Significant Intersections between Legal and Rhetorical Theories: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary Reading of al-Bāqillānī's Theory of Language

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Abstract

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) was a preeminent scholar and an influential participant in a diverse range of Islamic discourses including the Ashʿarī school of theology and the Mālikī school of law. Al-Bāqillānī's texts are often studied within the context of individual disciplines, but this article demonstrates that an interdisciplinary reading of his scholarly production uncovers significant areas of overlap. These intersections bring to light topics of sustained concern for al-Bāqillānī that crosscut his work and allow him to draw together various Islamic intellectual discourses. Through looking at three such intersections, on the topics of *bayān*, *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*, and the so-called Mysterious Letters, this article shows that al-Bāqillānī's argument in favor of the clarity and eminent understandability of language, including all of the Qurʾān, is best understood through a cross-disciplinary reading of al-Bāqillānī's oeuvre. Bringing together al-Bāqillānī's thought in the two seemingly disparate genres of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal theory) and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (the inimitability of the Qurʾān) serves the dual purpose of examining the relationship between these fields and shedding light on al-Bāqillānī's work across disciplines. It thus contributes to a more complete picture of the identity of a scholar who was concerned with providing a consistent and multifaceted theory of language within a broader synthesis of Islamic thought.

Key words: Language, al-Bāqillānī, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, *bayān*, interdisciplinary

Introduction

This article explores the intellectual contribution of Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), a preeminent scholar who was an influential participant in a diverse range of Islamic discourses.[1] Famous for his wide-reaching impact on the Ashʿarī school of theology and the Mālikī school of law, al-Bāqillānī authored a body of work that has proved difficult for scholars to conceptualize and characterize as a whole, due not only to its participation in

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1   This article is based on findings that emerged from my dissertation. For a more detailed discussion see my dissertation, "Clarity, Communication, and Understandability: Theorizing Language in al-Bāqillānī's *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* Texts" (FRIEDMAN 2015), which I am currently revising as a monograph.

diverse specialized disciplines, but also to the circuitous structure of al-Bāqillānī's texts.[2] Extant studies contextualize and analyze aspects of specific books that al-Bāqillānī composed without bringing into view his broader scholarly identity and contribution. This article begins the work of offering a corrective to previous atomistic studies of his texts. It does so by bringing together al-Bāqillānī's writings in two seemingly disparate fields, *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (inimitability of the Qurʾān), highlighting important areas of overlap and intersection. It analyzes the ways in which these texts express al-Bāqillānī's theory of language, a central topic in his thought, devoting particular attention to his understanding of the roles of rhetoric and figurative language. It also demonstrates how al-Bāqillānī's sustained attention to some topics across his writings allows him to consistently express his own theological and exegetical interventions. One central point that comes to the fore through extensive readings of al-Bāqillānī's texts is his assertion of a unique vision of the Qurʾān as miraculously clear and understandable to humans even as it expresses divine meanings in language that humans could never successfully imitate.

Reading al-Bāqillānī's texts in these discourses with particular attention to their thought on language, broadly conceived, is far from a narrowly thematic undertaking. Rather, the implications of how to understand the ways in which language works permeate the central questions of classical Islamic scholarship at large and occur across disciplinary boundaries. Medieval Islamic scholars were acutely aware of these implications, and their discussions resulting from this awareness are found in a variety of fields of intellectual inquiry. Though writings on the Qurʾān's rhetorical excellence and Islamic legal theory are conventionally studied separately from one another, they both address larger language-related questions. In fact, both of these discourses dealt at length with the questions of how to understand Qurʾānic language in relation to humans' utterances and how to properly interpret both of these types of language usage. Scholarship undertaken in the last few decades has investigated the ways in which individual disciplines addressed such questions in the classical eras of Islam, with the fields of *balāgha* (rhetoric) and *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudence) constituting primary (but separate) areas of inquiry. Modern scholarship has emphasized that in the realm of *balāgha* and particularly in its Scripturally-centered valence of *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (the inimitability of the Qurʾān), classical scholars generally investigated language for its aesthetic qualities, though later developments in the field, led by ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), developed a rhetorical theory of the relationship between grammar and meaning.[3] Meanwhile, a recent spate of attention has been given to theories of linguistic communication in Islamic legal theory, particularly ideas regarding the correct ways of interpreting Qurʾānic verses and humans' utterances in order to determine their legal force and its scope.[4] Although those two fields still constitute separately treated realms of thought, other studies that are mindful of interdisciplinary connections have affirmed the importance

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2   Al-Bāqillānī's texts often circle back to the same topics in multiple sections, thus rendering it difficult to determine his overarching concerns or attitude toward a particular issue based on discrete sections of the texts.

3   ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's two celebrated treatises are *Asrār al-balāgha* (ed. Shākir 1991) and *Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz* (ed. Shākir 1995). For more on al-Jurjānī's approach and its influences, see Larkin 1988: 31-47. In the field of *balāgha*, see Heinrichs 1984: 180-211.

4   See Gleave 2012; Vishanoff 2011; Weiss 1992.

of looking beyond the boundaries of genre. For example, scholarly efforts to account for the effects of different intellectual fields and currents of thought on rhetorical theories that were developed during the late 3rd/9th century and the 4th/10th century have demonstrated the fruitfulness of such approaches.[5] It has become clear that concerns central to the intellectual milieu crosscut disciplinary boundaries in interesting ways, and that there was an especially close connection between linguistic and theological endeavors. Understanding these dynamics in turn broadens scholarly understanding of each discipline and the ways in which its constituent discussions related to other realms of Islamic thought.

An even more strongly comparative approach can shed light on the relationships between *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, both Islamic discourses *par excellence*. This type of approach can also help answer questions of an essentially interdisciplinary nature. For example, how consistent were theories of language across these disciplines? Can interdisciplinary investigations of a concept such as language provide a more robust understanding of how medieval Islamic thinkers understood that concept and their world more broadly? Wolfhart Heinrichs pointed to the potential insights of such an investigation when he called for a study of *majāz* (roughly, figurative language) as it developed in *uṣūl al-fiqh* in order to shed light on a concept that had been studied mostly through the lens of *balāgha* but was operative in *uṣūl al-fiqh* as well.[6] Though Heinrichs suggested this project more than twenty years ago, the gap between study of those two fields remains, and little has been added to the discussion of how useful it would be to study relationships in thought between two such apparently separate fields.

Though there are many possible starting points to investigate such questions of the relationships between disciplines, I have chosen to take the work of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī as an entrance point into this direction of study. Al-Bāqillānī was considered the most prominent Ashʿarī theologian of his day and studied under the students of al-Ashʿarī himself. He was also a famous Mālikī jurist and legal theorist. Because he authored books in both *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (among numerous other fields), he is an ideal subject for a comparative case study of the ways in which one thinker approached and theorized language in two fields.[7] If a comparison of legal and rhetorical discourse were to center on different authors, it would be difficult to determine whether significant divergences in terminology and theory of language were due to generic or disciplinary differences, or rather to other factors such as theological or legal school affiliation, regional ethos, chronological developments, personal background, and individual taste. A

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5   Wolfhart Heinrichs has described the dynamics between the study of linguistic expression and other Islamic endeavors. Margaret Larkin has demonstrated the theological underpinnings of ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's work on Qurʾānic inimitability and figurative language, while Alexander Key's study on al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) has examined the relationship between a theory of language and its ambiguities and diverse fields including exegesis, poetry, and theology. HEINRICHS 1984: 111-140 and 1977; LARKIN 1995; KEY 2012.

6   HEINRICHS 1977: 53.

7   Other topics on which al-Bāqillānī authored books include theology, miracles, political and religious leadership, intra- and interreligious polemic, divine attributes and characteristics, free will, physical theories, and morals and virtues. For more on his intellectual formation and production, see IBISH 1965: 226-29.

study of al-Bāqillānī's thought in two important realms has the additional benefit of contributing to current understandings of al-Bāqillānī's thought and intellectual identity. This comparative study of al-Bāqillānī's work in *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* uncovers the ways in which important themes in al-Bāqillānī's work reemerge in different forms across genres. It also discovers a cohesive scholarly identity and vision that al-Bāqillānī maintained in the various theological discourses in which he engaged.

