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Islamic Hermeneutics and the Christian Missionary: Does the Interpretive Structure of the Qur'an Apply to Non-Muslim Exegetes?

Systematic theologians who approach the Bible do so with a well-defined set of hermeneutical rules, such as *Sola Scriptura*, *Tota Scriptura*, and *Analogia Scripturae*. These principles are further augmented by more precise details, like whether the exegete understands the Bible to be thought-inspired or verbally-inspired, whether he adheres to a futurist, preterist, or historicist model of interpreting prophecy, and whether he interprets with a historical-grammatical or historical-critical method (Davidson 2010:10-29). The majority of biblical exegetes understand the Bible to be a book that contains, explains, and resides within an unavoidable historical framework, not only revealing truth for its particular setting but also echoing universal principles to people of all ages (Fee 2002:96).

In the same way, the Qur'an, its surrounding documents, and the exegetical practices of Islamic scholars suggest that the Muslim holy book also is governed by similar hermeneutical rules. Ganoune Diop has suggested that Christians should allow the Qur'an to be read according to its own "inner logic" system (2005:158). Today there is an increase in outreach materials being produced for the Muslim world. The questions that need to be asked are, in developing these materials, are missiologists bound to the underlying "inner logic" or hermeneutical system of the Qur'an?

There are some Christians who believe that the Qur'an is inspired on the same or similar level as the Bible. In order to be consistent and systematic, it would seem that this class of missiologists would need to operate within the hermeneutic structure that the Qur'an imposes upon itself. Others, who view the Qur'an as uninspired but containing some helpful elements of general revelation, will need to grapple with the question of hermeneutics. Are there consequences to disregarding Islamic hermeneutics for pragmatic reasons? If there are negative consequences, are they

outweighed by the usefulness of wielding Qur'anic passages according to our particular needs?

This article will briefly survey some of the major Islamic hermeneutic rules. It will discuss three types of interpretive moves made by non-Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an, which include: interpreting verses subjectively without regard to the historical context as revealed in Islamic literature, utilizing verses that have been abrogated by a chronological rendering of the Qur'an, and plain eisegesis. This article will analyze these examples for the purpose of raising the question: What hermeneutical guidelines are missiologists bound to when handling someone else's holy text?

Historical Context

The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad over a span of 18 years—eight years while in Mecca and 10 years while in Medina (Al-Wahidi 2008:x). For Muslim scholars, it is undeniable that the Qur'an contains time-bound, context-specific content, such as the scathing rebukes to Abu Lahab, references to the Battle of Badr, or Muhammad's relationship to his adopted son Zayd (see surahs 111, 3:123, and 33:37). However, the Qur'an also contains principles meant to be passed on for all time, such as "And do not kill the life that God has declared inviolable except by just right," Al-An'am 6:151. The *ulama* frequently disagreed on the boundaries of certain passages, debating on whether particular references were meant to have a universal application or whether they were bound to the context of 7th-century Muslims. Thankfully, a certain genre of *Tafsir*, the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, offered a breath of clarity (Brown 2014:91, 92).

During the various revelations in which Muhammad received each of the 114 surahs that now comprise the entire codex, there was always a specific event. Each surah was revealed as a direct response to particular historical realities (91, 92, 202). These historical realities are known as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the "occasions of revelation," and primarily take physical shape in the enormous body of Islamic literature, including the *ahadith* and *Tafsir*. According to Jonathan A. C. Brown, editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islamic Law*, "even an elementary understanding of the meaning of Qur'anic verses often depended on grasping the circumstances of their revelation" (92).

The *asbāb al-nuzūl* play an imperative part in Islamic interpretation, particularly for legal scholars. While these "occasions" certainly have a haggadic role of enriching Islamic narrative, their most important function is on a legal level (Rippin 1988:3). The *Tafsir* and commentaries are always sure to note the time and background situation of each surah. This concern for placing each surah in its correct historical setting is crucial

for facilitating abrogation (*naskh*), the Islamic hermeneutic which maintains that a later revelation, if it happens to conflict with another revelation, cancels out or abrogates the previous recitation. This will be outlined further in another section of this article. For now, it is important to note that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* act as the primary external interpretive materials. Because the Qur'anic language tends to be vague or generalized, knowing the exact meaning of many passages depends on this external body of literature. The largest and most well-known collection of *asbāb al-nuzūl* can be found in the grand collection by Imam al-Wahidi, which documents all known events with the Qur'anic revelations (Meri 2007:i).

