


Fights and Flights: Two Underrated ‘Alternatives’ to Dominant Readings in *tafsīr*

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The Muslim interpretive tradition surrounding the Qur’an, as reflected in the genre of *tafsīr*, is one in which analysis, transmission, debate, and selection play their intertwining roles upon the pages.¹ A given opinion may be traced from its earliest expression through subsequent works to determine how it was restated or adjusted; overlooked or concealed; or followed up with approval or critique. For the *mufasssīr*, the critical process seeks to determine the divine authorial intent behind the speech, or at least to delineate what may reasonably be said about it.

It has become commonplace in Islamic hermeneutical works (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*) to distinguish between transmission-based (*bi’l-ma’thūr*) and opinion-based (*bi’l-ra’y*) approaches; while this dichotomy has been soundly criticised,² it may yet be helpful to consider these two aspects of exegetical composition. If an author relies exclusively upon interpretations received from the earliest Muslim generations or later, this implies confidence in the collective tradition as having recognised and codified the meanings of the revelation. Yet the opposite is no great surprise: when a premodern exegete provides an additional possible reading of the text, that may be based on (a) belief in the expansiveness of the text, or (b) recognition that the *tafsīr* record may not have captured all plausible readings that may, nevertheless, have occurred to earlier interpreters. The more significant intervention of *ra’y* is when all recorded views (frequently characterised as representing *ijmā’*^c, the consensus of the exegetes) are dismissed as unsatisfactory: does this imply that the meaning was ‘lost’ until it was ‘found’ by this new interpreter?

Such objections are certainly levelled at novel thinkers in the current day,³ but what of opinions that – paradoxically – have been transmitted through time but contrasted

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with the ‘consensus’? These are sometimes described as *marjūh* (in contrast with the *rājih*, ‘preponderant’, opinion) or even as *shādh* (‘aberrant’).⁴ This type of opinion may well be narrated – in the manner of the ‘fabricated’ (*mawḍūʿ*) category of *ḥadīth* – solely to warn people against it should they encounter it elsewhere: Abū Muslim al-Ḥafḥānī (d. 322/934), whose own novel interpretation forms the second case study in this paper, is quoted as saying in the short chapter in *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* on ‘exegetical oddities’ (*gharāʾib al-tafsīr*) that ‘I only shared this [opinion on the opening letters of Q. 42] so it may be known that some who claim knowledge are idiots!’⁵ However, more charitable attitudes to isolated opinions may also be found. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), in particular, was charged with ‘presenting doubts up-front but delaying payment on the answers’⁶ – and this may be extended to his willingness, along with others, to include multiple opinions beside the one(s) he approved. It implies an openness to the idea that such opinions may yet prove to be correct, or at least useful in some way.⁷

Another concept relevant here is that of ‘problematic’ (*mushkil*) exegesis, a subjective judgement that interpreting a particular Qurʾanic verse is challenging. For example, various authorities have said of Q. 5:106–107 that it is ‘the most problematic (*ashkal*, alternatively *aʿdal*, *aṣʿab*, or *aʿwaṣ*) passage of the Qurʾān in terms of syntax, meaning and rulings’.⁸ The question is whether these exegetes felt that they have ‘solved the problem’ or met the challenge of interpreting the verse correctly. Indeed that is sometimes the case, yet we often encounter recognition that their explanations themselves contain *ishkāl* – which is to say that they are not entirely clear or convincing.⁹

Muslim exegetes in general proceed from the assumption that each piece of scriptural text has at least one ‘true’ meaning that exists independently of people’s efforts to understand and explain it. While the *tafsīr* process has a good rate of success in identifying that meaning, they recognise those cases in which it seems to fall short. The solution, for them, would be more (and better) *tafsīr*, by which I mean hermeneutical operations built upon traditionally defined parameters (i.e. *uṣūl*) – and not merely sourcing and narrating more opinions. Indeed, it is sometimes said that such narrations create a barrier between the text and readers who might be well-placed to understand it according to its original intent, if not misdirected by prior readings.¹⁰ Narrations frequently provide no more than an example of what the Qurʾanic locution extends to, but are taken by some to delimit the text’s meaning.¹¹ It is conceivable, even within the traditional paradigm, to believe that the correct reading of a verse has not yet been ‘discovered’ – the theological problem only arises in such cases where correct understanding was necessary, such as a credal tenet or practical ruling. This perspective need not impute a lack of understanding to the Prophet or others around him, if it is kept in mind that not everything that is understood is said out loud, let alone written and preserved.

Exegetes also speak of the 'plain sense' (*ẓāhir*) of Qur'anic locutions, by which they mean that one reading is most obvious on the basis of the Arabic language (itself subject to issues of transmission).¹² Frequently, they give preference to a reading precisely because it fits the wording in a way that is more intuitive and better attested, and they criticise readings that are considered 'distant' (*ba'īd*) from the apparent intent of the verse.¹³ However, at other times, an exegete may insist that the apparent sense is not intended (*ghayr murād*) and provide an alternative interpretation (*ta'wīl*): this is seen, most dramatically, in debates over anthropomorphic descriptions of God.¹⁴ What interests us about these discourses is the idea that the text carries a 'true' meaning which tends to align with its plain sense, but sometimes exists alongside that plain sense. A *mufasssīr* who finds earlier explanations problematic may argue that another reading is more straightforward; he or she may conceive of this reading not as novel, but as more authentic in that the text itself 'carried' it despite competing interpretations attached to it by previous exegetes.¹⁵

While the modern age has seen a wider range of interventions, reformist approaches, and novel opinions in *tafsīr*, the point I am highlighting is that *ra'y* (in the sense of educated opinion) was deployed by individuals among the earliest generations and the later scholarly classes.¹⁶ At times, this involved going against whatever consensus existed to that point. There is nothing special, therefore, about modern re-readings (by Muslim thinkers and/or critical scholars) which may be sandwiched between a list of problems with the received explanation(s), and reasons for preferring the new theory.¹⁷ Within the traditional paradigm, however, the weight of *ijmā'* increases with time and the restatement of established opinions in new works; and re-interpretations are often suspected (uniquely) of being influenced by their contemporary environment. We shall return to this point in due course.

What follows are two case studies (Q. 2:178 and Q. 2:260) which demonstrate the interplay of the concepts outlined here within premodern and modern *tafsīr*. Each case involves an 'alternative' reading which, arguably, fits the wording of the verse better, at least in some respects. These were transmitted in exegetical works without receiving much acceptance, or even attention; then each was 'picked up' by a later scholar who supported it with further arguments: and we shall look at the limited impact these later advocates have had. Our sequence of discussion follows not only the verse order in *Sūrat al-Baqara*, but also the time at which the opinion is first reported, and when the latter-day advocates emerged. In the first case, which relates to juristic issues, the alternative may resolve the disconnect long noted by exegetes and jurists between the wording and what they assume it must mean. The second case concerns a narrative passage which has been read literally and with a miraculous import, or as bearing various types of symbolism. In each, I will describe the views and their reception history, before providing a phrase-by-phrase analysis and explaining why each of these

‘alternatives’ is, in my view, worthy of greater consideration and may reflect the original intent of the verse.

Q. 2:178 – Lives for Lives

The first verse under consideration concerns *qiṣāṣ*, which is defined in Islamic (juristic) scholarship as applying a punishment upon a criminal that matches the crime committed, such as death as punishment for murder (*qatl al-ʿamd*).¹⁸ I cite here a translation of the verse in question by a contemporary Muslim jurist which leaves the term itself untranslated.¹⁹

O you who believe, qiṣāṣ has been prescribed for you in the case of murdered people: the freeman [will be killed] for the freeman, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female. However, if one is somewhat forgiven by his brother, the recourse [of the latter] is to pursue the former [for blood money] with fairness, and the obligation [of the former] is to pay [it] to the latter in a nice way. That is a relief from your Lord, and a mercy. So, whoever transgresses after all that will have a painful punishment.

This translation displays features of a broad understanding of this verse that is shared across the variety of legal schools and exegetical trends, despite disagreement over some of its specifics. The key issue is the import of the term *qiṣāṣ* here, which becomes clear from the gloss ‘will be killed’; it matches the jurists’ definition, and the verse is considered the most important proof-text for the ruling in the legal works.²⁰

The alternative reading of this verse is that, from the outset, it concerns the ruling of bloodwit (*diyya*) and legislates resolution, not retaliation. Although both views take into account reports concerning its context of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), this alternative – advocated most cogently by Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm b. Taymiyya (d. 728/1328)²¹ – can more clearly be characterised as a historicist reading, by which I mean that the verse is taken to deal with a particular situation that arose for the nascent Muslim society in Medina. Who was the first to articulate this alternative view according to the written exegetical record? It appears to be the view of several Kufan Successors, although their full understanding of the verse is difficult to discern from the fragmented narrations. In his fullest explanation of the verse, as found today in the collection known as *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*,²² Ibn Taymiyya frames his reading as the second of ‘two opinions’ (*qawlān*) – an effective strategy to bolster his preference against the more common one – and attributes it to ‘al-Shaʿbī and others as mentioned by al-Ṭabarī and others’. Hence, we turn to the latter work first to examine this opinion.

Al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) presentation of the historicist reading of Q. 2:178 is somewhat scattered and contradictory, but the main elements employed by Ibn Taymiyya are

present. He explains an alternative understanding of the word *qiṣāṣ*: that it is ‘for the bloodwits (*diyāt*) of the slain people to be neutralised by comparison ... such that the bloodwits of the women of one party are cancelled against those of the other women, etc.’²³ He uses several depreciative expressions (*wa-qad qīla*, ‘it was also said’, and *‘indahum*, ‘according to them’) and ultimately dismisses it, but does not specify any problems with this view. A little further on, al-Ṭabarī quotes the authorities who advanced this interpretation: first [Isma‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān] al-Suddī (d. 127/745),²⁴ then al-Suddī’s narration from Abū Mālik [Ghazwān al-Ghifārī] (n.d.),²⁵ and finally two narrations from [‘Āmir b. Sharāḥīl] al-Sha‘bī (d. between 103–110/721–728).²⁶ Before those narrations, his list supporting the commonplace reading includes one narration from ‘Āmir (i.e. al-Sha‘bī²⁷) which is, in fact, the clearest expression of this alternative: ‘That was specifically concerning widespread fighting (*qitāl ‘immiyya*): if a slave was killed from this group and another slave from that group, they would balance out (*takāfa‘ā*), and the same applied to two women, and to two freemen – that is its meaning, God willing.’²⁸ In the phrase *man ‘uḥfiya lahu min akhīhi shay‘un*, the passive verb *‘uḥfiya* is glossed by Ibn Taymiyya with the active verb *faḍala* or *baḥiyya*, hence the meaning becomes: *one for whom something was left over from his brother*. Al-Ṭabarī attributes this position to those who ‘contended’ (*za‘ama*) that the Prophet was commanded by this verse to enact a truce between the two warring clans in which ‘the bloodwits would be cancelled against each other, and one group would return any excess owed to the other’.²⁹ However, the narration he provides from al-Suddī (with the same *isnād* as previously) appears to follow the common identification of this ‘brother’ as the murdered person, so the meaning becomes: ‘Any [guardian] who has something left [to receive] from [the bloodwit of] his brother, should pursue it reasonably and the [culpable party] should pay it properly.’³⁰

Before looking at the limited presence of this interpretation and corresponding narrations in exegesis written between al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Taymiyya, let us turn to Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) for the context generally provided for this verse and its understanding. Ibn Kathīr presents two narrations in this regard, and I highlight him in particular to draw attention to the fact that he neither reports his teacher Ibn Taymiyya’s alternative reading, nor the supporting narrations from al-Ṭabarī’s commentary, which is well known as a key source for him.³¹ After glossing the verse as calling for equity in retribution (*al-‘adl fī’l-qiṣāṣ*) in contrast to the transgressions (*i‘tidā‘*) of former peoples, Ibn Kathīr explains that the reason (*sabab*) behind this ruling was what happened between the Jewish tribes of Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayza. The former had invaded the latter before Islam and imposed double standards: a Naḍārī would not be killed in retaliation for a Qurazī, but would pay 100 *wasāq* (roughly fourteen tons) of dates; in contrast, a Qurazī could be killed for a Naḍārī or ransomed for double the amount.³² The second narration, which Ibn Kathīr introduces more tentatively (*‘wa-dhukira fī sabab nuzūlihā’*) with a chain of narration to Sa‘īd b. Jubayr

(d. 95/714), has it that two Arab tribes entered into conflict just prior to the advent of Islam and women and slaves were among those killed. After becoming Muslim, they set about the mutual retaliation process but the stronger tribe swore that they would accept no less than a freeman from the other tribe to be killed for each of their slaves, and a man of the other side in retaliation for a woman from their own (regardless of the actual identity of the killer).³³ Some exegetes give precedence to this latter context over the Jewish one.³⁴

However, the narration from al-Sha^cbī about *qitāl ʿimmiyya* was mentioned and discussed in a few works, albeit alongside other attributions to al-Sha^cbī which seem to support the standard view. The more extensive version recorded in the *Muṣannaḡ* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849) may serve to reconcile the two stories:³⁵

ʿAbbād b. al-ʿAwwām reported to us, from Sufyān b. Ḥusayn, from Ibn Ashwa^c, from al-Sha^cbī, that he said: ‘There was fighting between two Arab clans and each suffered loss of life. One of the two said: “We will not be satisfied until we have killed a man for each of our women, and two men for each of our men.” The other party refused, so they referred the matter to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. The Prophet said: “The killing is *bawāʿ*” – which means *sawāʿ* (‘equivalent’)³⁶ – so the people made a settlement based on bloodwit. They determined the respective amounts for men, women, and enslaved people, then cancelled the bloodwits of one clan against the other. This is [the meaning of] God’s saying: *O you who believe, qiṣāṣ has been prescribed for you in the case of murdered people: the freeman for the freeman, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female.*’ Sufyān said: ‘*fa-man ʿuḡiya* etc. means that whoever has excess owed to him by his brother (*faḡala lahu ʿalā akhīhi*), [the latter] should pay it appropriately and the pursuer should be good in following it up.’

