

The Qur’anic Reading and Its Method

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Bio

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Qur’anic interpretation and interpretive methodology, arguing that the meaning derived from the Qur’an depends fundamentally on the reader’s methodological approach. It critiques fragmented, selective, and literalist readings that isolate verses from their textual, historical, and ethical contexts, thereby distorting the Qur’an’s intended message. The study emphasizes the necessity of systematic and holistic interpretation grounded in contextual analysis, particularly through the observation of intended meaning embodied in the text. It further explores the historical development of Islamic jurisprudence,

including *ijtihad*, *qiyas*, and *maqasid al-shari'ah*, highlighting efforts by Muslim jurists to relate revelation to the changing social realities. Applying the *maqasidi* framework to issues such as war and peace, the paper argues that the Qur'an advances a coherent moral vision centered on justice, human dignity, compassion, and peace. The paper concludes that comprehensive interpretation is essential for preserving the ethical integrity and universal relevance of the Qur'anic message.

Keywords: maqasid al-shari'ah, contextual interpretation, systematic reading, religious pluralism, usul al-fiqh, ijtihad

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1.1 Introduction

Understanding the meanings of the Qur'an and deriving its intrinsic message is closely tied to the method selected by its reader. A fragmented and selective reading is bound to provide a partial and therefore distorted understanding, while a systematic reading is more likely to provide a more comprehensive and complete meaning.

How does one read a revealed book whose first recipients lived in a time and place of particular social and historical conditions? How does one understand the intended meaning of the revealed text in ways that do not confuse it with historical experiences and interpretations? How does one relate this intended meaning to an evolving human condition?

Understanding the revealed text is both a simple task and a complex enterprise. It is a simple task for those who constantly return to the text desiring wisdom and understanding, as well as seeking religious inspiration and moral guidance. The task is markedly more complex for those who want to provide a systematic presentation of the divine message, for here one is presented with another layer of difficulty: a set of parallel texts developed by scholars and intellectuals to interpret and explain the original text. The interpretations are often colored by the spirit of the times in which they were written, and often influenced by the social, political, and educational conditions of the early societies.

This article outlines a systematic approach for reading the Qur'an and suggests a more conducive approach to deriving its message. In addition, it argues that the Qur'an has a definitive message, one that can be accessed through a proper methodology and approach.

1.2 Eternal Message and Varying Interpretations

The Qur'an's definitive message transcends the historical time and geographical space in which it was revealed. The historical specificity of the community to which it was revealed led to a protracted controversy over the question of its "creation." In reality, it was a question of whether the Qur'anic message was bound to the historical community that first received it or whether it was transcendental and therefore relevant to the life of subsequent communities. In the third Islamic century, two schools of thought emerged: the Mu'tazila, who asserted the Qur'an's historicity and thus insisted that it was created, and those who later became known as the "People of the Sunnah and Community" (ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah) who rejected this view. The conflict was theological in nature: What is the relationship between the Book, which was revealed during a particular historical epoch, and its Author, who is eternal and transcends all history?

The theological aspect of the Qur'an's historicity is no longer an issue; however, the exegetical and sociological aspects of the controversy persist. The debate today is over reconciling the claim of the eternity of the Qur'anic message with the fact that the Qur'an was revealed over 1,400 years ago to guide a historically situated community. The resolution of this issue lies in differentiating between the universal values and transcendental principles intended by the divine to guide the life of a historical community on the one hand, and the cultural practices and particular social, economic, and political conditions that distinguished the community that received the revealed message on the other. One has to abstract from the concrete experience of the early Muslim community and then use the abstracted knowledge and understanding to guide the experience of modern Muslim society.

The failure to distinguish the revealed message's intended meaning from the circumstances that prevailed in early Muslim society has led to the rise of literalist interpretations. Such understandings often confuse Qur'anic pronouncements against specific actions of the followers of a particular faith community, for instance, with the Qur'an's principled position regarding religious diversity. The Qur'an condemned the unscrupulous behavior of several Jewish tribes toward the Prophet and the newly founded Muslim community, in violation of their own religious teachings, while urging Muslims to respect the Jews' religious freedom and Judaism's religious traditions.

