Understanding Sacred Speech: An Interview with Shaykh Rizwan Arastu

How do we begin to approach the words of our Imams, who lived in worlds vastly different from ours today? How do we translate their sacred wisdom and teachings into an idiom that we can appreciate and apply? How can we use their teachings as a bridge in our attempt to approach the sacred words of the Qurʾan? The following is an interview where we ask these questions and more of Shaykh Rizwan Arastu.

Shaykh Rizwan Arastu is a graduate of the Islamic Seminary of Qumm, Iran, where he specialized in the study of the Qurʾan and hadith. Before attending seminary, he earned his bachelor's degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, with minors in Near Eastern Studies and Education, from Princeton University.

Shaykh Rizwan is the founding director of the Islamic Texts Institute, a non-profit research institute aimed at making Islamic sources available to the West with scholarly commentary. He is the founder of Islamic Literacy, and he is a member of the faculty at the Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Seminary.

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AL-SIDRAH: You have begun the difficult task of translating one of the earliest Shiʿi hadith compilations of al-Kāfī. Please describe your work and goals for us.

SRA: There are 2 volumes of al-Kāfī out, and a third, God and His Oneness, is at press. These are the first 3 books of al-Kāfī by Shaykh al-Kulaynī. The effort of the Islamic Texts Institute has been to make this collection of traditions accessible to non-specialists through excellent translation and original commentary, aimed at clarifying each tradition and situating it in the larger

body of Islamic teachings.

AL-SIDRAH: It must be quite difficult to choose a specific part of a key term's semantic range to emphasize when translating. For example, you translated jahl as foolishness, which may not be the word that immediately comes to mind for some people. Why foolishness as opposed to the more common translation of ignorance?

SRA:To understand and translate the terms ʿaql and jahl, we went through quite an intensive process. Translation is not just about looking up a term in a dictionary and finding an equivalent that fits. Translation requires that we discover what the speaker intended by a word, what his audience likely understood from it, and what emotions and images the word evoked for them. There is often figurative usage, allusions to the Qurʾan or to Prophetic traditions, or to debates current in the day. Sometimes they use rhymes or a play on words that make their statement stay in the mind better. In short, there is much that goes into understanding the source language. Then there are the challenges of conveying all or much of that in the receptor language. To understand the term ʿaql, we surveyed the existing positions. ʿAllāmah al-Majlisī has collected six meanings for the term. Keeping those meanings in mind, and also keeping our eyes open to other possibilities, we conducted our research on all 36 traditions in Book I, and all other aḥādīth that use the term. We tried to decipher what ʿaql meant in each tradition, and since jahl is the counterpart to ʿaql, this gave us insight into the meanings of jahl too. We determined that ʿaql is used in four meanings, and that jahl is used as the opposite of these four meanings.
When opposed to ʿaql, jahl never means "ignorance" or "not knowing." It means "not having an intellect," "not using one's intellect," or "using one's intellect for evil." I will add that I was influenced early on by Eugene Nida's The Theory and Practice of Translation, particularly whathe calls "dynamic equivalence."[1]

AL-SIDRAH: Some say that every translation is also an interpretation. Do you agree with that, or do you think translators should strive to bring out the original author's voice, not their own?

SRA: To my mind, it depends on the project. Probably in most cases, the translator is responsible for assuming the author's voice. But in the case of Islamic sources—i.e., Qurʾan and hadith—since guidance is the ultimate goal, the translator, particularly the scholar-translator, needs to have an eye to how a text will contribute to the guidance or misguidance of the reader. Because this is ITI's vantage point, I think some, especially in the academic world, have taken issue with our translation, accusing us of putting too much of our own understanding into the translation. In our defense, it is not our personal, unfounded understanding that we are injecting into the translation. Rather, it is the understanding we have gleaned from the sum total of related texts, informed by the interpretations of the Shiʿi scholarly tradition.

AL-SIDRAH: How have you chosen to resolve the tension that arises from a particular text allowing multiple readings or ways of understanding? Do you think it would differ depending on the nature of the text being translated—across disciplines or genres—or depending on the purpose of the translation itself?

SRA: As a rule, we have always attempted to examine all available scholarly views on a given tradition. Out of these, we rule out readings we find incongruent with the apparent meaning of the text. Sometimes, we are able to propose new readings. This usually leaves us with two or three plausible readings. If we find one reading compelling, we translate the text to convey that reading, and in the commentary, we offer alternate translations that lead to other readings. If we are undecided, we attempt to translate the text ambiguously, so that it lends itself to all possible readings.

AL-SIDRAH: In your work, what have you noticed about the language of the Imams? Do the Imams always directly respond to the issue they are asked about?