Now is an opportune moment to revisit al-Bāqillānī's scholarship, because more of his works are available for study than were to earlier generations of modern-era scholars. In recent decades, books previously thought to be lost have been discovered in manuscript form, and many of them have subsequently been published. The incremental discovery of al-Bāqillānī's texts has allowed for further insight into his thought and also encourages the continual revisiting of each text in light of newly discovered ones. Abdul Aleem wrote in 1933 that al-Bāqillānī's book on *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* was his only preserved work.[8] As recently as 1952, Philip Hitti wrote that al-Bāqillānī only had two surviving works.[9] In 1959, Johan Bouman only had access to three of al-Bāqillānī's works and believed them to be the only extant ones: *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, *al-Tamhīd*, and *al-Inṣāf,* described below.[10] The medieval bio-bibliographer Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ and 20th-century Islamicist Yusuf Ibish both provide lists of al-Bāqillānī's work (including texts no longer available) that were in turn compiled from earlier bio-bibliographical sources.[11] Most of the books they list are not known to be extant today, but many are widely attested in other medieval authors' writings. The following list comprises al-Bāqillānī's books that are proven to be extant today:

1. *Hidāyat al-mustarshidīn* [Guide for Those Seeking the Right Way], a comprehensive multi-volume work covering diverse theological matters;[12]

2. *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* [Book on the Inimitability of the Qurʾān], an investigation of the Qurʾān's stylistic excellence, particularly in comparison to poetry;[13]

3. *Al-Inṣāf fī-mā yajib al-iʿtiqād wa-lā yajūz al-jahl bihī* [The Just Treatment of What It Is Necessary to Believe and about Which One May Not Be Ignorant], a book of theological doctrines and discussion of the ways through which their truths are knowable;[14]

4. *Nukat al-intiṣār li-naql al-Qurʾān* [Remarks on the Victory of the Qurʾān's Transmission], on aspects of the Qurʾān concerning rhetoric, language, exegesis, and transmission;[15]

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8   ABDUL ALEEM 1933: 75.

9   HITTI 1952: 146.

10 BOUMAN 1959: 57.

11 IBISH 1965: 226-29; ʿIYĀḌ, *Tartīb*: 601-02.

12 Excerpts have been found in recent years. See GIMARET 2009: 259-313; SCHMIDTKE 2011: 39-71.

13 Ed. Aḥmad ṢAQR, Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.

14 Ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-KAWTHARĪ, [Cairo]: Muʾassasat al-Khānjī, 1963.

15 Ed. Maḥmūd Zaghlūl SALLĀM, Alexandria: Munshaʾāt al-Maʿārif, [1971?].

5. *Al-Intiṣār lil-Qurʾān* [Victory Belongs to the Qurʾān], a defense of theological doctrines surrounding the Qurʾān and its proper recitation;[16]

6. *Manāqib al-aʾimma al-arbaʿa* [The Merits of the Four Imams], lauding the four Rightly Guided Caliphs and defending their right to authority;[17]

7. *Kitāb al-Bayān ʿan al-farq bayn al-muʿjizāt waʾl-karamāt waʾl-ḥiyal waʾl-kahāna waʾl-siḥr waʾl-nārinjāt* [introduced and published by Richard Joseph McCarthy under the title *Miracle and Magic: A Treatise on the Nature of the Apologetic Miracle and Its Differentiation from Charisms, Trickery, Divination, Magic and Spells*], on miracles generally and the Qurʾānic miracle in particular;[18]

8. *Ikfār al-mutaʾawwilīn* [Accusing the Interpreters of Unbelief], a sectarian polemic;[19]

9. *Tamhīd al-awāʾil wa-talkhīṣ al-dalāʾil* [The Introduction of the Primary Premises and Summary of the Indicants],[20] which constitutes the first comprehensive laying out of Ashʿarī theological doctrine;

10. *Al-Taqrīb waʾl-irshād fī uṣūl al-fiqh* [Proximity and Guidance on the Roots of Law], a text of legal theory;[21]

11. *Al-Uṣūl al-kabīr fī ʾl-fiqh* [The Large Book of Roots of Fiqh], also on legal theory.[22]

The study of al-Bāqillānī's oeuvre is uniquely charged with potential insights into the intellectual landscape in the formative 4th-5th centuries AH (10th-11th centuries CE) because al-Bāqillānī participated in so many different discourses and, I argue, demonstrated a keen interest in synthesizing these discourses in order to construct an internally consistent conception of Islamic doctrine and thought. The relationship between various scholarly disciplines was undergoing change during al-Bāqillānī's lifetime. The movement toward systematization in both jurisprudence and Qurʾānic inimitability during that momentous time in the history of Islamic thought reflects the larger ethos of this period and its concern with conceptualizing and defending Arabo-Islamic heritage and ideology.[23] One contentious focal point of theological discussions, broadly construed, was the identification and inter-

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16 Ed. ʿUmar Ḥasan al-QAYYĀM, 2 vols., Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 2004; ed. Muḥammad ʿIṣām al-QUDĀT, 2 vols., Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2001. The latter edition includes a preface by the editor differentiating *Nukat al-intiṣār li-naql al-Qurʾān* from *al-Intiṣār lil-Qurʾān*.

17 Ed. Samīra FARAḤĀT, [n.p.]: Dār al-Muntakhab al-ʿArabī, 2002.

18 Introduced by Richard Joseph MCCARTHY in his edition under this title: *Miracle and Magic = Kitāb al-bayān: A Treatise on the Nature of the Apologetic Miracle and its Differentiation from Charisms, Trickery, Divination, Magic and Spells*, Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1958.

19 Ed. Cairo: Maʿhad al-Makhṭūṭāt al-ʿArabiyya, 2006.

20 Ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-KHUDAYRĪ and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Hādi Maḥmūd ABŪ RIDĀ, [Cairo]: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, [1989?]. Also known as *al-Tamhīd fī ʾl-radd ʿalā ʾl-mulḥida al-muʿaṭṭila waʾl-rāfiḍa waʾl-khawārij waʾl-muʿtazila*.

21 Ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ABŪ ZUNAYD, 3 vols. (1993), repr. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1998. Also known as *Al-Taqrīb waʾl-irshād fī tartīb ṭuruq al-ijtihād* [Proximation and Guidance in Organizing the Ways of Independent Legal Reasoning].

22 Sections of this manuscript have reportedly been discovered at al-Azhar, see ZAKĪ 2012.

23 See Ahmed EL SHAMSY 2013; Scott C. LUCAS 2004: 2-9.

pretation of figurative language in the Qurʾān, especially in connection with debates about anthropomorphism of the Divine.

Before turning my attention to significant points of intersection and dialogue between al-Bāqillānī's work in the fields of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, I will introduce the available text that al-Bāqillānī composed in each of those disciplines. A full-fledged review of scholarship on these treatises is outside the scope of this article, but a brief summary of how they have been approached and analyzed will provide important insight into how they have generally been received and studied so far. Starting with al-Bāqillānī's work on *uṣūl al-fiqh*, his only extant and published text in this discipline is entitled *al-Taqrīb wa'l-irshād fī uṣūl al-fiqh* (*Proximation and Guidance on the Roots of Law*). That book, to which I will henceforth refer as the *Taqrīb,* is also one of the earliest available treatises of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. The textual record indicates al-Bāqillānī authored multiple books in the *uṣūl al-fiqh* genre, but the *Taqrīb* is the only one that has survived and been published (if only in part, as explained below). Bibliographies of al-Bāqillānī's works tell us that he authored three different versions of the *Taqrīb:* a long one, a mid-length one, and a short one.[24] In 1993, ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamīd b. ʿAlī Abū Zunayd published and edited a three-volume set that according to Abū Zunayd comprises the first of two volumes of the short version of the *Taqrīb,* which he produced using a manuscript found at the Hyderabad State Library and marked as being the first of two volumes. Unfortunately, the second volume was not found, and no other copies of the manuscript are known to exist.[25] Large sections of the *Taqrīb* focus on issues related to language, among which are discussions concerning the means by which language communicates, ways of soundly discerning meanings in it, and a framework for understanding the relationship between Qurʾānic and human-authored language. Al-Bāqillānī focuses his discussions around methods of obtaining clear understandings of meaning at the levels of the word and the utterance.