Contextualizing the Qur'anic verses is, therefore, a must to avoid literalist interpretations. Early Muslim exegetists developed the analytical technique known as *asbab al-nuzul* (reasons of the revelation) to understand the revealed text's meaning in relation to social circumstances. This and other tools of textual analysis have helped avoid literalist interpretations of the text that often distort its intended meaning.

1.3 Systematic vs. Selective Reading

Literalist interpretation is not the only approach that distorts the Qur'anic text's intended meaning. Distortion very often occurs through selective reading. However, while such a reading of any text distorts its meaning, distortion is more possible with regard to the Qur'an due to the unique Qur'anic presentation. The unique Qur'anic style can be revealed by comparing its account of humanity's creation with the one recorded in the Bible. Unlike the Biblical account, the Qur'an does not present this story through a thematic approach. The Biblical creation story can be found in its entirety in the Book of Genesis, whereas its Qur'anic counterpart is narrated in chapters 2, 3, 7, 15, 17, 18, 19, 26, and 38. The same is true with regard to the missions of various prophets, the history of the Children of Israel, fasting and prayer, peace and war. This

means that a complete and authentic understanding of the Qur'anic text requires a systematic and comprehensive reading of the original text, whereby the interpreter traces the different verses that address the issue at hand. In fact, the Qur'an itself requires a systematic reading of its message and considers any attempt to focus on some verses and ignore others when dealing with a particular issue as perversion and distortion (Qur'an 2:85).

Any selective reading is an act of deception, for such an approach subordinates the divine text to individual inclinations and personal desires rather than providing enlightenment and guidance. As a result, the text no longer serves as the source of values, beliefs, and guidance, but rather as a tool for advancing self-interest. It also reverses the moral order by prioritizing the selective reader's self-interest over universal principles. Those who want to distort the Qur'anic message to promote a narrow agenda select those verses that support their positions and ignore other verses that would limit the selected verses' meaning or application. Thus one finds Muslim literalists stressing the Qur'anic verses that condemn the excesses committed by members of pre-Islamic religious communities while overlooking those that praise the actions of other members of the same communities. This enables them to advance a position that justifies their open hostility toward Christians and Jews.

Islam's critics in the West unwittingly emulate Muslim literalists when cherry-picking verses from the Qur'an that deal with struggle and fighting. For example Robert Spencer, a prolific critic of Islam, has persistently argued that violence and terrorism employed by Muslim literalists is rooted in the Qur'an and its message. He further contends that Muslim literalists who use violence against non-Muslims are not "misrepresenting, twisting, or hijacking what the Qur'an says." "There are over a hundred verses in the Qur'an," he insists, "that exhort believers to wage jihad against unbelievers. 'O Prophet! Strive hard against the unbelievers and the

hypocrites and be firm against them. Their abode is Hell, an evil refuge indeed' (Tawbah 9:73). 'Strive hard' in Arabic is jihad, a verbal form of the noun jihad. This striving was to be on the battlefield: 'When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield, strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly' (Muhammad 47:4). This is emphasized repeatedly: 'O you who believe! Fight the unbelievers who gird you about and let them find firmness in you: and know that God is with those who fear Him.' (Tawbah 9:123)."

Spencer selects just several of the numerous verses on peace and war, thereby misrepresenting Islam by arguing that the Qur'an directs Muslims to fight non-Muslims because they have a different faith. He does this by obscuring the selected verses' textual and historical contexts. The Qur'an states unequivocally that fighting is a last resort and is permitted to repulse aggression and stop oppression and abuse: "A declaration of disavowal from God and His Messenger to those of the polytheists (Arab pagans) with whom you contracted a Mutual alliance" Qur'an 9:1).

