AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

APPROACHING THE QURʾĀN THROUGH THE LENS OF MUḤAMMAD SHAḤRŪR: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

by
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ABSTRACT
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Title: Approaching the Qurʾān Through the Lens of Muḥammad Shaḥrūr: A Critical Analysis

"Read the Qurʾān as if it was revealed last night", this is a statement said and endorsed by the Syrian academic Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (1938-2019). Distinct from the long established theory that to understand the Qurʾān is to first learn about the culture in which it was revealed, Shaḥrūr's main thesis in approaching "God's Book" deviates from the norm by arguing for a contemporary reading (*qirāʾa muʿāṣira*) of this Holy Scripture, in a manner by which the reader must approach the text from his own historical position. For Shaḥrūr, past interpretations are outdated and, hence, are no longer adequate. In his view, counting on medieval dogmas and solutions decided upon during previous eras holds the Muslims back from reaching real reform and progress. He emphasizes the authority of one's own rational and critical thinking, as against "borrowed authority" and the inherited traditional *tafsīr* or *fiqh* works (*musallamāt mawrūtha*) of medieval Islam, irrespective of the level of subjectivity or unfamiliarity. He further argues that even the Prophets' prominence is solely derived from their own rational judgements (*ijtihād)* of God's objective truth, and maintains that each prophet taught the "universal message" of God in relation to the particular concerns of his people at that time. Accordingly, he reasons that once the prophetic era comes to an end, its revelations and teachings turn into historical perceptions with the passing of time, and must eventually be superseded by the universal concerns of all humankind. Moreover, he adds that approaching the Qurʾān should be based on modern sciences, such as civil engineering, physics, mathematics, as well as Western philosophies.

Shaḥrūr is not the first intellectual in history to believe in the universal epistemology of Islam, and like other Muslim reformers before him, he strived to combine Qurʾanic with modern worldviews. However, it is Shaḥrūr's "unorthodox" approach to the Qurʾān that differentiates him from his earlier counterparts. He breaks with the norms of tradition and gives new meanings for the divine words and consequently reaches a new sense of the Qurʾanic verses. Unlike traditional exegetes, non-synonymity and non-abrogation are at the core of his methodology. His "unorthodoxy" can further be illustrated by his theory of "God's limits" (*ḥudūd*- upper and lower boundaries) in relation to Islamic law, within which, according to him, societies can create their own rules and laws. These limits, Shaḥrūr argues, are eternal, immutable and absolute whereas human legislations (the flexibility within God's boundaries) are relative and subject to change. With his theory of limits, he revises Islamic law and establishes new codes of practice with respect to family law and *ʿibādāt* rituals. Furthermore, in Shaḥrūr's view, ethics must be prioritized over rituals and the strict adherence to *sharīʿa* law. Like his Western

counterparts, Shaḥrūr considers Islamic law as ineffective and deficient. He calls for the obliteration of the *Sharīʿa* and its replacement with Western/ civil legislations and institutions. The significance of his argument can be illustrated in years of public debates regarding the verbatim execution of *sharīʿa* law in Muslim countries.

Muḥammad Shaḥrūr's controversial works arouse the mind to intense scrutiny specifically when certain ideological dilemmas present themselves. There is no doubt that Shaḥrūr's "unorthodox" works challenged the authority of traditional Islamic institutions. Alarmed with the popularity of Shaḥrūr's works, and troubled that it would become an influential source, a large number of traditional *'ulamā'* and *fuqahā'* refuted his ideas in various ways, however, not effectively. In the sense that, contrary to their intention, Shaḥrūr's books became even more popular among Muslim readers. And despite the fact that further publications by Shaḥrūr were banned in certain Arab countries, they kept in circulation. He gained publicity through Syrian and Emirati TV interviews, and was awarded the U.A.E. "Sheikh Zayed Award" in 2017.

Shaḥrūr's critics approached his work from a purely religious and emotional perspective. The purpose of this study, however, is to evaluate Shaḥrūr's theories and arguments from a secular standpoint, try to allocate hidden objectives /intentions, and to assess whether his method fits in line with this new group of approaches which some revisionist historians claim should be considered as an approach in Historiography. This thesis intends to demonstrate that, despite the fact that the Qurʾān's essential message is active piety where all narratives fall under the categorization of moral choices, referring back to the historical context in which the Qurʾān was revealed is crucial to understanding the divine text, and neglecting it is a kind of reductionism. This study also aims at proving that the Shaḥrūr phenomenon is not original, and that his notion of the universality of the Qurʾān along with his theory of limits, despite his progressive intentions, are not realistic, and embody as Yūsuf al-Ṣayḍāwī said: "*bayḍat al-dīk*" (a rooster's egg).

This thesis utilizes a descriptive-historical research methodology. It is a systematic analysis and description of Muḥammad Shaḥrūr's works and theoretical conclusions. The purpose is to provide a detailed representation of Shaḥrūr's ideas as a means of generating hypotheses and pinpointing areas of controversy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> "The exegete, unlike God, is not impartial. In his humble attempt to illuminate and explicate the speech of God, the exegete, as a human, remains conditioned by the surrounding circumstances, and is, more often than not, driven by his theological and political dogmatic agenda". [1]

"Read the Qurʾān as if it was revealed last night", this is a statement said and endorsed by the Syrian academic Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (1938-2019). Distinct from the long established theory that to understand the Qurʾān is to first learn about the culture in which it was revealed, Shaḥrūr's main thesis in approaching "God's Book"[2] deviates from the norm by arguing for a contemporary reading (*qirāʾa muʿāṣira*) of this Holy Scripture, in a manner by which the reader must approach the text from his own historical position. For Shaḥrūr, past interpretations are outdated and, hence, are no longer adequate. He maintains that each prophet taught the "universal message" of God in relation to the particular concerns of his people at that time. Accordingly, he reasons that once the prophetic era comes to an end, its revelations and teachings turn into historical perceptions with the passing of time, and must eventually be superseded by the universal concerns of all humankind.[3]

Muḥammad Shaḥrūr is not the first intellectual in history to believe in the universal epistemology of Islam, and like other Muslim reformers before him, he strived

[1] Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

[2] In all his works, Shaḥrūr designates the Qurʾān as "*Kitāb Allāh*" (the Book of God), hence this term will be frequently used throughout this work.

[3] Andreas Christmann, *The Qur'ān, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xxxii. This book is a representation of most of Shaḥrūr's works translated and edited by Christmann. Hence, it is used as the main source throughout this work.

to combine Qurʾanic with modern worldviews. He even developed the thesis that all the eternal principles of *al-islām* are undistinguishable from the moral and religious perceptions of the world.

In 1990, Shaḥrūr's first book *Al-Kitāb wa'l-Qurʾān- Qirāʾa Muʿāṣira*, initiated a controversy among many Muslim scholars in the Arab world. The debates further generated numerous short reviews, journal articles, in addition to eighteen books within a span of ten years. These respondents resorted to a variety of different strategies in order to prove Shaḥrūr's "religious deviancy" from the "accepted-righteous" teachings of Islam. This, in turn, produced various distinct but mutually inclusive theories. These are: (1) the Conspiracy theory; (2) the Satanic theory; (3) the Infiltration theory; (4) the Revival of Medieval Heresy or Modernism theory; and (5) the New Religion theory.[4]

Through the above mentioned theories, these critics re-emphasized the already established norms and ideologies by emphatically marginalizing the so-called "modern" approaches like Shaḥrūr's. While some intellectuals, like the literary critic Naʿīm al-Yāfī praised Shaḥrūr's book as "a work that examines the Qurʾān in a sharp-minded manner, reveals a scientific spirit, a holistic vision, and a progressive modern point of view"[5], other scholars saw it as a threat, as did one of Syria's most influential *ʿulamāʾ*, Sheikh Ramaḍān al-Būṭī. The latter published an article in *Nahj al-Islām*, the official journal of the Syrian *Awqāf* Ministry, in which he condemned the work as the result of a Zionist conspiracy. According to al-Būṭī, a Zionist organization produced a new

[4] Andreas Christmann, "73 Proofs of Dilettantism: The Construction of Norm and Deviancy in the Responses to Mohamad Shahrour's Book *al-Kitāb wa'l-Qur'ān: Qirā'a Muʿāṣira*," *Die Welt Des Islams* 45, no. 1 (2005): 40, doi: 10.1163/1570060053628052.

[5] Naʿīm al-Yāfī, "al-Qurʾān wa'l-Kitāb: Qirāʾa Muʿāṣira", *Al-Usbūʿ Al-Adabī 247* (January 1991): 3.

interpretation of the Qurʾān and attributed it to an Arab writer.[6] By the same token, al-Būṭī's student, Shawḳī Abū Khalīl, wrote that this book is a "clear sign of a well-orchestrated intellectual war against Islam".[7] Several other respondents embraced this conspiracy theory and condemned Shaḥrūr's call for rationalism as a devilish scheme to abolish the Islamic religion.

The debates reached their peak in the year 2000, when Muḥammad Ṣayyāḥ al-Maʿarrāwiyya wrote a 1014-page *magnum opus* in refutation of Shaḥrūr's work and all other similar "anti-Islamic approaches". He maintained that these works "cunningly reshape society" by manipulating the Muslim mind in an attempt to dominate in religion, education, culture and politics. Sheikh al-Maʿarrāwiyya explained infiltration through the introduction of "heretical" or secularist concepts (*ashkāl ilḥādiyya aw ʿilmāniyya*) camouflaged in Islamic forms (*ashkāl islāmiyya*) to convince Muslims of the latter's compatibility with Islam.[8]

Furthermore, despite Shaḥrūr's efforts to establish a new interpretation of the Qurʾān, many of his critics condemned his work as a revival of anti-Islamic beliefs and practices going back to the Prophetic era. Sheikh al-Maʿarrāwiyya, for example, sees Shaḥrūr's contemporary reading as a revitalization of Abū Lahab's legacy against Prophet Muḥammad and the Meccan polytheists' denial of the Qurʾanic message.[9] On the other hand, Sheikh al-ʿAkk links Shaḥrūr's book to "four dangerous heresies: (a) the interpretations of the *Bāṭiniyya*-sect; (b) the philosophical speculations of the old

[6] Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al- Būṭī, "al-Khalfiyya al-Yahūdiyya li-Shiʿār Qirāʾa Muʿāṣira," (The Jewish Origins of the Call for a Contemporary Reading) *Nahj al-Islām 42* (December 1990): 17-21.

[7] Shawḳī Abū Khalīl, "Taqātuʿāt Khaṭīra fī Darb al-Qirāʾāt al-Muʿāṣira" (Dangerous Crossings on the Path of Contemporary Readings) *Nahj al-Islām* 43 (March 1991): 17-21.

[8] Christmann, 73 Proofs of Dilettantism, 47; al-Maʿarrāwiyya, *al-Mārkslāmiyya wa'l-Qurʾān* (2000), 300.

[9] Ibid.

rationalist school of the *Muʿtazila*; (c) the writings of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*; and (d) the thoughts of esoteric-speculative Sufism".[10] Moreover, Shaḥrūr's notion that the Qurʾān applies to all times and places (*ṣāliḥ fi kull zamān wa makān*), and his sole reliance on the divine text, led his critic ʿAli Nūḥ to categorize him as a "fundamentalist" (*uṣūlī*) serving the interests of the Islamist movements.[11] Other views link Shaḥrūr's works to the "modernist-rationalist" school of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh. Moreover, while further publications came as a direct attack on the person of Shaḥrūr depicting him as a "frantic, lunatic"[12], others targeted certain subjects within his works from a purely defensive mode of the Islamic doctrine. They condemned the author's works as dangerous in their interpretation of the Qurʾān to Islam and as irrelevant for the core of their religion.

On the other hand, and in contrast to the revival of anti-Islamic beliefs theory, Aḥmad ʿImrān argues that Shaḥrūr, intentionally or not, has created a "Qurʾān of a new kind" (*qurʾān min nawʿ jadīd*).[13] He explains his argument by maintaining that Shaḥrūr's vigorous attempt to harmonize Western science and philosophies with Qurʾanic values has "created an interpretation which neither perspective can possibly integrate".[14]

There is no doubt that Shaḥrūr's "unorthodox" works challenged the authority of traditional Islamic institutions. Alarmed with the popularity of Shaḥrūr's first book, and concerned that it would become an influential source, a large number of traditional

[10] Christmann, 73 Proofs of Dilettantism, 41; al-ʿAkk, *al-Furqān wa'l-Qurʾān* (Damascus: Ḥikma, 1994), pp. 728ff.

[11] Ibid., 63-64; Nūḥ, "Al-Kitāb wa'l-Qurʾān" *al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, no.4 (Summer 1994): 192- 209.

[12] Ibid., 39.

[13] Ibid., 49-50; ʿImrān, *al-Qirā'a al-muʿāsira* (Beirut: Dār al-Naqāsh, 1995), 27.

[14] Ibid.

'ulamā' and *fuqahā'* refuted his ideas in various ways, however, not effectively. In the sense that, contrary to their intentions, Shaḥrūr's books became even more popular among Muslim readers. And despite the fact that further publications by Shaḥrūr were banned in certain Arab countries, they kept in circulation. He gained publicity through Syrian and Emirati TV interviews, and was awarded the U.A.E. "Sheikh Zayed Award" in 2017.

Muḥammad Shaḥrūr's controversial works arouse the mind to intense scrutiny specifically when certain ideological dilemmas present themselves. Obviously, his thought was driven by a sense that something was wrong in the Muslim world, or even, according to him, by the failure of medieval established ideas and methods that are no longer adequate. Shaḥrūr's above mentioned critics approached his work from a purely religious and emotional perspective. The purpose of this study, however, is to evaluate Shaḥrūr's theories and arguments from a secular standpoint, try to allocate hidden objectives /intentions, and to assess whether his method fits in line with this new group of approaches which some revisionist historians, such as Patricia Crone[15], claim should be considered as an approach in Historiography. This thesis intends to demonstrate that, despite the fact that the Qurʾān's essential message is active piety where all narratives fall under the categorization of moral choices, referring back to the historical context in which the Qurʾān was revealed is crucial to understanding the divine text, and neglecting it is a kind of reductionism. This study also aims at proving that the Shaḥrūr phenomenon is not original, and that his notion of the universality of the Qurʾān along

[15] In one of her articles, "What Do We Actually Know About Mohammed" (2008), Crone suggests relying on the method of understanding the Qurʾān in light of the Qurʾān itself, and upheld that it should be adopted by historians instead of *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* material, whose historical accuracy she doubted. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/mohammed_3866jsp.

with his theory of limits, despite his progressive intentions, are not realistic, and embody as Yūsuf al-Ṣayḍāwī said: "*bayḍat al-dīk*" (the rooster's egg).[16]

[16] Yūsuf al-Ṣayḍāwī, *Bayḍat al-Dīk: Naqd Lughawī li-Kitāb* "*al-Kitāb wal-Qurʾān*" (Damascus, 2010).

CHAPTER II

THE SHAḤRŪR PHENOMENON: HOW ORIGINAL?

Muḥammad Shaḥrūr was a Syrian engineer, with no formal background in Islamic studies, who intentionally ignored the *tafsīr* tradition. He did not include citations from hadiths or Islamic legal schools to support his arguments on, and interpretations of, the Qurʾanic text. For him, "the reliability (*ṣidq*) of the Qurʾanic text has absolute priority over any form of endorsement (*taṣdīq*) by the authorities of the past".[17] Thus, he emphasizes the authority of one's own rational and critical thinking, as against "borrowed authority" and the inherited traditional *tafsīr* or *fiqh* works (*musallamāt mawrūtha*) of medieval Islam, irrespective of the level of subjectivity or unfamiliarity. In Shaḥrūr's view, counting on medieval dogmas and solutions decided upon during previous eras hold the Muslims back from reaching real reform and progress. Moreover, he adds that approaching the Qurʾān should be based on modern sciences, such as civil engineering, physics, mathematics, and Western philosophies.

With respect to exegesis, however, Shaḥrūr divides the Qurʾanic verses into two groups. The first group of verses belongs to "*al-qurʾān*" (eternal, objective, and absolute), whereas the second group belongs to "*umm al-kitāb*" (subjective, temporal/ changeable, and relative). Moreover, his approach differs from other exegetes who base their work on the assumption of synonymity of terms and verses in "God's Book"; non-synonymity and non-abrogation are at the core of his methodology. Shaḥrūr believes that every single word in *the Book* has its significance, even if humans, in their current status of knowledge, are not able to understand it or crack its codes. He gives as an

[17] M. Shaḥrūr, *Dirāsāt Islāmiya Muʿāṣira fi'l-Dawla wa'l-Mujtamaʿ* (Damascus, 1994), 37.

example the term "*kāmilatun*" (in all) found in verse 196 of *Sūrat al-Baqara*, "if he [the pilgrim] lacks the means, he should fast for three days during the pilgrimage, and seven days on his return, making ten days in all…", and explains that it alludes to the use of the decimal system to calculate the number of fasting days, and not the simple equation of three plus seven equals ten. He further asserts that *Allah*'s revelations can never be trivial, hence, the term "*kāmilatun*" must be interpreted as belonging to the "number system compared to a ten in a decimal system, expressed as 10/10 or as one whole (*kāmilatun*)".[18]

Furthermore, his approach is characterized by the notion that all verses of the Qurʾān are unquestionably correct even if, in certain cases, they are incompatible with the universally accepted codes of conduct and current theories of nature or society. In case of incompatibility between certain legal verses and the universal ethical norms, Shaḥrūr argues that the latter must be assessed; if these universal codes are still within God's limits, then they must take precedence and annul the *aḥkām* (legal verses) of *umm al-kitāb*. And since, according to him, the Prophet applied the *aḥkām* rules based on what was ethically and legally acceptable in seventh-century Arabia, this implies that the *Sunna* must not be applied today in case it contradicts universal human rights.

However, the first questions that come to mind are whether Shaḥrūr's thoughts were original or developed based on earlier Western works and/or certain Muslim schools, and whether his approach to the Qurʾān differentiates him from his earlier counterparts. For an adequate comparison, the history and development of various trends of qurʾanic exegesis and interpretation are briefly introduced below, followed by an attempt to allocate commonalities with Shaḥrūr's approach.

[18] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 484-485.

A. Exegesis vs. Interpretation

Before moving forward, a crucial distinction should be clarified between the two notions: exegesis (*tafsīr*) and interpretation (*taʾwīl*). During the life time of the Prophet, the companions' phase, until the early successors' phase, these two notions were used synonymously and interchangeably. Both words "exegesis" and "interpretation" meant the explanation of a Qurʾanic expression and its significations. However, in his commentary on the Qurʾān, al-Maturīdī (d.333/944) explicates that "exegesis (*tafsīr*) belongs to the companions, while interpretation (*taʾwīl*) belongs to the scholars (*fuqahāʾ*), because, in his view, the companions saw the events and knew the circumstances of the revelations".[19] Nevertheless, during the second half of the third/ tenth century, in the process of the early attempts to classify exegesis, the term "interpretation" theologically started to represent a distinction between sound and un-sound exegesis. In Rippin's view, this differentiation between exegesis and interpretation "can be traced back to the earliest sectarian disputes in Islam".[20] Beginning with the successors' phase onwards, mainstream[21] scholars (traditional Sunni) began to negatively inter-link the world "*raʾī*" with un-commended (*madhmūm*) exegesis. These scholars reject interpretation based on (Q17:36) which says: "Do not follow what you have no sure knowledge of". For them, the notion exegesis is based on conclusive evidence (*dalīl qāṭiʿ*), whereas interpretation is grounded on personal opinion and hypothetical evidence (*dalīl ẓannī*). However, they expound on two types

[19] Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Classical and Medieval," In *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol.2. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2002), 100-101.

[20] Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr". In *The Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, vol. 14. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 236.

[21] Abdul-Raof utilized the terms "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" to distinguish between traditional exegetes whose works were based on conclusive evidence and were considered as commendable, and others whose works were based on personal opinion and hypothetical interpretation.

of interpretation: the commendable and the objectionable. Whereas, the commendable means in line with the Qurʾān and the prophetic tradition, the objectionable interpretation refers mainly to personal hypothetical judgement while bypassing Qurʾanic intertextuality, the tradition, and the views of the companions or the early successors.[22] This division led to the emergence of a new group of exegetes, designated as non-mainstream (Sunni and non-Sunni), exemplified by the Shiites, Khawārij, Sunni Muʿtazilah, Sunni Ashʿarīs, and the Sufis schools of exegesis as opposed to mainstream exegetes.[23] Muslim scholars, mainly mainstream, relate objectionable interpretation to works provided by an unqualified exegete lacking the "required linguistic/ stylistic and jurisprudential skills of exegesis"; belonging to non-mainstream school of law; and/ or based on esoteric meanings.[24] The gap further widened between mainstream and non-mainstream exegetes due to their divergent exegetical methods. Non-mainstream exegetes do not refer to *ḥadīth* in their works, their techniques involve allegorical interpretation of Qurʾanic words, philosophical and scientific approaches. On the other hand, mainstream scholars claim that their non-mainstream counterparts adopt forged hadiths, fabricated exegetical views, and unknown *Isnāds* to authenticate their political and theological dogmas.[25]As Abdul-Raof puts it: "*Tafsīr* has ultimately become the battleground of political Islam and theological conflict among various Muslim schools of thought".[26] Moreover, according to Ḥassan Ḥanafī, "each *tafsīr* expresses the socio-

[22] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 106.

