Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2026 (pp. 1150-1167)

RESEARCH ARTICLE WWW.PEGEGOG.NET

The Qur'anic Text According to the Zahiris: Between the Authority of the Text and the Limits of Interpretation - A Reading in the Thought of Ibn Hazm al-Zahiri

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Received: 23/07/2025 ; Accepted: 14/12/2025 ; Published: 17/01/2026

Abstract

Early scholars differed in their views of the Qur'anic text. Some immersed themselves excessively in interpretation, to the extent that they diverted certain texts from their intended purposes, as was the case with the Jahmiyya and the Muʿtazila, particularly concerning the verses on the Divine Names and Attributes. Others, by contrast, immersed themselves in strict adherence to the apparent meaning (ẓāhir), enforcing the authority of the text as it stands, as exemplified by the Ẓāhirī school under the leadership of Imam Muḥammad ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī (may God have mercy on him). Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamāʿah adopted a middle position between the two extremes: they applied most texts according to their apparent meanings, while interpreting those they deemed in need of interpretation, all the while ensuring conformity with the objectives of Islamic law and the foundational principles of Islam.

On this basis, the present paper seeks to address the following problem: What are the limits of the authority of the Qur'anic text according to the Ẓāhirīs, and particularly in the thought of Ibn Ḥazm? Did Ibn Ḥazm truly confine himself to the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text, or did he at times resort to interpretation? If so, what are the limits of such interpretation?

Keywords: Qur'anic text – textualism – authority of the text – apparent meaning – interpretation (taʾwīl) – Ẓāhirī school – Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī

Introduction

One of the most important functions of the exegete is to examine the various dimensions of the Qur'anic text in order to ascertain its meanings and the intent of God Almighty therein. This is a grave and delicate task that requires specific tools and conditions, which collectively enable the exegete to approach the text soundly and protect him from error and from speaking about God without knowledge. These tools and mechanisms vary from one exegete to another and from one school to another; the more comprehensive the tools, the more successful and accurate the interpretation.

While such tools and mechanisms are abundant among most exegetes since they affirm multiple sources of interpretation, such as the Qur'an itself, the Prophetic Sunnah, the statements of the Companions and the Followers, the Arabic language and its poetry, analogy, causal reasoning, occasions of revelation, objectives, juristic preference, and so forth the list of these tools becomes significantly narrower when the discussion turns to the Ẓāhirīs. This is because they deny most of these tools and mechanisms and do not consider them valid sources of proof. If this is the case, does

it mean that the Ẓāhirīs' engagement with the Qur'anic text was deficient especially given their claim that one must adhere strictly to the apparent meanings of texts and prohibit going beyond them except within very narrow limits, which will be clarified in the course of this study, God willing?

Accordingly, in an attempt to uncover the methodology of the Ẓāhirīs in dealing with the Qur'anic text, as well as their mechanisms of reading and interpretation, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

What are the mechanisms for reading and interpreting the Qur'anic text according to the Ẓāhirīs particularly Ibn Ḥazm? Did they truly stop at the limits of the apparent lexical meanings, submitting entirely to the authority of the Qur'anic text, or did they violate this rule and go beyond it through interpretation? If so, what is their concept of interpretation, and what are its conditions and limit?

First Chapter: Ibn Ḥazm and the Ẓāhirī School

1.Biography of Imam Ibn Ḥazm

He is ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥazm, kunya Abū Muḥammad, commonly known as Ibn Ḥazm. He was of Persian origin, affiliated by allegiance to Quraysh, an Andalusian from Córdoba by residence. His grandfather, Khalaf, was the first of his ancestors to enter al-Andalus in the company of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Dākhil

[1]. Ibn Ḥazm was born in Córdoba on the last day of the month of Ramaḍān in the year 383 AH, as he himself reports, in the suburb of Munyat al-Mughīra on the eastern side, near the city of al-Zāhira, the seat of al-Manṣūr's rule [2]

He grew up from birth in the ancient city of Córdoba, benefiting from the prestige and social standing of his father, who was one of the viziers of al-Manṣūr ibn Abī ʿĀmir and among the people of knowledge, literature, and eloquence. Thus, Ibn Ḥazm was raised in a blessed scholarly environment rich with educators and teachers from among the scholars of al-Andalus. He came to be regarded as one of its great memorizers and scholars versed in the sciences of ḥadīth and jurisprudence, deriving legal rulings from the Qur'an and Sunnah, excelling in numerous disciplines, practicing what he knew, humble, endowed with many virtues, and ascetic with respect to worldly life, despite the leadership and authority that he and his father once possessed. This authority, however, soon vanished following the end of the ʿĀmirid dynasty in the year (933 AH / 8001 CE) and the onset of the period of civil strife, followed by the Berbers' seizure of Córdoba and their persecution of its inhabitants in the year (404 AH / 8089 CE).

As a result, Ibn Ḥazm and his family were forced to leave Córdoba, moving from one city to another. Concerning this, Ibn Ḥazm states: "Time struck its blows, and we were expelled from our homes; the Berber troops overpowered us, and I departed from Córdoba at the beginning of Muḥarram in the year 404 AH"[3]. He later returned to Córdoba in the year (403 AH / 8081 CE) and assumed ministerial posts under the remaining Umayyad caliphs. In this regard, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī states: "The jurist Abū Muḥammad served as vizier to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mustazhir bi-llāh ibn Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, and then to Hishām al-Muʿtadd bi-llāh ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir" [4]

Ibn Ḥazm's tenure as vizier to al-Muʿtamid bi-llāh, the last of the Umayyad caliphs, did not last long, as he soon abandoned it out of asceticism and humility, devoting himself instead to the pursuit

of knowledge, which he excelled in and preferred. This marked the end of his involvement in politics and ministerial office [5]Ibn Ḥazm left behind numerous works across various disciplines, among the most prominent of which are: [6]

-Al-Muḥallā bi-l-Āthār in Ẓāhirī jurisprudence.

-Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām in the principles of jurisprudence.

-Al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-l-Niḥal, on the comparison and critique of religions.

-Works on theology according to the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamāʿah.

-Al-Taqrīb li-Ḥadd al-Manṭiq.

-Jamharat Ansāb al-ʿArab.

-Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah fī al-Ulfa wa-l-Ullāf.

In addition to many other diverse writings that as previously indicated testify to his firm grounding and outstanding mastery in numerous fields. Ibn Bashkuwāl said of him: "Abū Muḥammad ibn Ḥazm was the most comprehensive scholar of Islamic sciences in all of al-Andalus, the most expansive in knowledge, along with his vast command of the Arabic language, his abundant share of eloquence and poetry, and his knowledge of biographies and historical reports"[7]. His student al-Ḥumaydī said: "We have never seen anyone like him in the combination of intelligence, rapid memorization, nobility of character, and piety" [8]

His Death: Imam Ibn Ḥazm (may God have mercy on him) passed away in the month of Shaʿbān in the year 456 AH [9]

2.The Ẓāhirī School and Its Main Foundations

The roots of the Ẓāhirī school, as is well known, go back to Dāwūd ibn Khalaf al-Baghdādī. Its foundations were later strengthened and firmly established in al-Andalus by Imam Ibn Ḥazm. In general, its methodology is based on adhering to the apparent meanings of texts and abandoning analogy and personal opinion. In doing so, it effectively closes the door to juristic inference through analogy and causal reasoning, for it relies solely on textual evidence[10]. It is thus a rigorously textual school, characterized by strict adherence to the meanings conveyed by the apparent wording of the texts. Accordingly, it is regarded as standing in opposition to the school of opinion, for it confines itself to the text and transmitted reports, refraining from seeking the underlying causes of legal rulings and instead stopping at the apparent meaning of the text [11]

Despite this, one of the principles of this school is the rejection of unreflective imitation. They permitted anyone who understands the Arabic language to speak on religious matters on the basis of the apparent meanings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Consequently, the sources of legislation are, in their view, restricted to the apparent meanings of the Book and the Sunnah, as well as those matters upon which the Companions agreed on the basis of explicit textual evidence. They do not investigate the causes of legal rulings, do not acknowledge analogy, and do not consider any consensus binding except the consensus of the Companions in matters grounded in textual proof. Indeed, they regarded the Companions' consensus on a ruling for which no text exists as invalid and non-authoritative [12]

The main features and foundations of the Ẓāhirī school may be summarized as follows:

Adherence to the apparent meanings of the established texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and confining interpretation to the limits of the outward meaning. There is no interpretation and no recourse to figurative language whatsoever, except on the basis of an explicit text or a certain consensus. In this regard, Ibn Ḥazm states:

"It is not permissible for anyone to divert any verse from its apparent meaning, nor any report from its apparent sense, for God Almighty says:﴿بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُّبِينٍ﴾ [الشعراء: 195] and He says, condemning a people: ﴿يُحَرِّفُونَ الْكَلِمَ عَن مَّوَاضِعِهِ﴾ [المائدة: 1] Whoever diverts a text from its apparent linguistic meaning without proof or consensus has claimed that the text contains no clarification, and has thereby distorted the speech of God Almighty and His revelation to His Prophet from its proper place. Therefore, no text may be diverted from its apparent meaning except by another sound text, a certain consensus, or a compelling necessity that prevents otherwise" [13]

The rejection of analogy, regarding it as a form of blameworthy opinion and as speaking about God Almighty without knowledge, and the invalidation of analogy in religious matters. What is obligatory, therefore, is adherence exclusively to the revealed texts [14]

The denial and rejection of practical juristic proofs, leaving no room for juristic preference, unrestricted public interest, or blocking the means, since all of these fall, in their view, under speaking about religion on the basis of opinion and false desire [15]

The absolute rejection of imitation. Ibn Ḥazm states:

"Imitation is forbidden; it is not permissible for anyone to adopt the statement of another without proof. In this regard, the layperson and the scholar are equal, and every individual is obliged to exert the level of independent reasoning of which he is capable" [16]

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the core of this school lies in relying on the apparent meanings of texts for understanding and interpreting them, stopping at the limits of their wording, neglecting their underlying causes and objectives, and showing no concern for the contextual indicators and surrounding circumstances accompanying those expressions at the time of their revelation.

Second Chapter: The Qur'anic Text and Its Authority in the Thought of Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī

Since the Noble Qur'an is the primary source of legislation in Islam, Muslims have devoted special care and attention to it. It is the very essence and foundation of Islam, the ultimate reference to which all understanding returns and by which all rulings and transactions are measured. It has always been and remains the foundation of civilization and the source of sciences and knowledge. It is an all-encompassing book that gathers everything beneficial to humankind and guarantees happiness in this world and the Hereafter.

