

Review of Robert Gleave, *Islam and literalism*

By David R. Vishanoff
University of Oklahoma

*This is the pre-print Accepted Manuscript (AM), made available on 6/7/2016 at <http://david.vishanoff.com/review-gleave/> for personal scholarly use. The Version of Record (VoR), published in *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 25 no. 4 (2014): 553–557, is available on the publisher’s web site at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2014.946823>.*

Robert Gleave. *Islam and literalism: Literal meaning and interpretation in Islamic legal theory*. [Revised] paperback edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. xii + 212 pp., £24.99/US\$39.95, ISBN 97807486898.

Literalism is a label frequently applied but seldom scrutinised, either by those who embrace it or by those who fling it disparagingly at others. In this creative and far-ranging book Robert Gleave exploits the technical vocabulary of modern pragmatics to explore just what this term might mean when applied to the history of Islamic hermeneutics. His central focus is the sophisticated analysis of language found in classical Islamic legal theory, but his panorama extends from the Qurʾān to early exegetes and grammarians, Shīʿī jurists and traditionists, modern Salafīs and Ayatollahs. Bridging such disparate discourses is necessarily a tentative and messy business, but it proves worthwhile, yielding new insights into neglected aspects of legal theory, revealing connections between disciplines, and offering new perspectives on the long development of Islamic interpretive theory.

The die is cast in Chapter One, which introduces several conceptions and gradations of literal meaning in modern pragmatics. Though the author questions whether that notion is even philosophically coherent, he settles on a single definition of strictly literal meaning: sentence meaning, the meaning that a text has in and of itself, by virtue of the rules of language, irrespective of context, the author’s intent, or the reader’s understanding. Gleave then seeks to detect echoes of such a concept, or of any of the broader notions of literal meaning developed by modern philosophers of language, in one Islamic source after another.

His definitional choice is a fateful one, and renders his task quite challenging, because his sources rarely articulate any such notion explicitly. Muslim legal theorists seem mostly unconcerned with what modern philosophers of language call sentences—unuttered hypothetical instantiations of the rules of language. Instead they are generally concerned with utterances, which, even when discussed abstractly, are always imagined as spoken by someone in some context. Even when they say that an imperative verb ‘devoid of contextual indicators’ has the literal meaning of ‘obligation’ (46), they are only saying that the imperative form was coined to be used that way, and that the utterance of an imperative should therefore be interpreted that way as long as there is no relevant contextual evidence indicating that something else was meant; they are not imagining an unspoken imperative with no context and no intended meaning at all. The closest that classical legal theorists come to articulating a concept of strictly literal meaning is when they speak of the meaning a verbal expression has according to its original linguistic assignment (*wad‘ al-lugha*), but even then, as Gleave points out, they are interested primarily in classifying the different ways those expressions are used in particular utterances. A recurring theme of the book, therefore, is that even when a Muslim scholar clearly regards a certain meaning as the most obvious meaning of a word, it is not at all clear that he is affirming the existence of a literal meaning in the strict sense defined by Gleave. In my experience, it is usually best to understand these scholars as thinking of how words are used, what the speaker intends them to mean, and how they should be interpreted, rather than what they mean in and of themselves. They usually think of meanings as existing in the minds of speakers and listeners, not in words or sentences.

To his great credit, Gleave never loses sight of this for long. He is quick to find unarticulated notions of literal meaning: the very practice of exegesis, to his mind, reflects a tacit assumption that a text’s intended meaning diverges from some kind of apparent or literal meaning that it possesses independently of the author’s intent or the reader’s comprehension (77, 87, 91, 128–130, 133–136, 140). Nevertheless, he ends nearly every section with an acknowledgement of the distance that remains between his sources and modern pragmatics. Frequently he ends up comparing a particular Muslim scholar’s notion of literal meaning not with his own strict definition but with one of several broader modern conceptions of literal meaning that take into consideration not only the rules of language but also the context of each utterance. His own definition, as he reiterates at several points, is only a lens whose sole purpose is to reveal more clearly what is going on in his Islamic sources. It succeeds because it

reveals that Muslim scholars have been wrestling with the same question as modern philosophers: just how much contextual information can one take into account before one's interpretation slips from the imagined privileged realm of the literal into some secondary and more subjective category of interpretation?

