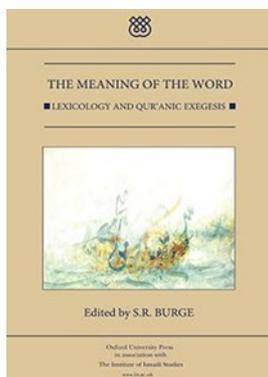




# READING GUIDE



## *The Meaning of the Word*

### *Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*

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“ Being aware of the different ways of constructing lexical meaning helps us to understand the influence of external texts on lexical meaning, as well as the way in which the meanings of words can come to direct and inform a particular reading of a Qur'anic word. The meaning of the Qur'an, taken in its most general sense, is built up from its smaller parts and the meanings of words are its very foundation.

Stephen Burge, *The Meaning of the Word*, p. 32.



### GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What ideas or beliefs influence my understanding of world affairs?
2. How does my own context come into play when reading a work of literature?

### INTRODUCTION

When people come to read the Qur'an, there is an interaction between what the words of the Qur'an say, and what the person reading the text already thinks and believes before reading it. This is a natural part of both being human and the way we read any text.

For example, we all have particular political beliefs and when we read a newspaper or watch the news the way in which we react to a story is largely dependent on our previously held political positions.

The main aim of *The Meaning of the Word* is to explore this phenomenon and to explain how interpreters of the Qur'an have used the actual words of the text to articulate different views and interpretations. This collection of articles studies how Muslims, from the earliest periods of interpretation up to the contemporary period, have read the Qur'an and used the meanings of words to articulate specific ideas and how their own previously held beliefs are involved in that process.

A news story might confirm our opinion, or it might challenge us and our previously

held politics, but we react to it because we already hold some sort of position on an issue, whether it concerns taxation, criminal justice, or the treatment of refugees.

The same is, of course, the case when religious (and even non-religious) people read scripture: people also have a personal understanding of what God is and what God is not, and read scripture in light of those beliefs.

Lexicology is the 'study of words' and their meaning, but it looks at what words mean in individual instances within a text, rather than what a word means in a language as a whole.

For example, the word 'fire' could mean a great many things: it could refer to the actual flames of a fire, but it could also refer more generally to a fire in hearth, and it can even indicate the firing of a gun or a cannon.



The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) developed the idea that ‘meaning’ was dependent on how a word was being ‘used’ – and the term lexicology is really a way to explore the ways in which words are ‘being used’ and understood within a text.

A link between a word’s meaning and its use was also noted by medieval Muslim theologians such as Abu ‘Ali Muhammad al-Jubba‘i (d. 303/915–16), who argued that a word could only mean one thing at a time, since a word’s meaning was tied to the meaning intended by its speaker and a speaker cannot mean two things at once. This speaker’s meaning is called in Arabic his/her *niyya* (‘intention’) or *irada* (‘will’). (See p. 15.) The problem with reading the Qur’an is that the intended meaning of the words in the Qur’an is not known, and different scholars have disputed and debated their meanings. The introduction seeks to explore this question, with a particular focus on how interpreters of the Qur’an (both formal exegetes and translators) engage with words and construct meanings by giving, or failing to give, definitions to words in the Qur’an.

## Section One

The first section of the collection (Chapters 2–4) looks at the earliest period of Qur’anic exegesis. Kees Versteegh analyses the earliest extant *tafsir* material and shows that comments on the meanings of words were a vital part of the early experience of commentary. However, these early

*“During the first two centuries of Islam, the main interest of scholars was the elucidation and analysis of the revealed message. Commentators were concerned to make sure that each and every word of the text was understood by believers. ... At the end of the second/eighth century, the focus shifted from the semantic interpretation of the text of the Qur’an to the study of Arabic grammar and lexicon. ... This shift in scope was accompanied by a change in the use of sources. ... The explanation of the Qur’an itself became increasingly the exclusive domain of tafsir as a separate discipline. Polished commentaries with a balanced view of selected aspects of the text replaced the raw efforts of the early commentators. Exegesis had become a profession carried out by professional scholars.”*