The Ẓāhirīs, and Ibn Ḥazm in particular, devoted special attention to the Qur'anic text, considering it the foundational source of their school. They approached it through a distinctive method based on adhering to the apparent meanings of its wording, avoiding delving into its depths or engaging in strained efforts to extract hidden implications beyond what is immediately conveyed.

Before attempting to present an analysis of Ibn Ḥazm's Ẓāhirī methodology and his approach to engaging with, reading, and interpreting the Qur'anic text an approach founded, as shown, on adherence to the apparent meaning it is necessary to define what he means by ẓāhir (the apparent meaning).

1.The Meaning of the Apparent According to Ibn Ḥazm

In linguistic usage, ẓāhir is the active participle derived from ẓuhūr (appearance). Its meanings include clarity and manifestation. It is said: ẓahara al-shayʾ ẓuhūran, meaning that something became evident after being concealed. From this derives the expression: ẓahara lī raʾy, meaning that I came to know what I had not previously known [17]

In technical terminology, al-Jurjānī defines it as: "A term applied to speech whose intended meaning becomes apparent to the listener by virtue of its very formulation, and which does not admit interpretation or specification"[18]. Accordingly, the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic expressions is the linguistic meaning that is understood from the verse and immediately comes to mind.

As for the apparent meaning of a text according to Ibn Ḥazm, it is:

"Any wording occurring in the Qur'an or the Sunnah that is cited as evidence for rulings concerning things this is the apparent meaning itself, and every statement conveyed exactly as spoken by the speaker may also be called a text"[19]. This entails adherence to the apparent meanings of texts and disregard for what lies beyond them in terms of hidden meanings, objectives, causal reasoning, speculative reflection, and personal opinion in general.

Ibn Ḥazm further clarifies this point by stating:

"Every person of reason knows that languages were arranged by God Almighty for the purpose of conveying meaning. Languages are nothing other than words composed to express meanings that clarify what they signify. God says:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ﴾ [إبراهيم: 04]'. The 'tongue' here is language, without any disagreement on this point. If speech does not clarify meanings, then what could these misguided people possibly understand from their Lord Almighty and from their Prophet, peace be upon him? Indeed, by what means would they even understand one another?" [20]

2.The Authority of the Text or Its Sacredness?

Ibn Ḥazm maintains that the language through which we were addressed, and in which the Qur'an was revealed, consists merely of meaningful articulated sounds; the totality of these sounds and letters forms words. Language accordingly is a structure by virtue of which a word is connected to its meaning[21]. The Qur'anic text that contains the address of obligation is related to wording rather than to action or anything else. This wording possesses a meaning and a signification to which it is attached; words are molds for meanings, and thus it becomes imperative to direct attention toward meaning and to realize it [22]

Language once again is posited by God Almighty Himself, for He is the Creator of all languages and of those who speak them. We are bound in worship to designate meanings by these specific names[23]. As Ibn Ḥazm states: "Every word has a meaning assigned to it in the language, which it is not permissible to transgress, for words were established in order to express what they entail

linguistically, and each word was assigned to the meaning attached to it. Whoever diverts them intends thereby to abolish realities altogether, and this is the utmost corruption” [24]

These preceding statements embody an attempt to explain the principle of adherence to the apparent meaning that is, to stop at the meanings for which words were originally assigned. In this regard, Ibn Ḥazm explicitly states: “Carrying speech according to its apparent meaning for which it was established in the language is an obligation that may not be transgressed except by a text or a consensus; for whoever does so has corrupted all realities, all laws, and all rationality” [25]

He proceeds resolutely in applying this principle while deriving rulings from the Book of God Almighty, contenting himself with the apparent meanings of the texts, and vehemently rejecting and denouncing those who claim otherwise in dozens of different instances. Among these, by way of illustration, are the following:

In his interpretation of the verse:﴿وَثِيَابَكَ فَطَهِّرْ﴾ المدثر: 04, he states: “Whoever claims that what is meant by ‘garments’ here is the heart has restricted the verse by mere assertion without proof. The original meaning in the language in which the Qur’an was revealed is that garments are what are worn and laid upon, and one may not move from this meaning to the heart or honor except with evidence”[26]. He thus asserts that what is meant by garments here are the actual clothes worn by a person to cover his nakedness, and that all other interpretations are invalid and unsupported by evidence.

In his interpretation of the verse: [النور 31] ﴿وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوِ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِن زِينَتِهِنَّ﴾

Ibn Ḥazm states:

“It is permissible for a maḥram to see the entire body of his female relative such as the mother, grandmother, daughter, son’s daughter, maternal aunt, paternal aunt, brother’s daughter, sister’s daughter, father’s wife, and son’s wife except for the anus and the genitals alone. Likewise, women with respect to one another, and men with respect to one another. The proof for this is what God Almighty mentioned in this verse regarding their adornment:

an apparent adornment that may be displayed to everyone, which is the face and the hands alone, as we have clarified;

and a hidden adornment which God Almighty has forbidden to be displayed except to those mentioned in the verse.

We find that God Almighty equated husbands, women, children, and all others mentioned in the verse in this regard. We have clarified in the Book of Prayer that a woman in her entirety is nakedness except for the face and the hands. The ruling regarding nakedness is thus the same in all that we have mentioned, except for what there is no disagreement about namely, that it is not permissible for anyone other than the husband to look at the genitals and the anus. We have found no distinction, in the Qur’an, the Sunnah, or reason, between hair, neck, arm, leg, and chest on the one hand, and between the belly, back, and thigh on the other except that it is not permissible for anyone to

deliberately look at any part of a woman who is unlawful to him, whether the face or otherwise, unless there is a circumstance that necessitates it, without any intention of impropriety in heart or eye" [27]

He thus interprets the verse strictly according to its apparent meaning, concluding that the woman's nakedness in relation to her maḥrams such as father, grandfather, brother, and so forth is limited to the major nakedness: the genitals and the anus only.