[23] Ibid., 9.

[24] Ibid., 108.

[25] Ibid., 10-11.

[26] Ibid., 13.

political commitment of the exegete".[27] The political, ideological and theological differences between these sects, mainstream and non-mainstream, had and still have a huge impact on the evolvement of sectarian exegesis.

From a different perspective, Shaḥrūr maintains that "the miraculous nature or inimitability (*al-iʿjāz*) of the *qurʾān* allows its reading from all possible angles, philosophical, scientific, historical, linguistic, and religious".[28] He argues that the ambiguous nature of the Qurʾān (*al-tashābuh*), by which he means, that the text is fixed while its content diverges, leads to a diversity in human interpretation. Shaḥrūr asserts that *al-tashābuh* was intended by God so that the readers of the Holy text are able to relate it to their life experience, since He "no longer communicates directly with human beings".[29] Shaḥrūr explains that, before God's revelation to Prophet Muḥammad, He recurrently communicated His messages to humankind as in the Torah followed by the Gospel. These communications, he argues, were revealed in a specific period in history, based on the historical circumstances of first the Jews and then the Christians, hence, they are "purely historical texts and do not possess the universal quality of *tashābuh* of the Qurʾān".[30] Accordingly, he acknowledges that, in contrast with traditional verse-by-verse exegesis (*al-tafsīr*), the process of interpretation (*al-taʾwīl*) is always partial, relative, rational, and consequently diverse. He thus believes that anyone can interpret the text. Also, he refutes the traditional understanding of "*al-rāsikhūn fi'l-ʿilm*" in verse

[27] Hassan Hanafi, "Method of thematic interpretation of the Qurʾān," in The Qurʾān as Text edited by Stefan Wild. (Leiden: E.J. Brill; 1996), 20.

[28] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 127.

[29] Ibid., 144.

[30] Ibid., 143-144.

7 of *Āl ʿImrān*[31] as "the most learned and devout among the *ʿulamāʾ* and *fuqahāʾ*". Instead, based on his interpretation of the verse, it designates prominent scholars, philosophers, the educated, and intellectually open readership. For him, it is important to understand the *qurʾān* through the contemporary period of its readers while investing in "the human faculty of reason (*al-ʿaql*) and the authority of progressive science rather than in regressive *tafsīr*".[32]

Even though Shaḥrūr does not categorize himself as an exegete, it does not change the fact that he belongs to non-mainstream interpreters, in the sense that his approach is philosophical and scientific, also, his techniques involve allegorical interpretation of Qurʾanic words. Furthermore, unlike his claim that he does not refer to hadiths, his works show many areas where he uses them in support of his arguments. Consequently, and to follow his scientific method, now it is fairly legitimate to compare his works with earlier counterparts, and try to allocate commonalities and differences.

B. Various Trends of Qurʾanic Exegesis: History and Development

Qurʾanic exegesis, as a discipline, began since the inception of Islam, in the first/ seventh century, and evolved throughout history with the theological, social, and political expansions of the Muslim community. The Qurʾanic exegesis by Prophet Muḥammad (d.570-632), characterizes the first stage of the formative phase. Muslim scholars link the Prophet's exegetic role to (Q16:44) which says: "We have revealed to you [Prophet] the message so that you can explain to the people what was sent down to them". His main tool of exegesis was Qurʾanic intertextuality by which he elucidated

[31] '…for its interpretation (*taʾwīlihi*). But no one knows its true meanings except *Allah* and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūn fi'l-ʿilm*) …' (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:7).

[32] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 148-149.

the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān. However, the Prophet's exegesis was not holistic, in the sense that it did not include the whole Qurʾān because the interpretations were dependent on the Companions' inquiries on certain vague or unknown expressions in the text. He explained the general meaning of semantic ambiguities such as the white and black threads in (Q 2:187), or theological issues such as *Zakāt* and the five daily prayers. Through his exegesis, the Prophet also restricted the un-restricted (*taqyīd al-muṭlaq*). An example would be in (Q5:38), which demands the amputation of a thief's hand, but does not indicate which one; the Prophet, however, allegedly limited the verdict to "the right hand".[33] He also introduced new sanctions or even punishments that were not stipulated by the text. For instance, (Q5:54) talks about reverting from religion, but doesn't specify the punishment. However, a tradition, also allegedly introduced, by the Prophet, commands death as a punishment.[34] Furthermore, through *ḥadīth*, the Prophet explicated the reasons for revelations, henceforth, Qurʾanic exegesis became an integral part of *ḥadīth*. During the course of this period, the Prophet's tradition (*ḥadīth*) and the Qurʾān became inter-dependent and was referred to as *tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-sunnah*.[35]

After the Prophet's death, the Companions' main exegetical sources were also the Qurʾān through intertextuality, in addition to the Prophetic tradition. Their approach in Qurʾanic intertextuality was similar to the Prophet's and comprised the following exegetical techniques: the general and specific meaning (*takhṣīṣ al-ʿāmm*) in which the general meaning of a verse can be specified by another; semantic ambiguity and paraphrase (*tabyīn al-mujmal*) in which certain ambiguous expressions are interpreted

[33] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 115.

[34] Ibid., 39.

[35] Ibid., 114-116.

in detail in a later verse, such as the expression (*yawm al-dīn*) in (Q1:4) is expounded in (Q82:17-19) : "It is the day when a soul will not possess for another soul power to do a thing, and the command, that day, is entirely with God"; unrestricted and restricted meaning (*tabyīn al-muṭlaq*) in which a verse restricts a general expression found in a previous one, such as the word (*raqabatin*) in (Q58:3) is restricted to "a believer slave" (*raqabatin muʾminatin*) in (Q4:92); brief Qurʾanic stories which are detailed in later verses such as the story of Adam and *Iblīs* where a brief reference is made in (Q3:59, Q4:1, Q7:189) but details are given in (Q2:30-39, Q7:11-25 and Q15:26-44); and the explanation of lexically related expressions such as *min turāb* in (Q3:59), *min ṭīn* in (Q23:12), and *min ḥamāʾin masnūn* in (Q15:26) which all relate to the creation of Adam.[36] Their exegetical works are characterized as synoptic since they were only concerned with the general meaning of the verse. Besides, whenever these Companions could not find explanations, neither in the Qurʾān nor in *ḥadīth*, they resorted to hypothetical opinion (*al-ijtihād wal-istinbāṭ*) and, in certain cases, to Jewish anecdotes. Furthermore, because the Companions were contemporaries to the Prophet during his mission, and witnessed the circumstances of the revelations, their exegetical views on the Qurʾān gained an authoritative status, were referred to as *marfūʿ*, and considered as *ḥujjah* (conclusive evidence), even if these opinions were not supported by the prophetic *ḥadīth*.[37] Among these Companions were Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d.13/634), ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d.23/644), ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d.40/660), and ʿAisha (d.58/677).[38]

Further on, Qurʾanic exegesis, also non-holistic, relied on the views of the Companions, hypothetical opinions, Jewish and Christian anecdotes specifically in

[36] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 122-125.

[37] Ibid., 3.

[38] Ibid., 118.

matters such as genesis and prophetic parables. However, the Companions' commentaries underwent redaction and some were transmitted interpolated and augmented. Furthermore, the successors relied more on hypothetical opinion, especially, in jurisprudence due to the emerging societal needs. However, their exegetical views became more polarized each influenced by his own school of thought (*al-madhāhib*) and the variant modes of reading. Moreover, even though Qurʾanic exegesis was still part of *ḥadīth* studies, the degree of reliance on the Prophetic *ḥadīth* differed from one exegesis school to the other. Each school had its own divergent exegetical approaches and techniques, however, they influenced each other in various aspects. The Mecca school of exegesis by Ibn ʿAbbās (d.68/687) was primarily interested in the study of exegesis as an independent discipline from *ḥadīth*. Its main exegetical techniques were Qurʾanic intertextuality and the views of Ibn ʿAbbās who was criticized for his reliance on pre-Islamic poetry and the People of the Book's explanations.[39] On the other hand, the Medina school of exegesis by ʿUbayy b. Kaʿb (d. 20/640) was more involved in *ḥadīth* studies, modes of reading, Islamic history, and the *maghāzī* rather than Qurʾanic exegesis. The Medina school prohibited reference to Jewish anecdotes in exegesis and had its own specific interests in: exegesis of Islamic legal ruling verses, circumstances of revelation, and phonetic problems pertaining to different pronunciation leading to variation in meaning.[40] The Kūfah school of exegesis by ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d.32/653), on the other hand, was known as the personal opinion school (*madrasat al-raʾī*). Ibn Masʿūd along with the exegetes of this school, relied upon their hypothetical opinion approach, but only in jurisprudential matters and only when they did not find a ruling supported by sound *ḥadīth* texts and *Isnāds*.

[39] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 148-149.

[40] Ibid., 151.

Furthermore, the Kūfah school developed the "exegetical mode of reading" technique (*al-qirāʾah al-tafsīrīyyah*) which is concerned with the insertion of a word or more, or, at certain times, with lexical substitution, in an attempt to elucidate semantic ambiguities.[41] Also, a fourth school, the Basra school of exegesis, was established by the early successor exegete al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.110/728) and his student Qatādah al-Sadūsī (d.117/735). However, these two were known and criticized for their leniency in accepting weak hadiths without sound *Isnāds* and/ or hadiths with weak chain of authorities.[42] They focused on supporting their "emotional" admonition lectures and arguments to "adopt an ascetic life style, and to repudiate the pleasure of worldly gains".[43] Hence, they were mainly interested in the exegesis of verses related to reward and punishment. The Basra school was also known for its thematic approach to exegesis as a linguistic exegetical technique.[44]

According to Claude Gilliot, it was only during the first quarter of the second/eighth century, that Qurʾanic exegesis became independent from *ḥadīth* and began to be documented as a discipline on its own.[45] It is claimed that Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d.150/767) was the first Qurʾān exegete to provide a verse by verse exegesis.[46] Qurʾanic exegesis began to be characterized as well-structured, detailed, with holistic paraphrastic approach in the sense that it covers the whole Qurʾān in the

[41] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 152.

[42] Ibid., 154.

[43] Ibid., 156.

[44] Ibid., 156.

[45] Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Classical and Medieval," In *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān* edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol.2. (Leiden-Boston: Brill; 2002), 104.

[46] Andrew Rippin, 'Tafsīr'. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, vol. 14. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 238.

systematic order of the *sūras* and the verses.[47] Also, more detailed historical commentaries were added to Qurʾanic parables, and quotations from pre-Islamic poetry were extensively used.[48] Another feature was the emergence of various schools of law such as the Ḥanafī school of law represented by Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Jassās (d.370/980), the Shāfiʿī school of law represented by Abū al-Ḥasan Ali al-Ṭabarī (d.504/1110), and the Maliki school of law represented by Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn al-ʿArabī .[49]

The modern phase of Qurʾanic exegesis, which developed between the nineteenth and early twenty-first century, was mainly influenced by contemporary socio-political and scientific requirements. Copious works of exegesis have been written during the previous phases and various schools of exegesis have been established to the extent that no significant contributions to the field were made. However, during this modern phase, a new school of exegesis emerged which was concerned with modern scientific, medical, social and political issues.[50] In addition to the prophetic tradition, companion and successors' views, hypothetical opinion exegesis, and anthropomorphism, new trends characterized the modern school of Qurʾanic exegesis such as: exegesis through the hypothetical opinions of non-Muslim scholars published in academic journals of Islamic studies; thematic division of the *sūras* and the verses; thematic exegesis by scientific exegetes dealing with natural

[47] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 136.

[48] Ibid., 136.

[49] Ibid., 140.

[50] Ibid., 144.

phenomena, creation and cosmology, as a proof of compatibility with the modern age of sciences.[51]

As seen above, Qurʾanic exegesis developed based on the needs of the Muslim community. Muslim and Western scholars on the *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* literature have identified various, at times overlapping, trends and techniques in approaching the Qurʾān. The most prominent, in relation to the arguments of this thesis, are: (1) The analytical verse-by-verse comprehensive exegesis in terms of "significations of its expressions, semantic ambiguity, grammatical problems, rhetorical features, the reasons of its revelation and its legal rulings"[52]; (2) the comparative contrastive analysis in which the exegete provides a critical account of divergent exegetical views and introduces his own using evidence from the Qurʾān and other authoritative sources; (3) the thematic exegesis in which verses with similar concepts but from different *sūras* are collected together[53]; (4) analogy (*qiyās*) which involves comparing the meanings of an expression that occurs in different passages[54]; (5) legal exegesis encompassing issues such as prayer, pilgrimage, theft, and marriage[55] ;(6) abrogating and abrogated verses; and (6) circumstances of revelation.[56]

Shaḥrūr, as to be argued, revived some of the above mentioned approaches to Qurʾanic exegesis such as: (1) *tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān*; (2) abrogation of the Qurʾān

[51] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 145.

[52] Ibid., 92-93.

[53] Ibid., 94-98.

[54] John Wansbrough, *Qurʾanic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 119-146.

[55] Claude, Gilliot, "The Beginnings of Qurʾanic Exegesis". In *The Qurʾān: Formative Interpretation* edited by Andrew Rippin. (Aldershot: Ash gate, 1999), 13-19.

[56] Wansbrough, *Qurʾanic Studies*, 119-146.

by the Qurʾān; (3) historicality of the Qurʾān; (4) thematic approach; (5) rejection of *asbāb al-nuzūl* as a source to understand the Qurʾān; (6) non-synonymity. However, he deviated by his (7) division of the holy text into Messengerhood and Prophethood; and his (8) theory of limits. The first three approaches are common with earlier exegetes, hence, are briefly discussed before moving forward to a detailed analysis of the rest as they distinguish Shaḥrūr's work from others in the field.

C. The Shaḥrūr Phenomenon: A Revival

1. Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bil-Qurʾān

In his approach of *Tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān,* Shaḥrūr categorizes the verses of *the Book* into definite and ambiguous verses. However, he adds a third category, the "explanation of the book" (*tafṣīl al-kitāb*), and maintains that these verses play the role of a "commentary" on the nature of the text; they clarify and provide further information, as well as establish a chronological sequence of events, "created by the scattered nature of the book's line of argument".[57] His categorization stems from (Q10:37) which, according to his interpretation, says: "This *qurʾān* is not such as can be produced by other than God; on the contrary it is a confirmation of [revelations] that went [with] it, and a fuller explanation of the book (*tafṣīl al-kitāb*)- wherein there is no doubt- from the Lord of the worlds" (*Yūnus* 10:37).[58] Yet, according to traditional interpretation, the verse says: "And it was not [possible] for the Qurʾān to be produced by other than Allah, but [it is] a confirmation of what [was before it] and a detailed explanation of the [former] Scripture, about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of

[57] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 131-132.

[58] Ibid., 125; more related verses such as: (*Yūsuf* 12:111), (*Hūd* 11:1), and (*Al-Anʿām* 6:114).

the worlds".[59] Irrespective whose interpretation was right or wrong, this is one clear indication that Shaḥrūr's own interpretation is meant to prove his argument. This method has a hint from the Kūfah school which developed the "exegetical mode of reading" technique (*al-qirāʾah al-tafsīrīyyah*). In the sense that, similar to the school's process, he inserts a word or more, or, at certain times, a lexical substitution, in his attempt to elucidate semantic ambiguities in a verse.

In all cases, as seen above, this *Tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān* approach is not new; it began with the Prophet, was followed by the Companions, and later by other schools such as the Mecca school of exegesis by Ibn ʿAbbās. It is also worth noting here, that during the 1950s, modernists in Egypt used the *tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān* approach as a rebellion against Islamist dogma, and in an effort to adapt to modernity. Through this approach, they strived to validate their views through the Qurʾān.[60] Furthermore, there were also efforts to modernize Islamic law by the call to abandon the rigid codes identified by the hadiths, and to derive the jurisdictions exclusively from the Qurʾān.[61] Hence, Shaḥrūr's approach is not original in this respect.

2. Abrogation

Unlike many traditional exegetes, Shaḥrūr refutes the notion that a prophetic *ḥadīth* can abrogate a qurʾanic ruling; for him, it is only and always vice versa. He argues that even if a verse contradicts reason or the laws of nature, it should not be

[59] Saḥeeḥ International.

[60] P. Crone, "How the field has changed in my lifetime," in Islam, the ancient near east and varieties of godlessness. Volume 3: collected studies in three volumes. Edited by Hanna Siurua (Leiden, 2016), 239-46.

[61] Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 90.

suspended. He gives the example of (Q25:45)[62] which according to him, "suggests that there are shadows that exist without light".[63] Hence, he asserts that no verse is ever wrong, rather human knowledge is not quite there yet. He maintains that there are "no final or fixed" interpretations; they must not be preserved as "guardians of truth" because these change over time along with human progress.[64]

Moreover, he argues that abrogation, within the same messengerhood, is also not an option. However, he explains that it may occur between subsequent messengerhoods, i.e., between different systems of legislation, where earlier ones can be either amended or abrogated by the latter. His reasoning is based on the belief that "Allah would not issue contradictive legislation within one and the same messengerhood, rather it is a succession of messages that are naturally replaced by a new revelation".[65] Furthermore, he argues that life circumstances have changed with the passing of centuries, consequently, legal adjustments were required as in "We substitute something better...or something similar…" (Q2:106). [66] In the sense that abrogation occurs either in the form of annulment (*ʿibtāl*) or in the form of amendment (*taʾdīl*) of earlier legislative verses.[67] He provides as an example verse 50 from Sūrat *Āl ʿImrān*: "I [Jesus] have come to confirm what came before me of the Torah and make lawful to you some of the things that were forbidden to you", to demonstrate the abrogation of "the legal proscriptions in

[62] "Have you not seen how your Lord extends the shade- He could have simply made it remain still if He so willed- then We make the sun its guide" (*al-Furqān* 25:45).

[63] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 149.

[64] Ibid., 150.

[65] Ibid., 217.

[66] Ibid., 398.

[67] Ibid.

Moses' *sharīʿa* by the legal proscriptions as issued in the *sharīʿa* of Jesus".[68] In a similar manner, Shaḥrūr maintains that Muḥammad's message "confirmed certain rules that were sent before, and has added rules or abolished others in order to complete *al-islām*".[69] He further supports his argument with the following verse: "O people of the Book! There has come to you our apostle, revealing to you much that you used to hide in the Book, and passing over much [that is now unnecessary]…"(*Al-Māʾida* 5:15).[70] He provides the example on the punishment of adultery which, based on the Jewish law, is the death penalty[71], while the Gospel calls for mercy and forgiveness.[72] However, Shaḥrūr tells us that the "better rule", which demands the penalty of flogging with a hundred stripes[73], was provided by Muḥammad's message.[74]

Nevertheless, Shaḥrūr asserts that Muḥammad's messengerhood is not subject to abrogation like the moral teachings that existed before him. To note, according to Andreas Christmann, this understanding is unique to Shaḥrūr in terms of the legal theory of *naskh*.[75] Though, from my understanding, it is under the traditional type of abrogation where "a qurʾanic ruling abrogates another qurʾanic ruling", yet put in different terms. Traditional *fiqh* applies this rule based on the criterion of the time of

[68] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 489-490.

[69] Ibid., 45.

[70] Ibid., 398.

[71] "If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die", (Deuteronomy 22:22).

[72] "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her", (John 8:7).

[73] "The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication- flog each of them with a hundred stripes…", (*Al-Nūr* 24:2).

[74] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 399.

[75] Ibid., 46.

revelation between 610 and 632, whereas Shaḥrūr follows, as Christmann argues, the criterion of "chronology of messenger-hoods".[76]

3. Historicality of the Qurʾān

Shaḥrūr distinguishes between the "*historicity*" (*nuṣūṣ taʾrīkhiyya*) of *the Book* and, what he calls as, its "*historicality*" (*taʾrīkhiyyat al-fahm*). He explains that the former (*nuṣūṣ taʾrīkhiyya*) refers to the verses that include historic narratives that may contain moral lessons but no legal injunctions. These stories, he tells us, talk about events that happened during the life time of Muḥammad such as the battles of *Badr*, *Uḥud*, *Tabūk*, the seizure of Mecca, military expeditions, etc. On the other hand, Shaḥrūr defines "*historicality*" as "a hermeneutical term that refers to the context-based nature and historical bias of our understanding and interpretation of texts, i.e., *taʾrīkhiyyat al-fahm*".[77] Hence, the stories in the book are historic, i.e., actually happened, but our understanding of them is historical, i.e., shaped by our historical context.[78]

Not far from this concept, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallah (1916-98) divides Qurʾanic narratives into three categories: the historical (one that revolves around actual history), the allegorical (one where the events are believed to be used to guide and explicate rather than to refer to a certain history/ artistic stories), and the *usṭura* (ancient narrative surviving in written form). Khalafallah explains that the allegorical story is part of *balāgha* (rhetoric); and is still capable of conveying the truth about what it narrates, however, such truth is conveyed through a story that may occur in different

[76] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 46.

[77] Ibid., 490-491.

