THE QUR'ĀNIC EXEGESIS OF MUHAMMAD ASAD: THE MIND, THE METHOD AND THE MAGNUM-OPUS

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Abstract: This article critically investigates the Qur'ānic exegesis and the methodology of Leopold Weiss aka Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), a prominent Muslim scholar of the 20th century. The exegesis, which addresses the Western intellectual audience, is considered by many to be among the best in the English language. The work inculcates traditional exegesis as well as traditional hermeneutics producing a contemporary interpretation. His work is controversial – well received in academia and attributed to ingenious scholarship; criticised by conservative Muslims for alleged neo-rationalistic tendencies. The work was labelled 'unorthodox' by neo-conservatives and banned by the Saudi Government as 'heretical', which led the work to become unpopular. The article examines the criticisms and his exegesis against mainstream sources. It argues that the exegesis in examination is able to withstand its criticisms and rank among the best of its kind.

Keywords: *Muhammad Asad, Leopold Weiss, Qur'ān exegesis, hermeneutics, tafsīr, ta'wīl*

INTRODUCTION

We have no right, in our present misery, to boast of past glories. But we must realise that it was the negligence of the Muslims – and not any deficiency in the teachings of Islam – that caused our present decay.[1]

Every age requires a new approach to the Qur'ān for the simple reason that the Qur'ān is made for all ages. It is our duty to look for deeper meanings in the Qur'ān in order to increase our knowledge and experience. The Qur'ān wants your intellect to be always active and trying to approach the message of God. God himself dedicated this book to people who think.[2]

The position of individual words in a sentence; the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas: all this makes the Qur'ān, in the last resort, unique![3]

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1 Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1982), 66-67.

2 Al Jazeera, "A Road to Mecca," Al Jazeera, December 18, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraworld/2011/10/2011102095616528352.html.

3 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), v.

– Muhammad Asad

According to Islamic narrative, Prophet Muhammad is the original commentator of the Qur'ān. After him, his Companions and the later generations used inference (*ijtihād*) in addition to Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) to deduce exegesis. Inference included rational deduction (*ra'y*) as well as interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of revelation (*naql*). As a consequence, friction emerged between textualism[4] and rationalism. Subsequently emerged; scholars of tradition (*ahl al-hadīth*) deriving through transmitted texts (*riwāyah*), while scholars of reason (*ahl al-ra'y*) preferred deduction (*dirāyah*). Prominent exegetes such as Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī (d. 923) produced encyclopaedic exegesis[5] based predominantly on transmitted sources, while Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) produced a no less voluminous exegesis[6] predominantly based on deductive sources. This tradition of interpreting the Qur'ān through unique lenses has continued to this day. In the last century, a significant attempt was made to harmonise textualism and rationalism – by an exegete who possessed a unique blend of the East and West, formidable in both Arabic and English.

Leopold Weiss aka Muhammad Asad (1900–1992) an Austrian-Jewish[7] Muslim convert was a prominent activist, diplomat and scholar of the 20th century. As a young adult, foreign correspondent journalist, Weiss struggled for the Palestinian liberation cause in Jerusalem, campaigning against the Zionist ideology. After converting to Islam,[8] Asad travelled the Arabian Desert as a wayfarer, earning repute among Bedouins and the elite,[9] and subsequently serving as an advisor to the Royal Court of Saudi Arabia. He engaged in diplomatic representation with Soviet and British stakeholders, acquiring significant recognition among Islamic nations as a bona fide Muslim ambassador.

In his mid-life, Asad worked tirelessly in British India[10] to materialise the vision of an independent Islamic State.[11] As a draftsman of the first constitution of Pakistan,[12] he became

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4 Textualism refers to a predominant inclination to rely on textual or transmitted evidence (*naql*) –Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (NY: Routledge, 2006), 42-56.

5 *Jāmiʿ al-bayānʿantaʾwīlāy al-Qurʾān* (collection of statements on the interpretation of verses of the Qur'ān) – 28 volumes.

6 *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (the Large Commentary) also known as *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (Keys to the Unknown) – 32 volumes.

7 Muhammad Asad is a descendent of a long line of Jewish rabbis. See, Ismail Ibrahim Nawwab, "Berlin to Makkah: Muhammad Asad's Journey into Islam," Aremco World, January/February 2002, accessed February 18, 2018, http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200201/berlin.to.makkah-muhammad.asad.s.journey.into.islam.htm.

8 Asad embraced Islam at the age of 26. Nawwab, "Berlin to Makkah."

9 Asad travelled the deserts of Arabia seeking knowledge spent almost six years living among Bedouins, during which time he met the family of Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki ibn Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al Saud (d. 1953), founder of the KSA – Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Makkah* (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2004), 11. Asad also developed a lasting friendship of 45 years with King Faisal bin Abdulazīz (d. 1975) – Asad, *The Road to Makkah*, dedication.

10 Greater India before the British partitioning included present day Pakistan and Bangladesh in addition to mainland India.

11 Muhammad Iqbal is a distinguished visionary of an independent Muslim state, Pakistan – Asad, *The Road to Makkah*, 2.

12 Raza 88, "How Jewish born Leopold became one of the Drafters of Pak constitution," *Pakistan Defence*, November 10, 2011, https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/how-jewish-born-leopold-became-one-of-the-drafters-of-pak-constitution.139800/.

the first naturalised citizen of the Islamic Republic in 1947. Remaining in Pakistan for almost two decades, he assumed various diplomatic positions, including Minister of Plenipotentiary, Ambassador to the United Nations, and Head of the Directorate of Islamic Reconstruction and Joint Secretary of the Middle East Division in Foreign Office.[13] His treatise –*The Principles of State and Government in Islam*[14]– published in 1961 instilled lasting impressions on successive Pakistani presidents, inviting him back to Pakistan on multiple occasions to contribute in political affairs. Having spent for the Muslim cause, in the late 1960s, he rejected all offers of gifts and wealth and retired to Andalusia, Spain, for the sole purpose of writing.

Among his many writings, significant works include *Islam at the Crossroads*[15] – a call for Muslims to abstain from imitating Western ethics indiscriminately, instead a return to ethics unique unto Islam, *The Road to Makkah*[16] – an autobiographical work of his adventurous and spiritual journey, *Sahīh Al-Bukhāri: Early Years of Islam*[17] – a partial[18] translation of the *hadīth* (Prophetic reports) corpus, and *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*[19] – a collection of sophisticated essays on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), sacred law (Sharī'ah) and a call to the message of the Qur'ān. However, among all his works, the most significant of which is his magnum opus: *The Message of the Qur'ān – Translated and Explained*[20] – an exegesis in the English language. After 17 years of labour,[21] at the age of 80, Asad published his work in 1980 – the embodiment of his ultimate effort.[22]

The work includes linguistic, philosophical, theological and historical derivatives. Sources include widely accepted Qur'ānic exegeses and the Authorised King James version of the Bible for Judeo-Christian references.[23] It is based on the recession of *Hafs*[24] and consists of 998 pages,[25] 5,371 notes[26] and four appendices.[27] It is a verse-by-verse exegesis (*tafsīr musalsal*)[28] and a comparative exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-muqārin*).[29] The work is both transmission (*riwāyah*) and deduction (*dirāyah*) based, utilising an array of techniques

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13 Asad, *The Road to Makkah*, 2.
14 Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1961).
15 Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*.
16 Asad, *The Road to Makkah*.
17 Muhammad Asad, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002).
18 Ten years of labour was lost during the Indo-Pak partitioning when his manuscript was looted. See, Nawwab, "Berlin to Makkah."
19 Muhammad Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001).
20 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*.
21 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 187.
22 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān,* v.
23 Ibid., ix-x.
24 Ibid., ix. The most famous and canonical recitation of Āsim ibn Abi al-Najud (d. 745) as narrated by Abū Amr Hafs (d. 796).
25 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 187.
26 M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān – A new Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), xxix.
27 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 989-998. These appendices are essays mostly addressing theological issues.
28 Abdul-Raof Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 92.
29 Abdul-Raof Hussein, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 94.

adopted from traditional exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l mā'thūr*)[30] as well as deductive exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l ra'y*).[31] The target segment is the Western intellectual audience.[32]

Asad's work is controversial – well received by the majority of Muslims and academia, not so by the Salafīs[33] and some Traditionalists.[34] His work is praised for its originality and extent, criticised for its alleged neo-rationalistic tendencies,[35] and banned and labelled 'heretical' by the Saudi Government.[36] Not particularly adhering to any canonical school of jurisprudence nor creed or methodology[37] and staunchly apposing dogmatic canonical imitation (*taqlīd*), his work is criticised as 'unorthodox.'[38] Ostracism led his work to become less popular.[39] This article therefore, attempts to revive this monumental work through critical evaluation. This is done by testing the exegesis and its criticisms against mainstream sources.

TRADITIONAL EXEGESIS (*TAFSĪR BI AL-MA'THUR*)

Traditional exegesis (lit. received *tafsīr*) is the understanding of the transmitted source (Qur'ānic texts) through another transmitted source (*naql*). The sources of traditional exegesis are the Qur'ān (as its commentary), Prophetic reports (*ahadīth*), Companions' (*sahābah*) views and the views of the Predecessors (*salaf*).[40] Traditional exegesis is also referred as transmitted exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l naql*) and narrated exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l riwāyah*). It consists of information transmitted through chains of narrations (*asānid*). Therefore, it contains only definitive evidences (*al-adilla al-qat'iyya*).[41] Hence, it is unanimously accepted as the earliest and most

30 Exegesis based on transmitted texts: definitive (*qatí*) evidences –Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 42-56.

31 Exegesis that includes hypothesis and rational evidences: indefinite (*zanni*) evidences–Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 57-68.

32 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, ii-iii.