In the *Taqrīb*, I argue, al-Bāqillānī interprets and redefines hotly debated elements of the Qurʾānic lexicon and Islamic discourse, such as *bayān, muḥkam, mutashābih,* and the so-called Mysterious Letters (*al-ḥurūf al-maqaṭṭaʿa*) in ways that support his vision of Qurʾānic and human language use. Al-Bāqillānī's definitions and discussions of these keywords contribute to the assertion of a particular, theologically attuned view of language, scripture, and interpretability. He develops a multifaceted argument, over the course of this treatise, that all language, even figurative language, is systematically comprehensible according to rules. He emphasizes the communicativity of language and the understandability of the Qurʾān. These discussions have been a particular focus of recent scholarly attention. Robert Gleave has given attention to the *Taqrīb* in his book *Islam and Literalism*, focusing on two sections of al-Bāqillānī's text, entitled by the editor as 'Divisions of communicative speech' and 'Knowing the difference between *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz*.'[26] David Vishanoff has also discussed al-Bāqillānī's legal theory with particular reference to linguistic interpretation in a chapter of his dissertation, published in revised form as *The Formation of Islamic*

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24 Iyāḍ, *Tartīb*: 601.

25 ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Abū Zunayd, "*al-Qism al-dirāsī,*" in al-Bāqillānī, *Taqrīb* (ed. Abū Zunayd) 1998: 91.

26 Gleave 2012: 116-20.

Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law.[27] Gleave's and Vishanoff's contributions are important starting points for understanding al-Bāqillānī's and other *uṣūlī*s' (jurisprudents') theories of language and for integrating their work into the narrative of historical development within the field of Islamic legal theory. Their thematic focus on the ways in which medieval Islamic legists determined the pragmatic qualities of utterances (to be literal, figurative, ambiguous, etc.) is an important point of departure for interdisciplinary study of Islamic semantics and pragmatics as well as wider intra-disciplinary studies of Islamic legal theory.

Turning to al-Bāqillānī's work on Qurʾānic inimitability, al-Bāqillānī's text known simply as *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* [The Book of the Qurʾān's Inimitability] is considered a classic work on the subject.[28] Past scholarship has consistently focused on a subset of the sections and themes the text includes. While providing important insights about al-Bāqillānī's approach, this scholarship's selective emphasis and decontextualization of discrete points in the text has led to a limited understanding of his view of the phenomenon of *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*. To be more precise, existing scholarship on al-Bāqillānī's *iʿjāz* work tends to highlight arguments he made that eventually became components of the normative Islamic doctrine of the Qurʾān's literary inimitability,[29] but scholars have focused their detailed attention on al-Bāqillānī's treatment of rhetorical figures and poetry.[30] They have attended to his long chapter cataloguing *badīʿ* (roughly understandable as 'literary devices') in the conventional genre established by Ibn al-Muʿtazz and continued by scholars after him, as well as al-Bāqillānī's extended literary analysis of poems by Imruʾ al-Qays and Abū Tammām. These sections of al-Bāqillānī's book differentiate it from previous *iʿjāz* texts that had not delved so deeply into the realm of the literary or carried out the detailed work of 'demonstrating' the Qurʾān to be superior to poetry based on literary analysis. However, the parts of the text that do not fit easily into a conception of the text as literary critical in nature have gotten far less attention.[31] By dwelling almost exclusively on these parts of the text, which are overtly focused on the literary, secondary scholarship perpetuates a conception of the text as a contribution to literary critical history. It is more accurate to characterize al-Bāqillānī's *iʿjāz* text as a scholarly contribution to theology that interfaces with exegetical theory and literary criticism, as my analysis below indicates.

Bringing together al-Bāqillānī's thought in these two different genres serves the dual purpose of constituting a case study in the ways in which thought in each of those disci-

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27 VISHANOFF 2011.

28 Sophia Vasalou, for example, includes his *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* in the "seminal works" on *iʿjāz* composed in the 10th century (VASALOU 2002: 24). Abdul Aleem says "Bâqillânî's book is reported to be the best ever written on the subject" (ABDUL ALEEM 1933: 75). He also claims it was "the basis for all those who wrote on the subject later" (ibid.: 77).

29 These 'canonical' points include the ideas that the Arabs were all unable to meet the Qurʾān's so-called Challenge Verses (*āyāt al-taḥaddī*), that only the few true experts in Arabic can fully appreciate the extent of this Qurʾān's linguistic superiority, and that the Qurʾān's generic form falls outside of what was previously known to people since it is neither poetry nor prose and certainly not *sajʿ* (rhymed prose).

30 These are also the only sections of the text that have been translated into English, see VON GRUNEBAUM 1950.

31 See, for example, the following sources: ABŪ MŪSĀ 1984; al-MAṬʿANĪ 1985: 275-83.

plines relates to work in the other, shedding light on al-Bāqillānī's body of work and indicating the rewards of theorizing language in his oeuvre. It provides a more complete picture of the identity of a scholar who was concerned with providing a consistent and multifaceted theory of language within a broader synthesis of Islamic thought. Through this investigation, the understandability and clarity of utterances, and particularly the Qurʾān, emerge as the central concern of his thought across the genres that this study investigates. In this way, al-Bāqillānī establishes the expressive clarity of the Qurʾān as inimitable and, at the same time, as verification of its understandability, a move that sets the practice of exegesis on stable theoretical footing. This idea emerges as a proposed resolution to the tension between views of the Qurʾān as inimitable miracle and the Qurʾān as a reliably interpretable basis for Islamic thought. I have selected three prominent examples of shared areas of discussion as focal points for this comparison: *bayān*, *muḥkam* and *mutashābiḥ*, and the so-called Mysterious Letters of the Qurʾān.

Textual Intersections: Three Examples

Bayān

The term *bayān* is the first key point of intersection in both al-Bāqillānī's *uṣūl* and *iʿjāz* texts that I have chosen to examine. For explanatory purposes, the most straightforward rendering of the term *bayān* may be 'clearness' or 'distinctness.' The word is a verbal noun from the Form I verb *bāna* [to become clear, distinct, differentiated], whose root is B-Y-N. Edward Lane notes in his dictionary of classical Arabic that the term *bayān* conventionally refers to the "means by which one makes a thing [distinct,] apparent, manifest, evident, clear, plain, or perspicuous," which can either be "a thing indicating, or giving evidence of, a circumstance, or state, that is a result, or an effect, of a quality or an attribute," or the "language that discovers and shows the meaning that is intended."[32] In *uṣūlī* technical usage, discussions of *bayān* are generally concerned with the clarifying ability of language and explanations in the service of understanding. Enlightening scholarship on this topic has contributed to the record of the ways *uṣūl* scholars explained *bayān*, but al-Bāqillānī's work has been largely absent from this history of the term.[33] The discourse on *bayān* in *uṣūl al-fiqh* literature is thus a particular instance where al-Bāqillānī's input could enrich the scholarly discussion, given the availability of textual evidence and the context in which to understand al-Bāqillānī's contribution.

Al-Bāqillānī's work on *bayān* may have been largely overlooked because of the relatively recent publication of the *Taqrīb* (as the above references from the mid-20th century indicate). Even given access to this text, though, Joseph Lowry has pointed out that al-Bāqillānī does not delve into a discussion of *bayān* in the short version of the *Taqrīb* that we have, because he had already done so in the long version to which we unfortunately do

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32 Lane 1968: 288.

