



Is the Qur'an Still Relevant Today? The Timeless Universality of Qur'anic Teachings

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Introduction

A careful modern reader of the Qur'an is immediately confronted with the following question. The Qur'an was revealed long ago in a very different context. Some verses were revealed in direct response to specific events, addressing particular people and scenarios. Others are concerned with the prophets and nations of the past. How do they continue to be relevant for us in the modern age?

On the one hand, there are some who advocate a historicist reading of the Qur'an. The revelation, they insist, is to be interpreted in its historical context. The Qur'an's teachings and laws are to be seen as restricted to the people it was directly addressing, i.e. the people of Mecca and Medina. While still upholding the divine origin of the Qur'an, such a historicist reading questions the idea that Qur'anic verses are universally applicable across time and space. Some modernists hold that the Qur'an aimed to deliver core values rather than institute specific laws or rituals, and it is these core values which are universal. These core values, furthermore, supposedly correspond to those preached by Western modernity. As such, the explicit laws laid down by the Qur'an can be changed because they were only intended to help our predecessors establish new systems embodying new values, after which they could be shed and superseded by the needs of later Muslims.

Muslims through the ages, on the other hand, have believed that the Qur'anic teachings are universal and that even specific verses contain teachings and rulings of universal applicability for all times and places. In this article, we substantiate this position, outlining the grounds for Qur'anic universality and addressing common objections and confusions. We show that notwithstanding the context-specific references, every single human being is the intended audience of every Qur'anic address.

A message for all of humanity

The simplest way to establish Qur'anic universality is its own clear insistence. Allah explicitly defines the Qur'an as a message to all of humanity, for all times and all places.

1. **For all the worlds (*‘ālamīn*)**. The revelation is but a reminder for “the worlds” (*al-‘ālamīn*).¹ This expression is mentioned in the Qur'an on a number of occasions. For instance, “And We have not sent you, except as a mercy to *al-‘ālamīn*,”² and “Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion upon His Servant that he may be to *al-‘ālamīn* a warner.”³ *Al-‘ālamīn* is always used in the Qur'an in an all-encompassing sense, for Allah describes Himself as the “Lord of *al-‘ālamīn*.”⁴ Some early exegetes, including Qatāda, Mujāhid, and al-Ḥasan, explicitly define *al-‘ālamīn* as referring to creation in its entirety.⁵ Likewise, Allah created the innumerable languages and colors of humankind as an instructive sign for *al-‘ālamīn*,⁶ beyond any restriction of color, ethnicity, age, or social status. Another variant that points to this idea reads, “This Book is only a reminder and a clear Qur'an to warn *whoever is alive* and justify the word against the disbelievers.”⁷ Since this verse includes all people who are living, it also extends to all subsequent generations who will live in the future.⁸

2. **For all people (*kāffat al-nās; al-nās jamī'a*)**. The universality of the Prophet's message is further affirmed in various verses of the Qur'an as well as in numerous hadith reports. Allah says, “And We have not sent you except comprehensively (*kāffa*) to humankind.”⁹ Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 541/1146) in his Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) states that this verse entails “an announcement that Allah has sent the Prophet

¹ Qur'an 81:27 and Qur'an 38:87.

² Qur'an 21:107.

³ Qur'an 25:1.

⁴ Qur'an 1:2.

⁵ Al-Ḥusayn b. Mas'ūd al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, eds. Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh al-Nimr et al., 8 vols. (Dār Tayba, 1997), 1:52.

⁶ Qur'an 30:22.

⁷ Qur'an 36:69–70.

⁸ See Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32 vols. (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999), 2:321.

⁹ Qur'an 34:28.

Muhammad ﷺ to the entirety of the world and that the word *kāffa* means the entire assemblage of humanity.”¹⁰ In a clear indication that Allah sends His message to all people in all times and places, He says, “And We have sent you, [O Muhammad], to humankind as a messenger,”¹¹ and “Say, [O Muhammad], ‘O humankind, indeed I am the Messenger of God to you all.’”¹² In one hadith, the Prophet ﷺ tells us that “every messenger was sent particularly to his own people, whereas I have been sent to all the red and the black.”¹³ Among the interpretations of “the red and the black” discussed by Imam al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) are that red symbolizes non-Arabs and black symbolizes Arabs, or that red represents human beings, whereas black represents the jinn. Al-Nawawī concludes that “all these meanings are valid since the Prophet ﷺ was sent to all of them.”¹⁴

3. To men and jinn. The inclusive scope of the Prophet’s message is displayed by the jinn who embraced Islam. God narrates that the jinn, after hearing about the Prophet’s message, said, “O our people, respond to the Messenger of God and believe in him; God will forgive [you] for your sins and protect you from a painful punishment.”¹⁵ Allah also informed the Prophet ﷺ that “a group of the jinn listened and said, ‘Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur’an. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it. And we will never associate with our Lord anyone.’”¹⁶

Muslim scholarship through the ages took the universality of the Qur’an as an established premise. In his *al-Muwāfaqāt*, Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) states that Islam is for all people equally, and that the Shariah is comprehensive and universal (*kulliyya ‘āmma*) in its scope.¹⁷ Thus, he insists on not excluding

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Aṭīyya al-Andalusī, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-Kitāb al-‘Azīz*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Abd al-Shāfi Muḥammad, 6 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 4:420.