This version was later provided by Abū Bakr Aḡmad b. ʿAlī al-Rāzī al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) in his Ḥanafī *Aḡkāḡ al-Qurʿān*, and subsequently in Shāfiʿī and Mālikī works of the genre, then in the exegesis of al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273)³⁷ – all before the time of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ noted the exegetical gloss from Sufyān b. Ḥusayn al-Wāsiṡī (d. c. 150/767), which added to the background provided by the narration; he then gave it further support by citing similar usages of the word ʿ*afw* in Q. 7:95 as well as a *ḡadīth* about allowing the beard to proliferate.³⁸ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ supports the Ḥanafī view of parity in retaliation, but he bases that, quite typically, on the universality of the opening statement of the verse. While arguing at length that the basic right of the victim’s heir (*walī*) is retaliation and not a free choice between that and bloodwit, he cites al-Sha^cbī’s explanation as the third of four acceptable interpretations

of *ʿafw* that fit the wording of the verse. Although his preference is for the first of the four, he goes on to suggest that these various opinions are complementary.³⁹

The overall picture, however, is that the reading attributed to al-Shaʿbī was marginalised or absent from exegetical works before, and indeed since, Ibn Taymiyya. Some authors noted the difficulty in making sense of the wording of the verse and reconciling it with juristic positions, to the extent that Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148) described how ‘the intellects of the scholars have been confounded’ by the phrase concerning *ʿafw*.⁴⁰ Further issues concerning the wording will be addressed in the comparative Table 1 below. The most problematic issue⁴¹ is the apparent implication of the phrase *al-ḥurru bi'l-ḥurri wa'l-ʿabdu bi'l-ʿabdi wa'l-unthā bi'l-unthā*, namely that a free man is to be killed in retaliation only if his victim is another free man, and that an enslaved man would only be killed due to killing another enslaved man. Reading gender specificity into these first two clauses is made more compelling by the third clause, which seems to limit this kind of retribution upon a woman to the case in which she kills another woman. The contrary implication (*mafhūm al-mukhālafā*, in the terms of Islamic hermeneutics) is that the freeman is not killed for the slave, nor vice versa; and that the man (free or enslaved) is not killed for the woman, and vice versa.

As Ibn ʿĀshūr states: ‘The scholars of Islam have agreed that this implication is not adopted in full, but they differed concerning the extent to which it is applicable.’⁴² Some suggested that the implication was indeed intended at first, but then abrogated by other verses – but this approach presents its own difficulties.⁴³ The Ḥanafis asserted complete parity in retribution due to the universality (*ʿumūm*) of the verse’s opening sentence. Others held a general stance that a freeman is not killed for a slave, or limited this to the case where he kills his own slave. Some argued that the three scenarios made explicit in the verse have no effect on the ruling of unstated scenarios, such as a slave killing a freeman; these must be determined based on other evidences.⁴⁴ If that is so, then why are the three scenarios mentioned? The point, according to this group, is merely to emphasise that the murderer alone is killed for the crime, as it was a common occurrence in pre-Islamic times for retaliation to be made or demanded against a ‘higher’ category (in gender or freedom) or additional people alongside the killer. For the Mālikīs, the third clause is clarification of the first two, to the effect that the differentiation between free and enslaved people applies to women as it does to men. There are various other positions attributed to the Companions.⁴⁵

Despite the variations within these stances, there is a shared perspective that the verse is dealing directly with cases of murder and how retribution is enacted upon the murderer. It emphasises just retribution (which may entail differentiation between categories, as the wording implies) before addressing the case of pardoning (*ʿafw*) in full or part, and giving the permission or recommendation to accept money in lieu of shedding blood.

Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya himself provided this explanation in one passage now in the *Majmūʿ*^c (while outlining the categories of homicide) without mentioning the alternative he found with al-Shaʿbī et al.⁴⁶ While I cannot be certain of the chronology, it appears that he paid more attention to the alternative when he had to respond to queries about mutual raids taking place between Bedouin tribes (*manāhib bayna al-Aʿrāb*): in his response, he appealed only to the alternative view among the Predecessors (*salaf*) to make a point about resolving this financial aspect (while attributing the ruling itself to ‘the generality of jurists’).⁴⁷ Under a question directly about mutual bloodshed between such tribes (*ahl al-barr*), he appeals to this verse and again explains the view of some of the Predecessors that it was revealed for such situations.⁴⁸ His most detailed discussion of the verse is not presented as a response to a question, so it may simply be that he chose to elaborate upon this view once he became convinced of its superiority.

Before looking at the post-Taymiyyan reception of this opinion and comparing it closely with the majoritarian reading, here is a corresponding translation of the verse:

O you who believe, equitable resolution has been prescribed for you as regards the slain: the freeman [is offset] by the freeman, the slave by the slave, and the female by the female. Then, if one has surplus over his brother (i.e. ‘counterpart’), then [the total bloodwit] is to be pursued reasonably, and it is to be paid properly. [All] that is a relief from your Lord, and a mercy. So, whoever [of the two groups] transgresses after that [by levelling further demands] will have a painful punishment.

The overall difference is subtle but significant: it changes the immediate topic from retaliation for murder (in which the culprit pays with his/her life, or else via bloodwit) to a process of reconciliation between two large parties who have suffered multiple losses. In the case of those previously warring clans, the matter could have been pursued in such a way that much more blood would be shed if individual families opted for full retaliation. However, upon this reading, the Qur’anic instruction was that the now-united community should move directly to bloodwit, such that payments in the two directions would cancel each other out. Only the surplus debt on one side which suffered more ‘expensive’ losses would have to be resolved, and in a spirit of goodwill from both sides.

That does not mean that the verse has no juristic implications which outlive that specific time and situation. Ibn Taymiyya clearly saw this ruling as applicable to comparable scenarios, as indicated by the aforementioned fact that he cited this verse and its particular understanding in response to questions he received about warring tribes at his time. His motives were basically practical, and certainly not about challenging the substance of the law as maintained by the various schools. Indeed, in his detailed case for this alternative reading, he argues that the law of retaliation is so ‘entrenched in

human nature' that there was no need for the Qur'an to legislate it as such.⁴⁹ Instead, the verse assumes knowledge of the basic process and provides the ruling for an emergent issue faced by the Muslims in Medina. Since no word in the verse refers directly to bloodwit, that must be read into the instructions: and while the majority do so upon the mention of 'afw and adā', the alternative reading sees it right from the outset, in qīṣāṣ. The fact of bloodwit parity by category is then implied and derived from 'freeman by freeman, etc.'⁵⁰

It is striking to note the near-complete absence of this reading in subsequent explanations of the Qur'an, despite the clarity of Ibn Taymiyya's argument and the latter-day prominence of his works via modern Salafī movements. This could be explained by multiple factors including genre boundaries (he did not leave behind a work identified as a *tafsīr*) and the route to publication of the scattered treatises that make up *Majmū' al-fatāwā*. Still, it is remarkable that it was not picked up by major advocates of Ibn Taymiyya's ideas⁵¹ or referenced in such encyclopedic works as *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī* by Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854). It is as though this alternative view from the *salaf* was all but excised since Ibn Kathīr, who may himself have been unaware of his teacher's support for it.

Looking to the Indian subcontinent, an alternative reading that bears some resemblance to Ibn Taymiyya's can be observed with Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762), who states in his hermeneutical treatise *al-Fawz al-kabīr* (originally written in Persian) that he came up with an original explanation that removes the need to posit abrogation or implausible explanations of this verse. He explains *qīṣāṣ* to mean equivalence between the slain (*takāfu' al-qatlā*) in their legal ruling.⁵² On this basis, the operative phrase could be rendered in English: 'Any freeman is equivalent to another freeman, etc.' – in which the particle *bi-* denotes that they are interchangeable in the sense that none is higher in value. This meaning is indicated in the Shāh's Persian translation,⁵³ but I have not found it adopted clearly in subsequent Urdu translations, even those by his sons. Instead, a second alternative has made its way into several Urdu and English translations. For example, Abul A'ālā Mawdūdī's (d. 1979) Urdu translation *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* is rendered in English as: *if a freeman is guilty then the freeman; if a slave is guilty then the slave; if a female is guilty, then the female.*⁵⁴ This is evidently an attempt to read the verse as saying something different and uncontroversial; thus, it illustrates the challenge the wording presented to thoughtful translators.

Also in India, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1930), the founder of the modern Structural Coherence school of Qur'anic exegesis, hinted at the alternative reading in his posthumously gathered notes: 'These pairs pertain to bloodwits only, as in terms of [retaliation in] lives, the slave and freeman are alike.'⁵⁵ Unfortunately, he did not leave behind a full commentary on this verse. While his student Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d. 1997) built on his views in his own Urdu commentary *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, he did not pick up

on this point under Q. 2:178 at all. The translation by Javed Ahmed Ghamidi (b. 1951), a prominent student of Iṣlāhī, follows the same syntax as that of Mawdūdī (with whom he was also associated), but is even less coherent.⁵⁶ Another advocate of the Farāhian school, Muḥammad ʿInāyat Allāh Subḥānī (b. 1945), expressed his basic agreement with Ibn Taymiyya’s position in his book *al-Burhān fī niẓām al-Qurʿān*, first published around 1992. However, Subḥānī argues that the verse expresses a universal ruling: hence, even in individual cases of murder, the options are only bloodwit or pardon.⁵⁷

I first encountered the alternative reading in a collection and study of Ibn Taymiyya’s exegetical choices, in which the author outlines the problems with the prevalent reading of the verse and concludes that Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation fulfils several conditions of preponderance (*tarjīh*). He argues that it cannot be deemed ‘aberrant’ (*shādh*) because a minority of the Predecessors held this view.⁵⁸ Furthermore, this view allows for the same rulings to be derived from the verse, while providing something additional as its basic purpose and meaning.⁵⁹ Ibn Taymiyya himself provides a list of reasons to consider this ‘second opinion’ clearer,⁶⁰ and I summarise his main points in the following table; it also draws from other sources and includes some of my own observations about the wording and explanations.

Majority Reading of Q. 2:178	Ibn Taymiyya’s Reading
<i>yā ayyuhāʾlladhīna āmanū kutiba ʿalaykum</i>	
<p>Exegetes and legal scholars debate the implications of this vocative which seems to address the whole community, and the sense of retaliation being ‘prescribed’ (<i>kutiba</i>) for them. One explanation is that implementing this on an institutional level is an obligation upon the community (i.e. its leadership). Another is that the obligation is upon the murderer to hand himself over to justice, whereas the heir has the option to take bloodwit instead.⁶¹</p>	<p>In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, this is straightforwardly an obligation to be implemented immediately, not only when putative instances of murder occur in the future. Moreover, it is to be carried out communally, not directly between individuals. He compares this scenario of collective liability for a debt to that described in Q. 60:11.⁶²</p>
<i>al-qīṣāṣu</i>	
<p>The core meaning of the root <i>q-ṣ-ṣ</i> can be found in the term if it describes retaliation: it ‘cuts’ disputation.</p>	<p>The alternative view takes the word in its basic sense of ‘following up’ and comparing with ‘equity’. Thus, the</p>

<p>Practically, it entails a just retribution which is applied solely to the guilty individual(s).⁶³</p> <p>Consequently, any imbalance (i.e. if the contrary implication is accepted and, for example, the freeman is not killed for the enslaved) would be difficult to square with the description as <i>qiṣāṣ</i>.</p>	<p>Qur'anic terminology (which may have been new) differs from that adopted by jurists.</p>
<p><i>fī'l-qatlā</i></p>	
<p>The sense of the particle <i>fī</i> applied to the victims raises a question. It is commonly explained as 'due to (<i>bi-sabab</i>) the slain' or, more fully, 'due to the slaying of the slain (<i>qatl al-qatlā</i>)', which is the true cause of retaliation.</p> <p>In other words, the phrase is taken to mean 'in cases of murder' – but it should be explained why it was worded in this way. It may simply be that the 'slain' (plural) are spelled out in the following phrase (<i>bi'l-ḥurri, bi'l-ʿabd, bi'l-unthā</i>).</p>	<p>Ibn Taymiyya highlights the significance of this wording, and his explanation uses a clearer sense of <i>fī</i>: the process of <i>qiṣāṣ</i> is to be applied to the slain (not to the living).</p> <p>The definite article and plural <i>al-qatlā</i> suggests an identified group of deceased people concerning whom this verse was revealed.</p>
<p><i>al-ḥurru bi'l-ḥurri wa'l-ʿabdu bi'l-ʿabdi wa'l-unthā bi'l-unthā</i></p>	
<p>This repeated construct is read by most in terms of 'life for life' due to the parallel expression in Q. 5:45 (<i>al-naḥsu bi'l-naḥsi</i>) and the implication of the preceding word <i>al-qatlā</i>. Hence it is 'the life of a freeman for the life of a freeman (whom he killed), etc.'</p> <p>The revelatory context (see from Ibn Kathīr above) is necessary to draw out</p>	<p>For Ibn Taymiyya, the separate pairings are intended, as they apply to bloodwit and not to retaliation against the guilty party.</p> <p>Rules of retaliation, including in scenarios not expressed by these pairings, are extracted by implication.⁶⁶</p>

