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When Opinions Overcome Revelation

Reason, Interpretation, and Human Judgment Under
the Authority of Revelation

Revelation is the final religious authority. Sound reason, interpretation, ijihad, custom, and scholarly judgment serve it within their proper limits. This study explains how that hierarchy is reversed when opinion, desire, ideology, or speculative premises are placed above authentic evidence.

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REVELATION GOVERNS

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Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim.

Reason, Interpretation, and Human Judgment Under the Authority of Revelation

There is a proper order in religious understanding.

Allah reveals. His Messenger ﷺ conveys and explains. The believer receives what is established from revelation, seeks to understand it through its language and context, returns unclear matters to clearer evidence, benefits from the understanding of the Sahabah and the early generations of this Ummah—the Salaf—and uses the recognized Islamic sciences to distinguish what is authentic, what a text indicates, and how it applies.

In that order, reason has a real and necessary place. It recognizes proofs, reflects upon signs, understands language, compares evidences, distinguishes categories, derives rulings, and applies revelation to circumstances. Scholarship also has a real and necessary place. The ignorant are not told to become independent interpreters; they are told to ask those who know.

The order is corrupted when these servants of revelation become its judges.

A conclusion may be fixed in advance because it appears philosophically necessary, culturally acceptable, politically useful, emotionally preferable, or intellectually fashionable. Revelation is then approached only after the conclusion has already been settled. A text is accepted if it agrees, rendered ambiguous if it does not, redirected to a remote meaning if necessary, or rejected because the prior framework has already been granted final jurisdiction.

That is the subject of this article.

It is not an argument against reason. It is not a call to uncritical literalism. It is not a rejection of interpretation, ijtiḥad, madhhab scholarship, custom, recognized benefit, empirical knowledge, or qualified disagreement. Nor is every mistaken interpretation evidence that a person knowingly followed desire or deliberately opposed revelation.

The question is more precise:

Who governs whom?

Does revelation govern our reasoning, correct our assumptions, and determine the limits within which interpretation and judgment operate? Or do our prior commitments determine what revelation is permitted to mean?

The difference is fundamental. Sound reasoning beneath revelation is part of understanding the religion. Reasoning that places itself above authentic revelation reverses the hierarchy of religious authority.

I. Who Has the Final Word?

Allah said:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا لا تقدموا بين يدي الله ورسوله واتقوا الله إن الله سميع عليم

“O you who believe, do not put yourselves forward before Allah and His Messenger, and fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Hujurat 49:1.

The verse establishes a governing disposition: the believer does not advance a religious judgment ahead of Allah and His Messenger. This is not a prohibition of thought. It is a prohibition of precedence over revealed authority.

Allah also said:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا أطيعوا الله وأطيعوا الرسول وأولي الأمر منكم فإن تنازعتم في شيء فردوه إلى الله والرسول إن كنتم تؤمنون بالله واليوم الآخر ذلك خير وأحسن تأويلا

“O you who believe, obey Allah, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you. If you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and best in outcome.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nisa' 4:59.

The verse does not assign final religious jurisdiction to custom, intellectual fashion, political theory, an inherited slogan, a scholar's bare personality, or private preference. Disagreement is returned to Allah and the Messenger.

After the death of the Prophet ﷺ, returning to the Messenger is through his authentic Sunnah. This immediately requires an important qualification: establishing what the Prophet ﷺ actually said may require hadith criticism, comparison of routes, knowledge of wording, and qualified scholarship. Verifying transmission is therefore part of submission to revelation; it is not a rival to it.

Allah said:

فلا وربك لا يؤمنون حتى يحكموك فيما شجر بينهم ثم لا يجدوا في أنفسهم حرجا مما قضيت ويسلموا تسليما

“No, by your Lord, they do not truly believe until they make you judge concerning what has arisen between them, then find within themselves no resistance to what you have decided and submit completely.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nisa' 4:65.

And He said:

وما كان لمؤمن ولا مؤمنة إذا قضى الله ورسوله أمرا أن يكون لهم الخيرة من أمرهم ومن يعص الله ورسوله فقد ضلّ ضللا مبينا

“It is not for a believing man or believing woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, to retain a choice contrary to their decision. Whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger has clearly gone astray.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Ahzab 33:36.

The qualification in the second verse is decisive: **when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter**. Before accusing someone of opposing revelation, it must first be established that the proof is authentic, that its meaning has been correctly understood, and that it actually applies to the matter under discussion.

Once that is established, however, the believer's relationship to revelation is not one of autonomous veto. Allah describes the believers:

إنما كان قول المؤمنين إذا دعوا إلى الله ورسوله ليحكم بينهم أن يقولوا سمعنا وأطعنا وأولئك هم المفلحون

“The statement of the believers, when they are called to Allah and His Messenger so that he may judge between them, is only that they say: ‘We hear and we obey.’ Those are the successful.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nur 24:51.

