We have spoken in previous chapters of an alleged conflict between reason and revelation. Yet the notion that "reason" might contradict "revelation" means little until we define each of these two entities and determine exactly how it is that each one allegedly contradicts the other. When philosophers, theologians, and others assert a contradiction between reason and revelation, this typically means that what are taken to be the unimpeachable conclusions of reason are found to be incongruent with the "literal" (ḥaqīqa) or obvious (ẓāhir) sense of the revealed texts\(^1\) (and, most important for Ibn Taymiyya, what those texts assert about the nature and attributes of God). According to Ibn Taymiyya, such thinkers essentially take the rational faculty and its deliverances as primary and require that the language of the revealed texts be (re)interpreted in congruence with reason. In other words, for the philosophers and the rationalistic mutakallimūn, the meaning of revelation is ultimately determined not by anything inherent in the texts but on the basis of (allegedly) certain and universal rational conclusions that are reached independently of the texts. Such conclusions can—and, in fact, often do (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the school in question)—contradict the plain sense of revelation, which is then

---

\(^1\) Wolfhart Heinrichs translates "ḥaqīqa" as the "literal, proper, veridical meaning or use of a given word." Heinrichs, "On the Genesis," 115. For an exhaustive treatment of the development of "literal meaning" in Islamic legal hermeneutics, including the meaning and development of "ḥaqīqa," "ẓāhir," and related terms, see Gleave, Islam and Literalism, the main thesis of which is summarized in Gleave, "Conceptions of the Literal Sense (ẓāhir, ḥaqīqa) in Muslim Interpretive Thought." For a discussion of "apparent" (ẓāhir) meaning—in light of its relation to ḥaqīqa expressions, figurative usage (majāz), and the legitimacy of taʾwīl—in the legal theory of the influential sixth-/twelfth- to seventh-/thirteenth-century Shāfiʿī jurist and theologian Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), who is representative of the mature uṣūl al-fiqh tradition, see Weiss, The Search for God’s Law, 463–472.
declared to harbor a “true” meaning that, unsurprisingly, coincides precisely with what has been derived through reason. Ibn Taymiyya sees this tendency exhibited in its most extreme form by the Muslim philosophers, who reduce revelation primarily to the status of an ethical motivator for the masses and essentially deny it any real role as a purveyor of metaphysical, ontological, or even theological truths—truths that, in the final analysis, can be known (by an elect few) through reason alone. Less extreme manifestations of this tendency mark the Muʿtazilī school as a whole and even, as Ibn Taymiyya regularly laments, later new-school Ashʿārī orthodoxy as represented, for instance, by the enthusiastically rationalistic Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.²

In diametric opposition to this tendency, Ibn Taymiyya insists that the true meanings of the revealed texts are, in one manner or another, entirely embedded in the language of those texts themselves. This obviates (or at least minimizes) the need to appeal, for a proper understanding of revelation, to any factors or considerations extrinsic to the texts, including—indeed, especially—the deliverances of abstract rational speculation as practiced by the philosophers and theologians.³ We have seen in previous chapters that Ibn Taymiyya’s overriding concern in the Darʾ taʿāruḍ is to vindicate a plain-sense understanding and straightforward affirmation of the divine attributes predicated of God in revelation over against the rationalists’ negation (nafy) or nullification (taʿṭīl) of any of the said attributes. He insists that this way of affirmation was the consensus approach and understanding of the Salaf, and for that reason it remains uniquely authoritative throughout time. The kinds of rational objections (muʿāriḍ ʿaqlī) raised by various theological schools usually involve the claim that a given revealed attribute (such as the possession of a hand or face, or the act of descending or settling upon the throne), if affirmed of God in accordance with the obvious sense (ẓāhir) of the texts, would entail a “likening” (tamthīl) or “assimilation” (tashbīh) of God to created beings and thus infringe upon the radical uniqueness of God’s divinity and His utter dissimilarity to anything tainted by creatureliness, contingency, or limitation of any kind.

² In his study on al-Rāzī’s ethics, Ayman Shihadeh speaks of al-Rāzī’s “reputation for being an exceedingly confident rationalist, which indeed he lives up to in the absolute majority of his works.” See Shihadeh, Teleological Ethics, 182. On al-Rāzī’s disillusionment with the rationalist project and later epistemological skepticism as expressed, for instance, in his late works al-Maṭāliḥ al-ʿāliya and Risālat Dhamm ladhdhāt al-dunyā, see Shihadeh, 182–203.

³ This does not, of course, mean that Ibn Taymiyya recognizes no role for what he deems to be pure and unadulterated reason (ʿaql ʿarīḍ) and sound rational inference (naẓar ḥasan / ḥusn al-naẓar). In fact, these play a central role in understanding revelation correctly and, he contends, are positively encouraged and even modeled by revelation itself.
Yet if Ibn Taymiyya’s project essentially consists in affirming and defending a plain-sense reading of scripture while refuting the rational objections that allegedly disqualify such a reading, then does this make of him the simple-minded and crass literalist his detractors have so often accused him of being? Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of interpretation, for instance, was “almost always understood by his opponents as a dogmatic denial of the existence of majáz [figurative usage] in the language or as a naive call directed at the adherents of ta’wil for the abandonment of the attention they give to non-apparent meanings in the Qur’ānic and Sunnī texts.”

In a similar vein, it has been noted that “subsequent tradition, even those who viewed Ibn Taymiyya favorably, understood his rejection of majáz as a sign of an anthropomorphic literalism rather than as a proposal of a whole alternative model of communication.” Ibn Taymiyya for his part—and for all his insistent and unabashed affirmationism with respect to the divine attributes—in no wise sees himself as a mushabbih, or “assimilator,” and, in fact, he explicitly condemns any view or doctrine that he considers to entail tashbih or tamthīl. How, then, does he propose to base the interpretation of revelation exclusively on textual and linguistic factors without falling prey to a reactionary and unyielding literalism? How does he purport to disavow ta’wil in favor of the apparent sense (ẓāhir) of the texts without succumbing to the odious assimilationism of tashbih? And finally, how does he argue for the hermeneutical independence of the texts from the speculations of the philosophers and their “rational conclusions” (ma’qūlāt) without undermining his own larger project, which consists not in excluding reason per se but in rehabilitating it, restoring it to what he deems to be its pure form and demonstrating its inherent congruence with revealed scripture?

The answer to these and similar questions requires a nuanced understanding of Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of the meaning of revelation, for prior to taking up the question whether revelation asserts anything that conflicts with reason, we must naturally first know what it is that revelation affirms. In the current chap-

---

4 Mohamed Yunis Ali [hereafter Yunis Ali], Medieval Islamic Pragmatics, 88. On the reception history of Ibn Taymiyya from the eighth/fourteenth to the thirteenth/nineteenth century, see El-Rouayheb, “From Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytāmī,” esp. 271–287 for the reception—often overtly hostile—of Ibn Taymiyya as a crass literalist (ḥashwī) and corporealist (mujassim).

5 Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 58, n. 113. On the relative lack of influence of Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of language and meaning even on fellow Hanbalis (before the current day), see Gleave, 26, n. 66 as well as Gleave, 58, n. 113, where the author remarks that “it seems that Ibn Taymiyya’s critique was only really understood by his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya.” On the implications of the centuries-long obscurity of Ibn Taymiyya’s linguistic theory as well as the newfound influence of his (and Ibn Qayyim’s) approach on current-day Ḥanbalī, and especially Salafī, ʿuṣūl al-fiqh discussions, see Gleave, 176–184.
ter, I answer these questions by synthesizing hundreds of disparate statements related to language and interpretation that appear throughout the Darʾ in an attempt to delineate the overriding principles of Ibn Taymiyya’s “philosophy of language” and hermeneutics of revelation as he developed and employed them in his magnum opus. As this chapter demonstrates, Ibn Taymiyya’s views on language and the interpretation of texts as elaborated in the Darʾ are very much in accord with the linguistic and hermeneutic principles he presents elsewhere in his expansive oeuvre. Specifically, the philosophy of language and hermeneutics that emerge from the Darʾ taʿāruḍ broadly confirm and reinforce the doctrines that Ibn Taymiyya lays out in his Fatāwā and Radd ʿalā al-mantiqīyyīn, as well as in his main treatise dedicated explicitly and singularly to the question of Qurʾānic interpretation, Muqaddima fi uṣūl al-tafsīr. Stated briefly, Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to the interpretation of revelation—and, indeed, of language generally—can be said to rest on the twin pillars of context (siyāq, qarāʾin) and linguistic convention (ʿurf). These pillars are backed up by the discrete interpretative utterances of the Salaf and predicated on the preeminent clarity (bayān) and lack of ambiguity implicit in the Qurʾān’s repeated characterization of itself as “clear” and “manifest” (mubīn). For Ibn

6
See Yunis Ali, Medieval Islamic Pragmatics, 87–140 (namely, chap. 4, “Ibn Taymiyyah’s Contextual Theory of Interpretation”), which is the most thorough and technical treatment to date of Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of the workings of language and the proper understanding of discourse. In addition to Fatāwā and Radd, Yunis Ali also draws, to a lesser extent, on Ibn Taymiyya’s Kitāb al-Īmān. (By contrast, the Darʾ taʿāruḍ is referenced only twice in the course of his 48-page treatment.)

7
See Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima fi uṣūl al-tafsīr. For a presentation and analysis of this work, see Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics.” For a partial translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s Muqaddima, see McAuliffe, “Ibn Taymiya: Treatise on the Principles of Tafsir,” 35–43.

8
The word mubīn (clear, manifest) occurs in the Qurʾān a total of 118 times as a qualifier of various objects, such as bounty (al-faḍl al-mubīn), victory (al-fawz al-mubīn—twice), the Truth (al-ḥaqq al-mubīn—twice), misguidance (ḍalāl mubīn—nineteen times), Warner (nadhīr mubīn—twelve times, once with the definite article), conveyance [of the message] (al-balāgh al-mubīn—seven times), enemy (ʿaduww mubīn—nine times), and others. As a qualifier denoting the clarity of the Qurʾān itself, the term occurs on eight occasions (modifying various nomina referring to the Qurʾān), at Q. al-Nisāʾ 4:174 (nūran mubīnan); Q. al-Mā’ida 5:15 and al-Naml 27:1 (kitāb mubīn); and Q. Yūsuf 12:1, al-Shuʿarāʾ 26:2, al-Qaṣaṣ 28:2, al-Zukhruf 43:2, and al-Dukhān 44:2 (al-kitāb al-mubīn). On two occasions, the Qurʾān states that it was revealed in a “clear Arabic tongue” (lisān ʿarabī mubīn) (Q. al-Naḥl 16:103 and al-Shuʿarāʾ 26:95), and on two other occasions, it refers to itself simply as a “clear Qurʾān” (Qurʾān mubīn) (Q. al-Ḥijr 15:1 and Yā Sīn 36:69). Finally, at Q. Ṭalʿa 32:38, we encounter the single occurrence in the Qurʾān of the related nominal form bayān (clarity; elucidation): “hādhā bayānun lil-nāsi wa-hudan wa-mawʿiẓatun lil-muttaqīn” (This [Qurʾān] is an elucidation for mankind, and guidance, and an admonishment for the God-fearing).
Taymiyya, the statement that revelation is “clear” essentially means that it is lucid, unambiguous, and fully self-explanatory without any need for recourse to extra-textual sources such as speculative reason.\(^9\)

In what follows, we first examine Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of the contextual interpretation of language, which is a paramount feature of his hermeneutics. This will necessarily involve a brief preliminary discussion of the question whether language contains figurative usage (majāz). If Ibn Taymiyya is found to reject taʾwīl, along with the notion of metaphor or figurative use presupposed on its behalf by the philosophers and later theologians, then what of the famous Qurʾānic verse, Āl ʿImrān 3:7, concerning muḥkam (supposedly “literal”) and mutashābih (supposedly “figurative”) verses that some claim endorse taʾwīl or the related procedure of tafwīḍ? Furthermore, how does Ibn Taymiyya propose to reject the notion of figurative language as it is traditionally understood while avoiding a crude literalism, particularly with regard to the divine attributes? An exploration of these and related questions is followed by an examination of several illustrations of Ibn Taymiyya’s contextual hermeneutics as brought to bear on representative “problematic” texts from the Qurʾān and hadīth that are normally deemed unsalvageable without recourse to taʾwīl as understood by the later tradition (that of the mutaʾakhkhirūn).

In the latter portion of the chapter, we take up the second principal pillar of Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretive theory, which involves privileging known linguistic convention (ʿurf) over rational speculation when interpreting words and texts. In this vein, we first explore Ibn Taymiyya’s theoretical reasons for prioritizing convention in the interpretation of scripture, then we consider his account of the various ways in which language conventions change over generations and across various technical specializations, giving rise to “vague and ambiguous terms” (alfāẓ mujmala mushtabiha) that Ibn Taymiyya blames for numerous grave distortions in the understanding of revelation. Such importance does Ibn Taymiyya attach to this notion of “ambiguous terms” that he goes so far as to contend that “the majority of disagreements among rational thinkers are due to an equivocity of terms (ishtirāk al-asmāʾ).”\(^10\) Correspondingly, he asserts that a proper clarification and analysis of terms is often sufficient to settle a signif-

---

\(^9\) See Ibn Taymiyya, Darʾ, 5:373–374 for a statement about why revelation must be clear and manifest in this sense. For the development of the ideas of clarity (bayān, nass, zāhir, etc.) and ambiguity (ijmāl, ibhām, tashābuh, etc.) in Islamic hermeneutical thinking from al-Shāfiʿi through representative figures of earlier Muʿtazili and Ashʿarī thought and culminating with the dominance of the mature uṣūl al-fiqh paradigm, see Vishanoff, Formation, 50–56, 123–125, 162–165, and 238–240, respectively.

\(^10\) See, e.g., Darʾ, 1:233, lines 4–6; 1:299, lines 3–4.
icant number of theological and philosophical disagreements. After a discussion of the method Ibn Taymiyya employs for disambiguating such expressions, we close with an illustration of this method in practice via his analysis and deconstruction of the key terms wāḥid (one), tawḥīd (oneness of God), and tarkīb (composition) that were so hotly contested in Islamic theological and philosophical circles before and during his time.

1 Taʾwīl and the Meaning of Qurʾān 3:7

Ibn Taymiyya, as mentioned, affirms that revelation is fully independent in conveying its meanings with certitude, but how can we determine what those meanings are? In fact, one may contend, we know from the Qurʾān itself that revelation contains non-literal usage, that some of its verses are “clear” and others “ambiguous,” and that the ambiguous passages have a non-literal, figurative meaning that must be determined through the application of taʾwīl. Ibn Taymiyya, however, maintains that this is not the case: the texts of revelation do not, in fact, endorse what is meant by the term taʾwīl in the (later) usage of the philosophers and mutakallimūn.11 The common later definition of taʾwīl as “diverting a word from its apparent sense (ẓāhir) to its non-preponderant (marjūḥ) meaning”12 is, Ibn Taymiyya contends, a convention found among “some of the later scholars,” one that was not available at the time of revelation or for generations thereafter. This being the case, the word taʾwīl cannot legitimately be interpreted as carrying this meaning where it is used in the Qurʾān. Ibn Taymiyya seeks to substantiate this view by citing numerous early authorities who vouch for only two meanings of taʾwīl, to the exclusion of the third, technical (iṣṭilāḥī) meaning that involves deflecting a word from its apparent

11 One of the most thorough studies to date of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on the fraught question of taʾwīl is al-Julaynid, al-Imām Ibn Taymiyya wa-mawqifuhu min qaḍiyyat al-taʾwīl.

12 “ṣarf al-lafẓ ‘an ẓāhirihī ilā ma’nāhu al-marjūḥ,” as defined by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Asās. For a detailed presentation and analysis of al-Rāzī’s explanation of taʾwīl in the Qurʾān, based on his extensive exegesis of Q. Al Ḥārām 3:7 concerning the taʾwīl of muḥkam and mutashābih verses in his famous exegetical work, al-Tafsīr al-kabīr, see El-Tobgui, “Hermeneutics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” and Lagarde, “De l’ambiguïté (mutašābih) dans le Coran.” On al-Rāzī as a theologian and exegete more generally, see Ceylan, Theology and Tafsīr in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (especially chap. 2, “Approach to the Qurʾān”) and Monnot, “Le panorama religieux de Fahr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.” On al-Rāzī’s life and works, see Street, “Concerning the Life and Works.”
ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl, or what is revelation?

