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Interpretation According to the Qur'an

In this chapter, I discuss the method of exegesis as spelled out by the Qur'an, which is my first argument. To understand Muḥammad's state of mind to perform some sort of hermeneutics, it is important to understand what methods of exegesis that the Qur'an suggests, as Muḥammad might have been providing a key so people could understand him. I argue in this chapter that the Qur'an only sanctions two methods for Qur'anic exegesis. The first is that God is the one who teaches the meanings of the Qur'an. The second is a linguistic approach, in which intertextual polysemy plays a major role, according to the Qur'an itself, as I will attempt to portray along with examples.

For centuries, the Qur'an has been studied to derive its meanings. Many schools of Qur'anic exegesis have developed throughout history ranging from literal interpretation to symbolic, from exoteric to esoteric, and from legalistic to metaphoric.¹ However, some of these methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a literal interpretation of the Qur'an does not necessarily mean that it disregards symbolism. Looking at it from a linguistic perspective, language holds meanings. The words themselves are symbols, from which we derive meaning. They are not themselves the realities. For example, the word "apple" is just a symbol of what an apple actually is. Language is a symbolic form of communication, therefore we can only understand words symbolically. The Aristotelian understanding of language is defined thus: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words."² Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) implies arbitrariness in the relationship between the linguistic symbol and the mental image formed by it.³ Saussure, in "Nature of the Linguistic Sign," states that a linguistic sign does not truly give a relationship between a thing and its name, but between a concept and its acoustic image.⁴

Identifying a word (symbol) with a specific meaning is not usually an easy task. In linguistics, a word in isolation usually has no specific meaning unless it is used within a specific context.⁵ However, in lexical semantics, words are defined independently of their context. The purpose of lexicons and dictionaries is to identify all the meanings that a word can be defined by regardless of its context. However, even in a specific context, this does not imply that a word cannot have multiple meanings even within that context. These concepts of understanding how to derive meaning from language and lexical semantics are important when analyzing any literature, including the Qur'an.

Qur'anic exegesis

According to some Muslim scholars, a scholar must possess certain qualifications to be considered capable of exegesis, such as knowing the different types of verses.⁶ Although the qualifications required by Muslim scholars, both traditional and contemporary, may seem intriguingly excessive, it does not necessarily have a basis in the Qur'an.⁷ We need to understand what Muḥammad intended to be the key to unlock his creative associations and symbolic metaphors. According to the Qur'an, there are two main criteria to understand the Qur'an, and only one of them is tangible. The first criterion, which is not tangible, is that it is God who teaches the Qur'an (e.g., Qur'an 55:1–2). The second criterion is repeated several times in the Qur'an, signifying the importance of understanding its Arabic language (e.g., Qur'an 12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 20:113, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 41:44, 42:7, 43:3, 46:12). The Qur'an states, "Truly We sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, that haply you may understand/connect (*ta'qilūn*)."⁸

Many early methods of interpretation are heavily influenced by tradition, whether the sayings of Muḥammad, his companions, or other early individuals whom the author of the commentary deemed to have some knowledge of Qur'anic meanings.⁹ Most traditional commentaries of the Qur'an use historic accounts for the circumstances or reasons of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as part of understanding the context of the verses.¹⁰ However, that method restricts the Qur'an to a historic event without taking into consideration Muḥammad's state of mind. Although traditional commentators of the Qur'an use history to understand its social and textual context, traditional scholars of the Qur'an do not consider it as a history book,¹¹ but a religious book with history.¹²

Al-Ṭabarī was an early Qur'anic exegete who used circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as a method of Qur'anic exegesis. Since al-Ṭabarī was himself a historian, it was very natural for him to view the Qur'an through a historical lens. Some scholars, such as John Wansbrough, have argued that the Qur'an is not a reliable historical account, but one that needs to be viewed as a literary discourse.¹³ Andrew Rippin attempts to shed light on the usage of the Qur'anic historical context according to traditional scholars, where he argues one of the fundamental usages of the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) is not necessarily for juristic purposes, but rather connected to creating a narrative story around Qur'anic passages.¹⁴ Some early scholars of the Qur'an, such as Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767),¹⁵ al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075),¹⁶ and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)¹⁷ have written some detailed accounts of the circumstances of revelation in their Qur'anic exegesis. This has provided an understanding of the role of historical and social context in interpreting the Qur'an. However, anyone trying to extract historical meaning from the Qur'an would fall into the trap of their own presuppositions. The reception of the Qur'an in post-Qur'anic literature does not always provide us with an objective understanding of the Qur'an. There could be doubts involved in the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) stories. Rippin states, "theory of the 'history reception' always presupposes most centrally that any work needs a reader to create meaning and that each reader will extract meaning appropriate to his own time, presuppositions and expectations."¹⁸

Traditional methods of Qur'anic exegesis, known as *tafsīr bil-ma'thūr*, are the most common method of interpretation in early and medieval Islam. They usually depend on a related prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) or sayings of the Prophet's companions for the interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁹ Although the traditional exegesis is considered mainstream, it still faces certain challenges, as follows:²⁰

1. The Qur'an may hold meanings that are not always obvious. The Qur'an describes itself as a veiled book (*kitābin maktūn*) (i.e., Qur'an 56:78) and states that some people do not comprehend it (e.g., Qur'an 6:25, 17:46, 18:57). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that Muḥammad explained the vague parts of the Qur'an and any parts unexplained are to be considered evident. If the Qur'an is clear, then it would not describe itself as veiled. Also, if the Qur'an is clear, it would not suggest that some people will have difficulty comprehending it. Historically, the main use of prophetic interpretation has been for juristic purposes of Islamic Shari'ah. The prophetic traditions used for Qur'anic interpretation do not always refer to a specific Qur'anic verse, but usually expound on the theme of rituals or legal rulings, such as the method of prayer, almsgiving, marriage, and divorce, etc.
2. The Qur'an often asks people to ponder its meanings. If the interpretation of the Qur'an was readily available or that the Qur'an is evidently clear, then it defeats the purpose of trying to contemplate its meaning (e.g., Qur'an 4:82, 47:24). Since the Qur'an often states that people should try to understand it using reason,²¹ it opens the doors to plural interpretation that may not always be obvious.
3. Actually, much of the tradition that is used in early Qur'anic exegesis is not even prophetic but related to Muḥammad's companions or later followers. Interpretation through traditional narration assumes the interpreters are knowledgeable of the parts of the Qur'an that they are explaining. Ibn 'Abbās, for example, is a widely celebrated companion who interpreted the Qur'an. However, it is important to recognize that the interpretation of the Prophet's companions or early successors may still be viewed as their own personal opinions, and should not necessarily have any specific authoritative tone. Al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) has shown that even the first two Caliphs, Abu Bakr and 'Umar, have disagreed with each other in many instances.²² As such, it is important to understand that the companions never considered the things they say beyond their own mere opinions, which can very much be fallible. Although some Muslims may claim that the Prophet's companions had firsthand knowledge of the Qur'an from Muḥammad, and therefore, perhaps understood the Qur'an better than any other, such a claim is unfounded. The companions still disagreed with each other many times, proving that whatever opinions they had are just that, opinions. They cannot be taken for granted as "the interpretation" of the Qur'an, but only an opinion of what they thought the interpretation is. Accordingly, their interpretation can be as fallible as any other scholar. On the other hand, Shī'i dogma states the infallibility of their imāms. I am not here to argue the infallibility dogma, according to Shī'i doctrine.²³ However, even if we do accept it, there still exists a dilemma that the narrators are not themselves infallible, and therefore, there could always be some doubt as to the correctness of the narrations. Besides, the Muslim doctrine of infallibility of

prophets is not in itself necessarily Qur'anic. The Qur'an, and even prophetic traditions, shows that prophets have erred and committed sins.²⁴

4. The reliability of the prophetic tradition is also brought into question.²⁵ James Robson argues that the prophetic tradition was not central to the early Muslim community in the time of Muḥammad. He suggests that although the tradition is presented as if it were preserved from early Islam, it actually emerged when the Qur'an gave no or insufficient guidance regarding new issues that arose in the community.²⁶ Tradition developed to become an authority in the Muslim community, and it was perhaps not even the intention of the authors who compiled books on these traditions.²⁷ Robson suggests that tradition does not portray Muḥammad for what he truly was, but portrays how his followers perceived him.²⁸

In the Muslim community, due to the challenges facing traditional interpretation, several schools of Qur'anic exegesis emerged beyond the mainstream conventional method. These became known as rational approaches, including esoteric, linguistic, and scientific approaches.²⁹ As discussed earlier, a linguistic approach is the only tangible method that is clearly sanctioned by the Qur'an several times. If the Qur'an is the work of Muḥammad's mind, then he is providing the key that would allow us to understand his symbolism and references mentioned therein. He must have used a linguistic form of symbolism of creative associations that provide double or multiple meanings, which would be natural according to his state of mind. Linguistically, having more than one meaning in a word is called polysemy. Symbolic associations would infer intertextuality. Therefore, Muḥammad might have applied intertextual polysemy in constructing meaning in the Qur'an.

