

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S THEORY OF *LUBĀB AL-QUR'ĀN* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSIFICATION OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In critically analysing Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's theory of "Essences of the Qur'ān" (*Lubāb al-Qur'ān*), this article explores, at the outset, a definition of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. Secondly, it introduces a brief exposition of the historical background of this theory. Thirdly, we analyse the theoretical structure of this theory, and how its implications illustrate al-Ghazālī's understanding of the Islamic sciences and discourse. This library-based qualitative research aims to analyse al-Ghazālī's theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. This article also compares al-Ghazālī's views with those of other scholars. Finally, it explores the influence of al-Ghazālī's intellectual makeup on this very theory.

Introduction

Al-Ghazālī's theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* promotes a particular kind of understanding of the Qur'ānic discourse. As mentioned in the introduction to his treatise, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, this theory constituted an intellectual contribution made when its author was at an advanced age, when he had already composed numerous, well-known works on many of the Islamic intellectual disciplines, such as his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. The theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* represents a particular portion of his broader understanding of the Qur'ān. Throughout this very theory, there is a strong emphasis upon a particular method of approaching the Qur'ān. A very clear-cut and complete yet brief theory concerning the aims (*maqāṣid*) of the Qur'ān is given in this book – a theory that is recognized as important and is often quoted by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH/1505 CE), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH/1328 CE) and some later scholars of the Qur'ān. Based on this theory, al-Ghazālī identifies the major themes of the Qur'ān as well as its higher objectives. He demonstrates how theory of knowledge in Islam is related to this theory. More precisely, he uses his theory as a tool in separating the Islamic sciences into two; namely the sciences of *lubāb* (essences) and the sciences of *ṣadaf* (shell). This theory is used in

dividing all Qur'ānic verses into two categories which he names "jewel verses" and "pearl verses". The categorisation of particular verses as being distinct from other verses of the Qur'ān, and this being based on such a distinctive theory, is unprecedented in the history of Qur'ānic literature. Therefore, the study of this theory is a significant endeavour, especially in terms of its being a contribution to Qur'ānic studies.

Definition of *Lubāb Al-Qur'ān*

The original term for the "essence of the Qur'ān" in al-Ghazālī's usage is *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. Literally, *lubāb* is the purest and best part of something, as well as its heart and essence. When it is used in relation to fruits, it means exocarp, which is the outer layer of a fruit. However, its use in relation to human beings refers to intellect (Ibn Manẓūr 2001: p. 730). In Qur'ānic usage, *lubāb* refers to such people as possess sound or superior intellect (al-Shanqīṭī, 1995: p. 251). Al-Qurṭubī says that the *lubāb* of a thing is its pure portion (Al-Qurṭubī, 2003: p. 152), (Al-Nawawī, 1392 A.H., p. 87). Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī (n.d: p. 42) says it refers to the substance of a thing. With shades of different meanings, with different implications in regard to thought, *lubāb*, according to Iḥsān 'Abbās (1975: p. 199), represents the pivotal concept which is in fact the core of a partial image.

The word *Qur'ān* is a verbal noun derived from the root *qirā'ah* (Ibn Qutaybah, 1978: p. 33). It literally means "reading" or "recitation", a usage which occurs in several Qur'ānic verses, such as Qur'ān, 17:78, 75:17, and 75:18. In quoting Qatādah, Ibn al-'Aṭīyah states in his exegesis, *al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz* that *qur'ān* means "composition" because when somebody intends to read something, he puts it together and verbally composes it (Al-Andalusī, 1993: p. 56). Exegetes of the Qur'ān mostly agree on the first meaning of the word *qur'ān*. In the technical sense, the *Qur'ān* is defined by Muslim scholars according to definitions that differ in their expressions, but in general, the *Qur'ān* is Allah's speech revealed to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) in Arabic with definite purposes and transmitted to us by continuous testimony (*tawātur*) (Kamālī, 2008: p. 16). The whole text has been placed in chapters (*sūrah*) consisting of 114 *sūrahs*, beginning with *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* and ending with *Sūrah al-Nās* (Ibn 'Āshūr, 2000: p. 71). The recitation of the Qur'ān constitutes a form of worship (Mannā' Qaṭṭān, 2000: p. 17).

