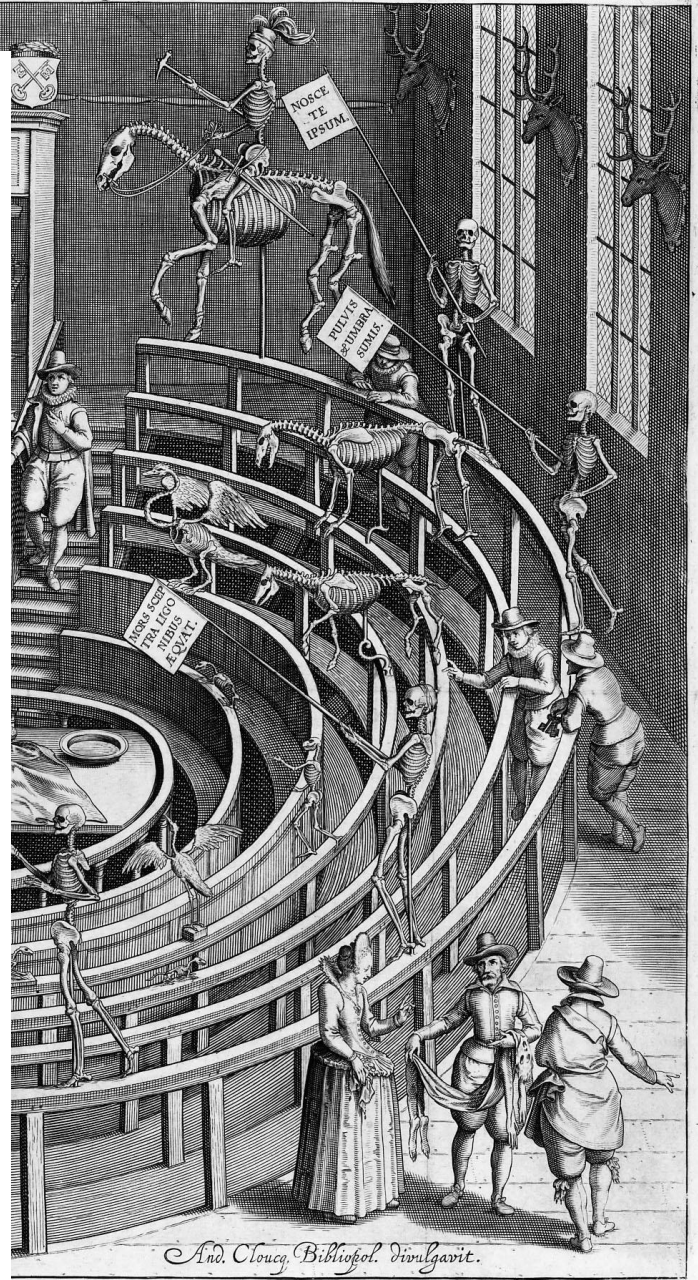


# Between a Backbone & Ribs

*How Science Obscures the Beauty of the Qur'an*

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JANUARY 29/2020

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**Abstract:** This paper examines contemporary arguments attempting to justify or discredit the scientific credibility of the Qur'an. Special consideration is given to Surah 86:5-7, which discusses the genesis of mankind through reproductive fluids emitted from "between the backbone and the ribs". Many contemporary Muslim apologists reference these verses as evidence of the Qur'an's miraculous scientific nature, while many anti-Islam polemicists believe it proof of its scientific inaccuracy. This paper argues both these approaches erroneous as neither conform to the scope of the Qur'an's intended message nor to the classical scholarly tradition of Quranic exegesis. Based on intertextual and extratextual evidence it is argued that the phrase "between the backbone and the ribs" should be interpreted as a euphemism for sexual relations between parents and as an allusion to humanity's first parents, Adam and Eve.

## Introduction

The first time I read the Qur'an was sometime back in 2008 when I was still completing my undergraduate degree in philosophy. At the time I was attending a private Catholic University run by a local Benedictine monastery. It was a highly academic institution, yet tranquil and devout – minus the occasional tipsy monk who would wander on to the school grounds. I recall him greeting the students with red cheeks and hearty laughs while he discussed the finer details of Christian theology in our local student cafeteria. I never partook in these disoriented conversations but noticed them from afar. If anything, the contradiction of virtue and drunkenness put a smile on my face. I would compare his state of being to my thoughts on religion at the time – when I started to lose my faith in Christianity. And although my degree wasn't necessarily the reason for my apostasy, it was beneficial in my journey to Islam. My degree was all about critical thinking and rationally assessing the thoughts of man. It certainly assisted me in reconciling many doubts I had about the conception of a triune god, the divinity of Jesus, and the authority of the Church. But it was the Qur'an which eventually brought my doubts to rest through the clarity and beauty of its message.

"Was it the Qur'an mentioning the Big Bang? Was it when the Qur'an mentioned embryology? Was it when it mentioned the boundary between fresh and saltwater?"

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are inquiries I often receive from Muslims regarding my reversion to Islam. For the over a decade now, my answer has remained the same. I give them a puzzled look and a frank response: “No, nothing of the sort.” The subsequent reaction to my comment is usually a mix between stunned confusion and an incredulous smile; a foreshadowing of an inevitable lecture on the Qur’an’s “scientific miracles” to relieve me of my ignorance.

Now, to be fair, I never saw these impromptu orations as ill-intentioned – quite the contrary – but they always brought to mind an unfortunate reality that many Muslims believe that science is the measure of the Qur’an’s divine nature, and that nothing else about the Qur’an really matters. And in those moments, I feel like my religion has been cheapened; completely undermined by superficial appeals to modern sensibilities.

You see, it never occurred to me that the Qur’an was miraculous because it revealed scientific truths. In fact, it never occurred to me that there was science therein to begin with. I have literally never read the Qur’an in this fashion. From the very first moment I opened a translation of the Qur’an and began reading Surah Al-Fatihah till the very end of Sura An-Nas, not one ayah, not one word, not one iota of the Revelations screamed out “science!” Rather, every utterance appeared to be referencing common sense observations, the life of the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions, or stories from previous scriptures. And to this day – as I now read it in Arabic – it still appears to me in this manner, albeit far more eloquently than before.

What strikes me as miraculous is the Qur’an’s coherency, its prose, and its power to influence, a power so remarkably other-worldly that it molded a seemingly insignificant group of desert dwelling merchants and farmers to fashion the most cosmopolitan civilization overnight, to overcome two of the most powerful empires of antiquity in only a few decades, and to expand a following beyond the boundaries of an arid land to the farthest points on earth; from the lushest jungles, to the greenest pastures, atop the highest mountains, through the tongues of every major known language, indiscriminate of every shade of skin, young and old, rich or poor.

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This is why I grimace when I read tabloid apologetics attempting to justify the Qur'an through contemporary science. For me, these sort of arguments obscure the beauty of the Revelation and rob it of its timeless message, reducing it to a set of 'facts' understandable only by those of us privileged to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But for something to be timeless, it needs to be understood by everyone, including the generations preceding us. However, proponents of these arguments will claim that the Qur'an's meanings are so vast that it can reveal itself differently to different people at different times in various ways. Although I agree with this notion to a degree, I believe many Muslims today have extended this principle beyond its intended scope, suggesting not only that the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions were oblivious to these interpretations – thereby indirectly implying them to be more ignorant than ourselves – but that the Qur'an's message is ultimately relative and unfixed. To me, such claims make the Qur'an appear capricious and a slave to the subjective lens of its readers, rather than allowing the Revelation to speak for itself.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary scholars on Qur'anic exegesis (both secular and religious) affirm my sentiments and cite historical precedent as evidence. For example, the late Andrew Rippin (d. 2016) contrast current exegetical trends with the classical scholarly tradition:

As an aside, it may be noted that especially some modern Qur'an interpreters have taken advantage of this flexibility of Arabic in their desire to derive modern science from the text of the Qur'an. This emphasizes a fundamental point that an exercise that considers the issue of historical context must be clear about its goals. Those who argue for science in the Qur'an generally take the position that while the historical context of the Qur'an is relevant, it does not dictate that the text was fully understandable in the time of Muhammad. Such interpreters more commonly take the approach of asserting that there are multiple meanings to the text and that a more 'true' meaning – a divinely intended message – has become apparent only in today's context. For most classical Muslim commentators, however, historical context is linked to contemporary intelligibility: that is, the life and milieu of Muhammad sets the context, and the text as intelligible to Muhammad himself (even if not all of his compatriots, let alone those who came later, fully understood the finer

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points of the text). So, it is a fundamental axiom of classical interpretation that Muhammad understood the text (to the extent that God allowed him access to its meaning) and that it ‘made sense’ within his historical context; that is, of course, a legal point in essence, embedded in the concept of Sunna, Muhammad’s practice, which was in full accord with the Qur’an and God’s wishes – Muhammad as the living Qur’an – but it also applies at the grammatical and textual level.<sup>1</sup>

As such, I find it surprising that others are surprised by my lack of enthusiasm for “scientific miracles” in the Qur’an. Not only is it an approach that has only been recently popularized since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (a topic that will not be discussed in detail), it lacks any real justification – such a reading is wholly unnatural to the intentions and scope of the Quranic message per intertextual and extratextual evidence. In step with this understanding, any notion of “scientific errors” should automatically be disregarded as well given that if the intention behind a text were to exclude any expression of scientific information it would be impossible to regard said text as “scientifically inaccurate”. But one would need to establish that intention first. To meet this challenge, I’ve have chosen to emphasize a particularly controversial set of verses which have been the focal point of both pro-Islam and anti-Islam polemics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Surah at-Tariq, verses 5-7.

## **“From Between the Backbone and the Ribs”**

Surah at-Tariq – roughly translated as ‘The Chapter of the Piercing Star’ or ‘Night Comer’ (lit. ‘Knocker’) – is the 86<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur’an revealed during the first half of the start of the Islamic movement. The chapter is quite short, only consisting of 17 short verses. However, this chapter has become an exegetical battle ground in the 21<sup>st</sup> century between Muslims seeking to validate the divine nature of the Qur’an and those who wish to invalidate it. The focal point of this conflict can be found in verses 5-7:

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Rippin (2013) “The Construction of the Arabian Historical Context,” in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur’anic Exegesis (2nd/8th – 9th/15th C.)*, Ed. Karen Bauer, p. 180.

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Let man see what he was created from. He was created from gushing liquid issuing from between the backbone and the ribs. (Q. 86:5-7)

These passages request man to observe [فَلْيَنْظُرِ] how he was created– to see that he was created from an ejected liquid [مَاءٍ دَافِقٍ] coming from between [يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بَيْنِ] the backbone and the ribs [الصُّلْبِ وَالتَّرَائِبِ]. Contemporary Muslim interpretations are generally unanimous that these verses be taken literally as an anatomical description of the region where reproductive fluids are produced and emitted. For example, conservative scholars like salafi shaykh Muhammad al-Munajjid, who runs the website *Islam Q&A*, adopts the following view:

So how come the Qur'an describes the emission of gushing water as coming from between the back and the ribs? The answer is that this is one of the scientific miracles of this great Book. Modern medicine has discovered that this place -- between the backbone and the ribs -- is the place where the cells that will form the testes first grow, and at a later stage of embryonic development they descend to the scrotum below the abdomen.<sup>2</sup>

This view seems to be derived from Dr. Zakir Naik, perhaps the most famous Islamic proselytizer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the course of his ministry Dr. Naik has expressed the exact same view in several of his lectures and published works.<sup>3</sup> Even more liberal-minded scholars seem to have adopted his perspective (albeit with minor variances). For example, shaykh Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri, founder of Minhaj ul-Qur'an International. In his *Creation of Man: A Review of the Qur'an and Modern Embryology*, ul-Qadri writes:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/118879/commentary-on-the-verse-he-is-created-from-a-water-gushing-forth%C2%A0proceeding-from-between-the-back-bone-and-the-ribs-at-taariq-866-7>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://islamguiden.com/arkiv/quran\\_science.pdf](http://islamguiden.com/arkiv/quran_science.pdf)

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Anatomical and physiological studies reveal to us that semen is a prerequisite for conception. A male gamete or sperm (spermatozoon) unites with a female gamete or oocyte (ovum) to form a single cell called a zygote. Moreover, the seminal passages do indeed lie between the sacrum referred to as *sulb* in the Qurā'nic verse and the symphysis pubis referred to as *tarā'ib*.<sup>4</sup>

Even modern translators and exegetes of the Qur'an have taken this approach. For example, the British born Abdullah Yusuf Ali (d. 1953), who fashioned the most popular English translation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stated the following in his footnotes on these verses:

A man's seed is the quintessence of his body. It proceeds from his loins, i.e., from his back between the hip-bones and his ribs. His back-bone is the source and symbol of his strength and personality. In the spinal cord and in the brain is the directive energy of the central nervous system, and this directs all action, organic and psychic. The spinal cord is continuous with the Medulla Oblongata in the brain.<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad Asad, an Austro-Hungarian convert to Islam who developed a more contemporary English translation of the Qur'an, likewise interpreted 86:5-7 in an anatomical fashion, although he renders the phrase “between the backbone and the ribs” [الصُّلْبِ وَالتَّرَائِبِ] contrary to the majority of his peers. His translation – “between the loins [of the man] and the pelvic arc [of the woman]” – is largely an invention of his

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<sup>4</sup> [http://minhajbook.kortechx.netdna-cdn.com/images-books/creation-man/creation-man\\_1.pdf](http://minhajbook.kortechx.netdna-cdn.com/images-books/creation-man/creation-man_1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.alim.org/library/quran/surah/english/86/YAT#ayanote-6071>

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own preferences. In his footnotes he openly admits that his translation of التَّرَائِبِ is anomalous in Quranic lexicography:

The plural noun tara'ib, *rendered by me* as "pelvic arch", has also the meaning of "ribs" or "arch of bones"; according to most of the authorities who have specialized in the etymology of rare Quranic expressions this term relates specifically to female anatomy (Taj al-'Arus).<sup>6</sup>

But these anatomical interpretations aren't solely held by those who believe in Islam, but also by those who oppose the religion. The disagreement is found in the scientific accuracy of these passages. Contrary to the aforementioned scholars and translators, anti-Islam polemicists believe these verses were contrived by someone still under the influence of antiquated Greek medicine. Sam Shamoun, a dedicated anti-Islam blogger, is one of the most prolific in spreading this opposing view to the masses. His article "The Qur'an on Semen Production" appears to be one of the main source texts for many anti-Islam polemicists on the Internet. Therein he states the following:

In light of the preceding considerations, we find that the interpretation of S. 86:5-7 proposed by [Muslim apologists] is more of a private interpretation that seeks to make science the standard by which the Quran is understood and judged. In so doing, these individuals must ignore the authentic interpretation of their Prophet and his companions in order to avoid the gross scientific errors contained within both the Quran and Hadith.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Asad (2003) "Surah 86: That Which Comes in the Night," *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 1079, fn. 3.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.answering-islam.org/Quran/Science/semenproduction.htm>



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The anti-Islam blog WikiIslam, owned by the organization Ex-Muslims of North America, utilizes many of Shamoun’s arguments, but adds that the Qur’an’s error rests in borrowing from the views of the ancient Greek philosopher, Hippocrates (d. 375 BCE):

Qur'an 86:7 says that sperm originates from the backbones and the ribs, a theory similar to another erroneous theory proposed by Hippocrates in 5th century BC (1000 years before Islam). Hippocrates taught that semen comes from all the fluid in the body, diffusing from the brain into the spinal marrow, before passing through the kidneys and via the testicles into the penis.<sup>8</sup>

The above examples represent the mainstream opinions shared between popular Islam apologists and anti-Islam polemics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In summary, an anatomical interpretation is widely considered an authentic interpretation of Q. 86:5-7. But is this exegesis a valid one? Do these modern interpretations align with the classical readings of the text and the “Qur’anic tone” of communication, or are they based purely on speculation? To answer these questions, let us begin with the extratextual evidence at hand: the opinions by classical scholars of Qur’anic exegesis or *tafsir*.