Understanding polysemy

Polysemy exists when a word has multiple meanings related to each other.³⁰ This definition is apparent from the nomenclature of the term, where "poly-" means many and "-semy" means meanings. This understanding of polysemy is important in Semitic languages, since the Semitic languages are constructed on root-based morphology (*mushtaqqāt*). This means that words in Semitic languages have roots that are typically three-lettered, in which morphologies of various meanings and understandings spring out.³¹ Perhaps Muḥammad's state of mind allowed him to make creative associations using polysemy to sketch his thoughts into the Qur'an. One of the reasons for polysemy to exist is that it may hold not only a direct root meaning, but also an allegorical meaning.³²

For example, the word "to write" is from the root "*k t b*." Different morphologies of this root would hold various meanings. A writer is called "*kātib*," a book is called "*kitāb*," a letter is called "*maktūb*," which literally means something written, dictating is called "*istaktaba*," a library is "*maktabah*," and an office is "*maktab*." However, defining those terms is not always semantically obvious, as it may sometimes be dependent on the context to understand what the term specifically refers to. For example, "*kitāb*" could be a reference to a book or sometimes even a contract, especially a marriage contract, and

a "*kātib* 'adl" would refer to a notary public. Those are just few definitions of the term and its morphologies.

Understanding etymology is also important to comprehend the root meanings. For example, the term "*katībah*" is a reference to an army battalion. The root of the term "*k t b*" actually means to join together in a group.³³ An army battalion is also a group of people who are joined together. Perhaps, it is because of this root meaning that it has taken the definition of the word writing, because writing is joining letters and words together in a group. Hence, having similar roots makes perfect sense once we understand its semantics and etymology.

Muqātil ibn Sulaymān was one of the first prominent scholars to deal with the topic of polysemy in the Qur'an in his books, *Kitāb al-wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* and *Al-Ashbāh wal-naẓā'ir*. Another early scholar dealing with polysemy is Abu al-'Abbās al-Mubarrad (d. 286/898) in his book, *Ma ittafaqa lafzuhi wa ikhtalafa ma'nāhu min al-qur'ān al-majīd*. Other early works on polysemy include *al-Wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* narrated by Maṭrūḥ ibn Muḥammad (d. 271/884) from 'Abdullah ibn Harūn al-Ḥijāzī, *al-Ashbāh wal-naẓā'ir* by al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1038), *Wujūh al-qur'ān* by Ismā'il ibn Aḥmad al-Ḍarīr (d. 430/1039), *Nuzhat al-a'yun al-nawāzīr fī 'ilm al-wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* by Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), *Wujūh al-qur'ān* by Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Muqri' (d. 658/1260), and *Kashf al-sarā'ir 'an ma'na al-wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* by Shams-ul-dīn ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-'Imād (d. 887/1482). These early and medieval works on polysemy usually tackle the issue of multiple meanings by defining them through their context.³⁴ Al-'Izz ibn 'Abdulsalām (d. 660/1262) says, "The context guides to clarify the many and the likelihood of the possibilities, and specifies the clarities."³⁵ However, once a word is defined through context, it loses its lexical semantics. Also, there could be multiple contexts understood from a passage, which will have various meanings, even contextually. If the Qur'an has a spiritual context that is different from its direct literal context, then the terms may have multiple meanings, one dependent on the direct literal context of the passage, and another on the fuller spiritual context of the Qur'an. This could be a case of applying the theory of *sensus plenior* (fuller sense) in scriptures.

Al-Suyūṭī discusses in *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* the use of polysemy in the Qur'an.³⁶ He refers to the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) (quoted in Muqātil's *al-Ashbāh wal-naẓā'ir*) stating under the authority of Abī al-Dardā', "A man is not a *faqīh* in all *fiqh* unless he sees the Qur'an in many faces (*wujūh*)."³⁷ Al-Suyūṭī explains from this tradition the importance of understanding polysemy.³⁸ He continues to say that some suggest that this prophetic tradition is meant for the understanding of esoteric symbolism, not just the exoteric interpretation.³⁹ Al-Suyūṭī also adds that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was told by Ibn 'Abbās not to argue with the *khawārij* by the Qur'an since the Qur'an has many faces (*ḥammāl dhu wujūh*),⁴⁰ but instead to argue by the Sunnah.⁴¹

Evidently, classical scholars realized the importance of polysemy in Qur'anic discourses, and the possibility that a Qur'anic passage might have multiple meanings due to the polysemy.⁴² Therefore, the role of intertextual polysemy may include determining different contexts in which the different meanings of the terms may still hold validity. Once the text is freed from its *Sitz-im-Leben* (site in life), it opens the doors to multiple interpretations.⁴³ Aḥmad Al-Ma'tūq states that although polysemy has been discussed by many grammarians of the Arabic language, they mostly give

examples without identifying a specific methodology.⁴⁴ Perhaps the complexity of the methodology makes it difficult to define polysemy with a specific method.

There are always arguments that one needs to interpret a text based on its context. However, what is the context of scriptures, which are perhaps intended as spiritual guidance using symbolism that self-identify with hidden meanings? Polysemy might play a major role in the textual hermeneutics of scriptures. We can always look at a text and figure out how an audience might interpret it without necessarily going into the texts that respond to it.⁴⁵ The issue of polysemy in hermeneutics is not only recognized in Qur'anic interpretation, it is also found in other traditions, such as rabbinic interpretations.⁴⁶ In the midrash, polysemy provides various senses of a word in scriptures.⁴⁷ Stern makes a detailed analysis of the notion of scriptural polysemy used in rabbinic literature.⁴⁸ Scriptural polysemy played a significant role in interpretation in Judaism with the allowance of multiplicity and plurality in meaning. Stern states:

Polysemy in midrash, then, is to be understood as a claim to textual stability rather than its opposite, an indeterminate state of endlessly deferred meanings and unresolved conflicts. In fact, midrashic polysemy suggests more than just textual stability; it points to a fantasy of social stability, of human community in complete harmony, where disagreement is either resolved agreeably or maintained in peace.⁴⁹

The rabbis view scripture as dictating its own polysemous reading.⁵⁰ Multiple interpretations were not only based on scriptural polysemy, but also in the distinction between literal or manifest meaning and allegorical or deeper sense. The latter was mainly utilized by the likes of Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE), where it is subdivided into categories of the naturalistic, the ethical, the metaphysical, or the mystical.⁵¹ These subcategories were developed in medieval Christian exegesis as the four senses of scriptures.⁵² The four senses of scriptures trace their origins back to Origen (d. 254 CE), Philo, and eventually the Stoics.⁵³ However, the notion of the four senses of scriptures is mainly a hierarchy in the different levels of meaning that could be ordered in ascending order of significance,⁵⁴ and not necessarily a polysemous approach, which Philo extensively used. Perhaps some Muslims have approached the Qur'an in a similar way, especially giving birth to the esoteric (*bāṭiniyyah*) schools. However, given Muḥammad's state of mind, he might have been able to easily make metaphor and multiple meanings in his speech by playing with polysemous words.

Paul Ricoeur defines polysemy as, "simply the possibility of adding a new meaning to the previous acceptations of the word without having these former meanings disappear."⁵⁵ Ricoeur has written extensively on hermeneutic phenomenology and the role of polysemy. He argues that language is polysemous, containing multiple meanings, and it is the context of the author and the audience that gives it univocality.⁵⁶ However, there might be multiple contexts in which a text may be read. Condit et al. have even argued that polysemous audience responses may possibly interpret texts differently if they were in a different context.⁵⁷ For example, an audience may respond to a survey differently than in a live discourse asking the same question.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, I think with Muḥammad's state of mind, his creative linguistic associations might easily be regarded as a play on words and polysemy.

Understanding intertextuality

Sometimes, it is possible that an author of a literary piece intentionally uses polysemy as part of its rhetoric style. We can assume that the Qur'an might use polysemy as an intentional portrayal of its rhetoric. Although the role of polysemy in early Qur'anic scholarship is well studied by various exegetes and linguists, especially between the different grammar schools of al-Kūfah and al-Baṣrah, another form of exegesis may be required besides understanding the lexical polysemy of Qur'anic text. Twice when the Qur'an emphasizes its Arabic language, it uses the term "*ta'qilūn*," as seen here:

Truly We sent it down as an Arabic Quran, that haply you may understand (*ta'qilūn*).⁵⁹

Truly We have made it an Arabic Quran, that haply you may understand (*ta'qilūn*).⁶⁰

As seen in the translation, the term "*ta'qilūn*" is assumed to mean "to understand." However, this term is also polysemous. The root of the term is "*a q l*," which holds various meanings. The term "*aql*" is the brain or mind, "*i'taqal*" is to arrest someone, "*mu'taqal*" is an arrested person or a prison, "*iqāl*" is the black ring worn as part of a traditional man's headdress in modern Arab cultures, "*uqlah*" is a knot, and "*uqunqulah*" is a rope.⁶¹ Although it appears those various meanings are distinct, it again comes back down to understanding the lexical semantics and etymology of the root term "*a q l*." The root meaning is to tie, such as tying a knot. Since the "*iqāl*" is twisted and tied, it gets its name from that. The same goes for a rope. Also, when arresting someone, they are usually tied or locked in prison, and hence, the same morphologies of the root "*a q l*" are used for arresting someone or a prison. Because the brain is capable of connecting things to make sense of them and understand them, it is also called "*aql*," as connecting is like tying things together and connecting them. When we read the word "apple," our mind connects the word with the actual fruit. Hence, it ties the word (the linguistic sign) with the visualization of the fruit and its mental image, and as such the mind understands the meaning once they are tied together or connected. Now that we know the lexical semantic of the root term for "*aql*," we may have a different understanding of the term "*ta'qilūn*" used in those two verses. It could be understood as an instruction that the Arabic Qur'an requires us to connect the Arabic words together. Also in Hebrew and Aramaic, the term "*arab*" means to mix and to combine, mixed races, or confusion and disorder.⁶² As such, when the Qur'an describes itself to be "*arabī*" and requires people to "*ta'qilūn*," then it may describe itself to be mixed or disordered and requires people to make the connections. As such, I may translate the passages as:

We have sent it down as an Arabic (mixed) Qur'an, in order that you may connect (*ta'qilūn*).⁶³

We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic (mixed), that you may connect (*ta'qilūn*).⁶⁴

From the context, this definition might be possible, as the context does not always provide us with an exclusive definition for a term. It may even be part of the Qur'anic rhetoric. Muḥammad might be giving us a key to unlock his creative associations. If we connect the Arabic words with what we think they mean, we would understand and comprehend them. However, it is also possible to understand that connecting the Arabic words may also mean some sort of intertextuality. Hence, those two verses might be considered an invitation to use some sort of intertextuality so we may be able to understand and learn wisdom.