In his interpretation of the verse:﴿فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ فَأْتُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَكُمُ اللَّهُ﴾ [البقرة222] , he states: "It is obligatory upon a man to have intercourse with his wife who is lawfully his spouse at least once in every period of purity, if he is capable of doing so; otherwise, he is disobedient to God Almighty." He thus interprets the imperative verb according to its apparent meaning and obligates, on that basis, that a man must have intercourse with his wife at least once in every period of purity, failing which he is sinful and disobedient.

It is evident that Ibn Ḥazm, in obligating himself and others to adhere to the apparent meaning especially the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text for anyone seeking to interpret or understand its implications is operating on the basis of a certain authority. It is as though Ibn Ḥazm here refers us to a latent authority that permits nothing other than adherence to the apparent meaning and judges all other approaches as corruption and invalidity. In such a case, we are entitled to ask about the source and nature of this authority: is it inherent in the Qur'anic text itself, or does it derive from beyond the text?

Attempting to answer this question inevitably leads us to another unavoidable dialectic namely, the issue of sacredness that distinguishes the Qur'anic text. It is abundantly clear that the supra-textual authority present in the Qur'anic text if we assume it to be the source of the authority from which Ibn Ḥazm proceeds stems from the fact that the Qur'an is a sacred text. Its sacredness derives from the sacredness of its Originator, namely God, exalted be His majesty. In this case, we are confronted with a settled matter for Ibn Ḥazm and for every believer since it is connected to multiple and variably significant dimensions, such as the religious, epistemic, and social dimensions. The issue is thus resolved as one possessing a religious, supra-epistemic (doctrinal) dimension, whose defining feature is absolute truth or rather, absolute correctness.

This absolute correctness ultimately returns to the religious supra-epistemic dimension and is explained by the fact that God, exalted and glorified, when He spoke this Qur'an and chose these specific words rather than others, did so intending to direct the addressees toward those apparent meanings. Had He intended other meanings, He would have chosen other words. All of this is based on Ibn Ḥazm's assertion that every word has a meaning assigned to it in the language, which may not be exceeded or diverted from its apparent sense except on the basis of a text or a consensus.

3.The Authority of the Text's Originator or the Authority of the Reader?

If the authority upon which Ibn Ḥazm and the other Ẓāhirīs relied in building their principle of adherence to the apparent meanings of texts derives from beyond the text, rather than being inherent within it as demonstrated in the preceding section then the previous analysis remains incomplete and unconvincing. This is because a logical division of the possible alternatives in this issue necessitates the existence of another possibility: namely, that the supra-textual authority of the text may not derive from the originator of the text, but rather from its recipient, even if the latter is connected to the former.

The recipient is also an active contributor in determining the meaning of the text and understanding it, no less important than the originator of the text. In our case, the recipient is the Ẓāhirī thinker or scholar represented by Imam Ibn Ḥazm.

This implies that there is a tension between two forms of authority whenever a text is read or interpreted:

The authority of the text's originator, represented in what the originator intends the recipient to understand from the content of the discourse.

The authority of the recipient, represented in what the reader or recipient seeks to understand from the text. This authority is estimative in nature; that is, it is subject to the reader's level of scholarly and cultural competence, as well as the extent to which he submits to the former authority.

Inevitably, this tension must be resolved by favoring one authority over the other.

However, this dynamic may be governed by additional indicators when the text in question is the Qur'anic text, which is fundamentally distinguished by sacredness the very source of its authority. This sacredness, as previously stated, derives from its Originator: God, exalted and sublime, who possesses absolute perfection and is free from any deficiency or flaw. The perfection and authority of the Qur'anic text thus stem from the perfection and authority of its Originator.

Yet a crucial paradox must be clarified here: the sacredness and authority inherent in the Qur'anic text and inseparable from it should not extend to what the exegete produces in interpreting it. The Qur'anic text is sacred, but the interpretations of interpreters and the explanations of exegetes are not especially when such interpretations are based on pure opinion. "The first form of sanctification is established in accordance with religious (legal) convention grounded in the principle of explicit textual designation, a convention that is firm and deeply rooted in the sphere of Islamic legislation. As for the second, popular imagination plays an influential role in conferring it as a result of historical and psychological accumulation, as well as the authority of consensus and the general acceptance of the views of certain exegetes, among other factors" [28]Returning to Ibn Ḥazm, who adopted a methodology focused exclusively on linguistic literalism and simple conventional meanings, one finds that he thereby whether consciously or unconsciously called for freezing the process of reflection upon the Qur'anic verses, their knowledge, and their sciences. Yet such reflection is explicitly required by the Qur'an itself, as in the verse:﴿كِتَابٌ أَنزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

In this way, Ibn Ḥazm and his fellow Ẓāhirīs succeeded in "creating an impression of self-sufficiency that dispenses with analytical, insight-based interpretive exegesis"[29]. Not content with this, Ibn Ḥazm went on to disparage "interpretive ijtihād-based exegesis, accusing it of exceeding the horizon defined by simple, common understanding and by what the apparent meanings alone dictate" [30]