SRA: Not necessarily. They tell us that God has commanded us to ask them, but it is up to them whether or not to answer us and how. Because they are infallible and supremely wise, everything they say is laden with meaning. Even

what they do not say is laden with meaning. Sometimes they avoid a subject out of fear. Sometimes they tread lightly so as not to offend or to demonstrate diplomacy. Sometimes they steer the questioner away from his question to something of greater importance. Whatever the case, we always make every effort to understand how the Imam's answer fits with the question, and to the extent that it doesn't, why that may be so.

AL-SIDRAH: Could you provide an example of a case, say, where the Imams steered the listener away from his original question toward something of greater importance?

SRA: For example, in al-Kāfī, 2.19.21, a man asks a follow-up question of Imam al-Ṣādiq. The question is presumably a legitimate question, but it seems the questioner has assumed that the Imam's response is like the opinion of any other scholar. Instead of answering, the Imam castigates him for this assumption.[2]

AL-SIDRAH: Your translation doesn't deal with the provenance of aḥādīth. Why?

SRA: The first eight books of al-Kāfī deal with matters otherthan law. In these areas, scholars have always paid less attention to chains of transmission and have focused mainly on the content of the tradition. The reason they give is that we have the tools to evaluate the content of such traditions using our reason, historical sources, universal ethical principles, and such. That said, al-Majlisī's Miʾāt al-ʿUqūl does label each tradition according to the traditional four-tiered system.[3] The software produced by the Noor Institute also labels each tradition based on the strength and other characteristics of the chain. Their labels are apparently based on Sayyid Mūsā al-Zanjānī's research.[4] We decided to prioritize content of the traditions over an evaluation of the chains, partly in keeping with scholarly tradition, and partly in knowledge that those who are interested in specialized aspects of the traditions can easily refer to the above-mentioned sources.

AL-SIDRAH: How can we understand certain aḥādīth that seem jarring to us nowadays, that may conflict with our sense of how the world works, either

physically, morally, or socially? For example, the Prophet's hadith,

انت وما أكل ألبيك

(You are simply a possession of your father.) where a person complained that his father dictated his life too much. How can we begin to understand these aḥādīth?

SRA: This question strikes at the core of the work of the commentator. He must steep himself in the culture of the time, the debates that were current, the language that was used, the norms that governed. While we are aided in this effort by past scholars, lexicographers, and historians, we must also have the humility to admit that we cannot fully steep ourselves in the past. There are aspects of the past that we may never understand. That said, the aspects of traditions that are lost to us because of our distance are not critical impediments to understanding Islamic faith and practice. The universality and timelessness of Islamic teachings is in its own place, and the particulars of time and place are in another.

AL-SIDRAH: The Imams are said to speak to people according to their levels of intelligence. So, many seemingly simple aḥādīth actually have much greater depth than meets the eye. How can we go about uncovering what the Imams really mean in a hadith?

SRA: It is not that a given statement contains endless meaning, and that each person who reads it understands something new. It is that they kept their immediate audience in mind, never overburdening them with more than they could handle. But, as with any area of knowledge, when a sage says something simple, it is a summary of profound knowledge. Compare this to the simple statement of a simpleton which means, perhaps, less than meets the eye.

AL-SIDRAH: Can you provide an example of this?

SRA: For example, in tradition 3.26.2, Abū Baṣīr asks how it is possible for God to want something to exist but not love it. [The complete hadith is as follows:

ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm reported from Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā from Yūnus ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān from Abān that Abū Baṣīr said, "I asked Abū ʿAbd Allāh [al-Ṣādiq], '[Does God] wish [a thing], [then] will [it], [then] decree [it], [then] decide [it]?' He replied: 'Yes.' I asked, 'And does he love [for it to be]?' He replied: 'No.' I asked, 'How [is it that he wishes [a thing], [then] wills [it], [then] decrees [it], [then] decides [it], but he does not love [for it to be]?' He replied: 'Thus has [the matter] come down to us.'" (al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 3.26.2)] We might expect him to explain why there is no contradiction between wanting something to be and not loving it or being pleased with it. Instead, he simply refers to the teachings of his forefathers and says, "Thus has [the matter] come down to us". Perhaps his message to Abū Baṣīr is that in such matters, it is not necessary to fully understand how it is true; it is sufficient to accept it as true because you have received it from an authoritative and trustworthy source.

AL-SIDRAH: How do you account for taqiyyah when reading a hadith?

SRA: Some statements in traditions stand as outliers to the corpus of Islamic teachings from the Prophet's family and reflect, instead, a view held by their detractors. These we consign to taqiyyah, dissimulation, by which the Imams prioritized some greater good over a particular true teaching. In such cases, we collect other traditions that reflect the true teaching and, where possible, cite the opposition viewpoint to make clear how this outlier agrees with the latter and contradicts the former.

