

# Can Qur'ānic Interpretation Be Both Practically Adequate and Theologically Principled? Some Instructive Historical Examples of the Delicate Connection between Hermeneutical Theories and Doctrines of Divine Speech

David Vishanoff

Associate Professor, Religious Studies Program, University of Oklahoma

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## Abstract

It seems reasonable to expect that one's approach to Qur'ānic interpretation should be consistent with one's theological presuppositions about the nature of the Qur'ān and divine revelation. Such congruence between theology and hermeneutics, however, has been difficult to achieve. Classical legal theorists and modern interpreters alike have struggled to formulate hermeneutical theories that are at once theologically principled and practically adequate for the challenge of legal and ethical interpretation. 'Abd al-Jabbār, for example, allowed the Mu'tazilī doctrine of God's created speech to govern his legal theory, but ended up with a hermeneutic that was surprisingly literal and inflexible, at least in the domain of law, and did not survive. Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī employed the Ash'arī conception of God's eternal speech to open up an interpretive space between the words of revelation and their meaning, but his flexible hermeneutic made the Qur'ān's meaning too hard to pin down. The Ḥanbalī Abū Ya'la' Ibn al-Farrā' articulated a legal hermeneutic that was flexible, powerful, and practical enough to survive until today, but it rested on the apparently contradictory notion that God's speech is an eternal act, and it was vulnerable to authoritarian abuse. Many modern interpreters have dodged the theological question of the nature of divine speech entirely. Others, such as Muḥammad Shaḥrūr and Aksin Wijaya, have developed elaborate and creative new versions of the Ash'arī doctrine of God's eternal speech, but only, it appears, as a way to legitimate their preconceived interpretations. Today everyone wants to talk about hermeneutics, but not everyone is willing to do the hard work of spelling out exactly how his or her hermeneutic fits

into an explicit and coherent theory of revelation. For this challenging task the classical tradition of legal theory offers some sophisticated resources and also some cautionary examples.

## Introduction

I want to thank Dean Winter, as well as our two organizers Harith Bin Ramli and Ramon Harvey, for including me in this symposium, and more importantly for conceiving it in the first place. It strikes me as a very important event, for two reasons. First, the explicitly multi-perspectival nature of the symposium invites a conversation between historians and constructive thinkers, between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. This does not make our conversation easier, but it acknowledges that rigorous academic work on religion is not the monopoly of an exclusive discipline or religious studies guild, and it forces each of us to stretch and expand the kinds of questions we know how to ask and the kinds of answers we know how to entertain. Second, the symposium draws attention to a theoretical question that today is often overlooked in the rush for practically adequate and relevant new formulations of Islamic law and ethics. That question is whether those new formulations are actually compatible with the reformers' own beliefs and assumptions about divine revelation. Every Islamic hermeneutic assumes some implicit theory about the nature of God's speech and the Prophet's experience, but unless those assumptions are made explicit it is hard to judge which classical models of revelation they presuppose, where they depart from classical theories, or whether they are even coherent.

Later today others will discuss the process of Prophetic revelation. My paper focuses instead on the concept of God's speech—not how it was delivered to humanity, but what it is: eternal, created, words, meanings, attributes, audible sounds, a heavenly tablet, etc. How a Muslim thinker imagines God's speech has (or logically ought to have) crucial implications for how that thinker understands and interprets the Qur'ān. Now some of you may want to dispute the logical priority of metaphysics over epistemology and hermeneutics, and I'm open to that discussion. Many today would say that the practical concerns that drive interpretation, like justice, and the lived experiences that shape interpretation, like oppression and economic deprivation, have existential priority over theological reflections on the nature of God and his attributes, and therefore should be given priority, in the search for God's will, over purely theoretical concerns like philosophical coherence. But the Cambridge Muslim College seems

like the kind of place where theoretical coherence and self-awareness, and an awareness of one's position vis a vis the classical Islamic tradition, are taken very seriously.

And they should be, because theories of divine speech have profound implications for the use and understanding of scriptures. I have been reading, very slowly, a book by the famous Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff called *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*.<sup>1</sup> It starts by defining speech not as strings of words that convey meaning but as a particular kind of action that puts the speaker into certain moral relationships with others. As Wolterstorff unpacks the implications of looking at God's speech in that way, he makes some radical suggestions about how Christians should view and read the Bible. Reflecting on the nature of God's speech has had equally profound implications for Muslim intellectuals—or at least for those who have been willing to think them through systematically.