Though the mention of the term *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* can be found in works dating back to several hundred years before al-Ghazālī's time, it is hard to trace any definition of the term. However, al-Ghazālī himself did attempt to define it, saying, "*Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is knowledge of Allah, whose speech the Qur'ān is, and the knowledge of His beauty, as well as being preoccupied with Him" (Al-Ghazālī, 2003: pp. 70-71). Yet this definition does not seem to reflect the full scope of his theory. This very theory of his fundamentally engages in the theory of knowledge i.e. its classification and sources, as well as the classification of Qur'ānic verses. Moreover, these considerations are in fact the cardinal dimensions of the theory, apparently absent in his definition.

Historical Root of the Term *Lubāb Al-Qur'ān*

The use of the term *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* first appeared among Muslims five hundred years before al-Ghazālī started to use it. Evidently, it was within a narration of Ibn

Mas'ūd's (32 AH/652 CE) that this term was first used. He narrated that "everything has a hump, and the hump of the Qur'ān is *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, the second chapter of the Qur'ān. Likewise, everything has an essence (*lubāb*), so the essence of the Qur'ān (*Lubāb al-Qur'ān*) is *al-Mufaṣṣal*" (Al-Dārimī, 1986: p. 539). *Al-Mufaṣṣal* refers to a group of chapters of the Qur'ān, beginning with *Sūrah Qāf* or *al-Hujurat* and ending with *Sūrah al-Nās* (Albānī, n.d: p. 82). In another narration from Ibn 'Abbās, *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* signifies the *ḥawāmīm*, that is, the seven chapters of the Qur'ān from *Sūrah* 40 to 46, each of which begins with the introductory letters *ḥā mīm* (Al-Alūsī, n.d: p. 39).

The foregoing instance indicates that al-Ghazālī was not the first to introduce the term *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*, but he may well have been the first to utilise this term as a concept which yields an understanding of the Qur'ānic discourse as well as of the Islamic concept of sciences. However, after al-Ghazālī, some Muslim scholars used this term in their writings, although mostly as either a citation of Ibn Mas'ūd's narration, or in terms of a reference to al-Ghazālī's treatise, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, or indeed in terms of a criticism of his theory. Instances of these references may be found in al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911 AH) *al-Itqān*, Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 728 AH) *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, and al-Zarkashī's (d. 794 AH) *al-Burhān*.

Although the use of the term *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* existed before al-Ghazālī's time, being most commonly cited in books of *tafsīr*, he has to be honoured as the pioneer of the particular usage of this term. Moreover, later literature on this subject either mainly criticised his idea, or cited him as a reference. Hardly any post-Ghazālīan Islamic literature has been found that further promotes this idea. Thus, it appears that as a concept, *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is unique in al-Ghazālī's treatment.

An Analysis of Al-Ghazālī's Theory of *Lubāb Al-Qur'ān*

Al-Ghazālī's theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* seems paradoxical as he once identified calling people to God (*da'wah*), along with *tawḥīd* (monotheism), as together constituting the *lubāb* of the Qur'ān. He asserted, "the purest pith of the Qur'ān and its ultimate aim consist in calling people to God" (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 21). But in the same book, he again defined that "knowledge of God i.e. his Essence, Attributes and Actions, which are collectively called *tawḥīd*, are the essence (*lubāb*) of the Qur'ān, its heart, pith and secret" (Al-Ghazālī, 2003: p. 70-71). However, the latter occupies the lion's share of his theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. This becomes apparent when he referred to another of his books, namely *Kitāb al-Arba'īn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, for an elaborate explanation of this subject. This book was written before his treatise *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, and it contains al-Ghazālī's definition of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. In defining the term, he explicitly mentions that *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is "knowledge of God" (Al-Ghazālī, 2003 pp. 70-71). Calling people to God and having knowledge of Him are two different things, as the former represents action, unlike the latter, which constitutes mere intellectual gain.

However, the extent of this theory does not seem limited to these different shades of meaning offered by these differing terminologies. While discussing the whole concern of this theory, al-Ghazālī went far beyond these limitations. In practice, his identification of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* came under another of his unique theories, *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* (the higher objectives of the Qur'ān). *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is only concerned with two *maqāṣid* (objectives) out of a total of six *maqāṣid*. The six

maqāsid are identified as classifying all Qur'ānic verses into six divisions of which each division represents one *maqṣad* (objective) of the Qur'ān.

