

Two Methods of Interpreting the Sacred Book

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A Book Review for

*Al-Ghazali, Averroes and the Interpretation of the Qur'an,
"Common sense and philosophy in Islam"*

By Avital Wohlman

Translated by David Burrell

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In her *Al-Ghazali, Averroes and the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Avital Wohlman tries to draw a map of the area of relations between reason and revelation based on Ghazali's and Averroes' thoughts. These two important Muslim figures of Islamic intellectual history differ on a discussion of the way of understanding the Qur'an. According to the author, this discussion is important not only for Muslims, but also other Abrahamic religions as well. In addition, Wohlman implies the key concern of the book in the subtitle: *Common sense and philosophy in Islam*. Her purpose is to explore "the debate between the two figures regarding Qur'an interpretation within their respective visions of society organized in the light of what is deemed essential to preserving the identity of believers."¹ It is to say, more than reviving a philosophical debate; rather the central topic of the book is only to demonstrate two divergent approaches to interpretation of the Qur'an. She eventually warns readers that this is not a discussion of relations between reason and religion. As indicated in the subtitle, Wohlman does not compare or contrast the philosophical interpretations of Ghazali and

Averroes on verses of the Qur'an; she only examines their ideas on relations between reason and revelation throughout the book. They do not diverge on the supremacy of the Sacred Book, but they differ in criteria of interpreting it.

The essential difference between their suggestions is that Averroes maintains that any act of interpreting be philosophically informed, while Ghazali would prefer *intertextuality* at best. Wohlman claims that the Qur'an has more to do with Averroes' metaphysics than it is thought because, according to Averroes, philosophy can resolve meaningful debates that diverse opinions and multiple experiences can never. That is to say, Aristotle's metaphysics completes, not undermines, the meaning of the Qur'an. Without philosophy, there can be no way of knowing it properly.

On the other hand, Ghazali is well enough convinced that a level of rational inquiry and discussion outside of any philosophy by the light of common human experience are sufficient to understand the Word of God, the Qur'an. For interpreting the Qur'an, sincere fear and hope regarding the last judgment is required. However, philosophers who are proud of their so-called unattainable intellectual abilities do not fulfill this requirement because of their breathtaking arrogances. Yet, "Literal sense of the Word is clear for the believer, especially those passages which concern articles of faith."² As understood, he does not want to neglect rational thought but rather to make room for common sense.

The book consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, these two Muslim thinkers are introduced with their life stories. For Wohlman, these stories will provide the background of their views on interpretation of the Qur'an. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), as a son of an ordinary devout Muslim, had succeeded to become the head of the first Islamic academy in Baghdad. After reaching the top of his career, he left all these legal positions and set out on his famous journey. During this long journey, inspired by Sufi teaching, his ideas had radically changed. From his returning to Baghdad to his death, he focused on the main tenets of Islamic belief instead of details of law or discussions in theology. He produced most of his major works such as *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, *Ihya' Ulum ad-Din*, *Al-Qistas al-mustaqim*, *Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayn al-Islam waaz-Zanadaqa*, *Al-Munqidh min ad-dalal* during this period. On the other hand, Averroes was a son of a family of high court judges in Andalusia. He lived in Cordoba and he had sufficient economic and political conditions to carry out philosophical inquiry.

The next chapter covers Ghazali's ideas about philosophy and interpretation of the Qur'an. While seeking for the most accurate way of understanding the

verses, Ghazali intended to avoid ‘philosophized’ interpretations. In order to protect Muslim faith, he objected to philosophy. Here, Wohlman underlines that Ghazali opposes philosophy itself, and does not support one school of philosophy in the name of another. However, as Wohlman correctly points out, ‘philosophy’ for Ghazali, instead of being a method or an area of study, is a group of people who had the distorted use of reason and ‘philosophized’ things. In this point, Wohlman shows how Ghazali distinguishes metaphysics and logic in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

