

## The Comparative Study of Qur'an Interpretation & Classic Hermeneutics

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### Abstract

*In the world of Islam, the interpretation of holy Qur'an, science of jurisprudence, inference of lawful judgments and reference to Qur'an and Imams' narrations for consolidation of literal beliefs and issues require the establishment and expurgation of Qur'an interpretation methods, text interpretation theory and dealing with the principles and criteria governing the texts perception which necessitate the need for an interpretation method and recognition of the principles that can assist us in better understanding of Qur'an verses and the interpreters' quotes. On the other hand, the classic hermeneutics came into existence with the purpose to expurgate the principles and methods of text perception and paved the ground for vast intellectual developments. Existence of the similar concerns and approaches has entailed the utilization of each other's common experiences by these two areas. The comparative studies will be the best solutions for accomplishment of such constructive interaction. In the current research we turned into the comparative interpretation of Qur'an and classic hermeneutics after explaining the hermeneutists' view points and demonstrated that the elites of the two areas believe in the perceptibility and interpretability of the text and their objective is to reach the author's purpose. They consider the meaning of the text an objective issue which is accessible by adapting an appropriate method and using public lingual rules and the interpreters' hypothesis and their time interval from the age of descending (compilation) are some of the misunderstanding factors which can be overcome by applying proper methods and perceive the exact meaning of the text.*

**Keywords:** Interpretation of Qur'an, Hermeneutics, Classic Hermeneutics, Author's Purpose

### 1. Introduction

According to Islamic beliefs, the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Muslims, was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 A.D.) through the Angel Gabriel during the twenty-two years of Muhammad's messengership between the years 610-632. The role of the Prophet Muhammad in codifying Muslim learning should not be underestimated. In principle, "everything" is in the Qur'an so; Muslims can derive the inspiration and impetus for their lives from this divinely revealed source.

While Qur'an was being revealed, the Companions would ask the Prophet all sorts of questions, for example, the meaning of certain words in the verses revealed, or their bearing on problems as they arose, or details on certain historical or spiritual matters on which the people sought more light. The Companions who had learned the Qur'an and its living *tafsir* and *ta'wil* (which refer to the explanation, clarification, interpretation, and commentary of the Qur'an and the Hadiths) from the Prophet himself passed away one by one. As the community expended, the vicissitudes of life and fortune meant that the next generation came face to face with all sorts of human experience that had to be sorted out. So, issues gradually led to the evolution and formation of the Qur'anic science. With the next generation, *tafsir* and *ta'wil* of the Qur'an became the most important science for Muslims. Heavily dependent upon philology, this branch of study is known as *the ilm al-Qur'an wa'tafsir* or the knowledge of the Qur'an and (its) exegesis.

All matters concerning the Islamic way of life are connected to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet in one way or another since the right application of Islam is based on an appropriate understanding of the guidance from God. Without commentary and interpretation (*tafsir* and *ta'wil*), there would be no a proper understanding of various passages of the Qur'an and the Hadiths. This, however, provided the ground for different interpretations.

The first theory under consideration is the interpretation theory. Interpretation is a *tafsir* and *ta'wil* (explication, exegesis, clarification, commentary, and analysis) of the written and recorded Islamic materials. Hermeneuticism sees interpretation as a circular process whereby valid interpretation can be achieved by a sustained, mutually qualifying interplay between our progressive sense of the whole and our retrospective understanding of its component parts. Hermeneutics, in its broadest sense, describes the interpretation of meanings, explication, clarification, analysis, and commentary. Originally applied to the interpretation of the Bible, hermeneutics comprises pointed readings plus exegesis –commentary on how the interpretation is applied to the texts (Kirazli, 2003).

## 2. Islamic Interpretation and Hermeneutics of Qur'an

Traditional Ismaili thought is posited on the notion that there are levels of meaning in the Holy Qur'an. An understanding of these levels of meaning can be arrived at through mastery of an elaborate curriculum that leads the individual through progressive study, where one acquires the tools necessary for understanding the Holy Qur'an and is able to relate this understanding to certain basic truths that lie at the heart of the Qur'anic message. The tool requisite for the process is *ta'wil*, the hermeneutical analysis, by which one arrives at the root of the original meaning of revelation. The complement of *ta'wilis tanzil*, that is the part of revelation that defines the formal aspects of religious life, the vessels within which the truths are contained (Nanji, 2010).