The first three out of these six divisions, according to al-Ghazālī, are the most important ones and the rest are complementary to them. The three important divisions are “the definition of God to Whom men are called; the definition of the Straight Path and the definition of the condition at the time of attaining to Him.” Moreover, the complementary three include, “the conditions of those who answer to the call to God and His delicate dealings with them; the conditions of those who deny God, and reveal their disgrace and their ignorance in disputing and arguing against the truth; and the stages of the path to God and the manner of taking provision and preparation for it” (Abul Quasem, 1989: pp. 21-22).

The first two classes from the most important *Maqāsid al-Qur'ān* are viewed as *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* by al-Ghazālī. This becomes clearer when he further classified *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* into two segments, “jewels and pearls”. The ‘jewels’ include the verses that are especially concerned with the Essence of God, His Attributes and His Works whereas, the ‘pearls’ include verses that describe the Straight Path and those that urge man to follow it. These are in fact the first two *maqāsid*.

However, the first category of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is cognitive, whereas the second is practical. The basis of this classification is the principle of faith (*īmān*) which lies in both cognition and action. Al-Ghazālī once again outlined that “the purpose of the string of jewels is only to gather the light of knowledge [of God, His Attributes and His Works], and the purpose of the pearls is steadfastness on the Straight Path by action” (Al-Ghazālī, 1992: p. 9). The distinction and distinctiveness of these two classes becomes clearly understood, in a more practical manner, in al-Ghazālī's sorting of the number of Qur'ānic verses that fall into these two categories at the end of his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*. He found that the jewels comprised some 704 verses, whereas the pearls comprised some 710 verses. In sum, the total verses of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* amounted to some 1414 verses.

The theory of Lubāb al-Qur'ān: the basis of al-Ghazālī's classification of religious sciences

Al-Ghazālī classified sciences in general into four different categories as follows:

1. Theoretical and practical.
2. Presential (*ḥuḍūrī*) and attained (*ḥuṣūlī*).
3. Religious (*shar'īyyah*) and intellectual (*'aqliyyah*) (Al-Ghazālī, 1992: p. 16).
4. Sciences that are obligatory for individuals to learn (*farḍ 'ayn*) and sciences that are obligatory for whole communities (*farḍ kifāyah*) (Al-Ghazālī, 1992: p. 13).

The theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is the basis of further classification of the “religious sciences”. Al-Ghazālī explains what he means by “religious sciences” in saying, “I mean by ‘religions sciences’, those which have been prescribed by the Prophets, and which reason or experimentation or audition cannot show the path to, in the way that they can in arithmetic, medicine and linguistics” (Al-Ghazālī, 1992: p. 16). Though this definition makes “religious sciences more specific than the transmitted sciences (*al-'ulūm al-naqliyyah*) ... in the same work as well as in *al-Risālat al-ladunniyyah*,

al-Ghazālī is also using the term religious sciences as synonymous with transmitted sciences. ... He makes clear, however, that in itself linguistic science is not a religious science; but inasmuch as it is one of the preludes (*muqaddimāt*) of the religious sciences proper, it may, for the purpose of classification, be included under the category of the latter.” (Bakar, 1992: p. 205).

The consideration of this fact encourages investigation into the basis on which a science should be considered a prelude to an Islamic science. Most of the studies in this regard seem reluctant to find a satisfactory answer to this question. However, al-Ghazālī gave a logical and methodological answer to this, making *Lubāb al-Qur’ān* the basis for this categorisation. Based on this theory, he classified sciences into two: sciences of *ṣadaf* (shell) and sciences of *lubāb* (essence) (Al-Ghazālī, 1992: p. 23). (*‘Ulūm al-Ṣadaf* literally refers to “sciences of shell” but al-Ghazālī used it in an allegorical sense to mean the sciences that are essential in order for one to be able to understand the sciences of *lubāb* or sciences of the pith). The former is an essential means to the latter. The sciences of *lubāb* are those sciences that are essential tools in understanding the themes that al-Ghazālī identified as the Qur’ān’s essence or its core subject matter. The sciences of the shell are the complementary sciences that are useful in order for one to be able to understand mainstream sciences.

