



Whitefield BRIEFING

August 2003 (Vol. 8 No. 3)

MUSLIM METHODS OF QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the question, 'How do Muslims go about interpreting the Qur'an?' It does so by posing a series of questions addressed through the centuries, relating to hidden meanings, the importance of historical context, other sources, tradition and reason, as well as how to approach both apparent contradictions and also knowledge which appears to lie outside the Qur'an. The paper concludes with a note on the modern desire to ignore some of the traditional resources used to interpret the text. It is evident that many interpretive questions asked by Qur'an commentators are also asked by Biblical scholars.

INTRODUCTION

An Egyptian friend once told me, "I spent a year in Libya – the most miserable year of my life". He then expanded on the differences between Egyptians and Libyans which contributed to his dissatisfaction. No doubt some Libyans might say the same in reverse. This illustrates well the diversity which can pass unnoticed by the casual observer of the Arab world, and, similarly, the wider Muslim world.

The aim of this paper is to explore one particular area which Muslims debate, that of Qur'an interpretation. While not everything in Islam springs directly from the Qur'an, just about everything needs to be seen to be Qur'anically acceptable, giving added energy to the quest for a Qur'anic basis to ideas. This paper will examine some of the different trends present in Muslim interpretations of their sacred text. The focus here is not on particular interpretations as much as on *methods* which help to shape these interpretations. After surveying some of the concerns which have been raised through the centuries, the discussion will close with a brief note on the current scene.

A brief word is needed on the Qur'an itself. It consists of 114 suras (chapters) of unequal length, always known to Muslims by their names rather than their numbers, and understood to have been dictated by God to Muhammad via the Angel Gabriel. This dictation model means that Muhammad is not seen as the author of the Qur'an in any way, in contrast to the Christian idea of Biblical inspiration, which regards the Bible as divinely inspired yet also involving human authorship.

QUESTIONS

A number of preliminary issues need setting on one side at the outset. For reasons of personal piety or even community pressure Muslim commentators do not usually explore whether some Qur'anic verses can be ignored as inauthentic, nor do they question whether Muhammad's role in the transmission of the Qur'an is really as Islamic tradition records it. What Muslim writers *do* debate include the following:

Does the Qur'an contain hidden inner meanings?

This issue arises most notably in Sufism (Islamic mysticism), which seeks in the Qur'an the basis for the mystical life. One of the most famous verses often interpreted allegorically is the 'Light Verse' (Q24:35), which begins, 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, the glass is like a glittering star...'¹. Many have written on how the elements of these phrases refer to different levels of knowledge or experience of God. However, it is not only Sufis who argue for different levels of meaning within the Qur'anic text. The philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes (d. 1198) writes, "The reason why there is an inner and an outer meaning in the revelation is to be sought in the fact that the natural talents of people are different and that their abilities in regard to the affirmative function (of reason) deviate from one another"². In other words, while the majority can be content with the 'outer' meaning, the philosophically gifted can have access to a deeper, inner meaning. However, only a minority would adopt this philosophical approach.

What is the role of historical context in interpretation? Muslim Qur'an scholarship has generally resisted the notion of the Qur'an as in any way a human document. For example, Muhammad is not seen as its author, but as the conveyer of words received directly from God. Nevertheless, it is central to Muslim understanding that the verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad in either the Meccan phase of his public career (610-622) or the Medinan (622-632), often in response to particular situations which arose. Whereas in Mecca Muhammad was a preacher increasingly marginalised by opposition, in Medina he was the leader of the community with administrative and other responsibilities. This difference is often reflected in the content of Qur'anic passages. For example, warnings of the day of judgment are more typically Meccan, while regulations about the daily affairs of the community over matters such as divorce or inheritance are more characteristically Medinan³.

Where does knowledge of the historical context of Qur'anic passages come from? Traditionally, Qur'an interpretation has relied heavily on the explanations of such contexts by scholars from the early centuries of Islam, and in particular the Hadith, or traditions.

These traditions record the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early figures, and are regarded as next in importance to the Qur'an itself. This strong emphasis on tradition-based readings tended to overshadow independent reasoning. So traditions often provide the context in which a verse was said to have been revealed, thus giving guidance on the range and limits of its applicability. This context is known as 'the occasion of revelation'. For example, Sura 8 (i.e. Chapter 8) of the Qur'an, entitled '*The Spoils*', begins, 'They ask you about the spoils, say: The spoils belong to God and to the messenger. So fear God and settle your differences'. But what are these spoils? The commentators inform us that this is a reference to booty gained after the Battle of Badr (624 A.D.), the first and highly successful confrontation between the Muslims and their opponents. Without knowing this, the verse remains opaque.

