

# Beyond Ideological Interpretation: Naṣr Abū Zayd's Theory of Qur'anic Hermeneutic

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## ملخص

تبحث هذه المقالة هرمينوطيقا القرآن الذى قدمه نصر حامد أبو زيد المنكر المصرى الذى اتهم بالارتداد عن الإسلام بسبب ما قدمه من النظرية التفسيرية . وقد وقف أبو زيد موقفا شديدا الانتقاد من التفسيرات الإيديولوجية التى من شأنها أن تقلل قيمة التفسير وتحمله وفقا لمصالح المفسر الإيديولوجية، محافظة كانت أو ليبرالية، وإن مثل هذا التفسير قد يؤدى إلى البراغماتية. وعلى هذا ، فلا غرو أن انتقد أبو زيد عبد الصبور شاهين ومحمد الغزالى فى جانب واحد وحسن حنفى فى جانب آخر وذلك -فيما رأى- لأن تفسيراتهم مليئة بالألوان الإيديولوجية . ولأجل تقليل هذه الآثار الإيديولوجية قدم أبو زيد فكرة ضرورة المدخل الأدبى ( Literary Approach ) فى دراسة النص القرآنى كما كان يقدمه أمين الخولى.

وفى هذه المقالة يحاول الكاتب أن يقدم مباحث حول الجوانب التفسيرية منها مبحث صحة التفسير ، ومبحث المعنى والمغزى، ومبحث المستويات السياقية، ومبحث المبادئ التفسيرية ومناهج التفسير، واختتمت هذه المقالة بالنقاش حول إسهام أبى زيد فى الخطاب القرآنى بصفة انتقادية .

## Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas hermenutika al-Qur'an yang dikemukakan oleh Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, seorang intelektual Mesir yang dituduh murtad karena

teori interpretasi yang dikemukakannya. Abu Zaid sangat kritis terhadap "interpretasi-interpretasi ideologis" yang dapat mereduksi nilai interpretasi dan mengarah kepada interes-teres ideologi penafsir, baik ideologi konservatif maupun liberal. Interpretasi semacam ini dapat mengarah kepada pragmatisme. Atas dasar itu, ia mengkritik tajam 'Abd al-Ṣābūr Syāhīn dan Muhammad al-Gazali di satu sisi, dan Hasan Hanafi di sisi lain, karena menurutnya penafsiran mereka itu penuh dengan warna-warna ideologis.

Untuk mengurangi pengaruh ideologi Abu Zaid menawarkan ide perlunya pendekatan susastra dalam studi al-Qur'an, sebagaimana yang pernah dikemukakan oleh Amin al-Khūli.

Dalam artikel ini penulis mencoba untuk mengajukan beberapa pembahasan sekilas beberapa aspek interpretasi, antara lain: masalah validitas dalam interpretasi. Artikel ini ditutup dengan diskusi sekitar sumbangan abu Zaid terhadap diskursus al-Qur'an, secara kritis.

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*Hermeneutics ultimately claims to set itself up  
as a critique of critique, or meta-critique.*  
Paul Ricoeur<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the context of Islamic thought, hermeneutics, as "a body of methods, theory, and philosophizing focused on the problem of understanding texts,"<sup>2</sup> dates back to the earliest time when the Qur'anic text was felt to be puzzling and problematic, and thus had to be explained, translated, and interpreted in order to be intelligible. In the course of history, Islamic scholars have employed hermeneutics to understand their Holy Scripture, the Qur'an. As they approached the Qur'anic text from various perspectives, Qur'anic hermeneutics became an interdisciplinary field. There are various schools, ap-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 76; italics belongs to the author.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Richard Palmer, "Allegorical, Philological, and Philosophical Hermeneutics: Three Modes in a Complex Heritage," in Stephanus Kresic, *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1981, p. 15.

proaches, theories, and trends.

The development of Qur'anic hermeneutics cannot be separated from that of Islamic sciences, mainly Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), philosophy and sufism, and of human sciences, mainly linguistics, literary theory and criticism, including semiotics and hermeneutics. Therefore, Qur'anic hermeneutics does not only belong to the so-called Qur'anic and Exegesis Sciences (*Ulûm al-Qur'ân* and *Ulûm al-Tafsîr*) in the traditional sense. This interdisciplinary nature of this discipline is very clear in contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics, in which the employment of human (and social) sciences is inevitable. Naṣr Abû Zayd's theory of Qur'anic hermeneutics is one of the best examples of this trend.

The present paper aims at reconstructing Abû Zayd's theory of interpretation (*ta'wîl*), especially that of interpretation of the Qur'anic text, and analyzing it critically within the framework of critical Qur'anic scholarship.

### **Naṣr Abu Zayd: The Man and His Ouvre**

Naṣr Hamid Rizk Abu Zayd was born in the village of Qahafa near to the town of Tana in Egypt on 10 July 1943, and grew up in a religious family. He studied reading and writing, and memorizing the Qur'an at *Kuttâb* when he was four. He had memorized the whole Qur'an by the age of eight, and was called "Shaykh Nar" by the children of his village. When the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwân al-Muslimûn*) were very strong and had branches in almost every Egyptian village, he formally joined the movement in 1954, at the age of eleven. When he was a teenager he used to call for prayer (*âdhân*) in the mosque, performed as leader of prayers (*imâm*).

Abû Zayd completed his elementary and secondary education in Tana. After the death of his father, when he was fourteen, he had to work to support his family. After graduating from Tana Technical College in 1960, he worked as a technician in electronics at the National Communication Organization in Cairo until 1972. In 1968 Abû Zayd began his studies in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University and graduated in 1972 with "Highest Honours". From that year onwards, he worked as an assistant lecturer in this department. Because the department obliged the newly appointed assistant lecturers to take Islamic Studies as their major field of research in both their Masters and PhD thesis, he changed his interest from purely linguistics and literary criticism to Islamic studies, especially Qur'anic studies. Abû Zayd was in fact reluctant to take this subject, based on the experi-

ence of Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallâh, who ran into serious problems because of the use of literary critical studies of Qur'anic narratives in his dissertation. However, he accepted the decision and began studying the Qur'an and the problematic of interpretation and hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup>

In 1975, Abû Zayd was granted a Ford Foundation Fellowship which enabled him to study at the American University in Cairo for two years. Two years later he obtained his M.A. degree with "Highest Honours" from the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University with a thesis entitled *Al-Ittijâh al-<sup>ç</sup>Aqlî fi al-Tafsîr: Dirâsa fi Qaḍiyyat al-Majâz fi al-Qur'ân <sup>ç</sup>inda al-Mu<sup>ç</sup>tazila* (Rationalism in Exegesis: a Study of the Problem of Qur'anic Metaphor in the Writing of the Mutazilites) published in 1982, and was promoted to lecturer.

During the period 1976-1978 Abû Zayd taught Arabic to foreigners at the Centre for Diplomats and at the Ministry of Education in addition to teaching at Cairo University. In 1978 he became a fellow at the Centre for Middle East Studies of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA, where he studied social and human sciences in general, and folklore in particular. It was in this period that Abû Zayd became more familiar with (Western) hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> He wrote an article "Al-Hirminiyûṭîqâ wa Mu<sup>ç</sup>ḍilat Tafsîr al-Naṣṣ,"<sup>5</sup> which was the first article ever published on the subject in Arabic.

