

**Cite this article:** Shamkhi, Mina. Masoudian, Aref. (2026) Mapping Interpretive Trends in Literalist Exegesis in the Abrahamic Religions. *Journal of Interreligious Studies on the Qur'an and the Bible*. Vol-3, Issue-1,

## Mapping Interpretive Trends in Literalist Exegesis in the Abrahamic Religions

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(Received: 8 June 2026- Accepted: 31 August 2026)

### Abstract

Sacred texts in the Abrahamic religions are among the most important sources shaping religious beliefs and teachings, and their interpretation throughout history has produced diverse exegetical approaches. One such approach is literalist exegesis, which emphasizes attention to the text's linguistic implications and apparent meaning. However, the authority of apparent meanings should not be equated with excessive literalism, since context, indications, authoritative sources, and rational principles may influence how a text's intended meaning is determined. Using a descriptive-analytical and comparative method, this study examines literalist trends in interpreting the Noble Qur'an, the Old Testament, and the New Testament. It seeks to explain the foundations and differences between verbal literalism and rationalist literalism in these three domains. Accordingly, while examining the basis for the authority of the apparent meanings of words, the study analyzes the role of contextual indicators and sources in determining the limits of textual appearance, as well as exegetes' approaches to difficult expressions and divine attributes. The findings indicate that all three

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exegetical traditions attend to the text's apparent meaning, but its meaning and scope differ. In verbal literalism, the primary and customary signification of words constitutes the central criterion, and departure from it is more restricted. Rationalist literalism, by contrast, accepts the authority of apparent meaning but allows departure from the initial meaning and the adoption of an allegorical interpretation when reliable rational, transmitted, or historical evidence is present. The comparative analysis also shows that literalism in all three domains has been shaped by their particular historical contexts, epistemological foundations, and exegetical controversies, and therefore cannot be regarded as a uniform or homogeneous trend.

**Keywords:** Noble Qur'an, Old Testament, New Testament, Verbal Literalism, Rationalist Literalism, Authority of Apparent Meanings.

## Introduction

Sacred texts in the Abrahamic religions are among the most important sources shaping the beliefs, teachings, and intellectual systems of their followers. From the earliest formation of religious communities, different perspectives and methods have shaped how these texts are understood and interpreted. Differences in epistemological, linguistic, theological, and methodological foundations have consequently led to the emergence of various exegetical trends and schools. One important approach in the history of interpreting sacred texts is literalist exegesis, which emphasizes attention to the apparent signification of words and the text's linguistic structure.

Literalist exegesis cannot be understood as the unconditional acceptance of a word's initial meaning, since understanding a text's apparent meaning also depends on factors such as linguistic structure, customary usage, context, and contextual indicators. Therefore, a distinction must be made between the authority of apparent meaning and verbal literalism. This distinction, particularly in determining the limits of apparent meaning and the conditions

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under which one may depart from it, is fundamental to the study of exegetical trends. Differences among exegetes are not limited to accepting or rejecting a text's apparent meaning; they also concern their views on the authority of textual appearance, the status of reason, the role of tradition and contextual indicators, and the limits of allegorical interpretation. Accordingly, the study of literalism requires an examination of the foundations on which an exegete identifies the apparent meaning and decides whether to preserve or set it aside. In the exegetical heritage of Judaism and Christianity, too, understanding the apparent and non-apparent meanings of sacred texts has been an important issue throughout the history of interpretation. In dealing with sacred texts, various methods have developed, ranging from an emphasis on the text's linguistic and historical meaning to symbolic, metaphorical, and theological readings. In Islam, too, disagreements over methods of understanding the Qur'an and over the relationship between apparent meaning, reason, tradition, and allegorical interpretation have given rise to diverse exegetical trends. A comparative study of these approaches in the Noble Qur'an and the Two Testaments can therefore help identify their similarities and differences within a unified framework.

Furthermore, the emergence and expansion of any exegetical trend may be influenced not only by linguistic and epistemological foundations but also by intellectual controversies, theological developments, and social and historical conditions.

Thus, analyzing literalism merely by presenting exegetes' views is insufficient to understand its nature and function. One must also consider the circumstances of its formation, its theoretical foundations, and the exegetical consequences of each approach.

On this basis, the present study aims to explain and comparatively analyze literalist trends in the Noble Qur'an and the Two Testaments. By distinguishing verbal literalism from rationalist approaches, the study examines the foundations and limits of the authority of apparent meaning, the role of sources and contextual indicators in strengthening or restricting literalist interpretation, and the consequences of these approaches for understanding sacred texts. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical and comparative method, and it collects and analyzes data through exegetical, theological, jurisprudential, and other relevant studies on the interpretation of sacred texts.

The study also seeks to answer the following questions:

- What foundations and criteria underlie literalist interpretation in the Noble Qur'an, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, and what similarities and differences exist among literalist approaches to these three texts?
- How can the authority of apparent meanings and the role of contextual indicators, authoritative sources, and rational principles in determining the limits of a text's apparent meaning be explained?
- What distinguishes verbal literalism from rationalist approaches in dealing with the apparent meaning of a text?

### **1. Research Background**

Previous studies have examined literalism and methods of understanding the apparent meanings of religious texts. Among them are the following:

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- Shaker, Mohammad Kazem, and Mohammad Hasan Mohammadi Mozaffari (2010 AD/1389 SH). "The Phenomenology of Literalism in Understanding the Qur'an." *Meshkat*, no. 106, 1-13.
- Bani-Asadi, Reza, Fatemeh and Asma Barghoun (2023 AD/1402 SH). "A Comparative Examination of the Literal and Esoteric Interpretations of *Maraj al-Baḥrayn* and *al-Lu'lu' wal Marjān*." *Comparative Qur'anic Exegesis Studies*, 9(18), 101-124.
- Shaker, Mohammad Kazem, and Mina Shamkhi (2012 AD/1391 SH). "Different Approaches to the Role of Tradition in Interaction with the Qur'an and the Bible." *Qur'anic and Hadith Sciences Research*, 9(1), 47-77.
- Shamkhi, Mina (2012 AD/1391 SH). "Literalist Schools in Qur'anic Exegesis." *Qur'anic Linguistic Studies*, no. 1, 95-116.
- Wilson, Brittany E. (2023 AD). "The Scriptural Shape of God: Divine Anthropomorphisms in Synoptic Perspective." *New Testament Studies*, 69, 138-153.
- Knafl, Anne K. (2014 AD). *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch*. Eisenbrauns.
- Wilson, Brittany E. (2021 AD). *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church*. Oxford University Press.
- Mtshiselwa, Ndikho, and Lerato Mokoena (2018 AD). "Humans Created God in Their Image? An Anthropomorphic Projectionism in the Old Testament." *HTS Theological Studies*, 74(1), 1-6.