In establishing this methodology, Ibn Ḥazm sought to marshal a set of evidences that would lend his approach a degree of solidity and strength evidences that are, in fact, largely the same as those invoked by the adherents of various schools of Qur'anic interpretation, such as

Reports prohibiting engagement in Qur'anic interpretation based on personal opinion, such as that related by al-Suyūṭī, who reports that Abū Bakr (may God be pleased with him) was asked about the verse:

[31 :عبس] (وَفَاكِهَةً وأَبًّا), to which he replied: “Which sky would shade me and which earth would carry me if I were to say about the Book of God that which I do not know?” A similar report is narrated from Ibn ʿUmar (may God be pleased with them both), except that he said: “By God, this is indeed undue burden and affectation. There is no harm upon you if you do not know what al-abb is. Follow what has been made clear to you of its guidance from the Book and act upon it, and consign what you do not know to its Lord” [31]

Reports asserting the impossibility of attaining correct Qur’anic interpretation through reason alone. A group of the Tābiʿūn and the jurists of Medina such as Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib, ʿUbayda al-Salmānī, Nāfiʿ, Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim, Sālim ibn ʿAbd Allāh, and others disliked speaking about the Qur’an based on opinion. It has also been narrated in this regard from the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) that he said: “Whoever interprets the Qur’an according to his opinion and happens to be correct has nonetheless erred” [32]

The prohibition of following the ambiguous, based on verses such as the statement of God Almighty:

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُّحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ ۖ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾.[آل عمران 07]

Thus was this methodology of Qur’anic interpretation established in the thought of Ibn Ḥazm one based on contenting oneself with the apparent meaning of Qur’anic verses as the utmost limit. This theoretical stance subsequently transformed into an epistemic authority that declares other interpretive approaches erroneous and effectively nullifies them. In reality, however, this authority derives from the reader or recipient himself, who believed in the methodology he had founded to such an extent that he rejected and invalidated all alternatives.

What further confirms this interpretation is al-Ghazālī’s response to Ibn Ḥazm and those who shared his view of restricting interpretation to the apparent meanings of texts. Al-Ghazālī states:

“Know that whoever claims that the Qur’an has no meaning other than what is conveyed by the outward interpretation is merely informing about himself. He is correct in informing about himself, but mistaken in judging that all of creation must be reduced to his own level, which constitutes his limit and station. Rather, reports and transmitted traditions indicate that the meanings of the Qur’an possess ample breadth for those endowed with understanding…” [33]

It is evident from al-Ghazālī’s statement that he attributes this methodology to the reader himself and regards it as non-binding upon others. Rather, it is an illusory authority constructed by the reader-exegete, who believed it to be binding upon himself and upon others, beyond which no one may transgress. Al-Ghazālī even considered this methodology among the obstacles that hinder understanding the Qur’an and obstruct the process of engagement with the Qur’anic text. In enumerating such obstacles, he states:

“Fourth: that one has read an outward interpretation and come to believe that the words of the Qur’an have no meaning other than what has been transmitted from Ibn ʿAbbās, Mujāhid, and others, and that anything beyond this constitutes interpretation by opinion” [34]

Some contemporary scholars hold that this Ẓāhirī methodology remains prevalent among Muslims today, sustained by multiple factors among them, tendencies hostile to ijtihād-based reasoning and those opposed to engaging with the truths of God's Book through a journey into realms of knowledge and meaning beyond mere fixation on the apparent. This tendency is further deepened by a deliberate conflation between what constitutes interpretation proper and what are merely moral or spiritual reflections unrelated to interpretation in its technical sense. The authority of this trend became even more entrenched and its influence more widespread after certain contemporary methodologies intervened in its favor methodologies that proceed from the premise that "the Qur'an is a linguistic text," whose essence is exhausted by its linguistic dimension alone. Accordingly, "the search for the concept of 'text' is, in reality, nothing other than a search for the essence and nature of the Qur'an as a linguistic text" [35]

Third Chapter: Interpreting the Qur'anic Text According to Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī

At first glance, the title of this chapter may appear to contain a contradiction, since it was established in the previous chapter that Ibn Ḥazm and his fellow Ẓāhirīs rejected recourse to anything beyond the apparent meaning of the text. Even if we concede the existence of such a contradiction, it must be attributed to Ibn Ḥazm himself rather than to the structure or methodology of this study. This will become clear in the course of this chapter, as it will be shown that Ibn Ḥazm did not consistently adhere to his professed methodology of stopping at the apparent meanings of texts. Rather, he resorted at times to interpretation for reasons that this study will attempt to elucidate, by clarifying Ibn Ḥazm's concept of taʾwīl (interpretation) and delineating its conditions and limits.

1.The Concept of Taʾwīl in the Thought of Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī and Its Relation to Tafsīr

In linguistic usage, taʾwīl derives from al-awlu (return). Ibn Manẓūr states in Lisān al-ʿArab: "Al-awl means return; one says: āla al-shayʾ yaʾūlu awlan wa-maʾālan, meaning: it returned. Awwala ilayhi al-shayʾ: he caused it to return. Ultu ʿan al-shayʾ: I turned back from it" [36]

In technical terminology, al-Jurjānī states in al-Taʿrīfāt:

"Taʾwīl in its original sense means return; in legal usage, it denotes diverting a word from its apparent meaning to another meaning that it can bear, provided that the intended meaning accords with the Book and the Sunnah. For example, the verse::19الرّوم ﴿يُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ﴾

,if it is intended as bringing a bird forth from an egg, it is tafsīr; if it is intended as bringing forth a believer from an unbeliever, or a scholar from an ignorant person, it is taʾwīl" [37]

This indicates that taʾwīl involves shifting a word from its apparent, literal meaning to another figurative meaning.

