

Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact

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Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact is a highly perceptive, technical study of the Qur'anic text that seeks to exonerate the Qur'an from claims of extremism, intolerance, or incoherence. This is accomplished through contextualizing the content and highlighting the impact of the Qur'anic message as applied throughout history. The underlying premise of its approach is that a perceptive and faithful reading of the Qur'an will result in the Qur'an exonerating itself through consistency in its own messages, rhetorical devices, and norms. In essence, it is a specific way of applying *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bil-Qur'ān* (explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an). This book is unique in the field of Qur'anic coherence in that it presents a consistent method of interpretation that is applied to a diverse range of Qur'anic subjects, not simply a study of the Qur'an's structure nor primarily of its Arabic. It builds on previous efforts, such as Mustansir Mir's summary of Hamid al-Din 'Abd al-Hamid al-Farahi's work on Qur'anic oaths, *Majmū'at-i-Tafsīr-i-Farāhī*, yet advances its own distinctive premise. The book has three sections, each consisting of several chapters, five of which are original to this book. This does not detract from the cohesiveness of the book. Abdel Haleem's technical yet accessible style pervades throughout and consistency in his chosen axioms of interpretation tie the book's parts together.

The book can be most accurately described as refutations of specific allegations against the Qur'an. The first two sections analyze, contextualize, and apply linguistic considerations to the Qur'anic text. While some western critics are accused of making misguided claims due to lack of proficiency of the Arabic language, traditional exegetes like Zamakhshari (d.1144 CE), Razi (d.1230 CE), and Baydawi (d.1286 CE) are criticized for their fragmented approach to Qur'anic interpretation. The author argues that both types of interpretations could potentially lead to the same conclusions made by Islamist extremists. Abdel Haleem rigorously approaches Qur'anic Arabic, throwing to the wayside any interpretation that, in his estimation, fails to conform to the Qur'anic context or message, honing in on an alternate interpretation that represents the true intent of the Qur'an. The third and final section transitions to framing the milieu in which the Qur'an is placed and its impact on each: east and west, past and present, Arabic and translation alike.

Abdel Haleem refutes the most pervasive arguments against the Qur'an's apparent aggression towards people of different faiths. While many people claim the "Sword verse" (Q. 9:5) represents the animosity of Islam towards other religions, analysis of contextual evidence reveals that the Qur'an urges its followers to practice restraint in situations of fighting. The verse preceding it instructs its followers to respect "those idolaters who honored the treaty you made with them, and who have not supported others against you," and the text that follows reveals that submitting to Islam is not the condition of peace. Abdel Haleem notes the linguistic form of each Qur'anic phrase and uses it to build an argument. The Sword verse says *fa-in*, meaning "if they choose to do so" (in reference to idolaters repenting and becoming Muslim), rather than *hattā* (until). Thus the Qur'an is merely instructing Muslims on how to deal with such non-Muslim individuals in the case that they accept Islam, which the Qur'an calls its readers to do, in contrast to the interpretation that polytheists must accept Islam in order to be spared. Analysis of the Qur'anic wording along with historical context build together a solid argument for Abdel Haleem's interpretation that in context of its surrounding verses, the call to take up arms is no more than permission to fight in response to a broken treaty.

Similarly, analysis of Q 9:29, known as the "Jizya verse", reveals that when rhetorical expressions found elsewhere in the Qur'an are taken into account, the description of the People of the Book as those "who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden" is, in fact, a chastisement of a group who did not behave in accordance to what proper belief in God demands of them, the misdemeanor committed being refusal to pay the Jizya after having committing to it. Though this linguistic analysis may be sound, the biggest detractment from this argument, as Abdel Haleem admits, is the dearth of any single account of *sabab al-nuzūl* (occasion of revelation) that corroborates his interpretation. This limits its relevance, given that he places significance upon the understanding of the generation to whom the verses were revealed; nonetheless, this is balanced by narrating instances of Companions urging just treatment of the People of the Book. Ultimately the goal of contextualizing the verses in light of the Qur'anic message is achieved.

Abdel Haleem notes how the Qur'an seeks to avoid the application of the penalties of the Sharia known as *hudūd*. By placing conditions on a penalty immediately after stipulating it, the Qur'an demonstrates that it seeks to deter a particular behavior rather than execute punishment. He at times dismisses contrary juristic opinions too quickly, and accepts too

quickly those concur with his own. This may lead to certain inconsistencies in analysis. For example, the commentary and al-Razi's statement regarding the abrogation of the hadith on fornication readily concluded weakness in the application of this penalty (101), yet a previous discussion on the Sword verse undermines the general validity of abrogation (22-23). Contrary to his approach thus far, Abdel Haleem is forced to discuss hadiths in order to corroborate his arguments as well as address issues (such as *hudūd*) not mentioned in the Qur'an. He is stuck between a rock and a hard place. He seeks to avoid engaging hadith criticism, as his concern is dealing with contextualizing Qur'anic content, yet he can not properly address the topic without referencing hadiths. The resulting discussion is cursory and leaves the reader wanting.