In 1981, Abu Zayd obtained his PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the same department with Highest Honours with a dissertation (published in 1983) entitled *Falsafat al-Ta'wîl: Dirâsa fi Ta'wîl al-Qur'ân <sup>ç</sup>inda Muhyi al-Dîn ibn <sup>ç</sup>Arabî* (The Philosophy of Interpretation: a Study of Ibn Arabî's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an). In this dissertation he argues that the use of the Qur'an for a particular interest is not only found in the rationalist school of the Mu<sup>ç</sup>tazila, as indicated in his previous study, but also in the Sufî discourses, especially the works of Ibn <sup>ç</sup>Arabî (d.638/1279), a great Andalusian Sufî.<sup>6</sup> In 1982, he was promoted to assistant professor and obtained Abd al-Azîz al-Ahwâni Prize

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<sup>3</sup>Naṣr Abû Zayd, "The Case of Abu Zaid," *Index on Censorship*. 4 (1996), 31-32.

<sup>4</sup>Before Abû Zayd left for the USA, Hasan Ḥanafî advised him to study hermeneutics to enrich his theoretical knowledge about the problem of understanding and interpretation. Personal communication, 2 June 1999.

<sup>5</sup>*Fuṣûl*, vol. 1, no. 3 (April 1981); republished in Naṣr Abû Zayd, *Ishkâliyyât al-Qirâ'a wa Aliyyât al-Ta'wîl*. Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al- Arabî, 1994 (3th ed.), 13-49.

<sup>6</sup>Abû Zayd, "The Case," 33.

for Humanities for his concern for humanity and the Arab culture.

During 1985-1989 he became a visiting professor at Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Japan. In 1987, when he was still in Japan, he was promoted to associate professor. The Japanese period was a very productive phase for him. It was during this period that Abû Zayd wrote his book *Mafhûm al-Naṣṣ: Dirâsa fî al-‘Ulûm al-Qur’ân* (The Concept of Text: A Study of the Qur’anic Sciences) and various other articles, some of which were published later in his other books. After his return from Japan, he published his most controversial book, *Naqd al-Khiṭâb al-Dînî* (a Critique of Religious Discourse),<sup>7</sup> which is a critical account of the development of the religio-political discourse of the Islam from Muḥammad ‘Abduh in the nineteenth century until Ḥasan Ḥanafî and his *al-Yasâr al-Islâmî* (Islamic Left) in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

In April 1992, at the age of forty-nine, Abû Zayd married Dr. Ibtihâl Aḥmad Kamâl Yûnis, a professor of French and comparative literature at Cairo University. A month later, on May 9, 1992, he applied to Cairo University for a promotion to full professorship. This, however, was also the beginning of his personal tragedy, an event which has affected the history of Egypt, and the Islamic world in general. He submitted two of his books, *al-Imâm al-Shâfi‘î* and *Naqd al-Khiṭâb al-Dînî*, and eleven other academic papers to an examining committee.<sup>9</sup> Although two of the three members of the committee were in favour of Abû Zayd’s works, the committee ultimately adopted the view of Dr. ‘Abd al-Ṣabûr Shâhîn, who accused Abû Zayd of violating Islamic orthodoxy concerning, *inter alia*, the Qur’an, the Prophet, his companions, and angels and other unseen creatures. The committee turned down the application.

The story, however, did not end there. Some Islamists accused Abu Zayd of being an ‘apostate’. Some lawyers brought him to the Giza Court of First Instance in 1993 demanding the dissolution of the marriage of Abu Zayd and Ibtihâl Yûnis, his wife. On 14 June 1995, the Court of Appeal of Cairo held that Abu Zayd was an apostate and should be separated from his wife. This deci-

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<sup>7</sup>This book is a collection of three writings published in 1989 and 1990, which were written in Japan. The second addition includes preface and introduction, in which the author responds the reaction of the first publication of the book.

<sup>8</sup>On Ḥasan Ḥanafî and *al-Yasâr al-Islâmî* (The Islamic Left), see Marien van den Boom, *From Dogma to Revolution*, (updated 6 January 1998), <http://www.hhit.hsholland.nl/levonet/islam/bx002.htm>.

<sup>9</sup>Abû Zayd, "The Case," 36.

sion was then confirmed on 5 August 1996 by the Egyptian Court of Cassation, the highest Egyptian civil court.<sup>10</sup>

The Abû Zayd Affaire brought about a fierce polemic in the media in Egypt as well as in other Arab countries. There are seven volumes of clippings by both the opponents and supporters of Abû Zayd, collected by al-Maḥrûsa li al-Nashr wa al-Khidmât al-Ṣafiyya wa al-Ma'lûmât, Cairo, entitled *al-Islâmiyyûn wa Nashr Hâmid Abû Zayd*, each of which numbers more than 250 pages. Concerning his Case, Abû Zayd published two books, *Al-Tafkîr fî Zaman al-Tafkîr* (Thinking in the Time of Seduction to Infidelity) in 1995<sup>11</sup> and *Al-Qawl al-Mufîd fî Qaḍiyyat Abû Zayd* (the Invaluable Accounts Concerning the Abû Zayd Affaire) in 1996.<sup>12</sup>

In the middle of his case, he was awarded the Republican Order of Merit for the Service to Arab Culture by the president of Tunisia in May 1993. During the period of 1992-1996, during which the so-called Abû Zayd Affaire took place, he was nevertheless very productive. In 1994 he was appointed member of the advisory board for the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*.

Nonetheless, Abu Zayd gained a full professorship in June 1995, after submitting to the committee, which was in fact a new committee, nine other writings.<sup>13</sup> On 26 July 1995 Abû Zayd and Ibtihâl Yûnis left Egypt for Leiden, the Netherlands, where he became a visiting professor in Islamic Studies at Leiden University. He began his living in exile.

Abû Zayd's other important works are: *Al-Imâm al-Shâfi'î wa Ta'sîs al-Aidiyûlujiyya al-Wasaṭiyya* (Al-Imâm al-Shâfi'î and the foundation of the Moderate Ideology);<sup>14</sup> *Al-Mar'a fî al-Khiâb al-Azma* (Women in the Discourse of Crisis);<sup>15</sup> *Al-Naṣṣ al-Sulṭa al-Ḥaqîqa* (Text, Authority, Truth);<sup>16</sup> *Ishkâliyyat al-Qirâ'a wa Aliyyât al-Ta'wîl* (Problems of Reading and Methods of Interpretation);<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>For the excerpts of the essential parts of these consideration, see "L'affaire Abû Zayd devant les tribunaux: Court of Cassation," translated from Arabic into English by M.S. Berger, in *Egypte/Monde Arabe* 34, (2nd semester 1998), 193-201.

<sup>11</sup>First edition, Cairo: Dâr Sînâ, 1995; second edition published in the same year, Cairo: Maktaba al-Madbûlî, 1995.

<sup>12</sup>Cairo: Maktaba Madbûlî, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>*Al-Ḥaqîqa*, 24 June 1995.

<sup>14</sup>First edition, Cairo: Sînâ li al-Nashr, 1992; second edition, 1995.