Chapter Two presents the classical Sunni legal theory tradition and its notion of linguistic assignment (*waḍʿ*), which Gleave takes to be the culmination of Islamic literalism. According to this theory of language, words and phrases are regarded as having been established or coined for certain meanings, which are therefore intrinsic to those phrases and remain attached to them as their literal meanings regardless of what meanings they are intended to convey in any particular utterance. Although it seems to me that most legal theorists regarded language as a set of parameters for how words could be used in actual utterances, rather than a set of intrinsic meanings, they did speak of the meaning that a word has 'in the language' even when it means something different in a particular utterance, and this fits Gleave's definition of literal meaning well. One drawback of Gleave's presentation is that he tends to assume that most words were regarded as having a single literal meaning, whereas, as I have argued in *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2011, pp. 5, 194–195, and 240), one of the key features of mainstream legal theory was that it ascribed multiple literal (linguistically assigned) meanings to many important words and grammatical forms such as imperatives and general terms, while designating just one of those meanings as more apparent (*ẓāhir*) than the others, or as the default meaning that should be the starting point of interpretation. The most important form of classical legal literalism, therefore, was not preference for linguistically assigned meanings but designation of one of those meanings as an interpretive default. Literal meaning was understood primarily as an interpretive default, not as a kind of sentence meaning that the text bears in and of itself. A different definition of literal meaning, focused on intended or understood meaning rather than sentence meaning, would have been a more natural choice for this comparative project.

Chapter Three jumps back in time to begin the book's historical narrative. Gleave notes first that the Qurʾān itself assumes that scriptures have a meaning plain enough that people are culpable for failing to follow it, but that the Qurʾān nevertheless prioritises the hidden inner meanings of things (*bāṭin*) over their apparent outward meanings (*ẓāhir*). He then studies several examples of early Qurʾānic exegesis and Arabic grammar, discerning several operative

notions akin (but not equivalent) to his definition of literal meaning: meanings that accord with common understanding of the language, with formal grammatical rules, or with how an imagined past community is thought to have used the Arabic language (93). The section on grammar illustrates well the difficulty of employing a foreign conceptual lens. It seems puzzling, from Gleave's perspective, that Sībawayh did not distinguish between those utterances whose intended meaning differs from their literal meaning and those that are grammatically so anomalous that they have no literal meaning at all (90, 92). The puzzle disappears, however, when we recognise that Sībawayh was not assuming that utterances have literal meanings and then attempting to explain why their intended meanings differ; he was assuming that utterances have intended meanings and then trying to explain unusual ways of expressing those meanings. Using Gleave's concept of literal meaning as a lens creates a problem that was not there, but in so doing it also helps to clarify exactly what Sībawayh was doing and thinking.

In Chapter Four Gleave turns to al-Shāfi'ī's *Risāla*, where he finds a much closer analogue to his concept of literal meaning. Al-Shāfi'ī used the term *ẓāhir* to designate a meaning that is somehow associated with a verbal expression before contextual evidence of intended meaning is taken into account. I found quite illuminating this section's suggestion that al-Shāfi'ī was formalising, in an unprecedented way, the idea that the texts of revelation had become detached from their author and their original context. This gave texts a new status as independent carriers of an apparent meaning, and made interpretation a matter of reassembling contextual evidence so as to determine whether that was also the intended meaning. In this sense I am persuaded that al-Shāfi'ī took a decisive step toward the concept of independent textual meaning.

Chapter Four continues with three relatively early surviving examples of the mature genre of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, all dating to the late tenth century: the *Fuṣūl* of al-Jaṣṣāṣ, the still understudied *Taqrīb* of al-Bāqillānī, and the *Muqaddima* of Ibn al-Qaṣṣār. This section illustrates again the difficulty of introducing a foreign conceptual framework: Gleave focuses on whether meaning is inherent in a text, but because his sources focus instead on whether meaning is understood from the text alone or only with the help of contextual evidence, they end up lumping together meanings that Gleave prefers to distinguish.

