

## The Nature of Scriptural Reasoning in Islam

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Muslims regard the Qur'an as God's Speech ( *kalam allah* ). God speaks to humanity through His prophets, providing them with universal as well as particular guidance to direct human life in order to achieve the divine goal on earth. Whereas the universal guidance in the form of innate reason aims to provide directives that can touch all humans qua human, the particular guidance in the form of scriptures provides prescriptive directions to organize both the spiritual as well as temporal affairs of that specific community under the leadership of God's envoy, the prophet. Accordingly, from the time the Prophet Muhammad presented the Qur'an as the Book of God ( *kitab allah* ), it has remained the source of religious reflection ( *tadhakkur* ) and intellectual appropriation ( *tadabbur* ). In other words, the message of the Qur'an is intimately linked to the expressions of personal piety as much as intellectual search for the meanings of the Divine Speech. Both these aspects – religious reflection and intellectual appropriation – have led the Muslims to interact with the Qur'an as the main proof for God's existence and concern for humanity. The search for the divine purposes for humankind in the Qur'an has functioned as the most dynamic source for scriptural reasoning in order to reflect on human actions and determine whether they are in conformity with God's will.

Muslims have always approached the Qur'an as a living source of prescriptive guidance for the community's well-being. Accordingly, Muslim scholars sought solutions to the concrete problems under given circumstances by applying the rules derived from the Qur'anic precedents. The Qur'anic cosmos was thoroughly human, profoundly anchored

in human experience as humanity tried to make sense of the divine challenge imparted in the revelation to create the ethical order on earth. As long as the belief about establishing an ideal order on earth remained the major component of the living community's faith and active response to the divine challenge, there remained the need to clarify the Qur'anic impetus in order to promulgate it at each stage of the community's drive towards its ultimate destiny.

Hence, the history of Muslim community provides a creative and fertile ground for an ongoing interpretation of the divine purposes indicated in the Qur'an. However, due to innumerable factors impacting upon a commentator, the representation of the Qur'anic goals for humanity has not received adequate treatment faithful to the text of the scripture. Undeniably, scholarly pretext <sup>[1]</sup> plays a significant role in the explication of particular circumstance of the text and its denotation. It is within this interpretive realm that an insightful investigator can discern the authorial pretext of the earlier commentators that led to the distortion of the otherwise objectifiable context of Muslim existence. In addition, it is through the investigation of such distorted explications of the context of the Muslim community that a Muslim exegete today is able to recontextualize the Qur'an and afford a fresh understanding of the divinely ordained Muslim community.

## The Challenge to Reflect

The most challenging aspect of the Qur'an is its invitation to humankind to reflect on the meanings of God's essentially universal message given to different prophets at various times in history. The purpose of this divine message, according to the Qur'an, is none other than to complement the innate reason in human beings, in order to seek right guidance for establishing an ideal society on earth that would reflect God's will for humanity. The divine message, in this sense, seeks appropriation and implementation by human beings through a divinely bestowed gift of reason – the "light" by means of which human ignorance can be turned into redemptive knowledge. <sup>[2]</sup> The key to human prosperity is the interaction between God's revelation in scriptural mode and the processes of human reasoning that endeavor to unlock the divine mysteries in nature and revelation. In this sense, there has been an ongoing relationship between reason seeking to uncover universal guidance related to the innate nature – the fitra – created by God in humankind, and the particularity of the revelation given to specific community to correlate the common goals of reason and revelation in Islam.

Scriptural reasoning in the Muslim community has arisen in response to the need to implement the prescriptive commandments of the Qur'an and the necessity to reflect upon the difficulties facing the community in realizing the ideals set forth therein. The major criticism leveled by the traditionalist scholars <sup>[3]</sup> of the Qur'an against the modernist discourse on the Qur'an is the tendency of the modernists to ignore the cumulative wisdom of the exegetical tradition in their scriptural reasoning. The modernists claim to appropriate the Qur'an on its own terms, without any reference to the classical exegetical literature, because they want to resolve immediate problems faced by the community about which the inherited tradition has little to say. In other words, the modernists <sup>[4]</sup> find the inherited cumulative tradition stifling fresh reading of the substance of the revelation. The traditionalists retort by pointing out the historical specificity of the revelation given to Muhammad, the Prophet, which cannot be fully comprehended without first engaging in an investigation of the inherited exegeses of the Qur'an.