<sup>15</sup>Cairo: Dâr Nuṣûṣ li al-Nashr, 1994.

<sup>16</sup>Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al-<sup>c</sup>Arabî, 1995.

<sup>17</sup>A collection of writings published between 1981 and 1988.

and *Dawâir al-Khawf: Qirâ'a fî Khiṭâb al-Mar'a* (Circles of Fear: A Reading of Women Discourse),<sup>18</sup> which is dedicated to his wife Ibtihâl Yûnis.

Since his exile, some of Abû Zayd's books and articles have been translated into German, Dutch, French, Turkish, Indonesian and Persian. When the present article was written, no single book had yet been translated into English. Furthermore, he is going to publish another book in Arabic which represents his idea of a modern liberal understanding of Islam. Some articles in this book have been published in journals and magazines. His intellectual biography is going to be published in German.<sup>19</sup>

### Naşr Abû Zayd, Amîn Al-Khûlî's School and Literary Approach

Literary approach to the Qur'an is indeed not new. It has been used since the first century of Islam when 'Abd Allâh ibn 'Abbâs (d. 68/687) used pre-Islamic poetry to interpret some Qur'anic texts. Ibn 'Abbâs said: "If you ask me about a strange word of the Qur'an, search it in the [pre-Islamic] poetry, since it was the divan of the Arabs."<sup>20</sup> This effort was followed and developed by some scholars, notably Abû 'Ubayda (d. 210/825) al-Jâhiz (d. 255/869), Qâḍî 'Abd al-Jabbâr (d. 415/1024), 'Abd al-Qâhir al-Jurjânî (d. 474/1078), and al-Zamakhsharî (d.538/1144).

In the course of history, however, literary approach has been somewhat marginalized by both liberal and conservative Muslim scholars. Muḥammad 'Abduh, for instance, was one of the prominent critics of these approach. Interpretation of the Qur'an, to him, is not an occasion for philologists or literary critics to display their mastery and ingenuity, because the Qur'an is primarily a book of religious and spiritual guidance (*hidâya*) and not a literary or philosophical book.<sup>21</sup> 'Abduh's criticism has influenced many other reformists in

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<sup>18</sup> Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al-'Arabî, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Navid Kermani (ed.), *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*. Germany: Herder / Spektrum (forthcoming). This book is an edited version of the three days intensive interviews conducted in Germany with Navid Kermani.

<sup>20</sup> "Idhâ sa' altumûnî 'an gharîbi al-Qur'ân fa iltamisûhu fi al-shî'r, fa inna al-shî'r dîwân al-arab." Al-Bayhaqî, *Al-Sunan al-Kubrâ*. Vol. x. Heyderabad 1344-55, 241; as quoted by J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974, 59. See also Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920, 70; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 217; M. Muranyi, "Neue Materialien zur Tafsîr-Forschung," in Stefan Wild, *The Qur'an as Text*. Leiden [etc.]: E.J. Brill, 1996, pp. 244-45.

<sup>21</sup> Rashîd Ridâ, *Tafsîr al-Manâr*, i, pp. 17, 25. Cf. Jansen, *The Interpretation*, pp. 24-25.

the Islamic world.<sup>22</sup>

ʿAbduh's criticism of the literary approach was countered by Amîn al-Khûlî (d.1967) as early as the 1930s. Al-Khûlî blames ʿAbduh for not realizing that one cannot benefit from the religious and spiritual guidance (*hidâya*) of the Qur'an unless one knows the "literal" meaning of the text as it was understood in the period of its revelation. Al-Khûlî developed a literary approach in interpreting the Qur'anic text (*al-manhaj al-adabî fî al-tafsîr*) and a theory on the relation between linguistics and Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Amîn al-Khûlî was also the first to make use of historical criticism.<sup>24</sup> However, it should be noticed that al-Khûlî's adoption of historical criticism was mainly because he saw that literary approach obliges one to recognize the historical context of the text.

This approach influenced ʿĀ'isha ʿAbd al-Rahmân Bint al-Shâṭi' and Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallâh. Bint al-Shâṭi' developed the idea of a rhetorical interpretation (*al-tafsîr al-bayânî*) of the Qur'an. The words of the Qur'an must always be defined in terms of what they meant to Muhammad and his contemporaries. Moreover, words must be assumed to have been used consistently throughout the Qur'anic text. Her emphasis on guidance rather than on facts relates her to the modern approach of ʿAbduh. But unlike al-Khûlî she missed historical criticism. This led her to be inclined to the conservative and anti-modernist stance.<sup>25</sup> That is why Abû Zayd does not refer to her works.<sup>26</sup>

Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallâh applied al-Khûlî's methodology to analyze the prophetic stories in the Qur'an. In dealing with the relationship between text and historical reality, he distinguished between 'truth' and 'reality'. For him, the prophetic stories in the Qur'an were not historical as such but kerygmatic. They were repeated in the text for moral-religious purposes,

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<sup>22</sup> Hasan Ḥanafî also criticises this approach. See, "Method," p.198.

<sup>23</sup> Amîn al-Khûlî, *Manâhij al-Tajdid fî al-Nahwi wa al-Balâgha wa al-Tafsîr wa al-Adab*. Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'rifa, 1961, pp. 308-17; Cf. Jansen, *The Interpretation*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Baljon, *Modern, Muslim Koran Interpretation*. Leiden: EJ. p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Volume 2: *The Contemporary Period*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> According to Abû Zayd, Bint al-Shâṭi' was excluded from the Amîn al-Khûlî School. She did not really follow al-Khûlî's methodology, but returned back to the classical concept of *Balâgha*, which comprised *al-badî*, *al-bayân* and *al-ma'ânî*, instead of following al-Khûlî's use of modern literary theory and criticism. This tendency is expressed in her method of "*al-tafsîr al-bayânî*", which refers to traditional *bayân*. Personal communication with Abû Zayd, 2 August 1999.

and were repeated in different ways and forms according to different contexts and situations. The Qur'an employed attractive literary figures through which psychological and religious truths were expressed.<sup>27</sup>

Abû Zayd follows Amîn al-Khûlî and Khalafallâh, and develops their theory further by using approaches developed in modern literary theory and criticism.<sup>28</sup> Abû Zayd even believes that the only way to understand and interpret the Qur'an "objectively" is by employing these approaches.<sup>29</sup> Abû Zayd believes that the literary study (*al-dirâsa al-adabiyya*) of the Qur'an, in which the concept of "text" is central, is very important as it leads to the employment of scientific consciousness (*al-wa'c'iy al-ilmî*) and the avoidance of ideological tendencies (*al-tawjîh al-aidiyûlûjî*).<sup>30</sup>

There are two aims in Abu Zayd's studies of the Qur'an. The first is to re-connect the Qur'anic Studies with the literary and critical studies (*al-dirâsât al-adabiyya wa al-naqdiyya*). For him, studies of Islam and the Qur'an are based first and foremost on the Qur'anic text. The study of the Qur'an as a linguistic text necessitates the use of linguistic and literary studies. Studying the Qur'an as a text, to him, is a response to Amîn al-Khûlî's call. To accomplish this study, Abû Zayd has adopted in his studies of the Qur'an the current theories in linguistics, semiotics and hermeneutics. The second aim is to define an 'objective' understanding of Islam (*maf'hûm al-mawdû'î li al-Islâm*) that is devoid of ideological interests. Abû Zayd has been aware of the fact that there have always been groups using Islam ideologically to endorse their political and economic purposes.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Rippin, *Muslims*, volume: 2, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup>The use of literary theory and criticism in Arabo-Islamic scholarship is indeed not new. Literary theory has always been related to the study of the Qur'an, such as in the case of *Majâz* (metaphor), whereas literary criticism has been used to appreciate poetry. The use of literary criticism in reading the Qur'anic text, however, as we will see, is relatively new. See Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Contacts between Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory in Islam: the Case of Majâz." *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991-92), 253-84; Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

<sup>29</sup>Naşr Abû Zayd, *Maf'hûm al-Naşs: Dirâsa fi 'Ulûm al-Qur'ân*, Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Mişriyya al-'amma li al-Kitâb, 1993, pp. 21, 27-31.

