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PROPHETIC HERMENEUTICAL RULES IN UNDERSTANDING QUR'ANIC TEXTS

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Introduction

The intellect ('Aql) is the light of Allah within human beings, which He bestowed upon whomever He chose for His vicegerency on His earth, to rectify therewith their livelihood and their worldly affairs, and to serve as a path to knowing their Creator in terms of His rights over them and how their relationship with this Creator should be established.

The term 'intellect' and its derivatives have appeared in the Qur'an across numerous verses, indicating the Sharia's validation of the intellects of accountable individuals (mukallafīn) and its regard for the deductions (istinbāṭ) and understandings of independent jurists (mujtahidīn). It commanded deep contemplation (tadabbur) of the Qur'an and established it as the primary objective of its revelation. The Almighty said:

كِتَابٌ أَنزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُوْلُوا الأَلْبَابِ [ص: 29]

"[This is] a blessed Book which We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], that they might reflect upon its verses and that those of understanding would be reminded." (Sād: 29)

Furthermore, He praised those who deduce conclusions from the Book and commanded referring back to them, saying:

وَلَوْ رَدُّوهُ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ وَإِلَى أُوْلِي الأَمْرِ مِنْهُمْ لَعَلِمَهُ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَنبِطُونَهُ مِنْهُمْ [النساء: 83]

"But if they had referred it back to the Messenger or to those of authority among them, those who can draw correct conclusions from it would have known it." (Al-Nisā': 83)

This implies that the Qur'anic message establishes another vital function for the intellect besides its previous two functions; namely, the function of:

An explicit cognitive framework: The dynamic interaction between the intellect and divine revelation, or granting the intellect the legitimate right to comprehend the text and apply it onto an ever-changing reality, in complete alignment with the foundational principles determined by the Lawgiver.

This intellectual application yields various forms of interpretive relationships that can be categorized into five distinct approaches:

1. The Pure Literalist Approach: Those who take matters exactly as they appear superficially, without any deep investigation, completely turning away from examining underlying causes (ʿilal) or higher objectives (maqāṣid).

2. The Esoteric/Purposive Approach: Those who attend exclusively to the inner dimensions of matters and the hidden meanings, objectives, secrets, and causes, without any regard for the apparent text (ẓāhir), thereby completely neglecting the literal wording.

3. The Predominantly Literalist Approach: Those who are dominated by the first approach (literalism), establishing it as their primary foundation, while occasionally or to a lesser degree adopting elements of the second approach.

4. The Predominantly Purposive Approach: Those who are dominated by the second approach (purposive), establishing it as their primary foundation, while occasionally or to a lesser degree adopting elements of the first approach.

5. The Balanced/Middle Approach: Those who consistently seek moderation and balance (tawassuṭ) in every matter presented to them, giving analytical insight its full right and the apparent text its proper ruling according to the specific issue under investigation. Such a person observes the apparent

facets of matters so that their search for causes and objectives does not drown in a sea of probabilities and dark depths of assumptions. Simultaneously, they observe causes and objectives so that they do not remain superficial, understanding nothing but the literal surface of words and actions.

Thus, we obtain five ranks of people, the most correct and justified of which is the last one. It is the middle path that synthesizes both the literal (ẓāhirī) and the objective (maqāṣidī) dimensions—or let us say, the exoteric and the esoteric—while maintaining a strict balance between them.

Prophetic Principles in Supporting the Inclination for Opinion and Ijtihad

If we trace the actions and interactions of the Prophet ﷺ with his Companions regarding their understanding of the Qur'an and their engagement with texts, we find ourselves before two distinct, overarching principles: the formal approval of intellectual analysis by the Lawgiver, and the active implementation of guidelines to regulate the practice of this analysis.

The First Principle: Approval of Intellectual Analysis

The Prophet ﷺ approved the independent reasoning (Ijtihad) of the Companions in interpreting the Qur'an across a number of situations, statements, and practices. Let us examine two specific Prophetic incidents that carry profound and varying implications. In the first incident, the Prophet did not blame the mujtahid; rather, he approved the actions of all the mujtahids—both those who leaned toward the literal text and those who leaned toward the objectives and causes. In the second incident, the Prophet censured the mujtahid, not from the perspective of performing Ijtihad itself, but from the perspective of committing an error within it, which reinforces the absolute necessity of regulating the practice!

