Harvard), 18 (1994): 201-224 (Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift issue). Note that, because of printer's errors, verses 12-14 and 33 are missing in that version.
2. Translated from the Arabic in Muhammad M. Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari* (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1983), 4:283.
3. Translated from the Arabic in Ghazi Ahmad, *Sayings of Muhammad* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1972), 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. Texts translated from the Arabic in William Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 117, 182-184; and adapted from Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 86, 116, 131, 307.

6. Muqatil ibn Sulayman, *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Cairo: n.p., 1979). On Muqatil, see Elz under Mukatil ibn Sulayman. On his tafsir, see John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sec. IV, passim.
7. Text is from a work printed in Cairo in 1951 under the title *Tanwir al-miqbas min tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, ascribed to al-Firzabadi (d. 1414), although this is likely a false ascription. On the text itself, see A. Rippin, "Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas and Criteria for Dating Early Tafsir Texts," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 38-83, 79-80. On Ibn 'Abbas as a commentator, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, sec. IV, passim, and the references to the *Tafsir al-Kalbi*, which is identical to this text.
8. *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:264-265.
9. Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim ibn Taymiya, *Muqaddimatun fi usul at-tafsir*, ed. 'Adnan Zurzur (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1391/1971). Several sections have been abridged in the interest of space.
10. Variants of this hadith may be found in both the *Sunan* of ad-Darimi and the *Jami'* of at-Tirmidhi, two of the six most authoritative collections.
11. Translated by Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, summer 1992 issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, commenting on fig. 38 (p. 29).
12. See Mohamed Hosein Halimi, "Le Mihrab en Iran et sa décoration," in *Le Mihrab dans l'architecture et la religion musulmanes*, ed. Alexandre Papadopoulos (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 95-96.
13. Geza Fehervari, "Tombstone or Mihrab? A Speculation," in *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Richard Etinghausen (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 241-252; Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum, 1991), 96. Cf. Nuha N. Khoury, "The Mihrab Image: Commemorative Themes in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Muqarnas* 9 (1992): 11-28.
14. The translation is based on the text of the work as edited by Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari and published in Cairo in 1359/1940 under the title *Qanun at-ta'wil*. The work is listed by Carl Brockelmann (*Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 1:539, no. 21) under the title *Al-qanun al-kulli fi 't-ta'wil*. An article on Ghazali's *Qanun al-kulli fi 't-ta'wil* with a partial Turkish translation was published by M. Serafeddin under the title "Gazaliniin Te'vil Hakkinda Basilmanis bir Eseri" in *Darulfunun Ilahiyat Fakultesi Mecmuasi*, 1st ser., vol. 4, no. 16 (1930): 46-58. Passages cited from the Qur'an are taken from the English translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall.
15. Reading *fawq* instead of *mauqif*.
16. *Manazil al-qamar*: As explained by Paul Kunitzsch, "The stations of the Moon are a series of 28 positions in the heavens through which the Moon passes, in its cycle from new moon to new moon, during each of its 27 or 28 nights. Each individual station has a name and is identified with one or more fixed stars in its immediate vicinity." See Paul Kunitzsch, *Arabische Sternnamen in Europa* (Wiesbaden: n.p., 1959), 53. See also his article "Al-manazil" in *Elz*, 6:374-376.
17. Such as "Alif Lam Mim," the first verse of Sura 2.
18. A reference to a well-known tradition; see Graham, *Divine Word*, 202.
19. Nawawi, *At-ribyan fi adab hamalat al-Qur'an*, the Cairo edition of Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa Awlad, 1379/1960.