<sup>30</sup>Abû Zayd, *Maf'hûm*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>31</sup>Abû Zayd, *Maf'hûm*, pp. 21-2.

## Beyond Ideological Interpretation

Abû Zayd begins with a proposition about the relationship between text (*nas/s*) and interpretation (*ta'wîl*). To him, text and interpretation are like two sides of the same coin: inseparable. The theory of interpretation, therefore, cannot be separated from the theory of text. In classical Qur'anic hermeneutics, the text has been separated from interpretation; the former was considered as "religious certainty that does not need any interpretation (*ta'wîl*)," and the latter was considered as a reprehensible act, even a blasphemy. Abû Zayd puts the "concept of the text" back at the centre of Islamic academic research by rejecting the traditional theory of the Qur'an as a *closed text* and, instead, treating the Qur'an as an *open text* and requiring interpretation as a key to open the world of the text. He attempts to reconstruct a systematic hermeneutics of the Qur'an, based on linguistic and literary approaches, in which the theory of text and interpretation is central. He believes that the employment of these approaches will minimize subjectivism and ideological interests.<sup>32</sup>

"Interpretation is another face of the text."<sup>33</sup> This statement works on the level of epistemology, as Abû Zayd said elsewhere: "the text has an existence independent of interpretation and commentary."<sup>34</sup> This statement should be understood in such a way that the text leads the act of interpretation to discover its own world. Interpretation and text are two sides of the same coin. This view is somewhat similar to J.L. Kugel and R.A. Greer's, although Abû Zayd did not refer to them. They state that:

Text and interpretation are like twin brothers; one can scarcely tell the one from the other. What emerges is unbroken dialogue or discourse between a book and a people, between Scripture and tradition, between the letter and the spirit, between word and the experience of those hearing it.<sup>35</sup>

The Qur'anic text has been subjected to interpretation since the time of its revelation. The Muslim scholars of the Qur'an hold that there are three

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<sup>32</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>33</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, pp. 11, 247.

<sup>34</sup> Bakr and Colla, "Silencing," p. 329.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by D.F. Morgan, *Between Text and Community*. Minneapolis, 1990, p. 138

main trends of Qur'anic exegesis and interpretation: textual interpretation or 'interpretation by transmission' (*tafsîr bi al-ma'thûr* or *tafsîr bi al-riwâya*), rational interpretation or 'interpretation by sound opinion' (*tafsîr bi al-ra'y* or *tafsîr bi al-dirâya*), and intuitive interpretation or 'interpretation by indication from signs' (*tafsîr ishârî*).<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, however, Abû Zayd classifies the trends of Qur'anic interpretation into two: literal interpretation and allegorical and/or metaphorical interpretation. The literal interpretation assumes the Qur'an to be an a-historical text, whereas, on the contrary, the allegorical and metaphorical interpretations presume the Qur'an to be a historical text.<sup>37</sup> This classification, like the traditional one, seems insufficient to include all trends of Qur'anic interpretation, which are, in fact, much too diverse to be classified into two trends.

There has been a debate in the Qur'anic studies about the use of, and the differences between, the terms *tafsîr* and *ta'wîl*, which are usually translated respectively as exegesis or commentary, and interpretation. Some consider that there is no difference between *tafsîr* and *ta'wîl*. Others, including Abû Zayd, argue that there is a difference. *Tafsîr* (from Ar. *fassara*), for the second group, means explanation and clarification, aiming at a knowledge and understanding of the Qur'an, to explain its meanings, extract its legal rulings and grasp its underlying reasons. *Tafsîr* explains the 'outer' (*zâhir*) of the Qur'an. *Ta'wîl* (from Ar. *'awwala*), on the other hand, is regarded by some as referring to the explanation of the inner and concealed meanings of the Qur'an.<sup>38</sup> Abû Zayd even distinguishes these from *qirâ'a* (reading) which is prior to, and not as 'in-depth' as, exegesis and interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

In the process of *tafsîr*, the 'exegete'<sup>40</sup> employs linguistics and Qur'anic sciences (*'Ulûm al-Qur'ân*) in its classical sense, in which it refers to transmission (*riwâiyât*). By employing these fields of study as 'tools of analysis', an ordinary reading (*qirâ'a 'âdiyya*) becomes an exegesis. But, it is does not mean that

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmad von Denffer, *'Ulûm al-Qur'ân: an Introduction to the Science of the Qur'an*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1994 (revised edition), pp. 123-32.

<sup>37</sup> Abû Zayd, "The Modernization," pp. 73-4.

<sup>38</sup> Von Denffer, *Ulûm*, pp. 121-22; Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, pp. 252-67.

<sup>39</sup> It should be noticed that Abû Zayd uses here the word 'reading' as an ordinary reading. He also uses reading as a term used in literary criticism which signifies all kinds of reading process, including exegesis (*tafsîr*) and interpretation (*ta'wîl*) in classical Islamic scholarship.

there is no knowledge of Qur'anic sciences and linguistics at all in an ordinary reading. Rather, in ordinary reading these fields of study are just background knowledge for the reader and are not used as the tools of analysis. As the exegete's role is merely to recognize signals (*tafsira*), interpretation (*ta'wil*) goes further than that, as it employs both the tools used in the exegesis and other scientific tools used in human sciences to discover a much deeper meaning of the text.<sup>41</sup>

Abû Zayd prefers using the term *ta'wil* to *tafsîr* because *ta'wil* is related to the process of discovery or invention (*istinbât*) which cannot be reached through a literal exegesis. In *ta'wil* the role of the reader in understanding and discovering the meaning of the text is more significant than that in *tafsîr*. However, the role of the reader is not absolute to avoid subjecting the text to his or her own subjective ideological inclination.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the problem is, in Abu Zayd's view, not the diversity of interpretation, as this is unavoidable, but rather the possibilities of mis-interpretation.<sup>43</sup> Here, the discussion about the validity of (in) interpretation starts.

### Validity of (in) Interpretation: between Ta'wil and Talwîn

Abû Zayd does not confront objectivity to subjectivity, as it often done, but to ideological inclinations instead. He talks about an 'objective' interpretation, which is *ta'wil*, *vis-a-vis* 'ideological' interpretation, which is *talwîn* ('colouring' or 'giving colour to the text'). But it does not mean that Abû Zayd approves of subjectivism (subjectivity as an ideology). He believes that both ideology and subjectivism are unscientific.