The Qur'an is often ambiguous about many issues that are inconsequential to its central message, allowing one to read multiple interpretations into its passages. Consequently, commentators have often differed greatly in their interpretations. In an effort to refute the claim that Noah is the first Prophet of punishment, Abdel Haleem attempts to illustrate, through the narrative of Noah in the Qur'an, that punishment is only given a cursory mention as it does not exemplify the main themes of the Suras in which it occurs. However, worldly punishment is an exception to this rule of Qur'anic ambiguity. The author's approach fails to note that suras frequently have multiple themes and lessons running throughout, of which the punishment of previous nations is often one. Abdel Haleem makes a compelling case that the passage on Noah in Q 54 highlights God's grace to Noah, yet he also notes in his own Oxford Qur'an translation's preface to this sura that in its entirety it deals "mainly with the punishment dealt out to previous generations of disbelievers...with the refrain 'Will anyone take heed?' running throughout the sura." Similarly, in the longest account of Noah and his people (Q 11), Abdel Haleem stresses the aspects of perseverance and trusting in God. Yet in this sura, following the accounts of a string of God's Messengers, the sura summarizes them by stating: "Such is the punishment of your Lord for towns in the midst of their sins: His punishment is terrible and severe" (Q 11:102). In order to dispel the notion that the God of the Qur'an is a God of punishment, Abdel Haleem could instead note the reason that the passages purport to detail such accounts. The Qur'an adamantly calls its readers to reflect on the previous nations and their empty dwellings (e.g., Q 6:11; 30:42). Therein lies the key. Two conclusions are highlighted by the text: firstly, the futility of worshipping any God but the one true God; after all, "their gods, which they called on beside God,

were no use to them” (Q 11:101). Secondly, the certainty of the Hereafter, urging the disbelievers to change their ways before its punishment befalls them.” There truly is a sign in this for anyone who fears the punishment of the Hereafter” (Q 11:103). Similar conclusions are emphasized in other suras that relate stories of Prophets (e.g., Q 40:82-85; 46:26-28). While the chapter on narrative style may not have sufficiently overcome the issue of punishment, it does succeed in clarifying the Qur’anic methodology of repetition. Abdel Haleem shows how no single account of Noah relates his story in its entirety; rather, each passage emphasizes aspects of his struggle that pertain to one or more of the sura’s themes.

The chapters that follow are truly the heart of the book. Any academic or layperson with interest in the Qur’an would benefit greatly from the nuanced analysis expounded in them. Concerning the topic of coherence of the Qur’an, analysis of the content of three suras reveals stylistic features that bind the sections of each sura together. These include noting unstated assumptions that are answered and commented upon, repetition of concepts such as grace and light, the underlying intent of leading the reader to action, and the relative independence of each sura in yielding a cohesive argument that recapitulates all the major themes of the Qur’an. By presenting the function and purpose of oaths in the Qur’an, the author further aids the reader in deducing the cohesiveness of the Qur’anic text. Abdel Haleem builds on the work of Hamid al-Din al-Farahi (1883-1930), who proposes divine oaths as arguments that validate the *muqṣam ‘alayhi* (“that which is sworn about”). He further proffers that the oath be classified by the *muqṣam ‘alayhi* rather than the *muqṣam bihi*, which facilitates understanding the intent behind the oaths in their contexts. The chosen interpretations are relevant and nuanced. To complete his analysis of Qur’anic style, Haleem discusses the varied grammatical and rhetorical features that are essential to interpreting the Qur’an and deducing its intended meanings. His astute and precise knowledge of the Arabic language shines in this section that discusses syntactic relations, various grammatical features (such as *iltifāt*, *tadamm* and *siyāq*) and rhetorical devices (such as emphasis, imagery, rhyme, and rhythm). This discussion elucidates how the parts of the Qur’an are bound together through these features, how grammar and rhetoric work together to achieve subtle layers of meaning, and how rhythmic beauty is achieved, while simultaneously responding to critics of the Qur’anic style. Abdel Haleem succeeds in increasing the reader’s appreciation for the Qur’anic style through its unique modes of expression.

He concludes his book with three short sections dealing with the effect of the Qur'an on Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. This includes such topics as the impact on Muslims' lives, the history of translations, the image of the Qur'an, and interfaith relations, all building on the premise that interpreting the Qur'an according to its intended meaning will result in a lasting positive impact on its audience. Though beneficial and insightful, this differs from that which ties the rest of the book together, namely that the Qur'an should be understood in context, according to its own expressive norms, in order to extract its intended meanings. These later discussions could reasonably be separated into their own book, though one can appreciate the effect in conclusion of shifting away from technicalities to consider the Qur'an's broader message.

Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact builds on previous work to produce an invaluable contribution to the field of Qur'anic studies as well as a beneficial resource for any person seeking to understand the Qur'an. Attempting to encompass a disparate range of arguments while simultaneously delivering a detailed analysis of the Qur'anic message occasionally results in certain convolutions, such as in the discussion on Jihad. However the meticulous linguistic and contextual analysis illustrating the intricacy involved in interpreting the Arabic language makes up for it. Above all else, it leaves the reader with a nuanced understanding of the intended Qur'anic message.

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