## Formative and Classical Opinions

The Qur’an was revealed gradually over a period of 23 years through the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in spoken format (‘Qur’an’ lit. trans. ‘Recitation’). During this time, the Prophet (ﷺ) and his followers understood and implemented the message through their words and actions, both of which were largely recorded in future biographies (*sirah*) and memorized narrations (*hadith*). Not surprisingly, some of these records discuss the

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<sup>8</sup> [https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Quran\\_and\\_Semen\\_Production](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Quran_and_Semen_Production)

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meaning of certain verses in the Qur'an. However, for those first few decades during the Prophet's (ﷺ) ministry and after his death, there was no formalized attempt to catalogue these records or produce a methodology of authentication. Only roughly after a century did the formative period of a Quranic exegetical science begin.<sup>9</sup> This development was primarily in response to a need that suddenly manifested itself during the early Islamic conquests – to teach the newly converted non-Arab population how to understand the Qur'an's lexicon.<sup>10</sup> Those initially tasked with this endeavor were from among the companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) himself and considered the most knowledgeable among their peers. They became the first professional exegetes (*mufasssirun*).

## The First Experts

Naturally, these professionals attracted students who eventually would go on to become experts themselves, fashioning their own axioms and procedures for determining authentic readings of the text (often as a means to validate or expound on their teachers' views). Among these students included Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), credited as the first known exegete to write a comprehensive *tafsir* of every verse in the Qur'an. As such, it is a very simple commentary with little to no supporting extratextual nor intertextual evidence. As Nicolai Sinai notes, Muqatil's exegesis "belongs to a relatively primitive stage of Qur'anic exegesis: grammatical analyses, quotations from Arabic poetry and reading variants are absent or used only very sparingly, and chains of transmitters (*asānīd*, sg. *Isnād*) are rarely given in the text."<sup>11</sup> For Muqatil, reading with proper recitation and understanding rudimentary semantics were his primary aims, aims largely restrained by the limitations of his practice (there weren't many prior experts to reference nor had much of the *sirah* and *hadith* been compiled and authenticated during

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolai Sinai (2014) "The Qur'anic Commentary of Muqatil b. Sulayman," in *Tafsir and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, Ed. Andreas Görke, pp. 122-123.

<sup>10</sup> Kees Verteegh (2015) "Lexical Explanation in Early Qur'anic Commentary," *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, Ed. S.R. Burge, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> "The Qur'anic Commentary of Muqatil b. Sulayman," p. 114.

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his time).<sup>12</sup> Typical of *tafsir* during the formative period, these newly sanctioned professionals were just starting to understand how to explicate their opinions in a structured and coherent manner, having little work with other than what they heard directly from their teachers and peers. Not until the 9<sup>h</sup> century do we begin to observe a systemization characteristic of an actual ‘science’ of exegesis. For that, we may credit the Persian scholar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923) and his commentary *Compendium of the Explanation in the Interpretation of the Qur’an (Jāmi’ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān)*. Claude Gilliot summarized at least four maxims which guided Tabari’s exegesis:

Among the most important concerns of Tabari in writing his commentary we can count: 1. *al-qirā’a al-mutawātira* (or *al-qirā’a al-mustafīda*), that is, the so-called uninterrupted (authentic) reading, also called the ‘reading of the people of the cities’ (*qirā’at ahl al-amṣār*), that is, the cities of Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra and Damascus. 2. That the interpretation should not contradict the interpretation of the ‘majority’ consensus (*ijmā’*, or *mā ajma’a ‘alayhi...*) of the (early) exegetes (*ahl al-tafsīr* or *ahl al-ta’wīl*). 3. Added to this second principle is a third axiom: that it is not permitted to interpret the Qur’an according to one’s own opinion (*bi-ra’yihī*). 4. A corollary of the second and third axioms is that the Qur’an cannot be interpreted according to one’s own opinion, basing oneself on the practice of the language of the Arabs (*bi-ra’yihī ‘alā madhabi kalāmi’l-arabi*).<sup>13</sup>

Out of these principles, half are dedicated to appeals to ‘expert consensus’; first with respect to conforming to a certain praxis of recitation, and second to not conflicting with prior professional opinion. In other words, Tabari means to confine understanding the

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<sup>12</sup> The first attempt to compile known *hadith* was by Malik b. Anas (d. 795) with his *Muwatta*. The *sirah* literature was just beginning to be compiled during this time as well. Muhammad b. Ishaq (d. 761) offered the first comprehensive account of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) life based primarily on oral traditions.

<sup>13</sup> Claude Gilliot (2015) “Lexicography in the Great Qur’anic Commentary of al-Wahidi,” *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Qur’anic Exegesis*, Ed. S.R. Burge, p. 123.

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Qur'an within the tradition of his peers, limiting any means towards individual opinion outside its scope. However, he does leave some space for new ideas by taking a negative approach towards contradicting scholars of the past – one need not conform *as long as* they are consistent with the plurality of previous interpretations.

The latter half of Tabari's maxims are more explicit in limiting the reader and serve to reemphasize the former. For added measure, he clarifies what constitutes a 'proper reference', stating that Arabic poetry in and of itself is not valid evidence by itself to judge the meaning of a specific word or passage (although he would admit it as supplementary). That said, he was one of the first exegetes to use hadith whenever possible, considering it among the *ijma* of scholarly opinion. This may have been due in part to the fact that at this point in Islamic history, *hadith* were far more accessible to the scholarly class.

Future generations of *mufasssirun* would continue to adopt Tabari's maxims, building on them with little variation and developing their own supplementary principles, among them the idea that the best method of interpreting the Qur'an is by the Qur'an. The Syrian exegete Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) was the first to formalize this principle and place it at the top of the hierarchy of hermeneutical methods. In his short treatise, *An Introduction to the Foundations of Quranic Exegesis (Muqaddima fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr)* he answers the rhetorical question "What is the best way to interpret the Qur'an?":

The best way to interpret the Qur'ān is by the Qur'ān. For what is elliptical (*ujmila*) in one place is explained more fully in another and what is in summary form in one place is expounded in another. If one cannot find the interpretation through this method then one can have recourse to the Sunna, for the Sunna expounds the Qur'ān and clarifies it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Walid Saleh (2010) "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics," *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, Ed. Yousef Rapaport and Sahab Ahmed, pp. 144-145

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For Ibn Taymiyyah, intertextual evidence should come before the extratextual – Quranic verses can be explained in reference to each other by mapping parallels and seeing how one expounds or clarifies the other. In the event where obscurity remains, the extratextual (*sirah* and *ahadith*) may be utilized to fill in any gaps. What we find here is a holistic approach towards interpretation which takes the Qur’an as arbiter and the Sunnah (Prophetic example of Muhammad (ﷺ)) as supplementary. Unsurprisingly, Ibn Taymiyyah draws influence for this methodology from the Qur’an itself:

O you who believe, obey Allah, the Messenger, and those in command among you. If you disagree about something, refer it back to Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best thing to do and gives the best result (Q. 4:59)

However, it would be an erroneous romanticization to assume every exegete agreed on the primacy of certain principles, much less on what constituted a ‘valid’ interpretation. While there is a great deal of conformity, exegetes were often influenced by their own political and theological biases and debated their views vehemently in their *tafasir*. This was especially the case during the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Mu’tazila (Rationalists) and Ahl al-Hadith (People of Hadith) scholars debated the extent metaphor and independent reasoning could be used to interpret the Qur’an.<sup>15</sup> The main point of contention was on the nature of the Qur’an itself. The former argued that it was created whereas the latter believed it was uncreated.<sup>16</sup> Eventually the former was deemed heretical and the latter went on to become the orthodox school of thought. Despite theological differences, some Mutazilites were prominent lexicographers and *mufasssirun* who were well respected by their peers. Even later scholars who subscribed to the doctrine went on to author *tafasir* that were referenced and utilized by those of the orthodox persuasion.

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<sup>15</sup> “Lexical Explanations in Early Qur’anic Commentaries”, pp. 55-56.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1669>

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The most famous example was the Persian Abu al-Qasim Mahmud ibn Umar al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) (although it is said he later repented and became Sunni).

## Classical Commentaries on Q. 86:5-7

With a rudimentary understanding of how the *tafsir* tradition came into existence and the ways in which early *mufasssirun* developed their profession, we should now examine how many of them interpreted the focus of this study: Surah 86:5-7. For this section of the paper we need only reference a few examples given that most classical exegetes generally agreed on how to interpret these verses, especially with regard to the reproductive fluids and the word for ‘backbone’ (*sulb*). However, there were some minor disagreements surrounding the word for ‘ribs’ (*tara’ib*). That said, let us begin our analysis with commentary from the aforementioned 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Imam Tabari.

Tabari begins his exegesis by simply defining *sulb* (الصُّلْبِ) as ‘backbone’ but goes into detail listing the various opinions surrounding *tara’ib* (الْتَّرَائِبِ). After a brief discussion, he settles on a valid reading based in Arab linguistic praxis: “The correct opinion in that, according to us, is the opinion of those who say it [*tara’ib*] is the neck-area of the woman, where it lies from her chest, because that is a known-usage in the Arabic language.”<sup>17</sup> After a rudimentary explanation of semantics, he says nothing more about the verse nor its implications; there is no discussion in whether its literal or metaphorical, no references to *ahadith*, no references to intertextual parallels, nor any mention of the medical sciences.

Although, what is interesting about his opinion is his understanding of the word *tara’ib*, a masculine plural noun which literally means “ribs”.<sup>18</sup> Curiously, however, Tabari insists that the common usage is peculiar to the upper chest of females based on the praxis of Arab linguists. Subsequent prominent exegetes followed suit, agreeing with Tabari’s

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<sup>17</sup> <https://furqan.co/tabari/86/7>

<sup>18</sup> [http://corpus.quran.com/wordmorphology.jsp?location=\(86:7:5\)](http://corpus.quran.com/wordmorphology.jsp?location=(86:7:5))

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overall analysis with little to no additional commentary, among them being Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi (d. 1076)<sup>19</sup>, Abu Muhammad al-Husayn ibn Mas'ud al-Baghawi (d. 1112)<sup>20</sup>, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abu Bakr al-Qurtubi (d. 1273)<sup>21</sup>, Imad ad-Din Ismail Ibn Kathir (1373)<sup>22</sup>, and Abu al-Fadl Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505).<sup>23</sup> Of these, only Qurtubi gave a passing endorsement for the *possibility* that the verse could be taken literally as an anatomical description of where reproductive fluids are generated. In subsequent commentary he declares there to be no contradiction between the verse and Greek scientific thought: "...and it was said [by the Greeks] that men's fluid comes down from the brain...and that doesn't go in conflict with saying between backbone, because it came down from the brain, but passes down between the backbone and the ribs."<sup>24</sup> Regardless, his opinion here is a far cry from modern exegetes.

