

## WHEN IS A MIDRASH NOT A MIDRASH? AN EXPERIMENT IN POLYSEMY, MIDRASHIC SPECULATION AND QUR'ĀNIC EXEGESIS

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It is He who revealed the Scripture to you; verses containing clear judgements – the heart of the Book – and others that are allegorical. Those with deviation in their hearts follow what is open to metaphorical interpretation, seeking conflict, giving them interpretations of their own. No one save Allāh knows their meaning. Those firmly rooted in knowledge say, “We believe in it, as all of it is from our Lord”. Only those who have wisdom understand.

Qur'ān 3: 6-7

This quotation from the Qur'ān informs its exegesis. In its classical traditions, it is open to three forms of interpretation:

- 1) *Tafsīr bil-riwāyah* (or: *bil-ma'tūr*)
- 2) *Tafsīr bil-ra'y*
- 3) *Tafsīr bil-ishārah*

The first is interpretation by transmission. That is how the Prophet interpreted them (or how his Companions or his family [Ahl al-Bayt] preserved them) text as preserved in the Ḥadīth literature. The second is interpretation arrived at via reason, based on sound sources. The third is interpretation arrived at by indications and signs that go beyond the outer, plain, meaning.

The third is clearly rejected by the orthodox, being favored by Sufis and other mystically inclined. One might think that the second would provide the basis for on-going interpretation of the text over the centuries. But an oft-cited Ḥadīth states that the Prophet condemned it in no uncertain terms. (In a (Sunni) tradition attributed to Ibn Jarīr, who attributed it to Ibn 'Abbās, there is a fourth aspect to exegesis, the linguistic, i.e., that aspect understood best by Arabs because of their familiarity with the languages. But it is not given the same priority as the other three.)

There are two words commonly used for “commentary,” namely *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*. Both derive from roots meaning, “to comment, interpret,” and depending on the time and circumstances, they can be pure synonyms. But the latter has for Sunni Muslims taken on the connotation of allegorical meaning, and is rejected. Among Shī’a Muslims, however, it refers to allegorical meaning preserved by the Imams in their Ḥadīth, which makes them legitimate.

Yet texts cry out to be interpreted. As each and every reader brings her or his background to any text, so even the simple matter of reading itself becomes an act of interpretation. When it comes to the Qur’ān, however, the reader, especially a reader new to the text and from another Scriptural traditions is confounded, for the “rules of play” are simply different.

In the Jewish tradition of rabbinic exegesis of Scripture there is a long tradition of seeking a deeper meaning from the Holy Scriptures. Not satisfied with the purely apparent surface denotation, there has been a desire to find further connotations. This literature bifurcates into legal and non-legal branches. The non-legal is called “Midrash”, from the radical  $\psi$ - $\gamma$ - $\gamma$  whose core meaning is “to seek; inquire”. An extended, indeed, even more common meaning is “to expound”, especially to make a homily. Furthermore, within the rabbinic tradition there are layers within the non-literal that touch on the esoteric and the mystical.

Within the exegetical tradition of Christianity, there are also the two layers of an apparent surface meaning and an exegetical meaning (“allegorical”). And the exegetical layer has further subdivisions of the moral (“tropological”) and the anagogic (“escatological”).

Within Islam the Qur’ān has a surface meaning (*ẓāhir*) and a hidden meaning (*bāṭin*). As mentioned above, the hidden dimension is largely ignored among Sunni Muslims, with the exception of the Sufis, who admittedly are of a mystical bent. Within the Shī’ite tradition, there are both the legitimate interpretations of some problematic verses attributed to the Imams and questionable ones raised by sects some consider heretical.

The question being raised here is what would happen if the exegetical hermeneutic of Midrash were applied to the Qur’ān. I am thinking specifically of Sūrah 55, which is entitled, *al-Raḥmān*, “The Beneficent”. It is unlike much of the Qur’ān in that it appears to be a singular whole, without those discontinuities that vex non-Muslims who approach it, especially for the first time. (This particular Sūrah also has an antiphonal quality to it, with a single verse being repeated, such that such some scholars have mistakenly likened it to Psalm 136. But aside from the formal, antiphonal quality, there is no other significance resemblance.)

Within the first four verses there is something of a semantic discontinuity or “riddle”: The Beneficent; / He taught the Qur’ān; / He created Humankind; / He taught him/it *Bayān*. (Let us leave this word untranslated for the moment.) The

riddle is: To whom did Allāh teach the Qur'ān before He created Mankind? Many exegetes "understand" that Allāh taught it to the Muhammadaan Light (*Nūr Muḥammadī*) that He created before He created the Universe. That may satisfy some, but other may feel it begs the question. Both Islam and Judaism embrace the principle that there is no sense of time within the text, so consequently this riddle is not a serious issue for Muslim exegetes. A solution to this "riddle" did occur to me, but it involved using principles not found within the Islamic tradition, but within the Jewish, namely the Midrashic.