The traditionalist scholars of the Qur'an have a point here. The exegesis of the Qur'an is essentially founded on a historical method in which the sources that provide evidential documentation are examined thoroughly to ascertain their reliability. Each piece of evidence is further analyzed for its internal consistency before it is admitted as a valid argument in support of a particular thesis. It is unthinkable for the community to accept the modernist mode of reflection over the meanings of the revelation, whether that revelation is the directly revealed Qur'an or the paradigmatic tradition of the Prophet, the Sunna. Muslims regard both the Qur'an and the Sunna as God's complete revelation to guide the community. As such the Sunna is an inseparable part of the revelation from God. Hence, any scriptural reasoning that ignores the totality of the revelation, that is, the Qur'an and the Sunna, cannot produce the necessary confidence in the community that treats the centrality of divine guidance through the entire body. As a normative source for Muslim life, scriptural reasoning must undertake a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an in its linguistic-lexical as well as its historical modes.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of the exegetical tradition in Islam and demonstrate the mode of scriptural reasoning that has been set forth in classical as well as modern works of Qur'anic exegesis. Muslim scholars needed to explain the historical setting of the revelation so as to uncover the principles that were applied in the development of Muslim society and its ever-expanding legal and ethical scope. In this

intellectual process of providing exegetical principles for reflective reasoning, these scholars stand within a long and creative history in the development of the Qur'anic exegesis in Islam. Their approach has been to search for historical precedents and for extracting doctrinal and juridical principles from precise references in the Qur'an that are relevant to contemporary situations.

## Historical Method in Scriptural Reasoning

From the time the Qur'an appeared on the stage of history in the seventh century there have been numerous commentaries that have ventured to make sense of this classical document. Historical method of interpretation that requires that the text be interpreted in accordance with the rule of grammar and of the meaning of words has had a long and creative history in the development of the Qur'anic exegesis. It is remarkable that even when a majority of the commentaries were guided by dogmatic prejudices, Muslim commentators paid close attention to the historical setting of the Qur'anic language out of which the text appeared.

The fact that every text speaks in the language of its time required Muslim interpreters to engage in conveying the relationship of the message to the social exigencies and other human conditions through the knowledge of historical conditions of the language and those who spoke it. There was an implicit recognition of the actuality that understanding the Qur'an required understanding of the history in which Muhammad emerged as the Prophet of God and launched his mission to establish the ideal public order. The assessment of the historical forces connected with the Qur'an gave rise to the divergent interpretations of the "occasions of revelation" (*asbab al-nuzul*), which, in turn were related to the distinct views held by the individual exegete engaged in formulating specific lines of inquiry into the meaning of the text.

To be sure, the inherently subjective nature of any historical enterprise, stemming from an inevitable relation between an interpreter's presuppositions and the substantive assessment of the written documents, was the major factor in the continued interest among Muslim scholars to unfold the preunderstanding of the earlier commentators of the revelatory text by a fresh understanding. Additionally, although the text of the Qur'an was fixed soon after the Prophet's death, if not earlier as maintained by some recent studies on the history of the text, <sup>[5]</sup> without the continued presence of the only

authoritative interpreter of the message, namely, the Prophet himself, any claim to a definitive understanding of the Qur'an on the part of the community was necessarily out of question. Furthermore, the constant need to expound the historical setting of the revelation in order to discover practical rules for deducing judicial decisions became part of the intellectual groundwork of Muslim legal scholarship.

Scriptural reasoning among Muslims today is dependent upon cultivating truth by weeding out seemingly endless errors of interpretation and unacceptable distortions of the context in the previous Qur'anic exegeses. This intellectual process leads to providing an explication of explication by creating a less troublesome and better suited vocabulary that will improve the prospects of rational assessment of the explicit sense of scriptural language. It is an ongoing engagement with the revealed text in reformulating better questions about the intended meanings and their contextual significance to uncover improved hermeneutical principles that will enhance the essential meaning of the Qur'anic text, irrespective of historical context or exegetical rationale provided by previous exegetes. In other words, rather than closing the gates of further rational inquiry into the lexical and grammatical usages of the Qur'an in the past works of exegesis, cumulative exegetical tradition must provide necessary templates for the reformulation and reappropriation of intertextual hermeneutics to make the terms of the scripture relevant in today's living community. Hence, for instance, no rationally interpreted scriptural solution to the problems arising from the inferior status of religious minorities living under the Muslim nation-state in the classical juridical corpus can be resolved merely by following the mode of scriptural reasoning employed by the classical or medieval exegetes. In the final analysis, intellectual engagement with the Qur'an must lead a Muslim commentator to assert with confidence the validity of beliefs about the timeless nature of the Qur'an as the most important source of guidance in the modern times.

It is important to underscore the necessary confidence in the tradition of scriptural reasoning in order to recognize the evolving intellectual process in understanding the revelation that would enable the commentator to search for the real intention and contextual significance of the recontextualized exegesis of the past commentators. Such recognition in the evolving clarity of meanings also equips the commentator to engage in his own hermeneutics without discarding some variant readings and ensuing interpretations, which are critically and painstakingly surveyed for their historical value in

as much as they reveal the true meaning of the text. Moreover, these conflicting and sometimes confusing interpretations put forward by representatives of particular theological or legal factions enable the commentator to propose a correct interpretation through elimination of the far-fetched and constrained meanings of the passage under scrutiny. Without pretending to have captured the essential meaning of the Qur'anic revelation, the commentator simply brings his interests and purposes to bear upon the reformulated exegetical intention and contextual significance of the Qur'an. It is this intellectual process that makes a commentary a fresh and creative attempt at discovering the meaning of the Qur'an.