[78] Ibid.

versions which differ in historical details.[79] For Khalafallah, the Qurʾān is not a book of science nor of history or political theory. It is rather a spiritual and ethical book of guidance, one whose stories function precisely to fulfill this purpose aesthetically. Therefore, Khalafallah maintains that it is a fatal methodological mistake to deal with the narrative of the Qurʾān as if it were purely history or to confuse history, as happenings or events, with history as communal knowledge of events that may or may not have taken place.[80] Furthermore, Khalafallah refers to the *usṭura* not as *khurāfa* (myth/fable), as in a way that detracts from the Qurʾān, rather it is a vehicle for conveying exhortation and wisdom. He refers, as an example, to the story of *Ahl al-Kahf* in (Q:18) and adds that the Qurʾān deliberately refuses to provide any historical detail as to where the cave is located, who the sleepers were or their number, from which ungodly society they were running away and hiding from, or for how long they remained asleep. This same point is also triggered by Sells in which he argues that, "as in many evocative passages in the Qurʾān", "what is left unsaid" is as important as what is said.[81] He gives the example of *sūrat Al-Najm* (Q:53) in which the power of the vision is evoked through a depiction of the gaze of the Prophet, but the vision itself is never described in detail nor given fixed form in a way that limits thought or imagination. This flexibility, however, results in an openness that invites the exegetes to exercise their own perspectives in their interpretations of the Qurʾanic text.

[79] Mohammad Salama, *The Qurʾān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 56.

[80] Ibid., 61.

[81] Michael Sells, *Approaching The Qurʾān: The Early Revelations*, (2007), 45.

Evidently, Shaḥrūr's notion of historicality is also not novel. He argues by the same terms of Khalafallah and maintains that these qurʾanic stories do not render the Qurʾān as a book of history, rather they are just for exhortation and moral purposes.

CHAPTER III

THEMATIC/ SUBJECT APPROACH IN QURʾANIC EXEGESIS

Whereas the conventional understanding of the word *tartīl*, found in *al-Muzzammil* (Q73:4): "Or a little more; recite the Qurʾān slowly and distinctly (*wa-rattil al-qurʾān tartīlan*)", is to read the verses in a "measured manner", Shaḥrūr literally follows the *Ambros Dictionary*'s translation of the term as "to arrange in good order".[82] He notes that *the Book* does not provide a "chronologically coherent exposition of its topics".[83] Hence, he interprets the Qurʾān using the method of *tartīl* which he defines as a "thematic arrangement of the many different subject themes (*mawḍūʿāt*) that are scattered throughout the entire *Book* and to create a logical order to meaningful sequence (*tartīl*) which allows a proper interpretation of a specific theme or topic".[84] For Shaḥrūr, *the Book* has been revealed in separate books to Muḥammad, but these books, however, are dispersed throughout the text. He divides *the Book* according to his subject-based approach, such as: "book of prayer", "book of fasting", "book of pilgrimage", "book of inheritance", and "book of death" etc...[85] He does not endeavor to understand the text as a whole, instead, his approach to the Qurʾān constitutes that process of gathering the verses that are subject-related, then interpreting them as a unit. This method, however, is also not new. For instance, Amīn al-Khūlī (1895-1966), in his seminal work, *Manāhij Tajdīd*, argues that scholars embarking on *tafsīr* must be topical

[82] Ambros, *Dictionary*, 108.

[83] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 131-132.

[84] Ibid., 28.

[85] Ibid., 122-123.

in their approach. He maintains that they must address all verses in which the Qurʾān discusses a subject, thereby collecting the totality of dispersed narratives- or, more precisely, the traces of narrative from different verses and different *sūras*.[86] The only difference, however, is the way Shaḥrūr linked the thematic approach to the term *tartīl* to support his argument.

For the purpose of this study, and in order to be able to decipher the consequences of the thematic approach, next is a brief overview of some other approaches to Qurʾanic interpretation. For the sake of comparative analysis, the following methods entail the notion that there is a sense of coherence in the qurʾanic *sūras* in terms of "contextual flow, theme and content, language, style, and structure". [87]

A. Diverse Approaches to Qurʾanic *Sūrās*

The question lies whether, in addition to the mixed presence of the Medinan and Meccan *sūras*, one should approach the Qurʾān through reading the *sūra* as a whole, as categorized shorter sections, or as a collection of verses based on the subject. This section provides views of Muslim and Western scholars, in an effort to find an answer while presenting diverse backgrounds.

1. Muslim Scholars' Approaches

Interpretations of the Qurʾān based on the *sūras* as unities is not novel; it was first propagated during the fourteenth century by Zarkashī (745-794/1344-1391) in his

[86] Mohammad Salama, *The Qurʾān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 55.

[87] Andrew Rippin, "Contemporary scholarly understandings of Qurʾanic coherence", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qurʾān and Hadith Studies* 11, 2 (2013): 1-14, doi: https://doi.org/10.11136/jqh.1311.02.01

Burhān, and later on by Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in his *Itqān*.[88] However, it has become fairly established by the twentieth century. Below are some examples of its propagators from among the Muslim scholars.

Beginning with the twentieth-century exegete Ashraf ʿAlī Thanavī, who, in his *Bayān al-Qurʾān*, strives to prove the connection between the verses within every *sūra*. He elaborates on *sūrat Luqmān* (Q31) as proof of the interconnectedness of the sections and the verses within the *sūra*. He explains that the *sūra* talks about the oneness of God (*al-tawḥīd*) as its main theme, and is "divisible into four sections: verses 1-9, 12-19, 20-32, 33-34; the first section begins with praise of the Qurʾān, which leads to praise of those who believe in the Qurʾān and criticism of those who disbelieve in it, followed by a statement of the punishment for the disbelievers and the reward for the believers; the second section takes up the theme of *tawhīd*, and the third section continues that theme by narrating the story of Luqmān, who first instructs his son to be steadfast in the matter of *tawḥīd*".[89]

In support, Sayyid Quṭb argues that there is a "central axis (*miḥwar*) which holds each literary unit/ *sūra* together on the basis of theme (i.e. a principal idea) and content".[90] He provides the example of *sūrat al-Furqān* (Q25) which was allegedly revealed as a consolation to the Prophet after the polemical attacks and the accusations from āl-Quraysh. Similarly, Quṭb explains the consecutive sections of the *sūra* as follows: that the first section refers to the beliefs of the Quraysh and their criticism of the Prophet, followed by "reporting the Quraysh's criticism of God for not sending

[88] Mustansir Mir, "The sūrah as a unity: a twentieth century development in Qurʾān exegesis," in Approaches to the Qurʾān, ed. G.R. Hawting & Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 211.

[89] Ibid., 213.

[90] Andrew Rippin. "Contemporary scholarly understandings of Qurʾanic coherence", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qurʾān and Hadith Studies* 11, 2 (2013): 1-14, doi: https://doi.org/10.11136/jqh.1311.02.01

down the proofs they had demanded, then by stating the punishment that lies in store for the Quraysh, which again, serves to console the Prophet".[91] Furthermore, it is worth noting here that Sayyid Quṭb rejects the notion of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, instead he relies on a context-based interpretation of the Qurʾān.

Likewise, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāḥī, along with his student Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, rejects the occasions of revelation and believe in the notion that every *sūra* has a "central theme which they call *ʿamūd*".[92] These scholars strived to identify the central theme of every *sūra* and consequently interpret it based on its proper *ʿamūd*. Mir Mustansir's use of *sūrat al-Baqara* (Q2) in his discussion of Iṣlāḥī's work is compelling; its relevance lies in Shaḥrūr's continuous reliance on this same *sūra* for most of his arguments. Mustansir notes that Iṣlāḥī divides the *sūra* into an introduction (verses 1-39), four main sections (Address to the Jews of Arabia 40-121; the Abrahamic Legacy 122-162; the *Sharīʿa* or Law 163-242; and liberation of the Kaʿba 243-283), and a conclusion (284-286).[93] He further explains that the *Sharīʿa* section is the most challenging with respect to coherence and connection. Since, the other sections represent a continuity from the critique of the Jews who were in opposition with the newly established Muslim community, to the claim that the Muslim community represents a continuation of the Abrahamic Legacy, hence the right for *Kaʿba* and the call for its liberation, as their *qibla,* from the Quraysh.[94] Nevertheless, Iṣlāḥī maintains that the section on the Law was incorporated because it was needed by the new community. He emphasizes its connection with preceding and subsequent verses as well

[91] Mustansir Mir, "The sūrah as a unity: a twentieth century development in Qurʾān exegesis", 214.

[92] Ibid., 215.

[93] Ibid., 215-216.

[94] Mustansir Mir, "The sūrah as a unity: a twentieth century development in Qurʾān exegesis," 215-216.

as within the section itself as follows: "It begins with the foundational principle (monotheism) which is contrasted with idolatry, which leads to the subject of lawful and unlawful food, followed by the notion of pious conduct and practical legislation crucial to the maintenance of peace and justice, respecting the life and property for others, the exercise of self-restraint as in fasting and rooting out greed, as well as *ḥajj*".[95] Iṣlāḥī further explains that these are all connected to the theme of soul discipline. He maintains that even when the section talks about *jihād*, it is still related. Since, for him, its relevance manifests in the war (*jihād*) to liberate the *Kaʿba*, which lead to further questions among the community in this regard, such as *jihād* in Ramadan, widows and orphans as a result of the war, which further leads to marriage and divorce inquiries.[96]

Other Muslim scholars, on the other hand, found certain disruptions or discontinuities in the text and reached the conclusion that dividing the text into segments would lead to a better understanding of its meaning as well as its historical context.[97] It is worth noting, however, according to Mustansir, that even though the above-mentioned exegetes had a similar approach, of dividing the *sūras* into sections and then establishing the link, their conclusions with respect to *sūras* as unities were reached independently without external influences from other similar works.[98] Nevertheless, one may debate that these arguments came as a reaction to the Western allegations that the Qurʾān has a "disjointed character".[99] For that same reason, below

[95] Ibid., 216.

[96] Ibid., 217.

[97] Andrew Rippin, "Contemporary scholarly understandings of Qurʾanic coherence", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qurʾān and Hadith Studies* 11, 2 (2013): 1-14, doi: https://doi.org/10.11136/jqh.1311.02.01

[98] Mustansir Mir, "The sūrah as a unity: a twentieth century development in Qurʾān exegesis," in Approaches to the Qurʾān, ed. G.R. Hawting & Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 217.

[99] Ibid., 211-224.

are examples of some Western scholars who, apart from a defensive and emotional undertaking, argue for the notion of unity in the Qurʾān.

2. Western Scholars' Approaches

There are also Western approaches to Qurʾanic interpretation which entail the notion that there is a sense of coherence and unity in the *sūras*. For example, in his book *How to Read the Qurʾān*, Carl Ernst asserts that one must appreciate the internal structure and organization of the Qurʾān in order to comprehend its whole message and understand the relationship between its passages. He maintains that the *sūra* must be approached as a "literary whole rather than a random assortment of unrelated verses".[100] He believes that the Qurʾān developed over time through channels of communication and interaction among its contemporary addressees. Ernst argues for a chronological reading of the text, which means that, the reader must begin with the short *sūras* at the end of *the Book,* in opposition to the official decreasing order of size arrangement of the one hundred fourteen *sūras*. His reasoning is based on the notion that the short *sūras* were the first to be delivered, and that this approach "recapitulates the sequence of the Qurʾān that was experienced by its first audience".[101] Furthermore, Ernst argues that the *sūra* must be read as a literally whole and not as a collection of unrelated verses. However, he also suggests the division of the *sūra* into symmetrically connected sections as in "a tripartite structure, in which the opening and closing sections affirm

[100] Andrew Rippin, "Contemporary scholarly understandings of Qurʾanic coherence", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qurʾān and Hadith Studies* 11, 2 (2013): 1-14, doi: https://doi.org/10.11136/jqh.1311.02.01

[101] Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qurʾān: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Accessed October 27, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 18.

revelation, while the central section often relates a scriptural narrative on prophecy and its reception".[102]

In another approach, Angelika Neuwirth argues that the content of the Qurʾān is "an open-ended communication process of theological debates, an ensemble of texts that have their *Sitz im Leben* (historical and social setting) in a public and audibly pronounced performance occurring in history".[103] Similar to Shaḥrūr, she bases her research on the Qurʾanic text itself, maintaining that the *Sīra* or other sources of Islamic history must be bypassed as completely separate works. Her main approach, however, is the distinction between a "pre-canonic" Qurʾān, which is the oral phase during the time of the Prophet, and a "canonic" one, i.e., the writing phase after his death. [104] Neuwirth's classification is based on what she considers as the recited text that took place in public on a single occasion. She distinguishes between reading the *sūra* as "a fixed unit within the transmitted text" and reading it as "as an oral communication whose context reflected earlier qurʾanic communications and- perhaps more importantly- individual religious debates that must have taken place among the early followers of Muḥammad and their neighbors in their particular cultural milieu, Mecca and Medina".[105] Furthermore, Neuwirth adopts a structural reading to the Qurʾān in which she identifies differences in the structure of the *sūras*, and associates the

[102] Ibid.

[103] Angelika Neuwirth, "The Qurʾān and History". In *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), doi: 10.1093/oso/9780199928958.003.0004.

[104] Ibid., 109.

[105]Angelika Neuwirth, "Sūra(s)". In *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC, Claude Gilliot, University of Aix-en-Provence; William A. Graham, Harvard University; Wadad Kadi, University of Chicago; Andrew Rippin, University of Victoria, Monique Bernards, University of Groningen; John Nawas, University Leuven, et al. Accessed November 1, 2021. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00197.

rhetorical element to the different periods in which she believes each *sūra* originated. She gives attention to the oral nature of the Qurʾān, and asserts that the text was developed as an accumulated outcome of an "ongoing communicative process with its audience".[106] She further links the style of the *sūra* to the historical period in which it was revealed and emphasizes that "the Qurʾān is a multi-voiced drama and must be treated as such, as opposed to being a legitimate subject of regular textual analysis in the way that other scholars have treated it". [107]

On the other hand, Neuwirth contends the notion of unity in the written text and calls for approaching the Qurʾān while taking into account the "differing contexts, functions, and forms of the originally independent individual texts". [108] She identifies four periods: early, middle, and late Meccan, and the Medinan period, and classifies each *sūra* as belonging to a specific period of revelation, even though she maintains that there are some sections which belonged to different periods. It is worth noting here, that Neuwirth's periodization approach does not look for a precise chronological list, rather she focuses on broader periodic groupings based on internal indications within the Qurʾān, i.e. rhyme, themes, and stylistic traits in the structure of the *sūra*.[109] For example, she maintains that the earliest *sūras* "pertain to the imagination of desert-dwellers", and are characterized with short verses, the style of the Islamic *kāhin* or a soothsayer, enigmatic expressions, the use of oaths, the summoning of heavenly

[106] Neuwirth, Angelika. "Sūra(s)". In *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2011.

[107] Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qurʾān." *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 130-156, 136.

[108] Angelika Neuwirth, "The Qurʾān and History". In *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), doi: 10.1093/oso/9780199928958.003.0004, 115.

[109] Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qurʾān." *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 130-156, 138.

creations (sun; moon; planets and stars), and the Day of Judgment.[110] These early *sūras*, she maintains, have the one task of persuading the crowd of God's omnipresence, their moral responsibility, and the consequences of their actions.[111] Whereas, she tells us that the verses that belong to the middle Meccan period are characterized by polemical expressions and curses against absent "adversaries who were not granted an opportunity to reply", unlike later *sūras* where voices from both sides are heard.[112] Furthermore, she maintains that the middle and late Meccan *sūras* comprise of Biblical figures narratives; they reflect monotheistic worship and an affirmation of revelation.[113] A further example of separation marks, provided by Neuwirth, is found in the Medinan *sūras*, specifically on rituals, as in "it is prescribed for you" (Q 2: 183-7), to differentiate between the new Muslim believers and the Jewish community who were, earlier, among the receivers of revelations. Moreover, Neuwirth argues that the recurring, but slightly divergent, narratives in the Qurʾān are neither a "deficiency nor mere repetitions, rather testimonies of the consecutive emergence of a community and on-going education of the listeners".[114]

Neuwirth's approach possibly renders the text more comprehensible in the sense that the classification of the *sūras* into periodic sections allows the reader to understand them within their historical context. On the other hand, there is a counter argument that there are no clear "demarcation lines between periods" which, in turn, causes

[110] Neuwirth, Angelika. "Sūra(s)". In *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2011.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Ibid.

obscurity.[115] Furthermore, different thematic interpretations lead to diverse transition points between sections and topics, hence, a "reductionist understanding" and a narrowing down or limiting of possible meanings.[116] However, as seen from the above representations, reading the Qurʾān through its context, does not necessarily render it a book of history, rather it provides the reader with a sense of testimonies and lineages between the revelations and the community within which they were revealed, giving it further clarity with respect to meaning and significance. Each verse, even the repeated ones, connotes a different meaning and purpose within its context.

B. Consequences of the Thematic Approach

In refutation of the thematic accumulation approach, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallah (1916-98) contends that "every piece of Qurʾanic narrative, even if it appears repeated or in scattered chapters, in fact, constitutes a unified and autonomous story in and of itself".[117] He argues, for example, that compiling a Qurʾanic story into one larger diachronic unit would risk destabilizing the historical context not of the storyline, but of the time of revelation, the historical context, and its immediate connection to the psychology of Prophet Muḥammad. By the same token, Michael Sells gives the example of the aspects of the story of Moses which occur in forty four different passages in the Qurʾān, and argues that "it is this very scattered or fragmented mode of composition that allows the Qurʾān to achieve its most profound effects".[118]

[115] Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qurʾān." *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 130-156, 142.

[116] Ibid., 142.

[117] Salama, *The Qurʾān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 55.

[118] Michael Sells, *Approaching The Qurʾān: The Early Revelations*, (2007), 15.

Similarly, Rachel Friedman argues that the process of categorization of verses, by trying to identify a central theme among the verses and bisecting them from their *sūras*, is by itself, "a reduction of the content to one essential theme or topic".[119] For her, the verses in each *sūra* are connected with each other for a reason, and their construction is based on the function of introducing each other in the sense that "traces of the latter will be found in the former".[120] Friedman believes that: "It is in the nature of divine texts to transcend human understanding. This is the domain of mysticism".[121] She asserts that the reader will always face something in the Qurʾān that is either differently understood, as in *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, or not even understood at all.[122]

Distinct from Shaḥrūr's argument, detaching the verses from their historical context would lead to a reduction in their meaning. Even though a full reconstruction of the historical context of these qurʾanic communications is impossible, nonetheless as Neuwirth debates, bypassing the possibility of a *Sitz im Leben* character of certain text units, would lead to an "insufficient reading".[123] These texts, she maintains, reflect the social interaction between the Prophet and his audience; they "present lively scenes from the emergence of a community".[124] Neuwirth may have a point when she maintains that canonization contributed to the notion of "extracting texts from their *sūra*

[119] Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qurʾān." *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 130-156, 143.

[120] Ibid., 144.

[121] Ibid., 153.

[122] Ibid., 153.

[123] Neuwirth, Angelika. "Sūra(s)". In Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill, 2011.

[124] Neuwirth, Angelika, "Qurʾān and History- a Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Qurʾanic History and History in the Qurʾān." *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 5, no.1 (2003):1-18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25728090, 6.

context to use them for explaining other arbitrarily selected texts...Textual sections thus become virtually de-contextualized, stripped of the tension that had characterized them within their original units".[125]

The factors of orality and the fragmentary communication process with the addressees should not be ignored. The historical context is, as a matter of fact, crucial in providing hints that can help in interpreting certain verses. At the same time, however, one needs to be cautious while using external sources. Since there is the concern that quite a number of historical and interpretive traditions that may have been fabricated as a way to fill gaps and elucidate the ambiguous sections of the text. Which, in turn, leads us to the fourth point of contention in Shaḥrūr's approach, that is, the complete abandonment of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (causes/ promptings of revelation) as a source for interpreting the qurʾanic text.

[125] Ibid., 11.

CHAPTER IV

ASBĀB AL-NUZŪL- AS A SOURCE OF QURʾANIC EXEGESIS

In an effort to understand the Qurʾān, many Muslim scholars relied on the *sīra* of the Prophet to learn about the verses and their occasions of revelation. Much like his predecessors, the twentieth-century scholar, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943-2010) argues that one cannot fully understand the Qurʾān without studying the history, geography, politics, and society in which it was revealed. He further emphasizes that there is both a remarkable human dimension and an intimate dialogue with divinity that connects the Qurʾān to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (causes/ promptings of revelation).[126] Similarly, in his seminal work *Manāhij Tajdīd*, Amin al-Khūlī (1895-1966) argues that proper *tafsīr* involves extrinsic and intrinsic components. The extrinsic component consists of studying the history of the Qurʾān by paying attention to the historical, geographical, and sociological circumstances of the first community of Islam when the Qurʾān was revealed, including *asbāb al-nuzūl* as well as the difference between *tartīb al-nuzūl* and *tartīb al-tilāwa*. Whereas, the intrinsic aspect, he argues, includes a thorough analysis of figuration, style, etymology, the meaning of words as used in the Qurʾān, and their linguistic specificities.[127]

For Shaḥrūr, however, *asbāb al-nuzūl* are non-existent and must be ignored, first, because their narratives are weak and un-authentic, and second, he argues, they render the qurʾanic text historical. Furthermore, his unorthodoxy can be clearly seen in his philosophical stance on God's revelation and His messengers. He diverts from the

[126] Salama, *The Qur'an and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 71.