¹¹ Qur’an 4:79.

¹² Qur’an 7:158.

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 521a.

¹⁴ Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, 7 vols. (Dār Ihya’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1392 AH), 5:5.

¹⁵ Qur’an 46:31.

¹⁶ Qur’an 72:1.

¹⁷ Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā al-Shāṭibī, *The Reconciliation of the Fundamentals of Islamic Law*, tr. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (Garnet Press, 2011), 188.

people from ritualistic and legal obligations without valid reason, which had become the practice of some Sufis in his time.¹⁸ Islamic Shariah, he states, “is not specific for some to the exclusion of others in its communication of the rules based on demand, nor does it selectively burden its subject through the rules.”¹⁹

Following the true path of Islam is obligatory for everyone equally regardless of their time, place, or situation. Since Islam is sent for the benefit of all people, he argues, it cannot be sent particularly to some people to the exclusion of others. Otherwise, nothing would guarantee the benefit of all people in the absolute sense.²⁰

The final revelation

The Qur'an establishes its universality in part through its self-awareness; we might say, its self-historicization. Namely, the Qur'an places itself in a historical progression of prophetic missions, of which its own mission is final and most general. Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ message is but the culmination of a long prophetic chain that includes Arab and non-Arab prophets. Thus Allah instructs the Prophet ﷺ, “Say, ‘I am not something original among the messengers.’”²¹ The Qur'anic call to monotheism is old and new, particular and universal, reaching far beyond the Prophet ﷺ and his people to address all mankind—before and after, in every place and at every time.

Observe the difference between doctrine (*‘aqīda*) and law (*sharī‘a*). *‘Aqīda*, the core of which is divine unicity (*tawḥīd*), is historically universal, with each prophet and messenger tasked with pronouncing the same monotheistic message from time immemorial. However, each of those prophets and messengers brought a different shariah, its laws restricted to the time and situation of the people for whom it was revealed. Each shariah was inevitably corrupted by time and human error, necessitating the final and universal revelation of the Qur'an. Allah says, “And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which

¹⁸ See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 155-166, for a list of these antinomian groups in early Sufism.

¹⁹ Al-Shāṭibī, *Reconciliation*, 188–89.

²⁰ Al-Shāṭibī, *Reconciliation*.

²¹ Qur'an 46:9.

preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it... To each of you We prescribed a law and a method.”²² The Shariah of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ therefore abrogates all preceding shariahs, and, at the same time, cannot itself be abrogated.²³ This Shariah is the last one, by which Allah ends the chain of prophets sent to humanity. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Each prophet was sent only to his nation, but I have been sent to all of humankind.”²⁴

Since this is the last shariah that humanity will ever receive, it marks a new era of universal law that must last until the Day of Judgment. As such, no other shariah or ideology, whether preceding the Prophet's message or constructed thereafter, can replace it. Ibrāhīm al-Lāqqanī's well-known work on scholastic theology titled *Jawharat al-tawḥīd* (the Jewel of Divine Unification) includes a poetic verse that articulates this truth best: “His [Prophet Muhammad's] Shariah will not be abrogated until time itself is abrogated.”²⁵

How particular rulings reveal universal truths

Having established the universality of the Prophet Muhammad's message and law, we now turn to show how seemingly particular commands in the Qur'an and the *sunna* reveal universal truths.

Allah's established ways

In the Qur'an, Allah makes reference to His established practices (*sunna*, pl. *sunan*) several times to indicate His unchanging ways of dealing with human beings. We tend to think about the *sunna* in terms of the practice of the Prophet—but what then is the *sunna* of Allah? The root of the Arabic word *sunna* indicates something flowing, proceeding smoothly.²⁶ The Qur'an employs ‘Allah's *sunna*’ to refer to the established patterns in Allah's dealings with human communities. For instance, “[That is Our] established *sunna* for those We had sent

²² Qur'an 5:48.

²³ Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī, *Tuḥfat al-murīd* (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), 151.

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 335, no. 438.

²⁵ Al-Bājūrī, *Tuḥfat al-murīd*, 150.

²⁶ Aḥmad b. Fāris al-Rāzī, *Maqāyīs al-lughā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, 6 vols. (Dār al-Fikr, 1979), 3:60.

before you of Our messengers; and you will not find in Our law (*sunna*) any alteration.”²⁷ Commenting on this verse, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751/1350) states, “The Almighty’s law (*sunna*) means His consistent way of treating His pious worshipers and enemies.”²⁸

By tracing the mentions of *sunnat Allah* in the Qur'an, we can infer that Allah’s established practice has three prominent characteristics. First, Allah’s *sunna* is fixed, consistent and unalterable; “And you will not find in the practice of God (*sunnat Allah*) any change.”²⁹ Consequently, the methods by which Allah dealt with the people of the ancient past were the same as those He used to deal with people during the time of the Prophet ﷺ and which He also uses in His dealing with us today.