<p>this sense of limiting the penalty to the guilty party, but the pairings of like for like remain difficult to understand. It may be to emphasise parity within each category, as no free man is valued higher than any other in this context, and the same within the other categories.⁶⁴</p> <p>However, the implication that the boundaries of ‘status’ should not be crossed is a very strong one.⁶⁵</p>	
<p><i>fa-man ʿufiya lahu min akhīhi shayʿun</i></p>	
<p>There are several possibilities based on the polyvalence of <i>ʿafw</i>. Most commonly, it is taken as ‘pardoning’, in which case it is the killer who is pardoned to some extent ‘by his brother’ (the heir) or ‘from the blood of his brother’ (whom he murdered) – that is, the heir accepts bloodwit in lieu of retaliation.</p> <p>Some understood <i>ʿafw</i> in terms of ‘giving’, hence it is the heir who is being given the bloodwit by the killer (who remains his brother in faith). The sense of ‘left over’ can also be associated with this meaning.</p> <p>The last word in the phrase is understood as <i>shayʿun min al-ʿafw</i> – which is more reasonable than Ibn Taymiyya claims. The particle in <i>lahu</i> is to say that the guilty party has been let off to some extent for his crime (<i>ʿan dhanbihi</i>). Complete <i>ʿafw</i> would be without the demand of bloodwit.</p>	<p>A scenario must be pictured, in which there are two ‘brothers’ counting on behalf of their respective tribes.⁶⁷ One representative finds that he is owed something by his counterpart.</p> <p>If this is based on understanding <i>ʿafw</i> as an amount exceeding that of his brother, then the usage of <i>min</i> is unclear (as it is said <i>faḍala ʿalā</i>). However, it can be explained instead in terms of ‘left over’, as Ibn Taymiyya glosses it in one place: ‘<i>baqiya lahu min jihat akhīhi shayʿ</i>’.⁶⁸</p> <p>As the others do, he understands ‘brother’ in religious terms and links it to Q. 49:10 which also refers to fighting between Muslims.⁶⁹ He also states that this form of mutual liability is only observed between Muslims.⁷⁰</p>

<i>fa'ttibā^cun bi'l-ma^crūfi wa-adā^oun ilayhi bi-ihsānin</i>	
<p>The term <i>ittibā^c</i> refers to the heir's acceptance of payments, or to pursuing them in a reasonable manner according to customary amounts.</p> <p>Some said that both the verbs describe the killer's duty, namely to follow up the demand and deliver payments promptly.</p>	<p>The alternative view differs in that the payments are made from one tribe to the other, not based on a specific case and to an heir. Hence the use of <i>ilayhi</i> is less clear upon this reading (as though the representative of the tribe receives it on their behalf).</p>
<i>dhālika takhfifun min rabbikum wa-rahmatun</i>	
<p>The majority take the 'lightening' to be permission to pardon and be pardoned (i.e. bloodwit; often understood in contrast to the Jewish law in Exodus).</p> <p>Ibn ^cĀshūr states that the Arabs used to think it disgraceful to accept blood money, as if selling the honour of one's brother, so this verse challenges that mentality.⁷¹</p>	<p>For Ibn Taymiyya, this refers to the whole verse, which concerns bloodwit and this specific operation whereby both sides are saved from giving up more of their living (even if there is an imbalance of slain on the two sides).</p> <p>Note [SS]: it also lifted the hardship of identifying the guilty individuals after such widespread conflict.</p>
<i>fa-man i^ctadā ba^cda dhālika fa-lahu ^cadhābun alīm</i>	
<p>Any further killing (or refusal to pay up) is a violation of these terms and the mercy is lifted.</p> <p>The 'painful torment' is in the Hereafter. Some said it means in this life: if he kills again, he will not be granted the option of paying bloodwit.</p>	<p>After this is settled, there are to be no more demands by one tribe of the other for money or blood.</p> <p>Note [SS]: it could also be a warning not to engage in internecine conflict ever again.</p>

Table 1: Competing Readings of Q. 2:178

Having looked at the two perspectives linguistically and comparatively, our study will touch on the basis for preferring the 'alternative' before repeating this process for the second case study (in which far more debate, and talk of *tarjih*, has occurred in the past). Neither of these alternatives has 'strength in numbers' historically or at

the present time; but, as I am arguing, they do have strength of clarity. Just as it is too simplistic to suppose that the traditional *mufassir* has always proceeded on the basis of rigid ‘rules for preponderance’ (*qawā'id al-tarjīh*), the factors which would lead me – or the reader of this paper – to prefer one or the other interpretation are varied and multifarious.

In both our case studies, the question of Muslim scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*) becomes relevant within the traditional framework; however, I have not encountered any criticism of Ibn Taymiyya for violating it in this instance. He is well known for his willingness to step outside the established positions of the juristic schools, such as with his famous edict on the triple-pronouncement of divorce – which is adopted by various states today.⁷² The stakes surrounding Q. 2:178 may well be lower because the jurists’ definition and rulings of *qiṣāṣ* remain operable (by implication and derivation, rather than direct divine statement), but the significance of his providing a completely different reading of the verse – such as would show up clearly in translation – should not be understated. Modern exegetes should be expected to address this reading and provide any defence they can offer for reading the terms *qiṣāṣ*, *'afw*, etc. in the commonplace way, beyond the continuity of tradition.

The placement of this verse within the sura is an important factor in determining its meaning, particularly within the hermeneutical trends that emphasise literary and structural coherence. Verse 178 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* has long been seen as opening an extended passage outlining legal prescriptions for ‘the newly minted Muslim community’ (as Nevin Reda puts it) after sections on belief and interaction with earlier communities.⁷³ Khan and Randhawa’s account of chiasmic structure contrasts this section (vv. 178–242) with earlier ‘criticism of the Israelites’ (vv. 40–121) which opened with the direct address *yā Banī Isrā'īl*.⁷⁴ The opening of our present verse with the vocative *yā ayyuhā'lladhīna āmanū* (albeit the fourth occurrence of the formula) should be seen in the context of establishing the Muslim identity as successors to the People of Scripture and the formation of society according to the laws and principles of the new revelation. Based on Ibn Taymiyya’s reading of v. 178, we may build on that contrast with the earlier passage by noting the specific criticism of the Israelites for ‘killing each other’ (*anfusakum*, literally ‘yourselves’, vv. 84–86).

In short, our alternative reading becomes more compelling in the light of this structural-historical context: before legislating for new issues, it was important to draw a line under bloody disputes of the past. In the spirit of embracing the new faith, the warring tribes were commanded to settle their accounts as brothers; this is a clearer rationale for the law of *qiṣāṣ* opening this legislative section than any I have encountered. As we have seen, there are historical narrations which indicate that this

process was actually enacted by the Prophet, and these are at least as plausible as – and broadly complementary to – those which assume the verse prescribed the law of retaliation.

Finally, it should be noted how much clearer this reading makes the subsequent verse, which proclaims that ‘there is life for you in *qiṣāṣ*’. While it is not unreasonable to take this to refer to the deterrent effect of the institution of retribution – and some scholars counted the juxtaposition of ‘life’ and ‘retaliatory killing’ in this verse to be among its most compelling rhetorical features⁷⁵ – it is more obvious that the divinely ordained reconciliation between the two Muslim clans was saving lives immediately. Nevertheless, the long-term meaning remains applicable upon this reading: there is life today, and continued life by observing the rulings and implications of this verse.

Q. 2:260 – Abraham and the Birds

In the second case study, we see a greater extent of discussion – both for and against – the alternative reading. Nevertheless, it is marginalised and depreciated overall in the *tafsīr* literature, while appearing in a few translations of the Qur’an since the early twentieth century. One of the core arguments directed against it has been its violation of Muslim scholarly consensus. Along with some other translations, Marmaduke Pickthall’s is vague enough to accommodate both interpretations of the verse in question:⁷⁶

And when Abraham said [unto his Lord]: My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead, He said: Dost thou not believe? Abraham said: Yea, but [I ask] in order that my heart may be at ease. [His Lord] said: Take four of the birds and cause them to incline unto thee, then place a part of them on each hill, then call them, they will come to thee in haste. And know that Allah is Mighty, Wise.

This may be read in accordance with the explanation provided by the vast majority of exegetes: that Abraham was instructed to kill the birds, chop them up, mix their remains, then place a portion of this mixture on every nearby hill. However, since Pickthall has not rendered any of the Arabic words as ‘chop’ or inserted that as a gloss, it is also possible to read this according to the alternative interpretation advanced by the Muʿtazilī exegete Abū Muslim Muḥammad b. Baḥr al-İṣfahānī, whose quote we encountered in the introduction to this paper.⁷⁷ The basic difference in Abū Muslim’s view is that he takes God’s words directed to Abraham not as instructions to resurrect the four birds, but as an illustration of how God performs resurrection. Being a rational demonstration, it is not necessarily the case that Abraham was expected to carry out the instructions.

It appears that most exegetes and translators encountered Abū Muslim via al-Rāzī; however, his opinion is recorded in the earlier – and recently published – commentary of al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101), who states:⁷⁸

The people of exegesis are unanimous that the verse means ‘cut them up’ and that Abraham did chop and mix together their limbs, meat, feathers, and blood – except Abū Muslim Muḥammad b. Baḥr, who denied that and stated: ‘*Ṣīrhunna*⁷⁹ means “make them incline to you” (*amilhunna ilayka*); *al-ṣayr* means to make incline and train to respond, i.e. “make them accustomed to being called and responding to you.” *Then place on each mountain a portion of them* means one of the four [birds]. By *then call them and they will come to you* God draws attention to His power [to do all] things. If He had meant that they should be chopped up, He would have said [the verb and object] *ṣīrhunna* without [the prepositional phrase] *ilayka*.’ However, this is unacceptable (*fāsid*) due to the consensus of the exegetes to the contrary; and because Abraham wanted Him to show him how He gives life to the dead; and because what [Abū Muslim] mentioned is not particular to Abraham.

Al-Rāzī’s presentation of this view is more detailed, beginning with a broad description: ‘When Abraham (peace be upon him) asked Almighty God to give life to the dead, God showed him an example to help him understand it ... the purpose was to mention a tangible example (*mīthāl maḥsūs*) for the life-spirits returning to the bodies with ease.’⁸⁰ He quotes several arguments made by Abū Muslim, including his view that reading ‘slaughtering’ and ‘chopping’ into the verse amounts to ‘inserting something foreign without basis, which is impermissible’, and his responses to attempts by some (in the manner of al-Jishumī) to solve the problem of *ilayka*. We then find a list of arguments that were made in support of the ‘famous’ (*mashhūr*) opinion, starting with the claim of consensus: I suspect that these points are quoted from the *qāḍī* °Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), whose commentary is now lost; al-Rāzī does not make his own stance explicit.⁸¹

From what I can see in Arabic exegetical works, there was little further engagement with this opinion⁸² until the nineteenth century, when al-Ālūsī poured fresh opprobrium upon Abū Muslim’s stance. In addition to being ‘against the consensus of the Muslims’, this view is dismissed in the harshest terms as conflicting with the apparent sense of the verse and with authentic reports – and all that ‘for no purpose at all’!⁸³ Although al-Ālūsī was a master of hermeneutical subtleties, he was unwilling to consider the positive features and effects of this alternative view, despite the reports he referred to being less certain than he chose to admit.⁸⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, several commentaries⁸⁵ produced in the Indian subcontinent adopted Abū Muslim’s view, but without naming him.⁸⁶ The first

major intervention on his behalf came in *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā's (1865–1935) expansion of the lessons of Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) in Cairo.⁸⁷ Riḍā presents the majority view along with a paraphrase of Abū Muslim, including an allusion to a parallel verse which may strengthen his case: *Then He turned to the sky, which was smoke – He said to it and the earth, 'Come into being, willingly or not,' and they said, 'We come willingly'* (Q. 41:11).⁸⁸ He quotes the whole passage from al-Rāzī, then counters each of the arguments against Abū Muslim before concluding that his is 'the most evident reading (*al-mutabādir*) which is supported by context (*yadullu ʿalayhi al-naẓm*)' and praising his 'subtle understanding and strong independence'.⁸⁹

However, this view met renewed critique after being revived in *al-Manār*, most notably from Twelver Shii exegetes. Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1903–1981) alludes to Abū Muslim, and then to 'someone who agreed with him', before responding point by point to the arguments in *al-Manār*.⁹⁰ Before that, he highlights the significance of the wording *kayfa tuḥyī* (*how You give life*) which indicates that Abraham wanted to know details of God's action: to answer this request necessarily involved 'the process being placed in Abraham's hand' in this way.⁹¹ In his narrations section, he mentions a comparable narration from Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq to that attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās in Sunni sources.⁹² As for the Persian commentary *Tafsīr Nemooneh*, published in Arabic as *al-Amthal fī tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-munzal*, its authors (led by Ayatollah Nāṣir Makārim al-Shīrāzī, b. 1927) state explicitly that they only mention Abū Muslim's opinion because it was adopted and promoted by the author of *al-Manār*. Before their own point-by-point explanation, they dismiss that view on the basis that 'striking examples and similitudes neither creates a concrete, witnessed [reality], nor serves as reassurance' for the heart.⁹³ They also deride the attitude of 'certain intellectual exegetes' (*baʿḍ al-mufasssirīn al-muthaqqafīn*) who seem to doubt the occurrence of this supernatural event.⁹⁴

English-language Qur'an translations in the twentieth century present their own story of adoption, deprecation, and suppression of the alternative view. Earlier Orientalist translations followed the standard narrative of 'cut them' (Ross, 1649; Rodwell, 1861) or 'divide them' (Sale, 1734, citing al-Jalālayn). Sale, Rodwell, and Palmer (1880) all refer to Genesis 15, though Palmer does not make the idea of cutting explicit.⁹⁵ The vast majority of translations by Muslims also adhere to the standard view, often explicitly, though sometimes the translation itself is ambiguous and explained in footnotes. Some, like Pickthall above, do not specify.

The first translations to adopt the alternative view explicitly were those from the two branches of the Ahmadiyya movement. However, like the movement's founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, they presented this view without reference to Abū Muslim.