## **Intra-textual Hermeneutics in Qur'anic Scriptural Reasoning**

Muslim exegetes at all times have resorted to intra-textual hermeneutics in order to explain one part of the Qur'an through another. The method also demonstrates inexhaustible layers of meanings the verses possess. This methodological preoccupation goes to demonstrate the infinite potentiality of the Qur'an and its ongoing relations to broader levels of context as its existence in history lengthens. It, moreover, demonstrates the need to go beyond the course of traditional interpretation to confront aspects of human self-understanding through intellectual development in every instance of making sense of authentic existence.

This method of the interpretation of the Qur'an begins with the Prophet himself. Different parts of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet during the twenty-three years of his mission on earth. Explication of the divine intention of the revelation was among the functions that the Qur'an assigned to the Prophet. The Prophet functioned as the projection of the divine message embodied in the Qur'an. He was the living commentary of the Qur'an, intricately related to the revelatory text. Without the Prophet the Qur'an was incomprehensible, just as without the Qur'an the Prophet was no prophet at all.

Following the Prophet's death a number of prominent disciples involved themselves in interpreting the prescriptive aspects of the Qur'an in order to provide rulings for specific situations in the community's social and political life. The result of this endeavor formed the groundwork for legal methodology in Islamic juridical studies. The main aspects that characterized the explication of the Qur'an at this stage included:

1. Analysis of literary and linguistic aspects of the revelation;
2. Determining historical context of the revelation;
3. Clarification of the meanings through intra-textual reference; and,
4. Explanation of the passages by using the materials that were transmitted in the form of *hadith*-reports attributed to the Prophet as the commentator and teacher of the Qur'an.

Of all the four above-mentioned methods of explicating the revelation, it was the exegesis based on the *hadith*-reports that found more acceptance in the community. The *hadith*, as the community came to believe, captured the essential meaning of the text under discussion as the Prophet had taught. However, such confidence in the *hadith*-reports without first scrutinizing them for their reliability proved to be most damaging in discovering the reasoning behind the apparent sense of the revelation. Some of these commentaries also exhibited suspicious attitudes to any opinion that was based on the apparent sense of the passage because such an approach was regarded as founded upon rational presumptions about the language and its ordinary usage in the Arab society. Investigation about the ordinary language of the Arabs was fundamental to the discussions of grammatical points, semantics or customary application of linguistic conventions — the discipline that proved to be indispensable for establishing the authoritativeness of the apparent sense of the Qur'anic passages in the works that dealt with the legal principles and rules.

The hermeneutics founded upon ordinary usage of the language of revelation undertakes to accomplish an even more complicated task of establishing general rules of intra-textual hermeneutics. How to relate sometimes different parts of a single chapter of the Qur'an which appears to the non-specialist reader to be an atomistic compilation of disparate themes and discontinuous narratives? In other words, how to present coherence in the present structure of the text to demonstrate its miraculous quality of being a masterpiece in itself? These two lines of inquiry have led a number of modern commentators to engage in explication of the Qur'an by the Qur'an ( *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* ), that is, intra-textual hermeneutics.

Accordingly, four major prerequisites have been recognized to accomplish intra-textual hermeneutics:

1. The commentator should not pre-formulate his opinion about the passage under consideration. If he does have an opinion, he should not impose it on the text, seeking its confirmation externally.
2. Lexicographical investigation must be thorough enough to acquire the most comprehensive sense of a term and its properties.
3. Intra-textual investigation must be based on not merely comparison of verses on similar topic. It should undertake to distinguish and determine the general from the specific; the absolute from the conditional; the literal from the apparent; and the explicit from the implicit senses of the texts being compared.
4. Careful attention should be given to the method that was employed by the Prophet to interpret the verse by another verse, just as 'Ali b. Abi Talib, a prominent disciple of the Prophet and an eminent exponent of the Qur'an states: "One part of the Book of God explains another,.... and one part serves as a witness to the other." [6]

## A Paradigm for Exegesis in the Twenty-First Century

The paradigm that I wish to propose is derived from the above-mentioned methodological prerequisites. As a rule, the exegesis of each chapter has to begin by an exposition ( *bayan* ) which identifies its central theme. Such an introduction facilitates the subsequent commentary which follows the order in which the verses of the chapter appear. However, some kind of thematic unity has to be maintained in the way the verses are grouped. As the general flow of exegetical discourse proceeds the commentator must provide further expository sections that treat each segment as a thematic unit. Throughout no opportunity to convey the thrust of the message as a unified discourse must be lost. Meticulous interrelating of the different parts of the chapter (the opening, the end, and the main body) and demonstrating its coherence through intra-textual hermeneutics provide the necessary unity of revelatory exposition.