Following is one example from recent Adventist outreach literature how this hermeneutical principle may be overlooked. The leaflet entitled "The Baptism of Allah" utilizes Surat al-Baqara 2:138 as a springboard for talking about biblical baptism (Harnish n.d.). The verse reads, "(Receive) the baptism of Allah, and who is better than Allah in baptising? and Him do we serve."

The leaflet goes on to discuss baptism utilizing several texts from Scripture, ending with a description of Christ's "baptism of blood" and finally the application, "Oh dear friends this is truly the 'baptism [or coloring] of Allah!' Surah 2:138." Thus the leaflet draws a direct parallel between Jesus' baptism of suffering and the baptism that is being described in the Qur'an. If Adventists decide that pragmatism is more important than adherence to Islamic hermeneutics, then this may prove to be a fruitful way of interpreting the passage. On the other hand, if scholars feel a need to find the underlying context of the verses being used, then what is found is slightly different.

Al-Wahidi notes the *asbāb al-nuzūl* or occasion of revelation was, in essence, competition with the Christians (which can already be deduced to a large degree by the surrounding context of 2:138). Ibn 'Abbas is quoted by Al-Wahidi as saying that the Christians used to baptize their babies on the seventh day and claimed that this was done to replace circumcision (Al-Wahidi 2008:9), which remains a Muslim practice even today. While Christians performed their baptismal ritual, they used to say, "Now the child has become a true Christian," and in response to this, Allah revealed the above verse to Muhammad (Al-Wahidi 2008:10). The verse is meant to show opposition to the ancient Christian practice, not to confirm it. Furthermore, there is no textual relation to Christ's baptism of suffering. To relate to baptism in the way the leaflet relates to it is really to say the exact opposite of the originally intended meaning.

Average Muslims might never realize the difference in meaning Adventists assign to their Holy Book, but the questions remains, "Is this wrong, or is this insightfully useful?"

Use of Abrogated Texts

The doctrine of abrogation builds itself upon two main verses, which read, "When We substitute one revelation for another,- and Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages),- they say, 'Thou art but a forger:' but most of them understand not" (Qur'an 16:103). "None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?" (Qur'an 2:106).

Verses that have been revealed chronologically later, if conflicting with a previous revelation, invalidate the former one. Edward Sell describes the doctrine of abrogation with these words: "It was an exceedingly convenient doctrine, and one needed to explain the change of front which Muhammad made at different periods of his career" (Sell 1920:102).

A variety of Muslim ministries utilize the theme "People of the Book," a group that is mentioned extensively throughout the Qur'an. Some Adventist evangelistic materials emphasize the respectful relationship that Muhammad had with the People of the Book, as expressed in Qur'an 2:109, 60:8-9, 29:46, and more. However, according to the Islamic legal system that is well accepted throughout the Muslim world, these verses, along with many others referring favorably to Christians, have been abrogated (Bukay 2007:3-11).

The *nasikh* (abrogator) verse for the previously mentioned positive references is Surat At-Tawbah 9:29, revealed around AD 630. "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

Surah 9 is considered the most violent surah, containing the famous "sword verse" and various other scathing instructions (Carimokam 2010:447). Throughout most of the Qur'an, the fury and desolation promised to unbelievers is to come to them in the time of judgment from the fires of hell. Surah 9, however, introduces a change in policy, in which Muslims are told to "fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands" (Surat At-Tawbah 9:14). In contradistinction to most of the other surahs, surah 9 and 5 (the last two chapters revealed to Muhammad) solidify the concept of an earthly Islamic kingdom in which unbelievers (including Jews and Christians) have no place. Muhammad gives a clear, unavoidable call for Muslims to establish the kingdom of God by means of coercive violence. Only Muslims who engage in religious *jihad* are considered true Muslims (Surat At-Tawbah 9:13-14).

Surah 9 begins at a time when Muhammad nullified a treaty with the Arabian pagans. He declared that they must all convert to Islam within four months. Thus, it is that surah 9 begins with a reference to this four-month period: “But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful” (Qur’an 9:5).

Surah 9 can be divided into two sections, verses 1-29 and verses 30-129, the latter section having been revealed slightly later than the former (Carimokam 2010:447). Qur’an 9:29, the particular verse that is listed as abrogating the previously mentioned verses about the People of the Book, is set within the same historical context as the sword verse. Ibn Kathir offers more background in his commentary by giving a somewhat lengthy explanation of why the people of the Scriptures are considered unbelievers, namely for rejecting Muhammad as a prophet of Allah. Because the People of the Book have rejected Muhammad, thus the faith they have in any and all of the earlier prophets is void of meaning (2006:733, 734). Ibn Kathir finishes his comments on verse 29 with a reliable *Hadith* by Abu Hurairah: “The Messenger of Allah “P.B.U.H.” said: ‘Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you, and when you meet anyone of them on the way, force him to go to the narrowest portion of it’” (2006:734).