Nevertheless, no study examines literalism comparatively and on an equal footing across the three domains of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity while analyzing the authority of apparent meaning, the relationship between

apparent meaning and reason, tradition and contextual indicators, and their exegetical consequences. The present study therefore seeks to address this gap, to some extent, through a comparative examination of literalist interpretation in the Noble Qur'an and the Two Testaments.

## 2. Literalist Exegesis

Attention to the apparent meaning of religious texts has consistently been prominent among Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Literalism in Qur'anic interpretation refers to discovering the intention of Almighty God in Qur'anic words and propositions based on their linguistic signification, whether that signification is direct, implicational, or inclusive, or whether it involves rational entailment and logical inference. In the science of the principles of jurisprudence, apparent refers to the meaning indicated by a word in light of its lexical assignment, linguistic and customary usage, and the structure of speech. In the absence of a reliable contextual indicator to the contrary, one may rely on the apparent meaning of an utterance (Muza'ffar, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 1, 75). In their discussion of "*Aṣālat al-Zuhūr*" (the presumption of apparent meaning), legal theorists have explained the authority of textual appearance based on principles such as the established practice of rational people in understanding and relying upon the apparent meanings of speech (Muza'ffar, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 3, 152).

Accordingly, attention to the apparent meaning of a text should not be equated with excessive literalism, since accepting the authority of apparent meaning does not entail disregarding contextual indicators or other customary rules of interpretation. From this perspective, the present study distinguishes between two principal forms of literalism: verbal literalism and rationalist literalism.

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Verbal literalism emphasizes preserving the initial and customary meaning of words and restricting the scope of allegorical interpretation. Rationalist literalism, by contrast, accepts the basic authority of apparent meaning but evaluates its validity in light of reliable rational and transmitted evidence, as well as the customary rules governing textual interpretation.

### 2.1. Verbal Literalist Exegesis

#### 2.1.1. Indicators of Verbal Literalism in the Qur'an

A tendency toward the apparent meaning of texts and reliance on the initial meaning of words is among the oldest approaches to religious texts. In Islam, attention to the apparent meaning of scriptural texts and adherence to the linguistic signification of Qur'anic verses and narrations have appeared in various trends and approaches. This approach is particularly evident in theological discussions, interpretations of divine attributes, and how scholars address ambiguous verses. Disputed issues include the vision of God, attributing direction and bodily parts or organs to God, the susceptibility of prophets to sin, and *Tawassul* and seeking intercession. These views have taken different forms across theological and doctrinal movements, from the Ahl al-Hadith and Hanbalites to the Jahmiyyah, Mushabbihah, and Mujassimah.

In its specific sense, literalism refers to an approach that emphasizes the apparent wording and initial meaning of religious texts and, as far as possible, avoids allegorical interpretation or introducing rational principles into the understanding of scripture. From this perspective, attention to the apparent meaning of Qur'anic verses and narrations has been a key feature of movements such as the Zāhiriyyah and certain groups among the Ahl al-

Hadith and Hanbalites. Nevertheless, applying the label "Literalist" uniformly to all these movements requires caution, since they did not hold identical views concerning the interpretation of revealed attributes or the extent to which the apparent meaning of scriptural texts should be accepted. One of the most important areas of disagreement concerned God's revealed attributes. The term "Revealed Attributes" refers to attributes mentioned for God in the Noble Qur'an or in narrations, whose knowledge is acquired through transmitted sources. These include *Wajh* (face), *Yad* (hand), *'Arsh* (throne), and *'Ayn* (eye), as well as the question of the vision of God on the Day of Resurrection. Muslim theologians did not agree on how to understand these expressions, and different views developed about their meanings and how to ascribe such attributes to God.

This issue matters for the discussion of literalism because, in certain cases, interpreting words denoting divine attributes according to their customary and material meanings may lead to notions of anthropomorphism and corporealism. Therefore, when examining literalist approaches, one must distinguish between "Accepting the apparent meaning of the word," "Affirming the existence of the attribute," "Consigning its modality to God," and "Accepting a corporeal meaning." Mere adherence to the apparent meaning of scripture does not necessarily entail acceptance of corporeality or anthropomorphism. Indeed, some groups described in theological sources as *Mujassimah* or *Mushabbihah* did not accept these labels and emphasized God's transcendence beyond resemblance to created beings (Shahrastani, 1988 AD/1367 SH: 1, 103). Their critics, however, maintained that certain implications of these groups' literal interpretations effectively led them to affirm corporeal characteristics for God.

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The method of adopting the apparent meanings of Qur'anic verses and narrations and affirming their literal signification appears among various literalist groups. The Ahl al-Hadith, the *Zāhiriyyah*, and *Muḥammad ibn Karrām* and his followers are among the movements mentioned in this connection. In addition, a group of Sunni jurists, particularly in the Hijaz, relied on the apparent meanings of the Qur'an and Hadith in theological matters and did not assign reason an independent role in deducing and explaining doctrinal issues. This approach became more prominent in the thought of *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* and continued in subsequent movements. Nevertheless, these groups differed in their epistemological foundations and methods of interpreting divine attributes, and they cannot all be subsumed under a single understanding of literalism (Shahrastani, 1988 AD/1367 SH: 1, 95, 105).