[127] Ibid., 45.

traditional theological notion by maintaining that the whole process of humans receiving God's divine knowledge is not "revelation" (*waḥy*), but rather a human subjective "comprehension" (*inzāl*) of what has been objectively "delivered" by God (*tanzīl*).

Before moving forward, it is important to note here that Shaḥrūr defines the "objective reality" "as a state of existence that has its cause outside the human mind".[128] He gives examples of the sun, gravity, death, and the Day of Resurrection, and asserts that these are objective facts, hence, they exist and will occur whether humans acknowledge their existence or not. On the other hand, Shaḥrūr defines subjectivity "as existence that depends on the state of affairs inside the human mind".[129] The act of acquiring this subjective knowledge is carried out through logical enquiry and common sense reasoning and does not involve "extraordinary prophetical gifts or divine inspiration".[130] However, Shaḥrūr argues that humans tend to forget their God-given rational faculty, especially when they prioritize "dogmatic ritualism" over "critical enquiry".[131]

Back to our topic, Shaḥrūr rejects the notion that the terms "*al-inzāl*" and "*al-tanzīl*" are synonymous and that they designate the process of revelations "coming down" to Prophet Muḥammad.[132] To prove his point, he links the terms "*nazzala*" and "*anzala*" to the same concept of "*ballagha*" as in "The apostle's duty is but to proclaim (*al-balāgh*) the message…" (*Al-Māʾida* 5:99), and "*ablagha*" as in "So *Shuʿaib* left

[128] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 163.

[129] Ibid., 163.

[130] Ibid., xxxi.

[131] Ibid., xxxi.

[132] Ibid., 151.

them, saying: "O my people! I did indeed convey to you (*ablaghtukum*) the messages of my Lord and advised you …" (*Al-Aʿrāf* 7:93). In the first instance, Shaḥrūr maintains, that the message is to be delivered to an uncertain addressee without confirmation of receipt. Whereas in the latter, "a conscious reception is implied with full recognition".[133] Accordingly, Shaḥrūr translates *al-tanzīl* as the "process of nonhuman communication that occurs outside the human mind where ideas are exchanged unrecognized by the human brain, and its reception is uncertain, impossible, or unintended", and the term *al-inzāl* as the "the process of recognition inside the human mind where ideas are transformed into information that is perceived and understood".[134] For example, even though he acknowledges the fact that these two terms were used interchangeably in the text as in "…and We send down (*nazzalnā*)[135] to you manna and quails" (*Ṭā-Hāʾ* 20:80), and "… and sent down (*anzalnā*)[136] to you manna and quails…" (*Al-Baqara* 2:57), yet he insists on non-synonymity. He further elaborates on these two verses that in the former, the "manna and quails" were not yet known to the children of Israel, whereas in the latter they have become "perceptible and registered as food to be eaten".[137]

Moreover, Shaḥrūr divides *the Book* into two main sections: the *qurʾān* and *umm al-kitāb*. He asserts that since the *qurʾān*, the objective reality, pre-existed before its communication to humankind, *asbāb al-nuzūl* do not apply to this part of the text.

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[133] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 152.

[134] Ibid., 153.

[135] Similar verses using the noun "*tanzīl*": (*Al-Insān* 76:23), (*Al-Jāthiya* 45:2), (*Fuṣṣilat* 41:2), (*Al-Wāqiʿa* 56:80), and (*Qāf* 50:9).

[136] Similar verses using the noun "*inzāl*": (*Al-Ḥadīd* 57:25), (*Al-Aʿrāf* 7:26), (*Yūsuf* 12:2), (*Al-Qadr* 97:1), (*Al-Baqara* 2:57), (*Al-Furqān* 25:48), and (*Al-Naḥl* 16:44).

[137] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 155.

Subsequently, "its revelation was inevitable, whether someone required this information or not, and regardless of any circumstances of revelation".[138] Furthermore, Shaḥrūr divides the content of the *qurʾān* into fixed and changeable sections. In the sense that the fixed part is written on "*lawḥ maḥfūẓ*", and is not subject to occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), it includes all the unalterable pre-existing and everlasting universal laws such as death, the Last Hour, the resurrection of the dead, Hell and Paradise.[139] Whereas the changeable part, accounted in "*imām mubīn*", comprises the unpredictable natural events and disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, and human affairs which changed with history (the stories or historical narratives of people's responses to the messages of prophets). None of these, Shaḥrūr argues, are pre-fixed, predestined or pre-recorded before their occurrence.[140] He further elaborates that terms used to locate these verses are: "*āyāt Allāh*", "*min āyātihi*" (a sign of God) and "*kitāb mubīn*" (clear record) as in (*Al-Rūm* 30:22)[141], (*Al-Anʿām* 6:59)[142], (*Yā-Sīn* 36:12)[143] and "*qaṣaṣ*" (stories) as in (*Yūsuf* 12:3)".[144]

[138] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 154.

[139] Ibid., 139-140.

[140] Ibid., 140.

[141] "And among His signs (*min āyātihi*) is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors…" (*Al-Rūm* 30:22).

[142] "With Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knows but He. He knows whatever there is on earth and in the sea. Not a leaf does fall but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the darkness [or depths] of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry [green or withered], but is [inscribed] in a record clear (*kitāb mubīn*) [to those who can read]" (*Al-Anʿām* 6:59).

[143] "Verily We shall give life to the dead, and We record that which they send before and that which they leave behind, and of all things have We taken account in a clear book [of evidence] (*imam mubīn*) (*Yā-Sīn* 36:12).

[144] "We tell you [Prophet] the best of stories (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*) in revealing this *qurʾān* to you. Before this you were one of those who knew nothing about them" (*Yūsuf* 12:3).

On the other hand, Shaḥrūr explains that "*umm al-kitāb*", unlike the objective *qurʾān*, "embodies the subjective behavior of humankind", in the sense that if humans decided not to treat parents well, pray, or perform any of the religious rituals, these acts won't happen.[145] He builds his argument on verse 39 of *sūrat al-Raʿd*: "Allah blots out and confirms what He pleases; and with Him is the mother of the book (*umm al-kitāb*)" (*Al-Raʿd* 13:39).[146] He argues that the saying "God blots out and confirms" means the possibility of alterations of content within the revelations of "*umm al-kitāb*". Unlike traditional exegetes, Shaḥrūr considers that "*umm al-kitāb*" is not inscribed in the "tablet preserved" (*lawḥ maḥfūẓ*) or in the "record clear" (*imām mubīn*); hence, its contents such as rituals and particular rules of social behavior, should not be deemed as absolute laws.[147] For him, the quality of being inscribed in the "tablet preserved" or "record clear" means being a part of the objective truth, natural, and instinctively practiced by the people, i.e. it is universal. Whereas, he maintains, that the "content of *umm al-kitāb* is issued directly from God and responds to 'causes of revelation' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)".[148] For example, he argues that if Muḥammad did not frown upon the beggar ʿAbdallāh b. Maktūb, the first four verses of *sūrat ʿAbasa* would not exist.[149] Similarly, he maintains that the legislative messages of earlier prophets, which came down based on their historical circumstances, belong to "*umm al-kitāb*" and hence, they become

[145] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 164.

[146] Ibid., 159.

[147] Ibid., 159.

[148] Ibid., 159.

[149] Ibid., 159.

invalid as soon as their time-periods ended.[150] This argument also comes in support of his notion of abrogation of earlier legislation through Muḥammad's messengerhood.

Despite Shaḥrūr's stance on the irrelevance of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, he, in contradiction with his argument, associated its applicability with verses that he designated as belonged to *umm al-kitāb*. Perhaps, there are certain instances that necessitate reliance on the causes of revelation as a way to decipher certain verses as the case with *sūrat ʿAbasa* (Q80:1-10).[151] On the other hand, there is a major concern, argued by Western scholars, of authenticity regarding the use of the occasions of revelations as an exegesis tool to explicate the Qurʾān. Thus, one is left with the confusion of whether *asbāb al-nuzūl* can be a reliable source of exegesis or not. However, to further discuss this point, we need first to examine the origin of this term *asbāb al-nuzūl* and how it became a genre of exegetical literature.

A. Authenticity of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* – History and Function

Sectarian and political differences began to influence exegesis in the sense that the transmitters, at certain times, either added their own views or misquoted the original source in an attempt to support their own theological points of view, their political and/or legal dogmas, to the extent that it is no longer possible to extricate the accurate.[152] As a result, Western scholars on the Qurʾān, such as Schacht, Juynboll, Wansbrough, Sprenger, Nöldeke and Goldziher, justifiably question the reliability of

[150] Ibid., 159.

[151] "[the Prophet] frowned and turned his attention away; because the blind man came to him interrupting; you never know [Prophet], perhaps he may be purified; or he may be mindful, benefitting from the reminder; As for the one who was indifferent; you gave him your undivided attention…" (Q80:1-10).

[152] Berg Herberg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam* (Survey: Curzon, 2000), 138.

the allegedly authoritative early sources due to forged ascriptions and weak *Isnāds*.[153] Furthermore, many modern Muslim scholars show skepticism about the authenticity of the *matn* of *ḥadīth* and occasions of revelations, and argue against their use as conclusive evidences (*hujaj*) in Qurʾanic exegesis.

By the same token, Patricia Crone tackles the Qurʾanic exegetical literature and convincingly argues that "the Qurʾān generated masses of spurious information"[154], and that if it was not for the *sūras*, certain information would not exist for the historian. She goes further to assert that many well-known revelation related stories about the rise of Islam, such as raid at *Nakhla*, the battle of *Badr*, the oath of allegiance at *Hudaybiyya*, are likely to be "exegetical inventions of this kind".[155] Crone argues that Muslim exegetes did not offer knowledge based on their recollection of the reasons of the revelations, or on the Prophet's thoughts when he recited the verses. Rather, they provided variant presumptions based on the verses themselves deeming the information offered as "false" and probably "invented".[156] She also notes that the exegetical literature does not refer to historical facts, rather to what the exegetes found plausible. She further argues that these spurious narratives were accepted by early Muslim scholars because they go under the category of *tawātur*, i.e. very well known among the community. To prove her point, Crone chooses *sūrat Quraysh* for further analysis, and gives two main examples: the first one is the verse on the journey in summer and winter, and the second is the word *īlāf, ilāf or ilf*. On the first example, she tells us that

[153] Ibid., 133.

[154] Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 213.

[155] Ibid., 214- 215.

[156] Ibid., 210-211.

the exegetes themselves did not know the true nature of this journey and the context of the Qurʾān does not give any further indication. Hence, these exegetes gave various interpretations of the journeys which ranged from the greater and lesser pilgrimages to Mecca, the *hajj* in *Dhū'l-hijja* and the *ʿumra* in Rajab, migrations of Quraysh to *Tāʾif* in the summer and their return to Mecca in the winter, and/ or their trading journeys to either Syria, or in Syria and the Yemen, or in Syria and Ethiopia, or in all three, and maybe also in Iraq.[157] On the second example, the word *īlāf, ilāf or ilf,* Crone tells us that the exegetes also disagreed over its reading and meaning. Several definitions were as well involved in the guessing game such as habit, harmony, divine blessing, pact and protection.[158] Crone questions the validity of these assumptions and asserts a lack of evidence. For example, she argues that if the word *īlāf* had a certain significance, as in agreements, or designated at least one of the above definitions, it would have been a familiar word, especially among the Meccans. She also argues that these assumptions were created based on the exegetes' knowledge of the Arabian customs and not those of historical Mecca.[159]

Similarly, in his controversial book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* (1926), Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1899-1973) discovers a few texts and events in the Qurʾān that are allegedly not "historically valid".[160] For instance, he questions the historical validity of the Qurʾanic reference to the building of the *Kaʿba* by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Ḥusayn argues that the story of Abraham and Ishmael served a socio-political purpose in pre-Islamic Meccan society; hence, he claims, that the story was co-opted in Qurʾanic narratives in

[157] Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, 204-205.

[158] Ibid., 209.

[159] Ibid., 212.

[160] Salama, *The Qur'an and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 23.

order to reinforce the Abrahamic lineage for Islam and facilitate relationships between Jews and Muslims, which, in turn, result in welfare and prosperity. Nevertheless, this rationale was deemed provocative; Ḥusayn's invocation of history, while useful, complicates the relationship between faith and anthropology. However, in an effort to defend Ḥusayn, Mohammad Salama tells us that the latter's intent is to contend that the Qurʾān is not so much a book of history as it is a book of faith.[161]

1. History of Asbāb al-Nuzūl:

Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, points out that the term *asbāb al-nuzūl* does not appear in either early exegetical literature nor in the literature on the *sīra* of Muḥammad.[162] By the same token, Andrew Rippin asserts that this literary genre had a late attestation in Islamic literature with respect to both meaning and usage.[163] Its emergence as a "technical term" was a result of historical evolution. Rippin points out that the usage of the term *asbāb al-nuzūl* began to appear as a result of exegetical activity only during the end of the third/ninth and beginning of the fourth/tenth century, and was technically consolidated with Wāḥidī's (d.468/1076) book "*Asbāb al-nuzūl*" during the fifth/eleventh century.[164] As is also noted by Roberto Tottoli, "Earlier qurʾanic commentaries and literary works must have included material serving the same

[161] Ibid., 29.

[162] Andrew Rippin, "The Function of 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl' in Qurʾanic Exegesis." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 51, no. 1 (1988): 1–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/618665, 14.

[163] Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl': A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 48, no. 1 (1985): 1–15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/618768.

[164] Roberto Tottoli, "4 Asbāb al-Nuzūl as a Technical Term". In *Islamic Studies Today*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017) doi: https://doi-org.ezproxy.aub.edu.lb/10.1163/9789004337121_005

function, but awareness of and the practice of mentioning *sabab* (occasion, cause) in relation to revelation (*nuzūl, tanzīl*) is a later phenomenon".[165] These findings were based on the evidence that the early use of the term *al-sabab*, was always associated with the term *ikhtilāf* (divergences) or *wujūh* (interpretations) and a follow-up explanation as in al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), before him, when they say: "*ikhtalafa ahl al-taʾwīl fī al-sabab alladhī min ajlihi nazalat hādhihi al-āya*" (they differed on cause/ occasion by which this verse was revealed).[166] However, Tottoli tells us that later works prove the transition from the long definition to a simple technical term, hence, they attest to the establishment of its meaning and "a greater general awareness of the reference to the occasions/ causes of revelation" by the beginning of the fifth/ eleventh century.[167]

2. Functions of Asbāb al-Nuzūl:

In order to identify the functions of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and whether they are a source for history, exegesis, or as Wansbrough suggests "deriving law", Andrew Rippin investigates the works of a variety of early exegetes such as Muqātil (d.150/767), al-Kalbī (d.146 /763), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d.161/777), Mujāhid (d.104/772), ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826), al-Ṭabarī (d.310/922), and al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075), in addition to the legal *aḥkām* works of Muqātil (d.150/767), al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d.543/1148) and al-Qurṭubī (d.671/1272).[168]

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[165] Ibid., 66.

[166] Ibid., 66; (Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī taʾwīl al-Qurʾān (Beirut 2000), 10:566, 574).

[167] Tottoli, "4 Asbāb al-Nuzūl as a Technical Term", 67.

[168] Rippin, "The Function of 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl' in Qurʾanic Exegesis", 1–20.

Rippin limits his study to *sūrat al-Baqara* since, he argues, it contains a mixture of narratives, polemics, exhortations, in addition to legal material. He realizes that the *asbāb* were adduced in these commentators' works for no specified reason and then ignored with no further explanation. His reasoning is that, in addition to the fact that a mere mention of these reports triggers the memories of the informed readers, such reports are cited "out of a general desire to historicize the text of the Qurʾān in order to be able to prove constantly that God really did reveal his book to humanity on earth; the material thereby acts as a witness to God's concern for His creation".[169] Hence, the phenomenon of *asbāb al-nuzūl* underlies a theological motive more than a literary one. Another theologically motivated function is the concern for a good story as in verse 260: "Indeed, Abraham said: 'Lord show me how you gave life to the dead!' He said: 'Do you not believe!' [Abraham] said: 'Why yes, but to satisfy my heart…!' He said: 'Take four birds, then turn them to you. Then put a part of them in each hill and call them and they will come to you swiftly. Know that God is powerful and wise!" (*al-Baqara* 2: 260). The *asbāb* cited to explain this verse ranged from defending Abraham's questioning of God's power through the narrative that Satan put doubt in his mind, to an argument between him and Nimrod where Abraham said that he has witnessed God restoring the soul to a dead body, and that is why he asked God to show him the process as a way to settle his heart, to a variety of other *asbāb* just to prove that Abraham "could not possibly have had any doubts in his faith".[170]

A second function, according to Rippin, is a "haggadical exegetical function", i.e., it provides "a narrative account in which the basic exegesis of the verse may be

[169] Ibid., 2.

[170] Ibid., 4-6.

embodied".[171] He gives as an example the narrative associated with verse 44 of *al-Baqara* "Do you preach righteousness and fail to practice it yourselves, although you read the Scripture? Do you not understand?" (*al-Baqara* 2:44), which goes, according to al-Wāḥidī and al-Suyūṭī, as follows: "The verse was revealed about the Jewish rabbis of Medina, who the *sabab* argues, acknowledged Muḥammad and his *Sunna*, but they were hypocrite enough to err, not follow it, and mislead the Jewish community.[172]

A third function, Rippin maintains, is to support disputes with regards to the variant readings as in the case of (Q2:119): "Indeed, We have sent you [Prophet] with the truth as a bringer of good tidings and a warner, and you will not be asked [or do not ask] about the inhabitants of Hellfire" (*al-Baqara* 2:119). Rippin elaborates that the term *tasʾal*, in verse 119, can be read due to *qirāʾāt* literature as either *tusʾalu* (to be asked) or *tasʾal* (to ask). Hence, two *asbāb* were adduced each to confirm a different choice of textual reading and interpretation. To support the former, the *sabab* cited: "The Prophet said: 'If God would reveal his strength to the Jews, they would believe.' So God revealed: 'You will not be questioned about the inhabitants of hell'".[173] Whereas to support the latter "*tasʾal*", the *sabab* cited: "The Prophet said one day: 'If only I knew what happened to my parents!' So this verse was revealed 'Do not ask about the inhabitants of hell'".[174]

A fourth function of *asbāb* is narrative expansion, as in *taʿyīn al-mubham* (explain the ambiguous) and the metaphorical, of the qurʾanic verse which ranged from simple settings to comprehensive elaboration incorporating glosses and simile in human

[171] Ibid., 3.

[172] Rippin, "The Function of 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl' in Qurʾanic Exegesis, 3.

[173] Ibid., 4.

[174] Ibid., 4.

events as in the interpretation of darkness as designating the disbelievers.[175] This *sabab*, Rippin argues, is "grounded on the notion of removing any ambiguity and at the same time of generating a story for repetition and edifying entertainment".[176]

A fifth function of *sabab* is to provide an authoritative interpretational context and plays a central role in supporting exegetical decisions.[177] In the sense that, Rippin explains, the exegete decides on the interpretation, then chooses the most appropriate *sabab*, from among a variety, to support it. *Asbāb* narratives, according to Rippin, also provide a *Jāhilī* background to the verses of legal injunctions, however, not with an intent to make legal deductions. It rather, he maintains, highlights the difference in how things were before Islam by contrasting "either positively (in the case of Abrahamic legacy) or negatively (in the case of the *Jāhilī* foil) with the provisions of the Islamic dispensation".[178] Furthermore, "the production of a *Jāhilī* background provides a measure by which Islam is evaluated and provides evidence of the protection and of the sense of identity which Islam entails".[179]

An important point, however, discussed by Rippin is that *asbāb* can either create or annul the legal meaning of a verse. He provides the example of (Q2:115): "To Allah belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn, you are facing [towards] Allah. Indeed, Allah is all encompassing and knowing" (*al-Baqara* 2:115). He explains, whereas one *sabab* links it to the previous verse which concerns the destruction of mosques, hence, believers can still pray, another *sabab* provides the verse with a legal

[175] Ibid., 7.

[176] Rippin, "The Function of 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl' in Qurʾanic Exegesis, 8.

[177] Ibid., 8.

[178] Ibid., 10.

[179] Ibid., 11.

content that prayer is legally valid, even if, out of ignorance or lack of clear direction, the *qibla* was not faced.[180]

In short, no matter what was the function of the *asbāb*, it is clear that they were added to solve the problem of lack of interpretation in the Holy text. Besides, the exegetes designated different circumstances of revelation to the same verse. They correspondingly provided different exegetical views to the same verse on which there was a disagreement whether it is an abrogating or an abrogated verse. The *asbāb*'s authenticity is questionable since their function was mainly exegetical with divergent motives of the exegete to prove his point. This in turn, from a rational perspective, deems Shaḥrūr's call, to ignore them as weak narratives, in place.

[180] Rippin, "The Function of 'Asbāb al-Nuzūl' in Qurʾanic Exegesis, 12-13.