33 Salafīsm (*salafīyyah*): A puritanical movement and methodology of literalistic understanding of revealed texts (*naql*) which strictly adheres to the ways of the Predecessors (*salaf*) –Yasir Qadhi, "On Salafi Islam," *Muslim Matters*, April 22, 2014, https://muslimmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/On-Salafi-Islam_Dr.-Yasir-Qadhi.pdf. The Saudi Government banned Asad's work asserting it went against their state creed (*athari*) –"The Book 'The Message of the Qur'ān' is Controversial and Topical," *Merinews*, February 16, 2011, http://www.merinews.com/article/the-book-the-message-of-the-Qur'ān-is-controversial--topical/15843127.shtml.

34 Those who strictly adhere to canonical schools of jurisprudence (Hanafi, Māliki, Shāfi'ī and Hanbal) and creed (Ash'āri and Māturīdi).

35 Haleem, *The Qur'ān*, xxix. Mu'tazila – a trend existed since the first century of Islam until today. The trend is an intellectual tradition that desires rational deduction over transmitted text and speculative theology –Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 47-51. This article is concerned with the trend rather than its origins.

36 "The Book 'The Message of the Qur'ān' is Controversial and Topical."

37 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 11, 20-22.

38 Abdur R. Kidwai., "A Survey of English Translations of the Qur'ān," *IlmGate*, 1987, http://www.ilmgate.org/a-survey-of-english-translations-of-the-Qur'ān/.

39 Muhammad T. Saleem, "The English Translations of the Holy Qur'an: A Critique," *Al-Idah* 27 (2013), 83, https://www.szic.pk/journal/DEC2013/7.pdf.

40 The first three generation of scholars after Prophet Muhammad – Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 10; Abdullah Saeed, *The Qurān: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 182.

41 Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 10-15. Definitive evidence in authenticity, not particularly in meaning.

authoritative form of exegesis. However, transmitted Judeo-Christian narratives (*isrāīliyāt*),[42] a supplementary component of this genre, considered neither commendable (*tafsīr bi'l mahmūd*) nor reprehensible (*tafsīr bi'l madhmūm*).[43] As the exegetical orthodoxy, traditional exegesis is commendable by default. However, cherry-picking verses, trivialising theme and context, may render it reprehensible.[44]

Intra-Qur'ānic Exegesis (Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l Qur'ān)

The concept of Qur'ān being "its own best commentary"[45] is known as the intertextuality of the Qur'ān[46] – alluding that it is an integral whole-text interconnected in its teachings. Hence, a thematic approach is required to articulate a particular issue, gathering all verses that corroborate the theme. This interconnection works like algebra[47] in mathematics. Asad elaborates:

> The Qur'ān must not be viewed as a compilation of individual injunctions and exhortations but as one integral whole: that is, as an exposition of an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, all of them clarifying and amplifying one another. Consequently, its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of its statements with what has been stated elsewhere in its pages, and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross references, always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic.[48]

The infamous "Verse of the Sword" (Qur'ān 9:5)[49] illustrates the use of the Qur'ān's intertextuality in which the elaborate explanatory footnote correlates between a dozen verses, including2:256, 2:190, 4:91, 2:192, 2:193 and 60:8-9. Asad explains the theme by

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42 Judeo-Christian reports transmitted through Islamic chains of narration (*asānid*) are considered weak (*da'īf*) in authenticity (*sihha*) and definitive evidence (*dalil al-qat'ī*). This paper shall exclude treating this source due to its insignificance to Asad's methodology and usage. Asad uses "the Qur'an as the determinant factor in deciding what is genuine and what is false in the earlier scriptures" –Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 153, fn 64. Asad seems to refer more to direct biblical sources over transmitted Muslim sources of Judeo-Christian narratives. For example, the commentary on verses 5:12: "This is a reference to the Biblical story (in Numbers xiii)" and 5:18 "Exodus iv, 22-23 ("Israel is My son"), Jeremiah xxxi, 9 ("I am a father to Israel"), and the many parallel expressions in the Gospels" – Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 144-145, fn22 and 30.

43 Taqi M. Usmani, *An Approach to the Qur'ānic Sciences* (Karachi: Darul Ishaát, 2000), 361-363.

44 The majority of scholars believe it is impermissible to cherry pick verses out of context or in an extra-thematic manner –Qur'ān 2:85 "Do you, then, believe in some parts of the divine writ and deny the truth of other parts?"; "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, alias 'abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-Declared 'Islamic State,'" September 19, 2014,http://www.letterto baghdadi.com/.

45 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vii. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774) says the "Best method is to explain the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān itself" – Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*, abridged by Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (KSA: Darussalam, 2000), vol. 1, 29.

46 Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 10-15; Qur'ān 17:106: "We have bestowed it from on high step by step, as [one] revelation"; Qur'ān 2:85: "Do you, then, believe in some parts of the divine writ and deny the truth of other parts?"

47 Algebra is derived from the Arabic term *al-jabr*, which literally means "union of broken parts" – *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v."Algebra," accessed April 15, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/ definition/algebra. The interconnection is similar to an algebraic formula that correlates between symbols.

48 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vii.

49 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 256, fn 9.

demonstrating that the specific import (*khāss*), the general import (*āmm*[50]) and the universal purport of the verse is in the context of war of established states. Asad's analysis is consistent with the elaborate treatment of this controversial verse by Abdel Haleem,[51] where it is demonstrated it is not an abrogating (*nāsikh*) verse when understood with context and intertextuality. The solution for Asad in the reconciliation of the text (*mushkil al-Qur'ān*) lies in the intertextual correlation between verses. Moreover, there is harmony among the verses and chapters of the Qur'ān (*munāsbāt al-Qur'ān*). This concept is further refined and developed to examine verses thematically correlated within a chapter and syntactically correlated within a verse.

The concept of *nazm* is the idea that the "Qur'ān is marked by thematic, and also by structural coherence,"[52] where chapters, verses and sentences' arrangement comprises meticulous order and flawless logic[53]. Asad does not explicitly use the term *nazm*,[54] however he alludes to the inimitable nature – ellipticism (*ījāz*) of the Arabic language[55] and the inimitable ellipticism of the Qur'ān (*ījāz al-Qur'ān*).[56] He observes "The position of individual words in a sentence; the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement."[57] The relationship between the two concepts *nazm* and *ījāz* is uncanny.[58] The theory of *nazm* brought to prominence in modern times[59] by Habid al-Din Abd al-Hamīd al-Farāhi (d. 1930)[60] and his student Amin Ahsan Islāhi (d. 1997) is noteworthy. They are however excluded as Asad's sources; rather, Abū al-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144)[61] is a more plausible inspiration,[62] as the exegetes' emphasis is on deriving the message of the Qur'ān rather than its empirical authenticity.

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50 On the dynamics of the general import see, Abū ʿAbdullāh Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Shāfi'ī's Risāla*, trans. M. Khadduri (UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 96-108.

51 M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'ān: Context and Impact* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 7-27.

52 Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qurān: A Study of Islahi's Concept of Nazm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Kaula Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 4.

53 The theory of *nazm* can be argued to be one of dogma invariably linked to *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān. This theory has no unanimity. For example: "Imam Mālik and al-Bāqillānī, hold the view that the arrangement of the Qur'ān has nothing to do with divine guidance" – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 2.

54 Not all scholars use explicit expressions such as *nazm* or *munāsabah* – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 19.

55 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, iv.

56 Ibid., v.

57 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, v.

58 Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 10.

59 The expression *nazm* was exclusively used by Islahi and Farahi – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 32. However, usage of the concept, not the term, is consistently identified throughout Asad's work.

60 Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 37.

61 Even though al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī did not write exclusively about the concept of coherence per se, they used a simplistic version of the concept extensively in their exegeses – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 16-17.

62 It is possible Asad may have referred to Islahi and Farahi for two reasons. First, they were both prominent Pakistani citizens; second, Islahi is a contemporary of Asad living in the same era from 1904-1997. However, they have been ruled out due to Asad not naming them anywhere nor emphasising the concept as *nazm* or paid an elaborate treatment thereto. There is no mention of Burhanuddin Ibrahim bin Umar al-Biqa'i (d. 1406) nor his work *Nazm al-Durar fi Tanasub al-Ayat wal Suwr***.** It is, therefore plausible that Asad followed al-Zamakhsharī instead - deducing from their similarity in approach (simplistic) and the fact Asad refers to him extensively.

Asad perceives two dimensions with regards to the phenomenon: first, the inter-textual correlation; and second, the syntactic correlation – "that inimitable ellipticism which often deliberately omits intermediate thought-clauses in order to express the final stage of an idea as pithily and concisely as is possible"[63]. Asad focuses on the thematic-structural coherence (*nazm*) within a chapter (*sūrah*), as did Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905)[64], al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī (d. 1144).[65] However, Asad's emphasis is on the intertextual correlation between verses and sentences in understanding its purported message, rather than the miraculous placement of verses and chapters. The verses within the chapter, especially the preceding and proceeding, play a major role in the explanation of a verse.[66] Also, within the verse, the grammatical structure (*i'rāb*) must correlate the theme.[67]

Under Qur'ānic verses 50:17-18,[68] where detailed analysis in footnotes 11 and 12 demonstrates, with regards to the phrase *yatalaqqa al-mutalaqqiyan* (the two receivers), the implication is derived in conjunction with self-desire (*nafs*) and self-consciousness. This analysis is derived from studying the intertextual correlation between words within the chapter, especially the preceding verse 16, which asserts the 'whisper to/of the *nafs*' and the proceeding verse 21, which asserts 'tasking to witness.' The concentration seems to be focused on verses correlated within the chapter. However, classical scholars understood this address to mean 'angels' who account for deeds. This analysis was supported by verses 43:80 and 82:10.[69] The classical case is obviously inspired by intra-Qur'ānic intertextuality; in this case however, Asad's deduction is based on intertextuality within the chapter. The latter deduction seems to closely represent the implied meaning due to it being supported by the theme discussed in the surrounding verses, whereas the former hypothesis seems to be based on the duality of the assertion – 'the two angels' and 'the two receivers.' For Asad, intertextuality within a chapter has priority over intra-Qur'ānic intertextuality, which is identical to the conception of Muhammad Abduh.[70] On the contrary to intertextuality is the theory of abrogation (*naskh*) advanced by classical scholars as a solution for the reconciliation and explanation of problematic verses.