In contrast to an approach that may lead from accepting the apparent meanings of words to anthropomorphism and corporealism, some members of the Ahl al-Hadith and certain Hanbalites accepted the revealed attributes based on their occurrence in scriptural texts but refrained from determining their modality. This view, known as *Tafwīd* (consignment), affirms the attribute's existence while denying anthropomorphism and consigning its modality to God. Accordingly, the attribution of an attribute to God is accepted because it occurs in scripture, whereas its actual nature is regarded as inaccessible to human beings.

Various views have also been reported among Salafī movements concerning how divine attributes should be approached, and they cannot all be reduced to a single exegetical method. These views include tendencies toward

affirming the attributes, allegorical interpretation, and consignment, each articulated on different principles. Therefore, applying the label "Literalist" to all these movements without distinguishing their foundations and methods may conflate different concepts, such as "Adherence to the apparent wording," "Affirmation of the attribute," "Consignment of its modality," and "Acceptance of a corporeal meaning." According to reports on the Salafi approach, Salafis accept the meanings of verses concerning divine attributes but refrain from discussing their modality and regard knowledge of that modality as belonging exclusively to God (Shahrastani, 1988 AD/1367 SH: 1, 84; al-Jalnid, n.d.: 72-73).

From this perspective, literalism may be understood not merely as a completely independent exegetical method, but as a spectrum of approaches. At one end of this spectrum lies the maximal acceptance of the apparent meaning. In contrast, at the other lies the acceptance of apparent meaning alongside allegorical, symbolic, and metaphorical levels of interpretation.

#### **2.1.2. Indicators of Verbal Literalism in the Bible**

Indicators of literalism in interpreting sacred verses and texts can be observed from ancient times in various exegetical works and schools. In some of these schools, literal interpretation, including historical, lexical, and verbal interpretation, was regarded as one of the most authoritative methods of understanding a text, and biblical verses were interpreted based on the apparent and initial meanings of their words. Accordingly, the exegete attempted, as far as possible, to understand the statements of the sacred text according to their apparent meanings and to avoid departing toward allegorical and metaphorical meanings except where necessary. One important exegetical trend in the Jewish tradition is the "Palestinian

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School," whose interpretive method paid particular attention to the rules governing words and the apparent meaning of speech. Its approach may therefore be regarded as an example of literal interpretation in Judaism. By contrast, in the "Western School," which to some extent established a connection between the exegetical method of the "Alexandrian School," with its inclination toward allegorical interpretation, and that of the "Antiochene School," with its inclination toward literal interpretation, exegetes sometimes employed the literal method and at other times the allegorical method. For example, Jerome initially interpreted the Book of Joel allegorically; after some time, however, he came to prefer literal interpretation to allegorical interpretation (Aziz, 1986: 61-62).

A study of the history of biblical interpretation shows that literalism was sometimes employed in a limited manner and at other times as a dominant method by exegetes. Many interpreters, even when inclined toward symbolic and allegorical interpretation, did not entirely abandon the text's apparent meaning. Therefore, literalism cannot be restricted exclusively to schools that defended verbal interpretation as their sole method. Rather, it appears in varying degrees throughout the works of a broad range of exegetes.

For example, Miller, a commentator on the Gospel of John, demonstrates a considerable commitment to the apparent meaning of the text in his interpretation of certain verses. Accordingly, when confronted with verses that some Christians regard as containing immoral themes, he shows little inclination toward metaphorical interpretation. Instead, he takes the apparent meaning of the text as the basis of his exegesis (Farjad, 1998 AD/1377 SH: 369).

In this approach, the primary aim of interpretation is to explain the meaning of the text and reconstruct the author's intended meaning in light of what the text's original audiences and listeners understood from it. Accordingly, attention to historical context and the initial audience's understanding is an important part of the interpretive process. Although some Christian scholars later criticized restricting interpretation to the text's historical intention and the understanding of its earliest audiences (Aziz, 1987: 480), this method enjoyed strong support at certain stages in the history of exegesis. On this basis, a successful interpreter was considered to be one who could explain ambiguous words, the author's intention, and the historical context of the text, since many aspects of the text remain unclear without attention to these factors. The circumstances and intended meaning of the discourse cannot be properly identified (Aziz, 1987: 66-67).

Nevertheless, attention to the apparent meaning within Christian interpretive approaches do not necessarily entail rejecting other levels of meaning. For example, Augustine proposed multiple meanings for the Bible, which various sources divide into four levels: the historical-literal meaning, the allegorical meaning, the analytical meaning, and the figurative or metaphorical meaning. Some accounts say Augustine focused on two fundamental meanings: the literal, corporeal-historical meaning and the allegorical-spiritual meaning. In certain cases, he also accepted the possibility of combining these two levels of meaning (McGrath, 2006 AD/1384 SH: 331-332).

On the other hand, even interpreters who paid particular attention to allegorical and symbolic interpretation did not necessarily abandon the apparent meaning of the text altogether. Philo, for example, one of the most important representatives and founding figures of allegorical interpretation,

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attached great importance to symbolic exegesis. Nevertheless, his approach did not mean that he categorically rejected the literal and historical interpretation of the sacred text. He also recognized the validity of the historical events and commandments contained in the Bible. Still, he maintained that, beyond their apparent meaning, these elements could convey deeper philosophical meanings. In his view, much of the biblical material served not only to guide human conduct in everyday life, but also to transmit and communicate the higher philosophical ideas of its age (Epstein, 2007 AD/1385 SH: 236).

Therefore, a study of the history of Qur'anic and biblical interpretation shows that although literalist exegesis has fluctuated across periods, it has never been completely removed from religious-text interpretation. Even in schools and methods inclined toward metaphorical, symbolic, or allegorical interpretation, the apparent meaning of the text has remained a significant level of understanding and interpretation.

### **2.2. Rationalist Literalist Exegesis**

#### **2.2.1. Indicators of Rationalist Literalism in the Qur'an**

Alongside an approach founded on maximum adherence to the apparent meanings of words and the initial denotations of scriptural texts, another form of literalism emerges. This approach attends to the verbal implications and apparent meanings of verses but resorts to allegorical interpretation when construing a text according to its apparent meaning conflicts with rational principles, theological foundations, or the principle of God's transcendence. From this perspective, the apparent meaning of a word remains the starting point of the interpretive process, but it is not necessarily regarded as its final stage. The principal characteristic of this approach is its combination of

adherence to verbal denotation with reason and allegorical interpretation when the apparent meaning of the text conflicts with definitive rational or theological principles.