(ẓāhir) or “literal” (ḥaqīqa) meaning to a non-apparent, or figurative (majāz), sense. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya affirms, an inductive survey of the stated positions (aqwāl) of the Salaf reveals that the early authoritative generations did not engage in taʾwil in the manner of the later philosophers and theologians. Rather, they resolutely affirmed the obvious sense of the texts, while nonetheless conceding that the modality, or the “how” (kayf /kayfiyya), of certain unseen realities—most prominently the divine attributes—lay beyond the full ken of human intelligibility. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya asserts, the Salaf did not even engage in tafwīḍ with respect to the meanings of Qurʾānic verses. If anything, they made taʾwil and tafwīḍ of the modality, or kayfiyya, of certain matters asserted in revelation, but never, he maintains, of the meaning (maʾnā) or the (straightforward) explication (tafsīr) of anything asserted therein.

1.1 The Meaning of “Taʾwil”

The majority of later Islamic theological and philosophical writings, and indeed most Western academic studies as well, take for granted that the Qurʾān, by its own declaration, is composed of two main types of verses, “clear” or determinate (muḥkam) and “ambiguous” or indeterminate (mutashābih), and that the latter are susceptible of a non-literal or figurative interpretation (taʾwil) at variance with their apparent sense and in which their true significance lies. Support for this view is normally sought in Q. Āl ʿImrān 3:7, which speaks of “āyāt muḥkamāt,” declared to be the “mother of the Book” (umm al-kitāb), and “others that are mutashābihāt.” The verse castigates those who, on account of a waywardness in their hearts, follow the mutashābihāt, seeking thereby to arouse discord (fitna) and to uncover the “taʾwil” of said verses.

For Ibn Taymiyya’s historical account of the rise and development of the ḥaqīqa–majāz dichotomy, along with his refutation of this division and his treatment of numerous other language-related topics that are typically discussed in works of usūl al-fiqh, see Ibn Taymiyya, Kitāb al-Īmān, 75–103 (Kitab Al-Iman: Book of Faith, chap. 8, 98–131), as well as Ibn Taymiyya, MF, 20:400–497. (Both sources are also referenced in Heinrichs, “On the Genesis,” 115, n. 1.) Heinrichs is inclined to think that Ibn Taymiyya was correct in attributing the birth of the ḥaqīqa–majāz dichotomy as a hermeneutical tool to the early (Basran) Muʿtazila. See Heinrichs, 117, 132, 139. Towards the end of the article, Heinrichs describes how Muʿtazili theologians seem to have adopted the philologist and exegete Abū ʿUbayda’s (d. ca. 210/825) early sense of majāz as the “natural-language” rewriting of idiomatic expressions and extended it to “cases which were linguistically quite clear and of no interest to Abū ʿUbayda, such as metaphors that were only theologically objectionable” (emphasis mine). Heinrichs, 139. On majāz in Abū ʿUbayda, see (to be read in light of Heinrichs, “On the Genesis”) Almagor, “The Early Meaning of Majāz and the Nature of Abū ʿUbayda’s Exegesis.”

For a useful discussion of the rise of taʾwil and the various positions taken on the meaning
der of verse 3:7, read with a pause in either of two critical junctures, declares the taʾwil of such verses to be known either by God alone or by God and “those firmly grounded in knowledge” (al-rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm)—presumably those possessing knowledge in religion, the ‘ulamā’. Later scholars concluded that if the verse is read such that the taʾwil is known by God alone, then the appropriate stance of the believer in the face of a mutashābih verse is tafwīḍ, namely, declaring the apparent sense inoperative while refraining from offering a specific alternative explanation of the verse. Those who read the verse such that the rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm are also said to know the taʾwil generally understand this as an invitation for specialized religious scholars—those “firmly grounded in knowledge”—to search for and suggest possible alternative, non-literal meanings of the verse in question. It is normally stipulated that the non-literal, or figurative, meaning put forth must conform to the known conventions of the Arabic language. Further, it is generally considered prudent for the interpreter to refrain from claiming certain knowledge (yaqīn) that a suggested meaning is definitively the one intended by God. Rather, he should simply suggest that such a meaning may be the one meant while admitting that the true meaning intended by God can be known with certitude by God alone. Yet the Qurʾān does not itself indicate precisely which verses are muḥkam and which are mutashābih. The tradition of the later mutakallimūn nonetheless generally identifies the putatively “ambiguous” verses as those whose apparent meaning (zāhir) has been determined to be impossible—typically on the strength of a so-called rational objection (muʿāriḍ ʿaqli)—thus necessitating an abandonment of this apparent meaning in favor of either taʾwil or tafwīḍ. Precisely

16 The full verse reads: “He it is who has sent down to you (O Muḥammad) the Book. In it are verses that are muḥkam; they are the mother of the Book. Others are mutashābih. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is mutashābih, seeking discord and searching for its taʾwil; and none knows its taʾwil save God. And those firmly grounded in knowledge say, ‘We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord.’ And none shall grasp the message save men of understanding.” (Trans. Yusuf Ali, with modifications.) The alternative punctuation of the recited verse yields “and none knows its taʾwil save God and those firmly grounded in knowledge; they say ...” Though English translations generally render the word muḥkam as “clear,” mutashābih as “ambiguous” (or “allegorical”), and taʾwil as “interpretation,” I have purposely left these terms untranslated since their exact meaning is precisely what is at issue for Ibn Taymiyya and what forms our main concern in this section.

17 From a historical perspective, it appears that the Baghdādi Muʿtazili theologian Abū Jaʿfar
which verses were to be counted as *mutashābih* and therefore open to interpretation was, naturally, the subject of much debate, fueled by various schools' contending doctrines regarding the nature and dictates of reason and the scope of its prerogative to adjudicate over the meaning of the revealed texts.

Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, rejects out of hand this later, technical definition of *taʾwīl* and the procedure of figurative interpretation practiced under its umbrella. He counters that the eventual standard definition of *taʾwīl* as "the deflection of a word from its preponderant meaning to a non-preponderant meaning on the basis of a relevant indicant" represents a technical usage that originated only in the academic convention of the later philosophers and theologians and was unknown to the Salaf (and the early scholars of *tafsīr*), in whose language the Qurʾān was revealed and in light of whose conventions it must therefore be understood. This being the case, Ibn Taymiyya argues, it is illegitimate to read the later, technical sense of the word *taʾwīl* back into the Qurʾān as if it were the meaning that was intended by the Book’s Author and that would have been understood by its initial recipient audience. But what, then, is the meaning of "*taʾwil*" if not the widely accepted sense of figurative interpretation taken for granted by the later theologians (*mutaʾakhkhirūn*)?

---

18 For Ibn Taymiyya’s main discussions of *taʾwil* (and *tafwīḍ*), see Argument 16 (*Darʾ*, 1:201–208), Argument 27 (*Darʾ*, 5:234–241), and also (on *taʾwil* specifically) *Darʾ*, 5:380–382 (which is part of Argument 41). On the relationship between *taʾwil* and the *mutashābih* verses of the Qurʾān, see also Ibn Taymiyya’s separate treatise "Risālat al-Iklīl fī al-mutashābih wa-l-taʾwil," in *Majmūʿat al-rasāʾil al-kubrā*, 2:3–36.

19 "ṣarf al-lafẓ ʿan al-iḥtimāl al-rājiḥ ilā al-iḥtimāl al-marjūḥ li-dalīl yaqtarinu bihi." Cited at *Darʾ*, 5:235, lines 3–4 and again at 5:382, lines 13–14. The addition "li-dalīl yaqtarinu bihi" is found at *Darʾ*, 1:206, line 7. Ibn Taymiyya gives an alternatively worded definition in another passage: "ṣarf al-lafẓ ʿan al-maʿnā al-madlūl ʿalayhi al-mafḥūm minhu ilā maʿnā yukhālifu dhālika" (*Darʾ*, 1:206, lines 3–4), which, for him, amounts to "deflecting the texts from what they properly denote" (ṣarf al-nuṣūṣ ʿan muqtaḍāhā) (*Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 2–3). Shortly thereafter, "ṣarf al-nuṣūṣ ʿan muqtaḍāḥā wa-madlūlihā wa-maʿnāhā" (*Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 2–3).

20 Gleave (*Islam and Literalism*, 65) makes a similar comment about the word *tafsīr*, which appears only once in the Qurʾān, at Q. al-Furqān 25:33: "And they come not to you (O Muḥammad) with any parable but that We bring you the truth and a better explanation (illā jiʾnāka bi-l-ḥaqqi wa-aḥsana tafsīran)."
Ibn Taymiyya calls upon a wide range of evidence to establish that the word *taʾwīl*—as it was employed by the seventh-century inhabitants of the Hijaz whose language habits form the linguistic matrix presupposed by revelation—carried only two possible meanings, neither of which is related to the third, specialized meaning that the word acquired when it was adopted as a technical term by later theologians and philosophers. The first of these meanings, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is “explication” (*tafsīr*) and “elucidation” (*bayān*), which he defines as a straightforward explanation of the apparent sense, or simply the “meaning” (*maʿnā*), of revelation “as found in the work of al-Ṭabarī and others.” In another place, he defines it as “cognizance of the intended meaning of [an instance of] speech such that it can be contemplated, grasped by the mind, and understood.” The second original meaning of the word *taʾwīl* in the convention of the Companions and the Salaf, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is “the ultimate reality of that to which the speech pertains” (*ḥaqīqat mā yaʾūlu ilayhi al-kalām*). In another passage, Ibn Taymiyya renders this second meaning as “the reality of a thing, like its ‘how’ (or modality), which is only known to God.” In yet another passage, he further clarifies that the “*taʾwil*” of those verses pertaining to God and unseen realities (particularly the events of the last day) represents “the very [ontological] reality” (*nafs al-ḥaqīqa*) of the entities mentioned in such verses. With respect to God, this *ḥaqīqa* refers to the quintessential nature of His divine essence and attributes, which is known only to Him. This definition of *ḥaqīqa* as the very reality of a thing is reminiscent of that given by al-Bāqillānī, who offers two definitions of the term...

---

21 For these two meanings as exhausting the original definition of “*taʾwil*,” see *Darʾ*, 5:234, lines 9–12. See also Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-Īmān*, 33, lines 3–8.

22 “*maʾrifat al-murād bi-l-kalām ḥattā yutadabbar wa-yuʿqala wa-yufqah.*” *Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 10–11. On *taʾwil* as linguistic explanation (*tafsīr*) in Ibn Taymiyya’s treatment of terms denoting the divine attributes, see also Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 53–55, 68.

23 In another place, “*al-ḥaqīqa allatī yaʾūlu ilayhā al-khitāb*” (*Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 4–5). For an extensive analysis of the term *taʾwil* as used in the Qurʾān, including in this second sense cited by Ibn Taymiyya, see Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 66–72.

24 “*ḥaqīqat al-shayʾ ka-l-kayfiyya allatī lā yaʿlamuhā illā Allāh.*” *Darʾ*, 7:328, lines 10–11. See also *Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 11–12 (“... *wa-huwa al-taʾwil alladhi infarada Allāh bi-ʿilmihī wa-huwa al-ḥaqīqat allatī lā yaʿlamuhā illā huwa*”).

25 “*wa-ammā taʾwil mā akhbara Allāh bihi ʿan nafsihi waʿan al-yawm al-ākhir fa-huwa nafs al-ḥaqīqa allatī akhbara ʿanhā.*” *Darʾ*, 12:27, lines 4–5. See also *Darʾ*, 5:382, line 5 (“*nafs al-ḥaqīqa allatī akhbara Allāh ʿanhā*”) and 9:24, lines 8–9 (“*al-ḥaqīqa allatī hiya nafs mā huwa alayhi fī al-khāraj*”).

26 “*wa-dhālika fī haqq Allāh huwa kunh dḥātīhi wa-sīfātīhi allatī lā yaʿlamuhā ghayruhu.*” *Darʾ*, 12:27, line 5. See also *Darʾ*, 5:382, lines 6–7, where Ibn Taymiyya explains that “the *taʾwil* [of verses] pertaining to God is none other than His own holy self [or essence] qualified by His exalted attributes” (*wa-taʾwil mā akhbara bihi ʿan nafsihi huwa nafsuhu al-muqaddasa al-mawṣūfa bi-sīfātīhi al-ʿaliyya*).
in his *al-Taqrīb wa-l-irshād*, one of which is “the reality (*haqīqa*) behind the qualification (*wasf*) of a thing by which it is specified [or defined] and that property (*maʿnā*) on account of which it merits the qualification, like saying, ‘The *haqīqa* of a scholar (‘ālim) is the fact that he possesses knowledge (‘ilm).’”  

Al-Bāqillānī’s definition of *haqīqa* resembles that of al-Ashʿarī before him, who defined *haqīqa* “not as a certain way of using words [i.e., literally], but as the true nature of things—the actual qualities by virtue of which things can be called by certain names.” Indeed, the precise relationship between words—specifically “names,” or nouns (*asmāʾ*)—and the ontological reality (*haqīqa*) of the nominata (*musammayāt*) to which they apply is of central importance to Ibn Taymiyya’s larger theological project in the *Darʾ taʿāruḍ* and elsewhere.

Ibn Taymiyya establishes this dual definition of *taʾwīl*—as simple explanation of meaning and as the ultimate reality of a thing—primarily on the strength of statements by the Companions and early exegetes explicitly defining it as such, as well as on the basis of *tafsīr* by the Companions and early exegetes on verses additional to Q. 3:7 that also employ the term *taʾwīl*. To establish the meaning of *taʾwīl* among the early exegetes, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. between 100/718 and 104/722), the early “leader of the exegetes” (*imām ahl al-tafsīr*), who is said to have asked Ibn ʿAbbās (d. ca. 68/687) to provide him the “*tafsīr*” of the entire Qurʾān, which he (Ibn ʿAbbās) did (*wa-fassarahu lahu*). Ibn Taymiyya informs us that Mujāhid used to maintain that those firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm*) know the “*taʾwīl*” of the Qurʾān, meaning the *tafsīr* of it, like the *tafsīr* bequeathed to Mujāhid by Ibn ʿAbbās. According to Ibn Taymiyya, this definition of *taʾwil* (in the sense of *tafsīr*) was also endorsed by Ibn Qutayba and others who upheld that those firmly grounded in knowledge are capable of knowing the *taʾwil* of the *mutashābih* verses. In addition to Mujāhid and Ibn Qutayba,

---

27 Al-Bāqillānī, *Taqrīb*, 1:352 (also cited in Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 118; translation mine). Gleave comments that *haqīqa* in this sense “means something like ‘the truth conditions of a defining characteristic’. It refers to the reality of the individual rather than a fact of language” (Gleave, 118)—which closely resembles Ibn Taymiyya’s characterization of it here. For a fuller treatment of al-Bāqillānī’s hermeneutics, see Vishanoff, *Formation*, 160–189.

28 Vishanoff, *Formation*, 22. This conception of *haqīqa*, Vishanoff elaborates, “suggested that the Muʿtazilī abandonment of the literal sense of scripture was not merely a departure from ordinary linguistic usage, but a *misrepresentation of ontological reality*” (emphasis mine). Vishanoff, 22.

29 *Darʾ*, 5:381, lines 15–16. Mujāhid (b. Jabr) is reported to have said, “I read (*ʿaraḍtu*) the *mushaf* to Ibn ʿAbbās from beginning to end, stopping him at every verse and asking him about it” (*Darʾ*, 1:208, lines 7–8).