Intertextuality is a broad term and could mean different things to different people. Personally, I hesitate to define it because, by doing so, I may inadvertently confine it and restrict it to a specific notion. With a few examples that will be seen in the following chapters, a better understanding of the extent of intertextuality and its role in Qur'anic exegesis may be realized.

Qur'anic hermeneutics

Arabic roots

Taking into consideration Muḥammad's state of mind and his ability to make creative associations, which may be understood through intertextual polysemy, the proposed method for Qur'anic exegesis is defined through the understanding of the root meanings of the Arabic words, since many Arabic roots are polysemes, i.e., having different meanings that are related. To remind the reader, the Qur'an emphasizes the understanding of the Arabic language to understand its meanings (e.g., Qur'an 12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 20:113, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 41:44, 42:7, 43:3, 46:12). The method identifies how the same root is used in other passages of the Qur'an, known as intertextual polysemy through understanding the lexical semantics of the term. It is also useful to relate the root words and their usages, not only within other passages of the Qur'an, but also with the Bible, which the Qur'an sometimes intends to engage with.

Words as symbols of spiritual realities

To talk about Qur'anic hermeneutics, one needs to understand what it represents to the community. The community that received the Qur'an considered it a divine symbol of the very Word of God. Since the Qur'an is made up of words of a language, then it is imperative to understand its language and representation.

According to the Mu'tazilah, language is a human invention because relating sound to a meaning is a social convention,⁶⁵ an idea which resembles that of a Saussurean approach. On the Mu'tazilah concept of language, Nasr Abu Zayd states, "Language never refers directly to reality, but reality is conceived, conceptualized, and then symbolized by the sound system."⁶⁶ Since language is a human invention, the Mu'tazilah considered the Qur'an created, as it cannot be eternal since the Arabic language was not eternal.⁶⁷ To them, there was a bridge between human reason and the divine word.⁶⁸ The Ash'ari school of theology held a different ideology in which language is not a

human invention but a divine gift to humans, as they take Qur'an 2:31, which refers to God teaching Adam all the names, to be a literal teaching of language.⁶⁹ The Mu'tazilah preferred a metaphorical meaning of this verse.⁷⁰ According to the Ash'arī view, therefore, the connection between the signifier and the signified is divinely stated, and not an evolution of a social convention.⁷¹ According to the Book of Genesis, language appears to be a human invention.

¹⁹ Now the Lord God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.⁷²

According to Philo of Alexandria, even if God did not do the naming, It still knew beforehand what the man would name them.⁷³ However, Philo was heavily influenced by the Stoics, who were naturalists and considered the names in a language not as arbitrary, but as innate in nature of the human who made the original names.⁷⁴ Aristotle argues, "Speech is the cause of learning ... not on its own account but by convention; for speech consists of words, and every word is a symbol."⁷⁵ Johann Süssmilch (d. 1767) published a thesis in 1766, *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erst Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe*, arguing that language was a gift from God. Herder (d. 1803) wrote his *Essay on the Origin of Language (Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache)* in 1772 to disprove Süssmilch by arguing that language is instead a human invention.⁷⁶ The diversity of language and its evolution as a phenomenon strongly suggests that language is a human invention.⁷⁷

Literacy in ancient cultures was very limited;⁷⁸ many ancient religions were perhaps taught through visualization and illustration, since literacy was reserved to an elite few, if a written language existed at all in that particular culture. Spiritual teachers had to use visual forms as metaphors and symbols for what they were trying to teach in the spiritual realm. The use of forms and images in religion was, therefore, necessary for these ancient cultures. It is not always obvious whether the spiritual teachers considered these symbols as sacred, or that after a time, future generations, who inherit the religion, take the forms and images of the religion to be sacred symbols, while perhaps forgetting the deeper meanings they were meant to portray. This is how idolatry might have acquired its negative connotation. Hence, in these cultures, intense meditation and contemplation upon those images are necessary in trying to identify what those different images are trying to teach about spiritual aspects.⁷⁹ Among widely known scholars in religious symbolism are Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, who have recognized the importance of symbolism and imagery in religious cultures throughout human history.⁸⁰ Eliade discusses how myth and symbolism are widely used in various religious cultures to further the understanding of their metaphysical denotations.⁸¹ Symbolic imagery and myths in various religious cultures are considered an anthropological understanding of the divine. They are understood as worldly metaphors for the nature of the divine. Since the divine is unknown, people use things in the physical realm to comprehend the spiritual realm.

Possibly, many of the great spiritual teachers of the ancient past founded religions that might be considered idolatrous, which may be defined as the veneration of a symbol. However, their intentions were very pure; they tried to explain the unknown divinity by using forms and images that were known to people, since the written word (literacy) was not easily accessible to the general public. This could be viewed in the religions of Ancient Egypt or Greece, or even the forms of animalism that might exist to this day. After all, even in Islam, the veneration of the Ka'bah would make it seem like idolatry to those who might otherwise be ignorant of the faith. As such, those who are ignorant of ancient religions, including the faith of pre-Islamic Arabs, may also accuse it of idolatry for venerating what otherwise should have been only symbols. In many religions, those forms and images were never intended to be taken literally, but rather as means of understanding deeper spiritual realities, just like the Ka'bah. Muslims do not consider God to be literally residing within the Ka'bah, it just symbolizes the House of God. For example, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb stated about the Black Stone (in the Ka'bah) that it is only a stone that does nothing, and that if he had not seen the Prophet kissing it, he would not have done so.⁸² Seemingly, 'Umar considered the Black Stone as a symbol, but perhaps not even a sacred symbol. It is not obvious whether Muḥammad intended it to be a sacred symbol or not, at least to 'Umar. Campbell suggests that since God is a mystery, then the divinity may only be defined through metaphor.⁸³ He argues that when a religious symbol is misinterpreted by mistaking its denotation for its connotation, the message embedded in that symbol is lost.

Some religions, such as Judaism and Islam, were founded upon the basis of literacy and the written word. Nonetheless, the foundations of those religions are still based on explaining the unknown divinity with words and language that are known to people. As some cultures have taken forms and images as sacred symbols of divinity, others have taken the written word as the sacred Word of God. With cultures that employ images and forms as symbols of divinity, the divinity is understood as an abstraction that is beyond the symbol, and can never be contained or restricted by that symbol.⁸⁴ However, the physical symbol merely tries to explain the spiritual reality of the divine. Similarly, in cultures with the written Word of God, it may also be understood that the word is a symbol for understanding deeper realities of divinity, while the divine itself cannot be fully contained within words. Naturally, in the heightened state of mind of Muḥammad, he is trying to convey his experience and the voice he hears, which he interprets as spiritual, into meaningful words (symbols). Campbell and Eliade have also considered the symbolism attained from within religious language.⁸⁵ They consider words as symbols with deeper meanings. Dupré argues that although religious expression is symbolized through ritual, the symbolic usage of words is also of great significance in religious expression.⁸⁶

Similar to the concept of visual images and forms, scriptures use words that need to be further contemplated and analyzed. In cultures with images, the emphasis is on understanding the deeper meanings of the forms and images. However, in cultures with scriptures as the symbol of divinity, the deeper meanings of the language of the words contained in scriptures must be emphasized. In these cultures, there are no images to meditate upon for their various forms and meanings, but it is rather the language itself

that is of great importance. As a spiritual teacher, Muḥammad, instead of using forms and images as symbols of divinity, uses words. The Qur'an places great emphasis on the understanding of the language through which it was recited or written, providing the necessary evidence that a linguistic approach for Qur'anic hermeneutics is vital.

Language is a symbol for a reality. It is, therefore, at some level of metaphor. Hence, it is not polysemy that creates the metaphor, but language is inherently symbolic and, therefore, metaphoric. Ricoeur gives a relationship between polysemy and metaphor by stating:

Metaphor is not polysemy. Semic analysis produces a theory of polysemy directly, and only indirectly a theory of metaphor, to the extent that polysemy attests to the open structure of words and their capacity to acquire new significations without losing their old ones. This open structure is only the condition of metaphor and not yet the reason for its production.⁸⁷

Language is a sign used in speech to convey a form of communication. An apple, whether phonetic or written, is just a sign that signifies the mental image of what an apple is in reality. Saussure defined language as a sign system, which is typically presented in binary terms as signifier and signified or sound-image and concept. The key concept in Saussure's work is the definition of language as nothing other than an arbitrary sign-system. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure states, "Language is a system of sign that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc."⁸⁸ According to Saussure, it is important to take the community into account because the community defines the meaning.⁸⁹

Robert Bergen highlighted some basic assumptions when trying to understand authorial intent through discourse criticism: (i) language is a code; (ii) most of the communication process occurs at the subliminal level of human consciousness; (iii) subliminal factors in human communication contain data essential for making judgments about authorial intention; (iv) the language code is genre-specific; and (v) though the specifics of each language code are unique to a given language, a common set of principles governs the structuring and application of the language code in all languages.⁹⁰

The problem with this definition when applied to the Qur'an is to understand which community defines its meaning. If the Qur'an suggests that it is a hidden book with obscure meanings that are veiled from the general public, then defining the community that would make sense of the Qur'an may be difficult. Muḥammad is in a heightened state of mind and at first is surprised why people do not see the creative associations that he sees in his recitation of the Qur'an. What he sees comes naturally to him. Muḥammad perhaps concludes that only a few people understand what he means and are capable of interpreting these creative associations that he is capable of making, as the Qur'an seems itself aware that it is a hidden book.