CHAPTER V

UNIVERSALITY OF THE QURʾĀN

In his book *Approaching the Qurʾān*, Michael Sells gives a brief description of the Arabian Peninsula and the historical context in which the Qurʾān was revealed, then he explains the premises of the Meccan *Sūras* and argues that they, contrary to the ones revealed during the Prophet's later life, involve relatively little historical, political, and legal aspects. Hence, he maintains, they speak most directly to every human being, regardless of religious confession or cultural background.[181] On the other hand, Muḥammad Shaḥrūr asserts that the whole text "has a universal character and should be treated as a guide for all humankind".[182] As said earlier, Shaḥrūr is not the first intellectual in history to believe in the universal epistemology of Islam, and like other Muslim reformers before him, he strived to combine Qurʾanic with modern worldviews. He even developed the thesis that all the eternal principles of *al-islām* are undistinguishable from the moral and religious perceptions of the world. However, it is Shaḥrūr's "unorthodox" division of the Qurʾān that differentiates him from his earlier counterparts. He classifies the verses of *the Book* into verses of prophethood and verses of messengerhood as an indirect endeavor to differentiate between people who believe in the existence of God, i.e., the universal religion "*al-islām*", and the believers who follow Prophet Muḥammad and the rituals associated with the Muslim "sect". Shaḥrūr's classification, this section suggests, aims at establishing this universality of *al-islām* by ridding it of its specified rituals and fundamental pillars.

[181] Michael Sells, *Approaching The Qurʾān: The Early Revelations* (2007), 2.

[182] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 487.

A. Messengerhood vs. Prophethood

As noted earlier, Shaḥrūr divides the Qurʾanic text into two parts: the "book of prophethood" (*kitāb al-nubuwwa*) and the "book of messengerhood" (*kitāb al-risāla*). The former, he maintains, comprises the crucial questions of existence, i.e., life, death, Hell and Paradise, etc…, however, it is ambiguous (*mutashābih*). Whereas the latter is definite (*muḥkam*) and encompasses religious practices and rituals, as well as moral and social duties to be implemented per diem by the believers.[183] He backs his finding with the following verses where the term "book" has two different/ contradictory attributions, i.e., "definite verses" vs "ambiguous verses": "[This is] a book, with verses basic or fundamental [of established meaning] (*kitāb uḥkimat āyātuhu*)…"(*Hūd* 11:1), and "…a book, consistent with itself (*kitāban mutashābihan*)…"(*Al-Zumar* 39:23). Consequently, Shaḥrūr reasons that there must be two different categories of verses collected in two smaller books harmoniously interweaved within the covers of the Holy text.[184] Accordingly, he distinguishes the verses between Muḥammad's prophethood- (*nubuwwa*) and Muḥammad's messengerhood- (*al-risāla*). He further calls for the necessity of keeping these verses apart as a way of safeguarding the meaning of the text.

On one hand, according to Shaḥrūr, the verses of messengerhood, the definite verses (*āyāt muḥkamāt*), constitute the legal injunctions, orders, and prohibitions. They address the codes of human behavior within "the spheres of ritual worship and human life, general ethics (*al-furqān*), absolute taboos (*al-muḥarramāt*), temporary (only valid for Muḥammad's time), nonbinding general instructions to the Prophet such as the dress code of women in (*Al-Aḥzāb* 33:59), and nonbinding specific notifications explicitly revealed for Muḥammad such as rules of behavior for his wives (*Al-Aḥzāb*

[183] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 72-73.

[184] Ibid., 116.

33:53)".[185] These verses, according to Shaḥrūr, are subject to *ijtihād*, to "remain in harmony with social realities", within the limits set in the divine text.[186] In this respect, Shaḥrūr argues that since mankind has greatly advanced in terms of intellectual capacities, knowledge, methodologies and legal systems, it is now the turn of the scientific institutions, legislative associations and parliaments to take over the role of earlier prophets and religious authorities. However, he asserts, they must first be approved by and in corroboration with the *qurʾān*.[187]

On the other hand, Shaḥrūr maintains that the verses of prophethood do not cover rules of behavior. Rather, they are ambiguous (*āyāt mutashābihāt*) and constitute the "universal laws that govern every event in the cosmos, nature, and human history".[188] For him, these ambiguous verses are fixed, however, they enjoy a flexible content that can be "constantly reread in the light of new progress in our knowledge of nature and the universe".[189] He divides this book of prophethood into two parts: (1) *al-qurʾān* (the truth) and (2) the seven oft-recited verses (*al-sabʿ al-mathānī*) which also talk, according to Shaḥrūr, about the universal truth.[190] He argues, however, that, unlike the *qurʾān* which consists only of "ambiguous" verses, the seven oft-repeated verses consist of both "ambiguous" and "repeated" verses. His finding is based on verse 23 from *Al-Zumar* "God has revealed the most beautiful event (*aḥsan al-ḥadīth*) in the

[185] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 124-126.

[186] Ibid., 488.

[187] Ibid., 126.

[188] Ibid., 134.

[189] Ibid., 488.

[190] Based on: "And We have bestowed upon you the seven oft-repeated [verses] (*sabʿan min al-mathānī*) and the grand *qurʾān*." (*Al-Hijr* 15:87).

form of an ambiguous book (*kitāban*)…(*mutashābihan*)[191], [yet] repeating its teaching in various aspects (*mathāniya*)…" (*Al-Zumar* 39:23).[192] Shaḥrūr maintains that the *sabʿ al-mathānī* are the seven groups of disconnected letters found at the beginning of some *sūras*: (1) *Alif-Lām-Mīm-Rāʾ*, (2) *Alif-Lām-Mīm, Sād,* (3)*Kāf-Hāʾ-Yāʾ-ʿAin-Sād,* (4) *Yāʾ- Sīn,* (5)*Tāʾ-Hāʾ,* (6)*Tāʾ-Sīn-Mīm*, (7)*Ḥāʾ-Mīm*. Their significance lies in his claim that they do not belong to the Arabic language, and that they are "utterances of the human voice", hence they are universal, i.e., this part of the book should not be confined to Arabic speakers only.[193]

Furthermore, Shaḥrūr strictly differentiates between the *Sunna* of the Messenger and the *Sunna* of the Prophet. In the sense that the former constitutes the acts and deeds of Muḥammad such as the ritual obligations that differentiate his followers from other Muslim-ascenders. Whereas, the *Sunna* of the Prophet constitutes the sayings of Muḥammad with respect to society, politics, and the state, and are divided into two categories: "words of wisdom"[194] and "prophetic statements"[195]. The "words of wisdom" do not require divine revelation, prophethood, nor messengerhood.[196] Rather, they are universally accepted moral aphorisms which originate from within the human being, and based on his own personal experience; hence, they cannot form the basis of

[191]Another interpretation of *kitāban mutashābihan* is "a book of perfect consistency" by Saḥeeḥ International.

[192] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 128-129.

[193] Ibid., 129-130.

[194] Based on: "God has sent down the scripture and wisdom to you, and taught you what you did not know..." (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:113).

[195] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 103.

[196] Shaḥrūr's reasoning comes from the fact that Luqmān was not a prophet, and yet he was bestowed wisdom from God: "We bestowed [in the past] wisdom on Luqmān: 'Show [your] gratitude to God" (Luqmān 31:12).

either religious or civil laws.[197] On the other hand, Shaḥrūr explains that "prophetic statements" reflect Muḥammad's *ijtihād* contingent to the needs of his society and in relation to the social and political problems of his time. He argues that the only value these statements have, is to teach humans *al-ijtihād,* as did the Prophet, through applying the divine rulings to their contemporary circumstances. He divides them into five categories: (1) Statements about the ritual obligations of *the Book*; (2) statements about Muḥammad's conjectures regarding the unseen world (*aḥādīth al-akhbār bi'l-ghayb*) which, according to Shaḥrūr, should not be considered as "truth" because the Prophet is only human[198] and it is not his "area of expertise"[199]; (3) statements about legal injunctions issued by Muḥammad (*aḥādīth al-aḥkām*) within God's limits, however, are historically contingent and belong to ancient Arabia; (4) sacred statements about messages from God through the medium of the Prophet and uttered in his words (*aḥādīth qudsiyya*) which, according to Shaḥrūr, should be discarded since they entail that "*the Book* was ambiguous or needed further elaboration or additional explanations"[200]; and (5) personal statements about Muḥammad's private and public life (*aḥādīth al-ḥayāt al-insānī*).[201]

By the same token, Shaḥrūr further refers to the concept of "separate obedience" (*al-Tāʿa al-munfaṣila*), i.e., "the eternal obedience to God and time-restricted obedience

[197] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 104-105.

[198] Based on: "Say: 'I am but a man like yourselves, [but] the inspiration (*waḥy*) has come to me…" (*Al-Kahf* 18:110).

[199] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 106.

[200] Based on: "Shall I seek for judge other than God? When He it is who has sent unto you the book, explained in detail (*mufaṣṣalan*)" … (*Al-Anʿām* 6:114); "And if the apostle were to invent any sayings in our name, We should certainly seize him by his right hand, and We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart" (*Al-Ḥāqa* 69:44-46).

[201] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 105-108.

to Muḥammad". [202] His reasoning is based on the dual obedience mentioned in (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:59) and (*Al-Māʾida* 5:92): "O you who believe! Obey God, and obey the apostle..".[203] Shaḥrūr argues that obedience to Muḥammad's rulings applies only during his lifetime since "they do not enjoy neither absolute validity nor eternal authority".[204] In the sense that they were relative, contingent, and reflected the circumstances of his time, i.e., their significance is provisional. He gives as an example Muḥammad's prohibition of music, dancing, and singing since it was essential to eliminate idolatry at that time, but this is no longer needed now. Another example, provided by Shaḥrūr, is when Muḥammad prohibited visiting graves, and then overturned his decision and allowed it after the new faith sank in. Shaḥrūr notes here that the practice of visiting graves was not banned in *the Book*, but Muḥammad was free to make *ijtihād* to restrict the superstitious practices of *jāhiliyya,* however, these should not be considered as Islamic legislations.

Shaḥrūr contends that Islamic jurists prioritized the *Sunna* of the Prophet over the rulings of *the Book* to the extent that the former turned into their "primary and, often times, only" source of Islamic legislation, even when they were in contradiction with the divine text.[205] Accordingly, the *Sunna* acquired a sacred status and an unquestionable authority. Moreover, Shaḥrūr claims that Muḥammad's companions knew that the prophet's words were concomitant of "the political-historical context in which he lived".[206] Furthermore, he ascertains that they also realized, based on (Q5:3)

[202] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 93.

[203] Ibid., 94.

[204] Ibid., 94.

[205] Ibid., 71.

[206] Ibid., 81.

"Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you *al-islām* as your religion…" (*al-Māʾida* 5:3), that the act of collecting *ḥadīth* in order to complete the religion of *al-islām* and interpret the divine text is against God's words.[207] For him, this traditional approach to the *Sunna* has led to "intellectual stagnation, cultural decay and backwardness" in the Arab-Muslim society.[208] Accordingly, he strives to prove that "the *Sunna* of the Prophet is culturally and historically conditioned, it lacks the universality of *Allah*'s Book, and needs to 'stay' in seventh-century Arabia".[209]

It is worth noting here that the *sunna* "is an ancient Arab concept, meaning an exemplary mode of conduct, and the verb *sanna* has the connotation of setting or fashioning a mode of conduct as an example that others would follow". [210] In pre-Islamic Arabia, as in many tribally structured societies, any person renowned for his rectitude, charisma and distinguished stature was, within his family and clan, deemed to provide a *sunna*, a normative practice to be emulated. The earlier Prophets, as well as Muḥammad, represented a prime source of *sunan*. In a general sense, therefore, "*sunan* were not legally binding narratives, but rather subjective notions of justice that were put to various uses and discursive strategies".[211] However, to elaborate further on the role of the Prophet, Shaḥrūr utilizes verse 7 from *Al-Ḥashr*: "Whatever the Messenger gives you (*mā atākum*), take; but whatever he forbids (*mā nahākum*), refrain from. Fear

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[207] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 81.

[208] Ibid., 79.

[209] Ibid., 72.

[210] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 40.

[211] Ibid., 40.

Allah, for Allah is terrible in retribution" (*Al-Ḥashr* 59:7). He refers the term *mā atākum* to what the Prophet shared from his own personal experience and knowledge. He further highlights the difference between *al-nahy* and *al-ḥarām* where the former is "contingent, relative, and flexible" and the latter is "divine, fixed, absolute, and everlasting".[212] He asserts that the Prophet could only "permit or prohibit (*yaʾmur wa-yanhā*) but never to absolutely allow or forbid (*yuḥallil wa-yuḥarrim*) since the latter is the prerogative of God alone".[213] According to Shaḥrūr, even if Muḥammad issued certain orders that were considered as "taboos" (*ḥarām*), these would only be temporary prohibitions (*nahy*) and not absolute, since God is the only one who can order absolute taboos or permissions. He argues that the Prophet created a viable state and "maneuvered" within God's boundaries to generate specific civil laws and legislations to regulate the affairs of his society by "either 'loosening' the areas of divine permissions (to give them general applicability) or 'tying' them due to specific circumstances (to make them only particularly applicable)".[214] However, such maneuvering, Shaḥrūr stresses, is prone to "human error and, unlike revelations, can be corrected".[215] Even governments and or parliaments, he maintains, may decree temporary prohibitions, but not absolute taboos or permissions. Therefore, a distinction should be made between divine interdiction and the human interdiction of Muḥammad, or else the latter would be considered universal and eternally valid.

Moreover, Shaḥrūr asserts that the reliance on the Prophet's *Sunna* is all due to wrong interpretations of certain verses in *the Book*. He elaborates using the verses from

[212] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 90.

[213] Ibid., 89.

[214] Ibid., 102.

[215] Ibid., 102.

(*Al-Najm* 53:3-4): " Nor does he speak of his own whims; It is only a revelation sent down [to him]"[216], and argues that these verses were mistakenly interpreted to mean that whatever the Prophet says (*yanṭiq*) is equivalent to divine revelation (*waḥy*). This wrong interpretation, he contends, ignored the reason of revelation behind these verses which were, according to tradition, revealed in Mecca as a proof that the Prophet received these verses from God.[217] One cannot but notice that, despite his refutation of the reasons of revelations, he uses them, just like the exegetes whom he criticizes, to defend his point of contention.

Another example of misinterpretation, discussed by Shaḥrūr, is the verse: "We sent them with clear proofs and scriptures; and We revealed to you the reminder, so that you may make clear (*li-tubayyin*) to mankind what has been revealed to them, and that, perchance, they may reflect" (*Al-Naḥl* 16:44), which according to him, led to the belief that the *Sunna* supersedes the Qurʾān and abrogates the divine text.[218] Shaḥrūr argues that the literal exegesis of the verse produced the misconception that the Prophet's *Sunna* was intended to elucidate the ambiguities found in the divine scripture and that the Qurʾān was in need of the *Sunna*.[219] Besides, he asserts, Muḥammad's role was to transmit and "make God's message known" without alterations. For him, the term *li-tubayyin* means to "make evident" or "to bring out what is hidden" and not "to explain or make clear"[220] as in (*Al ʿImrān* 3:187): "Remember, O Prophet, when Allah took the covenant of those who were given the Scripture to make it known (*la-tubayyanunnahu*)

[216] Dr. Mustafa Khattāb, the Clear Qurʾān.

[217] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 82.

[218] Ibid., 84-85.

[219] Ibid., 85.

[220] Ibid., 85.

to people and not hide it…".[221] Shaḥrūr insists on the notion that *the Book* is "complete in form and content, unobscured, uncovered, and unambiguous in all its details… and does not need clarifications by the *Sunna*", and it is for granted that the Messenger delivered God's messages verbatim to his people.[222]

What is striking, however, is Shaḥrūr's following statement: "His [the Prophet's] great mission was to make it public, that is, to 'unhide' what was hidden and to make clear what was unclear".[223] Shaḥrūr wrote a whole chapter to prove that it was not Muḥammad's role to clarify the qurʾanic verses, rather he was only to transmit the divine message verbatim. Then, he contradicts his work by stating "to make clear what was unclear". As a matter of fact, he bypasses the crucial point that the Qurʾān contains many mysterious words that the contemporary reader or hearer did not know the meaning of. As an example, in *Approaching the Qurʾān*, Michael Sells explicates that throughout the early Meccan *sūras*, the phrase "what can tell you of", or "what can tell you what" (*mā adrākā mā*) marks a term that is new or obscure to the original audience. He argues that the phrase indicates a moment of mystery, and the question often is only partially answered, only to be posed anew in another *sūra*, with another partial answer or hint. He provides examples from (Q:82, Q:101, Q:104) which include mysterious words such as *al-qāriʿa, ḥutama* and *hāwiya*, and argues that even though the *sūra* asks "what can tell what the *word* is", it does not define it.[224] At the same time, Sells tells us that most commentators and translators have simply equated these words respectively to

[221] Dr. Mustafa Khattāb, the Clear Qurʾān. There are also other verses that show confusion in interpretation among the religious scholars such as: (*Al-Māʾida* 5:15), (*Al-Baqara* 2:187), (*Al-Tawba* 9:114), (*Al-Naḥl* 16:89), and (*Al-Anʿām 6*:126).

[222] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 85-87.

[223] Ibid., 108.

[224] Michael Sells, *Approaching The Qurʾān: The Early Revelations* (2007), 25

"the fire of God in vaults" and "raging fire"; in other words, another name for hell, "interpolating into it a definite article that does not exist in the Qurʾanic text itself".[225] Accordingly, he argues that in the reduction of these two words, for example, to a synonym for hell and to a monotonic threat of punishment, the psychological complexity is lost.

In short, the Prophetic *ḥadīths*, according to Shaḥrūr, have no binding authority no matter what was their classification, i.e., whether they were authentic or feeble. The reason, he argues, is that the *Sunna* involves human legislation which changes according to the historical situation. Unless these *ḥadīths* were in congruence with *the Book* and in accord to social reality, they must not be employed and should be amended. Shaḥrūr further argues that also the traditions, of both the companions and the *fuqahāʾ*, should not be considered authoritative. For him, they merely serve as historical information and must be substituted by contemporary legislative institutions and parliaments.[226] According to Shaḥrūr, Prophet Muḥammad should only be followed as a "role model" in his belief in the oneness of God (*al-tawḥīd*), and be solely imitated in the way he practiced *ijtihād* within the limits set by God and by not violating any of the taboos. Muḥammad, he argues, was "a pragmatic leader who received the 'universal absolute' and applied it to the 'particular' of his time".[227] Consequently, governments should emulate the *ijtihād* model of the Prophet by applying the divine rules based on reason and modern scientific rationale and in accord with the political-historical context of their own time. This in return, Shaḥrūr believes, would turn the "very narrow-minded

[225] Ibid., 25.

[226] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 111.

[227] Ibid., 109.

īmānic discourse- caged into the space of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the seventh century- into a universal Islamic discourse that integrates all people on this globe and covers all periods of time until the coming of the Last Hour".[228]

Shaḥrūr's efforts to abate the reliance on the *Sunna,* and his classifications of the text to verses of messengerhood and verses of prophethood, do not pass without hidden intentions. This, however, does not imply the presence of wicked intents, rather maybe an attempt to free the believers from dogmatism by highlighting universal ethics over rituals and by proving the universality of the Qurʾān. To further reach this end, Shaḥrūr adopts the notion of non-synonymity; he breaks with the norms of tradition and gives new meanings for the divine words and consequently reaches a new sense of the Qurʾanic verses.

B. Non-Synonymity as the Main Approach

One of Shaḥrūr's main approaches to the Qurʾān is "non-synonymity" in *Allah's Book*; he refutes the concept of synonymity and strives to clarify every semantic variation he could find. He argues that, during the "era of Arab imperialism of the Umayyads and Abbasids", the *fuqahāʾ*, with their interpretations and *ijtihāds*, provided authoritarian rulers the legal rulings by which they were able to consolidate their power and mobilize the people for unjustified wars.[229] To elaborate, he contends that the *fuqahāʾ* "dogmatically" exploited this notion of synonymity to inflict military connotations on terms such as equating *jihād* with *qitāl* (fight) and *qatl* (killing), and

[228] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 493.

[229] Ibid., 336.

"fight in God's way" and "*al-jihād wal-qitāl*" with "martyrdom and warfare".[230] During this expansion period, Shaḥrūr maintains that the meaning of the term "*jihād*" transformed, from "a struggle in God's way to secure freedom of choice for all people", to a reference for "a mission for the spread of Islam through military conquests, invasions, and martyrdom".[231] He opposes the association of *jihād* with *qitāl* (fight) and *qatl* (killing), and shows through different verses of the Qurʾān that *jihād* constitutes the peaceful struggle for freedom, justice, and equality, the pursuit of knowledge, as well as military fighting that involves violence and force in self-defense or national security. However, he asserts that *qitāl*, in terms of violence, is only one possible type of *jihād* and must be a last resort. Shaḥrūr further supports his argument with a *ḥadīth*, taken from ʿAlā al-Dīn al-Muttaqī, alleged to be by the Prophet to his companions, in order to define *jihād*: "You have made a good transition from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*." They asked: "What is the greater *jihād*?" He said: "A servant's struggle against his desires".[232] Based on *ḥadīth*, Shaḥrūr maintains that the Prophet classified *jihād* into either great or small, in which the former designates the "struggle of the soul against its animalistic passions and cravings", and the latter constitutes "an armed defense in the event of external aggression".[233] However, he argues that it was after the Prophet's death, the term *jihād* was exploited by the *fuqahāʾ* to designate "armed conflict, conquest through raids, and the killing of unbelievers".[234]

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[230] Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, *Tajfīf Manābiʿ al-Irhāb*, 2008.