Submission, then, is not the refusal to investigate whether a proof is authentic or what it means. It is the refusal to grant a fallible human commitment superior authority once Allah's guidance has been established.

2. Reason Is Not the Enemy of Revelation

Any sound treatment of this subject must reject a false opposition: Islam does not command people to abandon reason.

Allah said:

أفلا يتدبرون القرآن أم على قلوب أقفالها

“Do they not reflect deeply upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?”

Source: Qur'an, Muhammad 47:24.

He also said:

إن في خلق السماوات والأرض واختلاف الليل والنهار لآيات لأولي الألباب

“Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for people of understanding.”

Source: Qur'an, Ali 'Imran 3:190.

The Qur'an calls to reflection, understanding, recognition of signs, comparison, remembrance, and inference. The human intellect is a created faculty by which a person understands speech, distinguishes truth from falsehood, recognizes evidence, and reaches conclusions.

Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Baz رحمه الله stated:

والعقل آلة يجب أن يستعان به في فهم النصوص، ولا يقدم على النصوص

“Reason is an instrument that must be used to assist in understanding the texts, but it is not to be placed ahead of the texts.”

Source: Official website of Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Baz, audio lesson: “09 من قوله: (باختلافهم على أنبيائهم وضربهم الكتاب بعضه ببعض)”. The official transcript records this wording.

This gives reason its proper jurisdiction. It is not abolished; it is disciplined.

Reason can establish that a contradiction has been claimed. It can examine the premises. It can ask whether a conclusion follows. It can understand Arabic grammar, distinguish general from specific wording, compare texts, evaluate ordinary facts, and participate in legal reasoning. It is also by rational consideration that many proofs of Prophethood are recognized.

But recognizing the truthfulness of a Messenger does not transform every later human inference into a tribunal above the Messenger. If reason has established that Muhammad ﷺ is truly the Messenger of Allah, then what is authentically established from him becomes evidence from the One who sent him. The same faculty that recognized the Messenger's truthfulness cannot consistently be used to declare his authentic message false merely because a later speculative premise conflicts with it.

There is also knowledge that reason cannot independently supply in detail. Ibn Abi al-'Izz al-Hanafi رحمه الله said:

ومن المحال أن تستقل العقول بمعرفة ذلك وإدراكه على التفصيل

“It is impossible for the intellects to know and comprehend that independently in detail.”

Source: Ibn Abi al-'Izz, *Sharh al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyah*, ed. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, first edition, 1418 AH, p. 6.

This does not mean that human beings know nothing without revelation. People possess **fitrah**—the innate disposition upon which Allah created them—along with rational necessities, ordinary experience, empirical knowledge, and valid inference. The point concerns the detailed divine religion: the unseen, the exact acts of worship Allah loves, the particulars of His commands, and realities of the Hereafter are not independently legislated by the intellect.

Allah sent Messengers precisely because mankind requires revealed guidance:

رسلا مبشرين ومنذرين لئلا يكون للناس على الله حجة بعد الرسل وكان الله عزيزا حكيما

“Messengers bringing good news and warning, so that mankind would have no argument against Allah after the Messengers. Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nisa' 4:165.

The correct opposition, therefore, is not **revelation versus reason**. It is **authentic revelation and sound reason versus error**, whether the error comes from an inauthentic report, a mistaken interpretation, a weak inference, a speculative premise, or an unjustified assumption.

3. Before Saying “Conflict”: What Exactly Is Certain?

Statements such as “the text contradicts reason” are often too imprecise to be useful. Before discussing a conflict, several questions must be separated.

The first is **thubut**: has the transmitted evidence actually been established? In hadith studies, not everything attributed to the Prophet ﷺ is authentic. A weak or fabricated report is not placed in conflict with a rational fact and then called “revelation.”

The second is **dalalah**: what does the established text actually indicate? A report may be authentic while a particular interpretation of it is mistaken. Syntax, context, other texts, Prophetic explanation, and the usage of the language can affect what a text proves.

The third is the degree of certainty. In the technical language of the scholars, evidence may be **qat'i**—definitive—or **zanni**—probabilistic—in a particular respect. These categories can concern transmission, indication, or the premise being used in an argument.

The fourth is the alleged rational proof itself. Is it a necessary truth? A demonstrated conclusion? A strong probability? An analogy? A philosophical assumption? An intuition? A prevailing social norm? These are not one category.

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله first framed the division as follows:

إذا قيل: تعارض دليлан، سواء كانا سمعيين أو عقليين، أو أحدهما سمعيا والآخر عقليا،
فالواجب أن يقال: لا يخلو إما أن يكونا قطعيين، أو يكونا ظنيين، وإما أن يكونا أحدهما قطعيا
والآخر ظنيا

“If it is said that two proofs conflict—whether both are transmitted, both rational, or one transmitted and the other rational—then it must be said: either both are definitive, both are probabilistic, or one is definitive and the other probabilistic.”