**Kees Versteegh, Chapter 2, pp. 59–60**

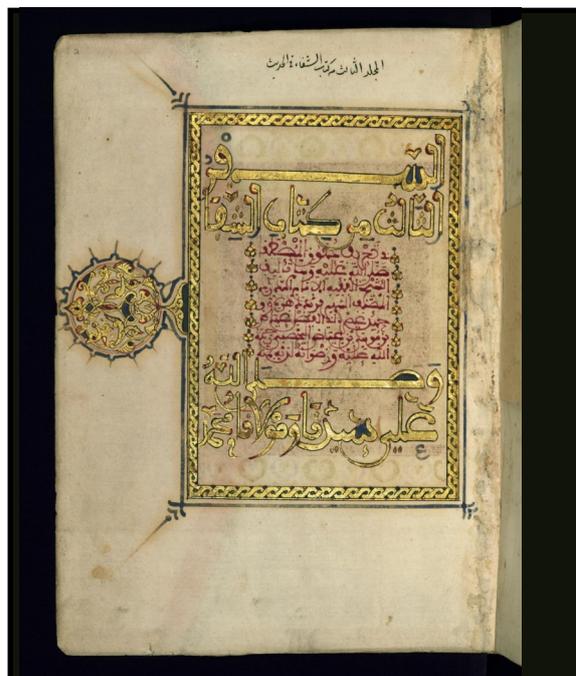
commentaries show a field that was emerging, rather than fully developed.

Herbert Berg uses lexical material to explore the role of the early hadith transmitter Ibn ‘Abbas in exegesis: Ibn ‘Abbas has been a controversial figure in the study of early Islam, with some scholars portraying him as a mythic figure. One theory is that Ibn ‘Abbas became the father of a ‘school’ of interpretation, a position which Berg challenges with an analysis of the hadith attributed to him and his followers concerning the meanings of words.



“... [T]he status of Ibn ‘Abbas in Qur’anic exegesis developed over time, the zenith of which corresponds with that of the early Abbasid caliphs’ political power. That is to say, Ibn ‘Abbas’s growing reputation as Islam’s greatest mufassir is suspiciously correlated to the onset of Abbasid propaganda and their later patronage of some scholars. ... [B]ecause very early sources depicted ‘Abbas as a very late convert, later historians were restricted to embellishing his personal importance to Muhammad and, occasionally omitting more problematic details. Despite these attempts, it was impossible to recast ‘Abbas as one who could compete with ‘Ali for religious authority.”

**Herbert Berg, Chapter 3, pp. 82–83.**



Page from the third volume of *Kitab al-Shifa'* by 'Iyad al-Yahsubi. The inscription states that it is the third volume of the book of *al-Shifa'* in the hadith. 12th century AH/18th century CE. From the collection of The Walters Art Museum.

The final article in this section, by Christopher Melchert, looks at the meanings of words in *tafsir*, lexicographical works, and in hadith relating to the *zuhd* ('renunciant' or 'ascetic') tradition. He argues that in some circumstances the hadith material provides interpretations of words that seem more accurate than those found in the *tafsir* literature.

“... *hadith and renunciant literature appear to preserve older interpretations of the terms siyaha, hikma, and siddiq than tafsir. Either tafsir is in fact less primitive than it has seemed or we must consider it strictly selective in what it recalls and what it ignores of late first-/early eight-century Islam.*”

**Christopher Melchert, Chapter 4, p. 110.**

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think lexicology was so important to the early Muslim community?
2. How important do you think different groups of people (religious communities, schools of thought, etc.) are in developing the meanings of words?



19th century CE lacquer binding of The Qur'an. From the collection of The Walters Art Museum.