AL-SIDRAH: The Imams speak to issues relevant to a particular person, but also issues that are universal. How can we distinguish between the two?

SRA: The issues relevant to a particular person fit into a larger, universal truth. The trick is to understand the particular in a way that is congruent with the larger picture.

Aḥādīth and the Qurʾan

AL-SIDRAH: How do aḥādīth help us understand the Qurʾan better?

SRA: The Qurʾan has an apparent meaning that is accessible, to a point, to anyone who reads it with preparation and reflection. That said, the Prophet and his family are the direct addressees of the Qurʾan and the final word in its interpretation. While we can understand something of the Qurʾan without them, we cannot conclusively know its intended meaning and practical implications until we scour the traditions to see what they have said about a verse. For the most part, the traditions in which the Imams cite the Qurʾan or explain the Qurʾan do not explain the apparent meaning the way an exegete does. Presumably, they expect that we can uncover the apparent meaning through deliberation. Sometimes they show an application or extension of a verse that is not immediately obvious to us. Sometimes they qualify the verse and limit it in a way that we have no authority to do. And sometimes they reveal hidden layers of meaning that are otherwise completely veiled from us. We cite some examples of their explanation of verses under tradition 2.11.9. There is one example of an apparently general verse regarding praying at the Station of Abraham, which they qualify. There is another example of an ambiguous verse on wudu', where they steer us away from its apparent meaning. [The verses, along with the commentary from al-Kafi: Book of Knowledge and Its Merits, vol. 2, are as follows:

For example, note the following verse: 'Make of the Station of Abraham a place of prayer' (2:125). Its apparent meaning is that we must pray at the Station of Abraham (the impression left by Prophet Abraham's feet on a stone that is preserved in a glass structure near the Kaʿbah). Certainly, it would be impossible for us to pray directly on top of Abraham's footprints, so the verse must be telling us to pray near the Station: in front of it, or behind it, or to one of its sides. Thus, the

verse, in and of itself, is general with respect to the location where this prayer must be offered. There are two traditions that qualify the general

meaning of this verse. The first is transmitted by Ibrāhīm ibn Abī Maḥmūd in which he said, "I asked al-Riḍā, 'Should I offer the two-cycle prayer for the ṭawāf of my obligatory ḥajj behind the Station [of Abraham] where it lies presently or where it was in the days of the Messenger of God?" He replied, 'Where it is presently'" (al-Kāfī 15.137.4). The second is transmitted by Muʿawiyah ibn ʿAmmār who reported that Imam al-Ṣādiq said, "When you complete your ṭawāf, approach the Station of Abraham and offer a two-cycle

prayer and put [the Station] in front of you" (al-Kāfī 15.137.1; see Mawsūʿah al-Imām al-Khūʾī vol.

29 p. 101 for the complete discussion). Clearly, if a person was unaware of these traditions and the correct methodology of textual analysis, he would incorrectly surmise that 2:125 is general and that one may legitimately offer one's prayer anywhere around the Station of Abraham.

AN INFALLIBLE ALWAYS SPEAKS INFALLIBLY, BUT A TRADITION IS NOT INFALLIBLE

…Unequivocal (muḥkam) verses are those whose apparent meaning is intended while equivocal (mutashābih) verses are those whose apparent meaning is not intended even though there is no clue within the immediate vicinity of the text to indicate this. For example, the Verse of Ablution (Qurʾān 5:6), which legislates wuḍūʾ seems apparently to be saying that we must wash our arms to the elbow, meaning from the fingers in

the direction of the elbows, and there is nothing in the verse to indicate otherwise. However, from the traditions, we understand that this apparent meaning is not intended and that the verse is only making known the limits of the arm, not the direction of washing, and that we must wash from the elbow down to the fingertips. Clearly, one who does not recognize this verse's point of equivocation will wash his arm the wrong way and spoil his ablution. (al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, trans. Shaykh Rizwan Arastu, vol. 2, p. 185-7)]

AL-SIDRAH: Certain aḥādīth seem to interpret the Qurʾan primarily in terms of wilāyah, even verses that may not be as clearly about the Imams. The second part of that same verse of Surat al-Jinn, verse 18, where it states, "Call not, along with God, upon anyone," is described in some aḥādīth as also including the Imams. How can we begin to understand these aḥādīth and this form of interpreting the Qurʾan?

SRA: When dealing with these types of traditions, we need to move away from the mindset of interpretation and realize that the Infallibles are uncovering meaning beyond the words. It is not just that they are smarter, cleverer interpreters. Rather, they are infallible vicegerents of God charged with teaching us what we could not otherwise have known.

AL-SIDRAH: How do we make sense of what the Imams say when the hadith diverges so drastically from the apparent meaning, which is the only level accessible to us independently? In other words, when the Imam's meaning diverges, does that almost negate or conflict with the apparent meaning?