The reason for this war against the pagans was their continuous fight and conspiracy against the Muslims to turn them out of Madinah as they had been turned out of Makkah, and their infidelity to and disregard for the covenant they had made with the Muslims: "Why do you not fight people who violated their oaths, plotted to expel the Messenger, and attacked you first" (Qur'an 9:13). Out of the hundreds of verses Spencer leaves out are those that direct Muslims to initiate fighting only to repel aggression while urging them to seek peace when the other party seeks peace: "Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not commit aggression, for God loves not aggressors. And fight them wherever you meet them and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for persecution is worse than slaughter. But if they cease, God is oft-forgiving, most merciful. And fight them on until there is no oppression and the religion is

only for God, but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression” (Qur’an 2:190-93).

1.4 Rational Mediation of Islamic Sources

Muslim jurists gradually developed the Shari‘ah (Islamic law) by applying human reasoning to the revealed texts with the goal of developing a normative system that could regulate individual actions and social interactions. Early jurists relied primarily on the Qur’an and Sunnah (the Prophet’s practices) to elaborate its rules and called the process of their elaboration *ijtihad* (intellectual exercise). Recognizing the imperative of rational mediation for understanding these rules, they exerted a great deal of time and energy to define the grammar of interpreting the divine texts and the logic of reasoning about their implications. The differences in methodological approaches led to the formation of various schools of jurisprudence. Because the Qur’anic texts were given in a concrete form, whereby the Qur’an commented on the early Muslim community’s actions and interactions and directed early Muslims in concrete situations, jurists applied legal analogy (*qiyas*) to expand the Qur’anic precepts’s application to new cases.

Qiyas, widely accepted by the schools of jurisprudence, requires jurists to identify the efficient reason (*‘illah*) of a specific Qur’anic statement and then use it as the basis for extending the precept’s application to new cases. For example, early jurists extended the prohibition of wine to all intoxicating substances on the ground that intoxication was the *‘illah* for this particular prohibition. They also utilized the statements and actions of the Prophet and his Companions to arrive at a better understanding of the revealed texts. Over time, their practices became known as the Sunnah and were captured in the hadith narrations. Early jurists, who did not feel that the Sunnah’s authority was independent of the Qur’an, therefore did not hesitate to reject any hadith that clearly contradicted a Qur’anic statement.

Ijtihad took a decisive turn in the middle of the second Islamic century with al-Shafi'i's *Al-Risalah* (The Message), the first work on Islam's principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*). In it, he declared that the Sunnah was an inviolable source of law on par with the Qur'an and that it enjoyed an independent authority. Furthermore, he confined ijtihad to qiyas, thereby declaring all other legal reasoning to be arbitrary. Ibn Hanbal, who insisted that qiyas could be used only as a last resort, further extended this restriction by requiring that even a weak hadith be given priority over qiyas. The other two major schools of Sunni jurisprudence, the Hanafi and the Maliki, escaped these severe restrictions by employing the techniques of *istihsan* and *istislah*, respectively. *Istihsan* meant that jurists were not bound by the apparent reason of a particular rule, for they could utilize other reasons of the Shari'ah whenever deemed more relevant. *Istislah*, on the other hand, allowed jurists to base the rules of the Shari'ah on public interest and utility, rather than confining them to *'illah*.

The desire of Hanafi and Maliki jurists to overcome the literalist approach equating ijtihad with qiyas (à la al-Shafi'i), or with linguistic explication of the Qur'an by reference to hadith (à la Hanbali), inspired them to develop methods that seek to prioritize the Shari'ah's rules and principles. Methods such as *al-qawa'id al-fiqhiyah* (juristic rules) or *al-maqasid al-Shari'iyah* (Shari'ah purposes) try to systematize these rules by eliminating internal contradiction, and constitute what is referred to today as the *maqasidi* approach. This approach, which emphasizes meaning, reasoning, and purposes of the *maqasid*, provides a powerful tool for reforming the historical Shari'ah because it rejects the literal reading of statements apart from their rationale and insists that those rationales cannot contradict basic Islamic values. Its definitive exposition can be found in the Andalusian jurist al-Shatibi's *Al-Muwafaqat*. His approach can be summarized as follows: (1) The Shari'ah's rules purport to promote human