He then said:

فأما القطعيان فلا يجوز تعارضهما: سواء كانا عقليين أو سمعيين، أو أحدهما عقليا والآخر سمعيا

“As for two definitive proofs, it is not possible for them truly to conflict, whether both are rational, both transmitted, or one rational and the other transmitted.”

Source: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa-l-Naql*, ed. Muhammad Rashad Salim, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, 2nd ed., 1411 AH/1991, vol. 1, p. 79.

He also said:

وإن كان أحد الدليلين المتعارضين قطعيا دون الآخر فإنه يجب تقديمه باتفاق العقلاء، سواء كان هو السمعى أو العقلى، فإن الظن لا يرفع اليقين

“If one of the two alleged conflicting proofs is definitive and the other is not, the definitive must be given precedence by agreement of rational people, whether the definitive proof is transmitted or rational, for probability does not overturn certainty.”

Source: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa-l-Naql*, vol. 1, p. 79.

This is more exact than the slogan “text defeats reason.” A genuine certainty is not overturned by a probability merely because one has been labelled “rational” and the other “transmitted.” Nor may a person simply label his preferred philosophical premise “certain” and use that label to discard revelation.

An additional distinction is necessary. Authenticity and technical certainty are not identical categories. In usual terminology, an authentic solitary report may be classified as probabilistic in transmission while remaining authoritative evidence; scholars also discuss circumstances in which such reports can yield certainty. That specialist discussion is outside this article. The point needed here is that **“authentic” and “qat’i al-thubut” are not interchangeable labels**, and technical classification must not be confused with the obligation to accept authentic Sunnah.

A disciplined analysis of an alleged conflict therefore asks:

1. **Thubut:** Is the report authentic?
2. **Dalalah:** What does the text actually mean and prove?
3. **Degree of certainty:** What is definitive and what is probabilistic?
4. **The rational premise:** What kind of claim is allegedly contradicting the text, and how certain is it really?

The same method applies when someone invokes an empirical fact. A genuinely established fact and authentic revelation cannot be contradictory truths in the same respect. But one must distinguish the observed fact from the interpretation placed upon it, and a scientific finding from a philosophical conclusion extrapolated beyond what the finding itself establishes.

Sometimes the conflict disappears because the report was weak. Sometimes because the text was misunderstood. Sometimes because a supposed certainty was only an assumption. Sometimes because two statements concerned different respects and were never contradictory in the first place.

Intellectual humility begins by identifying which problem one actually has before accusing revelation of contradiction.

4. When Opinion Becomes a Rival Authority

The Arabic word *ra'y* can refer broadly to opinion, judgment, or reasoning. It is therefore wrong to condemn every use of human judgment as though Islam recognized no reasoning at all. Qualified *ijtihad* has a legitimate place, as will be discussed below.

The blameworthy problem is different: an opinion becomes a rival authority when it is treated as a reason to resist guidance after the guidance is established.

One source of this reversal is desire. Allah said:

فَإِنْ لَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَكَ فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّمَا يَتَّبِعُونَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ اتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ بِغَيْرِ هُدًى مِنَ اللَّهِ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ

“If they do not respond to you, then know that they are only following their desires. Who is more astray than one who follows his desire without guidance from Allah? Indeed, Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Qasas 28:50.

He also said:

وَلَا تَتَّبِعِ الْهَوَىٰ فَيُضِلَّكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ

“Do not follow desire, lest it lead you away from Allah’s path.”

Source: Qur'an, Sad 38:26.

Desire is relevant because a conclusion may be wanted before it is proven. The person then searches for a religious route to the desired result rather than allowing revelation to correct the desire.

But this principle must be applied justly. Not every mistaken interpretation proves that a person knowingly followed desire. Error may arise from ignorance, an inauthentic report, a linguistic misunderstanding, faulty inference, mistaken *ijtihad*, or an interpretive error made in good faith.

A second source of reversed authority is conjecture. Allah said concerning the false beliefs of the polytheists:

إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى الْأَنفُسُ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ مِنَ رَبِّهِمُ الْهُدَىٰ

“They follow nothing but conjecture and what the souls desire, while guidance has certainly come to them from their Lord.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Najm 53:23.

And He said:

وَمَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَإِنْ الظَّنُّ لَا يَغْنِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا

“They have no knowledge of it; they follow only conjecture, and conjecture does not avail against the truth at all.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Najm 53:28.

The immediate context concerns the polytheists. The general epistemic lesson is that conjecture lacking proof cannot be promoted into knowledge merely because it is preferred.