Almost all of the foundational doctrines of the Islamic religion, including the foundational legal doctrines, matured during the three periods of the classical era. Contemporary scholars of Islam continue to rely heavily upon the discursive materials generated during the formative and classical periods of Islam. There are a number of important threads and genres found in this great store of classical scholarship, but the core of the tradition is the *tafsir* literature—the literature that is concerned with the interpretation of the Qur'an.

*Tafsiris* also not an easily defined concept and there is a serious scholarly controversy surrounding efforts to define it and demarcate its scope and reach. The word is a verbal noun derived from the verb *fassara*, which means “to explain, expound, explicate, elucidate, interpret” or “comment on.” (Wehr, 1961) The *tafsir* literature is representative of the hermeneutical tradition in Islam, that is, it is the product of efforts of scholars and exegetes concerned with understanding the meaning of the core Islamic text, the Qur'an, and translating those understandings into interpretations of the text. These interpretations can then, among other things, form the basis for liturgical and juridical decision-making by Muslim actors, including imams, judges, government officials, jurists, political leaders, military commanders, soldiers, parents, heads of families, and ordinary believers. Tradition has shown that opinions of scholars as expressed in the *tafsir* play an important role in the daily lives of Muslims as they seek to understand and translate the teachings of the Qur'an into practical guidance for behavior. Contemplation of the current state and role of the *tafsir* literature should therefore occupy a central place in our consideration of the future of Islamic scholarship.

John Wansbrough, in his seminal work *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Wansbrough, 1977), assigns “five sequential categories” to *tafsir*. They are: narrative (*aggadic*), legal (*halakic*), textual (*masoretic*), rhetorical, and allegorical. Andrew Rippin argues that Wansbrough's categories are, “in true scientific fashion, functional, unified, and revealing.” He points out that the first “true” works of *tafsir*, emerging in the tenth century C.E., combined all five of the categories. The first of these “true” works was al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayan 'anta'wil ay al- Qur'an*. Since al-Tabari's work appeared the literature has flowed in two great streams, *tafsir bi-al-ma'thur* (“interpretation by tradition”) and *tafsir bi-al-ra'y* (“interpretation by opinion”) (Rippin, 2006). *Tafsir bi-al-ma'thur* depends primarily upon the exegetical traditions of the Prophet, his companions, and the opinions offered by the early scholars of *hadith*.<sup>30</sup> *Tafsir bi-al-ra'y* involves interpretation based upon the “personal opinion” of the interpreter, more specifically his rational, theological, or philological analysis as applied to the text.

This *tafsir* literature, and particularly its division into these two great streams, is influenced by the well-known dispute between the Asharite and Mu'tazilite theologians. Notwithstanding these divisions and disputes, the *tafsir* literature remains the core of the “classical” Qur'anic hermeneutic.

Although there were differences of opinion among the various *tafsir* commentators, all approached the Qur'an with the same primary objective: to arrive at a reliable judgment concerning the meaning of the text.

The methods used by these exegetes included grammatical, linguistic, syntactical, philological analysis, consideration of the *asbab al-nuzul* (“the reasons for the revelation”), analysis based on comparison with other verses in the Qur’an, and analysis of the prior understandings of the revelation, including revelation from other Abrahamic faiths. (Rippin, 2006) For over five hundred years this body of literature dominated the understandings of the meaning of the Qur’an (Freeman, 2006).

As reflected in the curriculum developed in Fatimid Ismaili seats of learning such as *al-Azhar* and *Dar al-Hikmah*, the student commenced studies by mastering *al-‘ibadat al-‘Amaliya*, the sciences that were necessary to grasp and define the *shari‘a*.

Once this had been done, the student went on to study *al-‘ibadat al-‘ilmiyyah*, the sciences that expounded the *haqa‘iq*, the esoteric dimension of revelation and *shari‘a*. Thus the two methods of study and the subject-matter complemented each other, providing in the Ismaili view a comprehensive understanding of Islam and of the Holy Qur’an, in both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions. This is illustrated for instance in the works of al-Qadi al-Nu‘man, the famous Fatimid jurist and writer of the tenth century, who after having written his classic juristic formulation, *Da‘a‘im al-Islam*,<sup>3</sup> detailing the *shari‘a* according to the Ismaili *madhab*, then wrote a complementary work entitled *Ta‘wil al-Da‘a‘im*, where the foundational pillars of Islam are discussed in terms of their esoteric meaning. This dual and complementary aspect of Ismaili thought<sup>4</sup> is reflected in much of the classical Fatimid writings; where the concepts of *zahir* and *batin*, the formal and the inner dimensions of both revelation and practice of faith are discussed.