SRA: We addressed this issue in a footnote on tradition 2.11.9.
[The footnote states: You might also think that if such equivocal verses exist in the Qurʾān then we cannot rely upon the apparent meaning of the Qurʾān with any certainty because we will always entertain the possibility that the apparent

meaning is qualified by some other verse or tradition. Such a conclusion stems from a misunderstanding of what it means to rely on the apparent meaning of the Qurʾān. To rely on it without scouring the sources in search of all qualifiers is foolhardy. However, once we have scoured the sources and determined conclusively that there are no qualifiers for a verse, then we may reasonably rely on its apparent meaning. In the following passage, Imam al-Ṣādiq has described those who interpret the Qurʾān without scouring the sources: "They have slapped together parts of the Qurʾān with others. They argue using a verse that has been qualified while they presume it to be unqualified. They argue using a verse that is specific while they presume it to be general. They argue using the beginning of a verse and abandon the traditions that explain its correct meaning. They do not consider how a verse begins and how it ends, and they do not know its ins and outs. All this because they have not taken their knowledge from its possessors. Thus, they are misguided and they misguide others" (Wasāʾil al-shīʿah 27.1.13.33593).]

Conclusion

AL-SIDRAH: What are some strategies that non-specialists can use when reading aḥādīth to try to understand what the Imam may have really meant?

SRA: They must not be afraid to read traditions and draw preliminary conclusions, but they must not be over-eager to make conclusive claims about what they mean.

Our scholars are circumspect when it comes to drawing conclusions, so non-scholars must be ever more so. The best way to learn is with the guidance of scholars, not by independent study. They should approach well-attested scholars and ask them to teach them or at least to address their questions. A substitute for a live scholar is a book like ITI's works.

AL-SIDRAH: What are some main issues that non-specialists should be aware of when reading aḥādīth? For example, when dealing with seemingly contradictory aḥādīth?

SRA: Sometimes people fail to differentiate between the words of an infallible and the tradition, which is an archive of those words. An infallible always speaks infallibly (even when he is under taqiyyah), but a tradition is not infallible. It is possible for a hadith to be fabricated or distorted, and this does not mean that the Imam is not infallible. Taqiyyah is also a reality and it gives rise to contradictions. People should be aware of these ideas in general so that when they see a contradiction, their faith is not shaken; rather, they make note and ask a scholar to help resolve the discrepancy.

AL-SIDRAH: What are some benefits the English-speaking community may attain from translations of primary hadith sources like al-Kāfī?

SRA: My vision for ITI was to reproduce for people the experience I had when I began studying traditions with my teachers. The Imams, who had been two-dimensional in my mind, came into three-dimensions and color as I studied their traditions. Each tradition is a snippet of an interaction with the Prophet or Imam. It gives us a chance to see them in real life, interacting with the world around them. But reading traditions is not without its perils. I needed a teacher whom I could ask, before whom I could air my frustrations, who could address my concerns and channel my efforts into a productive learning experience. In writing our commentary, we have tried to anticipate the questions our readers are likely to have, to help them come away from a tradition with a heightened understanding of the teaching contextualized in the larger picture of Islamic teachings.

Endnotes:

[1] In this regard, Nida says, "…the intelligibility of a translation…is not to be measured merely in terms of whether the words are understandable and the sentences grammatically structured, but in terms of the total impact the message has on the one who receives it." Eugene A Nida. & Charles R. Taber, The Theory and Practice of Translation (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p. 22.

[2] The hadith is as follows: ʿAlī reported from Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā from Yunūs that Qutaybah said, "A man asked Abu ʿAbd Allāh [al-Ṣādiq] about an issue, and

he answered his question. Then the man said, ‘Tell me [your opinion.] If the circumstances had been such and such, what would you have said about this issue?’ Imam al-Ṣādiq told him: ‘Silence! Any answer I give you is from the Messenger of God. We, [the family of the Messenger,] have nothing to do with ‘Tell me [your opinion]?’’” al-Kāfī, trans. Shaykh Rizwan Arastu, vol. 2 (Dearborn: Islamic Texts Institute, 2014), p. 390.

[3] Mirʾāt al-ʿUqūl, by ʿAllāmah Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, is a complete commentary of al-Kāfī. A work of erudition, Mirʾāt expounds on the various dimensions of the aḥādīth, including the linguistic, the theological, and the provenantial.

[4] Sayyid Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī (b. 1928) is one of the contemporary marājiʿ of Qumm. His teachers were among the premier ʿulamāʾ of the 20th century, including Ayatullah Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Burūjirdī, al-Sayyid al-Muḥaqqiq Muḥammad al-Dāmād, and Ayatullah Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim al-Khūʾī. Sayyid al-Zanjānī’s expertise in hadith and its provenance is renowned.