Which Arabic is the Qur'anic Arabic? Did Muḥammad intend a specific dialect of Arabic in the Qur'an, or were his creative associations making use of polysemy through various dialects of Arabic? It is reported that the fourth caliph, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān,

requested the Qur'anic scribes to write the Qur'an in the language of Quraysh, as he states that the Qur'an was revealed in their language.⁹¹ However, this definition of the language of the Qur'an is based on the logic of 'Uthmān and it does not necessarily describe with certainty what Muḥammad intended. Actually, the Qur'an challenges its audience, even Quraysh at the time, to fully comprehend the language used in the Qur'an. If the meaning of words in a language is defined by the community that uses it, then in the case of the Qur'an, it states that the community receiving it does not even understand it. Contrary to the definition of Saussure, it appears that a single author has made an arbitrary sign with meaning independent of the community, and that is especially evident in the disjoined letters (*muqatta'āt*) in the beginning of some chapters of the Qur'an. Another possibility is to understand that the Qur'an uses the form of polysemy for the community to connect their meanings together or to form a metaphoric understanding of the meanings. A similar concept can be understood from the text of the Gospels, where Matthew reports that Jesus Christ states that he speaks in parables so that the general public would not understand him and only the disciples (his audience) would understand him (e.g., Matthew 13:10–11, 13:34–35).

Allegory in the Qur'an

The study of allegory (*majāz*) in the Qur'an is important in understanding the rhetoric of this body of literature. The allegorical sense's counterpart is the literal (*ḥaqīqah*) sense. However, the term "*majāz*" in the early texts on this study in the Qur'an does not always define it as allegory, since some are more subtle definitions than metaphor.

One of the earliest books on *majāz* in the Qur'an⁹² is by Abū 'Ubaydah Mu'ammār ibn al-Muthannā (d. 209/824) known as *Majāz al-Qur'ān*.⁹³ In his book, he shows how words and terms describe things that are not literal. However, Abū 'Ubaydah did not use "*majāz*" as a counterpart of "*ḥaqīqah*." The definition of "*majāz*" being the counterpart of "*ḥaqīqah*" appears to be developed in later Muslim medieval scholarship. Wansbrough argues that the term "*majāz*" by Abū 'Ubaydah may be best understood as periphrastic exegesis.⁹⁴ Almagor argues that in some instances this definition is not true, as in the cases of pleonasm and lexical explanations.⁹⁵ She explains that the term "*majāz*" is rooted in "*jāza*," which means to be allowable.⁹⁶ Also, the term "*jāza*" is rooted in the meaning to pass. This could be used as a definition that indirectly means something different than its literal sense. As such, this states that a word allows for more than one meaning. Abū 'Ubayda rarely used "*majāz*" as figurative language.⁹⁷ Heinrichs concludes that the definitions of "*majāz*" evolved throughout Muslim history, and they may not always mean the same thing.⁹⁸

Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1306/015) wrote two books on metaphor, *Talkhiṣ al-bayān fī majāzāt al-qur'ān* and *al-Majāzāt al-nabawīyyah*. However, there is a difference in the approaches between Abū 'Ubayda and al-Raḍī. Abū 'Ubayda describes a systematic study of "*majāz*," but it was not a study of metaphoric language as it was adopted by al-Raḍī. Abu-Deeb states:

Abū 'Ubayda is a *rāwīya*,⁹⁹ a genealogist, a historian, and a linguist, who wrote his book in response to a specific challenge. Al-Raḍī was a poet and a Shī'ite *imām*,

well immersed in *bāṭinī* interpretation an contemplation of what lies beyond the surface of discourse in all its forms, from an oral text like *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, to a tightly composed, written text, like the Qur'an.¹⁰⁰

Abu-Deeb provides an overview of the approaches on "*majāz*" by Abū 'Ubayda and Sharīf al-Raḍī.¹⁰¹ Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) suggests that the usage of the term "*majāz*" by Abū 'Ubayda has nothing to do with its later use as a counterpart of a literal sense (*ḥaqīqah*).¹⁰² Abdul-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) wrote a book on figures of speech called *Asrār al-balāghah*, where he gives some examples of "*majāz*" in the Qur'an.¹⁰³ Al-Jurjānī defines "*majāz*" as a word with meaning that extends beyond its original position.¹⁰⁴

Besides al-Jurjānī, other early scholars also looked into the sciences of allegory in Arabic, such as Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002),¹⁰⁵ al-Tha'ālbi,¹⁰⁶ al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143),¹⁰⁷ and al-Yāzījī (d. 1324/1906).¹⁰⁸ The Mu'tazilī school of theology interprets Qur'anic anthropomorphism of God's descriptions as metaphors.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, the Ash'arī school of theology maintains literal understandings of the words, with the "*bi-lā kayfa*" understanding.¹¹⁰ According to the Ash'arī school of theology, if there is no explicit evidence that a term needs to be taken metaphorically, then it should not be taken as such.¹¹¹ Some have considered the metaphoric and allegorical meanings in the Qur'an to be unacceptable.¹¹² Even after the Mu'tazilah disappeared, after being persecuted and fading away, their theological successors, such as the Shī'ah, continue to accept allegorical interpretations of the Qur'an.¹¹³

Avicenna (d. 427/1037) uses allegory in his philosophical treatises and narratives, such as the story of Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān. In some instances, he provides allegorical interpretations of select verses from the Qur'an.¹¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī uses the following law of allegorical interpretation.

Now listen to the law of allegorical interpretation: . . . all concur in subordinating the exercise of allegorical interpretation to having demonstrated the impossibility of a plain meaning. The first literal sense . . . embraces all other modes of existence, but when it fails, we have recourse to sensible existence, so that if we can affirm this, it will embrace the modes which follow. If not, we will have recourse to imaginative or rational existence, and only when these cannot obtain will we finally turn to metaphorical or figurative existence.¹¹⁵

Al-Ghazālī argues that the Muslim leaders of the first generation avoided using allegorical interpretations for the fear that they might shake popular faith.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, some Sufis and sectarians, such as the Shī'ah, considered every Qur'anic passage to have an exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) interpretation,¹¹⁷ which is typically called *ta'wīl*. Averroës (d. 595/1198), in *The Decisive Treatise*, writes on the issues pertaining to the apparent and allegorical interpretations of the Qur'an, and he states the following:

The reason an apparent and an inner sense are set down in the Law is the difference in people's innate disposition and the variance in their innate capacities for assent.

The reason contradictory apparent senses are set down in it is to alert “those well grounded in science” to the interpretation that reconciles them. This idea is pointed to in His statement (may He be exalted), “He it is who has sent down to you the Book; in it, there are fixed verses . . .” on to his statement, “and those well grounded in science.” . . . It has been transmitted that many in the earliest days [of Islam] used to be of the opinion that the Law has both an apparent and an inner sense if he is not adept in knowledge of it nor capable of understanding it.¹¹⁸

Averroës argues that demonstrative truth and scriptural truth cannot conflict, and whenever they do, scripture must be interpreted allegorically. Perhaps this principle of allegory by Averroës may also hold true—if scriptures contradict, then it may be a reason to resort to allegory to reconcile between them. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855)¹¹⁹ apparently uses a similar logic when arguing that the plurality used in the Qur'an for God, such as “We are with you,”¹²⁰ is metaphoric (*majāz*).¹²¹ Here, Ibn Ḥanbal accepts the existence of metaphor in the Qur'an but warns that the followers of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/746) (i.e., the Mu'tazilah) had used the metaphorical senses of the Qur'an to argue against mainstream understandings.¹²² Ibn Taymiyyah suggests that the dichotomy between literal and allegorical senses of the Qur'an was introduced by the Mu'tazilī school of theology.¹²³ There is no doubt that allegory and metaphor in the Qur'an are accepted by consensus from literature. However, the main argument by traditional scholars is like Ibn Ḥanbal's argument that sectarians would use the metaphorical meanings of the Qur'an to suit their needs, which the traditional scholars would consider devious.

The study of the disjoined letters influences the understanding of the Qur'anic language. If the philosophy of language is to convey the meaning of the text to the audience and this synergy is what makes meaning in language, then who is the audience that will make meaning out of the disjoined letters of the Qur'an?¹²⁴ If it is a message from Muḥammad to the people, while he is the only person who made up these words, then it is counterintuitive that the role of language considers the existence of a community that would make meaning out of arbitrary words, as defined by Saussure. Otherwise, Muḥammad could have made these as secret meanings to a select few of his followers, who would otherwise be considered the audience.¹²⁵ What can be concluded from the disjoined letters in the Qur'an is that its meaning cannot be taken primarily exoterically. As such, allegory and metaphor are undeniably in existence in the Qur'an. Also, this proves that the social and historical community that received the Qur'an may not be the only context in which the Qur'anic language needs to be understood. More important is to try to understand Muḥammad's state of mind to determine what he might have meant.