Perhaps the most contentious classical exegetes on this verse were Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). With regard to the former, Razi was more explicit about using Greek science in his *tafsir*. Responding to a group of skeptics who felt the Qur'an was incorrect with respect to the production of reproductive fluids – claiming that the brain was the sole producer of semen – he states the following: "There is no doubt that the greatest aid in the generation of semen is the brain, for it is the leader...but it [semen] travels down the author of the body [which is] the back. For this reason, Allah singled out these body parts."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "*tara'ib* is the place where the neckless is hanged on the breast, and that is the opinion of all people of language." <https://furqan.co/albaseet/86/7>

<sup>20</sup> "'Proceeding from the backbone and ribs,' meaning the backbone of the man and the ribs of the woman. 'Ribs' is plural of *tarbia* [meaning chest], which are the bones of the chest and neck." <https://furqan.co/baghawi/86/7>

<sup>21</sup> <https://furqan.co/qurtubi/86/7>

<sup>22</sup> "The backbone of the man and the ribs of the woman. It (the fluid) is yellow and fine in texture. The child will not be born except from both of them (i.e., their sexual fluids)." <https://furqan.co/ibn-katheer/86/7>

<sup>23</sup> "...issuing from between the backbone of the man and the breast-bones of the woman." <https://furqan.co/aldu-almanthoor/86/7>

<sup>24</sup> <https://furqan.co/qurtubi/86/7>

<sup>25</sup> <https://furqan.co/alrazi/86/7>

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Ibn Qayyim was more concerned with semantics than science, but also differed from the majority of exegetes. Although he affirmed the consensus surrounding the word *sulb*, he disagreed with the consensus on *tara'ib*, opting for a more literal reading of the text:

There is no disagreement that the meaning of backbone (*sulb*) is the backbone of a man. There is disagreement over 'ribs' (*tara'ib*). It is said that the meaning are his ribs as well, which are the bones of the chest, what is between the collar bone to the breast. It is said that it means the ribs of the woman, but the first meaning is more apparent. (Allah) did not say 'proceeding from the backbone and the ribs', so it must be the fluid of a man coming out from *between* these two different parts.<sup>26</sup>

Ibn Qayyim offers no additional intertextual nor extratextual evidence for his position other than for the phrase *min bayni* ("from between"). Contrary to previous exegetes who believed this means "from both", Ibn Qayyim suggests that "from between" infers the *space* between two objects. He bases his view on parallels with the grammar of Q. 16:66.<sup>27</sup> Given his divergence from the majority of scholars, his views were largely regarded as a minor opinion with little weight, although ironically its been adopted as the mainstream position since the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What we gather from the classical *tafasir* on 86:5-7 is a clear lack of evolution from formative methods of interpretation; most exegetes were simply concerned with basic semantics and proper readings – no more, no less. The majority of those surveyed never argued for a literal or metaphorical interpretation of the verses nor did they provide any extratextual evidence beyond the consensus of previous scholars. Neither do they

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<sup>26</sup> <https://furqan.co/ibn-alqayyim/86/7>

<sup>27</sup> "And indeed, for you in grazing livestock is a lesson. We give you drink from what is in their bellies - between excretion and blood - pure milk, palatable to drinkers." (Q. 16:66)



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attempt to cite *hadith* as evidence for their interpretations of *sulb* and *tara'ib*. That said, when interpreting the latter, they gave clues to its figurative meaning by explicitly arguing against its literal usage.

As for those who went against the grain, they were few and varied in their opinions. Some scholars, such as Qurtubi, made passive additions to prior commentaries by allowing the possibility of Greek science to be included in a non-contradictory manner. Others, like Al-Razi, were far more brazen in their support for Greek thought, using it to defend the verses against skeptics who denied their scientific accuracy. Those who went even further against the grain, such as Ibn Qayyim, relied on what they saw as apparent in the text itself.

What makes the minor opinions fascinating is not that they oppose the majority or attempt to interpret beyond the scope of previous exegetes, but exactly *when* and *how* their opinions began to develop. Al-Razi's exegesis was fashioned in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, Qurtubi's in the 13<sup>th</sup>, and Ibn Qayyim's in the 14<sup>th</sup>. These time periods are significant in that they marked the peak of the Golden Age of Islamic civilization when Muslim scientists had finally fully incorporated and progressed Greek science. At this point in Islamic history, Muslims were the height of the world in scientific and technological advancements – it not only affected the way they saw the world, but themselves, their values, their traditions, and even their faith. This would certainly explain the sudden inclusion of Greek science into the *tafsir* tradition along well as its previous absence – an absence that may reveal the original intent of these verses as having nothing to do with Greek thought. Although Ibn Qayyim doesn't flirt with the idea as much, his departure from the *ijma* of Arabic philologists is quite striking and will be discussed at a later point. However, what he does share in common with Razi and Qurtubi is a complete violation of Tabari and earlier exegetes' basic maxims for judging a verse on personal preference (i.e. without evidence from *ijma*, *ahadith*, etc.).

Further evidence of how Greek science being incorporated into *tafsir* was a departure from the established norms of the *mufassirun* may be found in the thoughts of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Andalusian scholar, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Muhammad al-Shatibi (d. 1380). In his *Al-Muwafaqāt fi Usul al-Shari'ah (The Reconciliation of the Fundamentals*

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of *Islamic Law*), he takes time to comment on this phenomenon while discussing the Qur'an's place in jurisprudence:

All of the righteous predecessors – of the Prophet's companions and those who followed them – were more knowledgeable of the Qur'an and its sciences than us. None of their narrations have reached us concerning this claim [the scientific interpretation of the Qur'an]...Had there been a contribution or an explanation made by the predecessors regarding this we would have received it and this would have helped us clarify the basic foundations of this subject. However, this is not the case – meaning this approach did not exist in their time – and this proves that the Qur'an does not intend to confirm any of their claims...[Therefore,] it is not permissible to add to the Qur'an all that it does not entail in order to understand it. What may be used as supporting knowledge is what the Arabs knew, as with this we understand the knowledge of juristic rulings found in the Quran.<sup>28</sup>

Although Shatibi's argument appears simple, it's quite profound. Given that the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions had no knowledge of 'scientific truths' in the Qur'an (here he refers to Greek science, the standard of his day) – and there is no evidence they utilized or justified such an approach – it must be invalid. Shatibi essentially shows that the Qur'an never intended to reveal anything related to Greek science, much less did the early *mufasssirun* see it as such. Therefore, it is unwarranted to read Q. 86:5-7 as a literal anatomical description based in Greek medicine.

However, some have argued that there is ample evidence to suggest that the early Muslims were in fact influenced by Greek medicine. Perhaps the main proponent of this view was William Campbell, who attempted to compare Galenic embryology with Quranic references, claiming the latter plagiarized the former. That said, his claims have

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<sup>28</sup> Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Muhammad al-Shatibi al-Gharnati (n.d.) *Al-Muwafaqāt fi Usul al-Shari'ah*, V.2, pp. 80-81.

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largely been refuted.<sup>29</sup> Some of the main issues with his argument are that he refuses to acknowledge the many differences between Galen's (d. 205) views and the Quranic narrative and that the earliest Greek translations of the Qur'an didn't even utilize Hellenic terminology, suggesting a clear disparity. Furthermore, classical scholars were keen on insisting a distinction between the medicine of the early Muslims and later developments. For example, the famous historian and sociologist, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) had this to say on the matter:

Civilized Bedouins have a kind of medicine which is mainly based upon individual experience. They inherit its use from the shaykhs and old women of the tribe. Some of it may occasionally be correct. However, that kind of medicine is not based upon any natural norm or upon any conformity (of the treatment) to temper the humors. Much of this sort of medicine existed among the Arabs. They had well-known physicians, such as al-Harith b. Kaladah and others. The medicine mentioned in religious tradition is of the (Bedouin) type.<sup>30</sup>

Let us also recall that Imam Razi felt obligated to refute skeptics who disagreed with the Quranic narrative's supposed consistency with Greek thought, showcasing that those knowledgeable of the latter weren't convinced of the former's conformity. Altogether, those who insist that the Author of the Qur'an was influenced by Hellenic medicine do so on specious grounds.

But then how should one read Q. 86:5-7? As of today, there is very little to garner from early exegetes on these verses. More importantly, why did they seemingly refuse – or were disinterested – to expound beyond proper readings and basic semantics? My hypothesis is that early *mufassirun* may have seen no need to do so, as they were

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.hamzatzortzis.com/did-the-prophet-muhammad-plagiarise-hellenic-embryology/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Khaldun (1958) *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Trans. Franz Rosenthal, p. 150

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primarily interested in other aspects of the Qur'an that were the focus of theological and political debates. Another possible reason for their lack of clarification is that they may have initially lacked enough evidence (*ahadith*, *sirah* literature, etc.) to support their views or considered the verses too ambiguous to comment on, opting to refrain from offering an unsubstantiated opinion due to academic integrity. But what about later exegetes? With the rise of Greek thought as a means to interpret the Qur'an, medieval scholars may have also felt no need to clarify because they saw an obvious concordance between these verses and the mainstream science of their time – their biases may have led them to disregard prior methods and see no need to offer alternative explanations.

Is an alternative explanation even viable? Is it possible to expound on these verses without referring to modern science? Can we build upon the work of earlier exegetes without contradicting them? And is there a need to develop an authentic interpretation in light of contemporary debate over their meaning? Given the above, it seems these are questions in need of answering. But before providing those answers, we should first examine the nature of the Qur'an with respect to its themes and tone to see if there is any intertextual evidence we can derive in support of this endeavor.

## How the Qur'an Speaks (about sex?)

In order to properly understand the Qur'an, we must first understand what it says about itself and how its message is conveyed and should be understood by the masses. Only then will we be able to begin fruitfully deriving its meanings and the weight of scholarly opinion with respect to its proper interpretation. First, we must know what the purpose and scope of the Qur'an are:

This [Qur'an] is enlightenment for mankind and guidance and mercy for a people who are certain [in faith]. (Q. 45:20)

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So, We have revealed an Arabic Quran to you, in order that you may warn the Mother of Cities [Mecca] and all who live nearby. And warn [especially] about the Day of Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in the Garden and some in the blazing Flame. (Q. 42:7)

And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ. (Q. 5:48)

The Author instructs us that the Qur'an is meant to be a "guidance and mercy" for those who believe, a "warning" to those who are unaware of the afterlife (its rewards and consequences) and as a "judge" over previous scriptures and belief communities. The guidance it purports to offer is religious and ethical in nature, specifically for the those who are already certain of its message. In other words, the Qur'an declares its guidance specific to believers and is generally apathetic towards convincing those who doubt its authenticity. The Author even corrects the Prophet (ﷺ) for desiring to convince certain skeptics of the Qur'an's Divine status, stating that only Allah has the power to guide people and no one else (Q. 28:56). This suggests that the proofs and arguments the Qur'an attest to are not meant to be used as a means to convince through debate but are merely for the believers to strengthen their convictions. More importantly, it implies that the Qur'an's miraculous nature is in no need of external evidence to validate its message – it is content with itself and what it offers. The implications here should be obvious: scientific accuracy is the least of the Qur'an's concerns, because its intention has nothing to do with science to begin with, despite erroneous claims to the contrary.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Although the Qur'an often mentions visible physical phenomenon, it never goes beyond this to inform the listener of how these things work. Some Muslims and anti-Muslim polemicists have argued that the Qur'an contains "everything" because

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The limitations of its scope are implied elsewhere within the text, such as when it commands believers to refer their disagreements on a matter to the Messenger (ﷺ) himself (Q. 4:59). Had the Qur'an claimed it contained everything in toto, there would be no need to refer to anyone outside of the message itself.

However, the scope of the Qur'an is not only limited in its context and audience, but also in its delivery. The Qur'an itself states that it was revealed in a specific language for the sake of a specific community (only later to be shared with the rest of the world). Numerous verses are explicit in this respect. For example:

Indeed, We have sent it down as an *Arabic Qur'an* that you might understand. (Q. 12:2)

And thus, We have revealed it as an *Arabic legislation*. And if you should follow their inclinations after what has come to you of knowledge, you would not have against Allah any ally or any protector. (Q. 13:37)

And thus, We have sent it down as an *Arabic Qur'an* and have diversified therein the warnings that perhaps they will avoid [sin] or it would cause them remembrance. (Q. 20:113)

It is an *Arabic Qur'an*, without any deviance that they might become righteous. (Q. 39:28)

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of the verse: "And [mention] the Day when We will resurrect among every nation a witness over them from themselves. And We will bring you, [O Muhammad], as a witness over your nation. And We have sent down to you the Book as *clarification for all things* and as guidance and mercy and good tidings for the Muslims." (Q. 16:89) However, the "all things" refers to the context of religious beliefs and the content the Qur'an intends to engage with. The majority of *mufasssirin* limited the context of "all things" in this manner. For example, Imam Suyuti stated the following: "And We have revealed to you the Book the Qur'an as a clarification of all things that people might need concerning the Law and as a guidance from error and a mercy and good tidings of Paradise to those who submit and affirm the Oneness of God." <https://furqan.co/jalalayn/16/89>

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A Book whose verses have been detailed, an *Arabic Qur'an* for a people who know... (Q. 41:3)

Indeed, We have made it an *Arabic Qur'an* that you might understand. (Q. 43:3)

And before it was the scripture of Moses to lead and as a mercy. And this is a confirming Book in an *Arabic tongue* to warn those who have wronged and as good tidings to the doers of good. (Q. 46:12)

What the Qur'an is informing its readers is that its message is based in the Arabic language, specifically understood in the context of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia; its semantics, grammar, syntax, idioms, etc. Therefore, our understanding of the message must accompany an understanding of how the Arabic language was understood and utilized by its first intended audience – the eventual conveyors of the message to the world. Likewise, we must understand the various references the Qur'an makes to individuals, places, and things that the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions would be aware of.<sup>32</sup> As Herber Berg aptly concludes, “the context of the Qur'an is the life of Muhammad”.<sup>33</sup>

The analytically minded would be inclined to question the Qur'an's supposed universal clarity given its limited scope. How can the Qur'an be considered a message from the Creator of the universe if it was only revealed in one language and limited to a specific group of people? This question has been discussed and answered by both traditional

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<sup>32</sup> “As we have seen above, recipients [of a message] need contextual information to understand the intended meaning. If such information is not accessible to them, they are likely to fail to understand the speaker's intended meaning. Similarly, if recipients of the Qur'anic text lack access to the knowledge they need to process the meanings of its language, they are unlikely to succeed in uncovering the intended meanings, including those meanings indicated by the relations between the themes/sections of suras. [For example,] A verse such as “May the hands of Abu Lahab be ruined, and may he be ruined too” (Q 111:1) is not understandable in the absence of the knowledge of who Abu Lahab is...” – Salwa M. S. El-Awa (2007) “Linguistic Structure,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Ed. Andrew Rippin, pp. 66-67.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert Berg (2007) “Context: Muhammad,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Ed. Andrew Rippin, p. 1

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Islamic and secular scholars for generations; a discussion outside the scope of this paper (no pun intended). However, their views may best be summarized by undermining the erroneous assumption about its universality. The fact of the matter is the Qur'an never declares that it is meant for everyone or that everything it states is necessarily 'clear':

It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses definite in meaning – they are the foundation of the Book – and others ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord." And no one will be reminded except those of understanding. (Q. 3:7)

The Qur'an specifies that there are verses in the text which are "specific" and others "ambiguous", and that only those "firm in knowledge" will accept it. This implies that only a certain type of person will understand what the Qur'an is saying and accept its message, knowing full well that there are certain passages which cannot be fully understood, either on account of their own limitations or the limitations imposed by the Author himself. In other words, the Qur'an must be *learned* – it is for those who come to the text with the intention of comprehending it beyond face value. Likewise, the Qur'an's clarity must be understood as specific to what it makes itself clear *about*. As Mustansir Mir explains:

If the Qur'an indeed is a clear book, then how does one explain, on the one hand, the difficulty encountered by Muhammad's companions in comprehending parts of the Qur'an and, on the other hand, the Qur'an's acknowledgment of the presence of ambiguity in it? The answer is twofold. First, the claim of any book to be clear does not necessarily mean that all its readers, regardless of their backgrounds – that is, their age, experience,



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mental acumen, level of knowledge, and linguistic ability – will understand it equally well or fully. Second, clarity is not to be confused with simplicity: a document will be called “clear” if it treats its subject in language that is clear relative to that subject. This brings out the relevance of the word *mubin*. The Qur’an is clear not only in a passive sense – “clear in itself – but also in an active sense – it clarifies the particular subject it treats, it is suitable for presenting a certain subject, and judgment on its clarity should be passed in reference to that subject. In fact, in the case of the Qur’an, the first meaning of the descriptive word *mubin* – “clear in itself” – arises as a corollary of the second – “that which clarifies (something else).”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the Qur’an’s clarity must be understood in light of its subject and intended audience, both immediate and expected – not *every* subject and not *every* person. The Qur’an even explicitly specifies what it means by ‘clarity’, stating its message is meant to ‘clear up’ variances and disagreements between previous revelations and religious communities:

And We sent not before you except men to whom We revealed [Our messages]. So ask the people of the message if you do not know. [We sent them] with clear proofs and written ordinances. And We revealed to you the message [The Qur’an] that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them and that they might give thought. (Q. 16:43-44)

O People of the Scripture, there has come to you Our Messenger making clear to you much of what you used to conceal of the [previous] Scripture and overlooking much. There has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book by which Allah guides those who pursue His pleasure to the ways of peace and brings them out from darkness into the light, by His permission, and guides them to a straight path. (Q. 5:15-16)

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<sup>34</sup> Mustansir Mir (2007) “Language,” in *Blackwell Companion on the Qur’an*, Ed. Andrew Rippin, p. 89.