[231] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 395.

[232] Ibid., 396; ʿAlā al-Dīn al-Muttaqī, *Kanz al-ʿummāl fī sunan al-aqwā wa'l-afʿāl* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1981), vol.4, 430 (ḥadīth no. 11260).

[233] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 416.

[234] Ibid., 416.

Another synonymity debated by Shaḥrūr is the term *shahīdun* as in: *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q2:23) "… and call your witnesses (*shuhadāʾakum*) or helpers [if there are any] besides God, if your [doubts] are true", and in *Sūrat al-Burūj* (Q85:9) "… and God is witness (*shahīdun*) to all things". He contends the connection of the term with martyrs or martyrdom, and maintains that its meaning, found 160 times in *the Book*, constitutes the "act of giving witnessing".[235] Furthermore, he highlights the difference between the terms "*shahīd*" and "*shāhid*", and elaborates that the former is associated with precision, accuracy, and physical presence during the event where the witness is still alive, whereas the latter is designated to someone who was not present but can base his testimony on evidence rather than direct experience.[236] Moreover, he maintains that the dead from Muslims and non-Muslims alike are *shuhadāʾ*, not because they are dead, but because they witnessed their own death.[237] He argues that the *fuqahāʾ* altered the semantics of terms such as *shahāda*, *shahīd*, *istishhād*, *shuhadāʾ* to create the concept of conquest. Hence, the term *shuhadāʾ* evolved to mean Muslim soldiers who die heroically on the battlefield.[238]

Shaḥrūr gives different explanations to similar words with the same root meaning such as *al-jazm* and *al-jurm*, *al-batr* and *al-shaṭr* which all mean 'to cut off'. Yet, according to him their meaning differs depending on their location and context. For instance, he solely designates the terms *al-ijrām* (i.e. j-r-m; to cut-off) and *al-mujrimūn* (culprits or criminals) as the act of dissenting from God, denying His existence, disbelieving in the Hereafter and the Day of Judgment, and detaching oneself from the

[235] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 403.

[236] Ibid., 405.

[237] Ibid., 408.

[238] Ibid., 417.

law.[239] Furthermore, as opposed to traditional interpretation which connotes the term *al-muṣallūn* to "those who pray", Shaḥrūr translates it as the ones who are in connection with God (*ṣila*) based on the root w-s-l (to connect).[240] His reasoning is based on (Q107: 1-7): "[Prophet], have you seen the one who denies the final Judgment? That is the one who repulses the orphan, and does not encourage the feeding of the poor. So woe to those hypocrites who pray yet unmindful of their [prayers] (*ṣalātihim*), those who only show off and forbid common kindness" (*al-Māʿūn* 107:1-7), and (Q74:39-46): "Except the companions of the right hand. They will be in gardens of delight: they will question each other, and ask of the sinners: 'What led you into Fire? They will say: 'We were not of those who [pray] (*muṣallīn*), nor were we of those who fed the indigent; but we used to talk vanities with vain talkers, and we used to deny the Day of Judgement" (*al-Muddaththir* 74: 39-46).[241] In that sense, Shaḥrūr deviates from one of the main pillars of *al-Islām* which is "prayer" by interpreting the terms *ṣalātihim* and *muṣallīn* as those connected to God and not those who performed the ritual of praying to God (*ṣalawat* as in *al-Nūr* 24:37[242]). Or else, he argues that it would be illogical to consider those who neglect the ritual of praying as *mujrimūn* who cut off their connection with God. Furthermore, he maintains that if the difference in meaning was not intentional, there would not have been a second derivative to the same lexeme.[243]

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[239] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 31.

[240] Ibid., 33.

[241] Ibid., 32.

[242] "By men whom neither trade nor sale can divert from the remembrance of *Allah*, nor form the regular prayer (*al-ṣalawa*), nor from paying *zakāt*, their only fear is for the day when hearts and eyes will be turned about" (*al-Nūr* 24:37); (Ambros also distinguishes between *ṣalāt* and *ṣalawāt* - Ambros. *Dictionary*: 163).

[243] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 33-34.

All of Shaḥrūr's work is based on the notion of non-synonymity irrespective of semantic similarities. He highlights the point that traditional *tafsīr* connotes the same meaning to different terms in the text, such as: *Allāh* (God) and *al-rabb* (Lord); *al-rūḥ* (spirit) and *al-nafs* (soul) ; *al-qurʾān*, *al-kitāb*, *al-furqān*, and *al-dhikr*, despite their juxtaposition by the conjunction "*wa*" (and).[244] For instance, Shaḥrūr argues that the divine text uses the term "Lord" (*al-rabb*) when it refers to a decree about universal human conduct, whereas, it uses the term "God" (*Allāh*) when it refers to religious duties. He provides the following verse as an example: "Thy Lord (*rabbuka*) has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor"(*Al-Isrāʾ* 17:23).[245]

Similarly, Shaḥrūr differentiates between the terms "*al-qaḍāʾ*" and "*al-qadar*", and strives to place each term in, what he believes to be, their respective sections, i.e., "*umm al-kitāb*" and "*al-qurʾān*". For him, it is only *al-qadar* that articulates the notion of predestination and objective reality, whereas *al-qaḍāʾ* "refers to decisions that are taken, or 'determined', by human beings; it signifies the existence of free will".[246] Furthermore, he argues that *al-qadar* belongs to the *qurʾān* i.e. the eternal laws of the universe, while *al-qaḍāʾ* belongs to the *umm al-kitāb* i.e. the legal rules of human behavior.[247] *Al-qaḍāʾ*, according to Shaḥrūr, is when humans make their decisions on

[244] As in: "*Alif Lām Rā,* these are the *āyāt* of revelation (*al-kitāb*)- of [and] a *qurʾān* that makes things clear", (*Al-Hijr* 15:1).

[245] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 119.

[246] Ibid., 169-170.

[247] Ibid., 170.

whether to abide by or reject God's precise rules, hence, these rules are not objective.[248] He gives as an example verse 17 from *sūrat al-Isrāʾ*: "Thy Lord has decreed (*qaḍā*) that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents..." (*Al-Isrāʾ* 17:23), and argues that this verse, where the term "*qaḍā*" is used, goes under the category of *umm al-kitāb* since it is an instruction that people can either accept or reject.[249]

Shaḥrūr goes further to differentiate between many other traditionally known as "synonymous terms", such as the terms *qurʾān* and *al-kitāb*. Unlike the traditional scholarship which refers to both words synonymously, according to Shaḥrūr "*al-kitāb* is the generic term (*ism ʿāmm*) which stands for the whole content of the written copy (*al-muṣḥaf*), beginning with *al-Fātiḥa* and ending with *sūrat al-Nās*, while the *qurʾān* is the more specific term (*ism khāṣṣ*) that comprises only one part of *al-kitāb*".[250] He elaborates further that *al-qurʾān* is the objective fixed truth, whereas *al-kitāb* is linked to social life, hence, open to re-interpretation relative to time and place.[251] Similarly, he gives the example of *al-kitāb* vs *al-qurʾān* where it is written in verse two from *sūrat al-Baqara* that "*al-kitāb* is guidance for the pious (*liʾl-muttaqīn*)", whereas in the same *sūra* verse 185 that "*al-qurʾān* is guidance for the people (*hudā liʾl-nās*)", and he argues that the message is intended for two different sets of individuals: all kinds of people (general) vs the religious (specific).[252] Following this separation, Shaḥrūr presumes that the *qurʾān* part, since it addresses people in general, does not contain verses that tackle

[248] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 170.

[249] Ibid., 171-172.

[250] Ibid., 23.

[251] Christmann, interview with Shaḥrūr in 1996, 512.

[252] Ibid., 117.

religious matters.[253] It is worth noting here, however, that verse 185 is about the Holy month of Ramadan inviting people to fast.[254] One might inquire how a verse addressing people in general, including religious and non-religious individuals, requests them to fast.

There exist a copious number of examples of various exegetical never-ending views and approaches to semantics and shades of meanings on every single word in the Qurʾanic text. For instance, the word *ẓālimūn* in (Q35:32) which was given three different meanings: (1) either the person who prays later than the specified time, or (2)the one who does not pay the *zakāt*, or (3) one who accepts interest.[255] Exegetes also tend to interpret the same referent to different but interrelated expressions such as *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* in (Q1:6) to either mean: *Islām*, being an obedient servant of God, to obey God and the Prophet, and / or to follow the *Sunni* school of law.[256] Additionally, what constitutes a major difference between early and modern exegetes, Companions and successors, are the allegorical (implicit, esoteric) and non-allegorical (literal, exoteric) significations of the verses. Hence, the production of multi-faceted meanings of Qurʾanic expressions. An example would be *ḥammālata al-ḥaṭabi* in (Q111:4) which was interpreted by Mujāhid as *al-namīmah* (slander) whereas designated by Saʿīd b. Jubayr as literally the firewood.[257] Furthermore, grammatical analysis and the variant modes of readings played their role in providing different significations to a given

[253] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 117.

[254] "The month of *Ramaḍān* in which the *Qurʾān* was revealed, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights [the crescent of] the month, let him fast it; and whoever is ill or on a journey- then an equal number of other days…" (*al-Baqara* 2:185).

[255] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 133.

[256] Ibid., 133.

[257] Ibid., 135.

expression depending on its mode of articulation. As Abdul Raof puts it: "One is left wondering which meaning is true and which one is purely hypothetical".[258]

This section, however, is not to discuss the concepts of synonymity or non-synonymity in the Qurʾān. Each interpretation has its own hidden objectives, and Shaḥrūr's is no exception. His "non-synonymity" approach, as to be argued, is an endeavor to prove the universality of the Qurʾān and, whether intentionally or not, at curtailing the specificities of *Islām* as a religious community. Shaḥrūr differentiates between the traditionally synonymous terms *al-islām* and *al-īmān* and asserts that they are two different concepts. As will be seen below, Shaḥrūr's definition of *al-islām* and *al-īmān* differs from anyone's conception of both terms. Since, according to traditional scholarship, *al-islām* "stands for the religion of those who are commonly known as Muslims, the followers of Prophet Muḥammad", and the term *al-īmān* is "used to also describe the 'faith' of these Muslims, the adherents of *al-islām*".[259] However, Shaḥrūr dedicated a whole book to prove this non-synonymity and to demonstrate that the term *al-islām* or *al-muslimūn* (those who assent to God) applies to all the believers in God's existence, and that the term *al-īmān* or *al-muʾminūn* (those who believe) belongs to a specific sect of religious belief, i.e. the followers of Prophet Muḥammad.[260]

[258] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 225.

[259] Christmann. *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 21; see also al-Bukhārī; Muslim, *Saḥīḥain*, chapters on *al-īmān*.

[260] Shaḥrūr, Muḥammad. *al-Islām wal-īmān – Manzūmāt al-qiyam* (*Islam and Faith- The Versification of Values*). Damascus: Dār al-Ahālī li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzīʿ, 1996.

C. *Al-Islām* and *Al-Īmān*

For Shaḥrūr, *al-islām* is innate (i.e., natural), while *al-īmān* is a type of "ritual worship that contradicts humans' innate disposition".[261] He believes that the distinction between *al-islām* and *al-īmān* "was fiercely protected during the life time of Muḥammad", however, it gradually disappeared after his death leading to the "semantical imprisonment of the universal concepts of *al-islām* within the culture of seventh-century Arabia, as they were kept inside the compound of *al-īmān*".[262] Based on his undisputable assumption that God's revelation is the objective truth and above human interpolation, Shaḥrūr's main approach in identifying what he believes to be the "actual" meaning of these terms is through their location within the verses in *the Book*. For instance, he reasons that verse 35 from *al-Aḥzāb* provides the distinction between the terms by "terminologically and conceptually" separating "men and women who assent to God (*al-muslimūn and al-muslimāt*)" from "men and women who believe (*al-muʾminūn and al-muʾmināt*)" (*al-Aḥzāb* 33:35).[263] Similarly, he reasons that chronologically, *al-islām* comes before *al-īmān* in terms of both, appearance in history and spiritual progress. He proves his argument based on *al-Ḥujurāt* (Q49:14): "The desert Arabs say, 'We have faith (*amannā*)', [Prophet] tell them, 'you do not have faith (*lam tuʾminū*)',What you should say instead, 'We have submitted (*aslamnā*)', for faith (*al-īmān*) has not yet entered your hearts".[264]

[261] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 55.

[262] Ibid., 334.

[263] Ibid., 23.

[264] Ibid., 23.

1. Al-Islām

Shaḥrūr defines *al-islām* as "the belief in the existence of God, in His unity and in life after death".[265] For him, the Muslims are not the ones who only follow Prophet Muḥammad; they are, however, whoever submitted to God, believed in His existence and the Hereafter, irrespective of their messenger and the religious community to which they belonged. He believes that it is a universal religion, conveyed by consecutive messengers from Noah to Prophet Muḥammad, undergone several developments through time, and shared by all creatures. This universality is proven, Shaḥrūr argues, by *Āl ʿImrān* (3:83): "All creatures in the heavens and on earth, willing or unwilling, bowed to His will (*aslama lahu*)".[266] The *Jinns*, Noah, all earlier prophets and messengers (Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Jesus, Abraham, etc..) as well as their followers are all Muslims according to Shaḥrūr. He provides as examples the verses of *al-Jinn* (72:14), *Āl-ʿImrān* (3:52), *al-Baqara* (2:132), and *Yūsuf* (12:101) to demonstrate Abraham's adherence to *Islām* when he submitted his will to God (*ḥanīfan musliman*).[267] Consequently, Shaḥrūr reasons that the first pillar and the traditionally crucial criterion of *al-islām*, *al-shahāda* (there is no god but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God), would not be accurate, since it negates the earlier prophets' and their followers' submission to God (*al-islām*) just because they did not follow Prophet Muḥammad.[268]

[265] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 28.

[266] Ibid., 29.

[267] Ibid., 24.

[268] Ibid., 24.

2. Al-Īmān

On the other hand, *al-īmān* (faith), according to Shaḥrūr, belongs to the realm of messengerhood and means the "belief in Muḥammad and his messengerhood, including belief in *the Book* and its message as well as the books that were revealed before the Apostle".[269] His definition is supported by verse 136 from *al-Nisāʾ* which says: "O you who believe (*alladhīn āmanū*)! Believe in God and His Apostle, and the scripture which He has sent to His apostle and the scripture which He sent to those before (him)…" (*al-Nisāʾ* 4:136).[270] To further prove his point, Shaḥrūr notes that the term "commander of the faithful" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*) was "specifically created for Muslim-Believers".[271] For instance, he tells us that Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb was known as the commander of the faithful and not the "commander of the Muslims" (*amīr al-muslimīn*), and that the term "mothers of the believers- (*ummahāt al- muʾminīn*) designates the Prophet's wives instead of "Mothers of the Muslims".[272] But he also links the term *al-īmān* to other messengers as well, and he argues that the word "believed" (*āmana*) in *the Book* designates a person who followed the messenger, belonged to his community, and believed in the heavenly scripture that was revealed to him.[273] One cannot but question, whether or not this link designates a universal characteristic to the term *al-īmān*.

Even though Shaḥrūr's new definitions of the terms may seem logical, they still overlap in every sense of meaning. However, as to be argued, this differentiation has its effects on the traditionally known pillars of the religion. Shaḥrūr's attempt to reshuffle

[269] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 51.

[270] Ibid., 51.

[271] Ibid., 56.

[272] Ibid., 56.

[273] Ibid., 52.

the pillars is somewhat provocative as he endeavors to erase centuries of rituals and beliefs.

3. The Pillars

Shaḥrūr goes on to say that also the other preconceived four pillars of *al-islām* (the rituals of prayer, alms tax, fasting, and pilgrimage) do not apply on all "Muslim-Assenters" (*al-muslimūn*). Rather, these rituals only apply on the "Muslim-Believers" (*al-muʾminūn*) and cannot be considered as pillars of *al-islām*. He supports his argument by stating examples from *the Book* which require these practices from "only" the believers (*al-muʾminūn*) such as *al-Nisā'* (4:103) and *al-Baqara* (2:183).[274] Distinctively, he designates the traditionally known pillars of *al-islām* as the main pillars of *al-īmān*, i.e., "*al-shahāda* that Muḥammad is the Apostle of God; prayer at specified timings; alms tax; fasting during the month of Ramadan; pilgrimage to Mecca; conduct affairs based on mutual consultation; and to fight in God's way for freedom, justice and equality".[275] In addition to the above-mentioned seven pillars, Shaḥrūr maintains that a Muslim- Believer should first fulfil *al-islām*'s three pillars of faith. He further argues that *al-īmān*, unlike *al-islām*, requires direction from the divine scriptures since it is about codes of ethical conduct and ritual performances.[276] However, these religious duties, he believes, are "not absolute but relative and subject to historical

[274] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 24.

[275] Ibid., 54.

[276] Ibid., 57.

change, and since they are not part of the human innate disposition (*al-fiṭra*) they are practiced in accordance with an individual's strength and ability".[277]

One of the controversies ignited by Shaḥrūr's arguments is that these traditionally preconceived pillars of *al-islām* "contradict human nature".[278] He supports his argument using verse 30 from *al-Rūm*: "So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion (*li'l-dīn ḥanīfan*). This is the natural disposition (*fiṭra*) God instilled in mankind- there is no altering God's creation- and this is the right religion (*al-dīn al-qayyim*), though most people do not realize it" (*al-Rūm* 30:30).[279] He reasons that these rituals come in contradiction with the above mentioned verse, since it is not in human nature or even instinct to simply perform them, neither to fast nor to pay some of one's own money as alms tax.[280] Therefore, Shaḥrūr concludes that these "specific forms of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage cannot be part of *al-islām*, the religion of all humankind. Rather, they are specifically required, by a precise section of *the Book*, for the Muslim-Believers (*al-muʾminūn*) only".[281]

Hence, for Shaḥrūr, the three pillars of *al-islām*, regardless of creed, are: (1) Belief in the existence of God; (2) belief in the Hereafter; and (3) Doing what is righteous (*al-ʿamal al-ṣāliḥ*). He maintains that the latter encompasses all the "moral commandments and ethical ideals" propagated by religions during the course of human history.[282] These ethical norms become binding among the believers of all religions

[277] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 59.

[278] Ibid., 25.

[279] Ibid., 25.

[280] Ibid., 25.

[281] Ibid., 26.

[282] Ibid., 34-35.

based on verse thirteen from *al-Shūrā* which states that "In matters of faith (*al-dīn*), He has laid down for you (*sharaʿa lakum*) the same commandments (*waṣāyā*) that He gave Noah, which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] and which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus…"(*Al-Shūrā* 42:13).[283] These common teachings (*al-furqān al-ʿāmm* i.e. general ethics), according to Shaḥrūr, were taught through "a chain of prophetical instructions that absorbed a steady growth of ethical norms and an increasing accumulation of moral values… adapting to the historical circumstances in which the prophets lived, as a result of which their messages underwent a process of acculturation and proliferation".[284] These moral guidelines increased in number overtime, from Noah to Moses, until they were perfected by Muḥammad's message and became universal. Shaḥrūr gives as an example the ethical commandment "Come not nigh to shameful deeds…" which, according to him, passed through "evolutionary development" from the prohibition of homosexuality by Lot, to the prohibition of fornication by Moses, until it was extended to a ban on public acts of homosexuality by Prophet Muḥammad.[285] He maintains that these ten commandments (the universal ethics) can be summarized by verses 151 till 153 of *sūrat al-Anʿām*.[286] Furthermore, the

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[283] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 36.

[284] Ibid., 35-36.

[285] Ibid., 36-40.

[286] Say: 'Come, I will rehearse what God has [really] prohibited you from': Join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want: We provide sustenance for you and for them. Come not nigh to shameful deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which God hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus does He command you, that you may learn wisdom. And come not nigh to the orphan's property, except to improve it, until he attains the age of full strength; give measure and weight with [full] justice. No burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear. Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned; and fulfil the covenant of God: thus does He command you, that you may remember. Verily, this is My way, leading straight, follow it; follow not [other] paths: they will scatter you about from His [great] path; thus does He command you that you may be righteous" (*al-Anʿām* 6:151-153).

universality of these commandments, Shaḥrūr argues, stems from verses in *the Book* that address "man" or "people" (*al-ʿinsān*) in general, such as verse fourteen in *Luqmān* (31:14): "And We have commanded people to honor their parents…" and verse fifteen in *al-Aḥqāf* (46:15): "And We have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment…".[287] However, it is not clear how he interprets the tenth commandment, "Verily, this is My way, leading straight, follow it; follow not [other] paths…", as "unity, agreement, and harmony among religious communities".[288]

On the other hand, Shaḥrūr confuses the reader when he states that the ethical guidelines for *al-īmān*, which are scattered throughout *the Book,* constitute the straight path of God (*al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*), and are naturally followed by the "good-hearted and the well-mannered" person.[289] These moral injunctions are: (1) not to scorn, speak ill of people, or spy on others (*al-Ḥujurāt* 49:11-12); (2) not to accuse or follow blindly without clear evidence (*al-Isrāʾ* 17:36); to encourage peace, resolve conflicts sensibly, and avoid war as in (*al-Anfāl* 8:61) and (*al-Nisāʾ* 4:90); (3) respect the property and privacy of others as in (*al-Nūr* 24:27-28); (4) to not suspend aid to relatives and the poor as in (*al-Nūr* 24:22), also pay alms and do "what is fair and just" (*iḥsān*) to relatives and whoever is in need as in (*al-Baqara* 2:180) and (*al-Tawba* 9:60) ; (5) to spend wisely and moderately as in (*al-Furqān* 25:67); (6) to commit loans and debts to writing as in (*al-Baqara* 2:282); in addition to (7) *zakāt al-īmān,* which according to

[287] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 39.