Second, Allah’s *sunna* is universal. His way of dealing with humans brooks no exception. The Qur'an poses a rhetorical question to its rejectors: “Are you disbelievers better than those [who came before you], or have you immunity in the scripture?”³⁰ The Qur'an expects its readers to instinctively respond in the negative. Having learned of the unchanging ways of Allah, they should not expect that they will be judged any differently or have any immunity. “Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it.”³¹

Third, Allah’s *sunna* is sublime and certain. This characteristic is emphasized by al-Rāzī (d. 605/1210) in his commentary on the verse, “But you will never find in the practice of God any change, and you will never find in the practice of God any alteration.”³² Al-Rāzī states that “He paired it [the term *sunna*] with Allah, because when the known practice is paired with Allah, it will be glorified and it will be known that its reality is certain and that there is no preventer of it.”³³ Always remembering that the *sunna* of Allah is the *sunna* of the Creator who is

²⁷ Qur'an 17:77.

²⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, *Shifā' al-'alīl fī masā'il al-qaḍā' wa al-qadar wa al-ḥikma wa al-ta'līl* (Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1978), 199.

²⁹ Qur'an 33:26.

³⁰ Qur'an 54:43.

³¹ Qur'an 4:123.

³² Qur'an 35:43.

³³ Al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-kabīr*, 26:247.

Omniscient, Wise, and Just gives us certainty in the truth and power of His laws. It serves to reassure us that Islam is for our own good and following its guidance will lead to happiness in this life and in the hereafter.

Learning from the past

The Qur'an leaves no doubt that in the stories of the past, there “is a lesson (*‘ibra*) for people of understanding.”³⁴ This drawing of lessons, in the words of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), “means comparing one thing to its counterpart, so that a person realizes that the ruling or outcome for one is the same as the other.”³⁵ Put differently, since God does not change his practice (*sunna*), the human being can reason by analogy to predict the consequences of actions before they happen. Stories of the past sensitize us to the universality of corruptive matters, behaviors, and temptations; they direct our attention to the nature of reality—that is, to Allah’s fixed and steady practice—so we may learn from the experiences of those who came before us. The Qur'an uses the term *‘ibra* (lesson) and its derivative *fa-‘tabirū* (so, take a lesson) to remind us that the Qur'an is a source of invaluable wisdom, inspiration, and counsel.³⁶ By getting to know the stories of the past, we come to understand Allah’s established practice and thus are able to take informed action to achieve the pleasure of Allah in this life and the hereafter.

For example, recurrent Qur'anic stories about the punishment that befell the peoples who denied their prophets invite deep introspection from the believer, warning of the grave consequences of abandoning Allah and His way. The right path to which previous prophets called is the same path to which Prophet Muhammad ﷺ called, and so we are liable to end up in the same position as the disbelievers if we follow in their footsteps. Thus these stories, far from serving as merely static and historical accounts, educate their audience in the timelessness of Allah’s established practice.

³⁴ Qur'an 12:111.

³⁵ Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, eds. ‘Āmir al-Jazzār and Anwar al-Bāz, 37 vols. (Mujmma‘ al-Malik Fahd li-l-Ṭibā‘at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 13:20.

³⁶ For example, Qur'an 3:13, 12:111, and 59:2.

Sūrah Hūd provides a paradigmatic example of the Qur'anic approach to the past. Allah narrates the stories of seven nations to whom He sent seven prophets. Throughout the stories, Allah establishes a contrast between the ways of the believers and those of the disbelievers. In verses 18-24, Allah describes the unjust as those who “averted [people] from the way of God and sought to make it [seem] deviant.” Despite their efforts, they did “not cause failure [to God] on earth, nor did they have besides God any protectors.” They are those “in the Hereafter who will be the greatest losers.” Allah contrasts their destination to that of those “who have believed and done righteous deeds and humbled themselves to their Lord,” emphasizing that “those are the Companions of Paradise; they will abide eternally therein.”

The *sūrah* then narrates the stories of ancient nations and their prophets. These stories all share the same pattern; each time, Allah compares the fate of those who obeyed and those who disobeyed. The law of Allah entails that He eventually punishes disbelievers and rewards believers in this world and the hereafter. After narrating the stories of the prophets Nūḥ (Noah), Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Ibrāhīm (Abraham), and Lūṭ (Lot) (as), Allah follows with Prophet Shu‘ayb (as) calling to his people, “And O my people, let not [your] dissension from me cause you to be struck by something similar to what struck the people of Nūḥ or the people of Hūd or the people of Ṣāliḥ. And the people of Lūṭ are not from you far away.” Allah’s *sunna* is consistent. Prophet Shu‘ayb (as) warned his people that Allah’s laws would apply to them, as it applied to those before them. As such, believers reading these verses are also warned that, by Allah’s *sunna*, disbelief ends in punishment and belief ends in glad tidings.