30 See *Darʾ*, 5:381, lines 16–17.
figures such as Ibn ‘Abbās, Muhammad b. Ja’far b. Abī Ṭalib (d. 37/657), and Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767), among others, also held that the pause in verse 3:7 should fall after “al-rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm,” such that those who are “firmly grounded in knowledge,” too, in addition to God, are said to know the ta’wil of the mutashābihāt. The alternative position—that of setting the pause after “Allāh,” such that the ta’wil of the mutashābihāt is known only to God—was reported also to have been held by Ibn ‘Abbās, in addition to eminent early authorities such as Ubayy b. Ka’b (d. ca. 35/656), ‘Abd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d. 32/652 or 653), ‘Āʾisha (d. 58/678), and ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 93/711 or 94/712 or 713), among others.

In light of the two original meanings of the word ta’wil and the alternative pauses recognized by the Companions, how did the early community understand verse 3:7? According to Ibn Taymiyya, whenever this verse was read with the pause after “al-rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm,” the Companions and the Salaf interpreted the kind of ta’wil that is known by those who are firmly grounded in knowledge in accordance with the first meaning cited above. That is, they understood it as a reference to (straightforward) tafsīr, such that whoever had knowledge of the Qur’ān’s tafsīr also had knowledge of its ta’wil. In contrast, whenever the verse was read with the pause after “Allāh,” the Companions and the Salaf interpreted the kind of ta’wil that is known only by God in accordance with the second meaning cited above. That is, they understood it as a reference to God’s exclusive knowledge of the ontological reality (ḥaqīqa) and the modality (kayfīyya) of the unseen (whether this pertain to matters such as the events of the day of judgement or to matters such as the essence and attributes of God). This dual interpretation of the term ta’wil (which alternates according to where one pauses when reading the verse) was determined and imposed, according to Ibn Taymiyya, by the Companions’ common understanding of the “conventional language known among them” (lughatuhum al-maʿrūfa baynahum). This shared language, as indicated in the Companions’ own statements and those of the early exegetes, admitted of only the two meanings discussed above to the exclusion of the third, “specialized technical meaning of ta’wil” (ma’nā al-ta’wil al-iṣṭilāḥī al-khāṣṣ) as developed and employed by the
later philosophers and theologians.\textsuperscript{35} For Ibn Taymiyya, therefore, the question is not one of \textit{haqīqa} (“literal”) versus \textit{majāz} (“figurative”), as it was for the later \textit{kalām} and \textit{uṣūl al-fiqh} traditions,\textsuperscript{36} but one of \textit{haqīqa} (in the sense of the ontological reality and modality of a thing’s external existence) versus \textit{ma’nā} (in the sense of straightforward lexical signification). Unlike in the \textit{haqīqa–majāz} distinction, the two terms of the \textit{haqīqa–ma’nā} pair are not mutually exclusive opposites; rather, they are two distinct yet complementary aspects—one semantic and notional, the other existential and ontological—of any given reality.

In addition to the early authorities of \textit{tafsīr}, Ibn Taymiyya calls to witness several other reports (\textit{āthār}) of the Companions to complete his mapping of the original semantic field covered by the word \textit{ta’wil}. He explains that when used with respect to imperative speech (command or prohibition), “\textit{ta’wil}” is the act of doing the thing commanded or refraining from the thing prohibited.\textsuperscript{37} In support of this meaning, he cites Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 198/814), who reportedly said, “\textit{al-sunna ta’wil al-amr wa-l-nahy},” which was taken to mean that proper conformity to the prophetic Sunna entails careful observance of the commands and prohibitions of the Islamic religion. A further report from ʿĀʾisha and one from ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr provide supplementary evidence for this meaning of \textit{ta’wil}.\textsuperscript{38} In citing this array of evidence, Ibn Taymiyya argues that there is no known circumstance in which the Companions and Salaf used the term \textit{ta’wil} to indicate the suspension of a word’s well-known signification—that is, its \textit{ẓāhir} (apparent) or \textit{rājiḥ} (preponderant) meaning—in favor of a non-apparent (\textit{mu’awwal}), non-preponderant (\textit{marjūḥ}), or non-literal/figurative (\textit{majāz}) meaning. Rather, it was always used either in the sense of explication (\textit{tafsīr}) or in the sense of the ultimate reality (\textit{haqīqa}) of a thing or the outcome of an affair. It is for this reason that, when explicating verses such as “\textit{al-Raḥmānu ʿalā l-ʿarsh istawā}” (the Most Merciful has settled upon the throne)\textsuperscript{39} or “\textit{thumma stawā ʿalā l-ʿarsh}” (then He settled upon the throne),\textsuperscript{40} early authorities like Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), Rabīʿa (d. ca. 136/753),\textsuperscript{41} and oth-

\textsuperscript{35} See \textit{Darʿ}, 1:206, lines 2–3.
\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, \textit{haqīqa} and \textit{majāz} are usually the first pair of hermeneutic terms dealt with in mature works of legal theory. Gleave, \textit{Islam and Literalism}, 36.
\textsuperscript{37} “\textit{huwa nafs fīl-al-māʾmūr bihi wa-tark al-manhī ʿanhu}.” \textit{Darʿ}, 1:206, lines 18–19.
\textsuperscript{38} See \textit{Darʿ}, 1:206, line 19 to 1:207, line 3.
\textsuperscript{39} Q. Ṭā Hā 20:5.
\textsuperscript{40} Q. al-Aʿrāf 7:54.
\textsuperscript{41} Rabīʿa b. Abī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Farrūkh, also known as “Rabīʿat al-Raʾy.” There is some disagreement regarding the date of Rabīʿa’s death. The year 136/753 (or 754) seems to be the most common date reported and is the one given, for instance, by al-Dhahabi, on the
ers used to say, “God’s settling [on the throne] is known (al-istiwāʾ maʿlūm), but the modality of it is unknown (al-kayf majhūl).” In other words, the lexical signification (maʿnā) of the phrase “istawāʾ alā al-ʿarsh”—according to the speech convention of the Arabs—is known (maʿlūm); it is the modality (kayf/kayfiyya) of how such an action pertains to God, who is utterly unlike any created being, that is unknown to us (huwa al-majhūl lanā). According to Ibn Taymiyya, it is the metaphysical and ontological modality—and therefore the ultimate reality (ḥaqīqa)—of God’s settling that constitutes the taʿwil that is known only unto God, not the lexical significance of the phrase “istawāʾ alā al-ʿarsh” (the taʿwil of which, from the linguistic perspective, is known to us as well). If the lexical signification of the verse, as understood according to the linguistic convention of the Salaf, were not known to us, then the verse would simply have no determinable meaning for us whatsoever, an eventuality precluded by the fact of revelation’s signature clarity (bayān) and lack of ambiguity.

In support of this understanding of taʿwil, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to the early jurist, muftī of Medina, and contemporary of Mālik, Ibn al-Mājishūn (d. 164/780 or 781), as well as to Ahmad b. Ḥanbal “and others among the Salaf,” who used to say, “We do not know the ‘how’ (kayfiyya) of what God has stated about Himself, even though we do know its explication (tafsīrahu) and its meaning (maʿnāhu).” Indeed, al-Ḥasan al-Ḥasan b. Baṣrī (d. 110/728) reportedly stated that “God did not reveal any verse except that He desired [us] to know what He desired.”

42 See Darʾ, 1:207, line 6; 5:382, line 9; and 7:328, line 11.
43 Darʾ, 5:235, line 2.
44 ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Abd Allāh b. Abī Salama al-Mājishūn, referred to alternatively as “al-Mājishūn” and “Ibn al-Mājishūn,” not to be confused with his son, ʿAbd al-Malik b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Mājishūn (d. 213/828 or 214/829), an accomplished jurist and muftī of Medina in his own right. On (Ibn) al-Mājishūn’s theological views, see al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 7:329–312, esp. 311 ff. Goldziher cites Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr’s (d. 463/1071) description of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Mājishūn as “der erste […], welcher die Lehre der muhammedanischen Theologen in Medina in einem Codex zusammenfasste” (the first to summarize the teachings of Muslim theologians in Medina in a codex). See Goldziher, Muhammedanische Studien, 2:229, also cited (with the English translation given here) and discussed in Brockopp, “Competing Theories of Authority in Early Mālikī Texts,” 9.
45 See also Darʾ, 5:234, lines 14–16 and further at 5:235, lines 1–2, where Ibn Taymiyya explains that “knowledge of [the meaning of] istiwāʾ (‘settling’) is a question of tafsīr, which is the taʿwil of which we have knowledge. As for the modality (al-kayf) [thereof], this is the taʿwil of which only God has knowledge and which is unknown (majhūl) to us.” (See index of Arabic passages.) On Ibn Taymiyya’s affirmation of God’s names and attributes as revealed, but without probing into modality, see Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy, 48–56 (esp. 48–52).
meant by it,"\textsuperscript{46} and in this spirit, Ahmad b. Hanbal “explicated (\textit{fassara}) all the \textit{mutashābih} verses in the Qurʾān and clarified what was meant by them.”\textsuperscript{47} By sharp contrast, the third, technical meaning of “\textit{taʾwil},” involving deflection to a non-literal (or figurative) interpretation, was condemned by the Salaf and early authorities as “false and devoid of any reality (or truth)” (\textit{bāṭil lā haqīqata lahu}).\textsuperscript{48} This third form of \textit{taʾwil}, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, amounts to “distorting words from their true intended meanings”\textsuperscript{49} and “deviating with regard to God’s names and (revealed) verses.”\textsuperscript{50}

2 The Centrality of Context and Ibn Taymiyya’s “Contextual Taʾwil”

We have seen in the preceding section that, according to Ibn Taymiyya, the texts of revelation do not allow for \textit{taʾwil} (or even \textit{tafwīḍ}) in the sense employed by later thinkers, which presumes the presence of a metaphorical meaning arrived at by diverting a text from its primary, literal (\textit{ḥaqīqa}) signification to a secondary, non-literal or figurative (\textit{majāz}) meaning. Are we to understand from this that Ibn Taymiyya did not accept the existence of non-literal usage, either in language as a whole or in the texts of revelation in particular, in other words, that he did not believe in the equivalent of what is meant by \textit{taʾwil} in the later tradition? To answer this important question, we must carefully examine Ibn Taymiyya’s views on the centrality of context in determining the meaning of language and texts, with linguistic factors determinative throughout, as opposed to the notion of primary/preponderant versus secondary/non-preponderant meanings with reason playing the decisive role in determining the intended meaning. In effect, Ibn Taymiyya advances a two-pronged argument concerning context, one addressing the use of language per se and the other addressing the specific case of the language and texts of revelation as embodied in the Qurʾān and Sunna.

Regarding the general use of language, when Ibn Taymiyya argues that there is no “figurative” or “non-literal” use (\textit{majāz}) in language—and hence no \textit{taʾwil}

\textsuperscript{46} “mā anzala Allāh āya illā wa-huwa yuḥibbu an yuʿlama mā arāda bihā.” \textit{Darʾ}, 1:208, lines 9–10.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Darʾ}, 1:207, lines 10–11.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Darʾ}, 5:382, line 15.

\textsuperscript{49} “\textit{taḥrīf al-kalim ʿan mawāḍiʿihi}” (\textit{Darʾ}, 5:382, lines 15–16), borrowed from several Qurʾānic passages in which past communities are indicted for distorting their respective scriptures. See, for instance, Q. \textit{al-Nisāʾ} 4:46 and \textit{al-Māʾida} 5:13. On the concept of \textit{taḥrīf} as deployed in the Qurʾān, see Gleave, \textit{Islam and Literalism}, 66–72.

\textsuperscript{50} “\textit{al-ihād} fi asmāʾ Allāh wa-āyātihi” (\textit{Darʾ}, 5:382, line 16), an allusion to Q. \textit{al-Aʿrāf} 7:180 and \textit{Fuṣṣilat} 41:40.
as understood by the later tradition—he is not arguing that words can have only one meaning or that they must always be understood in their most obvious sense, that is, the sense that the tradition normally refers to as the “literal” (ḥaqīqa), “apparent” (zāhir), or “preponderant” (rājiḥ) meaning of the word. Rather, he maintains that the distinction between “literal” (ḥaqīqa) and “non-literal” (majāz) meanings is, in fact, artificial, a mental construct entirely divorced from the way language functions in the real world.51 How is this so? Ibn Taymiyya is fully aware that many words in a given language can be (and often are) used to denote a number of different meanings, admitting an equivocity that he would nevertheless be loath to classify as “metaphorical” or “figurative.” For instance, he accepts that the conventions of the Arabic language allow the word yad (“hand”) to be used to mean things other than a five-fingered appendage of flesh and bone. Depending on context, for example, it may be used to mean “help” (as in English “Can you give me a hand?”) or “collusion” (as in English “She certainly had a hand in this!”). What Ibn Taymiyya rejects is the notion that words possess, entirely independent of context, particular “literal,” “real,” or “primary” meanings, which we are then, in certain circumstances (often motivated by putatively rational considerations), compelled to abandon in favor of “secondary,” “non-literal,” or “metaphorical” meanings. Rather, for Ibn Taymiyya, all meaning—and in each and every instance of language use—is determined by context, as judged in light of the known, communally shared conventions of the language in question.52

51 Yunis Ali mentions the difficulty, even in modern pragmatics, of providing a “water-tight distinction” between literal and non-literal use. He remarks that mainstream scholars of uṣūl al-fiqh devised lists of criteria to make this distinction clear but that some uṣūlis doubted their adequacy. By contrast, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya “deny the plausibility of the distinction altogether,” claiming that it is a “technical construct, and that it has no empirical basis.” Yunis Ali, Medieval Islamic Pragmatics, 75. For a detailed presentation of Ibn Taymiyya’s (and Ibn Qayyim’s) arguments against the ḥaqīqa–majāz distinction, see Yunis Ali, 109–114. On Ibn Taymiyya’s own account of majāz, see Yunis Ali, 114–125. See also Ibn Taymiyya, MF, 20:459, where he affirms that “a word can only signify in conjunction with the non-verbal context [in which it is used]” (al-lafẓ lam yadulla illā bi-qarāʾin maʿnawiyya). Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya’s position here resembles that of his contemporary, the famous Shiʿi jurist Jamāl al-Dīn (“al-ʿAllāma”) al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325). In response to common definitions of zāhir given by the likes of al-Ghazālī and al-Āmidī, who define zāhir as the meaning that is likely to conform with a word’s putative initial assignation, or wadʾ, but do not negate the possibility that the speaker may have intended a non-wadʾi (that is, a majāzī) meaning, al-Ḥillī states: “The zāhir is not restricted to whatever is indicated by the original [wadʾ] or by convention. Rather every utterance in which there is a meaning that establishes itself as preponderant (tarajjūh) is zāhir in relation to [the intended meaning].” See al-Ḥillī, Nihāyat al-wuṣūl, 23489 (cited, with the translation given here, in Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 50). (See index of Arabic passages.) See further
As a consequence of this radical dependence of meaning on context, the English word “hand” or the Arabic word *yad* simply cannot be said to signify a particular meaning absent any context whatsoever—that is, say, as an isolated item in a vocabulary list or as written up at random on a blackboard. Rather, in every instance in which the word “hand” (*yad*) is used, it is perf-orce employed in a particular context and against the backdrop of a particular linguistic convention, and what the speaker means by the word in any given utterance can, in every case, only be determined by considering that context in light of that convention. In other words, even if it happens to be the case that the word “hand” is used to mean “five-fingered fleshy appendage” in the great majority of instances in which a given speech community uses it, that would not make this particular meaning the preponderant (*rājiḥ*), real/literal (*ḥaqīqa*), or apparent (*ẓāhir*) sense of the word, with the meanings “help” and “collusion” classed as secondary, non-preponderant (*marjūḥ*), or figurative (*majāz*). This is so because in every instance, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, we are only able to determine what the speaker means by any word through considering the context in which it has been used. Thus, if one were to say, “I shall wash my hands before dinner,” then the real, literal, *ḥaqīqa* meaning of “hand” in this instance would indeed be the five-fingered appendage attached to the end of one’s arm. If, however, one were to ask, “Can you please give me a hand?” then the real, literal, *ḥaqīqa* sense of “hand” in this instance, as determined conclusively and unambiguously by the context, would be none other than “help” or “assistance.” Indeed, a person who, upon being asked to “give me a hand,” proceeded to cut off his metacarpus at the wrist and offer up his actual physical hand would be deemed fully incapable of judging context or else woefully ignorant of the universally shared conventions of the English language. Further, he would be unjustified in accusing his interlocutor of abandoning clear speech in favor of a vague, or even slightly ambiguous, turn of phrase. Finally, since “help” is the *only* meaning that any English speaker would understand in this context, then “help,” according to Ibn Taymiyya, would be the apparent (*ẓāhir*), “literal” (*ḥaqīqa*) sense of the word in this particular instance. Using the word “hand” to mean “help” in such a case would not count as metaphorical for him since, once again, all possible connotations of a given word are *ḥaqīqa* (“real,” “literal”) and *ẓāhir* (“apparent”) in their respective

---

53 See Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-Īmān*, 32, where he states, “No one may construe a person’s speech [to mean] other than what he [the speaker] is known to have intended [or meant], not according to the [various meanings] that word may convey in any [random] person’s speech” (*laysa li-aḥad an yaḥmila kalām aḥad min al-nās illā ʿalā mā ʿurifa annahu arādahu lā ʿalā mā yaḥtamiluhu dhālika al-lafẓ fī kalām kulli aḥad*).
Deflection of the meaning (ṣarf al-maʿnā) of a revealed text, invariably negative in Ibn Taymiyya’s view, would involve a deflection from whatever meaning has been determined—by context, convention, and related texts—to be the apparent sense in favor of some other meaning that cannot be defended on these bases. Presumably, this would be done out of a desire to accommodate an alleged rational objection to the primary (and in this sense “ẓāhir”) meaning, as dully determined by the factors mentioned. Such a deflection can, in fact, be carried out only on the basis of a scriptural proof or indicant (dalīl šarʿī), by which Ibn Taymiyya presumably means other texts of revelation that illuminate, and qualify the interpretation of, the text whose meaning is to be deflected.