The next stage of exegetical discourse is to be achieved by undertaking to support the exegesis by engaging in "discourse on the traditions," "philosophical discourse," or "social discourse" on the set of verses. In all this endeavor to explicate the divinely inspired text, a commentator pays attention not only to the grammatical points, semantics, and lexical meanings of words in their historical setting; he explores ideas and individual events connected by the succession of cause and effect as they relate to the salvation history of the Qur'an. Through the elaboration of life-orientational dimensions of the divine communication with humanity, the commentator as a believer

becomes a participant in this encounter of the sacred with history.

The other methodological consideration that must guide this paradigm is its being source-oriented exegesis, drawing upon the rich resources to support particular hermeneutical positions without treating this past heritage as a closed discourse. Source-oriented exegesis demonstrates comprehensive treatment of the Islamic exegetical tradition, by juxtaposing varying opinions held by major Sunni and Shi'i commentators, [7] and revealing their congruency or lack of it. Ambiguous passages must be taken up syllogistically in order to explain their meanings through inter-textual references to more explicit verses. This method of using one part of the Qur'an to explain the other permits the commentator to avoid the pitfalls of reason-based exegesis with its far-fetched and incongruent explications. More importantly, this approach to the Qur'an in more than one way avoids the errors of the past exegetical tradition in that the commentator ensures that his conclusions are in conformity with his overall expository stance adopted at the beginning of each chapter.

Besides being encyclopedic in preserving the extensive discourse on the understanding of the divine speech, this method provides a thorough and highly sophisticated critique of other exegetical works. This critique is not limited to any particular aspect that touches upon the Qur'an. It includes topics connected with misunderstood grammatical and lexical points; frivolous juridical and doctrinal resolutions; distorted historical contextualization of certain verses; and, unwarranted use of modern scientific data in the sufficiently explicit verses dealing with supernatural phenomena.

Some examples from the Qur'an will demonstrate the application of the above paradigm.

## **Natural-Supernatural in Scriptural Reasoning**

There are a number of verses in the Qur'an that speak about the religious truth based on an interaction between natural and supernatural realms of human existence and treat these statements of declaration as given in the faith. These passages also show the need to adopt intra-textual hermeneutics for making sense of the sacred text without imposing external, rationally-inferred criteria for their claim to supernatural verity.

For example, consider interpretation of Q. 2:127 which recounts the history of Ka'ba when it was completed by Abraham:

*And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised [the walls of the Ka'ba] on the foundations of the House, [and prayed:] 'Our Lord, accept this service from us; You are the All-hearing, the All-knowing.'*

On the interpretation of this verse one can take issue with the author of a modern, rationalist exegesis of the Qur'an, entitled *al-Manar fi tafsir al-qur'an*. In this commentary the exegete Muhammad 'Abduh criticizes the past commentators for narrating unreliable *hadith*-reports about the prehistoric origins of the Ka'ba and considering the institution of the pilgrimage as going back to the first human on earth, namely, Adam, while maintaining the heavenly origin of the Black Stone.

The scope of 'Abduh's apologetic criticism goes beyond the ostensible sense of the passage under consideration: How can one bring in the question of the reliability of the reports about the prehistoric origins of the Ka'ba or the heavenly origin of the Black Stone when such considerations are not part of the immediate sense conveyed by the verse? Does the verse go beyond simply stating the fact that the Ka'ba was built by Abraham and Ishmael? The information that the transmitters of the *hadith*-reports compiled to support the supernatural origins of the Ka'ba have nothing to do with the declaration of the Qur'an that Abraham and Ishmael built the house of worship. What appears to be the real issue in 'Abduh's conclusion is the subjective approach and the preunderstanding of the author who, because of his rationalist stance in theology, disapproves supernatural elements that are invoked to explain the contextual aspects of the Ka'ba narrative. Moreover, charges of incongruity between the traditions and the Qur'anic information stem from the commentator's knowledge of natural sciences. How can one corroborate religious truth through the prism of material or non-material sciences?

The scope and function of natural sciences is to explicate matter and its properties, just as the scope and function of social sciences revolves around social events. However, any attempt to go beyond matter and its relation to non-material supernatural events is beyond the scope of cognition founded upon sensory perception and empirical facts. That which the natural sciences can say about the Ka'ba can include natural and human

component of the building and material property of the structure. That which social science can undertake to explicate is social events surrounding the emergence of Ka'ba in the Arab society, such as the history of Hagar, Ishmael, Tahama, the arrival of Jurhum in Mecca and so on. As for the knowledge about supernatural events connected with the Black Stone and its heavenly or any other origin, that knowledge is beyond the scope of both these areas of human inquiry.

