

The Phenomenon of Literal Association in the *Qur'ān*

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Abstract

This article highlights the phenomenon of the Literal Association (*Zāhirat al-Mushtarak al-Lafẓī*) within the science of *Tafsīr* and *Qur'ān* in which the perspectives of some of the scholars of *Tafsīr* will be viewed, analysed, and evaluated in order to get to the conclusion of whether or not such a linguistic phenomenon exists in the *Qur'ān* by providing some examples from the *Qur'ān* and the comments of the scholars of *Tafsīr* on those examples. My theory of research is based on the analytical research methodology and inductive research methodology, which will employ both the quantitative and qualitative approaches by which we explore the definition of the literal association in the *Qur'ān*, the types of literal association in the *Qur'ān*, the opinions and the disputes of the scholars of *Tafsīr* (interpretation) about the existence of literal association in the *Qur'ān*, and some examples from the *Qur'ān* illustrating the existence of literal association in the *Qur'ān*.

Key Words: *Qur'ān*, Literal Association, *al-Mushtarak al-Lafẓī*, *Tafsīr*, *ʿIlm al-Wujūh wa al-Nazāʿir*

Introduction

The phenomenon of literal association in the *Qur'ān* is one of the research fields that scholars of Islam have focused on, especially those who are interested in the science of the *Qur'ān*. Therefore, they have categorized the literal association's phenomenon under two sections of research based on their interests and tendency. The first section is

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the research field in which they have compiled only the wordings, or the words, by which the literal association occurs. This field of knowledge is called *'Ilm al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā'ir*³. And in this field of research and interest, the scholars have only discovered and extracted the wordings of the literal association and their other meanings in the *Qur'ān*. The second section is the research field in which they have gone further than simply extracting words and delved into their semantics to its relations and functions within the *Qur'ānic āyāt* (signs) themselves. They have also looked into the *Qur'ānic* rhetorics of those literal associations and the wisdom and the significance behind the usage of those literal associations⁴. Listed below are some of the works done by various scholars who have focused on and written books on literal association in the *Qur'ān*:

- *Al-'ashbāh wa al-Nazā'ir fi al-'Alfāz al-Qur'ānyah al-Laty tarādafat mabānyhā wa tanawwa'at m'anyhā* by Abu Manṣūr 'Abdulmalik ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Ismā'īl al-Tha'ālabī⁵.
- *Wujūh al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Abu 'Abdirrahmān Ismā'īl al-Naysābūrī⁶.
- *Tahṣīl Nazā'ir al-Qur'ān* by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmiḏī⁷.
- *Al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā'ir li 'Alfāz Kitābillāh al-'Azīz* by al-Hussein Muhammad al-Dāmighānī⁸.

³ Muhammed Nūr al-Dīn al-Munajjid. *al-Ishtirāk al-Lafẓī fi al-Qur'ān al-Karīm bayna al-Nazāryah wa al-Taṭabīq*. (Dimashq: Dār al-Fikir, 1999), 75.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abu Manṣūr 'Abdulmalik ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Ismā'īl al-Tha'ālabī. *al-'ashbāh wa al-Nazā'ir fi al-'Alfāz al-Qur'ānyah al-Laty tarādafat mabānyhā wa tanawwa'at m'anyhā*. Taḥqīq Muḥammad al-Maṣry. (Dimashq: Dār al-Fikir, 1984).

⁶ Abu 'Abdirrahmān Ismā'īl al-Naysābūrī. *Wujūh al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Taḥqīq Fāṭimah Yūsuf al-Khiyamī. (Dimashq: Dār al-Saqā li al-Ṭibā'ah Wa al-Nashr Wa al-Tawzī', 1996).

⁷ al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmiḏī. *Tahṣīl Nazā'ir al-Qur'ān*. Taḥqīq Hussein Naṣr Zaidān. (Al-Qāhira: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1430 A.H.).

⁸ al-Hussein Muhammad al-Dāmighānī. *Al-Wujūh Wa al-Naḍhāhir li 'Alifāḍh Kitābillāh al-'Azīz*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1435 A.H.).