In 1905 came the translation by Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan: ‘Lord said, “Take four birds and tame them to thyself, then place each one of them on a hill, then call them”’;⁹⁶ followed by the influential translation by Muhammad Ali of Lahore in 1917, and the official Qadiani rendering by Sher Ali in 1955. Later, a number of Muslim translators not belonging to that movement adopted Abū Muslim’s view explicitly. Muhammad Asad has *Take, then, four birds and teach them to obey thee; then place them separately on every hill [around thee]*,⁹⁷ and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem has *Take four birds and train them to come back to you. Then place them on separate hilltops*.⁹⁸ The *Study Quran* translation is vague (*Take four birds and make them be drawn to thee. Then place a piece of them on every mountain*), but the accompanying note makes clear that it is supposed to be read in line with this second view.⁹⁹

The case of Abdullah Yusuf Ali is particularly interesting. In his own, 1934 edition, he translated it as *Tame them to turn to thee; put a portion of them on every hill* in contrast to the position of ‘the received Commentators’, and credited the translation of Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar (d. 1954) and the footnote by Maulvi Muhammad Ali for this alternative which ‘commends itself’ as the natural reading of *ṣurhanna*.¹⁰⁰ When this translation was revised and published by the King Fahd Complex in Riyadh in 1987, without Yusuf Ali’s name on the cover, the verse was rendered, strangely, as *Tie them (cut them into pieces), then put a portion of them on every hill*, and the footnote was truncated to remove the alternative view and its sources.¹⁰¹ From what I have seen of subsequent editions by other publishers, the general practice has been to return to the original wording, though the footnote is sometimes truncated similarly. Most curious is the fact that the ‘Yusuf Ali’ translation available on some major websites today is neither of these versions, but instead bears close resemblance to the translation by N.J. Dawood:¹⁰² *draw them to you, and cut their bodies to pieces*.¹⁰³ Leaving aside the question of how this false attribution came to proliferate online, it illustrates that this verse was a locus for interference by known and unidentified agents who found the ‘alternative’ view unacceptable.¹⁰⁴

Table 2 summarises the competing perspectives on this verse, in which Abū Muslim and those who agree with him are juxtaposed with the ‘majority’; both sides contain amalgamated explanations from existing works together with my own elaborations. Likewise, the arguments for and against various points listed here are drawn from the earlier sources as well as *al-Manār* and its respondents. As before, the purpose in analysing the verse phrase by phrase is to highlight the textual strengths and weaknesses of each reading. There are some non-textual considerations highlighted too, and further analysis follows the table along with my conclusions.

Majority Reading of Q. 2:260	Abū Muslim's Reading
<i>wa-idh qāla Ibrāhīmu rabbi arinī kayfa tuḥyī'l-mawtā</i>	
<p>According to the simplest accounts of the majority understanding, Abraham is asking here to witness resurrection with his own eyes. For this to take place, he would have to kill the birds before calling them back.</p> <p>Objection: Abraham was not asking to be reassured that God could revive the dead, but to be shown <i>how</i>; that is not fulfilled by the birds being reassembled at a distance.</p> <p>Response: it was fulfilled by Abraham being made to experience the role of 'resurrector'. God granted him that power temporarily.</p> <p>Counter: there is necessarily a gap between how God performs an act and how a created being carries it out, even with power granted to him.</p>	<p>Abū Muslim's view is often characterised as being based on this <i>irā'a</i> being intellectual demonstration. To 'see' may mean to understand, and the request may be to understand in such a way that equates to clear vision. Cf. Q. 6:75: <i>'Thus [did] We show (nurī) Abraham the dominion of the heavens and the earth so he would be of those possessing certainty.'</i></p> <p>Objection: he already believed with certainty but wanted to observe it physically. This grants satisfaction to the heart, which is different from accepting rational proof.</p> <p>Response [SS]: the sense of 'seeing how' corresponds better to understanding, cf. 'seeing that'. It differs from asking 'explain how' in that the response should involve imagery (not necessarily witnessed by the eyes).</p>
<i>qāla a-wa-lam tu'min qāla balā wa-lākin li-yaṭma'inna qalbī</i>	
<p>This is a significant point of discussion regardless of which of the two perspectives is adopted. Some of the issues have been touched on above.</p>	
<i>qāla fa-khudh arba'atan min al-ṭayri</i> ¹⁰⁵	
<p>In the majority interpretation, this is an actual instruction given to Abraham. God has accepted Abraham's request and is explaining how it will be fulfilled. Although the verse does not state that he carried out the actions, the exegetes generally consider that implicit.</p> <p>However, some entertained the possibility that this instruction, while being about chopping the birds and</p>	<p>While Abū Muslim's reading is consistent with this being a command which Abraham would carry out in order to experience all the steps, he has generally been understood as saying that these 'instructions' were given by way of explanation of how God revives the dead – like a thought experiment. That is to say: 'If you want to visualise it, then imagine that you take four</p>

<p>scattering their remains (the standard view), may have done its work even without the actual process being followed and the results witnessed by Abraham's eyes.</p> <p>Objection: the same could be achieved by killing/chopping one bird, and without putting it far away.</p> <p>Response: these aspects demonstrate the extent of God's power. The birds are generally thought to have been different species, and there may be symbolism in their number and their kinds.</p>	<p>birds, etc.' This could be compared with the rhetorical imperative <i>kūnū hijāratan aw ḥadīdan</i> in Q. 17:50.</p> <p>It is also possible, in this view, to consider the response <i>not</i> to match the request, as understanding the ways of God is, at its core, impossible for the creation. Thus it is to say: 'The closest you can get to understanding this is to take four birds ...', which has been compared with the response to Moses' request to look upon God (see below).</p>
<p><i>fa-ṣurhunna ilayka</i></p>	
<p>There are two opinions regarding the word <i>ṣurhunna/ṣirhunna</i>¹⁰⁶ it is either an instruction to 'incline them' (<i>amilhunna</i>) or 'chop them' (<i>qattī'ahunna</i>).</p> <p>Upon the first, the idea is that Abraham must familiarise himself with the birds so he will recognise them when they return to him. Thus one must read as implied an additional instruction to 'kill them, chop them up and mix their remains'. Upon the second, part of that crucial instruction is given explicitly.</p> <p>Objection: the meaning of the prepositional phrase <i>ilayka</i> ('to you') is unclear if the verb means 'chop'.</p> <p>Response: the preposition evokes an additional verb meaning 'incline', by way of <i>taḍmīn</i> (verbal embedding).¹⁰⁷ Hence it amounts to 'incline them towards you and chop them'.</p> <p>Alternatively, the preposition connects to the preceding verb <i>khudh</i>, i.e. 'take four birds unto you then chop them'.</p>	<p>Abū Muslim rules out the meaning 'cut' for the reason already explained.</p> <p>As for the sense of <i>imāla</i>, it is clearer upon this reading: the birds are to be made to incline towards Abraham, not the reverse.¹⁰⁸ Thus they will be familiar with him and come rushing back upon his call, illustrating how every atom of creation recognises and responds to its Maker.</p> <p>Comments [SS]: the use of this Qur'anic <i>hapax legomenon</i> should also be pondered. Instead of a word denoting clearly either inclination or chopping, an ambiguous term may have been preferred to indicate that, once they are responsive enough to their master, they would fly back <i>even if</i> they were chopped to pieces.</p> <p>Another possibility is that the root <i>ṣawr</i> evokes a connection to the divine creative act of <i>taṣwīr</i>: fashioning things upon their images, and to the</p>

<p>Counter: these readings involve inversion of phrases and events, and are certainly not obvious.</p>	<p>final call that will be made by blowing in the horn called <i>al-ṣūr</i>.¹⁰⁹ This strengthens the parable.</p>
<p><i>thumma'j' al 'alā kulli jabalin</i></p>	
<p>The expression 'every mountain' has given rise to numerous opinions. Some said it means literally every one within Abraham's reach or in his sight. Some said four, to match the number of birds (not necessary) or the cardinal directions. Some said seven.</p> <p>Comment [SS]: it is logically conceivable for the infinitesimally chopped remains to be divided between literally every mountain on earth. Therefore, building on my theory of intended ambiguity (see the right-hand column above), the idea may be: they would be gathered <i>even if</i> they were chopped and spread across all the world's mountains.</p>	<p>If the birds were alive, the expression necessarily denotes four mountains, understood from the expression (i.e. distribute them exhaustively). It has been argued that <i>thumma</i> ('thereafter') fits this reading better, as the training of the birds would take some time.¹¹⁰</p> <p>Objection and response [SS]: it may be impractical to leave a live bird upon a mountaintop. However, it may not be intended as a practical instruction.</p>
<p><i>minhunna juz'an</i></p>	
<p>The word <i>juz'</i>, denoting a 'piece' or 'portion', seems to fit the common interpretation. However, it should be noted that 'a piece from them' is being understood by these exegetes in a very particular way, i.e. 'a portion of the mixture of their remains'. This is not as evident as some have claimed.</p> <p>The word sounds more like a single piece than a portion of a mixture, and it could be read that way in the verse.</p>	<p>Opponents of Abū Muslim's view acknowledge that it is linguistically acceptable for the word <i>juz'</i> to refer to each individual bird.¹¹¹</p> <p>Comments [SS]: since they are being referred to in the context of an illustrative example and being compared to human body parts (and life-spirit) which will be called together for Resurrection, the use of <i>juz'</i> may be a deliberate shift to strengthen this comparison. At this point, the birds are being looked at not as birds, but as fragmented 'parts' after being collected together.</p> <p>The ambiguity might also be intended in another way (see above re: <i>ṣurhunna</i>).</p>

<i>thumma'd^cuhunna ya'tīnaka sa^cyan</i>	
<p>Abraham is told to call them by their names or a sound they recognise, and they will be reassembled and come 'running' (some said this means literally on foot, while others took it as an expression for 'rushing').</p> <p>Objection: the common explanation has it that the birds were resurrected upon those distant summits, so he did not witness anything in reality.¹¹² The fact of God's power was demonstrated to him by the return of the whole birds, but that fact was never in doubt; there is no demonstration here of 'how'.</p> <p>Response: the 'how' is demonstrated by the fact that Abraham was given power to bring the birds back to life by merely uttering a word, like God does upon Resurrection.</p>	<p>Abū Muslim argued that the flow of pronouns works better if they all refer to birds rather than sometimes referring to their remains.¹¹³</p> <p>The birds fly back from their respective positions at haste because they recognise their master. A conceptual comparison could be made with Moses saying '<i>I hurried to You, my Lord, so You would be pleased</i>' (Q. 20:84).</p> <p>Objection: this is achievable by any bird trainer, so there is no miracle for Abraham.</p> <p>Response: the verse need not be read as documenting a miraculous event or emphasising the uniqueness of Abraham. If taken as a verbal demonstration, it has a lasting effect for every reader of the Qur'an.</p>
<i>wa'^clam anna'llāha ^cazīzun ḥakīm</i>	
<p>The relevance of the names is not always given attention. One way of understanding the conclusion according to the standard view is: 'Know that God is able to overturn the laws of nature at any time, but only does so according to wisdom.'¹¹⁴</p>	<p>In contrast with the previous verse which was sealed with the man's admission that 'God is capable (<i>qadīr</i>) of all things', the present one ends with Abraham being told to appreciate the divine attributes of supremacy (<i>'izza</i>)¹¹⁵ and wisdom (<i>ḥikma</i>). The difference suggests that the whole verse has a different purpose. The conclusion is a comment on Abraham's question and the nature of the response, to the effect: the secrets of God's power are beyond anyone's comprehension, and He operates according to perfect wisdom.</p>

Table 2: Competing Readings of Q. 2:260

As we have noted, a number of exegetes explained Abū Muslim's position before rejecting it on textual, contextual, or non-textual grounds (not least appeals to authorities and majorities). While the role of consensus in *tafsīr* deserves deeper investigation,¹¹⁶ Riḍā certainly made light work of dismissing it: 'Nobody could say that the understanding of one group of people is binding upon others. Indeed, Abū Muslim's understanding is the evident one based on the wording of the verse, whereas their explanation is taken from narrations which they imposed upon it.'¹¹⁷ Even with the role of scholarly consensus acknowledged in the context of juristic rulings, one may reasonably question how it should apply to explaining an event recounted in the Qur'an which none of its listeners or readers witnessed directly. While some scholars supported the *ijmā'* doctrine by citing Q. 4:115, it hardly seems fair to accuse people who read this narrative differently as 'following other than the path of the believers'!¹¹⁸

While there is much to be said about this verse and its connection with doctrinal issues, the theological stakes in adopting one or the other interpretation are quite modest. Although the alternative reading was apparently innovated by Abū Muslim (an assumption of which we cannot be certain), other exegetes belonging to his school disavowed it or, like al-Zamakhsharī, ignored it. Neither is it a Mu'tazilī position, nor a modernist, naturalist, materialist one – even though it appealed to Riḍā and Asad, who are associated with such perspectives and motivations.¹¹⁹ There is no point of creed established independently by this verse such that the traditional reading must be defended; for example, if there was no miracle here, there are plenty of other miracles. If the Ahmadiyya adopted this reading to support some of their beliefs, that does not preclude others from agreeing with it on its own merits and for divergent purposes.