### The Baṣra branch of the Muʿtazila<sup>2</sup>

There is one group of Muslim theologians who, a little bit like Wolterstorff, viewed God's speech as an action. I am thinking of the Muʿtazila, and particularly the Baṣran branch of that school, best known through the work of al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025). He and his colleagues famously held the Qurʾān to be created, and by this they meant that it was one of God's attributes of action: part of his creation, and thus one of the things that God brings about in time and space. They identified the act of speaking with the sentences and words and letters and sounds that are produced by a speaker. They thought this definition of speech could and should apply to God just as well as to humans, since it does not say anything about how these sounds are produced: we produce them with bodily organs like tongue and lips, while God produces them without a body, but they all constitute speech. Since sounds and words and sentences, by their very nature, are extended through time, God's speech is necessarily temporal and created.

It is sometimes said nowadays that this Muʿtazilī doctrine of God's created speech makes the Qurʾān a historical document tied to a particular time and place. For some modern thinkers

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> This section is based on David R. Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law* (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 2011), ch. 4, where further details and references may be found.

this is a reason to embrace the Mu‘tazila because their theory seems an open invitation to historical, contextual interpretation. I hate to burst anyone’s bubble, but this is not at all what ‘Abd al-Jabbār had in mind. As he saw it, every word of God’s speech was created all at once, not in seventh-century Arabia but on the Heavenly Tablet, long before any of it was ever sent down into the specific historical circumstances of a particular prophet. None of God’s speech was uttered in a historical context. It is recited in various historical contexts, of course, and each recitation is created by the reciter in his or her own time and place, but its meaning was fixed long ago in the created but entirely supra-historical heavenly realm. The Mu‘tazila as much as anyone else adopted the mainstream view that what matters for interpretation is the generality of the verbal expression, not the specificity of the historical occasion of revelation.

It is also frequently said that making the Qur’ān temporal and created undermines its authority and lessens its importance in Muslim epistemology. For ‘Abd al-Jabbār, at least, this was neither the motive nor the consequence of the doctrine of the created Qur’ān. On the contrary, he argued that it was his Ash‘arī opponents who were undermining the value of revelation by making God’s speech eternal, thus putting it beyond the reach of human knowledge and leaving no way to prove its truth and reliability as a source of knowledge. To his mind, to know for sure that God’s speech was trustworthy, one had to know that God cannot speak deceitfully or even ambiguously, and we only know that because we know, rationally, that God must be just. But justice is a characteristic of a person’s actions, not of a person’s attributes. If God’s speech were an eternal attribute, it would a category mistake to say that it was subject to God’s justice and therefore must be good and true. That is why, in his monumental *Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawhīd wa-l-‘adl* ‘Abd al-Jabbār discussed God’s speech not in the section on *tawhīd* but in the section on *‘adl*, justice. God’s speech is only good, beneficial, and trustworthy if it is an action; and an action is something produced in time. That is why God’s speech has to be part of the temporal created realm.

The idea that God’s speech is one of his good, just, and beneficial actions had two important consequences for ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s hermeneutics. First, ‘Abd al-Jabbār reasoned that to be good God’s speech must have a purpose, and that purpose could only be to benefit human beings, since God himself needs nothing and does not stand to gain anything from his own actions. And the only kind of benefit that God’s speech can convey to humans, ‘Abd al-Jabbār reasoned, is to inform them of God’s law. (The Qur’ān cannot really inform them about God’s own nature, or about the basic principles of reason, because one had to know all those things before one could be sure that God was just and that the Qur’ān was, therefore, a trustworthy source of

knowledge.) Consequently, ‘Abd al-Jabbār regarded God’s speech as purely informative—not as a performative speech act that brings about new moral relationships, as in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s theory. This “informative” view of God’s speech has been taken for granted by many Muslim thinkers, but it is interesting to imagine a performative theology of revelation in which the Qur’ān functions primarily to create new moral relationships. After all, the Qur’ān itself presents God’s speech as performative and creative speech.

A second consequence of God’s speech being an action characterized by justice is that it must always be clear. If God’s purpose is to communicate his law, he would fail completely—which of course is impossible—if he were ever to create words that did not express exactly what he meant. His speech, therefore, is always and necessarily clear. The Ash‘ariyya could offer no such guarantee, so ‘Abd al-Jabbār argued that they had totally undermined revelation as a source of knowledge. In his eyes the Mu‘tazila were the real champions of revelation.