Many modes and dynamics to the theory of abrogation are beyond the scope and purpose of this analysis. Abrogation can be broadly divided into intra-Qur'ānic and extra-Qur'ānic, the latter being the Qur'ān abrogating other sources.[71] Concisely speaking, abrogation is a

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63 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān,* v.

64 Iftitah Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis: A comparative study of the methods of Muhammad Abduh and Rashīd Ridā" (MA diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1998), 117. http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=20893&local_base=GEN01-MCG02

65 Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 15-17.

66 Al-Rāzī is noted to use this method extensively – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 17.

67 Al-Zamakhsharī is noted to use this method extensively – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 15-16.

68 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 798.

69 Seyed Hussein Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 1267.

70 Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis," 117.

71 Such as the *Sunnah*/*ahadīth* and Judeo-Christian sources – Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān* (UK: Al Hidayah Publishing, 1999), 238-240.

broader[72] theory where revelations (*āyāt*), injunctions (*nusūs*) and/or its rulings (*ahkām*) may cancel or supersede another of its kind. It is noteworthy that no one before al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820) used the term '*naskh'* to address issues of textual reconciliation.[73] Nonetheless, the majority of scholars agreed upon the general theory of abrogation, with the exceptions of some neo-rationalists (*mu'tazila*) and Shia scholars.[74] Moreover, suffice to say among scholarly disagreements (*ikhtilāf*), the only mode of abrogation that all agree upon is *naskh al-hukm wa baqā' al-tilāwah* (abrogating the ruling and keeping its recitation).[75]

Asad categorically rejects the notion of intra-Qur'ānic abrogation altogether, asserting the notion of abrogation as "fancifulness" and the Qur'ānic verse 2:106 only applies to previous revelations (Judeo-Christian). He reasons that this notion emerged due to "the inability of some of the early commentators to reconcile one Qur'ānic passage with another."[76] In this vein, it is obvious that Asad rejects any source abrogating Qur'ānic injunctions, including mass transmitted (*mutawātir*) reports. *Sunnah* (authentic *hadīth* in this case) and the Qur'ān complement each other; hence, they cannot abrogate each other.[77] However, he seems to subscribe to the theories of specification (*takhsīs*)[78] and addition (*taz'īd*)[79] instead.

Similar to al-Shāfi'ī's exposition,[80]Asad understands the phenomenon as a form of explanation (*bayān*[81]) of integrated verses. This phenomenon is demonstrated in the Qur'ānic verse 4:43, which states, "Do not attempt to pray while you are in a state of drunkenness." This verse has no contradiction with the legal injunction prohibiting intoxicants (Qur'ān 5:90),[82] as per Asad. The term drunkenness (*sukara*) is not confined to alcoholic intoxication; rather, the term *sukr* indicates any mental disequilibrium that destabilises God-consciousness. This may include drowsiness, hallucination or ecstasy due to stress, medication or narcotics, notwithstanding psychedelic music and drugs. All in all, the verse's emphasis is the pre-requisite of God-consciousness for ritual prayer (*al-salah*). All verses addressing intoxication are individual injunctions, containing universal purport– having relevance to gradualism (*al-*

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72 The theory of abrogation is an elaborate concept – al-Shāfiʿī, *Al-Shāfi'ī's Risāla,* chap. IV; Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 238-239; Ahmad von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān* (UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1994), 102-111.

73 Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān,* 234.

74 Ibid., 235.

75 Ahmad Ali Al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qur'an: A Critical Study of their Historical and Linguistic Origins* (USA: IIIT, 2006), 32-33.

76 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 22-23, fn 87.

77 No single occasion to this effect was identified in his work. This analysis is also consistent with Asad's high regard for the *Sunnah* as the ultimate exegesis of the Qur'ān that can only complement it. Therefore, the Qur'ān theoretically cannot abrogate the *Sunnah*. This is similar to al-Shāfi'ī's concept –Muhammad Abū Zahra, *The Four Imams: Their Lives, Works and Their Schools of Thought* (UK: Dar Al-Taqwa, 2001), 372.

78 *Takhsīs* (specification) involves one verse streamlining (limiting or restricting) a general rule found in another injunction – Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān,* 249-250; von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'ān,* 109-110.

79 *Taz'īd* (addition) refers to adding or supplementing with another ruling (*ahkam*) to the original text – Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (UK: ITS, 2003), 217.

80 Al-Shāfi'ī, *Al-Risālā*, 123-145.

81 Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 205, 215.

82 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 111-112, fn 54.

tadarruj) and the jurisprudence of priorities (*fiqh al-awlawiyyāt*),[83] while having no relevance to abrogation (*naskh*).

However, in the past, substantial opposition existed to the general theory of abrogation and its various dynamics.[84] In present times, this trend is even more significant among philosophical exegetical studies.[85] Moreover, since the *Mu'tazila* "contended that if the Qur'ān could be subjected to abrogation, it could not be eternal,"[86] Asad seems to reject both – the *Mu'tazili* version[87] of intra-Qur'ānic abrogation as well as the temporal – origination of the Qur'ān. Moreover, differing from the *Mu'tazila,* Asad pays great attention to transmission (*riwāyah*).

Exegesis via Narration (Tafsīr bi'l Riwāyah)

Inspired by Abū Muhammad Ibn Hazm (d. 1064),[88] Asad considers the Shariah to consist only two sources:[89] the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*[90]. He agrees with Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328)[91] on the overriding authority of the *Sunnah* and the corpus of Prophetic reports (*ahadīth*).[92] The *Sunnah* is the ultimate source of exegesis, second only to the Qur'ān. In his words, "we must regard the *Sunnah* as the only binding explanation of the Qur'ānic teachings, the only means of avoiding permanent dissensions concerning their interpretation and adaptation to practical use."[93] Moreover, Asad attributes importance to *hadīth* throughout his works. His attempt to translate the *Sahīh al-Bukhāri* with commentary is testimony to this. He defends the authenticity of *hadīth* literature vehemently[94] and is quoted to have said, "To

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83 Yūsuf al-Qaradāwi, *Fiqh of Priorities* (Cairo: New Vision, 2012), 123.

84 Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 218-225.

85 Massimo Campanini, *Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis: Key Paradigms and Concepts* (UK: Equinox Publishing, 2016), 77-81.

86 Ahmad Hasan, "The Theory of Naskh," *Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (1965), 184.

87 It is imperative to distinguish the theological connotation of the *mu'tazila* with regards to abrogation. Since the *mu'tazila* claimed the Qur'ān was wholly created and temporal differing from the mainstream distinction between uncreated-metaphysical communication (*kalām al-nafsi*) and created-acoustic communication (*kalām al-lafzi*) in the classical sense. The implication is the Prophet formulated the Qur'ānic discourse after conceiving *kalām al-nafsi* as oppose to receiving *kalām al-lafzi* angel Gabriel. This conception undermines the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān because the Qur'ānic discourse in this case is not verbatim of divine origin. These theories are reinforced by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Abdullah Saeed (b. 1960) and Nasr Hamid Abū Zayd – Ali Akbar, "The Theory of Naskh" (paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, March 14-15, 2016), accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.worldconferences.net/proceedings/icasic2016/fullpaper/english%20papers/IC%20089%20THE%20ORIGINS%20OF%20FAZLUR%20RAHMAN%E2%80%99S%20THEORY%20OF%20REVELATION.pdf; Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-first Century – A Contextualist Approach* (USA: Routledge, 2014), part II, no. 5, 43-58;Nasr HamidAbū Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'ān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers, 2004), 18-21.

88 Talal Asad, "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," *Islam & Science* 10, no. 1 (2012); Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 2.

89 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 23, 43; Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 82-97; Showkat Ahmad Dar, "Muhammad Asad's Approach to Shariah: An Exposition," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilisation* 5, no. 2 (2015), 18; Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 42.

90 The prophetic practice and preaching of Prophet Muhammad.

91 Asad, "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," 78.

92 Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 82-97.

93 Ibid., 85.

94 Ibid., 82.

make the voice of the Prophet of Islam real, as if he were speaking directly to us: and it is in the *hadīth* that his voice can be clearly heard."[95] He also pays attention to the strengths of the reports and dismisses articulation through weak (*da'īf*) reports.[96]

The commentary on the controversial 'Verse of the Wife Beating'[97] illustrates his situation of *hadīth* in exegesis. In the footnote,[98] Asad begins by citing the six canonical *hadīth* corpuses (the *sahīh sitta*) and beyond, to demonstrate that Prophet Muhammad disdained abusing wives. Thereafter, the opinions of the exegetes and linguists such as al-Tabarī and al-Rāzī are advanced to showcase that the hitting is merely symbolic as a means of self-inflicted constriction of authority. Lastly, he advances al-Shāfi'ī's legal verdict, which treats this reprimand as mere permissibility (*mubah*) and should be avoided as it was disliked by Prophet Muhammad, thus deeming it reprehensible (*makrūh*). When carefully analysing the sequence of evidence provided, it is noteworthy that Asad first advances *hadīth*, then the views of the exegetes and linguists, and lastly the jurists' opinions. This indicates the prioritisation of *hadīth* then other transmitted reports (*riwāyah*) in his exegesis.

Athar includes the reports of all three generations of Predecessors[99] and is subservient to the *Sunnah*. However, the Companions' status is elevated above the other generations of scholars, simply due to them being personally taught by Prophet Muhammad. The Companions' views are considered conclusive proof (*hujjah*) and superior (*marfū*–elevated) with regards to verified occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) in particular.[100] On other occasions, they are considered inconclusive proof (*ghayr-hujjah*) and *mawqūf* (stopped). Yet the Companions' hypothetical opinions are considered commendable (*mahmūd*). A distinction was established between the Companions' interpretations and the successors' views in terms of authority – where the latter is speculative proof (*ghayr-hujjah*) and hypothetical (*mawqūf*) by default.[101] Moreover, *athar* does not bear the same authority as *Sunnah/ahadīth* to Asad as, "any person below the Prophet… *ijtihad* of any, even the greatest, Muslim scholar can never be binding on the community."[102]

Asad does not hesitate to accept the Companions' views where there seems to be unanimity. An instance of 'agreement' is illustrated with regards to commentary on Qur'ān 2:237, "According to some of the most prominent Companions of the Prophet (e.g., 'Ali) and their immediate successors (e.g., Said ibn al-Musayyab and Said ibn Jubayr), this term denotes the husband (cf. Tabarī, Zamakhsharī, Baghawi, Rāzī and Ibn Kathīr)."[103] However, where there

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95 Nawwab, "Berlin to Makkah."