A third source is inherited assumption. Allah said:

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُم اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءُنَا أُولُو كَانِ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ
شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

“When it is said to them, ‘Follow what Allah has revealed,’ they say, ‘Rather, we follow what we found our forefathers upon.’ Even if their forefathers understood nothing and were not guided?”

Source: Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:170.

The condemned feature is not that knowledge is transmitted from earlier generations. Islam itself depends upon trustworthy transmission. Nor is the verse a condemnation of madhhab study, family teaching, or legitimate **taqlid**—relying upon qualified scholarship when one lacks the tools of independent derivation. The error is using inheritance as a reason to reject what Allah revealed.

The pattern is therefore broader than any one school or age: a human commitment is elevated from a **tool to be evaluated** into a **court that evaluates revelation**.

5. Interpretation: Explaining the Text or Making the Text Serve a Theory?

No serious reader can avoid interpretation. Words have meanings, sentences have contexts, general statements may be specified, concise statements may be explained elsewhere, and some reports require comparison with other evidence. The question is not whether interpretation occurs. The question is **what governs it**.

Allah said concerning the mission of His Messenger ﷺ:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“We sent down to you the Reminder so that you may explain to the people what was sent down to them, and so that they may reflect.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nahl 16:44.

Prophetic explanation is therefore part of the revealed path by which the Qur'an is understood. The Prophet ﷺ said:

أَلَا إِنِّي أُوتِيتُ الْكِتَابَ وَمِثْلَهُ مَعَهُ

“Indeed, I have been given the Book and something like it along with it.”

Source and grading: Hadith of al-Miqdam ibn Ma'dikarib رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, no. 4604; graded **sahih** by al-Albani in *Sahih Abi Dawud*. A supporting route is reported by Ahmad, no. 17174; Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut graded its chain **sahih**.

This is why the Sunnah cannot be treated as an optional external commentary accepted only when it confirms what a reader has already decided the Qur'an must mean.

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله summarized the hierarchy of sound tafsir:

إِنْ أَصَحَّ الطَّرْقُ فِي ذَلِكَ أَنْ يَفْسَرَ الْقُرْآنَ بِالْقُرْآنِ، فَمَا أَجْمَلَ فِي مَكَانٍ فَإِنَّهُ قَدْ فُسِّرَ فِي مَوْضِعٍ
آخَرَ، وَمَا اخْتَصَرَ فِي مَكَانٍ فَقَدْ بَسَطَ فِي مَوْضِعٍ آخَرَ. فَإِنْ أَعْيَاكَ ذَلِكَ فَعَلَيْكَ بِالسَّنَةِ، فَإِنَّهَا
شَارِحَةٌ لِلْقُرْآنِ وَمَوْضِحَةٌ لَهُ

“The soundest method in this is that the Qur'an be explained by the Qur'an: what is stated generally in one place is explained elsewhere, and what is concise in one place is expanded elsewhere. If that does not resolve it for you, then turn to the Sunnah, for it explains and clarifies the Qur'an.”

Source: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fi Usul al-Tafsir*, ed. 'Adnan Muhammad Zarzur, 2nd ed., Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, Kuwait / Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 1392 AH/1972, p. 93. Parallel wording appears in *Majmu' al-Fatawa*, 13/364.

He continued:

وحينئذ إذا لم نجد التفسير في القرآن ولا في السنة رجعنا في ذلك إلى أقوال الصحابة فإنهم أدرى بذلك لما شاهدوه من القرآن والأحوال التي اختصوا بها ولما لهم من الفهم التام والعلم الصحيح والعمل الصالح

“Then, if we do not find the explanation in the Qur'an or the Sunnah, we return in that matter to the statements of the Companions, for they were more knowledgeable of it because of what they witnessed of the Qur'an and the circumstances particular to them, and because of their complete understanding, sound knowledge, and righteous action.”

Source: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' al-Fatawa*, vol. 13, pp. 364–365.

This methodology does not mean that every verse has a separate explicit Prophetic explanation, or that every individual statement of every Companion is infallible. It means that interpretation is received through an evidentiary order rather than invented from the reader's preferences.

Arabic is indispensable in that process, but even a linguistically possible meaning is not automatically the intended meaning. A word can bear more than one meaning in the language. Context, syntax, Qur'anic usage, Prophetic explanation, associated texts, and early understanding determine which meaning is actually intended in a particular passage.

This also prevents the opposite error: assuming that whatever first occurs to an untrained reader is necessarily the “literal” meaning and that every explanation beyond that first impression is distortion. The intended meaning of a text is not identical to the first impression of every reader.