These complementary sciences mainly branch off from the Arabic language which is, according to al-Ghazālī, “the shell of the jewels of the Qur’ān. From this shell, come five sciences which are the science of Arabic linguistics which stems off from the words of the Qur’ān; the science of syntax of Arabic grammar which stems off from the desinential syntax of the words; the science of reading which stems off from the various desinential syntaxes of the Qur’ān; the science of outlets of letters which stems off from the manner of pronouncing Qur’ānic letters; and the science of outward exegesis of the Qur’ān” (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 34). Likewise, the science of Tradition divides into these parts, except the science of reading and the correction of the outlets of letters. The sole purpose of these sciences is, therefore, to understand the exegesis of the Qur’ān (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 37).

The second type of religious science is the sciences of the pith (*lubāb* of the Qur’ān) which are of two grades; the lower and the higher. The lower grade is again divided into three (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 37): firstly, the knowledge of the stories [narrated] in the Qur’ān and of what is related to the prophets, to the deniers [of God] and to His enemies; secondly, God’s argument with the infidels and His dispute with them; and finally, the knowledge of the legal limits (*ḥudūd*) laid down in regard to wealth and women in order to seek help for the preservation of life and progeny.

The first grade is partially concerned with history, though al-Ghazālī did not name this grade as he did for the rest. The reason might be, as he said, that the need for knowledge of this grade is not universal. However, the second grade represents the science of theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) which aims to repel errors and heresies [with regard to Islamic religious beliefs] and to remove doubts [related to them]. The third grade represents the science of jurisprudence (*sharī‘ah*) which stems from the normative aspects of the Qur’ān (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 40).

The higher grade of the sciences of the pith (*lubāb of the Qur’ān*) consists of three sciences which constitute knowledge of God, that is, the sum total of knowledge of the Essence, Attributes and Actions of Allah; knowledge of the Last Day; and knowledge of the Straight Path and of the manner of traversing it. According to al-

Ghazālī, the first and second are the noblest of these higher sciences because they represent the science of *maqāṣid*. The third, however, entails the knowledge of (a) purification of the soul and removal of the obstacles of the destructive qualities, and of (b) making the soul beautiful with the saving qualities (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 42). This is obviously the subject of morals and ethics, which receives an extended treatment in al-Ghazālī's writings; researchers on al-Ghazālī often term his system 'Ghazālīan ethics'. Al-Ghazālī held that this science is superior to theology ('*ilm al-kalām*) and jurisprudence ('*ilm al-fiqh*) because it includes the science of how to traverse the road of life, theology and jurisprudence being merely supportive tools for it (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 42). These three higher grades of the sciences are the precedents and roots of the three lower grades of sciences mentioned above. The noblest and highest science of these three is that by which one attains to the knowledge of God because, as al-Ghazālī viewed it, all other sciences are manifested because of this science (Abul Quasem, 1989: p. 42).

While classifying the sciences of pith ('*ulūm al-lubāb*) al-Ghazālī included all the six types of *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, without being restricted to the two that he considered as being *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. It might provoke a question as to how the sciences of *lubāb* should comprehend all six types of the *maqāṣid* of the Qur'ān if the theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is restricted to only two of them. This is another apparent self-contradiction in al-Ghazālī's theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*.

Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān as a tool for understanding Lubāb al-Qur'ān

There is hardly any development on the concept of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* after al-Ghazālī's time. However, there is a historical succession of sharp development of a concept named *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* which is, according to al-Ghazālī, synonymous with the concept of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. To understand the theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* within a broader spectrum, more than a thousand years worth of resources rich in the concepts of *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* could be a helping tool. Al-Ghazālī was perhaps the first scholar who came to use this term, its precedence then becoming established in the later literature produced by prominent scholars.

Although there is a notable difference between al-Ghazālī and other scholars in the choice of terminologies, categories and conceptual implications of the concept of *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, there is also a considerable commonality between their views. The two core issues of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*, that is, *tawḥīd* and ethics, very commonly appear in certain prominent Muslim scholars' views of *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* though there is a difference in the choice of terminologies. For example, Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938) says that *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe (Iqbāl, 1996: 7); Maḥmūd Shaltūt (d. 1963) adds belief system and ethics; (Shaltūt, n.d.: pp. 5-6) while Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) ('Abduh, 1993: p. 23) and Sa'īd Nursī (d. 1960) consider *tawḥīd* to be the first *maqṣad* of the Qur'ān (Nursī, 2007: p. 19); Ibn 'Ashūr (d. 1973) identifies the amendment of beliefs and the education of the intellect so that they are in line with the Straight Path – the purification of morals (Ibn 'Ashūr, 2000, p. 36); and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) considers it to be the exposition of the basic pillars of the religion (Riḍā, 1306 AH: p. 191).