Commenting on Qur'an 3:7, Muḥammad Asad suggests that the Qur'an is explicit that some of its interpretations are supposed to be allegorical.¹²⁶ Bringing forth various arguments of what is allegorical in the Qur'an and what is to be taken in its literal sense is unclear. For example, the disjoined letters (*al-muqatta'āt*) in the Qur'an, if taken literally, only mean that they are simple alphabets, without necessarily any specific meaning attached.¹²⁷ However, since the Qur'an challenges its audience to understand its meanings, perhaps it is an attempt to prove that these are not to be taken literally, but

they need to be further extrapolated to be understood more deeply metaphorically. Unlike many other passages in the Qur'an in which the exoteric and esoteric meanings may both be valid, the disjoined letters are not meaningful exoterically, therefore their primary role perhaps is that of a metaphor.¹²⁸ It is narrated that the first caliph, Abu Bakr, stated, "To every book is a secret, and the secret of the Qur'an is in its disjoined letters."¹²⁹ If the disjoined letters are considered a secret, it can only mean that its exoteric meaning is not the intended meaning. Therefore, there is a place of allegory and metaphor in the Qur'an. Some Sufi understandings of the disjoined letters are summed up by Abu al-'Abbās (d. 1224/1809) considering them symbols that the general public would not immediately understand.¹³⁰ Undoubtedly, allegory is in existence in the Qur'an and clues of it are found in various parts of the Qur'an (e.g., Qur'an 6:25, 17:46, 18:57, 41:5, 56:77–80).¹³¹

Root-based morphology

As discussed earlier, the Semitic languages are root-based systems of lexical semantics. This challenges commentators in the interpretation of texts from scriptures due to the existence of semantic polysemy. The interpreter may find it difficult to identify and define which sense of the word is meant by the author. Determining whether the word is only meant in one form of its morphological definition, or in some or all of its forms, creates an enormous challenge. It is possible that, for this reason, the Qur'an emphasizes the significance of understanding its language. In addition, Islamic scholars do not consider Qur'anic translations to be the translation of the Qur'an, but merely an approximate interpretation of the Qur'an.¹³²

Classical commentators of the Qur'an have realized the polysemic nature (*al-ashbāh wal-wujūh*) of the Qur'an. As discussed, al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)¹³³ and Ibn al-'Imād¹³⁴ are examples of notable scholars who have studied the nature and sense of polysemic semiotics within the Qur'anic text. Classical scholars have identified polysemy in Qur'anic texts as semiotics (*ashbāh*) or different faces of the word (*wujūh*), quoting Qur'an 3:7 and 39:23. Al-Suyūṭī quotes Abu al-Dardā' as stating that a person does not understand *fiqh* unless he ascribes different faces to the Qur'an (*wujūhan*).¹³⁵ Some contemporary Islamic scholars, such as Mulla Ṣadr, have also allowed the analysis of Qur'anic keywords in a polysemous method for interpretation, as it reveals its linguistic eloquence.¹³⁶

The methodology proposed, intertextual polysemy, is a linguistic approach through lexical semantics in an attempt to understand the written word. The roots of the words are analyzed in their various forms to ascertain the diverse meanings of the polysemes rooted in the word. The various Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic meanings of the Semitic words are identified to understand the word fully along with its polysemes. The words are then compared in their usage within the Qur'an and perhaps the Bible and Biblical literature to identify how scriptures have used the words with their various forms or polysemes, as perhaps the Qur'an is engaging with the Bible. A comparison of etymological usage of the words between the Bible and the Qur'an is analyzed to provide further scrutiny of the meanings of scriptures. As a supplement, a comprehensive database of Qur'anic commentary, which includes a wide variety of Qur'anic

commentators from different Islamic traditions, are also consulted to view the commentary and interpretation of several scholars for the verses of the Qur'an.¹³⁷

The fallacy of the root and etymological fallacy

To keep it in the reader's mind, I must be clear that I do not necessarily argue in favor of an etymological supremacy. More specifically, the main core of the methodology I use is not necessarily etymology, but intertextual polysemy, although etymology is still an important factor to further utilize intertextual polysemy. Languages evolve with time giving birth to polysemous terms, some of which are divergent from the root meaning.¹³⁸ As such, it is imperative to understand the etymology of the words and its various morphological permutations.

Varro (d. 27 BCE), in *De Lingua Latina*, considered that the ultimate origin of a word is of little significance.¹³⁹ However, Socrates argues that unless one knows the principles of what the origin of a word means, then it is impossible to understand the meanings and evolution of its derivatives.¹⁴⁰ How the ancients considered the origin of language is divided into two schools: the natural and the conventional.¹⁴¹ The natural origin suggests that the primitive humans gave names to things inspired by an innate or psychological effect. The conventional origin is similar to that of Saussure, in which the symbolic names given to objects are arbitrary. As a conventionalist, Aristotle argues, "No name exists in nature, but only by becoming a symbol."¹⁴²

Even if we adopt a Saussurean understanding of language, in which meaning is shared by a community, words must have been created by a single person who has such an authority to impose this meaning onto the community. The origin of a word must have been started at some point by some person. Such an authority does not necessarily mean political or otherwise, but the ability to make an effect on the community. Plato (d. 347 BCE) considered language a human invention, in which much of it is conventional.¹⁴³ However, even when looking at the Arabic language, if it were true that the origin of the words is conventional, their derivatives may be highly associated with its etymology. This brings forth the case of polysemous terms, in which even if the etymology is arbitrary, their morphological derivatives are highly associated with the original symbol desired from the root meaning. This would be true especially in Semitic languages, which are highly polysemous. However, William Sidney Allen suggests that development of language, which is different in study than its origin, is speculative due to the lack of material for historical treatment of the subject.¹⁴⁴

Understanding the development of language from etymological roots was a popular study in antiquity. Allen argues that ancient studies of etymology are grounded on an insecure basis, especially on the concept of *composito* (etymology by contraction), in which a word is derived from two or more component words.¹⁴⁵ He brings forth examples from words, in which a suffix could be misunderstood as a second word combined with another to make meaning. Allen calls ancient etymology unscientific, in which a single syllable or even letter were commonly used to establish an etymological connection. Nonetheless, if these particular methods are what make etymological studies inaccurate, then it cannot be applied to etymological studies in

Semitic languages, such as Arabic. Due to having root-based morphologies, Arabic etymology does not stem from a combination of two or more words, but is based on the morphological permutations of a single root word. Another distinction between Semitic languages and many others in the study of etymology is the understanding of what came first, the noun or the verb.¹⁴⁶ According to Allen, the study of language development and etymology in antiquity saw a debate about what came first.¹⁴⁷

Several scholars, both traditional and contemporary, have issues with the usage of certain methods of a linguistic approach. Plato, Quintilian (d. 100 CE), Sextus Empiricus (d. 210 CE), and Augustine (d. 430 CE) criticized the overuse of etymology, though they did not completely deny the use of etymological inquiry.¹⁴⁸ Traditionally, some scholars, such as Ibn Durustawayh (d. 347/958) in his *Sharḥ al-faṣīḥ*, reject the notion that the Arabic language contains polysemy, and therefore, the sharing of a common etymological root. Ibn Durustawayh gives reasons why he thinks polysemy needs to be clear in the Arabic language. One reason is that God created language to have clear meanings, and if a word has multiple meanings then it is against how God intended it.¹⁴⁹ He also notes that the morphological permutations of a root term having different meanings are not evidence of polysemy, but that different meanings would have different morphological permutations and are not the same.¹⁵⁰ Ibrāhīm Anīs (d. 1399/1977), a prominent grammarian in the twentieth century, agrees with Ibn Durustawayh that polysemy occurs when a single word has two different meanings, and not that one that is the etymology of the other, in which the other is considered a metaphor derived from that etymology.¹⁵¹ Abū 'Alī al-Fārsī (d. 377/987), an early grammarian, took a moderate stance on the role of polysemy in the Arabic language. He did not deny it, as Ibn Durustawayh, nor did he exaggerate its existence. Nonetheless, he did not define a specific etymology to the polysemes, but argued that it is because different tribes use a term for different meanings that the Arabic language evolved to include all these meanings, and not that they necessarily share a root etymology.¹⁵² However, the opinions of Ibn Durustawayh and Ibrāhīm Anīs on polysemy go against how most classical grammarians, such as al-Suyūṭī, have defined polysemy and its special existence in the Qur'an.¹⁵³ It would also appear to go against the prophetic tradition that the Qur'an has different faces, as discussed earlier. Al-Suyūṭī suggests that it is natural for polysemy to occur because words are limited, while meanings are countless.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, it is only natural for polysemy to be born and to evolve with time.¹⁵⁵

In more recent times, James Barr argues against the use of certain semantic methods for theological interpretation of scriptures that he believes distorts the state of the intended meaning of the word.¹⁵⁶ It must be noted that he is more concerned with the relationships between Hebrew and Greek words than those within the same language, although he does examine some examples of differences within the same language. Andrzej Zaborski¹⁵⁷ and Walid Saleh¹⁵⁸ also argue against the extent of the use of etymology in Qur'anic interpretation, although not by completely ignoring it. Saleh's main issue is in the assumption that the Arabic language might have borrowed words from another Semitic language, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, or Syriac. However, in the study of language, we must understand that a word in a language that shares the same family of another language may not necessarily be borrowing a word from the other language. The concept is usually simpler than a mere borrowing from another

language in the same family. Since both languages share the same family group and origins, then those words could have evolved within the two languages, without having either of them borrowing from the other. They may be considered as having evolved from a similar ancestral protolanguage.