The First Incident: On the authority of Ibn 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with them both), he said: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said on the day of Al-Ahzāb (the Battle of the Trench):

[Hadith] **لَا يُصَلِّيَنَّ أَحَدٌ الْعَصْرَ إِلَّا فِي بَنِي قُرَيْظَةَ**

"No one should pray Asr except at Bani Qurayzah." Then, the time for Asr prayer overtook some of them on the way. Some of them said: "We will not pray until we reach it." Others said: "Rather, we will pray, for that was not intended of us [i.e., we were only commanded to hasten]." This was mentioned to the Prophet ﷺ, and he did not reprimand any of them.

Al-Nawawi commented in Sharh Sahih Muslim, stating: "Some of the Companions adopted this implied meaning, looking at the intent rather than the literal wording; so they prayed when they feared losing the time. Others adhered to the literal wording and its absolute reality, so they delayed it. The Prophet ﷺ did not reprimand either of the two groups because they were mujtahids. In this lies evidence for those who validate the use of implied meaning (mafhūm), analogical deduction (qiyās), and consideration of the underlying intent, as well as for those who adhere to the literal text (ẓāhir). It also shows that a mujtahid is not reprimanded for what he does based on his Ijtihad if he exerts his full effort, and it may be used as evidence that every mujtahid who exerts effort arrives at a correct ruling [in terms of validity and reward]."

Furthermore, the author of Fath al-Mun'im bi-Sharh Sahih Muslim noted that among the lessons derived from this Hadith is that: "No blame is cast upon someone who adopts the literal text of a Hadith or a verse, nor upon someone who deduces an underlying meaning from the text that specifies or qualifies it."

The Second Incident: On the authority of Al-Zuhri, from Salim, from his father, who said: The Prophet ﷺ sent Khalid bin Al-Walid to the tribe of Bani Jadhimah. He invited them to Islam, but they could not express themselves well by saying "Aslamnā" (We have submitted/accepted Islam). Instead, they began saying "Saba'nā, Saba'nā" (We have changed our religion). Consequently, Khalid began killing them and taking them as captives, and he handed over a captive to every man among us. One day, Khalid ordered each of us to kill his captive. I said: "By Allah, I will not kill my captive, nor will any

man among my companions kill his captive!" Until we came to the Prophet ﷺ and mentioned it to him. The Prophet ﷺ then raised his hand and said twice:

[Hadith] اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَبْرَأُ إِلَيْكَ مِمَّا صَنَعَ خَالِدٌ

"O Allah, I disassociate myself from what Khalid has done."

Here is Khalid bin Al-Walid (may Allah be pleased with him), sent by the Prophet on a missionary expedition (sarīyah da'wiyah)—and this dispatch occurred after the Conquest of Mecca in Shawwal, before the departure to Hunayn, according to all scholars of military history. He misjudged the situation and killed those who could not express themselves properly, thinking they were mocking the faith. Thus, he killed and captured. Despite this, the Prophet ﷺ did not treat him with personal harshness, nor did he punish him with retaliation (qiṣāṣ) or otherwise, while clearly disassociating himself from the error. Incidents similar to this can be traced throughout the Sunnah, and we find the exact same structural reaction repeated by the Prophet.

The Prophet ﷺ here approves of Ijtihad as a baseline principle but disassociates himself from Khalid's specific action since he erred in his judgment. And the one who errs—as stated in the famous Hadith of Al-Bukhari—is still granted a single reward!

The Second Principle: Regulating the Practice

As for the second principle, which concerns regulating the practice of deduction to minimize the margin of error in Ijtihad, it manifested in two distinct matters:

The First Matter: Practical Training. This manifested in a number of situations where the Companions would understand specific meanings from the verses—which could only occur by applying their analytical minds to the text—and then present their understandings to the Prophet ﷺ for validation. He would then correct their understanding and guide them toward universal rules of comprehension that would benefit them and subsequent generations.

Rule 1: Relying on Linguistic Signification (الدلالة اللغوية) — On the authority of Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), from the Prophet ﷺ, who said: "Whoever's account is scrutinized will be punished." She said: I said, "Does Allah the Almighty not say:

[الانشقاق: 8] فَسَوْفَ يُحَاسَبُ حِسَابًا يَسِيرًا

'He surely will receive an easy reckoning' (Al-Inshiqāq: 8)?"