interests; (2) the Shari‘ah consists of a hierarchy of rules, whereby the particular rules (ahkam juz’iyah) are subsumed under universal laws (qwanin kulliyah); (3) general rules must be modified to accommodate, whenever possible, particular rules; (4) particular rules that contradict general rules should be rejected or ignored; and (5) the Shari‘ah’s various rules and laws seek to advance five general purposes, namely, the protection of religion, life, reason, property, and progeny.

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to undertake a fresh interpretation of the Islamic sources on the moral positions enjoyed by Muslim women and non-Muslims living within an Islamic society, as well as the rights and obligations assigned to them. I propose to employ a methodology rooted in the maqasidi approach and based on the following five principles:

Principle 1: Rights and obligations cannot be established on the basis of individual statements of the Qur’an and Sunnah, for they have to be in accord with the totality of all relevant statements. According to this principle, therefore, jurists are required to consult all relevant texts before rendering a specific ruling.

Principle 2: The multiplicity of Qur’anic rules must be reduced into a coherent set of universal principles that, in turn, should be used to ensure the Shari‘ah’s systematic application within the modern context. This systematization should prevent the application of a specific (khass) rule in violation of a general (‘amm) rule, or a particular (juz’i) rule in violation of a universal (kulli) rule.

Principle 3: Given that generalizing a rule presupposes that the reason for its enactment is clear, no rule should be generalized unless its reason has been explicated. This principle requires that Qur’anic rules relating to social actions and interactions should be understood fully and

systematized with other rules. If this requirement is met, the literalist application of the Shari‘ah would be eliminated.

Principle 4: Given that universalizing a principle requires that the conditions of its application be identical, regardless of time and space, no principle can be declared universal if the particularity of the context for which it was intended is evident. This principle complements principle three by requiring jurists to examine the extent to which a specific statement or rule is directly connected with the socio-political context in which it was revealed.

Principle 5: Qur’anic statements take priority over prophetic ones. Hence, in the case of conflict and real contradiction, Qur’anic precepts override prophetic ones.

Utilizing the methodological framework outlined above, I turn now to examine the extent to which religious restrictions on religious freedom and the rights of women and non-Muslims are rooted in the attitudes and practices of historical Muslim communities, and how far these restrictions can be attributed to revealed texts.

1.5 The Maqasidi Approach and the Question of War and Peace

To illustrate how the maqasidi approach can be used to develop normative principles, let’s apply it to what the Qur’an has to say about the question of war and peace.

1.5.1 Verses Dealing With War

And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits. (2:190)

And kill them wherever you find them and drive them out from whence they drove you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers. (2:191)

And fight with them until there is no persecution, and religion should be only for Allah, but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors. (2:193)

Fighting is enjoined on you, and it is an object of dislike to you; and it may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you, and it may be that you love a thing while it is evil for you, and Allah knows, while you do not know. (2:216)

They ask you concerning the sacred month about fighting in it. Say: Fighting in it is a grave matter, and hindering (men) from Allah's way and denying Him, and (hindering men from) the Sacred Mosque and turning its people out of it, are still graver with Allah, and persecution is graver than slaughter; and they will not cease fighting with you until they turn you back from your religion, if they can; and whoever of you turns back from his religion, then he dies while an unbeliever – these it is whose works shall go for nothing in this world and the hereafter, and they are the inmates of the fire; therein they shall abide. (2:217)

And fight in the way of Allah, and know that Allah is Hearing, Knowing. (2:244)

Have you not considered the chiefs of the children of Israel after Musa, when they said to a prophet of theirs: Raise up for us a king, (that) we may fight in the way of Allah. He said: May it not be that you would not fight if fighting is ordained for you? They said: And what reason have we that we should not fight in the way of Allah, and we have indeed been compelled to abandon our homes and our children. But when fighting was ordained for them, they turned back, except a few of them, and Allah knows the unjust. (2:246)