Abû Zayd is very critical of the so-called ideological interpretation of religious texts. He criticizes the conservative, moderate and liberal Muslim thinkers alike for having been influenced by their own ideologies.<sup>44</sup> Some-

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<sup>40</sup> Abû Zayd distinguishes between *mufassir* (exegete) and *mu'awwil* (interpreter). Therefore, the term exegete is used here to signify one who employs exegesis (*tafsir*), and interpreter to signify one who uses interpretation (*ta'wil*). But the term interpreter is also used in general sense which includes both exegete and interpreter, as interpretation in general also includes exegesis. See Abû Zayd, *Maḥnûm*, p. 264.

<sup>41</sup> Abû Zayd, *Maḥnûm*, p. 268.

<sup>42</sup> Abû Zayd, *Maḥnûm*, p. 264.

<sup>43</sup> Maḥmûd Râfî Mâha Sâlim, "'Al-Siyâsî al-Miṣrî' Tuwâṣilu Kashfa al-Maḥzûr fi Fikr Dr Naṣr Abû Zayd," *Al-Siyâsî al-Miṣrî*, 30 July 1995.

<sup>44</sup> This criticism is vehement in most of his writings, chiefly *Al-Imâm al-Shâfi'î*, *Naqd al-Khitâb al-Dînî*, and *Al-Naṣṣ al-Ṣulṭa al-Haqîqa*.

times he uses ideology in its restricted meaning as the consciousness of a group to protect their interests against other groups in a society,<sup>45</sup> and sometimes he uses ideology loosely when he criticizes any interpretation which, in his view, does not have any ground in the text itself. He even regards the claim that *tafsir* is better than *ta'wil* as directed by ideological motives. Moreover, he also relates ideologies to political and pragmatic manipulation of the meaning of the text, and contrasts this to a scientific understanding.<sup>46</sup> Hence, it seems that, in general, Abû Zayd uses the word ideology to refer reader's bias, interest, orientation, ideological inclinations, political and pragmatic purposes, and even religious convictions. He states:

Ideology is the *bias* of the interpreter, it is his *orientation*, the *conviction* that sometimes leads him, while he should fight it. For example, when starting your studies as a Muslim, of course there are many convictions. If you cannot separate yourself from them, you cannot be a scholar. This is what I mean by ideology. So, ideology could be religious ideology, could be social ideology, could be national ideology, could be political ideology, *any kind of sets of ideas or convictions which are not approved academically or scientifically*. I do not deny that I have my own ideology, but I try my best not to let it interfere and manipulate my ideas. It is not easy, but what I am asking is that every scholar fight against this disease. *It is a disease*, a common disease in the Muslim world.<sup>47</sup>

Abû Zayd, however, distinguishes between ideology and epistemology. Unlike ideology, epistemology touches the level of general agreement, that is the level of convinced truth (*al-ḥaqâ'iq al-yaqîniyya*) at a certain time in a given culture. This truth is absolutely relative and changeable due to changes in human consciousness. Epistemology in a cultural sense refers to a common social consciousness, regardless of the diversity of the people. Moreover, epistemology implies a participation in the process of understanding contained in any kind of linguistic communication. Furthermore, epistemology makes communication possible and produces meaning. It is a 'canal' of semantic commu-

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<sup>45</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naşş*, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Abu Zayd, *Naqd*, pp. 63-4; idem., "The Textuality," pp. 43, 50-2.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview, 2 June 1999.

nication and exists prior to the participants of the communication.<sup>48</sup>

It is worthwhile here to mention two schools of hermeneutics: the objectivist and the subjectivist. The objectivist school is advocated by such scholars as F. Schleiermacher, W. Dilthey, E. Betti, and E.D. Hirsch; whereas the subjectivist school is promoted by such scholars as Heidegger and Gadamer.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting that Abû Zayd is inspired by both Hirsch (objectivist) and Gadamer (subjectivist). Nonetheless, the influence of Hirsch and the objectivist school seems much greater in Abû Zayd's works than that of Gadamer and the subjectivist school. From Hirsch, Abû Zayd has taken the distinction between meaning and significance, and the argument of objectivity,<sup>50</sup> whereas from Gadamer he derives merely the argument that the reader/interpreter should be aware of his or her subjectivity and keep this subjectivity under his or her control. But this is, in fact, not Gadamer's point. Gadamer allows subjectivity to play a role in forming any interpretation. For Gadamer, there is no objective interpretation.<sup>51</sup> Abu Zayd, on the contrary, insists on offering an 'objective scientific interpretation' to produce a valid interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

Abû Zayd even criticizes the subjectivity school for establishing subjectivism (*al-dhâtiyya*) as a means of interpretation, a critique typical to the objectivists. The defence of the role of the reader and mechanism of reading leads to developing a subjective inclination which neglects, to some extent, the objective truth.<sup>53</sup> He calls this practice *talwîn*. However, what Abû Zayd means by objectivity is not an absolute objectivity, but a cultural objectivity which is bound by time and place.

It does not mean that the objective interpretation (*al-ta'wîl al-mawdû'î*) of a religious text—or a literary text—is a demand impossible to implement, as exaggerated by a certain trend in contemporary hermeneutics. Re-

<sup>48</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> R.E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*. Evanston: Northwestern U.P., 1969, 46-65; Nar Abû Zayd, "Hirminiyûṭiqâ wa Muḍalat Tafsîr al-Naṣṣ," in *Ishkâliyyat al-Qirâ'a wa âliyyât al-Ta'wîl*. Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al-ʿArabî, 1994 (3th edition), pp. 21-22; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1982, pp. 8-11.

<sup>50</sup> Abû Zayd, "Al-Hirminiyûṭiqâ," p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> See Thiselton, *New*, pp. 10-3; 440.

<sup>52</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, pp. 22, 271; idem., "The Textuality," pp. 50-1.

<sup>53</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, p. 139.

jecting objectivity means establishing subjectivism. The objectivity that is possible to implement in interpreting the texts is a *cultural objectivity* which is bound up with time and place, and not an absolute objectivity which is in fact only an illusion (*wahm*) created by the western colonialist ideology.<sup>54</sup>

In this respect, the discussion on the difference between *ta'wîl* (interpretation) and *talwîn* is very central. Unlike *ta'wîl* which is a productive reading (*qirâ'a muntija*) based on the epistemological principle of objectivity, *talwîn* is an ideological-subjective-tendentious reading (*qirâ'a mughrîda*) of the text. *Ta'wîl* is 'reading out' whereas *talwîn* is 'reading into' the text. However, Abû Zayd recognizes that there is no 'innocent reading' (*qirâ'a barî'a*) as there is no act of knowing that begins from scratch. A reader is always limited by his or her horizons of reading.<sup>55</sup> But it does not mean that the reader is allowed to force his or her own ideological pragmatical interest into the meaning and significance of the text (*qirâ'a mughrîda*).<sup>56</sup>

The text *qua* text, in the view of Abû Zayd, does not have any power, except epistemological power. Every text tries to represent its epistemological power anew, replacing the previous texts. However, such a "textual" power will not become a socio-cultural power without a group that establishes the text and changes it into an authoritarian framework (*itâr marja î*). Here, the textual power becomes a socio-cultural power through ideology. Abû Zayd tries to separate the texts from power. Hence, he calls for "the liberation from the [power of] texts", which is the liberation from the absolute and authoritarian power of reason that applies suppression, hegemony and power by forcing meanings which are out of time, space, circumstances and relations.<sup>57</sup>

By distinguishing epistemology and ideology, as mentioned above, Abû Zayd denies the possibilities of absolute objectivity. He opens the door to inter-subjectivity and not to subjectivism.