An interesting trend in the negative reactions to Abū Muslim's position is the contention that a verbal demonstration would be insufficient as reassurance. However, just as the Qur'an (as 'verbal miracle') is often contrasted with the short-term miracles granted to support earlier true claimants to prophethood, the point in this verse may be that Abraham – and every hearer of the Qur'an – is provided with an insight that settles more firmly in the heart than witnessing one instance of resurrection.¹²⁰

As we have seen, Orientalists and others¹²¹ have often cited Genesis 15 as a similar, presumably related, passage. In my view, the connections are not the most compelling and do little to determine the intent of the Qur'anic verse. The Biblical Abram asks for confirmation of God's promise (not related to resurrection) and is commanded to bring 'a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon (*gozal*)'. He offers the animals then cuts their bodies in half *except* the birds – or singular bird, as it has also been understood. This has been read in Jewish commentary to symbolise either Israel or Rome.¹²² In Christian commentaries, they may represent 'the future spiritual progeny of Abraham', who cannot be divided like the 'carnal people'.¹²³ However it may be, it is understood as a physical event but not a

miraculous one; indeed, it can only be understood as a symbolic demonstration. While the correspondence of certain elements – the question, the animals/birds, and the number four – certainly invite careful consideration, to assume that both stories involve ‘cutting’ would be to beg the question. If there is a connection, it remains possible that the Qur’an has adjusted or subverted the narrative such that cutting is absent. There is a clearer correspondence in Q. 2:260 between the question and the instructions given: either to see resurrection in action, or to visualise it as birds flocking back to their master. While it is true that certain symbolic interpretations have been advanced for each of the interpretations, these only tend to make the purpose of the verse more obscure.¹²⁴

Let us return, then, to Qur’anic context and intratextuality. We have already noted that some commentators discounted Abū Muslim’s view by appealing to one or both stories that precede it directly: Abraham and his debate with Nimrod, then the man who was raised after being dead for a hundred years (Q. 2:258–259). Both refer to God’s power to give life and death: the first contains a verbal appeal to natural phenomena, namely God’s power to bring the sun from the east; the second involves at least one supernatural occurrence and physical proof, namely the preservation of the man along with his food and drink for a whole century.¹²⁵ To this may be added the resurrection of his donkey from its decayed bones before his eyes, as exegetes typically explain the verse.¹²⁶ Does this entail that the third verse must also involve a physical proof? The implication of some objections to the alternative reading, that the core meaning pertains to physical miracles or the uniqueness of Abraham, is certainly unpersuasive.

In his contextual-flow-based exegesis *Naẓm al-durar*, al-Biqā‘ī (d. 885/1480) argued, drawing from the commentary of al-Ḥarāllī (d. 638/1241),¹²⁷ that the common thread in the passage is proofs for resurrection. They note the progression from a stubborn disbeliever, to a sceptic (who may have had some faith), then to a believer who sought full certainty of heart.¹²⁸ Based on the majority view (which al-Biqā‘ī follows), we see that Nimrod claimed to have power to give life, then Abraham was granted some of that power; according to the alternative view, he was only granted deep understanding – because that power is God’s sole preserve, as Q. 2:258 states. We might also argue, combining al-Biqā‘ī with Abū Muslim, that there are three kinds of proof described in succession: an appeal to a consistent law in creation, then proof via a miracle, and then a rational proof. Another subtle connection between the two Abraham stories is the imagery of God ‘bringing forth’ the sun (*ya’ṭī bi’l-shams*), which he mentions after Nimrod rejects the notion that Abraham’s *rabb* possesses exclusive ability to give and take life; then the latter incident shows him that the resurrection occurs when everything comes rushing back to its master (*ya’ṭinaka sa‘yan*). This correspondence is clearer upon Abū Muslim’s reading, especially if we posit that they are in reverse chronological order: so Abraham went before Nimrod carrying this certainty and that proof.¹²⁹

Finally, we consider comparable passages elsewhere in the Qur'an. Gabriel Reynolds makes a connection to the disciples in Q. 5:113, who asked for the table from heaven so '*our hearts will be reassured (tatma'innu qulūbunā)*',¹³⁰ and were granted what they asked for. Perhaps more can be made of the similarity of this to Moses' request to see God, which includes the same word *arinī*: a literal rendering would be '*Show me, so I may look upon You*' (Q. 7:143). As Riḍā argued, it may be that in each case, the prophet asked for something that involved direct experience of divinity; each was directed to something else: the maximum that could be granted to a human being. For Moses, that was to see God's majesty manifest upon a mountain; for Abraham before him, it was to understand the power of the creative word 'Be'.¹³¹

Conclusion

In the two preceding case studies, we have not only considered the possible meanings of these verses with diverse and fascinating themes, but paid particular attention to how specific readings – which, as I have argued, are persuasive – have been advanced but then critiqued or simply overlooked in exegetical works through history and to the present day. In general, those who were bold enough to break free from the orbit of received tradition gave 'flight' to alternative opinions, which then charted a path through the written record, not necessarily finding safe landing. Such opinions sometimes generated exegetical 'fights' and were dismissed by opponents as flights of fancy.


The examples discussed provide much material for further exploration of *tafsīr* and adjacent genres (including Qur'an translations, which, as we have seen, may amplify some views depreciated in exegetical works), and invite deeper examination of key terms – such as *zāhir*, *ishkāl*, and *ijmā'*^c – and how they are understood and deployed particularly in exegetical contexts. By tracing the reception of the 'alternative' opinions against the dominant interpretations, we have seen how certain readings have been considered more evident and literal than others, but the phrase-by-phrase analysis showed that claims of the clarity of the dominant view are overstated in places.¹³² Indeed, some exegetes were explicit in noting the problems in their explanation of the verse (Q. 2:178), while seeing no preferable alternative. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that both views can have strengths and weaknesses which are weighed against each other, both in their treatment of the wording and broader contextual factors.

In my view, more consideration should be given to the possibility that both alternatives are intended on some level, and that the ambiguity encountered in some Qur'anic verses is a feature of their literary construction. If the standard rulings of retaliation can yet be derived from the *qiṣāṣ* verse even with Ibn Taymiyya's reading being treated as its primary sense, then a similar argument can be made for the birds verse, as suggested in Table 2. It is not always possible for competing readings to hold true in the same way (as al-Jaṣṣāṣ suggested for Q. 2:178), but it may be argued that

one reading reflects the outward sense of the verse, while the other is taken as an esoteric reading, for example. More than just a compromise in the fight over the meaning – saving the majority from being completely ‘wrong’ – I propose that combining Abū Muslim’s reading with elements from the majority interpretation gives rise to the most fitting solution to puzzles thrown up by some of the ambiguous wording.¹³³

While Ibn Taymiyya is receiving increased scholarly attention in his role as an exegete, numerous other authors whose works are discussed above deserve far more attention, not least Abū Muslim al-Īṣfahānī (whose exegesis, along with ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s, remains to be discovered). Qur’anic Studies can only be enriched by broader and closer engagement with *tafsīr* and adjacent genres which record the hermeneutical thought and debate of past centuries.

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NOTES

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2 See Saleh, ‘Historiography of *tafsīr*’.

3 A case study is discussed in Saeed, ‘The Shāhīn Affair’.

4 The term is more clearly defined in the contexts of non-canonical recitations (*qirāʾāt*) and anomalous *ḥadīth* reports. The recent book by al-Dahsh, *al-Aqwāl al-shāhdha*, p. 86, makes it equivalent to a variety of terms indicating ‘mistaken’ *tafsīr* (such as *gharīb*, *munkar*, *bidʿa*), though the author notes (p. 23) that he has not encountered a clear definition. He does not limit the causes to violating consensus but includes opinions that fail on methodological or credal grounds. He further distinguishes this type from the *marjūh* (‘non-preponderant’) which is nevertheless *maqbul* (p. 90); hence it would have made sense for him to use the term *mardūd* in contrast.

5 al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 6, p. 2,322. For the genre of works presenting and critiquing ‘strange’ or ‘deviant’ exegetical opinions, see al-Dahsh, *al-Aqwāl al-shāhdha*, pp. 76–85. An additional term used in the curriculum of al-Azhar University is *al-dakhīl fī l-tafsīr*.

6 See al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr waʾl-mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, p. 252. This has led otherwise careful readers to misattribute opinions to al-Rāzī: I intend to document examples in a future publication.

7 Cf. Walid Saleh’s observation about ‘contrarian readings ... buried deep in the tradition so that they are incapable of breaking free from the pull of the accepted understanding of a given verse’, and that such readings may be ‘compelling enough to make us realize that the verse’s apparent meaning was not far from their grasp had they wished to see it’. However, it remains to be seen whether either of our case studies will ever effect the kind of ‘hidden reversal’ Saleh describes as having occurred frequently in the exegetical tradition (Saleh, ‘Meccan Gods’, p. 95).

8 This quote from Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib is in Ibn Juzayy, *al-Tashīl*, vol. 2, p. 223. The other terms are quoted from various authorities by al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, vol. 7, pp. 468–469.

9 This attitude can sometimes be observed in a subtler form, such as when Ibn Juzayy (d. 741/1357) introduces all the opinions under a particular verse with the noncommittal *qāla* ('it has been said').

10 See for example al-^cAlwānī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 27, 34. While I am less pessimistic about the genre of *tafsīr*, I have coined the phrase *ḥijāban ma'thūran* (evoking Q. 17:45) to describe the particular problem of seeking and accepting explanations without comparing them to the explained text or attempting to understand it in its own right.

11 Ibn Taymiyya highlighted this reality in the context of 'complementary differences' (*ikhtilāf al-tanawwu'*) in the explanatory glosses of the Companions and Successors (Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, pp. 42–43). The same can be said of explanations by the Prophet, as Ibn ^cĀshūr argues concerning *al-maghḍūbi 'alayhim* and *al-dāllīn* (Q. 1:7) that their identification with Jews and Christians, respectively, was only by way of an example familiar to the Arab listeners (Ibn ^cĀshūr, *al-Tahrīr wa'l-tanwīr*, vol. 1, p. 199).

12 Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, discusses a variety of terms used in Islamic scholarship. On the problem of language transmission, see al-Rāzī, *The Great Exegesis*, p. 39.

13 There are some works on 'rules for preponderance', such as al-Rūmī, *Dirāsāt fī qawā'id al-tarjīh*, which is based on the exegetical choices of al-Rāzī. The author counts among these principles that 'one must not divert from the plain sense (*zāhir*) of the wording except on the basis of a transmitted or rational evidence' (vol. 2, pp. 697–758). Ibn Juzayy, *al-Tashīl*, vol. 1, p. 86, lists eight rules affecting his own preferences, the seventh being 'that the meaning is the most readily apparent (*al-mutabādir ilā al-dhihn*), which is evidence of its clarity (*zuhūr*) and correctness (*rujūhān*)'.

14 Texts requiring such interpretive manoeuvres are often designated *mutashābih* and contrasted with the *muḥkam* verses (the dichotomy derived from Q. 3:7). However, identifying which verses belong to each category faces a problem of subjectivity. The genre documenting ambiguous passages was pioneered by Mu^ctazilī scholars such as the *qāḍī* ^cAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī. See the preface to his *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*, p. 51, then the main text, pp. 8–9; also Mourad, 'Introduction to the *Tahdhīb*', pp. 111–112.

15 The term used for possible readings (not necessarily the *zāhir*) is *muḥtamal*, literally 'borne'.

16 Conceptually, any opinion not derived from *waḥy* ('inspiration to the Prophet or others') is essentially *ra'y* before it is potentially *ma'thūr* (i.e. recorded and transmitted). For early debates over *ra'y*, see Birkeland, 'Old Muslim Opposition'.

17 This sometimes occurs in published works, but often in other media such as internet posts discussing a particular verse. The example of Subḥānī is given below under both verses.

18 An equivalent term used is *qawad*, with the sense that a person is 'bound and led' to their death if guilty of murder. Apart from this passage, the word appears in Q. 2:194, *wa'l-ḥurumātu qiṣāṣun*, and Q. 5:45, *wa'l-jurūḥa qiṣāṣun*. I am leaving aside the question of whether its meaning should be interpreted reductively, or the Qur'an itself uses it in more than one way. The law of retaliation is known in broader (and Biblical) contexts as *lex talionis*.

19 Usmani, *The Noble Qur'an*, p. 49. The footnote glosses *qiṣāṣ* as 'retaliation in offences of murder or grievous hurts' but specifies that this verse deals only with the first. To my knowledge, there is no translation that follows Ibn Taymiyya's reading, including Salafī ones – the clearest sign would be rendering ^c*uḥfiya* in terms of 'surplus' instead of 'pardon'/'remission'.

20 Also important are Q. 5:45 which references the ruling provided in the Torah, and Q. 17:33 which points to authority which has been granted to the heir (*walī*).

21 My present study faces an obvious question: should Ibn Taymiyya be discussed among works belonging to the genre of *tafsīr*? Younus Mirza notes that historical sources 'frequently' list Ibn Taymiyya as a *mufasssīr*, although this aspect of his contribution tends to be overlooked in

contemporary biographies (see Mirza, ‘Ibn Taymiyya as Exegete’, pp. 39, 62). In his final imprisonment at the Citadel of Damascus, in response to a student’s request for Ibn Taymiyya to compile a full exegesis, the latter described his intent only to clarify verses which have proven difficult for many exegetes before him (see Baraka, *Ibn Taymiyya*, p. 73, citing Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, *al-Uqūd al-durriyya*). However, he only managed to write a little before his materials were taken away (Baraka, *Ibn Taymiyya*, p. 181). The description seems to correspond to the collection bearing the extraordinary title *Tafsīr āyāt ashkalat ‘alā kathīr min al-‘ulamā’ ḥattā lā yūjad fī ṭā’ifa min kutub al-tafsīr fihā al-qawl al-ṣawāb bal lā yūjad fihā illā mā huwa khaṭa’*, which does not contain Q. 2:178 (see editor’s introduction to Ibn Taymiyya, *Tafsīr āyāt ashkalat*, vol. 1, pp. 94–96). The commentary on Q. 2:178 is also not mentioned among the exegetical treatises listed by his student Ibn al-Qayyim (Baraka, *Ibn Taymiyya*, p. 90. See also Saleh, ‘Radical Hermeneutics’, p. 155 n. 5, re: Ibn Taymiyya’s exegetical authorship).

