



## A Quranic Critique of the Orientalists' Views on *Ṭahāra*

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### Abstract

Ritual purity (*Ṭahāra*) is an important Quranic command requisite for prayer and certain rituals. Despite their positive points, the Orientalists' views on this topic are deficient or incorrect. This research attempts to analyse some of their views with a descriptive-analytic method to highlight their shortcomings and present genuine Islamic views on this topic. Some of the Orientalists' views on *ṭahārah* are as follows: words derived from the root *ṭ-h-r* refer to the requisite state of ritual purity or the process of achieving this state. The purpose of ablution (*wuḍū*) is to perform the prayer as God wills. Water has the power to repel demons. The prophet was influenced by the religious culture of his time in performing ritual purity. *Muṭahharūn* (the purified) are those who have repelled evil away from themselves or have performed ritual ablution. Ritual purity is a symbolic state in the context of ritual worship. The results of the present research are as follows: The word *ṭahāra* in the Quran refers to the state of purity, which according to the context in which the word appears, refers to the physical, spiritual, or both aspects. The ultimate purity is achieved by abstaining from any material or spiritual impurity at the level of one's thoughts, attributes, and deeds. The purpose of *wuḍū* is to attain spiritual purity and submit to God's guardianship, and to attain proximity to God. It is the state of physical or spiritual purity caused by using water according to the Divine command that removes evil impurities. The Quran is a miracle in its wording and content, which was revealed to the Prophet by God, and the Prophet was not influenced by the culture of his time in performing ritual purity. *Muṭahharūn* can refer to the angels, the purified servants of God, or those who have performed major or minor ablutions. Ritual purity is a real spiritual state needed for spiritual growth and proximity to God. As long as the Orientalists are not awakened to the revealed nature of the Quran, one should not expect them to present a fair and true picture of Islamic teachings and rulings.

**Keywords:** Ritual purity, The meaning of *ṭahāra*, Orientalists, purification, spiritual purity.

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## Introduction

The Orientalists have presented their voluminous research on Quranic concepts such as beliefs, ethics, and rulings in articles, books, and encyclopedias. *The Encyclopedia of the Quran*, edited by McAuliffe, and *The Quran: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Oliver Leaman, are two significant contemporary works on the Quran with many entries on different subjects, including “*tahāra*.” In the present research, the entries “Purify” by Berjak (2006), and “Ablution” by Leaman (2006) are chosen from *The Qur’an: an Encyclopedia*, and the entries “Prayer” by Bowering (2003), “Ritual Purity” by Lowry (2003), and “Pre-Islamic Arabia” by Hawting (2003) are selected from *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*. These entries are examined and analysed, and specific debatable points related to “*tahāra*” have been extracted from them.

Although some of these entries have merits and strong points, they exhibit certain deficiencies and faults in their views on “*tahāra*.” As the views of the Orientalists have a significant impact on presenting an unrealistic image of the Quran and its profound teachings, the present research endeavors to shed light on and scrutinize some of their drawbacks and faults, while presenting the genuine Quranic teachings on this subject.

Some of their shortcomings are as follows:

### 1. The Root and Meaning of *Tahāra*

#### 1.1. Lowry’s view

About the root and meaning of ‘*tahāra*,’ Lowry says: “Words derived from the root ṭ-h-r (compare Heb. ṭoharot) denote the requisite state of ritual purity for prayer as well as one of the processes by which that state is achieved” (Lowry 2003, 4:498). He also says: “*Tahāra* does not appear in the Qur’ān, though it seems likely to be originally a technical term, given

its fundamental etymological and semantic congruence with Hebrew *ṭoharot*” (Lowry 2003, 4:506).

## 1.2. Islamic view

In *al-Furūq fi al-Lughat*, “*ṭahāra*” (purity) is distinguished from “*nizāfat*” (cleanliness). “*Ṭahāra*” includes, on the one hand, body, and clothes, and on the other hand, the deficiencies in one’s disposition and moral traits. “*Nizāfat*” only refers to appearance, which includes physical body and clothes (‘Askarī 1979, 259).