For the sake of the book's historical argument, Chapter Five (rather than Chapter Two) would have been the point to discuss the mature Sunni tradition of legal theory and its

concept of linguistic assignment, followed by the discussion of Zāhirism in Chapter Six. Instead Chapter Five jumps back in time to provide a tantalisingly brief survey of early Imāmī *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* literature, arguing that the mere recognition that misunderstanding is possible implies a tacit acceptance of the idea that texts have intrinsic literal meaning. Chapter Six is much more detailed and satisfying. Gleave declines to speculate about the early Zāhiriyya, but gives a detailed analysis of the linguistic dimensions of Ibn Ḥazm's *Iḥkām* (unfortunately neglecting his *Taqrīb li-Ḥadd al-Mantiq*, an important source for his theory of language). Particularly insightful is Gleave's explanation of how regarding all of revelation as a single connected utterance allowed Ibn Ḥazm to depart from the literal meaning of one revealed text on the basis of other textual evidence, while still claiming to be following the literal meaning of revelation as a whole (166–167). I have argued elsewhere (*Formation*, pp. 99–102, 106) that this made Ibn Ḥazm, in the end, hardly more literalist than mainstream Sunni legal theorists, whose interpretive principles he largely adopted; but Gleave leaves his reputation for staunch literalism unchallenged even as he recognises the interpretive flexibility he allowed.

Chapter Seven is a brilliant culmination of the book's long historical argument. Rather than repeating common platitudes about the literalism of modern fundamentalists, Gleave dissects technical discussions by modern Salafī legal theorists on the narrow question of whether God can establish new literal meanings for words through his use of them in revelation (the question of *al-ḥaqāʾiq al-sharʿiyya*). He finds a striking move away from the primacy of linguistically assigned meanings toward the idea that meaning is established through specific instances of language use and is therefore always dependent on context. This echoes Ibn Taymiyya's denial of the concept of literal meaning (made famous by M. M. Yunus Ali) and shows that modern fundamentalism is not to be confused with literalism but is better understood, in the case of these Salafī authors, as a kind of contextualism. Contemporary Shīʿī discussions of the same question are then examined in similar depth, yielding what is perhaps the closest analogue to Gleave's chosen definition of literal meaning: a minority of modern Shīʿī scholars deny that usage can have any impact on literal meaning, which remains exclusively a function of a primordial linguistic assignment. Here, at last, are Muslim thinkers who really seem to uphold the modern concept of pure sentence meaning.

The difficulty of this comparative historical project is staggering. Inevitably such comparison results in some false parallels, questionable interpretations, and unnecessary puzzles. Gleave defends the project, however, as a valuable heuristic exercise (viii, 23, 195)

with the potential to bring greater rigour to the sloppy terminology that characterises both modern scholarship on Islamic legal theory and the Islamic discourse itself. What seems sloppy to a modern pragmatist, of course, is not necessarily sloppy from the perspective of a scholar trying to make different distinctions based on different premises. Nevertheless, the very attempt to bridge such disparate yet obviously related discourses forces us to recognise exactly what distinctions are being made by each party, and to make their premises more explicit. The difficult and problematic nature of such a project is only made evident in Robert Gleave's impressive book because he has made explicit what is really implicit in any modern historical study of Islamic thought: that intellectual history is always and inevitably a comparative enterprise that requires the negotiation of a new, third vocabulary to bridge the gap between the mismatched horizons of the modern historian and the scholars he or she is seeking to interpret. By undertaking this project with such rigour, Gleave has taken us far beyond the vague and unexamined notions of literalism that are often imputed to various Muslims, and has taken us beneath the surface of some subtle and understudied technicalities of *uṣūl al-fiqh* to reveal their profound hermeneutical implications. Not since Mohamed Yunis Ali's book *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000) has such an important step been taken in bridging the conceptual gap between classical Islamic hermeneutical thought and modern theories of language.

Just as importantly, the book opens up a new area of study that is worthy of much further attention: the phenomenon (real or imagined) of literalism. As this book illustrates, literalism is a potentially illuminating category that spans multiple Islamic discourses and multiple religious and philosophical traditions. The topic is ripe for a major interdisciplinary conference.