After narrating these seven stories of the prophets and their people, Allah explains how these stories exhibit His *sunna* and serve as sources of guidance for the believer. In verse 103, Allah says, “Indeed in that is a sign (*āya*) for those who fear the punishment of the Hereafter.” The word *āya* is usually translated to “sign” and is the more common meaning in the Qur’an. In many verses of the Qur’an, Allah uses the expression “verily, in that is a sign” (*inna fī dhālika la-āya*) following verses that indicate His existence and His power. A similar sense of meaning is

present in this verse, with most exegetes interpreting the word *āya* to mean “a lesson” through which Allah teaches us His *sunna* so we may take heed. The exegete Ibn ‘Aṭīya (d. 548/1146) combines the two meanings of *āya*, giving the term a unique dimension. He states that in these stories there are lessons and guidance for those who fear the hereafter and fear its punishment, which leads them to think, which leads them to faith in God Almighty.³⁷ By narrating these stories, Allah teaches us a lesson and, at the same time, shows us a sign that guides us to Him.

In Sūrah al-Shu‘arā’, Allah repeats the expression “*inna fī dhālika la-āya*” eight times. While the first instance in verse 8 refers to producing plants from the earth as a *sign* of Allah’s power and Omnipotence, the seven subsequent mentions use the word *āya* to mean *lesson*, as is the case in Sūrah Hūd. Each mention appears after Allah narrates a story of a prophet. He teaches us that in the story of saving Mūsā (Moses) (as) and the people with him and drowning Pharaoh and his followers, “there is a sign”; in the story of Ibrāhīm (as) and the consequences of idol worship, “there is a sign”; in the story of Nūḥ (as) and the saving of believers and drowning of disbelievers, “there is a sign”; in the story of Hūd (as) in which God destroyed the deniers, “there is a sign”; in the story of Šālīḥ (as) and the punishment of the disobedient, “there is a sign”; in the story of Lūṭ (as) and the severe torment of those who refused purity and the salvation of those who kept themselves pure, “there is a sign”; and in the story of Shu‘ayb (as) and the punishment of the mockers, “there is a sign.” In affirming the lessons that are contained within, Allah shows us that each of these stories is relevant to our own time. The denial and mockery that prophets of the past faced are not merely historical events but experiences that believers have faced throughout the history of humankind.

Similarly, another Qur’anic example of lessons from the past connects disbelief and transgression (*tughyān*). Since faith in the Islamic tradition is inseparable from action, the Qur’an warns its readers that false beliefs are going to be reflected in one’s actions and attitudes. Transgression is mentioned in the Qur’an several times

³⁷ Ibn ‘Aṭīyah al-Andalusī, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, 3:206.

describing disbelievers who rejected the revelation after seeing clear evidence of its truth.³⁸ The term is also mentioned in the context of describing Pharaoh as a tyrant.³⁹ Linguistically speaking, the root of the word *ṭughyān* indicates exceeding the limits in a way that leads to injustice.⁴⁰ 'Exceeding the limits' manifests in different forms. An egocentric person transgresses their limits as a finite human being. An arrogant person exceeds the limits of what they actually deserve. A tyrant transgresses the limits of their actual autonomy.

Thus, the Qur'anic connection between disbelief and *ṭughyān* reminds us of a certain law (*sunna*) that is relevant to our time and place. It teaches us that belief and disbelief do not simply exist in the mind as isolated states, but rather form part of an entire system that manifests in one's behavior and characteristics. Believing in God and His messenger ﷺ drives a person away from misconceptions and arrogance. When a person cuts ties with the Creator and believes that they do not need God for guidance, they exceed the limits and become *ṭāghiya* (tyrannical or arrogant). The subtle connection between disbelief and tyranny can be read in the saying of Allah, "No! [But] indeed, man transgresses because he sees himself self-sufficient."⁴¹

The Qur'an speaks to you

Even when we know that the Qur'anic message is universal, it is easy to forget what that means. The great Andalusian scholar Abū al-Ḥasan al-Marākishī (d. 638/1241) illustrates this point by saying:

What prevents most of this *umma* from understanding the Qur'an is the misconception that the stories of ancient people and the reports of the rewarded and punished people are meant only to convey stories and reports. This is not the case. Rather, they are meant to convey lessons (*i'tibār*) and direct attention to cases that are recurring in this *umma*, that resemble these [reported] cases, situations, and traits so one can listen to the whole Qur'an

³⁸ For example, Qur'an 6:110, 7:186, and 10:11.

³⁹ See Qur'an 20:24, 20:34, and 79:17.

⁴⁰ Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, 30 vols. (Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, n.d.), 1:308.