22 The exegetical writings of Ibn Taymiyya cited in this paper are all found in the broad compendium known as *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, originally published around 1962, and of which volumes 13–18 concern *tafsīr* directly. There are several other collections of his exegesis; I benefited from *Tafsīr Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, vol. 1, p. 413, in locating multiple discussions of Q. 2:178 within the *Majmū‘*.

23 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 861.

24 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 862. This narration fits the alternative opinion in that it ends by saying ‘the Prophet squared them off against each other’ (*fa-qāṣṣahum ba‘dahum min ba‘d*), but the preceding part of the explanation is unclear to me in this regard: ‘the freeman would pay the bloodwit of a freeman, etc.’ (*‘alā an yu‘addī al-ḥurr diyat al-ḥurr*). It also has it as a Muslim clan versus a non-Muslim Arab one under covenant.

25 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 862, here with two clans (*ḥayy*) of the *Anṣār*. Again, it states that the Prophet reconciled between them (*yusliḥ baynahum*) and seems to be saying that each category was offset against its equivalent (*fa-ja‘ala al-nabī al-ḥurr bi’l-ḥurr*, etc.). However, it also brings in the factor from the other explanation, namely that the stronger clan were demanding more. Cf. Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 293–294, which gives a ‘standard’ narration (from Sa‘īd, see below) then states that Abū Mālīk said similar. That narration also indicates that it was abrogated by Q. 5:45.

26 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 863. The first includes the comment from one of the narrators, Shu‘ba, that it was a kind of truce between them (*ka-annahu fī ṣulḥ ... iṣṭalahū ‘alā ḥādḥā*).

27 See al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsū‘at*, vol. 3, p. 287. I used square brackets to display how al-Ṭabarī himself presented the names and the discrepancy between the two ways of naming al-Sha‘bī (in the same broad context).

28 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 862.

29 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 868.

30 ‘*Man baqiya lahu min diyat akhīhi shay’ aw min arsh jirāḥatihi fa’l-yattabi‘ bi-ma‘rūf*’ (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 868). While there are at least two main views concerning the identity of this ‘brother’, the explanation of Ibn Taymiyya differs markedly from both.

31 The fact that Ibn Kathīr operated independently from this teacher of his has been demonstrated well in Mirza, ‘Was Ibn Kathir the Spokesperson?’. Their readiness to disagree with al-Ṭabarī is seen in another paper by Mirza, ‘Ishmael as Abraham’s Sacrifice’.

32 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 494.

33 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 495. Al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035) attributes this to various others alongside Sa‘īd, namely al-Sha‘bī (who is named by Ibn Taymiyya as advocating the alternative view), al-Kalbī, Qatāda, Muqātil b. Ḥayyān, and Abū’l-Jawzā’. He attributes

to Sa'īd that they were the Aws and the Khazraj. The alternative view is attributed in this text to 'al-Suddī and a group' who explained *qiṣāṣ* in terms of 'equivalence' (see al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 4, pp. 353–355). From the same century, see the commentaries of Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 437/1045), and al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058). All these works mention the alternative view without endorsing or refuting it. In consulting these commentaries (and others below) chronologically, I was helped by the online tool *al-Jāmi' al-tārīkhī* at mobdii.com.

34 It is frequently claimed in exegetical works that the Qur'anic ruling was a mercy in that Jews were obligated to implement life-for-life, and Christians were obligated to pardon. For some discussion of this passage and its possible relation to Biblical laws, see Azaiez et al., *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, pp. 68–72. Holger Zellentin notes that 'The Qur'ān combines aspects of the rabbinic and the Christian attitude, reflecting its notion of the continuity of the Torah and the Gospel.' However, Michael Pregill observes: 'Initially, it seems unclear whether the penalty of retaliation (*qiṣāṣ*) for murder being simultaneously reiterated and ameliorated here is the Biblical *lex talionis* (Exod 21:23–25, Lev 24:19–20, Deut 19:21) or merely a tribal custom.' Guillaume Dye suggests, somewhat in line with our 'alternative' view, that the allusion is to grades of bloodwit: 'Je suis donc tenté d'interpréter le texte autrement, et d'y voir une allusion au principe de compensation (qui est précisément la manière dont la *lex talionis* était comprise à l'époque): les dommages sont proportionnés au statut social de la victime ...'

35 Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, vol. 14, p. 323; it is the last narration in the chapter *Anna al-Muslimīn tatakāfa' dimā'uhum*. I found this via al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsū'at*, vol. 3, p. 287, but the page reference there appears to be incorrect.

36 This gloss may be from Sufyān or another of the narrators.

37 See works by Ilkiyā al-Harrāsī (d. 504/1110), and Ibn al-Faras (d. 597/1201), which summarise the roles of al-Sha'bī and Sufyān in the same way. Al-Qurṭubī's exegesis, basically a broadened *aḥkām* work, mentions it as the fourth in a group of explanations (*al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 190).

38 *A'fū al-liḥya* (al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, pp. 164–201).

39 al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, pp. 185–187: '*wa-laysa yamtani' an yakūn jamī' al-ma'ānī allatī qaddamnā dhikrahā 'an muta'awwiliḥā murāda bi'l-āya.*' It may often be that several *asbāb* accounts can hold true. As far as the meanings are concerned, there is flexibility in the word *qiṣāṣ* such that it could be read in both ways. However, it does appear impossible to understand the phrase 'freeman for freeman, etc.' in both ways without contradiction.

40 Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 96.

41 Of course, I intend 'problematic' with respect to how to read and understand it. I will not delve into juristic details beyond what is necessary, let alone broach the various ethical questions surrounding these points of scripture, law and society.

42 Ibn ʿAshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa'l-tanwīr*, vol. 2, p. 137.

43 Muṣṭafā Zayd summarises al-Ṭabarī as presenting four approaches to the verse (Zayd, *al-Naskh*, vol. 2, pp. 147–150). The second is that of al-Sha'bī et al., but, as Zayd notes, all the first three views are attributed to al-Sha'bī. Only the fourth assumes that the verse was initially applied with this disparity between categories, then abrogated by the ruling of equality in Q. 5:45. Zayd notes two sets of problems with this. First, chronological problems: Q. 5:45 describes the ruling in the Torah, so, if they contradict, Q. 2:178 would be the abrogator of the prior dispensation (*shar' man qabl*). (See also the commentaries of Ibn ʿAṭīyya, al-Qurṭubī, and al-Ālūsī on this point.) As for the other related verse, Q. 17:33, that is a Meccan revelation and could not abrogate the verse of *al-Baqara*. Second, historical problems: there are narrations stating that the Prophet enacted equality in retaliation between man and woman, but none supporting the literal application of Q. 2:178 which was allegedly abrogated. Revenge was

already prevalent, so the purpose of *qīṣāṣ* (even upon its commonly understood meaning) was to lessen bloodshed. As such, Zayd argues, any *naskh* would have gone in that direction rather than limiting the forms of retaliation at first and then granting more (such as man-for-woman).

44 This includes *ḥadīth* reports, especially ‘Muslims are equivalent to each other in blood (*al-muslimūn tatakāfa dimā’uhum*)’, recorded by various authorities and graded by al-Tirmidhī as *ḥasan*.

45 Attributed to °Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is the view that, in cases where the ‘higher’ is killed for the ‘lower’, the heirs of the victim must repay half of the bloodwit to the heirs of the guilty party.

46 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū° al-fatāwā*, vol. 28, pp. 374–378.

47 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū° al-fatāwā*, vol. 30, pp. 325–326.

48 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū° al-fatāwā*, vol. 5, pp. 81–82.

49 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū° al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 79.

50 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū° al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, pp. 79–80.

51 See, for example, the commentaries of al-Shawkānī (d. 1255/1839), Riḍā (1865–1935), al-Sa°dī (1889–1956), and Ibn al-°Uthaymīn (1925–2001). Re: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1866–1914), Pieter Coppens kindly showed me a letter the Syrian reformist scholar sent to Muḥammad Naṣīf, in which he states that he ‘adorned’ his own commentary *Maḥāsīn al-ta°wīl* with everything he could find of the exegesis of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, noting that ‘the exegetes after them did not concern themselves with quoting from them, and I was distressed to see their insightful conclusions (*tahqīqāt*) about many verses going to waste’. Coppens suggests that much of the material he quotes from Ibn Taymiyya was uncovered by al-Qāsimī himself in the libraries of Damascus with the help of the Shaṭṭī family and Ṭāhir al-Jazā°irī.

52 Dihlawī, *al-Fawz al-kabīr*, p. 101.

53 Dihlawī, *Faḥ al-Raḥmān*, p. 28.

54 Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding*, p. 139. Mustansir Mir criticised this (in its original Urdu) as ‘needlessly drawn out’ but did not make clear that it is based on a highly implausible reading of the *bā°* and the repetition of the terms *al-ḥurr*, etc. (see Mir, ‘Some Features’, pp. 236–237). This reading appears to originate with Maulvi Muhammad Ali (one of the founders of the Lahore Ahmadiyya, 1874–1951) in his Urdu translation, first published in 1922. The 1917 English translation advances this reading only in the footnote (Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān*, p. 79), which may explain its lack of uptake among subsequent translators. Yet another alternative, perhaps even further removed from the Arabic syntax, is found with Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (1893–1985), who relies heavily upon the Urdu translation *Tafseer sagheer* ascribed to Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad (1889–1965), the second caliph of the Qadiani Ahmadis: ‘exact it [retribution from the freeman if he is the offender, from the slave if he is the offender, from the woman if she is the offender]’ (Khan, *The Quran*, p. 28).

55 al-Farāhī, *Ta°līqāt*, vol. 1, p. 59.

56 See Iṣlāhī, *Pondering*, pp. 443–450, and cf. the English translation of Ghamidī’s *al-Bayān*, p. 134: ‘such that if the murderer is a free-man, then the same free-man should be killed in his place ... and if the murderer is a woman, then the same woman shall be killed in her place.’ The question here is: to whom does the pronoun refer in ‘his place’ and ‘her place’?

57 Subḥānī, *al-Burhān*, pp. 258, 261–262. He sees the passage context as concerning financial propriety, in which people are urged to hand over what is due (pp. 263–264). Concerning the standard interpretation, he presents six ‘problems’ (*ishkālāt*) (pp. 250–257); the most original concerns the ‘ambience’/‘tone’ (*jaww*) of the verse compared to others which concern corporal punishments (pp. 252–253). However, it remains plausible that Q. 2:178 touches on retaliation (even indirectly, as Ibn Taymiyya holds) while focusing on the ‘lightening’ (*takhfīf*), balanced by the severity of Q. 4:93 concerning the punishment of the hereafter. A more fundamental problem

with Subḥānī's reading is that the role of the phrase *fa-man ʿufiya* etc. becomes unclear if it refers to waiving part of the bloodwit, as he suggests (p. 262, comparing with *taṣadduq* in Q. 5:45, which he explains with reference to Q. 4:92) – in short, what is the *ittibāʿ* and *adāʿ*?

58 This is a point of difference between this case study and the next one, in which the first proponent of the alternative view was after the period of the *salaf* (the first three generations of Muslims) and belonged to a 'heterodox' sect. The present case raises questions about the notion of *tafsīr bi'l-maʿthūr*, which Ibn Taymiyya is known to have advocated: is that what he was doing here by selecting a depreciated view that, nevertheless, existed in the old collections?

59 Hindī, *Ikhtiyārāt*, vol. 2, pp. 321–335.

60 He states (*Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 74) that this view '*yazḥar min wujūh*', which may simply mean that it defeats the other on the basis of evidence. I return to the question of *zāhir* later.

61 See Hindī, *Ikhtiyārāt*, vol. 2, p. 328 for more.

62 As is often the case with Qur'an citations intended as supporting parallels, the relevance depends upon the interpretation of Q. 60:11. Ibn Taymiyya understands that a Medinan man whose wife joins the unbelievers in Mecca is to be compensated from general Muslim funds, including that which would otherwise be owed to a Meccan man whose wife joined the Muslims. The point is that 'members of the collective based on solidarity, in that they support one another mutually, are like a single person' (*Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 83).

63 Ibn ʿĀshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa'l-tanwīr*, vol. 2, pp. 135–136.

64 Ibn Taymiyya also says concerning slaves that they are valued the same in this context: any disparity is 'overlooked' (*Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 81).

65 al-Rāzī gives the wording *muqtaḍā al-zāhir* and states that a man is killed in retaliation for a woman only via the proof of consensus (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 3, p. 56).

66 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 80. He uses the terms *luzūm*, *tanbīh*, *faḥwā*, and *awlā*, the latter ('a fortiori') because the 'lower' category would obviously be killed for murdering the 'higher'.

67 Like *ukht* (literally 'sister') in Q. 7:38 and Q. 43:48, the word can be taken metaphorically to refer to one's like and counterpart.

68 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 77, and cf. the adjacent expression: *faḍala lahu min muqāṣṣat akhīhi muqāṣṣa ukhrā*.

69 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 78.

70 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 14, p. 82.

71 Ibn ʿĀshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa'l-tanwīr*, vol. 2, p. 142.

72 See al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, pp. 177–181, which assesses Ibn Taymiyya's own framing of the issue as having divergent views within that juristic school. In this paper, I consider Ibn Taymiyya's relationship to al-Shaʿbī to be like Rashīd Riḍā's to Abū Muslim (discussed below), in that each selected and amplified the earlier 'alternative'. However, a key difference is that Riḍā had to defend his view against earlier critique.

73 See for example Drāz, *al-Nabaʿ al-ʿaẓīm*, p. 258, and Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, p. 16. The same point has been made by exegetes such as Abū'l-Suʿūd, *Irshād*, vol. 1, p. 292. However, Reda, in *The Al-Baqara Crescendo* (p. 104), considers the legislative section to start at Q. 2:152; she characterises v. 178 as one piece of law for 'what to do when things go wrong' (p. 148). Upon Ibn Taymiyya's reading, this could become 'how to start off on the right foot'. Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, pp. 108–111, cites Q. 2:178 among several verses which William Montgomery Watt considered 'isolated' from their contexts, then responds with Iṣlāḥī's explanation (see Iṣlāḥī, *Pondering*, p. 443).