In *Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr*, “*ṭuhr*” (purity) means being purified from pollution and uncleanness, and to be “*ṭāhir al-irḍ*” means to be devoid of deficiency (‘ayb). “*ṭāhir*” refers to something free from defects and moral blemishes and can also be used to describe the state opposite to menstruation (Fayyūmī 2017, 379).

The first verse, “And purify your cloak” (Quran 74:4) means that you should correct your deeds and not wear your clothes out of pride and arrogance. Some interpretations state that it means to wash your clothes with water. In contrast, others suggest protecting your heart from impurities, and others suggest it means not being treacherous as treachery stains one’s clothes. The second verse, “Therein are men who love to keep pure, and Allah loves those who keep pure” (Quran 9:108), is interpreted to mean purification from sins, and most commonly refers to purification from physical impurities (Ṭurayḥī 1983, 3:378).

“*Ṭahāra*” in Arabic is derived from the root letters *ṭ-h-r* which have a shared origin and indicate purity and the removal of impurities. It is the opposite of “*danas*,” [meaning impurity or contamination]. “*Ṭahāra*” also refers to the act of purifying oneself from sins and all that is deemed ugly or repulsive (Ibn Fāris 1983, 3:428).



Rāghib al-Isfahānī states, “And the reading of those who have read ‘*ḥattā yaṭṭahharna*’ confirms: ‘till they are clean,’ meaning they perform the purification which is washing. Allah says: ‘And He loves those who keep pure’ (Quran 2:222), meaning those who refrain from sinning and strive towards righteousness” (Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1991, 525).

(*T-h-r*) in origin refers to what is the opposite of impure and unclean, regardless of whether they are physical or spiritual. Verses such as Verse 11 of *Sūrat al-Anfāl*: ﴿وَيُنزِلُ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً لِيُطَهِّرَكُمْ بِهِ﴾ “and He sent down water from the sky to purify you with it” (Quran 8:11) and verse 4 and 5 of *Sūrat al-Muddathir*: ﴿وَتِيَابِكَ فَطَهِّرْ وَرُجْرَ فَاهْجُرْ﴾ “and purify your cloak and keep away from all impurity” (Quran 74:4-5) refer to avoiding external physical impurities and contaminants. Verses such as verse 42 of *Sūra Āli-i Imrān*: ﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ﴾ “Allah has chosen you and purified you” (Quran 3:42) and verse 33 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*: ﴿إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ﴾ “Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification” (Quran 33:33) refer to purification from spiritual impurities and uncleanness. Verses such as verse 9 of *Sūrat al-Tawbah*: ﴿فِيهِ رِجَالٌ﴾ “Therein are men who love to keep pure, and Allah loves those who keep pure” (Quran 9: 108) and verse 25 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*: ﴿وَأَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ﴾ “and chaste mates” (Quran 2:25) refer to purity in its absolute sense whether physical or spiritual. Purity is either in the generation (*takwin*), ideas and beliefs, attributes and morals, voluntary actions and deeds, or in the natural current. “Purification” (*taṭhīr*) is a comprehensive concept and has a general meaning: it takes place in all the stations of wayfaring (*sulūk*). Absolute purification is to abstain from any material or moral flaws and impurities at any level of ideas, attributes, deeds, and in one’s nature, and this is the ultimate perfection and



attainment of the highest level of enlightenment (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 7:152-155).

## Analysis

Lawry believes that the word *ṭahārat* denotes the requisite state of ritual purity for prayer and one of the processes by which that state is achieved. He also compares this word with the Hebrew word *Tahora*. There is no evidence proving that *ṭahāra* is derived from the Hebrew word *Tahora*. The mere resemblance of words in their wordings and meanings does not refer to their similar origin. While the word *ṭahāra* is not mentioned in the Quran, its different derivatives (*mushtaqqāt*) are mentioned referring to the purification either of body, soul, or both. It is the meaning and context of the verses, along with the occasions of revelation, which determines one or both aspects. Absolute purification is to avoid any physical or moral impurity at the level of ideas, attributes, deeds, and generally one's nature.