[288] Ibid., 41.

[289] Ibid., 42.

Shaḥrūr, is different from *zakāt al-islām* in the sense that it is given only to the followers of Muḥammad, whereas *zakāt al-islām* can be given to anyone .[290]

In short, for Shaḥrūr, *al-islām* means the universal religion of all humans on earth. His reasoning stems from the verse: "If anyone desires a religion other than *al-islām*, never will it be accepted of Him" (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:85). This in turn, would not make sense, Shaḥrūr argues, if the term *al-islām* in this verse is limited only to the followers of Muḥammad. For him, its values are naturally followed by humans irrespective of the society or the state to which they belong. Furthermore, these moral virtues, Shaḥrūr claims, existed long before Prophet Muḥammad, hence, they exist outside the realm of *al-īmān*. However, the religious obligations of *al-īmān*, particular to the followers of Muḥammad, are not universally valid nor of political significance.[291] He strives to separate the notion of *al-islām* as a way to claim its universality, argues that the moral ethics (*al-akhlāq*) of *al-islām* differ from traditions and customs, and maintains that it is a common misconception to limit these universal commandments to a certain ideology or a cultural tradition. He states that the above mentioned ten commandments do not require special skills, rather they are embedded in human nature (*al-fiṭra*). This in turn, Shaḥrūr maintains, gives the morality of *al-islām* its "universal validity" since they are commonly shared by diverse cultures, sects, political and economic systems, while, still apply to present day in any historical, religious, or economic background.[292] He argues

[290] Ibid., 43- 45.

[291] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 66-69.

[292] Ibid., 48-49.

that non-Islamic countries, where there is prosperity and well-being, adopt *al-islām* "by hundred miles" more than the Arab Muslim countries.[293]

Despite Shaḥrūr's efforts to separate between what he designates as the ten commandments of *al-islām* and the moral guidelines of *al-īmān*, one cannot but see the resemblance; they all belong under the category of ethical behavior. There may be, however, other motives behind this differentiation, specifically when it comes to his attempt to re-allocate the traditional pillars of the Islamic religion to the private and ritualistic spheres of sectarian belief. In Shaḥrūr's view, ethics must be prioritized over rituals and the strict adherence to *sharīʿa* law. Wael Hallaq, however, argues that "the *sharīʿa* cannot be understood, nor could it have operated in any social context, without its moral bearings. And Islamic morality, legal, social or otherwise, traces its sources in large measure to the performative force of the five pillars…To oust these pillars from the *fiqh* is to disengage the moral foundations of the law, to render it devoid of the most compelling impulse for legal observance".[294] To elaborate, the pillar of fasting, for example, which represents self-control and self-discipline, is a way to train oneself to control both, physical and mental longings. This in turn, sheds light on the probability that Shaḥrūr's attempt to rid the "universal *islām*" from its pillars, is to rid it from its *sharīʿa*. The significance of this argument can be illustrated in years of public debates regarding the verbatim execution of *sharīʿa* law in Muslim countries. Shaḥrūr insists on a contemporary reading of the Qurʾān away from the traditional preoccupation with the cultural details of seventh century Arabia and the rigid fixation on the past. He introduces his theory of limits and strives to establish new codes of legislation away

[293] Ibid., 69.

[294] Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 226.

from *Sharīʿa*. Next, is a comparative analysis between Shaḥrūr's theory of limits and the *Sharīʿa* in modern Islam.

CHAPTER VI

THEORY OF LIMITS VS. SHARĪʿA

Shaḥrūr's "unorthodoxy" can further be illustrated by his theory of "God's limits" (*ḥudūd*- upper and lower boundaries) in relation to Islamic law, within which societies can create their own rules and laws. These limits, Shaḥrūr argues, are eternal, immutable and absolute whereas human legislations (the flexibility within God's boundaries) are relative and subject to change. Moreover, he believes that traditional jurists restricted the universal message of *al-islām* within their Sunna-based legal injunction, and contends the notion that the current *sharīʿa* law must be regarded as "eternally fixed and followed to the letter without adaptation".[295] With his theory of limits, he revises Islamic law and establishes new codes of practice with respect to family law and *ʿibādāt* rituals.

Shaḥrūr begins by arguing that it is crucial to distinguish between "Islamic *sharīʿa*" and "Islamic *fiqh*". He defines the former as containing the "divine legal verses of *the Book*", and the latter as signifying "the human understanding and interaction with divine legislation at a specific time and place in history".[296] He maintains that the legal verses of *the Book* must be taken as "ethical markers" and not as the way traditional *fiqh* perceives them, i.e., as "fixed absolute laws".[297] He further debates that the *sharīʿa* law must be more flexible and able to adapt to the changing needs of human societies. In addition, Shaḥrūr claims that his theory of limits "aims to regain the flexibility and elasticity in human legislation that was originally built into the divine text but was

[295] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 177.

[296] Ibid., 496.

[297] Ibid., 496.

removed by an overly rigid system of *fiqh* jurisprudence".[298] He further asserts that humans are now better able to comprehend the legislative verses of the divine text, and this, he argues, is because of the advances in knowledge and natural sciences. Moreover, he practically makes a comparison between *sharīʿa* law and civil laws as a way of proving the need for new legislations in light of social developments and technical progress. He provides as an example the evolution in car industry and the consequent change in civic laws concerning "traffic control, the issuing of driving licenses, and prosecution of driving offences".[299]

A. Shaḥrūr's Theory of Limits

In order to explain his theory of limits, Shaḥrūr introduces what he considers as "contradictory but complementary concepts": "straightness" (*al-istiqāma* or *al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*) and "curvature" (*al-ḥanīfiyya*).[300] "Straightness", according to Shaḥrūr, is God's limits that humans are not allowed to contravene, yet, he asserts, they can move freely within these limits to adapt their laws to the needs and circumstances of their times, and to fulfill the requirements of social change.[301] In order to accomplish this, Shaḥrūr inserts words into the text to support his own reading. He defines *al-istiqāma* or *al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm* as "to put something right that has strayed", whereas, he defines "*al-ḥanīfiyya*" as the natural inclination "to bend or drift, as in incorrectness or distortion".[302] The traditional exegesis defines "*al-ḥanīfiyya*" as "being true in faith and

[298] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 214-215.

[299] Ibid., 178.

[300] Ibid., 180.

[301] Ibid., 183.

[302] Ibid., 180- 181.

religion". For example, *sūrat al-Rūm* states: "So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion (*li'l-dīn ḥanīfan*). This is the natural disposition (*fiṭra*) God instilled in mankind- there is no altering God's creation- and this is the right religion (*al-dīn al-qayyim*), though most people do not realize it" (*Al-Rūm* 30:30).[303] However, Shaḥrūr's definition of "*al-ḥanīfiyya*" derives from his approach to verse 79 from *sūrat Al-Anʿām*: "I have turned my face toward Him who created (*faṭara*) the heavens and the earth, as one by [nature] (*ḥanīfan*), and I am not of the idolaters" (*Al-Anʿām* 6:79).[304] As stated earlier, "*ḥanīfan*" means either "being upright"[305] or " inclining toward truth"[306], however, Shaḥrūr adds the term "nature" to the verse in order to link its meaning to "a natural quality as it is intrinsic to human nature" and that it means "fluctuation and inconsistency", hence the "law of natural nonlinearity".[307] Shaḥrūr's imagination goes further by stating that Abraham was the first to realize the *ḥanīfiyya* notion of change and non-linearity based on the following verse: "Say, 'Indeed, my Lord has guided me to a straight path- a correct religion- the way of Abraham, inclining toward truth. And he was not among those who associated others with Allah" (*Al-Anʿām* 6:161).[308] Shaḥrūr further designates the principle of *ḥanīfiyya* to "the way a certain community formulates and translates ethical rules based on its historical context, i.e., on constantly absorbing diverse developments".[309] And, since

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[303] Ibid., 181. See also: (*Al-Bayyina* 98:5), (*Al-Ḥajj* 22:31), and (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:125).

[304] Ibid., 182.

[305] Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Qurʾān.

[306] Saḥeeḥ International.

[307] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 182-183.

[308] Ibid., 185.

[309] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 63.

human societies are developing, new ethical rules will be needed in light of these changes. Accordingly, he argues, that the Qurʾān must not be considered as a "book of codified law", rather as a reference to Allah's limits within which human legislation should take place.[310] He maintains that "this dialectical opposition between curvature and straightness allows for a limitless number of movements which human legislation can take so that Islamic law remains adaptable to all times and places until the coming of the Last Hour".[311]

B. Upper and Lower Limits

Shaḥrūr divides the limits of legislation into "lower limits" and "upper limits". The former are seen in verses related to: (1) Prohibition of certain types of marriage[312]; (2) food taboos[313] (only the ones mentioned in the Holy text, and not what the *fuqahāʾ* deemed unlawful); (3) regulations concerning debt and what minimally constitute a

[310] Ibid., 64.

[311] Ibid., 183.

[312] Such as: "And marry not women whom your fathers married, except what is past: It was shameful and odious- an abominable custom indeed" (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:22), and "Prohibited to you [for marriage] are: your mothers, daughters, sisters, father's sisters, mother's sisters, brother's daughters, sister's daughters, foster-mothers, foster-sisters, your wives' mothers, your step-daughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in- no prohibition if you have not gone in- [those who have been] wives of your sons proceeding from your loins, and two sisters in wedlock at one and the same time, except for what is past; for God is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:23).

[313] As in: "Forbidden unto you [for food] are carrion and blood and swine flesh, and that which has been dedicated unto any other than Allah, and the strangled, and the dead through beating, and the dead through falling from a height, and that which has been killed by [the goring of] horns, and the devoured of wild beasts, saving that which you make lawful [by the death-stroke], and that which has been immolated unto idols. And [forbidden is it] that you swear by the divining arrows. This is an abomination. This day are those who believe in despair of [ever harming] your religion. So fear them not, fear Me! This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favor unto you, and have chosen for you a religion al-Islam. Whoever is forced by hunger, not by will, to sin: [for him] lo! Allah is forgiving, merciful." (*Al-Māʾida* 5:3), and Say: "I find not in the message received by me by inspiration any [meat] forbidden to be eaten by one who wishes to eat it, unless it be dead meat, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine, for it is an abomination, or what is impious [meat], on which a name has been invoked, other than God's". But [even so], if a person is forced by necessity, without willful disobedience, nor transgressing due limits, your Lord is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (*Al-Anʿām* 6:145).

valid contract[314]; and (4) women's dress[315]. Whereas regarding the upper limits, Shaḥrūr claims that it is totally permissible to stay below them. They constitute verses related to: (1) The punishment of theft[316]; (2) the punishment for corruption in the land and war against God[317], i.e. those who are involved in sabotage, corruption and / or suppression of freedoms of opinion and religion[318]; (3) homicide and physical harm[319]; and (4)

[314] As in: "O you who believe! When you deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: let not the scribe refuse to write as God has taught him, so let him write. Let him who incurs the liability dictate, but let him fear His Lord, and not diminish aught of what he owes. If the party liable is mentally deficient, or weak, or unable himself to dictate, let his guardian dictate faithfully, and get two witnesses, out of your own men, and of there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as you chose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her. The witnesses should not refuse when they are called on [for evidence]. Disdain not to reduce to writing [your contract] for a future period, whether it be small or big; it is just in the sight of God, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves but if it be a transaction which you carry out on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if you reduce it not to writing. But take witness whenever you make a commercial contract, and let neither scribe nor witness suffer harm. If you do [such harm] it would ne wickedness in you. So fear God; for it is God that teaches you. And God is well acquainted with all things" (*Al-Baqara* 2:282).

[315] As in: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts (*furūjahunna*); that they should not display their [hidden] beauty (*zīnatahunna*) except what appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their upper private parts (*juyūbihinna*) and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or what follows next in line (*nisāʾihinna*), or the [temporary partner] whom their right hands possess, or male [persons] free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden beauty. O you believers! Turn you all together towards God, that you may attain bliss" (*Al-Nūr* 24:31).

[316] As in: "As to the thief, male or female, cur off (*fa- aqṭaʿū*) his or her hands (*aidiyahumā*): a punishment by way of example (*nakālan*), from God, for their crime- God is exalted in power. But if the thief repents after his crime, and amends his conduct, God turns to him in forgiveness; for God is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (*Al-Māʾida* 5:38-39).

[317] As in: "Those who wage war (*yuḥāribūn*) against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land (*yasʿauna fi'l- ʾard fasādan*) should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land…" (*Al-Māʾida* 5:33), and "Except for those who repent before they fall into your power: in that case, know that God is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (*Al-Māʾida* 5:34).

[318] Andreas Christmann, *The Qurʾān, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 201.

[319] As in: "Do not take a 'human life'- made sacred by God- except with 'legal' right. If anyone is killed unjustly, We have given their heirs the authority, but do not let them exceed limits in retaliation, for they are already supported 'by law'" (*Al-Isrāʾ* 17:33), and "O believers! 'The law of' retaliation is set for you in cases of murder- a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave, and a female for a female. But if the offender is pardoned by the victim's guardian, then blood-money should be decided fairly and payment should be made courteously. This is a concession and a mercy from your Lord. But whoever transgresses after that will suffer a painful punishment" (*Al-Baqara* 2:178).

Public homosexual activities[320] (*al-faḥshāʾ*).[321] With respect to the case of homosexual intercourse, Shaḥrūr maintains, unlike traditional *fiqh*, that, since *the Book* is silent on private acts of homosexuality, punishments are not for homosexuals, rather for the act of sexual intercourse in public.[322]

Furthermore, in his approach to the legal verses, Shaḥrūr argues that "legal injunctions change with the changes of time".[323] He further asserts that both lower and upper limits cannot be transgressed, yet further restrictions may be added to them, and still not violate God's limits. With respect to the lower limits, for example, he explains that once there is a scientific evidence that children from a related couple may develop genetic disorders, an *ijtihād* is allowed for new legislation to prohibit such marriages.[324] Another case where further regulations can be added, according to Shaḥrūr, is with the expansion of commercial markets and hence, new rules of financial contracts need to be developed.[325] On the other hand, he tells us that the upper limit in extreme cases of theft, such as stealing information through espionage and threatening national security, is to cut off the culprit's hand, i.e., this is the maximum punishment a thief can get, and not to be executed for example.[326]

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[320] As in for women: "Those who commit immorality [i.e., unlawful sexual intercourse] of your women-bring against them four witnesses from among you. And if they testify, confine them to house until death takes them or Allah ordains for them [another] way" (*al-Nisāʾ* 4:15), and for men: "If two men among you are guilty [of it], punish them both. If they repent and amend leave them alone; for God is oft-returning, most merciful" (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:16).

[321] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 191-206.

[322] Ibid., 205.

[323] Ibid., 496.

[324] Ibid., 192.

[325] Ibid., 195.

[326] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 197.

Another example in relation to the upper limits is the notion of punishment by death for apostates. Shaḥrūr argues that the death penalty of the apostate is a fiction created by the *fuqahāʾ* to discipline the rebels and suppress political dissent.[327] He further explains that the *fuqahāʾ*'s commentaries helped turn "purely historical narratives into sanctified heritage, and, consequently, heritage became legislation".[328] These *fuqahāʾ*, he maintains, were a tool in the hands of their despotic rulers, the Umayyads and the Abbasids, to help them "legitimize the liquidation of their political opponents" by digging in search for prophetic *ḥadīths* (authentic or not) to support their rulings.[329] Such *ḥadīths* were attributed to the Prophet which allege that: "he who changes his religion, kill him" (narrated by al-Bukhārī) and "He who changes his religion, cut off his head" (narrated by Imām Mālik in his *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, reported by Zayd b. Aslam).[330] Shaḥrūr also rejects al-Rāzī's analysis, in his *Mafātīh al-ghayb*, that "an apostate should be killed and should be fought until he is defeated. He does not deserve any support, help or good words from the believers. His wife should separate from him, and he does not deserve inheritance from the believers".[331] However, Shaḥrūr tells us that despite the fact that these were considered *mursal* by all narrators and unreliable because of their weak chain of transmitters, they were unanimously accepted by the *fuqahāʾ*. Nevertheless, he asserts that the clans who were fought and killed lost their lives, not because they apostatized from faith, but because of political reasons, military

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[327] Ibid., 338.

[328] Ibid., 343.

[329] Ibid., 343.

[330] Ibid., 344; Mālik b. Anas al-Asbahī, *Muwattā al-Imām Mālik* (Abu Dhabi: Muʾassasat Zāyid b. Sulṭān Āl Nahyān, 2004), vol. 4, 1065, (hadīth no. 2727).

[331] Ibid, 342; Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-ghayb* (n.p., n.d.), 323-25 (*tafsīr* of 2:217).

control, and lack of loyalties "measured according to the standards of tribal alliances of ancient Arabia… Apostasy from religion, as such, did not matter to anyone".[332] To support his argument, he provides an exhaustive account, taken from al-Ṭabarī, al-ʿAsqalānī and al-Jāḥiẓ, of narratives related to men known to be killed during the time of apostasy wars, such as Khālid b. al-Walīd (d. 21/642)[333], al-Ashʿath b. Qays, ʿUyayna b. Ḥuṣn al-Fazārī[334], al-Zubriqān b. Badr[335]. These stories of "confusion between religion (disbelief) and politics (dissension)", he maintains, are proof that the so-called apostasy wars, from the time of Abū Bakr, "provided the perfect legal pretext, for the elimination of political opponents during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, and henceforth, came to be articulated in Islamic law".[336] In opposition, he reasons, based on (Q2:217)[337] and (Q5:54)[338], that God's punishments for apostasy are the loss of both God's love and the worth of their deeds in this world and the Hereafter.[339] He argues that these constitute the upper limit of punishment for apostasy, which, according to

[332] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 349.

[333] see al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, vol. 2, 'Prophets and patriarchs', translated and annotated by William M. Brinner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 496-502.

[334] Ahmad B. Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyīz al-saḥāba* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyyat al-Azhariyyah, n.d.), vol. 7, 195-96.

[335] Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr Al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa'l-tabyīn li'l-Jāḥiz* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998), vol. 1, 128.

[336] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 352.

[337] As in: "And whoever of you reverts from his religion [to disbelief] and dies while he is a disbeliever-for those, their deeds have become worthless in this world and the Hereafter, and those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide therein eternally" (*al-Baqara* 2:217), Saḥeeḥ International.

[338] As in: "Allah will replace them with others who love Him and are loved by Him" (*al-Māʾida* 5:54).

[339] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 341.

him, is a personal decision and its punishment is only in God's hands on Judgment Day.[340]

Then again, Shaḥrūr believes that the Islamic law has an "inbuilt flexibility" and a "moderate character", which, according to him, is similar to the common practice in legal systems of non-Muslim states where mitigation is a standard procedure.[341] He explains that, with respect to punishments, the legal verses in *the Book* list options to provide the *mujtahid* / legislator certain flexibility in choosing the appropriate penalty based on the context of the case.[342] He goes further to elaborate on the term "mitigation" which, according to him, is the process when the judge decides on each case "on its own merit, between the limits that Allah has set".[343] He gives as an example, the amputation of the hand as a punishment in case of theft, and argues that this measure should be the last resort depending on the circumstances of the theft, i.e., was it because of hunger or greed.[344] He tells us about a narrative from al-Qurṭubī according to which the second Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb judged a case based on its circumstances, and exonerated a servant who stole from his master, because he learned that the servant had a share in his master's property (*lahu fīhī naṣībun*).[345] In this case, Shaḥrūr maintains, that ʿUmar did not infringe the divine ruling on theft, rather he made

[340] Shaḥrūr's reasoning was based on the following verses: "Say: 'O you men! Now truth has reached you from your Lord! Those who receive guidance, do so for the good of their own souls; those who stray, do so to their own loss: and I am not [set] over you to arrange your affairs" (*Yūnus* 10:108), and "We showed him the way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful [rests on his will]" (*Al-Insān* 76:3).

[341] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 190.

[342] Ibid., 201.

[343] Ibid., 197.

[344] Ibid., 189.