To examine an old example, Saleh correctly assumes that the term "*ḥanīf*" is probably one of the most widely debated words in terms of its etymology and meaning.¹⁵⁹ In Syriac, the meaning of the root "*ḥ n p*" is an idolater, something that Rippin states is what scholars generally accept as the roots of the Arabic word.¹⁶⁰ Rippin quotes Beeston¹⁶¹ that the Arabs in Ḥijāz might have adopted a Najrānite word, which came by way of Syrian missionaries to designate all non-Christians, whether polytheists or monotheists. While Saleh agrees with Rippin that the term "*ḥanīf*" can only be understood in its Qur'anic context and that the etymological analysis of the word would not lead us anywhere, I find these statements very generalized. There can be an etymological link of how to understand the term "*ḥanīf*" in the Qur'an when we first understand the term's polysemous nature.

To analyze the term "*ḥanīf*" from its polysemous and etymological point of view, we must understand its root meanings. The term is usually understood as someone who is upright, according to its assumed Qur'anic context. However, it also means someone with a crooked leg.¹⁶² The term for water tap is "*ḥanaḥīyyah*," sharing the same root, because a water tap is typically crooked. The root of the term, even in Arabic, is something crooked.¹⁶³ Therefore, let us not assume that the word was simply borrowed from Syriac and that the Syriac definition means heathen, or in other words "a person whose thoughts are crooked from ours," in a Christian Syriac context. In the context of the Arab idolaters, the Muslims or monotheists hold a crooked belief from the mainstream ideology, and therefore they would be called "*ḥanīf*" too. Similarly, Abraham had lived with idol-worshippers and his thoughts were crooked (*ḥanīf*) from their mainstream thought. If a person is crooked from the mainstream people who are crooked, then it could be that the person is considered upright. A prophetic tradition states that, "Islam started strange and will return back strange as it started. So, blessed are the strangers."¹⁶⁴ This prophetic tradition implies that Islam is not mainstream, and therefore crooked (*ḥanīf*) from the mainstream. The root meaning of crooked for the term "*ḥanīf*" is as much Arabic as it is Syriac, while not assuming that either has borrowed it from another, but that they share the same ancestor, in which this word perhaps had independently evolved in each language.

Analyzing the etymology of a word is to understand its root meaning, and not necessarily to assume a cross-cultural borrowing of a word from a different language to another. It would be somewhat safe to assume that the majority of the Semitic roots share a similar ancestor. Therefore, that Semitic languages share similar roots is not necessarily evidence that one has borrowed from another, but more correctly it is understood that the root term has perhaps evolved independently within each of the sister languages from a common ancestor. Hence, those who argue against the use of etymology for Qur'anic terms seem to generalize their statements. They are perhaps defensive against misuse of etymological analysis of terms, but misusing etymology is not enough to condemn an objective use of etymology. Although Zaborski¹⁶⁵ and Saleh¹⁶⁶ agree that etymology is not the best method to understand the Qur'an, they had to refute methods that seem to be

false. However, this should not be a reason to generalize the statement that etymology is not a good way to understand scriptures. If we understand the polysemous nature of root terms and their morphologies, etymology is both necessary and beneficial.

James Barr, in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, argues fervently against what he assumes are devious and dubious methods of Biblical interpretation using etymological approaches. Although Barr brings some good understandings of the pitfalls of a linguistic approach, he still has some issues with his arguments. For example, he states that in Pauline writings, the Greek term "*sarx*" is used for flesh and "*sōma*" for body, while the Hebrew only uses "*bashar*" for both.¹⁶⁷ He assumes that the way of thinking of the Greeks in the past had to differentiate between flesh and body, while the Hebrews did not delve into philosophical questions that required such a term to be differentiated. However, the Hebrew has several words for body and flesh, and not just one in Biblical language (e.g., *gewiyah*, *gawph*, *lehum* all which correspond to the Arabic *juwa*, *jawf*, and *laḥam*), although he is correct to state that the Septuagint has at various instances translated the term "*bashar*" into the Greek "*sarx*" and at other times into "*sōma*." Perhaps the two terms can sometimes be synonymous, though not necessarily always. Besides, in the analysis of a linguistic approach, we must realize that the language of an original text should not be compared with a translation. Although a translation may provide a good approximation of the meaning, it would not hold the same credibility as the original language, in which the author might have specifically intended a certain word to be used. Hence, the translators of the Septuagint should not be always considered a reference for the Greek New Testament, although to a great extent it could be used for such, especially since the majority of the New Testament authors were thinking in Hebrew (Aramaic) and possibly translating in their minds the Hebrew (Aramaic) words into Greek.

Nonetheless, Barr assumes that a language is not always necessarily a reflection of the thoughts of people in a particular culture.¹⁶⁸ I agree with this concept. However, Barr argues what he considers the root fallacy, which is an extensive reliance of understanding root meanings of the Hebrew language.¹⁶⁹ Since I argue in favor of understanding its roots, polysemous nature, and morphologies, then I must disagree with Barr. Barr provides an example where he doubts that the Hebrew words for bread (*laḥm*) and war (*milḥama*) have any significance in sharing the same root.¹⁷⁰ This again proves the misunderstanding of root meanings of Semitic languages. The term is polysemous and one of the meanings of "*laḥm*" is to join,¹⁷¹ which is very similar to that of its corresponding Arabic cognate, "*laḥm*."¹⁷² Something that joins together is called "*yaltaḥim*." As such, the term for welding is called "*liḥām*," as it joins two objects together.¹⁷³ When skin is wounded, it joins itself back, usually creating scar tissue. Bread is the joining of flour together. Flour is separate pieces joined together (*laḥm*) into dough to make bread.¹⁷⁴ A battle is when two or more forces collide with each other and therefore joined together (*milḥama*) or also a reference to swords cutting off flesh (*milḥama*). The standard understanding of the Semitic language is that when we want to understand the polysemous nature of words, it is important that we understand the root meanings. Suggesting that apparently completely different meanings are derived from the same root is meaningless or abstract is the naivety of Semitic linguistics.¹⁷⁵ This is similar to the previous example shown between writing (*kitābah*)

and an army battalion (*katibah*) sharing the same root meaning. Barr suggests that the etymology of a word is only useful to understand the history of a word, but may not necessarily be a guide of how to understand a word in its present form.¹⁷⁶

The Qur'an challenges its audience to be as eloquent as itself. It challenges its audience to be fully versed in deeply understanding its Arabic language to fully appreciate it and understand its meanings. The Qur'an portrays that its audience, even at the time of Muḥammad, did not fully comprehend its language and meaning. The Qur'an shows that although it is in Arabic and revealed among Arabs, they still had difficulty understanding it.

² A revelation from the Compassionate, the Merciful, ³ a Book whose signs have been expounded as an Arabic Quran for a people who know, ⁴ as a bringer of glad tidings, and as a warner. But most of them have turned away, such that they hear not. ⁵ They say, "Our hearts are under coverings (*akinnah*) from that to which you call us, and in our ears there is deafness, and between us and you there is a veil (*hijāb*). So do [as you will]; we shall do [as we will]."¹⁷⁷

This means that the mainstream understanding of the words in the Qur'an may not necessarily be a full and correct understanding of the Qur'an: a good example of this is the use of the disjoined letters (*muqatta'āt*) in the beginning of some Qur'anic chapters. Muḥammad seems to have intended to use obscure meanings of words, while creatively reciting the Qur'an, thinking it may be obvious to people other than himself. However, when he saw that people did not understand his creative associations using the Arabic language, he said that the general public would not fully understand the Qur'an. If at the time the Qur'an was first recited, there was difficulty in understanding its language and meaning, then it should not be at all surprising that we have difficulty even today. In many instances, Barr suggests that current speakers of a language when using a word are usually unaware and care less of its etymological meaning in the past.¹⁷⁸ If we are to assume scriptures to be literature without any divine significance, Fishbane illustrates with plentiful examples how Biblical authors had a great deal of awareness of previous Biblical literature, while using words selectively showing their full awareness to form what is known as inner-Biblical exegesis.¹⁷⁹ As such, understanding the root meanings and etymology is not only important, but perhaps necessary to fully appreciate the meanings of the Qur'an.¹⁸⁰

Arabic and the Qur'an

Within the methodology of intertextual polysemy proposed in this book, not only are the Arabic terms analyzed, but they are also compared with other Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Aramaic, as the term "*arabi*" does not necessarily specify a single standard language of the Arabs. What does the Qur'an mean when describing itself as "*arabi*?" The term may mean various languages of Arabia, some of which could be closer to Hebrew and Aramaic, while others could be closer to Ethiopic (*Ge'ez*). This provokes a question about the pursuit of polysemy. Muḥammad Bakr Isma'il defines

polysemy as an Arab tribe using the same term for a different meaning than that used by another tribe, and so there is vagueness in its meaning.¹⁸¹ Muḥammad might have been aware of various Arabic dialects and perhaps Semitic languages. When Muḥammad entered a heightened state of creativity, he might have associated meanings from across the Arabic spectrum.