⁴¹ Qur'an 96:6–7.

as relevant to this *umma* and its leaders, both the guided and misguided ones. Thus, the gate of understanding opens, the light of knowledge shines, [the reader] feels the fear [of God] and notices the similarity between the people of the past and the current *umma*. And it was said in the parable 'I'm talking to you. But listen to me, oh neighbor.'⁴²

Then, if [the reader] witnesses the relevance of the Qur'an to the entirety of the *umma*, thus he is a scholar, the gate of progress opens for him, his ability of understanding progresses until he finds the entirety of the Qur'an that applies to this *umma* also applies to himself regarding his conditions, fluctuations, behaviors, and the crowding of his thoughts. When he realizes that the Qur'an applies to himself, he benefits from hearing all of it and will take a lesson from every verse he hears. Thus, he seeks its relevance to himself and finds it in some way, whether it is for hope or fear, ascending to the highest goals or descending to the lowest levels, so he would be a person of knowledge.⁴³

In the same vein, Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), in his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), lists ten inner actions that one should engage in when reciting the Qur'an. The seventh action is called 'specification,' in which the reader should assume "that he is the intended audience of every Qur'anic address."⁴⁴ When the reader hears "a command or a prohibition, he assumes that he is the one being prohibited or commanded; likewise if he hears a promise or a threat."⁴⁵ The same attitude should be adopted when a reader encounters a narrative of ancient nations: "If he hears a narrative of the bygone peoples or Prophets, he realizes that genial story-telling is not the goal; rather, the goal is for him to take himself to account through it, and to extract from within its folds what he needs from it, for every narrative in the Qur'an is drawn out for a specific benefit with respect to the Prophet ﷺ and his community."⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī points out a beautiful analogy. He reminds us that when reading the verse "that by

⁴² The Arabic proverb reads "iyyāki a 'nī wa isma 'ī yā jāra" and refers to when the speaker is addressing someone indirectly by conveying the desired message to someone else in the vicinity.

⁴³ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Andalusī, *Turāth Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ḥarālī al-Marrākishī fī al-tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammād 'Abd al-Salām al-Khayyāṭī (Manshūrāt al-Markaz al-Jāmi'ī l-il-Baḥth al-'Ilmī, 1977), 126–27.

⁴⁴ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 4 vols. (Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1982), 1:285.

⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

which we grant strength to your heart,”⁴⁷ readers should realize that God is granting strength to their hearts through His narration of the stories of the prophets, of their patience and resolve upon the truth and their trust in the ultimate relief from God. Thus, al-Ghazālī shows us that the fact that this verse is revealed to the prophets entails that it is also “healing, guidance, mercy, and light to the worlds.”⁴⁸ He mentioned examples of verses like: “We have revealed to you a Book in which is your [honorable] mention”⁴⁹ and “We have revealed to you the remembrance such that you would clarify to people what has been revealed to them”⁵⁰ to show that “When He [God] directs his address to all people, He also intends every individual, so this individual reciter is also intended in what pertains to him and the rest of the people. The reciter should thus always assume he is the intended target.”⁵¹ Commenting on the verse “And this Qur'an was revealed to me that I may warn you thereby and whomever it reaches,”⁵² al-Ghazālī adduces a fascinating quote by Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Quraẓī: “It is as if God Almighty speaks directly to whomever the Qur'an reaches.”⁵³ This inner action that al-Ghazālī calls ‘specification’ connects Muslims in all times and places to the Qur'an, so they realize that the Qur'an has a specific message for them in the most literal sense of the word.

Similarly, Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (d. 1762) points out that when God tells a story of the ancient people or addresses disbelievers during the time of the Prophet ﷺ, He is directing us to relevant issues in our current time. Dehlawi states that:

In every case, when you read the Noble Qur'an, you ought not to think that the polemic is addressed to a people who have since become extinct, but that there is no test and trial that has existed in the past except that an example of it exists even today as is narrated in the noble hadith: ‘You surely follow the traits of those before you.’ The objective of the Noble Qur'an is to explain

⁴⁷ Qur'an 11:120.

⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

⁴⁹ Qur'an 21:10.

⁵⁰ Qur'an 16:44.

⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

⁵² Qur'an 6:19.

⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

the universality of these corruptive matters and not the particularity [or intricate details] of events.⁵⁴

Thus, it is narrated that when the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ came to a verse that spoke of mercy, he stopped and made a supplication, and when he came to a verse that spoke of punishment, he stopped and sought refuge in God.⁵⁵ These emotional reactions show us how we are supposed to read the Qur'an. The Prophet ﷺ understood that these verses addressed him as a reader and are meant to give a lesson to whoever is reading the Qur'an. As the Prophet ﷺ found them relevant to himself, we also should have the same perception.⁵⁶

Universality of laws

The universality of human nature and of Allah's fixed and consistent *sunna* allow us to see the shared and continued moral realities. However, it can be harder to see how legal rulings (*fiqh*) connect with present times. One might wonder how universal laws are borne from particular instances, or how some Qur'anic rulings could possibly relate to us, given that they were commanded to specific people and for specific contexts. This section clarifies some of the confusion which surrounds the universalization of Qur'anic rulings.

General meanings and occasions of revelations in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, Allah reveals a body of laws that direct people's actions in their everyday lives. Some of these rulings do not explicitly address all people; some were revealed for specific individuals, and others were revealed in particular contexts. In all cases, given the universal characteristic of the Qur'an, universally applicable laws have been extracted from these verses using specific tools. One main issue that arises when considering this process is the question of "the

⁵⁴ Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, *al-Fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* (The great victory on Qur'anic hermeneutics) (TaHa Publishers, 2014), 40.