74 Khan and Randhawa, *Divine Speech*, pp. 209–210. Cf. Klar, ‘Text-Critical Approaches, Part Two’, p. 84; I am not necessarily arguing for the ‘complex circular plan’ about which Klar expresses scepticism, but the basic idea of contrast is straightforward. This paper also mentions Bell’s hypothesis that the second part of Q. 2:178 – from *fa-man* ^{‘ufiya} – was a later addition intended to replace Q. 2:179, which lauds *qiṣāṣ* (p. 92). Such speculation could only arise if the ^{‘afw} portion is taken to contrast with *qiṣāṣ*, whereas they are the same topic in Ibn Taymiyya’s reading.

75 See in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 5, pp. 1,593–1,597.

76 Pickthall, *The Meaning*, p. 60.

77 Abū Muslim’s exegesis is no longer extant and it seems that al-Rāzī has been pivotal in recording many of his opinions, particularly his alternatives to claims of abrogation. Rashwani, in ‘al-Ḥākīm al-Jishumī’ (p. 152), observes that the selections presented by al-Jishumī and then al-Rāzī give the impression of a free-thinking interpreter who pays little heed to the conclusions and methods of most exegetes.

78 al-Jishumī, *al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 2, p. 1,020. Mourad has understood al-Jishumī’s position to be that ‘the exegete is not restricted by the range of opinions reached by earlier scholars’; and that ‘he understood Qur’anic exegesis as a battlefield’ (‘Introduction to the *Tahdhīb*’, p. 112). In this instance, al-Jishumī has opposed a fellow Mu‘tazilī with an appeal to consensus. Rashwani (‘al-Ḥākīm al-Jishumī’, p. 151) describes how, under Q. 38:33, the author inclines towards Abū Muslim’s reading but then rejects it on the basis of an opposing consensus (see al-Jishumī, *al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 8, pp. 5,991–5,998). Much later, the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974) characterised Abū Muslim’s explanation of Q. 2:260 as being ‘based upon the wording’ (*mabnī* ^{‘alā al-alfāz}) with no attention to context. This challenges the common charge that his reading conflicts with the plain sense of the verse. For Abū Zahra, the purpose of the verse is to attribute to Abraham ‘a miracle in which life is given to the dead perceptibly (*bi’l-ḥiss al-mu‘āyan*) despite the modality (*kayfiyya*) being unknown, just as the man [in Q. 2:259] was made perceptibly to die and brought back to life’ – hence the point was to make the matter so clear as to make asking ‘how’ redundant (*Zahrat al-tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 966–967).

79 I have vocalised *ṣirhunna* here according to the cited root *al-ṣayr*, but the footnote records other manuscripts with *al-ṣawr*, hence *ṣurhunna*. In the introduction (al-Jishumī, *al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 1, p. 56), the editor notes that most early copies of the work vocalise the Qur’anic text according to the narration of Qālūn from Nāfi‘ (which would provide *ṣurhunna*), which he states was the most used by Zaydīs, Yemenis, and most Mu‘tazilīs. However, in a striking display of what I call ‘Ḥaḥṣonormativity’, he explains that his edition adopts the narration of Ḥaḥṣ from ‘Āṣim simply because it is the dominant one today! While this does not affect the present verse (since ‘Āṣim and Nāfi‘ agree), my point is that we do not know for certain which reading(s) Abū Muslim intended in his analysis.

80 al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, pp. 43–44.

81 As we shall see, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā would later read al-Rāzī as siding with the majority, and with good reason: his presentation of Abū Muslim’s view appears negative overall, unlike some other junctures where he quotes him. However, it is clear that the points are quoted from elsewhere, and al-Rāzī’s patterns of citation throughout his *Mafātīḥ* suggest that he was accessing Abū Muslim via ‘Abd al-Jabbār, who often provided a rejoinder; both have long been accessible to us only via al-Rāzī, who also adds a defence of Abū Muslim at some junctures (see under Q. 2:58 and 222, and Q. 9:36). In reaching this conclusion, I was helped by a recent collection entitled *Tafsīr al-qāḍī* ‘Abd al-Jabbār, edited by Khuḍr Nabḥā, who lists (p. 13) the *qāḍī*’s citations of Abū Muslim. An additional clue is that al-Rāzī goes on to cite ‘*al-qāḍī*’ under a later point on the same verse (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 45). The case of al-Ṣafadī (see the following note) is also relevant to this textual history. In conclusion, it appears that Riḍā’s retorts should have been directed at ‘Abd al-Jabbār.

82 One exception, dated to soon after al-Rāzī but far less famous, is the recently published commentary of Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Şafadī (d. 696/1296). He does not mention al-Rāzī as far as I have noted, but he describes his own access of Abū Muslim via ʿAbd al-Jabbār, which he ‘consulted at al-Madrasa al-Fāḍiliyya in Cairo in 675 [AH]’ (al-Şafadī, *Kashf al-asrār*, vol. 3, p. 247) – this suggests that ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s commentary was accessible (with some difficulty), while Abū Muslim’s may have disappeared. Under Q. 2:260, al-Şafadī gives an interpretation that is broadly in accordance with the common reading, but adds: ‘Ibn Baḥr [i.e. Abū Muslim] said: Abraham did not chop the birds; rather, when God said that to him, he was satisfied and his heart became at rest with certainty, so he no longer needed to see it with his eyes. Hence God did not say of him as He did of the one in the preceding [verse], *once it became clear to him* [i.e. by physical witnessing]. This is a convincing point’ (*Kashf al-asrār*, vol. 1, pp. 294–295). Notice that al-Şafadī does not touch upon the core issue in Abū Muslim’s view, namely the lack of chopping; as such, his account combines the two approaches: it is a verbal description of a supernatural event. As I understand him, he also makes a subtle argument for the ‘chopping’ besides the denotation of *şurl/şir*: the instruction to place a piece on ‘every mountain’ implies making it into as many small pieces as possible. However, subsequently, he explains the need for the mountains to be close by so that Abraham could see the birds’ revival, and so that they could return on foot in a timely fashion. Abū Muslim’s view is subsequently mentioned in Abū Ḥayyān’s *Baḥr*, al-Nīsapūri’s *Gharāʾib*, and Ibn ʿĀdil’s *Lubāb*. Al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, vol. 3, p. 438, attributes a similar view to an unnamed scholar (who must be subsequent to Khālīd al-Azharī, d. 905/1499, as he cited the latter’s *Sharḥ al-tawḥīd*), namely that *ruʿya* describes understanding, not physical vision; and that it is possible that Abraham did not carry out the instructions, which were comparable to explaining a recipe for ink.

83 al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, vol. 3, p. 439.

84 Under this verse, al-Ālūsī mentions only a few reports from early authorities. Only one, from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, has direct bearing on the question of the birds being cut up (al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, vol. 3, p. 437) and it is unclear why it would be binding. A broader collection of narrations, 110 pertaining to the whole verse, are in al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsūʿat*, vol. 4, pp. 523–542; rather than attempt to assess the credibility of individual reports (of which only one tangential report is attributed directly to Muḥammad), I will present some general observations regarding these materials. First, numerous narrations have Abraham wondering (upon seeing the corpse of a man, or a beast, donkey or whale) how God would bring back all the parts together after being consumed by numerous different animals – and birds! – of prey. Some suggest that he was really asking for confirmation of his status as God’s intimate friend (*khalīl*), or that the hardship he faced from his people would be lifted. Second, while most of the narrated exegesis of *şurhunna* explains that it means ‘chop’ (*shaqqiq*, *qatṭiʿ*, *mazziq*), it may be that these glosses (and the ascription to the *nabaṭī* or *ḥabashī* languages) were needed precisely because other meanings were more obvious. Third, a group of narrations describe this as a similitude (*mathal*) which God presented to Abraham: this depends on ascribing the birds’ revival to Abraham, so he would grasp by analogy *how God will* gather and raise the dead from every direction, at any distance.

85 Among them is Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908): see the Urdu collection of his exegesis, *Tafseer Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad*, vol. 2, pp. 441–443, where his explanations are reproduced from the 1903 *Al Hakam* newspaper issues of 28 February (part of an essay) and 24 April (a transcribed answer to a question), along with a shorter comment from his *Izālat-i awhām* (from around 1891, written in the context of defending his view that Jesus died a natural death). The interpretation was then elaborated by his son and the second caliph of the Ahmadiyya movement, Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad in his partial exegesis *Tafseer kabeer*, vol. 2, pp. 600–604. That explanation was then translated almost directly in Ahmad, *The Holy Quran*, vol. 1, pp. 409–411. This five-volume work, first published in 1947, spans the full Qur’an and is based on Mahmud Ahmad’s notes as well as the published Urdu work: it was compiled by

Sher Ali (whose Qur'an translation also accords with this interpretation), Mirza Bashir Ahmad (another son of the founder) and Malik Ghulam Farid. This sequence of commentaries does not make reference to its precedent in *tafsīr* works, nor do non-Ahmadi works make reference to this version. As 'Promised Messiah' for this movement, Ghulam Ahmad seemed to be presenting his interpretation as divinely inspired. His son Mahmud Ahmad, as well as describing the standard view as 'clearly wrong' (p. 411), provided a symbolic reading of this story such that each bird's return represents 'the rise of a fallen nation', twice for the Israelites and twice for the Ishmaelites: 'the final rise is being arranged by God through the Ahmadiyya Movement ... they are now being given a new life by Ahmad, the Promised Messiah' (pp. 410–411). He also states, in line with the commentary of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), that this verse describes a vision. By shifting the meaning of the verse towards the revival of nations, it becomes unclear why the birds were placed *alive* on those hills. The resemblance should also be noted with the rabbinical interpretation of Genesis 15 discussed later in this article, at which point we also note the remarks of Muhammad Ali of the Lahore branch of the Ahmadiyya. As we shall see, translators from the two branches of this movement were the first (at least in English) to translate the verse upon the alternative view.

86 Another significant example was a nemesis of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, namely Thanā³-Allāh Amrītsarī (1868–1948), leader of the the Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement (Amrītsarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, p. 68.) While his earlier Urdu translation maintained the standard view, this Arabic commentary (first published in India in 1902) places the alternative in the main text and relegates the standard view to a footnote with the instruction to 'choose as you please.' In the foreword, the editor of this Saudi edition describes the controversy Amrītsarī faced from fellow Salafīs in India and Saudi Arabia (pp. 17–21); he also adds a parenthesis to the author's footnote: 'But the first interpretation chosen by the author does not entail Abraham being shown how God revives the dead, so what is the point in this interpretation?' Martin Riexinger, *Sanā'ullāh Amrītsarī*, p. 341, describes the specific charge by °Abd al-Ḥaqq Ghaznawī (in a treatise *al-Arba'īn* critiquing 40 junctures of Amrītsarī's exegesis) that the latter was beholden to the Mu'tazilī 'mulḥid' Abū Muslim. Amrītsarī's response appeared in a counter-treatise, also in Urdu, entitled *al-Kalām al-mubīn fī jawāb al-arba'īn*; at the time of this paper's publication, I have only had access to a partial copy. From what I can see, Amrītsarī does not ascribe his interpretation to Abū Muslim, but does argue that it is valid to take sound opinions from 'deviant' individuals. See also Riexinger, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Worldview', pp. 502–513, which includes an account of Riḍā's meeting with, and defense of, Amrītsarī at the Islamic World Conference in Mecca in 1926.

87 °Abbās, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, vol. 2, pp. 97–99. He notes °Abduh's frequent citations of Abū Muslim (p. 63).

88 The editor of the Tawfīqiyya edition has noted in the margin of vol. 3, p. 49: 'This statement of Abū Muslim is distortion (*tahrīf*) [of scripture] which conflicts with what is apparent from context, and contradicts the statements of the Predecessors (*salaf*).' I compared the first edition (1927), vol. 3, p. 57, against the original journal *Majallat al-Manār* (April 1906), p. 183, and found that four important lines of text were elided by error in this and subsequent editions. In them, Riḍā begins his response to al-Rāzī by saying that the strongest of his arguments concerned the *juz'* but that 'a *juz'* of a group is one individual, and a *juz'* of an individual is a piece'. He then says that it is strange that al-Rāzī, the expert *uṣūlī*, would think that *ijmā'* is relevant to an issue like this. After all, 'there are many verses which al-Rāzī and others understood differently from all preceding exegetes (*wa-kam min āya fahima al-Rāzī ...*).'

89 Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 3, p. 51.

90 al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, vol. 2, pp. 372–375; in other contexts, he does name Riḍā as his interlocutor (e.g. vol. 7, p. 210).

91 al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, vol. 2, p. 372. Similarly, Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī (d. 1998) explains that Abraham had to be made the resurrector by power granted by God. On a somewhat contradictory note, he mentions the possibility that Abraham did not carry out the

operation after it was explained to him, since the Qur'an does not state explicitly that he did so (al-Sha^crāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha^crāwī*, vol. 2, pp. 1,154–1,155).

92 al-Ṭabāṭabā³ī, *al-Mīzān*, vol. 2, p. 383.

93 al-Shīrāzī et al., *al-Amthal*, vol. 2, pp. 94–96.

94 al-Shīrāzī et al., *al-Amthal*, vol. 2, p. 97.

95 I have referred to the scanned editions on quran-archive.org. A similar pattern can be seen in other languages: Arrivabene (Italian, 1547), Bibliander (Latin, 1550), and Du Ryer (French, 1647) all refer to cutting: see on quran12–21.org.