This principle of clarity led ‘Abd al-Jabbār and other Mu‘tazilī theologians to formulate interpretive rules that were remarkably literalist. In theology, of course, they were known for metaphorical interpretation, but remember that for ‘Abd al-Jabbār the Qur’ān could not be a source of theological knowledge; at best it could only reinforce rational or natural knowledge of God, and must always be reinterpreted if necessary to accord with that prior knowledge. In the field of law, however, the Mu‘tazila were not proponents of *ta’wīl* at all. If you are a modern reformer looking for a flexible Qur’ānic hermeneutic, do not look to the Mu‘tazila! In domain of legal hermeneutics (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) they expressed a strong preference for taking the Qur’ān literally and at face value. If an expression is general or unrestricted, it must be meant unrestrictedly unless God simultaneously provides clear evidence narrowing its scope. Likewise a command cannot be taken to imply anything more than it linguistically entails, which is that God desires the act to be performed, so commands only entail recommendation, not obligation. Commands do not require immediate obedience, or more than one act of obedience. They do not imply that if one fails to obey one will have to make up the duty later, nor for that matter do they indicate that one will not have to make it up if one does obey. A command does not prohibit the opposite of what is commanded, nor does a prohibition make an act legally invalid. If God specifically prohibits an action in a special situation, this does not imply that it is otherwise permitted, as many other scholars held. God can mean only exactly what he says, or else he has to provide clarifying evidence, and he must make that evidence available at the very moment of his speech; he cannot delay clarifying it (*ta’khīr al-bayān*), as most other legal theorists said he could.

Now the Baṣra Muʿtazila were not as rigid as the strictest members of the Zāhiriyya, a literalist movement that was sparked in part by members of the Baghdād school of the Muʿtazila.<sup>3</sup> Its early proponents adhered so literally to the words of revelation that if two revealed texts seemed to conflict one of them would be discarded before either would be reinterpreted. The Zāhiriyya did not think there was any coherent moral meaning or rationale behind God's speech or law; they believed that the law consisted solely of the words of God's speech, which must therefore be followed to the letter. That approach turned out to be utterly unworkable. There were too many apparent conflicts between revealed texts, and too many texts that had to be reinterpreted to make any practical sense. Already by the time of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) the Zāhiriyya had been slowly giving way to the more flexible interpretive practice of mainstream jurists, and Ibn Ḥazm's own legal hermeneutic was in fact remarkably similar to that of the Mālikīs around him. Pure Islamic literalism died out long ago.

The Baṣra Muʿtazila were not so strict. They engaged in the mainstream juristic practice of reconciling conflicting evidence through reinterpretation, and of extrapolating from the available evidence by means of analogy when necessary, because they were convinced that God's law must be coherent, reasonable, and good, and that if his speech did not fit what was known from other revealed evidence and from reason then it must be interpreted to fit the available evidence. But through the end of the fourth/tenth century, in the domain of legal theory, they remained quite attached to the plain literal meaning and avoided any deviations from it that were not absolutely required by the other evidence God had provided.

This theory of interpretation was principled, and it flowed from ʿAbd al-Jabbār's theological premises, but it was not a very powerful, flexible, or practical legal hermeneutic. It was cautious and even minimalist, assigning to the Qurʾān only those meanings that could be justified by irrefutable evidence. But it is hard to ensure certainty and avoid ambiguity in Islamic law, so ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutic did not survive even among the Muʿtazila. By the early fifth/eleventh century even his own pupil Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044) was shying away from such a theologically grounded legal hermeneutic and adopting the much more pragmatic hermeneutic of the *fuqahāʾ*.

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<sup>3</sup> Further details and references on the Baghdād Muʿtazila and the Zāhiriyya may be found in Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, ch. 3.

## The Ash‘ariyya<sup>4</sup>

Before we get to the jurists, however, I want to mention more briefly the alternative hermeneutic of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935) and his second-generation follower al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). They shared ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s concern to ground hermeneutics in the theology of revelation, but they believed God’s speech to be eternal, so their hermeneutic was necessarily quite different. Al-Bāqillānī in particular developed very explicitly the hermeneutical implications of the Ash‘arī doctrine that God’s speech itself is an eternal attribute subsisting in God’s essence, while the letters and words that make up the Qur’ān are just a created expression of that eternal attribute. That attribute, technically called a *ma‘nā*, is also the meaning that is expressed by the words of the Qur’ān. God’s speech is both an eternal attribute and an eternal command, prohibition, statement, and all the other meanings that make up God’s revelation.