As for Imam Ibn Ḥazm, he defines taʾwīl as:

"Transferring a word from what its apparent meaning entails, and from that for which it was assigned in the language, to another meaning. If such a transfer is established by proof and issued by one whose obedience is obligatory, then it is valid; otherwise, it is to be rejected and disregarded, and the transfer itself is judged to be false" [38]

This means that, for Ibn Ḥazm, taʾwīl consists in abandoning the apparent linguistic meaning of a word on the basis of evidence. This is grounded in his principle that languages were arranged by God

Almighty for the purpose of conveying meaning; consequently, it is impermissible to divert a word from its apparent linguistic meaning except on the basis of an explicit text or a certain consensus transmitted from the Prophet (peace be upon him) indicating that it has been diverted from its apparent sense. It is noteworthy that Ibn Ḥazm sets extremely strict and rigorous conditions for accepting taʾwīl conditions related both to the act of interpretation and to the interpreter himself. Otherwise, such interpretation is deemed invalid and rejected.

It should be noted in this context that taʾwīl is, in fact, among the broadest avenues of rational inference and analysis of religious texts in the history of Islamic thought. It is a vital tool in the hands of jurists and mujtahids, enabling them to uncover the spirit of the text in harmony with the circumstances and contingencies of their time, on the one hand, and to derive legal rulings from their proper sources on the other within the bounds of linguistic signification.

However, deviation from the norms of rigorous inquiry and deliberate rebellion against language and nature gave rise to serious intellectual schisms that nearly undermined the unity and cohesion of the Muslim community. Moreover, this concept did not escape distortion in numerous readings carried out by those steeped in cultures foreign to Islam, who then imposed such readings upon the text under the pretext of taʾwīl and opening the door to ijtihād[39]. This rendered the concept of taʾwīl dangerous and undesirable in the eyes of certain Islamic groups.

It must also be emphasized that although this term had an early connection with the Qur'anic text, it was initially intertwined with another term tafsīr. The latter, however, came to be more closely associated with the Qur'an and more widely accepted among exegetes. Ibn Taymiyya confirms this overlap between the two terms when he states: [40]"

The term taʾwīl is used in three senses:

First, it refers to the reality to which speech ultimately leads, even if it accords with the apparent meaning. If the speech is a command, its taʾwīl is the very act commanded; if it is a report, its taʾwīl is the very thing reported. This is perhaps the literal sense of the text.

Second, it is used to mean interpretation (tafsīr), and this is the usage adopted by many exegetes.

Third, it denotes diverting a word from its apparent meaning to another meaning that contradicts it, on the basis of an external proof that necessitates such a shift; in this sense, distortion itself becomes taʾwīl".

It is evident that taʾwīl in this third sense is what most exegetes rejected and invalidated. It also conflicts with Ibn Ḥazm's declared methodology, which is grounded in adherence to the apparent meanings of language. Yet, paradoxically, Ibn Ḥazm resorted to taʾwīl of the Qur'anic text in several instances, some of which will be indicated in what follows

2.Interpreting the Qur'anic Text According to Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī

Before presenting some examples in which Ibn Ḥazm did not interpret Qur'anic verses according to their apparent meanings but instead resorted to interpretation regardless of whether his own stringent conditions permitting taʾwīl were fulfilled according to the methodology he established it is only fair to note that Imam Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī, in undertaking the interpretation of Qur'anic texts, "was not oblivious to the possibility of multiplicity of meaning. There is no clearer evidence of this

than his insistence, in the context of rejecting analogy, that God has neglected nothing in the Book. Such multiplicity of meaning cannot be determined through rational speculation alone, as the Muʿtazila did; rather, it requires extensive awareness of contextual circumstances, along with all available indicators" [41]

This is in addition to linguistic context and the structure of the texts themselves. Ibn Ḥazm states:

…"Intensive investigation can only be achieved through extensive reading of all opinions and views, reflection on the nature of things, listening to the arguments of every claimant and examining them, scrutiny and observation, acquaintance with religions, sects, schools, doctrines, and divergences among people, and reading their books. The seeker of truths must be acquainted with the Qur'an its meanings, the transmission of its wording and rulings as well as the hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him), his biography encompassing all praiseworthy virtues in this world and leading to the Hereafter. Along with this, one must study ancient and contemporary historical reports, be aware of the divisions of lands, possess knowledge of cosmology, understand the languages into which books are translated, examine their usages, and study grammar sufficiently at least to recognize how variations in vocalization result in differences of meaning" [42]

The conditions Ibn Ḥazm enumerates here are, in fact, almost unanimously agreed upon by the majority of Qur'anic exegetes, despite differences in their schools and methodological starting points.

Among the Qur'anic texts in which Ibn Ḥazm departed from his methodology of adhering to the apparent meaning are verses with doctrinal content, particularly those concerning the Divine Names and Attributes, such as the following:

His interpretation of the verse: ﴿هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا أَن يَأْتِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ فِي ظُلَلٍ مِّنَ الْغَمَامِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَقُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ ۚ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ﴾[البقرة 210]

Ibn Ḥazm states:

"His saying, exalted be He: 'Do they await anything other than that God should come to them in canopies of clouds, along with the angels…' all of this is to be understood, as we have explained, as referring to an act that God Almighty performs on the Day of Resurrection, which is called 'coming' and 'arrival.' The meaning of 'your Lord came' and 'God comes to them' is well known in the language in which the Qur'an was revealed, and is commonly used therein, as in the expression 'the king came to us,' meaning that his army, authority, and command came" [43]

Here, Ibn Ḥazm interprets "coming" and "arrival" non-literally, assigning them a figurative meaning namely, the coming of God's army, power, and command thus contradicting his professed methodology of adhering to the apparent Qur'anic meaning and the immediate linguistic sense.