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<sup>54</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, p. 271; translation mine.

<sup>55</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, p. 143.

<sup>56</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, p. 142.

<sup>57</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Taḥkîr, fi zaman al-Taḥkîr*. Cairo: Maktaba Madbuli, 1995 p. 138. Abû Zayd has been criticized by the Islamists for calling on people to neglect the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions. See Abd al-Ṣabûr Shâhîn (ed.), *Qiṣṣat "Abû Zayd" wa-nḥisâru al-'Almâniyya fi Jâmi'at al-Qâhira*. Cairo: Dâr al-Îṭiâm, n.d.

## Meaning and Significance

The distinction between 'meaning' and 'significance' is also very central in Abu Zayd's hermeneutics. To understand Abû Zayd's concepts, it is worthwhile to mention Hirsch's theory of meaning and significance, referred to by Abû Zayd.<sup>58</sup>

It is not the meaning of the text which changes, but its significance to the author. This distinction is too often ignored. *Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a perception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable [...] Significance always implies a relationship, and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means. Failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory.<sup>59</sup>

Abû Zayd's understanding of meaning and significance in general is derived from Hirsch's. Meaning is that which is presented by the text, and significance is the relationship between the meaning and the reader. Meaning is the "original contextual meaning, which is almost fixed because of its historicity," and significance is "changeable."<sup>60</sup> Like Hirsch, Abû Zayd also distinguishes between the meaning intended by the author and the meaning represented by the text, whereby he stresses the meaning represented by the text. But unlike Hirsch, who intended to rehabilitate the 'authorial meaning',<sup>61</sup> Abû Zayd turns the discussion from the intention of the author to the meaning of the Qur'anic text as understood by the first generation of Muslims. If the meaning depended on the intention of the author, who is God in the context of the Qur'anic text, this would lead to shutting this meaning from any new significance.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Abû Zayd, "Al-Hirminiyûfiqâ," p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967/1978, 8. Italics by the author.

<sup>60</sup> Abû Zayd, "The Textuality," p. 51; idem., "Divine," p. 200.

<sup>61</sup> This is expressed throughout the book, especially, the first chapter of *Validity in Interpretation*, entitled "In Defense of the Author".

<sup>62</sup> Abû Zayd, "The Modernization," p. 84.

Hirsch's dualism of meaning and significance has been the *locus* of criticism in contemporary hermeneutics. Abû Zayd tries to solve the problem by defining *three levels of meaning of message*, which are inherent in religious texts. The first level of meaning is that signifies merely "historical evidences" (*shawâhid târikhiyya*), which cannot be interpreted metaphorically. The second level signifies "historical evidences", and can be interpreted metaphorically. The third level deserves extension of meaning based on "significance", which can be discovered from the socio-cultural context within which the texts develop.<sup>63</sup> On the third level, meaning should be gained objectively, so that significance can be rendered from it. Significance, however, should not violate meaning. Meaning depends on the text, whereas significance depends on the reader. Significance gives a room for reader's subjectivity, guided by the objective meaning.<sup>64</sup> This distinction of the levels of meaning is very important. It means that meaning does not always lead to significance, because this is only one of three possibilities.

### Levels of Context

A text brings with it its own levels of context, which should be taken into consideration by the interpreter. There are five levels of context.

The first level is the level of the socio-cultural context, which consists of the social rules and culture with all of its conventions, customs and traditions expressed in the language of the text. This is the epistemological reference (*marjâ'iyya mâ rifiiyya*). The language contains collective conventional rules that depend on the cultural framework. The text as a message was addressed to people who had their own culture, mental conceptions and cultural beliefs. In this framework Abû Zayd proposes his fundamental proposition that the Qur'an is a cultural product, and that it should be understood within its culture.<sup>65</sup>

The second level relates to the external context, i.e. the context of address (*siyâq al-takhâtub*) which is expressed in the linguistic structure (*bunya lughawiyya*) of the Qur'anic text. The context of address is related to the relationship between the speaker/sender and addressee/receiver, defining the

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<sup>63</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, p. 210.

<sup>64</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, pp. 144-6.

<sup>65</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, pp. 96-8.

characteristics of the text on the one hand, and the refervece of the exegesis and interpretation on the other hand. Abû Zayd also calls this context the "context of revelation" (*siyâq al-tanzîl*). This is based on two facts: first, the Text was revealed in parts over more than twenty two years, whereby each part had its own context. In traditional Qur'anic science it is called "the circumstances of revelation" (*asbâb al-nuzûl*). Second, there is variation in the speech levels (*mustawayât al-khiṭâb*) and, even, that in the secondary language (*al-lugha al-thânawiyya*), which is the specific language of the Qur'an,<sup>66</sup> due to the different addressees of each part of the text. The addressees vary: the Prophet (first reciever), humankind in general, believers, unbelievers, polytheists, Prophet's wives, Muslim women, women in general, etc. Each speech level has its own meaning. The context of address has disappeared, but it can be recovered from the linguistic structure of the Qur'anic text.<sup>67</sup>

The third level is the internal context, which is related to the "unitedness" of the structure of the Text and the plurality of its levels of discourse. The structure of the Text is ununited, due to the different arrangements of the text (*tartîb al-ajzâ'*) from the order of revelation (*tartîb al-nuzûl*). Moreover, the Qur'anic texts are plural in nature (*al-ta'addudiyya al-naṣṣiyya*), and are impossible to understand except by taking their own peculiar level into consideration. A reader should recognize the level of discourse he or she is dealing with. The discourse of story (*siyâq al-qisṣa/al-qaṣṣ*), for instance, differs in its sense and emphasis from the discourse of ordering good and withdrawing from evil (*al-amr wa al-nahy*), attraction and intimidation (*al-targhîb wa tarhîb*), debate and contest (*al-jadal wa al-sijâl*), promise and threat (*al-wa'ad wa al-wa'îd*), and threat and warning (*al-tahdîd wa al-indhâr*). There are also various discourse levels such as the level of description, theology or law, which lead to various understanding too.<sup>68</sup>

The fourth level is the linguistic context which is not only related to the elements of a sentence, correlation between sentences (*nazm*), and to the figurative expansion or *majâz*-ification<sup>69</sup> (*tajâwuz*) in the meaning of grammatical

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<sup>66</sup> Abû Zayd calls the language of the Qur'anic text a "secondary language". It is implied that the language of the culture is regarded as a "primary language". Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, p. 100.

<sup>67</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, pp. 101-3.

<sup>68</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, pp. 104-8.