33 Excellent articles on the history of *bayān* in *uṣūl al-fiqh* include Lowry 2008 and Bernand 1995. A broader history of *bayān* can be found in von Grunebaum 2015. Each of these texts touches on al-Bāqillānī but does not give a detailed account of his *uṣūlī* thought on *bayān*.

not have access.[34] However, Abū Zunayd's third volume of the *Taqrīb* does include sections on *bayān* that provide insight into al-Bāqillānī's views on the topic and can help us situate them in relation to other scholars' understandings of it. Al-Bāqillānī begins his discussion of *bayān* by providing general and technical *uṣūlī* definitions of it. In his non-technical definition of *bayān*, al-Bāqillānī cites linguists' definition of *bayān* as the appearance, distinction, or separation of an item.[35] In this vein, al-Bāqillānī provides several examples of the term *bayān* and other words from the same root in non-language-related contexts, with glosses on them that show that *bayān* is identified with clarity, clarifying, and distinguishing. Al-Bāqillānī's technical definition of *bayān* is 'an indication' [*dalīl*], i.e. the knowledge by which we know the word's meaning:[36]

> It is the indicant [*dalīl*] that is connected, by sound reflection [*naẓar*] on it, to the knowledge [*ʿilm*] of which it is an indicant.[37]

In other words, *bayān* is the means by which knowledge comes to be known by a thinker who reflects on and understands the indicant properly. Al-Bāqillānī continues with an extensive set of discussions about *bayān* that engages topics current in *kalām* (theology) discourse at his time. For instance, he writes that necessary knowledge does not have *bayān* because it is known directly. Al-Bāqillānī also responds to other scholarly opinions expressed in the same technical discourse. A prominent example is that al-Bāqillānī clarifies that unlike other *uṣūl* scholars (such as al-Shāfiʿī, not mentioned by name), he does not hold that *bayān* must clarify another, unclear text, but rather that its object is knowledge.[38]

The term *bayān* also arises in *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* discourse, but in classical *iʿjāz* writings it is not typically a technical term in the way as it is in *uṣūlī* discourse. In the *iʿjāz* genre writings of al-Bāqillānī's precursors and contemporaries, the word *bayān* is used as part of a semantic field of words related to rhetorical excellence, such as *faṣāḥa* and *balāgha*. This point can be illustrated with reference to ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsa al-Rummānī (d. 998) and Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd ibn Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 996), two scholars who composed books on *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* around the same time as al-Bāqillānī. Al-Khaṭṭābī, in his short treatise *Bayān Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān,* does not use the term *bayān* widely, but when he does, it is often in the general sense of 'explanation,' 'exposition,' or 'clarification,' as in the title of his book, which Issa Boullata has recently translated under the title "Elucidation of the Qurʾān's *Iʿjāz*."[39] Al-Khaṭṭābī responds to a potential claim from an opponent that the Qurʾān is not fully clarified (*mubayyan*) by responding that he has "presented the explanation [*bayān*] of the descriptions of rhetorical excellence [*balāgha*] in the Qurʾān."[40] Al-Khaṭṭābī also occa-

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34 LOWRY 2008: 522. Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ refers to that lengthier discussion in *Taqrīb*, iii: 374.

35 Ibid.: 370-71.

36 The designation of this definition as technical comes from al-Juwaynī's abridgement of the *Taqrīb*, entitled *Talkhīṣ al-Taqrīb*. Al-Juwaynī repeats this definition verbatim. Al-JUWAYNĪ, *Talkhīṣ*, ii: 204-05.

37 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, iii: 370.

38 Ibid.: 372-73.

39 al-KHAṬṬĀBĪ, "Elucidation of the Qurʾān's *Iʿjāz*," in the English translation (2014) of KHALAFALLĀH & SALLĀM (eds.) 1968.

40 Al-KHAṬṬĀBĪ 1968: 35.

sionally uses the word *bayān* to refer to general excellence of the rhetorical quality of an utterance, as when he says that the Qurʾān's expressions are "located in the most eloquent and best aspects of rhetorical excellence [*bayān*]."[41] In these ways, al-Khaṭṭābī uses the term *bayān* much as he does words like *faṣīḥ* (eloquent) and *balāgha* (excellent rhetoric) to describe the qualities of the Qurʾān's language, not distinguishing *bayān* as having its own unique technical signification within the semantic field of rhetorical excellence.

The body of al-Rummānī's *iʿjāz* treatise is made up of a list of ten aspects of the Qurʾān's literary inimitability, the last one of which is *bayān*. In that section, al-Rummānī says the entirety of the Qurʾān is classified as being beautiful *bayān* of the highest rank.[42] He includes a definition of the term *bayān*: "*Bayān* is supplying that which makes apparent the distinction of a thing from everything else perceived."[43] He posits that *bayān* has four parts: speech, state, indication, and sign; within this classification, speech has two types: "speech that manifests the distinction of a thing from all else, which is *bayān*; and speech that does not manifest the distinction of a thing from all else, which is not *bayān*, like mixed-up speech and impossible speech from which meaning is not understood."[44] For al-Rummānī, the term *bayān* is only used for speech that expresses beautifully, not for clumsy, ugly expressions, and he provides numerous Qurʾānic verses as examples of superlative *bayān*.[45] The distinction he draws between speech that is *bayān* and speech that is not recalls the larger discussion of *bayān* taking place beyond the realm of *iʿjāz* discourse. Al-Rummānī does not expound on his conception of *bayān* and the special properties of Qurʾānic *bayān* that render it superior to other (human-authored) speech that manifests *bayān*. On this basis, a reader may conclude that al-Rummānī drew on an educated and informed conception of *bayān* without developing it into a technical term in the *iʿjāz* lexicon.

Al-Bāqillānī's discussion of *bayān* is found outside the widely-studied sections of his book described above. It is found, instead, in a vital but often overlooked section of his book where he theorizes a novel distinction between features of the Qurʾān's language and structure that have a bearing on its inimitability and those that do not. There are many conditions that al-Bāqillānī stipulates must be fulfilled for a rhetorical feature to be considered a contributor to *iʿjāz*. Some rhetorical and stylistic features participate in *iʿjāz* and others do not, and al-Bāqillānī draws this distinction by giving examples of particular features in each category rather than explaining the essential difference between the categories.

One of the meta-categories of textual features where al-Bāqillānī says *iʿjāz* is found is *bayān*. Al-Bāqillānī associates *bayān* with other expressive properties of language, and he is in agreement with his fellow *iʿjāz* writers in generally using this term to emphasize the soundness of Qurʾānic expression. However, he is unique among classical writers on *iʿjāz* in that he developed the concept of *bayān* as a distinctive technical feature of the Qurʾān in his *iʿjāz* work, developing his conception of *bayān* much more fully than his contemporaries

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41 Ibid.: 37-38.

42 Al-Rᴜᴍᴍᴀ̄ɴɪ̄, *Nukat*: 107.

43 Ibid.: 106.

44 Ibid.: 106.

45 Ibid.: 106-09.

al-Rummānī or al-Khaṭṭābī do. He does not see it merely as having an aesthetic function; rather, he emphasizes the word *bayān*'s association with clarity and clarifying. That emphasis is one component of al-Bāqillānī's multifaceted expression of the idea that the Qurʾān and all sound language usage are eminently clear.

Al-Bāqillānī argues that the Qur'an contains a consistent, high level of *bayān* that is miraculous and inimitable. *Bayān* is connected to the production of understanding in a text's audience; features of this clear and clarifying *bayān* can be more specifically identified and associated as such with *iʿjāz*.[46] Al-Bāqillānī's classification of features that contribute to *iʿjāz* also includes rhyming verse endings (*fawāṣil*), verse breaks (*maqāṭiʿ*), verse beginnings (*maṭāliʿ*), and suitable wording (*talāʾum al-kalām*).[47] It is noteworthy that these categories are not included in al-Bāqillānī's famed chapter on *badīʿ*, perhaps because they are not normatively considered types of *badīʿ* in taxonomies of that phenomenon. Rather, these characteristics that concern versification and word choice are semiotic features of the text, deeply implicated in the expression and communication of meaning in utterances. Al-Bāqillānī discusses *bayān* as a property of the Qurʾān's language, prooftexting the verses that say the Qurʾān is clear or clarifying.[48] For al-Bāqillānī, the point of *bayān* overall as well as its constitutive features like *istiʿāra* ('borrowing,' 'metaphor') is to communicate ideas clearly. In the introductory chapter, al-Bāqillānī states this thesis directly, using the root B-Y-N repeatedly in phrases such as "the Almighty clarified in it [i.e. the Qurʾān] that its proof is sufficient and guiding, and with its lucidity [*wuḍūḥ*], not needing a clarification to exceed it."[49] He closes the chapter with Qurʾānic verses that emphasize clarity: "a Scripture whose verses are made distinct as a Qurʾān in Arabic for people who understand" [Q 41:3],[50] and "We have made it a Qurʾān in Arabic so that you [people] may understand" [Q 43:3].[51] This method of prooftexting the Qurʾān through which al-Bāqillānī scripturally supports his point allows him to locate his thesis strongly in the Qurʾānic text and read his own definitions of contentious terms back into the text itself.