The term *ta'wil* illustrates why terminology must be controlled carefully. Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله explained that later scholars often used the term for moving a wording from a stronger meaning to a weaker one because of an accompanying proof:

فإن التأويل في عرف المتأخرين من المتفهمة والمتكلمة والمحدثه والمتصوفة ونحوهم هو صرف اللفظ عن المعنى الراجح إلى المعنى المرجوح لدليل يقتضيه

“Ta'wil, in the convention of later jurists, theologians, hadith scholars, Sufis, and the like, is to turn a wording from the stronger meaning to a weaker meaning because of an accompanying proof.”

He then said concerning the usage of the Salaf:

وأما التأويل في لفظ السلف فله معنيان: أحدهما تفسير الكلام وبيان معناه سواء وافق ظاهره أو خالفه فيكون التأويل والتفسير عند هؤلاء متقاربا أو مترادفا

“As for ta'wil in the language of the Salaf, it has two meanings. One is explaining speech and clarifying its meaning, whether it agrees with its apparent wording or differs from it; in this usage ta'wil and tafsir are close in meaning or synonymous.”

Source: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' al-Fatawa*, vol. 13, pp. 288–289. He identifies another early usage as the actual reality or outcome to which the speech refers.

The article therefore does not condemn the bare word *ta'wil*. What must be examined is the actual interpretive act: What meaning is being proposed? What evidence establishes it? Does the language bear it in this context? Does it harmonize with the other revealed texts? Is it supported by the Prophetic explanation and the inherited understanding, or is it being imposed because a prior theory requires the text to say something else?

Interpretation serves revelation when it seeks the meaning the evidence establishes. Interpretation corrupts the hierarchy when its function becomes rescuing a prior commitment from the text.

6. Ijtihad, Scholarly Disagreement, and the Limits of Opinion

A necessary protection against exaggeration is the authentic hadith concerning qualified ijtihad. The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِذَا حَكَمَ الْحَاكِمُ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَصَابَ فَلَهُ أَجْرَانِ وَإِذَا حَكَمَ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَخْطَأَ فَلَهُ أَجْرٌ

“When a judge gives judgment, striving to reach the correct ruling, and he is correct, he has two rewards. If he gives judgment, striving, and he errs, he has one reward.”

Source and authenticity: Hadith of 'Amr ibn al-'As رضى الله عنه. Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 7352; Sahih Muslim, no. 1716. Agreed upon and authentic.

This hadith alone is enough to prevent the slogan that all human reasoning in religion is blameworthy. **Ijtihad** is the qualified exertion of effort to reach the correct ruling where derivation and judgment are legitimately required. A qualified scholar can strive sincerely, be mistaken, and still be rewarded for the qualified effort.

The error does not become truth. But neither does the error automatically become deliberate rebellion against revelation.

This requires distinguishing two different situations.

The first is a question in which the evidence admits qualified weighing, interpretation, reconciliation, application, or derivation. Such matters can produce recognized scholarly disagreement.

The second is a matter in which an authentic, explicit, binding text is established and directly applicable, and a person knowingly refuses it because another authority has been preferred over it.

These categories must not be collapsed.

The phrase **nass** is often used for a revealed text, and in more technical contexts can refer to wording whose indication is particularly explicit. Beginners should therefore be careful before declaring, “There is a clear text, so everyone who disagrees is opposing revelation.” Establishing authenticity, explicitness, scope, abrogation, specification, and applicability can itself require scholarship.

Allah said:

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

“Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nahl 16:43.

The layperson is not commanded to reconstruct the entire discipline of hadith, tafsir, and usul before acting. He may ask a trustworthy qualified scholar. That legitimate reliance upon qualified scholarship is therefore not what this article condemns.

At the same time, the individual scholar is not revelation. His authority is connected to knowledge, evidence, and qualified explanation. A madhhab is not worshipped; it is a scholarly school through which legal understanding is transmitted and disciplined. A scholar can err. A majority can differ from a minority.

The term **ijma'** means an established scholarly consensus. It must not be claimed merely because a view is famous, held by a majority, or stated by one imam. Any claim of **ijma'** therefore requires independent proof that the consensus actually occurred. The full doctrine of **ijma'** lies outside the scope of this article.

The balanced position is neither independent amateur interpretation nor blind elevation of a fallible person. Revelation remains the governing authority; scholarship is among the principal means by which people correctly know what revelation establishes.

7. How the Salaf Responded When Evidence Became Clear

The conduct of the Sahabah illustrates both sides of the method: submission to established Prophetic evidence and care in verifying whether a report is truly established.

When a Prophetic instruction was opposed by a contrary reaction

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لا تمنعوا النساء حظوظهن من المساجد إذا استأذنوكم

“Do not prevent women from their share of the mosques when they seek permission from you.”

When Bilal ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar responded that they would prevent them, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما replied:

أقول قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وتقول أنت لنمنعهن

“I tell you that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said this, and you say: ‘We will prevent them?’”

Source and authenticity: *Sahih Muslim*, no. 442. Authentic.