Chapter 3 identifies two motives of Ghazali’s thought in *Decisive Criterion*: the first, the threats against the identity of Muslim believers, and the second, his ability to encourage believers and to protect faith against hypocrisy. To meet his goals, Ghazali offers a strong medicine to believers: a balanced feeling between fear and hope of their ends. Wohlman, in this chapter, points out fivefold disposition that Ghazali proposes for reading the Qur’an by reference to his own examples in *Decisive Criterion of Distinction*.³ According to him, existence of a thing is either particular (*dhati*) or sensible or imagined or rational or analogous (metaphorical). Moreover, the first degree of existence is present in the other four, that is to say every being thing exists through God. It constitutes “the objective domain of the real”. Knowing this categorization allows believers to confirm the accuracy of everything the Messenger asserts. As Wohlman emphasized, “distinguishing five modes of existence allowed Ghazali to admit divergent interpretations of the Qur’an while also revealing the hypocrisy of the philosophers.”⁴

We move on to Averroes’ ideas in the next two chapters. Wohlman indicates that his views insistently take into account the ideas of past masters of philosophy for the interpretation of the Qur’an. Because philosophers have higher intellectual capacities than ordinary people and other scholars like Ghazali, only they are able to appreciate the very meanings of the Qur’an and its inimitable eminence. In his *The Book of Decisive Discourse*, Averroes establishes the connection between revelation and philosophy by saying that “Qur’anic verses cannot be adjudicated clearly without a rule of interpretation”⁵. This claim constitutes the backbone of his method of interpreting the Qur’an. The effort to render the Qur’anic notion of God with the Aristotelian view of the unique existence of the Artisan penetrated to every corner of this book. For him, the Qur’anic view of creation corresponds to Aristotle’s allegory of Artisan. “Creator is an artisan who fashions, models, composes and decomposes matter, rather than a magician who draws forth being from non-being.”⁶ Even if he tries to restructure

³ Ibid, p. 4

⁴ Ibid, p. 21

Aristotle's system in the light of the assurance of faith, it would still be correct to conclude that Averroes considers philosophy as the sole right interpreter of the Qur'an.

The last chapter is about the reflection of these opposing views in public opinion throughout the centuries. Although they both agree that this discussion should be out of the public sphere in order not to confuse the minds and hearts of believers, Ghazali's attitude towards philosophy gained recognition in a wide range of Muslim territories throughout the centuries while Averroes' remained extreme and sophisticated.

The book deserves to be praised for its efficient organization and intense scrutiny. Wohlman follows step by step what she promises at the beginning of the book. Methods of both thinkers are clearly treated in several chapters. In addition, the author is not only asserting the ideas of Ghazali and Averroes on this issue, but also gives you an idea about the roots of certain disagreements in Islamic thought. The basis of the famous debate of priority between reason and revelation could also be found in this discussion.

On the other hand, there is neither sufficient number of examples how Ghazali and Averroes interpret verses nor a comparison of their diverse views on the same verse. Such a comparison would provide a clear picture on the distance between their attitudes toward the Qur'an. Wohlman provides Ghazali's interpretation of Abraham's reasoning as an example. Ghazali strongly denies the Sufi interpretation that Abraham did not see the Heavenly bodies in ordinary sense but what he saw were "luminous angelic substances, whose luminosity is rational rather than sensible, and characterized by ascending degrees of perfection"⁷. In order to clarify the distinct views of two thinkers Averroes' account of the same topic is of great importance. Even if this entails an encompassing study on Ghazali's and Averroes' works, showing basic examples of their differences would not be beyond the scope of her study. In addition, such a comparison or a contrast between two would engender accurate representations of their stance on interpretation of the Qur'an.

To sum up, Wohlman's book is a thorough piece of research that provides the roots of certain methodical approaches to interpretation of the Qur'an. As indicated at the beginning, she is focusing on Ghazali's and Averroes' 'approaches' to interpretation of the Sacred Text, not on their interpretations of it. As Wohlman indicates that, they agree on the position of revelation, but differ in method of interpreting it. Wohlman achieves her goal and successfully shows this methodical difference between attitudes of these two thinkers towards interpreting the Qur'an.