This theory of speech introduced an ontological gap between God’s speech itself, which consists of meanings, and the words of the Qur’ān that express those meanings. Al-Bāqillānī made of that ontological gap a hermeneutical gap. The goal of interpretation is to know the Qur’ān’s meaning, but that meaning does not reside in words; it resides in God. All we have access to is words, so we have to use those words as evidence from which to infer the hidden meaning of God’s speech. In ordinary human speech we can often grasp the speaker’s meaning immediately, without any reflective process, because contextual cues like facial expressions, tone of voice, and the physical setting make it obvious what the speaker is trying to say; but since we cannot perceive God directly we do not get those same contextual cues along with his speech, so we have to sit down and think: if God chose these words to express his meaning, then he must mean such and such. Interpreting divine speech requires a process of rational deliberation to move us from audible words (which in and of themselves have no meaning) to the inner meanings that the speaker intends to express.

Our knowledge of the Arabic language, of course, gives us a lot of clues about what meanings each word might be used to express, but al-Bāqillānī said that many important words and verbal forms, including, for example, the imperative form of a verb, can express many different meanings. Interpreting an imperative verb, therefore, requires a lot more evidence than just the word itself. Unless we can find additional evidence from which to infer what was

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<sup>4</sup> This section is based on Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, ch. 5, where further details and references may be found.

meant by a particular imperative—a command or an authorization, an obligation or a recommendation—we have to suspend judgment and admit that we don't know the word's meaning. Al-Bāqillānī and his few followers were therefore known as the *Wāqifiyya*, the suspenders of interpretive judgment.

This appears to leave the meaning of revelation woefully underdetermined, and to leave interpreters in a quandary. But uncertainty actually presented an opportunity. The interpretive problem in Islamic law is not usually a lack of evidence but a superabundance of evidence that often seems to point in several directions at once. Al-Shāfi'ī had shown how that superabundance of evidence could be reconciled into a coherent picture of the law: some evidence could be designated as unclear, and other conflicting evidence could then be used to reinterpret it. Al-Bāqillānī's hermeneutic justified this solution by making it possible to claim that almost any evidence is unclear, and that virtually any other evidence, no matter how weak, could be used as evidence from which to infer its intended meaning. The pieces of revelation could therefore be fitted together in nearly endless combinations to produce almost unlimited interpretive possibilities. For al-Shāfi'ī and for al-Bāqillānī ambiguity was not a problem but an opportunity that gave interpreters great flexibility in determining the hidden meaning of God's speech.

Still, in principle al-Bāqillānī's hermeneutic called for an enormous amount of interpretive labor. Very little could be taken for granted; many crucial interpretations had to be justified by appeal to additional pieces of evidence. Like 'Abd al-Jabbār's hermeneutic, al-Bāqillānī's was theologically principled but also rather impractical.

### The *Fuqahā*<sup>5</sup>

Few legal theorists, therefore, followed either al-Bāqillānī or 'Abd al-Jabbār beyond the early fifth/eleventh century. Most adopted a more pragmatic hermeneutic that retained the flexibility of the Ash'ariyya but also provided the interpretive power to claim that certain interpretations were obvious without having to justify them by appeal to evidence beyond the words themselves. They might say, for example, that imperative verbs have a strong and definite default meaning—they impose an obligation of immediate and repeated obedience and simultaneously prohibit and render invalid any action contrary to the commanded act—but that this default meaning can easily be set aside in favor of a less stringent meaning on the

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<sup>5</sup> This section is based on Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, ch. 6, where further details and references may be found.

basis of the slightest evidence. I call this hermeneutic the law-oriented hermeneutical paradigm because it was adopted across the Sunni *madhāhib* by thinkers whose main concern was the elaboration and justification of *fiqh*, not philosophical coherence or theological consistency. Many of these thinkers did not make any attempt to articulate explicitly the theological conception of divine speech that lay behind their powerful and flexible hermeneutic, but I want to introduce briefly one particularly strong proponent of this hermeneutical paradigm, the Ḥanbalī Abū Ya‘lā Ibn al-Farrā’ (d. 458/1066), who was also a pretty sophisticated theologian and whose language reveals pretty clearly how he conceived of God’s speech.

When we look at how Abū Ya‘lā defined commands, for example, and how he defended his rules for their interpretation, we can see that he was treating God’s speech as an action. In his theological writing he asserted that God’s speech was eternal, but in his work on legal theory he asserted just as clearly that a command is not a meaning subsisting in the speaker but an act of verbally demanding or requesting that a person of inferior status perform some action. This had profound consequences. If a command were just a word—an imperative verb uttered with a certain intent, as the Mu‘tazila held—then its meaning would be closely tied to the linguistic meaning of the imperative. That was why the Mu‘tazila ascribed only minimal legal meaning to commands. If, on the other hand, a command is an act of requesting somebody to do something, then it can be imagined to include all sorts of implications that follow from a superior’s instructions to a subordinate. If a master asks his slave to bring him a drink, for example, we might normally suppose that he wants the drink now, not at some unspecified time before the slave’s death, and that if the slave continues to just sit there he will be punished. These things are not part of the linguistic meaning of an imperative verb, but they are part of the social meaning of a master’s instructions to a slave.