Clearly surah 9 cannot be harmonized with the other accolades concerning the People of the Book. The core matter to be determined is, which surahs were revealed first and which ones were revealed last? Islamic hermeneutics demand a historical, chronological reading of the Qur’an in order to deal with this form of progressive revelation. As mentioned before, surah 5 and 9 were the last two revelations to come to the prophet before his death, thus surah 9, the latter revelation (*nasikh*) makes the earlier revelations about the People of the Book nullified (*mansukh*) (Bukay 2007:3-11). David Bukay explains this change in policy in the following way:

During the lifetime of Muhammad, the Islamic community passed through three stages. In the beginning from 610 until 622, God commanded restraint. As the Muslims relocated to Medina (623-26), God permitted Muslims only to fight in a defensive war. However, in the last six years of Muhammad’s life (626-32), God permitted Muslims to fight an aggressive war first against polytheists, and later against monotheists like the Jews of Khaybar. Once Muhammad was given permission to kill in the name of God, he instigated battle. (2nd para. under heading “Abrogation and Jihad”)

Surah 9 erases at least 124 formerly revealed verses that called for tolerance, compassion, and peace (1st para. under “Modern Revisionism of Jihad”). However, many modern missiologists continue to use earlier passages about the People of the Book that systematically are no longer valid for the believing Muslim. Islam, taken to its logical, hermeneutically accurate, and systematic end, makes it a disadvantage to be called People of the Book. While it may still be advantageous in many cases to continue ministering under this banner, some discretion may be required if speaking to a more fundamental or otherwise more knowledgeable Muslim.

Once again, Adventists cannot remind themselves too often of the past and present usefulness of resources such as these, and must also remember the fact that the majority of average Muslims are not well versed in Islamic hermeneutics and thus may not be aware of how their scriptures are being handled or mishandled. Nevertheless, the question remains: if a Muslim handed *me* a pamphlet that was *mostly* systematic and *mostly* hermeneutically correct, would I not suspect the pamphlet’s conclusion?

Eisegesis in Qur’anic Studies

Exegesis is what most systematic theologians attempt to do, defined by John Hayes and Carl Holladay as “a systematic process through which we reach an informed interpretation of a passage of Scripture” (2007:189). Eisegesis, in contrast, is the process of reading into the passage one’s own personal bias or other facts that are simply not contained in the text (Bell 2009). Some attempts to harmonize the teachings of the Qur’an with the Bible at times use methods that would seem to be categorized as eisegesis.

One example is found in Suleyman Romain’s book *Longing for Paradise*. In his chapter entitled “Then the End Will Come,” he describes the fall of Adam and *Hawwa* (Eve), pulling from data contained in both Genesis and surahs 4 and 7. At one point, he focuses on the meaning of the covering that God gave to Adam and Eve after the fall. From a Christian perspective, the garment is symbolic of the covering robe of righteousness that God’s people receive from Christ, the atoning sacrifice. This understanding is taken from several verses, not just the verses that speak about God making “coats of skins” for Adam and Eve before driving them out of the garden (Gen 3:21). The Genesis account gives no hint that the coats of skin had any kind of allegorical, symbolic meaning—it is as literal as literal can be. It is from other passages, such as Job 29:14, Isa 61:10, and Matt 22:11, 12, which speak more particularly about a robe of righteousness or wedding garment, that Christians find additional information to flesh out salvific ideas about the garments.

In *Longing for Paradise*, Romain quotes from Surat Al-A'raf 7:26, which reads, "O ye Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness,- that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition!" Romain goes on to apply the same theological implications from the biblical account to this reference to the "raiment of righteousness." He writes,

Allah Himself performed the first blood sacrifice ever made in order to provide a clothing of skins that covered the nakedness of Adam^(pbuh) and Hawwa. To make this possible, a living being had to die. This innocent animal died in the place of sinners. Through its death, Adam and Hawwa were released from their sin and shame. They got their honor back. They were acquitted of their death sentence. (2013:87)