The term “*arabi*” in the Qur'an is typically understood to mean the Arabic language. However, we need to further analyze what the term “*a r b*” actually means, as it is a term that is itself polysemous. According to *Lisān al-‘arab*, the term “*arab*” means the Arabs or the dwellers of the desert,¹⁸² which has the same definition in Hebrew and Aramaic.¹⁸³ However, *Lisān al-‘arab* also mentions that the Arab tribes did not all have a single standard Arabic language, their languages were diverse.¹⁸⁴ Hence, we should not assume that the Arabic Qur'an is specifically the language of Quraysh, as ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān stated.¹⁸⁵ There is no Qur'anic basis that its language is specifically that of Quraysh. Assuming that the traditional account is correct and Patricia Crone's account that Islam rose in northern Arabia is incorrect,¹⁸⁶ then Muḥammad lived in Makkah, which is in central West Arabia, where Arabs from various parts of the peninsula flocked for pilgrimage. Also, perhaps being at the center of the trade route of merchant caravans traveling between South and North Arabia, he was likely aware of the various Arab tongues spoken by different tribes. Also, according to prophetic tradition, Muḥammad allowed the Qur'an to be read in various ways.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, there is no specific form that is exclusive. This also shows that the Arabic language was not a specific single language, but that various tribes had a different language, while some might be closer to other Semitic languages, such as Aramaic or Hebrew.

We need to look closer at the meaning of “*arab*.” The term has various meanings that are not always related. As such, the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT) cautions that since the root has many unrelated meanings that it should not be considered to all have been derived from the same etymological root.¹⁸⁸ The term “*arabāh*” means a boat, while “*ta'rib*” is cutting palm leaves.¹⁸⁹ The term “*urbūn*” is the contracted sale value or a deposit,¹⁹⁰ which is similar to its definition in Hebrew and Aramaic,¹⁹¹ stemming back to the Akkadian usage from the Alalakh texts to mean pledge or surety.¹⁹² Also, the term means to be sweet (e.g., Psalm 104:34; Hosea 9:4; Sirach 40:21) or pleasure, with its etymological meaning also found in South Semitic, mainly Old South Arabic and Arabic dialects.¹⁹³

Since the term for “*arab*” also means to be pleasant,¹⁹⁴ it is interesting, because the term “*ajam*,” which is typically used as non-Arab by the Arabs,¹⁹⁵ also means to grieve in Hebrew and Aramaic,¹⁹⁶ and therefore, would act as an antonym to “*arab*.” Nonetheless, one must not jump to conclusions. According to *Lisān al-‘arab*, one of the meanings of “*ajam*” is to be of unclear speech, and perhaps for that reason the Arabs called those who are not Arabs “*ajam*” as their speech is unclear to them.¹⁹⁷ Yet, *Lisān al-‘arab* also states that the term “*ajam*” means one whose speech is unclear, even if they were Arabs.¹⁹⁸ Hence, its root meaning is not necessarily an antonym of Arab, but an antonym of clear speech (*faṣāḥah*).

In addition, in Hebrew and Aramaic, the term “*arab*” means to mix and to combine, mixed races, or confusion and disorder.¹⁹⁹ The usage in this meaning is attested in Exodus 12:38 and in various other places in the Hebrew Bible. It has also been used in

the sense of weaving, which is perhaps due to mixed fabric woven from different yarns (e.g., Leviticus 13:48).²⁰⁰ In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the term is also used in the meaning of mix, confuse, or intermingle (e.g., 11QT19 45:4). If the term for “*‘arab*” also means mixed races, then this might describe ancient Arabia, in which tribes could have been mixed between different Semitic tribes. As such, when the Qur’an states that it is in clear (*mubīn*) “*‘arabī*” and not “*‘ajamī*” (i.e., Qur’an 16:103, 41:44) it might mean that its language is clearly “*‘arabī*,” whatever “*‘arabī*” means. It could mean clearly mixed (*‘arabī*) in need of connecting (*ta‘qilūn*). These are just few non-exhaustive examples of what the term “*‘arab*” means.

According to a prophetic tradition, it is narrated that Muḥammad said, “Five prophets from the Arabs are Muḥammad, Ishmael, Shu‘ayb (Jethro), Ṣāliḥ, and Hūd.”²⁰¹ Here, the meaning of Arab is those living in the desert, and not even necessarily describing a single ethnic group or language. Ishmael is presumed to have a Hebrew father and an Egyptian mother but lived among the Arabs in the desert. Though a Semite, he was not himself ethnically an Arab. Shu‘ayb, on the other hand, was a Midianite in North of Arabia. What is the Midianite language? It cannot necessarily be assumed to be standard Arabic. We do not have much knowledge of their language. However, given the geographic location of Midian, then it might be assumed that it could have been close to Aramaic. Rofé suggests that the Canaanite language is close to the Midianite language,²⁰² which means that the Midianite language might have had its own distinct features, though it is a Semitic language.

If, according to tradition, Madā’in Ṣāliḥ is the place where Ṣāliḥ preached, then he would be a Nabataean in North of Arabia. If Patricia Crone and Michael Cook’s theory that Muḥammad was from northern Arabia is correct, then his Arabic might have been Nabataean.²⁰³ North Arabic might be represented by Classical Arabic and other pre-Islamic dialects, such as Lihyanite, Thamudic, and Safaitic. However, there are various hypotheses on the Nabataean language. Beyer suggests that it is close to Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic.²⁰⁴ Healey notes that Nabataeans are believed to have used Arabic in everyday life, but that their vocabulary is clearly Aramaic with loanwords from languages such as Greek and Persian.²⁰⁵ He states, “There are four other, more or less contemporary Aramaic dialects, Palmyrene, Hatran, Nabataean and Jewish Aramaic, which can be compared with Syriac.”²⁰⁶ Healey continues: “The most distinctive feature of Nabataean by comparison with all other Aramaic dialects of the period is its Arabic colouring or, to be more precise, colouring from an Arabian language allied in some way to what became Classical Arabic.”²⁰⁷

Some scholars believe that Nabataean seems to be likely Aramaic that was slowly influenced by Arabic, as its vocabulary was slowly being replaced by Arabic loanwords.²⁰⁸ If the language of Ṣāliḥ is Thamudic, which is a dialect of Arabic,²⁰⁹ then it would still be different to Classical Arabic, which was only standardized in the eighth century.²¹⁰ It might still have had some of its Nabataean ancestral resemblance, which would have been close to Aramaic.²¹¹ Healey states, “there is evidence of a difference between the Arabic in the background of the Nabataean texts and Classical Arabic, both in vocalism and in morphology—the Arabic behind Nabataean had already lost case endings. This seems to imply that the dialect behind the Nabataean inscriptions is a more developed form of Arabic than Classical Arabic.”²¹²

According to tradition, Hūd lived in Yemen, South of Arabia, which included languages such as Ancient South Arabian, Sabaean, and Mehri. Through an analysis of modern dialects, it is suggested that although they may have been influenced by Classical Arabic, they still resemble, in some ways, their ancestral ancient languages. This suggests that the languages of Ancient South Arabia, while they may have had a close resemblance to Classical Arabic, were still distinct.²¹³ With Shu'ayb and Ṣāliḥ situated in North Arabia, while Hūd was situated in South Arabia, Muḥammad lived in Makkah, which is in central West Arabia, perhaps with a language influenced by both the north and the south. This would be especially true since Makkah was perhaps a destination of many of the Arabs in the peninsula, as it might have been a stop on the trade route between South and North Arabia.²¹⁴

So it comes to question of what is meant by Arabic. Which Arabic are we talking about? Is the Arabic of the Qur'an specifically that of Quraysh, as 'Uthmān assumed, or is it more general to the dwellers of the desert, with their various forms of the Semitic languages? It seems that Muḥammad did not mean by the term "Arab" specifically Quraysh, but a more general term meaning the dwellers of the deserts of Arabia, who had various languages, some of which were possibly closer to Hebrew and Aramaic in North Arabia, while others were different and even possibly closer to Ethiopic in South Arabia.

Since Classical Arabic was only standardized in the post-Qur'anic era of the eighth century, it cannot be presumed that this is the language of the Qur'an. The Arab grammarians, who standardized the Arabic language based on the Qur'anic discourse in the eighth century did not always agree, especially among those between the grammar schools of al-Kūfah and al-Baṣrah.²¹⁵ The term "*arabī*" in the Qur'an is not the Classical Arabic standardized in a post-Qur'anic era. Nor is the term specific to the Arabic of Quraysh. It can simply mean the languages of the dwellers of the desert (*'arab*), which would include many various forms of Semitic languages. Abū 'Ubayda is noted to say, "Whoever pretends that there is in the Qur'an anything other than the Arabic tongue has made a serious charge against God."²¹⁶ However, what is the Arabic tongue that the Qur'an refers to? Why should it be restricted to the tongue of Quraysh or even why should it be restricted to what grammarians of the eighth century assumed? This assumes that the Arabic of the Qur'an is restricted to these opinions based on dogmas and not facts, as noted by Kopf.²¹⁷ Since the Qur'an itself does not specify what it means by the term "*arabī*," then one can only think that the term may simply refer to the dwellers of the desert and their languages.²¹⁸ Otherwise, it might mean its definition of mixture, as the Qur'an is mixed (*'arabī*) in need of making connections (*ta'qilūn*) to make sense out of it.

The methodology

Being in a heightened state of mind, Muḥammad was able to make creative connections using language as a symbol. I attempt to decipher his state of mind and read the Qur'an based on his state of mind. Although I have stated that the proposed approach of

hermeneutics is linguistic using intertextual polysemy and tried to show the significance of such style, it is important to briefly describe this method in a systematic manner, so that it can be understood clearly.