96 For example the commentary on the Qur'ān verse 8:17– Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 240, fn 19. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī also prohibits narrating weak *hādith* with certainty – Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Approaching the Sunnah: Comprehension & Controversy* (USA: IIIT, 2006), 72.

97 Qur'ān 4:34.

98 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 109-110, fn 45.

99 They include the Companions who personally knew Prophet Muhammad, the next generation of scholars who knew the Companions (*tabiūn*) and the immediate following generation of scholars (*tabi' al-tabi'īn*).

100 Hussein, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 3.

101 Ibid., 4.

102 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 24.

103 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 53, fn 226.

is 'partial agreement,' Asad tends to choose an opinion or combine opinions. In his commentary on Qur'ān 4:117,[104] it is indicated that al-Tabarī reports on the authority of Urwah Ibn Zubayr (d. 713) that Ā'isha bt. Abū Bakr (d. 678) claimed that her collection of the Qur'ān contained the word *awthan* (idols) instead of *ināth* (female beings), which is acknowledged by al-Zamakhsharī and Ismaīl Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) in their works. The two terms seem to be the general (*āmm*) and specific (*khāss*) with regards to multiple readings of the text.[105] On the other hand, al-Tabarī reports that Abd Allah Ibn Abbās (d. 687), al-Hasan al-Basrī (d. 728) and others understood *ināth* to mean "inanimate things." Asad combines both and renders the term as "lifeless symbols". In this deduction, the noteworthy point is Asad's inclination to the general import (*āmm*) – 'idols' – and the universal purport of the text. On the contrary, in most classical analyses, the treatment is primarily focussed on the specific import (*khāss*) of the text, where the 'female beings (*ināth*)' are deduced as the pagan deities al-Lāt, al-Uzzā and Manāt mentioned in 53:19-20.[106] Moreover, Asad chooses the more 'rational' opinion where possible, even if it was in the minority.

Asad takes the report of al-Ā'isha[107]and the opinion of al-Hasan al-Basrī against a large number of Companions with regards to the nature of 'The Night Journey' (*isrā*), where they held the journeys were a wholly spiritual experience while the Prophet physically remained stationary.[108] Asad would further supersede the opinions of the Predecessors and the Successors (*khalaf*) where there is clear disagreement. In such cases, if an opinion is untenable, the best recourse is to rely on linguistic and rational deduction. Such is the case in the commentary on Qur'ān 2:255,[109] where Mujāhid Ibn Jabr (d. 722) and Atā Ibn Abi Rabah (d. 732) understood *bayna yadayhi* and *ma khalfahu* to allude to 'this life' and 'the next,' while their contemporaries understood the exact opposite in order.[110] Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī fall within this line of understanding. Asad, on the other hand, understands the idiomatic expressions indicating 'that which is perceivable' and 'that which is hidden.' It is clear from the disagreements that these are the Predecessors' personal opinions, well-recognised by Asad.

Athar to Asad is only a means to an end[111] in establishing the *Sunnah*, not an absolute authority on its own. Therefore, in exegesis, he would supersede the personal opinions of scholars among the Predecessors (*salaf*) and Successors (*khalaf*)[112] with the exception of the Companions, if it did not sit well with his own reason, especially with regards to current contextual interpretation of the texts (general – *āmm* and universal imports). The clear textual injunctions (*nusūs*) of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* are the only definitive evidences (*al-adilla al-*

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104 Ibid., 128, fn 140.

105 Ā'isha's claim is substantiated as Abū Bakr al-Siddīq's collection contains multiple readings –Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text: From Revelation to Compilation* (KSA: Azami Publishing House, 2014), 84-90. For an elaborate study of multiple readings, see Al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qur'an*.

106 Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 245.

107 Prophet Muhammad's wife.

108 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, appendix IV, 996-998. See chapter 3 for further illustration.

109 Ibid., 57, fn 247.

110 Ibid.

111 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, chapter IX.

112 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 149, fn 45, section (d), last para.

qat'iyya) for Asad.[113] Upon this premise, all other sources, without exception, are hypothetical and indefinite evidence (*dalīl zanni*).[114] The reason (*aql*) would surrender to revelation (*naql*) of sound *ahadīth* as long as it is with regards to the interpretation of the specific import (*khāss*) of Qur'ānic text. Even though he adheres to the overriding authority of the *Sunnah*, he is selective with the sayings of the Companions (*qawl al-Sahābah*) and critical with the reports (*athar*) of the Predecessors (*salaf*),[115] differing from the Salafī methodology[116] as well as contextualist approach[117]. Asad's sources and principles of Sharīah are similar to that of al-Shāfi'ī compared to other imams of the canonical schools. This deduction is based on his particular methodology employed against transmitted sources:[118] such as, Asad's adherence to *ahadīth* independently as the *Sunnah* as opposed to the regional practices of Medina or Iraq, the exclusivity given to the views of the Companions as compared to that of the subsequent generation of scholars, particularly their take on texts such as in abrogation, general (*āmm*) and specific (*khāss*) and the concept that the Sharīah encompasses all worldly affairs.[119] An exception is that preference is given to the metaphorical meaning over the apparent.

Deductive Exegesis (Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y)

Deductive exegesis is the explanation of the transmitted source (the Qur'ān) through non-transmitted sources – reason and analogical deduction (*al-istinbāt*). It is also referred synonymously to intellectual exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l dirāyah*) and rational exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l aqli*).[120] When interpreting verses containing ambiguity (*mutashābihāt*[121]), deductive exegesis uses allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*[122]) through independent reasoning (*ijtihād*), and may or

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113 Dar, "Muhammd Asad's Approach to Shariah," 18; Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 42.

114 Even *ijma* (general consensus of scholars) is hypothetical or speculative evidence (*zanni dalīl*). As per Asad, *ijma* is not definite evidence in the sense of not being eternally binding and being specific to context of time and place, except in the fundamentals of belief (*usūl al-dīn*) and acts of worship (*ibādat*) – Asad, *This Law of Ours*,11-28.

115 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 23-24. However, Asad advocates assimilating the character (*akhlāq*) of the Companions – Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, 24.

116 The Salafi methodology (*minhāj al-salafiyyah*) advocates absolute adherence to the ways of the Predecessors (*salaf*), trivialises context (*wāqi*), objectives (*maqāsid*) and rationale (*illa*); hence, a textual–literalist approach neglecting universal principles – stagnating a medieval worldview of Islam – Qadhi, "On Salafi Islam." Ibn Taymiyyah, an often misrepresented nonetheless a prominent figurehead of the Salafī movement claims interpreting the text of the Qur'ān contrary to the views of the Salaf to be tantamount to heresy – Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 61.

117 As far as the abrogation theory is concerned, the temporal origin of the Qur'ān is a vital ingredient for contextualist hermeneutics. Also, the human elemental origin of the Qur'ān is vital in contextualising and historicising the Qur'ānic discourse. Another key factor of contextualist hermeneutics is trivialising the authenticity and use of *ahādith* – Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-first Century*, 20. The similarity to *mu'tazili* notions is uncanny.

118 Abū Zahra, *The Four Imams*, 359-380.

119 "Since the Sharīah embraces all things, there must be a ruling on every occurrence" – Ibid., 378.

120 Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 28.

121 Words and verses that have ambiguous meaning, which may require clear (*muhkam*) verses for its comprehension. The ambiguity may be abstract concepts where the reality is unfathomable to mortal intellect – Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, chap 12.

122 Rationally deducing or assigning a meaning other than the apparent, especially with regards to *al-Mutashābihāt* – Hussein, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 102-110.

may not subscribe to the doctrine of consignment (*tafwīd*[123]). It uses metaphorical renditions where literal meanings do not comply with reason.[124] This genre uses indefinite evidence (*dalīl zanni*) for its articulation. The broader spectrum of deductive exegesis culminates in 'commendable' and 'objectionable' elements; hence, scholars of the past have advanced elaborate arguments as proponents and opponents thereof.[125] However, the scholarly discourse is not for its invalidity altogether, but a process of filtering its elements.

Abdel Haleem (b.1930) observes, "Asad is one of the most original translators, who did the background research for himself in the original lengthy Arabic exegeses."[126] Among all modern scholars, Muhammad Abduh must be singled out as the most significant personality who influenced Asad's thought patterns.[127] His primary inspiration of Abduh is 'critical thinking' and *ijtihād* (scholarly inference) as opposed to dogmatism and blind imitation of traditional opinions.[128] Most of Abduh's prowess, brought to light[129] by his successor Rashīd Ridā (d. 1935), has been extensively relied upon.[130] Al-Rāzī, the "linguist *par excellence*,"[131] is a significant inspiration to Asad[132] for his linguistic, philosophical and rational deductions. The neo-rationalists and master linguist al-Zamakhsharī[133] (d. 1144) is particularly relied upon[134] for linguistic interpretations.

Linguistic Analysis

Original Intent versus Bastardisation and Institutionalisation

Asad emphasises on words' original linguistic intent, going back to ancient classical Arabic usage, prevalent at the time of revelation, and reinstates the original meanings of words by ridding them of 'bastardisation' and 'institutionalisation.'[135] The former implies words that have lost their original intent and the latter implies words transformed into 'terms' over time and canonisation. With dialectical evolution, Arabic words have undergone changes in usage. Asad believes the original Arabic tongue is preserved best among the Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the central and eastern parts. To be familiar with the idioms closest

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123 Consigning the actuality to God. Abstinence from rational deduction with respect to the divine attributes of God (*al-sifāt*) and/or *al-mutashābihāt*. For three opinions regarding *tafwīd*, see Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 213.