## Section Two

Section two presents four case studies of lexicology in classical Qur'anic exegesis. The first, by Claude Gilliot (Chapter 5),

*“... Wahidi’s formation in poetry and lexicography contributed to a certain tension in him between the exegete and the lexicographer. He could not be unaware of the very peculiar language and style of the Qur’an, often not pertaining to the system of the Arabic language, even if both language and style of this Book was, in his theological representation, ‘inimitable’. ... As for Tabari, he was also a good grammarian of the ‘Kufan’ tradition, and also well-versed in lexicography, but, writing a century and a half earlier, he was above all concerned with affirming the superiority of the interpretations of the recognised ancient exegetes, so that the language of the Qur’an should not be submitted to the criteria of other manners of speaking (lughat); this was one of the results of the dogma of the Qur’an’s inimitability, which developed in the fourth/tenth century.”*

**Claude Gilliot, Chapter 5, pp. 142–43.**

explores the handling of lexicology by Abu'l-Hasan ‘Ali al-Wahidi (d. 468/1076) through a comparison with Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari’s exegesis. This gives an excellent opportunity to see how two exegetes from the ‘classical’ period differ in their approaches to lexicology and how the approach of each had an impact on their scholarship.

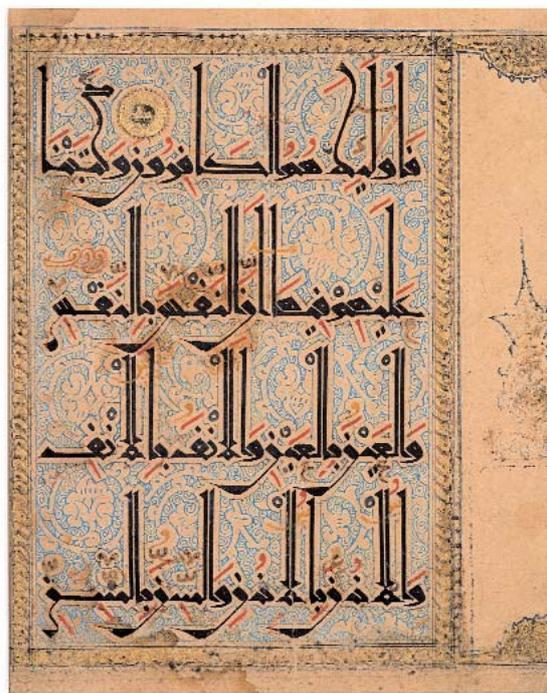
Burge (Chapter 6) examines the way the word *falaq* (Q. 113:1) has been interpreted by different medieval exegetes, as well as in lexicographical works. In this chapter, Burge looks at a single word in order to trace its interpretation through the classical period, from the earliest extant exegesis of Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767) to one of the last classical exegeses, the *al-Durr al-manthur* of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505). Although the exegetes nearly always give this word the same meanings (‘dawn’, ‘a place in Hell’, or ‘creation’), the way they defend their interpretations can vary. The implication is that it is important to consider not just what answer an exegete or interpreter gives, but also the way they arrive at it.



Devin Stewart (Chapter 7) examines the *Mufradat alfaz al-Qur'an* by al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 422/1031) and a process found in the Qur'an where words are given a different form in order to account for the internal rhyme scheme.

*“Recognition of the phenomenon of cognate substitution risked implying that God coined new forms on an ad hoc basis for particular texts in the Qur'an or that God could say one word while intending another, both of which bordered on blasphemy. Exegetes therefore argued that every difference in form implied a difference in meaning.”*

**Devin Stewart, Chapter 7, p. 246.**



Qur'an folio in cursive script. Iran, mid-12th century CE. From the collection of The Aga Khan Museum.