Unlike verbal literalism, which tends more readily to accept the apparent meanings of words, including in verses concerning the divine attributes, rationalist literalism maintains that not all verses can, under every circumstance, be interpreted according to their initial and sensory meanings. In particular, when such an interpretation would entail likening God to created beings or attributing corporeality to Him, the apparent meaning of the word must be reconsidered in light of rational indications and the principles of divine unity. Accordingly, while this approach accepts the authority of apparent meaning, it allows allegorical interpretation when the text's apparent meaning conflicts with established rational and theological principles. The Imamiyyah and the Mu'tazilah are among the most important schools classified within this approach in theological sources (Shamkhi, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 103).

Within this framework, verses and expressions that, if understood in a sensory and corporeal sense, would entail likening God to created beings are interpreted in a manner appropriate to the divine status. For example, in some theological commentaries, *Yad* (hand) is interpreted as "Power" or "Blessing," "*Istiwā*" as "Dominion and control," and *Wajh* (face) as "Essence" or "Reality." This method is prominent in Mu'tazilite and Imamite exegesis and rests on the principle of declaring God transcendent above corporeal and material attributes. In Mu'tazilite thought, theological issues are regarded as belonging to the category of rational knowledge. Consequently, accepting a theological proposition solely based on submission to the apparent meaning

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of the text, without evaluating it against rational principles, is not considered acceptable (Shahristani, 1988 AD/1367 SH: 1, 74, 81).

Like other rationalist theologians, the Mu'tazilah assigned reason a fundamental role in understanding and evaluating theological knowledge. In their view, the content of religious texts is acceptable only insofar as it does not conflict with definitive rational principles. If a conflict arises between the apparent meaning of a text and a definitive rational judgment, the text may be interpreted allegorically and construed in a manner compatible with reason. Accordingly, for them, allegorical interpretation does not mean completely setting aside verbal denotation; rather, it is a method for reaching the intended meaning of a text in cases where its apparent meaning is incompatible with definitive rational and theological foundations (Mashkur, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 416).

The fundamental difference between rationalist and verbal literalism lies in the limits of apparent meaning's authority. In verbal literalism, the apparent meaning of the text generally enjoys greater independence, and departing from it faces stricter limitations. In rationalist literalism, by contrast, the authority of apparent meaning continues only so long as it does not conflict with definitive rational principles and fundamental theological doctrines; when such a conflict occurs, the interpreter searches for a non-apparent meaning of the verse by employing verbal and rational indications. This characteristic becomes especially important in interpreting the divine attributes. Proceeding from the premise that God is transcendent above corporeality, location, direction, and material characteristics, the rationalist interpreter construes words that apparently indicate such attributes in meanings appropriate to the divine status. Thus, *Yad* cannot mean a corporeal

organ and is consequently interpreted, in certain cases, as power, blessing, or sovereignty. Likewise, *'Ayn* (eye) is not accepted in its corporeal sense and may refer to the divine essence or reality. Rather than interpreting *Majī'* (coming) as corporeal arrival or movement, scholars have proposed meanings consistent with divine transcendence (cf. Masoudiyan, 2025 AD/1404 SH: 43, 74, and 126).

### 2.2.2. Indicators of Rationalist Literalism in the Bible

The tendency toward allegorical interpretation in dealing with sacred texts is not limited to Islam. In Judaism as well, interpreters have, in certain cases, departed from the apparent meaning of the text when they deemed it incompatible with rational principles or with a conception of God that emphasizes divine transcendence. For example, Philo the Jew considers allegorical interpretation necessary when the apparent wording makes it impossible to accept attributing a particular attribute or action to God (Aziz, 1987: 26). This approach demonstrates that, within the Jewish interpretive tradition, a distinction has also existed between accepting the apparent meaning and accepting it absolutely.

For example, in the Book of Genesis, when Adam's hiding from the presence of God is mentioned (Genesis 3:8), construing the expression according to its apparent meaning may be regarded as incompatible with God's knowledge and encompassing awareness. Philo therefore interprets such expressions in a manner consistent with the divine attributes and maintains that no meaning incompatible with God's knowledge and encompassing awareness should be attributed to Him (Aziz, 1987: 26).

Another example comes from certain biblical narratives whose literal interpretation, from the interpreter's perspective, raises ethical or rational

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difficulties. These include the story of Lot's drunkenness and his relations with his daughters in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 19:33-38). In such cases, some interpreters have used allegorical or symbolic exegesis to offer a meaning beyond the narrative's literal-historical sense (Aziz, 1987: 19).

Some scholars have identified general rules for determining when one can move from the apparent meaning to an allegorical or interpretive meaning. According to this view, three situations may provide grounds for allegorical interpretation: first, when the text attributes something to God that is incompatible with His status and attributes; second, when an inconsistency or contradiction is observed between one part of the text and another; and third, when the text itself possesses an allegorical character (Ram, n.d.: 12).

In Christianity, Origen is also among the interpreters who, in certain cases, do not consider acceptance of the apparent meaning sufficient and emphasize the necessity of metaphorical or spiritual interpretation. In his view, some biblical expressions, if understood in their literal and corporeal sense, produce a result incompatible with religious or rational teachings. Therefore, in such cases, one must move beyond the apparent meaning and arrive at the spiritual or metaphorical meaning of the text (Origen, 1966: 4, 276-286).

In this regard, expressions concerning God's corporeal members, such as "The hand of God" or "The face of God," are important examples. Interpreting these expressions as referring to bodily parts is incompatible with a transcendent conception of God. For this reason, allegorically oriented interpreters have interpreted them in terms of concepts such as power, sovereignty, or essence. Likewise, certain biblical narratives and stories that appear ethically or rationally problematic have provided grounds for non-literal and allegorical interpretations (Aziz, 1987: 52).