Curious to see if the traditional exegetes noted or comments upon this "riddle", I embarked on an admittedly unsystematic search of traditional commentaries on the Qur'ān. Like traditional Jewish commentaries on the Torah, Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān can be a treasure trove of information, but in my quest I found nothing remotely resembling my insight. At this point, let us turn to the opening verses of Sūrah 55 of the Qur'ān, and let us examine them in reverse order.

"He taught him/it '*Bayān*'." Who is the object "him/it" in this verse? Traditional exegesis, both Sunni and Shī'ite accept either the Prophet Muhammad or Humankind, with the second verse, "He taught the Qur'ān" being in anticipation of the fuller fourth verse. Indeed, in calling itself *Kitāb Mubīn*, "a clear writing" or "scripture", the Qur'ān sanctions *Bayān* as a synonym for the Qur'ān. Indeed, all the commentaries concur that verse means, "Allāh taught him [Muhammad/Humankind] the Qur'ān".

The word *Bayān* can have several meanings in Arabic. In the Qur'ānic idiom, the word *Bayān*, based on the triliteral root *Bā'Yā'-Nūn*, means "to expound; to render clearly", Its derived meanings include nouns translated as "explanation; distinctness and clarity of speech".

It is interesting to see how several standard translations into English treat this verse:

YUSUF ALI: He has taught him speech (and intelligence).

PICKTHALL: He hath taught him utterance.

SHAKIR: Taught him the mode of expression.

ASAD: He has imparted unto him articulate thought and speech.

BEWLEY: [T]aught him clear expression.

IRVING: [T]aught him self-expression

AHMED ALI: [T]aught him to express clearly.

Yet how odd that none of these modern translations captures the classical interpretation that Allāh taught Muhammad or Humankind the Qur'ān. All of them, however, do concentrate on the subtlety of the word, *Bayān*. A person



knowledgeable of Arabic can also see the same trilateral root as having a slightly different but related aspect, in the preposition, *bayn*, ‘among’ or ‘between’. That is, one can easily make the case that the ability to distinguish between items serves to clarify which is which. In Arabic grammar, the *af‘ala* form (which Western-trained Arabists call the Fourth Derivation) of this radical would mean, “to explain, make clear, etc.”

A person knowledgeable of Hebrew can see this Fourth Derivation as parallel to the Hebrew *hif'il* form, which also has grammatical causation at its lexical root. The cognate trilateral root in Hebrew, *Bēt-Yōd-Nūn*, also carries the idea of discernment, as the preposition also means “among” or “between”, and the *hif'il* form of the verb has a slightly oblique meaning, namely, “to understand”, that is, to be able to distinguish between X and Y. The Verbal Noun of this root in Hebrew, *Bīnah*, has the additional notions of “mental intelligence; intellect; insight”. Etymologically the Arabic *Bayān* and Hebrew *Bīnah* may not be cognates, but they certainly carry similar pods of meaning.

The word *Bayān* in the verse is marked by a case ending that Western trained Arabists call the Accusative or Objective Case. But this case can also be used to express instrumentality, or specification (called *Tamyīz* in Classical Arabic grammatical terminology). This verse could then be interpreted, as mentioned above, “Allāh made Humankind different from the rest of Creation by the distinctiveness of an intellect and the powers of discernment.” Indeed, some commentaries make the point that *Bayān* is what distinguishes Humankind from the rest of Creation. Hence the many and slightly different translations/interpretations just given above do fit the bill.

Add to this mix the verb in that verse, *‘allama*. This is the standard verb in Arabic of all ages and varieties meaning, “to teach, instruct”, coming from the trilateral root, *‘Ayn-Lām-Mīm*, whose plain core meaning is “knowledge”. A person knowledgeable of Hebrew will recognize that the *Pr‘el* form of the verb parallels Arabic’s Second Derivation, *fa‘ala*. In both Arabic and Hebrew, this form of the verb can mean either “to do with intensity” or “to cause X to do Y”. In the case of *‘allama*, “X causes Y to know”, that is, “X teaches Y”.

All commentaries accept that the verb *‘allama* is derived from the nominal form, *‘ilm*, “knowledge”. Yet there is a homophonous root in Arabic whose nominal forms, *‘alam* and *‘alāmah* means “sign”, or “token”, or “mark”, it can even mean “flag, emblem, or standard” in some forms of Arabic. The plural form *‘alāmāt* occurs in the Qur’ān, meaning “signs” or “marks”, synonymous with *Āyāt* (synonymous with Hebrew, *ōtōt*) [the Qur’ān is considered the greatest of Allāh’s Signs]. And there is a homophonous verbal form in the Second Derivation that means “to denote, cause to stand out”.