Indeed there was a sign for you in the two hosts (which) met together in encounter; one party fighting in the way of Allah and the other unbelieving, whom they saw twice as many as

themselves with the sight of the eye and Allah strengthens with His aid whom He pleases; most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight. (3:13)

They shall by no means harm you but with a slight evil; and if they fight with you they shall turn (their) backs to you, then shall they not be helped. (3:111)

O you who believe! be not like those who disbelieve and say of their brethren when they travel in the earth or engage in fighting: Had they been with us, they would not have died and they would not have been slain; so Allah makes this to be an intense regret in their hearts; and Allah gives life and causes death and Allah sees what you do. (3:156)

And that He might know the hypocrites; and it was said to them: Come, fight in Allah's way, or defend yourselves. They said: If we knew fighting, we would certainly have followed you. They were on that day much nearer to unbelief than to belief. They say with their mouths what is not in their hearts, and Allah best knows what they conceal. (3:167)

Therefore let those fight in the way of Allah, who sell this world's life for the hereafter; and whoever fights in the way of Allah, then be he slain or be he victorious, We shall grant him a mighty reward. (4:74)

And what reason have you that you should not fight in the way of Allah and of the weak among the men and the women and the children, (of) those who say: Our Lord! cause us to go forth from this town, whose people are oppressors, and give us from Thee a guardian and give us from Thee a helper. (4:75)

Those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of the Shaitan. Fight therefore against the friends of the Shaitan; surely the strategy of the Shaitan is weak. (4:76)

Have you not seen those to whom it was said: Withhold your hands, and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate; but when fighting is prescribed for them, lo! a party of them fear men as they ought to have feared Allah, or (even) with a greater fear, and say: Our Lord! why hast Thou ordained fighting for us? Wherefore didst Thou not grant us a delay to a near end? Say: The provision of this world is short, and the hereafter is better for him who guards (against evil); and you shall not be wronged the husk of a date stone. (4:77)

Fight then in Allah's way; this is not imposed on you except in relation to yourself, and rouse the believers to ardor maybe Allah will restrain the fighting of those who disbelieve and Allah is strongest in prowess and strongest to give an exemplary punishment. (4:84)

Except those who reach a people between whom and you there is an alliance, or who come to you, their hearts shrinking from fighting you or fighting their own people; and if Allah had pleased, He would have given them power over you, so that they should have certainly fought you; therefore if they withdraw from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah has not given you a way against them. (4:90)

They said: O Musa! we shall never enter it so long as they are in it; go therefore you and your Lord, then fight you both surely we will here sit down. (5:24)

Say: He has the power that He should send on you a chastisement from above you or from beneath your feet, or that He should throw you into confusion, (making you) of different parties; and make some of you taste the fighting of others. See how We repeat the communications that they may understand. (6:65)

And whoever shall turn his back to them on that day – unless he turn aside for the sake of fighting or withdraws to a company – then he, indeed, becomes deserving of Allah’s wrath, and his abode is hell; and an evil destination shall it be. (8:16)

If you demanded a judgment, the judgment has then indeed come to you; and if you desist, it will be better for you; and if you turn back (to fight), We (too) shall turn back, and your forces shall avail you nothing, though they may be many, and (know) that Allah is with the believers. (8.19)

And fight with them until there is no more persecution and religion should be only for Allah; but if they desist, then surely Allah sees what they do. (8:39)

Therefore if you overtake them in fighting, then scatter by (making an example of) them those who are in their rear, that they may be mindful. (8:57)

And if they break their oaths after their agreement and (openly) revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief – surely their oaths are nothing – so that they may desist. (9:12)

What! will you not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Apostle, and they attacked you first; do you fear them? But Allah is most deserving that you should fear Him, if you are believers. (9:13)

Fight them, Allah will punish them by your hands and bring them to disgrace, and assist you against them and heal the hearts of a believing people. (9:14)

Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection. (9:29)

Surely the number of months with Allah is twelve months in Allah's ordinance since the day when He created the heavens and the earth, of these four being sacred; that is the right reckoning; therefore be not unjust to yourselves regarding them, and fight the polytheists all together as they fight you all together; and know that Allah is with those who guard (against evil). (9:36)

Therefore if Allah brings you back to a party of them and then they ask your permission to go forth, say: By no means shall you ever go forth with me and by no means shall you fight an enemy with me; surely you chose to sit the first time, therefore sit (now) with those who remain behind. (9:83)

Surely Allah has bought of the believers their persons and their property for this, that they shall have the garden; they fight in Allah's way, so they slay and are slain; a promise which is binding on Him in the Taurat and the Injeel and the Qur'an; and who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah? Rejoice therefore in the pledge which you have made; and that is the mighty achievement. (9:111)

O you who believe! fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness; and know that Allah is with those who guard (against evil). (9:123)

And Allah has made for you of what He has created shelters, and He has given you in the mountains places of retreat, and He has given you garments to preserve you from the heat and coats of mail to preserve you in your fighting; even thus does He complete His favor upon you, that haply you may submit. (16:81)

Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them; (22:39)

And he went into the city at a time of unvigilance on the part of its people, so he found therein two men fighting, one being of his party and the other of his foes, and he who was of his party cried out to him for help against him who was of his enemies, so Musa struck him with his fist and killed him. He said: This is on account of the Shaitan's doing; surely he is an enemy, openly leading astray. (28:15)

Allah knows indeed those among you who hinder others and those who say to their brethren: Come to us; and they come not to the fight but a little, (33:18)

They think the allies are not gone, and if the allies should come (again) they would fain be in the deserts with the desert Arabs asking for news about you, and if they were among you they would not fight save a little. (33:20)

And Allah turned back the unbelievers in their rage; they did not obtain any advantage, and Allah sufficed the believers in fighting; and Allah is Strong, Mighty. (33:25)

And those who believe say: Why has not a chapter been revealed? But when a decisive chapter is revealed, and fighting is mentioned therein you see those in whose hearts is a disease look to you with the look of one fainting because of death. Woe to them then! (47:20)

Say to those of the dwellers of the desert who were left behind: You shall soon be invited (to fight) against a people possessing mighty prowess; you will fight against them until they submit; then if you obey, Allah will grant you a good reward; and if you turn back as you turned back before, He will punish you with a painful punishment. (48:16)

And if those who disbelieve fight with you, they would certainly turn (their) backs, then they would not find any protector or a helper. (48:22)

And if two parties of the believers quarrel, make peace between them; but if one of them acts wrongfully towards the other, fight that which acts wrongfully until it returns to Allah's command; then if it returns, make peace between them with justice and act equitably; surely Allah loves those who act equitably. (49:9)

1.5.2 Rules Regarding War

Fighting is intended to repeal aggression.

Fighting is hateful and must not be desired for itself.

Believers should not initiate war against peaceful parties.

The response must be proportionate to the attack and must not target innocent bystanders.

Those whose land is taken by war are permitted to fight back until they push the aggressors back and free their land.

Fighting is permitted to end violent persecution.

Believers have a duty to come to the aid of those who are wronged and persecuted and may engage in war, if required.

1.5.3 Verses Dealing With Peace

They shall have the abode of peace with their Lord, and He is their guardian because of what they did. (6:127)

And between the two there shall be a veil, and on the most elevated places there shall be men who know all by their marks, and they shall call out to the dwellers of the garden: Peace be on you; they shall not have yet entered it, though they hope. (7:46)

And if they incline to peace, then incline to it and trust in Allah; surely He is the Hearing, the Knowing. (8:61)

Their cry in it shall be: Glory to Thee, O Allah! and their greeting in it shall be: Peace; and the last of their cry shall be: Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds. (10:10)

And Allah invites to the abode of peace and guides whom He pleases into the right path. (10:25)