As a feature connected to the Qurʾān's inimitability, *bayān* is a characteristic of style that attests to the text's miraculousness. Elaborating the concept of *bayān* and explicating its properties and relationship to inimitability in this technical and highly developed way sets al-Bāqillānī apart from his peers in *iʿjāz* discourse and may be seen as a mark of the influence of his identity as a theologian and legist knowledgeable of other discourses such as *uṣūl* where the term *bayān* was also used in a technical and reified way.

Despite the fact that *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* and the *Taqrīb* examine *bayān* from two disparate vantage points, the conception of *bayān* that lies behind both is consistent. The *iʿjāz* treatise describes *bayān* as a feature of the Qurʾān that is consistently excellent and

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46 Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 429.

47 Ibid.

48 Verses declaring the Qurʾān's property of being in clear Arabic are among those most heavily cited by al-Bāqillānī in this text. Q 26:195 declares "in a clear Arabic tongue," and it is cited in al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 12, 45, 298, 314, and 418.

49 Ibid.: 3.

50 Quoted in al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 9.

51 Quoted *ibid.*

only occurs in lesser levels in human speech. This account does not suggest that an utterance that is a *bayān* is identified as such because it clarifies some other utterance (though it may also do that), but rather that it constitutes *bayān* because it communicates meanings and ideas clearly. Whereas some of al-Bāqillānī's *uṣūlī* peers would identify *bayān* as that which clarifies a separate utterance, al-Bāqillānī disagrees, maintaining that any clear utterance (i.e., one that communicates knowledge) constitutes *bayān*, whether or not it requires knowledge of additional information or utterances in order to be clear to a reader or listener.

In both texts, discussions of the definition and properties of *bayān* are one location where al-Bāqillānī develops his emphasis on the clarity of language and the particularities of the miraculous clarity of the Qurʾān through attention to its linguistic and rhetorical properties. His *uṣūlī* discussion of *bayān* responds to debates in that field and asserts that *bayān* is an indicant through which knowledge is known, and that any utterance can be *bayān*, regardless of whether there is a secondary utterance that it clarifies. Analysis of his *iʿjāz*-based discussion of *bayān* suggests that in that context he treated it as a clarifying feature of language that was connected to word choice and versification.

Muḥkam and *mutashābih*

Another significant area of overlap between the *Taqrīb* and *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* concerns the Qurʾānic keywords *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*. Al-Bāqillānī also weaves his strategic reinterpretation of these fraught terms into both his *iʿjāz* and *uṣūl* work in a significant recasting of the question of interpretability. The terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* were a key site of disputes, garnering a variety of interpretations by scholars.[52] As al-Bāqillānī's and other scholars' views on Q 3:7 have shown, this verse was a locus of scholarly debate on humans' ability to interpret the Qurʾān.[53] One common interpretation of the terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* was that *muḥkamāt* were *āyāt* understood to be clear and not in need of interpretation (thus not open to alterative readings), while *mutashābihāt* were ambiguous verses open to multiple interpretations. According to some interpreters, these latter verses are available for interpretation by humans, while other commentators held that only God could understand such verses, and trying to understand them could mislead people.[54]

Al-Bāqillānī explains his own definitions of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* in both his *iʿjāz* and *uṣūl* texts, and his pointed ways of situating and applying these terms are consistent

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52 For accounts of how a wide range of interpreters have explained these terms in Q 3:7, see KINBERG 1988, SYAMSUDDIN 1999 and MASSEY 2014. For analogies in the Shīʿī tradition, see STEIGERWALD 2006a/b.

53 The verse is especially difficult to render in English due to the significant lexical and grammatical items that have served as the basis for exegetical debate. One possible translation of its meaning reads as follows: "It is [God] who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are clear [or 'definite'—*āyāt muḥkamāt*] in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture [*umm al-kitāb*]—and others are mutually similar [or 'ambiguous'—*mutashābihāt*]. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities [*mā tashābaha minhu*] in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down its interpretation: nobody knows the interpretation [*taʾwīlahū*] except God and those firmly grounded in knowledge who say [or 'except God. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say"—*al-rāsikhūn fī 'l-ʿilm*], 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord'—only those with real perception will take heed."

54 See SYAMSUDDIN 1999: 71-72.

and closely aligned across these texts. He does not address Q 3:7 in a single section of either text devoted to exegesis of that verse but rather explains his conception of each of the two terms at thematically relevant points in each text. In both texts, al-Bāqillānī takes the word *muḥkam* to have two significations: the first refers to an utterance whose meanings are expressed overtly, and the second refers to an utterance that is internally consistent and non-contradictory, either in meaning or in arrangement (structure).[55] Al-Bāqillānī suggests that these terms' applicability is not limited to Qurʾānic *āyāt* but rather covers any utterance (*kull kalām*), in a departure from the standard understandings of the scope of these terms. All language, for al-Bāqillānī, is understandable using one unified set of criteria and categories.

As for the term *mutashābih*, al-Bāqillānī defines it as speech that carries multiple meanings.[56] He thus allows for a single utterance to carry two or more meanings at once, as long as the meanings do not contradict each other. His examples clarify how this multivocality works: a word that can indicate different meanings (i.e., homonymy or polysemy) is used in an utterance that does not indicate that one of the meanings is not operable in that utterance.[57] His explanation is distinguished from the more normative interpretation of the word *mutashābih* as meaning 'ambiguous/obscure verse.' Al-Bāqillānī's proposed alternative meaning is in accordance with his turn away from the notions of linguistic vagueness and opacity. Recasting the definition *mutashābih* in the way he does is one component of his rejection of the idea of a category of unclear or opaque verses in the Qurʾān. Instead, al-Bāqillānī pointedly casts the whole Qurʾān as understandable and clear.

It is highly unusual to include discussion of the terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* in *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* writing because those topics are not strongly associated with the literary, aesthetic, or rhetorical aspects of the Qurʾānic miracle. On the contrary, they open up disputes about understandability and interpretability of the kind that may not unequivocally or clearly support defenses of the Qurʾān's inimitability. Al-Bāqillānī's book is the only one in this genre that includes discussion of these terms, and including this topic in *Kitāb iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* implicitly bridges the *iʿjāz* discourse and other exegetical disciplines. As a theological move, this inclusion also suggests discussion of *iʿjāz* is part of a cohesive and consistent world of Islamic thought rather than a niche undertaking. In *Kitāb iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, al-Bāqillānī weaves his reading of Q 3:7's contentious terms into his assertion that the Qurʾān's level (of language use, rhetorical excellence, and clarity) does not waver at all but is consistent, so that verses are 'mutually similar' to each other in their level of clarity and excellence.

Al-Bāqillānī's creative reassignment of meanings to the terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*, in the context of the Qurʾān's linguistic inimitability, supports his thesis that the Qurʾān's level of linguistic excellence is consistent and does not waver or fluctuate (*yatafawwat*) specifically with regard to its level of clarity. He argues that the Qurʾān's language usage is

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55 *Fa-kull kalām hādhihī sabīluhū fa-innahū yūṣaf bi-annahū muḥkam wa-in iḥtamala wujūhan wa-ʾltabasa maʿnāhu"*. Al-Bāqillānī, *Taqrīb*, i: 330.