His interpretation of the verse:

(وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ) [البقرة: 255]

Ibn Ḥazm states:

"The speech of God Almighty must be carried according to its apparent meaning, and it must never be diverted from its apparent sense unless a text, consensus, or necessary rational proof establishes that some part of it is not intended in its apparent sense and has been transferred to another meaning.

In such a case, obedience to what that text, consensus, or necessity entails is obligatory, for God's speech and reports do not contradict one another, consensus can only be upon truth, and God Almighty speaks nothing but truth. Whatever is invalidated by necessary proof is not truth.

It has been established that God's knowledge is neither an accident nor a body, nor is it something borne in Him or in anything else, nor is it something other than God Himself. Necessarily, therefore, it must be known that the meaning of His saying: 'And they do not encompass anything of His knowledge' refers only to the created knowledge that God has granted to His servants an accident existing within created beings and that this knowledge is attributed to Him by way of ownership. This is beyond doubt, for we possess no knowledge except what He has taught us" [44]

Despite the prefatory insistence on adhering to the apparent meaning of God's speech and refraining from interpretation, Ibn Ḥazm ultimately departs from this principle by interpreting "knowledge" in the verse not according to its apparent meaning, but alternatively as ownership or as referring to the Divine Essence itself.

His interpretation of the verse:

(لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ) [الشورى 11]

Ibn Ḥazm interprets this and similar verses mentioning hearing and sight as referring to God's knowledge, not to attributes of hearing and sight as such especially since the text does not state that God possesses hearing and sight, but rather that He is Hearing and Seeing. Since nothing resembles Him, He is Hearing and Seeing by His essence. Thus, the meaning of His being Hearing and Seeing is that He is Knowing, and the meaning of: [46 طه] (أسمع وأرى) is His encompassing awareness of all things, which ultimately denotes knowledge [45]

In this way, Ibn Ḥazm diverts hearing and sight from their apparent meanings and interprets them as knowledge or as referring to the Divine Essence.

3.The Limits of Interpretation According to Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī

Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī resorted to interpretation in his engagement with certain Qur'anic texts, particularly doctrinal verses concerning the Divine Names and Attributes, in support of his theological position denying attributes as distinct from the Divine Essence. In fairness, Ibn Ḥazm (may God have mercy on him) attempted to provide theoretical grounding for his interpretive approach and to absolve himself of the charge of capricious interpretation. Accordingly, he repeatedly affirmed that the default principle is to carry texts according to their apparent meanings and not to interpret them except under specific conditions.

On this basis, he maintained that departing from the apparent meaning must be grounded in proof proof that must consist either of Qur'anic text, Prophetic Sunnah, or consensus.

He states:

"If they ask: by what do you know that speech has been diverted from its apparent meaning? We reply by God's grace that this is known either through another apparent text indicating such diversion, or through a certain consensus transmitted from the Prophet (peace be upon him) that it has been diverted from its apparent meaning" [46]

He also states:

"It is not permissible for anyone to divert a verse from its apparent meaning, nor a report from its apparent sense, for God Almighty says: [195 الشعراء] (بلسان عربي مبين) , and He says, condemning a people: [13 المائدة] (يُحَرِّفُونَ الكلم عن مواضعه)

. Whoever diverts a text from its apparent linguistic meaning without another proof or consensus has claimed that the text contains no clarification, and has distorted the speech of God Almighty and His revelation to His Prophet from its proper place and this is exceedingly grave" [47]

From these two citations, it becomes clear that the limits of interpretation according to Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī ultimately rest upon three types of evidence:

The first proof: the Qur'anic text itself that is, interpreting the Qur'an by means of the Qur'an.

The second proof: the Sunnah, meaning reports transmitted from the Prophet (peace be upon him), who is the one who clarifies God's intent. Such reports must be soundly transmitted and attributed directly to the Prophet. As for reports that are halted or incomplete, they do not constitute proof in Ibn Ḥazm's view and are equivalent to reports transmitted by unreliable narrators.

The third proof: consensus. Ibn Ḥazm recognizes only the consensus of the Companions (may God be pleased with them), as it alone can be definitively established due to their limited number and the possibility of knowing their opinions. Moreover, such consensus must pertain to a matter grounded in explicit textual evidence. Consensus upon a ruling for which no text exists whether based on opinion or analogy is invalid and does not constitute proof [48].

It is thus evident that Ibn Ḥazm imposed stringent limits upon interpretation that may not be transgressed. In doing so, he effectively closed off many avenues of juristic reasoning, for "practical life cannot be regulated solely through adherence to the apparent meaning of texts; recourse to analogy is indispensable. It is likely that the Ẓāhirīs sensed this and resorted to analogy under the guise of what they termed 'evidence.' Yet when other texts conflicted with their views, they diverted them to alternative meanings or restricted them so as to avoid textual contradiction" [49].