In addition to the central role he assigns to context, Ibn Taymiyya elsewhere speaks of the centrality of tabādur (the sense that first impresses itself upon the mind) in determining the meaning intended by the speaker (murād al-mutakallim) in a given communicative situation. All lexicographers agree, for instance, that the word ẓahr (“back”) can be used in Arabic to refer to all animal backs. Nevertheless, what first comes to mind (mā yatabādaru ilā al-dhihn) for most people upon hearing the word ẓahr is the back of a human only. This, according to Ibn Taymiyya, results from the fact that “ẓahr” happens to be used most frequently in reference to human backs, as opposed to the backs of ants, or camels, or horses. This frequency does not, however, make the human back a unique and privileged ḥaqīqa meaning of the word ẓahr but only makes it the statistically dominant one. As for whether, in any given instance of actual language use, a human back, an ant back, or any other type of back is the meaning intended by the speaker, this can only be determined on the basis of various contextual factors accompanying the given utterance.

In discussing the notion of tabādur, Mohamed Yunis Ali remarks that “the opponents of majāz [such as Ibn Taymiyya] would prefer to say that what occurs to the mind first in the actual respective situation is the intended and, consequently, the proper meaning.” In other words, proper meaning (al-maʿnā al-ḥaqīqa) and intended meaning (al-maʿnā al-murād)—as determined (partly) on the basis of contextual evidence, would be clear, then that [meaning] is the apparent [or ‘literal’] sense [i.e., in that context] (al-lafẓ idhā qurina bihi mā yubayyinu maʿnāhu kāna dhālika huwa ẓāhirahu). Darʾ, 5:236, line 2.
of tabādur—are, for Ibn Taymiyya, one and the same in any given instance. Surprisingly, Ibn Taymiyya does not discuss the concept of tabādur explicitly in the Darʾ taʿāruḍ, despite the fact that he deals at length with other aspects of the communicative process in light of which he holds proper and intended meaning to be the same.

Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of meaning as entirely dependent on and inseparable from context, along with the related concept of tabādur, stands in notable contrast to the view of mainstream legal theorists, which holds that “an expression is ḥaqīqah if it signifies independently of context (in dalla bi-lā qarīnah) and majāz if it does not signify without context.”\(^5⁹\) For Ibn Taymiyya, this distinction is meaningless since, he insists, there is no entirely context-free instance of actual language use. This does not negate the fact, as he explains in Kitāb al-Īmān, that “expressions in isolation can indeed be found in the works of lexicographers, but this is because these abstract expressions are understood by lexicographers to represent the common range of what native speakers mean in different utterances.”\(^6⁰\) In other words, the mainstream uṣūl al-fiqh model regards the zāhir meaning as inhering in the texts themselves, and this zāhir meaning either coincides or does not coincide with the meaning determined, on the basis of contextual clues, to be that intended by the speaker. The apparent (zāhir) meaning of a text, on the mainstream model, can thus diverge from the intended meaning of the author. For Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, texts cannot be said to possess or to convey any meaning whatsoever on their own, that is, as abstract entities divorced from the intentional (and contextualized) locutionary act of the speaker. Whatever speaker-intended meaning the context determines the speaker to have meant on a given occasion is, for Ibn Taymiyya, one and the same as the zāhir meaning of the text. In fact, even referring to it as the zāhir meaning of the text, as opposed to the zāhir meaning of the author that he intends to convey through the text, risks misrepresenting Ibn Taymiyya’s position since, once again, any actual meaning (maʿnā) involved can only be that of a conscious agent (the speaker of an utterance or the author of a text) and not of the utterance or the text itself. This stance, in fact, corresponds perfectly with Ibn Taymiyya’s consistent and rigorous distinction between what he regards as the theoretical constructs of the mind and the external facts of objective reality (a topic addressed at length in chapter 5). Though he does not say so himself (as far as I am aware), Ibn Taymiyya would probably dismiss the notion of a text holding

---

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 99.

\(^{60}\) Ibn Taymiyya, Kitāb al-Īmān, 104 (also cited, with the translation given here, in Yunis Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 115).
a meaning entirely on its own (in isolation from the intent of its author) as a pure mental abstraction. Since the text did not write itself, it cannot properly be seen as a locus where meaning somehow resides in abstraction from the actual communicative process instantiated between a willful speaker and a conscious, recipient interlocutor.

Finally, we may compare Ibn Taymiyya’s equation of ẓāhir and intended meaning with the mainstream uṣūlī taxonomy of ẓāhir and muʾawwal meanings. The mainstream taxonomy classifies as an “interpreted” or non-apparent (muʾawwal) meaning any meaning that is taken to be the one intended by the speaker but that (a) is not in accord with the apparent (ẓāhir) meaning of a given text when viewed in isolation and (b) was only arrived at through the consideration of a “non-contiguous textual indicator elsewhere within the revelatory corpus.”61 In this schema, the ẓāhir meaning may eventually be put aside and the muʾawwal meaning identified as that intended by the speaker (and, thus, as the correct interpretation of the text). Ibn Taymiyya, however, seems to go so far as to identify the ẓāhir meaning of any text as whichever meaning happens to emerge once all other relevant revelatory data have been brought to bear—since, once again, he does not seem to concede any meaningful distinction between “apparent” (ẓāhir) meaning and intended meaning. He would thus seem to have no particular name or category for the meaning that seems to emerge from a text when considered in isolation, prior to an inductive investigation of the revealed texts as a whole.

2.1 Ibn Taymiyya’s Contextual Taʾwīl in Practice

The foregoing principles of contextual interpretation, tabādur, and the identification of ẓāhir meaning with intended meaning apply to language use in general and represent Ibn Taymiyya’s account of the intrinsic mechanism by which meanings are expressed via human language at all times and in all places. Islamic revelation, which represents an expression of meaning addressed to human beings in the particular language of Arabic, necessarily conforms to the same universal linguistic principles delineated above. That is, the texts of the Qurʾān and Sunna, like any other communication via human language, necessarily convey their substantive content through words (alfāẓ), the meanings of which are determined, in each and every instance, as a function of the immediate context (qarāʾin, siyāq al-kalām) as judged in light of the shared linguistic convention (ʿurf) of their original target audience, namely, the Prophet Muḥammad and his immediate Companions. We have seen that Ibn Taymiyya

61 Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 51.
lays great stress on the fact that revelation, by its own declaration, is eminently clear (mubīn) and devoid of any ambiguity that would obscure its message or impede its communication to its intended recipients.\(^6^2\) Given his theory of meaning and the preeminent role of context in it, Ibn Taymiyya understands the translucent clarity of revelation to rest on a further principle: namely, that the texts of revelation, taken collectively, always contain within them explicit indications of the meaning intended by “ambiguous” passages.\(^6^3\) We may denote this principle by the (admittedly unwieldy) term “semantically explicit, self-contained intertextuality.” Not only does this principle confer upon the revealed texts their signature clarity, but, in a major move Ibn Taymiyya makes against the rationalists, it also ensures that the texts remain fully independent of any external factor (particularly the deliverances of abstract rational speculation) in conveying the meanings they were intended to convey.

The way in which the principle of semantically explicit, self-contained intertextuality functions is best illustrated by examining instances of its application, instances in which Ibn Taymiyya attempts to sidestep the straightforward literal meaning of “problematic” texts while nevertheless adhering firmly to his linguistic principles and avoiding recourse to purely rational considerations. A simple example is the following ḥadīth, reported on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās:

“The Black Stone is the right hand of God on earth; whoever shakes it and kisses it, it is as if he had shaken and kissed the right hand of God.” Though Ibn Taymiyya rejects the authenticity of this report as a prophetic ḥadīth,\(^6^4\) he nonetheless considers it a report whose literal wording, or obvious sense (ẓāhir), renders its intended meaning clear and thus stands in no need of an

\(^6^2\) Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of the clarity of revelation and the necessarily unambiguous nature of its propositional content mirrors, in numerous interesting respects, the views of the major Muʿtazilī theologian, Shāfīʿī jurist, and systematizer of Muʿtazilī thought, al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025). See, e.g., ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s argument for the linguistic univocality of the Qurʾān in Schöck, Koranexegese, Grammatik und Logik, 382–393. See also Vishanoff, Formation, 2.

\(^6^3\) See, for instance, Darʾ, 5:239, line 18 to 5:240, line 2, where Ibn Taymiyya states, “al-tafsīr alladhī bihi yuʿrafi al-ṣawāb qad dhukira mā yadullu ʿalayhi fī nafs al-khiṭāb immā maqrūnan bihi wa-immā fī naṣṣ ākhar.” The principle of intertextual clarification—in which one text of revelation elucidates another, resulting in the clarity (bayān) of revelation as a whole—goes back to al-Shāfīʿī, who, in his Rīsāla, sets out five discrete ways in which the meaning of an initially ambiguous Qurʾānic passage can be clarified by appeal to various forms of intertextual evidence. See Vishanoff, Formation, 42–44.

\(^6^4\) On the status of this ḥadīth, see Darʾ, 5:236, lines 8–9; 5:239, lines 5–6; 3:384, line 9; and the editor’s note at 3:384, n. 2. The ḥadīth appears in various versions and has alternatively been categorized as fair (ḥasan), weak but with corroborating narrations (ḍaʿīf lahu shawāhid), and authentic (ṣaḥīḥ) but as a saying of Ibn ʿAbbās, not the Prophet.
external factor—such as reason—to deflect it from its (putative) outward sense via ta’wil (that is, in order to avoid the implication that the Black Stone constitutes a divine attribute, namely, God’s hand). In fact, this hadith, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, is explicit (sarīh) in affirming that the Black Stone is not the hand of God. This is so because, first, the predicative statement “the Black Stone is the right hand of God” is restricted by the qualifier “on earth.” Though Ibn Taymiyya does not say so explicitly, he implies that since it is known, on the basis of other texts, that God does not inhere in the earth in any manner, the qualification that the Black Stone is the right hand of God “on earth” immediately alerts the listener to the fact that the predication is not to be taken “literally.”

Second, we know the Black Stone is not the hand of God because the hadith states explicitly that whoever greets (ṣāfaḥa; lit. “shakes the hand of”) the Black Stone, it is as if (fa-ka-annama) he had shaken the hand of God. And since it is known that the thing compared (mushabbah) in a simile is other than the object to which it is likened (mushabbah bihi), Ibn Taymiyya asserts that the hadith is explicit (sarīh) in affirming that the act of greeting the Black Stone (the mushabbah) is not, in fact, synonymous with the act of shaking the right hand of God (the mushabbah bihi). This amounts to an explicit denial that the Black Stone is literally the right hand of God, be it on earth or elsewhere. For these reasons, the hadith requires no ta’wil, or figurative reinterpretation, at variance with its obvious sense (zāhir).

Ibn Taymiyya affirms that there are numerous such examples from the Qur’ān and the hadith in which the text itself makes it clear that the false (bāṭil) meaning is not the one intended. This relieves us of any need, in order to disavow this false meaning, for a “separate indicant or a figurative reinterpretation (ta’wil) predicated on a deflection of the explicit verbal form (lafẓ) from its [naturally understood] import and connotation.”

And while Ibn Taymiyya does not deny that reason, on its own, might also recognize that it is impossible for a created element of the world (such as a black stone) to be an attribute of a transcendent and perfect God, we are in no way dependent on reason’s judgement of this impossibility for our knowledge that this is what revelation is affirming.

It is important to reiterate, with regard to the foregoing hadith and similar texts, that Ibn Taymiyya is by no means claiming that all linguistic utterances are to be taken “literally.” Rather, he is saying that in all instances, the correct

65 “min al-akhbār mā yakūnu zāhiruḥu yubayyinu al-murād bihi lā yaḥtaḥju ilā dalil yaṣrifihu ‘an zāhirihī.” Dar’, 3:384, lines 5–6.
66 “lam yaḥtaḥju nafy dhālika ilā dalil munfaṣil wa-lā ta’wil yukhriju al-lafẓ ‘an mujibihī wa-muqtaḍāhu.” Dar’, 3:385, lines 11–12. For Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of the Black Stone hadith, see, inter alia, Dar’, 3:384, line 5 to 3:385, line 2.
intended meaning is inherent in the texts themselves and (readily) discernible from them. This eliminates the need for arguments and would-be proofs of a purely speculative or theoretical nature derived from sources extrinsic to revelation. It bears to be stressed that when Ibn Taymiyya insists upon a firm adherence to the “lafẓ” (that is, to the explicit verbal form) of a text, he is not advocating anything like a strict “literalism.” For Ibn Taymiyya, the lafẓ is never conceived of as a bare word, primordially assigned to denote a specific, disembodied “primary” meaning. Rather, what Ibn Taymiyya refers to as the “lafẓ” is always the lafẓ (1) as embedded in a given context, (2) as understood according to the linguistic conventions of the Salaf, and (3) as interpreted in light of other relevant texts. There is simply no such thing as a lafẓ in the abstract since no lafẓ, for Ibn Taymiyya, possesses any determinable meaning whatsoever outside a particular, contextualized instance of use. In other words, he rejects the meaning–use distinction altogether. As we have seen above with the example of the word “hand” (yad), Ibn Taymiyya does not admit of any preponderant (rājiḥ) or “literal” (ḥaqīqa) meaning that can simply be assumed by default unless a rational (or even a textual) objection arises to alert us that such meaning cannot have been the one meant. So, while Ibn Taymiyya certainly purports to be a strict textualist, he is by no means a strict literalist in the way this term is normally understood.68 The true literalist would be the one who claimed that words have primary, disembodied default meanings, then insisted that a word can be taken to denote only this one meaning whenever and wherever it is used, regardless of such factors as context, convention, and intertextuality (let alone the presence of a putative rational objection). Literalism in this sense does not reflect the position of Ibn Taymiyya and, after him, of his student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya; rather, it seems to come somewhat closer to that of the Žāhirīs, whose approach appears, at least in certain respects, to be the diametric opposite of Ibn Taymiyya’s. Whereas Ibn Taymiyya proposes a heavily pragmatic model in which context—linguistic and paralinguistic—and the intent of the speaker are central, the Žāhirī model has been characterized as one that operates primarily in reverse. According to Yunis Ali, for instance, the Žāhirī model is one that “is based primarily on the non-pragmatic givens of the language and stresses the predetermined conventions of the language which are encoded in the linguistic structure of the texts as the essential, and perhaps the only requirements for communication,” while “extra-linguistic contexts are generally ignored and the inferential capacity of the hearer has almost no role to play

68 Here again the parallel with al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥilli’s views is striking. See Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 52 and 52, n. 93.
Recent work by Amr Osman, however, has nuanced the notion of ẒāHIRĪ thought as unremittingly “literalist” in this sense, suggesting “textualism” instead as a more accurate description of the premises, methodologies, and aims of the school. My analysis of the Darʾ taʿāruḍ has led me to a similar conclusion regarding the “textualism” of Ibn Taymiyya, who has long been described—and decried—as a simplistic “literalist” in both Muslim and non-Muslim sources.