⁵⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 772. Also see *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, no. 873. NB: There is a difference in opinion as to whether it is permitted to make supplication during the recitation of the Qur'an when performing obligatory prayer.

⁵⁶ For more on Qur'anic reflection, see: Yousef Wahb and Mohammad Elshinawy, "Keys to Tadabbur: How to Reflect Deeply on the Qur'an," Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, April 22, 2021.

generality of the verbal form and the particularity of the occasions of revelation.”⁵⁷ That is, how are we to understand the relation between the general ruling itself and the context in which it was revealed? The majority view is that “the crucial factor is the general meaning, not the specific context”⁵⁸ (*al-‘ibra bi-‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab*). This means that verses revealed on special occasions are considered in their general meaning, and are not taken as articulating a particular rule that is only relevant to the specific context of revelation.⁵⁹

One verse to which this principle applies is Allah’s proclamation that “Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds.”⁶⁰ This verse was revealed when a man came to the Prophet ﷺ and said “Messenger of God, I consorted with a woman on the outskirts of Medina, and I got what I wanted from her short of having intercourse with her. Now here I am, so decide what you wish about me.” ‘Umar (rA) said to him, “God has concealed this about you. If only you would have kept it to yourself!” The Prophet ﷺ gave no reply, so the man got up and went away. Then the Prophet ﷺ sent a man after him to summon him, and he recited the verse, “And establish prayer at the two ends of the day and at the approach of the night. Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds. That is a reminder for those who remember.” One of the people asked, “Oh Prophet of God, does this refer to him in particular?” He replied, “No, it refers to all people.”⁶¹

Imam Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) supports this principle by referring to the practice of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ. He points out that it was their common and widespread practice to adjust to new situations during their time by appealing to Qur’anic verses and hadiths that had been revealed on particular occasions in the past.⁶² One example that al-Suyūṭī provides is a report on Ibn ‘Abbās’ understanding of the verse about theft (5:38). Even though the verse was

⁵⁷ See Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad Sulaymān al-Ashqar, 2 vols. (Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1997), 2:131–34.

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*.

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, 2:131.

⁶⁰ Qur’an 11:114.

⁶¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2763d.

⁶² Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1974), 1:107. Translated in John Renard, ed., *Islamic Theological Thought Themes: A Primary Source Reader*, trans. David R. Vishanof (University of California Press, 2014), 53–58.

revealed concerning a theft committed by a specific woman, Ibn 'Abbās indicates the meaning of this verse is to be determined by the generality of its verbal form.⁶³ Following this principle, al-Ṭabarī includes a relevant statement in his discussion on the occasion of the revelation of the verse, “O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone altars [to other than God], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid them that you may be successful.”⁶⁴ After surveying the various narratives of the occasion of revelation, he continues, “exegetes disagreed the reason for which this verse had been revealed... we do not have a sound report, however, whatever the right reason is, the rule in the verse enjoins all morally responsible people, and there is no need from them to know the reason for this verse.”⁶⁵ Al-Ṭabarī emphasizes this principle even more when explicating the meaning of the verse, “And be not excessive (*tusrifū*). Indeed, He does not like those who commit excess (*al-musrifūn*).”⁶⁶ He clarifies that linguistically, *isrāf* means failing to give the right amount, whether by giving too much or too little. After describing these two meanings, al-Ṭabarī states that “the verse had been revealed to the Messenger of God ﷺ for a specific reason, and its rule became general and universal, as it is the case for the majority of Qur'anic verses.”⁶⁷

However, the emphasis on the general meaning of a ruling over the particularity of its occasion of revelation does not render the latter entirely irrelevant or useless. Al-Suyūṭī mentions several benefits of knowing the particular occasion of revelation of verses and pushes back against those who believe that they are only a matter of history. For example, one benefit is to understand the reasoning behind the imposition of a specific law.⁶⁸ Another benefit is “their usefulness in figuring out the meanings of revelations and resolving interpretive puzzles.”⁶⁹ Al-Suyūṭī quotes Ibn Taymiyya, who argues that “knowing the occasion of revelation directs

⁶³ Renard, *Islamic Theological Thought Themes*, 53.

⁶⁴ Qur'an 5:90.

⁶⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 10:574.

⁶⁶ Qur'an 6:141.

⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 12:177.

⁶⁸ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1:107.

⁶⁹ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*.

one to a comprehension of the verse; knowing the occasion leads to knowing what is occasioned.”⁷⁰

One example that al-Suyūṭī provides to illustrate this benefit is a narration of Marwān b. al- Ḥakam. Marwān was puzzled by the Qur'anic verse, “And never think that those who rejoice in what they have perpetrated and like to be praised for what they did not do—never think them [to be] in safety from the punishment, and for them is a painful punishment.”⁷¹ Al-Suyūṭī recounts that Marwān said, “If everyone who exalts in what is given and loves to be praised for what he has not done is to be punished, then surely we will all be punished.” In response, Ibn ‘Abbās clarified that this verse was revealed regarding the People of the Book, namely Jews and Christians. The Prophet ﷺ had inquired about a matter, but they concealed the truth from him, instead presenting a distorted version. They made him think that they had told him what he had asked about, and then sought his commendation for it.⁷² Thus the context of revelation assuages Marwān’s concern by restricting this verse’s condemnation to individuals seeking praise for actions that outwardly appear to align with religious teachings but actually contradict them.