This view of speech as a socially embedded act made it possible for Abū Ya‘lā to maximize the legal force of revealed language, and to claim that the strong meanings he assigned to commands and other utterances were obvious from the words of revelation alone, without appeal to additional evidence. At the same time, however, Abū Ya‘lā retained all the flexibility of al-Shāfi‘ī’s and al-Bāqillānī’s hermeneutics, justifying departures from his strong default meanings, whenever these seemed necessary, by appeal to even the weakest of evidence. This was the thrust of the law-oriented hermeneutical paradigm, and that explains why it was adopted so quickly and so widely, even among theologians and the Zāhiriyya, by the middle of the fifth/eleventh century. The law-oriented hermeneutic was practically adequate for

dealing with the large and complex body of revealed evidence, and for interpreting that evidence in a way that made sense in a given social context.

This pragmatism, however, came at the price of theological coherence. Would Abū Yaʿlā really have affirmed, if pressed, that God’s speech was an eternal action performed eternally upon created beings? I doubt he would, but by the fifth/eleventh century theological grounding was becoming less and less of a concern; *kalām* was being excised from books of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and from the *madrasa* curriculum. Law and legal theory could be grounded, at least implicitly, on a notion of revelation that was paradoxical or even incoherent. My research has not taken me past the fifth/eleventh century, so I cannot say what later developments might have reinserted theological considerations into *uṣūl al-fiqh*, but from reading modern textbooks on *uṣūl al-fiqh* I am under the impression that the law-oriented paradigm still holds sway among Sunnis, and that theological and philosophical considerations have not yet been reintegrated into many modern Muslims’ assumptions about what God’s speech is and how it should be interpreted.

### The danger of authoritarianism

This loss of theological grounding also posed the practical and moral danger of what Khaled Abou El Fadl calls authoritarianism: the arrogation of authority that often occurs when an interpreter identifies his or her interpretation as the obvious and indisputable meaning of God’s speech, without disclosing her presuppositions, values, or interpretive choices, and thus effectively substitutes her own interpretation for the text of revelation.<sup>6</sup> The law-oriented hermeneutical paradigm embraced by the Sunni *madhāhib* permitted exactly that, at least in principle, because it allowed jurists to find a great deal of legal meaning in revelation, and to claim that it was the plain literal meaning of the text, while reserving the flexibility to deviate from that default meaning whenever they felt it necessary to do so. The law-oriented paradigm concealed the jurists’ interpretive labor, making their conclusions seem more obvious than they were—something theologians like ‘Abd al-Jabbār and al-Bāqillānī would have denounced.

Fortunately, the *fuqahāʾ* were not free to employ their hermeneutic at will. The constraints of the scholarly tradition limited quite severely their ability to propose whimsical new interpretations and claim revealed authority for them, even if those might have been

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<sup>6</sup> See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 5, 7, 93, and *passim*.

hermeneutically justifiable. In the modern world, however, where the scholarly tradition no longer controls the framework and limits of legal interpretation, the law-oriented hermeneutic has become a more powerful and dangerous tool. Modernists, Salafīs, and reformers of all stripes frequently employ the principles and mechanisms of classical legal theory, wittingly or unwittingly, to justify interpretations that would never have been accepted within the classical interpretive tradition. More often than not they do so without any apparent awareness of the theological underpinnings of that hermeneutic.

It is refreshing, therefore, to see some modern thinkers proposing new theologies of revelation. One example that comes to mind is Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, who developed at great length a distinction between a suprahistorical *qurʾān* and a historical *umm al-kitāb*. This metaphysical distinction had a definite hermeneutical purpose: it allowed Shaḥrūr to classify Qurʾānic teachings that fit his own modern liberal values as eternal and objective, while declaring other parts of the Qurʾān to be historically contingent and subject to human reasoning.<sup>7</sup> While Shaḥrūr embedded his view of the Qurʾān in a broader philosophical framework, it appears to me from what I have read that his Qurʾānic theology is principally motivated by his desire for a hermeneutic that can support the modern liberal values he wishes to promote. It is not clear to me, therefore, whether Shaḥrūr has allowed a principled theology of revelation to govern his approach to interpretation, as the premise of today’s symposium seems to demand. Nevertheless, he has made a serious attempt to ground his hermeneutic in a systematic theology of revelation.