2.2 Taʾwil on the Basis of Intertextuality

We can gain further insight into Ibn Taymiyya’s “contextual taʾwil”—particularly the aspect of it that I have referred to as the principle of intertextuality—by examining instances of taʾwil by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal that Ibn Taymiyya cites approvingly as paradigmatic examples of proper engagement with the texts. Ibn Taymiyya cites one such example from Ibn Ḥanbal’s purported work, al-Radd ʿalā al-jahmiyya wa-l-zanādiqa. The example involves Ibn Ḥanbal’s response to those among the “Jahmiyya” who deny that God is distinct and separate from (mubāyin li) creation, claiming instead that He is everywhere (that is, in all places such that no place is ever devoid of Him and He is never in one place to the exclusion of another). The implication is that God Himself—that is, God in His very essence—is not distinct from the world but rather inheres in every place within it. Those holding this view find support in a “literal” reading of Q. al-Anʿām 6:3: “And He is God in the heavens and on the earth,” interpreting this to mean that God inheres with His essence in the heavens and the earth. Ibn Ḥanbal’s ultimate response to this contention is that the true meaning of this verse is that He is the God of those in the heavens and the God of those on

---

69 Yunis Ali, Medieval Islamic Pragmatics, 9. For useful summary treatments of literalism and ẒāHIRĪ thought, particularly in the context of legal hermeneutics, see Yunis Ali, 130 ff.; Vishanoff, Formation, 66–108 (esp. 88–102); and Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 146–174, esp. 150 ff. Roger Arnaldez’s Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue remains an excellent resource, particularly for ẒāHIRĪ thought as developed by its famous latter-day representative, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). The most recent comprehensive study of the history and doctrines of the ẒāHIRĪ school—and the first monograph on the topic since Goldziher’s 1884 work, Die Žāhiriten—is Amr Osman, Žāhirī Madhhab.

70 See Osman, Žāhirī Madhhab, 171–224.

71 In this vein, see also Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 2 for the observation that “those Muslim groups and tendencies commonly called ‘literalists’ (hashwiyya, ẓāhiriyya, salafiyya and so on) are simply applying rules concerning non-deviation from the literal meaning with a greater level of rigidity than other so-called ‘non-literalists’. The various groups are not, in truth, operating in a different hermeneutic context.”

72 “wa-huwa Llāhu fī l-samāwāti wa-fī l-ard” (Q. al-Anʿām 6:3).
the earth, while He Himself is above the throne, encompassing with His knowledge everything beneath the throne (that is, all of creation). No place is devoid of God’s knowledge, nor is His knowledge in one place to the exclusion of another.

Yet how does Ibn Ḥanbal arrive at this conclusion, which seems to represent a rather extreme particularization (takhṣīṣ) of the overt import of the verse (in fact, it would seem to contradict the most “literal” meaning of the verse and to constitute a straightforward instance of the kind of ta’wil that Ibn Taymiyya rejects)? In establishing the correct meaning of this verse, Ibn Ḥanbal makes a textual appeal to numerous other verses describing God as being “in the heavens” (fī al-samāʾ)73 and “above” (fawq)—in other words, not inherent in creation in any way.74 He also appeals to a number of verses showing that everything “down” (asfal) is blameworthy and ignoble (madhmūm), such that in addition to being ontologically impossible, it would also be morally unbecoming for God to be “down here” on earth.75 He combines this with the common sense appeal that we know instinctively (that is, by the fiṭra) that God, in His exaltedness and majesty, could not possibly inhere in numerous filthy and execrable places, such as our innards or those of a pig or other such squalid locations. Thus, Ibn Ḥanbal concludes, it is inconceivable that God should inhere in the earth (fī al-arḍ) or in any part of creation. Consequently, a verse like Q. al-Anʿām 6:3: “And He is God in the heavens and on the earth” must be taken to mean that He is the God of those that are in the heavens (such as the angels) and of those that are on the earth (such as humans, birds, and animals). Yet His lordship over them entails that although He is separate and distinct from them, He has full knowledge of them. This is confirmed by Q. al-Ṭalāq 65:12: “that you may know that God has power over all things and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge.”

The foregoing instance of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s use of ta’wil provides an example of what I have called the principle of intertextuality. While it is true that Ibn Taymiyya is normally at pains to show that single verses and ḥadīth contain their own self-exonering elements of clarification, he nevertheless allows, as we see here, that disparate texts of revelation can elucidate one another.

---

73 He interprets this to mean not contained in the physical heavens but, rather, distinct from all created things (that is, from the creation as a whole) and distinctly above it, reading “fī al-samāʾ”—derived from the verb samā, yasmū (to be high, lofty)—in this case as synonymous with an expression like “fī al-ʿulūw.”

74 These verses are Q. al-Baqara 2:29, Āl ‘Imrān 3:55, al-Nisāʾ 4:138, al-Anʿām 6:18, al-Nahl 16:50, Fāṭir 35:10, al-Mulk 67:16–17, and al-Maʿārij 70:4.

75 See, for example, Q. Fuṣṣilat 41:29 and al-Ṭin 95:5.
This is precisely why I refer to his theory as one of “intertextuality.” The critical point for Ibn Taymiyya, ultimately, is that the texts of revelation, taken collectively and considered in light of one other, are always fully independent and self-sufficient in conveying—explicitly—the meanings we are intended to take from them. This premise explains why I qualify Ibn Taymiyya’s principle of intertextuality as being both *semantically explicit*, as all meanings are indicated in an explicit (ṣarīḥ) fashion when revelation is considered as a whole, and *self-contained*, as the collectivity of revealed texts stands in no need of an independent source, such as speculative reason, to endorse, qualify, or modify any of the (explicitly indicated) meanings contained within them.

2.3 Taʾwīl on the Basis of the Positions of the Salaf

In addition to immediate context and the principle of intertextuality, Ibn Taymiyya recognizes a third authoritative determinant of meaning for revealed texts, namely, the reported statements (aqwāl) of the Companions and the Salaf, especially when these statements converge to form a consensus (ijmāʿ) or quasi-consensus. Thus, we sometimes find the “taʾwil” of a verse explicitly justified on the basis that it is from the “aqwāl of the Salaf” or because the Salaf were unanimous in interpreting the verse this way. We may cite as an example Q. al-Ḥadid 57:4: “And He is with you wheresoever you may be.” Ibn Taymiyya cites Abū ʿUmar al-Ṭalamankī (d. 429/1038), who, in his book al-Wuṣūl ilā maʿrifat al-uṣūl, reports a “consensus among the Muslims of ahl al-sunna” that this verse, as well as similar verses in the Qurʾān (wa-naḥw dhālika min al-Qurʾān), refers not to God’s essence or very self (dhāt), which is “above [and not inside] the heavens,” but rather to His knowledge.

A similar verse is Q. al-Mujādila 58:7: “Never is there a secret parley among three but that He is their fourth.” On the meaning of this verse, Ibn Taymiyya cites Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 463/1071), who states that “the learned (ʿulamāʾ) among the Companions and the Successors, from whom knowledge of taʾwil is taken, affirm unanimously, with respect to the taʾwil of this verse, that God is upon His throne and that His knowledge is in all places, and no one whose opinion is deemed authoritative has contradicted them in this.” This understanding is further supported by a statement reported of Mālik b. Anas, as well as of numerous other authorities.

76 “wa-huwa maʿakum aynamā kuntum.”
77 Dar’, 6:250, line 15 to 6:251, line 3.
78 “mā yakūnu min najwā thalāthatin illā huwa rābiʿuhum.”
79 “ajmaʿaʿ ulamāʾ al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿīn alladhīna ḥumila ʿanhum al-taʾwil qāli ā ... huwa ʿalā al-ʿarsh wa-ilmuhu fī kulli makān wa-mā ḥālafahum fī dhālika aḥad yuḥtajju bi-qawlihi.” Dar’, 6:255, lines 7–11.
both before and after him, through authentic chains of transmission (asānīd ṣaḥīha) to the effect that “God is in the heavens (fī al-samā’),” but His knowledge is in all places.”

As we have seen, the specific interpretations cited above with regard to verses stating that God “is God in the heavens and the earth” are ultimately justified by appeal to the consensus (ijmāʿ) of the Salaf. But if this is the case, then we may well raise the question, How did the Salaf know that this was the meaning? Was it because the Prophet had explicitly informed them that this was the correct interpretation of these verses? Was it on account of their preeminent understanding of the Arabic language that they could understand this meaning from the language of the verses directly and immediately? Was it by comparing, even implicitly, such verses with other verses affirming God’s transcendence and understanding these in light of their (the Salaf’s) emerging appreciation of the overall ontology and theology of the Qurʾān? Though Ibn Taymiyya does not address these questions directly in the Darʾ (at least not in the context of the verses under consideration), it would seem safe to assume that any of the three, or a combination of them, could be at work in the case of any given report of the Salaf’s positions (aqwāl). Yet, however the Salaf came to endorse a particular view, the point for Ibn Taymiyya is that once we ascertain that a given understanding or interpretation of revelation has been transmitted to us from the Salaf (maʾthūr ʿan al-salaf), their opinion becomes a binding and authoritative determinant of the textual meaning of that verse. If the Salaf are known to have understood a verse “non-literally,” such as their understanding that only God’s knowledge and not God Himself is “in the heavens and on earth,” then such is the legitimate meaning of the verse. If, on the other hand, the Salaf are known to have understood a verse according to its more “literal,” or ḥaqīqa, sense (ḥaqīqa as understood by the mainstream, that is, not according to Ibn Taymiyya’s contextual construal of it), such as their affirmation that God is indeed “above” the heavens “ḥaqiqatan,”

---

80 Ibn Taymiyya, as mentioned above, explains the phrase “fī al-samāʾ” (in the heavens) as being synonymous with “fī al-ʿuluww,” stressing that God is not in the heavens—that is, inherent in and confined by the created universe—but rather above them, that is, beyond and transcendent to creation. The main reason for stressing that God Himself is “above the heavens” while His knowledge is “in all places” is to avoid the theologically (and rationally) precarious suggestion that God could inhere in, and thus be limited by, His creation (though His knowledge nonetheless encompasses all things). The objection of the later Ashʿarīs that holding God to be “above” creation would entail corporealism (tajsīm) by attributing to Him spatial location (jiha) is a related but separate point with which we deal more closely in the following chapter.

81 See Darʾ, 6:261, line 19 to 6:262, line 4.
then such is likewise the only legitimate interpretation of the verse in question. What Ibn Taymiyya opposes is that latter-day philosophers or theologians should put forth a “metaphorical” or otherwise non-apparent interpretation based on factors extrinsic to the revealed texts, such as speculative rational (or, as Ibn Taymiyya might say, “putatively” rational) considerations, particularly if these contradict the straightforward construal of a given text as transmitted on the authority of the Salaf.

3 The Salaf and the Authority of Their Linguistic Convention (ʿurf)

In the preceding section, we examined Ibn Taymiyya’s views on the centrality of context in determining the meaning of linguistic utterances in general and of the texts of revelation in particular. I have also mentioned another crucial element of Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutics, namely, that of the larger, well-known linguistic habits and conventions (ʿurf) of the speech community in which a given utterance is made.82 Ibn Taymiyya insists that any utterance directed to a community of people is necessarily subject to due consideration of both context and convention. This principle applies equally to the words of divine revelation, for even though the source of the linguistic product in this case is God, He nevertheless addresses His revelation to human beings by clothing it in a particular human language. That language, like any other, operates within a living speech community, and revelation addresses that community in light of the community’s established linguistic conventions at the time revelation supervenes upon it. This is simply another way of saying that revelation came to the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions in their own language and that if it were to be clear and manifest (mubīn) to them—which the Qurʾān persistently affirms that it is—then it could only be sent to them in conformity with their established patterns of language use. This fact lies at the base of Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence that revelation always be understood and interpreted according to the known linguistic conventions of the initial recipient community. Indeed, linguistic convention (ʿurf) forms the larger backdrop against which the previously discussed principle of contextual interpretation is possible. My ability to judge from context that a statement such as “Can you please give me a hand with the yard work?” is really a request for assistance (and not my actual hand) is a result of my broader

82 The notion of the “normative speech of the Arabs” as an important element of the hermeneutic endeavor, one that is central to Ibn Taymiyya, goes at least as far back as the tafsīr of Muqāṭīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 84. On Muqāṭīl’s tafsīr more generally, see Versteegh, Arabic Linguistic Tradition, 11–22.
familiarity with the conventions of current-day English speakers. It is this familiarity that allows me to determine successfully that in such a context, “hand” means “help.” Absent sufficient familiarity with the larger linguistic convention of the relevant speech community, one would have no grounds for selecting which of the possible meanings of a word is intended in a given context.

Yet, in some cases, revelation impinges upon and modifies the previously established linguistic convention and related conceptual categories, shifting the meanings and implications of existing terms, altering their moral and ethical content (or redefining them altogether), or introducing new terms and usages that inaugurate fresh conventions in the language that correspond to novel conceptual innovations. This linguistic convention that is proper to revelation is technically known as ‘urf shar‘ī, or the “convention of revelation,” and stands beside the general communal convention discussed above. An example of this revelational convention (‘urf shar‘ī) is the word ṣalāh, which, before the advent of revelation, designated any type of supplication but was reassigned by the Qur‘ān to refer specifically to the well-known Muslim ritual prayer. Because revelation has impinged upon and modified a previous linguistic convention, we must consider not only the wider context of the pre-existing convention that formed the linguistic backdrop of the revealed texts but also the larger worldview of revelation, taking into account new meanings, terms, and conventions that revelation itself has introduced. Ibn Taymiyya’s key contention, however, remains the same: namely, that in all cases, the meaning of revelation can be determined in a self-referentially independent manner, that is, on the basis of the texts themselves as interpreted in light of the larger linguistic convention and the specific terminological and conceptual innovations inaugurated by revelation. We must therefore judge any putative conclusions of abstract reasoning in light of what we have determined revelation, on its own terms, to be saying rather than reinterpret revelation to conform to what are thought to be the conclusions of independent reason. I speak deliberately here of the “putative” conclusions of abstract reasoning and of what are “thought” to be the conclusions of independent reason since, for Ibn Taymiyya, pure reason (‘aql ṣarīḥ) will never judge to be true any proposition that stands in conflict with the texts of the Qur‘ān or the authenticated Sunna.

83 The definitive works on this topic remain Toshihiko Izutsu’s three masterly studies, Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur‘ān, The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Quran, and God and Man in the Qur‘ān. See also Bravmann, Spiritual Background.

84 For a more detailed discussion of ‘urf shar‘ī, or the “convention of revelation,” see Vishanoff, Formation, passim; Gleave, Islam and Literalism, 37–39, 176–194, and passim; and Weiss, The Search for God’s Law, 138–143, 449.
3.1 The Salaf’s Authority in Knowledge and the Understanding of Revelation

Central to Ibn Taymiyya’s worldview is the notion that the Salaf were not only the most pious of Muslim generations but also the most knowledgeable and possessed of the best and most perfect understanding of the faith, quite apart from their exemplary practice thereof. In establishing this view, he appeals, inter alia, to a statement by ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas’ūd, who describes the Companions as “having the purest hearts, possessing the deepest knowledge, and exhibiting the least unnatural strain and affectation (takalluf)” of all Muslim generations. Ibn Taymiyya holds these three qualities—purity of heart, clarity and depth of intellect, and, as a natural accompaniment to both, straightforwardness and a lack of affectation—in very high esteem, and, as demonstrated in this study, he places them at the center of his entire epistemic system. A further statement in deference to the Companions’ perspicacity, paraphrased from al-Shāfiʿī’s Risāla, declares that the Companions were “superior to us in every rational matter, science, and merit and in every means by which knowledge is gained or truth is apprehended; what they opine for us is of greater worth than what we opine for ourselves.” Ibn Taymiyya adds to these accolades his own contention that “every person knows that the Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of the Successors are the most perfectly gifted in intellect of all people.” And it is precisely these first three generations, from the Companions to the Successors of the Successors, that Ibn Taymiyya defines as the “Salaf” and whose linguistic convention and understanding of the texts he takes as uniquely authoritative for all later generations.