- *Iṣlāḥ al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by al-Hussein Muhammad al-Dāmighānī⁹.
- *al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Hārūn Mūsā¹⁰.
- *Ma ittafaqa Lafzuhu wa ikhtalafa Ma'anāhu Min al-Qur'ān al-Majīd* by Muhammad Yazīd al-Azdī¹¹.
- *Al-'Ashbāhu wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Muqātil Sulaiman al-Balkhī¹².

1.0 The Definition of the Literal Association in the Qur'ān

The definition of the literal association in the Qur'ān is always defined with the same definitions given and provided by the scholars of the Arabic language or Arabic linguistics in their work. And this may cause vagueness in understanding especially after we know that the Arabic language in general and the Arabic language of the Qur'ān have slight differences in terms of semantic principles and bases, thus we have to make the distinction that the Qur'ānic Arabic is different from the Arabic language itself in terms of the semantic output. Even though the Qur'ān is written in Arabic, it has its own principles and concepts of *Tafsīr* (interpretation) that are different from the principles found in the Arabic language in relation to Semantics. Thus, there are many *āyāt* in the Qur'ān that have reasons of revelation; in other words, they have been revealed specifically on a particular group, event, or incident. Whereas in Arabic this is not found. Nonetheless, al-Zarkashī has stated that from the types of the Qur'ānic miracles is being able to find a single word that can be referred to twenty meanings, or even more, and this cannot be found in the

⁹ al-Hussein Muhammad al-Dāmighānī. *Iṣlāḥ al-Wujūh Wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Taḥqīq 'Abd al-'Azīz Sayyid al-Ahl. (Bayrūt: Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1983).

¹⁰ Hārūn Mūsā. *al-Wujūh Wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Taḥqīq: Dr. Ḥātim Sālih al-Ḍāmin. (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥurriyyah li al-Ṭibā'ah, 1989).

¹¹ Muhammad Yazīd al-Azdī. *Ma ittafaqa Lafzuhu Wa ikhtalafa Ma'anāhu Min al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*. Taḥqīq Ahmad Muhammad Sulayman. (Al-Kuwayt: Wizārat al-Awqāf Wa al-Shuūn Islāmiyyah, 1989).

¹² Muqātil Sulaiman al-Balkhī. *Al-'Ashbāhu wa al-Nazā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. (Al-Qāhirah: al-Haiyah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmat li al-Kuttāb, 1414 A.H.).

speech of mankind¹³. Thus, the definition of literal association in the *Qur'ān* is the *'āyah* in which one wording, or more, bears and refers to more than one meaning¹⁴. Before I explain further, I would like to expand on the use of the word *'āyah* and its translation to the word 'sign' in English. I mention the term 'sign' specifically and not the term 'verse' (which means 'a line of writing' in Latin)¹⁵ because the word "verse" is a copy paste from the bible, and we, as Muslims, cannot change the labels that are already given by Allāh and His messenger *ṣallallāhu 'alayh wa sallam*. By using the word 'verse', we fell into an assimilation process rather than a translation process and there is a huge difference between these two processes Islamically and linguistically.

Also, if we go back to the original meanings of these words in Latin, we will find that the word 'sign' is more reminiscent of what is meant to be used in the *Qur'ān* because the word sign in the *Qur'ān* means a miracle, a mark, a lesson, and an example which means that in each sign, or *'āyah*, there is a sign for something incredibly new and amazing. Furthermore, even in Latin, the word sign goes back to the word 'cut'; therefore, the word sign can be understood as a signal that cuts all your doubts. As a result, Allāh uses it in the *Qur'ān* to combine all these meanings due to the fact that the words *'āyah* and *'āyāt* have been used in many signs in the *Qur'ān* with meanings that cover all these roots and meanings as it has been illustrated in the *Qur'ānic* and linguistic dictionaries in which it will become apparent how one wording can bear and refer to more than one meaning¹⁶. And one of those meanings, or even more, can be the intended meanings of the literal association in the *'āyah*¹⁷. For example, the wording *ṣalāh* in *Sūrat al-Ḥzāb* in *'āyah* number 56 in which Allāh says: **"Indeed, Allah confers honour and blessings upon the Prophet, and His angels [ask Him to do so]. O you who have believed, ask [Allah to confer] blessing upon him and ask [**

¹³ Badr al-Dīn 'Abdillāh al-Zarkashī. *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. (Al-Qāhirah: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1957), vol. 1, 102.