## Aksin Wijaya

Another remarkably elaborate and creative Qurʾānic metaphysics is that proposed by Aksin Wijaya, a forty-year-old Indonesian scholar whom I just had the pleasure of interviewing at his home in Ponorogo, East Java, several weeks ago. Like the Ashʿariyya, he thinks it important to distinguish between God’s eternal inner speech and its temporal verbal expression,<sup>8</sup> but

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas Christmann, “Read the Qur’an as if It Was Revealed Last Night’: An Introduction to Muhammad Shahrur’s Life and Work,” in *The Qur’an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xxxv.

<sup>8</sup> See Aksin Wijaya, *Arah Baru Studi Ulum Al-Qur’an: Memburu Pesan Tuhan di Balik Fenomena Budaya* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009), 59–63, where he says approvingly that this view resolves the conflict over the created or eternal nature of God’s speech by distinguishing aspects of God’s speech that had been conflated. He attributes to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī the view that God’s speech has only an eternal dimension, and attributes to Ibn Rushd the distinction, usually associated more broadly with the Ashʿariyya, between the meaning that constitutes God’s inner speech and the verbal form in which it is expressed (*Arah Baru*, 68–69).

then he also distinguishes sharply between the oral and written forms of the Qurʾān, ending up with a tripartite theory of God's speech consisting of revelation, the Qurʾān, and the ʿUthmānic Codex.<sup>9</sup>

Aksin defines the first dimension of God's speech, revelation or *wahyu*, not as an eternal attribute but as an act of communication<sup>10</sup> that took place when the Prophet, by virtue of his extraordinarily spiritual orientation, transcended the physical dimension of his human nature and entered the realm of spirit and divinity.<sup>11</sup> This communication took place, he argues, in a private<sup>12</sup> language or sign system that was not Arabic<sup>13</sup> but was freely chosen by God<sup>14</sup> and was thus independent of any specific culture. This communication involved no intermediary: the stories about Gabriel conveying God's messages were just the Prophet's way of explaining his claim of revelation to an audience who conceived of supernatural inspiration as coming through intermediaries such as *jinn*.<sup>15</sup> Nor did it require any interpretation; rather, it yielded immediate, unreflective, and perfect understanding of the divine message (*pesan*) by the Prophet. It is this original message, which cannot be explained as the product of Arab culture, that constitutes the principal miraculous feature of the Qurʾān<sup>16</sup> and that God promised to protect from corruption.<sup>17</sup> Because it is free of cultural trappings and is therefore relevant to any social context,<sup>18</sup> only this part of the Qurʾān's message is authoritative for all. It is, therefore, the sole object of the interpreter's quest.<sup>19</sup>

The words of the oral Qurʾān (*al-Qurʾan*) Aksin regards as a second act of communication that took place between the Prophet and his original Arab audience. This required transferring the divine message from the private language in which the Prophet had received it into clear Arabic.<sup>20</sup> The Arabic words of the Qurʾān did not exist in the heavenly realm; they were chosen

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<sup>9</sup> Summarized in *Arah Baru*, vii, 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Arah Baru*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Arah Baru*, 27–29, 74–77, 80. Aksin also says that God simultaneously entered the human dimension and took on some kind of human attribute (*nasut*).

<sup>12</sup> *Arah Baru*, 54–55, 76–78, 85.

<sup>13</sup> See *Arah Baru*, 64–65, 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Arah Baru*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Arah Baru*, 78–84, 100 n. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Arah Baru*, 36–42. Wijaya also recognizes a literary dimension to its miraculous nature on pp. 48–51.

<sup>17</sup> *Arah Baru*, 162.

<sup>18</sup> *Arah Baru*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> See *Arah Baru*, 158, 160.

<sup>20</sup> *Arah Baru*, 85–89.

by the Prophet himself.<sup>21</sup> In his initial prophetic experience in the cave of Ḥirāʾ the Prophet had been commanded to read—not to recite particular words that were given to him, but to read or diagnose the social reality of his time and place in light of the universal revelation he was to receive.<sup>22</sup> He did so using the existing medium of Arabic which, following Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, Aksin regards as a carrier of its own cultural message.<sup>23</sup> The Prophet responded to pagan Arab society in its own terms, mimicking its notions such as charismatic figures who receive otherworldly messages through otherworldly intermediaries and express them in poetic form.<sup>24</sup> The result was that God’s message became “trapped” in an Arabic linguistic and cultural system, so that it could not speak directly to all God’s servants across the face of the whole earth.<sup>25</sup> The oral Qurʾān proclaimed by the Prophet carried both a divine message and a human cultural message in approximately equal proportions. Aksin does not say how he reaches his figure of fifty percent, but by giving a specific number he goes beyond vague assertions about the ability of a language to carry its own implicit message and gives us a bald statement of just how radical his interpretive project is: he will consider himself at liberty to dismiss about fifty percent of the Qurʾān’s content as Arab cultural baggage that need not be imported to Indonesia.