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However, this is not to say that most people won't understand its message nor that those who cannot genuinely understand it will be made culpable; it is simply obvious that the Qur'an intends its readers to commit some effort in using their minds to comprehend. On the contrary, there are those who believe the Qur'an should communicate itself like some Divine IKEA manual; an overly simplified pamphlet of commands available in multiple languages right outside the box. But is this an accurate description of how a Creator would communicate His message to the world? I would argue that such a desire is an insult to the collective intellect of humanity. What would a Revelation from an Omniscient Creator be if it didn't test humanity's ability to use the very rationality gifted to them? Why would a Creator treat His creation as generally incapable? More importantly, why would a Creator restrict Himself to banal statements just to appease the facile objections of a minority of intellectually lazy individuals? One would think the Creator has the right to be an elitist and expect the best of His creation. Or perhaps my standards for rationality are much higher than the typical "skeptic".

Knowing that the Qur'an has its own scope, an intended audience, and an intended language, we must now know what the Qur'an's tone is with respect to certain subjects. Given that Q. 86:5-7 discuss reproductive fluids emitted from a certain place, its context implies one sexual in nature. Thus, to get a better grasp of what these verses' meaning, we should examine how the Qur'an addresses the subject of sex overall.

## Let's Talk About Sex

The Qur'an has around 150 references to sexual intercourse, sexual partners, genitalia, and reproductive fluids. Nearly half of those references are implied in the term *zawj* or *zawja* (زَوْجَيْنِ), which translate as "spouse", "mate", or "pair" and carry a much broader meaning beyond sexual relations. However, the other half are focused entirely on sexual intimacy. That said, what's fascinating about these references aren't their frequency, but how they're communicated by the Author of the Qur'an. The 'tone' is consistently indirect, lacking even a semblance of candidness in its treatment of the subject. This consistency is so striking that an observant reader will notice only one literary device utilized throughout the Qur'an's corpus – that of euphemism.

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Even so, translations don't always make these euphemisms all that obvious, sometimes rendering certain expressions literally and other times replacing them with their intended meaning. However, the Arabic is far more explicit. Take for example the word *zina* (الزَّيْنَا), which is typically rendered as “adultery”, “fornication”, and “unlawful sexual intercourse”. While these are accurate translations, they do not provide us the literal meaning of the word. As Edward Lane (d. 1876) noted:

In the proper language of the Arabs, الزَّيْنَا signifies *the mounting of a thing*; and in the language of the law it signifies the commission of the act first mentioned above [adultery].<sup>35</sup>

“Mounting” appears an allusion to the unruly sexual behavior of animals; based entirely on lust and free of any legal boundaries. If one were to employ imagery which didn't explicitly mention the act of sexual immorality itself, this would appear apt.

Other euphemisms for sex include “approach”, “touch”, and even the imagery of being “clothing” for one's spouse. When it comes to genitalia and reproductive fluids, the Qur'an remains consistent in this respect, utilizing terms like “chastity” and “modesty” for the former and “despised fluid” and “ejected fluid” for the latter. Not once does the Qur'an refer to either of these in a blunt fashion, but simply signals to them through the use of figurative or vague language meant to conceal what it deems as insufficiently appropriate for its message to be conveyed. These references and their euphemistic meanings can be surveyed below (Table 1):

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<sup>35</sup> Lane's Lexicon, p. 1260.

Q. Verse	Excerpt	Arabic → Lit. Trans. → Euph. Meaning
2:187	It has been made permissible for you the night preceding fasting to go to your wives <sup>1</sup> . They are clothing <sup>2</sup> for you and you are clothing <sup>2</sup> for them. Allah knows that you used to deceive yourselves, so He accepted your repentance and forgave you. So now, have relations with them <sup>3</sup> and seek that which Allah has decreed for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night]. Then complete the fast until the sunset. And do not have relations with them <sup>4</sup> as long as you are staying for worship in the mosques. These are the limits [set by] Allah, so do not approach them <sup>5</sup> . Thus, does Allah make clear His ordinances to the people that they may become righteous.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rafathu</i> (الرَّفَثُ) → “to approach” → have sex</li> <li>2. <i>Libasun</i> (لِبَاسٌ) → “clothing” → sexual partner</li> <li>3. <i>Bashiruhunna</i> (بَاشِرُوهُنَّ) → “have relations” → have sex</li> <li>4. <i>Tubashiruhunna</i> (تُبَاشِرُوهُنَّ) → “have relations” → have sex</li> <li>5. <i>Taqrabuha</i> (تَقْرَبُوهَا) → “approach” → have sex</li> </ol>
2:197	Hajj is [during] well-known months, so whoever has made Hajj obligatory upon himself therein [by entering the state of ihram], there is [to be for him] no sexual relations <sup>1</sup> and no disobedience and no disputing during Hajj...	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rafatha</i> (رَفَثَ) → “approaching” → having sex</li> </ol>
2:222-223	And they ask you about menstruation. Say, "It is harm, so keep away from wives during menstruation. And do not approach them <sup>1</sup> until they are pure. And when they have purified themselves, then come to them <sup>2</sup> from where Allah has ordained for you. Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves. Your wives are a place of sowing of seed <sup>3</sup> for you, so come to your place of cultivation <sup>4</sup> however you wish and put forth [righteousness] for yourselves. And fear Allah and know that you will meet Him. And give good tidings to the believers.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Taqrabuhunna</i> (تَقْرَبُوهُنَّ) → “approach” → have sex</li> <li>2. <i>Fatuhunna</i> (فَأْتُوهُنَّ) → “come to” → have sex</li> <li>3. <i>Harthun</i> (حَرْثٌ) → “field” → vessel to place one’s semen (i.e. lawful sexual partner)</li> <li>4. <i>Harthakum</i> (حَرْثِكُمْ) → “field” → vessel to place one’s semen (i.e. lawful sexual partner).</li> </ol>
2:237	And if you divorce them before you have touched them <sup>1</sup> and you have already specified for them an obligation, then [give] half of what you specified - unless they forego the right or the one in whose hand is the marriage contract foregoes it...	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Tamasshunna</i> (تَمَسُّوهُنَّ) → “touched” → had sex with</li> </ol>
4:23-25	Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your [milk] mothers who nursed you, your sisters through	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Dakhaltum</i> (دَخَلْتُمْ) → “entered” → had sex with</li> <li>2. <i>Aslabikum</i> (أَصْلَابِكُمْ) → “backbones” → ?</li> </ol>

	<p>nursing, your wives' mothers, and your step-daughters under your guardianship [born] of your wives unto whom you have gone in<sup>1</sup>. But if you have not gone in unto them<sup>1</sup>, there is no sin upon you. And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are from your loins<sup>2</sup>, and that you take [in marriage] two sisters simultaneously, except for what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful. And [also prohibited to you are all] married women except those your right hands possess. [This is] the decree of Allah upon you. And lawful to you are [all others] beyond these, [provided] that you seek them [in marriage] with [gifts from] your property, desiring chastity<sup>3</sup>, not unlawful sexual intercourse<sup>4</sup>... [They should be] chaste<sup>5</sup>, neither [of] those who commit unlawful intercourse randomly<sup>6</sup> nor those who take [secret] lovers.<sup>7</sup> But once they are sheltered in marriage, if they should commit adultery<sup>8</sup>, then for them is half the punishment for free [unmarried] women<sup>9</sup>.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. <i>Muh'sinina</i> (مُحْصِنِينَ) → “those being chaste” → virgins or those who desire lawful sex</li> <li>4. <i>Musafihina</i> (مُسَافِحِينَ) → “those being unchaste” → adulterers</li> <li>5. <i>Muh'sanatin</i> (مُحْصَنَاتٍ) → “those being chaste” → virgins or have only had lawful sex</li> <li>6. <i>Musafihatun</i> (مُسَافِحَاتٍ) → “those being unchaste” → adulterers</li> <li>7. <i>Akhdanin</i> (أَخْدَانٍ) → “secret friends”<sup>36</sup> → secret sexual partners</li> <li>8. <i>Bifahishatin</i> (بِفَاحِشَةٍ) → “commit unchasteness” → have unlawful sex</li> <li>9. <i>Muh'sanati</i> (الْمُحْصَنَاتِ) → “those being chaste” → virgins</li> </ol>
5:5	<p>This day [all] good foods have been made lawful, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them. And [lawful in marriage are] chaste women<sup>1</sup> from among the believers and chaste women<sup>1</sup> from among those who were given the Scripture before you, when you have given them their due compensation, desiring chastity<sup>2</sup>, not unlawful sexual intercourse<sup>3</sup> or taking [secret] lovers<sup>4</sup>. And whoever denies the faith - his work has become worthless, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Muh'sanatu</i> (الْمُحْصَنَاتُ) → “those being chaste” → virgins or have only had lawful sex</li> <li>2. <i>Muh'sinina</i> (مُحْصِنِينَ) → “those being chaste” → virgins or those who desire lawful sex</li> <li>3. <i>Musafihina</i> (مُسَافِحِينَ) → “those being unchaste” → adulterers</li> <li>4. <i>Akhdanin</i> (أَخْدَانٍ) → “secret friends” → secret sexual partners</li> </ol>
7:20, 22, 26-27	<p>But Satan whispered to them to make apparent to them that which was concealed from them of their private parts<sup>1</sup>...So he made them fall, through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their private parts<sup>2</sup> became apparent to them, and</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Sawatihima</i> (سَوَاتُهُمَا) → “shame” → genitals</li> </ol>

<sup>36</sup> Lanes Lexicon, p. 712

	they began to fasten together over themselves from the leaves of Paradise...O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts <sup>3</sup> and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness - that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember. O children of Adam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts <sup>4</sup> . Indeed, he sees you, he and his tribe, from where you do not see them. Indeed, We have made the devils allies to those who do not believe.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. <i>Sawatuhuma</i> (سَوَاتُهُمَا) → “shame” → genitals</li> <li>3. <i>Sawatikum</i> (سَوَاتِكُمْ) → “shame” → genitals</li> <li>4. <i>Sawatihima</i> (سَوَاتِهِمَا) → “shame” → genitals</li> </ol>
7:81	Indeed, you approach men with desire <sup>1</sup> , instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people.”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Lalatun-rijala shahwatan</i> (لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً) → “approach men lustfully” → [you men] have unlawful sex with men</li> </ol>
7:189	It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her. And when he covers her <sup>1</sup> , she carries a light burden and continues therein. And when it becomes heavy, they both invoke Allah, their Lord, “If You should give us a good [child], we will surely be among the grateful.”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Taghashaha</i> (تَغَشَّاهَا) → “to cover” → have sex</li> </ol>
11:78	And his people came hastening to him, and before [this] they had been doing evil deeds <sup>1</sup> . He said, "O my people, these are my daughters; they are purer <sup>2</sup> for you. So, fear Allah and do not disgrace me concerning my guests. Is there not among you a man of reason?"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>L'sayiati</i> (السَّيِّئَاتِ) → “evil acts” → unlawful sex with the same sex</li> <li>2. <i>Atharu</i> (أَظْهَرُ) → “purer” → lawfully permissible for sex</li> </ol>
12:23	And she, in whose house he was, sought to seduce him. She closed the doors and said, "Come, you <sup>1</sup> ." He said, "[I seek] the refuge of Allah. Indeed, he is my master, who has made good my residence. Indeed, wrongdoers will not succeed."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Hayta laka</i> (هَيِّتْ لَكَ) → “come, you” → have sex with me</li> </ol>
16:4	He created man from a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> ; then at once, he is a clear adversary.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids</li> </ol>
17:32	And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse <sup>1</sup> . Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Taqrabul-zina</i> (تَقْرَبُوا الزِّنَا) → “approach mounting” → have unlawful sex</li> </ol>
18:37		