¹⁴ 'Abd al-Rahmān Jalāludīn al-Suyūṭī. *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. Taḥqīq Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyyah. (Riyadh: Wizārat al-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyyah Wa al-Da'awah Wa al-Irshād al-Sa'ūdiyyah, 1426 A.H.), 301; Badr al-Dīn 'Abdillāh al-Zarkashī, vol 2, 208.

¹⁵ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

¹⁶ 'Abdulḥalīm Muhammad Qunbus. *Mu'jam al-Alfādh al-Mushtarakah fī al-Lughat al-'Arabiyyah*. (Istanbul: Maktabat al-Nūr, n.d.), 22.

¹⁷ Abū Bishr 'Amr 'Uthmān. *Kitāb Sibawayh*. Taḥqīq wa Sharḥ 'Abdul-Salām Muhammad Hārūn. (Al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1988), vol 1, 24; Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs Al-Shāfi'ī. *Al-Risālah*. Taḥqīq Aḥmad Shākīr. (Al-Qāhirah: Muṣṭafā al-Bāby al-Ḥalaby, 1940), 52; Badr al-Dīn 'Abdillāh al-Zarkashī, vol 2, 207-208.

Allah to grant him] peace". Allāh uses the wording *ṣalāh* twice in the same *'āyah* which has two different referents and meanings beside the linguistic meaning which means to perform the prayer. The first meaning is 'to confer honour and blessings' and the second meaning is 'to supplicate or ask' as it has been narrated by Ibn 'Abbās¹⁸.

2.0 The Types of Literal Association in the *Qur'ān*

There are three types of literal association in the *Qur'ān* as follows:

1. The literal association of antonymic wordings or antonyms, which cannot be combined or joined together semantically. This kind of literal association occurs quite often in the *Qur'ān*; for example, the word *Qurū'* which means 'the state of purification' and also means 'the state of menstruation'¹⁹. Also, we have the word *al-Shafaq* which carries many meanings but two of these meanings are antonymic, one is 'whitish', and the second is 'reddish', and it can also mean fear as well²⁰. So, these meanings or semantics, mentioned above are antonyms of one another, and their meanings cannot be combined semantically in the same *'āyah* whatsoever.
2. The literal association of distinct and different wordings which do not have any sense relations such as antonymic or synonymic relations between each other in all senses as in the different meanings of the word *'ayn*²¹.

¹⁸ Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. *Jāmi'u al-Bayān 'an T'wīl Āyi al-Qur'ān*. (Al-Qāhirah: Dār Hajar li al-Ṭibā'at Wa al-Nashr, 2001), vol 19, 174.

¹⁹ 'Abdulḥalīm Muhammad Qunbus, 92.

²⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

3. The literal association of the linguistic constituent in which the literal association is resulted and caused by the linguistic structure of the *'āyah* in relation to syntax, morphology, and even phonology rather than a specific or particular wording in the *'āyah*. So, this kind of literal association is resulted from the way the syntactic components and structures are presented in the *'āyah*. An example of this is in the *'āyah* in which Allāh says:

And if you divorce them before you have touched [had sexual intercourse with] them and you have already specified for them an obligation, then [give] half of what you specified - unless they forego the right or the one **in whose hand is the marriage contract** foregoes it. And to forego it is nearer to righteousness. And do not forget graciousness between you. Indeed Allah, of whatever you do, is Seeing. [*al-Baqarah:237*].

“**In whose hand is the marriage contract,**” means ‘the husband’ or ‘the guardian’, and these two meanings got referred to not because of any specific word in the *'āyah* that bears two meanings but because of the structure of the sentence as it has been illustrated above²².

And these three types of literal association cover all the word classes such as nouns, verbs, and prepositions.