The point is not to extract every legal detail of the mosque question here. The methodological lesson is clear: once the Prophetic instruction was being stated, Ibn ‘Umar rejected the contrary response being placed against it.

Verification is not rejection

Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari رضي الله عنه reported to ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله عنه the Prophetic ruling concerning seeking permission three times. ‘Umar asked him to produce corroboration for what he had reported. After the report was confirmed, ‘Umar explained:

سبحان الله إنما سمعت شيئاً فأحببت أن أثبت

“Glory be to Allah. I only heard something and wished to verify it.”

Source and authenticity: *Sahih Muslim*, no. 2154. Authentic. A parallel form of the incident is transmitted in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 6245.

This incident is particularly important for the present discussion. Submission to Sunnah does not mean that every attributed statement is accepted without examination. ‘Umar’s verification was not an attempt to make his opinion superior to the Prophet ﷺ. He was verifying whether the statement was in fact established from the Prophet ﷺ.

These two incidents together establish a disciplined sequence:

1. verify the attribution;
2. understand the evidence;
3. once the Prophetic proof is established and applicable, do not set a contrary preference above it.

This is also why following the Salaf does not mean claiming infallibility for every individual early Muslim. Revelation is infallible. Claims of consensus must be established rather than assumed. Individual Companions, Tabi‘in, and imams can err. The value of the inherited Salafi methodology lies in receiving revelation through those closest to its language, circumstances, transmission, and Prophetic explanation, while preserving the distinction between revelation and the fallible explanations of individuals.

Allah said:

ومن يشاقق الرسول من بعد ما تبين له الهدى ويتبع غير سبيل المؤمنين نوله ما تولى ونصله جهنم وساءت مصيرا

“Whoever opposes the Messenger after guidance has become clear to him and follows a path other than that of the believers, We will leave him to what he has chosen and burn him in Hell—an evil destination.”

Source: Qur’an, al-Nisa’ 4:115.

8. Hidden Courts of Appeal: Desire, Theory, Culture, and Ideology

A rival authority is not always announced openly. Few people say, “I reject revelation because my own opinion is higher.” The reversal often occurs through a hidden court of appeal: a framework whose conclusions are treated as non-negotiable before the text is examined.

That framework may be philosophical, political, ideological, social, cultural, or personal. None of these fields is automatically forbidden. Philosophy can describe arguments. Social sciences can study human patterns. Political analysis can assess institutions. Culture can explain usage. Empirical investigation can establish facts. The problem begins when the framework is granted **final religious jurisdiction**.

Then the process becomes predictable. A text that agrees with the framework is called clear. A text that conflicts with it is declared culturally obsolete, metaphorical without evidence, historically confined without proof, or too ambiguous to govern. The framework is never placed in the dock; revelation is.

The same distinction is necessary with **custom ('urf)**. Islamic law recognizes custom in its proper domain. It can help determine customary meanings, contractual expectations, factual descriptions, and matters the Shari'ah itself leaves to prevailing usage. But custom is not an independent legislature.

Ibn 'Abidin رحمه الله said:

الباب الأول: إذا خالف العرف الدليل الشرعي، فإن خالفه من كل وجه بأن لزم منه ترك النص
فلا شك في رده

“The first section: when custom conflicts with the Shar'i proof. If it conflicts with it in every respect, such that it necessarily entails abandoning the text, then there is no doubt that it is rejected.”

Source: Muhammad Amin Ibn 'Abidin, *Nashr al-'Urf fi Bina' Ba'd al-Abkam 'ala al-'Urf*, printed within *Majmu' Rasa'il Ibn 'Abidin*, Dar Sa'adat, Istanbul, 1325 AH/1907, p. 113.

He also stated:

لأن النص أقوى من العرف فلا يترك الأقوى بالأدنى، وما لم ينص عليه فهو محمول على عادات
الناس

“Because the text is stronger than custom, the stronger is not abandoned for the lesser; as for what is not textually specified, it is referred to the customs of the people.”

Source: *Nashr al-'Urf*, p. 115.

The point is narrow. It is not that every legal application is culturally identical in every time and place. Facts, usages, capacities, harms, and circumstances can change. The point is that changing custom cannot simply be declared superior to an explicit fixed ruling.

The same balance applies to **maslahah**, recognized benefit. The Shari'ah considers benefit and harm, but “benefit” is not an autonomous revelation that can cancel revelation.

Al-Shatibi رحمه الله said concerning a claimed consideration rejected by the Shari'ah:

والثاني: ما شهد الشرع برده فلا سبيل إلى قبوله

“The second is that to which the Shari'ah has testified by rejecting it; there is no way to accept it.”