[345] Ibid., 189; see Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-qurʾān* (Cairo, n.p., 1952), end ed., vol. 6, 169).

his verdict between the "upper limit of punishment for theft (amputation of the right hand) and its lower limit (full pardon)", as in "As to the thief, male or female, cut off (*fa- iqtaʿū*) his or her hands (*aydīyahumā*): a punishment by way of example (*nakālan*), from God, for their crime- God is exalted in power. But if the thief repents after his crime, and amends his conduct, God turns to him in forgiveness; for God is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (*Al-Māʾida* 5:38-39).[346] Furthermore, Shaḥrūr tells us that God also allowed a lower limit with respect to homicide and physical harm. He provides as an example verse 92 from *sūrat al-Nisāʾ* [347] which states that in case of an unintentional killing, the convicted can either "fast for two consecutive months" or "free a slave or more". However, he designates a modern equivalent to "freeing a slave" by linking the term to someone burdened by financial debts.[348]

Shaḥrūr's theory of limits (*ḥudūd*) differs from the traditional Muslim legal schools in the sense that it is more literal and comprises the entire field of Islamic law, not just restricted to penal law. To elaborate, the Ḥanafī legal school limits the "*ḥudūd*" to five crimes which are: "illicit sexual intercourse, theft, banditry, alcohol consumption, and false accusation of illicit sexual intercourse".[349] Whereas, the *Mālikī* and *Shāfiʿī* legal schools add "homicide, apostasy, rebellion, and sodomy" to the above

[346] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 190.

[347] "Never should a believer kill a believer; but [if it so happens] by mistake, [compensation is due]: If one kills a believer, it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's family, unless they remit it freely. If the deceased belonged to a people at war with you, and he was a believer, the freeing of a believing slave is enough. If he belonged to a people with whom you have treaty of alliance, compensation should be paid to his family, and a believing slave be freed. For those who find this beyond their means, [is prescribed] a fast for two months running: by way of repentance to God: for God has all knowledge and all wisdom" (*Al-Nisāʾ* 4:92).

[348] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 204.

[349] Ibid., 187.

mentioned crimes.[350] Moreover, unlike traditional jurisprudence, Shaḥrūr's theory of limits does not use "analogy" (*qiyās*)[351] as a juristic tool, which, according to him, is an obstacle that locks jurists in the legal perspective of seventh-century Arabia. He argues that his theory of limits permits jurists/ *mujtahids* to work within their contemporary context and to overcome the need to compare with early Islamic legislation by substituting their references to the latest outcomes of scientific research. He further asserts that his theory is concerned with the developments in social and cultural patterns of human behavior, where scholars, of sociology, economy, and natural science, play the main role in advising state authorities and political legislators.[352] It is also worth noting here that Shaḥrūr's understanding of God's limits, as they encompass all aspects of social life, is more inclined with the qurʾanic text.[353] However, one is left with the question on the extent of his theory's validity and applicability in comparison with *Sharīʿa* and as a universal source of law.

C. Validity of the Theory of Limits

It is not the purpose of this section to analyze Shaḥrūr's hidden intentions or to prove whether his work is part of an anti-Islamic orientalist discourse or not. There are, however, three major points that need to be discussed in refutation of his theory of limits. The first main point is that Shaḥrūr ignored the fact that *Sharīʿa* came into

[350] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 187.

[351] *Qiyās* in Islamic fiqh means judicial analogy and is a juristic tool that legal scholars use when they are dealing with issues for which there is no specific provision in the *Qurʾān* or the *Sunna*. It is technically defined as the extension of an original legal precedent to a subsidiary case by virtue of an effective *ʿilla*, or cause common to both.

[352] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 484.

[353] See *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, s.v. "Boundaries and Percepts" (R. Kimber), 252-53.

existence from among its socio-religious community, its practices and culture in which it generated. Second, there are traces of modifications in Islamic legal education and court practices across time and space. Third, Shaḥrūr disregarded the fact that the period between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries witnessed a gradual reduction in the *Sharīʿa*'s scope of application to become limited only to the personal spheres of jurisdiction in relation to family law, marriage/ divorce, child custody, and inheritance; these in turn, became "the point of reference for the modern politics of identity".[354]

Beginning with the first point of contention, the *Sharīʿa* was not imposed on the society in which it was born and developed. Social consensus was a normal practice within the culture of Arabia; people sought to conform to the group while imitating what their forefathers perceived as the right conduct. "When an important decision was to be taken, be it by a caliph or a *qāḍī*, a precedent, a *Sunna*, was nearly always sought".[355] The aim here is to shed light on the fact the *Sharīʿa* constituted an amalgamation of social, economic, moral and cultural relations which intersected with and continuously affected *fiqh*, legal practice, and moral codes. Furthermore, these Islamic laws were derived through the intellectual efforts of jurists, scholars, educators, historians, and theologians, who belonged to the community's diverse social strata. Through Qurʾanic revelations, the newly formed community developed a full-fledged legal system out of its needs within the spheres of trade and commerce, agriculture, taxation, and tribal relations which was mainly based on customary laws. And, within a span of around four centuries, Muslim society developed its customary laws into substantive legislation as in modification of criminal penalties, family law, and female

[354] Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 446.

[355] Ibid., 43.

inheritance. Another example would be the pre-Islamic concept of *zakāt* which was rehabilitated to comply with the teachings of the Qurʾān by helping the needy.[356] It is worth noting here that the Qurʾān does not provide a detailed coverage of all aspects of family, commercial, and criminal codes. N.J. Coulson, argues that the legal contents in the Qurʾān are relatively few in contrast with its moral injunctions; in the sense that out of five hundred legislative verses, only eighty are strictly legal. His classification is based on the notion that the verse is legal only when it constitutes earthly prosecution, or else it belongs to the category of pious exhortation. He further maintains that despite the detailed elaboration within these legal verses, they represent solutions for specific issues and not wide-ranging.[357] However, this gap was filled through an intertwine between the customary laws of Arabia, modified, and the newly formed Islamic legal system. Therefore, "when the Qurʾān lacked relevant or obvious provisions, the natural thing to do was to look for leading models of behavior or a collective conduct perceived to have been a good course of action".[358] Hence, as Hallaq affirms, "the *Sharīʿa* then was not only a judicial system and a legal doctrine whose function was to regulate social relations and resolve and mediate disputes, but also a discursive practice that structurally and organically tied itself to the world around it in ways that were vertical and horizontal, structural and linear, economic and social, moral and ethical, intellectual and spiritual, epistemic and cultural, among much else".[359]

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[356] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 32.

[357] N.J. Coulson, A History of Islamic Law (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.ezproxy.aub.edu.lb/10.4324/9781315083506, (1964), 34.

[358] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 43.

[359] Ibid., 544.

The second point of argument is that Islamic law, unlike what Shaḥrūr believes, is not rigidly dissociated from social realities. According to Hallaq, by the beginning of the fourth/ tenth century, Islamic legal schools started to embrace the synthesis between rationalism and traditionalism, which later came to be defined as *uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal theory).[360] The importance of the legal theory, he argues, lies in the way different opinions were pitted against each other through systematic comparison by weighing conflicting evidence which ranged from the Qurʾān and *Sunna* (the conclusive authoritative sources), consensus, legal reasoning, and *qiyās* (the other major sources of law).[361] This in turn, diminished the multiplicity of legal points of view into a unified juristic opinion belonging to a particular school or a disputable case. However, Hallaq maintains, this *ijtihadic* diversity was not entirely curtailed, rather it allowed greater flexibility in the application of the law, by granting the faithful the option of resorting to the legal school of their choice for conflict resolution. In fact, Shaḥrūr embraces and calls for this diversity of opinion in Islamic Law. Since the Qurʾān does not explicitly reveal laws, rather indications (*dalīl*), Muslim jurists had the flexibility to infer or practice *ijtihād* to reach a verdict or rule. And despite that different interpretations lead to diverse conclusions, known as either *khilāf* or *ikhtilāf,* one superior verdict is chosen by the jurist or his school as authoritative to be issued as a *fatwa*.[362] The difference in Shaḥrūr's argument, however, is that he insists that the Qurʾān must be the only source of law, based on Allah's limits. But there is the element that the Qurʾān is not explicit

[360] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 59.

[361] Ibid., 77.

[362] Ibid., 82.

enough, consequently, the Prophetic *ḥadīth*, along with *qiyās*, consultation, and *ijtihād* became the next authority.

Furthermore, with respect to the notion of an inability to change and rigidity of *Sharīʿa* in Shaḥrūr's argument, historical evidence show that Muslims developed the will to re-instate their Islamic law under the pretense of reform and modernization. According to Hallaq, these legal reforms, however, were exploited by Western and modern claims, and were used as evidence that the *Sharīʿa* hinders progress due to its inefficiency and the corruption of the *fuqahāʾ*.[363] As a matter of fact, the *Sharīʿa* adapted to modernization, opting for acceptance by the juristic system of the state through several devices which allowed the Islamic legal tradition to be absorbed by the state's defined structure of codification.[364] Muslim law makers used devices such as : (1) the notion of necessity (*ḍarūra*); (2) procedural application of the *fiqhī* law, i.e., provisional; (3) selection and amalgamation (*takhayyur* and *talfīq*); (4) neo-*ijtihād* as an interpretive approach; and (5) the notion that any law that does not contradict the *Sharīʿa* is deemed lawful.[365] Adaptations also affected what is left of the Islamic family law in the sense that it underwent several structural and foundational changes.[366] Legal decisions (*fatwas*) were constantly undergoing a process of editing, amendment, and/ or abridgment reflecting the "societal changes to which the law was bound to respond".[367] However, as Hallaq argues, codification, through unifying the law by the modern state,

[363] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 445-446.

[364] Ibid., 449.

[365] Ibid., 448-449.

[366] Ibid., 446.

[367] Wael B. Hallaq, "From Fatwās to Furūʿ: Growth and Change in Islamic Substantive Law." *Islamic Law and Society* 1, no. 1 (1994): 29–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/3399430, 61.

"eliminates almost all such juristic and hermeneutical possibilities, leaving both the litigants and the judge with a single formulation and, in all likelihood, a single mode of judicial application…. A means by which a conscious restriction is placed upon the interpretive freedom of jurists, judges and lawyers".[368] Unlike the notion of the modern state that the "law applies to all", the *Sharīʿa* required *ijtihād* based on the circumstances of the individual and the context.[369] Despite that, Hallaq asserts that the *Sharīʿa*'s structural mechanisms and procedures were common and that they followed, based on the Qurʾān, a "unified notion of justice", a social code and harmony, and a cohesive body of legal doctrine.[370] Noticeably, Shaḥrūr's argument is going around in circles, in the sense that his endeavor to look for flexibility in Islamic law, which he acknowledges as one of the law's characteristics, by calling for its interpolation with the law of a state, leads to further rigidity through its codification.

The third point is the fact, as Hallaq argues, that many features that constituted the *Sharīʿa* system "met their structural death in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the veneer of the *Sharīʿa* that survives today in the civil codes of Sunnite Muslim countries and in the politicized education of 'traditional law' has been severed from its legal ability to reproduce, precisely due to the absence- or death- of those structural and systematic features that allow us to interpret and speak of the *Sharīʿa*'s episteme".[371] All other branches of Islamic law, whether penal, commercial, financial, etc., were all replaced with Western/ civil laws such as corporate, copyright, patent, and

[368] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 449-450 & Hallaq, Wael B. "Juristic Authority vs. State Power: The Legal Crises of Modern Islam." *Journal of Law and Religion* 19, no. 2 (2003): 243–58. https://doi.org/10.2307/3649176, 255.

[369] Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, 546.

[370] Ibid., 16.

[371] Ibid., 15.

maritime laws. This in turn, deems Shaḥrūr's argument out of place, as he is waging a war against an almost diminishing concept.

Like his Western counterparts, Shaḥrūr renders Islamic law as ineffective and deficient. He calls for the obliteration of the *Sharīʿa* and its replacement with Western/ civil legislations and institutions. He obviously fell in the pitfall of generalization by bypassing a plurality of individualistic particulars in Islamic law. His approach is reductionist in the sense that he ignored the multiplicity within the *Sharīʿa* which resulted from cultural, economic, and customary differences. Furthermore, one cannot just oversimplify the complexity of the social, political and legal relations, while simply throwing a comparison between Islamic law and the civic modern one. It is most probably true that the *sharīʿa* became highly politicized in modern Islam, and that the Islamic jurisprudence was part of a political project. In the sense that not all jurists had epistemic, moral and religious motivations. Some of them had certain political aims which involved state power and reflected the interests of the ruling class, others were prone to corruption in return for privileges or lucrative positions. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the *sharīʿa* with its doctrines and practices within pre-modern Islamic societies to realize its important role as a democratic source of law with respect to social relations.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Shaḥrūr argues that the backwardness in the Muslim world derives from the pre-occupation of the *ʿulamāʾ* and the *fuqahāʾ* with the particulars of seventh century Arabia where Prophet Muḥammad's words and deeds remain the highest ideal of human behavior. This religious class, according to him, imposes the *ḥadīths* onto the qurʾanic text and "holds its meanings firmly locked up in the distant past".[372] Furthermore, he debates that the *ḥadīth* contradict *the Book*, but Muslim scholars managed to cover the contradictions with the dictum that the *Sunna* abrogates the Qurʾān.[373] Shaḥrūr maintains that these *ʿulamāʾ* impose their dominance by suppressing freethinking and marginalizing scientists; he considers their approach "primitive, entangled in political corruption, breeding fanaticism, superstition, and sectarianism".[374] He attacks all the *ʿulamāʾ* without exception for misinterpreting the Holy text for their own interests and to justify violence and coercion, as well as their determination to distinguish themselves as the privileged group chosen by God. He argues that they also intentionally used wrong variant readings, misplaced words, and read the verses out of context. His critique, however, is not novel. As a matter of fact, since even before the assassination of the third Caliph ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān in 35/656, followed by the civil war in 41/661, qurʾanic semantics, modes of reading, and allegorical interpretations were manipulated by rival exegetes to defend and promulgate their theological and/or political views. For instance, the Umayyads vindicated their rule by a theological reference to (Q21:105)

[372] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 18-19.

[373] Ibid., 391.

[374] Ibid., xxxiii.

which says that "My righteous servants shall inherit the land". Hence, they claimed that God had entrusted his land to them since they are the righteous servants.[375] The meaning of the word *qadar* (predestination) was also manipulated by the Umayyads to justify their injustice and mischievous rule.[376] These manipulations were not monopolized by the Umayyads alone, the Abbasids and other Muslim rulers had their shares as well. Furthermore, in their attempt to exhort the unbelievers or wrongdoers, many exegetes exaggerated the significations of verses related to reward and punishment, hell fire, and after death.[377] They also, as Shaḥrūr argues, exploit "forbid what is wrong" to eradicate whoever defies them under the pretense that the convicted is a heretic, an atheist, and apostate (*kāfir*).[378] Similarly, political Islamic organizations, moderate or extreme, created their own exegetical versions and *fatwas* supported by Qurʾanic passages to empower their status and dogmas. One, however, must keep in mind that the diversity in qurʾanic interpretation is a result of the theological or sectarian traditions in which these religious scholars were trained. Hence, their interpretations stem from a specific lens. Nonetheless, Shaḥrūr has generalized in the sense that he included all the *fuqahāʾ* in the basket of exploitation and terrorism. This, however, may be out of Shaḥrūr's concern with regards to the re-emergence of terrorist groups under the pretext of Islamic revivalism. Yet, this also stems out of his clear intentions to bypass all these works, whether these were ethical or exploitive, and go back to the Qurʾān as the main source of law.

[375] W. Montgomery Watt, *Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 60-62.

[376] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Quranic Exegesis*, 57.

[377] Ibid., 43.

[378] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 391.

Though, while avoiding the copious exegetical tradition in approaching the Qurʾān frees the reader from previous influences and limitations, one has to question the correctness of bypassing fourteen centuries of history and interpretation while reading the Qurʾān as if it was revealed yesterday. Maybe, one should take into consideration Wilfred Cantwell Smith's saying that: "the meaning of the Qurʾān is the history of its meanings".[379] On the one hand, however, there is a beautiful tree metaphor by Salama, which comes in support of Shaḥrūr's argument, to explain "a parasitical relationship in which derivatives become substance, in which the host human text metamorphoses into a God while God's original word is relegated to a condition of silence, accessible and mediated only through the lens of those 'guarding texts' that claim to protect it against all enemies".[380] He further elaborates that this ideology "confuses a tree with its surrounding bushes by guarding those bushes, and not the tree, against all that is new and foreign".[381] On the other hand, Diane L. Moore defines religious literacy as entailing "the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a basic understanding of the history, central texts, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular, historical, and cultural contexts across time and space". [382] At the same time, Salama maintains that a key theological difficulty with rethinking Qurʾanic exegesis is

[379] Smith, "True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian's Non-Reductionist Interpretation of the Qurʾān," in *the International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 11:4 (1980).487-505", 503-504; Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qurʾān." *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 130-156, 154.

[380] Salama, *The Qurʾān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 1-2.

[381] Ibid., 35.

[382] Diane L. Moore, "Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion". Harvard Divinity School, 2015.

"the closure of all borders that demarcate so-called correct readings or interpretations of the Qurʾān".[383] Which leaves us wondering about the sufficiency of approaching the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān. It is a truism that religions are internally diverse and that they: (1) evolve and change as living conditions; (2) are connected to their historical contexts; and (3) are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted by the believers. They are influenced by their cultural, political, and economic contexts. As a matter of fact, the Qurʾān is the product of its environment, and one cannot understand it without reference to its culture and vice versa.

As a conclusion to the above discussion on Shaḥrūr's approach, three main points need to be highlighted. The first one is that he is an interpreter who, just like the exegetes whom he criticizes, creates, in many instances throughout his works, new meanings to the qurʾanic words. For instance, he defines the term *al-kāfirīn* in (Q8:15-16)[384] as the "aggressors" whatever were their religious beliefs, whereas, according to traditional exegesis means specifically the unbelievers or infidels.[385] His definition is part of an effort to prove the universality of this verse, since he contends its historicized reading by the exegetes who, according to him, narrowed it to a fight between the believers (the companions) and *al-kāfirīn* (the idolaters of Banū Quraysh in Mecca).[386] Furthermore, he argues that the phrase "when you meet", at the beginning of (Q8:15),

[383] Salama, *The Qurʾān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 1.

[384] As in: "O you who believe! When you meet (*al-kāfirīn*) in hostile array, never turn your backs to them. If any do turn his back to them on such a day- unless it be in a stratagem of war, or to retreat to a troop [of his own]- he draws on himself the wrath of God, and his abode is Hell- an evil refuge [indeed]!" (*Al-Anfāl* 8:15-16).

[385] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 453.

[386] Ibid., 454.

refers to something that may happen in the future. Hence, this verse, unlike (Q8:17)[387], connotes general instructions, and is not a historical account of certain event in the past, i.e. it is universal.[388] However, this same distinction between the two verses, unlike Shaḥrūr's reading, may come in support of the more logical notion, by Neuwirth, of oral communication which involved inquiries from the audience.

The second point in contention is that the Qurʾān is not sufficient as a source of law. History shows that the holy text has never been the only contributor to the law and its practices. By the same token, in his work, "On the Sources of Islamic Law and Practices", Ahmed Souaiaia examines several legal cases in inheritance and property laws, in addition to historical documents, and shows that the traditional Islamic jurisprudence was not solely derived from qurʾanic interpretations nor *ḥadīth* literature.[389]

The third and most important point is that the Qurʾān cannot be reductively viewed as a prescriptive text of permissions, prohibitions, and obligations; it is, rather to be viewed as having the essential message of active piety/ morality. The Qurʾān's main view of mankind is whether they were good or evil, and all the Qurʾanic narratives fall under this categorization of moral choices with the guidance of Prophets and God's revelations. In support of this argument, it is worth noting here that, while Rippin argues for the necessity to refer to Jew-Christian traditions as a tool in order to expound on the abridged parables found in the Qurʾān, Waldman believes that these stories,

[387] "It is not you who slew them; it was God. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but God's. In order that He might test the believers by a gracious trial from Himself, for God is He who hears and knows all things" (*Al-Anfāl* 8:17).

[388] Christmann, *The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 454.

[389] Ahmed Souaiaia. "On the Sources of Islamic Law and Practices." *Journal of Law and Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 123–47. https://doi.org/10.2307/4144685.

though similar in plots, differ in their thematic, theological, and moral aspects.[390] Waldman elaborates on the story of Joseph and argues that the role of God is different in each of the scriptures. In her view, the story in the Qurʾān shows "how God sends signs and constantly guides his prophets and rewards the God-fearing", while in the bible, the story shows "an indispensable step in the unfolding of God's divine plan and manipulation of history to ensure the future of the Hebrews".[391] Similarly, Donner compares Jewish anecdotes with those of the Qurʾān and argues that these stories, though similar in plots, differ in their thematic, theological, and moral aspects. While the Old Testament's stories explain certain episodes in Israel's history, Qurʾanic narratives emphasize on "how the true Believer acts in certain situations".[392]

In short, despite the fact that the Qurʾān's essential message is active piety where all narratives fall under the categorization of moral choices, referring back to the historical context in which the Qurʾān was revealed is crucial to understanding the divine text, and neglecting it is a kind of reductionism. Furthermore, while Shaḥrūr rightfully argues that the qurʾanic stories on Muḥammad and earlier prophets present moral exemplars for the people where the fundamental concern is the eternal moral choice between good and evil, however, his notion that the Qurʾān is the only source for Islamic law needs further reconsideration.

[390] Marilyn R. Waldman, "New approaches to biblical material in the Qurʾān". In *The Muslim World,* 1985, vol. 75.1-16.

[391] Ibid., 1-16.

[392] Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 84.

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