All interpretation of the Holy Qur’an in Ismaili thought assumes such an exegetical basis, leading via levels of meaning, to the ultimate truths expressed as *haqa‘iq*. Though the validity of *zahiri* meaning is not denied, it is to be but one aspect of the overall meaning that can lead to higher understanding. It is this process of interpretation that I have chosen to highlight around a cluster of key Qur’anic concepts (Nanji, 2010).

### 3. Qur’an Studies in Iran

*Tafsir* and Qur’anic studies in contemporary Iran have been influenced by three different traditions: the Shi‘i exegetical tradition; the (mainly Sunni) classical heritage of Qur’an sciences and exegesis; and modern studies about Islam and the Qur’an, some of which are by Western scholars. As in most Islamic countries, the major bulk of academic activity in Iran in this field has traditionally been undertaken by the *‘ulama*; however, since the beginning of the twentieth century and changes in the educational system, there has been an increasing diversity in the field as linguists, engineers, physicians and political activists joined the debate and advanced their views on the Qur’an and its exegesis.

During the 40’s and the 50’s, familiarity with Western Qur’anic studies in Iranian academic circles was mostly confined to the popular writings of such authors as Carlyle, Davenport and Cragg, but acquaintance with other Western works such as those of Goldziher increased over time, mostly on the basis of their Arabic translations. Following the Islamic Revolution, changes in the structure and approach of centers of religious learning and universities, in conjunction with advances in science and communications, have meant that institutions engaged in the study of human sciences have been confronted by new conditions. As a result, the traditional Shi‘i centers of learning, which until 50 years ago devoted themselves exclusively to the study of Islamic law and jurisprudence (and refrained not only from dealing with the sciences of the modern world and but also denied official recognition to even such disciplines as *tafsir* and *kalam*), today teach foreign languages, and Qur’anic sciences and exegesis, including Western studies about the Qur’an to a certain extent, and recognize the importance of almost all human sciences of the West (Karimi-Nia, 2013).

In this paper, we describe only the main common principles of Qur’an interpretation and classical hermeneutics as follows:

#### 1. The Possibility of Understanding and Interpretability

Although some Ash‘arites and Ahle Hadith say that only the Prophet and his companions and followers were able to understand the Qur’an (Shahrestani, 1395 AH) and some Akhbaryun also know it for the Prophet and the Imams (HorAmeli, 1988), but most commentators believe that understanding the contents of the Qur’an is possible to others too, because the realization of the higher goals of this book of the scripture and wisdom, requires that its contents be understandable as otherwise, guiding people towards good and happiness will not happen.

## 2. Author Based

Among commentators' beliefs, is the base that in the lexicon of hermeneutics, called the thrust in the author. So, it is said: "The centrality of the author is accepted by Islamic thinkers." (Rabani,2004).For the commentators, one must seek the meaning of the Qur'an in its revealed wisdom. So, all linguistic efforts for understanding the meanings of words must be used to achieve these goals. Since the author centrality is of the main classical hermeneutics doctrines, taking such base causes closeness of commentators of the Qur'an to classic hermeneutics and keeps it away from their philosophic hermeneutics.

## 3. Method Based

The issue of method is important for the interpretation of Qur'an and all commentators believe in it. However, the rules are different for them (Marefat, 2006). The importance of this issue is to the extent that some resorting to the hadith "من فسر القرآن برأيه فقد أصاب خطأ" (Ragheb, 2005) know the criterion of legitimacy of interpretations not in reaching or not reaching the meaning, but in taking correct approach to understanding God 's word (Rabani, 2004). For the classic hermeneutics, known as method based hermeneutics, the subject of criteria and method is very important. Experts in this field agree that only with the use of appropriate methods and adopting right criteria, true meaning of the text can be achieved. This approach was also later reflected in the method based approaches of classic phenomenology. (Khatami, 2003)

## 4. Objectivity and Determinacy of Meaning

The purpose of objectivity is that an objective meaning of the text is fixed and immutable and depending on the understanding circumstances and the mentality of interpretive and his historical perspective (Vaezi, 2006). Objectivity is of the most fundamental principles of interpretation of the Qur'an. It is the nature of interpretation of religious texts, reproduction and discovery of requests and messages that are sent by God to guide and uplift people and not to make sense of the text (Saeidi Roshan, 2007).