The next communicative event occurred after the death of the Prophet, when his Companions passed on the Qurʾān’s message in writing. In order to avoid conflict over the oral Qurʾān’s seven variant recitations (which Aksin seems to regard as irretrievably lost), they reduced it to a single written text, the ʿUthmānic Codex (*Mushaf Usmani*).<sup>26</sup> In this way God’s message was further entrapped, this time by the linguistic and cultural system of one particular tribe, the Quraysh, and also by the act of writing itself.<sup>27</sup> Aksin argues that the very act of fixing the Qurʾān as a written text broke the direct connection between speaker and hearer that had previously allowed the Companions to understand the oral Qurʾān immediately and unreflectively.<sup>28</sup> The ʿUthmānic Codex, which is the only form in which we now have access to God’s message, can now be understood only with the help of linguistic analysis, which tends to

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<sup>21</sup> *Arah Baru*, viii, 64–65, 86, 87 n. 48, 164. Wijaya attributes such a view to Abū Ḥanīfa.

<sup>22</sup> *Arah Baru*, 42–48.

<sup>23</sup> See *Arah Baru*, viii, 73 n. 31, 159, 160, 163, 218.

<sup>24</sup> *Arah Baru*, 97–102, 105. See also 118–119.

<sup>25</sup> *Arah Baru*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> *Arah Baru*, 89–93, 165.

<sup>27</sup> *Arah Baru*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> *Arah Baru*, 2–3, 165–168, 180, 220.

highlight the cultural messages that are embedded in the Arabic language.<sup>29</sup> Equally problematic is the hegemony accorded to specifically Qurayshī language and culture. The seven variant readings were intended to address the linguistic and cultural diversity among the Prophet’s Arab audience, but the ‘Uthmānic codification further narrowed both the cultural relevance and the cultural message of revelation,<sup>30</sup> so that the message of the text we read today is about twenty percent Qurayshī ideology. That leaves only thirty percent of the text’s message that can be attributed to God himself. The task of hermeneutics is to identify and extract that thirty percent from behind the veil of Arab and Qurayshī culture so that revelation can speak to all societies past and present, across the face of the whole earth including Indonesia, without subjecting them to Arab cultural imperialism.<sup>31</sup>

This is a splendid example of an explicit theology of revelation put forward in the service of Qur’ānic hermeneutics. Aksin reworks the classical Ash‘arī doctrine of God’s eternal speech in terms of modern communication theory, and ends up with a justification for a hermeneutic of recovery that sounds like a slightly more sophisticated, Indonesianized version of Fazlur Rahman’s hermeneutic. The hermeneutical dimension of Aksin’s project, however, remains underdeveloped in his book on the Qur’ānic sciences. He says that “exegesis” (*tafsīr*), which considers only the language of the text, can only discover the Qur’ān’s Arab cultural message,<sup>32</sup> and so calls for it to be supplemented with “hermeneutics”<sup>33</sup> so as to consider both the internal linguistic and external contextual dimensions of the text.<sup>34</sup> He calls for analysis of Qur’ānic vocabulary after the manner of Toshihiko Izutsu<sup>35</sup> as well as isolation of the divine elements of the Qur’ānic message from its Arab cultural elements,<sup>36</sup> along the general lines taken by Fazlur Rahman<sup>37</sup> and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd.<sup>38</sup> Following Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā, he suggests that God’s universal message is more readily apparent in the Meccan portions of the ‘Uthmānic

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<sup>29</sup> *Arah Baru*, 168.

<sup>30</sup> *Arah Baru*, 169–172.

<sup>31</sup> *Arah Baru*, 173–175.

<sup>32</sup> *Arah Baru*, viii, 168.

<sup>33</sup> *Arah Baru*, viii, 175–182.

<sup>34</sup> *Arah Baru*, 5, 12–14 (following Amīn al-Khūlī’s distinction between *mā ḥawla al-Qur’ān* and *mā fī al-Qur’ān*).

<sup>35</sup> *Arah Baru*, 216, 221–222, 230–233.