The above presentation shows that though there is paramount conceptual and numerical diversity in the identification of the *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, but there is also

commonality in the scholars' views. *Tawhīd* and ethics are more dominant *maqāṣid* of the Qur'ān in these scholars' findings. This strengthens al-Ghazālī's position on *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*.

Subject matter of the sūrahs that are considered Lubāb al-Qur'ān and their consistency or inconsistency with al-Ghazālī's views

According to Ibn Mas'ūd's narration, as mentioned above, a group of Qur'ānic chapters represent *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*, beginning with Chapter 15 and continuing up until the end of the Qur'ān. Most of these chapters were revealed during the Makkan period of Qur'ānic revelation (Al-Ṭabarānī, 1415 AH, p. 258) and the major themes of the Makkan revelations are belief in Allah, monotheism, eschatology, and reward and punishment (Leaman, 2006: pp. 522-523). Al-Shāṭibī notes that the axes of the Makkan *sūrahs* are three; first, establishing the truth of *tawhīd*; second, verifying the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) by rebutting false allegations against him; and third, establishing the fact that there is resurrection and an afterlife (Al-Shāṭibī, 1997: pp. 269-270). However, an analysis of the chapters from the 15th chapter to the end, with the exception of those which were revealed during the Madinan period (Chapters 55, 57, 61, 62, 63, 98, 99) (al-Zarqānī, 1995, p. 197), shows that the major themes of these chapters are establishing *tawhīd*, which includes knowledge of His Essence, Attributes and Actions; descriptions of the punishment of disbelievers and polytheists; conveying of good tidings for the believers; and describing the circumstances of Resurrection and Divine Judgment. None of these chapters is devoid of these issues. The close similarity of these issues with al-Ghazālī's *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* may lead one to believe that his findings as to the nature of *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* are an abstract deduction from the subject matter of *al-Mufaṣṣal*. However, it is more appropriate for the subject matter of *al-Mufaṣṣal* to have reflected onto *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* rather than onto *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, because *al-Mufaṣṣal* is described as *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*, not *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*. The scope of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* in al-Ghazālī's view seems much narrower than what is reflected in Ibn Mas'ūd's narration. This constitutes incongruence with what is a more reliable and original source of this theory.

Conclusion

Lubāb al-Qur'ān is a theory that promotes a particular kind of understanding of the Qur'ānic discourse. Al-Ghazālī is not the inventor of this term as its use can be traced back to the early period of Islam in the narration of Ibn Mas'ūd, who was a companion of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). Yet he pioneered the conceptual description of this term and he was perhaps the only Muslim scholar in Islamic history who can be credited for this unique contribution to Islamic Science. However, al-Ghazālī's theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* was born within another of his theories entitled *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* (the higher objectives of the Qur'ān) which comprises six major Qur'ānic issues. The theory of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is only concerned with the first two of them namely "the definition of God to Whom men are called; the definition of the Straight Path and the definition of the condition at the time of attaining to Him." The former represents *tawhīd* and the latter ethics. Al-Ghazālī used this theory in classifying Islamic sciences into two categories, namely *'ulūm al-lubāb* and *'ulūm al-*

ṣadaf. The first is of fundamental importance and the second is a complementary agent. This theory is again used in classifying Qur'ānic verses into two; the "jewels" and "pearls" which are distributed upon two core elements of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. The jewel verses are concerned with *tawhīd* and the pearls with ethics. However, a cursory glance at this theory may reveal some apparent self-contradictions; firstly, putting *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* and *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* in the same vein and then locating *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* within *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*; secondly, restricting *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* within two of the six *maqāṣid* of the Qur'ān and then comprehending all six *maqāṣid* in classifying religious sciences based on *Lubāb al-Qur'ān*. However, the total appearance of this theory is highly influenced by al-Ghazālī's intellectual makeup. While identifying the *lubāb* (essences) of the Qur'ān, his first and foremost concern is *tawhīd* which is the single issue that occupies perhaps the biggest portion of his entire intellectual production. The second and last element of *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* is ethics, which is much discussed in his writings. This theory promotes the unique idea that the basis of the theory of the classification of the Islamic Sciences and ethics should be *Lubāb al-Qur'ān* (the essences of the Qur'ān).

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