The method can be summarized as follows:

1. Keywords of a passage are taken back to their root meanings in the Arabic language. Possible meanings from the root's morphological permutations are taken into account. The lexical semantics are taken from Arabic definitions, but also from other sister Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Aramaic for the reasons described in the previous section. The reason is, we cannot fully rely on medieval lexicons to understand the Qur'an, as a word might have evolved as a reaction to its use in the Qur'an, instead of its actual etymological meaning at the time of Muḥammad. It is assumed that the Semitic languages have a common ancestor, in which the root meanings of the words could have evolved in each descendent language. Also, medieval Arabic lexicons may define Qur'anic terms as a way of interpreting (*tafsīr*) the Qur'an, and not the actual meaning of the word as it was intended. As such, comparing the Arabic definitions with their Semitic cognates, such as Hebrew and Aramaic, may provide us with a more reasonable knowledge of the possible meanings of the word without it being tainted specifically as a way of interpreting the Qur'an by medieval lexicographers. Some might argue why Hebrew and Aramaic lexicographers may have retained certain meanings of an Arabic Qur'an, while the Arabs may have not. The counterargument is that the literary history of several literary Semitic texts, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Aramaic by far surpasses that of the Arabic language and are attested during the pre-Islamic era, since Arabic literary history is mainly post-Qur'anic.²¹⁹ As such, it is conceivable that some Arabic words and meanings used during the time of the Qur'an might have had some associations with the Hebrew and Aramaic terms, but the Arabic meanings of these terms could have been lost in the post-Qur'anic era. As such, I would also argue that perhaps the definitions of the Hebrew and Aramaic words in defining Biblical language may also be compared with the Arabic words to ensure that definitions that may have been lost in its Hebrew or Aramaic use are still taken into consideration as possible intended meanings in the past. To ensure that an etymological usage of the meanings of the roots are all taken into account, the lexical semantics of the term and its morphological permutations are taken into consideration, along with possible permutations in the change of letters in the sister languages. For example, the word for remembrance is "*dhikr*" in Arabic sharing the same root for male, which is "*dhakar*." However, to ensure that the lexical semantics that need to be analyzed would include the term "*dakar*" in Hebrew and Aramaic, which means male, but also includes the term "*zakar*" in Hebrew, which corresponds to "*dhikr*" in its definition for remember. This is what I mean by taking care of various corresponding morphological permutations. Another major consideration would include terms with the letter "*hā*" or "*khā*," as their corresponding terms in Hebrew and Aramaic are undifferentiated. Hence, it is sometimes imperative to take into consideration the lexical semantics of the term to include both permutations of those letters. A similar issue would be permutations of letters that include "*tā*" and

"thā," "dāl" and "dhāl," "sīn" and "shīn," "ṣād" and "ḍād," "ṭā" and "ẓā," or "ayn" and "ghayn," as similarly the corresponding Hebrew and Aramaic terms are not always differentiated, when compared to their corresponding Arabic terms. This is also to keep in mind that these letters were undifferentiated in the written Arabic script during the time of Muḥammad and in the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts, including the presumed 'Uthmānic codex.²²⁰ However, not all undifferentiated early Arabic scripts are necessarily taken into consideration, as they correspond to different Hebrew and Aramaic alphabets, such as the "bā" corresponding to "beth," "jīm" corresponding to "gimel," "rā" corresponding to "resh," and "zayn" corresponding to "zayn." Nevertheless, certain morphological anomalies can occur between "dhāl" corresponding to "zayn," as in the case of "dhakar" and "zakar" stated above, and between "thā" corresponding to "shīn," as in the case of "thiq" and "shekel." Nonetheless, the examples in the next chapter are purely from the Qur'an and correspond to undebatable Arabic definitions. This is to ensure that the methodology remains valid even if other sister languages are not taken into account. Later examples in the book will include a comparative analysis of lexical semantics within Hebrew and Aramaic, which is sometimes necessary to ensure that all possible etymologies and polysemous permutations are taken into account, while also providing a gateway for a comparative textual analysis with the Bible and Biblical literature.

2. Once all possible meanings from the point of view of lexical semantics are taken into account, then intertextuality becomes important. The intertextuality has two forms. The first compares and analyzes how the term and its various morphological permutations are used within the Qur'an and other scriptures. The second form is not always obvious. It involves the intertextuality of comparative meaning or the homophone of the term being analyzed, and not necessarily one that would share the exact same root. An example would be analyzing the term for father, which is "ab." The root term for this word might include "awb," "ayb," or "aby." Arab Christians, for example, use the term "āb" for God the Father, which could be rooted in either "awb" or "ayb." Nonetheless, the term "aba," which also corresponds to the Aramaic "aba," could be rooted in the term "aby" or "abw." Hence, these would be cases in which a full array of possible root meanings is taken into consideration in the analysis. An example of homophone intertextuality would include terms such as "qirān," which literally means joining, but is usually understood as marriage or partnership, and comparing it with "Qur'an." Although the term "qirān" is rooted in "qaran," while the term "Qur'an" is rooted in "qara'," they are morphologically similar in nature. The second form of intertextuality is not as strong as the obvious first, where sharing the same root is more evident and simpler to compare. Nonetheless, the second form may sometimes provide us with interesting insights during intertextual analysis, and hence, cannot always be ignored.

The above provides a brief systematic description of the approach of intertextual polysemy. However, with examples in the following chapters, a clearer understanding of how they are applied can be more visibly appreciated.

Critique of the methodology

The methodology outlined for the method of intertextual polysemy appears not to be too different to that of Christoph Luxenberg's proposed methodology,²²¹ but also holds major differences. Luxenberg's thesis follows that of Günter Lüling that the origin of the Qur'an is dated earlier than originally thought (i.e., pre-dates the traditional dates of Muḥammad) in what he calls the Ur-Qur'an.²²² This is different to John Wansbrough's thesis that the Qur'an is to be dated much later than initially thought.²²³ Luxenberg's thesis is that the Qur'an stems from a Syriac Christian liturgy. I am in no way suggesting that the Arabic Qur'an somehow is mostly Aramaic in disguise. The language of the Qur'an is Arabic, which may encompass the many dialects and tongues of those living in the desert.

Fundamentally, I am not even assuming the Qur'anic origins to have come from anyone besides Muḥammad. I am assuming that Muḥammad is the author, and that the Qur'an is formulated in Muḥammad's mind, whether or not through divine intervention. Looking into cognate roots and meanings in other Semitic languages is not to assume that it was written in another language later adopted by the Arabs, but to assume that perhaps some Arabic meanings evolved during post-Qur'anic era that may have existed within the Arabic language during the time of the Qur'an. If we discover Arabic literature texts that pre-date the Qur'an, then we can test if any of the meanings are attested within the Arabic language or not. Also, the Qur'an does engage with the Bible in many instances, and therefore, it is possible that Muḥammad is attempting to use terminologies that are familiar to Jews and Christians; not that he adopted them from an original Syriac text and transformed it to a Qur'an. This can be especially seen how the term "*qiblah*," understood as the direction of prayer, appears to have been purposefully used to allude to the *Shema'* passages in Deuteronomy, which the Talmud calls "*kabbalat 'ol malkhut shamayim*," as I have discussed in an article.²²⁴

Luxenberg has many scholarly opponents and few who might agree, at least partially, with his views, such as Gabriel Reynolds.²²⁵ I admit that using the methodology outlined in this book, or that adopted by Luxenberg, is not without its flaws. However, no methodology is without its flaws. The main flaw of the method outlined here is that any term may be used to mean almost anything to fit one's predispositions. Gerald Hawting has made this point early on Lüling's theories.²²⁶ However, in using Semitic languages that attest to various meanings of the terms used in the Qur'an is not to assume that the text had Syriac origins. As stated earlier, Arabic and its sister languages come from a common ancestor of Proto-Semitic. Therefore, not every term found in Arabic and Hebrew or Aramaic is a loanword, but has come down through a common ancestral language. Therefore, it is essential to use Michael Fishbane's process of looking into patterns.²²⁷ A single word may not alone be evidence of intertextuality, but the existence of a pattern in the use of terms along with their contextual neighboring terms may be essential to provide evidence that such a reading is plausible.

I agree that some of the extrapolations made in some of the examples in this book are speculative. However, when there are several examples that prove that such a method is a possibility, such as that outlined on the "*qiblah*," as discussed,²²⁸ then it does give some plausibility to this method, where other methods have failed. However, this

method, like any other, is not foolproof. Therefore, I do request readers to proceed with caution. Do look at how the method is applied and make a distinction between what can be asserted, and extrapolations that are merely opinions of what the underlying metaphor might be. We can sometimes easily assert that a pattern does exist through intertextual polysemy, but why it exists and what message is it trying to convey may be a matter of opinion only.

The methodology outlined in this book is fundamentally different to the apparent intentions of the likes of Lüling and Luxenberg. Unlike Lüling and Luxenberg, I can make no assertions. I walk behind Socrates' fabled claim in Plato's *Apology*, which I rephrase as, "The only thing I know is that I do not know anything." I have absolutely no polemical intentions. The method outlined in this book is purely textual analysis of a comparative nature, which to the most part shows that the Qur'an is consistent in the areas where it appears to sometimes be self-contradicting, as will be seen in some of the examples.

Another main critique is that this book does not delve into the theological or historical reverberations that can be echoed from the observations made. The reasons for that are manifold, but one is simply a matter of space. Another reason is to avoid any assertions and to allow the readers to form their own conclusions. As stated in Chapter 1, one of the major intentions behind this research and its findings is to open new inquiries in the field and to incite insightful and thought-provoking dynamics in people's minds. Together, we can better understand reality.