<sup>36</sup> *Arah Baru*, 158, 218–221.

<sup>37</sup> *Arah Baru*, 142–143, 218–219, 224–227.

<sup>38</sup> *Arah Baru*, 216–219, 227.

Codex.<sup>39</sup> It remains unclear, however, how the narrowing from seven oral to one written version of the Qurʾān is to be undone in the process of “searching for God’s message behind the phenomenon of culture.” The sample exegetical problem to which he applies his hermeneutic by way of illustration—the Qurʾānic term *islām*—is even less developed than his hermeneutical theory: he never gets beyond internal vocabulary analysis before leaping to a predictable list of modern liberal values that he concludes must be the universal values that form the genuine revealed core of the Qurʾānic message.<sup>40</sup> It is his theology of revelation that is most detailed and suggestive; indeed one hardly needs an explicit statement of hermeneutical method, or a specific example of its interpretation, to see the kinds of interpretive moves that his theory of revelation suggests and supports.

In Aksin’s hermeneutic, as in al-Bāqillānī’s and Shaḥrūr’s, the doctrine of an eternal heavenly message plays a quite substantial role: it is the object of interpretive inquiry. The concept of an eternal Qurʾān is not just a pious affirmation of the transcendent nature of revelation; it is an imagined locus of pure meaning untainted by the processes of human communication and interpretive reasoning. If the Qurʾān is a historical and literary text comparable to other historical and literary artifacts, in a linguistic medium that reflects a particular human society, then the desire for a divinely authoritative normativity that transcends human cultures requires the positing of a supra-historical revelation that is nevertheless present in some discernible form in the historical traces of the Prophet’s words. The interpretive mechanisms that would guarantee recovery of that pure divine message may be impossible to define with any precision, and certainly would be impossible to carry out in any objective manner, but this does not trouble Aksin Wijaya. It is enough to believe that there is gold beneath the dross of Arab culture. This justifies not a certain method but a certain attitude toward the Qurʾān, and toward those who would try to impose its foreign values and customs on Indonesian Muslims.

Indeed, the Indonesian context is crucial for understanding the relation between Aksin’s theology of revelation and his hermeneutic. The state-supported drive for indigenization or “Indonesianization” of Islam<sup>41</sup> is “the tail that wags the dog” of much Indonesian Qurʾānic hermeneutics. For Wijaya and his circle, the interpretive outcome is not in doubt. Even the historicizing hermeneutic is already largely a given. What is needed is legitimacy: an updating of the Qurʾānic sciences that shows how traditional concepts like the occasions of revelation,

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<sup>39</sup> *Arah Baru*, 124–135, 138, 234–236.

<sup>40</sup> *Arah Baru*, 228–237.

<sup>41</sup> See *Arah Baru*, 114–115.

the distinction between Meccan and Medinan verses, and above all the Ash‘arī doctrine of God’s eternal speech actually support modern historicizing hermeneutical theories. As with Shaḥrūr, therefore, I think that we have here a theology of revelation that is motivated, and perhaps even determined, by the drive for a modern hermeneutic. Aksin does not avoid the risk of authoritarianism; his hermeneutic could easily be used to foist his own modern liberal values on the Qur’ān as though they were its only universal, transcultural message. But like Shaḥrūr, Aksin Wijaya has taken the trouble of constructing a theological foundation, however novel and precarious, for his hermeneutic. And he has shown that the Islamic intellectual tradition is a rich resource that can be mined, rethought, and redeployed in the service of contemporary Qur’ānic interpretation.

## Conclusion

Everyone nowadays, it seems, wants to talk about hermeneutics. Everyone wants a hermeneutic that is adequate for the concrete demands of living faithfully in the modern world. It is not hard to devise a powerful, flexible hermeneutic. Medieval legal theorists did that long ago, inspired by al-Shāfi‘ī and building on the insights of Ash‘arī theologians. But in so doing, I have suggested, the law-oriented theorists got their theology of revelation a bit tangled, and lost sight of the sometimes paradoxical theological assumptions on which they were grounding their increasingly pragmatic hermeneutic. Maybe paradoxes are a necessary part of any religious thought that aspires to adequately capture the complex experience of religious life. But what I appreciate about al-Bāqillānī, ‘Abd al-Jabbār, and even Aksin Wijaya is their willingness to be explicit about their theology of revelation, and about its consequences for interpretation, rather than just putting forward a hermeneutic and then assuming, or pretending, that it makes theological sense. That explicit and systematic reflection about the nature of revelation is obviously something the organizers of this conference value as well, and I look forward to a day full of such reflections.