56 Al-Bāqillānī, *Taqrīb*, i: 330-31.

57 Put simply, homonymy is when a single lexical item carries two or more distinct and unrelated meanings; polysemy is when a single lexical item has two or more different but related senses. However, closer study blurs the distinction between the two. Lyons 1977: 550-69.

distinguished from that of humans because the Qurʾān always maintains a level of excellence that humans cannot uphold for more than a line or two. Thus, in content as well as form, the Qurʾān is consistent, unwavering, and cogent. He ties this *muʿjiza* (miracle) of consistency to the term *muḥkam*, thereby asserting that this contentious term actually refers to the Qurʾān's verses' similarity to each other in terms of their level of clarity. He cites key *āyāt* to support his point, as in the following passage:

> The arrangement of the Qurʾān [. . .] does not vary [in quality], as [God] said: "If it had been from anyone other than God, they would have found much inconsistency in it" [Q 4:82]. It does not deviate from its uniformity [*tashābuhihī*] and internal consistency [*tamāthulihī*]—as [God] said: "an Arabic Qurʾān without any distortion" [Q 39:28], and "a Scripture that is consistent [*mutashābihan*]" [Q 39:23]—and does not cease elucidating [*ibānatihī*], as [God] said: "in a clear Arabic tongue" [Q 26:195].[58]

This passage emphasizes the clarity of the Qurʾān in its entirety, leaving no room for viewing any type of verse as an exception that is clear only to God and/or the Prophet (in the way that some other scholars interpreted the word *mutashābih*). The prooftexting of Qurʾānic verses al-Bāqillānī does here is typical of his method across his oeuvre.

Here, al-Bāqillānī explains the term *mutashābih* by linking the fraught term with the word *mutamāthil* ('mutually similar') in a construction that suggests they are near synonyms for him. The root SH-B-H, from which the term *mutashābih* derives, yields words having to do with similarity and resemblance as well as doubt and confusion.[59] The root of the word *mutamāthil*, M-TH-L, has a wide range of meanings, including those that concern likeness and comparison.[60] The morphological form of both words signifies mutuality. Pairing these two terms highlights the prominent area of overlap between their respective meanings. His usage of the term *mutashābih* shows he interprets it to mean 'mutually similar,' supporting his view with a verse about how the Qurʾān has no discrepancies in it.

Al-Bāqillānī also links these two terms in another passage, writing about the Qurʾān that God "clarified its light, brought its path close, eased its way, and in that made it mutually similar [*mutashābih*], like unto itself [*mutamāthil*], and despite that [sustained clarity], clarified [humans'] inability to [produce] it."[61] Its verses support and confirm each other rather than being contradictory, as the verse says they would be if the source of the Qurʾān were not God. Even if not all verses are equally easy to explain, holding that Qurʾānic style never fluctuates allows al-Bāqillānī to demonstrate the communicative excellence of some verses and proclaim by extension that the same excellence obtains in *all* verses. This synecdochic understanding of eloquence underpins al-Bāqillānī's approach to the Qurʾān as a text whose very clarity is a testament to its miraculousness.

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58 Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 314.

59 Lane 1968: 1510.

60 Lane 1968: 3017.

61 Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 69.

Elsewhere, al-Bāqillānī ties this idea of internal consistency of content and level of elo-quence directly to *iʿjāz*. He writes, in his chapter summarizing all aspects the miracle, that the seventh aspect of the Qurʾān's inimitability is as follows:

> The meanings [*maʿānī*] that it includes—in [the realm of] the setting down of *sharīʿa* and its prescriptions, proofs of the source of religion, response to the unbelievers re-garding marvelous expressions, its internal consistency [*muwāfaqat baʿḍihā baʿḍ*] in subtlety and superiority [*barāʿa*]—all of these are among that which is difficult and even impossible for humans. This is because it is known that selecting wording for familiar, current ideas [*maʿānī*] and associations [*asbāb*] in circulation among peo-ple is easier and more accessible than selecting wording for original ideas and newly established connections. If the wording of an exalted idea is outstanding, it is finer and more amazing than when the wording is superior for a well-established, [al-ready] conceived-of matter. When these aspects that bolster what it is originating and that it seeks to establish for the first time and affirmation is intended, relative merit in excellence and eloquence become apparent. If the wording is in agreement with ideas, and the ideas in accordance with them [i.e. the utterances], such that one of these categories is more than the other, then the excellence is more apparent and the eloquence is more perfect.[62]

Here, al-Bāqillānī describes the verses' *tashābuh* (in his sense of mutual similarity in level of clarity) using a different wording, *muwāfaqat baʿḍihā baʿḍan* ('internal consistency') which avoids the contentious term in Q 3:7 while expressing a similar idea. Meanwhile, he emphasizes the importance of the Qurʾān's speech having perfect mutual suitability of meanings and wording, thus allowing the Qurʾān to be a comprehensible basis for law. This type of explanation is one of the means by which al-Bāqillānī makes clear the ways in which *iʿjāz* fits into his larger theological project. While other *iʿjāz* scholars also locate rhetorical excellence in the combination of the superlative level of content and wording found in the Qurʾān, al-Bāqillānī is unique among these scholars in naming categories of content that the Qurʾān includes in this context. In particular, he lists the Qurʾān's proffer-ing of legal and theological knowledge that, since they are understandable to humans, are available to form the basis for Islamic religious and legal thought.

Al-Bāqillānī decouples the terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* by explaining them as cate-gories that are not oppositional at all; in his understanding, an utterance could be both *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*. He discusses the terms together (as was consistently the case in discussion of these terms), but his explanations make clear that for him they are separate categories, not opposites of one another. Being *muḥkam* speaks to the clarity and con-sistency of an utterance, while the status of *mutashābih* concerns multivalence. In ap-proaching the discussion in this way, he takes his readers from an expected starting point to a new understanding of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* as decoupled, non-oppositional terms. Al-Bāqillānī writes that speech fitting this description is *muḥkam* even if it carries multiple facets (of meaning) and its meaning is obscured (*iḥtamala wujūhan wa-iltabasa maʿnāhu*); thus an utterance can be both *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*. However, if speech's *naẓm* is cor-

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62   Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*: 63.

rupted, that speech is described as corrupt, not as having *tashābuh*. For al-Bāqillānī, *muḥkam* here means clear communication, either in meaning or (grammatical) structure (*naẓm wa-tartīb*).

The Mysterious Letters

So far, we have seen how two very different topics, *bayān* and the contested pair of terms *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*, recur in al-Bāqillānī's Qurʾānically centered legal and rhetorical theories. The third example I will discuss of bridging concepts in his thought is that of the so-called Mysterious Letters (*ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿa*). These letters are found at the beginnings of 29 *sūra*s of the Qurʾān and have long been a source of puzzlement and speculation for interpreters.[63] Islamic tradition has typically considered them to be *mutashābihat,* in the sense of opaque verses open to a multiplicity of possible interpretations, "but no definitive solution or explanation has ever risen to widespread acceptance."[64] The Qurʾān itself often follows these letters immediately with verses proclaiming the Qurʾān's clarity, fueling speculation about their meaning. Eventually they became one of the paradigmatic instances of the category of the *mutashābih*. As such, some scholars took the position of 'consignment'; that is, they viewed these verses as secrets known only to God. Others treated the *mutashābihāt* as being open to a multiplicity of interpretations by human audiences. However, even scholars who espoused the theory of consignment (e.g. al-Thaʿlabī, al-Wāḥidī, and al-Qurṭubī) put forth lists of interpretations.[65] Exegetes interested in defending the Qurʾān's inimitability, such as Quṭrub and al-Farrāʾ, tended to argue that the letters reinforce the idea that the Qurʾān is made of ordinary letters and yet was never matched in level by human composition. (This point feeds into a larger debate over whether the *taḥaddī,* or challenge, to produce a *sūra* like those in the Qurʾān necessitated the Challenge being accessible to humans.)[66] Al-Bāqillānī enters into this debate over the signification of the Mysterious Letters and takes the opportunity to reframe discussion of a Qurʾānic feature to support his thesis of the Qurʾān's eminent clarity, as we saw him do above in the cases of other contentious terminology.