It was said: O Nuh! descend with peace from Us and blessings on you and on the people from among those who are with you, and there shall be nations whom We will afford provisions, then a painful punishment from Us shall afflict them. (11:48)

Peace be on you because you were constant, how excellent, is then, the issue of the abode. (13:24)

So go you both to him and say: Surely we are two apostles of your Lord; therefore send the children of Israel with us and do not torment them! Indeed we have brought to you a communication from your Lord, and peace is on him who follows the guidance; (20:47)

And when they hear idle talk they turn aside from it and say: We shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds; peace be on you, we do not desire the ignorant. (28:55)

So turn away from them and say, Peace, for they shall soon come to know. (43:89)

And be not slack so as to cry for peace and you have the upper hand, and Allah is with you, and He will not bring your deeds to naught. (47:35)

And if two parties of the believers quarrel, make peace between them; but if one of them acts wrongfully towards the other, fight that which acts wrongfully until it

returns to Allah's command; then if it returns, make peace between them with justice and act equitably; surely Allah loves those who act equitably. (49:9)

The believers are but brethren, therefore make peace between your brethren and be careful of (your duty to) Allah that mercy may be had on you. (49:10)

He is Allah, besides Whom there is no god; the King, the Holy, the Giver of peace, the Granter of security, Guardian over all, the Mighty, the Supreme, the Possessor of every greatness
Glory be to Allah from what they set up (with Him). (59:23)

Peace! it is till the break of the morning. (97:5)

1.5.4 Rules Regarding Peace

Peace is an ultimate goal in this life and the hereafter.

Ultimate peace is the peace with Allah, which leads to eternal peace.

Peace is one of the beautiful names of Allah.

Believers should end hostility and seek peace when their enemy calls for peace.

Peace in the absence of the freedom of conscience is not desirable.

1.6 The Message of the Qur'an

Does the Qur'an have a clear and consistent message for its readers? If the answer is in the affirmative, then what is this message? The ensuing debate has raged for over a millennium, even among Muslim scholars. Many renowned jurists have argued that the Qur'an is open to many interpretations (hamal awjuh). This widely held opinion emboldened the muhadithun (hadith scholars), who have persistently relied on hadith books, to develop Islamic theology, ethics, and eschatology.

In modern times, Muslim intellectuals and scholars have frequently referenced the Qur'an to advance ideas and interpretations of varying emphases. Contemporary authors present it as

providing a spiritual, scientific, political, and even revolutionary message. The fact that it has been presented in competing lights reaffirms the old argument of its openness to different interpretations, a quality characteristic of all revealed books, even of all books dealing with matters of considerable depth. Yet asserting that the Qur'an can mean different things to different people does not mean that one must concede that it conveys no clear and definitive message to its readers.

The Qur'an has a clear and definitive message, one of peace, harmony, and hope. Its readers are urged to seek a life of peace: peace with oneself, with God, with those people with whom they constantly interact, and with their larger social and natural environments. One can therefore trace certain overarching themes that focus on issues of spirituality, faith and faithfulness, inner peace, community peace, universal peace, and eternal peace.

The Qur'an does not present peace as the premise upon which human life is constructed, but as the general goal and the final end to which life should evolve. The road to peace, however, is a tedious and challenging journey that starts with discovering the spiritual essence of life. Listening to the spiritual voice and choosing God and His guidance over the immediate demands of the world lead the individual to a life of faith, the cornerstone of peace. Through faith, the human spirit finds its way to inner peace as the first step in its journey to eternal peace. In the movement from inner to eternal peace lies the purpose of life and the mission of humanity.

The Qur'an teaches that humanity was created to fulfill a divine purpose by bringing the latent human qualities of intelligence and passion to bear on the social and natural environments in which its members find themselves. In the struggle to fulfill the divine intent of creation, the human spirit has to struggle to find its eternal peace by seeking communal and universal peace. Struggle is then the way to attain peace. This struggle, which is multidimensional and never

perfect or complete, always revolves around key concepts and values. The key to moral perfection is moral discipline and a strong commitment to justice and a life of equity and balance. Death, which ultimately concludes this endeavor, brings the human being face to face with eternity and the prospects of eternal peace.