Within the Christian interpretive tradition, expressions concerning "The right hand of the Lord" offer a clear example of this approach. The Epistle to the Hebrews states that, after offering a sacrifice for sins, Christ "Sat down at the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10:12) Elsewhere, it speaks of his sitting "At the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (Hebrews 1:3) In interpreting these expressions, some Christian interpreters have not understood "The right hand" as a bodily organ; rather, they have regarded it as a metaphor for power, authority, and sovereignty.

For example, Barclay interprets "The right hand" as referring to power and absolute rule. He maintains that the purpose of the expression is to convey Christ's status and authority, not to establish the existence of a bodily organ in God (Barclay, 2018: 107-108).

This example shows that, even in Christianity, adherence to the text's wording does not necessarily mean accepting its corporeal and sensory meaning. Rather, while preserving the principle of the text's denotation, it is possible to offer an interpretation consistent with theological principles and the doctrine of divine transcendence.

In light of the examples above, "Rationalist literalist exegesis" may be understood as an approach that takes a word's apparent meaning as the starting point for textual understanding but does not treat its authority as absolute. Within this approach, the interpreter first examines the expression's lexical and conventional meaning. However, if this meaning conflicts with definitive rational principles, theological foundations, divine transcendence, or other parts of the text, the interpreter moves beyond the initial apparent meaning and, using contextual indicators and allegorical interpretation, selects another meaning.

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Accordingly, the most important indicators of this type of literalism can be summarized in four components:

1. The initial validity of the apparent and lexical meaning of the text;
2. Acceptance of the possibility of departing from the apparent meaning when a valid indication exists;
3. The role of reason in determining whether the text can or cannot be construed according to its apparent meaning;
4. The use of allegorical interpretation to resolve conflicts between the apparent meaning of the text and definitive rational or theological principles.

On this basis, the difference between this approach and verbal literalism does not lie in the "Fundamental attention to the apparent meaning," but rather in the limits of the authority of apparent meaning and the conditions under which one may depart from it. The verbal literalist generally regards the apparent meaning as the final destination of interpretation. In contrast, the rationalist literalist considers it the starting point of interpretation and accepts the possibility of moving from it to an allegorical meaning when a valid rational or transmitted indication exists. Thus, these two approaches may be regarded not as two entirely distinct methods, but as two different degrees of adherence to apparent meaning in the interpretive process.

### **3. Types of Rationalist Literal Exegesis**

In rationalist literalist exegesis, the interpreter does not confine themselves to the verbal and conventional denotations of words in

seeking a valid and defensible meaning of the revealed text. Rather, alongside attention to the expression's apparent meaning, the interpreter draws on reason and other epistemic sources to explain revealed concepts and resolve their ambiguities. Accordingly, although the apparent meaning of the text remains the starting point in this method, attention to rational indicators, inter-textual relationships, and other exegetical sources is also necessary to reach the ultimate intended meaning. In light of this approach, various types of rationalist literalist exegesis may be identified:

### 3.1. Inter-textual Exegesis

In Qur'anic studies, inter-textual exegesis is primarily known as "Interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an." A review of this method's background shows that interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an has its roots in the earliest stages of revelation and the formation of the science of exegesis. In Islam, it has been used to explain Qur'anic verses. According to this view, some of the earliest examples of interpreting and explaining Qur'anic concepts took the form of citing one verse in support of another.

A narration from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) states: "The Qur'an confirms and verifies itself"; that is, the various parts of the Qur'an confirm and corroborate one another (al-Hindī, 1985 AD/1405 AH: 1, 619).

It is also narrated from Imam Ali: "It is the Book of God through which you see, through which you speak, and through which you hear. One part of it speaks through another, and some of its verses testify to others." (Sayyid Raḍī, 1977 AD/1397 AH: Saying 133; Jafari, 1997 AD/1376 SH: 23, 250)

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The substance of this statement indicates the existence of an internal relationship among the verses and the possibility of explaining certain verses with the help of others.

*Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī*, whose *al-Mizān* is regarded as a prominent example of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an, likewise maintains that the foundation of the exegetical method of the impeccable Imams (AS) was based on interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an, and that this method was among their common approaches to explaining Qur'anic meanings (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 1, 12). In his view, many exegetical traditions attributed to the Impeccable Imams (AS) also contain arguments in which one verse is used to explain another, or the meaning of one verse is cited to clarify another. This constitutes an instance of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 3, 87).

Nevertheless, interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an should not be restricted merely to cases in which two verses share a word or expression and one verse is directly employed to explain another. This method has a broader scope, and it identifies various forms of relationships among verses. Because certain Qur'anic verses explain and interpret others, establishing relationships among verses is especially important for understanding the text. At times, placing two or more verses alongside one another reveals a meaning that none of them, independently and in isolation, explicitly denotes. This relationship is not necessarily based on verbal similarity; rather, verses with different wording may share a certain conceptual affinity that creates the basis for an exegetical relationship

between them. Furthermore, in some cases, there may be neither verbal similarity nor an obvious conceptual relationship between verses. Nevertheless, close attention to and comprehensive knowledge of the entire corpus of verses may lead to the discovery of new points and meanings (Marifat, 1997 AD/1418 AH: 1, 25).

Accordingly, inter-textual exegesis may be understood as a process in which the interpreter refers to other parts of the same text to understand a particular section and reveals its intended meaning by establishing relationships among the text's constituent parts. In addition to the exegetical tradition of Muslims, this method has a long history among biblical interpreters. In biblical hermeneutics, inter-textual exegesis is a recognized and valid interpretive method. Although its status has shifted over time, interpreters have consistently employed it across different periods (Farjad, 1998 AD/1377 SH: 360).

In Christianity, Saint Augustine is among the thinkers who emphasized the role of the sacred text itself in understanding its ambiguous passages. He regarded the hermeneutics of the sacred text as a discipline in which the interpreter needed to be proficient to reach the text's meaning, and he considered familiarity with Hebrew, Greek, and Latin essential for a biblical interpreter.

In his view, certain elements in the Bible, including numbers and proper names, may carry symbolic meaning. For example, the account of the creation of the world in six days may have symbolic significance, and the numbers used in the sacred text may point to realities beyond their apparent meanings. Consistent with this view, Augustine regarded

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referring to the text itself as a valid way to discover the Bible's hidden meanings. In other words, one part of the text could be used to disclose the meaning of another part of the same text (Ahmadi, 1996 AD/1375 SH: 502).