While his interpretation would seem to harmonize with the biblical text, it can hardly be considered harmonious with the surrounding context or the overall content of the Qur'an. In surah 7, there appears to be nothing in the surrounding context to suggest that the raiment bestowed upon Adam and Hawwa had any sort of substitutionary symbolism or atonement properties, or that it even came from an animal. In fact, in the Qur'anic account of the fall, when Adam and Hawwa realize their mistake and subsequent nakedness, they beg for Allah's mercy and forgiveness, and the immediate response is to send them down from the heavenly Eden to planet earth as their punishment (Surat Al-A'raf 7:22-25). The text itself merely states that the raiment was given to cover their shame (in some translations, "nakedness") and to be an adornment. No suggestion is made that the clothing is somehow symbolic of a future substitutionary atonement, for indeed, the Qur'an as a whole denies the possibility of it (Geisler and Saleeb 2002:278, 279). The "clothing of righteousness" (*libāsu al-taqwa*) is not said to have been given immediately to them; in fact, the conjunction "but" suggests that Allah mentions the clothing of righteousness in *contrast* to the literal clothing given to them, perhaps a corrective remark as Adam and Eve descend from Paradise to their new home on planet earth in punishment.

Although the *Tafsir* informs us of the traditional Islamic interpretation rather than the occasion of revelation as mentioned earlier, it is interesting to note that Ibn Kathir's commentary lists the varying opinions of six other commentators on the garment of righteousness—none of which include any reference to a substitutionary atonement or anything that could have appeased God's displeasure at Adam and Eve's sin (2006:544). Indeed, perhaps it is because there is nothing in the text—either surah 7 or the

combined context of the rest of the Qur'an—to suggest this conclusion. While we would agree that the Bible certainly agrees with Romain's conclusion, it would seem that the Qur'anic text itself does not give enough conclusive evidence to support Romain's interpretation.

The garment of righteousness in the Qur'an is not referring to substitutionary atonement. Again the question: Is interpreting the Qur'an this way wrong, or is it an insightful new analogy?

Summary and Conclusion

Using the Qur'an as a bridge for reaching Muslims is a decision that many missionaries have chosen to make. While there remains some difference and continued discussion about the extent and style of Qur'anic usage, for those who use it, there are some further questions to ask. In using the Qur'an as a bridge, must Christians subject themselves to its interpretive rules? If they do not, are there potential consequences? Will Muslim converts learn from Christians to take the biblical text at face value, or will they also do eisegesis? Might Adventist materials be dismissed by scholarly Muslims?

Gottfried Oosterwal has made an important contribution to the conversation by his categorization of methods of using the Qur'an (Oosterwal 2005:180-185). The phenomenological method of Qur'anic use, which aims at demonstrating commonalities as bridges between Islam and Christianity, perhaps produces more of an agenda to find those harmonious points of contact rather than a policy to be true to the text itself. At the same time, it is important to note that the phenomenological method has produced many fruitful gospel experiences. On the other hand, utilization of Oosterwal's Functional-Comparative and Core-Comparative methods leave room for dissonance between the Islamic and biblical text, which gives more space to apply Islamic hermeneutics consistently. Is one better than the other? Might they be used consecutively or in combination to demonstrate the gospel? Will the Christian's sporadic or inconsistent adherence to a set of hermeneutical rules cause chaos in the minds of our Muslim friends?

The purpose of this paper is not to draw immediate conclusions but merely to raise questions. It has endeavored to show three Islamic hermeneutics that can be overlooked in our efforts to bring our Muslim brothers and sisters to an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It may be worth considering the historical context of each surah that is being utilized, its place in the Qur'an's chronology, and the actual words and intent of the text. But, at the end of the day, it might be decided that Adventist missiologists are *not* bound to Islamic hermeneutical rules. If we view the

Qur'anic text as an uninspired historical document with some gleams of general revelation that we would like to pick out and use, and we see no objectionable consequences to slightly adapting the original meaning for our interpretation, then by all means let us plunge forward in the continued production of (mostly) correct applications of the Qur'an.

Notes

¹The majority of Islamic scholars seem to side with the thought that Muhammad's revelations were both localized in origin and extremely universal in application. It is from this presupposition that Shari'a Law can grip its fingers firmly in both 7th century Arabia and the 21st century Muslim state, applying laws and capital punishments that were first instituted hundreds of years ago. Interestingly, a reform movement of "Qur'an-Only" advocates arrived on the hermeneutic scene in the 1890s, intellectual Punjabi Muslims in Northern India, who challenged the use of what they saw as debatable and probably falsified *Ahadith*. They rejected all external materials and utilized only the Qur'an, convinced that it could be used to interpret itself and that much of the Qur'an's content was very much localized to the particular event. Although this movement attracted several great intellectual minds well up until the present day—such as Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan), Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (Egypt) and Muhammad Shahrur (Syria), the Qur'an-Only movement has remained a fringe movement, widely considered heretical (Brown 2014:200-202).

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