Al-Bāqillānī summarizes the range of posited meanings of the *ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿa* and casts doubt on their veracity.[67] He follows in the steps of scholars who considered these letters to be understandable by humans and goes further in seeing them as announcements of the Qurʾān's clarity. In the *Taqrīb*, al-Bāqillānī writes that the best of what has been said in the debate over the Mysterious Letters' meaning is that these letters are actually a *kināya*, or allusion, to the rest of the alphabet, a metonymic reference to the entirety of the Arabic letters, therefore encompassing the whole of the *sūra* for which these letters serve as a beginning.[68] However, al-Bāqillānī does not see this phenomenon as an exclusively Qurʾānic one. He provides some examples of poetry that he interprets to contain certain

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63 NGUYEN 2012. For an overview of the topic, see MASSEY 2014.

64 NGUYEN 2012: 6.

65 Ibid.: 9.

66 See RAHMAN 1996: 415.

67 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, i: 331.

68 Ibid.: 332-33.

letters that metonymically stand for the whole poem, as in the case of poems that begin a line with the word 'a-lā'.[69] There are different interpretations of this particle, al-Bāqillānī says. Some people also call those usages 'Mysterious Letters,' even though they are found in human-authored compositions rather than the Qurʾān.[70] Others say, on the contrary, that God put these letters at the beginning of the sūras precisely because the Arabs did not have the habit of doing so, a reference to the explanation of iʿjāz as having broken the customs of the Arabs in speech.[71] Al-Bāqillānī does not refute either of these ideas, though they may seem incompatible. However, he comments the familiarity of the letters themselves underscores "the Arabs' being informed that it [i.e., the Qurʾān] addresses them in their [own] language."[72]

This interpretation is consistent with al-Bāqillānī's explanation of the Mysterious Letters in his *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān,* where his goal is also to recast these famously 'mysterious' elements of the Qurʾān as signs indicating the Qurʾān's clarity—self-referential announcements that serve as reminders that the Qurʾān is made up of the same letters familiar from Arabs' own speech.[73] In that text, al-Bāqillānī explains that long after the time of the Prophet, experts on Arabic language independently discovered the properties of the letters of the alphabet (e.g. whether each letter is voiced or emphatic, and its place and manner of articulation), and any educated observer can witness that there are significant patterns in the occurrence of Mysterious Letters based on these properties. He writes in *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*:

> The letters on which the Arabs' speech is based are 29 letters, and the number of sūras that open with the mention of the letters is 28.[74] All of the letters that are mentioned at the beginnings of sūras are half of the entirety of the letters of the alphabet, which is 14 letters, in order to indicate the others by their mention, and so they may know that this speech is arranged [muntaẓam] from the letters with which they arrange their speech. These letters are divided according to how Arabic experts divided them and built upon them divisions by aspect, which we will mention.[75]

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69 The implication is that a-lā does not impart a meaning in the sense that words ordinarily do but rather communicates something metapoetic or metalinguistic. Wright lists many uses for the particle a-lā, the most relevant here being his characterization of it as "often used to draw close attention to the certainty of the following assertion, and hence admits being rendered into English by *truly, verily, certainly*" and "as a corroborative before the optative perfect, the imperative, jussive, and energetic." W. WRIGHT 1964: 310. Citations refer to the Cambridge edition.

70 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, i: 334.

71 Ibid.: 334.

72 Ibid.: 333.

73 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Iʿjāz*: 68-69.

74 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ seems to intend to draw an equivalence between the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet and the number of sūras that open with ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿa. He does not explain the discrepancy between the numbers, but one possible explanation is that 29 signifies 28 letters of the alphabet plus the hamza, the glottal stop that is orthographically represented in written Arabic but not named as a letter in the alphabet.

75 Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Iʿjāz*: 66.

According to this line of thought, affirmation of the distribution of Mysterious Letters re-
lies on Arabic linguists' findings during the Islamic era. 'Mathematical' defenses of the
Mysterious Letters have persisted in the history of exegesis, but this 'proof' might nonethe-
less strike readers as being based in circular reasoning, an unsatisfying demonstration of
the Mysterious Letters' indication of the miracle. Regardless, this explanation positions al-
Bāqillānī on the side of debate that views the Mysterious Letters as pointedly familiar.
Accepting the idea that the Qurʾān's Mysterious Letters are akin to elements of human-
authored poetry removes them from the realm of the 'mysterious' altogether, reassigning
their signification as quite the opposite: an indication of the familiarity of the text's lan-
guage. Al-Bāqillānī also draws a connection between the Mysterious Letters as divine
'signs' and 'proofs' and the *sūra*s they open containing verses about the Qurʾān as a 'sign'
and 'proof' as well.[76] This explanation also emphasizes the Mysterious Letters' interpreta-
bility.

The Mysterious Letters are a standard 'aspect' of Qurʾānic inimitability found in texts
on that phenomenon, but it is more surprising to find explanations of this Qurʾānic feature
in a text on legal theory. They are not taken to have legal content or direct implications for
Islamic law, and most explanations of them did not consider this usage of the letters to be
part of the framework of ordinary language, as indicated above. Thus, al-Bāqillānī's inclu-
sion of explanations of the Mysterious Letters in the *Taqrīb* is exceptional. It can be seen at
once as a result of al-Bāqillānī's deep and permeating attention to the ways in which Islam-
ic disciplines can engage each other in the service of a synthesized, unified vision of Islam
and the Qurʾān, and his own desire to emphasize the Qurʾān's miraculous clarity across
genres.

Discussion

This cross-disciplinary study of key elements of al-Bāqillānī's work on *uṣūl al-fiqh* and
iʿjāz al-Qurʾān has brought to light interesting areas of intersection and overlap. It has
shown how al-Bāqillānī used both genres to assert and advance ideas that are part and par-
cel of his larger contribution as a theologian. Al-Bāqillānī expresses his views on issues
including language and Qurʾānic understandability in both of the discourses I have investi-
gated, despite the different goals of the fields of *uṣūl* and *iʿjāz*. Through my examination of
al-Bāqillānī's writings in these genres, I have drawn out his views on language and its ways
of expressing and making clear, using the examples of some contentious keywords that al-
Bāqillānī explains and uses in both texts. Al-Bāqillānī's focus on the clarity and under-
standability of language, particularly Qurʾānic language, is a theme of his work that cuts
across his oeuvre in surprising and unique ways. In both texts studied here but particularly
in the *Taqrīb*, al-Bāqillānī often cites the authority of Arabic experts (*ahl al-ʿarabiyya*) in
questions of how to interpret utterances, thus anchoring his approach in language and its
nature.[77]

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76 Ibid.: 12-13.

77 See, for instance, al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, iii: 331-333, 370-71.

Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān and the *Taqrīb*, in the course of their generically different projects, put forth the shared thesis that language is clear and its utterances are understandable given the right information, and that the Qurʾān in particular is wholly understandable by humans because it uses clear language that is measurable and understandable by the same means that allow audiences to know the meanings of human-authored language. The ways in which al-Bāqillānī departs from his predecessors and peers to explain the significations of *bayān, muḥkam, mutashābih,* and the Mysterious Letters are three instances in which al-Bāqillānī shows his thought to be consistent across disciplines. This focus on meanings conveyed through language orients al-Bāqillānī's contributions to both *uṣūl* and *iʿjāz* discourses and is a distinguishing characteristic of his body of thought. His focus on language and the way it communicates does not constitute merely a thematic study but rather a contribution to what Gregor Schwarb has in another context called "the most basic semiotic and hermeneutic questions, i.e. how God's speech signifies and how it may be understood."[78] Schwarb has also shown how different discourses, particularly within *uṣūl*-type disciplines of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, were fruitful loci of exegesis in the Islamic milieu.[79] This observation is a testament to the centrality of Scripture in Islamic scholarship at large during those important eras of theological and cultural development. My reading of al-Bāqillānī's texts supports that view of theological writings beyond *tafsīr* proper as performing an exegetical function (among other functions).

The clarity and communicativity of language, particularly Qurʾānic language, is important not merely in conjunction with contentious keywords and the disciplinary debates in which they figured. Rather, interpretability is the theoretical basis for the Islamic tradition relying on commentary with the confidence of a community that has methodical and reliable means of understanding language. Al-Bāqillānī maintains that God only revealed the Qurʾān to its human audience in words known to this audience, and according to the meanings of those words that were known to them.[80] This position allows al-Bāqillānī to tie a correct understanding of the Qurʾān to the known methods of understanding human-authored utterances, and specifically to the vocabulary usage of the Arabs at Muḥammad's time. Confidence in understanding of Scripture is a foundation for considering interpretation of it to be trustworthy, which in turn allows for theoretically-sound development of discourses based on this interpretability.