96 Khan, *The Holy Quran*, pp. 95–96. His footnote explains how the birds represent 'the atoms of the universe' which 'shall come together by [God's] call.' He also considers the possibility that this was shown to Abraham in a vision, and that it corresponds to the event described in Genesis 15. Abdul Hakim Khan's translation represents the pioneering role played by the Ahmadiyya in Qur'an translation, though he abandoned the movement after its publication. In 1914, other separatists led by Muhammad Ali formed the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. They raised doctrinal and procedural disputes when Ghulam Ahmad's son, Mahmud Ahmad, was appointed as his second caliph in Qadian. The much larger body which followed Mahmud Ahmad and his successors is known formally as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at. Its headquarters moved from Qadian to Rabwah (Chenab Nagar, Pakistan), then Tilford in England. My use of the common shorthand designations 'Qadiani' and 'Lahori' should be understood against this background.

97 Asad, *The Message*, p. 59. His footnote states that he is following the 'primary meaning' of *ṣurhunna*, and that 'The moral of the story has been pointed out convincingly by the famous commentator Abū Muslim (as quoted by Rāzī)'.

98 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 30. He sides with Abū Muslim (again via al-Rāzī) against the majority of classical commentators. However, the translation he offers for that majority opinion, *Then place them separately on hilltops*, does not make the distinction clear.

99 Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, p. 114. The translation and commentary of this sura is by Caner Dagli, who cites '(R)', i.e. al-Rāzī, without noting that it is actually Abū Muslim's view.

100 Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān* (1934), p. 106.

101 Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān* (1985), p. 119. It may be justified by the gloss *awthiqhunna* attributed to Ibn ^cAbbās: see al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsū'at*, vol. 4, p. 533.

102 Dawood, *The Koran*, pp. 361–362. Thanks to Conor Dube for spotting this resemblance.

103 See, for example, Quran.com and Islamawakened.com (both accessed August 2021). The latter does contain two versions, but the Dawood wording is mistakenly ascribed to the King Fahd Complex. Sideeg, "Translating "Invisible Meanings"", pp. 81–85, makes the same error.

104 A similar case is the French translation of Muhammad Hamidullah (1959), revised by the King Fahd Complex (1990) to insert the gloss 'et coupe-les' and remove the translator's marginal note which drew upon *Tafsīr al-Manār*. Before this, in an open letter to the Saudi king himself, Hamidullah criticised the tampering with Yusuf Ali's translation; when the same was done to his, he disavowed the revised version. See the blog post by Mouhamadou Khaly Wélé, 'Muhammad Hamidullah's French Translation, as Revised by the King Fahd Complex (2000)' at quran12–21.org/en/contexts/hamidullah. The point is also illustrated by the editorial remarks in Arabic editions of the commentaries by Amritsarī and Riḍā, as described above.

105 The wording here allows for the common exegetical view that they were four different types of birds; it may even suggest it, while exegetes assume that only four birds were taken in total. A narration to this effect ('a peacock, a rooster, a crow, and a pigeon') was explained by Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) in terms of vices which a person must 'kill' to enjoy eternal life: see this with further elaboration in al-Qūnawī, *Hāshiyat al-Qūnawī*, vol. 5, p. 422. One may question how this imagery works, given that the birds (hence the corresponding vices) were

resurrected. Moreover, it must be noted that these spiritual allusions (al-Bayḍāwī uses the term *īmā*^o) cannot be extracted from the Qur'anic text; rather, they compete with the central point about seeking certainty regarding revival of bodies and souls. For the various alternative lists of bird species (including herons, ducks, and vultures), see al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsū'at*, vol. 4, pp. 532–533; an intriguing detail is Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq's (d. 150/767) ascription of the first list above to earlier scripturalists (*ahl al-kitāb al-awwal*) despite its lack of correspondence to Genesis 15 or any other known text (see also p. 542).

106 The latter is ascribed only to Ḥamza among the Seven canonical readers, but among the broader Ten, it is also vocalised with *kasra* by Khalaf (also from Kufa) as well as Abū Ja'far (Medina), and Ya'qūb (Basra) in the narration of Ruways. Both are attested among the Companions and early generations (see Makkī, *al-Kashf*, vol. 1, p. 359). It is generally accepted that they are two dialectal variants, and each one can mean either 'incline' (similarly *uḍmum*, ['gather'], or *wajjih*, ['direct']) or 'chop' – al-Fārisī (d. 377/987), *al-Ḥujja*, vol. 1, pp. 521–522, provides poetic citations for these usages. However, some differentiated between them, arguing that *ṣur* means 'incline' and *ṣir* means 'chop', e.g. Ibn Khālawayh (d. 370/980), *I'rāb al-qirā'āt*, p. 61; on this basis, he expresses his preference for the former reading. Al-Mahdawī (d. 440/1048), *Sharḥ al-Hidāya*, pp. 395–396, states that *ṣur* can only mean 'chop', whereas *ṣir* has both meanings. The position of al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) is often reported as *ṣur* = both, *ṣir* = 'chop', but I understand him to be saying the opposite, namely that *ṣur* = 'incline', *ṣir* = both (see al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 174). Al-Farrā' also speculates that the meaning of 'chop' has come from the root *ṣ-r-y* by way of metathesis. The possibility of it being an Iraqi Aramaic (*nabaṭī*) or Syriac (*suryānī*) loan meaning 'chop' is also mentioned in some sources (see the comments of Jabal, *al-Mu'jam al-ishtiqāqī*, vol. 3, p. 1,213). The root is attested in Old South Arabian: the meaning 'to cut off, separate' is noted in Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary*, p. 146. Al-Jishumī argued that the core meaning of the root is *qat'* and that the sense of 'inclining' to something arises from being relatively 'cut off' from other things (*inqiṭā' ilā al-shay' bi'l-mayl ilayhi*) (*al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 2, p. 1,017). Hence the two senses come together if the phrase is translated as 'make them devoted solely to you.'

107 *Taḍmīn*, usually rendered as 'inclusion' or 'implication', is when a verb is coupled with the particle which normally accompanies a different verb. In this way, the latter is implied alongside the explicit verb.

108 The same explanation is given by al-Ḥarālī upon the standard reading, as quoted in al-Biqā'ī, *Naḥm al-durar*, vol. 1, p. 511.

109 See, for example, Q. 64:3, Q. 78:18. The semantic connection between these words can be seen in Jabal, *al-Mu'jam al-ishtiqāqī*, vol. 3, p. 1,214: the *ṣūra* is the form and image that defines a thing ('cuts it off' from others), and the *ṣūr* is so named for its curvature ('inclination').

110 Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, vol. 3, p. 51. Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī counters this by saying that Abraham chopping and distributing them would take just as long (*al-Mīzān*, vol. 2, p. 375), though this point should refer to familiarising himself with them and chopping them. I have not seen a direct discussion of the subsequent *thumma*, i.e. between placing them and calling them. This could denote the period of time in which their remains decompose (on the standard view), or the time for them potentially to forget Abraham (on the alternative).

111 al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 44. Subḥānī (*al-Burhān*, p. 391) cites two verses to back the point that 'a *juz'* of a group is not the same as a *juz'* of an individual': Q. 15:44 and 43:15 – the former, cited earlier by Amrīsarī and Mahmud Ahmad, is clearer in this regard.

112 Unless, as some exegetes reported, he had kept hold of the birds' heads!

113 al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 44. However, as al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī points out, it is not unreasonable for him to have directed a creative address (*khiṭāb takwīnī*) to reconstitute their essences (*al-Mīzān*, vol. 2, p. 374), just as God says 'Be' to a thing before it exists.

114 al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, vol. 3, p. 440.

115 Riḍā glosses this divine name as 'al-ghālib alladhī lā yunāl' (*Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 3, p. 51).

116 For a traditionalist overview, see al-Ṭayyār, *al-Taḥrīr*, pp. 269–285. Al-Khuḍayrī's short compendium *al-Ijmā' fi'l-tafsīr*, pp. 111–125, lists 'causes of an exegete going against consensus.'

117 Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 3, p. 50.

118 See al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, vol. 4, pp. 35–66, for debate over this proof-text. A further consideration: even if consensus occurs that a verse *does* have a particular meaning, that is a lesser matter than consensus that it *must* mean that.

119 See °Abbās, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, vol. 2, pp. 68–86; Hammad, *The Gracious Quran*, vol. 2, pp. 79–81.

120 al-Biqā'ī describes the certainty delivered by this proof – to the reader of the Qur'an, not only to Abraham – as being beyond 'ilm al-yaqīn to reach 'ayn al-yaqīn, a level usually describing something witnessed directly (*Naẓm al-durar*, vol. 1, p. 508). If Abū Muslim's reading is more effective with respect to this aim, that could be another factor in its favour from a confessional perspective.

121 The assumption of continuity with the Bible is maintained in a different way by Muhammad Ali who, like the Qadiani Ahmadis, considered the subject to be not physical resurrection, but the fate of nations. He argues in a lengthy footnote to his translation (*The Holy Qur-an*, pp. 124–125) that the Genesis account is 'quite meaningless' and 'only shows that the text here has been tampered with.' For him, Abraham's question in the Qur'an is equivalent to the Biblical 'Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit [Canaan]?' but the Qur'anic response alone is effective in demonstrating how God has 'the power to control all those causes which govern the life and death of nations.' He further appeals to the word *ṭā'ir* for 'bird' also signifying 'the cause of good and evil' as in Q. 7:131, before criticising the 'puerile story' maintained by the exegetes, even al-Rāzī.

122 The identification with Edom, i.e. Rome, is based on reading *gozal* as an attribute: 'it was a turtle-dove, but of a predatory nature' (*Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1, p. 371). Explaining the non-division of the bird(s), this commentary attributes to R. Abba b. Kahana, in R. Levi's name, 'that he who attempts to resist the wave is swept away by it, but he who bends before it is not swept away by it.' The footnote in the Soncino translation explains that 'Only by such a course could the bird – symbolical of Israel – be saved from being cut up and destroyed.' Cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 15:9–12; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 28:3.

123 Augustine in *The City of God*, as cited by Stemberger, 'Genesis 15', p. 157. This paper also sheds light on interpretations of Abraham's question in Genesis 15:8 which suggests doubt in God's promise of the land. Christian commentators tended, for theological reasons, to dismiss that reading: one strategy was to read the question as pertaining to 'how' (p. 152). Some Jewish commentators, in contrast, and possibly in reaction, considered it a sinful, unbelieving question which even brought about his descendants' enslavement in Egypt (p. 156).

124 With the standard view, see above for al-Bayḍāwī's symbolic reading. For the alternative, we have also described the Qadiani and Lahori Ahmadi explanations. As for the Structural Coherence school: al-Farāhī argued that 'The example of the birds corresponds to the state of the Jews, as they were dispersed but would be gathered together by God by the lamp of prophethood and their acceptance of Muḥammad, as promised by Moses and mentioned in the Torah and the Qur'an' (*Ta'liqāt*, vol. 1, p. 81). This was ignored by his student Iṣlāḥī, who criticises the 'live birds' view without attribution (Iṣlāḥī, *Pondering*, p. 616). Subḥānī, for his part, has his own alternative to the alternative, as we saw also under Q. 2:178. He concurs with Riḍā that the words do not denote chopping (Subḥānī, *al-Burhān*, pp. 390–391), but does not mention Abū Muslim. His own interpretation is that Abraham was asking for confirmation of the glad tidings he was given, and was shown through these instructions that 'the hearts that turn away and deny this call

today will come running to it tomorrow' (pp. 392–395); he further assumes that this verbal reassurance was sufficient (pp. 398–399). It is noteworthy that Subḥānī departs from the plain sense of the verse selectively (especially *tuh̄yī al-mawtā*); moreover, while he elaborates at length on some points, he leaves the explanation of the parable, as he sees it, with little clarification: how do the birds correspond to people who already rejected Abraham? What is meant by the imagery of placing them on mountains and then calling them?

125 See Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, pp. 100–102; Hoyland, 'The Language of the Qur'an', p. 37. To see how the narrative 'makes sense' to Muslim exegetes without the appeal to intertexts, see al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 37.

126 Alternatively, it is said that the man had decomposed partially, so the reference is to his own bones (al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 38). In contrast, °Abduh and Riḍā took this to point to the general laws in creation: how beings are assembled, not resurrected (*Tafsīr al-manār*, vol. 3, pp. 45–46).

127 The former has been studied in various publications by Walid Saleh, including his entry 'al-Biqā'ī' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE*. For the latter, see Casewit, 'Harmonizing Discursive Worlds'.

128 al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar*, vol. 1, pp. 508–509; cf. Subḥānī, *al-Burhān*, pp. 47–52.

129 With these observations, I have not attempted a full account of the passage structure. Cf. Subḥānī's view (*al-Burhān*, pp. 384–389, 400–402) that the running theme is that 'God is the possessor and granter of life ... so [any nation who seeks life and posterity should hasten towards Him' and fight in His cause – linking this to preceding verses (including Q. 2:243). He reads Q. 2:259 as carrying the same message as the story in Ezekiel 37, but he insists that the man in the Qur'anic story was an unbeliever, possibly Nebuchadnezzar.

130 Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, p. 102.

131 Riḍā states that this answers al-Rāzī's complaint that the alternative view grants 'nothing special' to Abraham: it may be said, instead, that it shows that *even he* could not hope for that direct experience of 'the secret of creation and life' (*Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 3, p. 51).

132 The alternative view of Q. 2:178 uses the basic sense of *qiṣāṣ* rather than the developed legal term, which makes it more evident as the reading of the verse; the rest is quite intuitive (though arguably °ufiyya is less obvious). Abū Muslim's reading of Q. 2:260 is also more evident when one does not presuppose a supernatural event taking place (though the word *juz'* may give pause). As we have shown, these two terms are attested within the Qur'an itself with their 'alternative' meanings.

133 Some may suggest the reverse: that Abraham witnessed the physical resurrection of the birds, but that the alternative reading allows for readers of the Qur'an to keep witnessing the underlying meaning.

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