	His companion said to him while he was conversing with him, "Have you disbelieved in He who created you from dust and then from a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> and then proportioned you [as] a man?"	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُظْفَةٍ) → "mixed drop" → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
19:20	She said, "How can I have a boy while no man has touched me <sup>1</sup> and I have not been unchaste <sup>2</sup> ?"	1. <i>Yamsasni</i> (يَمْسَسْنِي) → "touched" → had sex with 2. <i>Baghiyyan</i> (بَغِيًّا) → "unchaste" → having unlawful sex
20:121	And Adam and his wife ate of it, and their private parts <sup>1</sup> became apparent to them, and they began to fasten over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred.	1. <i>Sawatuhuma</i> (سَوَاتُهُمَا) → "shame" → genitals
21:91	And [mention] the one who guarded her chastity <sup>1</sup> , so We blew into her [garment] through Our angel [Gabriel], and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds.	1. <i>Farjaha</i> (فَرْجَهَا) → "chastity" → virginity or genitals
22: 5	O People, if you should be in doubt about the Resurrection, then [consider that] indeed, We created you from dust, then from a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> , then from a clinging clot, and then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed - that We may show you...	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُظْفَةٍ) → "mixed drop" → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
23:5	And they who guard their private parts <sup>1</sup> .	1. <i>Lifurujihum</i> (لِفُرُوجِهِمْ) → "modesty" → genitals
23:13-14	Then We placed him as a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> in a firm lodging. Then We made the semen-drop <sup>2</sup> into a clinging clot, and We made the clot into a lump [of flesh], and We made [from] the lump, bones, and We covered the bones with flesh; then We developed him into another creation. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators.	1. <i>Nut'fatan</i> (نُظْفَةً) → "mixed drop" → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids 2. <i>L'nut'fata</i> (النُّظْفَةَ) → "mixed drop" → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
24:2-4	The adulteress <sup>1</sup> and adulterer <sup>2</sup> - lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment. The adulterer <sup>2</sup> does not marry except an adulteress <sup>3</sup> or polytheist, and none marries an adulteress <sup>4</sup>	1. <i>Al-zaniyatu</i> (الرَّانِيَةُ) → "the mounter (f)" → adulteress 2. <i>Al-zani</i> (الرَّانِي) → "the mounter (m)" → adulterer

	<p>except an adulterer<sup>5</sup> or a polytheist, and that has been made unlawful to the believers. And those who accuse chaste women<sup>6</sup> and then do not produce four witnesses - lash them with eighty lashes and do not accept from them testimony ever after. And those are the defiantly disobedient...</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. <i>Zaniyatun</i> (زَانِيَةٌ) → “mounter (f)” → adulteress</li> <li>4. <i>Al-zaniyatu</i> (الرَّانِيَةُ) → “the mounter (f)” → adulteress</li> <li>5. <i>Zanin</i> (زَانٍ) → “mounter (m)” → adulterer</li> <li>6. <i>Muh’sanati</i> (الْمُحْصَنَاتِ) → “those being chaste” → virgins or have had only lawful sex</li> </ol>
<p>24:26</p>	<p>Evil women<sup>1</sup> are for evil men<sup>2</sup>, and evil men<sup>3</sup> are for evil women<sup>4</sup>. And good women<sup>5</sup> are for good men<sup>6</sup>, and good men<sup>7</sup> are for good women<sup>8</sup>. Those [good people] are declared innocent of what the slanderers say. For them is forgiveness and noble provision.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Al-kabithatu</i> (الْكَافِيئَاتُ) → “the evil women” → adulteresses</li> <li>2. <i>Lil’khabithina</i> (لِلْكَافِيئِينَ) → “evil men” → adulterers</li> <li>3. <i>L-khabithuna</i> (لِلكَافِيئُونَ) → “the evil men” → adulterers</li> <li>4. <i>Lil’khabithati</i> (لِلْكَافِيئَاتِ) → “evil women” → adulteresses</li> <li>5. <i>L-tayibatu</i> (الطَّيِّبَاتُ) → “the good women” → chaste women</li> <li>6. <i>Lilttayyibina</i> (لِلطَّيِّبِينَ) → “good men” → chaste men</li> <li>7. <i>L-tayibuna</i> (الطَّيِّبُونَ) → “the good men” → chaste men</li> <li>8. <i>Lilttayyibati</i> (لِلطَّيِّبَاتِ) → “good women” → chaste women</li> </ol>
<p>24:30-31, 33</p>	<p>Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts<sup>1</sup>. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts<sup>2</sup>...But let them who find not [the means for] marriage abstain<sup>3</sup> until Allah enriches them from His bounty. And those who seek a contract [for eventual emancipation] from among whom your right hands possess - then make a contract with them if you know there is within them goodness and give them from the wealth of Allah which</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Furujahum</i> (فُرُوجَهُمْ) → “chastity” → genitals</li> <li>2. <i>Farujahunna</i> (فُرُوجَهُنَّ) → “chastity” → genitals</li> <li>3. <i>Lyasta’fifi</i> (لَيْسْتَغْفِبِ) → “refrain” → remain chaste</li> </ol>



	He has given you. And do not compel your slave girls to prostitution <sup>4</sup> , if they desire chastity <sup>5</sup> , to seek [thereby] the temporary interests of worldly life. And if someone should compel them, then indeed, Allah is [to them], after their compulsion, Forgiving and Merciful.	<p>4. <i>L'bigai</i> (لَبِغَاءٍ) → “the seeking of unchastity”<sup>37</sup> → prostitution</p> <p>5. <i>Tahassunan</i> (تَحَصُّنًا) → “be chaste” → virginity or lawful sex</p>
25:54	And it is He who has created from water <sup>1</sup> a human being and made him [a relative by] lineage and marriage. And ever is your Lord competent [concerning creation].	<p>1. <i>L'mai</i> (الْمَاءِ) → “the water” → reproductive fluid</p>
25:68	And those who do not invoke with Allah another deity or kill the soul which Allah has forbidden [to be killed], except by right, and do not commit unlawful sexual intercourse <sup>1</sup> . And whoever should do that will meet a penalty.	<p>1. <i>Yaznuna</i> (يَزْنُونَ) → “commit mounting” → commit adultery</p>
26:165-166	Do you approach <sup>1</sup> males among the worlds and leave <sup>2</sup> what your Lord has created for you as mates? But you are a people transgressing.	<p>1. <i>Atatuna</i> (أَتَاتُونَ) → “approach” → have sex with</p> <p>2. <i>Tadharuna</i> (تَذَرُونَ) → “leave” → do not have sex with</p>
29:29	Indeed, you approach <sup>1</sup> men and obstruct the road and commit in your meetings [every] evil." And the answer of his people was not but they said, "Bring us the punishment of Allah, if you should be of the truthful."	<p>1. <i>Lalatuna</i> (لَتَاتُونَ) → “approach” → have sex with</p>
32:8	Then He made his posterity out of the extract of a liquid disdained <sup>1</sup> .	<p>1. <i>Sulalatin min main mahinin</i> (سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ مَاءٍ مَهِينٍ) → “extract of despised liquid” → small quantity of reproductive fluids</p>
33:35	Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the	<p>1. <i>Furujahum</i> (فُرُوجَهُمْ) → “chastity” → genitals</p>

<sup>37</sup> Although the term is accurately rendered as ‘prostitution’, when we consider its other verb and noun forms, the appropriate literal translation should be “seeking unchastity”.

[http://corpus.quran.com/wordmorphology.jsp?location=\(24:33:32\)](http://corpus.quran.com/wordmorphology.jsp?location=(24:33:32))

	fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts <sup>1</sup> and the women who do so...	
35:11	And Allah created you from dust, then from a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> ; then He made you mates. And no female conceives, nor does she give birth except with His knowledge. And no aged person is granted [additional] life nor is his lifespan lessened but that it is in a register. Indeed, that for Allah is easy.	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
36:77	Does man not consider that We created him from a [mere] semen-drop <sup>1</sup> - then at once he is a clear adversary?	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
40:67	It is He who created you from dust, then from a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> , then from a clinging clot; then He brings you out as a child; then [He develops you] that you reach your [time of] maturity, then [further] that you become elders. And among you is he who is taken in death before [that], so that you reach a specified term; and perhaps you will use reason.	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
53:46	And that He creates the two mates - the male and female - from a semen-drop when it is emitted <sup>1</sup> .	1. <i>Nut'fatin idha tu'mna</i> (نُطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَى) → “ejected mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids (coming out)
55:56	In them are women limiting [their] glances, untouched <sup>1</sup> before them by man or jinni...	1. <i>Lam yatmith'hunna</i> (لَمْ يَطْمِئُنَّ) → “not touched” → virgin
55:74	Untouched <sup>1</sup> before them by man or jinni...	1. <i>Lam yatmith'hunna</i> (لَمْ يَطْمِئُنَّ) → “not touched” → virgin
60:12	O Prophet, when the believing women come to you pledging to you that they will not associate anything with Allah, nor will they steal, nor will they commit unlawful sexual intercourse <sup>1</sup> , nor will they kill their children, nor will they bring forth a slander they have invented between their arms and legs <sup>2</sup> , nor will they disobey you in what is right - then accept their pledge and ask forgiveness for them of Allah. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.	1. <i>Yaznina</i> (يَزْنِينَ) → “commit mounting” → commit adultery 2. <i>Yatina bibuh'tanin yaftarinahu bayna aydihinna wa-arjulihinna</i> (يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ) → “slander they invent between their arms and legs” → attribute children born of unlawful sex to their husbands

66:12	And [the example of] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity <sup>1</sup> , so We blew into [her garment] through Our angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient.	1. <i>Farjaha</i> (فَرْجَهَا) → “chastity” → her genitals or virginity
70:29	And those who guard their private parts <sup>1</sup> ...	1. <i>Lilfurujihim</i> (لِفُرُوجِهِمْ) → “chastity” → genitals
75:37	Had he not been a drop from semen emitted <sup>1</sup> ?	1. <i>Nut'fatan min maniyyin yum'na</i> (نُطْفَةً مِنْ مَائِيٍّ يُمَيِّنِي) → “ejected mixed drop of fluid” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids (coming out)
76:2	Indeed, We created man from a drop of mixed fluid <sup>1</sup> that We may try him; and We made him hearing and seeing.	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
77:20	Did We not create you from a liquid disdained <sup>1</sup> ?	1. <i>Main mahinin</i> (مَاءٍ مَّهِينٍ) → “despised liquid” → reproductive fluids
80:19	From a semen-drop <sup>1</sup> He created him and destined for him...	1. <i>Nut'fatin</i> (نُطْفَةٍ) → “mixed drop” → small quantity of mixed reproductive fluids
86:5-7	Let man see what he was created from. He was created from gushing liquid <sup>1</sup> issuing from between <sup>2</sup> the backbone <sup>3</sup> and the ribs <sup>4</sup> .	1. <i>Main dafiqin</i> (مَاءٍ دَافِقٍ) → “ejected fluid” → reproductive fluid (coming out) 2. <i>Min bayni</i> (مِنْ بَيْنِ) → “from between” → ? 3. <i>L'sulbi</i> (الصُّلْبِ) → “the backbone” → ? 4. <i>L'taraibi</i> (التَّرَائِبِ) → “the upper chest” → ?

**Table 1.** There are 88 known references to sex, sexual partners, genitalia, and reproductive fluids in the Qur'an. This table includes their literal translations and euphemistic meanings. Note the “?” entries will be answered at a later point in the article.

After analyzing the above references, a relevant question should be asked: *If the Quranic tone on sex is so consistent, why do some insist on interpreting Q. 86:5-7 literally?* Indeed, it seems we have a conundrum. Undoubtedly, however, there will be those who claim their interpretations are in concordance with this tone when they insist that “from

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between the backbone and the ribs” refers to male genitalia – that the phrase “from between” (*min bayni*) is in and of itself a euphemism. Although I understand the logic behind this defense, I also see a great deal of inconsistency with this line of reasoning, the most obvious of which being Q. 4:23:

Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your [milk] mothers who nursed you, your sisters through nursing, your wives' mothers, and your step-daughters under your guardianship [born] of your wives unto whom you have gone in. But if you have not gone in unto them, there is no sin upon you. And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are from your backbones (*aslabikum*)... (Q. 4:23)

The word *aslabikum* (أَصْلَابِكُمْ) is often rendered as “loins” (male genitalia) in translations and is the plural of *sulb* (الصُّلْبِ) which occurs in Q. 86:7. The problem here is that Q. 4:23 uses the word to reference the place *from* which one’s lineage originates, which is contrary to those who propose the genitalia are “from between” the *sulb* and the *tara’ib*. This appears a contradiction that cannot be resolved by merely appealing to the Quranic tone, because even euphemisms need to be consistent to some degree. No, the only way one can resolve this issue is by rendering *sulb* as a euphemism in and of itself.

