

Prof. Robert Gleave

The Irrelevance of “Quranic meaning”: Akhbārī Shī‘ī interpretive techniques and the legal verses of the Qur’an

The great Akhbārī scholar Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d.1186/1772) say that there are (at least) two Akhbārī opinions on the possibility of interpreting the Quran . There are those who say the meaning of the Quran is as clear to every reader as it was to the Imams – thereby making themselves “equal” to the Imams in terms of interpretation; then there are those who deny the possibility of interpreting the Quran independent of the sayings (*akhbār*) of the Imams. It was the latter position which represents the majority Akhbārī view. For these Akhbārīs, the only proper interpretation (*tafsīr*) is that of the Imams; any individual attempt to understand the Quran is not only likely to be incorrect: it is a denial of the Imams’ role as the true interpreter of the Qur’an. The term *ta’miya*/blindness – i.e., the community is “blind” to the Quran’s true meaning without the Imams’ *tafsīr* – was on occasions used to refer to this doctrine, and it was used to refer to both theological and legal verses. On the latter, Akhbārī Quran commentators used the Imams’ legal dicta to restrict the possible references of the Qur’an, control the reading of the Quran and to eliminate ambiguity. In this paper, I aim to explain the various Akhbārī doctrines on the interpretation of the legal verses of the Quran through an examination of the works of so-called Akhbārī *mufasssirs* (‘Abd al-Ālī al-Ḥuwayzī, Hāshim Baḥrānī, Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, and Mīrzā Muḥammad Akhbārī). For these authors, *tafsīr* was not a place to explore the richness and diversity of Qur’anic meaning; rather it was an opportunity to restrict the legal relevance of the so-called “first source” of the Sharī‘a.



Prof. Robert Gleave

University of Exeter

Robert Gleave is Professor of Arabic Studies, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. His areas of research focus are Islamic law and legal theory, with a particular emphasis on the role of messianism in the history of Shi'i Jurisprudence. He is author of '*Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*' (Edinburgh, 2012) and co-editor of '*Violence in Islamic Thought: from the Quran to the Mongols*' (Edinburgh, 2014).