General Remarks on My Publications

Sources, Method, *tashkīl* and Language

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First published: 11/2026

This text will be supplemented as needed, in sha Allah.

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الحمدُ للَّهِ والصّلاةُ والسّلامُ على رسولِ اللَّهِ وعلى آلِه وصحبِه ومَن والاه، وبعدُ،

Introduction

The following pages bring together remarks that apply to all my books and writings, the Arabic ones as well as those in other languages. Some of them answer questions that are asked again and again. The others explain my method of working, so that the reader knows where the quoted texts come from, how they are reproduced and how to understand the source references, the vocalization and the punctuation.

Some of this is already found, in shorter form, in the forewords of the individual books. Here it is gathered in one place and set out in somewhat more detail. Where a book departs from it, this is mentioned in its foreword.

Why I Quote Almost Exclusively from the Early Sources

My books cite first and foremost the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the statements of the scholars of the first centuries. The later generations, the *muta'akhkhirīn*, are by contrast quoted rarely or not at all. There are several important reasons for this. It is certainly not because I reject all later scholars without exception, let alone regard them wholesale as non-Muslims – as it may perhaps seem to some. Rather, the main reasons are the following:

- **The first generations are the standard.** Whoever wants a correct understanding of Islam must strive to learn it the way the first generations of Muslims conveyed it. What was unknown at that time, or was not regarded as correct teaching, cannot be correct later either.
- **They undoubtedly had more knowledge.** Al-Hasanu l-Basrī said about the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ:

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا أَبَرَّ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةِ قُلُوبًا وَأَعْمَقَهَا عِلْمًا وَأَقَلَّهَا تَكَلُّفًا ...

"Of this ummah, they had the purest hearts, the deepest knowledge and the least affectation ..."

[narrated by Ibnu ʿAbdi l-Barr in Jāmiʿu Bayāni l-ʿIlmi wa-Fadlihi]

So if someone tries to learn from them, that should not really surprise anyone. Rather, it is the one who learns and quotes more or less only from the *mutaʾakhkhirīn* who ought to be asked why he gives them preference.

- **Hardly anyone today truly goes back to the Salaf.** This is evident from the very fact that these lines have to be written to explain and justify this approach. Whoever today quotes from the Salaf wherever possible is met with great astonishment and scepticism. The books of the later scholars have largely replaced those of the Salaf. Anyone who calls himself a Salafi and reflects on this reality ought to be astonished by precisely this state of affairs.
- **The endless loop of disputed questions.** Anyone who studies the Islamic sciences knows that there are many, often fierce, differences of opinion even on fundamental questions, that is, on questions of creed (*ʿaqīdah*) and of methodology (*manhaj*) in dealing with the texts of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah and the statements of the Salaf. Some of these have been discussed for centuries, others mainly in the last fifty to one hundred years. To settle them, people almost always argued only from their own understanding of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah, or cited statements of the *mutaʾakhkhirīn* to support their own view.

  This method, however, has not settled the questions. Instead, people have in effect argued endlessly about what those later scholars meant by their statements. Indeed, in most cases one side cites the statements of Ibnu Taymiyyah or of the Daʿwah Najdiyyah as evidence, while the other side cites the very same statements, only in

support of the opposite view. Anyone who has followed the discussions of recent decades has inevitably found himself in exactly this endless loop time and again.

This back-and-forth has therefore not achieved its aim. That is a clear argument for breaking the loop and returning to an earlier, higher level. For the earlier statements convey more clearly what the teaching of Islam was in its early period, that is, the true teaching of Islam. Returning to them is therefore the logical consequence.

One might object here that the statements of the Salaf, too, do not answer every question so unambiguously as to rule out differing understandings or misunderstandings, and that even those who call for this return dispute the meaning of these statements among themselves.

This objection is justified. The statements of the Salaf are concise, and some of them – in certain books and fields of knowledge even many – are not readily understandable even for today's Arab reader. I also share the observation that people who turn back to the early sources and want to take them as the standard quite often have the very same differences of opinion. The discussion about the meaning of the scholars' statements has simply shifted back to an earlier period.

In my view, however, two things need to be said about this:

- If we have to spend effort and years of our lives anyway in order to understand the Islamic sources better through the statements of scholars, then I would far rather devote that time to the statements of the Salaf than spend it on the statements of the *muta'akhkhirīn* without knowing in the end what they really meant on the disputed questions. The Salaf surely have a greater right to have their statements studied and understood than anyone who came after them, whoever he may be.