## The Creation of Mankind: Quranic Parallels?

Q. 86:5-7 are not merely about sex but are part of a larger narrative about the Qur’an’s creation story. More specifically, they are part of a sequence of events describing how mankind came into existence. This sequence is divided according to the themes the Qur’an wishes to focus on in a given moment, using individual portions as examples to illustrate a point or lesson. However, the sequence is easily discernible among these scattered parts and goes as follows:

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### 1. Dust/Clay:

“Indeed, the example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created Him from dust; then He said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was.” (Q. 3:59)

“[So, mention] when your Lord said to the angels, ‘Indeed, I am going to create a human being from clay.’” (Q. 38:71)

### 2. Adam + Eve:

“O people! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and created from it its mate, and propagated from them many men and women. And revere God whom you ask about, and the parents. Surely, God is Watchful over you.” (Q. 4:1)

### 3. Fluid:

“He who perfected everything He created and originated the creation of man from clay. Then made his progeny from an extract of an insignificant fluid. Then He proportioned him and breathed into him of His Spirit. Then He gave you hearing, and eyesight, and hearts—but rarely do you give thanks.” (Q. 32:7-9)

### 4. Fetus:

“O people! If you are in doubt about the Resurrection—We created you from dust, then from a small drop, then from a clinging clot, then from a lump of flesh, partly developed and partly undeveloped. In order to clarify things for

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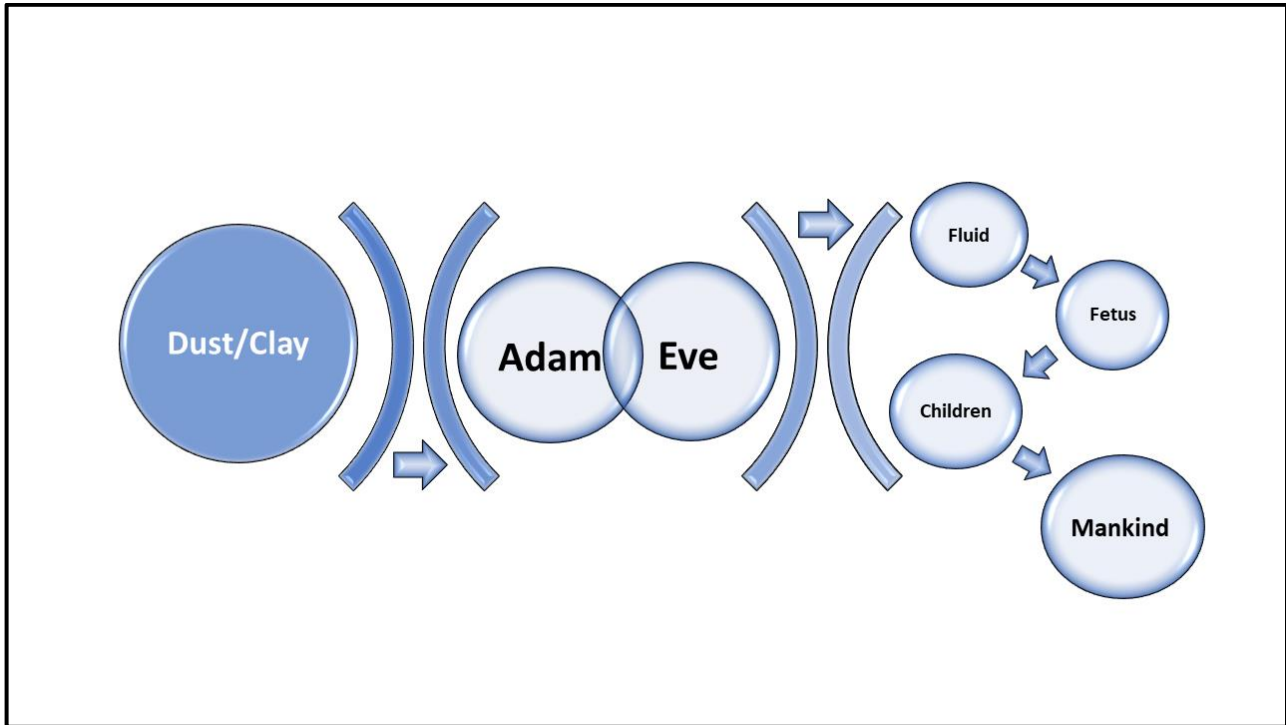
you. And We settle in the wombs whatever We will for a designated term, and then We bring you out as infants, until you reach your full strength. And some of you will pass away, and some of you will be returned to the vilest age, so that he may not know, after having known. And you see the earth still; but when We send down water on it, it vibrates, and swells, and grows all kinds of lovely pairs.” (Q. 22:5)

### **5. Children:**

“It is He who created you from dust, then from a seed, then from an embryo, then He brings you out as an infant, then He lets you reach your maturity, then you become elderly—although some of you die sooner—so that you may reach a predetermined age, so that you may understand.” (Q. 40:67)

### **6. Mankind:**

“O mankind, indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” (49:13)



**Figure 1.** The Qur'an's narrative of mankind's origins

Where in this sequence (if anywhere) can we place Q. 86:5-7? Our first clue is that it mentions a “gushing fluid”. The second clue? It mentions where said fluid comes from – “between the backbone and the ribs”. In the above figure, only two steps in the sequence precede the emission of fluid: Dust/Clay → Adam + Eve. Are either of these parallels which explain the euphemistic meanings of *sub* and *tara'ib*? I believe so.

## Adam, Eve, and the Beauty of the Qur'an

After a lengthy preliminary discourse, we can now attempt to offer a valid exegesis of Q. 86:5-7. Many may be asking why all the above was necessary, but I assure my readers it was essential for fully understanding the conclusions of my research. Simple answers without background information are always easy to formulate – especially if your readers share your biases. However, I expect most of those coming to this paper don't share my views, so the previous discussions were necessary to “clear the field” of any obstacles. As such, let us recollect and summarize what evidence is needed to offer a valid interpretation:

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## 1. Intertextual Evidence:

- a) Conformity to the Quranic tone about sex and sexual organs
- b) Conformity to Quranic parallels on the origin of mankind
- c) Quranic references that help to define the meaning of said word/phrase.

## 2. Extratextual evidence:

- a) Conformity to the consensus of previous exegetes and/or not contradicting that consensus
- b) Evidence from *ahadith* and/or *sirah*
- c) Evidence from other *hadith*, linguistic sources, or scriptures (as supplementary)

## The Failure of Contemporary Interpretations

What should be immediately discernible from these criteria is that contemporary interpretations violate all of these. Take for example the opinion that “*min bayni*” refers to the place between a male’s backbone and ribs – an opinion first preferred by Ibn Qayyim in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This view contradicts the consensus of previous scholars who agreed that the *sulb* and *tara’ib* refer to separate genders, and that *min bayni* doesn’t refer to a place, but the origin of the fluid coming from both the *sulb* and *tara’ib*. Nearly all contemporary exegetes adopt the minority opinion of Ibn Qayyim (along with his errors) and impose their own understanding of medical science on to the text. Similarly, those who suggests that the ‘fluid’ refers to sperm or that the testes “originated between the backbone and ribs before maturity”, fail to offer any satisfactory explanations as to how the early Arabs could have understood the verses in this fashion.

Q. 86:5 asks its audience to literally “see” (*faly nazuri* [فَلْيَنْظُرِ]) from where humans have been created from. The object of this ‘seeing’ is an “ejected fluid from between the *sulb* and *tara’ib*”. An Arab in the 7<sup>th</sup> century could not possibly empirically observe



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microscopic sperm nor would it be logical to assume that the visualization of ejected fluid referred to the development of the testicles prior to its ability to produce said fluid. Furthermore, the fluid itself is said to be “ejected” (*dafiqin* [دَافِقٍ]), implying an event experienced during sexual activity.<sup>38</sup> As such, to actually “see” what these verses were referring to an Arab would have to have intimate knowledge of the suggestive imagery—not something requiring a microscope or prior to the events of the liquid being ejected. Likewise, if the only purpose of the word ‘see’ was regarding the liquid, but not where it came from (*sulb* and *tara’ib*), then what would be the point of mentioning the latter at all? Therefore, the *sulb* and *tara’ib* must likewise be objects meant to be visualized as well.

More importantly, none of the contemporary commentaries on Q. 86:5-7 conform to the Quranic tone with respect to euphemisms nor utilize this aspect of the Qur’an as part of their argument. Nearly all of them suggest that the *sulb* and the *tara’ib* are literal objects bordering the place where the semen or sperm are produced. However, if that were true, it would contradict the use of *sulb* in Q. 4:23 as being the source for man’s lineage, leading to an inconsistency in the text. But one cannot be literal whereas the other figurative, especially considering the overall consistency of the Qur’an’s message with respect to anything about sex. Furthermore, neither of these commentaries rely on Quranic parallels to the narrative surrounding these verses – that of human origins. In other words, these commentaries opt for an anomalous rendering of these verses when compared to the entire corpus of the Qur’an.

In a similar vein, none of these commentaries cite the consensus of scholars, hadith, *sirah*, or any other extratextual evidence to support their conclusions, thereby admitting

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<sup>38</sup> The “ejected fluid” between the male and female here refers to the semen of the male and the “semen of the female” or cervical mucus discharged from the woman’s genitalia prior to and after her period. The cervical mucus is most obvious at the height of ovulation and changes to an egg-white color and more slippery texture (sometimes taking on a yellowish hue prior). The quality and content of mucus is obvious to the naked eye, marking the time for ovulation or “the best time to conceive”. It is known (for certain) today that the cervical mucus aids in conception by assisting the sperm to travel to the egg and nurturing them along the way. Said fluid is mentioned directly in the hadith collections, such as in Sunan an-Nisa’i <https://sunnah.com/urn/1002010>. For more information on cervical mucus, please refer to: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2358-04292015000200007](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2358-04292015000200007)

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that their claims are essentially baseless and in violation of the exegetical maxim to “not make your own opinion”.

Those who criticize the Qur’an similarly lack any justification for their views of the text, borrowing exclusively from the above commentaries and supplementing them with unsubstantiated appeals to Greek medicine and the “obviousness” of its literal reading. The former has already been refuted a great deal and the latter is merely the conscious bias of skeptics who believe that Islam is nonsensical by default. Skeptics may respond by stating that the lack of commentary on the metaphorical use of the words *sulb* and *tara’ib* automatically indicates their literal use, but this is fallacious reasoning better known as an *ad ignorantium* fallacy<sup>39</sup>. As shown earlier, many early scholars were simply interested in explaining rudimentary semantics and proper readings of the text. In some cases, they would explain metaphor and in others they would avoid it (usually due to disinterest or a lack of available supporting evidence to back their own opinions). For example, issues of metaphor and literal readings didn’t begin to become prominent until the rise of the Mu’tazila, and this was in response to specific theological issues surrounding the attributes of Allah. As such, the early exegete’s preference for silence in many matters cannot be taken as evidence of approval of one view or the other. Had this been the case, the exegetes themselves would have included their silence as one of the maxims by which to render an interpretation. Furthermore, a literal interpretation has already been disproved by the consensus of early exegetes themselves, all who preferred the meaning of *tara’ib* as “upper chest of the woman”, contrary to its apparent reading as “male ribs”.

All that said, the interpretation I have settled on *can* and *does* conform to the evidence stipulated in this article. As such, allow us to begin with the meaning of *sulb*.

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<sup>39</sup> “The Fallacy of Appeal to Ignorance comes in two forms: (1) Not knowing that a certain statement is true is taken to be a proof that it is false. (2) Not knowing that a statement is false is taken to be a proof that it is true. The fallacy occurs in cases where absence of evidence is not good enough evidence of absence. The fallacy uses an unjustified attempt to shift the burden of proof.” <https://www.iep.utm.edu/fallacy/#AppealtoIgnorance>

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## *Sulb* (الصُّلْبِ)

The literal definition of *sulb* is ‘backbone’. However, I believe that the most valid rendering of its meaning should be ‘paternal genitalia’. The word *sulb* acts as a euphemism and is derived from the story of the Father of Humanity, Adam, when the souls of his lineage were created from his back and asked to testify that Allah was their Lord. Since then, *sulb* became a means to appropriately speak of paternal genitalia. The following evidence is utilized in support of this interpretation:

### 1. Intertextual Evidence:

- a) All references to sex, sexual organs, and sexual fluids are euphemisms in the Qur’an (Table 1). Therefore, it should be expected that *sulb* be a euphemism as well.
- b) Q. 86:5-7 takes place within the sequence of the origins of mankind, specifically within the first three parts: Dust/Clay → Adam + Eve → Fluid (Figure 1). Considering the masculine *sulb* and the feminine *tara’ib* are used in conjunction to describe the origin of reproductive fluids, the former must be a euphemistic reference to the paternal genitalia (of Adam).
- c) The noun *sulb* is only used once more in the Qur’an in its plural form:

“...And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are from your *backbones* (*aslabikum* [أَصْلَابِكُمْ]), and that you take [in marriage] two sisters simultaneously, except for what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful.” (Q. 4:23)

This verse appears to share similarities with an isolated event before the creation of mankind mentioned on the Qur’an:

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And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their backs (*dhuhurihim* [ظُهُورِهِمْ]) – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have testified.’ [This] - lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were of this unaware.’” (Q. 7:172)

The word used for “backs” here is *dhuhurihim* (ظُهُورِهِمْ) and is used literally throughout the Qur’an to refer to the actual backside of an individual or animal. However, the verse in question is referring to what occurred to Adam prior to the creation of mankind as physical human beings.<sup>40</sup> In other words, mankind did not have actual ‘backs’ during this time as they were just metaphysical souls with no sexual organs to speak of. Only Adam had a ‘back’ as he was the only man created and only souls came from his back – not fluid. As such, the Qur’an is drawing attention to the figurative use of the word ‘sulb’ through this linguistic and narrative distinction. In other words, if someone wanted to suggest this verse supports a literal interpretation of 86:7, they would need to explain how a onetime event about Adam generating non-physical entities from his back is a literal rendering of sexual activity between humans that had yet to be created.

## 2. Extratextual Evidence

- a) The meaning of *sulb* as ‘paternal genitalia’ conforms to and does not contradict the consensus of the early exegetes. Regarding the former, it conforms in recognizing the *sulb* as part of the male and *tara’ib* as part of the female. Regarding the latter, it does not contradict because the

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<sup>40</sup> This will be discussed in detail when citing extratextual evidence (2.B-C) for my position.

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consensus of early scholars did not designate the word as literal or figurative.