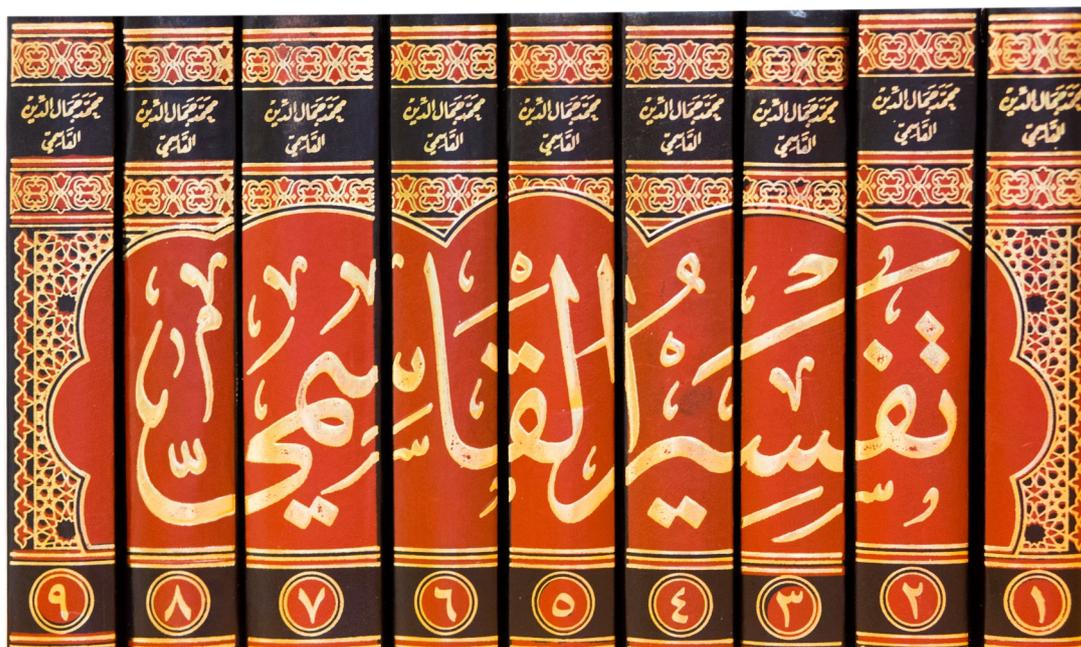
The final chapter in this section, by Toby Mayer (Chapter 8), explores the mystical lexicology of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 548/1153), illustrating the ways exegetes can apply mystical or metaphysical readings of words to generate an understanding of divine mysteries.

*“... on one side, Shahrastani viewed his etymology, regular lexicology and other historical treatments of the text as addressing the Qur'an qua inchoate, as manifest within the conditions of human history. On the other side, he viewed the arcana sections with their items of 'esoteric lexicology' and their unlocking of the text's latent semantic system through the dyadic keys as addressing the scripture qua eternally accomplished.”*

**Toby Mayer, Chapter 8, p. 275.**

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Medieval exegetes often give a range of potential meanings for words. Is this helpful or a hindrance? Why?



*Tafsir al-Qasimi al-musamma Muhasin al-tawil*

### Section Three

This section explores the relationship between the meanings of words in legal debates. The first chapter in this section, by Agostino Cilardo (Chapter 9), looks at how different words used in the Qur'an to denote relatives were important to legal interpretations and discussions of inheritance law. For example, in Shi'i law women are able to inherit, so the word *ikhwa* (Q. 4:11) is held to refer to both sons and daughters, whereas in Sunni law, only males can inherit, so the word is interpreted as only referring to sons. This study illustrates the importance of people bringing previously held beliefs (in this case, legal positions) into their interpretation of the Qur'an and even specific words.

Ayesha Chaudhry (Chapter 10) examines how exegetes dealt with the word *nushuz*

in Q. 4:34 and Q. 4:128; this word (usually interpreted as 'disobedience') is applied in the Qur'an to both husbands and wives, but the exegetes interpret the word differently in each case. Chaudhry argues that this is because the exegetes are imposing a worldview on the Qur'anic text in which men are superior, both physically and mentally, to women.