## 5. The Possibility of Passing the Historical Understanding Obstacles

Commentators believe that in spite of the age interval between the time of revelation and the time of interpretation, objective knowledge and understanding is possible (Rezaie, 1993, p 72). Classical hermeneutists believe that the historical gaps can be swept and objective understanding of historical phenomena and classical texts can be achieved. They think "to understand" needs to overcome this time gap. Hence, they employ hermeneutics as an efficient tool to traverse the historical distance between the era of writing and age of exegesis and on the other hand, between the author and commentator (Vaezi, 1996, p 218) .

On the whole, although classical commentators and hermeneutists believe in the negative impact of the historical gap in the understanding and interpretation of the text, they do not consider it as abysmal obstacle.

## 6. Considering to the General Rules of Language

From the perspective of rational norms, communication flows is shaped according to the general rules of the language, involving vocabulary, syntax (grammar), rhetoric, aesthetics, semantics, etc. According to the commentators, God has expressed his great book of his teachings in the form and structure of human language and documented with the general rules of language and principles of understanding and the norms of rational expression of dialog. (Saeidi Roshan, 2007, pp. 421-424) In addition to commentators, principalists aiming to understand the meaning of legislator, have also considered knowing the general rules of understanding in their work and have paid attention to it in the words subject and the principles of rational discussion. Interpreters in many cases, have used the results of scientific endeavor of principalists in this matter. Classical hermeneutists have also considered the linguistic general rules for the interpretation of texts. They paid special attention to the intersubjective relations for various reasons, including the influence of Romanticism (Ahmadi, 2006).

## 7. Necessary to Avoid the Effects of Pre-Assumptions

Among the common ground among commentators and hermeneutists, avoiding defaults effect ofpre-assumptions is in practice of interpretation. Although this rule has been proposed by some scholars (like Sayyid Qutb) as the absolute, but in practice, is bound by the shackles of "maximum". For example, some commentators say: "Who he wants to understand the verses of the Quran, has to temporarily forget all his knowledge and scientific theories and not to rely on any scientific theory." (Tabatabai, 2014).

While some others believe that "thoughts and opinions of the commentators cannot be assumed away from their imaginations of Qoran. Every commentator on his mind with thoughts imagines the meaning of the verse " (Zanjani, 2006)

New thinking on the West, two views on the influence of pre-formed assumptions: first view of Arbitration rejected any pre-formed counts. This view belongs to clear out Gary, any knowledge that the procedure - not the rational was deny that. However, the second approach is based on the pre-judgment is not always a negative impact not inevitable. (Rabbani, 1383, p 299) Classical Hermeneutics travels in this middle way. Meanwhile, the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the role of assumptions lays emphasis on understanding the process and the impossibility to put aside all prior assumptions acknowledge that., ensuring it impossible posited influenced by the romantic notion of the principle of misunderstanding and inability to abstain completely from the impact of the assumptions laid (poured expensive, 1378, p 72) and hermeneutics as an approach to avoid (most) of the misunderstanding mentioned. Schleiermacher's theory of ideas and the thinkers he will be more Mueller, 1986,) p.57)...

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results from this study showed that the classic hermeneutics is in fact a response to the lack of regularity in the interpretation of context evolved in the enlightenment era. Based on the classic hermeneutic perspective, a text has more than one interpretation. Both thinkers in the field of classical hermeneutics and interpretation of the Qur'an consider the possibility of understanding and interpretability of the text and they aim to achieve the intention of the author.

The purpose of the fundamentals of classical hermeneutics are principles and directions that contribute to this flows of thought in nature and is considered of its knowledge attributions and is agreed by all or most of the classic hermeneutists. Among these principles, some cases are seen that although as an individual vote proposed by one of hermeneutist, but the majority of scholars accept as the intellectual movements and it has been publicly accepted and has changed from an individual vote to a collective basis and a scientific identity for classical hermeneutics. Although minor differences are possible to exist in their perception of this common basis.

Consequently, the principles of interpretation of the Qur'an and classical hermeneutics in understanding and interpreting text are public compared to each other and particular in aspects. In other words, in addition to that both parties agree on a set of common principles, they hold also particular principles raised from their certain expectations and presuppositions of their interpretations. The common principles among them include: the possibility of understanding and interpretability, the author-based, method-based, objectivity and determinacy of meaning, the possibility of passing the historical understanding obstacles, considering the general linguistic rules, the need to avoid the effects of pre-assumptions. We also reviewed some of these differences among commentators and saw that the views of some commentators are closer to principles of philosophical hermeneutics. However, the principles of most commentators in interpretation of the Qur'an are similar to the classic hermeneutists in understanding and interpreting the text.

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