This approach was subsequently articulated more extensively within Christian interpretive thought and became an important criterion for biblical interpretation during the Reformation. In that period, one of the principal criteria for evaluating an interpretation was its compatibility with Christian faith, and the Bible itself was regarded as the standard for assessing such compatibility. Consequently, verse-by-verse or text-to-text interpretation was emphasized as one of the most appropriate methods for understanding the Bible (Aziz, 1987: 81).

Within this framework, the fundamental principle was that the Bible itself interprets the Bible. That is, to understand ambiguous or difficult passages, one should refer to clearer passages within the same text. Put differently, ambiguous passages must be understood in the light of the text's clearer passages. This principle matters because certain biblical teachings may be obscure to contemporary readers, whereas they were not obscure to the author or the original audience. Therefore, clearer passages of the Bible may be used to arrive at the correct and complete meaning of a difficult passage.

This approach also gained particular importance in opposition to the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church maintained that it possessed the guidance and grace of the Holy Spirit and could therefore explain the Bible's ambiguous teachings. The Reformers rejected this claim and did

not recognize the Church's exclusive authority to interpret the Bible. Instead, they maintained that the Bible itself should serve as the criterion for its own understanding and interpretation (Ram, n.d.: 42). According to this view, if difficulties arose in understanding the correct and complete meaning of a verse, one should refer to other verses that were clearer so that the meaning of the difficult verse could be clarified in their light (Anas, 1890: 97). In other words, less clear passages of the text should be understood in relation to its clearer and more explicit passages, particularly those concerning events and matters that had been publicly observable and known (Peters, 2002: 202).

On this basis, it can be said that although inter-textual exegesis in Islamic and Christian interpretive approaches differs in terms of theological foundations and hermeneutical frameworks, it shares a common methodological principle: "To understand ambiguous or difficult passages of a sacred text, one should draw on the internal capacities of that text and its clearer passages." The widespread use of this method among interpreters of the Qur'an and the Bible therefore demonstrates its importance and effectiveness in understanding sacred texts. The following sections examine examples of the various forms of inter-textual exegesis:

### **3.1.1. Interpreting Ambiguous Verses through Clear Verses**

The Noble Qur'an divides its verses into two categories, clear and ambiguous. It introduces the clear verses as the "Mother of the Book": "It is He who has sent down to you the Book. In it are verses that are clear and decisive, they are the foundation of the Book, and others that are ambiguous." (Āli 'Imrān:7)

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According to this verse, the clear verses constitute the reference point and foundation for understanding the ambiguous verses. Their meanings can therefore be clarified by referring the ambiguous verses back to the clear ones.

A narration from Imam *Riḍā* (AS) states: "Whoever refers the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an back to its clear verses has been guided to the straight path." (Majlisī, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 92, 377) Accordingly, verses such as "The Most Compassionate established Himself upon the Throne," (Ṭāhā:5) "The hand of God is above their hands," (al-Fath:10) and verses that describe God as Hearing and Seeing or speak of God's coming must be understood and interpreted in light of the clear verses, including: "There is nothing whatsoever like Him." (al-Shūrā:11)

### 3.1.2. Interpreting the Unqualified in Light of the Qualified

In this type of interpretation, a ruling or proposition that is stated in one part of the Qur'an in an unqualified form, without any restriction, is accompanied by a qualification in another verse, thereby narrowing its conceptual scope. This method is not confined to legal verses; rather, in various instances, one verse can be interpreted by referring to another verse that contains a greater degree of qualification and restriction.

For example, in the verse, "He has only forbidden you carrion, blood, and the flesh of swine..." (al-Baqarah:173) the prohibition of blood is stated without qualification. Elsewhere, however, blood is described with the qualification poured forth: "Unless it be carrion or blood poured forth." (al-An'ām:145) Accordingly, exegetes have understood the unqualified

expression in light of the qualified one and regarded the prohibition as referring specifically to shed blood (Suyūṭī, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 3, 102).

### 3.1.3. Interpreting the Concise in Light of the Elucidated

In this type of interpretation, a subject that is presented concisely in one Qur'anic verse and does not possess a sufficiently clear indication is explained and elaborated upon in another verse. For example, in the verse, "Indeed, you have wronged yourselves by taking the calf..." (al-Baqarah:54) no details are provided concerning the calf that the Children of Israel had taken. In another verse, however, some of its characteristics are explained: "A calf, a mere body that had a lowing sound..." (al-A'raf:148) Accordingly, the relationship between these two verses can contribute to explaining and completing the meaning of the first verse.

This method is even clearer in Qur'anic narratives, where an event may be mentioned briefly in one verse while its details appear in one or more other verses. Therefore, for a more complete understanding of a Qur'anic account, it is necessary to consider the totality of verses that discuss the event in question.

This method also appears in biblical interpretation. For instance, in the verse, "And Salmon begot Boaz of Rahab, and Boaz begot Obed of Ruth..." (Matthew 1:5) the name "Rahab" is mentioned without any explanation of her identity. One biblical interpreter, to clarify the intended referent of this name, cites a verse from the Old Testament and writes: "Rahab was a foreign, corrupt, and wicked woman." (A Group of Theologians, 1987: 4, 5, citing Basil Atkinson) To substantiate this interpretation, he refers to a verse from the Book of Joshua, which states:

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"Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim... So they went to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and lodged there." (Joshua 2:1)

### 3.1.4. Interpreting the General in Light of the Specific

A general term is a term designated for all members of a category and applicable to all of them. Linguistic forms indicating generality in the Qur'an include conditional nouns, relative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, definite nouns preceded by the definite article al-, and indefinite nouns in contexts of negation and prohibition.

In this type of interpretation, a proposition stated generally in a verse or part of a verse is accompanied by a specific qualification in another verse or another part of the same verse, thereby limiting the scope of the general ruling. Consequently, if an interpreter disregards specific verses and interprets a general verse solely based on the generality of its wording, they may misunderstand the intended meaning of the Qur'an. Identifying specific verses and considering them alongside general verses is therefore essential for arriving at a comprehensive and accurate interpretation.