3.0 The Opinions and the Disputes of the Scholars of *Tafsīr* (Interpretation) about the Existence of Literal Association in the *Qur'ān*

In regards to the existence of literal association in the *Qur'ān*, we have to know that the dispute about it did not begin until after the time of al-'Imām al-Shāfi'ī. Otherwise the beliefs, and the schools, of the classical scholars tend to affirm the existence of such a linguistic phenomenon in the *Qur'ān* as they do with the phenomenon of synonymy²³.

²² Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, vol 4, 318-319. Narrated by Ibn 'Abbās and Mujāhid.

²³ Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, 51-53.

Yet, presently we have two schools of opinions. One school is the school of those who acknowledge the existence of the literal association in the *Qur'ān*, and this is the opinion of the majority of the scholars of *Tafsīr* (Qur'ānic science) such as al-Shāfi'ī, al-Ṭabarī, and Ibn 'Ashūr. However, even though they agree on the existence of literal association in the *Qur'ān*, they differ somehow in the principles by which they interpret or view the literal association in the *Qur'ān*. For example, some distinguish between what is meant to be metaphoric speech from what is meant to be non-metaphoric speech. While others do not have that distinction in interpreting the *Qur'ān* unless there is a very clear linguistic hint which will make the semantic meaning or the intended meaning prominent over the literal or the metaphoric meaning. Therefore, al-Shāfi'ī interpreted the *'āyah* in *Sūrat al-Nisā'*

O you who have believed, do not approach prayer while you are intoxicated until you know what you are saying or in a state of *janābah*, except those passing through [a place of prayer], until you have washed [your whole body]. And if you are ill or on a journey or one of you comes from the place of relieving himself or you have **contacted** women [**by having sexual intercourse**] and find no water, then seek clean earth and wipe over your faces and your hands [with it]. Indeed, Allah is ever Pardoning and Forgiving. [*Sūrat al-Nisā'*:43]

in which the word *lāmastum* occurs which means 'you touched or contacted' with both its usages and meanings: the literal and semantic meanings²⁴. Whereas, others like Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī stick with the semantic meaning rather than the literal meaning based on their other interpretational principles and views regarding the literal association as it has been narrated in his book *al-Tafsīr*²⁵. The second school is the school of those who deny the existence of the literal association like al-Ghazāly who states that the literal association could happen but not because of the nature of the semantics of the language but because of the willingness of the speaker. Also, al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī believe that literal association could happen; however, the two meanings cannot be combined together whatsoever, so one meaning should be dominant over the other which makes the definition of literal association invalid in their opinion.

²⁴ Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, vol 7, 52. Narrated by Ibn 'Abbās

²⁵ Ibid.

As a result of the dispute mentioned above, I summarized some approaches taken regarding the interpretation of the literal association:

1. The semantics of literal association should cover all its meanings whether its metaphoric or non-metaphoric (real); literal or semantic; or, general or specific meanings.
2. The semantics of the literal association should not cover all its meanings whether its metaphoric or non-metaphoric (real); literal or semantic; or, general or specific meanings so, we should look for proof excluding or specifying one over the others.
3. The semantics of the literal association does not occur in the *Qur'ān* in the first place.
4. The semantics of the literal association must have only one meaning with one word and context at a time, and it cannot refer to two meanings at the same time.

Moreover, the disputes did not stop at the scholars of *Tafsīr* only; but, it went further than that to the scholars of Islam in general, such as the scholars of *al-'Uṣūl*. And each one of them began analyzing the literal association in the *Qur'ān* based on their methodological principles taken from their main concepts and beliefs rooted in the field of their knowledge. Therefore, we as students of knowledge should know and understand the schools, backgrounds, and orientations that the scholars of Islam come from, in order for us to have a better judgment and a fair conclusion about the conclusions they have reached in terms of their opinions in *Tafsīr* and Islam in general. Thus, we see the scholars of the Arabic language applying and extracting their conclusions regarding the literal association based on the linguistic principles as well as the scholars of logics, the scholars of *Fiqh*, the scholars of *Ḥadīth*, the scholars of *al-'Uṣūl*, and many others. And these differences in the fields of knowledge have caused many categories by which the literal association has been viewed and analyzed²⁶. However, all those differences in how the literal association are viewed have not taken away the fact that the *ṣaḥābah* (whom Allāh has been pleased with) have taken the *Qur'ān*

²⁶ Muhammed Nūr al-Dīn al-Munajjid, 82-90.

with its meanings and interpretation from the Prophet *ṣallallāhu 'alayh wa sallam*, or have caused any contradiction in its meaning or interpretation²⁷.