It is not clear how these commentators who are interested in giving a materialistic twist to religious truths would deal with description of the Paradise with its gold and silver promised to the faithful as their reward. Whereas gold and silver are mentioned because of their precious value and dearth on earth, what does accumulation of wealth mean in Paradise when its relative importance is meaningless if seen without its social context?

At this crucial juncture one needs to raise the critical question in religious epistemology: is there any rational method of interpreting these religious truths except that there is the concealed world of faith behind them which both the natural and social sciences are incapable of scrutinizing?

In interpreting such verses a religious scholar needs to bear in mind the nature of religious truths and their meaning for the faithful, for whom these truths are based on more firm foundations than those recognized in natural and social sciences. The Qur'an, for instance, uses the similitude of the good "words" that go "upward" toward God (Q. 14:24) and "piety" from human beings that "reaches" the Divine (Q. 22:37 in a figurative sense. And, although "words" denote human agency and have a concrete existence, and "piety" is nothing but an action or a description thereof, can one undertake to interpret such figurative references in the Qur'an through the prism of empirical sciences?

In conclusion, the methodological predilection of explaining the Qur'an with the help of the Qur'an itself, that is, interpreting a verse with another verse, is the legacy of the Prophet's own method of scriptural reasoning. Since the Qur'an did not exist in the form that we know today, the Prophet naturally used earlier passages to explain the later message revealed to him, relating them in a unified theme or subject under consideration.

## **Text and Context in Scriptural Reasoning**

The second example for the proposed paradigm comes from the verse that deals with the fate of those who engage in usurious commercial transactions. The subject of this particular verse has been widely discussed in all periods of the Qur'anic exegesis. In fact, it still remains unresolved because many religious-minded Muslims regard the practice as forbidden by God. The verse provides an interesting case of the way scriptural reasoning operates beyond the context of all areas of human knowledge about psychology, economics, and eschatology. Here is the verse (Q. 2: 275):

*Those who devour usury [and resort to sophistry in order to justify their wrongdoing] shall not rise again unless it be like madman whom Satan has rolled in the dust and the mud; only them, completely abased shall they rise. This is because they claim that usury is simply another form of trade.*

The subject matter of Q. 2:275 has much wider implications than merely threatening those who are engaged in exploiting others with a severe punishment in the hereafter. The terms of this passage extend to psychology, economics and eschatology. It speaks about the condition of those who "devour usury" that "they shall not rise [on the Day of Judgment] but like a man possessed of a devil and demented." The social-economic context of the threat serves to lay emphasis on the prevailing injustices in Mekkan society as much as to warn the people of the grave consequence the act carries both now and in the future. At the time that the Prophet emerged in Mekka, transactions with a fixed time limit and payment of interest ( *riba* ), as well as speculations of all kinds, formed an essential element in the highly developed regional system of trade in Arabia. A debtor who could not repay the capital (money or goods) with the accumulated interest at the time it became due was given an extension of time in which to pay, but at the same time the sum due was doubled. The practice was prevalent during the early part of the Prophet's mission in Mekka before he migrated to Medina in 622 CE, where he denounced it. Like other social reforms the Prophet introduced into his growing community, the prohibition against interest was introduced in stages in the Qur' an. It began with a caution: "O believers, devour not usury ( *riba* ) doubled and redoubled, and fear your God." (Q. 3:110) Later, the prohibition was proclaimed in no uncertain terms, as the verse Q 2:275 shows. This latter verse speaks about the hereafter, which is established only through faith. However, the way hereafter translates into the situation of being "possessed of a devil" is as palpable as any phenomenon whose veracity depends

on sensory perception.

One of the ground rules to which a commentator must adhere is to rid oneself of the preunderstanding that one has about a concept. That is accomplished by investigating the wording of the verse for its lexical and literary significations and comparing it with other similar occurrences in the text. By doing so one avoids imposing preformulated meanings on the text to seek their confirmation. Thus, in responding to the questions about the meaning of "usury" one can explain the concept in its lexical sense as "giving a thing and later on taking back a similar thing plus an increase," and relate it to its concrete cultural usage by citing an example of a case in which a person devouring usury accumulates wealth at the expense of others. Such an exploitation of others intrudes upon the balance and equilibrium that a society aims to achieve under the divine guidance.

The next exegetical move is to analyze the problematic phrase about being "possessed by a devil" as a punishment for devouring usury. To that end one needs to undertake an extensive investigation of the exegetical traditions and opinions offered by other scholars. Furthermore, one needs to critically evaluate their opinions and demonstrate the underlying problem that some of them have overlooked the necessity to contextualize the punishment of being "possessed by a devil." The verse implicates in the punishment only those who have voluntarily chosen not to differentiate between "trade and usury," the former being permitted and the latter prohibited.