As we saw briefly in chapter 3, Ibn Taymiyya was particularly concerned to defend the unique normative status of the Salaf and early authorities in light of the later contention that they were content merely to believe in and uphold the language of the revealed texts (alfāẓ al-nuṣūṣ) while turning away from a deep contemplation and profound understanding of their meanings. This assumption about the Salaf and their beliefs eventually led to the assertion that the later scholars (the khalaf) had a greater knowledge and deeper understanding of the revealed texts than the Salaf, whose approach—based, allegedly, on an unreflective affirmationism devoid of sophistication and nuance—repre-

---

85 “abarr hādhihi al-umma qulūban wa-aʿmaquhum ‘ilmān wa-aqalluhum takallufan.” Dar’, 5:69, lines 13–15.
86 “innahum fawqanā fī kulli ‘aql wa-‘ilm wa-faḍl wa-sabab yunālu bihi ‘ilm aw yudraku bihi șawāb wa-rayyuhum lanā khayr min ra’yinā li-anfusinā.” Dar’, 5:73, lines 1–3.
87 “kullu aḥad yaʿlamu anna ‘uqūl al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿīn wa-tābiʿihim akmal ‘uqūl al-nās.” Dar’, 5:72, lines 1–2.
88 Dar’, 5:378, lines 6–8.
sent merely the “safer” way. Ibn Taymiyya asserts that later thinkers were induced to adopt such a position precisely because of their belief that a proper understanding of the texts required the extensive use of rationalistic ta’wil (in the third, technical sense discussed above), an enterprise of which the authorities of the Salaf were found to be conspicuously innocent. These later thinkers, Ibn Taymiyya explains, tended to view the Salaf as being aware that numerous words in revelation could carry many different meanings, but, since there was a danger of error in assigning one particular meaning to a verse over another, they preferred to follow the safer (aslam) way by upholding the verbal form (lafẓ) of the texts while refraining from definitively endorsing any particular interpretation of their meaning (maʿnā): in other words, they practiced tafwīḍ. Ibn Taymiyya is keen to exonerate the Salaf and the early authorities of this charge by demonstrating that they (1) affirmed in a straightforward manner the divine attributes specified in the texts; (2) contemplated and deeply understood the full import of these texts; and (3) actively refuted the methods and the discrete views of the negationists (nufāh) once these began to crop up, demonstrating them to be contrary both to the texts of revelation (as authentically understood by the earliest generations) and to the dictates of sound reason. Consequently, Ibn Taymiyya considers the way of the Salaf to be both the safest (aslam) and the most intellectually rigorous (a’lam wa-āḥkam) at the same time.

In establishing what he purported to be the early community’s full-fledged and consistent affirmationism, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to a number of early tafsīr

---

89 This is often expressed in the pithy formula “ṭarīqat al-khalaf aḥkam (or ‘a’lam’) wa-ṭarīqat al-salaf aslam” (the way of the khalaf is more exact [or “more learned”], and/but the way of the Salaf is safer). See Dar’, 5:378, lines 9–10.

90 Dar’, 5:378, lines 15–18.

91 All earlier and later (non-Mu’tazili) mutakallimūn in fact agree that the Companions and Salaf performed this function—and were right to do so—in the face of the early sects inspired by the likes of Jahm b. Šafwān, including the Mu’tazila. An Ash’ari, for instance, would hold the same opinion here as Ibn Taymiyya and congratulate the Salaf for honorably discharging such a vital task. But from an Ash’ari perspective, the ta’wil engaged in by the later Ash’ari school (that of the so-called muta’akhkhārūn) has nothing to do with the brazen negationism of the early sectarians. For his part, Ibn Taymiyya insists that early negationism and later Ash’ari kalām share, in fact, many of the same operative principles and assumptions, just that the Ash’arīs do not apply them as broadly as the Mu’tazila, who, in turn, do not go quite as far in their negationism as the earlier sectarians or the philosophers.

92 Dar’, 5:378, line 19 to 5:379, line 4. For some examples Ibn Taymiyya gives of how the Salaf were aware of and addressed a number of the theological issues raised by later groups, albeit with terminology different from the technical language of the later mutakallimūn, see Dar’, 8:53.
works that have the advantage, for him, of being based primarily on the specific interpretations transmitted from (ma’thūra ‘an) the Prophet, as well as the Companions and Successors—precisely those generations he considered uniquely authoritative. Ibn Taymiyya contends that such works of tafsīr—in addition to other early works of Sunna (al-kutub al-muṣannafa fi al-sunna) containing reports from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors—unambiguously establish the universal affirmationism (ithbāt) of the early community. In fact, he reports that their affirmationism is established through an overwhelming abundance of reports from the tafsīr literature and from other works that were transmitted in a mutawātir fashion and in which one cannot find so much as a “single letter” (ḥarf wāḥid) that agrees with the position of the early negationists. The combination of these reports attests to a consensus (ijmāʿ) of the Salaf on the necessity of full affirmationism with respect to the divine attributes. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya contends, the Qurʾān itself does not contain a single explicit denial of any discrete attribute of God. What it does contain are verses denying that God has any likeness (mithl) or equal (kufuʾ), particularly the verses “There is none like unto Him” and “There is none comparable unto Him.” Yet these verses, Ibn Taymiyya

93 He mentions specifically the early works of ‘Abd b. Ḥumayd (d. 249/863), al-Ḥusayn (“Sunayd”) b. Dāwūd (d. 226/840 or 841), ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), and Wakī b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/812), then the tafsīrs of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ibrāhīm Duḥaym (d. 245/859), Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938), Ibn al-Mundhir (d. ca. 318/930), Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz (d. 369/979), Jaʿfar b. Hayyān (“Abū al-Shaykh”) al-Aṣbahānī (d. 369/979), and Abū Bakr b. Mardawayhi (d. 410/1020) and similar works subsequent to these, such as the tafsīrs of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm b. Rāhawayhi (d. 238/853), Baqi b. Makhāl (d. 276/889), “and others.” For this list, see Darʾ, 2:21, line 10 to 2:22, line 5. See also Darʾ, 7:308, lines 16 to 7:309, line 5 for a much more extensive list, as well as Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 36–37, 51, 62–64.

94 For the explicitly affirmationist statements of numerous early authorities. It is on the basis of these and similar statements that Ibn Taymiyya identifies those early figures whom he calls to witness in defining the approach of “the Salaf and early authorities” (al-salaf wa-l-aʾimma).

95 See Darʾ, 7:308, lines 11–13, where Ibn Taymiyya speaks of “al-tafsīr al-thābita al-mutawātirā ʿan al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿin” and “al-nuqūl al-mutawātirā al-mustafīḍa ʿan al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿin fi ghayr al-tafsīr.”

Though he does not say so explicitly in this particular passage, it is clear that Ibn Taymiyya means that the Qurʾān does not deny that God possesses what he refers to as “attributes of perfection” (ṣifūt al-kamāl). It does, however, deny God’s possession of attributes that entail deficiency or imperfection, such as the attribute of injustice, which is negated of God on several occasions in verses such as Q. Fuṣṣilat 41:46: “wa-mā rabbuka bi-ẓallāmin lil-ʿabīd” (And your Lord is in no wise unjust to [His] slaves). See additional references at p. 36, n. 58 above.

96 “laysa ka-mithlī shayʾ” (Q. al-Shūrā 42:11).

97 “wa-lam yakun lahu kufiwan ahad” (Q. al-Ikhlās 112:4).
contends, do not deny the very existence of God’s attributes; rather, they deny any essential similarity or likeness (mumāthala) between the attributes of God and those of created beings.  

4 Analysis of Terms to Detect and Correct for Semantic Shift

In chapter 2, we encountered a quotation attributed to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal100 to the effect that those who proffer abusive interpretations of scripture and false religious doctrines “discourse on God and the Book of God with no knowledge and speak in vague and ambiguous terms (yatakallamūna bi-l-mutashābih min al-kalām), fooling thereby the ignorant among men.”101 As it turns out, a significant portion of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique against the philosophers and theologians (Muʿtazilī and later Ashʿarī) is directed against their (mis)use of language, a task he notes al-Ghazālī had undertaken before him.102 Throughout the Darʾ, Ibn Taymiyya consistently inveighs against the use of “vague and ambiguous terms” (alfāẓ mujmala mutashābiha) and, as mentioned earlier, goes so far as to state that “the majority of disagreements among rational thinkers are due to an equivocality of terms”103—a state of affairs that results in the untold corruption (fasād) of both reason and religion. In fact, he states, every heretical innovation (bidʿa) in belief and every alleged conflict between reason and revelation can essentially be traced back to the use of vague and ambiguous terms, terms that carry a range of various meanings and implications that are often not fully understood or clearly conceptualized by those employing them. Such terms—complete with the implicit meanings and assumptions they carry—are accepted because of the truth they contain, but they end up serving as the basis for an eventual contradiction with revelation on account of the falsehood

99 Darʾ, 7:111, lines 2–9. For a more extensive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of what it means for there to be “nothing like unto God,” see Darʾ, 5:83–85.

100 See pp. 115–116 above.

101 For the original of this quotation, see, inter alia, Darʾ, 1:221, line 11 to 1:222, line 2.

102 See, for instance, Darʾ, 6:295, lines 4–5, where he mentions al-Ghazālī “and others.”

103 “akthar ikhtilāf al-ʿuqalāʾ min jihat ishtirāk al-ʾasmāʾ.” Darʾ, 1:233, lines 5–6 and 1:299, lines 3–4. See also Darʾ, 1:274, line 18 to 1:275, line 3, where Ibn Taymiyya states that authentic rational proofs or indicants (adilla) can never contradict one another and that later theologians who claim an equivalence, or equipollence, of proofs (takāfuʿ al-adilla) or who experience perplexity (ḥayra) over an issue do so only because of their faulty reasoning and inference (istidlāl)—owing either to their personal inability or to the invalidity of their arguments—and that “one of the greatest causes of this is vague terms [that carry] ambiguous meaning” (min aʿsam asbāb dhālika al-alfāẓ al-mujmala allatī tashtabihi maʿānihā). (See index of Arabic passages for original passage paraphrased here.)
they also contain, falsehood that most people are unable to detect because of the multi-layered ambiguity inherent in such terms. The trouble, according to Ibn Taymiyya, lies in the fact that people adopt such terms wholesale without carefully analyzing their various meanings, then simply affirm or negate the term as such, along with the different meanings and implications attached to it, rather than first analyzing the term meticulously—or “critiquing” it, as one might say today—then judging the truth or falsehood of each individual meaning separately. As a result of this rampant terminological confusion, and because revelation is primarily a phenomenon of language (a revealed text) and rational discourse itself can only be conducted through the use of language, Ibn Taymiyya is of the view that a great many of the philosophical and theological issues debated—as well as the (in his view abusive) interpretations often given in order to make revelation concord with the putatively rational conclusions reached through such debates—can, in fact, be resolved through a careful, methodical dissection of both the various terms used in revelation and the terms used to express the rational arguments that are allegedly in conflict with revelation. Once the various meanings implied in a given term have been patiently sifted and the measure of truth or falsehood of each meaning—as judged by (sound) reason and (authentic) revelation—has been clarified, then the doubts and confusions (shubuhāt) surrounding a given question can be cleared up, whereupon the alleged conflict between reason and revelation is revealed to have been a mere chimera.

But what is the origin of such doubts and confusions (shubuhāt)? Ibn Taymiyya explains that the shubuhāt in question most often arise when the experts of a given discipline adopt common words as technical terms through which they communicate with one another, in the manner of craftsmen who use everyday words in a specific technical sense when referring to particular aspects of their trade. Such terms, Ibn Taymiyya explains, are agreed upon through a particular group convention (alfāẓ ʿurfiyya ʿurfan khāṣṣan), though what this group means by these terms is different from what the terms are understood to mean in the original linguistic convention of the larger speech community (ghayr al-mafhūm minhā fī aṣl al-lugha). As an example, we may cite the term jism (“body”), which is used in revelation in accordance with the normal linguistic convention in reference to, say, the body of a man or an animal. The word jism is not used in revelation with reference to God, by way of

---

104 See Darʾ, 1:208, line 15 to 1:209, line 2.
105 See Darʾ, 9:152, lines 14–17.
106 Darʾ, 4:227, lines 9–12.
107 The word jism (pl. ajśām) appears twice in the Qurʾān, at Q. al-Baqara 2:247 and al-Munāfiqūn 63:4. Two other common terms for “body” are also mentioned in the Qurʾān:
either affirmation or negation, but when the philosophers apply it to God (by way of negation), they do so in a manner that departs from the acknowledged conventional meaning of the term. That is, they use the word in accordance with their particular convention (‘urf khāṣṣ) that defines “body” as any entity of which it is possible to predicate distinct attributes (that is, attributes that are distinct from one another and from the essence of the entity in which they inhere). For instance, maintaining that God is not a “body” (jism) is true and valid according to the linguistic convention of the Arabs, since the word jism as used in the Qur’ān and in Arab linguistic convention has very specific meanings, none of which are applicable to God. But when the philosophers say that God is not a “jism” and mean this according to their technical use of the term (which is wide-ranging and essentially includes any entity of which it is possible to predicate attributes or qualities), then negating that God is a “jism”—when defined in this manner—indeed leads to a contradiction with revelation. This is so because when the philosophers negate God’s being a “jism,” they are actually negating a great deal more than what the word as used in the Qur’ān and according to the linguistic convention of the Arabs actually means.

Such vague and ambiguous terms, according to Ibn Taymiyya, fall into two main categories. The first category includes words that are used both in revelation and in common everyday speech but that the philosophers (and mutakallimūn) employ in a modified technical sense. This technical usage results in ambiguity and confusion (ishtibāh wa-ijmāl), particularly when a direct appeal is made to revelation in support of the philosophical views expressed by means of the terms in question. This phenomenon is clear from the example of the word jism (“body”) above. The second category of vague and ambiguous terms consists of words that do not appear in revelation but that do exist in the everyday language of the Arabs, albeit, once more, with widely shared conventional meanings that are radically at odds with the technical definitions given to them by later philosophers and theologians. Examples of such terms include words like tarkīb (composition), juzʾ (part), iftiqār (dependence), and šūra (image, form). Additional terms Ibn Taymiyya cites in this category include much of the basic vocabulary of philosophical discourse: jawhar (substance), ’araḍ (accident), dhāt (essence), sīfa (attribute), tahayyuz (occupying space), jiha (directionality or spatial location), ʿilla (cause), maʿlūl

the word jasad (pl. ajsād) appears four times, at Q. al-Aʿrāf 7:148, Ṭā Hā 20:88, al-Anbiyāʾ 21:8, and Šād 38:34, and the word badan (pl. abdān) appears once, at Q. Yūnus 10:92.