- It is true that the statements of the Salaf are very dense and often not easy to understand, and this is certainly one of the reasons for the differing interpretations today. But the right course cannot be to turn away from them more or less completely for that reason. Rather, the consequence must be to engage with them, in the hope of gaining a good understanding of them after years and decades and of resolving some, or even many, of the disputed questions in this way.

This does not mean:

- that all later scholars are rejected or their books regarded as worthless. In many matters they convey the teaching of the Salaf correctly, but many later authors also differ from the early views time and again. Whatever good their books contain, the Salaf had already said long before – above all with regard to the important parts of the *dīn* – and said it more briefly and better.
- that I claim to know the teaching of the Salaf completely or to be able to resolve every difference of opinion. Anyone who knows how vast Islamic knowledge is will make no such claim, and I am far from it. Whatever I write is only a small, modest attempt to make a contribution in this direction.

The works quoted in my books therefore date almost entirely from the first centuries. In each book's list of sources, they are arranged by the year of their authors' death, so that the reader can see at a glance which period a quotation comes from. Where later works are named, for example to draw attention to something specific in them, they are generally mentioned in a footnote.

Quotations from People Who Deviated in *ʿaqīdah*

Occasionally I quote from people who deviated in *ʿaqīdah*, for example as-Sāhib ibnu ʿAbbād, who was a Muʿtazilite, or al-Bayhaqī, who followed the way of the Ashʿariyyah on the question of the attributes of Allah. In most cases this concerns the explanation of the Arabic language: the meanings of the words were generally known and widespread in the first centuries, and on this those authors agreed with the other scholars of their time. Sometimes I also cite one of them in a footnote because he gives a narration in a wording that no one else has. Such wordings can make understanding easier, but a correct understanding of the narration in no way depends on them.

Such quotations are neither an endorsement of these people, nor do they mean that these people are being cited as evidence in any matter of the *dīn*. Muhammad ibnu Sīrīn said, as Muslim narrates in the introduction to his *Sahīh*:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْعِلْمَ دِينٌ فَانْظُرُوا عَمَّنْ تَأْخُذُونَ دِينَكُمْ

"This knowledge is dīn, so look carefully at whom you take your dīn from."

Narrations with Slight Weakness in the *isnād*

Some of the statements cited, especially on *tafsīr*, have a slightly weak chain of narration. The early scholars did not reject such narrations wholesale but distinguished according to the field of knowledge: strict in matters of the lawful and the unlawful, more lenient in *tafsīr*, for example. Such narrations are cited here only to illustrate and reinforce a principle that is already established by the Qurʾān and sound narrations, not to establish a principle in the first place. More on this can be found in the "Explanation of the Preface to the Tafsīr of Ibnu Abī Hātim ar-Rāzī".

Citing Sources without Volume, Page or Hadith Numbers

When citing sources, I name the work but give no volume or page numbers and no hadith numbers. The reasons are as follows:

- The numbers differ from edition to edition. Anyone who has a different edition in front of him has no use for them.
- Books today often do give the volume, page and number for a quotation, but not the edition from which it is taken. Anyone who wants to check the passage would therefore have to search through all the editions. That is very laborious, and very few people do it.
- I quote from the editions available in al-Maktabatu sh-Shāmilah. There, the quickest way to find any passage is to search for its wording.
- Where there are several editions of a work, I generally follow the one that is regarded as reliable. The edition used is given (especially in the Arabic books) under each work in the list of sources at the end of the book.
- I insert nothing of my own into the quoted texts. Chains of narration are mostly left out for the sake of brevity, except where they need to be mentioned. Omissions are marked in the Arabic text with three dots (…). This is unambiguous even without brackets, since the Arabic authors of that time did not use these punctuation marks.

The Qur'anic Verses and the *rasm ʿUthmānī*

The verses are given in the ʿUthmānī script of the *masāhif*, according to the narration of Hafs from ʿĀsim, as published by the King Fahd Complex. Where a scholar cites a verse in a different reading (*qirā'ah*), it is given in that reading and in the script of its *mushaf*. This applies to the books; in the texts placed on the website for online reading, the verses

are in the spelling customary today (*rasm imlāʾī*), so that they can be searched for more easily.

On the Vocalization of the Arabic Books

In my books, the vocalization follows a fixed system of its own, midway between a text with no vowel marks at all and full vocalization.