## 2. The Purpose of *Wuḍū* (Ablution)

### 2.1. Oliver Leaman

Oliver Leaman, about the purpose of ablution, states: “The purpose of wudu’ or ablution is referred to in 5.6: ‘O you who believe, when you observe the contact prayers (salat) you shall wash your faces, wash your arms to the elbows, wipe your heads and wash your feet to the ankles’” (Leaman 2006, 2). He, further, adds: “Yet it must be said that there is no evidence that the reason behind ablution is cleanliness. Rather, it is a formulation of God’s will. Were cleanliness to be the issue, the requirement might be to clean other more important parts of the body” (Leaman 2006, 2).

### 2.2. Allamah Ṭabāṭabā’ī

The Quranic verse about ablution and its purpose reads as follows:



﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ وَ  
امْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى الْكَعْبَيْنِ وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ جُنُبًا فَاطَّهَّرُوا وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ  
عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ مِنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا  
طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ مِنْهُ مَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيَجْعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ حَرَجٍ وَلَكِنْ يُرِيدُ  
لِيُطَهِّرَكُمْ وَليُسِّمَ نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴾ (مائده/6)

“O you who have faith! When you stand up for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe a part of your heads and your feet, up to the ankles. If you are junub, purify yourselves. But if you are sick, or on a journey, or any of you has come from the toilet, or you have touched women, and you cannot find water, then make tayammum with clean ground and wipe a part of your faces and your hands with it. Allah does not desire to put you to hardship, but He desires to purify you, and to complete His blessing upon you so that you may give thanks.” (Quran 5:6)

Allamah states that the purpose of the verse is not purity from uncleanness, rather it is a state of spiritual purity attained through one of the three actions mentioned in the verse, and this is the real condition of prayer. In addition, Allamah believes that the Quranic phrase “complete His blessing upon you” refers to the blessing of religion not only in terms of its teachings and rulings, but also in terms of submission to Allah in all matters, and it is the guardianship (*wilāyah*) of Allah over His servants in His commands. This is accomplished by implementing all religious laws, including the rulings of the three types of purification (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1996, 5:230-231).

## Analysis

Leaman posits that the function of ablution is to ready oneself for prayer, while Allamah asserts that purification’s purpose is to achieve spiritual

purity and complete submission to Allah's authority by following His commands. Ablution goes beyond its customary practice of preparing for prayer; it is a means of achieving a state of spiritual purity that enables communication with the Divine, leading to spiritual growth and proximity to God. Purification of the body is a precursor to spiritual advancement, and its objective is not solely cleanliness, but rather purification from moral blemishes and spiritual impurities, resulting in spiritual progress and perfection.

### 3. Supernatural Attributes of Water

#### 3.1. Bowering's View

Böwering states: "Behind these stipulations lies the perception that water has the power to drive off demons" (Böwering 2003, 4:225).

#### 3.2. The Quran

About verse 11 of *Sūrat al-Anfāl*: ﴿وَيُنزِّلُ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً لِيُطَهِّرَكُمْ بِهِ وَيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمْ رِجْسَ الشَّيْطَانِ﴾ "and He sent down water from the sky to purify you with it, and to repel from you the defilement of Satan" (Quran 8:11), Ayatullah Makārim states: "This impurity may have been satanic temptations, and it may have been physical impurity due to someone's *jinābat* (major impurity) that night or both, and in any case, this life-giving water that was collected in the ditches around Badr, while the enemy had taken control of the wells, was used by Muslims to wash [their body] and quench their thirst and it washed away all the impurities" (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 7:106).

#### Analysis

What Bowering says implies that water by itself has the power to drive off demons. This echoes the pre-Islamic beliefs which originate from tribal customs and popular beliefs, while the Quran is the book of truth that



speaks about reality, and in the aforementioned verse both the physical or spiritual impurities from Satan are removed by water, not because of its own power and magical influence, but due to the physical or spiritual state of purity attained by the use of water. As such, if someone uses water for major washing (*ghusl*) but not according to the Divine ruling, it only removes the physical pollution, not the state of impurity caused by *jinābat*. Therefore, water by itself does not have any supernatural power in repelling devils.