124 Saeed, *The Qurān*, 182.

125 Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 61-66.

126 Haleem, *The Qur'ān*, xxix.

127 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, v, fn4.

128 Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis," 22-24.

129 Rashīd Ridā wrote *Ta'rikh al-Ustadh al-Imam ash-Shaykh Muhammad Abduh*, the most authoritative biography of Muhammad Abduh –Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, v, fn 4.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid., xxxvi.

132 No large chapter does not contain al-Rāzī's commentary.

133 Kifayat Ullah, "Al-Kashsháf: Al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 538/1144) Mu'tazilite Exegesis of the Qur'ān" (Phd diss., Georgetown University, Washington, 2013), https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/558227/Ullah_georgetown_0076D_12053.pdf?sequence=1.

134 An observation consistent throughout his work.

135 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, iv-vi. About the elite's influence on institutionalisation, see Winter, *Classical Islamic Theology*, 112-114.

to the original intent of Qur'ānic discourse, one must, in addition to academic study of classical Arabic, learn the speech of the Bedouins[136] – which he achieved while living among Bedouins for many years.[137] He highlights the significance of this endeavour in exegesis:

> the translator must be guided throughout by the linguistic usage prevalent at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, and must always bear in mind that some of its expressions – especially such as relate to abstract concepts – have in the course of time undergone a subtle change in the popular mind and should not, therefore, be translated in accordance with the sense given to them by post-classical usage. As has been pointed out by that great Islamic scholar, Muhammad Abduh, even some of the renowned, otherwise linguistically reliable Qur'ān– commentators have occasionally erred in this respect.[138]

In light of this, Asad points out, "the noun *walad* in its primary sense of 'offspring', which applies to a child of either sex"[139] and "the term *zawj* denotes 'a pair' or 'a couple' as well as each of the components of a couple – i.e., with reference to human couples, 'a spouse': hence it signifies either 'husband' or 'wife.'"[140] This is reiterated by Abdul Haleem: "the word *zawj* (which in modern Arabic means 'husband') applies in classical Arabic to both sexes. It has no feminine; it is like the English word 'spouse.'"[141] However, the original intent is lost not only through bastardisation, but Islamic institutionalisation of 'words' into 'terms.' Asad states:

> The religious terms used in the Qur'ān in the sense which they have acquired after Islam had become "institutionalised" into a definite set of laws, tenets and practices. However legitimate this "institutionalization" may be in the context of Islamic religious history, it is obvious that the Qur'ān cannot be correctly understood if we read it merely in the light of later ideological developments, losing sight of its original purport and the meaning which it had – and was intended to have – for the people who first heard it from the lips of the Prophet himself.[142]

In light of this conception, he renders words such as 'Islam' and 'Muslim' as 'self-surrender to God' and 'one who surrenders himself to God.' Also, Abraham's statement *kāna musliman* as 'surrendered himself unto God' and the statement of the disciples of Jesus *bi-annā muslimūn* as 'bear thou witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto God.' Further, he renders *kufr* and *kāfir* as 'denial of the truth' and 'one who denies the truth,' as opposed to popular 'disbelief' and 'disbeliever'; *kitāb* as 'divine writ' or 'revelation,' and *ahl al-Kitāb* as 'followers of earlier revelation' as opposed to 'book' and 'people of the book.'[143] Only "two exceptions from this rule are the terms *al-Qur'ān* and *Sūrah*, since neither of the two has ever been used in Arabic to denote anything but the title of this particular divine writ and each of its

136 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, iv.
137 Nawwab, "Berlin to Makkah."
138 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, v.
139 Ibid., 436, fn 133. Abdullah Yūsuf Ali (d. 1953) in his translation of the same verse (17:111) interprets "who begets no son" as deriving from the modern usage of *walad* or forcefully implying the notion of the divine sonship of Jesus in Christianity – Abdullah Yūsuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (USA: Amana Publications, 2009), 706.
140 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 363, fn 46.
141 M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān: Themes and Style* (NY: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 49.
142 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vi.
143 Ibid.

sections or 'chapters,' respectively."[144] What is deduced is that forceful instilling of ideas upon words creates a dichotomy of a specific import. Thus, removing pre-conceptions engraved upon words brings forth their original purport and general import.

The Priority of the General Import over the Specific

Verses of the Qur'ān have specific (*khāss*) import and general (*āmm*) import;[145] invariably, both simultaneously infused.[146] The specific import is guided by Prophetic reports (*hadīth*), occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) or other Qur'ānic verses that impose the specification (*takhsīs*).[147] Nonetheless, for Asad, the general import has priority, simply because "the Qur'ān is made for all ages."[148] Therefore, the general import and 'underlying purport'[149] are present in every verse. Hence, "the message of the Qur'ān is universal – that is, addressed to mankind as a whole – and is neither time-bound nor confined to any particular cultural environment."[150] Asad explains this fundamental premise,

> No part of the Qur'ān should be viewed from a purely historical point of view: that is to say, all its references to historical circumstances and events – both at the time of the Prophet and in earlier times – must be regarded as illustrations of the human condition and not as ends in themselves. Hence, the consideration of the historical occasion on which a particular verse was revealed - a pursuit so dear, and legitimately so, to the hearts of the classical commentators – must never be allowed to obscure the underlying purport of that verse and its inner relevance to the ethical teaching which the Qur'ān, taken as a whole, propounds.[151]

With regards to the Qur'ānic verse 2:10 – "In their hearts is disease..." – Asad comments that this verse's specific import maybe addressing the hypocrites of Medina.

> However, as is always the case with Qur'ānic allusions to contemporary or historical events, the above and the following verses have a general, timeless import inasmuch as they refer to all people who are prone to deceive themselves in order to evade a spiritual commitment.[152]

In this example, it is clear Asad gives priority to the general import over the specific, and illustrates both simultaneously,[153] countering the apologetic approach of some modern hermeneutical trends[154] that subject the Qur'ān to historicity and superimpose a contextual

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144 Ibid.
145 Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 140-141.
146 Al-Shāfiʿī, *Al-Shāfi'ī's Risāla,* 96-98.
147 Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 152.
148 Al Jazeera, "A Road to Mecca."
149 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vii. The object here is the 'rationale' in a general sense; however, the implication has relevance to the use of *illa* (effective cause) in *qiyās*– Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 274-279.
150 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 227, fn 126.
151 Ibid., vii.
152 Ibid., 5, fn 8.
153 As noted in previous examples of commentary, the depth of elaboration of the general import is according to the gravity of the verse and its message. This concise example illustrates the principle employed.
154 Neo-rational historicity advocated by Nasr Hamin Abū Zayd (d. 2010) – Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text*, 9. The contextual hermeneutics advocated by Fazlur Rahman were succeeded by Abdullah Saeed – Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 23; Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-first Century*.

reading, compromising the texts' universal import. For Asad, the 'underlying purport' is never obsolete; on the contrary,

> Let the reader remember that the very uniqueness of the Qur'ān consists in the fact that the more our worldly knowledge and historical experience increase, the more meanings, hitherto unsuspected, reveal themselves in its pages. The great thinkers of our past understood this problem fully well. In their commentaries, they approached the Qur'ān with their reason: that is to say, they tried to explain the purport of each Qur'ānic statement.[155]

However, the 'underlying purport' is not always the literal (*haqīqī*) meaning.

The Priority of Implied Meaning over the Literal

Asad extrapolates the message of the Qur'ān to remove literal (*haqīqī*) expressions and pay special attention to idiomatic and metaphorical (*majāzi*) expressions to bring out the implied (*mafhūm*) meaning of a verse.[156] The literal (*haqīqī*) meaning is apparent (*mantūq*), while the metaphorical (*majāzi*) meaning is implied (*mafhūm*) or vice versa.[157] Due to the highly concise sentence structure of the Qur'ān,[158] the literal meaning may not adequately express the message; hence, it "necessitated the use of whole sentences to convey the meaning of a single Arabic word."[159] Differing from Ibn Hazm's concept of literalism,[160] Asad believes that metaphorical implications of the texts are intended and necessary. He claims, "It is an attempt – perhaps the first attempt – at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'ānic message into a European language."[161] The title of his work –*The Message of the Qur'ān*– is another indication that he prioritises the implied (*mafhūm*) message of the texts over its literal (*haqīqī*) meaning. He elaborates,

> The position of individual words in a sentence; the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas.[162]

An example of a word – *al-ghayb* (Qur'ān 2:3) – is rendered as "that which is beyond the reach of human perception" and he comments, "Al-Ghayb (commonly, and erroneously, translated as 'the Unseen') is used in the Qur'ān to denote all those sectors or phases of reality which lie beyond the range of human perception."[163] An example of a phrase – "*wal-asr*" (Qur'ān chap. 103) – is rendered as "consider the flight of time."[164] An example of a longer idiomatic expression (as implied) in the Qur'ān (111:4) is rendered as "carrier of evil tales"

155 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vii.
156 Ibid., v.
157 Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 158-161; Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 230-231.
158 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vi.
159 Ibid.
160 Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism* (UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 150-174; Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 2.
161 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, v.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid., 4.
164 Ibid., 974.

and he comments, "Lit., 'carrier of firewood', a well-known idiomatic expression denoting one who surreptitiously carries evil tales and slander from one person to another."[165] Moreover, as Abdul Haleem points out, "his 'rationalistic' approach leads him to translations that some Muslim theologians disagree with": for example, "his translation of 50:17 as 'the two demands of his nature...' rather than 'recording [angels]', or *hamim* in 56:93 as 'burning despair' rather than 'scalding water.'"[166] The former rendering was dealt with already. In the latter, Asad's reasoning is, with regards to the afterlife, most illustrations in the Qur'ān are allegorical – that which is beyond the reach of human perception. In this case, the underlying purport is 'despair' as the recompense.[167] Upon closer examination, it is distinguished that Asad is only concerned with metaphorical (*majāzi*) implications in a linguistic sense, not in an esoteric (*bātin*)[168] sense, which he believes is the implied (*mafhūm*) meaning. In defence of "linguistic vehicles"[169] of metaphorical implications in the Qur'ān, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (b. 1926) explains a crucial aberration of Ibn Taymiyyah in this very issue, as "he went to the extreme of rejecting the figurative from the language (Arabic) as a whole."[170] Asad adheres to these principles and, with al-Qaradāwī,[171] is not concerned with esoteric (*bātin*) *ta'wīl* of mystical exegesis (*tafsīr al-ishārī*)[172]; rather, an exoteric (*zāhir*) *ta'wīl* using linguistics and rational deduction. Asad's expression 'mystic' often represents metaphysical illustrations and parabolic symbolism of the Qur'ān, rather than unsubstantiated interpretations by inspiration (*ilhām*) of a select-elite (saints).