He explained further:

فإن المراد بالمصلحة عندنا ما فهم رعايته في حق الخلق من جلب المصالح ودرء المفاسد على وجه لا يستقل العقل بدركه على حال، فإذا لم يشهد الشرع باعتبار ذلك المعنى، بل شهد برده، كان مردوداً

“What we mean by *maslahah* is what is understood to be considered for people in bringing benefits and warding off harms, in a manner that reason does not independently comprehend in every case. If the Shari‘ah does not attest to considering that meaning, but rather attests to rejecting it, then it is rejected.”

Source: Al-Shatibi, *al-I‘tisam*, vol. 2, p. 610 in the verified digitized classical pagination. Controlling research edition: ed. Abu ‘Ubaydah Mashhur ibn Hasan Al Salman, Maktabat al-Tawhid, 4 vols.

This article does not attempt a full study of custom, *maslahah*, or *maqasid*—the higher objectives of the Shari‘ah. The governing boundary is enough: valid considerations operate **within** the Shari‘ah; they do not become independent sources empowered to annul it.

A final hidden authority is the prestige of the speaker. Eloquence, confidence, popularity, academic vocabulary, institutional position, emotional force, and a large audience can make an argument impressive. None of these is an independent proof of religious truth. A claim is established through evidence, not through the social force of the person presenting it.

9. Practical Diagnostics: Is Revelation Correcting Me, or Am I Correcting Revelation?

The principles above are most beneficial when used first for self-examination rather than accusation.

A person can ask:

- Did I decide the conclusion before gathering the evidence?
- Do I accept an authentic text only after it agrees with a theory I already hold?
- Do I call a text “ambiguous” only after its established meaning becomes difficult for my position?
- Am I selecting a merely possible linguistic meaning because it rescues my conclusion, despite stronger contextual evidence?
- Do I maximize the texts that appear congenial to my view and minimize those that challenge it?
- Am I using “context” as something established by evidence, or as an undefined escape clause?
- Am I treating “modernity,” “culture,” “benefit,” or “reason” as an independent source of religious law rather than a consideration with defined limits?
- When I do not understand how two truths fit together, do I say, “I do not yet understand,” or do I immediately accuse the revelation of contradiction?
- Would I accept the same interpretive method if it produced a conclusion I disliked?

These questions diagnose a method; they do not reveal another person’s hidden intention.

A mistaken interpretation may be sincerely held. A scholar may be rewarded for a qualified *ijtihad* in which he errs. A person may not know a *hadith*. He may dispute its authenticity on grounds he believes valid. He may misunderstand Arabic or application. He may follow a scholar because he lacks the tools to investigate independently.

Therefore, criticism must remain proportionate to what is actually established.

It is valid to say: “This interpretation is not supported by the evidence,” or, “This principle places an external theory above an explicit text.” It does not automatically follow that a named person is a disbeliever, an innovator, or knowingly following desire.

Allah said:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا كونوا قوامين لله شهداء بالقسط ولا يجرمنكم شنآن قوم على ألا تعدلوا اعدلوا هو أقرب للتقوى

“O you who believe, stand firmly for Allah as witnesses with justice. Do not let hatred of a people cause you to depart from justice. Be just; that is nearer to taqwa.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Ma'idah 5:8.

The same submission that prevents us from placing our opinions over revelation also prevents us from using revelation as a pretext for unjust judgments that the evidence does not establish.

10. Safeguards for Sound Understanding

The remedy for speculative distortion is not intellectual laziness. It is disciplined understanding.

A Muslim facing a difficult text, a scholarly disagreement, or an alleged contradiction can proceed through a clear sequence.

1. Authenticate before arguing

Do not construct a conflict between “Islam” and another claim until the Islamic proof has actually been established. In hadith questions, this may require knowing the collection, route, grading, wording, and whether another authentic version affects the meaning.

2. Separate thubut from dalalah

An authentic text can be misinterpreted. A correct meaning can also be falsely attached to a weak report. Ask separately: **Is it established? What does it indicate?**

3. Identify what is definitive and what is probabilistic

Do not allow a probable inference to masquerade as certainty. Likewise, do not treat every authentic solitary hadith as technically qat'i al-thubut merely to make the argument sound stronger. Precision protects the truth.

4. Gather the relevant texts

One verse or hadith should not be isolated from the rest of revelation. The Qur'an explains the Qur'an. The Sunnah explains the Qur'an. General and specific, unrestricted and restricted, concise and detailed texts must be considered together where relevant.

5. Use Arabic according to evidence, not convenience

Arabic vocabulary, grammar, rhetoric, and usage matter. But the existence of a possible dictionary meaning is not enough. Ask which meaning the context and transmitted evidence establish.

6. Recover Prophetic explanation and the understanding of the Sahabah

Allah sent the Messenger ﷺ to explain what was revealed. The Sahabah witnessed revelation, knew its language, and knew circumstances unavailable to later readers. Their explanations carry a methodological weight that cannot be replaced by a reader centuries later approaching the text without that inherited context.