#### 4. The Influence of the Culture of the Time on the Prophet

About the influence of the culture of the region on the Prophet, Hawting says: “In general, scholars who connect the Qurān or Islam with evidence from pre-Islamic Arabia lying beyond the traditional scope of the *jāhiliyya* envisage that Muḥammad had contacts with and was influenced by the religious culture of those regions. For example, it has been suggested, on the basis of a small number of south Arabian inscriptions in which the root *sh-r-k* has been read, that both the qurānic word and the concept of shirk are derived from south Arabia. In the area of ritual, parallels have been drawn between some south Arabian practices regarding ritual purity (q.v.) and those of Islam” (Hawting 2003, 4: 258).

#### Analysis

The Quran is a Divine revelation both in its wording and meaning. Accepting the notion that the Prophet incorporated certain elements from his own cultural context into the Quran leads to denying the divine origin of the Quran and affirming human authorship, while the Quran negates any intervention by the Prophet in its wording and content (Riḍā’ī-Iṣfahānī 2021: 110). The Quran emphasises this issue in verses, ﴿وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ. إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ﴾ “Nor does he speak out of [his own] desire: it is just a revelation that is revealed [to him]” (*Sūrat al-Najm/3-4*); ﴿وَلَوْ تَقَوَّلَ





«Had he faked any sayings in Our name, We would have surely seized him by the right hand and then cut off his aorta» (*Sūrat al-Hāqqah*/44-46); ﴿وَلَا تَعْجَلْ بِالْقُرْآنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ﴾  
﴿وَلَا تَعْجَلْ بِالْقُرْآنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ﴾ “Do not hasten with the Quran before its revelation is completed for you, and say, My Lord! Increase me in knowledge” (*Sūra Tāhā*/114).

Contrary to what some orientalist suppose about the Quran to be the work of the Prophet, both the words of the Quran and the arrangement of the verses are Divine revelation. Ayatollah Ma‘rifat, referring to verse, ﴿إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ﴾ “Indeed We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it” (*Sūrat al-Hijr*/9), considers the order of the verses and their arrangement in the sūras in certain numbers to be through Divine decree (*tawqīfī*) and the order of the Prophet<sup>3</sup> (Ma‘rifat 2008, 1:278) and points to reasons such as the challenges (*tahaddī*) and miraculous aspects of the Quran (*i’jzā-i Quran*) and the consensus of the Islamic community (*umma*) in all historical periods that the existing order of verses was made through divine revelation (ibid, 1:279). Additionally, it has been stated that the sequence of verses within the sūras is based on the order in which they were revealed, with the exception of rare instances where the Prophet, with divine permission, arranged them in close proximity due to the compatibility between certain verses and those revealed earlier. (ibid, 1:281). The arrangement of the sūras in the Quran is just as miraculous and divinely inspired as the wording and meaning of the individual verses.

Hence, it is essential to view the Quran as a source of factual evidence regarding the realities of the created world, including the secrets of the

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<sup>3</sup>. نظم الآيات وترتيبها القائم ضمن السور وفي أعدادها الخاصة، شيء حصل على عهد الرسالة توقيفياً وبنص صاحب الشريعة لم تمسه يد.



angelic and heavenly realms. The verses of the Quran are not only Divine revelation in their wording and meaning but also strategically arranged according to the wisdom of God. It is important to note that the Prophet served only as a messenger of revelation and did not interfere with the Quran's verses, nor was he influenced by the religious culture of his time. Therefore, we should not limit our understanding of the Quran to simply confirming native culture and local beliefs.