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78 SCHWARB 2007: 114.

79 Ibid.: 112-14.

80 Al-Bāqillānī writes, citing three Qurʾānic verses about clarity: "'We made it an Arabic Qurʾān' [Q 12:2], and the Almighty's saying: 'In a clear Arabic tongue' [26:195], and the Almighty's saying: 'And we have not sent a messenger except in the language of his people. . . The externally apparent meanings of these verses require that all of the speech be in the Arabic that the Arabs used, and that otherwise it would have been speech not in their language." Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, i: 391. In another passage, he says: "The angel will not go to a human messenger except for in the language of the messenger, in which he has previously learned and spoken by way of conventional knowledge of its meanings and indication." [*Wa-lan yuʿaddī al-malak ilā ʾl-rasūl min al-bashar illā bi-lughat al-rasūl allatī qad taqaddama ʿilmuhū wa-nuṭquhū bihā min ṭarīq al-muwāḍaʿa ʿalā maʿānīhā wa-dalālatihā.*] Al-BĀQILLĀNĪ, *Taqrīb*, i: 431. For a broader discussion of the tension between the Qurʾān's addressing of all humankind and its revelation in a particular Arabic language, see KOPF 1956 and SHAH 1999.

Taking a broader view of the significance of emphasizing clarity in this way, implications of al-Bāqillānī's thesis can be seen as amounting to more than the sum of their parts. In general, the discipline of *uṣūl al-fiqh* emphasized the Qurʾān's understandability, allowing for it to be a firm and accessible source of law. On the other hand, writings on *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* emphasized its inimitability and the miraculous qualities that rendered production of anything like it outside the realm of human capabilities. This disciplinary tension makes al-Bāqillānī's thesis of Qurʾānic clarity even more intriguing. His interdisciplinary concern for the Qurʾān's eminent clarity ultimately suggests a resolution to this tension by seeing the Qurʾān as unparalleled in its expression of excellent ideas, thereby locating both its understandability and its miraculousness in its clarity and tying those two key properties together.

Conclusion

The important insights that emerge from reading al-Bāqillānī's work in any single discipline come into clearer focus when considered in light of multiple parts of the scholar's oeuvre. A language-centered thesis might seem like one of many main ideas in his *iʿjāz* work or his *uṣūl al-fiqh* work, but focusing on signature explanations that al-Bāqillānī includes in both of those texts—even to the point of including topics that were not conventionally treated within the genre at hand—shows that an interest in characterizing language as a basis for interpretive work cuts across his work in these disciplines. The three realms of overlap between al-Bāqillānī's *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* treatises described here are but a few examples of this phenomenon, but many such connections occur within these books and more broadly within al-Bāqillānī's wide-ranging oeuvre.

Al-Bāqillānī's sustained cross-disciplinary concern for these topics suggests an awareness on al-Bāqillānī's part of the importance of language and its interpretation, a topic that would continue to be a source of contention. Positioning the Qurʾān as inherently and definitely comprehensible by humans, as al-Bāqillānī does, has important implications for theological doctrine. Perhaps most importantly, holding that the Qurʾān's human interpreters can understand its meanings strengthens the basis for the Qurʾān's status as the starting point of religious knowledge and law. If the Qurʾān were outside the realm of human comprehension, how could it be the basis of Islamic law and doctrine? How could anyone declare its words and ideas to be perfectly suited to one another if the ideas were not available to humans? Al-Bāqillānī responds to such questions by placing interpretation of the Qurʾān (in which people were already taking part) on sound theoretical footing. He reinterprets key terms to refer to verses' perfect mutual suitability of meanings, allowing the Qurʾān to be at once a comprehensible basis for law and a miraculous text. Al-Bāqillānī's scholarly identity can be described as that of a systematizer attuned to the ways in which discourses interact to produce a cohesive vision of Islamic theology. By arguing and prooftexting the idea that the whole Qurʾān is subject to sound interpretation by humans, al-Bāqillānī provides a textual basis for basing Islamic law and doctrine on the Qurʾān. Even if al-Bāqillānī's arguments are sometimes circular and his textual interpretations may not strike the reader as ultimately convincing, his awareness of a need to place Islamic exegetical and interpretive methods on solid footing and to provide a theoretical grounding for these activities speaks

to a strategic need at this point of crystallization of traditions in Islamic religious and intellectual history.

Highlighting the Qurʾān's clarity and constructing a multifaceted explanation of it affords interpreters and their activities a place in the religious and intellectual life of the community. Describing the Qurʾān as wholly clear and understandable to human interpreters legitimizes the communities of readers who base Islamic thought on the text. The miracle of the Qurʾān is available directly to every generation, and the guarantee that it has been faithfully transmitted (an idea al-Bāqillānī defends in *Kitāb Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*) is another way of defending the direct access every audience has to the text. In this way, al-Bāqillānī avoids the issue of authenticity that has defined the corpus of *aḥādīth* (Prophetic reports).[81] Even aside from the particularly fraught discourse of the authenticity of *aḥādīth*, the focus on the directly-available Qurʾānic text in all its clarity responds to the threat of misinterpretation by dismissing what Travis Zadeh has called "anxieties of mediation."[82] The Qurʾān is clear, so it is not in need of mediation in forms such as translation or decoding. Even in the case of parts of the Qurʾān whose eloquence and logic is more difficult for human audiences to explain, the clarity of these verses is still known and thus they are still understandable. In this way, al-Bāqillānī opens up a space between understanding and explanation. Verses whose verbal explanation is more out of reach are still part of the whole of the Qurʾān, which as an entirety can rely on metonymies to point to its clarity. The so-called Mysterious Letters are, for al-Bāqillānī, a form of metonymy that indicates the clarity of the whole text by announcing and reminding that the Qurʾān is made up of familiar Arabic letters.

This clarity is balanced out by the limits of Arabic language knowledge. Emphasizing the Qurʾān's Arabicness, and its particular usages that are tied to the Prophet's community's own usages, also determines the type of interpretive community al-Bāqillānī allows. The interpreter must be an expert of Arabic, knowledgeable about the meanings that words, structures, and idioms had at the Prophet's time. At al-Bāqillānī's time, the Islamic empire was changing in response to its recent expansion to include powerful contingents who were not native speakers of Arabic, especially in Khurasan and Transoxania. Most immediately for al-Bāqillānī, the Buyid rulership of Baghdad at his time was non-Arab in origin, descendants of Zoroastrian converts to Islam from the region of Fars, probably Daylamites. During this same time, translation and exegesis of the Qurʾān in other languages were gaining legitimacy in some circles, provoking a reaction from those scholars who maintained the cultural and religious priority of Arabic.[83] Suggesting that sound knowledge of the Qurʾān's meanings relied on methodical and language-based exegesis limits the community of legitimate interpreters to those with deep knowledge of Arabic. Al-Bāqillānī's continual recourse to experts of language and literary criticism grounds his understanding of the Qurʾān in its Arabic heritage.

Al-Bāqillānī's concern for language and its communicative nature, as well as the importance of its rhetorical and literary dimensions, privileges a larger theological vision over the practices of understanding and interpreting language. His participation in many disci-

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81 For an analysis of approaches to the authenticity of *aḥādīth*, see BERG 2000.

82 ZADEH 2007: 612.

83 ZADEH 2007: 52-59.

plines and interest in synthesizing results in a unified and consistent theological vision expressed over multiple genres of his writing, though some interesting tensions remain unresolved. Al-Bāqillānī was an intellectual precursor to literary critics, legists, and theologians that academic consensus has deemed to be some of the greatest thinkers in Islamic history and in their respective disciplines. His wide-ranging texts must be read together in order to take full account of his contribution to Islamic thought. The surprising areas of overlap between al-Bāqillānī's *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* treatises suggests that interdisciplinary investigations of classical-era Islamic thought can shed light on important intersections in currents of thought as well as thinkers' concerns that transcend disciplinary boundaries.

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