Conclusion

The foregoing pages have, perhaps, clarified an important aspect of the methodology of Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī and his followers in their engagement with and interpretation of the Qur'anic text, by addressing the central problematics from which this study proceeded. The findings of the study may be summarized as follows:

The concept of the apparent meaning (ẓāhir) of the text according to Imam Ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī refers to the wording as it occurs in the Qur'an and the Sunnah namely, that speech is to be taken exactly as articulated by the speaker, without regard for what lies beyond the text in terms of hidden meanings, objectives, causal reasoning, speculative reflection, or opinion in general.

Ibn Ḥazm applied his methodology of adhering to the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text to a large extent, at times exaggerating its application to the point of suspending all forms of juristic reasoning that do not remain within the bounds of apparent textual meaning.

In the domain of doctrinal rulings particularly texts concerning the Divine Names and Attributes Ibn Ḥazm departed from his methodology and engaged in interpretation and opinion-based reasoning.

Interpretation according to Ibn Ḥazm consists in "transferring a word from what its apparent meaning entails, and from that for which it was assigned in the language, to another meaning under specific conditions".

Interpretation is not permissible except on the basis of evidence that justifies diverting a word from its apparent and linguistic meaning namely, an explicit text or a certain consensus transmitted from the Companions (may God be pleased with them).

The Qur'anic text possesses authority for Ibn Ḥazm that derives either from the sacredness of the text itself a sacredness rooted in the source and originator of the text, God Almighty, who is characterized by absolute perfection and transcendence or from an illusory authority whose source is the reader himself. The latter consists in the set of beliefs and constraints the reader imposes upon himself and resolves not to violate, because they conflict with what he professes and believes.

There exists a disparity between the authority of the Qur'anic text and the limits of interpretation embraced by Ibn Ḥazm in actual application. As a result, Ibn Ḥazm did not escape inconsistency and deviation from the very criteria and controls he himself established for reading and interpreting the Qur'anic text.

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[18] al-Jurjānī, ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad. al-Taʿrīfāt. Edited by Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī. 1st ed. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1405 AH, p. 143.
[19] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām. 1st ed. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1405 AH, vol. 1, p. 42.
[20] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 308.
[21] See: the same reference, vol. 7, p. 980.
[22] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Nubadh al-Kāfiya, pp. 83–84; see also Manhaj al-Madrasah al-Ẓāhiriyya fī Tafsīr al-Nuṣūṣ, p. 149.
[23]See: the same reference, pp. 26, 70 ff., with adaptation.
[24] See: Ibn Ḥazm. al-Iḥkām, vol. 1, p. 53.
[25] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-l-Niḥal. Edited by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣīr and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿUmayra. 1st ed. Riyadh: Maktabat ʿUkāẓ, 1402 AH, vol. 2, p. 9.
[26] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Muḥallā bi-l-Āthār. Edited by ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Sulaymān al-Bandāwī. 1st ed. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1408 AH, vol. 2, p. 202.
[27] Ibid., vol. 9, p. 163.
[28] See: Muṣṭafawī, Muḥammad. Fundamentals of Methodology and Discourse in Qur'anic Studies and Exegesis. Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī / Maktabat Muʾmin Quraysh, 1st ed., 2009, pp. 311–312 (adapted).
[29] Kassar, Jawād ʿAlī. Understanding the Qur'an. Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī / Maktabat Muʾmin Quraysh, 1st ed., 2008, vol. 1, p. 46.
[30] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 46.
[31] al-Suyūṭī. al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi-l-Maʾthūr. Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, vol. 6, p. 137.
[32] See: Kassār, Jawād ʿAlī. Understanding the Qur'an, vol. 1, p. 27.
[33] al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid. Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1st ed., 2005, vol. 1, p. 289.
[34] Ibid., p. 285.
[35] See: Abū Zayd, Naṣr Ḥāmid. The Concept of the Text: A Study in Qur'anic Sciences. Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1st ed., 2014, pp. 9–10; also Kassār, Jawād ʿAlī. Understanding the Qur'an, vol. 1, pp. 52–53.
[36] Ibn Manẓūr. Lisān al-ʿArab. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1993, entry: awl.
[37] al-Jurjānī. al-Taʿrīfāt, p. 86.
[38] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām, vol. 1, p. 42.
[39] Buqrah, Nuʿmān. "Interpreting Texts and the Limits of Taʾwīl in the Thought of Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī." Journal of Sharīʿa and Islamic Studies (Kuwait), vol. 19, no. 57, 2004, p. 223.
[40] See: Ibn Taymiyya. Naqḍ al-Manṭiq. Edited by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir Ḥamza et al. Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1951, pp. 57–58.
[41] Buqrah, Nuʿmān. "Interpreting Texts and the Limits of Taʾwīl in the Thought of Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī," p. 233.
[42] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Taqrīb li-Ḥadd al-Manṭiq wa-l-Madkhal Ilayhi. Edited by Iḥsān ʿAbbās. Cairo: Dār al-ʿUrūba, 1960, p. 199; see also Buqrah, Nuʿmān, p. 233.
[43]Ibn Ḥazm. al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-l-Niḥal, vol. 2, p. 209.
[44] Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 300–301.

[45] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 310.
[46] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām, vol. 1, p. 310.
[47] Ibn Ḥazm. al-Nubadh al-Kāfiya fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh, p. 36.
[48] See: Ibn Ḥazm. al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām, vol. 1, p. 128.
[49] Madkūr, Muḥammad Sallām. An Introduction to Islamic Jurisprudence, previously cited, p. 162.