### 5. *Muṭahharūn* (The Purified)

Böwering refers to the Quranic verse about the *muṭahharūn* in these words: “Behind these stipulations lies the perception that water has the power to drive off demons (cf. Goldziher, *Wasser als Dämonen*, 27) as well as the solemn qurānic assertion that the Qurān is a sublime book only to be touched by “the purified” (*al-muṭahharūn*, Q 56:76-9) (Böwering 2003, 4:225). About purification, Berjak states: “It is a requirement that has to be met prior to many worship practices, including touching or reciting the Qur’an: ‘none can touch it, but the purified’ (56.79)” (Berjak 2006, 513).

### Analysis

It remains unclear who exactly the “purified” (*al-muṭahharūn*) mentioned by Böwering are. However, it appears that he believes they are those who have rid themselves of evil through a process of water purification, as water is believed to possess a magical power that can drive away demons. According to Ayatullah Makārim, many exegetes have interpreted this verse as a warning against touching the Quran without performing ablution or washing, citing hadiths from the infallible Imams. On the other hand, some interpret it as a reference to the pure angels who are knowledgeable about the Quran or act as intermediaries for revelation to the Prophet's heart, while others see it as a statement that only the pure can truly understand the profound truths and concepts of the Quran. Despite these differing views, there is no inherent contradiction between them, and all



three interpretations can be considered valid within the context of the verse (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 23:268).

## 6. The Symbolic Nature of *Tahāra*

Defining ritual purity, Lowry states: “A state of heightened cleanliness, symbolic or actual, associated with persons, activities, and objects in the context of ritual worship” (Lowry 2003, 4: 498). He, further, adds: “Thus, the exception would, in the enumerated situations in which water is not available, allow for the symbolic wiping of the face and hands, and by implication also of the head and feet” (ibid, 4: 499-500).

### Analysis

According to Jung, “A symbol is an indefinite expression with many meanings, pointing to something not easily defined and therefore not fully known” (Jung 1967, 124). As Jung describes in *Man and His Symbols*: “Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider ‘unconscious’ aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason” (Jung 1978, 4).

Lowry does not make it clear whether he considers ritual purity as a real state or a symbolic state. Nevertheless, it seems that he leans toward the idea that it is a ritual action that symbolises a purified state whereas a symbol is an indefinite expression that can have many meanings. For example, water can be a symbol of life, purity, generosity, freshness, hope, knowledge, and so on. Therefore, to consider ablution (*wuḍū*) or ritual body washing (*ghusl*) as a symbolic state is to ignore their real spiritual effects, which are necessary for spiritual growth and proximity to God.



## Conclusion

Despite the good points mentioned by the Orientalists on *ṭahārat*, some of their views are either deficient or incorrect. Some of their deficient views are as follows:

1. Considering *ṭahārat* as the state or process of achieving purity, while in the Quranic context, *ṭahārat* refers to the physical or spiritual state of purity or both aspects.

2. The purpose of ablution (*wuḍū*) is to perform the prayer as God wills. In Islamic teachings, in addition to this, the purpose of *wuḍū* is to attain spiritual purity, submit to God's guardianship, and attain proximity to God.

3. *Muṭahharūn* (the purified) are those who have repelled evil away from themselves or attained purification through ritual ablution. In the Quran, *Muṭahharūn* can refer to the angels, the purified servants of God, or those who have performed major or minor ablutions.

Some of their incorrect views are as follows:

1. Water has the power to repel demons. While, in the Quran, it is the use of water according to God's order that removes the physical or spiritual impurities. In addition, ultimate purity is achieved by abstaining from any material or spiritual impurity at the level of one's thoughts, attributes, and deeds.

2. The act of performing ritual purity was a result of the religious culture prevalent during the time of the prophet. However, as per the Quran, the prophet was the divine messenger of God who conveyed His revealed words to humanity and was not influenced by the prevalent religious culture of his era.



3. Ritual purity is a symbolic state in the context of ritual worship. According to the Quran, ritual purity is a real spiritual state necessary for spiritual growth and proximity to God.

As long as the Orientalists are not awakened to the revealed nature of the Quran, one should not expect them to present a fair and true picture of Islamic teachings and rulings.

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