

**Interpreting the Qur'an:
Towards a Contemporary Approach**

Abdullah Saeed

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The book *Interpreting the Qur'an* is a welcome addition to the developing field of Qur'anic studies, as it contributes specifically to the study of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis). In a field that still lacks adequate historical surveys and monographs, Saeed offers an insightful work on how the exegetical tradition can be read and understood. He attempts to plot various trajectories of development that span the classical and modern periods leading up to the present. However, the success and accuracy of his historical inquiry is largely affected by his more prominent and overarching objective: developing a modern methodology of scriptural interpretation. Over the course of twelve chapters, Saeed embarks upon an attempt to reevaluate and redefine how the Qur'an is understood.

In the introduction, the author states that he is dealing only with the Qur'an's ethico-legal concepts, the source material of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Traditionally, this material has been read in a "legalistic-literalistic" fashion. However, the author hopes to replace it with a "contextualist"

approach, which would take “into consideration both the socio-historical context of the Qur’an at the time of revelation in the first/seventh century and the contemporary concerns and needs of Muslims today” (p. 1).

From this starting position, a series of premises are discussed. First, the modern era, plagued by a host of new crises, paradigm shifts, and revolutions, is said to be vastly different from the social, political, and cultural landscape of pre-modern times. Traditional methods of *fiqh* must be seriously rethought, reinterpreted, and reformulated to meet today’s radically different circumstances.

The second premise defines interpretation as a human act: fallible, subjective, and open to change. And from this premise, the author locates a wide exegetical spectrum, ranging from “textualists” to “contextualists,” and from “tradition-based” commentators to “reason-based” ones. In particular, chapter 2, “The Context of the Debate on Interpretation,” traces modern trends in Qur’an commentaries and the issues surrounding them. It also sets the stage for a historically wider reading of the *tafsir* tradition and makes way for Saeed’s own venture into modern exegetical theory.

The author makes his final and third premise in chapter 3, “Revelation and Interpretation.” Here, he contrasts human interpretation with revelation and situates his project in the realm of interpretation, remaining respectfully deferential to the classical conception of revelation as the literal Word of God. What Saeed adds to this is a stress on revelation’s socio-historical context: The Qur’an’s ethico-legal dimension unfolded in the context of a prophetic personality and his community. And it is this historical anchor point that is crucial to Saeed’s “contextualist” approach. Interestingly, Saeed depends primarily on non-classical sources, especially Fazlur Rahman and Toshihiko Izutsu, to build his framework in the first three chapters. But from chapter 4 to the end, he demonstrates an intimate engagement with the Arabic primary sources as well as with the secondary literature.

Chapters 4 and 5, “Interpretation Based on Tradition and Textualism” and “Interpretation Based on Reason,” respectively, offer a historical survey of the main concepts and exegetes within these two trends of the *tafsir* tradition. Each treatment is commendable – with one major reservation: References to Sufi and Shi’i exegesis, while present, are overwhelmingly scant. Clearly, Saeed wishes to align his project explicitly with what is commonly perceived of today as the mainstream Sunni orthodox tradition. His methodological framework thus appears to be anchored in one tradition and one community – to the exclusion of others.

The following three chapters focus on particular features found within the Qur’anic sciences. In chapter 6, “Flexibility in Reading the Text,” the

author interprets the seven variant recitations of the Qur'an. He deals with scriptural abrogation (*naskh*) and its debate in chapter 7, "Abrogation and Reinterpretation." In chapter 8, "The Meaning of the Text as an Approximation," three issues are taken up: the conceptual category of the Unseen (*ghayb*), the explanation of historical texts by referring to the other faith traditions (particularly the *isra'iliyat*), and parables (*amthal*).

In all three chapters, Saeed locates potential avenues for penetrating beyond literalistic and narrow readings of the Qur'an. After presenting the traditional views, the author offers his own. For example, concerning *naskh* in ethico-legal matters, the primary concern of abrogation should not be a literal reading of the prescribed punishments, but rather a reading of the underlying intentions: "The Qur'an does not abrogate the objective of a ruling, but rather reinforces that objective by amending the ruling itself" (p. 86). It is a method of reinterpretation oriented around the ends, rather than the means. The scriptural interpretation of legal issues should revolve around addressing the crime and not the punishment. All other elements of the Qur'anic sciences are similarly recast with an eye for broadening and flexibility.

Finally, the last chapters are rich explorations into hermeneutical theory. In chapter 9, "Recognition of the Complexity of Meaning," the author wrestles with the various layers and processes of meaning-making and touches upon the issues of subjectivity, the limits of understanding, and the plurality of meaning. Chapter 10, "Socio-historical Context and Interpretation," and chapter 11, "Ethico-legal Texts and a Hierarchy of Values," present the loudest overture for contextualization in interpretation. In these two sections, Saeed unfolds a process of interpretation based upon a hierarchy of values that ties together the points and assertions made throughout the book. A general framework of contextualist exegesis is finally laid out. This picture draws on traditional inkwells to pen new pages.

Yet this work remains only an initiatory step. The author provides an interpretive methodology, but offers little in terms of its application. We are never allowed to see the process unfold. Examples demonstrating this exegetical model in action would have strengthened its case, if not actually helped to expose its weaknesses so that it could be further refined. The work is ultimately theoretical. But despite these criticisms, Saeed presents an intellectually engaging and revealing work. *Interpreting the Qur'an* pushes as much as it uncovers. In it, the author draws our attention to valuable hermeneutical resources that have often been overlooked in the tradition and tenders an interpretive approach that both respects and challenges that tradition. Regardless of its appropriateness, (re)interpreting the Qur'an demands

further debate and discussion, and Saeed's work brings the matter resoundingly to the fore.

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