<sup>69</sup> To use Wolfhart Heinrichs' term in "Contact between Scriptural Hermeneutics and

forms and styles (*maʿanî al-naḥw*, to use ʿAbd al-Qâhir’s term), but also to the signification of the implicit or the ‘unmentioned’ (*al-maskûṭ ʿanhu*) in the structure of discourse. The analysis of the text through its linguistic signs should discover the ‘unmentioned’ by going beyond the words to the cultural structure of the Text. This is because language is a part and a crystallization of its culture. The ‘unmentioned’ in the *sûra Jinn* for instance, which presents the *Jinns* as if they exist, is that the Qur’an uses existing cultural beliefs in the pre-Islamic Arabic culture. However, this does not mean that *Jinns* exist in reality.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, the fifth level concerns the context of reading (*siyâq al-qirâ’a*). The process of reading, which is in its very essence a deconstruction of code, is not the external, supplementary context attributed to the text, since the textuality of the Qur’an is discovered through the act of reading.<sup>71</sup> There are two kinds of the context of reading: internal and external. At the level of internal context, there is the ‘imaginative potential reader’ (*al-qâri’ al-ḍimnî al-mutakhayyal*) in the structure of the text itself, which is regarded as an event. In this case, the reader is a speaker/sender, who is God, engaged in the continuous reading in the process of creation/sending, and then He changes his role from the sender to the receiver when the text is being read by an ‘external reader’. The ‘external reader’ should be aware of this internal context of reading (together with the rest of the levels of context mentioned above) as well as his own (external) context of reading. The variation of the levels of the context of reading is caused by different conditions of an individual reader and of different readers, on the one hand, and by the different reading perspectives, such as linguistic, rhetoric, theological, philosophical, and ideological readings, on the other hand.<sup>72</sup> Interpretation is, thus, in a metaphorical expression, a ‘mutual reading’ between the sender and the receiver.<sup>73</sup>

The above five levels of context are related to each other, and should be taken into consideration in interpreting the text. Otherwise, one easily arrives at an ideological pragmatical interpretation of the text.

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Literary Theory in Islam: the case of Majâz," *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991/1992), pp. 253-84.

<sup>70</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, pp. 39-40; idem., *Naqd*, pp. 212-13; idem., *Al-Naṣṣ*, p. 109.

<sup>71</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, pp. 110-3.

<sup>73</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ*, pp. 112-3.

## Principles of Interpretation

The basic principle of interpretation is that the Qur'an is not meant to answer all human problems. The Qur'an does not contain everything. A lot of things are to be found outside the Qur'an. The interpretation then is not always based on the actual needs, does it always fulfil these needs. If this is not kept in mind, the interpretation will be easily manipulated to fulfil these needs, and the answer is found before the interpretation is done.<sup>74</sup> In interpreting the verses stating that the Qur'an is "an explanation of all things",<sup>75</sup> Abû Zayd states that "all things" (*kull shay'*) in these verses signifies 'all things in the framework of religion', as the Qur'an is the book of Religion.

To study and interpret the Qur'an "objectively", Abû Zayd offers two premises: a major and a minor, which are related to the religious language of the Qur'an. The major premise (*al-muqaddima al-kubrâ*) says that the Qur'anic language derived its authority from the Arabic language (*al-lisân al-<sup>c</sup>Arabî*) in general, and from its historical use in the Arabic peninsula before Islam. The minor premise (*al-muqaddima al-sughrâ*) says that the Qur'anic text had changed the meaning of some pre-Islamic Arabic terminology (i.e. pre-Qur'anic language) to give it a the religious meaning (*al-dalâla al-shar<sup>c</sup>diyya*). For instance, the words *al-şalât*, *al-zakât*, *al-şawm* now used as terms for particular religious Islamic devotions and rituals, are different from their original meanings.<sup>76</sup>

On the basis of these two premises, Abû Zayd sets up the hypothesis that the language of the Qur'anic text, while originating from the "mother language" (pre-Qur'anic language), possesses its own specific system which does not only change the meaning of some words from pre-Islamic (pre-

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<sup>74</sup>Moch. Nur Ichwan, "Nasr Abu Zayd: Pahamilah al-Qur'an Sesuai Konteks Narasinya," *Ummat* no. 1, 4th year, (July 13, 1998), pp. 62-3.

<sup>75</sup>Qur'an 16:89, "Wanazalnâ 'alayka al-kitâba tibyânan likulli shay'." Qur'an 6:38, "Wamâfarraqnâ fi al-kitâbi min shay'."

<sup>76</sup>Abû Zayd, *Al-Naşş*, pp. 314-15. This is indeed not new. Some other scholars have the same opinion. Ibn Fâris, for instance, discusses this transformation of meaning in his *Sâhibî*, especially chapter *al-Asbâb al-Islâmiyya* (Islamic matters). See Michael G. Carter, "Language and Law in the Sâibî of Ibn Fâris," *Zeitschrift für arabische Linguistik*, vol. 25, (1993), pp. 139-147. But different from Abû Zayd who stresses the new meaning of some Arabic terms, Ibn Fâris stresses the *dual meaning* of the terms. Some words kept their primary meaning but acquired a new and specifically Islamic sense. Ibn Fâris gives some examples, such as *mu'min*, *muslim*, *kâfir*, *munâfiq*, *jihâd*, *rukû<sup>c</sup>*, *sujûd*, *hajj*, *umra* and *şalât*. For a modern study of this phenomenon, see also Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966.

Qur'anic) linguistic conventions to religious terms, but goes beyond much broader horizons; the Qur'anic language tries to build its own specific linguistic system.<sup>77</sup> The originality and the degree of creativity of the text are led by developments in the linguistic system as well as in *reality* and *culture*. Reality is the *socio-political condition* which embraced the actions of those who were addressed by the text, and which embraced the first receiver of the text, the Prophet; whereas culture is the *world of concepts embodied in the language*, the same language in which the Qur'an is also written.<sup>78</sup> This means that the text cannot be separated from the linguistic cultural reality on the one hand, and produces a specific code which forms language and culture on the other hand.<sup>79</sup>

### Method of Interpretation

The interpreter should be aware of his/her ideology and subjectivity, so that they will not interfere with the process of interpretation. To discover the hidden meaning of the text, the interpreter should begin with a preliminary reading. This reading is then followed by an analytical reading (*al-qirâ'a al-tahliliyya*), through which the keys and central ideas of the text are discovered. Through these central ideas, the interpreter discovers other hidden meanings and develops new readings. The interpretive reading should be based on the total involvement of the reader in the world of the text.<sup>80</sup>

Interpretation is a process of decoding the text (*fakk al-shifra*),<sup>81</sup> because the specific linguistic encoding dynamics of the Qur'anic text lead to endless processes of decoding. But, in this process of decoding, the interpreter should take the contextual socio-cultural 'meaning' into consideration, by using historical criticism as a preliminary analysis followed by linguistic and literary analysis. This meaning will guide the interpreter to find the "new message", i.e. the significance, of the text. This means *movement from the 'meaning' to its 'significance'* in the present socio-cultural context of the interpreter. Moreover, the interpreter will also find the *direction of the text* (*ittijâh al-naşş*), by analyzing the transformation of meaning and from the pre-Qur'anic language to the religious Qur'anic language. This will also enable the interpreter to recognize

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<sup>77</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naşş*, p. 216.