Another example: Qudāma b. Maẓ‘ūn and ‘Amr b. Ma‘dī Karab reportedly claimed that wine was permissible based on the verse, “There is not upon those who believe and do righteousness [any] blame concerning what they have eaten.”⁷³ Al-Suyūṭī explains that “they would not have said this if they had known the occasion when this verse was revealed. When wine was made forbidden, some people said, ‘What of those who fought and died in the way of God, and who used to drink wine when it was merely unclean [and not yet forbidden]?’ Then this verse was revealed.”⁷⁴ The occasion of revelation makes it clear that the verse does not permit wine, but does pardon those who drank wine before its prohibition.

⁷⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*.

⁷¹ Qur’an 3:188.

⁷² Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 1:107.

⁷³ Qur’an 5:93.

⁷⁴ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*.

Knowing the occasion of revelation also helps us discern when a verse has not exhausted the topic at hand, per al-Suyūṭī.⁷⁵ Consider the following verse: “Say, ‘I do not find within that which was revealed to me [anything] forbidden to one who would eat it unless it be a dead animal or blood spilled out or the flesh of swine—for indeed, it is impure—or it be [that slaughtered in] disobedience, dedicated to other than God.’”⁷⁶ Al-Suyūṭī quotes Imam al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), who explains that the verse was revealed in response to the disbelievers who forbade what Allah had allowed and allowed what Allah had forbidden. The verse lists foods that these specific disbelievers considered permissible in order to oppose their desire and confirm that what they considered permissible is in fact forbidden.⁷⁷ Understanding the occasion of revelation, we realize that the verse does not cover all forbidden foods.⁷⁸

General (‘āmm) and particular (khāṣṣ) phrases

One key mechanism for universalizing legal rules relates to the distinction between phrases that are general (‘āmm) and phrases that are particular (khāṣṣ). These two categories, devised by Muslim legal theorists, are primarily discussed in the context of command phrases found in the original sources (the Qur'an and hadith). A general phrase or expression is defined by al-Rāzī as “the word that includes all its proper referents,”⁷⁹ meaning that it applies to all people. Examples of such phrases include “*kull*” and “*jamī*” which both mean “all.” However, the scope of a general commandment could be narrowed to a specific group through the tool of specification (*takhṣīṣ*), such that it only applies to men, women, the elderly, etc. For example, the verse, “And [due] to Allah from the people is a pilgrimage to the House”⁸⁰ does not include minors, based on other proofs from hadith and reason (‘aql).⁸¹ Specification does not negate the rule’s universality, but rather limits the

⁷⁵ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*.

⁷⁶ Qur’an 6:145.

⁷⁷ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*.

⁷⁸ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 108.

⁷⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl fī ‘ilm al-uṣūl* (Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1997), 2:309.

⁸⁰ Qur’an 3:97.

⁸¹ For further discussion on ‘āmm and khāṣṣ, see al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, 2:106–62.

group of individuals to whom it applies. If a rule obligates men and excludes women, the rule remains universal within the context of this specific group.

What then of rules addressing a specific person or responding to a specific occasion—should they be considered universal? When we read that God revealed a verse commanding a specific companion of the Prophet ﷺ to follow a specific rule, should we also follow this rule? When we read that the Prophet ﷺ answered a particular question with a particular ruling, are we to understand that the ruling only applies to the questioner? In his *al-Mustasfā*, al-Ghazālī mentions two categories in which Prophetic responses should be considered universal and not only particular to the immediate addressees. In the first category are responses expressed in generic terms. For example, when the Prophet ﷺ was asked about seawater, he responded, “Its water is purifying, and its dead [animals] are lawful [to eat].”⁸² In this case, we know that this ruling is universal given the generality of the Prophet’s response (i.e., the use of generic terms).

The second category involves cases where neither responses nor questions include generic phrases. Al-Ghazālī provides an example: a man once asked the Prophet ﷺ what to do after having sexual intercourse during the fast of Ramadan, and the Prophet ﷺ instructed him to free a slave.⁸³ Another example comes from Imam Badr al-Dīn Zarkashī (d. 794/1392). A man came to the Messenger of Allah when he was in al-Ji‘rānah wearing a cloak and perfume. The man said: “O Messenger of Allah! I have entered *iḥrām* for ‘*umrah* and I am as you see.” The Prophet ﷺ said: “Take off the cloak and wash off the perfume, and whatever you would do for Hajj, do it for ‘*umrah*.”⁸⁴ In these types of cases, al-Ghazālī clarifies, the response is universalized not by means of the genericity of the linguistic expression (‘*umūm*) but by means of analogy (*qiyās*).⁸⁵ In such a case, the jurist should investigate the ‘*illa* (lit. *ratio legis* or reason for the law) that triggers the ruling that the Prophet ﷺ made. Al-Ghazālī justifies this principle by citing the

⁸² Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, 2:129.