The parable of a person devouring usury to the one confounded by a devil refers to the confused state of the mind of that person whose choice to devour usury is the result of his muddled thinking. Hence, "possession by a devil" does not refer to the involuntary convulsions of epileptic attack or some state of lunacy, as maintained by some commentators.

The next exegetical shift is to clarify the purpose of the parable by critically evaluating the past commentaries that mention "rising" as being a reference to "rising from the grave" at the time of resurrection. Some commentators take the parable to serve as a reminder that those who are entangled in the love of wealth and ultimately become enslaved by it, in this life. These individuals have abandoned the legitimate ways of earning, and have instead concentrated on earning money through money only. This

preoccupation with wealth has caused them to deviate from the path of moderation, leading them to lose equilibrium in their lives. It is in this aspect that the actions of a person devouring usury and the “disorganized movements” ( *al-takhattub* ) of the one possessed by a devil have a common factor, namely, that both have lost a sense of balance. Obviously, a person muddled in his thinking and disoriented in his movements could be said to be in a state of psychological abnormality. The verse is, in fact, describing the state of abnormality and ensuing conduct when it declares: “That is because they say trade is like usury.”

The above two examples demonstrate intra-textual hermeneutics in which the goal is to let the Qur’an resolve existing differences of opinion among the Muslim exegetes by making rational acceptance of what is denoted conceivable by the Qur’an itself. Indeed, intra-textual hermeneutics vindicates the coherence of the Qur’anic message, without ignoring the contribution of the extensive traditional exegetical sources, meticulously sifted and selectively utilized in providing the ultimate “balance of judgment” to which the Qur’an invites in understanding the Book of God.

## Sectarianism in Scriptural Reasoning

How does one resolve sectarian exegesis, ridden with polemics and theological exclusivism? The Muslim community was not spared from this divisive approach to the scripture. The third example in this paradigm provides an opportunity for a corrective approach to conflict in intra-faith exegesis.

The Q. 33:33 is one of those verses in which Sunni and Shiite interpreters have focused their peculiarly sectarian interpretations:

*People of the House ( ahl al-bays ), God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you.*

The subject of the *ahl al-bayt* (People of the House, i.e., the family of the Prophet) and the attending belief in their being free from any “abomination” and “pollution,” in this verse has enormous theological ramifications for the Muslim concept of leadership.

Following the intra-textual method one can begin one’s explication by analyzing the

explicit sense of the verse. The restricted sense of the divine assurance in the verse is understood by the context in which the adverbial clause with which the verse addresses the desire on the part of God to cleanse the "people of the house," that is, the family of the Prophet, appears. In fact, the verse asserts that it is only the "people of the house" from whom God "desires to put away abomination." Who is intended by the "people of the house?" Does the phrase include the wives of the Prophet who are the subject of severe admonition in the preceding two verses? From the point of grammatical rules, the object pronoun that is used for the "people of the house" is in second person, masculine, plural form ( *'ankum* ). Whereas for the verse to be specifically addressed to the wives of the Prophet, the rule requires a feminine, plural ( *'ankunna* ), form. Hence, the reference to the "people of the house" could not be for them specifically at the exclusion of others.

Some Sunni exegetes have maintained that the phrase refers to the "people of the Sacred House," that is, the sacred mosque of Mekka, who are the god-fearing ones in accordance with the statement in the Qur'an that "His friends are none other than the god-fearing." Others are of the opinion that it expressly refers to the "people of the Prophet's household." These customarily consist of his wives and close kinsmen; or that it simply includes the Prophet and his wives. 'Ikrima and 'Urwa, among the early transmitters of the Qur'an, have restricted the phrase to the Prophet's wives only.

In any case, if the meaning of "putting away abomination" or "freeing from pollution" refers only to the religious piety by means of which a person is enabled to avoid acts of disobedience and carry out the acts of obedience, then God certainly does not do more than putting to advantage the guidance in the matter of the obligations for them, and only desires to remove abomination and pollution from them in the way He states: "God would not place a burden on you, but He would purify you and would perfect His grace upon you that you may give thanks." (Q. 5:6) This latter sense does not agree in any way with the previously considered meanings of the phrase "people of the house" because of its obvious incongruity with the general sense accorded to the phrase to include all Muslims obliged to carry out the requirements of the religion.

On the other hand, if "putting away abomination" or "freeing from pollution" means profound, mature piety, and if this piety in the obligations pertains to the wives of the Prophet, as mentioned in the preceding verses, then such a sense cannot be deduced from the nature of the address, which is more general than that. Moreover, reference to

the decrease in the reward or punishment, ensuing from the omission or commission of acts of obedience respectively, does not benefit God, rather it frees those who are being addressed from "abomination" and "pollution." The message applies to the wives of the Prophet and others, after it has been specifically addressed to them, as evinced in the preceding verses. Moreover, the general sense of the address is not applicable to the wives and to other women, because others do not share with them the severity of the obligations and the decrease of the reward or punishment.