Allegorical Interpretation (Ta'wil)

Abdel Haleem's observes "his [Asad's] 'rationalistic' approach leads him to translations that some Muslim theologians disagree with"[173] – referring to interpretations that may not align well with mainstream theological schools.[174] Nonetheless, in evaluation of Asad's deduction, he explains a fundamental reality of the human psyche:

> the human mind (in which term we comprise conscious thinking, imagination, dream-life, intuition, memory, etc.) can operate only on the basis of perceptions previously experienced by that very mind either in their entirety or in some of their constituent elements: that is to say, it cannot visualize, or form an idea of, something that lies entirely outside the realm of previously realized experiences.[175]

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165 Ibid., 983. Asad seem to prefer Mujāhid ibn Jabr's (d. 722) interpretation in this instance –Muhammad Taqī-ud-Dīn al-Hilāli and Muhammad Muhsin Khān, *The Noble Qur'ān* (KSA: King Fahd Complex, 2014), 857, fn 2.

166 Haleem, *The Qur'ān*, xxix.

167 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 182, fn 60.

168 What is meant is the interpretation of a verse that is said to be the acquisition of a few individuals or saints by divine bestowal (*ilhām*), other than deduction – Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 335.

169 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 990, Appendix I. For an explanation with examples, see Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān*, 118-125.

170 Al-Qaradawi, *Approaching the Sunnah*, 172.

171 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, Appendix I.

172 Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 335.

173 Haleem, *The Qur'ān*, xxix.

174 The Ash'ārī and Māturīdī schools of creed, as implied by Abdel Haleem.

175 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 989, Appendix I.

Therefore, allegorical references are used in the Qur'ān to illustrate an abstract concept or metaphysical phenomenon and describe a "realm which is beyond the reach of human perception" (*al-ghayb*).[176] The allegory contained within Qur'ānic verses is termed *al-mutashābihāt*.[177] In essence, *al-mutashābihāt* is an illustration of reality that mortal intellect cannot fully[178] comprehend. Therefore, metaphysical reality is phrased in the Qur'ān "through a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience."[179] For Asad, "this is the innermost purport of the term and concept of *al-mutashābihāt* as used in the Qur'ān."[180]

Allegory with Regards to the Creator's Attributes (al-Khāliq)

Interpreting God's attributes is primarily a debate between the mainstream theological schools, Traditionalists and Traditionists.[181] The discourse in summary is a debate between parameters of *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd*.[182] The common denominator of the debate is the specification of 'how' or the 'exact reality' of God's attributes. Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 795) is quoted to have said its actuality is incomprehensible and its exposition is an aberration.[183] This statement is reiterated by Asad.[184] Nonetheless, the crux of the conclusion is that *ta'wīl* is permissible if it meets conditions: first, without isolating a particular meaning; second, without specifying 'how'; and third, not in a tone of certainty.[185]

Every instance in the Qur'ān where 'the Face of God' (*wajhillah*) occurs,[186] he translates it as 'countenance' and does not explain further, as opposed to al-Rāzī[187] and al-Zamakhsharī.[188] One such example with regards to the commentary of Qur'ān 55:27:

> Lit., "face", or "countenance", a term used metonymically in classical Arabic to denote the "self" or "whole being" of a person – in this case, the essential Being, or Reality, of God. Cf. also 28:88, "Everything is bound to perish, save His [eternal] Self."[189]

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176 Ibid.

177 Muhammad Asad defines *mutashābihāt* "as those passages of the Qur'an which are expressed in a figurative manner, with a meaning that is metaphorically implied but not directly" – Ibid., 66, fn 5.

178 Qur'ān 3:7, 17:85.

179 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 990, Appendix I. It is also called a *mathal* (likeness) – Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'ān*, 75.

180 Ibid., 990, Appendix I.

181 Here *ahl al-hādith* generally refers to scholars of *hādith*. However, it can also mean a distinguished tradition of scholars adhering to the *athari* creed, such as Ibn Taymiyyah and others. Either way, *ahl al-hādith* tradition shall be considered part of orthodoxy – Winter, *Classical Islamic Theology*, 107; Hamad Al-Sinan and Fawzi Al-Anjari, *Ahl al-Sunna: The Ash'aris – The Testimony and Proofs of the Scholars* (Rotterdam: Sunni Publications, 2016); Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 63-64.

182 This debate is beyond the scope of this article: however, the general conclusion by the majority of scholars or common denominator shall be addressed to focus the perspective of evaluation.

183 Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 218.

184 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 188.

185 Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān*, 112-114; Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 213.

186 Occurs 12times in the Qur'ān – Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'ān*, 112.

187 Ibid., 114; Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 68-83.

188 Ullah, *Al-Kashsháf*, 188-189.

189 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 825, fn 11.

Moreover, Asad does not interpret 'hand of God' in most instances[190] and leaves it (literal), except in few cases (Qur'ān 48:10, 5:64) commenting, "The phrase 'the hand of God is over their hands' ... a metaphor for His being a witness to their pledge"[191] and "The phrase 'one's hand is shackled' is a metaphorical expression denoting niggardliness."[192] This deduction is qualified with respect to the coherence[193] of the previous verse, for the apparent (*mantūq*) and exoteric (*zāhir*) meaning is naturally idiomatic in accordance to the rhetorical eloquence (*balāgha*) of its sentence.

In the Qur'ānic verse 2:17, 'light' and 'darkness' convey a metaphor to 'guidance' and 'error' respectively.[194] Asad does not hesitate to apply a similar metaphorical implication with regards to the 'light of God' (39:69) as the "clear revelation of His will."[195] He justifies his deduction in conjunction with the chapter theme 'The Light'[196] – as the "mystic parable of the 'light of God' in verse 35 and its echo inverse 40: 'he to whom God gives no light, no light whatever has he!'"[197] This justification is qualified by exegetical authorities who exclaimed, "It is the parable of His light *in the heart* of a believer."[198] It is also noteworthy that most authorities on the basis of a Prophetic narration, "I saw Light" reported by Abū Abd Allah al-Qurtubī (d. 1273),[199] do not dismiss it as optical 'light'–perhaps a composite manifestation of God without specification.[200] In this vein, interpretations (*ta'wīl*) of the 'Creator' seem to lie in the borderline of mainstream orthodoxy. However, the creation of God does not seem to demand similar reverence.

Allegory with Regards to the Attributes of the Created (Makhlūq)

Classical scholars have two distinct perspectives on the throne (*arsh*) and footstool (*kursī*), where the two approaches seem to continue until today.[201] The first group focuses on the 'attributes of God' that encompass the grand creations, such as power (*qudra*) and knowledge (*ilm*) respectively. Among them are al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī that ascribes power (*qudra*),[202]

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190 Qur'ān 5:64, 38:75.

191 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 786, fn 8.

192 Ibid., 157, fn 81.

193 Asad says "This outstanding example of the elliptic mode of expression (*ijaz*) so often employed in the Qur'an" – Ref: Ibid. However, Traditionists neither interpret the 'Hand' nor deny its literal meaning –Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Islamic Creed Series* (Riyadh: IIPH, 2014), vol. 1, 256-263.

194 An obvious and apparent implied meaning of the parable in this case.

195 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 715, fn 69. Traditionists will have reservations to this metaphor since it is in conjunction with God's attribute of light (*al-nūr*) – Hussein, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 36.

196 Qur'ān, Chapter 24, *al-Nūr.*

197 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 532.

198 Ibid., 541, fn 50.

199 Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 878.

200 Throughout the exegesis, as identified, Asad tends to sideline the literal meaning in preference of its alluded allegory. The possibility of the literal meaning having some reality is not considered. For example, in "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" (24:35), there is a possibility God literally is/emits light to the universe as He is the source of energy and light travels throughout the universe.

201 Detailed polemics concerning this issue is out of the scope of this article.

202 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 57, fn 248.

while Abd Allah Ibn Abbās[203] and al-Tabarī ascribed knowledge (*ilm*). The second group focuses on the 'grand creations' that are subject to God's attributes. Among them are Abd Allah Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 653), Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī al-Kinānī (d. 652), Mujāhid Ibn Jabr (d. 722) and Alī Ibn Abū Tālib (d. 661), who narrated a Prophetic report describing the grand creations God encompasses with His attributes and providing physical descriptions within time and space.[204] The differing focuses are attributed to that which is being subjected (i.e. the grand creations) and that which subjects (i.e. the divine attributes), respectively. Nonetheless, Salafīs may have reservations for such interpretation.[205] The noteworthy point is absolutely none among the Predecessors, including the Prophet, understood the *arsh* and *kursī* in a literal sense as a throne and footstool nor did they refrain from describing them allegorically using mental imagery. Asad understands the throne (*arsh*) and footstool (*kursī*) metaphorically as manifestations of God's attribute of power (*qudra*). It is deduced as "God's absolute sway over all His creation."[206] Asad interprets this by correlating verses that describe God's almightiness in 7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4 and 57:4, thereby extracting its underlying purport.