Can anything modify the teaching of the Qur'an? Sometimes the role of particular traditions becomes even more dominant than this, for example in the case of whether the penalty for adultery should be stoning or flogging. While Q24:2 stipulates one hundred lashes, the common punishment through Islamic history has been stoning, based on the occasional practice of Muhammad. Muslim scholars have therefore long debated the reasons why the practice of Muhammad appears to be at variance with the Qur'an. For example, was there a 'stoning verse' which ended up being excluded from the Qur'an?⁴ The exegetical role played by the thousands of traditions concerning Muhammad gives scope for commentators to diverge over particular emphases and interpretations as they draw on different traditions to support their argument.

To what extent can reason be used? Alongside appeals to traditions of Muhammad, and early commentaries, reason is also employed in interpretation. This can be implicitly, as when exegetes discuss details of the grammar of Qur'anic Arabic. However, the role of reason is also discussed explicitly. For example, the famous theologian al-Ghazali (1058-1111) tackles the question of the role of reason in interpretation in his work *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Between Islam and Godlessness*⁵. Godlessness here refers to wrong interpretations. The 'decisive criterion' is al-Ghazali's own scheme for determining when to interpret a Qur'anic verse

¹ Qur'anic quotations are taken from Majid Fakhry's translation, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Reading: Garnet, 2000).

² Quoted in Gatje, *The Qur'an and its Exegesis*, p. 232.

³ A useful summary of the differences of Meccan and Medinan suras, can be found in Faruq Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an* (Reading: Garnet, 1995), pp. 5ff.

⁴ See on this John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 81ff.

⁵ Al-Ghazali, *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Between Islam and Godlessness*, translated into English as 'Appendix I' in Richard McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfilment*, (Boston, Twayne, 1980), pp. 145-75.

metaphorically. This scheme, the elaborate details of which need not detain us here, involves five levels of interpretation, the first being literal. It is only legitimate to move away from the literal to one of the other four levels of interpretation if decisive rational proof exists that the literal interpretation is not the correct one. While his elaborate scheme is not readily applicable, his emphasis on the role of reason is noteworthy.

How should apparent contradictions be handled?

Evangelical Biblical commentators often work with an underlying framework of promise-fulfilment, which helps them not only to hold together the Old and New Testaments, but also to deal with particular differences. Muslims focus instead on the idea of abrogation, “the removal of something by something else [and] annulment”⁶. This is based on Q2:106, “Whichever verse we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring instead a better or similar one”. Amongst other meanings of abrogation, one Qur’anic verse can be seen as abrogating another, even though the earlier verse is still seen as part of the authentic text as originally given. A famous example of apparent contradiction in the Qur’an, which is never in fact seen as such by Muslims, is that of the gradual hardening of attitudes against alcohol. Q16:67 states, “From the fruits of palms and vines you get wine and fair provision”, a provision regarded as one of the signs of God. Yet Q5:90 includes wine in a list of items which are “an abomination of the Devil’s doing”. While there is no dispute over this example, no universally accepted list exists of the range of verses abrogated. In fact, as the contemporary South African Muslim writer Farid Esack states of abrogation, “there is probably no other genre in Qur’anic Studies to rival it in confusion regarding its validity, meaning, and applicability”⁷.

How is the Qur’an to be used in formulating

Islamic law? There are two issues here. One concerns when it is legitimate to depart from the apparent literal meaning of a Qur’anic stipulation and interpret a verse in its non-literal sense. This issue has generated a mountain of scholarship over the centuries, unsurprising in a scholarly milieu which prized the Arabic language, and its correct usage and inter-

pretation, as one of its most precious assets. Possible factors for non-literal interpretation include the rational impossibility of the literal meaning, and contextual or linguistic considerations.

The second issue concerns how other sources are used alongside the Qur’an in the formulation of the law. Typically these additional sources are regarded as being three. One is the Hadith or traditions, referred to above, which often give both context and additional detail concerning certain Qur’anic stipulations. They also provide regulations on issues not directly addressed by the Qur’an. The second additional source is the consensus of the community, usually seen as expressed in the consensus of scholars rather than that of the whole society. Finally, for Sunni Muslims⁸, there is analogy, for which a topical example would be the prohibition of drugs such as heroin, by analogy with the Qur’anic ban on another mind-altering substance, alcohol.

The existence of these other sources also leads to discussions of whether they can modify or add to what the Qur’an teaches. Most significant is the issue of whether a tradition can abrogate a Qur’anic verse. Again, opinions vary.