The Qur'anic message is ultimately borne out of the key concepts that permeate its discourse and are given various connotations in different verses and chapters: life and death, faith and faithlessness, truth and falsehood, peace and war, infinity and finitude, confidence and arrogance, moderation and excess, hope and despair, good and evil, justice and oppression, compassion and intolerance, love and greed. These concepts serve as triggers that ignite the powerful energy constituting the human spirit. Whether one's spiritual energy is transformed into a burning heat or a guiding light is a question of interpretation and order.

The impact of words and verses ultimately hinges on how the words are ordered, how the verses are interpreted, and the extent to which the meaning derived from the revealed source is partial or complete. Partial meanings, which release a partial and imbalanced energy, help turn the revealed words into a source of destructive energy that burns all who come near it, whereas complete meanings shine brilliantly and enlighten all who are drawn to them.

Partial readings, interpretations, and applications are also outer signs of deeper problems concerning the human will and purpose. They reflect a concealed desire to subordinate truths to personal gain, instead of aligning one's will to the transcendental will as well as to sublime purposes and values. Partial readings, as the Qur'an puts it, indicate ill-intent.

He it is who has sent down to you the Book; in it are verses of profound meaning; they are the foundation of the Book: others are not of well-established meaning. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is not of well-

established meaning, seeking discord and alternation, but no one knows its true meanings except God. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord; and none will grasp the Message except people of understanding.” Qur’an 3:7)

The received message is not simply a question of text, but of context as well. Its meaning is not completely subsumed in the meaning intended in the source, but depends on the meaning derived by the reader as well. Meaning also depends on the recipients of the message, on their intentions and circumstances. It matters a great deal whether the recipients of the message and the readers of the divine text are willing to submit their individual and particular wills to transcendental truth and law, or whether they want to manipulate the message to privilege their individual interests and limited aims over universal principles and transcendental law.

In fact, the Qur’an is susceptible to many readings and has been read in many ways. Its content and style leave no doubt that it was intended as an open and dynamic message, one intended to address human intelligence, spark noble emotions, and inspire people by awakening their spiritual energy. Given this reality, if people are diverse in their purposes and experiences, the same must be true of their readings of the revealed book and their understanding of its intended message.

It was true when the Qur’an was revealed and remains so today: Some of those who read the revealed words are intent upon pursuing the perplexing verses while casting aside the most profound and foundational verses. The journey we undertook in this paper into the main themes of the Qur’an should convince any open-minded traveler that its message is grounded in the sublime moral teachings that inspired, and continue to inspire, countless people to live a life of service, compassion, dignity, and courage.

Notes

1. Spencer, R. (2005b). Jihadism and the Qur'ān. Front Page Magazine, December 8, 2005.
2. For further elaboration on this point, see Safi (1998a, pp. 107–112).
3. Al-Shāfi'ī, M. ibn I. (1940). Al-risālah. Maktabat al-Halabī.
4. Al-Shāfi'ī, M. ibn I. (1979). Al-risālah (2nd ed., pp. 401–476). Dār al-Turāth.
5. Al-Shāfi'ī (1979, p. 507).
6. For an elaboration of the Hanbali principles of jurisprudence, see Ibn al-Qayyim (1991, pp. 24–26).
7. Shi'i jurists imposed far fewer restrictions on ijtihad.
8. Al-Shātibī, A. I. (n.d.). Al-muwāfaqāt fī uṣūl al-sharī'ah. Dār al-Ma'rifah.
9. This approach is further elaborated in “The Methodology of Comparative Rules” (Safi, 1998a, p. 117). See also Safi (1998b, chap. 4).
10. For an elaborate exposition of the Qur'ānic message and a detailed application of the maqasidi reasoning, see Safi (2010).
11. See for example Rahman (2009).

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