It should be noted, however, that not every general expression in the Qur'an is necessarily restricted from its general scope. General expressions in the Qur'an can be divided into three categories: first, a general expression that remains general and for which there is no specification; second, a general expression whose actual intended referent is a specific case; and third, and a general expression that has been subjected to specification (cf. Suyūṭī, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 1, 49-55).

For example, the verse, "A day shall come when there will be no buying or selling, no friendship, and no intercession," (al-Baqarah:254) generally negates friendship and intercession on the Day of Resurrection. However, the verse "Close friends, on that Day, will be enemies to one another, except for the righteous" (al-Zukhruf:67) reports a certain form of friendship among the righteous on the Day of Resurrection. Likewise, the verse, "unless God grants permission to whomever He wills and is pleased with," (al-Najm:26) establishes the possibility of intercession by the angels, subject to divine permission and approval. Accordingly, in light of these verses, the apparent unrestrictedness of the first verse must be understood in light of the other verses.

A similar example of interpreting the general in light of the specific also appears in the Bible. If a ruling is expressed in general terms in a biblical passage and specific cases are subsequently mentioned in the same verse or in other verses, the scope of the general ruling can be restricted in light of those specific cases. For example, the Book of Leviticus states: "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering from the livestock, that is, from the cattle or from the sheep." (Leviticus 1:2) The term "Livestock" in its general usage could encompass various animals. However, given that only "Cattle" and "Sheep" are subsequently mentioned, the ruling concerning the offering in this passage is restricted to these two categories. Therefore, to understand the precise intention of the text, it is necessary to consider the relationship between the general term and the specific cases subsequently mentioned.

### **3.2. Interpreting the Qur'an through the Sunnah**

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One of the methods of Qur'anic interpretation is interpretation through the Sunnah, or the "*Atharī* method." In technical usage, *Athar* refers to narrations reporting the Prophet's (PBUH) statements, actions, and tacit approvals. In Sunni hadith terminology, however, *Athar* has sometimes been used more broadly to include the statements of the Companions and the Followers. Nevertheless, according to the view that does not recognize the intrinsic authority of the statements of the Companions and Followers, *Athar* is restricted to the words, actions, and tacit approvals of an Impeccable. On this basis, the Sunnah is regarded as one of the most important sources for elucidating the intended meaning of Qur'anic verses and understanding their meanings.

In this method, the interpreter seeks to discover and explain the divine intent in Qur'anic verses by drawing on narrations transmitted from the Prophet (PBUH) and the Ahl al-Bayt (AS). From this perspective, the Sunnah can help explain concise concepts, determine the intended meaning of a verse, clarify its applications and referents, and resolve ambiguities in certain Qur'anic expressions. In transmitted or tradition-based exegesis, however, the question of the authority of reports, particularly the status of solitary reports in Qur'anic interpretation, is an important issue that has received considerable attention from scholars in this field (Shamkhi, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 110-111).

The role of the Sunnah in interpreting sacred texts is not confined to Islam; forms of transmitting and drawing on interpretive heritage and religious tradition alongside sacred texts also appear in Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, the concept of tradition, its origin, and the degree of its

authority differ across these religions. In Judaism, tradition and interpretive heritage hold an important place alongside the written text, and in some interpretations, the Oral Law is considered alongside the Written Law. From this perspective, Jews believe that God transmitted not only the Written Law but also the Oral Law to Moses (Steinsaltz, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 22).

In Christianity, religious and interpretive tradition has likewise played a role in understanding and elucidating the Bible. According to a view presented in the sources cited in this study, the Holy Spirit is regarded as the source of tradition, and tradition therefore possesses religious authority alongside the Bible (Hick, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 121; Dokht shouraki & Michel, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 165; Herbermann, 1913: 14, 134). Accordingly, in these two religious traditions, the interaction between sacred text and tradition cannot be reduced to a single interpretive method; rather, it also shapes and transmits religious teachings and understanding. Despite this broad similarity, views differ on the scope of tradition and how it relates to sacred texts in Judaism and Christianity. Consequently, the position of tradition in these two religions cannot be regarded as identical; rather, distinctions must be made among different religious interpretations and movements. Conversely, groups have also emerged within both religions that have emphasized the Bible's sufficiency for guiding believers' theoretical and practical lives and have limited or rejected tradition's role (Shaker & Shamkhi, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 60-73).

From the perspective of this discussion, tradition's significance lies not merely in its status as a source for interpreting sacred texts; rather, the

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central issue is how tradition interacts with the text's apparent meaning. In some approaches, tradition may elucidate and explain a text's apparent meaning. At the same time, it may be cited as an indicator of the text's g. Therefore, exposition of tradition within literalist movements requires attention to the fact that acceptance of tradition does not necessarily entail setting aside the apparent meaning of the text. Rather, in some approaches, tradition serves as a means of arriving at a more precise understanding of that very apparent meaning and of determining the limits of its denotation. Differences among interpretive movements in this regard concern less the fundamental acceptance or rejection of tradition than the degree of authority accorded to it, its scope, and how it is employed in understanding sacred texts.

#### 4. The Basis for the Authority of Apparent Meanings of Words

One fundamental basis for understanding the distinction between verbal and rationalist literalism is the authority of words' apparent meanings. The authority of an apparent meaning means that, in the absence of a valid indicator to the contrary, the meaning that ordinary usage derives from a speaker's statement may serve as a basis for reliance and action. Accordingly, the principle of the authority of apparent meaning differs from excessive literalism, because in determining the speaker's intended meaning, scholars of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* consider not only the primary denotation of an expression but also connected and disconnected contextual indicators and other valid evidence.