The last part of this exegesis that needs to be pointed out is that if the meaning of the phrase "putting away abomination" or "freeing from pollution" through Divine will is without any precondition, then such an inference is incongruent with the stipulation regarding their high standing in piety. How can such an endowment be made without aiming at rewarding ordinary or extraordinary performance of religiously imposed obligations? It is inconsistent with the divine will, whether expressed in the form of legislation or through creation of order of nature, to presume that it is the absolute divine will to remove admonition and pollution specifically from the family of the Prophet, whoever they happen to be.

The foregoing discussion leads the commentator to produce the ultimate evidence for that which has been reported as the historical "circumstances of the revelation" for this verse, namely, that the verse was revealed specifically regarding the Prophet, Fatima (his daughter), 'Ali (her husband and the Prophet's son-in-law), al-Hasan and al-I usayn (their son and the Prophet's grandsons), and no one else shared this honor with them.

Here one needs to examine the *hadith*-reports and see if there is any evidence to support the claim that *ahl al-bayt* in the verse are none other than the immediate family of the Prophet. Both Sunni and the Shi'ite sources mention these traditions. Those transmitted by the Sunnis relate these traditions on the authority of Umm Salima and 'A'isha, among the wives of the Prophet; Abu Sa'id al-Khudari, Ibn 'Abbas, Thawban and others among his companions; and, 'Ali, al-Hasan bin 'Ali among his immediate family members. The Shiite sources transmit these traditions from their Imams and other early personages like Umm Salima, Abu Dharr, Abu Layla, Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, Sa'd b. Abu Waqqas, and so on.

Most of these traditions, especially the ones reported on the authority of Umm Salima, in

whose house the verse was actually revealed, state explicitly that the reference in the verse was distinctly to them, i.e. the *ahl al-bayt*, without including the Prophet's wives among them.

The final exegetical tool available to the commentator requires paying attention to the Qur'anic convention ( *'urf al-qur'an* ). In the Qur'anic usage the phrase *ahl al-bayt* has become a proper noun for the immediate family of the Prophet (his daughter, et. al.) and does not apply to anyone beside them. This is so even when there are his close kinsmen, who, in accordance with the customary Arab usage of the phrase, it would be correct to include among the "people of the house."

The next hermeneutical maneuver is to see whether "taking away abomination" is actually endowing the *ahl al-bays* with *al-'isma*, that is "protection from committing any sinful act or error of judgment." *'isma* is the direct and necessary corollary of removing "abomination" ( *rijs* ) which includes erroneous belief and sinful deviation. Accordingly, endowment of *'isma* empowers the person to discern the truth in belief and action. This endowment is the direct result of the divine will in the order of nature, and not in the order of legislation, which aims at providing guidance for the fulfillment of religious obligations for a believer, without any concern for the position a person holds. In other words, God continues to fulfill His will by endowing them with *'isma* by removing from the *ahl al-bayt* erroneous beliefs and the impact of evil acts and by offering them that which will enable them to remain in this state of purity of faith and action. This is *al-'isma* .

This third example of intra-faith exegesis demonstrates the theological method, rooted in the lexical and grammatical analysis of the text, assisted by the traditions. It also illustrates a sectarian dimension and its critical status in seeking doctrinal rationalization of Sunni-Shi'ite stance from the Qur'an. Adoption of such a hermeneutical posture by a Sunni or a Shi'ite is understandable in the light of the commentator's own theological and creedal faithfulness to the Sunni or Shi'ite tradition. What is, however, important is the absence of polemical tone in this approach to the Sunni or Shi'ite sources. Critical evaluation of the documents presented by early sources with a clear bias towards Sunni or Shi'ite position has to be treated in a scholarly manner to expose their authoritativeness or lack of it in relation to the evidentiary nature of the literal sense derived from the Qur'anic reference. The ultimate judge is the meticulously researched

linguistic and lexical aspects of the intra-textual Qur'anic analysis in its contextual setting and not the *hadith*-reports conditioned by ideological considerations.

## Concluding Remarks

The contextual exegesis of the Qur'an, founded on its major ethos as a "living" guide for the believers, was quite often overshadowed by the restrictive traditions ascribed to the Prophet, in which the ability of human reasoning to discover the philosophy of divine legislation was circumscribed by an insistence of authoritative traditions to reveal divine purposes for humanity. For the jurist-theologian deeply rooted in the study of legal theory in which reason played a significant cognitive role in distinguishing objective good and evil, it was obvious that contemporary juridical deliberations to illuminate the divine intention in legislation were bound to be deficient without a creative interpretation of the evidential function of the Qur'anic text in its most immediate sense.