108 Another critical term in which an analogous semantic shift has occurred is the all-important word wāḥid (one), which we investigate in greater detail below (see section 5, p. 215 ff).
(effect), *wujūb* (necessity), *imkān* (contingency), *qidam* (eternity), *ḥudūth* (temporal origination), and others.\(^{109}\)

In addition to the use of vague and ambiguous terms, Ibn Taymiyya also notes that confusions can arise from a misconstrual of grammar. Similar to the case of lexical items, such grammar-related confusions stem from a failure to account for the actual manner in which the language is conventionally used, as distinguished from the abstract and idealized grammar projected by the mind of the professional grammarian. As an example, Ibn Taymiyya cites the manner in which many of the rationalists (*nuẓẓār*) interpret the use of certain passive participles (*ism mafʿūl*) in Arabic. He says that such thinkers often encounter a passive participle and then, by deducing directly from the morphological form (as opposed to the actual usage), claim that there must be an agent involved. For instance, they might draw the conclusion that if God is said to be “*makhṣūṣ*” (“specified” or “characterized”) by the possession of particular attributes, then this must mean that He has a *mukhaṣṣiṣ* (“specifier” or “characterizer”) external to Himself who conferred these attributes upon Him. Ibn Taymiyya, however, argues that in the actual conventional use of the Arabic language, certain passive participles have come to be used in a purely intransitive sense, meaning (in the case of the word *makhṣūṣ*, for instance) only that the thing is qualified by a certain characteristic or attribute, not that the attribute in question has been conferred upon it by an external agent (as suggested by the passive participle form when considered in the abstract). In actual usage, then, the passive participle *makhṣūṣ* is equivalent in meaning to the active participle *mukhtaṣṣ*, derived from the verb *ikhtaṣṣa*. This verb, derived from the same root as *makhṣūṣ*, normally conveys the intransitive/mediopassive sense of “to be specified or characterized by,” meaning simply “having or possessing the characteristic of” with no implication that the characteristic in question has been conferred upon its bearer by an external agent.\(^{110}\)

Ibn Taymiyya contends that many of the terms used by the rationalists fall into the same category as the word *makhṣūṣ*. That is, while such terms may be, formally speaking, past participles of transitive verbs, they are nonetheless used in a strictly intransitive or mediopassive sense. Technical terms that fall into this category include the all-important words *mawjūd* (existent, existing), *makhṣūṣ* (specified or characterized [by]), *muʿallaf* (made up [of]), constituted

---

\(^{109}\) *Darʾ*, 1:222, lines 11–15.

\(^{110}\) Note that Form \(\text{VIII} \) (*iftaʿala*) of this particular verb (“*ikhtaṣṣa*”) carries the transitive meaning of Form 1 as well, as evidenced in a verse such as “*wa-Llāhu yakhtaṣṣu bi-rahmatihī man yashā*” (And God singles out for His mercy whom He will) (Q. al-Baqara 2:105).
ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl, or what is revelation?

[by]), murakkab (composite), and muḥaqqaq (realized; real, actual). As a question of conventional usage, such terms do not necessarily mean (and, when applied to God, definitely do not mean) that an external agent has conferred the given quality on the entity characterized by it. However, many people misinterpret these and similar terms by construing them strictly on the formal basis of their morphological pattern while disregarding their meaning as determined by their actual usage in the known convention of Arabic speakers. The problem, for Ibn Taymiyya, is that such people have interpreted the morphological form of the word too “literally,” mistakenly prioritizing abstract linguistic forms, and the formal generalizations made about them, over the more relevant criterion of their actual use in the known linguistic convention of the relevant speech community. Ibn Taymiyya considers this yet another example of the rationalists forcing language into their own intellectual mold and grafting the conclusions of their rational speculations onto the pre-existing linguistic convention. Ibn Taymiyya, once again, maintains that due consideration of established linguistic norms is likely to clear up the issue under investigation and, typically, to undercut the doctrines and assumptions that have come to be attached to it through the speculations of the rationalists (nuẓẓār).

5 A Case Study: The Terms wāḥid, tawḥīd, and tarkīb

Ibn Taymiyya discusses at length the specific example of the all-important words wāḥid (one) and tawḥīd (oneness of God), as well as the related notion of tarkīb (composition). As we saw in chapter 1, the early Muʿtazila, influenced by the Aristotelian distinction between essence and attributes, understood

111 Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of granting automatic precedence to formal grammatical and morphological patterns over actual language use, given that such use does not always conform mechanistically to the strictures of an idealized system, was advanced in a much more stringent and comprehensive form by the iconoclastic Zāhirī Andalusian grammarian Ibn Maḍāʾ al-Qurṭubī (d. 592/1196), who, in his relatively short (seventy-page) Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā al-nuḥāh, written towards the end of his life, calls for a fundamental overhaul of what he considered the abstruseness, artificiality, and needless complication of the existing linguistic sciences. In a spirit reminiscent of Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on the theoretical constructs of many of the theologians, Ibn Maḍāʾ took fellow grammarians to task for their preoccupation with abstract notions like grammatical governance (ʿamal) and analogy (qiyās), which needlessly complicated grammar and often had little bearing on the actual functioning of the language or its correct use. For a summary presentation, see Versteegh, Arabic Linguistic Tradition, 140–152. For more detailed treatments, see Nakamura, “Ibn Maḍāʾ’s Criticism of Arabic Grammarians,” esp. 98–111; Versteegh, “Ibn Maḍāʾ as a Zāhirī Grammarian,” esp. 216–228; and Suleiman, Arabic Grammatical Tradition, 145–177.
oneness—particularly that of God—in much the same way as Aristotle did, that is, as perfect simplicity. According to this technical philosophical usage (iṣṭilāḥ), that which is truly “one” is that whose essence is completely simple (basīṭ) and entirely undifferentiated (lā yuʿlamu minhu shayʾ dūna shayʿ) and, as a consequence, is necessarily devoid of any attributes distinct from essence. On this view, if God were to possess attributes, He would no longer be truly “one” (in the sense of being perfectly simple and undifferentiated); rather, He would be “composite” (murakkab), that is, “composed” of His essence and His attributes. On this understanding, then, the affirmation of divine attributes—even those that seem to be affirmed unambiguously in revelation—would lead to a contradiction with the even more fundamental principle, also affirmed emphatically by revelation, that God is, first and foremost, one (wāḥid). Based on the premise that affirming the divine attributes would compromise God’s oneness, the philosophers and the Muʿtazila presume that if revelation is to be deemed consistent (with itself and with reason), it cannot be held to affirm both God’s oneness and His possession of myriad attributes, since oneness and the possession of attributes are mutually exclusive and therefore contradictory. On the basis of philosophical principles requiring that God be one, in addition to the Qurʾān’s own emphatic insistence that God is one, the philosophers and the Muʿtazila maintain that the internal and rational consistency of revelation can be maintained only if God’s alleged attributes are interpreted as metaphorical rather than real, that is, as mere names (asmāʾ) that do not correspond to any actual extant qualities (ṣifāt) by which the divine essence (dhāt) may be said to be qualified. From another angle, they argue that anything that possesses attributes is necessarily a body (jism), that all bodies are divisible (munqasim), and that anything that is divisible cannot be said to be “one.” Here, we find an example of a conclusion (namely, that an entity that is truly one cannot be qualified by attributes) that has allegedly been reached through reason but that is also asserted to concur with revelation, since revelation also uncompromisingly declares the emphatic oneness of God. This declaration of oneness is taken to be more fundamental than revelation’s simultaneous apparent affirmation of divine attributes. As a result, these qualities are interpreted not as real attributes but as mere names in order to avoid the implication that revelation, by affirming attributes of a God who is “one,” is both internally inconsistent and in contradiction with the dictates of reason.

The question of the rational coherence, let alone the necessity, of the view that something that is truly one must be perfectly simple—and, therefore, devoid of attributes so as not to be “composite”—is taken up at length in the next chapter, in which we examine Ibn Taymiyya’s rational critique of the
philosophers’ ontology and epistemology. Here, we explore the linguistic side of Ibn Taymiyya’s endeavor, in which he is concerned to determine whether, from a purely linguistic point of view, it is plausible to identify revelation’s insistent affirmation of God’s oneness with the philosophers’ and the Mu’tazila’s notion of oneness as pure simplicity devoid of any positive attributes (such as those predicated of God in revelation). Presumably, a Mu’tazili would argue for the validity of this identification on the basis that if reason has discovered that “one” means “simple” and if God and His revelation are rationally coherent and not absurd or nonsensical, then Qur’ānic statements to the effect that God is one must be meant as a declaration of His perfect simplicity and His concomitant lack of real attributes. Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, maintains that revelation can reasonably be interpreted to mean only what the Prophet and his Companions can plausibly be held to have understood from its wording, as received and comprehended in the context of their own linguistic milieu and thought world. For Ibn Taymiyya, then, the first question—prior to any rational investigation or critique of the philosophers’ notion of oneness—is to identify what the word “one” meant in the linguistic convention (ʿurf) of the Prophet and his Companions and, therefore, what the assertion of God’s oneness in the Qurʾān must have meant to them, as a function both of their existing linguistic convention and of the theology and overall worldview of the Qurʾān as it impinged upon and modified that convention.

Starting with the linguistic meaning of “one” (wāḥid), Ibn Taymiyya asserts that this word in the Arabic language (and in all languages, he avers\textsuperscript{112}), as determined by its actual use among the language’s speakers, is only found to apply to that which, in the terminology of the philosophers and the Mu’tazila, is considered “divisible” and a “body”—in other words, to an entity qualified by particular attributes. He remarks that Arabic speakers speak of “one man” (as opposed to two men or three men), where the one man in question is a bodily entity with various attributes, is divisible (that is, his limbs can be severed and separated from him), and so forth. The Arabic word “one” in “one man,” therefore, simply signifies a lack of plurality of entities (in this case, men), not the lack of qualities or attributes proper to and inseparable from the (one) entity itself. To

\textsuperscript{112} Despite his strong “empiricism” and the importance he gives to the specific contextualized use of a particular language (in this case Arabic), Ibn Taymiyya nevertheless hints at the existence of universally shared notions and conceptions that are the same for all individuals in all cultures, irrespective of the specific languages in which they are expressed. In fact, in another place in the Darʾ, he speaks specifically of “the meaning that does not change according to the difference in languages” (al-ma’nā alladhī lā yakhtalīf bi-ikhtilāf al-lughāt). Darʾ, 5:325, line 18.
be “one” in the conventional use of the Arabic language thus simply means to be a single instantiated particular entity (rather than a plurality of entities), one that is necessarily and inescapably qualified by whatever range of attributes are inherent to the species or class to which the entity in question belongs. Ibn Taymiyya also calls to witness a number of Qur’ānic verses in which the word “one” is used to refer to a single, whole entity invariably qualified by attributes of some sort or another.¹¹³ In no circumstance, he argues, is the term “one” in Arabic found to have been used by its speakers in the idiosyncratic and highly restricted technical sense of the philosophers and the Mu’tazila. In fact, such a usage would have been quite impossible since the distinction between essence and attributes that it presupposes was unknown to the Arabs and formed no part of their intellectual framework.¹¹⁴ And yet, God spoke to the Arabs in their language, in terms that they could only have understood as a function of their native frame of reference.

Beyond this, Ibn Taymiyya contends that what the philosophers refer to as “one” in their technical discourse—namely, a perfectly simple essence unqualified by any attributes whatsoever—is a notion of which most people have no conception¹¹⁵ and of whose existence they have neither theoretical knowledge (ʿilm) nor practical experience (khūbra) such that their conventional language should contain a word to express it. It goes without saying, he maintains, that a term that is widely shared (mashhūr) among people and used by both the general population (al-ʿāmma) and the specialists of a particular discipline (al-khāṣṣa) cannot legitimately be construed to carry a meaning only conceived by and known among the specialist few.¹¹⁶ In other words, since language is shared by all members of the speech community equally, it must be assumed to presuppose the conceptions (taṣawwurāt) that are common to all and not those of a philosophical elite or any other group of specialists. (This is particularly true of the language of revelation since revelation is explicitly addressed to all people equally.) Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya contends, people know by the light of their natural, inborn faculty of reasoning that the entity the philosophers call “one” (namely, an entity devoid of any attributes whatsoever) could only be conceived of theoretically in the mind but could not exist as such in

¹¹³ These verses are Q. al-Baqara 2:266; al-Nisāʾ 4:31; al-Tawba 9:6; Yūsuf 12:36, 12:41; al-Kahf 18:22, 18:26, 18:32, 18:49, 18:110; al-Qaṣaṣ 28:26, 28:27; al-Jinn 72:18, 72:22; al-Muddaththir 74:11; and al-Ikhlāṣ 112:4. (Darʾ, 7:115–116).

¹¹⁴ For an exhaustive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the philosophers’ theory of essences, see Hallaq, Greek Logicians, esp. at xiv–xxvii.

¹¹⁵ “layṣa huwa shayʾan yaʿqiluhu al-nās.” Darʾ, 7:16, line 14 (and lines 12–15 for general point).

¹¹⁶ “al-lafẓ al-mashhūr bayna al-khāṣṣ wa-l-ʿāmma lā yakūnu musammāhu minmā lā yataṣawwuruhu illā al-khāṣṣa.” Darʾ, 7:120, lines 17–18. Also Darʾ, 7:18, lines 8–9 and similar at 7:120, lines 3–6.
external reality. And even if, for the sake of argument, one allowed for the possibility of the existence of such an entity in external reality, one would still have to substantiate that such an entity is properly designated by the term “one” (wāḥid) in the known linguistic convention of the seventh-century Arabs to whom the oneness of God in the Qurʾān was initially proclaimed. Since, however, the word wāḥid in actual Arabic usage is known to connote nothing of the specialized technical meaning of “one” as used by the philosophers and Muʿtazilī theologians, one cannot legitimately appeal to such verses as Q. al-Baqara 2:163: “And your God is one God” (wa-ilāhukum ilāhun wāḥid) or Q. al-Ikhlāṣ 112:1: “Say, ‘He is God, [who is] One’” (qul huwa Llāhu aḥad) as textual support for the denial of the divine attributes. Ibn Taymiyya concludes that projecting the later technical, philosophical meaning of the word “one” onto terms like wāḥid or aḥad as they are used in revelation constitutes not only a falsification of (firyaʿalā) the revealed texts and reason but also a distortion and disruption of the manner in which language itself functions as a tool for the communication of meaning among its speakers on the basis of a necessarily transparent and commonly shared linguistic habitus.

Indeed, as the Qurʾān itself informs us, “Never did We send a messenger except [that he spoke] in the language of his people, that he might explain to them clearly.” Such, then, is the case of the usage of the term “one” in the common speech of the Arabs to whom the Qurʾān was initially revealed. But what of the particular use, if any, of the word “one” as employed by revelation specifically in relation to God? The oneness of God (tawḥīd) affirmed in the Qurʾān, Ibn Taymiyya explains, entails not simply the affirmation that God is numerically singular (that is, that there is only one God and no others) but, more specifically, the affirmation of the exclusive divinity (ilāhiyya) of God and God alone, in other words, that there is no other god (ilāh) rightfully deserving of worship save the one true God. To put it differently, the point of the Qurʾān’s insistence on tawḥīd is to assert not merely that God is one but that He is one God. Ibn Taymiyya cites a hadith and a number of Qurʾānic verses to support this conception of what it means to declare that God is one. This understanding stands in contrast to the definition that many mutakallimūn give of the word tawḥīd when they define it as consisting (merely) of God’s oneness in His essence, whereby He has no part (juz’) or counterpart (qasīm); His oneness in His attributes, wherein He

---

117 "bal 'uqūl al-nās wa-fitaruhum majbūla 'alā inkārihi wa-nafyihi." Darʾ, 7:16, line 15.
118 Darʾ, 7:120, lines 7–8.
119 "wa-mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi-lisāni qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum." (Q. Ibrāhīm 14:4).
120 These verses are Q. al-Baqara 2:163; al-Naḥl 16:36, 16:31; al-Isrāʾ 17:45; al-Muʾminūn 23:17; al-Ṣāfīt 37:35–36; Ṣād 38:5; al-Zumar 39:45; al-Zukhruf 43:45; and al-Mumtaḥana 60:4. (Darʾ, 1:224–225).
has no like (shabīḥ); and His oneness in His actions, in which He has no partner or co-sharer (sharīk). Yet this tripartite division of tawḥīd into oneness of essence, of attributes, and of acts only partly overlaps with the tawḥīd affirmed by revelation, which includes, as we have seen, the explicit affirmation, in word and in deed, of God’s singular divinity (ulūhiyya) and His unique right to be worshipped. In this manner, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, the later mutakallimūn fail to include in the nominatum (musammā) of the word tawḥīd this aspect of divinity and rightful worship that is essential to it while smuggling into it a range of other meanings (based on the private and idiosyncratic technical usage of the philosophers) that entail a contradiction of the plain sense of revelation through a negation of the divine attributes unambiguously affirmed therein.