What resources does the Qur’an contain to help Muslims respond to significant intellectual challenges which arise?

Some Muslim scholars, particularly in the last hundred years, have sought evidence that the Qur’an contains at least the seeds or principles of all intellectual disciplines, including medicine and other sciences. Adherents of so-called ‘scientific exegesis’ argue that the Qur’an must include such information, at least in embryonic form, on the basis of the verses “We have revealed to you the Book which explains everything” (Q16:89) and “We have not left anything out in the Book” (Q6:38). So aeroplanes and the revolution of the earth are said to be referred to in the Qur’an.⁹ Scientific exegesis is still a popular activity, but it is important to note that it is emphatically opposed by more sober Muslim scholars. Its spread in the last century or so can be seen as a reaction to the political dominance achieved by Western powers, dominance obtained with the help of superior technology. Scientific exe-

⁶ Farid Esack, *The Qur’an: a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), p. 126, quoting a classical Islamic definition.

⁷ Esack, *The Qur’an: A Short Introduction*, p. 127.

⁸ Shi’a Muslims (c.15% of the whole worldwide Muslim population) replace analogy with reason. The Shi’a trace their origins back to the split in the decades after Muhammad’s death over whether the ruler of the Muslim community should be a relative of Muhammad. They believe that he should, whereas Sunnis consider that any suitable leader can be chosen. The essence of the Sunni/ Shi’a divide is thus over leadership rather than doctrine, although doctrinal differences developed subsequently.

⁹ A useful discussion of scientific exegesis of the Qur’an can be found in Chapter 3 of J.J.G. Jansen’s *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 35-54.

genesis enables ideas claimed as European discoveries to be seen as in fact Qur'anic. Yet the question of the validity of scientific exegesis arises centuries earlier than this recent Western-Muslim dynamic. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) argues that the Qur'an contains the principles of all disciplines.¹⁰ This view was opposed by the Andalusian scholar al-Shatibi (d.1388) on the grounds that such information would be incomprehensible to seventh century Arabs, and was not the intent of the text. Al-Ghazali's argument shows that the impulse for such an approach to the Qur'an is not solely the political domination of Muslims by the industrialised West.

What About Today? Traditionally, verses were analysed in sequence. In the last century, however, there has been an increasing interest amongst Muslims in thematic studies, gathering and discussing all that the Qur'an says about a given topic. This is part of a move to make the Qur'an more accessible.

Another trend is highlighted by a recent article in the British Muslim periodical, *Q-News*.¹¹ This article advocates respect for the views of scholars who have invested years in learning how to interpret the sources, and warns against other Muslims who are simply " 'pamphlet scholars' – individuals who think reading a few books or leaflets will make them experts on Islam". Such a discussion arises precisely because there is a move amongst some to get 'back to the Qur'an', resisting the authority of centuries of exegetical traditions and methods which they feel render the text irrelevant and inaccessible. Yet this democratisation of hermeneutics can lead to interpretations of topics such as jihad, to pick an obvious contemporary example, which some Muslims believe disregard traditional checks and balances. Accusations of errors over the legal limitations on jihad form one of the leading Muslim objections to the practices of al-Qa'ida.

CONCLUSION

Many of the questions raised by Muslim scholars about the Qur'an can be readily grasped by those who study the Bible. What exactly is God saying, what does this tell me about him, how does it apply today, and what should I therefore do or avoid doing in daily life? Issues of language, context and the role of reason and tradition in interpretation all play their part. Furthermore, even traditional methods give ample scope for a range of opinions to form, hence the need to be cautious in declaring, 'Muslims think...' when there probably exists a range of views, plausibly drawn from the sources, on a given issue. The ability to understand both the family resemblances and the diversity within the tradition of Qur'an interpretation can take time to acquire– but that is a statement to be expected from someone trying to be more than a 'pamphlet- scholar'...

¹⁰ M.A. Quasem, *The Jewels of the Qur'an: al-Ghazali's Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, 1983)), p. 46. This work is an English translation of al-Ghazali's text.

¹¹ Asra Adiba, "Pamphlet-scholars and sound-bite Islam", *Q-News* no. 384 (Oct. 02-Feb. 03), p. 59.

Further Reading:

- Faruq Sherif *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an* (Reading: Garnet, 1995).
John Burton *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994) [a semi-technical work].
Farid Esack *The Qur'an: a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), Ch. 4, "Understanding and Interpreting the Qur'an".
Helmut Gatje *The Qur'an and its Exegesis* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996).
F.E. Peters *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Ch. 4, "The Word of God and

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