Of all the traditional sources used to interpret the Qur'an, Muslims found that the exegesis based on the traditions (*hadith*) that recounted the explanations of specific passages of the Qur'an was most acceptable because it seemed to recapture the essential meanings of the text under discussion. However, what the Prophet taught was not always easy to determine because quite often there existed various contradictory interpretations of the same passage. The traditions represented various political and theological trends in the community. The Sunnis accepted only those reports related on the authority of certain narrators who were regarded by them reliable; by contrast, the Shiites admitted only those who represented their own viewpoint. No opinion was accepted as an authoritative documentation for the specific exegetical opinion on the Qur'an if it did not meet the ideological-sectarian criterion. Consequently, in the history of the Qur'anic exegesis, the interpretation based on the traditions was most prone to factional considerations and prejudices. Ironically, it is the inherently subjective nature of any historical enterprise that underscores the major factor in continual interest in unfolding the understanding of earlier commentators of the verses that deal with many disputed judicial decisions in the area of interhuman relationships. There is a constant need to explain the historical setting of the revelation so as to uncover the principles that were applied in the development of Muslim society and its ever-expanding legal and ethical scope. In this intellectual process of providing exegetical principles for searching for historical precedents and for extracting the doctrinal and juridical principles from precise references in the Qur'an that are relevant to contemporary situations, rational

reflection on the relevance of the scripture for the living community has ushered in a period of revitalization of the Qur'anic exegesis in Islam.

The community that sets out to establish its own public order that reflects the divine will cannot take its scriptures lightly. The role of the scripture as the sole provider of the life-orientational directives is even more critical in the post-empire period of Muslim history. More importantly, if the legitimacy of a nation-state depends upon Islam, then it has to institutionalize the role of scripture in formulating its policies covering all the aspects of human existence. It is here that the revelation and reason need to reinforce each other in providing substantial solutions to the pressing problems of day to day operation of the government. Muslim scholars have throughout their social and political history developed hermeneutical principles to direct their interaction with the revelation, that is, the Qur'an and the Sunna, in order to find ways of generating confidence that God is the ultimate guide of the community.

But in this journey to establish God's kingdom on earth, Muslims have also stifled their rational-reflective abilities in fear of introducing innovation in matters derived directly from the revelation. That hesitation in confronting the challenges of rethinking has also resulted in treating the inherited cumulative tradition, propounded and expounded by past Muslim scholars, as as sacrosanct as the revelation itself, thereby depriving themselves of approaching the Qur'an afresh through their own contemporary experience of living in a changed time and place.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] The question of 'authorial pretext' or 'author's intentions' and contextual significance and their relation to broader context in historical understanding of a text is taken up by Jeffrey Stout in his article "What Is the Meaning of a Text?" in *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation, Volume XIV (1982-83), Number 1*, pp. 1-12.

[2] The Qur'an speaks about a light that shines into the heart: "God is the light of heavens and earth .... God guides to His Light whom he wills" (24:35). Once this light has shone into the heart, no darkness can ever overcome it.

[3] I use “traditionalist” to indicate the kind of education received by these scholars in the *madrassa* (seminary) in preparation for becoming jurist-theologians in the community. The curriculum in these institutions of Islamic learning is based on classical Arabic texts dealing with exegesis, traditions, and jurisprudence.

[4] These are the modernly-educated scholars with or without seminary curriculum. Their training in classical tradition is generally weak, leaving them open to sometimes serious mistakes in their interpretation of the scriptural sources like the Qur’an, its exegesis and the Sunna – the Tradition – attributed to the Prophet.

[5] Such is the opinion of Abu al-Qasim al-Khu’i in his *al-Bayan fi tafsir al-Qur’an* (Beirut, 1974), Volume 1. This opinion has been adopted and critically examined in the light of the earlier works by the Western scholars of the Qur’an by John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), Chapter 10.

[6] *Nahj al-balagha*, ed. Muhammad ‘Abduh (Beirut: Dar al-Ma ‘rifa, n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 17.

[7] There are a number of standard commentaries that are used by the Sunni scholars as important. These include, among others: Tabari, *Tafsiral-Qur’an*; Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf Baydawi*, *Anwar al-Tanzil*; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*; Razi, *Tafiris al-Kabir*; ‘Abdu, *al-Manar*; Sayyid Qutb, *Fi zdal al-Qur’an*. Among the Shi’ites, following are standard commentaries, in addition to the all the Sunni works on the Qur’an, they use: Tusi, *al-Bayan*; Tabarsi, *Majma’al-bayan*; Tabataba’i, *al-Mizan*. Besides Sunni-Shi’i, one can also classify these commentaries in accordance with the theological positions (e.g., pre-determinist, rationalist, traditionalist, and so on) adopted by the exegetes in their interpretation of the Qur’an.

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