<sup>78</sup> Abû Zayd, "Divine," p. 199.

<sup>79</sup> Abû Zayd, *Naqd*, pp. 203-4.

<sup>80</sup> Abû Zayd, *Mafhûm*, p. 270.

<sup>81</sup> Abû Zayd, *Al-Naşş*, p. 110

what is 'historical' and what is 'temporal' in the text.

"[T]he Qur'an, being encoded in the light of its historical, cultural and linguistic context, has to be reordered into the code of the cultural and linguistic context of the interpreter. In other words, the internal structure of the Qur'an must be reconstructed from its surface appearance, and then reordered according to contemporary values."<sup>82</sup>

This endless decoding process of interpretation, which is the consequence of the universality of the message of Islam to all humankind regardless of time and space, necessitates this diversity of interpretation. Abû Zayd believes that being aware of the difference between the original contextual 'meaning', which is almost fixed because of its historicity, and the 'significance' which is strongly related and rationally connected to the meaning, will produce a more valid interpretation.<sup>83</sup>

### **Epilogue: Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Critical Qur'anic Scholarship**

The "ideological war" in Egypt has sharpened Abû Zayd's sensitivity of any ideological reading of the Qur'an by both the conservative and liberal Muslims. He has criticised the conservative Muslims, such as al-Shâfi'î, al-Ash'arî and al-Ghazâlî, Sayyid Quṭb, Ḥasan al-Bannâ, Muḥammad al-Ghazâlî, Fahmi Huwaydî, Muḥammad al-Baltajî, and 'Abd al-Ṣabûr Shâhin, as well as the rationalists and liberalists, such as the Mu tazilites and Ibn Rushd (Averroism), Muḥammad 'Abduh, Ḥasan Ḥanafî and Muḥammad Shaḥrour. Abû Zayd attempts to formulate a methodological tool by which one can detect ideological readings of religious texts.

In this respect, however, Abû Zayd's stance regarding ideological readings of religious texts reminds us of Hirsch's "hermeneutics of innocence",<sup>84</sup> which, in fact, cannot be sustained in the post-Gadamer era. Abû Zayd repeatedly states that an ideological and subjective reading of the Qur'an is no more than manipulation of meanings, which is against scientific objectivity. For him,

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<sup>82</sup> Abû Zayd, "The Textuality," p. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Abû Zayd, "The Textuality," pp. 51-2.

<sup>84</sup> On Hirsch's "hermeneutics of innocence" see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 256-87.

ideology is a "disease". At this point, the influence of Marxist concepts of ideology, as alleged by his opponents, appears evident. Marxists see ideology as a "distortion" of reality, and contrast it with 'true consciousness'.<sup>85</sup>

Abû Zayd's belief in the authority of reason, objectivity and academism leads him to become the best representative of the modern rationalist. The fact that he sometimes adopted postmodern concepts is undeniable. Fouad Ajami, for instance, says that Abû Zayd is "at home with the methods and language of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci",<sup>86</sup> and Edward Said states that "the debt to Foucault is evident" in Abû Zayd's use of 'discourse' in the *Naqd al-Khiṭâb al-Dîni*.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, it cannot be said that Abû Zayd has been working within the framework of postmodernism, which rejects the centrality of reason, objectivity and academism. Moreover, he has never expressed his support to postmodernism, and has never quoted postmodern works in his writings, although he read some of them.<sup>88</sup>

In respect to Qur'anic studies or, more precisely, critical Qur'anic scholarship, Abû Zayd proposes some new, important perspectives. In the first place, the relationship between Qur'anic hermeneutics and Qur'anic criticism is obvious. Qur'anic hermeneutics and Qur'anic criticism are like two sides of the same coin; one presupposes the other. Abû Zayd has contributed significantly to the development of these disciplines, although he hardly mentions explicitly Qur'anic criticism or critical Qur'anic scholarship in his writings. He uses historical criticism as a preliminary study of the Qur'anic text and discourses, but the most important approach is the use of literary theory and criticism. Historical criticism is important to recognize the historical context and "meaning" of a text or discourse, and literary theory and criticism are important to extract its "significance." Criticism here should not be understood as "spoken or written remarks that express your disapproval or bad opinion of someone or something",<sup>89</sup> but a judgement of what has been thought about the nature

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<sup>85</sup> Daniel Bell, "Ideology," in Allan Bullock [etc.] (eds.), *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*. New York [etc.]: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988 (new and revised edition), pp.404-5.

<sup>86</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998, p. 215.

<sup>87</sup> Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession*. London: Vintage, 1995, p. 409.

<sup>88</sup> Personal interview, 2 June 1999.

<sup>89</sup> *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. England: Longman Group Ltd., 1995 (3rd ed.), p. 323.

of the Qur'an, its science and interpretations, and a reading of the Qur'anic text to discover its possibilities of new messages and significance, and examine its unknown potentialities. It does not primarily deal with the known, but with the ignored, the absent, and the distant dimensions.<sup>90</sup>

Secondly, as a consequence of the first, he desacralizes and demystifies the Qur'anic text by subjecting it to scholarly investigation. He believes that the nature of the text should be defined and that the laws that govern the study of it should be examined. The Qur'an, thus, should be treated like any other (profane) text. According to Abû Zayd, the Qur'an should be treated primarily as a cultural product, a linguistic text, a historical text, and even a human text, despite its nature as a religious text.

Thirdly, the nature of the text necessitates a discussion of "revelation" (*wahy*), as it is believed to be a Book of revelation. He investigates the cultural beliefs of the Arabs before the coming of Islam, in which he finds a phenomenon quite similar in pre-Islamic poetry and soothsaying (*kihâna*), which were believed to be revelations or inspirations of the *Jinn*. He even believes that this pre-Islamic Arabic theory of revelation was the model for the belief in the religious revelations of God mediated by the angel *Jibrîl*. On the other hand, he also uses communication theory to explain the process of revelation, i.e. revelation as a communicative act. Here, he uses Roman Jakobson's communication theory in literary criticism.

Forthly, he sees the religious language (*al-luġha al-dîniyya*) as an important aspect of Qur'anic studies and hermeneutics. This also brings him to relate the Qur'anic language, as a religious language, to culture and history. Abû Zayd uses current theories in linguistic and literary criticism to study and understand the religious language. Hence, he introduces terms of modern linguistic and literary theory into Muslim Qur'anic scholarship.

Abû Zayd's interest in Qur'anic criticism actually stems from literary criticism, developed in the "Amîn al-Khûlî school." Historical criticism is only used for preliminary studies. The consequence of these studies is that the Qur'an is treated as any other literary text, which is historical and human, and as a "cultural product", because its language is cultural in nature and cannot rid itself of general rules of the Arabic language and the culture of the seventh-

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<sup>90</sup>Cf. 'Alî Ḥarb, *Naqd al-Naşş*. Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al-'Arabî, 1995 (2nd ed.) p. 202.

century Arabs. On the top of that, however, Abû Zayd has challenged the traditional Qur'anic studies and hermeneutics by applying modern literary theory and criticism to the study and interpretation of the Qur'anic text and exegetical literature, and by crossing beyond the sacral realms and theologically sensitive issues in Islamic thought.

## NOTES

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