Asad explains Jesus speaking in his cradle (Qur'ān 3:46) as "A metaphorical allusion to the prophetic wisdom which was to inspire Jesus from a very early age."[207] He understands 'Jesus brings the clay bird to life' as an idiomatic expression and 'healing the blind and the leper' and 'bringing the dead to life' as metaphorical descriptions of spiritual awakening.[208] Also, he interprets the ascension of Jesus (Qur'ān 4:158) as exaltation: "The verb *rafa ahu* (lit., 'he raised him' or 'elevated him') has always, whenever the act of '*raf*' ('elevating') of a human being is attributed to God, the meaning of 'honouring' or 'exalting.'"[209] Moreover, Asad denies there was motion in the ascensions[210] of Prophet Muhammad. His rationalisation is that it is a psychological experience[211] and takes liberty "Since the Prophet himself did not leave a clear-cut explanation of this experience."[212] Further attempt is made to rationalise supernatural occurrences[213] that defy the laws of physics.

Asad interprets the experience of Moses with regards to "the miraculous transformation of the staff into a serpent" (Qur'ān 20:20, 27:10, 28:31) to allude to "mystic significance" as:

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203 This claim attributed to Ibn Abbās is disputed. Ibn Kathīr cites another report of Ibn Abbās describing the *kursi* allegorically with reference to the size of a ring in a desert, ascribing space – ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, vol. 2, 29.

204 Abū Abdullah al-Qurtubī, *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī – Classical Commentary of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. A. Bewley (UK: Dar al-Taqwa, 2003), vol. 1, 657-658.

205 Winter, *Classical Islamic Theology*,127; Khan, *The Noble Qur'ān*, 57, fn1; Al-Ashqar, *Islamic Creed Series*, vol. 1, 267-274. The Salafīs interprets *arsh* and *kursī* as tangible or intangible creation subject to space and time, irrelevant to God's attributes, while producing reports on them as grand creations, yet subscribing to the literal meaning – Khan, *The Noble Qur'ān*, 57, fn 1.

206 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 57, fn 248.

207 Ibid., 73, fn 33.

208 Ibid., 74, fn 37 and 38.

209 Ibid., 134-135, fn 172.

210 *Mi'rāj* (ascension to the realms of the heavens) and *isra* (night journey to Jerusalem).

211 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 996-998, Appendix IV.

212 Ibid., 996.

213 This is, miracles (*mu'jizat*).

> It seems to be an allusion to the intrinsic difference between appearance and reality, and, consequently, to the spiritual insight into this difference bestowed by God on His chosen servants (cf. the experience of Moses with the unnamed sage described in 18:66-82). This interpretation finds strong support in 27:10 and 28:31, in both of which places it is said that Moses saw the staff 'move rapidly, as if it were a serpent (ka'annaha jann).'[214]

Here, the obvious allusion is it was an optical illusion. However, even if it was an optical illusion, it was disposed by God's command, "Throw it down, O Moses!"[215] Be it physical reality or optical illusion, it was an occurrence surreal to Moses and actualised by something that suspended the norm; thus, it was an extraordinary occurrence. Moreover, classical scholars such as Ibn Kathīr, al-Tabarī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) narrated its physical appearance and even gave physical descriptions of a serpent.[216] Even though Asad testifies to the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān (*ījāz*), he has difficulty digesting supernatural feats of the Prophets (*mu'jizah*) illustrated in the Qur'ān. Moreover, he is reluctant to consider the possibility of literal texts being the reality.

Asad translates *fawq* in 2:26 as "something [even] less than that," alluding to allegorical imagery and dismissing the application of its apparent meaning.[217] The word *fawq* can mean 'top' and 'smaller' linguistically. Hence, it is possible both are correct literally. Recent scientific research reveals there are second-organisms, microscopic parasites that live on the body, inside the body of a female mosquito (host) and on top of its head.[218] Asad furthermore rejects the throwing of Abraham into the fire (Qur'ān 21:68-69) as "Talmudic Legends"[219] and the claims that Luqman, al-Khidr and Dhu'l-Qarnayn are mythical figures of allegory.[220] He goes against classical exegetes and Biblical narrative of Isaac as the sacrificial son of Abraham (Qur'ān 37:100).[221] It seems Asad agrees here with Ibn Kathīr's analysis, while Ismāil was the first-born is corroborated in recent research.[222] He also casts doubt on metaphysical afflictions such as the 'evil eye' and 'black magic,' where harm is said to affect without physical contact. Asad's rationalisation is the evils of both are due to psychological 'self and to' afflictions through envy and occult fallacies.[223] His rational deduction seems to be based on empirical evidence of direct consequences rather than indirect consequences based on the metaphysical. The emphasis is obviously on the 'visible forces' rather the 'invisible forces' at play, which is verifiable by empirical evidence. His neo-rationalistic tendencies can be clearly identified with

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214 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 472, fn 14.
215 Qur'ān 20:19.
216 Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 792.
217 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 7, fn 18.
218 Dar Jeyad, *Summarize of Research of the Tenth World Conference on Scientific Signs in the Qur'an and Sunnah* (KSA: Muslim World League, 2011), 17,https://www.muslim-library.com/dl/books/English_Summarize_of_Research_of_The_Tenth_World_Conference_on_Scientific_Signs_In_The_Qur'ān_and_Sunnah_1432_2011.pdf.
219 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 495-496, fn 64.
220 Ibid., 628, fn 12; 452, fn 81.
221 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 688, fn 38.
222 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, vol. 8, 271-272. Surprisingly, Asad's view is corroborated by contemporary scholars – Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (al-Dhabīh, Qur'ān 37: 99-113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* XXXIV, no. 1(1989).
223 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 986, fn 3 and 4.

regards to the commentary of the 'Miracles of Solomon.'[224] Asad attempts to reconcile reason and revelation with free-will (*irāda*).[225] In this endeavour, he seems to be adamant that God would not suspend the laws of physics; rather, there is a rational explanation, consistently resistant to "believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception."[226]

The Unorthodox Philosophy

For Asad, reason is the precursor to deduction and the enemy of reason is dogmatic imitation (*taqlīd*).[227] The foremost classical exegete who broke all shackles of dogmatic imitation is none other than al-Rāzī,[228] referred to as the 'leader of doubters' (*imām al-mushakkikīn*)[229] for practising the 'philosophy of doubt'[230] on deduction. It is evident Asad has adopted a similar philosophy of doubt. With regards to metaphysical illustrations in the Qur'ān, it is not "innocent until proven guilty"; rather, it is "guilty until proven innocent." If one was to substitute 'innocent' with 'apparent meaning' and 'guilty' with 'allegorical meaning,' then it is "allegorical until proven apparent." Moreover, it can be argued the particular philosophy of doubt adopted by Asad[231] is a predisposition contrary to the orthodox Islamic philosophy of enquiry. Even though the Islamic faith is primarily based on reason,[232] doubt is not a constituent of sound reason or deduction according to the teachings of Islam. Moreover, neutrality in enquiry is the core criterion of sound reason. Doubt therefore is predisposed conjecture of impossibility, which dismisses possibility.[233] On the contrary, neutral enquiry considers the

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224 "Although it is undoubtedly possible to interpret such passages in a 'rationalistic' manner, I do not think that this is really necessary. Because they were so deeply ingrained in the imagination of the people to whom the Qur'an addressed itself in the first instance, these legendary accounts of Solomon's wisdom and magic powers had acquired a cultural reality of their own and were, therefore, eminently suited to serve as a medium for the parabolic exposition of certain ethical truths with which this book is concerned: and so, without denying or confirming their mythical character, the Qur'an uses them as a foil for the idea that God is the ultimate source of all human power and glory, and that all achievements of human ingenuity, even though they may sometimes border on the miraculous, are but an expression of His transcendental creativity" – Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 498, fn 77.

225 Asad. "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," 78.

226 Qur'ān 2:3 as rendered by Muhammad Asad – Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 4.

227 Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 54-58; Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 75-81.

228 Jaffer, *Razi*, 21-38.

229 Ibid., 19.

230 A method of inquiry initiated with doubt only to believe if evidence shows otherwise. A form of critical analysis through initiated scepticism – Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Skepticism," June 2, 2015, accessed March 7, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/.

231 In ancient Greek understanding "Doubt is often defined as a state of indecision or hesitancy with respect to accepting or rejecting a given proposition. Thus, doubt is opposed to belief. But doubt is also contrasted with certainty" –Michael Williams, "Doubt," In *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* [online] (UK: Taylor and Francis, 1998), https://www.rep.routledge.com/ articles/thematic/doubt/v-1. However, Asad departs from neutrality of the Ancient Greek philosophy of doubt and takes a pre-disposition to reject a matter based on doubting due inconclusiveness or incomprehensibility, without suspension, similar to the Cartesian philosophy of doubt –*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Skepticism."

232 "Notwithstanding that no human being can ever attain to faith otherwise than by God's leave, and [that] it is He who lays the loathsome evil [of disbelief] upon those who will not use their reason?" – Qur'ān: 10:100.

233 Supported by the Qur'ānic verse; "[since] they have no knowledge whatever thereof, they follow nothing but surmise: yet, behold, never can surmise take the place of truth" (53:27-28).

rational possibility of a matter,[234] while acknowledging the possibility of its impossibility. It can be argued categorical rejection based on doubt due to insufficient evidence, as an equivalent to impossibility, is a flawed methodology.[235] Rejection should be supported by evidence and lack of evidence cannot be equivalent to evidence by default.[236] Rather, acceptance based on possibility (until conclusively disproved) or suspension[237] of conclusive judgement[238] (until conclusively proved) due to it (the issue) being inconclusive[239] is neutral enquiry. This arguably must be the conception of those "who believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception."[240] This could be a departure from balanced moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and orthodoxy in deduction.

Moreover, Asad seems to understand a perennial philosophy[241] in the Qur'ānic message. From an Islamic perspective, perennial philosophy concerns the theological premise that monotheism is sufficient creed for salvation while trivialising the fellowship to Prophet Muhammad.[242] To demonstrate this adaptation, analysis of one verse of the Qur'ān (2:62) should suffice.[243] Talal Asad (b. 1932) recalls his father Asad often recited verse 2:62, which alludes to the central theological theme that all Abrahamic religions share.[244]Asad comments on the verse,

> The above passage – which recurs in the Qur'ān several times – lays down a fundamental doctrine of Islam. With a breadth of vision unparalleled in any other religious faith, the idea of "salvation" is here made conditional upon three elements only: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and righteous action in life.[245]

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234 Supported by the Qur'ānic verse; "Have you given thought [to how you will fare] if this be truly [a revelation] from God, while you deny its truth?" (41:52).