- b)** In support of (1.B-C) above, there are various *hadith* that can be utilized to conclude that the word *subh* in the Qur'an is a euphemism for "paternal genitalia". Let us begin with references to the event when the souls of mankind were taken from Adam's back:

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Allah will say to that person of the (Hell) Fire who will receive the least punishment, 'If you had everything on the earth, would you give it as a ransom to free yourself (i.e. save yourself from this Fire)?' He will say, 'Yes.' Then Allah will say, 'While you were in the backbone of Adam, I asked you much less than this, i.e. not to worship others besides Me, but you insisted on worshipping others besides me.' " (Sahih Bukhari)<sup>41</sup>

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Allah will say to the person who will have the minimum punishment in the Fire on the Day of Resurrection, 'If you had things equal to whatever is on the earth, would you ransom yourself (from the punishment) with it?' He will reply, Yes. Allah will say, 'I asked you a much easier thing than this while you were in the backbone of Adam, that is, not to worship others besides Me, but you refused and insisted to worship others besides Me.'" (Sahih Bukhari)<sup>42</sup>

Yahya related to me from Malik from Zayd ibn Abi Unaysa that Abd al-Hamid ibn Abd ur-Rahman ibn Zayd ibn al-Khattab informed him from Muslim ibn Yasar al-Juhani that Umar ibn al-Khattab was asked about this ayah - "When your Lord took their progeny from the Banu Adam from their backs and made them testify against themselves. 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we bear witness'. Lest you should say on the Day of Rising, 'We were heedless of that.'" (Q. 7:172) Umar ibn al-Khattab said, 'I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) being asked about it. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), said, 'Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, created Adam. Then He stroked his back with His right

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<sup>41</sup> <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/60/9>

<sup>42</sup> <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/146>

hand, and progeny issued from it. He said, "I created these for the Garden, and they will act with the behavior of the people of the Garden." Then He stroked his back again and brought forth progeny from him. He said, "I created these for the Fire and they will act with the behavior of the people of the Fire." 'A man said, 'Messenger of Allah (ﷺ)! Then of what value are deeds?' The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) answered, 'When Allah creates a slave for the Garden, he makes him use the behavior of the people of the Garden, so that he dies on one of the actions of the people of the Garden and by it He brings him into the Garden. When He creates a slave for the Fire, He makes him use the behavior of the people of the Fire, so that he dies on one of the actions of the people of the Fire, and by it, He brings him into the Fire.'" (The Muwatta of Imam Malik)<sup>43</sup>

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "When Allah created Adam He wiped his back and every person that He created among his offspring until the Day of Resurrection fell out of his back. He placed a ray of light between the eyes of every person. Then He showed them to Adam, and he said: 'O Lord! Who are these people?' He said: 'These are your offspring.' He saw one of them whose ray between his eyes amazed him, so he said: 'O Lord! Who is this?' He said: 'This is a man from the latter nations of your offspring called Dawud.' He said: 'Lord! How long did You make his lifespan?' He said: 'Sixty years.' He said: 'O Lord! Add forty years from my life to his.' So, at the end of Adam's life, the Angel of death of came to him, and he said: 'Do I not have forty years remaining?' He said: 'Did you not give them to your son Dawud?'" He said: "Adam denied, so his offspring denied, and Adam forgot, and his offspring forgot, and Adam sinned, so his offspring sinned." (Jami at-Tirmidhi)<sup>44</sup>

This was a onetime event in the life of Adam and mankind's souls prior to our physical creation. Additional *hadith* reference this event when discussing the resurrection of mankind:

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<sup>43</sup> <https://sunnah.com/urn/416880>

<sup>44</sup> <https://sunnah.com/urn/640820>

The earth would consume all of the son of Adam except his tailbone. From it he was created, and from it he will be recreated (on the Day of Resurrection). (Sahih Muslim)<sup>45</sup>

Every son of Adam will be devoured by the earth with the exception of the tailbone from which he was created and from which he will be reconstituted. (Sunan Abu Dawud)<sup>46</sup>

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "When Allah created Adam He wiped his back and every person that He created among his offspring until the Day of Resurrection fell out of his back. He placed a ray of light between the eyes of every person. Then He showed them to Adam, and he said: 'O Lord! Who are these people?' He said: 'These are your offspring.' He saw one of them whose ray between his eyes amazed him, so he said: 'O Lord! Who is this?' He said: 'This is a man from the latter nations of your offspring called Dawud.' He said: 'Lord! How long did You make his lifespan?' He said: 'Sixty years.' He said: 'O Lord! Add forty years from my life to his.' So, at the end of Adam's life, the Angel of death of came to him, and he said: 'Do I not have forty years remaining?' He said: 'Did you not give them to your son Dawud?'" He said: "Adam denied, so his offspring denied, and Adam forgot, and his offspring forgot, and Adam sinned, so his offspring sinned." (Jami at-Tirmidhi)<sup>47</sup>

These hadith state that all of mankind was created from the tailbone (of Adam) and will be reconstituted through their own tailbones. In the first half of these hadith, the tailbone does not refer to the tailbones of mankind (as humans did not make themselves from their own tailbones) – it obviously refers to Adam. However, the latter part *does* refer to the tailbones of mankind for our recreation. The first part is a means to justify the second by referring to the beginning of mankind and our eventual return to this earth. This imagery has parallels with Q.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://sunnah.com/muslim/54/178>

<sup>46</sup> <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/148>

<sup>47</sup> <https://sunnah.com/urn/640820>

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86:5-8, which begins and ends with, “So let man observe from what he was created...Surely He is fully capable of returning them to life.”

However, there are also hadith which use the word “backbone” in conjunction to “penis” and “testicles” (showing a difference between these terms):

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) wrote a letter to the people of Yemen, included in which were the rules of inheritance, the *sunan* and the (rules concerning) blood money (*diyah*). He sent it with 'Arm bin Hazm and it was read to the people of Yemen, Its contents were as follows: "From Muhammad the Prophet (ﷺ) to Shurahbil bin 'Abd Kulal, Nu'aim bin 'Abd Kulal, Al-Harith bin' Abd Kulal, Qail dhil-Ru'ain, Mu'afir and Hamdan. To precede" - And in this letter it said that whoever kills a believer for no just reason is to be killed in return, unless the heirs of the victim agree to pardon him. For killing a person, the *diyah* is one hundred camels. For the nose, if it is cut off completely, *diyah* must be paid, for the tongue, *diyah* must be paid; for the lips, *diyah* must be paid; for the testicles, *diyah* must be paid; for the ends, *diyah* must be paid; for the backbone, *diyah* must be paid...<sup>48</sup>

Full blood money (i.e. total *diyah* of 100 camels) is paid for the total cut off of each of the following: the nose, the eyes, the tongue, the lips, the penis, the testicles and the backbone.<sup>49</sup>

However, both these hadith are largely considered *daif* (weak in authenticity) and are thus unacceptable as evidence.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://sunnah.com/nasai/45/148>

<sup>49</sup> <https://sunnah.com/urn/2053190>



- c) There is evidence from some hadith showcasing that the early Muslims understood their semen and physical lineage did not come literally from their backbones. For example, in the following hadith we find that the word semen (مَيْي) was used as a means to describe the male sexual organs (not the backbone):

"I said: 'O Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), teach me a supplication from which I may benefit.' He said: 'Say: O Allah, protect me from the evil of my hearing, my seeing, my tongue and my heart, and the evil of my sperm.' – Meaning his sexual organ."<sup>50</sup>

Another oft used hadith by Christian apologists to impugn Islam is also beneficial to this discussion. In the following narration, the Prophet (ﷺ) was said to have said that anyone who boast of their lineage should be told to “bite the male organ of their father” and not to use a figurative language:

“It was narrated from Ubayy ibn Ka’b that a man boasted in an ignorant manner of his tribal lineage, so he told him to bite his father’s male member, and he did not use a metaphor. The people looked askance at him, so he said to the people: I can see what you are thinking, and I can only say this: that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) instructed us: ‘If you hear someone boasting in an ignorant manner of his tribal lineage, then tell him to bite his father’s male member (*han* [هن]) and do not use a euphemism (*kuna* [كنى]).’”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> <https://sunnah.com/nasai/50/57>

<sup>51</sup> Robson, James (1994) *Mishkat al-Masabih – English Translation with Explanatory Notes*, Vol. 2, p. 1021

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Notice that the Prophet (ﷺ) did not instruct to say, “to bite the *backbone* of your father, but use a euphemism”, thus indicating that *sulb* is among those euphemisms.

These above evidences are sufficient to show that the word *sulb* was not to be taken literally but was a euphemism for the father’s genitalia – an allusion derived from the event when the souls of mankind were brought out the back of humanity’s first father, Adam. However, to strengthen my position further, we need to examine the meaning of *tara’ib*.

### ***Tara’ib* (التَّرَائِبِ)**

The literal definition of *tara’ib* is ‘ribs. However, I believe that the most valid rendering of its meaning should be ‘maternal genitalia’. The word *tara’ib* acts as a euphemism and is derived from the story of the Mother of Humanity, Eve, when she was created from Adam’s rib to be his wife. Since then, *tara’ib* became a means to appropriately speak of maternal genitalia. The following evidence is utilized in support of this interpretation:

#### **1. Intertextual Evidence:**

- a) All references to sex, sexual organs, and sexual fluids are euphemisms in the Qur’an (Table 1). Therefore, it should be expected that *tara’ib* be a euphemism as well.
- b) Q. 86:5-7 takes place within the sequence of the origins of mankind, specifically within the first three parts: Dust/Clay → Adam + Eve → Fluid (Figure 1). Considering the masculine *sulb* and the feminine *tara’ib* are used in conjunction to describe the origin of reproductive fluids, the latter must be a euphemistic reference the maternal genitalia (of Eve).
- c) *Tara’ib* is only used once in the Qur’an (86:7) and no where else. There are also no other references to “ribs” or anything else similar.

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## 2. Extratextual Evidence

- a) The meaning of *tara'ib* as 'maternal genitalia' conforms to and does not contradict the consensus of the early exegetes. Regarding the former, it conforms in recognizing the *subh* as part of the male and *tara'ib* as part of the female. Regarding the latter, it does not contradict because the consensus of early scholars did not designate the word as being literal or figurative.
- b) In support of (1.B) above, there are various *hadith* that can be utilized to conclude that the word *tara'ib* in the Qur'an is a euphemism for "maternal genitalia". The first clue may be found in hadith mentioning what women were created from:

"Allah 's Apostle said, 'Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so, if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So, treat women nicely.'" (Sahih Bukhari)<sup>52</sup>

"He who believes in Allah and the Hereafter, if he witnesses any matter, he should talk in good terms about it or keep quiet. Act kindly towards woman, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, its crookedness will remain there. So, act kindly towards women." (Sahih Muslim)<sup>53</sup>

"Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so, if you wish to benefit by her, benefit by her while crookedness

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<sup>52</sup> <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/60/6>

<sup>53</sup> <https://sunnah.com/muslim/17/80>

remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her.” (Sahih Muslim)<sup>54</sup>

“The Prophet (ﷺ) said concerning the urine of a nursing infant: ‘Water should be sprinkled over the urine of a boy, and the urine of a girl should be washed.’ Abul-Hasan bin Salamah said: "Ahmad bin Musa bin Ma'qil narrated to us that Abul-Yaman Al-Misri said: 'I asked Shafi'i about the Hadith of the Prophet (ﷺ), ‘Water should be sprinkled over the urine of a baby boy, and the urine of a baby girl should be washed,’ when the two types of water (urine) are the same. He said, ‘This is because the urine of the boy is of water and clay, but the urine of the girl is of flesh and blood.’ Then he said to me: ‘Did you understand?’ I said: ‘No.’ He said: ‘When Allah the Most High created Adam, He created Eve (Hawwa') from his short rib, so the boy's urine is from water and clay, and the girl's urine is from flesh and blood.’ Then he said to me: "Did you understand?" I said: ‘Yes.’ He said: ‘May Allah cause you benefit from this.’” (Sunan Ibn Majah)<sup>55</sup>

These hadith reflect the understanding of both Judaism and Christianity with respect to the creation of Eve (Hawwa’) being made from the rib of Adam. This is unsurprising given the Qur’an states that it “confirms” aspects of previous scriptures (3:3). In the Islamic tradition, women are regarded to have originated from a rib and may figuratively be referred to as “the rib of their husband”. What’s interesting is that no other references to ribs (in a sexual nor maternal manner) are made in the Qur’an and *ahadith* – only when alluding to Eve, the Mother of all Humanity:

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<sup>54</sup> <https://sunnah.com/muslim/17/79>

<sup>55</sup> <https://sunnah.com/urn/1255240>

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O people! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and created from it its mate, and propagated from them many men and women. And revere God whom you ask about, and the parents. Surely, God is Watchful over you. (Q. 4:1)

- c) There is additional evidence from early exegetes, previous scriptures, and secondary sources affirming the creation of woman from a rib, along with the euphemistic nature of *tara'ib*.

The aforementioned Muqatil ibn Sulayman, in his commentary on Q. 7:189 states about the creation of Eve, “[Allah] created from Adam’s rib his mate Eve on Friday while he was asleep.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 800’s) stated, “[Allah] may He be exalted, created Eve from Adam’s left rib.”<sup>57</sup> The notion that Eve had been created from Adam’s rib was later expounded by Imam Tabari in his *Tarikh al-Rusul wa'l Muluk (Annals of the Apostles and Kings)*. He offers two opinions on the matter:

“[The first opinion]...Then Iblis was exiled from the Garden when was cursed, and Adam put to dwell in the Garden. He went around alone with no wife in whom he could find repose. Then he fell asleep and woke up to find a woman sitting beside his head whom God had created from his rib...[The second opinion]...Then He cast slumber upon Adam – according to what has reached us from the people of the Torah among the people of scriptures, and from other people of knowledge, through ‘Abdullah ibn Abbas and others – and

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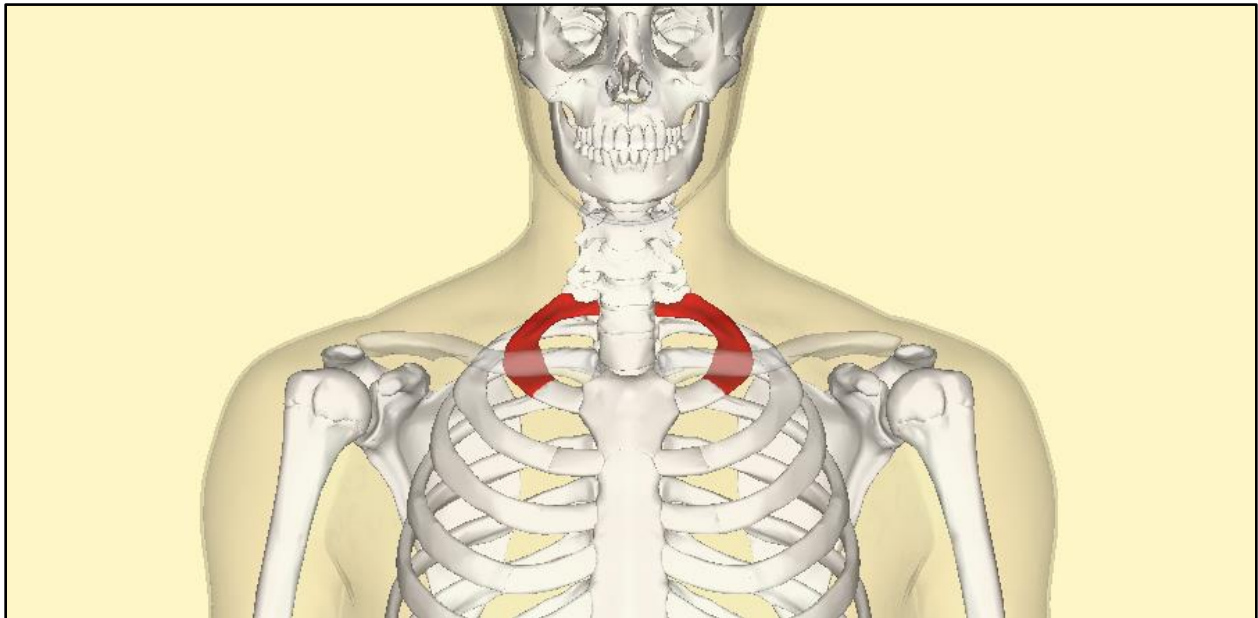
<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Amir Lerner (2019). “Rib or Side, Right or Left and the Traits of Women: Midrashic Dilemmas about the Creation of Eve in Medieval Islamic Tradition and Literature,” *Studia Islamica*, 114(1), p. 29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

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then He took one of his ribs from his left side, and joined together the place where it had been with flesh.”<sup>58</sup>

The view that Adam’s left rib was used to create Eve was shared among prominent scholars such as Imam Suyuti<sup>59</sup> and Ibn Kathir.<sup>60</sup> That said, there is very little mentioned on the *type* of rib. One of the earliest Arabic philologists, al-Khalil b. Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. late 700’s) gives his understanding of the type of rib Eve was made from based on Arab lexicography: “Eve was created from the last rib of Adam...The last rib of everything that has ribs, and the shortest one.”<sup>61</sup> This appears to conform to the opinion of Imam Shafi’i (d. 820) quoted above in the *hadith* narrated in Sunan Ibn Majah along with the consensus of the scholars with regard to the word *tara’ib*, whom denote the uppermost portion of the chest where the shortest ribs (and most bent) lie.