*"The interpretation of the same term, nushuz, to produce two different meanings, at times reading against the plain-sense meaning of the Qur'anic text, is significant in terms of methodology. It demonstrates that pre-modern exegetes read and interpreted the Qur'an within the context of an idealised cosmology in which a patriarchal marital structure was divinely prescribed."*

**Ayesha S. Chaudhry, Chapter 10, p. 343.**



The final chapter in this section, by M. Brett Wilson (Chapter 11), explores the interpretation of a specific verse about fasting (Q. 2:184) and the heated debates in early twentieth-century Turkey on whether the Ramadan fast was obligatory or not. The verse, and its exegesis, became a flashpoint of debate about modernism and traditionalism, revealing that words and their interpretations have wide social and political ramifications.

*“By revealing the ambiguity over the meaning of the word yutiqunahu, the debate over Q. 2:184 in Turkey highlights the importance of political context in the pursuit of meaning in the Qur’an and, methodologically, provides a fascinating case of modern lexicographic analysis, and its limits, in the print-based public sphere.”*

**M. Brett Wilson, Chapter 11, p. 368.**

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Why are the meanings of words so important in legal and theological disputes?
2. In what ways have theology or societal beliefs and customs had an impact on the interpretation of words?



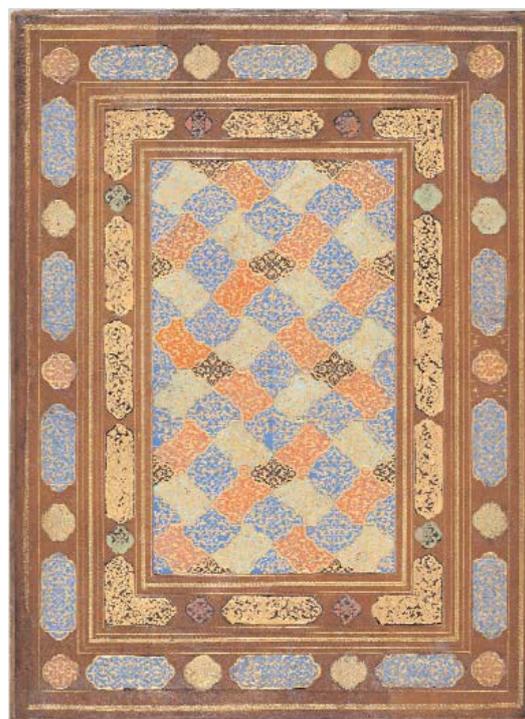
Double page illuminated frontpiece to a Qur’anic commentary (*tafsir*). Egypt, 15th Century CE. The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



## Section Four

Lastly, section four examines the debates about translating the Qur'an into other languages. Travis Zadeh (Chapter 12) looks at how legal scholars of the early twentieth century incorporated an older tradition about the translation of the *Fatiha* into Persian by Salman al-Farisi (d. after 23/644), a close Companion of the Prophet and the first Persian convert to Islam, into contemporary debates.

Stefan Wild (Chapter 13) looks at the contemporary context, exploring the translation of the Qur'an in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the ways in which the translation of the Qur'an can enter the realms of ideology, theology and politics. Wild concludes that translations are now a part of wider Islamic culture, far outnumbering editions printed in Arabic, typifying the global aspect of contemporary Islam.



Binding from a Qur'an manuscript. Safavid Iran, mid-16th Century CE. From the collection of The Aga Khan Museum .

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Why is the translation of the Qur'an so complex?
2. To what extent is the translation of the Qur'an affected by contemporary politics?
3. Does the fact that the majority of Muslims read the Qur'an in translation present problems for the community at large?

The very specific focus of this volume on lexicology and Qur'anic interpretation means that some of the chapters are quite specialised and technical. However, many others are easily accessible (particularly Burge, Chaudhry, Melchert, Wild, Wilson and Versteegh). Some chapters are for those with specialist

interest: for example, anyone with an interest in Sufism will find the chapters by Mayer and Melchert illuminating; likewise, section three will appeal to anyone with an interest in law. There is also an index of Qur'anic citations and an index of Qur'anic words discussed in the volume, for those interested in specific words.