Ayatollah Khoei accepts the authority of the apparent meanings of the Qur'an and maintains that the apparent meanings of the Qur'an are

authoritative insofar as they are not inconsistent with definitive rational or transmitted evidence. The basis of this authority is the rational convention governing the understanding of speech: rational people rely on the apparent meanings of statements in their ordinary communication, and the Lawgiver has not adopted a special method, contrary to rational convention, for conveying His intentions (Khoei, n.d.: 263). Thus, from the perspective of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, the authority of apparent meaning does not mean that every initial meaning of an expression should be regarded as definitive and final without considering contextual indicators (Muṣaffar, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 3, 156). An apparent meaning is authoritative when there is no valid indicator to the contrary (Ḥakīm, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 4, 208). On this basis, it can be argued that the disagreement between scholars of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* and excessive literalists does not concern the principle of "Paying attention to the apparent meaning"; rather, it concerns the limits of the authority of apparent meaning and the factors that legitimately permit departure from it. This distinction is particularly important in the analysis of anthropomorphic attributes, because one exegete may accept the apparent meaning of the word *Yad* (hand) but, in light of rational evidence and verses affirming divine transcendence, depart from its corporeal meaning. Another exegete, by contrast, may preserve the word's primary denotation while maintaining that its modality is unknown. Therefore, merely affirming the authority of apparent meaning cannot, by itself, place an interpretive approach within the category of excessive literalism. Although Islamic *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* has formulated attention to the apparent and conventional meaning of a text coherently and systematically through

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the theory of "The authority of the apparent meanings of words," this approach is not exclusive to Islamic interpretation. Interpretive approaches also appear in Jewish and Christian traditions that emphasize discovering the direct, linguistic, and conventional meaning of sacred texts. Nevertheless, these concepts should not be regarded as entirely equivalent, because "The authority of apparent meaning" in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* concerns the epistemic validity of, and the possibility of relying upon, the apparent meaning of an utterance. In contrast, concepts such as "Peshat and *sensus literalis*" have developed primarily within frameworks for understanding and determining the meaning of sacred texts. In Judaism, "Peshat" generally refers to the simple, direct, and natural meaning of a text. In the history of Jewish exegesis, particularly in contrast to certain forms of "Derash," it has been employed to emphasize attention to the linguistic and conventional meaning of biblical passages. Historical studies, however, indicate that "Peshat" did not have a fixed, uniform meaning from the outset and evolved over time. In particular, as a clearer distinction emerged between the plain meaning of the text and "Derash" interpretations, "Peshat" became established as an approach that focused on the natural, linguistic, and sometimes historical meaning of the text (Bacher & Lauterbach, 1912: 9, 652-653; Cohen, 2024: 283-311). In Christianity, the concept of "Sensus Literalis" has likewise occupied an important position in the history of biblical hermeneutics. The "Literal Sense" does not necessarily mean a word-for-word reading or the initial apparent meaning of individual words; rather, it refers to the meaning conveyed by the text within the framework of linguistic rules, literary genre, historical context, and the author's intention. Accordingly, the

"Literal Sense" in Christian theology should not be equated with "Literalism." The interpretation of the Bible within the Church has likewise emphasized the necessity of seeking the precise meaning of the text, while clarifying that the literal sense should not be identified with a literalistic, word-for-word reading; rather, the literary and linguistic conventions of the period in which the text originated must also be taken into account (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993; García-Jalón, 2016: 181-209).

Therefore, the three interpretive traditions examined in this study share a methodological commitment to attending to the text's conventional meaning, although their theoretical formulations and foundations differ. In Islamic *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, this issue is formulated in terms of the authority of apparent meaning and the validity of relying upon the conventional understanding of an utterance. In Jewish exegesis, "Peshat" primarily refers to the simple, natural, and linguistic meaning of the text; in Christian hermeneutics, "Sensus literalis" refers to the textual and historical meaning arrived at through systematic interpretation and attention to the language and literary structure of the text. Thus, the common ground among these three domains should be sought in their attention to the conventional and direct meaning of the text, rather than in treating their foundations of authority or interpretive methods as identical.

### **Conclusion**

A comparative examination of literalist approaches to interpreting the Qur'an, the Old Testament, and the New Testament showed that attention to the apparent meaning of the text matters in all three domains; however,

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this commonality does not imply methodological uniformity. In each domain, language, textual genre, exegetical sources, epistemological foundations, and interpreters' historical circumstances determine the apparent meaning of the text. Literalism, therefore, spans a spectrum of approaches, from adherence to the initial meaning of words to accepting the apparent meaning while also drawing on rational, transmitted, historical, and interpretive indicators.

One important finding of the study is the distinction between the "Authority of apparent meanings" and "Verbal literalism." The authority of apparent meaning does not mean regarding the initial meaning of an expression as definitive and final without taking contextual indicators into account; rather, an apparent meaning is authoritative within the framework of conventional understanding and in the absence of a contrary indicator. Accordingly, *Uṣūlī* and rationalist approaches do not reject the principle of attending to the apparent meaning; rather, they differ over the limits of its authority and the possibility of departing from it. In the interpretation of divine attributes, likewise, an exegete may accept the denotation of an expression while rejecting its corporeal meaning based on rational or transcendence-oriented evidence.

Within the Islamic tradition, differences among the Ahl al-Ḥadīth, Hanbali, Salafi, and rationalist approaches concern primarily their epistemological foundations and the limits of apparent meaning's authority, rather than the fundamental importance they attach to textual sources. Verbal literalists emphasize preserving the textual denotation and restricting interpretation whereas rationalists evaluate apparent meaning alongside definitive rational and theological principles. These two

approaches can therefore be viewed as occupying opposite ends of a single spectrum.

In Judaism and Christianity as well, concepts such as "Peshat" and the "Literal Sense" show that apparent meaning depends on the language, context, historical setting, and literary genre of the text and does not necessarily entail a word-for-word reading. Historically, too, literalism is a context-dependent phenomenon shaped by theological disputes, the status accorded to reason and tradition, the development of exegetical methods, and each period's intellectual circumstances.

Ultimately, the common feature shared by the three domains is their attention to the text and their effort to discover its meaning; their differences, however, lie in the criteria used to determine meaning, the authority attributed to contextual indicators, the position of reason and tradition, and the limits of departure from the apparent meaning. Therefore, an analysis of literalist approaches must consider the text's meaning, the basis for its authority, and the limits within which departure from its apparent meaning is permissible.

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