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<sup>58</sup> Muhammad al-Tabari (1989) *The History of Al-Tabari: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, V.1, Trans. Franz Rosenthal, pp. 273-274

<sup>59</sup> <https://furqan.co/aldur-almanthoor/4/1>

<sup>60</sup> <https://furqan.co/ibn-katheer/4/1>

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in “Rib or Side, Right or Left and the Traits of Women”, p. 29, fn. 6.

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**Figure 2:** The shortest and most crooked ribs in the human body are the uppermost ribs (now known as ‘Ribs 1’). This is where the necklace would hang from and fall (counting the uppermost part of the sternum).

The *mufassirun*, the hadith, and the Qur’an seem content on justifying the narratives of previous scriptures with regard to Eve’s creation. The most obvious of them being from the Torah:

Then the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. And while he was asleep, He took one of his ribs and closed the place with flesh. The Lord God then fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman’, for out of man this one was taken.” Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis, 2:21-24)

The only question remaining is with regard to the plurality of *tara’ib*. While it is easy to find references on Adam’s rib being the source of Eve’s creation, the fact that it was his shortest, uppermost rib and that, due to this, the Arab’s most likely designated the upper chest as exclusively feminine, there is no explicit evidence showcasing why the term is plural. Although, one *could* argue that the ‘uppermost chest’ is a singular entity designated by a plural term. If I were to speculate, this would be the most common sense understanding of the use of plural. However, if I were to go deeper, I might argue that the plurality of the term may be derived from the fact that Eve is considered to have a dual nature; being made from one soul (Adam), but functioning as a separate individual. Thus, the plural connotation acts as a way to differentiate her from Adam as her own self and more than just a part of her husband.

Given the above, “from between the backbone and the upper chest” should be rendered as “from the paternal and maternal genitalia” or more generally, “from the father and mother”. This imagery invites man to recall the activity of procreation; that he came

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from an “insignificant fluid” coming from his parents. As a parent oneself (or someone who has engaged in sexual activity) this can be easily visualized and understood. It is also beautiful in that the words used here (e.g. *sulb* and *tara'ib*) invoke references to Adam and Eve, the first parents of creation.

## Conclusion

When one reexamines contemporary views on 86:5-7 in light of the above, they should come to the conclusion that such cold and lifeless interpretations do not befit the eloquence of the Qur'an – its ability to utilize imagery while weaving together a narrative that both calls to the past and inspires the present. The position that I've offered here pays respect to the Qur'an's aesthetic voice while conforming to the strict guidelines of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Here, the beauty of the Revelation can be seen for what it is, not by the measure of science, but by the measure of itself and its own intentions. Although the answers offered here are not set in stone, the evidence provided builds a strong case for the most valid and likely interpretation of these verses.



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## APPENDIX

### Addressing Potential Responses

**1. “If you needed this many pages to explain something, then it must mean you’re wrong and making excuses!”**

The length of something doesn’t dictate the validity of one’s arguments no more than the type of font one uses. This article isn’t just about my position on Q. 86:5-7, but includes an introduction, a survey of contemporary opinions, a survey of formative and classical opinions, early exegete’s methodologies, an analysis on how the Qur’an communicates its message, criticisms of literal-scientific readings, and tables and graphs. The reason for including all these parts is to be exhaustive, as that’s what academics do when we research and discuss a topic. That said, I have included a small table of contents above for those who don’t wish to read all the background information which led to my conclusions. If you wish to get a quick answer, then jump straight to Section V. However, don’t complain when you don’t fully grasp how I reached my conclusions if you’re not willing to read preceding sections of this article.

If the above explanation is still not satisfactory to you then allow me to give you some food for thought:

I probably spent less time researching and writing this paper than you do on bashing Islam and harassing Muslims on social media. And if that isn’t your main cup of tea, I still probably spent less time on this paper than you do on social media in general. In other words, if you can’t spare 30 minutes or so to read this article, but can spare more than that writing comments on Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube telling me and other Muslims how “stupid” we are for “believing in fairytales”, then the only one here giving excuses is you.

I do not cater to intellectually lazy individuals who are incapable of processing information beyond a meme. So, if this is you, it’s best you do us both a favor

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and not waste my time with your overcompensating posturing about being “more rational” because you believe in the fairytale that you’re an autodidact genius by virtue of lacking belief in something. Well, here’s a reality check: I lack belief in your intelligence. So, if you’ve read this far and feel offended by what I just said, know that I’m smiling just as you finish this sentence.

**2. “All this explanation for something so obviously wrong.”**

If your objections were so obvious then you’d have some rationale or evidence to back it up. Simply saying “it’s obvious” is not an argument. The bottom line is this: my position has good reasoning and evidence to back it – yours does not. Therefore, it is not “obvious” to anyone other than you and anyone dense enough to take your claims seriously.

**3. “There isn’t an explicit statement from the Qur’an, ahadith, nor any scholars confirming your position!”**

There isn’t any explicit statement from the Qur’an nor ahadith confirming Q. 86:5-7 should be taken literally, and the literal interpretations offered come from a select minority who go against the consensus of previous scholars with respect to the non-literal understanding of the word *tara’ib*, circumvent agreed-upon standards of exegesis, and violate the Qur’an’s literary tone. In other words, there is *nothing explicitly* supporting one interpretation over the other. However, there is sufficient supporting evidence to make the case for one of these positions, and that position is mine. You see, my view is validated by a great deal of evidence – based in the Qur’an, Sunnah, and *tafasir* tradition – whereas your view literally has zero evidence and is based entirely on assumptions about what the text *should say* in accordance with your whims (to have it conform to Greek or contemporary medical science). Therefore, my view is the more rational position. Want to show otherwise? Offer a better response.

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#### 4. “Are you saying you know more about Q. 86:5-7 than people like Zakir Naik and other contemporary apologists and scholars?”

That question is slightly misleading. I believe most contemporary apologists and scholars have been influenced by an erroneous methodology (“scientific miracles”) and have a very weak grasp of what science is. As such, I do believe that contemporary apologists and scholars who interpret Q. 86:5-7 contrary to my view are in fact incorrect – not because they’re ignorant of their religion, but because they’ve been led to believe that they *don’t need* to reexamine their interpretations in light of their erroneous biases. You see, I attempt to refer to the scholarly tradition prior to the contemporary period in order to make my case. That said, while I respect contemporary scholars for their knowledge and dedication to our religion and this ummah, they can be wrong sometimes. However, as long as one’s disagreement is rooted in the scholarly tradition then it’s perfectly fine to have those disagreements. But if your disagreement is based on erroneous assumptions – especially those not validated by the tradition prior – then this is a problem. In summary, I’m an academic, not some random guy on Twitter who thinks he knows everything about Islam because he watched a few YouTube videos and frequents Reddit to edge-lord Muslims behind an anonymous account.

#### 5. “Are you offering a new interpretation?”

No, I don't believe I am. If you read the article you'll find that I am appealing to the consensus of the scholars with respect to their rudimentary explanations of semantics, while advocating for a *deeper* meaning beyond what they chose not to expound on (for reasons I offer in the article as well). In other words, I am simply explaining these verses *more*; explicating them in detail because most previous scholars didn't see a need to do so. Only today do these verses incur a great deal of controversy, so it's fitting that only today they be explained in this amount of detail. That said, I believe scientific interpretations *are* innovations which contradict the consensus of previous scholars.

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**6. “I don’t need to read your paper to know it’s nonsense!” \*tips fedora\***

Then why are you reading it? Don’t bother explaining, *because I don’t need to read your explanation to know its nonsense.*

**7. “I refuse to read the paper, but here’s an article/hadith/verse of the Qur’an which shows you’re wrong! Haha! Stupid Moslem!!11”**

One of the biggest mistakes anyone could ever make is offering a “rebuttal” to one of my articles without having read it. You see, unlike you, I’m not an idiot. I prepare for counter arguments from every possible angle (minus the insane ones that I can’t imagine even most people considering). The very Appendix you’re reading now, anticipating the very comment you’ve just made, should already make you aware of that. In other words, there’s about a 99% chance your “rebuttal” has already been addressed in my article. So, do yourself a favor and don’t give me the opportunity to embarrass you further. Trust me, I’m very good at making you look as dumb as you actually are, so please, spare me the guilty pleasure.

**8. “The fact that you wrote this article means the criticisms are correct!”**

By that logic the fact that you wrote this comment in response to my article shows that my article is correct. Maybe you should stick to your day job and let the grownups do the thinking.

**9. “You’re just trying to defend the Qur’an from its scientific errors!”**

Considering I don’t even believe the Qur’an refers to anything in a scientific fashion, it doesn’t make much sense to think I’m “defending” any erroneous or valid scientific aspects of the text. Might want to rethink your position there.

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## 10. “But why can’t the Qur’an include science? Isn’t scientific information part of being inspired and taught by a Divine message?”

Although I’ve already answered this question in the article, I thought I’d expound further. Consider this: If the Qur’an was meant to convey a scientific message, then why didn’t earlier scholars develop scientific theories on the basis of reading the Qur’an? Why did the *mufassirun* not come up with quantum physics, the big bang theory, plate tectonics, and a host of other contemporary scientific discoveries? The idea that there is “science” in the Qur’an, yet Muhammad (ﷺ), his companions, and the earliest exegetes didn’t discover it, implies that the early Muslims were more ignorant of the message than we are today or that they were too incompetent to discover these things before the non-believers (*astaghfir’Allah*). Apparently, every learned Muslim prior our century wasn’t capable of interpreting the Qur’an in a way that would allow us to scientifically surpass those who never read the Qur’an at all. How profoundly insulting.

Even if you assert that “the Qur’an offers multiple meanings to different people over time”, you’re implying that Allah withheld this information and then only revealed it during a time when non-Muslims have surpassed Muslims in scientific knowledge and technology – thereby making said revelations useless outside a facile appeal to “inspiration” without any moral or intellectual benefit. In other words, to you, the Qur’an’s validity as a Revelation from Allah has been reduced to being measured by contemporary science. How pitiful and unbecoming a Divine message. Not only that, but you’ve essentially opened the door for the Qur’an to be wrong in the future once the science of the day is replaced by more nuanced theories in the future (as will most likely occur).

I understand what I’m saying is harsh but consider this tough love: if your trust in the Qur’an rests on science, then the problem isn’t the Qur’an, it’s your understanding of Islam.

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The early Muslims did not need science to validate the Qur'an and you are no more intelligent nor sophisticated than they were. So, if they didn't need it, why do you?

**11. "But the Qur'an mentioned breasts explicitly in 78:33 (*kawaib*), therefore you're wrong about it only mentioning sex in euphemisms!"**

Although in the contemporary period breasts are considered synonymous with sex, the Qur'an merely treats them as objects of lust or "adornments" akin to other parts of the body concealed by the *hijab* (Q. 24:31), not as sexual organs. Also, it's quite odd that you believe breasts are somehow similar to genitalia and reproductive fluids.

**12. "Muhammad married Aisha when she was 9! OMGERD!"**

This has nothing to do with my article and is just an unnecessary comment from someone desperate for a platform and attention to compensate for their own irrelevance. If you think offering a completely off-topic response undermines the article in question, then please understand you're not exhibiting the qualities of a rational or intelligent individual. Aside from that, I've already written an article on the very comment shown here. However, considering you thought your response was "clever", I'm pretty sure you're not capable of understanding anything beyond your own delusions, so don't bother.

**13. "You're so arrogant!"**

On the contrary, I'm simply confident in my abilities in countering the arrogance of ultracrepidarians like yourself. Unlike you, I don't go around randomly attacking people I disagree with (Muslims especially), insulting their intelligence every chance I get because "muh lack of belief" makes me deluded enough to think I can school anyone and everyone. I insult people's intelligence

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when they behave like you. Don't like it? Humble yourself and stop being a douche. Pretty simple.

#### **14. "Taqiyyah!"**

Don't flatter yourself. I wouldn't waste my precious time (or braincells) lying to you so that I can "trick you into conversion" or "conquer you later". I have much more important things to worry about in my life and some insignificant conspiracy theorist nutjob like yourself isn't even on the list. However, if you're desperate to be added, I can put you under "clean toilet". Let me know.

#### **15. "But...but...you..."**

Stop while you're ahead. At this point you should realize I'm out of your league; your only contribution to humanity thus far being my entertainment. Spare yourself any further punishment and go get an education, a decent job, and start a family or something. You're not an intellectual avenger come to save the day from "irrational" people like myself, you're just another random idiot on social media who needs to learn their place in the world and needs to stop looking down on others because you think Google somehow trumps 10+ years of academic experience. In case you haven't realized this yet, it doesn't.

Now go make me some tea.