So we now have the following several possibilities:

“Allāh taught him the Qur’ān.”

“Allāh taught him Discernment.”

“Allāh caused him to stand out by his ability to discern.”

“Allāh caused him to stand out by the Qur’ān.”

[i.e., only Muhammad/Humankind received the Qur’ān.]

With regard to the second verse: “He taught the Qur’ān”, none of the commentators address this question, tacitly seem to agree that the second verse anticipates the fourth. (Regarding the last meaning of the verb, *‘allama*, I did ultimately find it in the commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), whose gloss was somewhat different: Allāh caused the Qur’ān to stand out as a sign of prophecy.)

Yet there is another unrelated lexical concept associated with this same triliteral root, namely, *‘ālam*, ‘the cosmos; world’ (cognate to the Hebrew *‘ōlam*). This word is a “perfect nominal”, that is, it is not derived or related to any verb. But let us just suppose hypothetically that there existed a verb, “to cosmos”, Or better, “to cause a cosmos”, or, “to bring a world into being”, based on *‘ālam*, then *‘allama* would be a logical candidate.

Let us also recall that the word *al-Qur’ān* in this second verse is also in the accusative/objective case, and that this case can be used to refer to instrumentality. (Normally, instrumentality is expressed by the preposition, *bi-*, one can make a case for the use of the Accusative. But, then, one can claim this is a form of poetic speech, and poetry by definition and essence pushes the boundaries of language to its limits, if not beyond.) In this case, I can then project, “Allāh created the cosmos with or by means of the Qur’ān”. (I took the liberty of checking with colleagues in England, Saudi Arabia, and England, both Sunni and Shī’ite, and no one seems to recall any Ḥadīth in which the Qur’ān plays such a role.)

Yet such a notion is at the very heart of Jewish exegesis. At the very beginning of Midrash Genesis Rabba, the text says that as a builder consults a plan in constructing a palace, so God consulted the Torah when He created the cosmos. Moreover, there is also a tradition that the word, *Be-reshit* ..., “In the beginning ...” was a coded expression meaning, “With Wisdom, [God created Heaven and Earth]”. This is stated more explicitly in the late [eighth century of the Common Era] Midrashic work, Pirkē de-Rabi Eli’ezer [whose references to the Ishmaelites reveal an Islamic context], where, at the beginning of Chapter 10 it is stated, “... the Holy One, blessed be He, took counsel with the Torah, whose name is *Tūshiyah* (“Stability” or “Wisdom”) with reference to the creation of the world ...” (See also Abraham Joshua Heschel’s magisterial work, *Torah min ha-Shamayim* (London, 1965) which contains a plethora of related sources.)

One can take this image one step further. In Proverbs 8:14, Wisdom says, “Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am undertaking, power is mine”. The Hebrew is far more revealing than the English, *Lī `etsah ve-tūshiyah; anī vīnah lī gevūrah*. One can perceive in this verse a pseudo-chiasmus. *Tūshiyah* and *bīnah* are both forms of wisdom, and *Gevūrah* and *`etsah* form a parallel pair if one allows a play on the letters, whereby the *tsadeh* of *`etsah* is replaced by a *zayin*. Here, the “strength” of *gevūrah* is paralleled by the “might” of *`ōz*. Again, wisdom and counsel come together, with the word *bīnah* at the fore.

If God consulted the Torah at the beginning of the creation of the cosmos, where did the Torah come from? The apocryphal book of Ben Sira seems to be the earliest textual evidence identifying the Torah with personified Wisdom. And later rabbis posited the Torah as one of the half-dozen or so things God created before embarking on the creation of the Cosmos itself. This is in marked contrast to the medieval Islamic metaphysicians, who tied themselves in knots over whether the Qur’ān was created or was eternal.

So where do we stand with regard to the fourth verse of Sūrah 55?

Allāh taught [him] *Bayān* = Reason.

Allāh taught [him] *Bayān* = Qur’ān.

Allāh made [him] stand out from the rest of creation by *Bayān* = Reason.

Allāh made [him] stand out from the rest of creation by *Bayān* = Speech.

Allāh “created” [it = the world] by the means of the Qur’ān.

Applying the Midrashic principles used in rabbinical literature to the Qur’ān, one can find remarkable parallels to classic rabbinical cosmology, yet they are totally unsupported by any Islamic textual tradition. This leads to an important question: Has any of this relevance for understanding or interpreting the Qur’ān, especially as it is unacceptable in terms of traditional Islamic exegesis? I am in no position to judge. But I can say that I have found at least one other unitary Sūrah that lends itself to “Midrashic analysis” with interesting results, which I will publish soon, *in shā’a Allāh*, and am searching for more.