⁸³ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 111a. The hadith continues, stating that the Prophet ﷺ offered him other options since the man could not afford to free a slave.

⁸⁴ Badr al-Dīn Zarkashī, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Ānī et al., 6 vols. (Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1992), 3: 199–200.

⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, 2:130.

hadith, “My judgment on the individual is my judgment on the whole.”⁸⁶ In al-Ghazālī’s example, a jurist should investigate the *ratio legis* that required the man to free a slave and implement this rule whenever and wherever the *ratio legis* occurs, at any time and place.

According to al-Shāṭibī, the practice of using analogy to universalize particular Qur’anic commandments and Prophetic utterances goes back to the companions of the Prophet ﷺ. Al-Shāṭibī illustrates this by reference to how the companions generalized the particular meaning revealed in Qur’an 33:37, in which Allah abrogates the pre-Islamic tradition of adoption and its consequences. All these attempts, as al-Shāṭibī argues, show that earlier jurists from among the companions, their followers, and those who followed them aimed to show that a particular rule from a case did not remain confined to it.⁸⁷

One final example from the Qur’an is found in the fourth verse of Sūrah al-Mā’idah. It is narrated that two companions, ‘Adiy b. Ḥātim and Zayd b. Muḥalhal (rA), asked the Prophet ﷺ, “We are a people who hunt with hounds and falcons, so what is permissible for us from their [hunt]?” Then, God revealed the verse that reads, “They ask you, [O Muhammad], what has been made lawful for them. Say, ‘Lawful for you are [all] good foods and [game caught by] what you have trained of hunting animals which you train as God has taught you. So eat of what they catch for you, and mention the name of God upon it, and fear God.’ Indeed, God is swift in account.”⁸⁸ Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) cites several scholars from different generations who debated the meaning of “hunting animals” (*jawāriḥ*), when a hunting animal is considered “trained,” and what exactly becomes lawful after their hunting.⁸⁹ These meanings became the base for a universal Islamic dietary law that applies to all people and is not restricted to those who originally asked the Prophet ﷺ.

⁸⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*. This hadith is considered by hadith scholars to be baseless. See Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana* (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1985), 312. However, scholars do not reject the principle even if the hadith is rejected, provided that its meaning is sound and aligns with the conception of the universality of revelation.

⁸⁷ Al-Shāṭibī, *Reconciliation of the Fundamentals*, 2:189–90.

⁸⁸ Al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, 3:15.

⁸⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 543–71.

The Qur'an's universality entails that rulings were prescribed for specific people on specific occasions during the time of the Prophet ﷺ for the purpose of conveying rulings to the rest of humanity. Through the tools mentioned, scholars, following the approach of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ, have endeavored to extract universal rules from particular contexts.

Conclusion

“My son, read the Qur'an as if it were revealed to you.”

Decades later, this single piece of advice from his father is what stuck most in the mind of the 20th-century poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. Indeed, it was “the most impactful advice I received in my life.”⁹⁰

The advice of Iqbal's father was sound. When the Prophet ﷺ, in the Qur'an, is instructed by Allah to declare “And this Qur'an was revealed to me that I may warn you thereby and whomever it reaches,”⁹¹ he ﷺ is telling us that the Qur'an addresses every single person who hears it. Various scholars, commenting on this verse, cite the Prophet ﷺ as saying, “Whoever the Qur'an reaches is as if I directly read it to him.”⁹²

The Qur'an is a revelation that directly speaks to us. It is universal in its application and relevance, as promised by its own verses and the testimony of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. By viewing themselves as the intended audience of every Qur'anic address, and connecting each address to Allah's established *sunna*, believers are able to take invaluable lessons from the past stories of the prophets and their nations. We must always understand that rulings prescribed for specific people during the time of the Prophet were prescribed for all of humanity.

⁹⁰ Muhammad Manzur Alam, *Kalam-e-Iqbal mein Qur'ani Ayat-o Ahadith* (Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1995), 43.

⁹¹ Qur'an 6:19.

⁹² Muḥammad 'Alī al-Shawkānī, *Faṭḥ al-Qadīr* (Dār al-Ma'rifa, 2007), 413. It is also reported that Sa'īd b. Jubair (rA) said, “Whoever the Qur'an reaches is as if he has seen the Prophet.” See Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-kabīr*, 12:188.

Thus whenever we approach the Qur'an and reflect upon its verses, we should take ourselves into account. We should read ourselves into every scenario, every story, every ruling. Do we act like the Pharaoh? The Children of Israel? The hypocrites? The believers? Are we honoring Allah's rulings?

The Qur'an is a grace from Allah, enabling people to connect with Him and to feel the consciousness and presence of the Almighty. This experience is accessible to anyone who approaches Allah's words with a sincere heart.