This does not make every individual early statement infallible. It establishes the proper order of reception.

7. Use recognized usul (methodological principles)

Usul al-fiqh means the principles governing legal derivation. Together with hadith methodology, principles of tafsir, Arabic, and related sciences, these disciplines help govern inference and distinguish a proof from an assumption and legitimate interpretation from arbitrary reading.

8. Ask qualified scholars

Allah said:

فاسألوا أهل الذكر إن كنتم لا تعلمون

“Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Nahl 16:43.

A person who does not possess the tools of independent analysis should not treat self-confidence as qualification.

9. Distinguish an established fact from the theory built upon it

Whether the subject is science, history, language, culture, or society, identify what has actually been proven and what has been inferred beyond it.

10. Prefer “I do not know yet” to accusing revelation of contradiction

A temporary inability to reconcile two matters is evidence of a limit in one’s present understanding, not proof that Allah’s revelation is internally false. The disciplined student corrects the weak premise, searches for the missing evidence, and suspends judgment where knowledge has not yet been reached.

This is the proper place of humility. Revelation does not require the believer to pretend that every difficult question is easy. It requires him not to convert his present uncertainty into an authority over what Allah and His Messenger have established.

Conclusion

The central issue is not whether Muslims should reason. They must reason. The Qur’an commands reflection, recognition, understanding, and consideration. The Islamic sciences themselves are disciplines of careful reasoning.

The issue is the hierarchy in which that reasoning operates.

Allah said:

فإن تنازعتم في شيء فردوه إلى الله والرسول

“If you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger.”

Source: Qur’an, al-Nisa’ 4:59.

And He said:

وما كان لمؤمن ولا مؤمنة إذا قضى الله ورسوله أمراً أن يكون لهم الخيرة من أمرهم

“It is not for a believing man or believing woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, to retain a choice contrary to their decision.”

Source: Qur’an, al-Ahzab 33:36.

Sound reason serves truth. It helps establish authenticity, understand meaning, weigh evidence, recognize certainty, expose weak premises, and apply revelation correctly. Qualified interpretation, ijtihad, scholarship, custom, and consideration of benefit likewise have recognized jurisdictions.

None of them becomes revelation’s sovereign.

When a conflict is alleged, the Muslim does not answer with slogans. He asks whether the report is authentic, what it means, what is definitive, what is probabilistic, and whether the supposed rational necessity is actually necessary. He returns interpretation to the Qur’an, authentic Sunnah, Arabic, the understanding of the Sahabah and Salaf, recognized methodological principles, and qualified scholarship.

The most dangerous reversal occurs when the answer has already been decided and revelation is then permitted to speak only within the boundaries of that prior conclusion.

The sound order is the opposite:

Revelation governs. Reason understands, verifies, derives, and applies. And when authentic guidance becomes clear, the believer corrects his opinion by revelation rather than correcting revelation by his opinion.

REVIEW AND APPLICATION

Remember

1. Revelation is the final religious authority; sound reason is a necessary faculty that serves its correct understanding.
2. An alleged conflict must be analyzed through authenticity (thubut), meaning (dalalah), degree of certainty, and the real strength of the competing premise.
3. Sound interpretation is governed by the Qur'an, authentic Sunnah, Arabic, the understanding of the Sahabah and Salaf, and recognized methodological principles.
4. Qualified ijtiḥad and recognized scholarly disagreement are not the same as knowingly opposing an authentic, explicit, binding text.
5. Opinion, desire, inherited assumption, custom, benefit, or prestige becomes blameworthy when it is made a court over revelation rather than a consideration judged by it.

Test Yourself

1. What governing principle is established by Qur'an 49:1 concerning precedence before Allah and His Messenger?
2. Why is "revelation versus reason" an imprecise description of the real methodological problem?
3. What is the difference between thubut and dalalah?
4. How do the categories qat'i and zanni help analyze an alleged contradiction?
5. What distinguishes evidence-governed interpretation from an interpretation imposed to rescue a prior theory?
6. How does the hadith of qualified ijtiḥad prevent the claim that every scholarly mistake is deliberate opposition to revelation?
7. What practical signs can reveal that a desired conclusion is governing one's reading of the evidence?

Apply

Choose one religious question about which you already have a strong view. Record the primary evidence, whether the transmission is established, what the text actually indicates, what is definitive and what is probabilistic, the qualified scholarly explanation you are using, and any prior assumption or preference that could be influencing your conclusion. Then ask what you would change if the stronger evidence pointed in the opposite direction.

Continue

Next foundational study: The Heart Is Weak

That study examines why the heart can be affected by repeated exposure to error and why the Salaf were careful about what enters through hearing, companionship, and persuasive speech.