- **Quotations in full:** verses, hadiths, statements of the Companions and of those after them, and the quotations from the scholars are fully vocalized. Their wording should be read exactly as it has been narrated, and old texts in particular contain many words that a reader today does not know or would read differently.
- **My own text, as much as necessary:** in headings, explanations and footnotes, a mark is placed wherever a word could be read differently and the reader would therefore have to stop and think, and nowhere else. This applies above all to the word ending (*iʿrāb*), every *shaddah*, the distinction between "min" and "man", passive and active, ambiguous and unfamiliar word forms, as well as proper names and lesser-known titles of works.
- **Without vowel marks**, the inflection remains hidden, and whatever is ambiguous has to be guessed. Reading an unvocalized text correctly is a skill that even most Arabs lack today, as do those who have learnt Arabic as a foreign language.
- **Full vocalization** overloads the page, the important marks get lost among the self-evident ones, and with every mark the potential for error grows as well.
- **The middle course** shows what is needed for reading correctly and leaves out what is clear anyway. The text remains easy to read, the inflection is nevertheless recognizable, and the fully vocalized quotations stand out clearly from my own text.

In all of this I make use of the technical tools available today, and have done so ever since they came into existence. Before that, I did this work by hand, though to a lesser extent.

On Punctuation

The old manuscripts have practically no punctuation marks. The punctuation marks in today's editions come from the editors and are already an interpretation: where a sentence ends, what a phrase belongs to, whether something is a question, an exclamation or a statement, and where the words of the person quoted end – all of this can change with a single mark. Caution is therefore called for when working on these texts.

For this reason I intervene in the quoted texts as little as possible. I place question marks and exclamation marks there only in clear cases; otherwise I leave them out. Where the punctuation could change the meaning, I point this out in a footnote.

On the Language of My Own Arabic Text

For about thirty years – ever since I began studying the sciences of the language – I have been striving to bring my own Arabic closer to the old Arabic language. Over time, however, I have come to realize that this is not fully possible. The longer I studied it, the clearer it became to me how extensive the differences between today's language and the language of that time really are: in the meaning of individual words, in their usage and in the styles of expression (*asālīb*).

This does not mean that the old language cannot be understood. One distinctive feature of the Arabic language is surely that the old source texts, many explanations from the earliest period and also poems have been preserved in great numbers. The most important thing that has survived and been preserved is the Book of Allah, and it is the greatest means by which Allah has preserved the Arabic language from change.

But one should at least be aware of these differences from the Arabic in common use today.

These differences also show very clearly why the Salaf, and especially the first three generations, were far superior to those who came later in their understanding of the Islamic sources: their understanding of the language alone is beyond our reach. And they show why we must at least make the effort to understand the early language as well as possible, for through it we also understand the texts better.

On the other hand, it is natural and unavoidable that the common and prevailing understanding of the language changes over time. Every age has its language, and this cannot be prevented. My aim in my own writings is therefore to bring them as close as possible to old Arabic while still keeping the text easy and understandable. This leads to the following:

- Where possible, I try to replace modern words and expressions with older ones.
- If an old word would be understood today differently from what is meant, a newer expression is kept, though one that can be formed or used in this way according to the rules and principles of the Arabic language. A few newer words that are very widespread and unambiguous are used deliberately.
- The common errors (*al-akhtāʾu sh-shāʾiʿah*) are very numerous and varied. Avoiding them entirely is hardly possible, if it is possible at all, and with some words and expressions a degree of compromise is unavoidable. In such cases, I use forms that can at least be justified by the rules of the language, even if they are not attested (*masmūʿ*) in exactly this form.
- Rare words in the quotations are explained, as far as possible and practicable, according to the early dictionaries and works on *gharīb*.

Conclusion

I hope these explanations have made somewhat clearer how I proceed in my writings and what the reasons for it are, and in particular why I consider it very important, indeed indispensable, to approach the Islamic sources with this method, even though it may seem unusual to most people today. From what has been said it should be clear that my primary concern is not to exclude the later scholars but to give precedence to the more knowledgeable early scholars – in the interest of my own understanding and in the interest of the Muslim community in general.

May Allah make it easy for all of us to learn this *dīn* from its source, to acquire beneficial knowledge and to act upon it, and may He grant us humility and truthfulness in dealing with knowledge. Āmīn.

… and regarding all that has been said:

Allah knows best.

واللَّهُ أعلمُ

وصلّى اللَّهُ على نبيِّنا مُحَمَّدٍ وآلِهِ وصحبِهِ ومَن والاه

والحمدُ للَّهِ ربِّ العالمينَ