4.0 Some Examples of the Literal Association in the *Qur'ān*

To further illustrate the phenomenon of literal association in the *Qur'ān*, below are some examples of its occurrences in the *Qur'ān*:

- The word *al-dīn* which means “the religion” in English. This word appears in several *'āyāt* in the *Qur'ān* with different meanings other than ‘the religion’. Some of the different meanings are: ‘obedience’ as in *'āyah* number 9 in *Sūrat al-‘Imrān*²⁸; ‘religion’ as in *'āyah* number 99 in *Sūrat al-Tawbah*²⁹; and ‘supplication’ as in *'āyah* number 22 in *Sūrat Yūnis*³⁰.
- The word *al-ḥaq* which means “the truth” in English appears in several *'āyāt* in the *Qur'ān* with different meanings other than ‘the truth’. Some of the different meanings are: ‘Allāh’ as in *'āyah* number 71 in *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*³¹; ‘justice’ as in *'āyah* number 2 in *Sūrat al-Zumar*³²; and ‘the prophet’ as in *'āyah* number 109 in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*³³.

²⁷ Ibid., 60-71.

²⁸ Ibid., vol 5, 280. Narrated by Ibn Jarīr.

²⁹ Ibid., vol 11, 422. Narrated by Ibn 'Abbās.

³⁰ Ibid., vol 12, 147. Narrated by Qatādah.

³¹ Ibid., vol 18, 88. Narrated by Ibn Jurayj.

³² Ibid., vol 20, 154. Narrated by Ibn Jarīr.

³³ Ibid., vol 2, 418. Narrated by Qatādah and Ismā'īl al-Sudy.

- The word *al-hudā* which means “guidance” in English appears in several *'āyāt* in the *Qur'ān* with different meanings other than guidance. Some of the different meanings are: ‘the prophet of Allāh’ as in *'āyah* number 115 in *Sūrat al-Nisā*³⁴; and ‘the correctness’ as in *'āyah* number 198 in *Sūrat al-'A'rāf*³⁵.
- The word *al-'afū* which means “forgiveness” in English appears in several *'āyāt* in the *Qur'ān* with different meanings other than ‘forgiveness’. One of the different meanings is ‘bounty’ as in *'āyah* number 199 in *Sūrat al-'A'rāf*³⁶.
- The word *marad* which means “sickness” in English appears in several *'āyāt* in the *Qur'ān* with different meanings other than sickness. One of the different meanings are: ‘doubt’ as in *'āyah* number 10 in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*³⁷

Conclusion

The literal association, *Al-Wujūh wa al-Naḏā'ir*, *al-Mushtarak al-Lafẓy*, or as some even call it *al-Mushtarak al-Lughawy*, which covers the phenomenon of the opposites, the synonymy, and the literal association, are all debatable in terms of their actual names and terms, definitions, causes, existence, and the principles of how they are interpreted³⁸. And all this goes back to the main fact that, the opinions of the scholars of *Tafsīr* have not been documented clearly and explicitly by which we can know surely and certainly that this is what any particular *mufassir* tends to, or believes

³⁴ Ibid., vol 7, 483. Narrated by Ibn Jarīr.

³⁵ Ibid., vol 10, 637. Narrated by Ibn Jarīr.

³⁶ Ibid., vol 10, 639. Narrated by Mujāhid.

³⁷ Ibid., vol 1, 286. Narrated by 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, Ibn 'Abbās, Qatādah, and al-Rabī' ibn Anas.

³⁸ Ali Ismā'īl al-Ash'arī. (1432 A.H). *al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Dīyānah*. (Al-Riyāḍ: Madār al-Muslim li al-Nashr, 1432 A.H.), 101.

in, in regards to the actual term, the definition, the causes, the limitations, the existence of the literal association, and the principles of how they are interpreted by that particular *mufassir*.

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