235 Supported by the rationale of the universal maxim "Certainty is not overruled by doubt" –Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 145.

236 Supported by the Qur'ānic verse; "and they claim, 'None shall ever enter paradise unless he be a Jew'– or, 'a Christian'. Such are their wishful beliefs! Say: 'Produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true!'" (2:111).

237 Ancient Greeks "call themselves 'those who suspend,' thereby signalling that their investigations lead them to suspension of judgment" – *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Ancient Skepticism," May 31, 2014, Accessed March 7, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/.

238 Supported by the Qur'ānic verse; "For, after the truth [has been forsaken], what is there [left] but error?" (10:32).

239 It is possible to understand tomorrow what it is not understood today. Similarly, we understand today that which we did not understand yesterday. Supported by the Qur'ānic verse; "In time We shall make them fully understand Our messages" (41:53).

240 Qur'ān 2:3, as rendered by Muhammad Asad – Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 4.

241 "The central idea of the perennial philosophy is that Divine Truth is one, timeless and universal, and that the different religions are but different languages expressing that one Truth" – William Stoddart and Mateus Soares de Azevedo, "The Perennial Philosophy is not for Fools — and neither is Christianity," academia.edu, accessed March 7, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/17881561/The_Perennial_Philosophy_is_not_for_fools_and_neither_is_Christianity._By_William_Stoddart_and_Mateus_Soares_de_Azevedo; Adis Duderija. "The Question of Salvation of Non-Muslims: The Exegesis of Muhammad Asad," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 3 (2015).

242 Duderija. "The Question of Salvation of Non-Muslims," 290.

243 For an explanation, see Duderija, "The Question of Salvation of Non-Muslims."

244 Asad. "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," 79-80.

245 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 14, fn 50.

The conclusive 'three elemental doctrine of salvation' is re-emphasised in the commentary of the Qur'ānic verse 5:48,[246] reasoning if communities would adhere to their original theology and law sincerely, they should attain God's grace. Another point of note, in this case, Asad neither includes classical commentators on this issue, staying true to the exoteric (*zāhir*) meaning of the text, nor does he delve into logical semantics or theological polemics.[247] Given the odds, many authoritative classical exegetes would disagree with Asad's view, primarily with regards to the fellowship to Prophet Muhammad.

Al-Tabarī reports on the authority of Ibn Abbās that the provision of this verse is abrogated by verse 3:85.[248] Al-Qurtubī surrenders to the same authority.[249] Nāsir al-Dīn al-Baydāwī (d. 1286) advances a specification (*takhsīs*) by the verse, "O children of Israel! Remember..."[250] as referring to the basis of the three-elemental doctrine of salvation, specific to the 'previous nations' before the advent of Islam.[251] However, Abū Hamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) qualifies Asad's notion arguing on the basis, if the non-Muslim did not receive Prophet Muhammad's message in its pristine form, then how can one be accountable?[252] Nonetheless, it is clear al-Ghazālī's argument supports the exception and not the norm of the obligation, granted due to complete oblivion of the Qur'ānic message or unsolicited reception of a distorted version thereof.

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

Asad adopts the main three concepts common to Abduh and Ridā.[253] First, the general import of a verse should be understood with reference to its universal message; second, rational deduction plays a vital role in interpretation; and third, the use of Qur'ānic intertextuality and the coherence within a chapter. The second concept[254] is identified as the cause of his work to become less popular.[255] He seems to use *ta'wīl* or reason over revelation in hermeneutics[256] as a necessity, not by preference, dissimilar to al-Rāzī,[257] concerning the interpretation of

246 Ibid., 154, fn 66.

247 The first contention is the obligation of believing and following Prophet Muhammad. The second debate is the inclusion of 'righteous action (*amal al-sālih*)' as a necessary constituent of a believer. However, the discussion at hand is not the constituents of faith, rather the constituents of final grace and salvation, even though it is related. Nonetheless, the debate is out of the scope of this article. Moreover, for Asad, Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*) "now resemble nothing so much as a vast old-clothes shop where ancient thought-garments, almost unrecognisable as to their original purport, are mechanically bought and sold, patched up and re-sold, where the buyer's only delight consists in praising the old tailors' skill" – Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 10.

248 Khan, *The Noble Qur'ān*, 13, fn 2.

249 Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 32.

250 Qur'ān 2:47.

251 Nasr, *The Study Qur'ān*, 32.

252 Ibid., 31-32.

253 Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis," 117.

254 Haleem, *The Qur'ān,* xxix; Kidwai, "A Survey of English Translations of the Qur'ān."

255 Saleem, "The English Translations of the Holy Qur'an," 83.

256 Metaphysical illustrations, excluding God's attributes.

257 Al-Rāzī departed from classical Ash'ārīsm, giving precedence to reason (*aql*) over transmitted texts (*naql*), and preferred *ta'wīl* over *tafsīr*–Jaffer, *Razi*, 3-14.

metaphysical illustrations relating to the ambiguous (*mutashabihát*).[258] However, the exegesis neither contends the fundamentals of belief (*usūl al-dīn*) nor creed (*aqīdah*) of the Sunni orthodoxy; rather, it isolates subsidiary issues of theology that are open to interpretation. In line with the contention of Ibn Taymiyyah,[259] Asad neither takes al-Rāzī's liberally philosophical approach[260] nor the neo-rationalist (*mu'tazili*) approach of al-Zamakhsharī.

Asad dismisses esoteric (*bātin*) interpretations[261] of mystical exegesis (*tafsīr al-ishāri*) in general and of al-Zamakhsharī[262] preferring rational deduction instead, perhaps due to the large number of forged narrations al-Zamakhsharī employs in his mystical interpretations.[263] Hussein Abdul-Raof isolates 13 distinct beliefs and 14 significant Qur'ānic interpretations of the neo-rationalists,[264] of which Asad subscribes to none.[265] Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah's 'acid test' of reprehensible exegesis[266] includes: first, interpretation with any pre-conceived notions;[267] and second, interpreting from a purely linguistic perspective without considering the implied (*mafhūm*) meaning of the text. Asad certainly passes the second test dissimilar to Abduh,[268] in four ways: by employing intra-Qur'ānic intertextuality in correlating meaning, usage of transmitted reports (*riwāyah*) in deriving meaning, reinstating the original meaning of Arabic words and applying idiomatic expressions and metaphors of classical Arabic usage. With regards to the first test, Asad seems to fall short by employing a philosophy of doubt in interpreting metaphysical implications of the text inconsistent with the Qur'ānic philosophy of inquiry. Nonetheless, the perennial philosophy advocated is facilitating and accommodating wider audience for the Qur'ānic message.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from his writings that Asad is proud of the Muslim identity, which he believes is unique, having a comprehensive ideology attributed to the Prophetic practice (*Sunnah*). He

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258 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, appendix 1.

259 Ibn Taymiyyah criticises al-Rāzī's exegesis as, "it contains everything but Tafsīr" – Jaffer, *Razi*, 7.

260 Ibid., 54-56; Shalahudin Kafrawi, "Fakr al-Din al-Razi's Methodology in Interpreting the Qur'an" (master's diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1998), 68-73, http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=21224&local_base=GEN01-MCG02.

261 What is meant is the interpretation of a verse that is said to be the acquisition of a few individuals or saints by divine bestowal (*ilhām*), other than deduction – Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 335.

262 This observation is consistent throughout the exegesis.

263 Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir*, trans. S. Abdallah ibn Morgan (Sydney: Islaam Publications Intl, 2001), 59; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, A *Textbook of Hadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Hadíth* (UK: ITS, 2014), 216. On a side note, Asad seems to have adopted the form of mysticism Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad Abduh understood it – Asad. "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," 78; Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis," 21.

264 Abdul-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 32-36.

265 If he did, it would be reflected in his interpretation of the Qur'ān.

266 Ibn Taymiyyah has advanced a significant criterion (acid test) for the qualification of commendable exegesis –Ibn Taymiyyah, *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir*, 61.

267 With regards to this article's goals, the reference ascribes to Mu'tazili notions – Ibn Taymiyyah, *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafsir*, 62.

268 Muhammad Abduh is identified as giving less importance to *ahadīth* as opposed to his student Rashīd Ridā– Jafar, "Modern Qur'ānic Exegesis," 118.

believes in a wider sense that departure from the Prophetic practice is the cause of the present deterioration of Muslims. Muslims are thus regressing in three ways; intellectually, morally and ideologically. His exegesis is his earnest effort at addressing the state of Muslims and the strongest argument against Orientalism. Two problems are identified and addressed. First, the propensity to contextualise and historicise the Qur'ān, while undermining its universal imports and underlying purport; and second, the ambiguity in the Qur'ān with regards to metaphysics. The first problem is addressed through the argument that the general import of texts is always present and relevant, and the universal purport is perpetual. There is no obsolescence or deficiency in the message; rather, the intellect that fails to comprehend it. The second issue is addressed by advancing rational explanations to the text.

The work is neither laden with dogmatic literalism found in traditional exegesis nor trivialises tradition and transmission. It is a fusion of traditional exegesis with contemporary hermeneutics. Reason is used to interpret revelation while revelation is used to corroborate reason. In light of the extent of the work, the article argues that the exegesis in discussion is highly intellectual, embodying sophisticated analysis and rhetorical eloquence, exhibiting mastery with Arabic and English. The fact that classical exegeses, such as al-Rāzī's and al-Zamakhsharī's, are clearly marked by neo-rationalistic tendencies and well-received by mainstream scholarship, it is incumbent to deduce the exegesis in evaluation is well within the bounds of commendable exegesis. The author argues Asad's exegesis ranks among the best in the English language and justifiably renders *The Message of the Qur'ān* "for people who think."[269]

[269] This famous Qur'ānic phrase is on the first pages of his original work without a page number. He dedicates his work thus.

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