We have seen in the preceding two paragraphs that the Qur’ān uses the terms wāḥid and tawḥīd, with respect to God, both in terms of a common everyday meaning (namely, that there is only one entity who is God and not several) and in terms of a novel meaning introduced by revelation (namely, that this numerically singular God is alone deserving of worship). A problem arises, however, when a word is used in a technical sense by a particular group and infused with meanings not originally part of the semantic field assigned to it by its original users. As we have seen above, Ibn Taymiyya concedes that when the philosophers and Muʿtazila affirm that God has “no parts, no counterpart, and no like,” this is a true statement that indeed conveys a (rationally and scripturally) valid meaning, namely, the impossibility that God should separate into parts (yatafärraq), degenerate (yafsud), or disintegrate (yastahīl). This is so because God is both “aḥad” (singularly and emphatically one) and “ṣamad” (which means, for physical objects, that which is solid and has no hollow center, but which also carries the abstract meaning of a “master or lord whose sovereignty and power are complete and perfect”). Yet the philosophers and the Muʿtazila superimpose upon this correct meaning a negation of God’s being above His creation (ʿuluwwuhu ʿalā khalqihi) and His being distinct and separate from it (mubāyana). And they deny other such attributes on the grounds that affirming them would entail that God is composite (murakkab) and therefore divisible (munqasim), rendering Him in this manner “like” (mithl) or “similar to” (shabih bi) created things. In response, Ibn Taymiyya insists that those knowledgeable of the Arabic language and the context of revelation know that such meanings are simply not signified by the terms “composition” (tarkīb), “divisibility”

---

121 On this theme, see Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy, 26–29 (“The Centrality of Worshipping God Alone”) and Hoover, 123–122 (“Lordship and Divinity”). See also Hoover, “Hanbali Theology,” 634–635. For Ibn Taymiyya’s theology more generally, see “Tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya” (vol. 1 of MF) and “Tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya” (vol. 2 of MF).

122 “al-sayyid alladhī kamula suʾdahu.” Darʾ, 1:228, line 6.
(inquisām), or “likeness”/“similarity” (tamthīl/tashbīh) in the commonly understood Arabic language in which the Qurʾān was revealed.

As for the precarious term tarkīb (composition), Ibn Taymiyya cites several common everyday meanings of this word, including (1) that which has been put together or assembled by something else (mā rakkabahu ghayrahu), (2) that which was disaggregated and subsequently came together (mā kāna muftariqan fa-ijtama’a), and (3) that which can be dissembled or taken apart (mā yumkinu tafrīq baʿḍihi ‘an baʿḍ),123 such as a man, an animal, or a plant.124 Now, it is doubtless true, according to Ibn Taymiyya, that God is not composite in any of these commonly understood senses. The philosophers (and particularly Ibn Sīnā), however, have adopted the word “composition” (tarkīb) as a technical term and endowed it with a number of meanings additional to its original connotations, among which is the notion that God must be devoid of all attributes so as not to be “composed” of His essence (dhāt) and His would-be attributes (ṣifāt).125 This conclusion is based on the premise that “every composite entity (kullu murakkab) is dependent on (muftaqir ilā) its parts (ajzāʾihi)” or, alternatively, dependent on “other than itself” (ghayrihi)—on the assumption that a thing’s constituent parts are “other than” the thing itself taken as a composite whole.126 On this understanding, God’s would-be attributes are taken to be “parts” (ajzāʾ) that are “other than” (ghayr) God Himself and upon which He would be “dependent” (muftaqir) if He were indeed to possess such attributes.

Thus, not only would the possession of attributes make God “composite” and therefore not “one” (in the specialized philosophical sense of perfectly simple), but His alleged “dependence” on “other than” Himself would negate His perfection and divine self-sufficiency as well.

In this manner, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, the philosophers have negated God’s ontological reality (ḥaqīqa) and attributes (ṣifāt) in the belief that, by doing so, they were preserving the oneness (tawḥīd) of His essence (dhāt).127 Yet in reality, Ibn Taymiyya insists, the distinction between essence and attributes is a purely mental one since the various attributes of a given entity can only be separated by the mind for the purpose of rational analysis but can never exist as such—that is, separate from essence—in the outside world.128 In external real-

123 In another place, Ibn Taymiyya uses the words “that whose parts can be separated” (mā yaqbalu tafrīq ajzāʾihi). Darʾ, 3:16, lines 3–4.
124 Darʾ, 1:280, lines 14–18. Also Darʾ, 3:16, lines 3–4.
125 For a list of the five technical usages that the philosophers added to the original nominatum (musammā) of the word tarkīb, see Darʾ, 3:389, line 5 to 3:393, line 3. Also Darʾ, 5:142, lines 1–9.
126 Darʾ, 3:16, lines 1–2.
127 Darʾ, 5:141, lines 17–18.
128 And it is only in this notional sense that one may legitimately describe an attribute as
ity, there can exist only the thing’s essence as qualified by the various attributes and properties concomitant to it.\textsuperscript{129} In short, according to Ibn Taymiyya, while the mind may make a \textit{logical} distinction between essence and attributes, the \textit{ontological} reality of any existent entity necessarily comprises both its essence and its concomitant attributes as one (ontologically) inseparable and indivisible whole. On this analysis, then, the philosophical maxim that “every composite entity is dependent on what is other than it since it is dependent on its part(s)”\textsuperscript{130} can, once the rational meanings have been stripped from the technical jargon of the philosophers, be translated as “any entity qualified by a necessary attribute concomitant to it can only exist along with its necessary attribute.”\textsuperscript{131} And this meaning, Ibn Taymiyya asserts, is true (in fact, it is tautological) and conforms both with a sound rational analysis of the issue and with the numerous scriptural dicta that unambiguously affirm specific attributes of God—quite in spite of the fact that the philosophers have chosen to refer to the inseparable attributes of an entity as “parts of” or as “other than” the entity itself, or to describe the ontological concomitance (\textit{istilzām}, \textit{talāzum}) between the entity’s essence and its attributes as the “dependence” (\textit{iftiqār}) of the former upon the latter, or to refer to an entity’s being qualified by necessary attributes concomitant to it as a form of “composition” (\textit{tarkīb}). Ibn Taymiyya’s point is that if these are the specialized, technical meanings the philosophers have given to the common terms “part,” “other,” “dependence,” and “composition,” then there is no rational or scriptural reason to deny the statement that God is “composed” (of His essence and attributes) and therefore “dependent” on “parts” that are “other than” He on \textit{this interpretation} of the terms—quite apart from the fact that such idiosyncratic meanings fly in the face of what these words mean in the widely shared convention of Arabic speakers\textsuperscript{132} and are therefore likely to be misleading and to give rise to numerous confusions and errors on the level of both rational analysis and scriptural interpretation.

---

\textsuperscript{129} “laysat lahu ḥaqīqa ghayr al-dhāt al-mawṣūfa \[bi-ṣifātihā al-lāzima lahā\].” \textit{Darʾ}, 1:281, line 7 and \textit{Darʾ}, 3:16–17, \textit{passim}.

\textsuperscript{130} “kullu murakkab muftaqir ilā ghayrihi li-iftiqārihi ilā juzʾihi.” \textit{Darʾ}, 1:281, line 12 and \textit{Darʾ}, 3:16–17.

\textsuperscript{131} “al-mawṣūf bi-ṣifa lázima lahu là yakūnu mawjūdan bi-dīn sīfātihi al-lāzima lahu.” \textit{Darʾ}, 3:16, lines 11–12.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states that “referring to this meaning as ‘composition’ is a convention that they [the philosophers] have established (\textit{waḍʿ waḍaʿūhu}) and that does not conform to the (conventional) language of the Arabs or to the language of any other community (laysa muwāfiqan li-lughat al-ʿArab wa-lā lughat aḥad min al-umam).” \textit{Darʾ}, 1:281, lines 2–3.
Ultimately, a given question must be decided on the basis of a sound rational analysis and a sound scriptural exegesis once the terms of the discussion have been carefully analyzed and their various meanings separated, fully clarified, and individually judged for their scriptural, as well as their rational, integrity.

We have seen above the example of a term used in revelation, *wāḥid*, and a closely related term not used in revelation, *tarkīb*, both of which underwent a significant semantic shift by being infused with unprecedented meanings reflecting a novel conceptual framework alien to the intellectual and linguistic habits of the early Muslims. This novel conceptual and linguistic schema was then read back into revelation by later philosophers and theologians such that the uncontroversial statement “God is one and incomposite”—understood in accord with the original convention as carrying the (scripturally affirmed and rationally coherent) meaning that there exists only one single entity who is God and who alone deserves to be worshipped and who neither was assembled nor is subject to disaggregation—was now taken to carry the (scripturally indefensible and rationally incoherent) meaning that God, who is perfectly simple, is absolute or unconditioned being (*wujūd muṭlaq*) possessing no attributes whatsoever. That such a notion of “God” is radically at odds with the plain sense of scripture (understood according to the linguistic convention of its original recipients) is beyond question for Ibn Taymiyya since, at the time of revelation, the words *wāḥid* (one), *murakkab* (composite), and related terms carried none of the highly specialized meanings invested in them by later philosophers attempting to express the assumptions and entailments of a foreign *Weltanschauung* in the Arabic language. But Ibn Taymiyya goes beyond asserting the mere scriptural incompatibility of such a notion of God, arguing that it is rationally indefensible as well since “unconditioned being” and “unconditioned essence” not qualified by any attributes whatsoever are, he insists, purely logical constructs that can exist only in the mind. The crucial lesson to be drawn here, for Ibn Taymiyya, is that a statement such as “God is one and incomposite” cannot be responsibly affirmed or negated categorically until all its constituent terms have been carefully dissected, whereupon one

---

133 Indeed, the reader will note that, for Ibn Taymiyya, the all-important Qur’ānic term *ta’wil* has itself suffered a similar fate, as detailed above in section 1, pp. 184–185.

134 See von Weizsäcker, “Über Sprachrelativismus” for an insightful treatment of the manner in which the modes of thought in the major world cultures (including the Islamic and the European) are, to a considerable extent, bound to and determined by the specificities of those cultures’ regnant languages—what the author refers to as the “Sprachbezogenheit der Denksysteme der großen Kulturen” (the language-boundedness of the thought systems of the major cultures).

135 This topic is taken up in greater detail in the following chapter.
should then proceed to affirm and deny the individual meanings thus identified irrespective of the terms used to express them, for “rational inquiry is concerned with meanings (maʿānī), not [the] mere technical terms (iṣṭilāḥāt)[by which they are expressed].”




We began this chapter with a Qurʾānic verse that states, “Never did We send a messenger except [that he spoke] in the language of his people, that he might explain to them clearly (li-yubayyina lahum).” In a sense, this chapter—and indeed Ibn Taymiyya’s entire linguistic philosophy and hermeneutical approach—can be seen as a commentary on and an elaboration of this and similar verses. The fundamental fact of revelation is that it consists of a communiqué from God on high to His human creatures here on earth. The message is vital, the communication essential, and the stakes for human welfare in this world and the next exceedingly high. If men are to be imparted the truth about themselves and their Creator and are to be held morally accountable for this truth in an eternal hereafter, then certainly, Ibn Taymiyya reasons, God would not fail to communicate to them with utmost clarity and determinacy the content of those beliefs and actions for which they will be held eternally responsible. I pair the terms “clarity” and “determinacy” here deliberately, for Ibn Taymiyya takes it as axiomatic that there is a strong correlation—or, as he might say, a “talāzum,” or mutual implication—between clarity, on the one hand, and a determinacy approaching univocity (particularly in broad theological matters), on the other. For Ibn Taymiyya, effective communication is that which leaves the recipient with no doubt regarding the content of the missive and the intentions of the dispatcher. A highly indeterminate text open to a multitude of contradictory readings would represent, for Ibn Taymiyya, a consummate failure in effective communication, as it would leave each reader to foist his own subjective opinions onto an essentially meaningless concatenation of ambivalent vocables. A text that can mean anything means, in fact, nothing.

136 “wa-l-naẓar al-ʿaqlī innamā yakūnu fī al-maʿānī lā fī mujarrad al-iṣṭilāḥāt.” Darʾ, 10:239, line 17. See similar at Darʾ, 1:282, lines 15–16; 1:296, lines 8–10; 1:299, lines 1–5; 3:237, lines 15–16; and 9:291, line 17.

137 Q. Ibrāhīm 14:4.

138 I say specifically “contradictory readings” since Ibn Taymiyya does allow that the words and verses of revelation can, to a limited degree, legitimately carry several meanings, but these, he insists, are always complementary—highlighting various aspects of one and the same reality—rather than contradictory. For a more detailed analysis, see Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 131–136.
Working from the premise that revelation is preeminently clear and intelligible, Ibn Taymiyya elaborates a thoroughly language-based hermeneutic that views the collective repository of revealed texts as fully independent and self-sufficient in their conveyance of a unified, coherent, and comprehensible worldview and theology. The transparency and self-sufficiency of the texts relieve the exegete of any need to rely on extra-textual sources in order to comprehend revelation, particularly the notoriously contentious and parochial “rational conclusions” (‘aqliyyāt) of the divers schools of philosophy and speculative theology. Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretive method, as we have seen, builds on a larger linguistic epistemology that posits that the meaning of any linguistic utterance is solely determinable through a careful consideration of context, judged against the backdrop of the known linguistic conventions of the speech community to which the language is directed. Context and convention work together to isolate, usually in a definitive manner, which of the various meanings signified by a given word is meant in any given instance. Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence on the inherent and hence inescapable contextuality of all linguistic utterances (revelation or otherwise) renders redundant the traditional distinction between putatively “literal” (haqiqa) and “figurative” (majaz) meanings presupposed by the kind of “third-wave” ta’wil beloved of the philosophers and theologians but that Ibn Taymiyya insists was vehemently rejected by the Salaf. If the apparent sense (zahir) of any utterance is determined strictly as a function of context, then there can never be any need to deflect a word from its supposed primary meaning to a would-be secondary, “non-literal” one. Given the central importance Ibn Taymiyya accords to context, I have qualified his hermeneutics as a kind of “contextual ta’wil,” an appellation he would no doubt accept insofar as “ta’wil” here is taken strictly in its original sense of “tafsir al-ma’na,” or the explication of the straightforward lexical meaning of an utterance-in-context.

Yet if we are to judge what a particular word must mean in a given context, we can only do so if we are thoroughly familiar with the wider linguistic conventions of our speech community, which dictate that a given word conventionally carries such-and-such a meaning when used in such-and-such a context. Absent this experiential familiarity with the discrete conventions of a defined linguistic community, we would have no basis on which to pass an accurate judgement on the contextualized meaning of an utterance. Given that the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions in the seventh-century classical Arabic familiar to them, it is, naturally, their linguistic convention (and related conceptual framework) that must be considered the final determinant of what revelation meant to them. And what revelation meant to them is, for Ibn Taymiyya, what revelation means, period. To enter-
tain the possibility that revelation could have a “real” meaning at odds with the understanding of the Salaf—only to be uncovered generations later via the idiosyncratic conventions of a foreign society whose vocabulary, assumptions, and intellectual habits are other than those presupposed by the Qurʾān—would not only amount to a fatal belying of the Qurʾān’s own self-proclaimed clarity but also entail the categorical negation of the very essence of language and the design and function of linguistic communication, be it divine or otherwise.139

As the investigation we have conducted in this chapter makes clear, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to effect a shift away from a hermeneutic that prioritizes abstract speculation (and that endeavors to fit revelation into the mold of a preset worldview allegedly derived on the basis of pure reason) towards a hermeneutic that is thoroughly grounded in language and in which the revealed texts are fully self-sufficient in their conveyance of theological and other truths to mankind. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to how Ibn Taymiyya deconstructs the basic assumptions of philosophy in order to reestablish the connection—and the harmony—between authentic revelation (naql ṣaḥīḥ) and his reconstructed notion of pure reason (ʿaql ṣarīḥ).

139 Once again, this should not be taken to mean that Ibn Taymiyya necessarily rejects the prerogative of later generations to entertain their own personal or collective insights regarding the revealed texts, provided these insights are complementary to, and never in contradiction with, the meanings we can determine to have been understood by the Salaf.