He replied: "That is only the presentation (al-ʿarḍ)." In another narration, he said: "That is only the presentation, and no one is subjected to a scrutinized account on the Day of Resurrection except that he is punished." The Prophet ﷺ did not forbid her from applying her intellect, nor did he say to her: "How dare you deduce from the Book of Allah before waiting for an explanation from me?!" Rather, he directed her toward the precise methods of understanding and analysis, which include: relying on linguistic signification. For linguistically, "the letters Nūn, Qāf, and Shīn (N-Q-Sh) constitute a sound root indicating the extraction and comprehensive exhaustion of something until nothing is left of it; and proximate meanings are derived from it. From it comes the plucking of hair with tweezers (minqāsh). And from it comes al-munāqashah (scrutiny): thoroughness in accounting until nothing is left out. On the other hand, the letters Yāʾ, Sīn, and Rāʾ (Y-S-R) constitute a root indicating openness, ease, and lightness."

Rule 2: Observing the Context (مراعاة السياق) — On the authority of Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), she said: "I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ about this verse:

[المؤمنون: 60] وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْتُونَ مَا آتَوْا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ وَجِلَةٌ

'And those who give that which they give with their hearts full of fear' (Al-Mu'minūn: 60)."

Aisha asked: 'Are they those who drink wine and steal?' He replied: 'No, O daughter of Al-Siddiq! Rather, they are those who fast, pray, and give charity, while fearing that it will not be accepted from them:

أُولَئِكَ يُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَهُمْ لَهَا سَابِقُونَ [المؤمنون: 61]

'...It is those who hasten to good deeds, and they are foremost in them' (Al-Mu'minūn: 61).'"

The verse that the Prophet ﷺ recited strictly prevents the phrase "those who give that which they give" from meaning the commission of sins like drinking wine and theft; because Allah explicitly designated them as those who hasten to good deeds and are foremost in them. If they were as Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) initially understood, they would be categorized among the negligent or deficient. The Prophet ﷺ here also guides her to a vital rule of deduction, which is: observing the context.

Rule 3: Observing Literal vs. Metaphorical Meanings (مراعاة الحقيقة والمجاز) — Adi bin Hatim understood from the words of the Almighty:

وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ [البقرة: 187]

"And eat and drink until the white thread becomes distinct to you from the black thread of dawn" (Al-Baqarah: 187)

that what was meant were two actual threads. So he took two cords—one white and one black—placed them under his head, and began looking at them, but they did not become distinct to him. He informed the Prophet ﷺ about that, and the Prophet said to him: "Your pillow must then be very wide if the white and black threads are under your pillow!" Then he said: "Rather, it is the darkness of the night and the whiteness of the dawn." The Prophet ﷺ here points to a crucial rule in understanding, which is: that language should be understood according to the native Arabic tongue, which encompasses both literal expressions (ḥaqīqah) and metaphorical expressions (majāz).

Rule 4: Observing Qur'anic Terminology (مراعاة المصطلح القرآني) — This same Adi heard the Prophet ﷺ reciting:

اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهْبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ [التوبة: 31]

"They have taken their scholars and monks as lords besides Allah" (Al-Tawbah: 31)

He said: "O Messenger of Allah, we did not worship them!" The Prophet ﷺ replied: "Did they not forbid what Allah made lawful, so you made it forbidden, and did they not make lawful what Allah made forbidden, so you made it lawful?" He said: "Yes!" The Prophet said: "That was their worship of them."

The Prophet ﷺ here points to a critical rule in comprehension, which is: the absolute necessity of observing Qur'anic terminology. The Qur'an introduced a specific conceptual framework for the word "Lord" (al-Rabb), explicitly declaring that the One who created is exclusively the One who commands:

أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ [الأعراف: 54]

"Unquestionably, His is the creation and the command" (Al-A'rāf: 54).

Thus, creed (ʿaqīdah) and legislation (sharīʿah) are inseparable twins. Worship is not restricted to bowing and prostrating alone; rather, it fully encompasses adopting a legislator besides Allah and obeying them in defiance of Allah's explicit intent.

The Prophetic rules that can be deduced from his dialogues with the Companions are numerous, and they are highly deserving of deep academic attention and dedicated research.